Words Fail

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Summary

Fighting a heroic battle in a room full of mysterious time pieces is not a smart thing to do.

Notes

Although I've chosen to rate this fic 'Mature', please be warned that there won't be any mature content until much, much later in the story.
For all his burliness, the Death Eater was surprisingly agile and quick on his feet. Harry tried to attack him from behind, by buckling his knees using a low tackle that Piers Polkiss had favoured in Primary School. The bastard managed to step aside, leaving Harry to fall on his face. Harry was quick to get back on his feet. The Death Eater grabbed him by the shoulders, in a display of primal outrage (which seemed to have made him forget that he was a wizard) and pushed Harry relentlessly backwards. Harry could see the Death Eater's eyes through his mask - they bore through him with determined fury.

A desk clattered over as Neville sprang up to defend him. A red jet of magic cruised harmlessly over the Death Eater’s shoulder, merely singing a few hairs on his head and shoving him off-balance. Sent with more accuracy, Hermione's spell hit the offender in the back. A classic *Petrificus Totalus* pinned his arms to his sides, ripping his hands off the Boy-Who-Lived. He teetered on spot for a few seconds before falling down on his side with a loud crash.

Harry was left to flail in overbalance. He fell backwards, connecting with a shelf too fragile to withstand the impact. There was a crash of glass shattering and the clinking, tingling pitter-patter of shards as they rained over him. Shock clouded his mind. He could hear Hermione approach and call out his name worriedly.

“T’m fine,” he called to her, gritting his teeth against the pain in his back. He tried to blink away the haze clouding his vision.

He couldn't see clearly, let alone get up. A cyclone swept into the room, picking up shattered glass and splintered wood to form a lethal whirlpool around Harry. He curled up against the onslaught, the fierce wind stealing his scream. He was left breathless. Afraid for his friends, he tried to drag himself up, fighting against the gale and the pain permeating his battered body. An overwhelming force was pinning him down and pulling him backwards at the same time. Before he fell unconscious, Harry cursed Voldemort, blaming him for the current situation.
Chapter 1

Harry came to with a start, his eyes flying open and mind staggering under the pain that erupted from this action. Recognising the rude awakening of Remnervate, he moaned pitifully against the pounding in his head. The raw, stinging pain radiating from all over his body didn’t help. He would have rather stayed unconscious.

His eyes watered from the effort of keeping them open, but after a moment or two of squinting he was able to make out that what he was seeing was, in fact, a face hovering startlingly close to his own. He flinched back and regretted it immediately.

The face belonged to a man who was at an age that could be estimated anywhere between thirty and sixty. With wizards, it could as well be ninety. He had brown hair and dull dish water grey eyes shadowed by droopy bags that vaguely resembled a basset hound. Not a single muscle twitched on his impassive face. It was rather unnerving.

"An unexpected encounter," the man said once it became clear that Harry was coherent. "You don't look like you belong here, boy." He straightened up from where he had been hunched low over Harry and offered his hand to help the younger wizard up.

Harry stared at the hand for a moment, bewildered, before moving to take it. Noticing he was still clenching his wand in said hand, he went to move it to his left. However, his left hand was occupied as well. It took a moment of examining the strange, spun glass orb he was holding for the memories to return to him. With a strangled gasp, Harry tried to push himself into a sitting position, but the sudden motion made the shooting pain that had settled into a stagnant ache flare like petrol over fire. As he fell back onto his back he could feel the shards of glass burrow deeper into his flesh, but the pain hardly mattered.

'The prophecy,' he thought, and images from the night before hurried across his mind, flitting by in a frantically disjointed chronology, but startlingly vivid and detailed: Sirius in danger, Thestrals, the Ministry, Death Eaters, Hermione, Neville, Ron, Ginny, Luna... What the hell had happened? What happened to him, to the others? Had he been knocked out and left behind? The battle must be over; what had happened to his friends? Were they dead? 'Sweet Merlin, what if they're dead? I led them here, it's my fault, I should have listened, I killed them – oh dear Merlin, what if I killed them?'

"Are you quite alright?"

The stranger’s voice snapped Harry back from his panicked thoughts, his gaze fixing onto those grey eyes that were now looking at him rather warily. The need to know made him forget all manner of courtesy: he grabbed the wizard's robes, forcing the man to bend over in his position crouching beside his prone form.

"What happened? Where is everyone? How long was I out? What about the Death Eaters?"

The man blinked slowly, looking unmoved. "I must ask you to be more specific. Taking a deep breath might help."

That made sense. Closing his eyes, Harry heaved in a shuddery breath and let it out in a slow and
steady exhale. It helped him calm down, but only marginally.

"Could you help me sit up?" he requested, preferring to have this conversation on a somewhat equal level with the stranger. The man did as he asked.

"I should call a Healer," the man noted, lifting the torn edge of Harry’s sleeve and inspecting a piece of glass glinting at him from the boy's wrist.

"That'd be great," Harry agreed. "But please tell me. How long has it been since the battle?"

"What battle?"

"Uh…" Harry stared at him, trying to see if the wizard was completely serious. He couldn't tell. Suddenly feeling uncertain, he looked around, getting a sinking feeling when he didn't recognise his surroundings. "The one at the Department of Mysteries? Last night, I think, me and my friends were lured down there and ambushed by a bunch of Death Eaters. Do you know about that?"

The man's expression didn't change, but somehow Harry got the feeling that he wasn't quite impressed with the explanation.

"I am afraid you have me confused," the wizard droned. "The night security haven't reported any intruders on the premises. You just arrived here."

"Night security?" Harry repeated, bewildered. "Where exactly am I?"

He looked around once more, this time paying closer attention to the details. He was in a large room that looked like a cross between Professor Snape's classroom and some mad scientist's laboratory. There was a large cauldron on a simmer in one corner, with purple steam puffing out from under its lid. Shelves stacked with unlabelled jars full of bizarre looking ingredients protruded from the walls. The room was dominated by a huge, convoluted system of different sized glass phials with arching and spiralling tubes and tiny, twisting slides connecting them to each other. All of this was supported on flimsy, gleaming silver scaffolding that seemed to spit in the face of gravity. Different coloured toxic looking tonics bubbled merrily over blue flamed burners or sat despondently in their containers. One concoction was smoking quite badly and a large black stain was forming on the ceiling above it.

"We are at the Department of Mysteries of the Ministry of Magic. My name is Fobbs. I work here."

"But then, how come you don't know? We smashed things up pretty badly. I'm sorry about all those prophecy thingies, by the way. I'll pay you people back somehow, I swear."

"You are making no sense. Wait here while I call for the Healer."

Before Harry could protest, the man picked himself up and disappeared among the humongous distillation system, winding his way to the other side of the room. Craning his neck, Harry could see him press a big red button on the wall before turning around and coming back the same way. He had barely reached the injured boy again before a door to Harry' right burst open and a man wearing the familiar lime green robes of a St. Mungo's Healer and carrying a black medicine bag hurried inside, out of breath.

"What's the emergency?" the Healer gasped out, grasping the door frame for support. When Fobbs pointed at Harry, the newcomer's eyebrows shot up in surprise, but he didn't ask any questions. Instead, he merely straightened up, pulled out his wand, and set to work. A few minutes later, Harry was sitting hunched over on a transfigured bed while the wizard silently extracted shards from his magically numbed back with a long pair of tweezers.
Distracted as he was by the Healer's work, Harry was startled when the Unspeakable who had revived him appeared before him again. Sitting down on the stool he had dragged with him, Fobbs handed the confused boy a smoking glass phial filled with a pale yellow potion.

"This will help with your disorientation. Take it and then tell me who you are and what happened." He then waved his wand and uttered an unfamiliar incantation almost as an after thought. "This man won't understand the words we are saying."

Harry took the phial but didn't down its contents.

"I'm Harry Potter, sir. And I'm not disoriented – I just don't understand what's going on. How can you not know about the fight? Does this have something to do with that hurricane?"

"Just tell me what happened," Fobbs repeated, sounding almost bored.

"Right. Well."

If the Unspeakable truly didn't know, Harry wasn't sure how much to tell him. It also occurred to him that he might not really have a choice in the matter. In the end, he recounted how he had been tricked into coming to the Ministry so that he could steal a prophecy for Voldemort. He wasn't sure if it was wise to mention that name, popular beliefs being what they were, but Fobbs didn't show any reaction to it. However, he thought better of telling him about the false visions, since they would certainly make him sound loony. Instead, he led the other to understand that he had received a message saying that someone close to him was being held hostage at the Department of Mysteries. He gave a rundown of the battle they had fought against the Death Eaters, trying to include as many details as he could remember, and finished his story by describing the strange windstorm that had accosted him in the room filled with clocks.

A short silence ensued during which the Healer patted Harry on the shoulder to signal him that he was all healed now. Harry thanked him politely, but this went ignored as the man snapped his bag closed and swooped out of the room. When the boy turned back to face Fobbs, the Unspeakable was still staring at him in that disconcertingly dispassionate way of his. Nervous, Harry ran his hand through his hair. A plethora of fine, glinting dust showered down, disappearing before reaching the floor. It clung to his hands and gathered in fluorescent clumps in the crevices before melting away.

"A room full of clocks," the Unspeakable deadpanned finally. "There is no such room in this department." Harry had a sinking feeling. He was about to ask the man what he meant, but he continued speaking. "However, it sounds like it would have something to do with temporal magic. What would you say the current date is?"

Harry blinked. “June 5th, 1996.”

For the first time, Fobbs displayed a sign of reaction: his left eyebrow twitched and he made an obvious attempt to hide his surprise. "Really?" he said, sounding interested. "Not even close. The date here is October 12th, 1942."

It took Harry almost a full thirty seconds to process this information.

“What?” he exclaimed finally, hoping that he had heard wrong.

"This is a very interesting phenomenon," Fobbs said, ignored his distress. "One that deserves immediate study. I shall take you to the Supervisor – he will decide how to proceed from here."

With that he stood up and his stool skittered back to its place next to one of the laboratory's workbenches. For the first time Harry noticed that he had a tough protective coat slung over his
robes. The material it was made of seemed to be some sort of dark coloured fish scales which reflected the light like a puddle of oil. Now the man took the coat off and hung it up on thin air next to the door before turning back to look at Harry expectantly.

Hurriedly Harry pulled his newly mended clothes over his head and was still adjusting the hem of his robes around his legs as he sprinted after the Unspeakable, who had already left the room.

"Wait! Mr Fobbs! What do you mean 1942? The year 1942? But that's insane! I've only heard of people going back in time a few hours, I'd've had to go back whole decades!"

"Hmm. A few hours," Fobbs mused aloud. "We have great advances to look forward to in the field of magic."

After passing by the Hall of Prophecy, which looked exactly the same as Harry had seen earlier, except with none of the destruction they had caused, they walked through a very high ceilinged chamber with a towering helix of golden light revolving languidly around its axis in the centre. Four Unspeakables were studying the thing, standing on absurdly tall ladders and pulling rays of light that stretched like bubble gum out of it to examine them under large magnifying glasses. None of these people paid the two any mind as they passed through.

The office area they entered next immediately reminded Harry of his visit to the Auror Headquarters the summer before, with its many cubicles and cramped aisles, though it completely lacked the lively hustle and bustle of many stories above. Harry noticed that whenever he tried to look into any of the workspaces, everything but the person sitting inside looked blurred. Here he garnered many curious or guarded looks, but no one opened their mouths to question his presence – in fact, no one seemed to open their mouths at all. There was a secretive silence resting over the department, the kind in which a furtive cough would have everybody's eyes on you. Harry found it rather suffocating, but he supposed that if each Unspeakable was doing some highly confidential research, they wouldn't have much to chat about with their colleagues.

On the other side of the room there were a few doors with brass name plates on them. Fobbs took them to the one in the middle. The plate read Head of Department. He knocked on the door twice and a few seconds later it opened silently on its own.

Inside was a remarkably ordinary office. There was a potted plant in the corner (although it looked a bit carnivorous) and a desk standing in the middle, facing the door invitingly and with a chair in front of it for visitors. The wizard sitting behind the desk was tall and thin and wore voluminous striped grey robes.

"Supervisor, Harry Potter here is from the future," Fobbs went straight to business.

The Supervisor lifted his eyebrows in a mild display of surprise. "Is he really? Do sit down, both of you." He waved his wand and the lonely visitors' chair stretched sideways like rubber and divided into two. "Where did you find him?"

"He appeared before me suddenly," Fobbs went straight to business.

The Supervisor nodded seriously as though this explained a lot and turned his gaze at Harry. "When do you come from?"

"1996, sir. There was this room filled with clocks, you see..." He gave the man the same explanation he had given his subordinate.

"Fascinating," the Supervisor said once Harry had finished. "Time travel. It isn't something
completely unheard of. However, all recorded travellers have been reported to hail from the 22nd century onwards. I don't believe that within the next fifty years or so there will be enough advancement made in this area for there to be a possible way for you to have come this far back from the 1990s." He held a pause that didn't seem to bode well. "You must show me proof."

"I – I... P-proof?" Harry stammered, trying to grasp at words, patting his pockets blindly for something to show. Then he caught himself, reminding himself that he was a victim here and that he shouldn't trust this man so easily. He could very well be a Death Eater trying to trick him – after all, it had been Voldemort who had got him into this mess in the first place. "Show you proof? I don't have to prove anything to you! What about my proof? I don't have any more reason to believe this than you do. I told this man, there is no way to go back entire decades. A Time-Turner will only take you back some hours. I'm not falling into any more traps – show me proof that this is the year 1942."

The Supervisor's eyes hardened into a severe look. He steepled his fingers and glared at Harry over them, trying to brow-beat him into submission.

"A stalemate," Fobbs commented in a flat tone.

Finally, the Supervisor huffed and began rummaging through his desk drawers. He piled all sorts of things on his spotless blotter: an issue of the *Daily Prophet*, a bag of colourful sweets and a bottle of milk, a handful of Galleons and Sickles stacked neatly on top of each other, a few Christmas cards and lastly, an official looking folded piece of parchment he pulled out of an inside pocket of his robes.

"Have a look at these items," he said.

Harry gave him a suspicious look before leaning closer. He picked up the piece of parchment first and unfolded it cautiously. It read:

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APPARITION LICENSE

Name: Joseph Archibald Doalott
Sex: Male
Nationality: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Date of Birth: 12/06/1892
Granted: 14/06/1909

This License has been approved by the Department of Magical Transportation of the Ministry of Magic of the United Kingdom.
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The Supervisor certainly looked younger than the dates on the document suggested. Harry held it up against light to reveal an authentic looking watermark of the Ministry's logo printed at the bottom. He put the license back down and pulled the newspaper closer to him. The Old English font of the title
seemed a little narrower than what he was used to and the small print underneath it displayed the date Monday, September 28th 1942.

"Mr Fobbs claimed that today is October 12th, 1942. This is from September," Harry pointed out.

"I don't follow the newspapers very closely."

Harry remained sceptical. He gave the Prophet back to the man and picked up the Christmas cards. They had gilded pictures of smiling children and Christmas trees on them and looked quite vintage. The arching cursive salutations on them read: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year 1942! On the back side of them were personal well wishes from aunts and cousins. There weren't any post-office stamps on them, though, since wizards used owls to deliver their mail.

The coins had all been minted between the years 1937 and 1942. The Use Before- date on the bag of sweets read 15/11/1942. The milk would expire by 13/10/1942. Supervisor Doalott would have to hurry drinking it if he was telling the truth.

Harry set the bottle down with a sigh. He didn't know what to think. The whole idea of having gone fifty-four years back in time was positively absurd, but this did seem like an awful lot of trouble for a simple prank. He didn't think that the Unspeakables of the Department of Mysteries would go along with something like this, and even if Fobbs and Doalott were just Death Eaters in disguise, he doubted that Voldemort's forces had the means to hijack the whole Department premises for their use. Also, Harry admitted, he had been brawling with a huge Death Eater in a room full of mysterious clocks, and even if it was impossible to guess what all the weird stuff they had seen in the Department was for, it didn't take a genius to deduce that time was being fiddled with in that particular chamber.

"Okay, let's say you aren’t lying," he said finally. "I don't have much on me to prove to you that I'm from the future. No, wait, I might have some money on me." He dug his hands into his pockets and felt around. With relief he pulled out his money pouch, along with the prophecy he had put away earlier. "And this, too. It belongs to the Department. Supposedly it's about me, but you can't trust a Malfoy as far as you can throw 'em, can you?" He handed the orb over to Doalott, who took it with interest.

The older wizard inspected the ball with a knowing touch. "The prophecy you mentioned," he nodded. He poked it with his wand a few times and then announced, "It will be made in the year 1979." After contemplating it for a while, he looked up at Harry and smiled a bit unnervingly. "Welcome to the past, Harry Potter. Let me have a look at those Galleons."

After inspecting the coins and excitedly noting the dates, the Supervisor was smiling very genially indeed.

"This is marvellous," he expressed, "Wizarding Britain today can hardly be called a hotspot of revolutionary movement, so I never thought that anyone would think of coming here from the future. I feel honoured to have met you like this."

"I didn't mean to come here!" Harry exclaimed, starting to feel the weight of the situation. "And this is far from marvellous. I have to get back, my friends are in danger. I can't leave them to fight alone – I led them right into the trap! I'm responsible!"

"Your friends," Doalott said calmly, "will need you fifty-four years from now. Right now, you aren't needed anywhere, since you don't exist yet."

"Yeah, but still…!"
"I understand your concern, Mr Potter, and I assure you that we will do our best to find a way to help you. I shall assign a team to the study of time. However, I would ask you to calm down and think reasonably. Once we find a way – if we do, mind, don't get your hopes up – you will be able to return to the exact moment you left and your friends will not be left on their own. And besides," he spread his hands in an encouraging gesture, "you are a strong, young lad. Fifty-four years is no time at all to a wizard."

Harry was left gaping at him incredulously. He had no way of going home, and these people thought it was perfectly acceptable to just wait out half a century to get back to his life. He moaned miserably and buried his face in his hands.

Supervisor Doalott allowed Harry his moment before clearing his throat. "We must now decide where to put you for the time being. You go to school, do you not?"

Harry lowered his hands and nodded. "Yes, Hogwarts. I just finished my O.W.L.s yesterday, with the History exam. I'm sure I flunked that one, though."

"Then I shall write to the Headmaster of Hogwarts and see if they are willing to take you in. Hopefully there will be no problems – it would be a good place for you to stay at."

"Thank you, sir."

"There is also the matter of temporal continuity. This is very serious. We cannot allow you to disrupt history with your pre-knowledge. One small change and you might even disappear from existence because your grandparents will not have intercourse on the right night."

Harry had to slap his hand over his mouth as he almost choked on his breath, but the Supervisor's countenance remained grim.

"You shall not speak of the future or act on the knowledge you have."

"Of course not, I promise."

"Of course, your word alone is not worth much," the older wizard continued as though he hadn't heard Harry. "That is why you have to take a binding oath of silence and inaction."

Harry felt apprehension creep up on him, making his palms sweat and foot twitch in unconscious preparation to flee. Binding oaths didn't sound like something to be taken lightly. "How is it binding?"

"I speak of the Oath of Unspeakability. It will make sure that you do not break it."

"How?"

"By physically preventing you from doing against it. If you swear not to speak of the future, you will not be able to speak of the future." The Supervisor shook his head with a reassuring smile. "You ought not worry. Everyone in this department has taken it, and as you have seen, it does no harm to the person."

Harry glanced sideways at Unspeakable Fobbs and found him staring back at him with the same placidity that had unnerved him from the beginning. Recalling the creepy silence permeating the main office and the unblinking round eyes that had followed his every move, he felt no small amount of horror at the idea of becoming like these people. It certainly didn't look like this Oath of Unspeakability was completely harmless to the human psyche.
"What happens if I don't take it?"

Doalott leaned back in his chair. "Then you cannot go out in public. We will have to keep you confined to this department's domain until we find a solution to your temporal displacement."

"Are you serious? Who says you can do that?"

"I do," was the simple answer. When Harry opened his mouth to make an outraged retort, the Supervisor went on to elaborate: "This is the Department of Mysteries, Mr Potter. Whatever happens within these walls remains within these walls until I, as the Head of Department, deem it safe enough to be exposed to the world at large. You may take this matter up with the Minister of Magic, but I doubt that you will find a differing opinion there. Mine is a very independent and influential position."

In short, Doalott's word was law and resistance was futile. Harry deflated in his seat, struggling against despair. He wouldn't give up that easily, though. "Well, is it permanent? I mean, can it be undone at any point?"

"Undone?" Doalott repeated, pursing his lips and squinting into the distance thoughtfully as though that question had never even occurred to him before. "No, I do not think so. But you should not worry. If we ever get you sent back to your own time, the future will once again be in the past. That will all but annul the Oath, would you not agree?"

"You're speculating," Harry muttered discontentedly. He had been backed into a corner. He really didn't want to swear this forever binding Oath of Unspeakability, but neither did he want to spend the rest of his life cooped up here, surrounded by weirdoes. It was a matter of picking the lesser of two evils. With a heavy sigh, he raised his hands in a sign of defeat. "Fine. I'll take the Oath."

Briefly, the Supervisor looked almost disappointed to hear that, which was a rather disturbing notion. "Good choice," he nodded approvingly. "We shall do it right away, then. Fobbs, could you go find another witness?"

"Yes, sir." The droopy eyed Unspeakable got up from his seat and left the office.

"We're doing it now?" Harry exclaimed, alarmed. "What do I have to do? Is it complicated?"

"No, you will just have to repeat a few phrases and I will do the rest."

A few moments later the door behind Harry opened again and Fobbs stepped back into the room, a long haired woman in tow. The woman smiled at Harry shyly, the slightly fanatic, curious gleam in her eyes ruining the effect somewhat. The two stayed standing by the door.

"With Unspeakables Toby Fobbs and Charity Chirping as our witnesses, we shall begin," the Supervisor announced formally and stood up behind his desk, indicating for Harry to do the same. "Now, I will be adding a clause to the Oath about not speaking of what you have seen in my department, I am sure you understand why," he warned as he gave his wand a little shake as though to dust it off. "Take out your wand and hold it in both hands like this." He demonstrated by bringing his own wand up to his chest level, and Harry followed suit. "And repeat after me."

Palms sweating with nerves, Harry grasped his wand tightly and repeated the binding words. "Of what will happen, I shall not speak. With what must happen, I shan't intervene. The Mysteries of these chambers I shall take to my grave." The tip of his phoenix feather wand began to glow softly at the first syllables as though he had cast *Lumos*, but he didn't feel any different. At the end of the recitation, Doalott pointed his wand at him and declared a few magic words. A brief flash of light
followed before dying down.

Harry stood still for a moment, waiting for something more to happen. When the older wizard tucked his wand back into his robes and adjusted his hems in preparation of sitting down, he realised that nothing else was forthcoming. "That's it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, are you sure it worked? I don't feel any different."

"Of course I am sure," the Supervisor said huffily, frowning at Harry for questioning his spell casting. "I have done this a countless number of times."

"Okay, sorry," Harry apologised warily, tucking his wand back into his pocket and sitting down. Doalott sighed and shook his head as though to clear it. "Now that we are finished with that matter, we have arrangements to make," he changed the subject. "Let's see. I will send a letter to the school today, but the response is not likely to arrive before tomorrow. At least until then you will stay at Hotel Dittany. It has a history of housing the Ministry’s honourable guests. And also, I would have your clothes."

Harry kept nodding his head in understanding but stopped once the last part registered in his brain. "…What?"

"Your clothes," the Supervisor repeated. "We do not know how you got here, but there might be some traces of the magic that caused your time leap lingering in the fibres of your clothes."

"Oh." A silence stretched as the Supervisor kept staring at Harry expectantly. "Are you expecting me to undress here?"
Chapter 2

The hotel Harry had been sent to certainly put The Leaky Cauldron to shame. It made him vaguely uncomfortable. Everything in his suite looked so expensive that if he broke something, Harry thought he would have to replace it with his life.

When Harry and his friends had broken into the Ministry, it had been the middle of the night, but it was early afternoon when he left the Department of Mysteries in 1942. Despite these added hours, sleep came fitfully to him after he settled in bed that evening. He lay beneath the luxurious covers, staring at the ceiling above him, or turned from side to back to front, kicking the sheets away from his heated skin, or sat up to fluff his pillow. His mind was moving miles a minute, but still it was having difficulties reconciling with his predicament – that the present was the past, the past the present. That he hadn't been born yet. Even his late parents hadn't been born yet. He worried for his friends, whom he had abandoned to the Death Eaters' mercy, though none of his friends existed yet. He hadn't abandoned them to the Death Eaters, but that was what he could not understand. The present was far in the future. The past was now.

He also had trouble grasping the permanence of the situation. No mode of transportation through time had been invented yet, none at all – not even a measly three-hour Time-Turner – and he was here to stay until something was custom made for his needs. That could be never in his life time. He would likely have to live day by day, year by year, until he reached June 5th, 1996 the old fashioned way. Fifty-four years.

He was still expecting someone to come up to him with a smile and a pat on the shoulder and hand to him a miracle time machine – right this way, Mr Potter. Whew, what a strange detour.

When morning arrived, Harry got up blearily, having barely slept at all. He still did not comprehend his situation, but he did possess the resignation needed for facing the day. Breakfast was waiting for him in the sitting room, served on china plates covered with gleaming steel domes, heating and preserving charms keeping it perfect for him whenever he chose to eat it. The restless night had left Harry famished, so he dug in with zeal. The bacon and grilled tomatoes were particularly tasty, but not as good as the food served at Hogwarts.

Harry really hoped that he would return to Hogwarts. If Supervisor Doalott couldn't convince the current Headmaster to take him in, Harry didn't know what he would do and where he would go. He was fairly confident that the man had enough interest vested in him not to leave him to starve on the streets, but to be honest, Harry's familiarity with the British wizarding world only encompassed Hogwarts and Diagon Alley, if one didn't count the Ministry and St. Mungo's Hospital. He had no idea where else they could toss him, and he fervently hoped that Plan B wasn't to keep him under lock and key in the Department of Mysteries.

The morning oozed by. With nothing else to do, Harry sat on a window seat looking out over a busy street in Muggle London and worried about his fate. For lunch he ordered room service, and then he waited some more.

Finally, he was startled by the tingling of a bell near the door leading out of the suite. He went to investigate and found a letter sitting on a small table next to the door. On the envelope was his name written in rustic gold ink, the loop of the 'y' greatly exaggerated and elaborate swirls added around
for effect. Inside he found a short note requesting him to meet a guest in the lobby.

'This is it,' Harry thought. The Supervisor had said that the reply from the school would come today. Harry looked down at himself to make sure that he looked presentable. He was wearing blue robes he had got from a wizard who appeared to live in the Department of Mysteries. He had a whole wardrobe stashed in his cubicle, fitted inside a narrow cabinet that was much larger on the inside than it appeared on the outside, as well as a sleeping bag, a rack full of toiletries, and a portable stove. Pausing in front of a mirror, Harry raked his fingers through his hair, trying to bring some semblance of neatness to it. With his belongings safely in his pockets along with the room key, he left the suite.

Supervisor Doalott was standing next to the reception counter, making the witches working there fidget with his staring, when Harry stepped out of the lift and approached him. Harry was starting to wonder if the Unspeakables were weird on purpose to find some amusement in their lives. The Supervisor turned around as he heard his footsteps and held up an opened envelope.

"Hogwarts is very interested to have you," he told him as a greeting. "This Portkey will take you to a meeting with the Headmaster. He wants to talk with you about your studies."

"Ah," Harry floundered as he stopped to stand before the man, briefly thrown by the lack of mandatory pleasantries. "That's great! When's the meeting?"

"Shortly. You can leave the key with these ladies here. You won't be coming back," The Supervisor added.

Harry hurried to dig through his pocket and pulled out the fancily carved brass key. After handing it over and thanking for the excellent service, he turned back to Supervisor Doalott to find him staring at him.

The older wizard's smile widened and he acquired a possessive glint in his eye as the time traveller's gaze met his. He gave the envelope to him. "It will activate at fourteen-o-two. I will keep informing you of the progress we make on the research. Keep in touch."

"Um. Okay." There was silence during which Supervisor Doalott kept staring and smiling and Harry tried to think of something more to say. "Thank you," he finally settled on, "for your help."

"My pleasure." The Supervisor gave him a short bow and put on this pointed hat. "I must leave now." He Disapparated with a loud crack.

Harry blinked at the spot where the man had stood and then shook himself. He glanced at his watch and saw that he had a little less than ten minutes until the Portkey would activate, so he went to sit on a velvet-covered sofa next to an exotic palm tree.

He stared at the envelope in his hands. Now that his most immediate fears had been relieved, new worries raised their voices. This Hogwarts wasn't the same as the one he had known during the past five years of his life. Ron and Hermione wouldn't be there, nor would any of his other friends. The teachers would be different too – the whole castle would be full of strangers. Harry would have to start all over with making friends, which was something he had never been very good at, thanks to his cousin scaring away all the potential candidates when he was little.

Besides, fifty-four years was a long time, and it was likely that the curriculum had changed somewhat between now and Harry's time. He might have a different base of knowledge than the rest of the students and he might not be able to keep up with the others.

Discipline was probably stricter, too. Harry didn't know how much truth there was to Filch's stories
about dangling students from the ceiling by their ankles, but he had seen those chains in the caretaker’s office.

Nervous, he kept glancing at his watch. With the way these thoughts made his insides gnaw on themselves, this felt like the longest ten minutes he had been forced to endure in a while. What would the Headmaster be like? What sort of questions would he have to answer? He tried to compose something to say in advance, but his mind was too distracted.

Finally, the time approached 14:02, so Harry stood up in preparation for the journey. One of the receptionists looked up at him and smiled, giving him a small wave of goodbye. Harry would have waved back, but apparently his watch was a little slow, because he felt the familiar pull of the Portkey almost a full minute too early.

He appeared in the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts, and fell over gracelessly like he usually did when travelling by Portkey. He bit his lip to stop himself from making any undignified sounds of pain that would embarrass him even further and pushed himself up to his hands and knees. That was when he noticed the hand sticking into his face. He startled and stared at it for a second before following the arm with his gaze, noting the wide burgundy sleeve, up to owner of the hand.

He was about to gasp in recognition as saw the smiling face, twinkling sky-blue eyes, and auburn beard, but then something strange happened. His face muscles settled into a calm, polite expression without consulting with his brain first. This shocked him and caused him to panic internally, afraid that someone had possessed him and was taking over his body.

Professor Dumbledore, for that was who the man was, kept smiling. "Welcome to Hogwarts, Mr Potter," he said. "Let me help you stand up."

Harry stayed still for a second, scared that he might not be able to move if he couldn't even control his own countenance, but when he reached up to take the proffered hand, he wasn't hindered at all. The Professor pulled him up and kept hold of his hand in a firm handshake.

"I am Professor Albus Dumbledore, Deputy Headmaster," he said.

"Harry Potter, sir. Nice to meet you," Harry replied, his voice betraying none of his inner turmoil. He didn't understand what was happening to him.

"Headmaster Dippet is expecting us in his office. If you would follow me, I will take you there."

They started up the grand staircase, Harry following a couple of steps behind Dumbledore even though he already knew the way to the Headmaster's office very well.

"I understand you had a mishap with time?" Dumbledore said, making small talk.

"Yes." Harry was going to elaborate but found that his vocal cords refused to operate. Realisation began to dawn on him.

"Hmm. You have my condolences. It is very intriguing, though. We at Hogwarts don't usually take in new students after the term has already started, but yours is a unique case. There was no question about making an exception."

"I'm thankful for that, sir."

Harry's mind was racing. When he had agreed to take the Oath of Unspeakability he had expected something like this to happen – that he wouldn't be able to talk about the future at all. However, he had not expected the effect to be so thorough. It appeared that showing recognition of people he
knew was considered a breach of the Oath, because it would reveal that those people would still be around in fifty-four years' time. He was starting to understand why the Unspeakables behaved so oddly. The Oath seemed to take a worrying amount of control over one's life.

They reached the large stone gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's Office and Professor Dumbledore stopped them there. "Octahedron," he said, and the sentinel hopped aside, revealing the moving staircase behind it.

They travelled the stairs in silence, and when they reached the top, Dumbledore rapped on the gleaming oak door Harry was all too familiar with. A voice called for them to enter and Dumbledore pushed the door open.

The office was more crowded than Harry had expected. In addition to Headmaster Dippet, who sat behind the enormous desk, there were three other people in the room. A middle aged wizard with greying brown hair stood next to a bookcase on the left, while an older witch with a long white plait sat in a chair facing the Headmaster's desk. Dominating the room was the rather overweight figure of a short, moustachioed man with thick, straw coloured hair that gleamed in the lamp light. He stood in the middle of the room, one hand tucked into the tiny pocket of his waistcoat and the other holding a cut crystal glass of brandy.

"Ah, our newest addition," the Headmaster said as he stood up behind his desk. "Welcome, my boy, we are glad to have you here." He offered his bony hand to Harry, who shook it. "Armando Dippet is my name, I am the Headmaster."

Harry introduced himself as well, examining wizard. Of course, he recognised Dippet from his portrait in Headmaster Dumbledore’s office, but there was something about him that gave Harry a sense of déjà vu. Maybe it was the way the man spoke, or perhaps the way he held himself that tickled at his memory. However, before he was able to draw a connection, his attention was diverted elsewhere.

"Let me introduce to you Professor Merrythought, Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts and Head of Ravenclaw House." Dippet said, indicating the woman with the plait. Professor Merrythought nodded at him with a congenial smile, and Harry shook her hand. "Professor Beery is the Head of Hufflepuff and teaches Herbology." The middle aged wizard stepped forward. He had strong grip.

"You have, of course, already met Professor Dumbledore, Professor of Transfiguration and Head of Gryffindor," Dippet continued, and Harry and Dumbledore nodded at each other. "And finally, this is Professor Slughorn – our resident Potions Master and Head of Slytherin House."

The rotund wizard beamed, pulling his right hand out of his pocket, and shook Harry's with excitement. "How extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "To have crossed through time! You must be a young wizard of exceptional calibre. What a joyous affair to make your acquaintance, Harry Potter… Of the old and esteemed pure-blood line of Potters? A future scion?"

"Um. Yes, those Potters." He was going to point out that his mother had been Muggle-born, but the Oath disagreed with him.

"You do have the Potter look about you," Professor Slughorn said, almost preening. "Can't mistake that hair!"

Headmaster Dippet cleared his throat to interrupt. "Why don't you take a seat, Mr Potter, so we can discuss the arrangements of your stay here?"
After Harry had settled down and chairs had been conjured for those who had been left without one, Dippet picked up a thin stack of papers and tapped it against his blotter before setting it down and glancing over the topmost sheet.

"Now, Mr Doalott wrote in his letter that you have attended – or, sorry, will attend – Hogwarts in the future, is that correct?"

"Yes sir. I was just finishing my fifth year."

"So you've taken your O.W.L.s?"

"I just finished them, so I don't know the results I... would have got." Harry suddenly realised that he might never find out how he did in the exams.

"Hmm," Dippet frowned. "How do you think you did yourself? Feeling confident?"

"Oh. Um, I think I passed most of them," Harry said, wiping his palms on his robes nervously. He felt awkward talking about his failures in a room full of professors, but he thought he ought to be honest, at least. "I think I failed History of Magic, though. My... performance was disrupted and I had to leave the exam. Also, I didn't do very well at Divination, and Astronomy might be a bit of a close case. But," he hurried to add, "I think I did fine with everything else. Especially Defence Against the Dark Arts, it's my strongest subject."

"Hmm," Dippet hummed again, picking up a quill and twirling it absently. He didn't look very convinced. "What other electives did you take, in addition to Divination?" he asked.

"Care of Magical Creature, sir. I'm pretty sure I passed."

The Headmaster pondered this some more before sighing and rubbing his forehead. "Look, Mr Potter. I'm sure you did well in your examinations and received passing grades. However, I'm afraid I can't just take your word for it. The O.W.L.s are very important – and you need to have them on paper. Without documented proof that you have passed the Ordinary Wizarding Level, you won't be able to find work within the magical community once you've left Hogwarts."

"Sir?" Harry asked, getting a bad feeling about this.

"What I mean – and I'm sorry to tell you this – is that you will have to take your O.W.L.s again. Unfortunately, the exams are only held once a year, at the end of the spring term. We could always make special arrangements for you, but considering the fact that you've received your education so far in a completely different decade, we don't know how far it could take you now."

"What would you suggest, then, sir?" Harry asked, dreading the answer.

"I would suggest that you repeat your fifth year," Dippet said, looking at him through serious eyes. "That way, we can ensure that any possible gaps in your knowledge are filled by the time of the exams."

A pregnant silence followed this. Harry felt disappointment and despair settle over him. All the studying, all the hard work he had done over the past year – for nothing. All of it, down the drain. He would have to do it all over again.

"Oh," he managed to say finally. "I see."

"Look at the bright side," Professor Dumbledore chimed in from his right. "You can take this chance to revise and do even better than you did last time. And consider this: you won't have to work as
hard as you did before, because most of the material will already be familiar to you."

"I… I suppose you're right, Sir." It didn't do much to alleviate his chagrin. "I understand. I guess I'll just have to do it."

"That's the spirit," Dippet said, smiling encouragingly. "So, we'll enrol you among the fifth year students. What house were you – um, will you be – sorted into?"

"I'm in Gryffindor."

"Good. Why don't you try on the Sorting Hat, so we can confirm this?" He turned around in his chair and reached behind him, taking the ratty old Hat down from its shelf.

Harry took the Hat gingerly and placed it on his head. This time it didn't fall down to cover his eyes, although it was still a bit roomy for him. He closed his eyes and waited for it to speak.

The Sorting Hat remained silent for several seconds, rummaging through his mind. Finally, quiet words were whispered into his ear.

"My, my, haven't you been the model Gryffindor," the Hat sniggered.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry thought back at it, a little miffed.

"No need to get defensive. I see that this isn't the first, or even the second time I have or will sit on this head. And I have to say, Potter, that my opinion of you won't change no matter how many times you put me on. Ah, you know exactly what I mean."

Oh, Harry did. And this time, the Hat could actually make his opinion official. 'Do I have to beg again?'

"Hmm. You could," the Sorting Hat muttered, "but all jesting aside – looking at these interesting memories of yours, I wouldn't recommend it. Your presence in Slytherin would be beneficial to all around, and I don't only mean your own healthy ambitions."

Harry frowned. 'What do you mean?'

"I see you don't understand yet. I don't think I should say. But consider this. Slytherin is by nature a very close knit house. If you make real friends there, they will likely last you a lifetime. Everybody needs friends, and Potter, I'm not talking about you."

Harry wondered about these words, trying to make light of them. The Sorting Hat took advantage of his distraction and called out, "Slytherin!" so that the room's other occupants could hear.

Harry's eyes flew open in shock as the Hat was yanked from his head. Professor Slughorn, the Head of Slytherin, whooped and held it up like a prize. "Oho!" he boomed, cheeks rosy. "A convert! Welcome to Slytherin, m'boy! What a fine addition you are, you will make my house proud!"

The other Heads of House smiled a little stiffly, trying to hide their disappointment. Slughorn's enthusiasm didn't seem to be helping.

'I have been tricked,' the newly initiated Slytherin thought with horror. The Sorting Hat had deliberately confused him with moving talk about friendship and lifelong bonds and used his distraction to put him in the house he detested the most. It had always wanted to put him in Slytherin, and now it had taken its revenge. Bitterly Harry wondered what the universe had against him. All of this could not be simple coincidence.
Dippet smiled affably as he took the Sorting Hat back from Slughorn, not noticing the new student's tribulation. "It's funny how that happens," he said. "Who knows, if we sorted all our students twice, we might be surprised by the results."

Harry stared down at his hands, trying not to show how devastated he was as the Headmaster hummed and arranged the Hat back on its perch.

"Now," Dippet said looking through the letter in front of him again. "It says here that you have taken a magical oath to stop you from speaking about the future and disrupting the timeline. That's good. I will make sure to mention that when I announce your presence at dinner, so that your peers will know that asking questions about the future will be useless. Maybe that way you won't be harassed so much by your curious comrades." Realising something, he looked up at Harry. "You don't mind me telling the students that you are from the future, do you? I only think that it would be easier to be open about everything – secrets have the troublesome tendency of coming out at some point."

"Oh no, be my guest," Harry said distractedly, contemplating the horror of his sorting.

"Excellent. Dinner will be," he checked the clock on the wall, "in a couple of hours. Be there. You don't have to stand in front of the entire hall if you don't want to, but you should at least make an appearance. I will draw you your timetable for tomorrow, but we'll see if you'll be able to attend all of your morning classes – we'll have to get your supplies somehow. I think we can order most of them in from Aberdeen but I'll have to ask around if we can get a tailor to make a home visit for your uniforms. If not, we'll just pop you over to Gladrags in Hogsmeade, it won't take long. How does that sound?"

"That sounds good, but," Harry frowned, worried, "how will I pay for all of it? I don't think I'll be able to access my vault, since the other Potters must be using it and I'm not supposed to exist yet."

"Oh, don't worry about the money – Mr Doalott says that the Ministry is willing to cover all your schooling expenses. There's a cheque, right here." Dippet pulled out an important looking piece of parchment and gave it to Harry for inspection.

The parchment was large and square, with swirlily gilded framing printed on the edges. It stated in elaborate font that with this cheque, all acquirements made would be paid for from the Department of Mysteries' research fund. There was a purple wax seal with a silk ribbon pinned underneath it in one corner and a long strip of runic code along the bottom.

Harry handed the cheque back to the Headmaster, assuming that he wouldn't be allowed to keep it and abuse it.

"Well, I think that covers all for now," Headmaster Dippet said with finality. "Welcome to Hogwarts, 1942, Mr Potter. Horace, if you would take your new student and show him the way to the Slytherin dungeons?"

Professor Slughorn sprang up from his seat, clapping his hands delightedly. "Certainly, certainly! Come along, Harry. There is someone I want you to meet." He led Harry out of the office.

'Well,' Harry thought as they rode the winding stairs down to the second floor, 'at least this bloke is a vast improvement to Snape.' Professor Slughorn seemed like a nice enough wizard – cheerful and friendly. Even if Harry wouldn't feel at home in Slytherin or get on with his new house mates, at least he wouldn't be terrorised in Potions class.

"As you know, the dungeons are quite the tricky maze, a tricky maze indeed," Slughorn chattered. "I'm sure you'll need some help finding your way around there at first, so I'll introduce you to one of
our prefects." He smiled like a fat cat with a vat full of cream. "He's one of my most prized students, a very charming young man. He's in fifth year with you – I'm sure you two will get along splendidly."

He directed them up a staircase and led them down the corridors, stopping finally outside the Charms classroom.

"The last classes of the day are about to end in fifteen minutes or so. I cancelled my own for you," he added with a wink at Harry. He then knocked on the classroom door and promptly entered. "Daisy, you wouldn't mind if I stole Tom from you a little early, would you? Wonderful!" Harry heard him say, but the door blocked his view.

There was the sound of a chair's legs against the floor and a male voice made his excuses to the teacher called Daisy. A moment later, the prized prefect stepped out into the hallway, and Harry almost had a heart attack

Before him stood none other than Tom Marvolo Riddle – alive, solid and healthy, completely identical to the homicidal memory Harry had met in the Chamber of Secrets, from the criss-cross of his shoelaces to the last, well groomed black hair on his head. Harry's first reaction was shock, and then panic – 'it's Voldemort, kill it! Run!'

However, the phenomenon familiar from Harry's first meeting with Dumbledore occurred again. Not even the tiniest muscle on his face twitched to betray his raging instincts, and Harry felt his eyes glass over into a placid gaze as he stared at the Dark-Lord-To-Be.

"Harry, this is Tom Riddle," Professor Slughorn said, completely unaware of Harry's mental breakdown. "Tom, this is your new classmate Harry Potter, freshly sorted into Slytherin." He held a pause and spread one arm towards the green eyed boy like an auction host presenting the long lost Picasso. "He is from the future."

Riddle appeared entirely unimpressed for a second and then looked at the Professor with a baffled smile. "Excuse me, Professor?" he asked, as though thinking he had heard wrong.

"He's from the future," Slughorn repeated, preening. "From the year 1996, to be precise."

"How is that possible, sir?" Riddle asked. "Time travel has fascinated researchers for centuries, but it hasn't been made possible yet."

"Yes, it's amazing, isn't it? How did it happen again, Harry?" Slughorn nodded encouragingly at his newest student, visibly enjoying the show he was directing.

"Uh. I had an accident in the Department of Mysteries, at the Ministry of Magic. I might not be able to go back."

"What were you doing in the Department of Mysteries?" Riddle wanted to know.

"I can't say."

"Harry had to swear an oath," Professor Slughorn hurried to explain. "A magically binding oath which prevents him from speaking of the future."

"Ah, to protect the timeline," Riddle said. Then he smiled charmingly at Harry, apparently deciding to go along with the story, and offered his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Harry. Please, call me Tom."
Harry got the distinct impression that Riddle didn’t believe a word of what he and Slughorn were saying. He narrowed his eyes a little but took the hand and shook it. "Nice to meet you, too, Tom."

Slughorn set his hands on both their shoulders like a proud father blessing his daughter's arranged engagement. "I can already see the wonderful friendship ahead of you!" Then he clapped their shoulders so firmly that both boys' knees buckled slightly, and changed the subject. "Now, Tom. Harry went to Hogwarts before, in the future you see, but he was sorted into a different house. He'll need you to show him around the Slytherin territory. Can you do that for me?"

"Of course, Professor. I'd be glad to."

"Excellent! I'll leave you boys to it then, if you don't mind. Lots of work to do, homework to grade, I'm sure you understand." Then he left, in the opposite direction of the dungeons, humming a cheerful tune and with a victorious bounce in his step.

Harry was now left alone with Tom Riddle. He was actually quite grateful for the Oath of Unspeakability, because as sure as his name was Harry James Potter he would have given everything away the second he had seen the other boy if it weren't for enchantment.

"Shall we go, then?" Riddle asked after a short silence, extending an arm the way Harry had come from. There was a slightly mocking air to the gesture that Harry couldn't miss.

"Sure."

They set off down the hall towards the nearest staircase leading down. As they walked Harry took the opportunity to internally give himself a sound lashing. He could not believe that he had actually forgotten that Tom Riddle had been at Hogwarts in the early 1940s. The Chamber of Secrets had been first opened fifty years before. It had even said in the Prefect and Head Boy records he and his best friends had examined that Riddle had attended Hogwarts right at this time. For goodness sake, Harry had seen both Dippet and Dumbledore inside the cursed diary, exactly as they were now, and he hadn't made the connection when he was talking to them! Stupidity of this scale was unforgivable, simply unforgivable!

"So, what house were you in before now?" Riddle asked politely.

"Gryffindor."

"That's quite a dramatic change, then."

"Yeah," Harry muttered unhappily. "At least Professor Slughorn seems alright."

"So he won't be at Hogwarts anymore in the 1990s?"

Harry rolled his eyes to himself. Why have this conversation at all? Maybe Riddle was trying to see how far Harry would take his lie. "I'll let you figure that out."

Riddle chuckled. "Well, I'm sure you will find out that Slytherin isn't so bad after all. A word of advice though – you may not want to be too vocal about your Gryffindor background. It might undermine the others' opinion of you."

"Yeah, I was thinking that might be best."

When they reached the dungeons, Riddle took the lead, pointing out landmarks that would help him remember the way to the common room. Harry was glad for the tips and tried hard to memorise them. The Slytherin common room was hidden behind many obscure twists and turns, something he
and Ron had been chagrined to learn during that ill-advised Polyjuice adventure in second year.

They arrived at a stretch of blank stone wall, and Harry remembered that this was how the dormitories were concealed.

"The password is sovereignty," Riddle said and a portion of the wall moved aside, "but it's due to be changed soon."

Harry wondered if the Slytherins always had such self-important passwords.

"The classes are finishing right about now, so the common room will be filling up soon," the other boy remarked as they entered. "You'll get to meet most of the others. I'll introduce you to my friends."

Harry wasn’t looking forward to that, but nodded anyway. He looked around the common room with interest. It was much like he remembered it being during his own brief visit there before. The ceiling hung low, green shaded lamps dangling from it and illuminating the room. At the back, a fire was burning merrily in the grate. Tall-backed armchairs and leather couches were arranged in groups, and there were a few lower year students doing homework at tables scattered around the room.

The windows looked out into the bottom of the lake. Harry paused to stare at the passing fish, feeling slightly awed despite himself.

The overall atmosphere of the common room was very gloomy compared to the bright, warm colours and squishy couches of Gryffindor Tower. The fish were a nice touch, but Harry already missed sunshine and the view of the mountains. He hoped he would grow used to living here.

"The boys' dormitories are down this corridor," Riddle said, leading him through an archway on the right hand side of the common room. "You're a fifth year, aren't you – the same as me?"

"Yes."

"Then it's the third door on the right, here. Oh, they've already set up a bed for you."

There were six four-poster beds in the large square room, not unlike the ones in Harry's old dormitory, but with dark green silk hangings instead of the red velvet. His bed was the only one with no trunk sitting at the foot of it, at the back of the room. There was a large cabinet for his clothes standing next to it.

"When will you be getting your school things?" Riddle inquired.

"Tomorrow, supposedly," Harry said, opening the door of his cabinet and inspecting the empty insides. "Professor Dippet said they're mail ordering them. Right now I don't own anything but my wand and the few Galleons I had on me at the Ministry."

Riddle sat down on what Harry guessed was his own bed, adjacent to Harry's. "Correct me if my assumption is wrong, but are you not one of the Potters of old money?"

"Well, yes," Harry shrugged, closing the drawer he had peeked in and turning around to face the boy, "but technically I haven't been born yet, so I can't exactly make any demands on my relatives' fortune."

Tom leaned back on his hands and smirked, lifting one mocking eyebrow. "But I'm sure if you made your presence known to them and gave them the right hints they wouldn't mind paying for your
living. A pure-blood should always be entitled to his own."

Harry shrugged stiffly in response.

Just then, the dormitory door opened and in came two boys, chatting about the day's lessons and digging out their textbooks to put them away in their trunks. They stopped short to stare when they spotted the stranger in blue robes, and the furniture that hadn't been there before. Riddle stood up to meet them.

"Avery, Rosier – this is Harry Potter," he said. "He has just arrived a bit late – or early, as we might have it." He allowed the boys to cast him quizzical looks before continuing. "According to Slughorn, he has come from the future. The 1990s, to be exact."

"What?" one of the boys, with sandy coloured hair, asked in a tone that questioned his sanity, letting his book bag fall to the floor with an irritable thump.

"Exactly what I said. Professor Slughorn has told me that Potter here has journeyed through time to come to us, and why shouldn't we believe Professor Slughorn?"

Harry had been teased and ostracised and pushed around enough in his life to know when someone was trying to put him down. However, the time was long past when had let himself be dominated by school yard bullies. Besides, both Avery and Rosier were the names of Death Eaters, and no Death Eater would get the better of Harry if he could help it, much less Voldemort himself.

"You can believe whatever you will," he said, "I don't really care. I might not be able to speak about anything that will happen, but I will tell you this. I'm not afraid of you."

Time seemed to freeze for a moment, and then Riddle's face shifted, acquiring a guarded look, realisation dawning in his eyes as though he were seeing Harry properly for the first time. Harry remembered – in the Chamber of Secrets the boy before him had told him that he had already been using the name Lord Voldemort in school, with his closest friends only, and that it had been his intention to make it so that people would fear to speak it.

"I see," Riddle said finally.

Harry could almost see the re-evaluation and speedy calculations whirl behind his eyes as he worked to fit this new variable into his plans. Then the look disappeared to be replaced with a smile, but one that was unlike the artificial polite smiles he had given him earlier.

"And you don't have to be afraid of us, or of any name." He spread his hands to the sides in a compelling, open gesture. "I'm sorry, Harry. I think we got off on the wrong foot. But you must understand my earlier scepticism – I was told that you had done something that is considered impossible without being offered any proof. I hope you can forgive me."

He offered his hand to be shaken for the second time.
Chapter 3

‘This is a problem,’ Harry thought as he stared at Riddle’s hand.

He didn't know how he had expected Riddle to react to his intimidation tactic, but he hadn't been prepared for this. Riddle was only covering his own behind – that much was obvious. Harry supposed that it would seem foolish to make an enemy out of someone who knew things about him that even he didn’t know yet.

Harry had a nasty feeling about this. He felt that if he went along with Riddle now, it would bring him a world of trouble later on. He remembered Dumbledore telling him that Tom Riddle had a talent for manipulating people, and Harry held no illusions about his own susceptibility to that sort of thing after being played so many times by Voldemort. If he wasn't careful, he might eventually find himself corrupted.

Besides, Harry had the upper hand here, the ability to snub the future Dark Lord and make him sweat. This gave him a thrilling feeling of power.

On the other hand, though, refusing the act of friendship wouldn't be singularly smart, either. He reckoned that the prefect and 'most prized student' held a lot of sway over the rest of Slytherin house and could make Harry's existence there very painful, figuratively or – indeed – physically. Making an enemy out of him was not something Harry was particularly keen on doing, especially after only being in the castle for an hour or two. The Unspeakables were unlikely to return him home any time soon, so he would have to put up with Tom Riddle at least for the next three years.

'Maybe I'm reading too much into this,' he thought. Maybe it was possible to get into Riddle's good graces without getting tangled in his web. At any rate, he didn't have much time to weigh his options, and for the time being the wisest thing to do seemed to be to take the hand already and smile like he meant it. So that's what he did.

This wasn't over yet though, that much was certain. As soon as he got Harry alone, Riddle would no doubt grill him to the bones with questions.

Explanations and proper introductions were made for Harry and the two newcomers, after which they all moved back to the common room to meet some of Riddle's other friends, these ones from upper grades. He recognised the names Dolohov, Mulciber, and Lestrange. However, he couldn't be sure whether they were the actual Death Eaters who had cornered him and his friends at the Department of Mysteries only two days ago, or their fathers or something. Harry felt decidedly queasy around so many of his enemies – 'murderers and torturers the lot of them,' he thought viciously – and if it weren't for the Oath keeping him nice and tranquil, he would have run out screaming ages ago. The Sorting Hat must be a unique sort of evil thing to deliberately put him in this lair of villains against his will.

By the time dinner rolled around and they all headed up to the Great Hall, Harry was safely ensconced among the gang of future criminals and he could see no way of inching away from them.

"So, Potter," said Lestrange as they sat down at the Slytherin table. "First one of those we have in Salazar's house. Or are you?" They all seemed to take the time travelling story for Riddle's word,
though they seemed a bit baffled by the idea.

"As far as I know."

"Your parents were Gryffindors, then?"

"...I can't say."

"I bet they were. That makes you the black sheep of the family." The Death-Eater-To-Be waggled his eyebrows. "Ouch for you." The others chuckled.

"What's your middle name, by the way?" someone asked.

"Uh. James."

"Ha! So your father's name must be James Potter. Unless you're the second son or something. Are you?"

"I can't say."

"What can you say?"

"Not much, really. At least when it comes to the future."

When the Great Hall had filled up and it looked like everyone who was going to show up for dinner had done so, Headmaster Dippet stood up from his extravagant seat in the middle of the raised teachers' table, gaining everybody's attention. Harry felt awkward already.

"Some of you may have noticed a new face among you." People at the other tables, who hadn't noticed anything yet, started looking around. "We have, indeed, gained a new student, under rather special circumstances. He has been sent here sponsored by the Unspeakables of the Ministry of Magic's Department of Mysteries after having a very misfortunate accident involving time on their premises. Harry Potter, if you would stand up." Harry did, feeling acutely the eyes of every single person in the hall on him. "Before his accident Mr Potter was attending – or will attend – Hogwarts in the year 1996, so he will now continue his studies with this generation's Slytherin fifth year students."

A rush of whispers and murmurs broke out in the hall as students turned to each other to voice their confusion. Dippet waved Harry to sit back down, much to the dismay of those who were craning their necks to get a better look at him.

"I know it sounds rather unbelievable and I'm sure you are all filled with curiosity and questions about how something like this could have happened. However, the Department of Mysteries has a strict policy about keeping their secrets quiet, so I do not have the exact details of the occurrence to give to you. Also in accordance to this Mr Potter has taken a magically binding Oath of Unspeakability to protect the knowledge he has of the future and to make sure that he can't make any decisions that could prove fatal to the timeline, so unfortunately questioning him will be useless."

There was a yelp and a loud clatter as a young Gryffindor, possibly a second or third year, fell to the floor after losing his footing on his chair, on which he had climbed to get a better view of Harry.

Dippet cleared his throat. "I expect from all of you a mature approach to the situation. Any harassment or interrogation of Mr Potter will not be tolerated. That said, I hope you will all welcome our new addition into your fold and make him feel at home in this time."
The Headmaster sat down. After a moment someone started to clap a bit belatedly, making others join, and Harry received his welcome applause.

"Aren't you a spectacle," Dolohov said, grinning and leaning back in his chair. The Slytherins seemed very pleased that they had been in on the story before all the others and didn't hesitate to show their smugness to everyone who was straining to see past their heads. "I bet you'll be the talk of the castle for months."

"Let's hope not," Harry muttered, avoiding the eyes of a curious Ravenclaw who was trying to gawk at him past Rosier's elbow.

"Don't like the attention? Boy, if I were you I'd make sure to reap all the benefits. Think of all the girls you could get with your mysterious future background!"

Harry hadn't even thought of that. Somehow, chasing skirts was the furthest thing from his list of priorities right now. His fiasco with Cho still stung and he thought he might be put off girls for a while.

"Hey, you could get us a ton of house points by showing off some magic that hasn't been invented yet," Suggested Mulciber, speaking up for the first time all evening.

"I rather think that doing so would be considered revealing what will happen and interfering with history," Avery pointed out. "Right, Potter?"

"I don't know, probably."

"How come?"

"Because it would be like saying, 'A spell like this will be invented between now and 1996,'" Avery explained.

"How exactly does this Unspeakable thing work, anyway? Does it, like, cause you pain to break the oath or are you just incapable of saying anything?"

Dinner passed in this manner, the Slytherins ever so curious about everything to do with Harry and Harry giving short responses in a futile hope that they would give up. The Ravenclaws, who sat nearest to them, didn't even bother hiding the fact that they were avidly listening to their conversation. One of them, a fifth year boy who turned out to carry another name Harry recognised unpleasantly – Nott – even reached across the gap between the tables to put in his two Sickles.

After the last crumbs had magically vanished, they all headed back to the dungeons. Once they reached the common room, Riddle pulled Harry into the corridor that led to the dorms – rather conspicuously, Harry thought, but aside from a few glances their way, nobody questioned them and everybody seemed to know better than to follow.

The dormitory's door firmly closed, Riddle turned to Harry with a serious expression.

"So you know me." It was a statement.

"Yes."

"You know what will become of me."

"Yes."
"But you can't tell me."

"No."

Riddle fell silent for a moment, considering which questions he should ask in order to get answers.

"Do you know me very well?" he finally asked carefully.

Harry paused. Now that he thought about it, he didn't. He had been inside Voldemort's head before, but what did he actually know about his life or the reasons he had for doing what he did? Quite honestly, he had never cared to find out. "Not that well, no."

Riddle didn't seem very pleased with this answer. "Do you know about my past?"

"Some of it."

"What do you know?"

Harry hesitated, thinking now, too late, that maybe he shouldn't have admitted anything. He had never been very good at lying and it would be impossible to do so convincingly with Voldemort staring at him like that. He decided not to try.

"I know you're half-blood." The corners of Riddle's mouth tightened at that. "Your father is a Muggle and your mother was a witch."

Harry was forced to stop at that. He had been going to say that Riddle's mother had been a witch descended from Slytherin, but the Oath had shut his mouth. This bewildered him for a moment until something occurred to him. Tom Riddle had opened the Chamber of Secrets in his fifth year and framed Hagrid for the crime when Hogwarts had been threatened to be shut down. None of this had happened yet, so if Harry said now that he knew Riddle was an heir of Slytherin, it would likely hinder the other boy from putting his sinister plan to action. Harry had vowed not to intervene.

The realisation felt like a ton of bricks had suddenly dropped into his stomach. A girl – Moaning Myrtle – was going to be killed and Harry could do nothing to stop it.

None of this showed on his face, though, which he could feel had gone a bit glassy-eyed. He shook himself internally and finished with telling what he knew. "He left her when he found out about her magic. She died after giving birth to you, and you grew up in a Muggle orphanage." He paused. "Your name is Tom Marvolo Riddle, Tom after your father and Marvolo after your grandfather."

"You know quite a lot about me for someone who doesn't know me that well," Riddle pointed out, voice chilly. Harry had nothing to say to that.

After a short silence, during which both of them tried to stare the other down and neither would submit, Riddle sighed. "Let us be straightforward. I can see that you aren't pleased with the person I will become. Likely you consider me an enemy. However, I wish that we can still be friends."

Harry watched impassively as he laid his hand against one of his bedposts and spoke demurely. "I have plans for my own future, but it's all still very uncertain to me. I don't know where life will take me yet. Please understand, I am not the same person as the me of fifty years from now, so you shouldn't have any reason to hate me."

"He's always been able to charm the people he needs," Harry reminded himself, 'he said so himself in the Chamber.'
He wasn't sure what to think. On one hand, Riddle was right – he wasn't the same person as the Voldemort Harry knew. On the other hand, Harry knew that he had been searching relentlessly for the Chamber of Secrets as soon as he had first heard about it and the deadly monster within it, and was even now planning on unleashing the legendary horrors on the school and its Muggle-born students. Tom Riddle was far from innocent even if he wasn't Voldemort yet, and unlike he had just so compellingly claimed, Harry did have reason to hate him.

He didn't trust Riddle and he hoped to Merlin that he would never fall under the thrall that had fooled everyone else at Hogwarts. The distrust was mutual, though, so he might as well play along.

"Don't worry about it," he said with a reassuring smile. "I wouldn't blame you for something you haven't even done yet."

"I'm glad." They smiled at each other, both knowing it was false. "Should we go back to the common room?"

"Let's."

* * *

When Harry woke up the next morning to the sounds of his Slytherin dorm mates moving about, he found a trunk sitting at the foot of his bed. It was brand new with shining brass at the corners and in the lock and not a single scratch on the dark brown leather. When he opened it he found inside a full collection of stiff-spined text books, a new pewter cauldron, scales, a set of phials, and a telescope – all arranged in neat order, gleaming and winking at him in the lamp light. He was impressed. All the equipment seemed to somehow be of better quality than his old ones back in the future. The Department of Mysteries sure wasn't stingy.

The only things that were missing were his school robes, or any clothes at that. However, Dippet had said that he would get to see a tailor in the morning, so thankfully he wouldn't have to wear the borrowed robes for much longer.

At breakfast Professor Slughorn came up to him with his new timetable. "Good morning, Harry, m'boy!" he greeted cheerfully. "Settled in nicely, have you? Did you have a good night's sleep?"

"Uh, yes, sir. Everything's fine."

"Wonderful! I have your timetable right here. Potions this afternoon with me – don't be late!"

"Thank you. I won't be."

"Now, I wanted to talk to you about something. I was thinking about throwing a little party to give you a proper welcome to 1942."

"A-a party, for me?" Harry stammered, taken aback.

"Why, of course! What you have done is unique. A sensation! It would be nothing too extravagant, of course – just some of our students and alumni. Good friends of mine, people I would like you to meet. It would be a nice and cosy get-together, to make you feel at home. Music and some good food."

"Ah." Harry was almost struck speechless with surprise. "I suppose... that would be nice, sir. But – you know, I didn't really do anything to get here. It was an accident."

"So modest! But how does Saturday evening on the 24th sound? I'm sure everyone on my invites list
would be able to clear the date up."

"Um, sure. If you really want to."

Harry wasn't actually certain at all that a party like the one Slughorn was suggesting was really his scene. He detested being the centre of people's attention and he really didn't have any experience with mingling. It would be rude to turn down the kind Professor's attempts at making him feel welcome, though, especially when he was now his Head of House.

"Excellent! I'll see you in my class, then." He made to leave but then immediately turned back. "Oh! I almost forgot. Professor Dippet managed to get a young lass to come from Hogsmeade to make your uniforms for you. You have an appointment with her in the Headmaster's office at nine thirty. You know the way, don't you?"

"Welcome to the Slug Club," said Lestrange, who sat beside Harry, after Professor Slughorn had left.

"The what?"

"The Slug Club," he repeated. "Professor Slughorn's Society of the Powerful and the Prosperous, Unofficial. You were bound to get in."

"…The Powerful and the Prosperous?" Harry started to regret saying yes to the party. Obviously Professor Slughorn was Head of Slytherin for a reason, and this was one of those Boy-Who-Lived things again, except without the Boy-Who-Lived part.

"Sure. It's great. We're all in it, and we get to meet a lot of influential people. If you play your cards right with Slughorn you get your whole career handed to you on a silver platter. All he wants in return is some sweets and your fabulous company. Maybe some dibs."

The other Death-Eaters-In-Training around them nodded and sniggered in agreement. Riddle merely sipped his morning tea, unaffected, although from the way Slughorn had spoken of him the day before it was clear that he was a notable presence in the 'Slug Club' himself.

Harry wondered if all the members of this society were Slytherins or the likes of these people. If so, he would gladly pass the chance to be one of the powerful and prosperous.

The meeting with the seamstress was uneventful, aside from the surprise addition of a set of dress robes thrown over his head. Professor Slughorn had apparently considered them a necessary acquirement. The girl who did the fitting worked as an assistant at Gladrags Wizardwear and looked young enough to have graduated from Hogwarts only recently. She made flirtatious small talk with Harry and told him to call her Jeanie, but her work was efficient enough and Harry managed to make it to double Herbology, which was the last of the morning classes.

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The Slytherins shared this class with Hufflepuffs. Apparently they were in the middle of a small project and all the students had been paired up, so Harry had to squeeze in with Riddle and Rosier. He had actually been casting hopeful glances towards Ornel and Bornhalt, the two of his dorm mates who, according to his knowledge, wouldn't become notable Death Eaters, but Riddle had invited him over before he could pick a group for himself. Harry figured he preferred to keep Harry close, despite – or because of – the tension that their earlier conversation had caused between them.

As they set to work, it turned out that there could have been a perfectly innocent reason for the action. They were tuning Carolling Glories, and Rosier couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. Harry wasn't much of a singer himself, but at least he was able to pull his own weight without too many
mishaps. All groups were given tuning forks and they had to sing scales to encourage the confused flowers to find their keys so that they could carol in harmony. The noise in the greenhouse was quite horrid.

Riddle had a very nice singing voice, Harry found out as he watched the boy tickle one of the trumpet shaped flowers and help it find the C-sharp major. He thought it was a bit unfair that all the good things piled up on one person, especially when that person would use none of them for good. To think, it was such a horrible waste that a man of so many talents would make terror and carnage his life's greatest ambitions.

"I hate these weeds," Rosier grumbled and span around on his stool, the rotations twisting the screw and taking him higher, and then lower as he changed the direction. "Why the hell do we have to have some special abilities to get a good grade in Heroblogy?"

"I don't think that the Professor can fault you for being tone deaf," Harry reassured him.

"Hmph. It won't gain me any credit, either," the other said gloomily and watched Professor Beery conduct a pair of Hufflepuff girls on the other side of the greenhouse.

“…Doe, ray, me, fa, so, la, tea, dooowoe, tea, la, so, fa, me, ray, doe!”

"Goddamn Mudbloods," Rosier muttered irritably. Harry suspected that he was more annoyed by the clear, unwavering timbre of the girls' voices than the Muggle vocalisation.

"Be glad that Beery's so soft," Riddle commented mildly without taking his attention from the Glory in front of him. "Someone else might give you extra homework to make up for your slacking in class."

"I'm not slacking! You're the one who won't let me near those things!"

"I wasn't accusing you of slacking." Tom said and resumed his scales.

When the bell rang to announce the end of the lesson and everyone started packing up their things and taking their leave, the teacher held Harry back to give him a mountain of homework so that he could catch up with the month and a half of school he had missed. The 1940s took the O.W.L.s just as seriously as the 1990s and Harry was now acutely reminded of why one should always listen to other, more intelligent people's advice before running headlong into traps and trouble. Fifth year had been hell the first time around, and no matter what anyone said about the advantage of already knowing the material, repeating a year meant repeating the work. Professor Beery’s project prompts were completely different from Sprout’s.

At lunch and between classes Harry was reminded of his first year at Hogwarts, because everywhere he went excited whispers followed, and people got up on tiptoes or bent forward to peek past bodies to get a look at him. The staring wasn't malicious, so it didn't exactly annoy him as much as it baffled him, and made him feel self-conscious and fidgety. These stares were also for different reasons than the ones he had experienced before. While he really hadn't done anything fantastic to go back in time, he understood that all the tight-lipped mystery around him gave off such an impression. It was a better reason to be gawked at than something as stupid as not dying when someone meant for you to, in Harry's opinion. It was also, he hoped, something that would grow old at some point.

Double Potions was a refreshing experience, because although the lessons were held in the dungeons just like they would be in the future, Slughorn's manner of teaching couldn't have been further from what Harry was used to. He found that with the relaxed atmosphere and the lack of Snape's looming and sneering, bat-like presence he could actually put together a decent enough concoction. It also
helped that he had made a Sensitivity Solution before.

The last class of the day was one Harry had not been looking forward to. As soon as he had seen his timetable he had regretted not asking Dippet if he could drop Divination when he still had the chance, but he supposed he had been too distracted by other things during his meeting with him and the Heads of House. He reasoned, though, that since Trelawney wouldn’t be teaching the class, it couldn't possibly be that bad.

Like with Potions, the location of the classroom wouldn't change within the next fifty years, so Harry found himself climbing the winding stairs to the top of the North Tower as he followed the scant few other Slytherins who also took the subject. Riddle was one of them, which surprised Harry a bit at first. He had always – or as soon as he had seen it for himself – thought of Divination as a waste of time – it never worked and really, no witch or wizard worth their wand took it seriously. Thinking about it, though, Harry remembered that Riddle was one of those students who topped every class and probably took as many of them as he could to make sure that nobody missed the spectacle.

And wasn't it a prophecy that Voldemort had coveted from the Department of Mysteries? It appeared that he put quite a bit of value on Divination, then. Why on earth had Harry given that thing away without even asking to hear it first? Now he really wanted to know what was so special about this one prediction among many that the evil killed to get their hands on it and the righteous risked their lives to protect it.

The subject was taught by a greying wizard named Professor Mopsus. He had a better eye for décor than Trelawney, Harry gave him that. The round room was still somewhat dark with the drapes covering the windows, but the suffocating incense was missing. Instead of pillows on the floor everyone got to sit upright on chairs, although the seating arrangement with the square tables was still such that they were all facing each other rather than the teacher's desk, which replaced Trelawney’s wing-backed armchair.

Professor Mopsus started the lesson by directing his piercing gaze at Harry and roasting him with questions concerning the future.

"Will London be bombed again?"

"I can't say, sir."

"Dumbledore will be the next Headmaster, won't he?"

"I can't say, sir."

"Who is your mother?"

"I can't say."

"Will they make Muggle-hunting legal?"

"I can't say."

"Will the Holyhead Harpies beat the Heidelberg Harriers in an epic week long match about ten years from now?"

'How the hell does he know that?' "I can't say."

He was doing his best to make Harry slip up and give incriminating answers, but the Oath of Unspeakability was doing its job admirably. Harry's vision was starting to get blurry with the way his
eyes refused to focus on the Professor's face and show emotion. His muscles had gone slack to prevent body language from giving away his agitated reactions and someone had thoughtfully grabbed him firmly by the back of his robes to stop him from keeling over or sliding off his seat. He was dimly aware of the people around him becoming a bit alarmed.

"Hmph. I don't trust this oath of yours. You better not cheat in this class, I'll know if you do. The consequences will be dire." Mopsus directed one last withering stare at Harry before turning to the rest of the class and telling everyone to take out their textbooks and dream journals and pick a mellow dream to interpret. Today they would learn that all happy dreams didn't bring tidings of joy.

Slowly, Harry felt his strength and awareness return to him as the other students busied themselves with their instructions and Professor Mopsus went back to sit behind his desk. Riddle let go of his robes and pulled back to return to him his personal space.

"That looked a bit scary," said the girl sitting opposite Harry. He couldn't recall her name, though they had been introduced the day before. "Does it do that every time?"

"Uh… No." Harry shook his head to get rid of the last white spots in his vision and cracked open his *Dream Oracle*. "Or at least, it hasn't been that bad before. Reckon it was the interrogation." He really hoped that no one else would get that bright idea again. What a nasty experience. Professor Mopsus had certainly not made a very good first impression.

By the time the last bell rang to signal the end of the school day, Harry was exhausted. When he was busy with classes it was easy to forget the wretchedness of his situation, but once he was allowed to breathe and relax again there was no ignoring the hole inside him that used to hold in it the Hogwarts he called home. Everywhere he looked he saw things and places that were familiar and dear to him twisted into something strange and bordering on grotesque. The absence of Ron and Hermione was like a weight pulling him down, made all the worse by the people occupying their place at his side. The notion of adapting to these circumstances galled him.

And as though all of this weren't enough, he was now forced to repeat his O.W.L. year. Before his time leap he had been looking forward to the break from school work the summer holidays had promised, even though returning to Privet Drive was never something he did gladly. Now he had to get used to new Professors and settle in for another gruelling year of studying without being given the chance to rest first. He had barely even lifted his quill from the last exam paper – where on earth was justice?

With these mixed feelings of desolation and ire, he was not keen on socialising with his new house mates. So when Riddle and his cronies descended on the best seats in the dungeon common room like a murder of crows, Harry made up some excuse to slink into the deserted dormitory to wallow in peace. There he cloistered himself behind his bed curtains, though the action brought him little consolation. Everything was too green.

None of this was helped by the fact that the other Slytherins, whom he knew to grow up into something vile, all seemed like such ordinary kids. It was difficult to keep despising their guts when Rosier slouched amongst potted flowers, dung on his robes and lamenting his inability to sing, or Avery baffled over why the extract of dandelion wasn't mixing into his potion, only to realise that he hadn't lit the fire underneath the cauldron. He couldn't afford to make friends with these people, and the notion of one day growing to like them disturbed him. It might have been unfair, because as Riddle had said earlier, they weren't the same men they would be fifty-four years from now and probably hadn't killed anything bigger than a ladybug yet, but that didn't change the fact that they were going to.

If only the Sorting Hat weren't such a wretched, vindictive little piece of obsolete hocuspocus, Harry
would have a dozen fewer things to worry about. If he were still in Gryffindor, he could simply choose not to look in Tom Riddle’s direction. In honour of a millennium long sacred house rivalry, he could close his eyes from all things Slytherin and no one would think anything of it. However, here he was, with no choice but to look his arch enemy in the eye and, instead of cursing him like nature had meant it, he was forced to smile and play nice.

Coming to the conclusion that life was cruel to him, Harry flopped onto his back and closed his eyes, resolutely ignoring the homework that had piled up on him during the day. Like so, he drifted into slumber, nursing the futile hope that when he woke up, all would be better.
Harry supposed it shouldn’t surprise him that he could no longer find his way in the library. In fifty years of time the layout would probably be changed around many times over to accommodate the whims of various librarians. However, knowing this didn’t comfort Harry, who had a History of Magic essay due tomorrow and couldn’t even find the right section, let alone the needed source material.

He picked his pace up to a light jog – the fastest he dared to go with Miss Spencer around – and turned a corner, letting his fingers skim over book spines and frantically looking for the right sort of titles. It was no use, though – all of these seemed to be about Transfiguration and glancing over at the shelves on his other side proved equally fruitless. In fact, he was pretty sure he had passed through here at least twice before and was just going in circles.

This was what he got for neglecting his homework in favour of sulking, but Harry wasn't in the mood to appreciate karmic justice.

"Potter," someone called behind him, and Harry came to halt, swirling around. "Are you looking for something?" It was Ichabod Avery, who shared Harry's dorm. He had his wand out and pointing at a pile of books hovering in the air beside him.

Harry considered blowing him off, saying he didn't need assistance, but the fact was that he was lost. He would probably lose points from his house if he didn't complete his assignment in time, and who knew, Binns might even care enough to dispense detention slips now that he was still alive.

"I can't find the History section."

"You still haven't started on the Copenhagen Council? You're cutting it close."

"Well, I've had bigger issues on my mind than an essay I've already had to write once," Harry flared irritably.

"No need to get snappy," Avery said warily and moved past him, his books trailing behind him obediently. "Come on, I'll show you where you need to go."

Harry followed, feeling vaguely uncomfortable, as though he should apologise for his tone. To soothe his conscience he caught up to the other boy and grappled for a topic of conversation.

"This place is completely different from what I'm used to," he said, waving his hand to encompass the entire vast reaches of the library. "Even the bookcases are arranged differently. They used to be in a horizontal shape around there, cutting through those cases, and my friend Hermione said that if you looked at the room from above they would look a bit like a cross potent." He paused in thought. "Don't ask me what that means, though – it's just one of those things she liked to lecture about. She could almost recite *Hogwarts: A History* by heart."

"Oh yes, the cross potent, or Krückenkreuz in German," Avery caught on with a shrewd nod. "Also known as the crutch cross. It's a form of heraldic cross, equilateral in shape with cross bars or 'crutches' at all the four ends. The symbol had essential significance in the Second Runic Wave – that of the medieval times – particularly in Central Europe. In current times it's mostly used by various
Roman Catholic organizations in their logos and insignia. I can see how a shape like that would be useful in the layout of a library. I've always thought this place is unnecessarily difficult to navigate."

"You sound like a textbook," Harry commented, feeling a little unnerved. It was like uttering Hermione's name had summoned her unborn spirit here to haunt him.

"Yeah, I get that a lot. We're here," Avery stopped them at the south end of the library, which Harry had learned to associate with Herbology and botanical anthologies.

"Thanks. I better get to work, then." Harry walked further down the aisle, peering at the tomes stuffed onto the shelves and hoping for something that indicated the 16th century international politics.

Avery let his pile of books descend to the floor and leaned his shoulder against the bookcase, crossing his arms over his chest and observing Harry critically.

"You know, you really are in a bit of a pickle with this," he said after a minute of this. "A 30-inch analysis on all the reasons why the Council was a failure is a lot to write in one sitting. Don't you have other homework to do as well? What about that quiz Professor Slughorn assigned us with?"

"I'll fill it out during break tomorrow," Harry dismissed. "And you don't have to rub my face in how little time I have – trust me, I know."

"Relax. I was just going to ask if you need a hand with that, is all. I've already finished mine."

Harry paused in his search, considering the offer. His first reaction was to suspect ill of the other boy's motives – no way would a Slytherin do something selfless like that without a hidden agenda. However, when he regarded Avery, he could see no trace of mal-intent on his face or scheming glint in his eyes – his expression was friendly and hopeful, although he looked like he wasn't really expecting Harry to accept in his waspish mood.

"What do you want in return?"

Avery shrugged. "Nothing. Unless you really want to pay me back somehow. I just thought I'd offer my help, since I can."

"Oh." Harry looked back at the titles in front of him, and then glanced down at his watch to verify that, yes, if he didn’t want to lose sleep, he would be a moron for not taking all the help he could get. "Okay, then. I'd appreciate that."

"Great!"

The sandy haired boy pushed himself away from his support, and with a flick of his wand his books jumped back into the air, leaving Harry to wonder where he had learned wordless spells, since they hadn't been taught in class yet.

"First off, you're looking in the wrong place. The Renaissance political climate is over here."

He swooped past Harry confidently and stopped several yards away and started pulling out tomes.

"This is the obvious choice." He held up a formidably sized book with the title *Copenhagen, 1565-1571 – What Was the Point?* He added it to his pile, which sagged in the air under the weight before stabilising again. "But this one's good if you want to put in something about the more far-reaching consequences –" He hunted around for a bit, his fingers fluttering just above the titles, before *From One Revolution to Another*, subtitled *The Evolution of Wizard-Muggle Relations* was removed from
its shelf. “– And it's always good to have a proper briefing on the council the Muggles had in Trent, since that's what got the wizards moving in the first place.” A third, slimmer book found its place on top of the pile.

"How do you expect me to read through all these with the time I have?" Harry asked, bewildered, as Avery led him towards the nearest unoccupied table.

"I don't," was the succinct response. "They're just for my own reference. Trust me – I do this all the time with Rosier. I'll just summarise the important bits for you, so all you have to do is write it down."

Harry blinked and paused with his hand on the back of the chair he had just pulled out for himself.

"And you're okay with that?" he asked incredulously. "Wouldn't that be cheating? Like giving someone the right answers to a test?"

"What? No." Avery sat down and directed the source material onto the table. "Well, okay, I suppose you can look at it like that, but I've no problem with it. If you're good at something, why not share it?"

"Someone else might point out that I won't be learning anything if I just write down what you dictate," Harry remarked as he finally settled himself in his seat and started pulling out his writing utensils.

"Nah," the other boy dismissed with a negligent wave of his hand. "Once you're out in the real world, who's ever going to come up to you and ask you what a bunch of snivelling bureaucrats did in Denmark in the year fifteen-something?"

He had a point there – one that Harry himself had contemplated more times than he cared to count throughout his school career – so he just shrugged, rolled open a blank scroll of parchment, and loaded his quill in preparation as Avery laid the books he needed open around him for easy reach.

"Okay, let's start with the Trent Council, that'll make a good introduction."

With Avery's help, Harry's essay gained inches as though on wings, and he would even have time to stop by at the Great Hall to eat dinner. He could hardly believe his luck. However, despite how grateful he felt towards the other Slytherin for his aid, or quite possibly because of it, he couldn't shake off the feeling that this was somehow very wrong, that he was shamelessly taking advantage of his house mate's ready mind. Perhaps it was because of Hermione's adamant refusals to let him or Ron copy her answers even in the direst of situations – she had lectured them about honesty and honour, and even though they had whinged and grumbled, some of it must have sunk in and taken root as part of Harry's moral code. He resolved to find a way to get even with Avery sometime in the near future.

They were nearing the 20-inch mark when someone sneaked up behind them and scared the living daylight out of Harry by suddenly bringing their hands down on his shoulders.

"There you are!" exclaimed the person behind him. "Avery, I've been looking for you – I'd say 'all over', but this was actually the first place I decided to check. And Potter, too! That's great, two birds, you know."

"Lestrange," Avery growled, annoyed by the surprise attack as well. "Why were you looking for us?"

"You guys have any plans for Tuesday evening?" Lestrange countered instead of answering,
glancing over his shoulder for Miss Spencer before perching himself on the edge of the table Avery and Harry were occupying.

"Tuesday? I dunno. Figure I'll be working on my Herbology project. I have a few books checked out that I need to return by Thursday."

"Too bad," said the older boy. "We got the monthly call."

"Whaaat?" Avery dragged out in a whiny tone. "I thought that with Potter's party on Saturday we wouldn't have to do that this time!"

"You shouldn't make assumptions with that guy, you'll give yourself false hope."

"What's the monthly call?" asked Harry, feeling out of the loop.

"Slughorn," replied Avery gloomily as though that explained everything. Harry hadn't known Professor Slughorn for long, but even he was starting to think that it actually might.

"Slughorn doesn't discriminate by house, but he prefers to keep closer tabs on his own students than the other members of the Slug Club," Lestrange elucidated. "He deludes himself into thinking that since he's our Head of House, of all the people in his little collection he has the biggest influence on us. So, every month he likes to invite us over to his office for dinner or whatnot so he can bask in our arse-kissing and the nice, cosy feeling of self-importance he gets from it."

That didn't sound nice at all, at least the way Lestrange described it.

"And you just… go there and 'kiss his arse' like he expects you to?" Harry asked incredulously.

Lestrange shrugged. "Sure. The food's great and there's plenty of booze." When Harry still didn't look convinced he leaned closer to him with an understanding look in his eyes. "Look, I get why you're giving me that look right now. But it's a symbiotic arrangement – Slughorn's kind of co-dependent, so we give him the ego-stroking he needs. In return, he allows us in on the full benefits of his huge network of important friends. If we weren't getting anything out of it, we wouldn't bother with that geezer, and ultimately we aren't fooling him at all. But we're both alright with it, so why not use each other?"

Harry stared at him, trying to get into his logic. Personally, he couldn't fathom voluntarily sucking up to anybody for any sort of benefits. He was hard pressed to think of anything more demeaning than that. However, he supposed that if one wasn't bothered by such trivial things as morals or dignity it was a convenient way of getting what you wanted. It had seemed to work like a charm for Draco Malfoy and obviously it worked for Lestrange, too. Also, it shouldn't come as a big surprise that the people who would one day spinelessly grovel before a man with a stupid pseudonym, calling him 'Master', weren't above brownnosing their teachers.

"Do I have to go, too?" he asked.

"Of course!" Lestrange exclaimed, straightening back up. "You're a VIP right now. If you don't come it'd be like Riddle not showing up." He shook his head, tsk'ing regretfully. "Too much unpleasant awkwardness would follow. Best to just grit your teeth and sit through it. But hey! As I said, it isn't that bad at all. There's wine."

He clapped his hands down onto the table in a gesture of finality and pushed himself back to his feet. "So, yeah; the call's on Tuesday, six o'clock in Professor Slughorn's office. Be there, both of you. I have to go find Rosier now and I have no idea where to start looking. Wish me luck with that."
And with a last wave of his hand, he traipsed off, his animated footsteps echoing in a way that boded the librarian's wrath.

Harry looked to Avery questioningly as the brainy Slytherin sank lower in his seat, swearing darkly under his breath. When he noticed Harry's attention he scowled. "I hate that old man," he explained. "He thinks that just because he's Head of Slytherin he can take all the credit for my grades. As if."

"That's a pain," Harry sympathised awkwardly. "Do you think we should move on with this essay, though? We'll still make it to dinner if we hurry."

"Oh, right." Avery shook his head, seemingly to rid himself of the unpleasant contemplations of the coming Tuesday, and pulled his back straight again. He cleared his throat and dragged *What Was the Point?* closer to him, peering at the pages. "So where were we? Okay, so the Italian Magical Senate, despite their dignitaries' votes in the Council, weren't too enthusiastic about putting the decisions made in Copenhagen into action, since that would have meant big economical losses. See, loads of wizards were making booming business selling enchanted oil colours and stuff to Muggle painters, and cutting that off would have had a serious impact on taxation..."

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"Man, I'm starving!" Dolohov declared and stretched his arms above his head, a smug grin on his face. "I skipped lunch today to build up a good appetite."

"You are so shameless," commented Avery without lifting his nose from *Creeping Greenery and Their Creepy Quirks*. "Nobody wants to see you stuff your face."

"Hey, I'm just showing my appreciation for the grub," the older boy said defensively. "A man like Slughorn can take me stuffing my face as a compliment. Just look at his profile! Eating's his favourite pastime."

It was five o'clock on Tuesday afternoon. Most of the other Slytherins had already left for dinner up in the Great Hall, so Tom Riddle and his band of proto-Death Eaters, Harry among them, had the Common Room almost completely at their disposal. Killing time until they had to leave the dungeons and head for the Potions Master's office, some of them opted to take full advantage of the rarity. Lestrange had commandeered an entire settee, luxuriously draping his tall frame over it, while Dolohov had his shoe-clad feet unrepentantly on the coffee table. Even Harry, not one to let an opportunity pass by, had managed to snatch one of the comfier armchairs in the vicinity of the open hearth. Others, though, chose to spend the hour more industriously.

"That man better have a note for me to give to Professor Kettleburn that explains exactly why I wasn't able to finish my report on time," Rosier groused from his place sitting at a desk, scribbling furiously on a roll of parchment, one finger planted on the right reference point in his hastily doodled class notes. "One would expect a teacher to understand the significance of the O.W.L.s. I have much better things to be doing than indulging his goddamn ego."

"Why don't you just stay here then?" Lestrange suggested. "We'll say you were under the weather. Or hey! You're meeting a girl and that's why you couldn't come. Bet he'd like that, since he's always prodding us about the lady situation."

"If only," Rosier sighed and dipped his quill into his inkbottle, leaving it to stand erect there as he
rubbed his right hand over his eyes. "But I've got stuff riding on Slughorn. He said he'd put in a good word for me with the law office, and that he'd even introduce me to some hotshots. I don't want to blow a chance like that by not jumping when he tells me to. My grades alone won't get me anywhere."

"You're aiming for the Wizengamot?" Harry asked curiously. "That sounds tough."

"Nah. Even Slughorn wouldn't be able to get me into the Wizengamot. No. I want to be a prosecutor." He leaned his chin into his palm with a tired sigh. "I still need at least six N.E.W.T.s to get into law school, but at least connections have some sway on the board."

Harry held back a disapproving frown. To him 'sway' sounded a lot like corruption, which made him wonder whether there was a single institution in the magical community that couldn't be bought off. Hogwarts, maybe – but then again, Harry remembered quite clearly how Lucius Malfoy had got Dumbledore sacked in his second year by bribing and threatening the Board of Governors.

Hearing that Rosier wanted to be lawyer surprised Harry. Granted, Harry had only known him for about a week, but he hadn't pegged him for the particularly ambitious sort. From what he had seen of him, he privately agreed that he would need all the help he could get to achieve his goal.

"Well, good luck to you with that," Lestrange said with a lazy grin, arching himself into an exaggerated, cat-like full-body stretch. "Meanwhile, I have exactly one word to say to you guys: inheritance."

"What, you're going to rely entirely on your parents' money?" Harry contested before he could stop himself. "What about before they're dead? Is your dad going to pay all your bills for you?"

"Take it easy, chilli pepper." Lestrange said a bit defensively and rolled around to lie on his front on the couch, hugging a pillow to his chest and narrowing his eyes at Harry over its edge. "What I meant was that when my father kicks it, I'll be taking over the business. Any profession I may decide to take up before that will just be a hobby. I've got enough gold to live rich until then either way. My future's set, I just need to sit back and wait for it to come to me."

"What sort of business is that?"

The older boy shrugged his shoulders negligently. "All sorts. We've got a spoon in almost every boiling cauldron on the British Isles, and a few beyond. The stock market is where the real money lies these days – not Gringotts. Right now it's my father who's looking after the shares, but one day I'll take hold of the reins, myself."

"…And so the ancient and glorious House of Lestrange fell to ruin," quipped Dolohov.

"Ha bloody ha," Lestrange drawled. "No need to speculate how you would fare in the same position, genius. All your fingers and toes together wouldn't help you keep you up with all those baffling big numbers."

"I'd rather pass Charms than be good with numbers," Dolohov retorted.

"That was one time! One exam! How come he gets to consistently fail Astronomy, and the one time I get a P for Charms, I never hear the end of it?"

"Because Charms is easy."

"What about you, Potter?" Rosier asked suddenly, turning to sit sideways in his chair and ignoring his Care of Magical Creatures homework. "Got any plans for your future yet? I mean…" He bit his
lip as he realised the complications involved in that. "Whether you… stay here or get to go back to the '90s. Do you know what you want to do with your life?"

Suddenly at the centre of attention, it immediately occurred to Harry that revealing his plans to join the law enforcement wasn't likely to gain him any points of favour among this lot. Just as immediately, though, he realised that he didn't want to gain any points of favour from the Death Eaters. *This is a perfect opportunity to get out while I still can!* he thought excitedly. So, very calmly, he said, "Yes, I want to be an Auror."

"Cool," said Rosier. "That's a tough one too, though. Even after scrounging up all the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s needed to get in, I hear that the Academy itself is a real wringer." The others nodded and murmured in agreement. "But seeing you in Merrythought's class, I can already tell you're really good at Defence Against the Dark Arts, so I'm sure you won't have too much trouble with that."

Harry looked around him, confused. Where were all the traded glances, all the suspiciously guarded looks? Nobody had reacted to his defiant declaration at all. He might as well have told them he dreamed of selling insurances or regulating cauldron bottom thickness for the Ministry of Magic. Either they were all excellent actors or they really just didn't care. Harry found it disappointing – even a little insulting, when he considered the possibility that they didn't think he would pose a threat. He snuck a glance at Riddle, who at least should have been able to understand his message, and found him already looking at him. To Harry's annoyance, Riddle remained unaffected despite being caught staring and merely lifted an eyebrow as though he knew exactly what Harry had been trying to do and found it rather amusing.

Harry avered his eyes to irritably stare into the fireplace. He didn't understand what Riddle wanted from him. They didn't see eye to eye, so why did he insist on keeping Harry within his clique? If he was worried about all the things Harry knew about his future, he should realise that with the time traveller's mouth spelled shut, they weren't likely to cause him any trouble. Did he think he'd be able to sway Harry to the dark side if he exposed him to it long enough? Why would he even want to do that? It wasn't like he didn't have people lining up to do his bidding.

Eventually it was time to get up and answer to the call. Avery tucked his Herbology book under his arm as they got ready, rebelliously announcing that he wasn't going to let this stop him from acing his Wily Vine project.

"Yeah, you show him who the boss is," Dolohov sniggered.

Professor Slughorn's office resided on the second floor, which was a relief to Harry. He had enough bad memories about Snape's office to last a lifetime. When they reached their destination, five minutes early, Slughorn was already eagerly awaiting – he swung the door open before Riddle had even finished knocking.

"Right on time, as usual, m'boys," he exclaimed, a big jolly grin on his face. "Come in, come in – Tom, Lester… everyone. Come on in and make yourselves comfortable. Harry, everything alright? Starting to feel at home, I hope?"

"Me?" said Harry a little distractedly as he looked around curiously, having filed in last. "I'm fine. Getting used to things and all."

This was the largest teacher's office he had ever been in. It had clearly been designed more for the purpose of entertaining guests than professor-ly stuff like grading papers and intimidating misbehaving students. There was a desk, but it was tucked out of the way in a far back corner. Instead, the room was dominated by an unusual number of armchairs, divans, and footstools arranged in cozy, conversation-friendly groups. An oval-shaped dining table stood to the left, lit by
gas lamps and neatly set with china plates and gleaming cutlery. All in all, it was a little cluttered for
Harry's tastes, but he'd take it over pickled eyeballs and tentacles any day.

"Wonderful! I'm sure that soon enough you'll have forgotten that these walls are younger than you
once knew them." Harry highly doubted that and scowled at the Professor's back as he turned to
address the rest. "Now, gentlemen. Dinner will be served soon – I'm sure you're all hungry – but
why don't we get settled first. Take seats where ever you like and I'll bring out the drinks."

They all sat down, most making a beeline for what were clearly their favourite chairs. Harry ended
up on one of the divans next to Rosier. When he looked up again, Professor Slughorn was floating a
huge tray towards them. On the tray there was a large jug filled with what looked like red juice and
stemmed glasses for everyone.

"I had a sudden craving for some chilled Grenadine Gusto – a lovely punch recipe sent to me by
young Betty Elderbrew, who now co-owns a five star restaurant in Edinburgh. Perhaps you
remember her; she graduated a couple of years ago, in spring 1939." the Potions Master explained as
the jug poured the drinks out. "Low alcohol, of course – you're all still minors, after all," he added
with a wink.

"I'm not a minor," Dolohov pointed out indignantly even as he accepted his own glass.

"Ah, yes, of course. Forgive me, Antonin. We did celebrate your birthday only a few weeks ago.
Now, I hope you haven't taken too much advantage of your legal age?" He fixed Dolohov with a
strict look, but the good-natured twinkle in his eye gave him away.

"Of course not, sir," assured the sixth-year with earnestness that was almost convincing. "Why
would you even think that?"

"Oh, don't you try, now!" said Slughorn, wagging his finger shrewdly. "I may be starting to gain a
little on the years, but I know what you youngsters get up to when you think we aren't watching.
After all, I was young once, too. Your generation wasn't the first to think of hiding spirits behind the
headboard of your bed."

"We can't hide anything from you, sir, can we?" Lestrange sighed, going along with the banter.
"Now I'm going to have to move my illegal stash of Firewhiskey."

"Or just get rid of it now that he's on to you," suggested Rosier. "I'll be glad to help you there, my
friend."

Professor Slughorn chuckled. "Alright, all in good fun, lads, but that's enough of that. It wouldn't do
for me to give you any untoward ideas, after all. How do you like the punch? Not too sour?"

"Oh, it's excellent," Riddle complimented, and all the others murmured approvingly. "Please send
Miss Elderbrew our regards."

Harry noticed that he hadn't taken more than a single experimental sip before putting his glass aside.

"Oh, she's been invited to our little party this weekend – you can tell her yourself there. Speaking of
which, Harry, are you looking forward to your welcome celebrations?"

"Uh…" Harry was stumped for anything to say, not only because of the suddenness of the question,
but also because he really wasn't looking forward to the party. "Sure. Bet it'll be wicked."

"That it will!" the Professor preened, failing to notice the spasm that made Rosier spill some of his
drink, or Lestrange's sudden bout of cough, which the boy muffled behind his fist. "Perhaps you'll
even meet people you already know! I'm sure many of my guests will have made a lasting impression on our society by the time you come from."

Harry's gaze, though forced into impassiveness by the ever-watchful Oath, automatically slid over to Riddle, who was once again already staring back. Unfortunately, this significant gesture didn't go unnoticed. There was a moment of silence when everybody seemed to look between the two boys, raising collective eyebrows.

"Oho!" Professor Slughorn exclaimed, sitting up straighter. "Oho! I see we've already found a winner!" He clapped his hands together in delight. "Can't say that I'm the least bit surprised, though. I always knew, from the very beginning, that our Tom would come to do great things! Great things, indeed!"

Great things, that's right. So much so that nobody even knew just how great the number of his crimes was.

Riddle on his part lowered his head demurely. "But sir, that isn't for certain yet. We don't know how exactly Harry knows about me – and I wouldn't ask him even if he were able to answer such questions."

'\textit{Lies}', thought Harry.

"So modest, as always. The world is open to someone like you, Tom. Your name will be immortalised – mark my words, I'm an excellent judge of character."

Harry almost felt sorry for Slughorn. He didn't think he was a bad person – sort of despicable in his own, opportunist way, yes, but otherwise a pleasant, well-meaning fellow. Harry supposed it wasn't really his fault that he was too blind to see his cherished students for who they really were. Riddle was so talented at everything that any Head of House would have been enamoured with him, and he had had years to wrap the man around his little finger through pretence and flattery. Still, he couldn't help thinking that the Potions Master was committing a special sort of crime by singing Riddle's praises and, no doubt, gladly handing him every tool he needed to reach a position of power.

"But," the Professor said in a tone that suggested a subject change, "I think I can hear a rumble coming from the vicinity of Antonin's bellybutton. If you're all finished with your antipastos, I think it's time to move on to the evening meal."

With excited exclamations on certain boys' part, they got up and headed to the table set for eight. After that, the topic of conversation returned to Professor Slughorn and his many mentionable acquaintances, and Harry found out exactly how much the man enjoyed listening to his own voice. The others, of course, were all shamelessly taking advantage of the trait. The Professor was kept immensely entertained and happy all evening, which, Harry supposed, was the sole driving purpose of these monthly get-togethers.

The food was very good though, there was no denying that. The food served at Hogwarts was always good, but Professor Slughorn had apparently had the house-elves working on an entirely different level of their culinary expertise, and the results were such fancy dishes as roast pheasant, grilled oysters, and tiramisu. It was an interesting gastronomic experience, if nothing else. It was also amusing to watch Avery make a mess as he attempted to eat and pretend to be listening to the conversation while simultaneously turning the pages of the textbook he was hiding in his lap under the table.

"You look like you're having the worst time of your life," Lestrange whispered into his ear while Slughorn was trying to recall the name of the opera that he had gotten free tickets to from so and so
in the winter of 1937. "You should drink more – you'll have much more fun."

He proceeded to top Harry's half full glass of white wine from a bottle that was already mostly spent.

This was one thing that Harry was having a bit of a hard time getting his head around. He was used to people abiding to the laws concerning underage drinking, but in the 1940s the general sentiment seemed to be 'a little never hurt anybody'. He would have expected things to be the complete opposite, but not so. In any case, he still felt uncomfortable with all the alcohol he was being served, believing that it was wrong of him to accept it.

Eventually, when the sky had gone completely dark outside and they had long since moved back to the sitting area, Professor Slughorn happened to glance at the clock on the mantelpiece in a way that seemed all too rehearsed to be coincidental. "Dear me, is that really the time? It sure does fly when you're having fun. I better not keep you boys up any longer – a long school day ahead of us all tomorrow." He then pushed himself up and his students all followed.

"Yes, we should get going," Riddle agreed without missing a step as he delicately smoothed away the wrinkles from his sleeves. "Thank you for the dinner, sir. It was truly exquisite, as always."

"My pleasure, m'boy, my pleasure. Now off you go, and remember to go straight to bed!"

They all bid their goodnights and shuffled out of the study. However, when Harry was about to step into the hallway, a hand on his shoulder prevented his way.

"Harry, a brief moment if you please."

The knee-jerk reaction to those words was a sinking feeling and trying to remember what he had done wrong recently. The warm smile on Slughorn's face eased that a bit, though it didn't make Harry any happier to stay behind while all the others got to return to the dormitories.

"Of course. What is it, Professor?"

Avery lingered behind, hand on the door knob and casting a questioning look at them.

"Go on, Mr Avery," urged Slughorn gently. "You can wait for your friend outside if you want; this won't take long."

"Alright, sir. See you in class tomorrow." He left, shutting the door behind him with a click.

"So, Harry," the Professor said and went to stand by the lit fireplace, extending his hands towards it to let the heat warm them. "It's been almost a week now since you joined us here at Hogwarts. I did ask you earlier, but now we're alone – how are you doing? Don't hesitate to tell me if anything is bothering you."

"Oh, um…" Harry shifted his feet uncomfortably. The inquiry came a little out of the blue – nobody else had actually asked him how he was really coping with everything, and in a way he was touched that Professor Slughorn cared enough to pull him aside for it. On the other hand, he didn't really like talking about his feelings and stuff, especially with grown ups he didn't even know. "There's nothing, really. Like I said, I'm fine. Or, as fine as you could expect me to be. There are people I miss – a lot – but, you know. I just have to deal with it."

"You have a very mature attitude about this," Slughorn said approvingly. "And you are clearly a very strong young lad. But I hope that no one has made things any harder for you than they need to be. I heard about what happened last week in your Divination class, and rest assured, Professor Mopsus was properly scolded."
"No, no, everyone's been great," Harry hurried to reassure. "People have mostly left me alone. They
stare, but they leave me alone."

"Yes," Slughorn nodded shrewdly. "You've made friends with the right people. Young Mr Riddle is
very well respected among the student body, and so are those who associate with him. It's a good
thing I introduced you to him, eh?"

"Yeah," Harry said after a pause, feeling awkward with the lie. "Thank you for doing that, sir."

"You are most welcome, my boy. I just wish to help you to the best of my ability. If it really is true
that you will never be able to return home… Well. If you can't make the future, you will just have to
make history, isn't that right?"

Harry stared, taking in the mischievous and yet disquietingly intent look on the Slytherin Head's face.
"I don't think that's quite what the Unspeakables have in mind, sir," he said, choosing his words
carefully.

"The Unspeakables make their own rules and set their own boundaries. But they are smart enough to
leave weaknesses and gaps into those boundaries."

Harry wasn't sure what exactly the Professor meant by that, or what he wanted him to do with the
information, but knew that it was something he didn't like to hear coming from a Slytherin.

"I see," he said nonetheless. "Thanks for telling me. I think I should go now."

"Yes, I think I'll be turning in myself," Professor Slughorn agreed. "Have a good night, my boy."
Chapter 5

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After brooding on the matter for a while, Harry decided to ignore Professor Slughorn's words for the time being. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the man was suggesting him to change the course of history somehow – Harry just didn't get why he would want that. It sounded awfully reckless to him, especially since Slughorn wasn't supposed to know what the course of history was. It made Harry wonder if he was actually more perceptive than he appeared and had suspicions of his own concerning Riddle, although it seemed highly doubtful. It was more likely that he was just attracted to the thought of having such unperceived control over the future.

If Harry had to choose between the Unspeakables and Slughorn and say whom he trusted more, there was no question about it. Even he, with all the knowledge he had about the horrors Voldemort would bring for the magical community, could see the wisdom in keeping his mouth shut and his hands in his armpits. He didn't like it, but that didn't mean he couldn't relate with the logic. He would go by the rules Unspeakable Doalott had laid down for him, at least for now. Although, Slughorn's insinuation that there should be ways to get around the Oath, was certainly something worth exploring.

The day after the dinner with their Head of House, Professor Binns handed back the essays the Slytherins had written on the Wizards' Council held in Copenhagen in the 16th century, all neatly graded and corrected. One of Binns' few redeeming qualities as a teacher was the fact that he didn't dawdle doing his job – something that would only gain emphasis with his death, since as a ghost he wouldn't need to sleep. When Harry received back his own contribution, he was immediately reminded of how much he owed Avery for helping him write the essay. He wasn't fond of the idea of being indebted to anyone in Riddle's gang of future criminals, but there it was, and he wasn't one to let something like that slide – it wasn't right.

The problem was that Harry couldn't think of a way to repay Avery. He didn't have any gold since all the money he had once owned either didn't exist yet or had other rightful owners. He also couldn't offer to do the other boy's homework for him in turn, because with Avery he would only succeed in crashing his grades. Harry didn't have anything special of his own to offer, which only left the unpleasant option of owing the other boy a favour. So far Harry had been given no reason to expect anything devious or nasty from Avery, but he refused to suspend his suspicion after only knowing the boy for a week.

Harry found the opportunity to bring up the matter when he was partnered together with Avery in Transfiguration the next day.

"A favour?" questioned Avery, lifting his eyebrows. "I've got no need for anything right now, but I don't mind making a mental note if that's what you want. But you know, I was just doing my thing. You don't have to think too much of it."

"But I've never got an Outstanding for any History assignment in my life before this," Harry explained as he poked the bunny slipper on his desk with his wand. It was stuck half way on the road to becoming a wader. "I didn't do anything to earn it. By all rights it's your O, not mine."

The other boy blinked at him. "I got an O of my own. It's not like I'm missing out."
"I really don't get your way of thinking."

"What's not to get?" Avery shrugged. "If you're good at something, you don't hold back. There's no such thing as a limit to what you can or should do with your knowledge. I see no reason why I shouldn't help out a friend who's in trouble with his homework."

In this way Avery must have been the most generous person Harry had ever met. However, the ideology 'there's no limit to what you should do with your knowledge' gave him cold shivers. He tried not to think about all the places it would take the easy-going fellow sitting next to him and concentrate on the now, but didn't quite succeed. Instead, the quasi-boot he was working on got to feel the brunt of his agitation and sprouted its ears back.

"Here, just take a long look before casting," Avery said and pushed his own finished boot closer to Harry, pulling the leg straight up to fully display its perfection. "Having a clear visual in mind is a world of help."

Harry muttered his thanks and peered closely at the unblemished, gleaming rubber, trying to memorise everything from the curve of the upper to the stitching of the lining. He even lifted the boot up to see what sort of pattern it had on the sole. Transfiguration had never been his strongest subject and working together with someone like this guy raised the bar. He really didn't want to be the one to blow their assignment, so he was determined to do at least almost as well as Avery. After a few minutes of careful scrutiny he turned back to his own pathetic attempt and lifted his wand once more.

"Good job, Mr Potter," said Professor Dumbledore a moment later as he stopped to stand before them, his hands clasped behind his back. He leaned in closer and inspected Harry's fishing boot from both sides, eyes twinkling amusedly behind his half-moon glasses. "However, it looks like you have given the phrase 'two left feet' a literal meaning."

Indeed he had. In his attempt to match Avery's half of the job, he had neglected the part where they were supposed to transfigure a compatible pair of waders between them and had, instead, made a shockingly accurate duplicate of his partner's left foot boot. It figured that when he finally managed a half-decent transfiguration it was actually too good to count.

"Truly admirable team spirit, Mr Avery," Dumbledore continued. "But I am afraid that Mr Potter's blatant copying is going to have a marginal effect on today's grading for the both of you."

"Yes, sir," said Avery with a chastised nod. However, once Dumbledore's back was turned, Harry saw his face twist into an irritated scowl that spoke volumes of what he really thought of the grading.

"I'm sorry," Harry apologized guiltily, chagrined by his failure. "You shouldn't have to work with someone like me."

"It's not you I'm upset with," Avery muttered, still looking displeased. "This was supposed to be a team assignment. What does he expect us to do? Hide our own slippers behind our arms like jealous children and then compete who did a better job? What sort of team work is that?"

Harry glanced around the classroom, observing the pairs still struggling with the transfiguration. He couldn't help but notice that several of them were doing exactly what Avery had just derisively suggested.

"That man's a menace," Avery continued. "You should know, just as a warning, that he has some serious issues against Riddle, and through him all of us. I'd say Paranoia was his middle name, but since he has so many of those it wouldn't mean much. Whenever something bad happens we're the first people he's dragging in for questioning, as though we didn't have better things to do than play
childish pranks on Mudbloods and stupid people. I bet he won't see you any differently."

Harry frowned at his casual use of the foul word, before wiping his expression blank, since he didn't want to cause a scene by starting an argument on social equality in the middle of class. Instead he let his gaze follow Professor Dumbledore, who was making rounds among the students, inspecting their progress and occasionally lending a helping hand to those who hadn't made any. It still felt weird to see the old schoolmaster with auburn hair. Harry had never really given thought to the man's natural colouring in the future and to him, luminescent white had always been synonymous with the name Albus Dumbledore. However, there was no mistaking this sorcerer's identity – his eyes, his expressions, his bearing and mannerisms were so inherently Dumbledore that even with the younger visage Harry was having trouble thinking of him as separate person from the Headmaster he had known.

And that really wasn't fair of him, he knew. Even now he had to beat down anger and hurt and remind himself that it wasn't *this* Dumbledore who had avoided him all last year, refusing to even look at him and leaving him to suffer Voldemort's visions alone. Harry prided himself on being independent for his age and generally not requiring adult support in his life, but it had really hurt his feelings that right when he had needed his mentor's help the most, he had just been shouldered off to Snape of all people. He had a good idea why Dumbledore had done that, but he would have liked to hear the explanation from the man himself, preferably accompanied by an apology.

Be that as it may, it was unfair of him to direct these thoughts at his Transfiguration teacher. However, when he caught the man casting him an unreadable look that somehow still managed to convey distrust, he could hardly help himself.

He tried to distract himself from all this stewing negativity by turning his attention back to his tauntingly well-formed failure of a fishing boot.

"Still," he said, arranging the floppy long leg to lie neatly to the side, lamenting the damage he had done to their grades. "We're in completely different leagues in this class. You should be partnered with someone who's on the same level with you."

"I've alright. It was partly my fault for not reminding you to make the mental image reversed." Avery dismissed as he screwed the cap onto his inkbottle, although to Harry he looked a little despondent. "To be honest – and this is between you and me," he lowered his voice furtively. "No matter what you might think, I'd rather work with you or Rosier or whoever than pair with Riddle."

"Why's that?" Harry asked, glancing at where Riddle was reclining back in his chair. The boy was gazing into the distance with a bored air about him, his wader sitting forgotten on the floor next to his desk, while Rosier, his partner, was still hard at work with his own half of the task. "It seems to me like you'd be much more equally matched with him."

"Yeah, I would be," Avery admitted. "And that's the problem. See, Riddle's quite comfy at the top, so whenever anyone comes anywhere near scratching at his heels, he goes out of his way to make them feel as stupid and inadequate as possible to show them the seat's taken."

"That's really petty if you ask me." "Maybe, I suppose it's just one of his ways of reminding me of my place, or something. It's not as though I'd ever be able to do better than him. I've never been the best at anything – third or second place a lot of the time, but never first. Anyway, I like my dignity too much to sit next to him in class anymore."

So Voldemort was already establishing his lordship over his followers. Harry wasn't the least bit
surprised to hear that. Having observed the dynamics of the group from a front row seat for the past week, he had been able to come to many educated conclusions about Riddle's position in it, the most obvious of which being his unquestioned leadership. For one, he had noticed that although Riddle was hardly ever on his own, the only reason for that was that he chose not to seek solitude. Everything revolved around him, but he himself rarely took part in the activities or conversations, preferring to watch and listen from his higher perch, or to just ignore the others and read. Like a king residing over his court, he wanted his minions to constantly be aware of his power by reminding them of it with his ever-presence -- for they were only his minions. Harry could tell that no matter what Riddle said, he wasn't friends with a single one of the people he kept around.

It wasn't long before the bell rang, signalling the end of class, and the castle corridors thundered with the masses of students setting forth on cue. Harry and Avery labelled their boots and took them up to Dumbledore's desk, setting them neatly in a row with all the other footwear (and other things), before picking up their bags and heading out into the throng. Despite his earlier rant about Riddle, Avery made a beeline for the boy, taking his place on his right side while Rosier flanked him on the left. Rolling his eyes behind the trio's backs, Harry stalked after them reluctantly, but made sure to hang back so as not to appear so tastelessly goonish.

They were descending a heavy traffic staircase leading to the second floor when the rest of the Death Eaters caught up with them. Harry was almost sent tumbling headfirst into Rosier when a hearty smack between the shoulder blades greeted him from behind, but he managed just barely to catch himself.

"Hey there, cheerful," Lestrange said as he casually hopped down on level with Harry, completely ignoring the dark scowl he was directing at him. "What's with the big smile?"

"He looks like he's about to split a big smile onto your face, Lestrange," Dolohov sniggered and poked his friend in the side, hard. "Vertically."

"Give him some space, guys," called Rosier over his shoulder. "We just had Dumbledore."

Lestrange hissed as though he had just burned his finger on the stove. "I feel your pain, mate." He rubbed his side to prove it.

"You should," Rosier said and actually turned around, walking backwards once they were on even ground again. "If only you'd been there. The looks the old codger kept giving Potter! He thought he was being all furtive and impenetrable, but I could tell. He was all like 'You cannot hide from me,'" He wiggled his fingers before him comically and directed his next words at Harry. "I bet he would have just loved to have the cool new guy in his house and now he's jealous that you're hanging out with us vile Slytherins instead of his own kittens. We're his least favourite students, you know, so he thinks that since you're one of us now, he has you all figured out." He tapped his temple shrewdly before turning again to watch where he was going.

"Rosier's right," agreed Avery, glancing meaningfully at Harry. "Dumbledore's keeping an eye on you. I don't think you're on his black list yet, not quite. You're new, so he's giving you the benefit of the doubt. However, he really has it in for all of us, so as long as you're with us there isn't much you can do to avoid the stigma."

Hearing the conviction in the other Slytherin's words didn't make Harry feel any closer to forgiving Dumbledore. If the man was really so ready to judge a person based on the people standing around him, Harry wondered if it was worth the effort to even try.

Break was spent hanging out in the dungeon common room. Conversation consisted of snarking about Professor Dumbledore, eventually moving through natural association on to generally sneering
at Gryffindors. Harry, of course, felt somewhat indignant about this, but couldn't help being reminded of how he and Ron had made fun of Malfoy and his Slytherin cronies, coming up with the most creative and outlandish ways of getting them in trouble. All in good fun, of course. He didn't really know how to feel about this uncomfortable parallel.

Before long, though, the brief respite between lessons ended and the Slytherins parted ways, the sixth years heading for Professor Slughorn's class while Riddle and Avery had to climb above ground for Arithmancy. Suddenly it was just Harry and Rosier, both of whom had a free period, and the air around them turned slightly awkward. Harry hadn't got to spend much one-on-one time with any of the boys in Riddle's clique, and without all the others around to make noise, it put him on the spot to actually say something. He considered pulling out his Potions essay to excuse himself from socialising, but he had been planning to leave all homework until later.

Apparently, Rosier was affected as well, for he was fidgeting in his chair, drumming his fingers against the upholstery and letting his gaze wander around the room as if searching for a topic of conversation. Harry was just about to get up and fetch his Potions homework when the other boy finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

"So Potter," he ventured with the air of someone grasping at straws. "What's your favourite Quidditch team?"

"Oh. Um…" Harry said eloquently, quite relieved that he hadn't had to speak first. "I've never really had a specific team. But, if I had to choose, I'd probably say Puddlemere United. Someone I knew got onto the reserve team after graduating." After a pause he thought to ask, "You?"

"I'm not a big Quidditch fan myself. I've been to a couple of Kestrels' matches with my family, though."

"Really? I haven't actually been to any league games myself. Though, I did attend the World Cup final once. That was really amazing."

Wistfully Harry reminisced on the effortless grace and lightning reflexes of the best players of his time on their top grade brooms. Naturally, these thoughts brought him back to memories of his own top grade broom, which was one of the few material possessions that he truly missed. Flying would never be the same for him again. There was no point in playing Quidditch anymore – even the best racing broom on the current market would no doubt leave him frustrated.

"What about the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup? Will Slytherin still be going strong in the '90s? Or are you even allowed to say?"

Harry was about to snort derisively out of reflex but managed to abort the reaction, remembering that Rosier didn't know that Harry hadn't always been a Slytherin.

"The team was efficient enough," he said carefully, thinking of the way the Slytherin players rammed their way through the opposition's defences with the ruthless use of brawn, "but they lacked a sense of refined strategy if you ask me. Also, it was really quite unfortunate about their choice of Seeker." He shook his head regretfully, somehow managing to keep his face straight. "He just didn't measure up to the competition, and as you know, if there is a single player the whole team depends on to win, it's the Seeker."

"Oh," said Rosier, looking a bit disappointed. "Well, the other Houses were bound to get lucky at some point. I take it you don't play yourself?"

"Not for the Slytherin team, I didn't."
After that they both ended up starting on their homework after all, occasionally helping one another with bits that confused them. They were able to relax in each other's company, and despite himself, Harry felt rather warmed on the inside by the experience. He supposed this was what people called 'bonding', and while it hadn't been his intention to form any sort of bonds with these people, he figured that a little bit of friendly familiarity wouldn't hurt if he was to remain here indefinitely.

* * *

Harry’s welcome party that weekend was just like he expected. Professor Slughorn had managed to expand his office even further to accommodate the dozens of guests milling about. Wizards and witches young, old, and in between filled the room with a loud susurrus of chatter and laughter, their entirely too closely packed bodies making the temperature rise to the realm of discomfort. In one corner a group was playing lively but non-distracting jazz, while linen-clad house-elves meandered unobtrusively among the crowd, carrying huge trays of drinks and finger foods above their heads.

Harry, being the star of the evening, could hardly find a moment of peace from the party guests’ hounding curiosity. They all seemed to regard him as some sort of magical wonder that had been sent there for them to poke and prod at, as such thinking they were completely entitled to asking him difficult or intruding questions and invading his personal space.

"Will they finally come up with a spell for extracting the essence of Mandrake?"

"Can you tell us how the war on the continent will end?"

"Really? An accident? But what did you do to get into a position to have such a mishap? Surely it was something experimental and dangerous. You're only a boy – how did you get involved with something like that?"

"Were your parents aware of this stunt of yours?"

"Ever heard of Evergreen's Effervescent Refreshments, eh? Will I make it big?"

"So you're going to stay and settle down, is that it? Have you set your sights on a nice girl yet?"

Someone even had the gall to suggest that he had fallen in love with some old professor of his and chose to come back in time to be with her without any stigmas. Apparently it was a joke, since it had everyone laughing heartily, but Harry was not amused. The only bright side to this whole farce was the fact that the Oath of Unspeakability provided a conveniently credible excuse for non-committal responses even when they weren't strictly bidden. It brought him some guilty pleasure to leave the nosy vultures' curiosity unsatisfied.

There were also quite a few of the pompous, self-important type who liked to hog Harry to themselves and engage him in one-sided conversations on such dubiously intellectual topics as the anatomy of time, prophecy, and the nature of a temporal paradox, 'provided that such a thing is even possible to create'. Harry could barely understand half of these rambling speculations, so he settled on nodding his head politely and trying not to look bored out of his mind as he let his thoughts wander. Excusing himself from these exchanges was futile, for there was always somebody else prowling in wait, ready to snag his arm at the first opportunity.

It was actually so bad that since coming here Harry was lucky to have even caught brief glimpses of the other Slytherin boys who had accompanied him to the party in the first place. Right now, he
could really use a familiar face. If only he could find the others, he could put Dolohov between him and the rest of the room – the boy was the size of a wardrobe, he would keep the guests at bay. He looked around him, raking the crowd with his eyes, and finally spotted a head of combed dark brown hair that unmistakably belonged to Lestrange.

"...and then if you consider the divergence of ley lines – a disputable concept in and off themselves, granted – the phase of the moon, and high tide, the amount of conflicting energies converging on these latitudes…"

"An interesting theory," Harry interrupted the little old man he was currently stuck with, for the life of him not recalling his name. "Very illuminating and all. But I think I just spotted someone I've been dying to talk to all evening, so if you don't mind terribly…?"

The man opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, looking comically flustered. He was clearly offended by the thinly veiled snub, but didn't want to appear desperate by insisting that he wasn't finished yet.

"W-well, of course not, Mr Potter," he finally managed. "I wouldn't dream of keeping you from your pursuits. Shall we continue our discussion at a later junction?"

"Sure," Harry agreed distractedly and dashed off towards where he had seen Lestrange, hunching his shoulders so as to appear as small and unnoticeable as possible. It didn't work, for he noticed an old lady with a feather boa and a zealous looking fellow in chequered robes beginning to approach him from opposite directions, but luckily he managed to slink between two overweight witches and disappear from their view. After that he found his target with seemingly miraculous ease.

Lestrange was casually holding one of the server elves captive, snacking on the triangular salmon sandwiches she was sporting on the tray she carried.

"Having a good time, Potter?" he asked with a grin once he spotted Harry.

"A blast," Harry replied dryly.

Lestrange snorted. "You certainly look like it." He punched the younger boy lightly on the shoulder. "Don't worry. Once the dust has settled people will find something more interesting to focus on and then you'll be left alone."

"Let's keep our fingers crossed."

"Until such a time, though, you'll make front page. Bottoms up!" And without looking he snatched drinks for both of them from a passing house-elf, handing one to Harry. It was shocking flamingo pink in colour with a spinning umbrella sticking out of it.

Grimacing at the reminder of the blinding camera flashes that had accosted him the moment he stepped foot in the room, Harry took a deep gulp of his cocktail. The strong twang of alcohol on his tongue gave him dark satisfaction. He highly doubted that it was coincidence that Slughorn had included all of his contacts among wizarding press in his guest list. He did not look forward to reading tomorrow's *Daily Prophet*. At least this time he wouldn't be depicted as a raving, attention-seeking lunatic.

He couldn't help wondering what Unspeakable Doalott would think when he read the articles. Somehow he doubted that this was what the man meant when he talked about 'temporal continuity'. Who knew what sort of history-altering ideas people might get from all this press coverage?

As if being forced to think about it wasn't enough, just then a pretty young witch with a trendy little
hat perched askew on her auburn curls popped up next to him, a note pad and a quill ready at hand. "Ah, Harry, at last!" she chirped. "I was hoping to catch you alone."

Harry stared at her incredulously and then glanced significantly at Lestrange to show that he certainly wasn't alone, but she didn't take the hint. Instead she went on.

"I'm Madeline Mahler, with *Mode Magique* magazine, and I was hoping –"

"Miss Mahler," Lestrange interrupted haughtily, "I do not believe Mr Potter has given you leave to address him by his given name."

Harry shot him a grateful look, but the other boy's attention remained fixed on the reporter, his eyes cold. She had been caught off guard, but gathered herself back together soon enough, plastering a coy smile onto her face.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, glancing between the two boys. "Of course I didn't mean to presume…"

"Yet you did."

"Well, I hope you can both forgive me. But, if I may return to the reason I came to you –" She lifted her writing pad up higher, quill perched and ready to take notes. "– I see that you are a young wizard of excellent taste, Mr Potter. My compliments on your outfit, you look very dashing tonight."

"Thanks," Harry acknowledged, glancing dubiously down at his dress robes. They were dark green in colour, and he had been given very little say in the matter of choosing them. The seamstress from Gladrags had insisted it was his colour, and seeing her enthusiasm Harry had decided that it wasn't worth it to argue. He knew it was silly of him to dislike the robes just because they were Slytherin green. He hadn't had any problem wearing green to the Yule Ball, but now that he was actually sorted into the House of Snakes he wasn't keen on advertising the fact to the world.

"So I was wondering if you would be willing to answer a few questions for me," Miss Mahler went on. "I'm sure our readers would love to hear what thoughts someone with your point of view has on current trends, and perhaps a sneak peek into what the future will bring for wizarding fashion –"

"I'm sorry," Harry said, holding up his hand to stall her, "but I'm not allowed to talk about the future at all. Fashion really isn't my cup of tea anyway, so even if I could say something, I'm not the right person to ask these things. I also don't have anything to say about any current trends. And no, you may not quote me. Was there anything else?"

"Uh…" The reporter frowned, failing to hide her frustration. "No. Are you completely sure, though? Perhaps just a statement, it will only take a minute of your time. What, in your reckoning, is the greatest difference between…?"

Harry let out an exasperated sigh. He was trying to think of a way to chase the woman away without being a complete twit about it, but Lestrange was once again ahead of him.

"Miss, you have out-stayed your welcome," he informed frostily. "Be kind and make yourself scarce." He stroked the handle of his wand to drive his point home.

Finally, she took the hint. Apologising for the inconvenience, she curtsied to Harry and then scurried away, but not before casting a withering glare at Lestrange.

As soon as she was out of sight, Harry received a swat upside the head. It wasn't maliciously delivered, but there was enough force behind it for it to sting.
"What were you thinking?" Lestrange hissed, voice low enough for nobody else to hear. "You've got to stick up for yourself! You can't just let plebs like her take liberties with you. Morgana's tits!" He rolled his eyes and started to lead Harry away by the elbow, absently waving his hand at the house-elf to send her back on her rounds. "Didn't your mother teach you anything?"

Harry knew that he didn't behave exactly like a properly bred pure-blood wizard should, and it rankled him that he was starting to be affected by it. It wasn't that he was ashamed of his upbringing (although he wasn't proud of it, either), but he hated standing out, and the best way to stand out in Slytherin was to act low-class. The others didn't suspect him yet as far as he knew, and he was smart enough to count that as a blessing. Although it wasn't by choice that he had omitted the truth about his blood purity, he would rather keep the status quo than have it come out and make things difficult for him.

It didn't take long for them to find Riddle and the rest of his coterie gathered near the door.

"Finally fought your way through the mob then, Potter?" Rosier teased when the two came to join them.

"We were just discussing Mulciber's trouble with finding a suitable birthday gift for his sister," Riddle explained with a magnanimous sweep of his hand to encompass the whole posse. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Ah, I don't know," said Harry. "What's come up so far?"

"Well, I think Maris would really benefit from that laced shampoo I saw in London last summer. It makes the wearer appear incredibly attractive, and with looks like hers she needs all the help she can get," Dolohov said and earned a painful jab in the side courtesy of his friend's wand.

"One more comment about my sister and I'll make you shut up," Mulciber growled in a tone that made Harry believe that he wasn't all bark. Threats like this seemed to be commonplace among friends.

"I suggested that he buy her a nice pair of earrings," said Rosier, "ones that are enchanted to whisper the right answers to you in class and during exams."

"Maris is a Ravenclaw," Mulciber rebuked as he tucked his wand back into his pocket. "She'd lose face with her friends if she was caught cheating."

"I almost wish I were a girl," Rosier sighed. "Those earrings would be damned useful."

"Don't let anything stop you," Lestrange sniggered into his drink. "Never be afraid to be yourself, my friend. We aren't judgemental here."

"Ha bloody ha," Rosier replied dryly, but a small, amused smile twisted the corner of his lips as they all had a chuckle over the mental image.

When they got back to the topic, Avery shrugged to show his lack of input. "I don't know what girls like. Buy her a letter opener or something. So Potter, what do you think?"

"Hard to say, seeing as I don't know her," Harry said and scratched his temple uncertainly. "And I'm no expert, anyway. The only girl I've ever bought presents for was easy to please since pretty much all she did was read."

"Easy to please, easy and pleasing," Dolohov quipped.
It took Harry a second to decipher the remark, but when he did he felt his blood run cold.

"Excuse me," he said frostily, turning to pin the older boy under his baleful glare, absently noting how the smile melted off his face and the others seemed to shrink into the background to observe the suddenly wound up situation, "did I just hear you imply what I think I did?"

"No! Of course not!" Dolohov exclaimed, lifting his hands up to show he was unarmed, his eyes glued nervously on the holly wand now hovering dangerously close to his left nostril. "I mean, it was a joke! Of course I didn't mean to insult your girl, I just wasn't thinking and I'm really sorry."

Harry glowered at him through narrowed eyes, wand hand unwavering, and saw genuine contrition in his eyes. He sincerely considered jinxing him into next month, but after a few moments managed to rein in his temper and draw back.

"Hermione isn't 'my girl'," he informed haughtily, glancing around at all the other Slytherins to let them know that they were being addressed as well. "She's one of my best friends. And if any of you ever see fit to say anything disparaging about her or any of my friends again, there might not be a crowd of witnesses around to stop me from cursing you so that your grandchildren will hate you for it."

"I told you, I'm sorry!"

Lestrange stepped on Dolohov’s foot, shaking his head at him to shut him up. Avery and Rosier stood close to each other, at some point having put a slight but definitive distance between themselves and the bumbling upperclassman, nonchalantly gazing at the party guests milling around them to avoid their friends' eyes. The interlude had completely abolished the carefree camaraderie of only minutes ago. The tension was only diffused when Riddle stepped forward, fluidly and with a smile as though nothing were wrong.

"Come walk with me," he said to Harry pleasantly, directing him away with a long fingered hand gently resting on the small of his back.

The unexpected gesture throwing him off, Harry went willingly, his anger momentarily evaporated.

"That was quite an impressive display," Riddle complimented once they were out of earshot.

That was when Harry realised that he had just issued explicit threats to Lord Voldemort and his closest Death Eaters. With a cringe he began to say, "Look, I'm sorry about –"

"Do not apologise," Riddle said with an irritated hiss. He closed his eyes briefly seemingly to regain control, and when he opened them his expression was once again serene. "What I meant was that you handled that situation very well."

Harry took him in warily. "You think so?"

"Yes. It is important to assert dominance early on. I don't know how the dynamics work in Gryffindor, but here in Slytherin, to have the respect of your peers you must earn it."

"Oh," said Harry, mulling this over. "So, up until now…?"

"So far the novelty of your presence has been enough to earn you my friends' regard, but eventually you would have been expected to prove your worth in one way or another. Now that has been taken care of, and they shall think twice before antagonising you again."

"But, I didn't even do anything," Harry felt the need to argue. "I didn't curse him or anything. How
was that enough to convince them I'm not all talk?"

"Well, perhaps it isn't," Riddle amended. "However, it certainly shows that you are not one to let them walk all over you. You might be surprised how far confidence alone will take you."

"That's good then, I suppose." Harry wasn't particularly keen on demonstrating his worth in practice.

"Yes, this is an excellent turn of events," Riddle agreed with a satisfied nod. "I'm happy to see you integrating yourself so well into our group."

*That could be taken in many ways,* mused Harry, trying to ignore the ominous sinking feeling in his stomach.
Chapter 6

The next Wednesday, when Harry had spent two weeks in the Hogwarts of the past and was brooding about how much he missed his friends, Harry received mail for the first time with the morning post. Two owls landed before him – it was almost enough to overwhelm him.

One of them was clearly a Ministry owl, so he guessed that it was from the Department of Mysteries, a research update no doubt. However, the other bird, an unfamiliar great grey, was a more puzzling creature. The way it behaved when he relieved it of its burden gave him an anxious feeling. Tilting its head inquisitively, it leaned forward to stare at him with huge, round yellow eyes as though it wanted nothing more than to know him. The envelope it had delivered looked innocuous enough: off-white and rectangular, his name and address written on it in black ink and generic handwriting. On turning it over, though, what Harry saw made something flip in his stomach.

"Hey, that's the Potter crest, isn't it?" Lestrange said, leaning over Harry's shoulder to shamelessly read his correspondence. His voice was loud enough to gain the attention of most of the Slytherins sitting in the vicinity, which Harry bet was his intention.

The older boy was right, though. Harry had seen the crest imprinted into the red wax seal before, nailed to the inside wall of his Gringotts vault and in passing in history books he had researched for various school assignments. However, it had never really meant anything to him. Being the only Potter left, he hadn't really felt a great sense of belonging in regards to the pure and noble House of Potter. In fact, he had always sort of thought of it as moot, since he was a half-blood. There was no use for any silly lineage bravado for him. Besides, if he was totally honest with himself, the name Harry Potter in itself had been famous enough to get him by without any added family pride.

This wasn't the 1990s, though, and the House of Potter was far from extinct. Harry had, of course, been aware from the beginning that he had some family out there in this time, but it wasn't until now, holding an item that had passed through the living hands of a Potter other than himself, that the fact was finally driven in – like a punch in the gut, only kind of in reverse and less painful. Suddenly, the coat of arms encompassed a whole different category of significance. Now behind it stood people – living, thinking, acting people, who blinked their eyes and snored while they slept and probably liked pancakes and jazz music – instead of a vague, faded family tree with forgettable names and dates of death.

Harry looked back at the owl, which was still craning its neck to bring its goofy round face close to his. *This must be my family owl, then,*' he thought and felt an acute pang of longing at the memory of Hedwig, another innocent victim of time. He put out a hand to stroke the creature's head, smiling as it leaned trustingly into his touch. It may not have looked anything like his own majestic snowy, but just like Hedwig had been a beloved friend to him, so was this owl close to his ancestors. This was his first direct contact with his family.

"So what's the hold up? Let's open it and see what's inside," Lestrange urged next to him.

"Uh…"

Rosier rolled his eyes. "Morgana's knickers, Lestrange. Don't you have the faintest sense of courtesy?"
"Yeah, there's this thing called secrecy of correspondence," drawled Avery. "It means it's impolite to read other people's mail."

The sixth year opened his mouth to say something, but Harry decided to interrupt before the bickering could escalate.

"I think I'll just read it later when there's more time, if you guys don't mind."

"Oh, please don't mind us," Rosier tried to placate. "Tactless over there will shove off so no one will be reading over your shoulder. Right, Lestrange?"

Ignoring the displeased frown Lestrange sent Rosier, Harry shook his head.

"No, I mean, you know. It's from my family. I want to read it in private. I'll just wait until break, no problem." He let his gaze linger longingly on his mystery relative's handwriting before moving to put the letter away.

"Wait," said Rosier. "We have History first. Why don't you just skive? Binns won't notice a thing."

"What?" exclaimed Avery, aghast. "You can't do that! What about roll call?"

"I'll say 'here' when he calls Potter's name. He won't notice a thing," Rosier insisted. "Besides, if Potter really doesn't want to miss class he can just come in late and say he had to stop by at the infirmary for a headache cure."

"I like that plan," Harry said before Avery could argue. "It'll work. And even if it doesn't and I get caught ditching class, it's not like I've never served detention before in my life."

"Serve all the detentions you like, but if you lose any house points from Slytherin, you better earn them back double," Dolohov put in his two Sickles crossly.

"You're one to talk," Lestrange said, levelling his fork at him accusingly. "We never saw you earning back those thirty-five points you lost us for hexing Leslie Turner right in front of Professor Merrythought."

"That Mudblood had it coming," Dolohov said defensively. "Strutting around like he owned shares to the school. His old man could be the bloody Prince of Wales or whatever and that would mean nothing in these parts."

"I don't know about that," said Avery with a serious face. Harry couldn't tell whether he meant it to be mocking or not. "Royalty are tricky folk. The king still has authority over our Minister even though he never bothers to call on it."

"What a disgrace," Dolohov muttered. "Bowing down to a Muggle of all things."

Harry's left eyebrow twitched in annoyance, and he was quite proud of the level of his restraint. He wasn't stupid enough to stand up against Muggle bigotry in present company, but that didn't mean he liked listening to this tripe. It took quite a bit of will power to keep his mouth shut, but he had managed so far. He wasn't sure how well the others were buying it though – he knew he was rubbish at keeping his thoughts and feelings off the surface.

Ridding these unpleasant thoughts from his mind with a mental shake of his head, Harry turned his attention back to his mail. He told the great grey to fly up to the Owlery if it was waiting for a response, and then picked up the other letter he had received.
As he examined its crisp, official whiteness and the impersonal cursive printed on top, he couldn't help being reminded of all the other letters he had received from the Ministry in his life. None of them had borne good news, and although he had no reason to think that he was in trouble, he nonetheless felt apprehensive.

Lestrange, with his acknowledged lack of tact, scooted closer to get a better angle, apparently thinking that any mail sent to the resident time traveller was worth seeing. However, as soon as Harry broke the seal and pulled out the folded piece of parchment inside, he seemed to lose interest.

"Ooh, kippers. My favourites!" he exclaimed and reached out far to the right – away from Harry – to pull the suddenly irresistible platter closer to him.

Looking around him, Harry noticed that all the other students in the vicinity were acting strange as well, turning to each other for mindless small talk or craning their necks and making loud remarks about the weather. Dolohov realised that he had made a mistake on his Charms essay and panicked, digging frantically into his book bag. Even Riddle, who always seemed so unaffected by everything, disappeared under the table to retie his shoelaces.

There must have been some sort of attention repelling charm on the letter. Harry shrugged and started to read.

The letter was, indeed, from Unspeakable Doalott of the Department of Mysteries, and detailed the progress they had made on the case of his time leap, just like the Supervisor had promised Harry. It turned out that they had put his clothes through a thorough screening and found some interesting particles among the fibres – traces of some sort of organic dust with never-before-seen magical qualities. However, the Unspeakables had yet to properly analyse the substance, and they were having some difficulties because the sand had the tendency to vaporise when disturbed. Doalott closed the letter by inquiring him if he had any useful insight to give to help the research along.

To Harry, 'mysterious dust' immediately brought up memories of his third year and his daring traipsing through time with Hermione. In his mind's eye he could still see the delicate hourglass that his friend had handled with such gentle care – how the golden framing gleamed in the torch light, and how the translucent sand inside seemed to sparkle on its own.

He felt like hitting himself now. Time-Turners were the only mode of transportation through time, so how come it hadn't occurred to him that it was a Time-Turner that brought him here? Or a bunch of shattered Time-Turners, as the case must be. Thinking back on that fateful night at the Department of Mysteries, he remembered impacting with some sort of glass cabinet. No doubt that was where the Unspeakables had stored their Time-Turners, and when it all came crashing down all that unstable sand had caused the hurricane that had taken Harry away.

Resolving to explain his theory to the Supervisor in his reply, Harry lowered the letter and contemplated what these revelations meant. It wasn't very encouraging that the Unspeakables had never seen the sand before. From what Harry had gathered, the Department of Mysteries was supposed to house some sort of professional inventors – pioneers of all things magic. If even they couldn't recognise the components that made up a Time-Turner, things really weren't looking up for Harry. He might as well completely kiss his hopes of ever seeing his friends again goodbye.

This depressing thought drawing a gloomy cloud over his mood, Harry stashed the envelope away and got poked in the side by Lestrange, who felt that he had been cheated out of sating his perfectly reasonable curiosity. However, soon enough the bell rang to announce the beginning of classes, lifting his mood up again.

"I'll come to class later, tell Binns that thing about the infirmary," Harry instructed before turning to
jog towards the ground floor boys' loo, an excited grin on his face.

"Will do, Potter," Rosier agreed and then called after him, "Don't forget to tell me all about it!"

Not really listening, Harry lifted a hand in acquiescence even as he hurried away, thoughts centred on speculations of what the Potters had to say to him. When he reached the bathroom he shut himself in one of the cubicles near the back and pulled the letter from his pocket. He held it with ceremonial reverence, examining the crest pressed into the wax, trying to memorise it where before he had paid it so little attention. Finally, he slid his finger beneath the flap, easing the seal off, careful not to break it. He pulled out the folded piece of parchment inside, and read:

Dear Harry,

Although surely these past weeks you have heard naught else, we wish to express how gladly received you are in our year. Words fail to describe our wonderment at this miracle, for addition to our family is a long awaited gift. Your existence lays many worries to rest and gives new hope both for our own future and the continuity of the lineage we carry.

This experience must be very distressing for you, Harry. No doubt, leaving behind your loved ones has caused you great suffering. We hope you will allow us to extend our help to you in these difficult times. Though you may not know us very well, if indeed at all, it is our fervent wish that you will come to trust us and let us near. The parents who raised you we may not be, but our blood runs strong in your veins, and family comes before all else. Let time not pose a barrier between us of kin.

If you are willing, we would most dearly like to meet you in person. We have made preparatory arrangements to dine at the Augurey's Nest in Old Town, Edinburgh on the coming Sunday evening and would love for you to join us. If you find the date inconvenient, the plans remain open for revision. The restaurant is a lovely establishment that we are sure will be agreeable to your standards.

Please send us a reply with your answer to our request. The owl's name is Ethel and she has been instructed to carry your response for you. We eagerly await your correspondence.

Sincerely yours,

Howard & Iris Potter

Harry had to return to the top twice over before he could fully process all the words and convince himself that they were real and still there. Fighting a valiant battle to control his reactions, he drew in a shaky breath and lifted a trembling hand to rub his eyes, wiping away the moisture that wet his lashes and pushing his glasses slightly askew. Sirius had mentioned those names before. His grandparents.

To be perfectly honest, this was exactly what Harry had expected. It was a hope he had tried to beat down to spare him from disappointment, but nonetheless he had been expecting this. He wondered what that said about him as a person, if those assumptions made him very arrogant and selfish. However, though none of this came as a great surprise, it didn't take away from the overwhelming sense of relief he was experiencing, and the building excitement in his chest the deeper all of it sank in.
All these two weeks Harry had been absorbed in all the bad things that came with ending up in this particular year of all years – being forced to co-exist with his worst enemy and having to watch all these normal and mostly likeable people live their ordinary and uninteresting lives while knowing that they would grow up to be Death Eaters.

He had kept agonising over the fact that any day now they would likely find another eerie writing on the wall and people would start to topple over like domino blocks, and he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. All he could do was to wait silently and patiently for the culmination – the damnation of an innocent girl's spirit to forever haunt a smelly cubicle in a perpetually out-of-order bathroom.

These were the things on which Harry had centred his existence here, and he had completely forgotten or disregarded the possibility that there might be something good out there – a different, better world outside of Voldemort's influence. Voldemort, after all, was yet to be anything more than a relatively powerless teenager with fantasies of grandeur. There might be something worthwhile waiting for him out there, if only he was patient. Three years of this, even less, and he would be free of Tom Riddle. Lord Voldemort wouldn't come to terrorise wizarding Britain in some decades yet, so Harry would be allowed to enjoy peace while it lasted.

Now, though, that better world had come to him and reminded him of the hope that was belied by the gloom of the most Slytherin side of Hogwarts.

Harry read the letter again, this time with more thought and attention to detail. He wondered what they meant by the hope he brought to their future. Were they having trouble having children? That would pose a problem for a pure-blood family, he supposed, since it must be important to them to have heirs to pass their legacy on. A quick mental math revealed to Harry that Howard and Iris wouldn't have his father until, what, the early 1960s? That seemed like a long time if they were already trying.

The talk about 'loved ones' and 'parents' made him feel bad, not because he still felt touchy about the deaths of Lily and James – he didn't – but because if Howard and Iris knew that their son and daughter-in-law would die young and leave the last scion of their old and noble House in the hands of bigoted Muggles, they would no doubt be horrified. They might pity Harry, a thought which he didn't like at all, but worst of all they might feel guilty and somehow responsible. Illogical, Harry knew, but he also knew that that was how people tended to think when faced with such things.

It was a good thing, then, that Harry wasn't allowed to talk about his parent' deaths. Howard and Iris wouldn't need to find out, and they could live their lives with their blissful hopes and dreams and plans for the future. Harry would let them believe that he was what they expected him to be: a proper, magic-raised young wizard from a healthy, normal family and nothing more, nothing less.

He glanced down at his wristwatch and regretfully decided that it was time for him to get to class. The excuse of getting a pain reliever from the school nurse only bought him so much time before even Binns would become suspicious. Sighing, he put the letter away and unlocked the cubicle door to leave.

There was someone standing next to the sinks, drying his hands on a self-disposing paper towel. Harry recognised him vaguely as one of the Gryffindor boys in his Care of Magical Creatures class. He nodded politely at the boy before making to exit the bathroom.

"Hey, you didn't wash your hands!"

"Oh, I wasn't doing anything in there," Harry explained with a dismissive wave of his hand as he approached the door. "Just skiving. But I'm heading to class now."
"Bloody Slytherins, always the same…" the boy muttered, making Harry freeze with his hand on the doorknob.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" he asked, turning to look at him.

The boy looked surprised that he had been heard, but hardened his expression defiantly.

"I said you just proved to me that you Slytherins are, and always will be, exactly the same."

Harry stared at him, feeling a little stupefied. He'd been expecting this ever since his sorting, but encountering baseless bias like this felt decidedly unpleasant. Finally he stepped away from the door, towards the other boy.

"Exactly the same, huh," he said. "What's that then? Sneaky, slimy little villains, I guess? Well, maybe I have a good reason for being late for class, ever think of that?"

"Oh, sure. I guess you were crying in that cubicle."

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" Harry snapped.

The boy looked affronted that he even had to ask. "I'm Marcus McKinnon, Gryffindor. No need to ask who you are, coming here all full of yourself, posing smugly on the front page of –"

Harry's wand was jabbing him in the chest before he could finish the sentence.

"Shut up, you don't know the first thing about me. I do not pose. And you might want to consider who you're talking to before you start spouting that load of crock about my house. I'm a Potter, and I know all about Gryffindor, so don't think I can't recognise a hypocrite when he's staring me right in the face."

"Point that thing away from me," McKinnon snarled, pushing Harry's wand hand away from him while, funnily enough, aiming his own wand at the bridge of Harry's glasses. "Strange you should bring that up. I've been wondering how the son of a Potter ended up in the snake pit. You a traitor, huh? We don't like traitors, you know. We don't like them at all."

That stung, but Harry would be damned if he let it show. Instead he rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

"I don't know. Am I? Does sleeping in a different dorm make me a traitor to you? Because if it does, I'm glad I was never in with your lot in the first place."

"Well I wouldn't want one of Tom Riddle's bootlickers around me anyway, thanks."

"I'm no one's bootlicker," Harry argued automatically, the mere notion sending a disgusted shiver travelling through his body. He grabbed hold of the other boy's wand and pushed it down in turn. "What's your problem anyway? Aren't you supposed to be in class, too?"

"I have a free period."

"Good for you. However, because of you I'm now even more late to History of Magic than I wanted to be, so if you don't mind, I'll take my leave." Harry turned to go but paused again. "Feel free squeal on me. I'm sure professors will be impressed with your integrity."

He closed the door behind him with a firm snap and stomped through the hallways towards the first floor, fuming. It certainly didn't surprise him that Gryffindors would now be wary of him and even treat him with hostility, but what did surprise him was how strongly he had reacted to it. A
Gryffindor at heart, he would have expected himself to be able to brush an encounter like that off with the nonchalance it deserved. Instead, he had been genuinely offended by the slight against his new house. Why was he so defensive of Slytherin if he didn't even want to be in Slytherin?

Well, no matter the reason, one thing was sure – that guy's treatment of him had been completely uncalled for. Harry had been nothing but the very image of a polite stranger to him, and his courtesy had been rewarded with antagonism. Was it any wonder that he had answered in kind? People like McKinnon deserved no less than what they asked for.

He reached the History of Magic classroom and entered, pasting a sufficiently sheepish look on his face. Harry had to remind Binns of his excuse for being late, but it didn't seem to matter either way. Binns didn't even ask for a signed note from the nurse as proof. Harry wondered whether he was absentminded or just didn't care about what his students got up to.

"You took a while," Rosier commented as Harry slid into the seat next to him, his tone probing for insight.

"Yeah," Harry said with a frown as he dug into his bag for his textbook. "I think I just made an enemy."

"What do you mean? Did something happen?"

Realising that he might be blowing this out of proportion, Harry shook his head dismissively. "Just ran into this guy in the loo who started picking a fight. Something McKinnon. A complete arse."

"Ah," Rosier nodded shrewdly. "Marcus McKinnon. I'm not surprised. He thinks he's so righteous, but things between Slytherin and Gryffindor would be so much better if people like him were just strung up and done away with."

That was a little extreme, Harry reckoned, but kept the thought to himself.

"Anyway. What did the letter say?"

"Huh?" Harry blinked and then frowned, annoyed that the Gryffindor had managed to distract him from the happy turn of events. "Oh, they invited me to have dinner with them this weekend."

"What? No sweet details? Come on now, Potter, be a good sport."

"What details?" Harry shrugged. "They were surprised to hear about my presence and now want to see the oddity for themselves. They probably just want to make sure I actually am who I say I am."

"Can I read it?"

"No."

Harry spent the rest of the period ignoring Binns' lecture and composing his response to the letter. It was consuming work, for Harry was determined not to come across as a complete peasant to his high brow relatives, despite how truthful that may be. Here at Hogwarts where kids were kids it was okay to act uncivilised, but it didn't change the fact that most of the young witches and wizards around him had years of pure-blood grooming and rhetoric lessons under their belts, and Harry was supposed to be one of them. It worried him that he might disappoint his grandparents when it turned out that he wasn't – which was inevitable, because no matter how much effort he put into fine tuning his wording, once they met him face to face there would be no hiding his mediocrity.

The confusing mix of excitement and anxiety took its toll on him for the rest of the day. In
Herbology he was so distracted that Tom Riddle had to perform an emergency re-potting for their Omnivorous Orchid when it started to choke on an overdose of manure. Professor Beery docked fifteen points from Slytherin for Harry's blunder, but reasonably returned ten of them for his class partner's quick thinking.

For Harry, it never stopped being cause for some disturbed awe to watch the young Voldemort in Herbology class. Re-potting, pruning, fertilising, and generally keeping things alive had never been something he could conceivably associate with the Dark Lord. The way the different plants crooned or contentedly fluttered their leaves at Riddle showed that the boy had in him the capacity to be gentle and kind – a frustrating revelation to Harry, because it proved that becoming evil was a conscious choice for Riddle.

At break after Double Potions Rosier offered to accompany Harry to the Owlery to send his letter off.

"So do you already know you grandparents or will they have died by the time you were born?"

"I can't tell you."

"Oh. Of course. Sorry for asking." Rosier scratched his neck uncomfortably. "Either way, though, it must be nice to meet them and all."

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to it."

"I mean," the other boy ploughed on in spite of the awkward ambience, "I can't even imagine what it's like for you. Coming here you're like an orphan. Except your parents aren't dead. They're just yet to be born."

Harry was so used to everyone knowing all about his history that it was weird to hear someone say things like that to him. Very few people had ever actually shown him any sympathy or pity for growing up without his parents, seeing as they were all wrapped up in Voldemort's defeat, and here was Adam Rosier, who didn't even know he was an orphan. Concerned that Harry might be lonely. It was quite touching.

"It's okay, really," Harry said uncomfortably. "It's just like you said – they aren't dead, so it's not like I'll never see them again. If not soon, then at least once their born. Hopefully."

Rosier eyed him strangely, obviously thinking he must be insane to be so blasé about it, so he tried to justify himself.

"Well, I didn't really see them much anyway, going to a boarding school and all."

Rosier looked bewildered and a little disturbed, until his face split into a knowing smile.

"You don't have to do the macho act with me, Potter. I'm from a big family myself. Or, not really. There's only my parents and two elder sisters. But I'm really close to most of my cousins and in-laws. I have no idea what I would do if I suddenly had to leave all of them behind. You must have it hard."

Oh hell. This sort of discussion on family ties and feelings really wasn't up Harry's alley. He looked away and shrugged evasively.

"I dunno. I don't really want to talk about it."

Finally they arrived at the top of the tower that housed the Owlery. As soon as Harry stepped foot on the straw covering the floor, there was a rustle of wings up in the rafters and Ethel the great grey
swooped down to meet him.

"Do you reckon you'll be able to stay with them for holidays?" Rosier asked, leaning his elbows on a window sill and gazing at the mountains while Harry was busy tying his letter to the owl's leg.

"The Potters? I wouldn't know. It's just dinner."

"Well, do you know where you'll go if they won't take you in?"

"I figure I'll stay here."

"You can't over summer, though."

"Then I don't know."

It was a valid question – one that Harry hadn't thought to worry about until now. Where would he go, indeed? The threat of being secreted away within the labyrinth that was the Department of Mysteries still loomed over him, giving him cold shivers. He made a mental note to write to Unspeakable Doalott and ask. Hopefully they would just chuck him into some hotel room again.

"Tell you what," said Rosier after a thoughtful moment of silence, turning around to face Harry. "If things don't pan out with your grandparents, I'll ask my father if you can come and stay with us for the hols. Amanda's already moved out so you could use her old room. It's better than any of the guest bedrooms."

Harry jerked his head around to stare at him, so taken aback that he hardly even noticed Ethel smack him in the head with her wing as she took.

"Are you serious?"

"Sure," Rosier shrugged with carelessness that might have been a little tense. "I mean, if you want to."

"I don't know," Harry stalled, glancing away and shuffling his feet restlessly. Did he want to stay with Rosier's family? The answer was: not particularly. "I wouldn't want to be any trouble. You don't even know me very well, and your family doesn't know me at all."

"They've read the newspapers," Rosier quipped, earning a scowl from Harry. "Yeah, I know. Not funny. But you don't need to worry about that, you wouldn't be any trouble at all. They might not know you yet but that can be fixed. What's not to like about you?"

Despite everything, Harry was flattered to hear that.

"I'll think about it," he promised but hastened to add: "We don't know what'll happen yet, though – maybe I'll get to stay with my own family. Besides, the Unspeakables might already have something planned for me. I'll have to ask them."

The other boy scoffed. "The Ministry doesn't own you and you shouldn't let them treat you like they do. Next thing you know, you're nothing more than a brain in a jar. Or they'll milk you for all you're worth and then just dump your sorry arse at some cheap orphanage until you're of age. Maybe you'll get to share with Riddle."

"Now you're just blowing things out of proportion," Harry said. Yet he was acutely reminded of the huge tank with human brains floating in it that he had come across during his misadventures in the Department of Mysteries.
"Maybe. Still, you should wrench yourself away from them while you still can. I've heard things about how the Unspeakables operate, and while all of them may not be true, none of them are particularly complimentary."

"The Unspeakables are paying for my education, though," Harry pointed out. "If I wrenched myself away now, I'd be in trouble."

"This coming from Mr Magical Wonder, celebrity of the month? No, you wouldn't. There are people out there dying to pour gold in your lap just to get their share of the headlines. And even if there weren't, you'd still get to dip your spoon in the fund Hogwarts has for poor kids."

"You've given this a lot of thought, haven't you?" Harry said and headed out of the Owlery, his companion taking his lead. Break was almost over. "I don't know. The Unspeakables are the ones trying to find a way for me to go back home, and I haven't completely given up hope that they'll succeed yet. Don't bite the hand that feeds you and all that."

Rosier rolled his eyes, putting his hands up in surrender. "Fine. Whatever floats your boat. Can't say I didn't try."

"No, you put forth a valiant effort," Harry agreed with mock seriousness.

They reached the bottom of the winding staircase that lead to the Owlery and set a leisurely pace towards the North wing of the castle.

"What have you got next? My schedule's already free," Rosier asked.

"Divination with Professor Mopsus."

"Oh, that? I couldn't bother with it, personally. So few people actually have any potential in the first place, and somehow I doubt I'm one of them. Are you any good at it?"

Harry snorted cynically. "I haven't made a single genuine prediction in my life, let alone a correct one," he told honestly.

"Oh. Well, most of the others in that class probably haven't either, so don't worry. I hear Riddle's dominating there as well."

"I suppose he is. I have no idea how he does it."

"I'm not surprised. He's one of those people who just have it all. But you know him. From the future, I mean. He's going to make it big, isn't he?"

Before he could tense up at the uncomfortable subject Harry felt himself relax into expressionless placidity.

"You know I'm not allowed to talk about things like that."

"Yeah, I know." Rosier ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "It'd just be nice to have some forewarning. He never talks about what he's planning. Sometimes I'm half-convinced he's plotting a coup d'état or something, and sometimes I suspect he's stringing us along just for kicks. I don't know if I should be worried or looking forward to seeing what he'll become."

Harry stopped in his track and stared at Rosier, who went on a few yards before noticing that he was no longer with him.
"What?" Rosier asked, turning around to look at him oddly.

Grateful that the magic of the Oath kept the shock off his face, Harry shook his head and started walking again.

"Nothing. Just thought I'd forgotten something for a moment."

But as they continued their trek towards the North Tower, Harry could hardly keep up with the conversation for his racing thoughts. Could it be that Riddle's followers truly didn't know what they were getting into? That they hadn't sought out the Slytherin heir's leadership because they wished to help further his ambition of spreading terror in the wizarding world, but because they simply felt compelled by his genius and charisma?

If what Rosier said was true, then it appeared to Harry as though Riddle knew that his youth put him in a precarious situation where it was easy for people to not take him seriously, not matter what accolades he had on his name. If he went and bragged about his plans to overthrow the Ministry of Magic and assert dictatorship over magical Britain, he would mostly likely be laughed at. By keeping his cards close to his chest, he maintained an air of mystery and simmering potential about him that most of his lackeys probably found incredibly alluring. If Harry could hazard a guess, he was likely to have thrown them the occasional bone by alluding to a great future that included them, his loyal friends, reaping the harvest of his success. After all, what better way to acquire a crew of dedicated servants than to draw them in early? By the time it was time for the great unveiling, their devotion would be guaranteed.

"Hey, I'll be heading down from here," Rosier's words cut into his speculations. "See you at dinner!"

"Yeah, see you," Harry agreed distractedly, raising his hand in farewell at the other boy's retreating back.

Conflicting views fought for dominance in his mind. On one hand was the conviction that a Death Eater was nothing but a Death Eater – a mindless, vicious enemy, corrupt to the core – which, granted, was a somewhat ignorant attitude deriving from his own personal grudge against Voldemort and his forces. On the other hand, there was the dawning realisation that Rosier was almost as much of a victim of Voldemort's as was anyone who had died by the man's wand. To manipulate a person's hopes and dreams and to steal their allegiance was to rob them of their future, their life.

It was something Harry could not stand for. With a deepening frown and growing displeasure, he began to climb the stairs towards the top of the North Tower, where Divination was held. To be evil was one thing, but to poison the minds of others to pull them down with you was another matter altogether. Riddle had just gone down a few pegs in Harry's already unflattering estimation.
Harry's mood didn't improve over the rest of the day, nor the one that followed. Rosier's unwitting revelation forced him to look around him with different eyes, observing the other Slytherins and factoring in the reality that they didn't know. For the first time he saw nothing more than ordinary teenage wizards, and it was a change he didn't fancy. For one, he hated being proven wrong about people, especially since he had always thought himself above bigotry and preconceived notions, and for another – as much as he would have liked to deny it – this newfound awareness made his chest ache with sorrow. It was the pain of knowing a tragedy before it unfolded and having no control over it. Because of the magical oath tying his hands and sealing his lips, all Harry could do was stand in the sidelines and watch as his new friends fell from grace.

Naturally, all of this was entirely Tom Riddle's fault. Without Riddle Harry would have no reason to worry about the state of anyone's soul or virtue – and let it not be forgotten that he wouldn't even be here in the first place if it weren't for Voldemort and his false visions. In fact, every single thing that had gone wrong in Harry's life could be blamed on Lord Voldemort, either directly or second hand. Now that he thought about it, so many problems would easily be solved if he could just push the haughty prefect down the stairs and make it look like an accident. If only it were as simple as that.

All of this inner turmoil added up to a very sullen Harry, and it wasn't long before the others picked up on it, too. Riddle could sense the hostility wafting his way and became wary of Harry, giving him space and seemingly staying watchful for any displays that would call for an intervention on his part. It miffed Harry that the other boy would think it within his rights to butt into his business at all, but what really rankled him was that he probably wouldn't be able to do anything about it if Riddle decided to flex his proverbial muscles at him.

The rest of the gang seemed troubled by the tension, but wisely chose to stay out of it and pretend nothing was wrong. Lestrange and Rosier took it upon themselves to cheer Harry up by digging up some wizarding genealogical charts to see how closely related he was to each of them. There was a fruitless and, on Harry's part, awkward argument when the two pure-bloods tried to convince Harry to reveal his mother's identity, but in the end they had to settle on comparing a copy of the Potter family tree to their own charts.

It turned out that the relation among the three of them was distantly legal at best, but when they branched out to include the other boys in their circle, the results became more interesting. Harry found out that he was Avery's third cousin, twice removed and that Nott the Ravenclaw's great-grandfather had been married to Harry's great-great-great-aunt. Knowing this gave Harry a funny feeling. Even though the kinship was tenuous, and even though it would have actually been strange if his pure-blood roots hadn't tangled with the other families at some point in history, it was a new and not entirely unpleasant experience to see him as part of a collective web that connected together such a large part of their society.

Of course, if the Slytherins knew about his mother and his Muggle upbringing, they probably wouldn't let him anywhere near their precious charts. Luckily for Harry, the only chart he really cared about was his own.

This brought up the worrying matter of his impending dinner with Mr and Mrs Potter. There was no telling how strict their opinions were on proper conduct and the like, so there was a definite
possibility that the plebeian background shining through Harry would displease them enough to get his branch cut off the family tree altogether.

There was little he could do to change his manner, Harry decided, but he could make an effort to get up to date on current things so that he would at least be able to hold a conversation. So that weekend he made excuses about homework to his companions and headed to the library to go through some recent newspapers.

What shouldn't have surprised him but nonetheless did was the amount of press coverage given over the past couple of years to the wizarding war being fought on the continent. The impression given of the war in Professor Binns' History of Magic class certainly didn't do it any justice. Of course, history in general wasn't done any justice in Binns' class, so Harry felt that he had no excuse for having almost forgotten about Grindelwald.

Lord Voldemort, Harry knew, would be all about dominating Britain. The terror he and his Death Eaters caused would be great, but other countries wouldn't be involved much. They would be left alone, and conversely, they would pretty much leave Britain alone. Harry remembered reading about volunteers coming in to reinforce their Auror Department and Hit-Wizard squads from places like France, Sweden, and Australia along with a few other member nations of the Commonwealth, but no official help would ever be sent. Voldemort wasn't the only Dark Wizard in history, and not even the only rogue out there at the time, so international authorities wouldn't see him as great enough a threat to be dealt with using the big guns.

Harry didn't see how people could really be that dumb. Maybe they were just be scared that once the unmentionable You-Know-Who had the British Isles under his thumb, he would come after the ones who had been the first to help his enemies.

Grindelwald, however, worked on a larger scale. His reach stretched out from the administrative West of Soviet Russia, across Eastern Europe, into Germany, Austria, and Italy, and made intrusive probes into France and England.

His methods were also a tad subtler than Voldemort's, if Harry was any judge. There hadn't been any slaughtering of notable witches or wizards along with their entire families, although many distinguished politicians, journalists, and wealthy entrepreneurs of liberal thinking had been imprisoned under suspicious circumstances. And while many Muggle deaths had taken place and continued to occur even now, most of them were disguised cleverly so that they could be passed off as casualties of World War II, which was ravaging through Europe at this very moment (a fact which still boggled Harry's mind).

All of this made Harry feel uneasy, and a bit guilty for having just sat here in the safety of Hogwarts' thick walls, ignoring the bigger picture completely. He realised that there was nothing he could do to help with the war – and he probably wouldn't even be allowed to if there were – but he should have at least spared some reflection and grief for all the lives that were being lost and ruined in the name of someone just as despicable as Voldemort.

A brief moment of digging through his sluggish memory brought Harry the foreknowledge that Professor Dumbledore would defeat Grindelwald in 1945. However, as far as reassurances went, it wasn't much. There were still more than two years left until then, after all.

Setting down the issue of the Daily Prophet he had been studying, Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses. Things were certainly looking bleak if the only topic of conversation available to him was people dying. He hoped that Howard and Iris liked to talk about themselves. Resigned, he picked himself up from the desk he had commandeered in the archives and wearily gathered up the newspapers to take them back to their shelves. A glance at the clock on the wall
revealed that he still had plenty of time left for homework before he had to return to the dungeons to prepare for the evening out.

A few hours later found Harry knocking on the door to the Headmaster's office, ready for departure and feeling stuffy in his winter cloak. A voice inside called him to enter.

"Ah, Mr Potter," said Headmaster Dippet as Harry pushed the door closed behind him. "Good, good. I have your Portkey right here. Are you ready to go?"

The Potters had been in contact with the man, and although it went against Hogwarts policy to allow students to leave the premises when the school year was in session, Dippet had agreed to make an exception in Harry's case. Sometimes it helped to have done the impossible.

"Yes I am, Professor," Harry said, folding his hands to stop his fidgeting. "How much time until the activation?"

"Eleven minutes, counting back. Please take a seat. I would offer you refreshments, but I don't want to spoil your appetite."

"Thank you, sir. I hope I'm not interrupting anything." Harry sat down in one of the chairs meant for guests.

"Not at all, my boy, not at all. It is a slow evening today. Here is the Portkey, as promised. The bell will ring once to signal activation." Dippet said, pushing the object towards Harry on his desk. "Mr and Mrs Potter should already be waiting for you when you arrive."

Leaning forward in his chair, Harry picked up the Portkey curiously. Unlike every other Portkey he had ever come by, this one wasn't disguised as a piece of rubbish, no doubt because it wouldn't be exposed to Muggles. It was a strip of red ribbon tied up in a bow, with the little bell the Headmaster had mentioned attached in the middle. Harry thought that this was quite a useful feature. No matter how expected the Portkey journey was, even down to the last second, the sharp tug behind the navel always came as a bit of a shock and it would be nice to have some kind of warning.

"I still remember your grandparents from their time here at Hogwarts," Dippet reminisced. "It was before I became Headmaster, when I was still teaching the Arithmancy course. Howard was one of the brightest students I ever had the pleasure to instruct. Or was it his brother Charlus? They looked so much alike…"

Harry smiled feebly at him and let him ramble, tuning him out in favour of trying to stave off his nerves. Now that it was time to actually go through with this, Harry started having second thoughts. He had never been in a situation where he had been required to interact with people like cousins or grandparents or aunts and uncles (the Dursleys didn't count). He had never had a family, and although he had constantly wished for one when he was little and still had those occasional wistful moments, all things considered he had done quite fine without it. He was almost 16 years old – not that far away from adulthood at all. He felt like maybe he didn't need a family anymore – he didn't really need anyone to take care of him. He worried that if he was suddenly presented with a family, he wouldn't know what to do with it. Merlin knew he didn't even know what to say to these people.

'This isn't the right mindset at all,' Harry scolded himself and mentally shook his head to get rid of these negative thoughts. Maybe he should start out by thinking small. This didn't mean he suddenly had a family who would insist on looking after him and interfering in his life. This didn't mean any sort of commitment at all. He was just going to have a nice dinner with new people who were interested in knowing him, and whom he was interested in knowing back for a change. They weren't his parents. They were more like… distant cousins that he had never met before, or something. He
couldn't possibly be expected to come running into their arms, crying tears of joy, the pink rays of sunset painting the touching moment of reunion with its hues.

Yes, Harry wouldn't fret about things like familial expectations. There had been nothing in the letter that had indicated overt familiarity. He would just go to Edinburgh, meet his grandparents and that was it. No pressure about it. Maybe with time they would really grow to like each other, even love each other, and form real family ties instead of one's only made of blood.

This was a good thing for all around. He was getting to know his roots, and the side of his family he had never known and which he had always had a hopeful longing for as a child. He needed this.

Besides – and these were thoughts Harry was too ashamed of to even let them form fully in his mind – over the past five years of his life, he had got used to having a vault full of honest-to-Merlin gold, all just for him. He was accustomed to being able to buy all the sweets and silly trinkets he liked in Hogsmeade without looking at the price tags, getting nice birthday and Christmas gifts for his friends, and not having to ever count his Sickles or ask himself the question 'Can I afford this?' when he came across something he needed or wanted. He was reluctant to give that up, and since that gold was supposedly still there, deep down he felt that he should still have some claim to it, no matter what he would say to the contrary to anyone who asked. He was a Potter just like Howard and Iris, and if it went by blood and kinship alone, he shouldn't be made to depend on the sponsorship of the Department of Mysteries, which might not even last beyond his Hogwarts years.

But no, this wasn't what occupied Harry's mind as he sat there waiting. Fiddling with the ends of the Portkey ribbon with sweaty fingers, he hoped that he wouldn't make a fool of himself, and that his family would accept him even if he did.

Finally, a clear, merry tingle interrupted the Headmaster's journey along the memory lane as the bell on the bow bounced around zealously as though caught in a strong torrent of wind. Harry felt himself almost seize up with anxiety, but managed to stand up from his chair, and before Professor Dippet could even wish him goodbye he was whisked away in a whirlpool of colour.

He made a harsh landing on unyielding, icy stone pavement, once again falling on his front with a yelp.

As he got up and dusted off his robes, he took a curious look around at his surroundings. He had never been to Edinburgh before. He stood on a narrow, cobble stone street with tall, old looking buildings flanking it on both sides made of grey stone. There was no one else around, and the sun was completely blocked by the buildings, leaving the street in a chilly, gloomy shadow. Uncertain, Harry wondered what he was supposed to do now. Dippet had told him that the Potters would be here waiting for him, but instead there wasn't even any indication as to where 'here' was. He peered at the signs hanging over the various establishments around him, but none of them bore a familiar name, or even looked like an eatery of any sort.

Feeling indignant as the seconds ticked by with no sign of another living soul, Harry frowned and turned around on spot, trying to see through the shop windows around him. How rude, to invite him for supper and then just leave him hanging. He was sure that if he started walking either which direction he would no sooner find himself hopelessly lost, so he had no choice but to stay put and wait.

Suddenly, there was a brief, strong wind in the air that seemed to come from completely the wrong direction – the sleepy barber's shop on Harry's right – and two people dropped down onto the cobble stones in front of him, stepping out of thin air.

"Oh dear," said one of them. "You're already here. Darling, did you send him the wrong Portkey?"
The speaker was a woman with a fur lined cloak and dark maroon hair in vintage curls.

"Uh…" said her companion. There was the tingle of a bell as he lifted a velvet bow identical to Harry's to look it over. "It wasn't me?"

Harry watched with fascination as the woman placed her hands on her hips and fixed her husband with a narrow glare, lips pursed unappreciatively while the man bit his lip and spread his hands sheepishly. Somehow the scene managed to put some of his worries at ease.

A few seconds later the woman seemed to give up and turned to face their observer.

"You must be Harry," she said with a smile. "I'm so sorry, my husband was supposed to give you the Portkey that was set to activate two minutes later than ours so that you wouldn't have been left to stand here alone. I'm Iris Potter, and this is Howard. It is so, so wonderful to meet you." She took his hand in both of her gloved ones and squeezed it warmly.

"Yes, I'm to blame for this," said Howard, gaining Harry's full attention and offering his hand with an apologetic smile. "I usually am for this sort of things. I tend to act before I think."

Harry gawked openly. This man looked like a middle-aged incarnation of him. This was really, really creepy, because he could understand looking like his father, but looking like his father, who in turn looked just like his father? Harry wondered if his future children would look just like him. If they did, he might just go loony and start throwing around salt and holy water to ward off evil.

'Maybe it's a wizard thing,' he thought suddenly. Maybe the Weasleys had been red heads for centuries, and maybe the Malfoys had all been blond, pointy and mean from the beginning of time.

Suddenly he realised that was staring and that he hadn't said anything yet. He shook his head a little to get rid of his stupor.

"It… It's nice to meet you, too," he stammered distractedly. "Sorry. I mean… I'm sorry, I got a little stuck there. It's just that we..." He indicated between them with his hand, searching for the right word, all the while completely aware of the bright red colour taking over his face.

"I know. It's like looking into a warped mirror," Howard grinned. "That's alright. Oh, shall we get going? The clock's ticking, and we have a reservation at six."

They started walking down the narrow street, the older couple arm in arm with each other, an unobtrusive distance away from Harry.

"We were, at first, a little sceptical about your identity," Howard confessed as they made their way towards the restaurant. "We don't have any children of our own, you see, and we aren't getting any younger. So when someone came to us and told us that there's some kid at Hogwarts who'd come from the future, claiming his name was Harry Potter, we thought: Well, it would be the easiest thing in the world for him to say he's a Potter. He might as well have gone with," and here he stuck his nose up in the air and changed his accent to imitate the Queen (or wasn't it the King nowadays?), "'Oh yes, We are Henry Windsor, Crown Prince of England from the future. But please, do call Us Harry, for We do not like to be too formal.'"

Harry almost choked as he tried to muffle his giggles with his hand.

"But then we saw your face in the newspaper. 'That boy,' we said, 'can be none but a descendent of ours."

Harry felt his face flush uncomfortably at the reminder of the flash-light ambush he had been caught
"No need to be embarrassed, dear," Iris comforted, misinterpreting his reaction. "They caught your good side."

They turned a corner, and not long after they arrived at a façade that obviously didn’t belong in this quaint street. While the buildings around them remained a charming but rather ordinary grey, The Augurey's Nest, as the sign proclaimed in curly calligraphy, stood out with its colours. The gleaming brass in its door frames and window panes and the soft, warm glow of gas lamps visible through the windows together created an inviting effect, and the emerald green awning stretching over a spell-warmed little smoking terrace enhanced the homely feel. There was even a short wine red carpet leading up to the door, lined with velvet ropes.

"Am I a bit under dressed for this place?" Harry wondered uncertainly, parting his cloak and inspecting his robes critically. He was wearing one of the few outfits he owned aside from his school uniforms, and although not scruffy or slovenly, it was still rather plain. He hadn’t even considered putting on those pompous Slytherin dress robes of his.

"Not at all, sweetie – don't worry about it," Iris said as her husband opened the door for them. "We didn't know what kind of restaurants you're accustomed to dining at, so we picked this one as a nice middle ground between refined and intimate. The atmosphere here is very cosy, but the food they serve is exquisite."

Her reassurance didn't help much with Harry's anxiety. Iris seemed to assume that he ate at highbrow places like this all the time. Truth be told, he had never in his life stepped foot in any establishment finer than the Leaky Cauldron or Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour.

The interior of the Augurey's Nest was very nicely decorated with green velvet hangings softening the walls. The tables were all covered with clean white tablecloths and set with a dizzying amount of knives and forks, and a few spoons, too. Each table had a unique flower arrangement as a centrepiece.

They were greeted at the door by a young witch with flaxen curls and doe's eyes standing behind the hostess' booth. She recognised the older patrons by sight and didn't even have to confirm their reservation before she was taking their cloaks and leading them to a secluded table set for three. There was a painting hung on the wall above it, depicting a scene of rolling hills and a pigtailed sheepherder with her pasturing flock of sheep.

"While we still hang on to the subject of names," said Iris as they sat down. "Is your name short for anything, Harry? Like," she glanced amusedly at her husband, "Henry, or possibly Harold?"

"Ah, no. It's just Harry," Harry said and stopped himself from fidgeting as he glanced over the expensive looking crystal on the table. "Plain old Harry."

"That's good," Howard nodded approvingly. "We Potters don't believe in naming our children after constellations or Greek gods or silly things like that. It's the man who makes the name, not the other way around."

Harry figured this must be a philosophy learned through experience. After all, when it came to English surnames, you couldn't get much more common than Potter. It was nothing like the names like Dumbledore or Lestrange that just reeked of magic.

The silence grew awkward after that, when no one could immediately think of anything to say. Harry was relieved when a waiter came with the menus and took their orders for drinks.
He had, of course, been expecting big prices from the moment he saw what kind of restaurant the Augurey's Nest was, but it still made him sweat a little to look at the items listed on the menu. He had no idea what to order, since half the things written there he didn't even understand, so he decided to just ask his companions to suggest something. He ended up with a six course meal that cost a monumental amount of gold. Harry thought it was stupid to spend so much money on one meal.

The conversation was a bit forced at first. Fortunately, the wait for the food wasn't long, so Harry at least had something to occupy his hands with. Also, he was pleased to find out that while they ate he didn't have to concern himself with coming up with things to say.

He thought it kind of odd that here he was, feeling uneasy around his own grandparents, while with Sirius, whom he wasn't even related to, he had been able to forge a rather close relationship virtually in no time at all. There was nothing wrong with Howard and Iris. In fact, they were quite nice and definitely some of the more approachable people he had ever met. Howard was an entertaining, humorous sort of fellow – Harry suspected that James would get his Marauder side from him – and his grandmother didn't seem bad either. They both also appeared to genuinely want to know Harry, for him to be part of their family. Despite all this, Harry still felt out of place and under pressure.

During main course number one the atmosphere started to finally relax a little. Iris and Howard were reminiscing about Hogwarts, which they had attended way back in the beginning of the century. Apparently the two were Hogwarts sweethearts and had been together since they were both sixteen.

"We had to keep it secret at first, because my father was a very traditional man and strictly against any consorting before the wedding if it didn't involve a chaperone," Iris explained. "So we were forced to meet each other only after curfew. Any public hand holding or – Merlin forbid! – pecks on the cheek would have somehow been reported back to my parents. Of course, our dormitories were on the complete opposite sides of the castle, so that meant a lot of sneaking around for both of us." She had been in Hufflepuff while Howard was a Gryffindor alumnus. "Howard always managed to pull it off somehow," she sent an exasperated look her husband's way, "but I wasn't always so lucky and served many a detention for being caught out of bed."

"Do you still have the Cloak of Invisibility, Harry? It runs in the family," Howard asked.

This was news to Harry. He hadn't thought his dad's old cloak was *that* old.

"Yes, I got it for Christmas in my first year at Hogwarts. It's been really useful, but… I didn't bring it with me to the Department of Mysteries, so I don't have it anymore."

"It's a convenient thing, isn't it? Perfect for late night wanderings. I think I made myself quite familiar with the castle in my school years. Although the dungeons always spooked me out a bit. You should know them well enough, though, since you live there."

Harry felt himself tense. He was the first Potter in Slytherin since probably the beginning of time and there were bound to be consequences. It was paranoia, he knew, but he felt like he was being interrogated.

"I used to be in Gryffindor, you know," he said a bit defensively after a short, awkward silence, "but they sorted me again when I came here, and the Hat blathered on something strange about best friends forever or the like and then put me in Slytherin. Changed my sorting."

"Oh, darling, we aren't judging, don't get us wrong," said Iris, laying a hand on his on the table. "That would be terribly childish, and we're all adults here, aren't we? If the Hat thought you'll be the happiest in Slytherin, then no one should have the right to argue about it."
While Harry wasn't so sure that he would ever be happy in Slytherin, he was relieved to hear that. Since the only part of the wizarding world he was truly familiar with was Hogwarts, he tended to forget that things like house rivalry might not mean anything to grownups anymore. It sometimes slipped his mind that although the world to him was Hogwarts, Hogwarts wasn't, in fact, the world.

"And you shouldn't judge, either," Howard reminded him. "Slytherin isn't that bad. Back in our day, everyone knew that the Slytherins threw the best parties. I was never invited, naturally enough – Gryffindors never were – but there were plenty of rumours going around, and whoever did find an invitation hidden in their clean laundry pile was the envy of everybody. Of course," he conceded, "nowadays that sort of shindigs wouldn't be considered anything wild. Times change."

After that, with that particular elephant out of the room, Harry started to enjoy the meal a bit more. He found that although the portions were tiny, they actually seemed to fill him up quite nicely, since there were so many of them. The food was good too, even the courses that looked a bit odd.

They were finishing their first desserts (for Harry, a peculiar ice cream made with the minty flavour of some tropical tree's bark) when the rather serious topic of Harry's future-in-the-past came up. Harry had confided in them his lack of faith in the Unspeakables coming up with a speedy solution to his plight.

"I have no doubt that this isn't easy for you, and it won't get easier any time soon," Howard said. "Losing everyone you hold dear and seeing everything familiar warped into something strange and alien – it'll take time to accept it and get used to it. But you aren't on your own. From the sound of it, the Unspeakables are doing their best to support you even if their research seems to be doomed to failure. And you've got us. We would never leave a Potter hanging – if you need anything at all, I want you to come to us, don't hesitate for a moment."

"Once you're settled in, I'm sure everything will be fine," Iris went on to assure. "You'll have a fine wizarding education, and once you graduate from Hogwarts, you won't have any problems finding a place for further studies. You'll have a profession and a place in society, and you won't have anything to worry about."

"Yeah, let's hope so," Harry said awkwardly, pushing the melting remains of his ice cream around with his spoon.

He hadn't given any thought to actually making a life for himself here in the past. He knew this was permanent, but still he wasn't able to give up the notion that clung to the back of his mind that this wasn't it yet. He was reluctant to make any far reaching plans, because that would mean admitting defeat and saying a final goodbye to Ron and Hermione and Sirius and all the rest – even that stuck up ferret Malfoy and his sneering goons.

"But first, as I said, we need to get you settled in and comfortable," Iris said, glancing at her husband. "We've been thinking about that. For a few years still you have a spot at Hogwarts, but after that and during holidays you don't have a place arranged yet, am I right?" At Harry's nod she continued, "Well, Howard and I would be more than willing to provide for you while you're still busy with your studies. We wish you will agree to come and live with us in our home."

Well, this provided an answer to the question Harry and Rosier had debated in the Owlery a few days ago.

However, Harry was reluctant to take advantage of the kindness of these people. He had never been comfortable with letting others pay for his living. This was something instilled deep into him by his Muggle relatives, who always called him an ungrateful mooch for eating their leftovers and wearing Dudley's hand-me-downs. When he had found out that he had always been secretly a millionaire, he
had thought he would never again have to worry about that particular moral dilemma.

Not so. Coming here had made him completely dependent on others. If it weren't for Unspeakable Doalott's generous dispensing of his research funds, Harry would likely be living in a cardboard box somewhere right now, dreading winter. If he didn't accept charity from the Potters, he would have to accept it from someone else, be it the Rosiers or the Unspeakables. It all came down to whom he felt the least bad about inconveniencing. It wasn't a very tough choice, considering his history with the Ministry of Magic.

"I really don't want you to feel obliged or anything," he said. "You don't even know me, and you aren't responsible for me. It's my own fault I ended up here —" Though he could name several other people who were equally responsible. "— I made a really dumb mistake and now I'm paying for it. I'd hate for anyone else to be burdened with the consequences of my actions, least of all you guys. You seem like such nice people."

A short silence followed his words.

"Wow," Howard finally said. "When I was your age I didn't have the first clue about what the word 'responsibility' even meant. You're really something, aren't you, Harry?" He reached out across the table and ruffled his grandson's already messy hair. "You aren't a burden, kiddo. You could never be a burden to us. On the contrary, we agree that someone up there must have finally noticed we exist and maybe deserve just the tiniest miracle to cheer up our lives. Because you are a miracle – and a big one at that. We finally have a son to pamper, and we didn't even have to go through the horrors of nappy changing and teething."

Harry was speechless. No one had ever in his life said something like that to him. No one had called him a miracle before. Well, actually plenty of people had, but they hadn't meant it like that. They had been talking about the miracle of his mother's sacrifice as though it were something he had done in the glory of his drooling toddler omnipotence. Nobody had called him – just Harry – something that special for just existing, for being himself. Mrs Weasley had accepted him into her family as though he had been one of her own, but the love she had given him had been something she had possessed enough of for one more. Her own red headed, freckled children came first no matter how welcome Harry was to butt in. This, though… This was something just for him. Howard didn't have red hair or freckles. He had dark hair and he looked like him. To him – or to Iris – Harry didn't come eighth, last in line. Here, there was no queue at all.

Harry could feel a horrifying, tell-tale burning in the back of his throat and he tried not to blink to keep his eyes dry. He concentrated fiercely on keeping his face very still to stop it from giving him away, but apparently it was doomed from the start because Iris draped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close to her side in a half hug. A quiet, choked sniffle escaped him before he could clamp down the lid. Luckily, nobody laughed at him.

"So, what colour would you like your bedroom to be?" She asked as though Harry hadn't just wrestled down a sob fest.

That was how Harry suddenly had a plan for Christmas holidays that didn't involve creepy Ministry officials measuring his every step.
He returned to the castle later that night and headed down to the dungeons, still immersed in the fuzzy, happy feeling left over from the fabulous desserts he had shared with his new family. He walked through the dreary, chilly underground hallways, too happy to be put off by the menacing shadows or the eerie echo of his footsteps. He stopped in front of the now very familiar stretch of plain, undecorated wall, said the password (birth right) and stepped into the common room.

Since it was almost curfew, the large room was packed with people and buzzing with activity and conversation. A rowdy circle of fourth years playing a card game near the middle of the room caused most of the noise, and many of the students doing their homework were hunching over their essays in a pained manner that spoke of too many distractions. A quick sweep over the crowd located Tom Riddle and his gang at the back of the room by the fire, where they had habitually claimed the best seats in the dungeon complex.

Feeling too good about him to remember that he was supposed to be angry at Riddle, Harry wound his way across the room so that he could spread the joy.

"Potter, you're back!" Rosier exclaimed, sitting up in his spot next to Mulciber on the settee and causing the others to look up as well. "How'd it go?"

"It went fine," Harry grinned, stopping to lean against the side of Dolohov's armchair since there was no place left for him to sit. "A little awkward at first, but we got past that. I'm spending Christmas at their place in London."

"That's great! Now you don't have to worry about the Unspeakables coming up with anything nasty for you."

"Yeah. Also, it means I'm going to have to turn down your invitation this time. Thanks, though – I really appreciated it."

"You can still come over for a visit if you like. My parents would love that."

"We'll see," Harry said with a shrug. "What have you guys been up to here?"

"Oh, nothing. Just hanging. Me and Avery finished doing homework before dinner so now we're just free to relax." Rosier seemed inordinately smug about this as he glanced meaningfully at Mulciber, who had his Potions text open in his lap.

"You'd be free to relax every night if you made a habit of studying," Avery pointed out, reminding Harry so strongly of Hermione that he felt a sudden twinge in his chest. He was sure that his bushy haired friend had used those same exact words before to scold Ron and him.

"I'm sure I would, but don't expect any miracles."

"A miracle would be you choosing to work even when you could be relaxing," Avery countered and turned to face Riddle, who was ignoring them all in favour of a leather-bound grimoire that he must have smuggled out of the Restricted Section. "Riddle, won't you tell us what you're reading?"

"Nothing you couldn't easily acquire access to on your own if you tried," Riddle replied dryly without lifting his eyes from his book.

Avery huffed in annoyance but resisted from pestering any further. Harry, meanwhile, felt his good mood melt away as he stared at his future nemesis. Just like that, Riddle had reminded him of exactly why he had been a grumpy bundle of embittered resentment for the past few days. He was speaking before he could stop himself.
"But Riddle, don't you know that sharing is caring?" he said spitefully. "You should really work on this whole reciprocal friendship thing, or else just drop the act and call them all your minions."

There was a sudden hush as everyone within hearing distance stopped talking and turned to stare at him. Riddle sat frozen in place, emitting chill, and slowly lifted his gaze from the book to meet Harry's. There was an audible rustle as each future Death Eater shifted nervously, absurdly reminding Harry of a Mexican wave.

"What did you just say?"

The familiar high-pitched hiss and the bridled fury in the Slytherin heir's dark eyes made Harry regret his words a little, but he refused to back down. Squaring his jaw, he persisted, "I said you could afford to spare Avery some respect. I don't know what makes you think you have the right to take anyone for granted, but you should know that's not how you gain people's loyalty or trust."

The silence that followed this was tense. The Death Eaters sat still, doing their best to blend into the upholstery and watching from the corners of their eyes as Riddle closed his book and, with deliberate slowness, placed it on the armrest of his chair, front cover down.

"You are overstepping your boundaries, Potter," the Dark-Lord-To-Be warned.

"Assuming you have any say in my boundaries," Harry countered. "What are you going to do? Curse me? Kill me? Go right ahead. I know for a fact that you can." It was a gamble, he knew, but he figured that even if Riddle had the whole Slytherin house wrapped around his little finger, he wouldn't get away with assault with so many witnesses.

"Such a low opinion you have of me," Riddle said quietly, but not in any way soothingly. "I'm sorry that whatever you have seen in the future has skewed your view of my person so. Perhaps it would be best for you to just let it all out." He stood up from his chair, smoothing the front of his robes down neatly. "Come with me."

It was not a request, but Harry wasn't about to take orders from Voldemort.

"I'm quite content here, thanks."

"Please."

It was amazing how Riddle could make that word sound threatening. Unfortunately, the moment Harry took to marvel at this was all the opening the other boy needed to snag hold of his elbow and start dragging him towards the hidden exit. Yelping in surprise, Harry attempted to protest and struggle, but Riddle was relentless and – as it turned out – stronger than he looked. Though some cast pitying looks Harry's way as they passed through the room, nobody made a move to interfere. In no time the door was grinding closed behind the two of them and Harry was being pulled deeper into the bowels of the castle.

"Where are you taking me?" Harry demanded to know, fear rising within him. Alone with Riddle in the dungeons, where no one could find him... This hadn't been part of his plan. "You know, eventually someone will notice when I stop showing up for classes. They'll start investigating."

"Don't be ridiculous," was the only answer he received.

They were taking turns Harry had never taken before into territory that must have been deep within the bedrock on which the school stood. The temperature dropped by several degrees. Finally, Riddle appeared satisfied with their privacy and pulled Harry into one of the ominous cells lining an abandoned, musty passage well away from the Slytherin quarters, closing the heavy wooden door
behind them. He let go of his captive's arm and pulled out his wand, casting light into the damp cell, revealing a complete lack of furniture and a pair of shackles hanging from the back wall.

"Alright," said Riddle after taking a deep breath and visibly reining in his temper. "I meant what I said earlier. This is your chance to let out whatever it is that has you harbouring such hostility towards me."

Taken aback, for a long moment all Harry could do was stand there and stare dumbly at the other boy, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"That's it?" he asked when nothing else was forthcoming.

"Try my patience any further and I will make sure to come up with something more creative," Riddle replied glacially.

"Okay," Harry agreed quickly. "I just wasn't expecting this." He frowned and tried to recall his earlier anger. It didn't take a lot of effort.

"You want to know what my problem is with you? Aside from all the things I'm not allowed to talk about – and make no mistake, there are a lot of them – I really can't stand the way you're using all those people you call 'friends'. You string them along with vague promises of something great and keep them in the dark about what you really have planned for them and for everyone else in this country, but you aren't fooling me. I know what you're up to. You won't tell them what they're getting into, because you know that if you did they would walk away from you while they still can. You're poisoning their minds and dragging them down with you, and that's far worse than anything else you could and will ever do."

A silence followed this tirade during which Riddle regarded him, looking thoughtful and slightly fascinated as though he were studying some new form of life under a microscope. Finally he broke the stillness.

"You seem to be operating under the assumption that I have concocted in my mind a master plan to take over the world and that my actions over the next several decades have already been outlined in it."

Putting it like that did make Harry feel a bit silly, but nonetheless he refused to believe any claims of innocence the other might have.

"I know for a fact that you're planning to make people fear the name Lord Voldemort," he pointed out. "You can't convince me that you have no idea what I'm talking about."

"I would sure love to know how you came by that information," Riddle commented but didn't press the matter. "And no, I am not going to lie to you and plead ignorance. I am a very ambitious person, and the greatest of my ambitions is recognition and immortality in history. I fully intend to make a name for myself, and since I have always despised my name, I endeavour to do that quite literally. How I am going to do that, though, I have yet to decide."

"Not by any acceptable means, that's for sure. People don't fear the names of great heroes of the wizarding world."

Riddle frowned, annoyed. Apparently he wasn't used to facing open defiance.

"Look, I'm not trying to dispute what you know about the future – all I'm denying is my own knowledge of what it entails. I'd also like to correct you on your naive presumption that Avery and the rest of my associates are completely oblivious to my goals. May I remind you that in private they
call me by my preferred moniker? I can assure you that they are perfectly aware of every layer of significance it holds."

"Yeah, maybe, but that doesn't change the fact that you never tell them anything," Harry maintained stubbornly. "And what was that before in the common room, when Avery asked you what you were reading? Who were you to patronise him like that? Even I could tell what sort of a book that was just by looking at it; what was stopping you from just being a mate and showing him?"

"I am not Avery's 'mate'" Riddle scoffed contemptuously. "I am no one's 'mate', and I have never done anything to encourage such an impression. If anyone mistakenly thinks otherwise, that's a personal problem."

Harry had to wilfully stop himself from tearing into his own hair in his frustration.

"This is why I hate you!" he cried to the ceiling. "You don't give a whit about anyone but yourself, and still you have people following you around like lost puppies. You don't deserve anyone's loyalty, and yet Rosier and Avery and all the others give it to you without question. They'd be better off without you but they just don't get it, and I'm not allowed to tell them. All because of this dratted oath I was stupid enough to swear I can't do anything about anything and it's driving me mad! I'm stuck here for good and all I can do is stand by and let things go sour, and I've never been able to do that. I want to– " He had to pause then to gasp in a shuddering breath and hide his eyes with his hands, horrified by the sudden but unbelievably potent anguish that constricted his chest. This was not the time or place to start crying. "– I want to help!"

He turned his back to Riddle and tried to fight off the terrifying despair that burned in his throat and in his eyes, but once the snowball had started rolling, there was no stopping it. Though he had thought of these things many times in the privacy of his mind, he had agonised over them, speaking the words aloud now was like running head first into a brick wall. He had known all along that he was here to stay, but in the back of his mind he had stubbornly clung to the belief that one day soon he was going to return home. Now – finally – he had unlocked understanding, and it was like a black hole that pulled him in whole, leaving no secret nook of his soul settled and sweeping away every last vestige of hope left in him.

For a moment, the physically staggering enormity of his revelation made Harry almost forget that Tom Riddle was in the same room. Blindly, he found purchase on the wall with his hand to keep him from crumbling to the ground altogether, and with the other he tried to suppress the raw, gasping sobs that tore through his throat and could not be stifled.

He had lost everything – every single person he had ever held dear was gone to him and he would never get them back, ever. Not as he knew them, or as they knew him. He would never again play chess and complain about homework with Ron, or play Quidditch with the twins, or get a mouthful of Hermione's curly hair when she hugged him suddenly. He would never get to know Sirius the way he had wanted to or make him see him completely for himself and not for a mirror image of his father. He would never again look at the pages of the photo album Hagrid had given him, or fly on his Firebolt, or sit in the comfy, squishy armchairs by the fire in the Gryffindor Tower. He would never get any of it back.

Instead, what did he have now? He was surrounded by people he barely knew, dependent on their help and unable to warn them of the terrible things to come. He was the first Potter ever in Slytherin, Lord Voldemort treated him like one of his followers, and Dumbledore distrusted him on principle. Everything had been turned upside down without his consent and he hardly understood his place in the world anymore.

For what seemed like ages he stood there and trembled, sobs wracking his frame, and with his eyes
squeezed shut as the tears leaked out and ran down his cheeks, oblivious to and uncaring of his surroundings. When he felt a hesitant hand on his shoulder he didn't know whom it belonged to – all that mattered was that it was there. Warm and reassuring, it grounded him, keeping him from drowning in his grief. And while the touch didn't take the pain away, somehow it managed to reach deep within Harry's being, and something in him seemed to recognise it and reach back.

He wasn't alone, and that made the loss just a little bit more bearable.

* * *

If Tom had known he would end up witnessing the overdue emotional breakdown of an accidental time traveller, he would have come up with a different way of dealing with the open display of defiance. It was too late for regrets now, but Tom didn't let that stop him. While there were a great many things he excelled at, comforting other people in their distress was not one of them. He didn't know what he was supposed to do – if he ought to move closer to increase the area of contact, or perhaps say something soothing. He couldn't think of anything, so he stood still and kept quiet, keeping the other boy at arm's length and letting him pour out his sorrow in tears and snot.

He knew he would never do this for any of his followers, and certainly he should be appalled for doing this for Harry Potter. But even as they stood there, he could feel the magic that pulled him to this young wizard, so strong that it reached his conscious thought where it never had before. It was a sensation unlike any other – as though a part of his very soul were trembling in resonance with something about the boy whose shoulder felt so pleasant under his hand. He didn't know what it was, or what kind of magic could cause it, but it was exquisite.

Unconscious of his actions, he closed his eyes to better savour the bliss. Surely there was no such thing as a soul mate?

This called for some research.
The episode in the dungeon cell left Harry feeling worse than he had in living memory. Not only was he struggling to cope with the future slipping out of his reach for good, he was also so ashamed about having cried in front of Tom Riddle, that he went entirely out of his way to avoid occupying the same room with him. He spent a lot of time wandering around the castle alone, reacquainting him with all the nooks, crannies, and secret passageways he had learned to navigate with the help of his father's old map, and reliving memories that were dredged up in the process. He never wanted to forget his friends, but already he was unsure of the exact shade of brown of Hermione's eyes, or the pitch of Ron's laughter whenever Seamus told his dirty jokes late at night in the dormitory.

When Harry had failed to turn in his homework in three separate classes, Avery saw fit to interfere and drag him to the library. According to him, whatever was bothering Harry wasn't worth sacrificing his O.W.L.s for. "And if you don't care about your marks, you might want to consider what losing so many points from Slytherin will do to your popularity," was also a reasoning he used.

"What you should have learned by now is that neglecting your homework will only bring you a greater workload," Avery said as he dropped his books on a table near the Enchantments section with a satisfying thump. "The professors like to punish you with extra essays and whatnot, and if you don't turn those in either, you'll end up writing them anyway on holidays with Dumbledore watching over and making sure you actually do it. I haven't told you about Mulciber's rebellious phase in his third year, have I?"

"No, but I get the picture," Harry sighed and sat down, eyeing his Potions homework desolately.

Avery regarded him for a moment, biting his lip worriedly. "You know, you shouldn't take it so hard," he finally said.

"What's that?"

"Whatever Riddle did," he clarified. "You can't get so discouraged by it. He was just defending his position at the top of the food chain. We all know how he gets, believe me. It was nothing against you personally."

Harry was momentarily confused, before realising what he was talking about.

"Oh, no, this isn't about Riddle. It's just that... Well." His shoulders slumped as he thought about it. "It's just starting to sink in that I'm never going back to my own time."

An awkward pause followed this.

"Oh," Avery said, before hastily changing the subject. "So what did he do to you anyway?"

Harry groaned and covered his face with his hands when he felt it flush in embarrassment, feigning fatigue. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay, I get it. Let's talk about Potions, then."

They did, and despite Harry's dislike for the subject, it was certainly better than discussing his
shameful collapse. Slughorn had, indeed, assigned him with extra homework, and while technically
Harry should have been having no trouble with the proper preparation of the Verti-Go Solution,
since it had been covered in Professor Snape's O.W.L. class, he nonetheless was. Avery's helping
hand turned out to be priceless.

Just when Harry had managed to forget about Riddle, he heard his voice coming from the direction
of the librarian's desk. Harry listened in growing disgust mixed with awe how Riddle flattered and
flirted with Miss Spencer, a spinster with bad teeth and worse taste in jewellery, trying to get access
to the Restricted Section without a permission slip signed by a professor.

Realising that his pupil was no longer paying attention, Avery looked up from his task questioningly.
After a silent gesture from Harry he stopped to strain his ears as well.

When the disturbing conversation was over and the two sets of footsteps were fading towards the
forbidden part of the library, Harry turned to give his companion a meaningful look. Avery didn't
interpret it quite as he had meant it.

"Riddle's got himself a new pet project," he explained to Harry. "I don't know what he's researching
but he's been spending a lot more time in the library than he usually does. He gets like this
sometimes, but what he does is always a mystery."

"Can't you just ask him?" Harry asked dumbly, to which Avery shook his head.

"He never shares, or very rarely, at least. You remember the other day, don't you? Speaking of
which, it was really nice of you to stand up for me like that, but it wasn't necessary. I'm too used to
Riddle brushing me off like that to be offended by it."

"You shouldn't let anyone brush you off," Harry insisted, "least of all Riddle. He's so full of himself
it makes me sick, and you just lying down to take the abuse doesn't help at all."

Avery smiled at him in a way that was quite bewildered and almost pitying.

"I don't know how things will be in the future, maybe this is new to you, but here in Slytherin we
have a certain hierarchy that everybody goes by. Riddle is at the very top of that hierarchy and
everyone else defers to him. Trust me, he isn't up there for no reason – he earned that spot the hard
way. The really hard way, that is, since he's a no-name, piss-poor orphan with an iffy bloodline. And
you didn't hear me say that."

"Well, if that's the way he treats those who're below him, I don't think he deserves to be at the top at
all, no matter how brilliant he is," Harry grumbled stubbornly.

"Sometimes I wonder about it, too," Avery conceded with a shrug. "But that's just the way it is. And
it's not like I get nothing out of it. We – that is, me, Rosier, Lestrange, Dolohov, Mulciber, and now
you – enjoy high ranking perks simply through association with Riddle. Although I can't help
wondering how you got in so easily. The rest of us have had to really work for our positions.
Maybe's he's afraid of all the things you know about his future."

Harry figured as much, too. The only conceivable reason Riddle could have for keeping him around
was to keep his enemy closest.

"Which is funny," Avery continued, "because it would mean that you have power over him that he
desperately doesn't want you to use. Nobody has power like that over him."

This caused Harry to pause and look up from his essay again.
"What do you mean?" he asked when he failed to make sense of the other Slytherin's words on his own.

Avery shrugged.

"Well, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that oath of yours isn't exactly foolproof. You're still able to talk about things in general, give round-about hints... you know? And your personal history seems to be fair game, too. All it would take is a little creativity for you to spill all the beans you want. Riddle knows this, and since most of his ambitions are something he doesn't want certain people to know about, he wants to keep you from spilling anything unless he has some say in it. That's why he took you into the fold so readily, if you ask me."

What shocked Harry most about those words was not their content, but the indifference with which Avery delivered them. Perhaps it spoke of his own Gryffindor background that he couldn't instinctually come to such conclusions about the agendas other people harboured behind their actions. It amazed and intimidated him that the other boy could see through to them so effortlessly. It also took Harry off guard that Avery had been paying more attention to the way his Oath of Unspeakability worked than he himself had. He would have to shape up if he didn't want to be eaten alive in this house.

Suddenly Avery grinned at him.

"Or maybe he just likes you, is all," he teased, earning himself an incredulous snort and an eye-roll.

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Taking care of his piled up homework late into the night, while tedious, turned out to be a much needed distraction from the bleak desolation that had consumed his days until then and still lurked in the periphery of his mind. It left him tired the next day, but with a newfound determination not to let his grief get the better of him. So that morning he sat up straight and alert in Charms, made his feather duster dust by itself, and even volunteered his hand up a couple of times when the teacher posed questions.

Unfortunately, the next class was Divination, which took away some of the wind in Harry's sails. Professor Mopsus may have been much more competent than Trelawney, but his disposition lost him points in favour. The rather horrible interrogation on Harry's first lesson with him had not seen a repeat performance, thankfully enough, but the man didn't bother hiding his distrust of Harry's integrity. The constant scrutiny made Harry self-conscious and he felt that his performance in class, as bad as it had always been, would have been much better without it.

So, when he climbed the spindly ladder up to the tower classroom, he fought a losing battle to keep his spirits up. He trudged his way to his customary seat and sank down, settling to watch detachedly as the rest of the class wandered in. It was only when the hidden trapdoor pulled closed with finality that he noticed something strange about the seating arrangement.

"Where's the girl who always sits there?" Harry wondered aloud as he eyed the empty chair at their table of four.

His question was heard by a bunch of Hufflepuffs sitting around the table to his right, and they all turned to face him, faces distraught.
"Maggie was poisoned this morning," the one nearest Harry whispered loudly, leaning closer over the gap. Her eyes were large with worry, glistening with unshed tears. "At breakfast, someone slipped poison into her tea or something. No one knows who did it yet, but the professors are trying to find out."

"Poisoned!" exclaimed Nancy Higgs, who sat facing Harry. "That's horrible! Is she alright? What sort of poison was it?"

"She's in the infirmary," the girl said, "and they say she'll live. I don't remember the name of the poison, but it caused her to collapse in the middle of Transfiguration. She's fully conscious but she can't move a muscle. Poor Maggie, I can't imagine how terrible it must be for her. Professor Slughorn is brewing an antidote for her, but it won't be ready until this afternoon."

"Who do you reckon could have done it? Was it revenge or something? Does she have any enemies?" Harry asked.

"That's just it!" said another girl. "Maggie has tons of friends and she's nice to everyone. There's no reason why anyone would want to do this to her!"

"Unless there's something she hasn't been telling us," muttered the boy sitting next to her.

"How can you say that, Edmund?"

"Alright, finish with the gossiping!" Professor Mopsus' booming voice interrupted the argument before it could begin. "Class has begun. Today you will be interpreting nightmares. Unlike what one might assume, unpleasant dreams don't always bode bad things to come. You have learnt how some of the darkest omens can be found in the happiest and most light-hearted of dreams. Today you will learn that the reverse applies as well." He proceeded with a lengthy lecture on the subject before telling them all to hurry up and get to work.

Harry pulled his chair closer to the table and leaned forward in preparation to work with Nancy like he always did. He was just about to inquire about her nightmares, flipping through his own dream journal, when something distracted him. Next to him, Tom Riddle sighed and shifted in his seat, folding his hands before him in resignation.

"It looks like I find myself without a partner," he said regretfully. "Poor Miss Liesl, I do hope she makes an unhindered recovery."

His words made Harry's insides freeze. His gaze flickered from Riddle to the unoccupied seat and back again. Smiling like that, the other boy looked the picture of innocence, but that only deepened Harry's suspicion. What reason could Voldemort possibly have for poisoning an innocent and – all things considered – uninteresting Hufflepuff girl? As far as Harry knew, she wasn't even Muggleborn.

"Oh, that's right," said Nancy, oblivious to Harry's doubts. She glanced around the room for a solution to the problem. "Well, why don't you pair up with Harry this time, Tom? I can just go over there and ask Ellis and Euphie if they'll let me be a third wheel. It's been too long since I spent any time with them, anyway."

"That would work wonderfully," Riddle acquiesced with grace. "That is, if you don't mind terribly giving up your partner...?"

"It's no problem at all," Nancy reassured, gathering her things together and getting up from her seat. "Take care!" She left before Harry could get in a word edgewise.
"That settles it then," Riddle said calmly, fastidiously aligning his quill with his closed textbook. "So, do you have any nightmares we can work with?"

Harry eyed him distrustfully for a moment, but decided to put his speculations off for later in favour of getting something done. He opened his journal once more and skimmed through it, looking for something fitting.

"Not really. At least, nothing particularly disturbing or scary. Wait..." He stopped to scan an entry from the week before. "We can use this one. Here goes. I was gathering twigs in a woods with the guy who's the Minister for Magic in the '90s. We needed to build a fire, since it was the middle of winter and it was getting dark. At some point I got lost, and there were these huge bushes all around, covered in two inch thorns and I kept getting stuck in them. I lost all the wood I'd gathered trying to get out and I was sure I was going to freeze to death without it. Then I stepped on a bear trap and woke up."

"Alright, we can start with that," Riddle said, proper and business-like, opening his notebook at an empty page to make notes on his interpretation. "What was the Minister of Magic doing in the dream? Did he hold an authoritative position over you or were you standing on equal ground?"

"No, he was just kind of randomly there. He wasn't acting all pompous and bossy like he usually would. He tried to light a fire out of a bunch of moss, but it was too wet and just smoked a lot."

"Pompous and bossy? Was this person someone you disliked, then?"

"Oh yeah, that guy was a total waste of oxygen. Couldn't do anything right. I can't believe he got into office in the first place."

Riddle made mark of this in his notes.

"Did you find him as despicable in the dream as you did in life?"

"No. Like I said, it was random like that."

"Hmm," Riddle hummed. "It looks like soon you will reconcile with someone you are at odds with."

He had the Dream Oracle opened at the right page in front of him, but Harry noticed that he didn't have to even glance at it. He probably had it memorised.

"What about the thorny bushes and the bear trap?"

"Thorns are often thought to represent protection and also tumultuous romance. 'Every rose has its thorn,' as they say. Were there any flowers on those bushes?"

Harry looked down at the journal entry to check the detail.

"Yes, red ones, shaped like a trumpet. They looked a bit dangerous – as though they ate wasps for a nice snack or something."

"Red flowers," Riddle thought aloud. "That sounds like a rather clear case. You will find yourself in a romantic relationship, but it won't be – excuse my ironic use of the phrase – walking on a bed of roses."

The Hufflepuffs at the next table heard this and the girls oohed and giggled loudly. The one who had told them the story of Maggie Liesl's poisoning leaned her elbows on the table and propped her cheek on her hand, gazing dreamily at Harry.
"You lucky guy," she said. "What I wouldn't give for a prediction like that!"

Harry felt his face heat up in what must be a very unbecoming blush and slid down in his seat, unconsciously attempting to hide under the table.

"That's not what it means!" he argued futilely. "Riddle's just messing with me. Tell 'em!" He jabbed his class partner with his elbow, but he only offered an apologetic smile that couldn't have been the least bit genuine.

"Oh, I don't know," the girl frowned in mock thoughtfulness. "To me it sounded like a pretty good example of straightforward symbolism."

Grumbling under his breath, Harry turned his back to her and scowled half-heartedly at Riddle.

"Thanks a lot for that," he hissed. "I know you have plenty of reason to make fun of me, but I'd appreciate it if you did it where people from the other houses can't hear."

"I am not making fun of you," Riddle said calmly, looking him steadily in the eye. "I am merely voicing the omens of the future that your dream displays before me."

Harry glared at him suspiciously before rolling his eyes in disgust.

"Whatever. So what sort of 'omens' do you see in the bear trap I stepped on in the dream?"

"Well," Riddle said as though he hadn't heard the condescending tone in his voice and flipped the pages of his textbook towards the back cover, "the bear trap isn't mentioned here under 'most commonly occurring symbols' but I think it's safe to treat it as a trap or a cage in general. Unfortunately, there isn't really a positive way to interpret that, unless there is the gaining of freedom involved. In this case… Did you say you woke up when you stepped on the bear trap?"

Harry slumped back in his seat with a resigned sigh. Apparently there was no deterring Riddle.

"Yeah. It must have been the shock. I didn't even feel the illusion of pain."

"Then stepping on the trap freed you from the nightmare. That's interesting. Could we predict from this that you will find freedom or relief in an unexpected place?"

"I suppose?"

"Yes, we can. Now, we still have time for a few more interpretations. I'm afraid my dreams tend to be quite mellow, though. Do you have anything else we can use?"

The rest of the class went on as such, and though it miffed Harry, Riddle didn’t offer a single nightmare for interpretation. Either he didn't want to share them – a sentiment Harry could relate with, thank you very much – or he was just so evil that it was psychologically impossible for him to have bad dreams. There was something decidedly off about the arrangement, but Harry couldn't figure out what it was. His gaze kept returning to the empty seat of Maggie Liesl.

When the bell had rung and they were making their way towards the lower levels of the castle, Harry gathered his courage and turned to confront Riddle.

"You poisoned that girl, didn't you?"

Riddle looked up, a suitably surprised expression on his face.

"You mean Margaret Liesl? What on earth makes you say that?"
"Don't try to deny it. You put up a nice act, but you seemed all too pleased to hear about what happened to her. I know you, and it's just the sort of thing you'd do."

The smile on Riddle's face was perfectly friendly, but there was steel in his eyes.

"You have nothing to back your accusations with."

"No," Harry admitted, "but I won't let that stop me. I'll go to the professors."

Riddle laughed, the high pitched sound giving Harry the chills.

"Who do you think will listen to you?" he inquired, amused. "I'm a prefect and the best student in the whole school – not a single docked point to my name. Who would take such allegations seriously?"

"Dumbledore would. He wouldn't trust you with an empty paper bag, and he has enough influence in this school to make sure you'll get what's yours."

"Perhaps if he were my Head of House," Riddle said dismissively, trailing his hand on the rail of the staircase they were descending. "As it is, though, the Deputy still bows to the Headmaster, and Professor Dippet would never let him punish me for any transgression without sufficient evidence."

He was probably right, and for that, among other things, Harry hated him. Squeezing his hands into tight fists around the strap of his book bag, he seethed.

"Won't you even tell me why you did it?"

"I didn't do it."

"Oh, come on! It's not like Dippet will be any more likely to believe me if I say you confessed to me yourself. I know you did it, so you might as well come out and say it."

Riddle blew out a masterfully executed frustrated sigh.

"I had no role whatsoever in Liesl's poisoning and I will thank you to stop pointing fingers at innocent people."

There was a brief staring contest between them until Harry was forced to look away in disgust.

"Whatever," he grumbled and stomped away.

* * *

After that unsatisfying conversation, things got a little weird with Riddle. Before, he had never paid Harry much attention, in the same way that he never gave anyone more than cursory regard even when they were sitting down and having a conversation with him, but now Harry was lucky to find a moment of peace. Whenever he looked Riddle's way, the other boy was staring right back at him. What really disquieted him was the fact that there was nothing particularly malicious about that gaze – the look in his eyes was intent and scrutinising, and often there was a hint of a smile on his lips, carefully concealed from public view by a casual hand propping up his chin or scratching his nose.

Harry's immediate reaction to this was to freak out and hide from the other Slytherin, seeking the exclusive company of Rosier and Avery whenever he could. If those two had noticed anything, they
never mentioned it. However, there was only so much he could do to avoid Riddle's presence in a
boarding school where they shared all classes and slept in the same room. Increasingly often he
found himself with a new partner in classes where he normally sat with his other dorm mates, as
Riddle gave them thinly veiled hints to budge over. It made Harry feel slightly hunted, and not a little
paranoid. Why was Riddle keeping him under such a watchful eye?

There were also occasions when Riddle really went out of his way to crowd Harry. He would hog
him to the side on the way to Herbology and start a conversation, appearing genuinely interested in
Harry's life, or demandingly wave him over to sit in the chair next to his in the common room. Once,
when Harry was having trouble with the wand movements of a particular incantation in
Transfiguration, Riddle actually took hold of his hand and guided him through the correct sequence.
He was being nice to Harry, and the only reason Tom Riddle was ever nice to anyone was that he
wanted something from them. So what did he want from Harry?

The answer to this question remained a mystery and a frustrating one at that – not least because there
were moments when Harry had to berate himself for almost falling for the act. In his defence, though,
no one could say Riddle wasn't a brilliant actor.

While the change in Riddle's attitude towards him was troubling enough, it turned out that it wasn't
the only problem Harry had to worry about. One day, when Harry was making his way downstairs
after returning a book to the library, he came across Professor Dumbledore, who was walking in the
opposite direction with a box full of gerbils in his arms.

"Good evening, Mr Potter," Dumbledore said.

"Good evening, Professor," Harry replied politely. "What've you got there?"

"Material for tomorrow's third year class. How are you? Has there been any word from the Ministry
about the Unspeakables' progress?"

"Nothing groundbreaking, sir," was Harry's clipped reply. While he was slowly coming to terms
with his situation, he preferred not to talk about it, especially with grown-ups.

He glanced past Dumbledore, anxious to get going before all the good chairs in the common room
were taken.

"I am very sorry to hear that. This must be extremely trying on you," the professor said. "I have
actually been meaning to talk to you about that. Would you mind coming to my office with me? I
shall have some tea and scones brought in."

When a professor told you to come to their office, no matter how politely they phrased it as a friendly
invitation, there was no way of saying no. Sighing and hoping that someone might be thoughtful
enough to save a seat for him, Harry acquiesced and followed Dumbledore to the office that in his
time would belong to Professor McGonagall.

There was no tartan and the room looked a lot like Headmaster Dumbledore’s funky tower, though
there were fewer strange silver instruments. In a corner of the office stood a delicate glass cabinet
containing all sorts of diplomas, trophies, and plaques. Harry supposed modesty came with age.

"Have a seat, Mr Potter."

Harry sat down in the fancy looking antique chair placed in front of the cherry wood desk. It was
prettier than it was comfortable, very different from the cushy chintz armchairs the future
Dumbledore favoured. Harry guessed taste for comfort came with age, too.
"What would you like with your tea? Scones? Biscuits?" Dumbledore asked as he poured into china cups. Harry blinked. He could have sworn the tea set hadn’t been there a second ago.

"I don't really need anything," Harry assured. "And no milk, please! Just two sugars."

Dumbledore put down the creamer he had been about to use on Harry’s Earl Grey.

"Then I hope you do not mind if I nibble on some lemon biscuits while we talk. You are welcome to them if you happen to change your mind." With barely a wave of his wand, a plate popped silently into existence on his desk.

"Now," Dumbledore said as he settled comfortably behind his desk. "Mr Potter – Harry. May I call you Harry?"

"If you want to."

"Harry, then. I have noticed that you have forged many new friendships with your house mates. That is good. I am happy that you have been able to assimilate yourself into your new age group. It can't be easy for you."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said warily.

"Friends and companionship are invaluable resources of strength and happiness," Dumbledore went on. "They can carry you over hard and turbulent times of your life and shield you from the pain and grief that is loneliness."

"Well said, sir," Harry said after a short silence that was quite awkward on his part. "Friends are the best."

"Yes, they are," Dumbledore said, chuckling. "I myself am still in contact with many of my childhood acquaintances. I receive monthly dessert recipes from a friend of mine from my Hogwarts days who became a confectioner. I do so love to bake. It's a pity that the house-elves are so territorial about their kitchenware."

"That's nice."

"Slytherin is a house that is known for the strong and long lasting bonds of friendship it tends to produce. It is a fortunate side-effect of the most unfortunate rivalry that has plagued the Hogwarts houses from the time of the Founders. However," the Professor's expression turned sombre, "I am slightly worried about the particular company you choose to keep. I realise that Misters Rosier and Avery share your dormitory and as such are natural companions for you, but please listen to me when I tell you that they and the rest of Mr Riddle's associates are not the best possible crowd for you."

Harry stared flatly at him. It annoyed him that all Dumbledore ever seemed to care about was Voldemort, or Tom Riddle as the case was. Now the man actually looked him in the eye, but it was with the distant, uncle-like concern shown to someone you don't know or particularly care about. Harry wondered cynically if it had ever been more than that. Last year had left him disappointed in Professor Dumbledore – it had become clear to him that as soon as the threat came too close to home, the old man washed his hands, and Harry was sure that he was no different now, lacking the experience of fifty years.

Dumbledore took Harry's silence as an invitation to continue.

"There have been many… grievances that have taken place at Hogwarts over the past few years, and
I suspect that Mr Riddle and his assorted friends are behind most of them. Unfortunately, we have rarely been able to catch them in the act or find evidence against them, but that, in my educated opinion, is a sign of something far more organised and serious than mere school yard mischief. Harry, my boy, I have no reason to believe ill of you, but if you let your relationship with Mr Riddle continue on the track it is on now, you may find yourself falling down a slippery slope."

In other words, if Harry didn't jump ship soon, Dumbledore would assume that he was just as rotten and mean as the rest of the gang and treat him accordingly. He had been warned, but Harry still felt hurt. However, he was taken aback by the indignation and anger he felt on behalf of his friends. Dumbledore was really blowing things out of proportion if he thought all there was to them was a corrupt sense of superiority and ruthless disregard for the wellbeing of others. Harry bet he had never bothered trying to get to know Avery or Rosier, or even Lestrange and the other sixth years. What had happened to professors being objective and fair?

"With all due respect, sir," Harry said, working very hard on keeping his act cool, "I'm perfectly aware of what I've got myself into. I know even better than you do what kind of people Lestrange and Mulciber and the rest are, and I know exactly what will become of Tom Riddle. In fact, one could say I'm quite intimately familiar with the things he's capable of doing. Things would have been a lot different if I hadn't been sorted into Slytherin, but it's useless to think about that now. All I can do now is go with the flow. I think I can handle myself."

Dumbledore didn't lose his worried look.

"Well. I certainly hope you can," he said. "Human will is a fickle thing, though, and Mr Riddle is a highly charismatic and persuasive personality. I have no doubt that your resolve is strong, but you must stay on your toes. You do not know where the flow might take you. I still suggest you try and find companionship elsewhere – perhaps Mr Bornhalt in your year, or some of the lovely ladies in Slytherin –"

"Thanks," Harry interrupted, "but I really don't appreciate people telling me who to hang out with. I completely understand what you're getting at, and it's great you're so concerned, but please. Let me do things my way."

The Professor frowned as though he weren't used to people interrupting him when he was speaking. Then he sighed and closed his eyes momentarily in defeat.

"I see that I cannot turn your head. I hope for your own sake that you will not suffer for your decision."

"And that you won't suffer for it, either," Harry added perceptively before he could stop himself. "Sorry, sir," he apologised at Dumbledore's look.

"Well, yes. As you said, you know better than I do, but I can see a great future ahead of young Tom. I only fear that he shall choose a path that is advantageous only to himself, if even that." He laid his hands down on his desktop decisively, palms down. "But enough on this unpleasant topic. If you are finished with your tea, Harry, I believe that I have taken up enough of your time. Unless you have something on your mind…?"

"Oh no, sir." Harry picked up his cup and gulped down the rest of its contents before standing up and grabbing his book bag from the floor. "Thanks for the tea and the… lovely conversation."

"You are quite welcome, my boy. Go on, then – I shall see you in class on Thursday. Don't forget to turn in your essay."
"I won't, sir. Bye."

He hurried out the door and closed it behind him with relief. For a moment he stood still, then shook his head with a frustrated sigh and set forth towards the dungeons at a brisk pace. He wished things didn't have to be like this. He had always respected Professor Dumbledore – admired him, even – and now being forced into a position where he had to face such a different side of him made him question everything he knew about the man. It was a shame, because everybody had weaknesses, and a person's faults weren't the sum of their being. Harry mourned the all-good, omnipotent Dumbledore he had known when he was younger. How easy it had been when the world had still been black and white to him.

Now he was all confused about whom he was supposed to trust and whom to despise. Everything had turned upside down in that regard. One thing was for sure, though: he could no longer trust Dumbledore to trust him. That door had just closed with finality.
A couple of days later Harry made the mistake of saying "Hi" to Lestrange when he was passing him in the library.

"Potter!" the older Slytherin exclaimed. "...an answer to my prayers! Come with me." He grabbed Harry's arm and began dragging him away.

"Hey!" Harry yelped. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"I have been agonising over a most troublesome quandary, but now seeing your fair face has given me divine inspiration," was the very unhelpful explanation.

Lestrange brought him to one of the small private study rooms which could be found at the back of the library and which had always been occupied when they would have been useful to Harry. It turned out that this room was occupied, too.

"Hi, Nott," Harry said, though he was feeling less than polite about his impromptu kidnapping.

"Great, you found someone," said Nott, who was sitting at one of the two hard wood desks in the study room.

"Yes, I just came across him and thought he would do perfectly."

Harry was starting to feel like a virgin sacrifice.

"What's going on here?" he demanded to know, jerking his arm free from Lestrange's grip. "What do you want me for?"

"You didn't tell him?" Nott said, giving Lestrange a reproachful glare.

"I'm telling him now. Sit down, Potter."

The older boy directed Harry into the only vacant chair left in the room and then perched himself on the edge of the desktop. Lestrange liked to look downward at people when he was talking to them.

"I have a favour to ask of you," Lestrange said seriously. "It's not a big favour, only your participation in a small and harmless task Nott and I are undertaking."

"What sort of task is this?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"You know how Ravenclaw is playing Gryffindor this weekend?" Nott said, referring to the upcoming Quidditch game.

"Yeah."

Harry took the other boy in appraisingly. Since he was sorted into a different house – Ravenclaw – Harry hadn't had many dealings with him aside from a few fleeting interactions, but Nathaniel Nott was considered a sort of honorary associate member of Riddle's group of insiders. He looked remarkably similar to Harry's former Slytherin classmate Theodore, whom he assumed to be
Nathaniel's future progeny. He had the same narrow face and wily eyes, but the choir boy haircut that was so fashionable in the '40s did a good job softening the rat-like look.

"Well, Lestrange and I both agree that it would benefit many if Gryffindor were to lose."

Harry stared at him, unimpressed.

"You want to sabotage the Gryffindor Quidditch team?"

What with all the cloak and dagger, he had been expecting something sneaky and highly illegal. This, though, sounded like something Draco Malfoy would do. Harry couldn't say much about Nott, but he was disappointed to find out that Lestrange would bother with such trivial things.

"In simple terms, yes."

"Why?" Harry had to ask. "What do you care about Quidditch? Neither of you play."

"No, but Quidditch has a huge effect on general house morale," Lestrange explained. "Slytherin as a community will work together much better if Gryffindor performs atrociously this weekend, as will Ravenclaw. Victory will unite us like nothing else can. School will be a happier place for all of us."

This must be the most creative excuse for vandalising other people's hard work that Harry had ever heard. He had to respect that.

"But if Gryffindor loses this game, it's likely to fall out of the competition for the Cup. Don't you want Slytherin to trounce them royally in the finale?"

"That would be nice, yeah, but it will be much funnier when they fail so badly they're eliminated from the get-go. Besides, let's be honest here. If Gryffindor made it to the finale with us, there's no guarantee we'd trounce them as royally as they deserve."

Harry rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. Only in Slytherin could one encounter such shameless cowardice.

"So what are you planning to do? Rig their brooms or something?"

"Oh please," Nott sniffed condescendingly. "We have more class than that. In this book there are brewing instructions for a certain potion." He laid his hand on one of the tomes cluttering his desk – a perfectly innocent looking one with bluebells and artistic swirls painted on the cardboard cover.

"It's a very useful calming solution that works as a muscle relaxant and mild sedative. We are going to brew it and hide it inside the air vent in the Gryffindor changing room so that the enemy's reflexes will be impaired after inhaling the fumes."

Harry had to admit that it was a rather clever and sophisticated plan. He probably couldn't have come up with anything like it himself. However, that didn't mean that he was willing to go along with it – he still had a shred of loyalty towards his old house left in him.

"Good luck with that, then," he said and made to stand up from his chair in order to leave.

"No, no, no, don't go!" Lestrange exclaimed and pushed him back down. "We need your help!"

"What for? You seem to have everything covered."

"You have to get rid of the evidence while the game is on. I've got detention that day so I can't do it, and if people start talking about foul play and somebody points out that Nott didn't show up for the
match, all eyes will be on him – Dumbledore's especially. It's not a Slytherin game so nobody will care if you aren't there."

"I might," Harry argued. "I like Quidditch."

"Oh, come on. There can't be much in it for you. I bet you're used to some sort of futuristic high-speed brooms and death-defying situations we can't even fathom."

That was true, and Harry had hoped that Lestrange wouldn't come to think of it.

"I still like Quidditch," he insisted half-heartedly.

"You have to help us. We already asked everybody else but they all said no."

"And I wonder why that might be? This is ridiculous. I'm not going to sabotage a rival house's Quidditch team, that's just petty. Besides, how can you be satisfied with a win if you have to cheat in order to get it?"

"Better to win by cheating than to not win at all," Nott chimed in helpfully.

"There is something seriously wrong with your sense of honour."

"I have plenty of honour!"

"You know, I think it's kind of cute how you're so hung up on things like fairness and 'the right thing'. Must be the way you were brought up."

"Damn right, I was brought up that way! That means I'm not going to do it. Find someone else or just give up on the whole thing. It's a stupid idea, anyway."

"Come on, Potter. I'll owe you one."

Nott cast Lestrange an incredulous look, but Harry hardly noticed. He had only been in Slytherin for a little over a month, but already he had learned the value of favours. They were a hard currency in the house of the Serpent – they could be called in at any time and in a manner freely chosen by the one with the advantage. That was why Slytherins disliked owing each other favours and so tried to avoid it at all costs.

Harry had only found out about this after establishing his debt to Avery a few weeks ago and had since then been dreading the moment the other boy chose to bring it up again. Now, though, he was being offered the reverse position of that power over Lestrange of all people. It was tempting, but Harry couldn't help narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

"Why would you be willing to owe me a favour for something insignificant like this?"

"You're calling my noble mission insignificant?" Lestrange balked in mock outrage.

"Stop fooling around and answer my question!"

Lestrange regarded him for a moment before leaning back on his hands with a longsuffering sigh.

"Well, if you must know, I have a bet riding on the game. And I'm not talking about a few Sickles here. Ravenclaw winning is big deal to me."

Well, that made sense. Harry wasn't really one to advocate gambling – just look at what it had done to Ludo Bagman – but it, at least, was something he could understand. And while sabotage was
certainly not the right way to solve the problem, he couldn't ignore the currency. To make it in Slytherin one must play their game.

"Fine. I'll get rid of the evidence for you," Harry conceded. When Lestrange raised his fist to pump it in the air, he hastened to add, "But if I get caught, I'll be dropping your names like they're hot potatoes."

Lestrange grinned and clapped him companionably on the shoulder.

"I wouldn't expect any less from you, my friend."

* * *

Since Harry was now in on the plot, Lestrange and Nott saw fit to get him fully briefed on the different stages of its execution. That was how that Friday evening – the day before the big game – Harry found himself ensconced in a cramped and secluded dungeon cell with the two schemers. Nott had built in there a temporary Potions laboratory and at the moment was busy stirring counterclockwise until the potion turned pink. Lestrange, meanwhile, had got his hands on a set of blueprints of the Quidditch pitch and the connected buildings.

"The Gryffindor changing rooms are to the North of the pitch," he explained, pointing at a spot on the huge sheet of parchment he had rolled open on a transfigured table. Tracing the outline of the main dressing room with his finger, he continued, "The air vent is on the East wall, opposite the entrance to the showers."

Harry knew perfectly well the location and layout of the Gryffindor changing rooms and probably could have found the air vent in his sleep, but Lestrange didn't need to know that. Neither did he need to know how amusing Harry found this whole situation of looking over the blueprints of a target building and talking about air vents. He felt like he was in a spy film of some sort.

"I'm going to sneak out before breakfast, break into the changing room, pry off the grid covering the air vent, and place the calming solution behind it. We're using this bowl for that." He indicated a wide, glass salad bowl sitting conspicuously on the precipice of the table, serving as a paper weight on the curling edge of the blueprint. "I borrowed it from the kitchen.

"The match starts at 11:00 – that's plenty of time for the fumes to spread equally across the rooms."

"Won't they smell it?" Harry asked.

Nott shook his head, still stirring his gently boiling concoction.

"This is a mostly odourless potion. They would have to be Potions experts to notice the scent and realise its significance."

"Which they certainly aren't," Lestrange sniggered, clearly thinking about someone in particular.

"Okay. So when's my part?"

"Quidditch games can wrap up in no time at all, so you shouldn't dawdle. When the whistle blows to start the match, you're going in. No need for anything fancy – just walk in, vanish the potion, and walk out with the container. It won't take you more than five minutes at most. And avoid being seen
at all costs, of course. That means putting your best Disillusionment Charm to use."

"I like the way you're saying things like 'you're going in' and 'at all costs'," Harry commented. "It makes it sound like this is all really serious business."

"This is serious business," Lestrange insisted. "This is about my money! Do you have any idea what my father will do to me if he finds out that I've lost 50 Galleons to this game?"

"50 Galleons?" Harry exclaimed. "What sort of an idiot gambles 50 gold Galleons on a school Quidditch game? And it's not even the final match!"

"Hey," Lestrange protested half-heartedly, but the slightly sheepish look on his face told Harry that he agreed with the sentiment.

"So, how did that happen, anyway?"

Lestrange shrugged.

"The odds were stacked for Gryffindor winning. Four to one. So I figured, if Ravenclaw won, I'd get a pretty hefty profit for my wager. Look, it was Poker Night at Hufflepuff, and there was Firewhiskey. At the time it seemed like a stroke of genius. I didn't stop to consider the fact that Ravenclaw sucks at offence."

"I resent that," Nott pointed out but went ignored.

"Wait, you make it sound like this gambling thing is all organised?"

"Sure. This guy, Efrain Abercrombie, is wicked smart at bookmaking. He's a Hufflepuff in my year, nice fellow. He's really good at predicting outcomes and laying odds, things like that. There's actually a rumour going about that he's got some Seer in him, though he doesn't even take Divination."

Harry knew he shouldn't be shocked to hear that there was an underground gambling ring established at Hogwarts. Magic folk took their sports seriously – he had experienced it for himself – so naturally there would be money involved in all of it. Harry wondered if this would be going on in the '90s as well. If it would, he had never noticed. Then again, the Quidditch players themselves probably didn't have anything to do with the betting as a rule.

"What happens to your winnings if it comes out that Gryffindor was sabotaged?"

Lestrange froze visibly over his blueprints, staring unseeing into the middle distance. Just as Harry was starting to think that he was having some sort of a seizure, he jerked his head up to look at him, his eyes wild.

"I won't let that happen."

* * *

Breakfast the next morning was an unexciting affair. This was a phenomenon familiar to Harry from the future – one of the many downsides of the passionate rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor was the fact that any competitions and face-offs that didn't involve both of these parties seemed dull
in comparison. So while there certainly was tension in the air above the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables, the overall effect was rather underwhelming. The Slytherin upperclassmen were left entirely unaffected, with the possible exception of Lestrange, who wasn't quite successful in his attempts at hiding his nervous fidgeting.

"Pass the sugar, someone," Rosier ordered, rubbing his face tiredly. He dismissed the pristine teacups laid out for the taking and reached past them for a large mug, proceeding to fill it to the brim with strong Darjeeling. "It was a lousy night. I had all these weird dreams."

"What happened in them?" Harry asked as he handed him the sugar bowl.

At some point in the past week or two he had found himself migrating from across the table to sit right next to Riddle during meals. It was one of those recently frequent things where the Dark-Lord-To-Be had waved him over with a charming smile as though he were imparting a great honour on him. Judging by the affronted look on Dolohov's face when he had to move over, he was.

"It's not so much that anything happened," Rosier said, frowning as he dumped spoonfuls of sugar into his tea. "They were just... murky and confusing. And I felt like I was being watched all the time. Avery, are you sure you lifted that Paranoia Curse properly? It seems like there's a trace of it still lingering from when you cast it on me yesterday."

"I thought I did. You aren't feeling paranoid now, are you?"

"No, but my mind isn't in a completely defenceless state, either."

"Are you sure it was the curse, though? Maybe you were just having a bad night."

"Trust me, you'd be freaked out too if it were you. It must be the curse."

"Huh. I didn't know it could do that. Have any of you guys had that problem before?"

There were murmurs of disagreement as everyone shook their heads or shrugged their shoulders.

"Well, we need to come up with a way to lift it completely. We can't have you losing sleep because of this."

Harry narrowed his eyes, barely managing to hold back a scowl. He couldn't get around his deep disapproval of the Dark Arts, but he knew better than to start lecturing anyone, outnumbered as he was. The fact that his friends were so irresponsibly practising them on each other had him biting down on his tongue to keep his mouth shut.

"First off, you need to think back and figure out what you did wrong. Make no mistake, I'm blaming you for this."

"No pressure, huh? I can't really think of where the counter curse could have gone awry, though. It seemed to work just fine at the time, didn't it?"

"Obviously it didn't."

"Okay, once we're finished with breakfast, let's go back to the dungeons to try and sort this out. I still have the book I looked up the curse from."

"Nah, there's that Quidditch match, isn't there? The curse can wait until afterwards, it's not like it's going anywhere."
That was the stupidest thing Harry had heard anyone say in a while.

"Well, if you're sure," Avery ceded, looking rather doubtful. "Hey, Riddle. You're smarter than either of us – won't you give us a hand, too?"

Riddle glanced at the ceiling in a gesture that certainly wasn't a juvenile roll of the eyes.

"Fine. However, I won't be coming to watch the game, so come find me when you need me," he said, making it sound like a great concession on his part.

Harry turned his head to the side to hide his own, less subtle eye-roll. 'Come find me', said he, but helpfully neglected to tell them where.

"Thanks, man, you'll be a huge help," said Rosier and shuddered. "That was one nasty night."

"Okay, everyone, let's drop this depressing topic," Dolohov interrupted. "There's still plenty of time before the match starts – what say you guys if we stop by at the kitchens to grab some snacks before heading out to the pitch?"

"Count me out, my detention with Dumbledore starts in half an hour," Lestrange said immediately, scowling unhappily at the fact.

"I'm not coming to the game, either," Harry cut in. When everyone's attention suddenly turned on him he could only shrug helplessly. "I've got other things to do."

"Morgana's knickers, what is wrong with you people?" Dolohov exclaimed, throwing his hands up dramatically. "The one time something actually happens around here you all have better things to do. Is it an epidemic or something? Should I be worried for myself?"

"What 'other things' do you have to do?" Riddle asked, ignoring Dolohov's rant completely.

Harry turned to look at him only to find him pinning him under his gaze, his elbows on the table and hands clasped inquisitively below his chin.

"Just this thing Lestrange asked me to do. A favour."

"Ah, that," Riddle nodded knowingly. "So he did manage to convince someone to help him fix his mistakes?"

"I'm only doing it because he said he'll owe me," Harry said defensively.

"Did he? Well," here he leaned closer to whisper in his ear, "I guess you are finally starting to learn our ways. Keep it up."

Harry did his best to ignore the involuntary shiver running down his spine, but despite his efforts, a treacherous stutter crept into his voice.

"W-well, you know. I'm just trying to keep with the trends."

Riddle pulled back again, returning to Harry his personal space.

"I'll come with you," he offered easily. "I have made no particular plans for today – only to stay away from the sports, which I find most tedious."

"Oh, please don't bother," said Harry reflexively. "There's nothing exciting to see there, and if we get caught you'll get a black mark on that spotless record of yours."
"With me there you can cast aside all worries of getting caught," Riddle proclaimed with staggering confidence. "After all, my record isn't spotless due to my extraordinary virtue."

"That I can believe," Harry snorted. "Fine. You can tag along if you want to."

Harry was no longer put off by Riddle butting into his business like this. Though the motives behind his actions still eluded Harry, he was growing tired of staying on his toes all the time. He figured that if Riddle had some agenda, it would come up at some point and he would deal with it then. In the meantime, he might as well enjoy this while it lasted. Riddle was actually quite lovely company when he tried to be.

The breakfast crowd began to disperse from the Great Hall as the arms of the clock crept closer to eleven. Harry got up with the rest of the gang, catching the almost comically serious and meaningful look Lestrange cast his way before the boy was frog marched away by a benignly smiling Professor Dumbledore, who had shown up to collect him for his detention.

Once out in the Entrance Hall, Riddle pulled him away from the masses and into the shady stairwell leading down to the dungeons. Their footsteps echoed forlornly in the chilly gloom, eclipsing the rumble of the traversing student body coming from above. They didn't go very deep – only a few yards into the underground labyrinth Riddle yanked open the door to a broom cupboard and ushered them in.

"I assume that it is part of your plan to use the Disillusionment Charm as you conduct your mission?" There was no way Harry could have missed the amused twitch of his lips at the word 'mission'. "If you will allow me, I shall do the casting. Although I have no reason to doubt your magical prowess, I do know that mine is exceptional, so we will both be as good as invisible."

Not a day went by that Harry failed to be amazed by the sheer size of Tom Riddle's ego.

"Okay, you do that."

"Excellent," Riddle said and then glanced at his watch. "The game won't start for another twenty minutes. There will be a lot of people milling around the stands and locker rooms, and it is never a good idea to enter a crowd whilst invisible." When he looked up and met Harry's eyes again there was a certain, almost mischievous quality to his gaze that Harry couldn't interpret. "We should wait here for a while."

Harry got a feeling that there was some sort of encrypted message here that he wasn't getting, but shrugged it off when it failed to come to him immediately.

"Fine," he said and looked around him, absently straightening a mop that was in danger of falling over. "Why are we in a broom cupboard, anyway?"

There was a short silence before Riddle shifted with an annoyed little sigh to lean against the wall next to an askew stack of dusty buckets.

"If someone were to come by here, they might become suspicious of our loitering. This cupboard is the most convenient place to hide due to its location near the exit of the dungeons."

That made sense, so Harry merely shrugged and sat down on a conveniently placed step ladder.

A minute ticked by, then another, the silence in the cupboard only broken by the tapping of Riddle's foot against the floor, which was an uncharacteristic sign of restlessness from him.

"On second thought, why waste our time?" Riddle said suddenly, uncrossing his arms and pushing
himself away from the wall again. "There won't be a single soul in this part of the castle aside from us, anyway."

Harry had never pegged him for someone who changed his mind easily, so it was with some confusion that he looked up to see him pulling out his wand.

"I shall cast the charm now. Once I'm done we will not be able to see one another, which is why I believe that we should maintain physical contact in order to avoid losing track of each other."

"You mean like holding hands?" Harry asked doubtfully, eying the wand with suspicion that was exceedingly hard to shake.

"That would be the easiest solution," Riddle acknowledged with a disarming smile, extending his free hand to him invitingly.

Shaking off a feeling of apprehension, Harry placed his hand in Riddle's palm. Riddle then gave him a sharp rap on the crown of the head with his wand, making Harry wince both at the pain and the familiar cold sensation of the Disillusionment Charm trickling down his form. He was sure that it felt even more unpleasant than it ever had before. He only realised that he had screwed his eyes shut when he blinked them open again.

"Let's go," Riddle said, and just barely Harry managed to catch the little smirk on his face before it disappeared from view entirely. Then the door swung open seemingly of its own accord and the invisible force gripping his equally invisible hand was pulling him out of the cupboard and swiftly up the stairs.

'I never thought I'd say this,' thought Harry to himself, waving his hand before his face as they crossed the Entrance Hall on light feet, 'but this is even cooler than the Invisibility Cloak.'

There was nothing at all to be seen of him – not even the slight but disconcerting distortion of shapes and shadows that usually betrayed the Disillusionment Charm. He was really quite impressed that Riddle was able to do this.

As they neared the Quidditch field they slowed down their pace to avoid bumping into any of the spectators ambling about. Harry, despite having mostly lost interest in Quidditch with the realisation that the best racing brooms currently on the market were such pitiful antiques as the Cleansweep Three, still subconsciously viewed the pitch as his territory. As such it felt quite natural to him to tighten his hold on Riddle's hand and take the lead.

The four house Quidditch teams each had their own changing rooms, located separate from one another on either end of the field. To get to the Gryffindor changing rooms Harry guided them carefully through the crowded main entrance to the stadium and slipped onto the field itself. Making sure to stick to the edges right by the towering stands, they circled Eastward around the pitch, passing the shaded passage leading to the deserted Hufflepuff changing rooms, until they reached the Northern-most point of the arena.

When they sneaked into the passage cutting beneath the stands, at the end of which lay the entrance to the changing room, Harry could feel a slight tug on his hand and the sweep of Riddle's robes against his side as the other Slytherin stepped to the fore again. Harry took advantage of his invisibility to once again roll his eyes mightily. Riddle always had to be in control.

They stopped to take position next to the door where they could easily slip in unnoticed when the last player had exited, and settled against the wall there. There was light shining through the fogged window on the door and Harry could hear someone speaking inside – probably the team captain.
giving his players a pre-game pep-talk.

Suddenly Harry was flooded with a feeling of nostalgia. Listening to the muffled sounds drifting from the changing room, he couldn't help thinking back to all the boring and long-winded speeches Oliver Wood used to give on strategy in there, all the long and gruelling eternities of practise out on the pitch at ungodly hours of the day, come sunlight or storm. All of a sudden none of it seemed bad at all, and Harry would have given almost anything to get it back.

Lost in his tormented thoughts, he didn't notice that he had tightened his grip on Riddle's hand until the other boy squeezed his in return. The gesture invoked a startlingly foreign sensation of excited fluttering in his chest, as though a part of him was responding to a signal Harry didn't even know he had received. Alarmed, he looked reflexively to his right but of course saw nothing, the warmth surrounding his hand the only indication of another living presence next to him.

"Is something wrong?" a voice whispered in his ear, barely audible. Harry must have imagined the way the breath tickled his skin, but it made him twitch nervously nonetheless.

"I'm fine," he muttered back. "It's nothing."

A hint of a touch ghosted against his arm, but before Harry could question what Riddle was doing, the door banged open, making them both startle. Seven red-clad wizards and witches marched out of the changing room in an organised column, shiny yet hopelessly outdated brooms on their shoulders. As they walked by Harry eyed them critically, looking for any signs of Nott's calming solution taking effect. Many of them did, indeed, look quite mellow-faced, and there was a certain relaxed swagger to their steps that undermined the fiercely determined effect they were no doubt trying to achieve.

Concluding that the plan was so far a success, Harry waited, muscles coiled and ready for action, until the last person in the line had exited fully before silently dashing through the open door, pulling Riddle close behind him. They barely made it before the door was slammed shut again.

After that, the rest of the venture went as smoothly as could be hoped for, with Harry decidedly not thinking about Quidditch or about Riddle's inexplicable and oddly intimidating behaviour. Letting go of the other boy's invisible palm, he climbed on the bench lining the East wall of the main changing room and jimmed out the grid covering the air vent with the help of a few well-placed *Finites* to get rid of the Sticking Charms. Here up close to the uncovered potion the fumes were particularly potent, making him sway on his feet and blink his eyes sleepily, but he ignored it determinedly and vanished the offending concoction with a wave of his wand and a hissed *Evanesco*.

There was a brief exchange where Harry wondered aloud how they were going to get a seemingly floating salad bowl past a stadium full of people and Riddle's only response was to clink his wand against the edge of the dish, turning it as invisible as they were. Harry could just feel the longsuffering exasperation at his stupidity emitting from Riddle, and it did nothing to improve his humour. After that they made themselves scarce from the scene of the crime, sneaking past the noisy stands and then jogging across the sloping fields of frosted grass up to the castle.

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Meanwhile in the Slytherin stands Rosier, Avery, Dolohov, and Mulciber had found themselves good seats near the front row and sat comfortably in their winter cloaks and woolly scarves, buckets of popcorn and other various snacks in their laps.
"D'you reckon there's any difference in their game?" Avery asked his friends, following the Quaffle with his eyes as it was passed from Chaser to Chaser before being narrowly blocked by the Ravenclaw Keeper.

"Can't tell, really," Rosier said, his fingers digging through a rustling bag of dried apple slices. "Maybe they're a little less aggressive than before."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," Dolohov pointed out. "The Gryffs play nice, and Ravenclaw has a weak team this year. They wouldn't go all out on a bunch of underdogs."

Right then one of the Gryffindor Beaters missed a clear shot on a passing Bludger, and as a result the red-clad Chaser carrying the Quaffle was bludgeoned square in the back and sent reeling. The Quaffle ended up in enemy hands.

"Maybe they're a little out of it," Dolohov conceded.

For a long while they watched the game in silence, munching on their snacks and occasionally pointing and laughing at the Gryffindor team's bouts of clumsiness.

"Now that we're all here like this," Rosier spoke up about half an hour into the match when the referee had called for a penalty and Ravenclaw's lead Chaser was aligning herself with the Gryffindor goal hoops. "Well, except for Lestrange. But now that we're here, guys, what are your thoughts on Riddle and Potter?"

"Ooh, finally the topic is breached," Dolohov remarked and celebrated by tossing a piece of popcorn in the air and catching it deftly in his mouth.

"Tell me about it," Avery agreed, slumping back in his seat as though a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. "I've been dying to gossip about them for two weeks now. Could he be any more obvious?"

"Apparently he could, since Potter still doesn't seem to get it," Rosier muttered.

"He's an obtuse one isn't he?" Mulciber mused quietly from his seat at the edge of the group. "Poor bloke. He's probably never been hit on by anyone in his life, for him to be so clueless."

"I think it's more a matter of denial," Dolohov countered, tapping his finger against his lips thoughtfully. "Five Galleons says that he's as straight as his wand and Riddle's wasting his time on him."

"You're on," said Avery immediately. "Potter's obviously responding to the flirting – he just doesn't realise it yet. I say those two will be an item within the next fortnight."

"That would be stretching it a little," Rosier disagreed. "I bet it'll be a month before they get anywhere."

"Hold on, we have to write this all down to make it official," Avery interjected, bending down to rummage through his book bag, which lay at his feet. "So you're wagering five Galleons that Riddle and Potter will get together by the time Christmas hols begin?" he reaffirmed once he had a quill and a sheet of parchment in his hands. "And you're betting that Potter's straight and it's doomed from the start? Mulciber, would you like to place a bet?"

"Sure. Er..." Mulciber pondered his options. "I'll bet that... they won't get together before next year." He nodded once with finality.
"Got it," Avery said, writing the wager down. "We'll have to ask Lestrange for his input when we see him." He stared at the parchment for a moment, looking quite stupefied. "I never thought I'd see this day. I always thought Voldemort was incapable of acting like this at all, let alone towards another bloke.

"It explains a lot of things, though," Rosier pointed out reasonably. "Remember that time when he completely snubbed Lucretia Black? I reckoned back then that he must be mental, but now I see that wasn't the case at all."

They all turned to look at the girl in question, who was sitting surrounded by her sizeable court of Slytherinettes to their left.

"She's hot," Dolohov said.

"Yeah, but to be fair, so is Potter if you look at him in that light."

Dolohov tilted his head to the side and squinted into the distance as he tried to do just that.

"Is he? I can't really tell. I've never looked at a fellow in that way before."

"Well, the girls like him, at least," Avery shrugged. "I think it's the hair. And the eyes."

"Either way, I think it would be nice if things turned out well with him and Riddle," Rosier said. "It would give him something to focus on other than all the people he misses from the future. And Riddle could use some human contact, too. He's always so detached from everyone."

The others hummed in agreement.

"Also, it would mean that at least someone around here was getting some action."

It was then that the crowd around them stirred and the noise of the stadium doubled as both Seekers dived for the ground, flying shoulder to shoulder with their arms stretched out for the elusive glint of gold flitting just out of reach. They twisted and turned, looping and circling after the Snitch, trying to shake each other off and neither seeming to gain an inch from the other. It looked like sheer force of will was allowing the Gryffindor Seeker to overcome any crippling effects of Lestrange's nasty trick.

It was becoming almost boring to watch, until the Snitch led them in a tight loop around one of the Ravenclaw goal posts. The Gryffindor Seeker cut onto the inner edge, hooking one arm around the column and propelling himself those few inches further that threw his contender off balance and made all the difference.

"AND TOWLER CATCHES THE SNITCH! AFTER AN ELECTRIFYING CHASE AROUND THE PITCH THE GOLDEN SNITCH IS FINALLY CAUGHT! GRYFFINDOR WINS 290 TO RAVENCLAW'S 80 POINTS!"

The four Slytherins watched on in silent dismay as their house mates jeered and booed around them.

"Lestrange isn't going to like this."
Chapter 10

It was mid-December and the frost-laden grass crunched under Harry's feet as they crossed the sloping hills heading towards the enclosures used for Care of Magical Creatures. It hadn't snowed yet, but Harry was expecting the snowfall to come any day now. He wasn't very happy about the turn of seasons. It turned out that although there were, allegedly, enchantments in place around the Slytherin dungeons to ward off the bedrock’s chill, whoever cast them clearly didn’t have to live there, because the common room was cold.

Professor Kettleburn's class was held a definitive distance away from where Hagrid's hut would one day stand, but near the edge of the Forbidden Forest nonetheless. There were several mostly empty corrals and large cages encased in chicken wire, haphazardly thrown together to form a confusing, labyrinthine zoo. These cages contained piles of straw and large, gnarly pieces of dead tree for the little creatures inside to climb and scratch their claws on. Professor Kettleburn was still a young wizard in possession of all of his fingers and toes, filled to the brim with energy and passion for his subject.

Rosier had gone to the hospital wing to get a Pepperup treatment for his sudden but vicious cold, so it was just Harry and Riddle who bundled up in knitted hats and scarves and trudged through the grounds for their outdoor lesson, along with a couple of girls they knew. The class was shared with Gryffindors, and Harry noticed that the epidemic had reaped harvest among their numbers as well. The lesson was on Porlocks, which Harry had already covered in the future, and since the specimen Harry and Riddle were assigned refused to leave its pile of hay, they had a lot of time to kill. They sat on the ground, leaning back against the fence of the blessedly heat-charmed enclosure, mittens and mufflers discarded. Occasionally Harry would poke at the pile of hay with a long stick, and Riddle would rustle their basket of fresh sorrel enticingly, but apparently the creature just wasn't hungry and was perfectly content in its solitude.

"What if it's died in there?" Harry wondered aloud, idly rolling his stick between his palms.

"Don't be daft," Riddle muttered. "It looked quite fine twenty minutes ago. If it had suffered a stroke we would have noticed."

"But I think I heard somewhere that having a heart attack in your sleep is the most peaceful way to die there is. Doesn't that mean that there wouldn't be a whole lot of twitching and tossing around involved?"

Riddle gave him an odd, sidelong look.

"I wouldn't necessarily say that. Then again, I've never witnessed anyone dying in their sleep. Have you?"

"Of course not," Harry said, snorting cynically. "I don't know any people who died peacefully."

A short silence followed this statement during which Harry stared at the pile of hay with a frown, stewing in dark thoughts of people like his parents and Cedric Diggory dying before their time.

"You say things like that often," Riddle began hesitantly. "They give away quite a bit about the
future. I realise that your Oath of Unspeakability isn't fool proof, but how exactly does it work?"

Shaken from his distraction, Harry blinked at him before narrowing his eyes distrustfully. If Riddle thought Harry would go into an in-depth explanation for him, he had another thing coming.

"You're right, it is kind of leaky. I'm not completely sure how it works though – it's really intricate. I'm planning on asking the Head of the Unspeakables the next time I see him."

"It seems to me as though there are a lot of ways to get around the Oath," Riddle prodded, fixing him with an inquisitive look and shifting into a more comfortable position against the fence.

"Yeah, there are," Harry agreed vaguely, stalling for time as his mind raced for some sort of bone he could throw at him. "Like, I can't mention the full names of anyone I know in the future, but I can talk about them in general or just by their first names, as long as I don't reveal anything directly relevant to important events or anything. For instance, I can tell you that the Potions Master in my time was a humongous douche bag, but I can't tell you who, exactly, he is, will be – whatever."

He shrugged a little helplessly as he tried to explain. "That sort of thing. I mean, It's not exactly a shining example of a gaping loophole, seeing as I doubt anyone would care that the Potions Master of Hogwarts will be someone I don't like, but when you think about it, even vague descriptions of people like that could lead to someone recognising people in the future they aren't supposed to recognise, you know? Am I making sense?"

"Your articulation is atrocious, but I understand your point," Riddle nodded. "No matter how insignificant a detail might appear now, it could prove fatal to important people a few decades from now."

"That's right. Most people wouldn't be paying enough attention to what I say to still remember things like that when they become relevant, but I bet there are those who would keep a sharp watch on purpose."

"I don't doubt that," Riddle agreed, ignoring the thinly veiled jibe. "And I suppose the same principle applies to other things as well? I have heard you making references to future events without being hindered by the Oath."

"Yeah, I guess. I am able to make some sorts of general statements about stuff."

A moment passed in silence between the two of them, and eventually Riddle seemed to realise that Harry wasn't going to elaborate. In his peripheral vision Harry could see his brows furrow into a frustrated little frown, but he wouldn't let that faze him.

In actual fact, he had recently been paying close attention to all the things the Oath of Unspeakability did and didn't allow him to say and do, and by now he liked to think he knew how it worked as well as he could without reading a manual. There seemed to be a shocking amount of loopholes in the enchantment, and Harry could only assume that the Unspeakables had, for some inexplicable reason, been allowed to design it for themselves with no outside supervision whatsoever. After all, thought Harry, if he were tasked with developing an irreversible magical oath of silence and inaction, knowing it was going to be used on him, he would have poked it full of holes, too.

The nagging question was, then, why Supervisor Doalott had chosen to use such an unreliable enchantment on Harry, if he thought it was so important to preserve continuity. For the life of him, Harry couldn't think of reason for the oversight. He only hoped that he would get to ask the man in person sometime soon, if only to bring him some peace of mind. Either Doalott was a lot stupider than he looked and hadn't realised how much damage an ignorant, time travelling schoolboy could
cause, or he had an inordinate amount of trust in Harry's discretion. The latter wasn't likely, and the first seemed rather uncharitable.

The fact of the matter was that Avery had been right when he said that Harry only needed a touch of creativity to divulge his secrets – and conversely, someone like Riddle needed only to word his questions carefully and pose them when Harry was off his guard if they wanted answers. And now Riddle was prodding him to reveal the secrets of the Oath to him. Harry wasn't fooled, but he knew he couldn't stay vigilant all the time. He was sure that Riddle already knew too much, and he feared that someday he would manage to wiggle vitally important information out of him.

For the Oath of Unspeakability really was very intricate, but in a way that there were so many ways to get around it that Harry could never quite know he was giving something away before it had already happened. For instance, just last week he and Rosier had been griping about History of Magic when Harry had complained how tedious it was to do the same assignments all over again, and anyway, didn't it get dreadfully boring to teach by the same lesson plans decade after decade? Rosier had raised his eyebrows at him curiously, but in true Slytherin manner refrained from commenting. Harry realised right away what he had just unwittingly revealed. Professor Binns, who was already the subject of many a half-joking bet on when he would finally kick the bucket, couldn't possibly live to teach the History class in 1996.

Another incident took place a while back when Lestrange had, despite his diligent efforts not to, lost the reckless fifty-Galleon wager he had made on the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch match. Angered and frustrated by his predicament, the older boy had been quick to point fingers at his co-conspirators. Harry, not one to stand there and take the blame, had allowed his own temper to flare in response. Many heated words were exchanged, but what stuck in Harry's mind afterwards were the words he said before stomping away to cool his head.

"Knowing who you're going to be, I should never have expected any better, you –!"

The rest didn't bear repeating.

Since then the two of them had apologised to each other and called things even, but Harry was sure that he wasn't the only one to have noticed his slip of the tongue.

All the dizzying technicalities of the enchantment aside, there was also the fact that inevitably Harry's companions had learned to recognise instances of the Oath kicking into gear. Harry was generally a very open sort of fellow who carried his thoughts and emotions on his sleeve, so the blank neutrality that took over his features whenever he was confronted with something or someone he knew from the future was rather conspicuous. This was why, without him saying a single word, Riddle and the rest of his coterie knew quite well that Walburga Black in sixth year would be significant in his future, as would Head Girl McGonagall and 'that half-breed ogre' Hagrid from Gryffindor. Professor Dumbledore was a clear case as well, and of course, Tom Riddle need not even be mentioned.

Harry wished he weren't so easily read. He had taken to avoiding even looking Hagrid's way because it made him sick to listen to his fellow Slytherins' nasty speculations of what would become of the half-giant. Unable to defend his friend's honour, all Harry could do was try to keep the gang's attention elsewhere. Harry hated the fact that things had to be this way, and felt no small amount of resentment towards the Slytherins for keeping him from reacquainting with Hagrid.

"Well, in any case, the Oath can hardly stop you from being who you are," Riddle said eventually, prompting Harry to look up at him questioningly.

"What was that?"
"I only mean that your presence here alone has already had an impact. I’m sure that just knowing who you are and where you come from has been enough to make certain people think and act in a way they wouldn’t under normal circumstances. Wasn't it thanks to your press coverage that the Potters were reassured that their line wouldn’t die out?"

Harry paused in mid-motion with the tip of his branch buried in the haystack, thinking Riddle's words over.

"You're right," he said finally, surprised that he hadn't thought of worrying about his grandparents before now. "Sweet Merlin, I'm lucky to be still here, aren't I? I could have easily prevented my father from being born just by showing my face to my grandparents!"

"Perhaps, when the time comes, it will actually be your face that inspires them to have your father," said Riddle shrewdly.

"That's... gross."

The laughter this garnered from Riddle was shocking – spontaneous, genuine, and entirely unlike the high pitched cackle that never failed to give Harry the creeps, it bubbled from his chest as though it were the most natural thing in the world. It was a pleasant sound, bringing forth a cascade of startling mental images, such as a rocky brook, or ice cubes in a glass of lemonade on a hot summer day. Harry stared at him, mystified, taking in the white teeth exposed in mirth, the relaxed set of his shoulders, and the hand raised to run through his neat black hair in a sheepish gesture. It took him a moment to notice that his mouth was hanging open – hurriedly he snapped it shut with an audible click of his teeth.

"Well, phrasing it like that does make it sound rather disturbing," Riddle admitted, amusement still colouring his voice. "My mistake. What I meant to say is that perhaps you are meant to be here. Perhaps you presence here is required for history to take its known course."

"Yeah, I've heard that theory before, but I can't count on it," Harry muttered, turning his face away to hide his flushing cheeks.

It wasn't as though he had never heard Riddle laugh before. In fact, he did quite often. However, for Riddle laughter was more like a mandatory pleasantry than anything else, one trick among many in his superb small talk act. Never before had it sounded so instinctive and unrehearsed, and for reasons he decided not to examine too closely, it made Harry's insides squirm restlessly and his fingers reach for something to fidget with.

The Porlock chose that moment to rouse from its nap, as indicated by the violent shuddering of the hay pile. Harry grabbed the basket of sorrel and shifted onto his knees, pushing the food invitingly towards the hidden animal. If they didn’t get something done, they would be left without grading. After a few moments, the pile settled down again with a vague air of smugness about it.

"Damn," Harry muttered and sat back down on his behind.

"This isn't going very well, is it?" Riddle said. "Thankfully Professor Kettleburn is lenient. We’ll probably just have to write a short essay to make up for the lesson."

"Easy for you to say," Harry said cynically. "I for one prefer to do the school stuff in class. That'll be another hour of free time I’ll never see again."

Riddle patted his knee sympathetically, but his face looked altogether too amused, so Harry punched him lightly on the arm.
Riddle turned out to be right later, when the Professor came by to inspect their progress at the end of the class.

"He still hasn't come out?" he asked, hands on his hips and eyeing the hay with a concerned frown.

"No, sir," Riddle said solemnly.

"Well," Kettleburn said, sighing, "Huey is a very stubborn individual. I'll have to have you boys working with someone else next time so you can get some practise." Harry thought it was kind of endearing how he spoke of his creatures as though they were people. "This is unfortunate. I know it isn't your fault, but you have just passed an entire lesson doing nothing, and I can't have that – it would give the wrong impression to your peers."

He looked apologetic but it didn't stop him from handing out extra homework. Harry and Riddle were both assigned to write fifteen inches on the proper care and feeding of Porlocks.

At lunch, Rosier, still emitting smoke from his ears and nostrils, joined them for a bite to eat. He was concerned that since he had promised to meet his family on the Hogsmeade weekend scheduled for next week he'd be unable to do his Christmas shopping. He had talked about this before, and someone had suggested that he send an owl for some catalogues to look through so that he could mail order all the presents he wanted to give. Now the catalogues had arrived and he was disappointed in the selection they displayed.

"This is rubbish," he complained nasally and slammed the thick booklet he was browsing down onto the table, jarring his silverware and almost toppling jug of pumpkin juice. "They've left out all the good stuff."

"What were you expecting?" Lestrange said. "Of course they won't advertise their specialised merchandise on a catalogue anyone can order. Below-the-counter exchanges are supposed to be handled at a place where there is a counter in order to keep it – you guessed it – below the counter."

"But they keep that stuff on open display at the store!" Rosier argued. "Everyone knows what sort of things they sell on Knockturn Alley. If the Ministry wants to raid them, they can do it by walking in through the door, not by being sneaky and infiltrating their owl order system."

"What's got your knickers in a twist?" Harry wanted to know. "It's not like you could have gone to Knockturn Alley on a Hogsmeade weekend, anyway."

"Of course I could have," Rosier scoffed. "I can Apparate."

"Without a licence?"

"You're so innocent," Lestrange said fondly and reached over the table to pat his cheek.

Harry batted his hand away. "Where did you learn to Apparate? They don't teach us until we're of age."

"My dad taught me, naturally. People do it all the time."

Harry wondered why he had never heard of this before. He guessed it wasn't very different from Muggles teaching their children to drive before they could get their licence. Uncle Vernon had tried to teach Dudley, but Aunt Petunia had put her foot down when Dudley ran over a flower bed.

"It looks like this year I'll be known for the boring gifts I hand out," Rosier grumbled. "So, Riddle. What would you like for your birthday – a Self-Fanning Fan or Dictating Dictionary? Perhaps you'd
prefer this incense that makes you sing embarrassing arias, for when you decide to pull a good one on a first year Hufflepuff."

"Your birthday's coming up?" Harry asked Riddle. He had thought they were still talking about Christmas.

"On the 31st," was the reply.

"New Year's Eve? Neat. What are the odds?"

"Oh yeah, Potter, that reminds me – when's your birthday? Oh man, that's another one to put on the watch list. Please don't tell me it's soon."

"July 31st," Harry replied automatically, but then paused as he thought of something. "Wait. When I left it was June 5th, and when I came here it was October 12th, so if we're thinking linearly, or whatever you call it, I'll turn sixteen on…" He tried to do the math, but it turned out to be a bit difficult.

"December 7th," Riddle supplied.

"…Which was just a couple of days ago," finished Rosier. "Damn. Well, congratulations. I don't have anything for you, though. Hope you don't mind."

"No offence taken." Harry was a little shaken by this revelation. He had already turned sixteen without even realising it! "It would be weird to celebrate my birthday in winter anyway. I was still born in July – that doesn't change even though I missed a few months, does it?"

"Nah. But hey, now you kind of have two birthdays, don't you? That's wicked. One more excuse for a party."

There were more belated congratulations and well-wishes from the others, and Lestrange promised to treat them all to a round of 'let's-call-it-butterbeer' in a couple of days when they got to 'Hogsmeade'. Riddle gave him a friendly nudge on the shoulder in acknowledgment and smiled in a way that forced Harry to look away and fiddle nervously with his collar.

"Maybe I'll just sneak out of the castle some day," Rosier speculated once he had successfully pulled the topic back to his plight. "You guys could cover my behind. Tell people I… got struck by a malfunctioning Crackpot Jinx and had to stay in the dorm to suffer it off. Or something."

"Relax, man. It's not the end of the world," Dolohov said. "You don't need to prove anything by buying us all wicked cool presents."

"It's the thought that counts," Harry agreed sagely.

He had harboured his own worries concerning the holidays, since he doubted that the generosity of the Department of Mysteries covered things like Christmas gifts, but didn't want to be so rude as to get nothing for his new friends. The problem had been solved when one day he had received an owl from his grandfather carrying a – for all intents and purposes – bottomless coin pouch and a note suggesting Harry to splurge a little and shock his mates. Harry felt a stab of guilt accepting the money, but he wasn't going to look the gift horse in the mouth.

When Saturday rolled in and the Slytherin gang joined the crowd on the pilgrimage to the village, it took a lot of cajoling, but in the end Harry allowed Lestrange to grab his arm and Apparate him over to London. He was very nervous about it, because although he usually didn't mind sneaking around breaking rules, he had never considered completely leaving the allotted premises, let alone running
off to the other end of the British Isles. The others were all very blasé about the trip, though, and pointed out that the only supervision conducted in Hogsmeade were a few patrolling prefects, and they only paid attention to what the over-excited underclassmen were doing. Tom Riddle was one of those prefects and would cover their backs if anyone started asking uncomfortable questions.

They didn't venture onto Diagon Alley, since there would be a lot of people there who would recognise their uniforms and call the Headmaster to inform him of their shenanigans. On Knockturn Alley people didn't care enough to look twice, so they were able to conduct their business quite openly. Harry, who hadn't stepped foot on the Alley since that Floo Powder incident when he was twelve, let his friends lead the way and stuck close to either Lestrange or Mulciber, since they seemed to know Knockturn Alley best.

The place was pretty much the same as Harry remembered. Despite the cold weather it still hadn't snowed yet, so the Alley was probably the gloomiest and most forbidding it ever got. Suspicious looking characters ambled along the cobblestone lane and smelly tramps inhabited gateways and shady nooks. Most of the display windows were so sooty that one could hardly see through them into the shops, and what Harry did see didn't particularly invite him to step inside. However, he refused to complain and didn't hesitate when his companions took him from one shady establishment to another.

"I've never had such a hard time buying Christmas presents," Harry muttered as he inspected a rustic pair of binoculars that saw through people's clothes, and even skin and muscle tissue depending on the settings – if the card next to it was to be believed. Harry didn't feel inclined to test it on Mulciber, who was with him at the moment. The group had split up so that they wouldn't see what they got each other. "Or birthday presents, for that matter."

"You're new to these parts, aren't you?" Mulciber said perceptively.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Well, not really. Not many people are comfortable shopping here, and it's just common sense to look over your shoulder. It's just that you look completely lost. That clued me in."

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "It hasn't been a habit of mine to hang out on Knockturn Alley."

"Not into the Dark Arts?"

"…No, not really. Um… Nasty experiences."

"Of the 'Ouch' variety?"

"You could say that," Harry said, shrugging uncomfortably. Mulciber looked genuinely sympathetic, biting his lip uncertainly.

"Can't say I blame you, then. Some of that stuff could really mess with your head if you find yourself on the wrong end." He hesitated for a moment before ploughing on, "If you want to talk about it…?"

"No, no," said Harry hurriedly. "I'm fine. It was nothing, really. Don't worry about me. Now, what should I do – I have no idea what Avery might like."

Mulciber dropped the subject and became very helpful.

"Oh, well, you know Avery. He likes to act tough, but actually he's just a big nerd. Get him a book and he'll be happy. Here." He lead him to the back of the shop where there was a nook lined with
ceiling-high bookcases crammed full of dusty tomes. "Only, don't pick anything too serious. He might be into complicated stuff like Arithmancy and dead languages but he also likes to keep school and leisure separate."

“Okay, thanks. Good to know.”

Harry leaned in to peer at the spines and Mulciber clapped him on the shoulder before wandering off. There were many that didn't have any title embossed on them, so closer examination was in order.

He had often wondered what the others thought of the fact that he didn't share their hobbies. He never had the first thing to say when the discussion turned to the Dark Arts and although he kept his mouth shut, his disapproval must have been apparent. Harry knew that the only reason for his presence among them was that Riddle chose to keep him there. For simplicity's sake Harry maintained a neutral stance and kept looking through his fingers – he didn't like to think of what sort of trouble a bunch of more or less experienced Dark Arts practitioners could cause him if he crossed them. However, he would never join them, and if they tried to make him, he would leave Hogwarts.

Mulciber's reaction was a relief, not least because Mulciber himself was a mystery to Harry and as such unpredictable in many ways. The older Slytherin didn’t speak much, so a lot of people were quick to underestimate him. Harry knew for a fact, though, that Mulciber was top of his class in both Charms and Defence Against the Dark Arts, and also held the mantle of the only boy in their group who had ever had a girlfriend (Cho Chang didn't count, since Harry was still trying to block those memories). This was as far as Harry's knowledge of the introverted upperclassman's character went.

He replaced one of the books he had given a cursory glance-over onto its shelf and pulled out another, thicker volume. Turning over the blank front cover revealed the title page. The Woeful Song of Leopold, Who Reached for Yester-Eve. Flipping through the pages revealed it to be an epic, apparently about a wizard who had killed his wife with a flower-pot and later came to regret it, proceeding to undergo a number of valiant trials to take back his mistake. Curious, Harry jumped straight to the last pages, and found that in the end, he failed – with gruesome consequences.

He tucked the book under his arm. Avery might enjoy it.

An hour or two later the gang gathered at the Eel Barrel, a somewhat seedy pub towards the back of the Alley frequented by secretly hooded fellows and openly shifty-looking scoundrel types. Lestrange lived up to his word and bought them all a round of drinks. Without being asked, Harry was handed a smoking glass of something that looked like tomato soup and tasted strongly of chilli peppers and alcohol.

"I'm glad that's over with. I hate shopping," Dolohov grumbled into his drink.

"Good thing Christmas only comes once a year," Avery agreed. "Dad isn't going to be happy with me when he finds out how much money I've spent." He let out an exhausted sigh. "What's up with being born on New Year's Eve, anyway? It's bad enough finding a Christmas present for him, but Christmas and birthday in one go? Sometimes I'm sure he made that up just to make our lives harder."

"And he never even gets us anything in return," Dolohov muttered quietly, as though not meaning to be heard. He was, though, and the atmosphere tensed noticeably. Lestrange and Avery glanced around nervously as though expecting Riddle to be suddenly standing behind them, and Mulciber jabbed his friend in the side with his elbow, hard.

"That's because he hasn't got any money," Lestrange hissed in a low voice. "You know – 'cause he's an orphan?"
For some reason he glanced at Harry, his expression one that Harry couldn't quite interpret. There was a slight hint of plea, and was that fear? Harry wondered if he was expecting him to go to Riddle and squeal on Dolohov's mutinous words.

After that, the mood was ruined for light-hearted small talk, and as soon as they had all emptied their glasses, the gang stood up as one and filed out onto the Alley, ready to return to Hogsmeade.

They Apparated into a dead-end behind Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop, Harry once again clutching onto Lestrange for the journey. He couldn't help wondering if it was some sort of cosmic rule of tit-for-tat that any instant form of travel was also an extremely unpleasant experience. So far, the only mode of magical transportation he had tried and actually liked was the flying broomstick, and even those were now stripped of all the fun qualities, that is to say, speed and manoeuvrability.

They slipped out onto the High Street in two separate groups to avoid suspicion, Lestrange, Dolohov and Mulciber going first and Harry and Avery bringing the rear five minutes later. Once in open view they sauntered along, trying to look as though they had been there all day. Nobody seemed to recognise anything amiss, although Harry did notice one of his Ravenclaw year mates looking at them oddly. The boy lifted a finger and opened his mouth to say something to his friends, who were immersed in their own conversation. However, one baleful look and a discrete gesture of running his finger across his throat from Avery, and he let his arm drop back to his side and swivelled around hastily to turn his back on them.

"Hey, listen, Potter," Avery turned to Harry once he'd made sure that the Ravenclaw wouldn't pose a problem. "I'm thinking I'll head back to the castle right away. Some of this stuff I bought doesn't like being shrunk and I don't want my pockets to implode. Are you coming with me or do you still need something from the village?"

"Oh." Harry checked his watch. There was still about two hours left before everyone had to be back in the castle. "I still haven't bought anything for my grandparents. I figured they wouldn't appreciate most of the stuff I could find on Knockturn, and I didn't want to accidentally give them something cursed. You go on if you like. I'll be up in a bit."

"Alright, see you later then," Avery bid his goodbye and picked up his pace to a jog, heading for the forest path leading to Hogwarts.

Harry was left feeling a little nonplussed and suddenly alone. He looked around him in the street and heaved a pained sigh, knowing that he would have to hurry if he was going to finish his shopping, seeing as he was completely out of his comfort zone buying gifts for grownups. He would just have to start looking.

He had just started walking down the street again, peering at display windows, when he heard his name called. He turned to look for the source, although he recognised the voice immediately.

Riddle approached him from the direction of Honeydukes, pulling his hood down.

"I was wondering where you were. I saw everyone else heading towards the castle already."

Riddle had worried about him? Harry couldn't help the small smile tugging up the corners of his mouth. "I still have to get a couple of things – for Iris and Howard, you know."

"Would you like me to accompany you?"

"What, aren't you supposed to be on patrol duty?"

Riddle shrugged his shoulders. "By this point most students have already come and gone. And even
if somebody makes trouble," he smirked at this, "there are other prefects around who have more earnest regard for their responsibilities than I do."

Harry couldn't see any fault in that, so he just shrugged and said, "Be my guest, then. I don't suppose you've got any idea what sort of stuff adults like?"

"I might be able to help you there," Riddle replied with a mischievous smile.

Harry wasn't surprised to hear that. Riddle was a master at pleasing grown ups. He knew exactly which buttons to push and which issues to skirt around – that was how he had everyone from the caretaker to the Headmaster worshiping the ground he walked on. Harry had never thought of that as a particularly admirable trait – the image he fed to the professors was such a huge sham it gave Harry cold shivers – but this time it might come in handy for him.

"You don't know your grandparents very well yet, so you are yet to become aware of their particular preferences," Riddle took charge and led him down the street. "That is why it is best to go for something generally acceptable." They turned a corner, away from the High Street, and Riddle halted them in front of a jeweller's shop. "For your grandmother, I suggest looking here first. Not all women like to wear jewellery, but I have learnt that they all love receiving them for gifts."

"Where did you learn that?" Harry asked, frowning.

Riddle shrugged indifferently. "I pay attention to what goes on around me. Have you not noticed how Ignatius Prewett keeps showering Lucretia with gifts she never uses? Her exclamations and sighs of happiness are incongruently genuine."

"Oh, alright. So, jewellery. I can do that. Let's go inside, then."

"I would recommend either a brooch or a pair of earrings," Riddle said as he helpfully held the door open for Harry. "A necklace is often something a man buys for the lady he wishes to court, and bracelets hold much the same connotations."

"Oh, that's nasty," Harry didn't bother suppressing his shiver of disgust. "She's my grandmother!"

Riddle laughed. "I'm sure she wouldn't read anything into it if you did get her a necklace," he assured, "but just for the sake of etiquette, you should think of something else."

"I'll do that," Harry said and made a beeline for the brooch selection.

Riddle moved with a more sedate pace and looked around the shop with mild curiosity, imperiously waving away the shop assistant who tried to approach him with the intention of making a good sale.

"How is it that you struggle with buying gifts for your family?" he asked Harry. "Surely you have faced the same chore on a yearly basis."

Harry had no time to tense up before the magic kicked in, relaxing his shoulders and facial expression into nonchalant indifference. "I just don't know Iris and Howard."

Riddle turned to look at him shrewdly. "You asked me, and I quote: 'I don't suppose you've got any idea what sort of stuff adults like?'"

"Bad wording," Harry dismissed, inwardly cursing himself for that yet-another mindless slip.

"There are also many other things about you that confuse me in light of your high-born, wizarding background," Riddle pressed on, pinning Harry under his keen gaze. "For instance, your apparent
disregard for your image in the eyes of others. On occasion you also show startling ignorance of the social hierarchy of our culture and how it should be adhered to – especially in regards to your own beneficial position in it."

For a moment Harry just stared at him, silently but feverishly trying to poke his brain out of the blank incompetency it had stuttered into. "...What are you, my shadow?" was the best explanation he could come up with.

Riddle didn't respond, only stared at him, and as Harry met his eyes with his own he was grateful to the Oath for keeping his cool for him. Finally, Riddle relented and lowered his gaze, brushing his fingers through his hair in what could have been a nervous gesture but probably wasn't.

"I know you can't talk about it," he said. "However, I hope you realise that I would be the last person to judge you."

Harry let out an involuntary breath and lowered his gaze unseeingly to the jewellery display. He knew he didn't act anything like the typical rich pure-blood, and really, it was only the fact that his face had Potter copyright plastered all over it which made most people overlook the discrepancies in his behaviour. Riddle, though, as cunning as he was, had been bound to notice and put two and two together sooner or later. Harry had been hoping that he wouldn't, or that he would at least refrain from pointing them out. By now he had settled in nicely at Slytherin, and as much as he hated himself for thinking it, he didn't want his background to come up now and ruin things for him. He had been starting to like being 'pure-blood'.

Casually, as though nothing unusual had just happened, Riddle, too, turned to look at the brooch collection. "Do you see anything you like?"

Harry ended up choosing a rather simple silver piece in the shape of an ivy leaf with a couple of glittering cut crystals masquerading as dew droplets. He paid for it, and they left the jeweller's with plenty of time to find something for Howard.

"For your grandfather, you ought to try and go for something unique. Things like pocket watches or cufflinks are so overused a gift choice that he probably has a whole drawer full of them. We should go visit the antique shop."

Riddle's tone was as pleasant and friendly as ever, but Harry couldn't help feeling as though the air between them had gone a bit awkward. As they strode along the little side alleys not far from the High Street, the sensation mounted and after a short while it grew so stifling that Harry simply had to open his mouth, throwing caution to the wind.

"It wasn't an orphanage," he blurted, and Riddle stopped in his track to look at him. They could already see the old calligraphy on the sign hanging above the door of their destination. "I grew up with my aunt and uncle." Harry stopped and scratched his neck beneath his scarf in thought, trying to mentally gauge how much he would be able to say. "They weren't poor by a long shot, but it wasn't anything extravagant, either. Just… a normal, sort of upper-middle-class suburbia home. You know?"

"Oh." Riddle paused hesitantly, and Harry thought he may have looked a little disappointed. "Did you like it there?"

Before he could think of a calculated response, Harry was shaking his head. "No," he said empathically. "I hated my relatives, and the sentiment was mutual." He chuckled darkly. "I was a burden and they never let me forget about it."
The alleyway was deserted of other people, so nothing disturbed them as they stood for a frozen moment, held in place by each other's gazes. Harry held his breath, realising that he had given away more of himself to the young man who would one day be Lord Voldemort than any other person in the world of now knew. He hoped fervently that the other boy wouldn't come to hurt him with this new advantage.

Then, suddenly, Riddle smiled. It was an expression unlike the warm smiles he usually graced Harry with – somehow very sinister, it contained within it a burning, unholy flame of passion. He leaned closer to Harry, placing his hand lightly on the time traveller's chest, and insisted in a fierce whisper, "I understand you perfectly."

A strong shiver ran through Harry's entire body at the contact and the warm breath barely grazing his chin and vapourising into thin white mist between them – seemingly starting from the very core of his spine and spreading out in all direction like a tidal wave. It was the sudden thrill of fear mixed with excitement, to see Tom Riddle emerge as he remembered him, with no masterful pretensions of geniality. It had been easy to almost forget his true nature, and now as Harry stared into those eyes – they were blue, he noticed for the first time, dark, dark blue, almost cobalt in shade – he felt as though he were facing something completely otherworldly and demonic. It drew him in.

"How different we are, yet exactly the same…" Riddle murmured and leaned even closer, his eyes becoming hooded as they bored into Harry's. Harry observed, transfixed and almost hypnotised, as his face drew nearer, and it wasn't until they were mere inches from being connected that he realised what was going on. A sudden surge of shock and panic blew away his stupor and he threw up his hands to push at Riddle's shoulders.

"What the hell are you doing?" he exclaimed, and Riddle seemed to snap back to reality, drawing back from him with a slightly wounded expression.

"What does it look like?"

"I… I…" Harry flailed around for words, confused. "Were you about to…? Oh Merlin, you were, weren't you? And I just pushed you away like that, I'm sorry, you must think I'm such a git now…"

Harry felt his jaw drop and he stared dumbly at the other boy. "…You have?" He shook his head to clear it. "I'm sorry, I… didn't realise."

It took him a moment to put two and two together, but of course – the seat in the Great Hall, the friendly proximity, the chivalry, those smiles… It all made sense now that he had been told flat out. Harry could hardly believe it. He knew he tended to be a bit thick in these matters, but he really felt like he had no excuse this time.

"If I'd known, I would have…"

"Wait," Riddle interrupted, putting up his hands for emphasis. "Are you rejecting me?"

He sounded absolutely aghast, as though the mere notion were so ludicrous and farfetched that he had never even entertained the possibility.
"No!" 'I'm not?' "I just… This is just so sudden, I don't know what to think. But I'm not rejecting you."

The words came out without thinking, but although they surprised Harry, making him question all sorts of things about himself, he somehow knew them to be true.

For a long moment the only sound that could be heard was the cold wind whining mournfully between the buildings and the rustling of their cloaks as the breeze picked up the hems with its frosty fingers. Riddle still looked distrustful and guarded as he regarded Harry through narrowed eyes.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

Yes, what did he mean? Harry sighed and ran his hand over his face, accidentally leaving a smudge on his left lens.

"I mean that I need to think some first. But I'm not rejecting you."

Riddle turned his face away from him, and although he kept his expression schooled, Harry could tell that he felt angry and ashamed that things had veered so steeply off course.

"Alright," he said. "I understand. I will give you the time and space you require. I hope you will be able to sort out your thoughts."

"Thank you." Harry looked at his feet awkwardly, fidgeting with his sleeves. The wind kept tousling his hair, blowing it into his eyes, and for once he was grateful for it.

"You need to finish your shopping," Riddle said, indicating at the antique shop they had been headed for. "I wish you luck with that."

He turned around and walked away, towards the High Street. Harry watched him go with a confusing mix of embarrassment and regret.
Harry stowed the trip's booty in his fancy Ministry-issue travelling trunk. He had very nearly bought the first vintage pocket watch he had laid his eyes on, and it was only the novel sense of familial duty that had forced him to poke around a little more despite his sudden lack of enthusiasm.

He held one of the rather expensive crystal snifters he had finally settled on against the light, examining the way the light scattered and trying to recall, belatedly, if his grandfather had even touched alcohol that one time they had met for dinner. When the memory failed to return to him, he lowered his hand again with a sigh and stuffed the glass back in its box.

"At least they're pretty," he muttered, though his heart wasn't in it. Christmas gifts were low on his list of priorities right now.

Tom Riddle had tried to kiss him.

Harry closed the lid of his trunk and sat down on it, head bowed and heart hammering in his chest. A churning mixture of nervousness, fear, excitement, and bashfulness battled for dominance within him.

On one hand, there were danger alarms going off in his head, complete with flashing red lights and wailing sirens, because this wasn't a harmless boy-next-door with a puppy crush he was dealing with here. This was a young man with the capacity to commit murder, and not only get away with it, but also be awarded a medal for his troubles.

On the other hand, though – and this was a part of him that Harry was only now becoming aware of – there was an underlying feeling he could not ignore vying for his attention. It was a warm sensation in his chest that seemed to constrict into an aching knot and expand into an uplifting bubble at the same time. The feeling was telling him – completely irrationally, Harry thought – that he shouldn't write Riddle off as a hopeless and irredeemable case just like that. There was more to him than Voldemort, it whispered to him pleadingly.

He had no idea when he had started feeling like this. It must have been a subtle and creeping process, but there was no way he could pinpoint the catalyst that had set the ball rolling, when it had taken him this long to notice that anything was moving in the first place. He couldn’t believe that he had been this attracted to someone and not even realised it until the emotions were literally shoved right into his face.

This was all turning out to be one big, smelly can of worms that Harry would dearly have loved to leave closed. So many facts about Tom Riddle made an intimate relationship feel wrong to Harry, and he found he couldn't find a clear space in his head to deal with all the possibilities. He would have to deal with the proposal, though – sooner rather than later, because he hadn't rejected Riddle and the other boy was still waiting for an answer.

After a few moments of confused mental stumbling, Harry finally decided to settle on the problem that seemed to be the least pressing as well as easiest to solve.

Before now he had only ever been attracted to girls. He had never been in love or experienced
anything more significant than superficial infatuation, but he had never even considered directing those attentions to other boys. It wasn't really because he thought there was something wrong with that, but simply because he had always taken for granted that, if he didn't die young, he would find himself a nice girl, marry her, and have two or three children. That was how all normal people seemed to lead their lives, and Harry had always wanted nothing more than to be normal.

Now it looked like he couldn't assume anything of that sort anymore. It made him decidedly uneasy to think that he may have been gay all this time without knowing it. He looked back on all the friendships he had shared with guys he knew, trying to discern with the benefit of hindsight whether or not there had been any strange undertones to any of them. He first thought of Ron, trying to look at him through the eyes of a heated admirer, like Hermione.

"Bloody hell!" he swore and baulked physically, lifting his hand to shield his eyes, as though doing that could block away the scarring mental image.

'Okay, nothing queer going on there,' Harry thought once he had managed to calm his racing heart down a bit. 'Thank Merlin for that!'

Next, he turned his thoughts on his Slytherin mates. He gazed thoughtfully at Rosier's bed hangings, imagining the bed's occupant standing before him. He considered the boy's chestnut hair, cut short and neatly combed; his warm, brown eyes, the mischievous quirk of his lips, and the slope of his jaw.

The mental scrutiny didn't make him feel all flushed, flustered, and conflicted like Riddle's advances had, but neither did he feel disgusted like he had thinking about Ron. He did, however, detect a mild stirring of interest within him.

Fascinated by this new discovery, Harry made an attempt to analyse the sensation and what lay beneath the surface. Did he just find the other boy to be handsome? He frowned. While Rosier was, indeed, a fairly decent-looking bloke, he doubted that looks were the only reason he felt intrigued by Rosier. Even as he considered young Slytherin's features, he was thinking of all the aspects of his character that made him like Rosier as a person and as a friend: his witty sense of humour, his open friendliness, the way he really paid attention when someone was talking to him and altruistically put his friends' needs before his own. Even the way he drew such a harsh line between 'friends' and 'others', defending those he considered his with vicious vengeance and dismissing outsiders with the sort of disregard that Harry reserved for nobody at all. It all coalesced into one wholesome picture in Harry's mind. It was a very nice picture, and he realised that there was, indeed, the potential there for him to develop feelings for Rosier.

Conclusion reached and experiment over, Harry promptly clamped a lid on it, snapping on a mental padlock just to be sure. So, it wasn't just Riddle. That was good to know, wasn't it?

That was another troubling question. Was it really alright? Harry knew that if he were still in the 1990s he wouldn't have much to worry about – gay relationships, while not exactly common, weren't cause for fuss in the wizarding world. However, he had no idea what people thought of them now. The Muggle world at least still thought of homosexuality as a crime or a mental disorder or something equally unpleasant. Was it safe to assume that the magical community was the same? Perhaps it was kind of cowardly of him, but Harry didn't want to be shunned by his own society because of something he could easily avoid if he tried.

Besides, it wasn't as though he were suddenly gay all the way. He didn't think he had been lying to himself when he had crushed on Cho Chang, no matter how misguided he had been. Clearly this was merely a case of his door swinging both ways – it didn't have to mean that he was now doomed to a life of miserable self-oppression.
Of course, knowing this helped little when he was being wooed by a guy, or whatever he should call it, and he had already said 'maybe'. Maybe! To the destined murderer of his parents! *What on Earth was he doing?*

Harry groaned and buried his face in his hands as his head started to once again spin with fears, doubts, accusations, hopes, and the self-pitying despair of 'Why me?'

He was so absorbed in his whirling thoughts that he didn't hear anyone approaching until the bedroom door opened and the floorboards creaked. Harry snapped his head up, straightening his back and lifting his hand to run his fingers through his ruffled hair in a knee-jerk attempt to look casual, as though he hadn't just been hunched over himself, having an internal crisis. Clearly he wasn't very convincing, though.

"Potter," said Rosier, who had stopped by the open door to stare at him strangely, "are you okay?"

"What, me? Sure, I'm fine." Harry stood up from the lid of his trunk, but belatedly realised that this only left him standing around awkwardly. "So you're back from meeting up with your family? Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah, it was nice," Rosier said, after a pause, during which he eyed the other with shrewd suspicion, finally stepping fully inside and pulling the door closed behind him. He wandered over to his wardrobe and started to remove his cloak. "We caught up pretty well. Ate lunch at the Three Broomsticks. I wish I could have gone to London with you guys, though. What about you? What's up?"

"Oh, London was okay, I suppose. Though, I have to admit, Knockturn Alley isn't the cheeriest of places, so... But yeah, we had fun. I got all of my presents, which is a relief. Hey, speaking of presents –" Harry knew he was starting to ramble, but he hoped that Rosier wouldn't notice. "– the wrapping paper I bought? Wow, so retro. The wizarding world is so stagnant, you know, that most of the time you can't really tell the difference between decades, but it's the little details, like the wrapping paper, that keep reminding me that I'm way back. In fact, just earlier this week I –"

"Potter," Rosier held up a hand to interrupt him, face serious. "Are you sure you're alright? What's bothering you?"

Harry felt his shoulders stiffen defensively. Silently he cursed the fact that apparently he couldn't hide anything from Rosier. Under any other circumstances Rosier's caring would have been an admirable and welcome trait, but this was a personal issue and Harry didn't want to talk about it.

"I told you, I'm fine."

Rosier sighed and came over to sit on Harry's bed. "You're a dreadful liar, Harry. If you don't want to talk about it you don't have to, but you know I don't gossip if I'm told something in confidence."

Without thinking, Harry met Rosier's eyes and found his irritation faltering in the face of the solemn look in them. He felt the padlock rattle just a little bit in the back of his mind but ignored it, knowing it was ridiculous. They held each other's gazes for a moment before Harry forced himself to look away, shaking his head with a sigh and sitting back down on his closed trunk.

"I really don't feel like talking about it," he said, but feeling that his friend deserved an elaboration, continued, "Something's just come up and... You know, it's not even that important, I don't know why I'm making such a big deal out of it. You don't need to worry about me."

Rosier was silent for a moment as though giving him a chance to change his mind before nodding.
"Okay, if you're sure. So," he pushed himself up, brushing away the wrinkles from his robes and breaking the moment, "are you coming down to the common room with me? It looked like the others have set up a game of Prodding Poker."

"Yeah, I guess." Though, Harry didn't particularly feel up to socialising. "I don't know how to play, but I suppose I can watch."

"Great. Let's go, then."

Seeing Rosier's retreating back suddenly made Harry hesitate, his mind racing with reasonable arguments such as 'I can trust him, he's discreet,' 'I need to know,' and 'It's not like I have to tell him everything.' Before he knew it, he was calling out to Rosier, "Hey, wait a moment."

Rosier turned around to look at him expectantly. "Yeah?"

Harry leant against his hands, trying to look nonchalant. "I've been wondering recently about these times. I mean, I'm sure I should know most of this stuff from History class, but nobody ever listens in History, so I'm kind of clueless about a lot of things."

"That so? Well, what would you like to know?"

"Oh, I dunno. Things like what people generally think of... women's rights, for example. I know they must have the right to vote by now, but do they have the same jobs open for them as men do? Do they get paid the same wages?"

Rosier frowned thoughtfully, leaning against one of Avery's bedposts.

"Well... no, I don't think they do. No. I don't know about their salaries, but there aren't a lot of women in business and stuff. At least not in law. Many of them stay at home and if they don't, they mostly do things like secretarial or clerical work. Oh, and there are plenty of witch Healers. It's not as though there aren't any women in high positions, but they have to be really skilled and determined to fight all the odds to get there. Very few are. We're lucky we're guys, to be quite honest."

"Oh." Harry bit his lip, discomfited. This wasn't the question he really wanted answered, but it made him feel bad to hear about such inequality in the world. He imagined Hermione – so intelligent and talented – struggling to find her rightful success because nobody would take her seriously for her gender. The entire notion was an outrage. "That sucks."

"Yeah, I suppose it really does."

Reminding himself that he hadn't reached his objective yet and that he could worry about the unfairness of women's social standing later, Harry went to steer the topic closer to home.

"Then what about, er, different ethnicities? There doesn't seem to be very many at Hogwarts and I haven't been off the grounds much since I came here, so I can't really tell if there's a lot of discrimination or--"

"No," Rosier interrupted, shaking his head emphatically. "The wizarding world doesn't have any problems with racism. That's something you need to worry about more when you're among Muggles. Our community is so small even on an international level that it would be pretty stupid to look down on other wizards just because they look different or speak a different language."

He hadn't asked yet why Harry was suddenly interested in these things. Encouraged by the good sign, Harry thought it safe to venture for the real thing.
"Okay, that's good to hear. So, um. What else was there? Oh, what's the general attitude towards same-sex relationships? You know, girls with girls and guys with guys?"

Rosier raised his eyebrows and for a brief moment Harry thought he saw something flash in his eyes – realisation, maybe a bit of amusement – but it was gone after he blinked, so he wasn't quite sure.

"Oh, that," he said, settling himself more comfortably against the bedpost. "You have no worries there. Wizards are generally rather open-minded about sexual minorities. I hear that Muggles can be really mean to them, but since when do they know anything about anything? Having children and maintaining lineage is no problem if you go for adoption, and with magic it's easy to share your blood with the child and make them biologically yours. Also, love is actually a really potent form of magic even though most people have no idea how to make any concrete use of it, so a lot of magic folk consider it something almost sacred no matter what form it takes." Seeing Harry's wide-eyed expression, he shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, there are always ignorant idiots out there who think they alone know how people should feel and live their lives and most of them are really loud about it. Just ignore them. Mudbloods, the lot of them."

Something about the way he said all of this didn't sit right with Harry and made him feel defensive.

"It's not like I'm asking for my own sake," he pointed out.

"Of course not," Rosier agreed quickly. "I wasn't implying that you were."

"I just... wasn't sure how much things had changed in fifty years. They could have changed a lot for all I knew."

"That's completely understandable."

Harry had a tickling suspicion about his sincerity, so he decided that a change of subject was in order.

"Well, anyway. Thanks for hearing out my dumb questions. Like I said, I really should probably already know these things so I've been feeling kind of leery about asking."

"I told you, it's no problem. You can always come to me if you've got something on your mind. Now, are you ready to go down to the common room?"

"Sure."

Although Harry wasn't pleased with the idea that Rosier might now think that he was gay, he was relieved to have those particular worries laid to rest. As they entered the common room and were enthusiastically waved over to join the poker table, it was a little easier for him to smile now that he knew that his friends, at least, weren't going to judge him. However, it did little to alleviate his indecision of what to do with his Dark Lord problem.

The next several days passed in a haze and the only clear recollections Harry had of them were those of gnawing anxiety, Avery's elbow poking him in the side in a vain attempt to make him pay attention in class, and the conspicuous absence of Tom Riddle in his general vicinity. He made his best effort to keep a clear and calm head about the situation and rationalise his way through the dilemma like a man, but it seemed that the more he thought the more complicated it became, and the tighter the knot wound itself the more troubled and confined he felt.

The crux of the problem was the fact that Harry couldn't trust Riddle. No matter how close they became and how well he got to know him, he could never forget the fact that Voldemort had hunted his parents down and slaughtered them in their own home, even though he had made the conscious
effort to see Riddle as his own person and a child who hadn't killed anyone yet. There was also the whole debacle with the enchanted diary, Ginny, and the Chamber of Secrets – because of it Harry could directly connect this youthful face of Voldemort's with murder.

His own experience of Riddle's character wasn't one to particularly inspire trust, either. Sleeping in the same dormitory as he and sharing every class with him, Harry was in a prime position to make observations on Tom Riddle as a person. It could safely be said that he was dangerous: his great talent in the art of pretence made it nearly impossible to tell when one was being manipulated by him, and Harry had found that constantly staying alert around him was simply too tiring to be feasible. He also made no special effort to hide the fact that he held next to no-one in high regard, at least around his fellow Slytherins. In fact, Harry was quite sure that Riddle sincerely considered himself better than everybody else, if not in the entire world then at least at Hogwarts. Professor Dumbledore was a possible exception, but the best even he could garner was disdainful recognition of authority based solely on his magical competence.

From an entirely rational point of view there was really no cause for debate – clearly it was a bad idea to get involved with Riddle any more closely than he already was. However, for Harry it was past the point where reason ruled over his actions. If Riddle had propositioned him a month ago, he would have had no problem telling him no and possibly laughing uncharitably to his face while at it. Now, things had changed. Perhaps it was all part of Riddle's wily plan of seduction, but Harry had, against his better judgment, managed to develop some sort of feelings for the other boy. There was nothing rational about the restless beating of his heart, the teasing hope that maybe this was a sign of better things to come, or the unwillingness to just let it go, but there they were nonetheless, and they weren't going away. All of it together created a formidable opponent to his common sense, and whenever it seemed that one was getting the upper hand and he could finally have some peace of mind, the other would make a sneak attack from his blind side and the conflict would drag on.

Truly, he found it quite remarkable that his mind managed to make such a simple question as 'Will you go out with me?' so exceedingly complicated. Talk about making a mountain out of a molehill – or, as he liked to think of it, diving for the bottom of an iceberg.

As the days passed and still he was no closer to giving Riddle an answer, Harry realised that he wouldn't be getting anywhere without outside advice. It dismayed him to have to resort to asking for help with a problem that was his alone and of a nature that he really didn't want spreading around, but it was becoming clear to him that he would never make sense of his thoughts without an impartial sounding board.

He thought of approaching Rosier on the matter, but decided against it. Rosier already seemed to believe Harry was gay thanks to the unsubtle questions he had asked, and Harry didn't want to give him any further proof.

The only other conceivable choice was Avery. Harry considered him from the corner of his eye as they sat in class together. Avery was smart and very reasonable, and Harry rather suspected that he would be able to give better advice than Rosier. He also doubted that Avery would let the word spread. In many ways Avery reminded Harry of Hermione, and there was no doubt that Hermione would have been the first person he would have gone to with his problem had she been here.

So it was that Harry found himself waiting for an opportunity to pull his bookish friend to the side without arousing suspicions.

The chance came one day after the bell had rung for the last time for the fifth year Slytherins and Harry, Avery, and Rosier were making their customary way towards the lower levels of the castle after Defence Against the Dark Arts. Of course, Riddle had been the first to leave the classroom, no
doubt hurrying to do his homework or whatever it was that he got up to in the library in his effort to give Harry space.

"Just look at her," Rosier hissed to the two of them, eyes following the retreating back of one of their classmates. "She won't even look at me! I shouldn't have said anything. Now she thinks I'm some stupid dope with a crush and that is not the case."

"But I thought you did have a thing for her," Avery pointed out.

"I said I thought she was pretty – there's a difference. I can take being rejected, but she's making it look like I'd be devastated and need to be pitied. I do not want people to think that, not because of her."

To Harry he sounded a little too defensive for his own good. Rosier had spoken often of Ellis Carmichael, a Hufflepuff witch in their year, until he had actually bucked up the courage go talk to her and been turned down for reasons that remained obscure.

"Well, then. All you need to do is act like it's nothing," Avery reasoned, "which should be easy since obviously it is nothing to you. Nobody will pity you if you don't give them any reason to do so."

Rosier huffed, frowning. "I know that. It just pisses me off."

"She probably wasn't worth it if she can't even see what she's missing," Avery consoled him.

"Yeah, what does she know?" Harry agreed.

For a moment Rosier was too busy glaring daggers at Carmichael's back, but once she rounded a corner and disappeared from sight he sighed, deflating visibly.

"You're right. What does she know? And, for that matter, what do I know? I've barely ever even talked to her – she could have turned out to be a complete harpy and then it wouldn't have lasted anyway." He ran his hand through his hair in a frustrated gesture, but suddenly froze in his spot, eyes widening in shock. Harry and Avery continued for a few steps before noticing that he was no longer beside them and stopping to see what the holdup was. "Oh, bollocks. Guys, I just remembered that I was supposed to meet Professor Giddymeadow after classes so we could talk about that extension I need on the Charms project. I hope you don't mind, but I have to run!"

"What extension?" Avery yelped, outraged. "If you were having trouble reaching the deadline, why didn't you tell me?"

"You were busy," Rosier dismissed. "Don't worry, I'll get it done on my own, but I really need to go now. Talk to you later?" With that he turned on his heel and rushed back the way they had come from.

"Unbelievable!" Avery exclaimed, spreading his arms towards the ceiling dramatically. Then he turned to Harry and pointed his finger accusingly at him. "You don't need an extension, do you?"

Harry shook his head reflexively, glad that he didn't have to lie. "No, I'm almost done with the project."

"Good. I wouldn't forgive you if you, too, let your love life, or lack thereof, come before the O.W.L.s."

Thus acutely reminded of the reason why he needed to talk to Avery in private, Harry realised that now was his chance.
"Yeah, well, I don't think you'll have a problem there," he said lamely, wondering nervously about the truthfulness of his own words. "Hey, listen. Do you want to go outside for a walk? I kind of need to talk to you about something."

Avery's eyebrows shot up in surprise but he took the suggestion in stride. "Er, okay. Let's just go grab our cloaks first."

They made a quick trip to the dungeons, dropping off their school bags and retrieving their thick winter cloaks. Soon enough they found their way outside, Harry unconsciously steering them to the path circling the lake that he and Hermione had treaded a lot during the Triwizard Tournament in fourth year. They walked in silence for a while, Avery patiently waiting for Harry to speak, and Harry feeling queasy and trying to get over his instinctive disinclination to talk and fear of losing face.

Eventually Avery broke the silence.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

Harry let out a sharp breath, which puffed up into his face, fogging up his glasses.

"I... " he began, floundering for words. "I don't actually want to talk about it, but I feel like I have to."

"Oh. Alright," Avery said, pausing awkwardly before continuing. "So... are you going to?"

"Yeah, just... Okay. It's like this. I don't know if you've noticed, but recently Riddle has been..." He tried to find a good word to describe the situation but everything that came to him sounded too embarrassing to say out loud.

"Avoiding you?"

"No – I mean, yes, he kind of is, but before that he..."

"Ah," said Avery, understanding dawning on his face, "you mean how he's been doing everything short of singing ballads to woo your affections?"

It was almost as embarrassing to hear it as it was to contemplate saying it himself.

"So you have noticed?"

Avery laughed. "Potter, I'd have to blind to have not noticed anything going on." He punched Harry lightly on the shoulder, grinning. "I'm glad you've finally noticed, too. What did he have to do for that to happen, anyway?"

Harry scowled to hide his blush. "If you're going to be like that I think I'll just figure this out on my own, after all."

"Okay, okay," Avery said, lifting his hands in the air in a placating manner and made a visible effort to straighten his face. "This is serious. So, what exactly do you need to figure out?"

Harry had actually given a lot of thought to how he was going phrase this, but now that he needed his rehearsed speeches he couldn't seem to grasp onto any of them.

"I just can't decide whether or not I should go along with it. When I think about it logically I'm pretty sure it's a really bad idea, but... I don't know."
"Do you like him?"

"Kind of. But it isn't as simple as that."

"Enlighten me."

"Well, I'm not allowed to talk about most of it. I'm sure you have some idea what that means."

"Ah. So knowing what you do about the person Riddle will become makes you uncomfortable with the idea of having a relationship with him. Am I right?"

"I'd say more like 'afraid', but that sounds about right, yeah."

Avery stopped walking in order to regard him properly, face now genuinely serious.

"That does sound like an issue," he admitted and then glanced around critically at their surroundings. "Come on, let's sit down," he said and grabbed hold of Harry's cloak, pulling him over to a large rock a yard or two away from the frozen shoreline.

A couple of warming charms later they had settled on the rock as comfortably as they could. Avery cleared his throat.

"Now, I need to get some things straight before I can help you out. Are you afraid of Riddle, as in the bloke up in the castle right now, or the man you knew in the future?"

Harry scoffed indignantly. "Like I'd be afraid of him," he said, pointing at the castle. "Nor was I afraid of Voldemort. Okay, maybe a little, but only in a way that was good for your health. What I meant was that when I look at Riddle I can't help thinking about all the things he hasn't done yet but is capable of doing and then I keep wondering, what's to stop him from stabbing me in the back when I least expect it? Literally?"

Avery was silent for a moment, contemplating this with a thoughtful frown. Finally he spoke.

"Obviously I don't know the things you know. From what you've said I get the picture that Riddle will be a very formidable and intimidating wizard and that you have reason to consider yourself at odds with him. But I don't know everything, and that's why I'm having trouble seeing where you're coming from with this 'literally stabbing you in the back' thing. See, I've known Riddle for years, and I don't think he would do that. Yes, he can pull some pretty mean tricks on people who've antagonised him, and hell, even people he just doesn't like, but he's never seriously raised a hand on any of us who are with him. He likes to show off to spook us but in that regard he's all bark, no bite."

"Really?" Harry asked, thoroughly taken aback. "Then why does everyone always watch their steps around him like he'd just snap and curse them if they did something wrong?"

"Oh, well," said Avery, scratching the back of his neck in a vaguely embarrassed way, "the word 'never' might be a bit of an exaggeration. Remember how I told you once that he had to earn his place the hard way? But I don't know everything, and that's why I'm having trouble seeing where you're coming from with this 'literally stabbing you in the back' thing. See, I've known Riddle for years, and I don't think he would do that. Yes, he can pull some pretty mean tricks on people who've antagonised him, and hell, even people he just doesn't like, but he's never seriously raised a hand on any of us who are with him. He likes to show off to spook us but in that regard he's all bark, no bite."

"Really?" Harry asked, thoroughly taken aback. "Then why does everyone always watch their steps around him like he'd just snap and curse them if they did something wrong?"

"Oh, well," said Avery, scratching the back of his neck in a vaguely embarrassed way, "the word 'never' might be a bit of an exaggeration. Remember how I told you once that he had to earn his place the hard way? The first three or so years were rather tough for him in Slytherin, but he's a genius if I've ever seen one, and determined and ruthless as well. That's a deadly combination. He had a lot to prove, and against all odds he proved himself to be better than everybody else. Or worse, depending on how you look at it. I bet you can imagine he didn't do all that with Tickling Hexes and Leg-Locker Curses, eh?"

"I can definitely imagine that."

"Yeah. But it was necessary for him. If he hadn't risen to the challenge and shown his worth he'd be
an outcast. He did, though, and now everyone who was there to see it knows what he's capable of and, more importantly, what he's willing to do if he's threatened. That's why we respect him. But he has never raised his wand on us without a really good reason."

Harry turned his gaze on his hands where they rested on his lap, staring at them without really seeing them. He thought back on all the times he had seen Voldemort interacting with his Death Eaters and couldn't, from the top of his head, remember an occasion when the Crucius Curse wasn't involved. Violence and cruelty were things that he associated intimately with the Dark Lord, so it was somewhat surreal to hear one of his most devoted followers claim with such conviction that he would never hurt them. Thinking about it, however, Harry realised that Avery was right – he had never seen Riddle pointing his wand at any one of them, even when Dolohov really managed to shove his foot in his mouth or Lestrange got a little too friendly with his macho half-hugs and noogies. Could it be that Voldemort's fondness for agony-inflicting curses was an acquired trait?

It seemed like a silly thing to be awed about – of course nobody was born that evil. Only, it now looked like all this time Harry had believed that Tom Riddle had been. He had seen for himself the way he treated his cohorts but in truth he had closed his eyes to it, subconsciously convinced that it was an act, that the reality was something vile and he just wasn't made privy to it because he didn't really belong here.

"It seems to me," Avery went on, "that you're just really confused about who Tom Riddle actually is. You keep projecting the person you knew over him, and come one, that was fifty years in the future. People change. If I asked my grandpa what he was like fifty years ago when he was in his twenties, I bet, first of all, he'd barely even remember, and secondly he would chortle about what a lady killer he used to be before launching into a lengthy lecture on the naivety of youth and experience of life and whatnot."

"He glanced at Harry to make sure he was still paying attention. "What I suggest you do is try to forget about that man. You said you're not afraid of Riddle himself, and well you shouldn't be, so concentrate on that if you can. What do you think of him?"

Harry bit his lip hesitantly. "...Is that a rhetorical question or do you want me to answer that?"

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to," Avery hastened to reassure. "Just take it as food for thought."

"No, it's fine," Harry sighed, thinking of the convoluted tangle of emotions taking residence in his gut. "I don't think even I know what I think of him. I just... can't seem to stop thinking about him, if that makes any sense to you."

"Oh, it makes perfect sense to me," Avery said with a teasing smirk, nudging him with his shoulder. "Maybe you should just give him a chance, eh?"

Harry couldn't help the tiny smile quirking his lips up in response. Avery's advice to try and see Riddle for his own person was by no means something Harry had never thought of and, indeed, attempted before, but some of the other things he had said shed light to the problem that might make it easier to accomplish now.

"We'll see," he said, shrugging noncommittally.

"Who knows," Avery continued, leaning back on his hands, "maybe you'll be a good influence on him. You don't make his grown up incarnation sound like a very pleasant fellow – being with a good kid like you might be just the thing he needs."

This gave Harry a slight pause before he turned his head to look closely at Avery. "You really think that could make a difference?"
Avery shrugged. "There's no use in pretending that the Oath will stop you from changing things. Just look at how much influence your presence here alone has had on affairs, and you've only been here for what, two months, give a week or two?"

Feeling slightly lightheaded with all the possibilities suddenly raising their heads in his mind to tentatively sniff the air, and valiantly trying not to get his hopes up, Harry gazed unseeingly past the other boy's shoulder. Would it be incredibly stupid of him to deliberately try and change Riddle and, consequently, the rest of the 20th century? Would he just screw everything up? Would he disappear from existence? Would the universe spontaneously implode? Would hundreds of lives be saved? Would his parents live past their twenties?

"Hello? You still there?"

A gloved hand waving across his field of vision snapped him out of his reverie.

"What? Oh, yes, of course. I think you might be right."

"When have I ever not been?"

"Ha. Well, I'll be watching you, and when it finally happens I'll rub it in your face so you'll never forget it," Harry retorted with good-natured smirk before dropping the jest. "Thanks, though. You've been a big help. And... don't tell anyone about this, will you?"

"I wouldn't dream of it, mate. You know, it's bloody cold out here, why don't we go back inside?"

The talk with Avery had been very helpful, giving Harry plenty to chew on. Harry’s mind shifted between two arguments. The first was the internal emotions versus the logical thought, which combated with the second argument. Was it worth the risk to accept the offer, or should he deny Riddle? If Riddle's sadistic streak truly hadn't yet made itself known, it looked like the risk was actually a lot smaller than he had previously thought. Also, the notion of being able to change the future by making Riddle a better person was very appealing. In fact, the more he thought about it the more he felt that it was almost his duty as an upstanding wizard and human being to do his best to protect not only all of mankind but also Riddle himself from that kind of evil, no matter what the Unspeakables said. Supervisor Doalott could only blame himself for binding Harry with a faulty enchantment.

While he was on the subject, hadn't Riddle himself pointed out that Harry doing nothing but being himself was enough to have an impact on events? Imagine the effect it could have on another person he was frequently in close contact with – surely even Riddle would be hard-pressed to come out of it without absorbing at least some sort of moral fibre into his subconscious. Harry wouldn't even be going against the Oath by simply being who he was.

Eventually he realised that he was no longer considering whether or not he should say yes to Riddle, but instead trying to come up with enough excuses to convince himself to just do it already. It was then that he figured that he had made his decision on what answer to give to Riddle. To soothe the overpowered part of him that still begged him to listen to reason, he told it that if at any point he felt like he had bitten off more than he could chew, he was in no way obliged to stay in the relationship.

Unfortunately, as soon as he had come to his conclusion and could finally heave a sigh of relief, he was alerted, to his alarm, to the approaching end of term by the growing stack of holiday homework. Unlike every other Christmas until now, he would be leaving Hogwarts to spend it with his family – tomorrow. Unless he wanted to sit on his response for the next fortnight, he needed to act now, before he lost his nerve.
This turned out to be easier said than done. Before Harry could open his mouth to ask for a moment of his time after Divination, which was the last class of the day, Riddle had disappeared down the trap door and was putting a definitive distance between himself and the North Tower. Harry wasn't about to make a fool of himself by scrambling after him, so instead he sighed and took his time gathering his things and leaving the classroom, resolving to talk to Riddle as soon as he caught up with him.

However, that plan was ruined as soon as he entered the teeming masses of migrating students lower in the castle and was accosted by Lestrange, Dolohov, and Mulciber, who were on their way down after a Transfiguration session with Dumbledore. Unwilling to say that he had other things to do, especially since the older Slytherins would be bound to pester him about what those were, Harry was forced to accompany them to the common room. It wasn't until after dinner that he was able to extricate himself from the social circuit and go looking for Riddle. By that time his hands were sweaty with nerves and he was starting to second guess whether it really was so important to get this done before the holidays began.

He found Riddle in the library, as he had expected to. He was sitting in the back near a large window, surrounded by homework but not doing any. Instead, he was gazing at the falling snow, leaning his face against his hand and looking utterly bored and somewhat melancholy. Harry supposed it must get old to spend all his time surrounded by books for no other reason than to stay out of somebody else's way. He felt a twinge of guilt at that but couldn't bring himself to be entirely sorry for taking the distance he had needed to sort out his thoughts.

"Hey," Harry announced his presence, standing awkwardly between two bookcases and wondering if he ought to get closer or stay where he was. Riddle looked up and, seeing who it was, straightened his back, looking alert.

"Oh, hello," he said. A short silence followed, during which Harry tried to quickly think of how to go about this without sounding like a complete dork while Riddle stared expectantly.

"So, um, can we talk?" Harry finally managed, shoving his hands into his pockets to stop them from fidgeting. "Maybe somewhere a little more private?"

"Sure," Riddle agreed quickly, starting to gather his books and notes together and stuffing them into his bag. "Why don't we see if any of the study rooms are available?"

"Okay."

It turned out that all of the private study rooms were deserted – Harry figured that now that the term had practically ended, studying was the furthest thing from everybody's minds. They picked the remotest room they could find and went inside, Riddle closing the door firmly behind them.

The silence that enveloped the room was one of the most uncomfortable Harry had ever experienced. He felt stifled, the collar of his robes felt suddenly too snug, and for the life of him he couldn't look at Riddle for longer than a few seconds at a time. His heart thundered in his chest and he knew that his face must be tinted an unattractive shade of pink judging by how hot it felt. He didn't know what to say, but knowing that the longer he stood there doing nothing the stupider he looked, he went ahead and opened his mouth.

"So, I've been thinking a lot lately about what happened that one time," he began. Riddle leaned back against the single desk occupying the room and listened attentively, expression neutral. "And there was a lot to think about. I'm sure you understand that you aren't just any bloke – I can't tell you how much I know about your future, but it was enough to make me think twice about what I'd be getting into."
"And what conclusion have you reached?"

Harry drew in a shaky breath. "Well," he said, "eventually I figured... maybe it's worth it. If you haven't changed your mind by now, that is."

For a moment Riddle just stared at him, making Harry hold his breath. Finally, he smiled, and it lit up his whole face, taking Harry's breath away, and he found he could only focus on the warm feeling Riddle's smile brought him – a feeling which told Harry he's made the right decision.

"No, I haven't changed my mind," he said, "though I was getting worried. You made me wait for so long that I was starting to doubt whether you were ever going to speak to me again."

"I'm sorry about that," Harry said. "And I know my timing is awful, seeing as I'm leaving tomorrow, but... Yeah. I'm really rubbish at these things – if my ex were here, she'd be more than willing to attest to that. Let's never, ever bring her up again."

"I'll do my best to remember that," Riddle replied dryly before smiling again. "I'm just glad that you chose to give me a chance. I'm quite fond of you."

Harry felt embarrassed, mainly because when people paid him compliments – especially people he liked – he always had the urge to look at his feet. He heard Riddle push himself away from the desk and approach him, but still he couldn't bring himself to look him in the eye. Before he knew it, Riddle was ghosting his hand over his cheek, coaxing Harry to look away from the peeping portrait of an elderly witch that was hanging on the wall.

"Won't you let me finish this time?" he murmured, and once again Harry couldn't help noticing the deep shade of blue of his eyes.

Mouth feeling suddenly very dry, Harry forced a smile through his nerves.

"I suppose you've earned it after waiting for almost two whole weeks."

Riddle spared him one last little smile before leaning in, slowly and giving him plenty of warning. Harry watched him come closer, holding his breath – but then, at the last second, he realised that he shouldn't let Riddle do all the work and met him halfway.

Their noses bumped a little, but Harry realigned himself quickly, tilting his head to the side and pressing closer. Riddle's lips felt soft against his and his breath smelled faintly of tangerines – he must have eaten some at dinner. The thought alarmed Harry a little, making him wrack his memory for what he himself had eaten and fervently hope that it hadn't contained any garlic.

Soon enough, those thoughts were swept away by something that he definitely hadn't experienced with Cho Chang. It was like a live animal startling awake inside of him, uncurling like a roused dragon and rumbling with pleasure. At the same time, a violent shudder passed through his body, starting from deep within his core – an insistent tugging sensation in his chest, like a string being pulled taut and then plucked like a guitar string, thrumming with electrifying vibrations. It pulled him to Tom, and Harry pressed closer, moaning quietly into the kiss and sliding his hands up over Tom's shoulders and into his hair, where they found a firm hold.

He was dimly aware of Riddle's arms wrapping around his middle and his hands travelling up his back, and every touch elicited pleased purring from the beast. When he felt a warm tongue brush against his lower lip he saw no reason to deny it entry – however, the all too familiar and horribly embarrassing stirring this promptly evoked below the belt had his eyes flying open and his senses returning to him. Pulling away now seemed like a mortal sin, but for the sake of his dignity, he
"Wow," Harry breathed, reluctantly untangling his hands from Riddle's hair and laying them on his shoulders instead. "Was it as good for you as it was for me? 'Cause that didn't feel entirely natural."

"You're right," Riddle agreed. His face was somewhat flushed and his pupils dilated, and the disarray into which Harry had mussed up his carefully groomed hair did little to help Harry with his problem. "I don't know what it is, but there is something strange connecting us, some kind of magic."

"So it wasn't just me. Good to know," Harry joked, but then frowned when his words sank in. "What could it be, though? I've never heard of anything like this before. I doubt people would ever quit snogging if it were like that for everybody."

Riddle snorted and pulled away from him completely, making his way back to the desk while running his fingers through his hair to make it settle again. "As I said, I don't know. But I intend to find out." He turned to give Harry a scandalously mischievous look. "Perhaps you would be willing to help me with the research?"

Harry blushed despite himself. "My, Riddle, I thought I heard somewhere that you never share your research with anyone."

"You haven't heard wrong. However, every rule has its exceptions. Also," Riddle raised an eyebrow at him as he picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder, "don't you think we are past the point where we can call each other by our given names, Harry?"

He had a point there, Harry had to concede, though he suspected that he might have some trouble getting used to calling him by a different name. "Yeah, I suppose we crossed that line just now."

Riddle flashed him a smile before going for the door. As he brushed past Harry he tugged on the cuff of his robes to make him follow.

"Now, I shall be glad to go back to the dungeons. I have become entirely too familiar with the library these past couple of weeks."

Harry went with him, and together they traversed the abandoned aisles of the library towards the exit. Harry's heart was still beating a nervously elevated rhythm, and in his mind he hadn't stopped wondering whether or not he had done the right thing.

'Well,' he thought as he jumped over a trick step on their way towards the bottom of the castle, 'if that kiss was anything to go by, there's at least something good I'll be getting out of this for sure.'
The next morning it was time to board the Hogwarts Express that would take them away from the castle for Christmas. It was Harry's first time spending the holidays away from school, so it was with some curiosity that he looked around at the snow-covered station. A bunch of first years were playing tag to keep warm, and older students huddled close together in tight little groups while they waited for the conductors to open the doors of the train and let them inside. A gaggle of young Hufflepuffs had gathered next to the bright red locomotive, holding their hands close to its side and basking in the heat emanating from the engine.

Harry and the Slytherin gang had parked themselves near one of the doors to make sure that they would be among the first people to get on the train. Lestrange had placed his trunk right in front of the gridded steps leading up to the door and sat on the lid as though in sentry, sparing baleful glares to anyone who dared to look affronted. To keep their hands warm, Dolohov and Mulciber were playing a clapping game that Harry had seen some of his classmates in primary school playing, while Avery had brought along one of those nifty, portable blue-bell flames that Hermione had once used to set Snape’s robes on fire. He, Harry, Rosier, and Nathaniel Nott from Ravenclaw had gathered around it, holding their fingers close to the jar.

"I am so not going to miss the dorms for the next couple of weeks," Lestrange declared, pulling his cloak closer around him. "Don't get me wrong, all my respect to Salazar Slytherin, but that guy must have really hated kids to have tossed us into the dungeons of all places." He feigned a shudder to demonstrate how freezing it was not only out here on the station, but also in the Slytherin dungeons. "I don't get it – the Hufflepuff common room is underground, too, but the few times that I've been invited there it's been as cosy as my grandma's den down there. It's not fair."

While Harry had never been to the Hufflepuff common room and as such wasn’t able to comment one way or another, he did agree that the state of the heating charms down in the dungeons was deplorable. He had a hard time believing this was an insurmountable problem that would still plague the Slytherins in the ‘90s – surely Draco Malfoy, vain little prince that he was, would have had his father do something about it by then.

"Well, you'll be seeing your grandma's den soon enough, so don’t worry,” Rosier remarked. “But think of Riddle. Poor bloke, stuck there all alone.”

"I bet he loves it," Dolohov butted in. He was still clapping hands with Mulciber – right hand, left hand, both hands, repeat – the sounds muffled by their gloves. "He has practically the whole castle to himself. Who knows what he gets up to when there's nobody else around?"

Harry was glad that the cold had already turned his cheeks red, because thinking about Tom made him think about the amazing kiss he had shared with him right before departing for the train. He wasn't sure whether he was disappointed or relieved to be separated from his brand new boyfriend like this.

On one hand, if he were able to stay he would get to do a lot more ‘empirical research’ with Tom, and the mere idea made Harry's heart speed up in anticipation. On the other hand, though, there would also be the awkward intervals between research sessions. Harry had no idea how he was supposed to act around Tom now that they were together. Should he treat him any differently? Talk
about different sorts of things? What did being in a relationship with another boy entail, anyway? Surely, it wasn't the same as being with a girl. The notion of having to figure all of that out when it was just the two of them with no other distractions to escape to daunted him.

"Bloody hell, when are they going to let us in?" Rosier cursed, shifting his weight from foot to foot, his teeth chattering from the cold. "I bet they're doing this just to spite us. They're probably in there, looking out of the window and laughing at us while drinking hot chocolate with whipped cream on top. Arseholes."

"They're probably just doing some last minutes checkups to make sure everything's okay and ready to go," Nott said half-heartedy.

"Have some patience," Avery agreed. "Lestrange, you do realise that if you keep sitting there you'll be brained by the door when it opens?"

The wait lasted a few dragging minutes longer, the cranky Slytherins bickering amongst themselves. Harry, too, was starting to lose his patience. The warming charm he had cast on his cloak up at the castle had worn off already, and since the train station stood beyond the boundary of the school grounds, they weren't allowed to do magic anymore, especially with Professors Merrythought, Beery, and Slughorn keeping a sharp eye on the students.

Finally, the train staff opened the doors, to the enthusiastic cheering of everyone on the platform. Just as Avery had predicted, the door they had staked out beaned Lestrange in the back of the head, sending him hurtling face first to the ground.

"Serves you right, dummy," Dolohov chortled, giving his downed friend a light kick in the side as he was picking himself up. Harry might have felt bad for Lestrange and offered him a lift-up, if it weren't for the frankly shocking string of profanity spewing from his lips.

First in the carriage, they could have their pick of the compartments, so they chose the one the food trolley would pass first and settled in. With seven of them, it was a tight fit, but with creative seating arrangement, they managed well enough.

"I'll never buy a house in Scotland," Rosier said, slamming the lid of his trunk closed after putting his hat away for the journey, and as though on silent mutual consent, they did not bring up the weather again.

When talk drifted to holiday plans, Harry allowed his mind to shift back to Tom and the kiss. All joking aside, there really was something suspicious about it. He had heard plenty of romantic accounts on what kissing was supposed to feel like – the earth rocking, the sky opening, the soul soaring... that sort of thing – but what he had felt didn't quite fit the description. It was as though Tom's touch had awakened something alien inside of him, something that really liked the Dark-Lord-To-Be. Harry wasn't stupid. He knew that it must have something to do with the connection he had shared with Voldemort ever since the Avada Kedavra had failed to work on him when he was a year old.

This was unsettling, not only because Harry hadn't thought that the connection would still exist in the past, but also because he had always thought that the connection was little more than some sort of freaky psychic link between his mind and Voldemort's. Now, though, it was starting to look like the Dark Lord had left something behind in Harry when he tried to kill him, something more than just the ability to speak Parseltongue.

Harry remembered what had gone through his mind when Headmaster Dumbledore explained to him how he could have acquired that skill. His first reaction had been disgust – the notion of having a
piece of his parents' murderer in him, even something as abstract as a power or a talent, had made him feel violated and impure. He had learnt to accept it, though, seeing how useful Parseltongue could be – after all, that snake at the duelling club would have attacked Justin Finch-Fletchley had it not been for his knack for the snake language. Undoubtedly, the Parseltongue ability also had a something to do with his survival in the Chamber of Secrets, where he could hear and understand every order Tom's bloodthirsty memory gave to the Basilisk.

This, however, was something completely different – it felt like a half-sentient being, or quite possibly a separate magical reserve that recognised Tom's magic, responding to it like a lover after a long separation. Thinking about it gave Harry chills, but to be fair, he had to admit that so far nothing bad had come out of it. His scar hadn't ached at all since he arrived in the 1940s, not even a single twinge despite sleeping in the bed adjacent to Tom's, and it was safe to say that touching the boy didn't bring him any pain, either.

It occurred to Harry that perhaps that had something to do with how Tom felt about him. Voldemort had hated him and wished him dead, so it was only reasonable that his mal-intent would manifest accordingly. So, following that logic, didn't that mean that what Tom felt for Harry was quite the opposite? The thought made Harry feel hopeful, because Harry couldn't help the nagging suspicion that Tom had some hidden agenda. After all, someone like Tom could easily have anyone he wanted – why would he choose Harry, who didn't even have the dubious benefit of his fame going for him?

'I am not going there right now,' Harry told himself sternly, knowing that if he did he would only start doubting himself, and nothing good could come from that.

The train ride to London was in many ways a new experience for Harry. The Hogwarts Express itself held many fond memories for him, but underlying the journey away from school had always been the depressing fact that he would be returning to the drably uniform lawns of Little Whinging and the oppressive atmosphere of Number Four, Privet Drive. This time, those worries were history to him. Instead, he was both nervous about and looking forward to seeing his grandparents again. He didn't know what to expect from their home – all he knew was that it was a townhouse in London. Would it be a lot like Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place? Only without all the Dark Magic artefacts, Doxies, and Boggarts, of course. Grimmauld Place had been fairly big and showed signs of having once been a very impressive residence – although the neighbourhood hadn't been anything to celebrate – so if the Potters lived in a similar house, Harry supposed he wouldn't mind intruding.

He couldn't decide whether the time crawled or flew by. He had a lot of fun with his friends. It wasn't very often that they were all gathered together in the same room – due to differing class schedules, the sixth years tended to hang out with each other while Harry stuck mostly by Rosier and Avery, and Nott only made occasional appearances – so they had plenty to talk about. The conversations were lively and the card games raucous, and when Harry was able to get absorbed in them the scenery seemed to pass by entirely too quickly. However, whenever he remembered what lay ahead, he became anxious and the arms of his wristwatch appeared to slow down before his eyes.

The train finally slowed down as they approached King’s Cross Station. This time the Slytherins didn’t manage to get to the door first, so they were forced to stand around for quite a long time as the crowd filed out, inching their way down the hallway and accidentally dropping their heavy school trunks on each other’s toes. It was getting rather hot wearing their winter gear, so the blast of cold air was a relief to Harry when it was finally his turn to climb down to the platform.

Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was already packed and clamouring with families reuniting in heart-warming and tearful displays of affection. Harry had some trouble finding his own welcome committee, which at first gave him the sinking feeling that they may have forgotten him or just stood him up. Eventually, he spotted Howard and Iris Potter standing by a pillar towards the other end of
the platform, peering around them in between exchanging glares with another couple standing a few yards away from them. Harry sped up as much as he could while dragging his trunk with him, a grin spreading over his face.

"Harry!" Howard exclaimed when he saw him approaching, gaining his wife's attention as well. "There you are! We were starting to get worried."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Harry said, stopping to stand in front of them, unable to suppress the goofy smile on his face. "We were over there at the front of the train, second carriage."

"No need to apologise," Howard assured him. "Do you have everything? Ready to go?"

"Yeah, but... um," Harry looked around, belatedly realising that he had separated himself from the other Slytherins while searching for his elusive grandparents. "I haven't said goodbye to my friends. I guess they already left."

No sooner than he had said that, a familiar voice called his name behind him.

"Oi, Potter!"

Harry turned around to see Lestrange coming towards him, a jovial grin on his face. Following him at a more sedate pace were his smartly dressed parents. Harry realised that they were the couple Howard and Iris had been casting dirty looks at earlier. Hoping that there wasn't trouble ahead, Harry smiled back in greeting. "Lestrange! I thought I'd missed you leaving."

"Nah," Lestrange denied. "Although you did miss Dolohov and Avery. Their folks seemed to be in a hurry. Anyway, I want you to meet my parents. This is my father Leslie Lestrange, and my mother Rosalie."

It was easy to tell whom Lester Lestrange took after. Although he was tall like his father, all of his features came from his mother, from his dark brown hair and grey eyes to the shape of his nose and the arch of his eyebrows. Harry was reluctant to call her stunning, though judging by her expensive looking clothes and intricately done hair, that was the effect she was trying to achieve, but she was pretty in her own right. Together with her husband, a strict looking wizard with wire-rimmed spectacles and wheat coloured hair, she formed a handsome picture that oozed old money and pure blood.

"It's nice to meet you," Harry said, offering his hand.

"The pleasure is all mine," Mr Lestrange said as he shook Harry's hand. "My son has written about you in his letters. I must say that I was quite surprised to hear that a Potter had found his way into Slytherin." He glanced at Howard, a carefully neutral expression on his face.

Harry looked between the two of them uncomfortably. He knew he probably shouldn't ask, but went ahead anyway, "Do you know each other?"

"We're acquainted," Howard acknowledged flatly.

"Ah. Okay." Harry exchanged looks with Lester, who shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

Mrs Lestrange made a brave attempt to break the tension by shaking Harry's hand firmly in turn.

"I heard what happened to you, dear. Had it been intentional I would congratulate you, but Lester tells me that you were quite upset about the whole ordeal. Instead, you have my condolences."
"Oh well," Harry said, grinning awkwardly. "It could have been worse. I could have ended up sometime before indoor plumbing."

There was strained chuckling. They exchanged a few more words before Harry decided to put them all out of their misery and suggested that they get going. The adults were quick to agree, and after last uttered goodbyes between the two youngsters, the families parted ways.

"I didn't know you were friends with the Lestrange boy," Howard remarked lightly as he led them through the crowded platform, Harry's school trunk gliding after him obediently.

"Well, you know," Harry said nervously, dismayed that he seemed to have already let his grandfather down, "he's one of the guys. And he's pretty cool."

"Oh, that's okay then." Howard stopped walking when they reached an open area near the portal that led to Muggle London. "Have you Side-Along Apparated before?"

"Yes," said Harry, thinking back to his trip to Knockturn Alley with the other Slytherins.

A few murmured instruction, some shuffling, and an unpleasant journey through space later he found himself standing on a frozen kerb in front of a rather nice looking, four-story Victorian townhouse, with a number '7' above the shaded front door. Indeed, Harry could see a resemblance between the house and Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, but it was barely there.

The façade was made of light coloured bricks and was quite clean and in good repair. There was no garden, but flanking the door on the front steps were two identical stone statues of miniaturised Hippogriffs. One of them appeared to be asleep, while the other regarded them watchfully, scraping at its pedestal with one of its clawed feet and throwing its head back threateningly when it failed to recognise Harry.

"Welcome to our home, Harry," Iris said warmly, tapping the tip of her wand against the lock on the wrought iron gate to open it. "Number Seven, Candeed Court."

"It's great," Harry said and meant it. However, the tense interlude with the Lestranges still bothering him, the words came out lacklustre.

They filed in through the now open gate, Harry's trunk still silently floating after them, and after a brief introduction to the Hippogriff sentinel that made the statue mellow down, Howard let them into the house. Looking around in the foyer, Harry decided to stop trying to compare the place to Sirius' old house. Well lit and tastefully decorated with warm, light colours and modest simplicity, it couldn't have been much further from the Black family home.

The Potters didn't need crystal chandeliers or marble carvings to show off their wealth. There was nothing pretentious or remarkable about the décor, but one glance at the foyer told Harry that rich people lived here. Even the simple cream wallpaper looked expensive.

The mood was still awkward despite Iris' easy chattering about Harry's new bedroom as they shed their cloaks and hung them up in a cupboard near the entrance. Regretting that the holiday had started on such unhappy terms and not wanting this to continue, Harry figured he ought to try and clear the air.

"So, how do you know Mr Lestrange, anyway?" he asked Howard as he followed Iris up the stairs.

Howard frowned. "Business, mostly. Although we did go to Hogwarts together. We don't see eye to eye."
"I noticed," Harry said dryly. "How come?"

"He's a shark, completely ruthless in his dealings," Howard explained. "I could give you a list of people I know him to have driven to bankruptcy. And I don't remember the last time he donated to a charity that he doesn't own shares to."

"Oh. That... sounds awful."

Worrying his lower lip with his teeth, Harry thought of the way Lestrange spoke of his father, boastfully and with no small amount of admiration. Mr Lestrange was teaching him all about investment, Harry knew, so that he could one day take over the family assets, and judging by his smug attitude on the matter, Lester was very willing to learn. It could be that Howard was exaggerating out of some sort of sense of rivalry, but then again, maybe he wasn't – Lester had a certain disregard for the interests of those he didn't personally care for, and he must have learnt it somewhere.

"That's not to mention all the other things we disagree on – moral, social, political, you name it. I could never accept the outlook he and the rest of his family have on Dark Magic. It goes a long way back. I suppose they can't help centuries' worth of tradition, but some things just shouldn't be meddled with, that's what I think."

Harry felt a pang of guilt at the declaration. He knew very well what Lestrange and the other boys got up to with those books and notes they hid under false bottoms of their school trunks, and while he had never had any part of it himself, neither had he ever breathed a word about it or lifted a finger to stop them. He reasoned with himself that it would not only be futile, but counterproductive as well, but often he felt that not doing anything was just as bad as joining the others in their Dark Arts practise.

"You know I've never had anything to do with Dark Magic," he felt the need to explain. "Just because some guys I know may be into it –\"

"Harry, I know," Howard interrupted, holding his hand up to stall him and looking him seriously in the eye, "and I'm not going to tell you who to be friends with. I don't know Leslie Lestrange's son, so it isn't my place to judge him. I just want you to be careful, use some discretion. Everybody knows that families like the Lestranges, the Blacks, the Montagues, and the Rosiers dabble in the Dark Arts, and incidentally another common denominator among them is the Slytherin House."

"I am being careful," Harry assured him.

"Good. Now, let's take a look at your room so you can pass your verdict."

They had reached the second floor and Iris already had her hand on the knob of a door at the far end of the landing. With an excited grin, she pushed the door open.

"I hope it's to your liking," she said.

Harry walked through the door, looking around in awe. The room was twice the size of the room he had shared with Ron at Grimmauld Place. Unlike the hallways, here Iris had papered the walls with deep green to appeal to Harry’s masculine sensibilities, and Harry found himself beaming at the thoughtful gesture. A full bed dominated the room, covered in a thick green and white bedspread with matching throw pillows. On the far wall, facing a tall window (there were two of them looking out on the snow-covered backyard) was a large desk made of dark wood. Hanging on both windows were thick curtains following the colour scheme shared by the walls and comforter, and tucked in the opposite corner, near the bed, was a large oak wardrobe with a matching dresser. Near a small
fireplace was a comfortable looking armchair and a lamp stand.

Harry had never had a room this magnificent for his own use, and after years of making do with Dudley’s second bedroom, the generosity of his grandparents almost brought tears to his eyes.

He turned to Iris with a large, genuine smile plastered on his face. "I love it," he said earnestly. "Thank you." He wished he were better with words, for he felt that a simple thank you wasn't nearly enough to convey his gratitude. He considered hugging her, but there was still a wall between them, testament to their lack of shared history, that made him decide against it.

Iris didn't seem to mind, though. She smiled back at him, clasping her hands together before her. "You're welcome. If you don't like the colours, though, they can still be changed."

"No, no, they're fine." Harry turned to look at the room again. "It’s great, all of it, better than I could have expected."

Harry was just about to sit on the bed to test the mattress when Howard clicked his fingers as though he had just remembered something important.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "I just remembered – we received a letter from the Ministry a couple of days ago. It was from one of the Unspeakables, and he expressed his wish to see you over the holidays, as soon as possible. Does the name Joseph Doalott mean anything to you?"

"Sure," said Harry. "He's the Head of the Department of Mysteries. He's the one who did all my arrangements – you know: the Oath, Hogwarts, tuition…"

"Huh. He didn't sign it as the Head of Department. I guess it was supposed to be a secret. Anyway, we wrote back to him and he's coming over around tea time."

"Today?"

Harry glanced at his watch and saw that afternoon tea was only an hour away. That was certainly unexpected, and somewhat upsetting. He had hoped to get settled in and acquaint himself with his new home first before doing anything else. While he had certainly been looking forward to a chance to speak with Supervisor Doalott at some point and had even made plans to write to him over the holidays to request a meeting, he didn't really appreciate having the man sprung on him like that.

"I'm sorry," Howard said, spreading his hands and shrugging his shoulders helplessly. "He just sounded rather displeased about something in his letter, and you know the Unspeakables. You can never know what's going on with them, so to be safe it's best to just take whatever they ask for seriously, no matter how strange or inconvenient it is."

"He sounded displeased?" Harry echoed, a feeling of dread spreading inside of him. His mind began to race as he thought back on all the things he had done that could have displeased the Unspeakable. "I bet it's the newspapers. He kept telling me how important it was not to meddle with things, and then in comes Slughorn and his stupid party and reporter mates. That wasn't my fault. I didn't even want to have a party, but what was I supposed to say? He's my Head of House!"

"Calm down, Harry, I'm sure it's nothing," Iris cut in to reassure. "Surely Mr Doalott knows better than to place blame where it doesn't belong."

"Well, he'd better," Howard agreed. "I'll kick him out if he tries anything, that's for sure – Head of the Unspeakables or not. I’m rather good with hexes, if I do say so myself."

Harry cracked a smile at that. It was good to know he had someone on his side.
There was enough time for a brief grand tour of Number Seven, Candeed Court before the arrival of the expected guest. Harry marvelled at the intricacy of the rooms he walked through – at how well the furniture and décor worked together to make a cosy study or a wide dining room – and he found himself fascinated with what his grandparents had chosen to spend money on – being rich and childless as they were. There was a dark, smoky sort of room with a pool table on the first floor where apparently Howard liked to spend a lot of time with his friends, a small library, and a gallery devoted entirely to scenic paintings mostly depicting drab-looking English moors. A large room on the top floor housed a multitude of green plants from palm trees to cactuses under its glass roof. There were also, of course, a variety of guest bedrooms, a couple of sitting rooms, and a dining room, and everywhere there were various portraits peering down at them from the walls. Harry spied a number of other Potters who resembled him to a disquieting extent, but thankfully, it looked like the further back in time the dates inscribed into the plaques went, the clearer the distinction became. The messy hair seemed to be a constant, though, even while the hue varied a little from ancestor to ancestor.

Harry was in the middle of inspecting a sizable collection of exotic-looking crockery stored in glass cabinets in the drawing room while Iris told him about her connections in the Orient, when the melodic sound of the doorbell echoed through the house.

"Bessy!" Iris called into the air, startling Harry slightly until seconds later there was a barely audible pop! and before them stood a small, elderly house-elf. In addition to the classic tea towel wrapped around her like a toga, she wore a doily on her head as though it were a hat.

"Bessy will answer the door, Ma'am," the house-elf declared with foresight. "Where should Bessy bring the guest?"

"Bring him here to the drawing room. And then some tea and scones, if you would."

"Right away, Ma'am!" The house-elf curtsied low before disappearing again.

They listened to the distant sound of the front door opening, and then the footsteps approaching them up the stairs. Harry felt apprehension grow inside him as he imagined Doalott's face frowning at him angrily, or perhaps in disappointment. He looked at Howard, who stood by the window, straight and tall and looking very much like the master of the house, and then at Iris, who was checking her appearance in the faint reflection of one of the glass cabinets and fixing a few strands of her hair. She saw him looking and flashed him a smile.

"It'll be fine," she said. She might have continued, but it was right at that moment that there was a knock on the door before it swung open. Bessy stepped back in and curtsied again.

"Unspeakable Doalott from the Ministry of Magic," she squeaked before slipping out of the room and leaving the tall wizard standing alone in the doorway. He didn't look much different from the last time Harry had seen him. He even wore grey robes like those that he had before, though these looked somewhat sturdier to match the season. In his hand, he carried a briefcase – apparently, he had come straight from work.

"Afternoon," the man greeted blandly.

"Ah, Mr Doalott! Welcome to our abode," Iris exclaimed with a pearly smile, the picture of a perfect hostess. "Pray sit down. Would you like me to take your briefcase? It must be cumbersome to carry it around."

"No, I shall hold on to it," Doalott said, sitting down in the indicated armchair and setting the briefcase on his lap. "There could be confidential documents inside."
"As you wish, then. Now, I'm sure there's no need for introductions, but –"

"Quite right," the Supervisor interrupted. "We all know who we are." He fixed Harry with an irked look. "And therein lies the problem."

Harry held a certain amount of respect for Doalott, but in that instant, his annoyance eclipsed the intimidation he felt in the man's company.

"I know what that look is for," he said defiantly and dropped down onto a settee to face him, "and you can point it at somebody else. I didn't ask my Head of House to tell the press about me!"

"Take it easy, Harry," Howard admonished, but came to stand by him, laying his hand on the back of the couch behind Harry, in a clear show of support. "My good sir, I would be most obliged if you kindly refrained from persecuting my grandson. He is not at fault here."

Doalott looked up at him with a thin smile.

"Ah, yes, Mr Potter. I believe it was you who took it upon yourself to contact young Harry without a care for all the possible repercussions of mingling with someone who, in their mere presence, embodies fatal secrets of time itself. Did it never occur to you that by getting close to Harry you are putting his very existence in jeopardy? You may come to think of him as your own son – what, then, do you think will happen if you ever decide that you no longer need any children of your own?"

"Do not mistake us for complete imbeciles, Mr Doalott," Howard said with thinly veiled coldness in his voice. "We know what is at stake. Even so, however, we could not, with good conscience, leave one of our own flesh and blood in the hands of unfeeling, bureaucratic opportunists like the Unspeakables."

"You should have consulted with the proper authorities before making claims of guardianship."

"Namely you," Howard retorted snidely.

"Yes, me," Doalott stated firmly. "Harry Potter is legally a ward of the Ministry, and specifically of the Department of Mysteries –"

"I am?" Harry cut in. "I thought I wasn't legally anything, since I haven't been born yet."

"Yes, you are. I took care of the paperwork soon after your arrival."

"Mr Doalott, 'Finders, keepers' is not an acceptable policy in the matter of assigning guardianship over an underage wizard!" Iris interjected, outraged.

"There is a preceding case in Austria, in which a young witch travelled by means unknown to us from the year 2167 to 1814 to observe the Congress of Vienna for a school project," the Supervisor retorted snootily. "When the time came for her departure, the artefact she had used to cross time malfunctioned, leaving her stranded in the 19th century for good. The Austrian magical government proceeded to take over her custody."

"Did she have any relatives in Austria in that time?" Iris demanded to know.

"That is neither here nor there."

"Oh, I think it matters a great deal," Howard said. "Besides, I don't think you can compare Harry's case to someone who went back in time at their own discretion and fully aware of the risks."
The adults continued to argue in this manner while Harry sat in the middle of it, nibbling on the scones Bessy the house-elf had brought in and observing mutely. He was surprised to see Doalott so openly incensed. During his earlier interactions with the man, Harry had the impression that Doalott wasn't easily perturbed.

Then again, back in October the Head of the Unspeakables had seemed very pleased with every turn of events. Now that his claim to the sought-after accidental time traveller was being challenged, he was no longer amused and had apparently lost some of his Unspeakably mysterious cool. With a start, Harry realised that, underneath it all, the man was actually a very childish person.

The irony of the whole situation wasn't lost on Harry. Only a few months ago the only family he had would have loved to see the end of him if it meant that he would no longer darken their doorstep, but now he had enough willing, prospective guardians to form a fight. Harry might have been flattered, had it not been for the fact that he was feeling very indignant at Doalott for going behind his back to make his dependency on the Department of Mysteries official. How had he managed that anyway, when there was no birth certificate or any other proof of Harry's existence in the system?

"Didn't any of you ever think of asking me what I think about all this?" Harry interrupted the argument loudly, causing the others to fall silent and look at him. When he was sure that he had their attention, he went on, "Personally I would much prefer staying here with my family. No offence, sir, I know you mean well, but I'd like to have some semblance of normalcy in my life, and I doubt that when there was no birth certificate or any other proof of Harry's existence in the system?

"I wouldn't expect a 15-year-old boy to understand the gravity of his position and the precautions necessary for –"

"This coming from the guy who made me swear an Oath of Unspeakability that's more like a formality than a precaution," Harry interjected dryly. "You know, I've been trying to keep things secret, but it seems impossible with all the loopholes lurking in this little enchantment of yours. And I'm 16 now, thanks a lot."

Howard raised his eyebrows, a gleeful expression pushing through his mask – it was as though he had been dealt a straight flush in a game of Prodding Poker. Iris, on the other hand, looked scandalised.

"Is that true?" she gasped and turned to frown at Doalott. "And you dare to lecture us on responsibility? Isn't that the oath you yourself, along with the rest of the Unspeakables, have sworn to ensure the security of the Ministry's secrets?"

For a moment, Doalott looked self-conscious, but soon he recovered, smoothing his hands primly over the leather briefcase balanced on his knees.

"The Oath is as secure as it can get. Few people seem to appreciate how complex magic dealing with the mind really is. Many aspects of human behaviour need to be considered when designing an enchantment such as the Oath of Unspeakability. To completely deprive a person of the ability to speak of or act on something as unspecified as 'anything that happens here' or, in Harry Potter's case, 'anything that will happen in the future', would severely limit everything he or she does. This is not to even mention the vital importance of a backdoor in unpredictable emergency situations in which the communication of treasured secrets to those on the outside could save lives. I would like to point out that my Department specialises in experimental magic that can easily prove to be volatile.

"Young Harry is a prime example of why the Oath would not work without its loopholes. The future is all he knows – what do you suspect would happen, if he were magically disallowed from communicating anything at all about it? The only way to keep his mouth shut entirely would be to
render him mute, and forbidding him from acting on his knowledge would effectively paralyse him.

"I hope you realise that it would have been well within my power to take those precautions, but I
chose against it. I am not completely heartless. The only humane option left for me was the Oath
currently under scrutiny. The Unbreakable Vow was another enchantment I considered briefly, but
ruled out immediately. It is not preventative in nature, but, instead, is based on the concept of
retribution. Young Mr Potter wouldn't have lasted a day under it."

Feeling rather shocked, Harry realised that Doalott's explanation made sense and that the man was
probably telling the truth. It occurred to Harry that he was lucky Doalott had decided to use the Oath
of Unspeakability, and though it was faulty, he was glad he hadn't been put under an Oath that could
result in his injury or death. Although, he did hold on to the opinion that the Oath could use a few
stitches here and there. Doalott's hesitation in the beginning spoke of that much.

Howard shifted uncomfortably on his feet, the victorious look gone from his face and, in its place,
uncertainty. Up until now, he had remained standing out of a desire to appear intimidating to the
seated Unspeakable, but now he came around the couch and sat down next to Harry.

"Alright, so that sounds almost plausible," he conceded. "However, if you're so concerned about us
knowing Harry at all, why didn't you try to conceal his identity?"

"Ah, well," Doalott said with a shrug, "If Harry were anyone else, doing so might have worked.
However, it so happens that the blood of the Potters is strong in him. He could have introduced
himself as John D. Smith from Brisbane, Australia all he wanted, but eventually somebody would
taken a picture of you, Mr Potter, held it next to his face, and called his bluff. A change of
identity would have required the constant maintenance of powerful illusions to distort his physical
appearance, and charms like that are highly advanced. Sustaining charmwork of that kind indefinietly
would prove a challenge even to an experienced, fully educated wizard, let alone a minor who has
barely passed the Ordinary Wizarding Level.

"There is also the fact that alias's cause trouble even for experienced agents. There is no name like
your own, and responding to a fabricated name as though it were the one your mother gave you
requires unrelenting vigilance. Every instance where the agent's reflexes fail him when someone calls
out to him undermines the alias. As far as I know, Harry has no experience of operating under a false
identity, so I would expect him to do a poor job of it.

"As such, I found myself with the unpleasant alternative of relying on the discretion of others. I
stressed to the Headmaster of Hogwarts in my letter to him how important it was for Harry to keep a
low profile, but I see that he did not take my advice to heart. Apparently, neither did the fellow who
had the gall to brag to the press about the young time traveller in his care."

Harry wasn’t very keen on the man’s patronising tone. He found himself holding back a scowl, but
admittedly, he was more irked by the fact that the man kept talking over his head as though he
weren't sitting right there than out of any particular loyalty towards his blundering schoolmasters.
However, he couldn't deny that the points Doalott made were very useful to him, casting light over
nagging mysteries that had plagued his own mind for some time now.

Doalott sighed, rubbing his temple with his fingers in a longsuffering manner. "The situation is by no
means ideal and has given me the most terrible headaches on occasion, but at least we can console
ourselves with the fact that it is a relatively harmless teenage boy who has been stranded out of time
and not an important political figure or other such individual of great historical importance. I do not
even wish to contemplate such an unstable scenario."

Harry was glad that he had already been making an effort to maintain an impassive countenance,
because he could clearly feel the Oath, unpredictable as it was, settling its stifling veil over his face in a well-meaning attempt to protect the Unspeakable from the knowledge that Harry was, indeed, a figure of some remarkable historical importance. Had he been displaying his emotions openly right then, the change in his demeanour would have been worrying at best and deeply incriminating at worst. Hastily, he decided to steer the subject elsewhere.

"So, you said yourself that the Oath of Unspeakability is basically built on loopholes. Doesn't it come with any sort of instructions on how to avoid them if you really want to keep secrets instead of just pretending you're doing so?"

Doalott turned his flat gaze at him. "I don't like your tone, young man. Who did such a terrible job of instilling respect for your elders in you?"

Without expecting a response, he cast pointed looks to Howard and Iris. "The discussion isn't over between us. However, I would like to ask you two to leave the room as I question your grandson further about all the slip-ups he has so kindly admitted to making. Most likely there is very little that can be salvaged, but I find it important to know the nature of the precipice we are standing on."

"Why can't you ask with them here?" Harry countered immediately, not wanting to be left alone with the man when he was in such a disagreeable mood. "They know just as much as you do."

"I daresay they do not," Doalott deadpanned.

Warily, Howard eyed the wand that Doalott had just casually pulled out of his sleeve and laid on the flat of his briefcase. After a moment of hesitation, he frowned, annoyed, and said, "Fine. You have fifteen minutes, and if there's a single hair out of place on his head, you'll regret it sorely." Then he stood up, indicated to his wife to follow him, and strode out of the drawing room. The door closed behind him with a bang that vaguely reminded Harry of one of Dudley's temper tantrums.

The silence that followed the departure lasted only seconds, but for its tenseness, it felt much longer. Finally, Doalott reached over to pick up his tea for the first time and after tapping the rim with his wand to reheat the beverage, settled back in his chair and fixed Harry with a hard stare. Silently Harry cursed at himself for provoking the man even as he braced himself for an interrogation.

* * *

At Hogwarts, Tom Riddle found himself in a situation much similar to the one Harry was in. Stirring his Earl Grey in its cup, he wondered with idle disdain whether Professor Dumbledore had ever had a life outside of the castle walls. Most members of the school faculty had a home and family to return to over holidays, but Dumbledore never seemed to have any better things to do than to dog Tom's every footstep and regularly accost him with tea and biscuits.

"Ah," Dumbledore sighed, smacking his lips after taking a sip from his own cup. "There is nothing like a nice, hot cup of tea on a cold day like this, is there, Tom?"

"There sure isn't, sir," Tom agreed with a feigned smile.

"Indeed, I find myself reluctant to leave my cosy office today. The corridors are always fresh at best, but now they are downright nippy. Every winter we bemoan the draft, but alas, there are never enough resources to ward the entire castle against chill. How is the Slytherin common room, my boy? I trust that the enchantments are adequate there?"
"Bordering on snug, sir. There is certainly no room for complaint." Tom would be damned if he caught himself whining about Slytherin’s private discomforts to Dumbledore.

"Good, good," Dumbledore nodded his head. "I cannot help worrying, though. The bedrock, you see, is very unforgiving. I am glad to hear that the Slytherins are untroubled."

"I appreciate your concern," Tom said, raising his cup to his lips and taking a sip. He preferred Darjeeling to Earl Grey.

"So, how was your autumn semester, Tom?" Professor Dumbledore asked, peering at him over his own teacup.

"It was splendid," Tom said, smiling pleasantly. He tried to suppress the familiar stab of annoyance when the carefully moderated cordiality of his tone failed to have the lulling effect it had on every other adult he came across. Dumbledore was always the exception, the single, rebelliously out-of-tune note in his masterpiece, and Tom despised imperfections. "Remarkably exciting, I should say, with the unanticipated addition of Harry Potter in my dormitory."

"Ah, yes, young Mr Potter," Dumbledore said, nodding. "You have gone to extraordinary lengths to take him under your wing, if I am not much mistaken."

"Why do you find it extraordinary that I would seek the friendship of a newcomer?" Tom inquired innocently.

Dumbledore looked down – using the act of setting his tea cup on the desk as a bad cover to hide the dark look that crossed his face. When he spoke, his voice was as light as ever.

"I was only referring to the fact that you have always presented yourself as someone who is wont to entertain a very exclusive and insular group of acquaintances. I have never seen anyone catch your fancy as swiftly and thoroughly as Mr Potter has done."

Tom's immediate, instinctive reaction to the Professor's particular choice of wording was to raise his hackles defensively – to deny everything, or perhaps to suggest that Dumbledore kindly stuff it and mind his own business. However, he squashed those instincts ruthlessly, replacing them with cold logic.

Harry’s cluelessness had forced Tom to show his interest in Harry in a more outward fashion than he was used to. As such, it was necessary, after his none-too-subtle advances, that he be open with Dumbledore or risk the professor’s suspicion. He kept watch on Dumbledore’s reaction out of the corner of his eye, while at the same time shifting his gaze down to the steaming teacup in his hands.

"Well," he said, giving his tea a few clinking stirs in an attempt to appear nervous and fidgety, "Harry is a rather special case."

"Indeed," Dumbledore frowned thoughtfully. "Young romance is a beautiful thing. However, it is also very vulnerable. I hope you realise the fragility of the thing you strive to capture. The human heart is not a toy to be played with and then cast aside."

Tom did not need to feign indignation. "Why would you feel the need to tell me this? Do you really think so little of my acumen?"

"I know you understand a great deal of many things, Tom," the Professor said quietly, "but often I find myself doubting that matters of the heart are part of your expertise."

"Whatever could have given you such a preposterous idea, sir?" Tom said with a perplexed smile,
carefully avoiding Dumbledore's direct gaze and staring at the golden rim of his spectacles instead as he seethed inwardly. If he could get away with murder just once, there was no doubt about his victim of choice.

This man frustrated him to no end. Tom wished that he had thought to play up to him on their first meeting. Now the Deputy Headmaster's mind was forever poisoned with that one glimpse of Tom he had chanced to see, and no amount of pandering or good behaviour could turn his head from the opinion that Tom was a monster inside. There might have been more than a grain of truth to the notion, but nonetheless Tom despised Dumbledore for never giving him the benefit of the doubt.

Dumbledore didn't deign his question with an answer, instead sighing in a defeated and somewhat longsuffering manner. "Whatever the case may be, my dear boy, I implore you to be at your utmost discretion with regard to Harry Potter. From the position you seek, it would be only too easy to hurt him where every man is the weakest."

For a fleeting moment, Tom was treated to the ludicrous and completely un-called for mental image of him kneeling Harry in the groin during a heated assignation, until he realised that Dumbledore was, of course, talking about the boy's feelings. Tom was tempted to demand what on earth Harry's feelings were to Dumbledore, who treated the time traveller with every bit of the distrust and contempt he reserved only for Tom and his Slytherins. He restrained himself, determined to come through this accursed afternoon tea with his act intact. However, he calculated that letting some of his displeasure show wouldn't go amiss at this junction.

"Your advice is very sound, as always, Professor," he said, making a half-hearted attempt to veil the coldness in his voice. "However, I have no need for it. As shocking as it may seem to you, I have no intention to hurt Harry in any way. I will thank you to refrain from making any further remarks to the contrary. I find them very offensive and in bad taste."

"I have insulted you," Dumbledore said with contrition that appeared deceptively genuine. "Do forgive me – it was not my intention. I only have your wellbeing and that of young Mr Potter in mind."

"Apology accepted," Tom lied. He took another sip from his tea before putting the cup down on the Professor's desk, still half-full. "Would that be all, sir? I do so hate to cut our conversation short, but I am anxious to get my homework done and out of the way so that I may enjoy the holiday with a clear conscience."

"An admirable plan of action," Dumbledore said. "I shan't stand in your way, then. I do, however, expect to see you at the Christmas dinner tonight."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, sir," Tom insisted even as he cursed inwardly at the never-ending social duties. He stood up and slung his bag over his shoulder, careful not to hold it too close to his body, glance down at it, or with any other nervous gesture indicate that there was anything significant or incriminating about it. "Until then, though, I wish you a good day."

Once out of the office, he stormed down the hallway with temper he only dared to display when the castle was void of life. Clutching his bag with its fragile contents tightly to his hip, he dashed down stairs, round corners, and through hidden passages, barely on the civilised side of running, until he found himself safely engulfed by the soothing shadows of the dungeons. On the best of days, Dumbledore tried his facade merely by casting his hatefully twinkling gaze his way, but this sort of meddling made Tom's blood boil. Harry’s obtuseness during the early stages of their courtship had been a great enough blow to his pride to make Tom avoid speaking about the matter with anyone. At least his housemates and circle of friends knew better than to bring it up.
He arrived at the hidden entrance of the Slytherin common room and instinctively paused to take a calming breath and school his features, before speaking the password (prestige) and entering. He needn't have bothered, for the common room was deserted. He could count the number of Slytherins habitually remaining in the castle over Christmas and Easter on one hand with fingers to spare. This year was no exception. The only other pupil staying in the dungeons was a reclusive third year boy who was content to spend the days moping in his dormitory. There were also a pair of seventh years, but Tom was reasonably certain that they currently busy ticking off items on a list of exotic locations at which to perform scandalous acts. As such, Tom had the common room entirely to his own use, which suited his purposes quite nicely.

Out of a desire to relish this luxury, he picked a table situated near the centre of the room and dropped his bag down onto one of the cushioned chairs, proceeding to methodically empty its contents on the table. Among the objects he carried were: an impressive stack of hand-written notes, an assortment of different sized decks of cards, and a few tightly rolled scrolls of frayed parchment that appeared entirely too large for the satchel they had emerged from. Carefully, he dipped both hands into the charmed bag and pulled out – what he had spent the better part of the day acquiring – a round glass globe the size of a small melon. He lifted the crystal ball up to light, eyeing the gleaming surface critically. He passed the cuff of his robes over it to rub away any smudges, before setting it down on the table with a succinct thunk.

'Professor Mopsus really is one paranoid son of a hag,' Tom thought irritably as he settled down before the crystal ball.

It had taken him four hours and two trips to the library to figure out how to bypass the wards placed on the trapdoor leading to the Divination classroom without leaving a blazing trail of his presence in the charmwork while at it. A part of him appreciated the challenge, but mostly he resented jumping through all those hoops just to get his hands on such a simple artefact.

Unsurprisingly, the sole reason behind his burgling the Divination instructor's lair, as well as the numerous notes arranged around him, was Harry Potter. The general clatter of interest around the time traveller had mostly died down since his arrival, people predictably growing bored with old news. Tom, however, found that the reverse applied to him – the more time passed and the closer he got to Harry, the more obsessed he became with uncovering his secrets.

There were times when he regretted taking Harry to that dungeon cell and discovering the mysterious link connecting them together on that fateful night nearly two months ago, but those moments were fleeting. There were no coincidences with magic, so Tom knew there must be something about Harry that made the boy important to his future. Finding out what lay behind the connection was proving to be a frustrating yet thrilling challenge to both his magical prowess and his acting skills.

When the library had yielded no results, the natural course of action for Tom had been to turn to divination. After all, surely the solution to the mystery that was Harry Potter could be found in the wizard's past, which lay in the future. The problem with divination, though, was that it was impossible to control – where Tom wished to see past decades, the tea leaves showed him tomorrow, the Tarot an undefined near future, and the stars only vague allusions to the years to come. Clearly fortune would not favour him with straightforward answers. However, it did deign to hand him a few tools through the medium of his dreams.

There was no mistaking the fact that most of the dreams recorded in his dream journal since October 12th – the day on which Harry Potter arrived in the past – showed through omens both ambiguous and glaringly obvious, that he would eventually find himself in an intimate relationship with the object of his fascination. The revelation had surprised him somewhat, for he hadn't felt any particular physical attraction towards Harry at all. However, on applying reason to the notion, he realised the
great possibilities the prediction laid before him. By coming into close contact with Harry in the manner dictated, he would be able to explore and study the magical thread connecting them much more closely than he had imagined possible. No doubt gaining Harry's trust would also allow him access to information Harry would not relinquish freely under any other circumstances. It was certainly a scheme worth attempting.

He required more data before launching the project, though – a confirmation of the prediction from a secondary source. For that, he needed to get his hands on Harry's dreams. Of course, he could have accomplished this easily enough by simply lifting Harry's journal from his bedside table and looking, but where would have the challenge been in that? Though Tom was hardly one to admit it, he had an adventurous streak. Therefore, he devised a plan to make Harry tell him with his own words. Margaret Liesl would get over her poisoning – she had hardly been in mortal danger from a few drops of Inertia Brew. In any case, her sacrifice had been worth it, for the endeavour was a raging success – clearly, Harry's subconscious agreed with Tom's on the inevitability of their blooming romance.

If only his conscious mind had agreed. If Tom had not known from the beginning that his efforts would bear fruit, he would have been discouraged by Harry's persisting blindness to his flirting. He was not accustomed to being thwarted when it came to manipulating other people's perception of him. Indeed, aside from Dumbledore, there wasn't a single person worthy of mention who had not succumbed to his charms in the matter of days, at the very longest. Harry was different, though, and while this had been evident from the moment they first met, Tom had not expected it to take so long to ease him into the position he wanted him in.

Tom threaded his fingers together before his mouth as he stared into the depths of the swirling white haze of the crystal ball. There was one definite advantage to the device that made stealing one worth the effort. Unlike tea leaves, playing cards, or the stars in the sky, the mists actually showed the future instead of alluding to it obscurely. Granted, the visions provided were hardly ever entirely clear and free of interpretation, but Tom would be a fool if he didn't make use of them. However, there was also a good reason why he hadn't stolen a crystal ball before now and had, instead, tried every other means of predicting the future to solve the mystery. Aside from the fact that there hadn't been a chance to break into Professor Mopsus' classroom before now, the mists were very flighty, and stubborn to boot, so it took an exceptionally patient and even-tempered wizard to coax any sign of the future out of them – something Tom was not. As the minutes stretched on, with nothing but vaguely smug looking plumes of ever-moving fog making itself known in the crystal, it was only with considerable force of will that he managed to keep his irritation at bay.

Dumbledore's warning of the perils of breaking Harry's heart had not taken Tom off guard. He was aware of the fact that most people would consider his motives immoral, but unlike what Dumbledore seemed to think, Tom was not a complete beast. While there were times when offending other people's sensitivities was unavoidable, Tom had no reason to believe that this was one of them. After all, he wouldn't have gone ahead with a plan like this if he found Harry to be completely undesirable.

Indeed, Tom was inclined to think that, were he the sort to seek intimate relations just for the sake of them, Harry Potter would be rather high on the list of potential partners he might approach – his frustrating case of the thickness of the head notwithstanding. There was something irrationally refreshing about the unspoilt nature of Harry's morality, and Tom wasn't sure whether he felt drawn to that purity because he wished to taint it, or simply because he knew no other person like him.

Time seemed to crawl by, until – right when he was about to give up – Tom had to stop himself from jumping from his seat in excitement. The fog finally began to shift to the sides and disperse from sight. Fortune rewarded his patience with a vision. He leaned in closer to the crystal, barely daring to blink lest he miss something vital.
Harry’s face comes into focus first.

Tom had expected this, though he was slightly disappointed that the time traveller looked no younger than he was now.

Harry sits at a table, looking down at something in his hands. Circles darken his eyes, pronounced by thick bags, but a fond smile stretches across his face. Harry looks up, his lips moving soundlessly. He laughs and shrugs, bringing an antique mirror, carved with elaborate designs, to the forefront. He holds the mirror at arm’s length, grinning rakishly at his reflection.

Tom found himself wondering what this could mean. A frown wrinkled his forehead, when Harry mouthed a line from a familiar Muggle story.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”

Harry flips the mirror around, grin still firmly on his face. His reflection looks back, despite the fact the mirror is facing away from him. Mirror-Harry rolls his eyes and mimes shooting himself in the head with a pistol.

The mist rolled in, obscuring the rest from view. Tom stared at the crystal for a long while, trying to make sense of the vision. What sort of magic was on that hand mirror? He had never seen such a thing before. Many mirrors at Hogwarts were enchanted to give compliments or fashion advice to anyone who looked into them, but they weren’t really sentient and the enchantments never manifested as an independent reflection. The mirror-Harry also showed a personality, much like a moving painting would. However, the image was intangible – there was no charmed paint on which to bind such an enchantment. Imbuing a memory into an object? But memories worked as mere recordings – they did not interact with the person viewing them. Tom would have to look into this.

Eventually, Tom sighed and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. It was an interesting vision, but hardly helpful. He was no closer to deciphering his connection with Harry. How disappointing. He could try again later, but he doubted that the mists would grant him another vision under similar prompting.

Frustrated, Tom stood up, heedless of the paraphernalia left scattered on the table, and went to the nearest couch to take nap. Hopefully, he would sleep through the Christmas dinner.
Once the brief shadow cast by Supervisor Doalott's sudden visit had passed, the rest of Harry's holiday went as pleasantly as he could have hoped. In fact, it seemed like his grandparents were going out of their way to make him happy, as though in compensation for the mistake of letting the Unspeaking into their house. They made no further mention of the custody debate between them and the Department of Mysteries, but one night Harry happened to overhear them talking about it in Howard's study. It sounded like they had already taken the matter to their solicitor and were in the process of pressing a law suit. The notion awakened a thrill of worry within Harry, irrationally bringing to mind the disciplinary hearing where he had been all but chained to a chair and interrogated by the Minister of Magic himself. He wasn’t pleased by the fact that Howard and Iris had chosen to go about this business behind his back, no doubt out of some misguided desire to shield him from the unpleasantness of reality, but for once he decided against outraged mutiny. The adults knew more about these things than he did.

None of this showed on the surface, and the holiday cheer kept all worries off Harry’s mind. He would be lying if he said he hadn’t had more fun spending Christmas with his friends in the Gryffindor Tower than with his grandparents, but there was a lot to be said for a real family. While Howard still had to go to work on most days, Harry got to spend a lot of time with Iris, in the process getting to know her quite well. He learnt that she was a relative of his old school mate Ernie Macmillan and that, although she was rather old-fashioned in many ways, she had a mischievous side to her that rebelled against convention in all the subtle ways that a witch of her stature was allowed. Harry could respect this sort of quality in a woman, especially in a time when women were pressed for their due rights.

Christmas morning was an interesting affair, for while Harry had slowly got used to receiving presents from his friends, he had never before seen such a large quantity of them meant solely for him. It was logical, of course – since he had largely kept his Christmas exchange list to Ron and Hermione, and now he was part of a rather large yet closely knit unit of boys. However, despite knowing this, Harry couldn’t help feeling somewhat awkward and undeserving when faced with the pile of brightly wrapped gifts nestled underneath the Christmas tree in the drawing room.

Another thing that made Harry uncomfortable was opening the gifts in front of his family. He had told the fellows at school not to get him anything cursed, incriminating, or otherwise questionable, seeing as it wouldn’t reflect well on him in the eyes of his strictly Light grandparents. He was reasonably sure that they had taken his request to heart but it was always possible that Lestrange or Dolohov had thought it funny to get him a talking skull or something of the sort.

He needn’t have worried, though, for the shadiest gift he unwrapped was the book on some particularly nasty curses and their counters he received from Avery. He explained it away with a completely truthful account of both Avery’s academic propensities and his own talent for Defence Against the Dark Arts.

The most memorable gift that morning was an entirely inconspicuous, soft one that had cleverly hidden itself behind the silver cobstone set Mulciber had sent him. Harry had thought nothing of it, thinking it was most likely addressed to Iris, until he picked it up and recognised the penmanship on the tag and had to make a double take.
“What is it, Harry?” Iris asked, never one to miss a change in his demeanour.

“What? Oh, nothing,” Harry said distractedly, still staring at the inscription on the card. “Just a gift from, ah… Tom Riddle, one of the blokes. I wasn’t expecting one.” He could feel a faint flush rising to his cheeks and tried to pretend there was nothing wrong.

“Why weren’t you expecting one? Aren’t you friends?”

“No, we are. But he never gives Christmas gifts. Can’t afford to buy any. He’s an orphan, you see.”

“Oh, the poor dear!” Iris exclaimed with the sort of genuine but patronising sympathy rich people feel for those who have little money. “But he got something for you. He must think highly of you.”

“Highly, I don’t know,” Harry trailed off, fingering the bow tied around the present nervously. While he had bought Tom a perfunctory present as well, he hadn’t given the first thought to Christmas in the light of their new relationship. Certainly he had not expected to get anything from Tom, though now that he thought about it, he found it unlikely that Tom would neglect something like this in his courtship.

What could the gift be? What did Tom find suitable for a love interest? Harry almost didn’t want to find out. He couldn’t help thinking back to Hogsmeade, where Tom had, without a second thought, directed him towards the perfect gifts for two grownups neither of them knew and whom he, Tom, had never even met. As though he had been hit by a sudden attack of cold feet, Harry’s mind now started to crowd with paranoid thoughts. With such skill for manipulation, Tom could have given him the seemingly most thoughtful gift ever and rationalised the thought behind it through sheer, cold logic instead of sincere sentiment. How could Harry ever tell the difference, when he was rarely able to do so even when they were face to face?

Iris was still watching him expectantly, so Harry only allowed himself this brief hesitation before slipping the ribbon off the present. He plucked off the bits of Spell-O-Tape with care, more for the sake of stalling than out of any sentimental unwillingness to ruin the wrapping.

Out of the wrapping paper rolled, both to Harry’s relief and disappointment, a soft, knitted scarf and a matching pair of mittens – a perfectly innocuous and universally acceptable Christmas gift from one acquaintance to another. This relieved Harry because his grandmother was watching and he didn’t want to explain why some guy had got him something with suggestive undertones. His disappointment was due to a hidden, morbid desire to see what sort of things Tom’s cunning could come up with to sweep him off his feet. He pushed that part of him firmly to the side and smiled as he spread the scarf over his lap to look at it properly.

“What a lovely pattern,” Iris remarked politely, inspecting one end of the scarf. She looked up at Harry with a warm smile. “This Mr Riddle must be a very charming young man.”

The knowing twinkle in her eyes unnerved Harry and made him want to change the subject as soon as possible. Luckily, Howard spared him the trouble by stepping into the room, bearing a tray of handmade chocolates and marmalade sweets.

Boxing Day was marked by a letter from Rosier, in which the boy invited Harry to spend a day at his home with a slightly amusing amount of formality. Harry could see that his grandfather wasn’t overjoyed about the invitation, but, true to his promise not to interfere with Harry’s friends, he bit his tongue and refrained from commenting. His only voiced protest was a solemn suggestion to be careful where he put his hands at Rosier’s house and to decline any refreshments his hosts might offer. Harry rather doubted that his friend’s family was planning to murder him with poisoned crumpets, but nonetheless he nodded seriously and promised to be on his guard. After all, he had
been to the house of an old Dark family before, so he knew better than to dismiss such warnings entirely.

If he had expected Rosier’s family home to be much like the Black house, he was once again proven wrong. The Rosiers lived in the countryside – deep in the moors of Devonshire stood a formidable, old mansion of red brick and mortar, which, despite all grandeur, was dwarfed by the wilderness surrounding it on all sides. The manor’s grounds seemed to extend as far as the eye could see, but there was barely any tended garden to speak of. Harry liked it.

Inside, the house was rather gloomy with its dark wood panelling, thick framed portraits and mounted body parts of various unfortunate creatures, but the atmosphere was so warm and overwhelmingly English that Harry could hardly count this as a fault. In fact, it was just the sort of house he might have expected any count or earl of the olden days to lounge at in between foxhunting and signing treaties at Parliament.

The family itself appeared nice enough, though of course they were no Weasleys. Adam Rosier had two elder sisters, both of whom found it very entertaining to fluster Harry with their shameless flirting. Amanda, the eldest, was actually married and no longer lived in the house, so Harry didn’t take her teasing to heart. The younger one, though – Danielle – made him feel just a smidgeon apprehensive.

Meeting Mr Rosier showed Harry from which parent Adam got his lofty ambition of attending law school.

“The British law is woefully lacking when it comes to business like this,” Mr Rosier declared, puffing on his foul-smelling pipe as they sat in the drawing room, having the man-to-man that fathers everywhere like to have with the friends and acquaintances of their children. “If the matter is something the average desk-jockey can’t wrap his head around, Merlin forbid they make any laws to regulate it! The future is a terrifying thing, with many amazing innovations we can’t even fathom – but the worst thing about it is the fact that the people in the future can reach us, while we have no means to reach them. One fears what one cannot see, and what one fears, one tries to ignore. What do we have to show for wilful ignorance? A veritable mess of a legislation that any fool with the slightest grain of wit can twist to their advantage!”

Harry nodded his head shrewdly, hiding his amusement at the older wizard’s pompous manner behind his teacup. Mr Rosier was a barrister and a member of the Wizengamot and probably knew what he was talking about.

“It was dreadfully unfortunate for you that the Department of Mysteries got their hands on you first,” Mr Rosier continued. “Shifty lot if there ever was one, the Unspeakables. I’ll be damned if I can guess at what they get up to down there behind all those locked doors, let alone what goes on inside their heads. I assume they have already pulled the Unregistered Aliens Act on you and snatched up your guardianship?”

Surprised at the show of insight, Harry nearly found himself at a loss for words. “Oh, well… That is, yes. I suppose they have. I met the head of the Unspeakables just a few days ago, and he told me that I’m now a ward of the Department. He didn’t explain what it was all based on, though.”

“Pshh! Of course he wouldn’t. What are you going to do about it then, boy?” The man fixed him with a stern look, as though he were expecting Harry to know his way around legal matters well enough to challenge the Department of Mysteries in court.

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “I don’t know the first thing about British law. I’d need a lawyer or something. Although…” He hesitated, wondering whether he should bring up something he wasn’t
supposed to know about it in the first place. “I mean, I suppose I don’t necessarily need one. I understand that the Potters are suing the Department of Mysteries. My grandfather wasn’t very pleased with the Unspeakables’ meddling.”

“Oh? Well, that’s good to hear. I hope he knows a decent solicitor. I don’t suppose he would welcome any recommendations from his old chess rival,” Mr Rosier chortled. “He never did seem to get over that British Junior Championship final of 1912.”

Harry hadn’t known that Howard played wizard chess.

“I’ll tell you what, boy – you are a nice lad. We at the Wizengamot are a friendly sort amongst our lot. The Department of Mysteries have some good lawyers in their pocket, but I’ll drop a few words here and there about my son’s good friend who is in a pinch. And if ever you have a problem in matters of the law, I don’t mind sparring a word or two of advice.”

Harry was taken aback by the genial promise. At first, he was delighted – though ‘dropping a few words here and there’ sounded rather like corruption to his ears – until he found himself back within reality, recalling that Mr Rosier had once been a Slytherin, just like his son.

“That would be awfully generous of you,” he said slowly. “What would you want in return?”

“Ha!” Mr Rosier exclaimed in a booming voice, clapping his hand down on his knee. “Hear that, wife?” he said to Mrs Rosier, who had remained silent so far in the conversation, calmly working on a piece of embroidery. “He may have the face of a Potter, but he sure has the smarts of a Slytherin.” He turned back to Harry. “No need to worry. There is nothing you can offer now that I need or want. You may owe me a favour, but I shan’t charge interest.”

‘Always with the favours,’ Harry thought darkly. It was one thing to owe a favour to Avery for helping him with a bit of homework, but it was quite another to owe one to Mr Rosier for a court trial.

On the other hand, the mere thought of remaining in the power of the Unspeakables made Harry dread his future. The more he heard about the enigmatic staff of the Department of Mysteries, the less he trusted them. If the Potters were, indeed, going to court over the guardianship debate, Harry was very eager to see them win the case. Would ensuring a victory be worth such a big favour?

As he pondered on the benefits and drawbacks of the offer, Mrs Rosier tutted lightly, not lifting her attention from her needlework. “Really, Edgar – he is only boy.”

“Almost a man, my dear,” Mr Rosier corrected her, his sharp gaze still boring into Harry. “Almost a man.”

Harry didn’t let their remarks bother him as he weighed his options. Finally, he spoke, considering his words carefully. “It’s a very tempting offer, sir. However, I think I’ll have to decline. I’m sure my grandfather is perfectly capable of finding a good lawyer, and together they’ll be able to come up with something that’ll win the Wizengamot’s favour without any interference on your part. Thank you, though.”

Mr Rosier’s piercing stare remained fixed on him. For a moment Harry thought the man was angry with him, but then the older wizard burst into robust guffaws of laughter.

“The smarts of a Slytherin! Didn’t I tell you? You want to save your chips for worthier gambles, and I respect that. Caution is a virtue. But now I see that your cup is empty – have some more tea.”

The proposition had, indeed, been intriguing. While Harry was strongly against all sorts of corruption
and bias, he had never before come across a situation where either of these would have been in his favour. However, there was no getting around the fact that Mr Rosier’s suggestion had been beyond the realms of legality. Consequently, when the man decided that it was time for Harry to pay his debt, he would likely demand some sort of equally illegal endeavours. Harry had never had any problems with breaking rules when he saw fit, but the law was the law, and getting caught breaking it would bring consequences far worse than scrubbing cauldrons for Professor Slughorn in detention. No, despite everything, it was better to rest his trust in Howard Potter and let matters run their course.

When the holiday drew to a close, it was with a wistful yet suitably refreshed spirit that Harry returned to Hogwarts. Thankfully, the remorseless, icy chill of December seemed to have passed, so the dungeons were now a marginally more comfortable place to live.

“My sweet home away from home,” Lestrange exclaimed as he pulled his trunk through the entrance of the Slytherin common room. “Oh, how I have missed the harmonious melody of my beloved alarm clock.”

The common room was already buzzing with activity as the students bustled about, eager to get settled after the long train journey. The upperclassmen from elbowed their way through the room, luggage clattering behind them, heedless of other people’s shins and toes. Harry trailed in after his friends, and as he took in the familiar dungeon complex, he was mildly surprised to find himself smiling fondly at being back. He had been sure that he would never be able to see the Slytherin House as anything resembling home, but here he was.

“I see you are all back in one piece,” said Tom as he set down whatever he had been reading and rose from his seat at one of the desks to greet his gang. “Did you enjoy your holidays?”

“Riddle, my man!” Lestrange cried, throwing his arms wide. “I hope your Christmas was as wicked as mine. And happy birthday to you again!”

“Why, thank you,” Riddle replied cordially. “The company was excellent, and the castle has never been more stimulating.”

There were barks of laughter all around and the Death-Eaters-To-Be proceeded to clap him on the shoulders and grab him into manly bear hugs by way of greeting. Harry kept to the side, hovering – he was suddenly very uncertain of himself and whether or not he was supposed to or even allowed to approach Tom with all these other people around.

Before he could make any decision one way or another, Tom met his eyes over Avery’s shoulder and smiled at him, a hint of mischief glinting in his eye. Harry couldn’t help grinning back at him.

“Such an enthusiastic greeting,” Tom said, amused, pushing Avery away from him. “Why, one could almost think that you are all happy to see me.”

There was a slightly awkward moment during which everyone wondered whether that was a joke or a mean jibe. Tom’s expression remained pleasant and unreadable, until he turned to Harry, his countenance relaxing into a more genuine smile.

“Harry, it’s good to see you again,” he said, taking a few steps forward before coming to a stop in front of Harry, offering his hand to be shaken. Harry stared at the hand for a moment, bewildered, but when he looked up to meet the other boy’s eyes, he understood that this wasn’t an aloof gesture meant to keep him at a distance. He brought his own hand up and clasped it around Tom’s.

“It’s good to see you, too,” he said.
Unbeknownst to him, this greeting – despite its casual nature – had the rest of the gang raising their eyebrows and exchanging significant looks with each other.

Classes took off with a vengeance after the holiday, giving Harry the impression that the professors were doing their very best make up for the weeks lost to the frivolities of leisure. He was very glad for his advantage of having already gone through his O.W.L.s once, for otherwise the sheer amount of new material probably would have made him succumb to despair. As it was, he was able to keep up.

It also helped that Tom was now more determined than ever to keep him by his side during their shared classes, which for Harry, of course, meant all of them. This was how Harry ended up with the most coveted partner in their year for all the shared assignments and projects of the spring term. At first, Harry was a little worried about the possessive behaviour, because surely no-one who paid any attention would fail to notice something going on between them. However, soon he realised that Tom, although he wasn’t one to make a general announcement, didn’t actually feel the need to hide their relationship, either.

This wasn’t to say that Tom was big on public displays of affection. Harry doubted that it would even occur to a casual observer that they could be anything more than friends. Unfortunately, Harry was dating the most popular and desirable bloke in the whole castle, so there weren’t too many casual observers around. It was probably mostly paranoia on his part, but it seemed to him that people were casting a disquieting amount of knowing looks their way, and more than once he had seen groups of people actually turn to each other and whisper behind their hands as they walked past. He wasn’t ashamed, per se, but it did pain him a little to have everybody know about something that, to him, was an incredibly private part of his life.

He brought the matter up with Tom one evening when they were cloistered up in the dormitory, working on their Potions project. Tom appeared entirely unconcerned.

“Of course people gossip,” he dismissed with a shrug, “they do little else. There has been betting going on concerning my love life ever since I turned down Lucretia Black’s advances a year ago, so people tend to keep a close eye on me.”

“People have been betting on your love life?” Harry repeated incredulously. He didn’t know whether he should be appalled or amused.

“Apparently everybody had taken for granted that Lucretia and I were made for each other.”

Harry found the entire notion of Tom being made for anybody ridiculous. However, he could see how people would have made the mistake of equating Tom Riddle with Lucretia Black – where Tom ruled over most of Slytherin, Lucretia did much the same with the female population of the house. As far as the intricate Slytherin pecking order went, Lucretia was as close to Tom as could be. Still, Harry had rarely seen the two interact beyond the perfunctory and, in his opinion, there hadn’t been the slightest hint of chemistry between them.

“So, do you know who won the betting?” Harry asked.

“‘To my knowledge, there is still debate over that. Some say that wagers made after the turn of November don’t count, because that was when it became obvious whom I had set my sights on. On the other hand, there are those who insist that an entirely different pool was formed to accommodate the changed status quo. Last I heard, the bookkeepers had no intention of distributing winnings until the argument is settled.”

Harry groaned, burying his face in a pillow in humiliation. “Am I really the only one who didn’t
Tom patted him on the knee in consolation. “I’m sure most people in this castle don’t actually care enough to know.”

Harry barely heard him, busy despairing over his own stupidity. It took him a long moment to realise that he still had a question.

“Hang on,” he said, sitting up again to fix Tom with his gaze, “how come you know so well what people say about us when none of this gossip and betting has reached my ears?”

“I make a point of keeping my ear on the grapevine when it comes to gossip concerning my person,” Tom explained without actually explaining anything. “However, I’m not surprised that you haven’t heard anything. The people we keep around us have enough discretion not to bring up such questionable topics in your presence.”

By that, of course, he meant that nobody wanted to say anything in front of Harry because they thought Harry would tell Tom, who in turn would decent upon the offender with hellish retribution. Harry no longer felt disquieted about people tiptoeing around Tom, but he did wonder how the whole popularity thing worked out for Tom when everyone was a little afraid of him.

“I see that the Befuddlement Draught is failing to hold your attention,” Tom broke into his thoughts, eyeing the book Harry was half-heartedly holding open in his lap. “Why don’t we give up the pretence altogether?”

Harry looked up in surprise as Tom snapped his own textbook closed and tossed it on the bedside table before falling back on the bed, arms crossed under his head. He shot Harry a teasing little smirk and then closed his eyes serenely. “Let’s take a nap,” he said.

Harry didn’t bother hiding the soft burst of laughter escaping him at that. ‘Moments like this are almost as good as all the snogging,’ he thought, embracing the warm and giddy feeling swelling in his chest.

* * *

While there was, indeed, plenty of snogging and Harry was spending more of his time in Tom’s company than he ever had before, some things didn’t change. One of them was Tom’s tendency to occasionally disappear into the library or the dungeons or wherever it was that he went for his private research. Harry was glad for those occasions, even though it meant that Tom was probably up to no good, because they gave him a chance to devote some attention to his friends.

It was a Thursday evening in late January and the gang had decided to head outside for some fresh air. Avery had opted to stay in the common room to get a head start on his Ancient Runes project, but the rest of them had all readily donned their cloaks and mufflers to brave the winter winds.

“What’s the point of living in a mind-blowing medieval castle if you’re just going to stay cooped up in the dungeons?” Lestrange had said by way of persuasion.

That was how Harry found himself huddled on a snow covered tree trunk, watching Lestrange, Mulciber, and Dolohov bumbling around the frozen lake on transfigured skates. He had bowed out of the sport when they had tried to get him to join them, claiming that he didn’t like skating. In truth,
he didn’t know how to skate in the first place. Rosier had stayed back, too, in order to keep him company in the side lines.

“What, skating? Pshh! Skating’s for girls,” he had said when Harry had told him that he didn’t need to. Harry, however, remembered seeing a pair of skates tucked away in the corner of his bedroom when he had visited the Rosier estate over the holiday. He decided not to say anything.

“So, how’s the love life?” Rosier asked to break a lull in their conversation. He posed the question with a casual air, but there was certain tenseness to him, the sort one got when broaching a taboo subject.

“What love life?” was Harry’s knee-jerk reaction.

“Oh, come on –”

“Sorry, sorry,” Harry said sheepishly. “I suppose there’s no point in playing dumb?”

An amused look from Rosier was answer enough.

“What about it?”

“‘What about it?’ he asks,” Rosier said, rolling his eyes to the sky. “Anything! Everything! Everybody knew this was coming and it was only a matter of time. Now you’ve finally got your act together and I want to know. So let’s hear it.”

Harry groaned, burying his face in his hands. “You’re such a gossip, Rosier. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“I don’t need to be told – I know. Now, out with it, or I’ll make you talk and then I’ll tell everyone, terrible gossip that I am. It’s been, what, a few weeks now? You haven’t shagged yet, have you?”

“What? No,” Harry said, waving his hand dismissively, “of course not. How easy do you think I am? And anyway, it’s not like that, at least not yet. It hasn’t really come up.”

“Okay, I guess that’s good,” Rosier nodded his head. “So, what do you two do, then, when there’s no one else around? Snuggle? Grope? Snog each other silly?”

Harry laughed, scratching under the collar of his cloak awkwardly. “Quite a bit of the latter, actually,” he admitted. “Not a whole lot of snuggling, though. That’d be a bit weird, I think.”

“Yeah, I never did take Riddle for the cuddly type. Is he a good kisser?”

“Well, I haven’t exactly had a whole slew of partners to compare him against, but as far as I can tell, he’s fantastic.”

“Oh.” Rosier took a moment to mull this over. “Do you mean ‘fantastic’ as in excellent technique, or do you think it’s just great because you’re smitten with him?”

“Why on earth do you want to know about Tom’s kissing technique?”

“Because!” Rosier waved his hands in the air inarticulately. “Because he’s Tom Riddle! Half the girls at Hogwarts have been swooning over his dashing good looks and suave charm from the moment he hit puberty, and do you have any idea how hard it is to get a girl to notice you when you’re always standing next to that guy? Up until now, nobody has had the honour of getting up close and personal with him, so you’re the only person in the world who can tell me if he’s actually
as good as all the hype.”

Harry bit his lip – whether to stop himself from laughing or offering platitudes, he didn’t know. “I don’t know about the girls, seeing as I haven’t really paid them any mind, but if it’s any consolation to you, I think it’s mostly because I’m so smitten with him.” He decided not to mention the strange, aphrodisiac-like magical connection between him and Tom that they still hadn’t been able to figure out.

Rosier feigned a relieved sigh. “Well, that’s a weight off my chest. Now I can take any rejection with grace, knowing that Riddle isn’t as talented with his tongue as everyone thinks he is.”

“Maybe you should remind the next girl who rejects you that now that Tom is taken and her hopes have been dashed, you’re her next best bet.”

“You’re right, that’ll do ‘em in. I’ll just add a comment on how Riddle wouldn’t go for her bits anyway, so that in her desperation she will fall into the arms of the nearest willing male specimen, which will be me, of course.”

They laughed at their crude jokes so heartily that they didn’t notice the sound of footsteps approaching them down the slope of the frozen beach until it was upon them.

“Merlin, I probably don’t want to know what the hyenas are cackling about now,” said a loud voice behind them.

Both Slytherins looked over their shoulders to find out who was speaking. Rosier rolled his eyes on seeing the newcomers and turned back to face the lake.

“That’s easily solved, then, McKinnon – simply don’t ask,” he said.

Marcus McKinnon scowled at the dismissal, crossing his arms as Harry eyed him suspiciously. Harry didn’t know him well, but he had met him a few times. Aside from a particular confrontation between him and Harry in the ground floor boys’ toilet a few months ago, McKinnon was in the habit of showing up to pick fights with Rosier, provided that he wasn’t entirely outnumbered. This time he had a friend with him – a skinny boy who shared some of Harry’s classes and whose name he probably should have learnt by now.

“Let’s call it morbid fascination,” said McKinnon, strolling over and placing himself between Rosier and the lake. His friend followed reluctantly, stopping to hover at a couple of yards' distance and casting indiscreet, longing looks up at the castle. “Anything that has to do with you lot can somehow be filed under ‘morbid’.”

“Ouch,” Rosier said, hissing and shaking his hand as though he had burned it on a flame. “Your insults are as below the belt as usual. How lucky I am to have such a worthy adversary.”

McKinnon scowled. “So, what was so funny anyway? Did you just come back from jinxing a first year to trip on the stairs for the rest of their life?”

“Where would the fun be in that?” Rosier asked. “I’d hardly ever get to see a firstie trip on the stairs – we don’t exactly run in the same circles. It’s much more entertaining to jinx a fifth year Gryffindor. Hey, speaking of…” He pulled his wand out of his pocket, stroking the length of it as he eyed the other boy up and down contemplatively.

“Keep dreaming,” McKinnon snorted. He glanced pointedly behind him at the upperclassmen currently chasing each other around on the ice. “With your big, scary pals busy making fools of themselves all the way over there you wouldn’t stand a chance against me.”
“I don’t know, you haven’t seen Potter here in Defence Against the Dark Arts. He can be scarier than Mulciber if you give him the right incentive.”

Harry wished that Rosier hadn’t dragged him into the argument. Rosier was free to quarrel with whomever and whenever he liked, but Harry preferred to keep his head down in matters of house rivalry. After all, only some months ago he had still been fighting for the opposing side, so the whole thing felt rather awkward for him.

“Oh, yeah?” McKinnon turned his piercing stare on Harry. “Well, I’m not too surprised. I bet he knows a lot of sticky Dark curses that nobody here knows anything about, wondrous time traveller that he is. Is that how you charmed your way into Riddle’s pants, eh, Potter?”

“Excuse me?” Harry exclaimed even as his face reddened involuntarily.

“Jealous, are you?” Rosier attacked immediately. “You’re in good company – all the other girls in this school are, too.”

“Jealous of who, Riddle?” McKinnon scoffed. “Only if I were desperate for some good old-fashioned whips and chains. Tell me, does he make you sit on the floor at his feet? Do you wear a collar under that ridiculous muffler of yours? Has he even given you a safe word?”

“You seem awfully knowledgeable of those sorts of relationships,” Harry remarked drily even as Rosier jumped to his feet.

“Watch your mouth, you oozing glob of slime. I know you haven’t got any respect, but at least show some bleeding shame!” he growled as he crowded into the Gryffindor’s personal space, wand held tightly in his fist. Harry sighed and got up after him, ready to interfere if the situation called for it.

“Oh, was that a touchy subject? Maybe you like to watch their little domination games.”

“Really, Mark, maybe we should go?” McKinnon’s friend suggested warily.

“Thank you, Towler, for finally demonstrating that the wind howling between your ears hasn’t drowned out the last whisper of intelligent thought left in your brain,” said Rosier.

“Oi!” Towler said indignantly. “Who are you calling stupid?”

“The fact that you need to ask answers your question, right there.”

“Okay, fellows, let’s not go down that alley,” Harry interrupted, coming to stand between the squabbling boys. “McKinnon, you’re welcome to leave, and take your friend with you if you would.”

“You can’t tell us what to do.”

“With all due respect, we were here first. Besides, we’re here with them.” He indicated at the three sixth years, who were now standing still on the ice, shielding their eyes from the sun as they gazed at the group gathered on the shore. Clearly they were as wary about the situation as Harry was, but did not yet see fit to come over.

“Yeah, listen to Potter and piss off. It’s a lovely day and your ugly mugs are ruining the scenery. Not to mention I have this paranoia that too much time spent in the presence of spectacular stupidity will rot my brain.”

It was moments like this that Harry felt bad for Hermione, who had always been saddled with trying
to keep him and Malfoy off each other’s throats. Now that he could finally appreciate her position, he wished that he had reined in his temper a bit.

“Why, you son of a harpy!” McKinnon snarled, pulling out his wand and moving to lunge forward. However, Rosier was quicker, sending a Stunner at him. The spell missed just barely, sailing over McKinnon’s shoulder and singeing the brim of his hat. The Gryffindor responded with a Leg-Locker, but Rosier batted it away with ease.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, you –! Stop it!" Harry cried, belatedly pulling his own wand out of his pocket while Towler did the same. For a moment, Harry thought that he had an ally in him in the endeavour of stopping the fight, but then Towler forced him to duck out of the path of a Stunner of his own. Was this how he and Ron had acted around Malfoy and his cronies?

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted, catching Towler in the shoulder before he could finish his shield. The Gryffindor staggered back several steps before falling on his rear, while his wand shot out of his hand, tracing an arc through the air and landing on the ice with a clatter. Deeming him sufficiently distracted for now, Harry turned back to the other pair of wizards, whose squabble was quickly deteriorating into an outright duel.

"Oi!" He yelled, but neither of them paid any attention. He huffed and stepped to the side to let one of McKinnon's wayward hexes fly past. After a moment of assessing the situation he figured that the only way to interrupt the fight was to get involved. He trained his wand at McKinnon, who was too absorbed in his adversary to pay him any mind, and began to cast a Full Body-Bind to incapacitate him.

However, he had hesitated for too long, for before he could finish casting, Towler had recovered from his tumble and found his wand again. Too late, Harry saw him approach from the corner of his eye, boots slipping against the ice. He levelled his wand at Harry and cried an incantation that was drowned out by the noise of the duel. No beam of light burst from the tip of his wand, and for a split second Harry was relieved, thinking that the spell, whatever it had been, had failed.

The next moment he forgot about the whole thing, because he suddenly realised that he was upside down. What was he doing upside down? Had he been this way the entire time? This wouldn’t do. He went to rectify the situation. However, the sky was very crisp and clear, no clouds in sight, so it was hard to find a foothold. Oh, if only the Dursleys had taken him along for those trips to the skating rink! Dudley was too fat to stay upright on those tiny blades, but at least Harry would have learned some valuable life skills. Now he would just have to hang here, afraid to set his feet down on the treacherous heavens.

“Potter, what are you doing?” a voice asked.

“What, me? I’m just… exercising. Seeing how long I can hang here. Of course I know how to skate, I just don’t like to!”

“…What? Protego! McKinnon, will you quit it! Can’t you see that something isn’t right?”

“Did he just flip? What’s wrong with him?”

His arms were getting tired – soon he would have to let go, there was no way around it. He was going make a fool of himself by falling all over himself.

“Harry, come on. Stop fooling around,” the voice said, closer now. Then, a hand on his leg made him lose focus. His hold slipped and he fell and the world made a somersault around him and wow, look at how the snow glittered in the sunlight! But what was the ground doing so close?
“The world looks so big from up here,” he marvelled.

“Harry, look at me,” the voice commanded from somewhere above him, but how could he look up when he was already standing on the very top of the world? “Look at me! What did you do to him? You did something! What the hell did you do to him!”

“I didn’t do anything! I was too busy kicking your arse to do anything to him.”

“Towler, you little shit! What did you do to Harry?”

“I didn’t do anything! It was just a Confundus Charm, nothing serious.”

“This is not what a Confundus Charm looks like, you complete imbecile!”

“I’m not an imbecile,” Harry pointed out with a frown.

“Of course you aren’t, darling. I was talking to that idiot over there. Now, can you focus your eyes? Look at my hand. Can you see my hand?”

There was a dark shape fluttering back and forth to the left of Harry’s line of vision, so he turned his head to get a proper look.

“No, right here!”

“Yes, right there. I have eyes, duh.”

“Bloody hell. You’ve really messed, up, Towler. You better run now, because we’ll have your hide before the end of this. MULCIBER! DOLOHOV! WHY ARE YOU STILL MUCKING AROUND?”
Chapter 14

The Gryffindors took one look at the sixth years speeding towards them across the ice before – for once – doing the smart thing and high-tailing towards the castle. Letting them go went against all of Adam’s instincts, but sometimes one had to prioritise. He turned his back on the two boys’ retreat, focusing on Potter. The poor bloke was lying spread-eagled in the snow, gaze wandering uncomprehendingly from one unseen object to another and hands clutching to the ground as though afraid that it would disappear from underneath him. He looked more confused than frightened though, which was at least a small comfort. Adam could hardly believe that someone could botch up a Confundus Charm so spectacularly. Clearly this proved, once again, that Mudbloods shouldn’t be allowed to carry wands at all. Seething, he did his best to arrange Potter into a more comfortable position, adding an extra warming charm on him so that he wouldn’t catch a cold.

“What happened here?” Lestrange demanded to know, expertly transfiguring his boots back to their original state even as he clambered onto the shore. Dolohov and Mulciber came close behind.

“McKinnon and Towler were mouthing us off so we fought,” Adam explained. “Towler caught Potter with a wonky Confundus and this is the result.”

“Bloody hell,” Mulciber swore. He crouched down next to Potter’s prone form, inspecting him critically. He waved his hand before the boy’s face, but Potter only reacted by turning his head this way and that as though trying to catch sight of something elusive.

“He must have cast the charm like it was a hex,” Mulciber concluded. “That’s the danger of using charms in duels – you need to put a lot less power behind them than offensive spells, otherwise they malfunction. In a fight it’s difficult to control how much power you push into the charm.”

“Fantastic,” Lestrange muttered, sweeping the folds of his cloak up to his lap before crouching down as well. “What do we do with him now? Should we take him to the infirmary?”

“We can’t do that, people will see,” said Dolohov immediately. “And if people see, they’ll ask questions, and then Dumbledore will ask questions. You guys can say what you will, but I know I won’t be able to lie to his face – I’m no Occlumens.”

“What does it matter if Dumbledore finds out? Serves the Gryffindors right if their Head of House knows they were in the wrong for once,” Adam argued.

“Think! You want Towler to pay, right? And you want him to pay on our terms? If Dumbledore finds out, he’ll assign Towler to catalogue all his medals in detention and then he’ll make damn sure that we don’t go vigilante on his little boy, no matter how much he deserves it.”

There was a moment’s pause when the others contemplated this.

“Dumbledore! He only pretended to care,” Potter moaned pitifully.

Adam hesitated, wavering between the need to protect and heal, and the simmering fury that demanded vengeance. Potter was important to him and he didn’t want to take risks with his friend’s wellbeing. However, Keegan Towler needed to suffer.
"You're right," he eventually conceded. "But what do we do? We can’t just count on the charm wearing off if we wait long enough."

Dolohov hesitated briefly before asserting, "We’ll fix him on our own."

"You mean you’ll fix him on your own?" said Lestrange. "I’ll tell you right now that my A in Charms won’t do Potter much good."

"I’m getting flight sickness," Potter whimpered, turning over and burying his face in the snow. Adam pulled off his own scarf and tucked it under the Confunded boy’s head to protect him from the cold.

"An O in Charms wouldn’t do him much good," Mulciber pointed out. "The Confundus messed with his head and we don’t even know the extent of the damage – it won’t be easy to undo the charm without hurting him in the process."

"But can you do it?" Adam asked. "Cause if you aren’t sure, there’s no way I’m letting you try. I’d rather carry him to the infirmary myself, Dumbledore be damned."

"Yes, we can," Dolohov said, but Mulciber drummed his wand against his knee thoughtfully where he was crouching.

"If we try to undo the charm the fiddly way, we’re out of our depth. Correct me if I’m wrong, though, but doesn’t this look a lot like the Capsizing Curse?"

"Ooh, I see what you mean," said Lestrange, leaning forward excitedly. "The symptoms are a bit tamer, but they’re basically the same."

"What are you all people doing here?" Potter asked, voice muffled by Adam’s scarf. "I never knew the ground was so crowded."

"Somehow I doubt that the counter for the Capsizing Curse is going to work," Adam pointed out.

"Of course it won’t," said Mulciber. "But we know how the curse works. We know what it does to the brain and nervous system to cause this effect. And excuse me, but I don’t think I’m bragging when I say that I’m brilliant at messing around with the brain. Let me tweak around in there a bit, and Potter will be right as rain in no time."

"Such overwhelming confidence," Lestrange quipped. "Hear that, Potter? You can be at ease now, for your valiant rescuer is here."

"You weren’t complaining when the troll was lying unconscious on the bathroom floor," Potter muttered sullenly in response, eliciting baffled snorts of laughter from his audience.

Adam was about to tell the older Slytherins to shut their gobs, but Potter beat him to it, pushing himself up so fast that he overbalanced and ended up with his face in his knees.

"This isn’t funny!" he yelled into his lap and for a second Adam staggered with relief, thinking that the charm had worn off. "My hero complex will save Sirius. Either you’re with me or not, but I’m going to the Department of Mysteries!"

Adam grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him back down so that he wouldn’t hurt himself.

"There’s a story here that I’d really like to hear," Dolohov remarked.

"This Sirius fellow must be a Black," Lestrange speculated. "I’m pretty sure there’s a Sirius Black
“Priorities, please,” Adam said through gritted teeth, “or I’ll take him to Madam Bobbin.”

“Right. Priorities,” said Lestrange, shaking his head to get rid of distracting thoughts.

“No need for Madame Bobbin,” Mulciber agreed, already rolling his sleeves.

“We seem to be forgetting one thing, though,” Dolohov pointed out. “We’re completely out in the open. It’s one thing to mess around with Dark Magic in the dungeons where nobody ever goes, and quite another to do it here where anybody could walk in on us.”

As one the Slytherins looked warily up at the castle looming over them. It was unlikely that anyone casually looking out the window would be able to tell what they were doing down there, but the risk wasn’t worth taking.

“Right,” Lestrange said and cast a critical eye at their surroundings. “Let’s hide behind those rocks.” He pointed at a small formation of snow covered boulders creeping out of the lake a few yards away. “Dolohov, you take the legs and I take the other end. I don’t think we should levitate Potter when he’s in this state.”

It took a bit of shuffling, but they finally managed to lift Potter off the ground.

“Morgana’s wicked dimples, who knew that such a skinny guy could be so heavy?” Lestrange huffed as he and Dolohov carried their Confunded friend to their makeshift hiding place.

“Next to Dudley anyone would look scrawny,” said Potter defensively, rolling his head back and staring at the sky with wide eyes. He added, “Don’t worry guys – I know how to do a Quidditch roll.”

They set him down behind the rocks and Mulciber peered over them to gauge whether they were visible from the castle. Satisfied that they weren’t, he crouched down next to Potter again and took control.

“Dolohov, I might need your help with this.”

“’Might’, he says,” Dolohov scoffed.

“Lestrange, you can go and keep watch for passers-by with Rosier. Sorry, but I’m not gonna let you anywhere near Potter’s brain. Maybe if I wanted to turn it into mush.”

“Oi,” Lestrange protested but didn’t look particularly offended.

“If something goes wrong, don’t try to fix it yourself,” Adam reminded, crossing his arms and fixing the older boys with his best imitation of Avery’s Strict Professor Glare. “Just give a shout and I’ll run up to the castle for the nurse.”

“Yes, Mummy. Now go hex intruders.”

With one last, stern look, Adam turned to leave the cover of the rocks. However, since he couldn’t let Mulciber have the last word, he paused to say, “Don’t screw up, though – I hate running. It’s so undignified.”

Lestrange followed him to the other side of the group of rocks, where the two boys did their best to look like they weren’t standing guard over any sort of illegal activity. Lestrange pulled himself up to
sit on one of the boulders, leaning back on one hand in a pose that could not possibly have been accidental. Adam leaned casually against the rock, arms crossed beneath the folds of his cloak.

“We should probably pretend we’re chatting,” Adam remarked, scanning their surroundings suspiciously.

“Right,” Lestrange agreed. “What about them Kestrels then, eh? I heard they got their arses handed to them in the last match, but they’ve been doing pretty well in the league over all.”

Adam dropped his head back, groaning mightily. “I said ‘pretend’, not ‘Let’s kill our brains with Quidditch talk.’”

“Ah, okay. So…”

A tense silence descended over them, during which Adam stewed on the worry gnawing on his insides. Right behind his back two amateur Dark Wizards were performing questionable acts on one of his closest friends, and he, Adam, was letting them. He hoped to any higher power that would listen that he wouldn’t come to regret this.

“You think maybe we should have gone find Riddle?” he asked a moment later.

“Are you kidding?” Lestrange looked down at him, aghast. “And tell him that we let his boyfriend get hurt under our watch?”

“He’s going to find out anyway, sooner or later.”

Lestrange snorted humourlessly. “Well, I’d rather postpone the inevitable as far down the line as possible. It’s the least I can do.”

Moments like this made Adam wonder about the line between healthy self-preservation and sheer cowardice. Somehow, he doubted that Salazar would be proud.

Lestrange saw his expression and added, “Besides, Voldemort isn’t the only one around here who happens to be good at Dark Magic. Have some faith in Mulciber.”

“Riddle might have been able to heal him without Dark Magic, though,” Adam argued. “Harry isn’t going to be happy with us even if nothing goes wrong – he doesn’t like the Dark Arts.”

“He’ll get over it. He won’t get by for long if he doesn’t loosen up a bit.”

“I heard he told Mulciber that he’s had bad experiences, though. In Potter-speak, that could mean anything from some errant Fiendfyre eating his Charms essay to an experimental torture session at the hands of a crazed rogue. If he was tortured, I don’t blame him for being wary. Have you seen that scar he hides behind his fringe? That’s a curse scar if I’ve ever seen one.”

“Even so,” Lestrange insisted. “I can’t imagine his relationship with Riddle going anywhere if he doesn’t adjust his views a little. Or can you imagine Riddle giving up the Dark Arts for him? Or for anyone?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. But neither can I imagine Potter willingly picking up a grimoire.”

“Not yet, maybe. He’ll come around, though – you’ll see.”

Adam was about to ask what made him say that, when a pained groan from behind the rocks made his heart jump to his throat. He pushed himself away from the rock, ready to leap into action.
“It’s alright!” Dolohov yelled. “Everything’s fine.”

Adam wasn’t about to take Dolohov’s word for it. He dashed around the rocks, Lestrange at his heels, and came to an abrupt stop when he saw the two sixth years helping Potter to sit up.

“My head…!” Potter whimpered pitifully. “I haven’t had headaches like this since –” His sentence was cut short by a hiss of pain as he settled into an upright position. He blinked and squinted like a newly released Azkaban convict, until Dolohov took pity on him and stepped up to block the sun.

It was several moments before Potter could look up at them properly. He looked almost as confused as he had when Confunded. “What just happened?”

* * *

There was something the guys weren’t telling him, but Harry would be damned if he knew what. All he cared about at the moment was the throbbing in his head. He had never been prone to migraines, and it was only now that he realised how lucky he was for that fact. The pain he had felt in his scar when Voldemort was near had been terrible, but at least it had been concentrated in that one spot.

“I’m sorry about that,” Mulciber said. “I’m not a professional Healer, you realise. It should pass eventually.”

“It’s okay,” Harry said, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other as they made their subdued way back to the castle. The incident had spoiled the mood for enjoying the outdoors.

The cool darkness of the dungeons was a blessed relief for Harry.

“Maybe you should go lie down in the dormitory,” Rosier said when they reached the common room.

The fussing tone of his voice caused a spike of annoyance in Harry, and although a lie-down in the dorm actually sounded rather nice, he was determined not to show that sort of weakness.

“I’m not a complete invalid,” he declared. “Just let me sit down a bit and I’ll be fine.” Before anyone could argue, he made beeline for the nearest armchair and sat down.

“If you’re sure,” Rosier said, following him and picking a chair adjacent to Harry’s.

“Where’s Avery?” Lestrange asked, looking around as he sat down as well. “He said he was staying here to study.”

“Probably gone to the library,” Dolohov shrugged. “Leave him alone for a bit and that’s where he’ll end up.”

Harry closed his eyes and rested his head against the wing of his armchair, tuning out the rest of the conversation. He knew that he wouldn’t be able to sleep with this mother of all headaches, but the rest of his body rebelled against the notion, leaving him feeling lethargic and weighed down.

Mulciber had said that the school nurse’s Headache Cures wouldn’t do him much good, so the best he could do was try and clear his mind like Snape had attempted to teach him once upon a time. Maybe that way he could ignore the pain to the point of forgetting about it.
He wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but he was still suffering in silence when a familiar voice cut into his consciousness.

“Evening, gentlemen,” Tom said, sounding tired. Whatever he had been doing all day must have done a number on him.

Harry opened his eyes, squinting a little against the light, and smiled up at him. “Hi. How was your day?”

“Disappointing, but that was to be expected.”

He didn’t elaborate and Harry didn’t bother asking for details. Instead, he waved his hand at a free spot on the adjacent couch. “You look exhausted. Why don’t you take a breather and sit down?”

He had tried to affect a nonchalant air, but apparently Tom detected something off about him, because he frowned and asked: “Are you alright, Harry?”

“Just a headache,” Harry said, shaking his head dismissively and wincing for his troubles. He didn’t notice the way the Death-Eaters-To-Be tensed up like rabbits sensing a predator, but Tom did.

“Are you sure?” Tom asked. “You look dreadful.”

He came closer and placed a hand on Harry’s forehead. He frowned some more at his findings and proceeded to take Harry’s pulse and peer into his eyes suspiciously. To complete the examination, he leaned in very close and sniffed at Harry’s skin, right above his collar where his scent was strong.

Then, he pulled back and whirled around, bearing on the other Slytherins with outrage. “What have you done to him? He reeks of Dark Magic!” When nobody could stutter out an immediate answer, he pulled out his wand and went on, “I turn my back for a few hours and this is what happens? Explain right now and so help me, if this is your idea of fooling around, I will make you hurt!”

“Wait, just wait a moment,” Harry interrupted before any of the others could get in a word. “Dark Magic? What are you talking about? I thought you said I was Confunded.”

Tom’s face twisted with fury and he was clearly about to launch into another spiel, but Rosier beat him by raising his voice.

“You were!” Addressing Tom, he continued, “He was! He was Confunded by that Gryffindor Mudblood Keegan Towler. Only, it went wrong and Potter was completely out of it, hallucinating and barely responding at all. We had to do something and Mulciber and Dolohov thought that neuro-manipulation was our best bet.”

“Neuro-manipulation?” Harry felt himself blanch. He didn’t know what that was, but just hearing the word made him feel ill. He lifted his hand to his head as though he could find the damage the Dark Magic had made just by feeling his scalp.

“A Confundus gone wrong,” Tom repeated, ignoring Harry in favour of looming threateningly over his minions. His voice was calm, but his stormy expression betrayed his displeasure. “A simple charm went wrong and you thought that your ‘best bet’ was Dark Magic.”

Mulciber stared at him with wide eyes, clearly knowing that he was about to give the wrong answer. “Yes?”

“It never occurred to you to fetch the nurse or Professor Giddymeadow? Or me? Even Slughorn could have done something! I know you like to treat Dark Magic like a toy to play around with, but
even you should know better than to use it for anything other than the intended purposes. Healing is not one of them.”

“It could be,” Dolohov piped in. “He healed me that one time when Lestrange’s *Imperio* stuck onto me.” He cowered a bit at the scathing look Tom cast him, but bravely went on, “Where’s your sense of innovation?”

Tom’s nostrils flared and his face twisted into a deranged snarl that brought all sorts of unpleasant memories to Harry’s mind.

“*Innovation?*” he hissed. “Let me show you just *how* innovative I can be.”

He whipped his wand into Dolohov’s face, swift as a striking cobra, and uttered an incantation that Harry didn’t quite catch. Dolohov hit the back of his armchair like he had been punched, and didn’t get up again. His arms hung limply over the armrests, curling fingers reaching for the floor while his head lolled to the side. His eyes were open, though, and Harry realised with a disquieting jolt that they weren’t vacant in the least – they were round with horror, the older boy’s gaze rapidly shifting back and forth as though frantically looking for an escape from a terrifying nightmare, but finding none in his body’s unresponsive state.

“He should lie down,” Tom said, walking over to Harry’s four-poster and jerking the silk hangings aside. “There isn’t much I can do for your headache. As I said earlier, the Dark Arts aren’t meant for healing or any other such altruistic purposes, so you’re lucky to have escaped with a migraine. If it were a curse, I would probably be able to lift it, but neuro-manipulation is a bit more complicated than that. It’s best for you to just let the after effects abate naturally.”

His voice was carefully neutral, which didn’t bode well for Harry. And indeed, as soon as Harry’s head had hit the pillow, Tom turned to him with a pinched expression.
“How is it that you let that half-rate Gryffindor catch you off guard with a Confundus Charm? I thought you were skilled at duelling, or is your prowess constrained to the controlled environment of Merrythought’s classroom?”

Harry groaned, covering his face with his hands. Knowing this was coming didn’t make the berating any more fun to hear.

“It’s because I didn’t know I was duelling him,” he said, voice muffled by his hands. “I was trying to break up the fight between Rosier and McKinnon and didn’t think the other bloke was a big threat or anything.” He peeked at Tom from between his fingers. “I swear, if I’d thought I was actually duelling with Towler, I wouldn’t be the one nursing a headache in bed right now.”

“So you say,” said Tom.

“It’s the truth,” Harry insisted, not wanting Tom to think he was incompetent. “For once in my life, I tried to be sensible and stop a fight instead of running head first into one, and this is what I get for my troubles. I’ve no history with the Gryffindors here and absolutely no reason to start throwing hexes at them, so excuse me for not doing so.”

“That attitude won’t get you far,” Tom pointed out. “I’m afraid you’ll only embarrass yourself if you make a habit of not throwing hexes at Gryffindors, because, as you’ve seen, they certainly will throw hexes at you. People will start thinking you’re soft – or worse, inept.”

“I know. I’ll try to shape up.”

“Don’t try. You have to always be on your guard around McKinnon and his sort, and never, ever lose to them, no matter how petty the squabble. It isn’t only your own dignity on the line – you’re also representing me and the entire House of Slytherin. So you’d better do more than try.”

It was a bit unfair of Tom to give him such a dressing-down while he was lying prone in bed with a crippling headache, Harry thought. He pushed himself up to lean back against the headboard.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Tom. I said I’d try to shape up and that’s the best you’re going to get.” When Tom opened his mouth to say something, eyes narrowing, he added, “Don’t worry – your dignity is safe, and so is Slytherin’s. I’m not too shabby when I try. I’ve had worse than a few bratty Gryffindors with Leg-Lockers and Stunners up their sleeves.”

For a moment it looked like Tom was still going to argue, but then he seemed to give in, his face softening into a wry smile. He sat down on the bed and pulled Harry’s feet into his lap to take off his shoes for him.

“Maybe I should try you myself, to make sure you’re not leading me on,” he said as he pulled on the laces. “You have to face it – that was rather pathetic, losing to Keegan Towler of all people.”

“I’ll take you on any time,” Harry said, flashing a cocky grin. “I may not know any nasty Dark curses, but that hasn’t stopped me from kicking arse before.”

“That could be fixed, you know.” Tom gave him a long, sideways look.

It only took a beat for Harry to catch on. “I could teach you some. I don’t normally go out of my way to teach others what they could learn on their own if they bothered, but I would make an exception for you.”

"That's awfully generous of you, but I'm good."
"Oh, I know you’re good, Harry," Tom said, dropping Harry's shoes to the floor and starting to slowly knead his soles with his fingers. "You are a remarkably good person, and that won't have to change. I wouldn't want it to change. Your goodness is one of the things that attract me to you. But knowing a few curses might just save your life one day. Leg-Lockers and Stunners won't always be your biggest concern, you know."

Harry frowned and went to pull his feet away from Tom, but the other held a firm grip and pressed harder with his thumbs. “You and your silver tongue,” he said. “You make it sound like nothing, like… like a girl carrying pepper spray in her purse just in case, or something, but that stuff actually kills.”

“Pepper spray?” Tom asked, confused.

“No, Dark Magic. You said yourself just now, it’s only meant for sick purposes.”

“I did not just say that, don’t put words in my mouth. I meant that the Dark Arts are offensive by nature and twisting them around will most likely backfire spectacularly.”

“And you just left Mulciber there with no choice but to do just that? How messed up is that?”

Tom shrugged unconcernedly, a little smirk on his face. “There’s a perfectly simple counter for that curse. He doesn’t need me holding his hand to figure it out.”

“I suppose you think you’re paying him a compliment, then. Somehow I doubt he appreciates it. Dolohov even less.”

“Don’t get me wrong.” He pressed his thumbs firmly into the arch of Harry’s left foot, and somehow the touch seemed to radiate along Harry’s nerves all the way up, bringing a smidgeon of relief to his headache. “They both got the punishment they deserved for what they did. In fact, I went easy on them. It would have been well within my rights to curse the whole lot. I can see how Lestrange would go along with the plan, but at least Rosier should have known better than to allow Mulciber to poke into your brain like that.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but closed it again when Tom’s words actually sank in. He had cursed Dolohov for Harry, because he and Mulciber had been irresponsible and could have hurt Harry. That was actually kind of sweet, in a twisted sort of way. Harry turned his head to the side self-consciously, hoping that the gloom of the dungeon would hide the slight blush that was creeping up his face.

“In case you hadn’t realised, I’m not actually a girl,” he said as a distraction. “I don’t need anyone protecting me or getting revenge on anyone who’s wronged me. I can take care of myself. When I try,” he added hurriedly when he saw that Tom was obviously about to make a smart-arse remark.

“Perhaps,” Tom said and pushed his feet off his lap in favour of crawling up the bed to lean over Harry, hands on either side of him on the headboard. Harry met his eyes, and even despite the pounding in his head, he felt a slight flutter of anticipation in his stomach – he could almost make out the individual flecks of cobalt and indigo in Tom’s irises, so close was he. “But this isn’t all about you. For some reason, I get a most primal satisfaction out of defending your honour. It’s such a nice feeling that I will leap at a chance to indulge in it. So, you see, what I did back there was actually quite selfish of me. So sorry to burst your bubble.”

“Oh, well then, it’s good to know you’ve got your priorities in order,” said Harry.

Tom smiled impishly and leaned forward to capture Harry’s lips. Harry’s head gave twinge and he
put up his hand to stop him.

“I’m really not feeling too great right now,” he said.

Tom frowned, but obediently pulled back. He shifted so that he was comfortably straddling Harry’s lap and sat up straight, business-like. “There’s a great possibility that the pleasure I can give you will counteract the pain you’re feeling,” he said gravely. “Your synapses are still sore from their rough treatment at the hands of our friend Mulciber, but drenching them with endorphins will likely accelerate their recovery. It’s a hypothesis that warrants further study, don’t you agree?”

“I thought you said there was nothing you could do about my headache.”

“Well, it just occurred to me that there is.”

Harry stared at him, awed by his shamelessness. “So, us snogging is going to cure my headache?”

“In all likelihood,” Tom nodded, lips twitching upward and betraying his serious expression.

“Whereas all of Madame Bobbin’s potions would undoubtedly fail.”

“Well, then. Who was Harry to argue with reasoning like that? “Alright, you win. In the name of science, obviously.”

‘He’s too used to winning,’ he thought to himself as Tom dove in, but all thought of putting his foot down flew out of his head the moment their tongues curled around each other. A familiar shudder rose in his chest, prompting him to reach out to wind his arms possessively around Tom’s waist. He barely even noticed his headache taking a backseat, too distracted by Tom’s fingers raking through his hair. He couldn’t imagine ever getting enough of this – of the scrape of Tom’s fingernails against the sweet little spot on the back of his neck, or the feel of Tom’s ribs beneath his splayed palms, or the warm weight holding him down like this. The tip of Tom’s tongue ghosting over the roof of his mouth…

…Tickled like hell. He squirmed, trying not to choke on his giggles as he pushed Tom away.

“What?” Tom asked, but Harry was too busy to answer, sticking his finger into his own mouth in a futile attempt to scratch the lingering itch. Tom extracted his hands from Harry’s hair and leaned back, a scowl darkening his brow. “That bad, was it?”

“No, no,” Harry said, pulling the finger out of his mouth, “just tickled a bit. You need to be bolder with your tongue.” He blinked, noticing the slow smirk creeping onto Tom’s face. “That sounded dirtier than I had meant.”

“Sure it did,” Tom teased, ducking his head and boldly running his tongue along Harry’s jaw, up to his ear. Harry shuddered involuntarily and tried to pull away, but the headboard thwarted his attempts.

“That isn’t hot, that’s disgusting,” he complained.

“Then why don’t you show me how it’s done, if you know better?”

“Me? Well, you know, I don’t like to show off…”

“Now you have permission to show off to your heart’s content.”
Harry hesitated for a moment, feeling self-conscious, but one look at Tom’s smug face was all the prompting he needed. He tilted his head to the side and leaned forward, brushing his lips over the edge of his jaw. Tom moved his head obligingly to the side, but made no further encouraging gesture, just sitting there expectantly.

Taking this as a challenge, Harry lifted one hand to thread his fingers through the trimmed hair at the nape of Tom’s neck and kissed his way down to Tom’s jugular. He fancied he could actually feel the heartbeat against his lips, but that was probably just his own nerves. This was hardly their first time fooling around, but before now Tom had always had the decency not to bring Harry’s skills to question.

“Is that the best you can do?” Tom said, though he sounded the slightest bit breathless.

“Just getting started,” Harry muttered back before baring his teeth and biting down. Served him right for being an arse. Tom flinched but didn’t pull away, though he did squeeze Harry’s arm in warning, or possibly as a threat. Harry took this as a cue to keep at it – Tom was often contradictory with his signals – and sucked hard, determined to leave a proper mark on that irritatingly smooth, white skin. Judging by the way Tom twitched and shivered in his lap, he was doing something right.

After a minute, he unlatched himself and pulled back a little to discreetly peek at the result of his efforts – he had never tried giving Tom a hickey before, so he couldn’t be sure of his technique. The bruise was a bit blotchy around the edges and it definitely could have been darker, but for a first attempt it was nothing to scoff at.

“How’s that for showing off?” said Harry. “You’re marked property now.”

Tom blinked rapidly, chasing away the hazy look in his eyes. Then he furrowed his brow in an annoyed frown that Harry could have sworn was actually a pout and lifted his fingers to his neck. The bruise must have felt tender to the touch.

“Ulterior motives,” he complained. “I see why the Sorting Hat changed its mind about you.” He shifted back in Harry’s lap before climbing off – rather awkwardly, to Harry’s delight – and going over to his wardrobe to look at himself in the mirror.

“How’s that for showing off?” said Harry. “You’re marked property now.”

Tom leaned close to the mirror, tracing the mark with his finger.

“You got me, so I suppose I don’t have a choice.” He narrowed his eyes and looked at Harry through the mirror. “I do hope that you aren’t planning to make a habit of ‘marking your territory’ like this. All the territory around here belongs to me.”

Harry snorted. “How do you not get stuck in doorways with that big head of yours?”

In the mirror, for a brief moment, Tom looked genuinely affronted, but before Harry could feel guilty, he turned to face him with a hand on his hip. “Did I not just miraculously cure you of your migraine? I think I can afford to have a healthy ego.”

Harry instinctively lifted his hand to feel his head. There was still an underlining drone of discomfort, but to be fair, Tom had dealt with the worst of the pain. “You didn’t do a complete job, though.”

“That’s what you get for being a sitting duck. The offer still stands, you know. The trick to defending yourself is never allowing your enemy to attack first.”

“That’s not self-defence, that’s called ‘asking for trouble’,“ Harry contradicted, “or ‘being an
arsehole’.”

“Is that a ‘no’, then?”

He just had to persist. “I already said no. Why can’t you just change the subject? Usually you’re so good at that.”

Tom stared at him for a moment before averting his gaze and closing his cupboard door to hide the mirror inside. “I’m sorry. I just thought that this was something I could share with you. I’ve never wanted to share before.”

“We share things,” Harry said. “We share a lot of things. Spit. Air. Everything to do with school. Once we shared a cup of tea, remember? By the way, I can’t see how you can go with only one sugar, it’s not right. If you’re so desperate to teach me stuff, why not Divination or History? I suck at those.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “Do you want me to teach you Divination?”

Harry snorted at the thought. “No.”

“Neither do I. You have no talent to speak of. But you do have talent for Defence, which means that you would also have talent for the Dark Arts.”

“Does it? I thought it just meant I have talent for Defence.”

“A Sickle has heads and tails, but it’s still a Sickle.”

“What?”

“It means that the Dark Arts and the defence against them are two aspects of the same thing.”

“Two opposing aspects,” Harry pointed out.

“But aspects nonetheless. If you master one, the other won’t pose you trouble.”

Harry frowned. “You’re making that up. It takes a certain type of person with certain type of morals to use Dark Magic.”

“Is that so?” Tom said, eyes narrowing. “What type of person? How would you describe Avery and Rosier? Or Lestrange? How would you describe me? I’d like to know, because clearly we’re so very different from you.”

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but stopped, because he had no idea what he was supposed to say. Tom’s hostile stare made him want to shrink back and apologise. He didn’t want to speak ill of his friends. However, on the other hand he felt that it would be cowardly of him not to speak up when he knew that he was in the right. He wavered for a moment before steeling his resolve and speaking.

“It takes a person with a certain disregard for humanity. Someone who doesn’t care about the wellbeing of others. I’m not saying they have to be completely selfish and rotten – just look at Rosier. He’s a great friend and really loyal. But I’ve never heard him say one good thing about someone who isn’t close to him, I’m just saying.

“Avery’s nice and he can be really helpful and all, but when it comes down to it, his friends come second to him. He just wants to be smarter and better than everyone.
“And as for you, well. You don’t even pretend to like the people you call your ‘friends’. Sometimes I wonder if you really even like me, and we just snogged.”

“A general dislike of other people does not equal disregard for humanity,” Tom said coldly. “Those are two completely different things. Besides, you don’t know anything about Dark Magic – you think you’re so high above it that you haven’t even bothered to find out what it’s all about. You have no right to preach anyone about the required qualities of a Dark Wizard.”

“Then what is it all about? Explain to me if there’s something I’m not getting. Because all I’ve seen of the Dark Arts so far are painful, gruesome, and downright horrifying curses that no sane person would ever cast on another living thing.”

“That’s because you’re narrow-minded and refuse to see the big picture.”

“What ‘big picture’? Really, please tell me. I’d love to see how you’re going to persuade me to think that going out of your way to hurt other people is perfectly okay.”

“It’s not about hurting anyone! And if for someone it is about that, then their approach is entirely wrong and they won’t get very far with the Dark Arts, anyway.”

“What is it about, then? You’re making a lot of claims but I don’t hear you backing them with anything.”

“There’s no point in trying to reason with you when you’re being this confrontational.”

“Just humour me.”

Tom glared at him for a moment, apparently weighing whether Harry was worth the wasted breath. Then he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin to look at Harry down the bridge of his nose. “Dark Magic is not about hurting other people,” he repeated. “It’s about power –“

‘Here we go again,’ thought Harry, rolling his eyes.

“It’s about power,” Tom repeated, frowning at the eye-roll, “and reaching the peak of one’s potential as a wizard.

“Magic isn’t just a passive energy reserve or a muscle you flex mechanically – it’s a complex and varied creature that needs to be coaxed and stimulated in different ways in order to release its full capacity. If you only train one or two aspects of your magic, your progress will be impeded, because your magic is a wholesome entity and needs to be treated as such. A candle shines the brightest in a darkened room. If you only light candles in brightly lit rooms, all you’re doing is wasting good beeswax.”

Harry stared at him for a moment. “So, if I don’t practise Dark Magic, I’ll be doomed to mediocrity?” He thought of Dumbledore and disagreed.

“No, you can become a decent wizard without Dark Magic,” Tom said. “You may even develop skills that are mildly impressive. However, you can forget about any ambitions of greatness.”

“That’s okay, then,” said Harry, leaning back with a shrug and a little smirk. ‘I’m fine with ‘mildly impressive’.”

Tom looked appalled. “How can you say such a thing? Don’t you have any aspirations?”

“Of course I do. One day I’m going to be Head Auror. I think that’s mighty ambitious of me. But I
don’t need to be particularly great to become an Auror, you know. I just need five N.E.W.T.s for that.”

“That’s no excuse for underachieving.”

Now, that was simply unfair. “You call this underachieving? I’ve been busting my arse with school since I came here! All the professors are expecting top grades from me, you know, since I’m repeating fifth year and it should all be easy as pie for me. I’ve been so busy not underachieving that I wouldn’t have time to mess around with Dark Magic even if I wanted to! Besides, only you would call getting five N.E.W.T.s underachieving.”

“Yes,” Tom said firmly. “I do think that settling for the pre-digested, standardised curriculum offered by the system is underachieving and an insult to your intelligence. Do remember that it’s your education on the line here. Education is the one thing that will give you control over your own future. Do you really want to hand that control over to others? Have you ever even cracked open a book to learn something that wasn’t written on a blackboard for you to swallow without chewing first?”

Harry went to respond, but the retort slipped away from him before it even reached his tongue. Opening and closing his mouth like a fish, he could feel doubt settling uncomfortably in his stomach as he realised that Tom may be right. He thought guiltily back on his years at Hogwarts, remembering all the half-hearted essays he had turned in, all the additional reading material he had habitually ignored, and all the nights he had spent cramming his head full of information that would promptly be forgotten once exams were over. When it came to school and learning, he had always worked just hard enough not to look like a complete idiot, but never more than that. In fact, the only time he had gone out of his way to learn more than he absolutely must had been during the Triwizard Tournament, when his life quite literally depended on it.

He had never thought much about his studying habits, figuring that they were quite normal. Slacking was what kids did in school – that was the natural order of things. Sure, Hermione had always nagged at him to work harder, but he had never once considered that perhaps he should work harder for his own sake, and not for the sake of some vague, universal principle which dictated that he simply must. Perhaps taking initiative wasn’t just for overachieving swots who wanted everyone to know that they were smart.

It seemed silly to be having an epiphany like this – to think that he hadn’t realised before now that studying actually paid off. This shouldn’t shock him. However, the more he thought about it, the more he came to appreciate Hermione, and Tom as well. What was it that made those two such powerful figures in Harry’s mind? It was their knowledge. They both knew a lot of things that were completely unfamiliar to him, not to mention most other witches and wizards their age. And here was Harry, whose entire understanding of magic consisted of information that was common knowledge to everyone in the wizarding world. He had none of the power that Tom and Hermione had. He had no advantage over all the teeming masses of average wizards who had received their education at Hogwarts. So, what was he worth? What was his education worth?

He had been quiet for a long while, lost in his disquieting thoughts, and he had almost forgotten about Tom’s presence until the other boy moved and spoke up.

“I see that you’re still unwell,” he said, a shrewd look in his eyes. “I’ll leave you alone to get better. You can find me in the library if you need me.” Then he left, touching Harry’s foot briefly as he went.
Chapter 15

Harry spent the rest of that day alone in the dormitory. Tom had given him plenty to think about, and he felt bad for Dolohov and did not want to run into the other Slytherins in the common room. It was Harry’s fault that Tom had cursed Dolohov. While Dolohov did almost deserve the treatment, Harry couldn’t shake the look of horror in Dolohov’s eyes as he lay lifelessly draped over his armchair. It was better for Mulciber to take care of the curse without Harry hovering helplessly in the sidelines. Yes, his presence would only make the situation awkward for everyone. This is what Harry told himself as he drew the hangings shut around his bed and settled to brood.

It was a shocking discovery to realise that everything he had achieved so far was quite meaningless in the grand scale of things. Here he had been doing rather well in school and feeling very pleased with himself, all the while never understanding that no matter how many O’s and E’s he earned, he would never be anything more than average. After all, they didn't call this the O.W.L. year for nothing. O.W.L. for *Ordinary Wizarding Level*. What was basic education for if not to make sure that every magical child in Britain became at least average at witchcraft and wizardry? If he ever wanted to rise above that, he would have to go beyond the curriculum and work even harder.

'Well, that's what Auror training is for,' a little voice in his head pointed out reasonably. 'You're only sixteen – all you need to worry about is getting the basics down so that you'll have a starting point for specialised education.'

However, knowing now that he could do better made him feel restless, especially while all of his friends were going to all sorts of lengths to do better at this very moment, even if it was by practising the Dark Arts. Surely studying Dark Magic wasn’t the only way to become more powerful at magic. Just take his father for an example – he had been good at Transfiguration and had capitalised on that, going so far as to become an Animagus at the age of fifteen. It had also been around that time that the Marauders had created their enchanted map of Hogwarts – an amazing feat of Charms work in itself.

Harry sat still for a moment as he pondered the implications of this, before banging his head against a bedpost. "I'm such a loser!" he moaned to himself. He had no idea how to go about creating an artefact like the Marauder’s Map, not to mention attempting something as mind-boggling as the Animagus transformation. Clearly, despite all appearances, James Potter had not been one to sit on his arse all day, unlike his no-good son. Neither had Sirius, for that matter.

Harry wasn’t stupid – he knew that if he put his mind to something he could really excel. Putting his mind to learning all those hexes and defensive spells for the Triwizard Tournament had made him so proficient at Defence Against the Dark Arts that the next year people had asked him to teach them. Even some upperclassmen had joined the DA. It had been an uplifting feeling to have all those people look up to him, not because he was the Boy-Who-Lived, but because he was good at something and had something useful to offer.

Of course, here in the past his repertoire of defensive magic was nothing to parade about. Professor Merrythought was an excellent teacher with decades of experience and the quality of her course soared above the various and sundry DADA professors under whose instruction Harry had studied over the years. Harry may still be at the top of his class, but that wouldn’t last for long if he didn’t get a grip soon.
Well, it wasn't too late yet. Harry would just have to start working hard to keep ahead and collect some aces up his sleeves. Starting tomorrow, he would spend a few extra hours in the library to study hexes, jinxes, and defensive spells, if not every day then at least every now and then.

Something occurred to Harry: Tom might be dismayed if he knew that his attempts at persuading Harry to study Dark Magic had done the exact opposite. Harry smirked wryly into the darkness, lying down and crossing his arms behind his head. Tom should have known better than to think he would get anywhere in that department. Harry wasn't fooled easily – he had seen what the Dark Arts could do. It was Dark Magic that had put Mr and Mrs Longbottom in St Mungo's for life. Dark Magic had killed Cedric Diggory before his very eyes. It had killed his parents before he even knew them. Even Tom's strongest arguments wouldn't convince him that anything good could come out of the Dark Arts.

Mind at ease in his conviction, Harry fell asleep in his robes before he could hear his dorm mates wander in for the night.

The next morning was a subdued affair as the Slytherin gang trickled into the Great Hall. Conversation over the breakfast table was stilted and scarce, everyone's minds still on the previous evening. Tom was conspicuous in his absence.

Dolohov was the last to arrive, with less than half an hour left until the start of the first class. He looked terrible with shadows around his eyes and his shoulders slumped forward.

"You should stay in bed," Rosier said, sizing him up. "The others can tell the teachers you weren't feeling well."

"Can't," said Dolohov. "We have Transfiguration first thing. Dumbledore would get suspicious."

"You don't think he'll get suspicious when you turn up in class looking like death warmed up?"

"We thought about that," Lestrange said. "We'll drop hints that'll make him think that he's just hung over. I'm going to complain about having a headache, too. We might get detention, but better than letting him find out what really happened."

"What happened last night after we left?" Harry finally asked. "Did you manage to break the curse without trouble?"

"No trouble at all," Dolohov said with a rather strained smile.

"Turned out there was a counter curse," Mulciber explained. "After that, it was all very straightforward, but it did take a bit of digging to find it in the first place."

Before Harry could think of a response, the air was filled with the beating of countless feathered wings as the morning post arrived. Harry looked up and idly scanned the flocks of owls for Ethel, the Potters’ family owl, not really expecting to see her.

She didn't turn up, but another owl did swoop down towards their group. It landed with a crash, upsetting a dish full of kippers, and upturned a few teacups and a glass of pumpkin juice as it staggered around confusedly.

"That's a long-distance owl," Avery pointed out, pouring some water on a saucer and pushing it towards the bird. "Looks knackered, too."

The owl ignored the water and determinedly crawled across the table to present its burden to Dolohov, who perked up a little despite his own exhaustion. "For me? Thanks!" he said and undid
the cord tying a little package to the bird's leg.

"Who's it from?" Lestrange asked, poking his head around Dolohov's shoulder.

"I have a hunch," said the other boy as he peeled back the plain, brown wrapping paper. Inside was a cardboard box with an envelope Spellotaped on top. Everyone watched curiously as Dolohov opened the letter and scanned the contents. "Yep. It's from my aunt and uncle."

"The ones who live, where was it again? Ukraine?"

"They live in Moscow, you dummy. Your geography needs some serious work."

"You have relatives in Russia?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. Well, actually, it's more like they have relatives in England. My parents moved to the UK back in the early '20s, during the civil war. That's when Grindelwald first started flexing his muscles around there. All of my extended family stayed put. We don't keep contact much, but sometimes they send me weird Russian sweets."

He proved this by opening the box that came with the letter, revealing a magically expanded space packed full of colourfully wrapped sweets.

Harry picked up one and peered at the unintelligible letters printed on the brightly coloured wrapper. "Are you able to read this?" he asked.

"Sure. Mind you, I'm a bit rusty. I speak Russian with my parents half the time, but I don't actually use the written form very often," Dolohov explained, squinting at the letter, which was written completely in Cyrillic script.

"That's still really cool. I don't speak any foreign languages."

"Do they say anything about the war?" Avery asked.

"Just that the war effort is going great," Dolohov said, frowning at the text.

"They're spreading the Greater Good," Lestrange stage-whispered. "Wackos."

"We can't know for sure, they haven't actually said," Dolohov argued, but he looked very uncomfortable.

"Why else would they have decided to stay in Moscow when your mum and dad defected?"

"Because it was their home? It isn't easy to just pack your things and leave your roots, you know."

"Maybe," Lestrange shrugged, "but they said the war was going great. Moscow belongs to Grindelwald, everyone knows that. So why would they say the war was going great if they weren't siding with Grindelwald?"

"I don't know," Dolohov said, glaring at Lestrange. "You got me there, okay? They probably wouldn't. So I have a bunch of crazy zealots for relatives. So what? That's why I'm all the way over here and not back there communing with them. I've never even met the people! Give me a break!"

He stuck his hand into the box and rummaged around before pulling out a chocolate bar wrapped in gleaming red and rusty brown. He waved it insolently before Lestrange's nose. "Just for that, you won't get any of my wicked cool Russian milk chocolate that pops and bubbles in the mouth."

"Why would they send you sweets if they've never met you?" Harry asked. "It seems weird."
"Mother thinks so, too," Dolohov said. "She thinks they're trying to recruit me, but Dad disagrees. He says they probably just feel bad for me. You know, for having such cowards for parents and for having to live so far away from 'home'. I guess he knows his own sister better than Mother does, so I'm going with his theory. Mother just wants me to throw out all these sweets without even having a taste!"

"And you can't have that!" Mulciber teased, grabbing his friend's belly and jiggling. Everybody laughed hard at Dolohov's outraged reaction, and the shadow of yesterday's incident seemed to have finally lifted.

The first class of the day for the fifth years was Potions, so when the bell rang, they got up and headed back to the dungeons while the sixth years trudged upstairs for their session with Professor Dumbledore. When they reached Slughorn's classroom, Tom was already there, leaning casuially against the doorjamb and looking classily bored.

“You weren’t at breakfast,” said Harry for a greeting.

“No, I wasn’t,” Tom agreed.

“Did you go to the kitchens?”

The corner of Tom’s lips twitched in an aborted smirk. “I’m fine. Don’t fuss.”

Rosier looked very awkward, refusing to look Tom in the eye. Avery, who hadn’t been involved in yesterday’s shenanigans, rolled his eyes at this and moved to the classroom door, trying the knob. It was locked.

“Slughorn’s late again,” he said.

Normally Rosier would have responded with a snide remark about Slughorn and how well he liked his breakfast, but this time only an uncomfortable silence followed. Now he seemed to have found something terribly interesting on the wall, going so far as to pick at it with his fingernail. Avery looked between him and Tom, who had gone back to looking bored. He was clearly ready and willing to act as a mediator, but since neither boy was saying a word, he was left twiddling his thumbs. Harry met his eyes and shrugged apologetically.

The crowd outside the Potions classroom grew as students wandered over more or less reluctantly. The Slytherins shared this class with Gryffindor, so the students huddled up in two clearly separate groups that shot glares and occasional half-hearted insults at one another.

The appearance of certain faces among the Gryffindor camp brought some life into Rosier.

“McKinnon,” he called out, garnering attention from the other students, “how nice to see your face this morning. When last we met, you were so quick to run away. For a while there I thought I’d scared you off for good.”

“Not bloody likely,” McKinnon said with a scowl, but his cheeks flared red with humiliation. “And I didn’t run away.”

“What would you call it then? Scarpering? Scuttling? Escaping! You’re right, that’s what it was.”

“You told me to leave!”

“Oh, you like taking orders? Why didn’t you tell me before? All this time wasted on a silly rivalry, while we could have had such a beautiful relationship!”
McKinnon cussed impressively and pulled out his wand, intending to wipe the smirk off Rosier’s face, but his friends grabbed him by his robes to stop him. “Not here, Marcus, get a hold of yourself!” said the boy Harry remembered from the day before.

“Wise words, Towler,” Rosier said, narrowing his eyes at the skinny boy, “but don’t think I’ve forgotten about you. We don’t forget, and we never forgive.”

Some of the Gryffindors looked confused, but Towler darted nervous glances around the Slytherin front line, lingering on Harry and finally coming to a stop on Tom. Tom was still leaning against the wall, casual as ever, but he stared right back at Towler with a hard glint in his eyes. Towler seemed to waver for a moment, but soon collected himself, frowning stubbornly and refusing to break eye contact. “That’s fine,” he said, addressing Rosier but still looking at Tom, “I don’t need your forgiveness for anything.”

“You might find that you do –” Rosier would have said more, but was interrupted by Professor Slughorn, who came jogging up the dungeon corridor.

“Sorry, sorry, everyone, for being late,” he puffed as the crowd parted to give him way. “I was held back in the Great Hall.” He pulled out his wand to unlock the classroom door and let everyone inside. “Did you try the grilled tomatoes with mushrooms? Exquisite!”

In the clamour of the students filing into the classroom Harry saw Rosier jam the tip of his wand between Towler’s ribs and heard him growl, “As I was saying, you’ll wish that you had grovelled for forgiveness once I’m through with you.” Then he elbowed his way into the dungeon, leaving the Gryffindor to rub his side indignantly. Harry hurried after him, casting an apologetic look Towler’s way.

“You really shouldn’t have done that,” he hissed at Rosier as he set his cauldron on his customary workstation behind the other boy. “I don’t want you going on any crusades over an honest mistake.”

“Honest mistake, my foot,” Rosier hissed back. “A hundred years ago he would have had his wand snapped for atrocious casting. Besides, there are principles – we have to get back at him!”

Tom took that moment to place his own cauldron onto the workbench next to Harry’s with a solid thunk. “Leave it to me,” he said.

“Pardon?” said Rosier.

“I’ll take care of Towler. You worry about your own business.”

Harry whirled to face him. “That’s even worse, Tom. I don’t want anyone to go on any crusades for me! I’m fine, look at me! Water under the bridge.”

“Rosier is right,” Tom said calmly, “it is about principles. If I let someone get away with hurting one of my friends, then everyone with the slightest excuse to dislike us will think we are fair game. Besides,” he added, fixing Harry with a weighed stare, “Towler made it personal when he trained his wand on you.”

“Alright, everyone, tone down on the chatter now – we’re already slightly behind schedule,” Professor Slughorn called out from the front of the classroom, clapping his hands together and effectively cutting off Harry’s response. “Like I promised to you last time, we’ll be skipping the Draught of Peace for today, since we’ll need a double period for that tricky little bugger. Instead, I want you all to turn to page 176. The Confusing Concoction! Don’t rub your eyes while handling the sneezewort, and don’t eat it or sniff at it. It won’t make you sneeze, but you will become irritable
and then nobody will want to sit next to you.”

There was a scramble as everyone hurried to the ingredients cupboard for their potion ingredients. Harry stuck close to Tom, and as they took turns to pick out their scurvy-grass, he continued their conversation. “If that’s your idea of being romantic, then I don’t care for it. Don’t go cursing Towler. You’ll just take it too far and then I’ll be really angry with you.”

“Clearly I haven’t romanced you enough if you think that this is me being romantic,” Tom quipped. Arms full of ingredients, he calmly turned to leave the cupboard, apparently finished with the topic. Harry dogged his heels again, struggling to balance his bundle of scurvy-grass on top of his jar of dried sneezewort.

“Did you hear a word I said?” he asked.

“I heard you perfectly well,” Tom said, arranging his bottles and jars in a fastidious row on his workbench. “I simply chose not to listen. I don’t take orders from you.”

Harry was briefly left gaping. “It’s a request. Please don’t do anything rash.”

Tom quirked a smirk at him. “I don’t do rash things.” Then he picked up both of their cauldrons and went to fill them with water from the tap in the corner.

Clearly there was no reasoning with Tom. Harry glanced toward the Gryffindor side of the classroom, where Keegan Towler sat with his friends, obliviously fiddling with his scales. He hadn’t appreciated the Confundus and was still annoyed at the Gryffindor, but nobody deserved Tom’s wrath. Harry hoped that he would be all right.

“Don’t be a wet blanket, Potter,” said Avery, leaning over from his seat next to Rosier. “This ought to be good. Riddle’s very neat and discreet, at least with the other houses, and he’s got imagination. Most of the time people don’t even realise they’ve been played until long after the fact.”

“I don’t get my jollies off people getting hurt, so excuse me for raining on your parade.”

“You’re much too serious. Think of it as pranking.”

“Less chatting, more chopping, lads!” Professor Slughorn exclaimed, fixing them with a stern look.

“Yes, Professor Slughorn,” Harry and Avery chorused, turning back to their work stations. Harry picked up his scurvy-grass and shredded it into his mortar, before starting to grind it to paste.

Later, when their potions were bubbling away merrily and Harry was waiting for his to turn the required shade of green, Tom shifted his stool closer to Harry and murmured into his ear, “I’m sorry.”

Harry was surprised. “Does that mean you won’t go after Towler?”

“No,” Tom said, and continued before Harry could interrupt him, “but you should know that I’m not doing it because of you. You don’t have to feel responsible for my actions.”

Harry frowned at him. “Don’t apologise to me,” he whispered back. “No matter who’s responsible, it’s Towler who ends up hurt.” With a scowl, he added, “And I’m not responsible for your actions. To think you’d even suggest that!”

Tom smiled at him, and Harry wondered what that was all about. Before he could ask, Tom darted forward to press a brief, light kiss on his lips.
As he pulled back, looking for all the world like nothing unusual had just happened, Harry felt his face flare red. He glanced around him instinctively. Most of the students hadn’t noticed, but there were enough people now staring at them to make Harry feel very awkward. He thanked Merlin that Avery and Rosier had their backs to him and Tom.

“You should turn down the heat,” Tom said, making Harry splutter indignantly. “The potion,” he clarified, “it’s turning green.” Then he went back to his own cauldron.

Harry cursed and grabbed his wand to lower the fire under his cauldron. He was just in time – the Concoction had just the right hue of shamrock green, though there was a thin but distressing swirl of olive around the edges. He dipped in his wooden spoon and started counting stirs, hoping that the redness of his face could be attributed to the hot steam rising from the cauldron. The pair of girls sitting behind him were giggling and whispering to each other.

What had come over Tom? He had never been public with his affections before. In fact, Harry had thought they had a silent, mutual agreement to keep their hands and lips to themselves when people could see, and he wasn’t at all sure he liked this breach of the code. Why now, in the middle of class? Harry hadn’t even said anything nice.

“Good, good,” said Professor Slughorn, who chose that moment to stop in front of his station to observe his brewing. “Just slow down a smidgeon on the stirring.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry muttered and did as he was told. A single large bubble rose to the surface of the potion and popped like a question mark.

“Excellent,” Slughorn said, beaming at Harry. There was a merry glint in his eye that couldn’t have been put there by Harry’s passable Confusing Concoction. “Keep it up, Mr Potter,” he added before moving on down the aisle.

Harry heard him address the whispering girls. “Oh dear. Miss Gamp, Miss Montague – it looks like your potions have boiled past the mark.” There was the sound of splashing as Slughorn ladled a potion and let it fall back into its cauldron, and Harry listened with vindictive satisfaction as the professor went on, “I’m afraid this is useless now.”

“I’m sorry, Professor,” both girls said, sounding chastised.

Harry glanced at Tom, who appeared entirely unaffected by everything, serenely tapping his wooden spoon against the rim of his cauldron to rid it off excess concoction. Why had he kissed Harry? Harry wracked his brain. Could it be that he had somehow interpreted Harry’s words as Harry giving him permission to go after Towler? Harry couldn’t see the logic, but Tom’s brain was rather convoluted.

And did this mean that PDA was okay now?

Tom had already taken his own concoction up to Slughorn’s desk and was busy chatting with the Professor, when Harry was ladling his finished potion into a phial. He almost spilled the whole thing over his desk when somebody laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Harry,” an excited voice whispered, “you’re dating Tom Riddle!”

Harry jerked his head up to look incredulously into the glowing face of Ariadne Montague, one of the Slytherin girls. It was funny how Harry shared most of his classes with her, but couldn’t remember ever actually having a conversation with her. The boys and girls in Slytherin stuck to their own, gender-specific groups.
“You didn’t know?” he said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know I should have pinned an announcement on
the notice board.”

“We knew,” the girl said. “We just didn’t really believe until we saw him kiss you. “

“You lucky bugger,” said Trudy Gamp, siegeing Harry on his left. “He’s such a dish. What’s he like
in bed?”

“We’re not sleeping together!”

“Oh, don’t be coy,” Trudy said, nudging him teasingly. “I imagine he’s intense. I bet he –”

“Trudy!” her friend gasped, feigning shock at her words.

“I told you, we’re not sleeping together,” Harry interrupted before the girls could start giggling. He
was met with stares that clearly expected him to burst out laughing and tell them he was joking.
Shifting uncomfortably on his stool, he fought a sudden feeling of inadequacy.

Eventually Ariadne frowned, brushing her long black hair behind her ear. “Really? Why not? Just
look at him!” She gestured at Tom, who was still talking with Slughorn.

“I know what he looks like, thanks,” Harry said, annoyed. “And I don’t have to answer questions
like that.”

“Oh, we’re just curious,” Ariadne explained. “It’s not just us. Everybody has always wondered what
makes the aloof Tom Riddle tick.”

“Exactly. Who would have guessed he would go for a nice, Light wizard? Or a wizard at all, for that
matter.” Trudy sighed dreamily. “What an earth are you waiting for? If I were you, I’d have him in a
heartbeat.”

Harry stared at her round, doll-like face and angelic chin-length ringlets, taking a moment for
profound thoughts on the deceptiveness of appearances.

“Well, you’re not me,” he said. “I’m not the sort to ‘have’ someone at the drop of a hat, and neither is
Tom.”

“Entertaining delusions, Gertrude?” a voice cut in. They looked up to find that Tom had returned and
was now looming over them with a vaguely contemptuous sneer on his face. “Even if you became
Harry, you would be no closer to ‘having’ me than you are now. That’s where Harry’s charm lies –
he is so very unlike you.”

There was a loaded silence during which Harry felt both embarrassed and sorry for Trudy. “Tom,”
he said warningly and tried to catch his eye to show him that he was going too far. However, Tom
didn’t look his way, keeping his haughty gaze fixed on the girl.

“Please, call me Trudy,” Trudy finally said with a strained smile that told them she would have liked
to say something very different.

“Well, our Tom is a romantic and he has class,” Ariadne said in a brave attempt to diffuse the
tension. “It looks like you and Harry are perfect for each other.”

Harry chose to take this as a compliment, although he wouldn’t exactly have called Tom a romantic.

“It would seem so,” Tom agreed, deadpan, and turned to address Harry in clear dismissal of the girls’
presence. “The bell is about to ring. You should hurry up and stopper your potion.”

Class ended soon after that, and the students clamoured to leave the dungeons. Trudy Gamp and Ariadne Montague retreated back to their giggling coterie of Slytherinettes, disappearing from sight as the crowd dispersed outside the classroom, but even with them gone, Harry’s mind lingered on what they had said, worrying.

He hadn’t given sex any serious thought before, thinking that he and Tom were content keeping things above the waistline. However, he had never considered asking Tom what he thought, and really, who was he to make assumptions? Earlier, Tom had sounded like he was fine with their current arrangement, but he could have just been trying to get rid of the girls.

“Potter, we have a free period. What do you say to a game of Gobstones in the common room?” said Rosier, pointing his thumb towards the Slytherin dungeons. Harry hesitated, glancing at Tom, who was already making his way towards the upper levels with Avery. They had Arithmancy next.

“Sure. Um, I’ll meet you there in a minute, okay?”

“Okay,” Rosier said, but Harry barely heard him, jogging to catch up to Tom.

“Harry,” Tom said, surprised, when Harry caught him by the elbow. “Are you walking me to class?”

“Er, no,” Harry floundered, glancing at Avery, who had stopped walking as well. “Listen, can I have a word with you?”

“I’ll just go ahead and see you in class, Riddle,” Avery said and left.

“What is it?” Tom asked.

“Um…” Harry stared at Tom’s expectant face and realised that this was neither the place nor the time to have this conversation, and that he couldn’t possibly bring up the topic without blushing and stammering and generally making a fool of himself. For a wild moment he considered a diversion, like asking if Tom could later help him with homework, but he knew that Tom would see right through that.

The silence stretched and Tom shifted his weight onto one foot and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Do you want to have sex?” Harry finally blurted, feeling his face burn up.

Both of Tom’s eyebrows were now reaching for his hairline. “Well, that was straightforward.”

“I don’t mean now,” Harry hurried to explain. “I mean in general. Is that what you want?” When Tom just stared at him, looking bemused, he went on, “Because, you know, I don’t… That is, I’m not sure if… if it’s—”

“This is about what happened earlier, isn’t it?” Tom cut in. “Don’t listen to anything Gertrude Gamp has to say. She’s loose. I heard that she hasn’t been a virgin since last summer.” He leaned in closer conspiratorially. “And it was with an older man, no less.”

Tom Riddle spreading gossip. That was something Harry had never thought he’d see. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Tom stared at him for a moment before letting his gaze drop to the floor and then wander around the deserted dungeon corridor. He shifted his weight again, and Harry could have sworn there was some red on his cheeks. “Eventually, I suppose,” he finally said, darting his gaze back to Harry. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, though.”
It took a moment for Harry to find his tongue again, staring at Tom. “Good,” he finally managed. “That’s good, I wholly agree. Thank you,” he added with a smile.

“I need to go to class now,” Tom said, waving his hand vaguely in the direction of class.

“Yeah, you don’t want to be late.”

Tom flashed him a smile and leant in to give him a quick kiss before turning and leaving. Harry watched him go even after the hem of his robes had disappeared around a corner. For a moment, his breathing didn’t seem to work like it should and there was a strange feeling in his chest – sadness that wasn’t quite sad, and bursting joy mixed with an irrational fear of something unseen. He didn’t know what it was, but it settled as a lump in his throat that was difficult to swallow.

Eventually he shook his head, took a deep breath and, composed, made his way to the common room to play Gobstones with Rosier.

* * *

After dinner that day, Harry headed to the library, telling Tom and the others that he had to finish his Divination homework for tomorrow. The boys waved him off disinterestedly, and Tom didn’t offer his help, just as expected. In fact, Harry had already finished his Divination homework, as pointless as it was, and was determined to spend the evening brushing up his jinxes.

Wondering what to do, he walked slowly through the Defence Against the Dark Arts section, which occupied a large stretch of space in the back of the library. Before, whenever he had done research of his own, he had always had a clear goal in mind – a specific topic and particular types of spells to look up – not to mention Hermione there to help him find the right books. In other words, he knew what he was doing, and even when he didn’t, there was always some desperate need driving him forward. He didn’t have that now.

He stopped to stand before a long aisle and gazed up at the bookcases towering over him. There was so much knowledge hidden away here that he couldn’t even begin to comprehend it all. Where should he start? What was he looking for, specifically? What was his goal? He decided that he needed to answer that question before he would get anywhere here. There were plenty of different types of hexes and jinxes out there. Which ones did he want to learn? What would he use them for?

“Duelling,” he muttered to himself. That seemed good enough – powerful, straightforward magic with no rambling incantations or unnecessarily complicated wand movements. It was a popular and broad field, so there should be plenty of spell books stuffed into these shelves for him to choose from. When he actually needed to practice casting spells, he could always go to the Room of Requirement, where he and his friends had done the same when the D.A. had existed. Though, it would be better if he had someone to practice with.

Decision made, he walked through the section, peering at the plaques attached to the shelves. Dark creatures, emergency healing, slow-working hexes, permanent jinxes… He turned a corner to another aisle, running his fingers along the spines. Wards and protective spells, cursed objects, hidden curses… Where did they keep the offensive magic books? To his shame, Harry hadn’t spent much time in this section, seeing as he had mostly depended on his existing knowledge of the subject when doing Professor Merrythought’s home assignments. He turned another corner and almost bumped into someone who was going in the opposite direction. They both muttered apologies and
went to continue on their respective ways, but when Harry spared a glance at the other boy, he heard himself calling after him.

“Oi, you! Wait a minute.”

The boy slowed down to a stop and turned around reluctantly. “What do you want?”

“You’re the one who caught me with that spell yesterday. Did a number on me, too. Towler, right?”

“It was a fair victory,” said the Gryffindor.

“I was off-guard,” Harry conceded. “That was some bad casting, though. You shouldn’t go throwing around spells you don’t know how to cast.”

“I know how to cast the Confundus Charm,” Towler said defensively. “It’s a sixth year charm, too, just so you know. I simply shouldn’t have cast it while feeling so angry. If we shared a Charms class, I bet I’d wipe the floor with your face.”

“…Okay,” Harry said. “An apology would have been nice, but I can live without one. I wasn’t trying to fight you, you know. I was trying to get our friends off each other’s throats.”

“Oh.” Towler pursed his lips, looking pensive. “In that case, I’m sorry I cast it wrong on you.”

“Thanks,” said Harry dryly.

Towler stared at him, narrowing his eyes and eyeing him up and down suspiciously, before simply looking confused. “You really aren’t angry at me, are you?”

Harry shrugged. “A bit miffed, sure. But I think Rosier is angry enough for both of us.”

“Don’t even mention that git. I’ll be looking over my shoulder for the next couple of weeks.”

Suddenly Harry felt guilty, remembering what had happened in Potions that morning. It took him only a split second to decide what he should do. “Listen, I don’t think you need to worry about Rosier.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he probably won’t do anything because Tom Riddle told him not to get involved. He said he’d take care of you, instead.”

“Seriously?” Towler cursed under his breath. “That’s not good. Wait, why are you telling me this?”

“Because I have nothing against you, and I thought you deserve a fair warning. I tried to talk him out of it, but he won’t listen. Just watch out for anything out of place in the near future – I doubt he’s going to do anything too straightforward. He doesn’t like to implicate himself.”

“Well, can’t you stop him then, if you’re so keen? You’re his squeeze, aren’t you?”

“How can I? If he chooses not to listen, there’s no turning his head, and I can’t very well keep a constant eye on him. Besides, I’m not responsible for him or his actions.”

“That’s a relief to hear. You were starting to scare me there, sounding all altruistic. But now that I know you don’t feel responsible, I can rest assured that Slytherins are still Slytherins and the Earth is still going round the sun.”
“I think I liked you better when you were scared meek of my hot-tempered friends. I have a temper, too, just so you know.”

“Well, I liked you better when you were doing hand-stands by the lake. That was funny.”

Harry felt himself blanch. His friends hadn’t told him what he had said or done while he had been Confunded, and now he knew he should have asked. “You just stopped being funny,” he said. “I think I’ve kept you here long enough. You were heading that way?”

For a moment, Towler looked contrite. He wavered in place before frowning and saying, “Yeah, you’re keeping me from my DADA homework.” Then he turned around to stalk away.

However, he didn’t get very far before his step faltered and he turned around again, looking a strange mix of sheepish and frustrated. “I’m sorry, that was rude of me. Thanks for the warning.” He stood there, staring at Harry, still wearing the strange expression. “You’re so confusing.” Then he turned on his heel and finally left.

Harry watched him go, thinking that the same could be said about Towler. He supposed he didn’t blame the boy – back in the future, he, too, would have been suspicious of a Slytherin who offered him any sort of help. For that matter, a Gryffindor offering him help here would be suspicious to him, as well.

It occurred to him, belatedly, that Towler might tell his friends about this, and if word spread that Harry was willingly offering information to Gryffindors, Tom and the rest of the Slytherins wouldn’t like that at all. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that, but for some reason, Harry wasn’t too worried.

He finally managed to find the books he was looking for – tucked away in a strangely out-of-the-way location near the Ancient Runes section. He was engrossed in the table of contents of *Into Next Week and Beyond: Incapacitating Your Opponent* when he heard a peculiar sound. He lowered the book and strained his hearing. It was a tiny sound, brief and muffled, and as seconds passed in silence, he wondered whether he had imagined it altogether.

Just when he was about to shrug and go back to leafing through his book, he heard it again: a sob followed by a whimper, before it was abruptly cut off. Was somebody crying? He couldn’t distinguish whether it was a male or a female voice, but it was definitely a person, and it sounded like they were crying. He closed the book and held it loosely in his hands, feeling torn. If there was somebody weeping alone in the library, he wanted to help them. However, the person was clearly trying to keep quiet so that nobody would come looking. What right did he have to butt in on a stranger’s moment of weakness? His help probably wouldn’t be welcome. He’d probably only serve to embarrass both them and himself.

But what if they really needed help? What if someone hearing and coming to look was just what they needed? What if that was what they really wanted? After all, they chose to cry in a library, where there were people, instead of in their dormitory or a loo.

Mind made up, Harry tucked the book under his arm and quietly made his way towards where he thought he had heard the noise. As he rounded a corner, he heard it again, and it sounded closer. Now he could tell the person was a witch. It made him uneasy to imagine the sorts of things a girl might be crying about in public, but nonetheless, he kept looking. Just behind this bookcase…

He turned the last corner and stopped dead in his track. For a few eternal seconds, all he could do was stare, rooted to the spot. There was no escaping the sight – his traitorous eyes took in every last detail of the scene before him. *I’m too young for this,* was the first clear thought that breached the shock and horror. It was then that he blindly yanked *Into Next Week* from his armpit and lifted it up.
to cover his burning face. Shielding his eyes like this, he stumbled backwards and twisted around, intent on fleeing as far as his feet could take him. Unfortunately, with the book squashed into his face, he didn’t get far before running bodily into a bookshelf. He heard a crack from the vicinity of his nose, and a surge of pain followed, forcing a muffled moan from his throat. He was tilting his head back and holding his sleeve against his nostrils when he heard hurried footsteps from behind him.

“Potter!” a voice exclaimed.

Harry stood frozen for a moment, mentally cursing himself and his twice damned saving people thing. Then he finally looked around, affecting a cheerful air. “Avery, hi! I didn’t see you there!”

It was hardly a convincing performance, and Avery was far from fooled, judging by the look of mixed fury and horror on his face. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“Nothing. I mean, research! For Defence.” He presented Into Next Week as proof. It now had a fresh bloodstain on its cover.

“You were spying!” Avery accused, jabbing his finger at Harry. “You were spying on us, you son of a hag!”

“I was not!” Harry exclaimed indignantly, though nasally, lowering his hand and immediately regretting it. He swore under his breath and cast a quick Episkey on his nose. “I heard noise and thought something was wrong. She sounded like she was crying!”

“She did not! Besides, don’t you know that if you hear strange noises in a castle full of teenagers, you should never investigate?”

“Excuse me, but I’m not the one who was… doing things in a public place for all to see!”

“Ichabod?” a quiet voice cut in timidly, and a girl with curled brown hair in slight disarray (thought she had clearly tried to pat it down) appeared next to Avery. “I have to go to the common room now.” Her eyes met Harry’s for the briefest of seconds, before she looked away with a red face. She was gone before Harry could do more than stare dumbly.

When her footsteps had faded away, Harry finally found his ability to speak. “Was that Dorcas Meadowes?” he hissed incredulously, pointing a thumb the way she had gone. Her face had been turned away from him when he had walked in on the couple.

“So, she’s a Gryffindor. So what?” Avery said defiantly, then rather contradictorily, “You can’t tell anyone. I mean it – I’ll rip your tongue out if you say a word to anyone, and I’ll do it slowly.”

Harry was sure that he knew how to do that, but he rather doubted that he actually would. However, it wasn’t the girl’s sorting that had his eyebrows in his hairline, but the fact that Dorcas Meadowes would be part of the original Order of the Phoenix. Mad-Eye Moody had once shown Harry a photo of the group and pointed out all the members who had met sticky ends in the first war. Harry couldn’t remember exactly what had happened to Meadowes, but he clearly remembered her name being mentioned. What was she doing fooling around with one of Tom Riddle’s notorious henchmen?

“I can’t believe I have to tell you this, but if you want to keep your girlfriend a secret, you shouldn’t put your hand down her knickers in the middle of the library. You’re lucky it was just me who saw and not someone who would print out fliers first thing.”

Avery’s face flared red, but he kept his stance stubbornly. “Usually the Ancient Runes section is
safe."

“Usually? So you get up to this sort of thing often?”

“Hey, you have no right to moralise me about this. I bet you and Riddle go at it all the time.”

Harry gaped at him. “There is no comparison! If we ever get up to anything – not that we do – we do it behind closed doors. We’ve never so much as held hands in public!”

“Oh, yeah? What’s this I hear about you two snogging in Potions this morning? In the middle of class, have you no shame?”

“That’s not what happened! It was hardly even a peck! Besides, that was all Tom and I had nothing to do with it.” Harry shook his head to clear it. “And that’s really not the point. Look, I’m not going to tell anyone. Just, please find yourselves a room, because the next poor bastard who happens by might not be so kind."

For a moment, Avery looked like he was still going to argue, but eventually he deflated. “You think we haven’t tried? We’ve looked, but the caretaker has all the unused classrooms firmly locked.”

“What about a nice broom cupboard? I hear they’re classic hiding spots for horny teenagers.”

Avery snorted. “Like I’d take Dorcas to a cramped place filled with dirty mops and mouldy buckets and what-have-you.”

“Fair enough,” said Harry after a pause, though privately he thought that Avery was being rather picky. “Then what about those study rooms over there in the back?” he suggested, indicating with his hand.

“They all have portraits on the walls and I don’t want them peeping.”

“Hidden passages?”

“I don’t know any good ones.”

“There’s plenty of room in the dungeons, and nobody ever goes there.”

“Neither does Dorcas. She says they give her a weird feeling.”

“Then I don’t know. Just keep doing what you were doing before. Don’t ever use the Divination section, though – I have to go there sometimes. Let’s agree that this never happened and forget I saw anything.” He turned to leave, but Avery grabbed hold of his sleeve.

“Wait! You owe me a favour!”

Harry looked at him, and seeing the gleam in the boy’s eyes, felt a ball of dread settle in his stomach. “Oh, no. You just helped me with some homework, remember? That’s wasn’t really worth a favour, you said so yourself!”

“But you insisted, so this is what you get.”

“Come on, just let me go. I swear I won’t tell anyone. I won’t even think about it.”

“No. It’s my right to call you up on the favour whenever I please, and I please to do so now. My favour is three-fold.”
“No, no, no,” Harry cut in. “One favour. I only owe you one favour.”

“Exactly – one three-fold favour.”

“That’s not fair!”

“It is, and will you shut up and listen. Firstly,” Avery shoved a finger in Harry’s face, “you need to find a decently-sized room with rudimentary comforts and secured privacy for myself and Dorcas. Secondly,” he lifted another finger to join the first one and raised his voice to drown out Harry’s protests, “you must provide an alibi for my absences when the others ask for my whereabouts. This includes distracting them if they decide to come looking for me.”

“This is ridiculous,” Harry said.

“Thirdly, on Valentine’s Day I want you to get all the others out of the common room and keep them out while I sneak her into the dorms.”

“Exactly how long are you planning to keep me leashed up like this? I don’t deserve this.”

“Exactly as long as it takes.”

“As long as it takes to what? You’re mad. Why is it such a big secret, anyway? You have a girlfriend, that’s great! So what if she’s in Gryffindor? It’s just a house.”

Avery looked at him like he was the mad one. “Ravenclaw is just a house. Even Hufflepuff is just a house. But Gryffindor is Gryffindor. They’re off-limits.”

“If they’re off-limits, then why are you with her?”

“Because,” Avery said and faltered, his eyes flickering to the side before returning to Harry’s face, composed and challenging. “Because she’s hot and I’d be stupid not to take what’s offered freely.”

It was such a big, fat lie that even Harry found it obvious. He stared at Avery steadily until the boy’s resolve seemed to crumble before his eyes. “You really like her, don’t you?”

“Of course I don’t.”

Harry sighed, running his hand over his face, idly scratching a bit of dried blood off his upper lip. “You know, if you had just told me and asked nicely, I would have been glad to help you. You didn’t have to blackmail me.” Avery opened his mouth to say something, but Harry cut him off before he could make a sound, “Don’t get me wrong – after all that, I’m not doing anything for you out of the goodness of my heart. But, I accept your terms, as long as you consider the debt filled. I want a clear time-limit, though.”

Avery was quiet for a moment. “A month,” he finally said, sounding rather less bold than he had before, “until the end of February.”

“That’s a bit more than a month, but okay,” Harry said with a shrug and a smile.

“Good. I’ll hold you to that, so you’d better start looking for that room. Remember – no cupboards!”
There was no way Harry was going to tell Avery about the Room of Requirement.

That is what he kept telling himself, as he wandered around the castle. If he was honest, he wasn’t even looking for a good place for a pair of lovers to meet in secret.

The Room was his secret – an ace up his sleeve that he might need some day – and he didn’t want to divulge its existence, let alone its location, to anyone, even his friends. He knew very well the sort of things his friends would get up to in the Room of Requirement if they knew about it, and that didn’t sit well with him. To him, the Room would always be Dumbledore’s Army’s headquarters, and DA would never stand for Dark Arts.

It was a promise easier made than kept, because Hogwarts, for being a sprawling castle of ludicrous proportions, had surprisingly few rooms that fit all of Avery’s criteria. Harry had been wrong in thinking that this would be an easy task. Unlike Filch in his time, the current caretaker was an actual wizard, and one that seemed to specialise in locking charms. He had every potentially useful room carefully sealed shut, and Harry was sure only a professional or a very determined Ravenclaw might be able to break through the charms. Of course, there were plenty of private little nooks if one just bothered to look for them, but Avery’s demand for ‘rudimentary comforts’, which Harry gathered meant some sort of flat surfaces and room to manoeuvre, ruled out most alcoves and hidden passages.

He was careful not to think too deeply on the uses Avery would have for his rudimentary comforts. The image from the library was still tragically engraved into his mind and there was no need to supplement it with his imagination.

“Mr Potter, how nice to see you.”

Harry almost startled but was able to abort the reaction. Instead he looked up from the doorknob he had been contemplating to face Professor Dumbledore with his best nonchalance. “Hello, Professor. How are you?”

“I’m splendid, thank you for asking. Whatever are you doing alone in this part of the castle? Surely your leisure would be better spent with your friends in the Slytherin common room.”

They were in the southern part of the sixth floor, hardly a suspicious place to be. “I’m just looking for the lavatory,” he said innocently. “All these twists and turns get so confusing sometimes.”

Dumbledore peered shrewdly at him and Harry remembered to avert his gaze to the man’s hat. He didn’t think that Dumbledore would use Legilimency on a student, but a Slytherin could never be too careful.

“The nearest men’s room is that way,” said Dumbledore, pointing over Harry’s shoulder. “Turn right over there and then take the second left. There should be a sign. Now run along.”

“Thank you. Have a nice day, sir.”

Harry turned around and obediently headed for the loo. He could feel the professor’s eyes on his
back until he turned a corner and disappeared from his sight. He rolled his eyes. Maybe it was a little weird for him to skulk around the castle in his lonesome, but he bet that if he had been a Hufflepuff, Dumbledore would have just let him skulk. He took the second left and stopped in front of the boys’ lavatory. He looked back towards where he’d come from, listening. He couldn’t hear any footsteps, but just in case Dumbledore came after him to make sure he hadn’t been lying, he decided to go in.

He found Tom inside, furiously washing his hands at a sink with his back to Harry. Harry could see the angry scowl on his face through the mirror and he appeared to be muttering to himself under his breath. He clearly hadn’t heard Harry.

“Tom?” Harry said, and the boy whipped his head up to stare at him through the mirror, before turning off the tap and turning around to face him.

“Harry, hello,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

Harry looked at him strangely. “It’s a toilet. What do you think?”

“Oh. Of course.”

“No, actually I’m just hiding from Dumbledore. Are you okay?”

Tom’s shoulders slumped a little and he gave him a strained smile. “I’m alright,” he said, pulling a self-disposing paper towel out of a dispenser to dry his hands. “It’s nothing.”

“What are you doing in these parts, anyway?” Harry asked, stepping closer and leaning against a sink. “I thought you said you were going to study after dinner. I figured you’d be in the library.”

“I was passing through,” Tom said, tone indicating end of discussion.

“…Okay.”

There was a stretch of tense silence before Tom turned to Harry abruptly.

“Harry –” he began to say, but was cut off by the door opening again. They both looked up, and Harry wasn’t the least bit surprised to see Dumbledore poking his head in.

“Oh,” said the Professor, seeing the two of them standing close together. “I seem to be interrupting something. Carry on, boys – I’ll just use the urinals downstairs.” Then he was gone.

Harry buried his face in his hands, mortified to consider what Dumbledore thought he was interrupting. “Professors shouldn’t have such dirty minds,” he complained, voice muffled by his hands.

Tom wasn’t amused. Apparently forgetting that he had something to say to Harry, he turned away and stalked to the door in quick strides. Startled out of his embarrassment, Harry hurried after him.

“No,” Tom said, halting and looking up and down the corridor, scowl still in place. It looked like Dumbledore really had gone downstairs.

“What? ‘No, I’m not okay’ or ‘No, don’t leave me’?”

Tom crossed his arms and gave him an exasperated look. At least the scowl had softened. “I’m fine.
You don’t have to go.”

“Okay,” Harry said. They stood there for a moment, and when Tom didn’t say anything else, he continued, “Do you want to tell me what’s up, or should we go back in there and do what Dumbledore already thinks we’re doing?”

Tom snorted. “You’re hilarious.”

“Who said I was joking?”

“Let’s just walk.”

They started off at a leisurely pace, Tom keeping his gaze resolutely ahead. Harry wondered what could have him in such a twist, but kept his silence, knowing that Tom would speak when he felt like it. After making a wandering tour of the sixth floor, Tom finally stopped at a window overlooking the courtyard, staring at the grounds pensively. Harry stood still next to him and waited.

“You weren’t raised by your parents,” Tom finally said. “You said you grew up with your relatives in a suburb.”

Harry looked at him, surprised. He had almost forgotten that Tom had figured out that much about him. His childhood hadn’t come up in conversation since that day in Hogsmeade. “Yeah. What about it?”

“You’re descended of a descent lineage, though. Did you ever feel deprived?”

Harry had been deprived of many things with his relatives, but this didn’t seem like the time for a long-winded rant. “Deprived of what, exactly?”

“Your rightful heritage.”

Frowning, Harry shifted his weight from foot to foot. He wasn’t sure if he liked where this was going. “Just to be clear, what do you mean by ‘rightful heritage’? Gold or some vague notion of pureblood aristocracy? Or something else?”

“I guess that would be the pureblood aristocracy.”

“T’ve never considered myself particularly special or better than other people. I don’t like being treated differently from everyone else.”

Tom was quiet for a long time, leaning against the window frame and staring out. “I always knew I was special,” he finally said. “I grew up in a Muggle orphanage, and I always knew that I was different from all the other children, and even the adults. They were beneath me – still are, because I have to keep going back.”

Harry turned his head to look at him with a sense of wonder. Tom Riddle wasn’t known for sharing specifics about his tortured past. Fearing that any sudden movements or sounds would scare Tom into clamming up again, he said nothing and just let him talk.

“Of course, that was just because I’m a wizard. I didn’t know what it was called as a child, but I was able to use magic before I got my wand. When I found out the truth, I knew that I couldn’t be Muggle-born. The first thing I did after coming to Hogwarts was look into my family history to find out where I came from. It wasn’t easy, because I didn’t have much to go by, but I found out that my mother was a witch – a pureblood of a most ancient ancestry, though her family had fallen out of grace. My father, though, is a Muggle.
“But you know this already. You told me as much when we first met.”

“Uh, yeah.” Harry wondered where Tom was going with this.

“Last summer I went to the Muggle archives in London and looked up my father. I’m named after him, you know. It turns out that he is minor nobility, very wealthy. He lives in a big manor house with his parents. And yet, he abandoned his pregnant wife in London, alone on the streets, with no money or means to support herself. Yes, he had married my mother – it was no quick affair or accident. He had plenty enough wealth to provide for all of us and he had already committed to do so, but out of sheer cowardice and cruelty, he left us to die. It must have been luck, or perhaps her sheer force of will that allowed my mother to live long enough to give birth to me.

“I hate him,” Tom said quietly, with such intense conviction that Harry had no trouble believing him. If what he was saying was true, Harry could sympathise. “For what he did, I hate him more than I have ever hated anyone.”

With nothing to say, Harry could only cover Tom’s hand with his own on the window sill in a show of support. Many things about Voldemort were starting to make sense now. To Harry, abandoning one’s own child was one of the worst things that a person could do. It was unforgiveable, unless there was truly no other choice. Harry could hardly be called fortunate in the matters of family, but at least he knew that both of his parents had loved him and he could be proud of them.

“It’s not that I want a family,” Tom continued, possibly misinterpreting the comforting hand. “I’ve managed quite fine without one all my life. But knowing that I could have had better makes me so angry. If only my father weren’t such a heartless, snivelling coward, I could have had a better life. Maybe I would have still grown up Muggle, but at least I would have been wealthy and loved.”

“Sounds to me like you’re better off without him,” Harry ventured. “Someone who’s ready to turn his back on his pregnant wife probably doesn’t have a caring bone in his body.”

Tom’s shoulders sagged. “I guess you’re right,” he conceded. “Though, it’s still incredibly unfair that my mother was a pureblood and my father nobility, and yet I was left with nothing but my magic – no heritage, nor any hope for some kind of inheritance. It shouldn’t be like this.”

“No, it shouldn’t,” Harry said. Pity twisted in his chest, but he tried not to show it, knowing that Tom wanted none of it. “But at least you have your magic,” he continued, “and that big brain of yours. If you put your mind to it, you could create your own legacy, and whatever children you may have would be proud to claim your name as their heritage. Not a lot of people have what it takes for that, you know.”

Tom turned to look at him with surprise, a pleased smile gracing his previously grim face. “You really know what to say.”

“Oh, well. I’ve been known to have great intuition and perceptiveness in the matters of the soul.”

Soon after, they returned to the dungeons, with a silent agreement that the discussion was finished and not to be referred to again. It was nearing curfew, so the common room was packed with Slytherins. Harry and Tom headed to the back where the rest of the gang had gathered around the fire, as per usual.

"Great, you're here, Potter," Rosier said when he saw them sit down. "Help me with my Defence homework." He sat curled up in an armchair, the quiz Professor Merrythought had assigned them spread over his knee.
Harry peered over and saw that he barely had anything written down. "Maybe you should give it a try on your own first."

"I was waiting for Avery to return from the library, but you got here first."

"What does that have to – ? Oh." Harry drummed his fingers against the armrest, frowning. "You're going to hate me for saying this, but Avery won't be able to take your O.W.L.s for you, and that will suck when you realise that you can't tell a jinx from a shrivelfig because you haven't done your own homework all year."

"You're right," Rosier said gravely. "That was entirely uncalled for and I'm deeply offended. Seriously, though – I'm completely pants at Defence."

"We all have weaknesses," Harry said with a shrug and pointedly turned away from him to address Lestrange. "Where's Mulciber?"

"Oh, he has detention. He called Leslie Turner a high-class lowlife in Charms."

Harry paused to consider this. "A high-class lowlife?"

"You know – cause his dad's a marquee or barrel or whatever those stupid Muggle titles are."

Tom developed a sudden, violent cough.

"Oh, well that makes sense," said Harry, rolling his eyes and extending his arm to steady Tom. "I bet, now that you've wounded him deeply, he'll run back to his fabulous mansion home and cry himself to sleep in his silk sheets. How will he face the world knowing that peerage means nothing?"

Rosier cackled behind his quiz and Lestrange glared at him. "Whose side are you on?"

"He's got a point, admit it," Rosier sniggered. "How many times have you managed to provoke that guy? He has an ego the size of this castle."

Lestrange grumbled under his breath before raising his voice over Tom’s persistent coughing.

"Anyway, it's Mulciber you should be making fun of – I just passed on the news."

At that moment the hidden entrance ground open and Avery came in, slouched and dragging his feet as though the satchel slung over his shoulder contained half the world's problems. He trudged over to the group sitting around the fireplace and stopped with a scowl when he saw that all the seats were taken. Without a word, he turned around and made a beeline for the nearest armchair.

"Budge," he said to the pig-tailed little girl sitting in the chair, who jumped up without further encouragement. Avery waved his wand and the chair lifted off the ground and made its way to the hearth. Dolohov obligingly moved his own armchair to the left to make room for the new addition.

"What's got your knickers in a bunch?" Lestrange asked, looking Avery up and down.

"I hate studying," Avery grumbled as he flopped down in his purloined chair. "I don’t ever want to pick up another book or quill in my life."

"You don’t mean that!" Rosier exclaimed, glancing worriedly down at his Defence quiz.

"Where's this coming from all of a sudden?" Dolohov asked.

Avery picked up a throw pillow and smothered it over his face while curling his legs up into a rebellious fort. "I don’t want to talk about it," he said, voice muffled by the pillow.
“It’s an early stage of O.W.L. sickness,” Lestrange said, nodding sagely. “Many succumb at this time of year. Symptoms range from constant jitters to violent rage and complete catatonia. When left untreated, it will ultimately lead to a parade of Trolls and a ‘try again’.”

“You didn’t even study for your O.W.L.s, so what do you know about it?”

“You just need a break, that’s all,” Dolohov said. “Just say to yourself: ‘today I will not overachieve’. It’s months until the exams, anyway.”

Avery lowered the pillow and glared moodily into the fire. Harry got the distinct feeling that it wasn’t the O.W.L.s that had him in a knot. He was frustrated and angry, and Harry could understand why – he may personally think that a house rivalry was a silly reason for so much melodrama and heartache, but most of Slytherin were serious about their enmity towards Gryffindor. Avery would take a hard blow to his reputation if his relationship with Dorcas Meadows came to light. Harry wasn’t even sure how supportive their closest friends would be of Avery’s choices. He could just imagine Dolohov and Lestrange clapping Avery on the shoulder, lewdly congratulating him on his impressive catch, but ultimately they would expect him to dump her once he had taken his fill.

In the end, it was an easy decision for Harry to make.

He heaved a sigh and rubbed the back of his neck in feigned fatigue. “You know what, guys? Astronomy tomorrow night. I think I’ll turn in early today.”

“You’re like an old woman, Potter,” Lestrange said. “Have sweet dreams of cinnamon buns and doilies and whatever it is that old women see in their sweet dreams.”

“If they’re anything like my Great Aunt Maude, it would be hard c–”

“Goodnight!” Harry exclaimed, shooting up from his seat before Rosier could finish his sentence. As he passed Avery’s chair, he clapped him on the shoulder, saying, “Cheer up, mate. Things will look better in the morning.”

Avery might have looked up at him suspiciously, but Harry didn't linger to make sure.

* * *

The next morning, Avery cornered him as he was coming out of the shower.

"What did you mean by that little show last night?” he demanded as Harry hurried to adjust his towel higher around his waist.

"You seem to have me at a disadvantage," Harry said dryly, squinting at him through his foggy lenses.

"Never mind that. Did you find something?"

"I know a place." He tried to clear his glasses by blowing up at them, but of course, that only made things worse. "It's perfect. I'll show you later, when I'm not naked."

"Okay," Avery said, looking mollified. "That's great. Today after dinner, maybe?"

"Yes, whatever. Can I go now?"

"Please, do."

* * *
"So, where are we going?"

They had just left the library, where they had told their friends they would be doing Herbology homework.

"Seventh floor."

"Well, that won't be a pain," Avery grumbled, no doubt imagining climbing all the way up from the dungeons every night to meet his lady love.

"Sometimes you have to make sacrifices," Harry shrugged. "Besides, I think in this case, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's no broom cupboard I'm taking you to."

When they reached the seventh floor, Harry made sure to point out all relevant landmarks on the way, ending with the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.

"What is he doing?" Avery said, aghast, as though seeing the tapestry for the first time. "What a complete imbecile."

"It's this way you want to look," Harry said, pointing at the empty stretch of wall facing Barnabas.

"What about it?" Avery asked, turning around and looking up and down at the wall.

"Behind it lies the Room of Requirement. It will grant you everything and anything you need. All you have to do is walk three times past that stretch of wall, thinking about what it is you desperately need, and a door will appear right there."

Avery stared at the wall for a long moment, before turning to Harry, nonplussed. "You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"Absolutely not. I've used it before for secret gatherings and stuff."

"Did you belong to a cult?"

Harry hid a snort. "It was more like a study group."

"Right. You're trying to make me look stupid. Well, it's not working."

"Please, just give it a try. Why would I try to make you look stupid? There's no-one here to witness. Except for Barmy, but he seems to be busy right now."

Barnabas had just been clobbered over the head and was lying spread-eagled on the ground, weakly clutching his temple.

Avery wavered, considering his point.

"Fine, I'll give it a try. I just walk past it three times?"

"And concentrate on what you need. Something simple will do, like 'I need a place for Dorcas and me.' The Room will pick up the rest on its own."

Avery dithered some more, before crossing his arms and, with one last suspicious glare at Harry,
determinedly fixed his eyes on the floor and started walking. After the third passing, a simple wooden door took form on the wall.

“See?” Harry said, and Avery looked up.

“It actually worked?” he muttered, but still didn’t look entirely convinced as he moved to grab the doorknob. He cracked the door open and peered inside before letting out a small laugh and pulling it wide. As he went inside, Harry took a few cautious steps closer and peeked past the doorframe, half expecting to see a huge bed and maybe even some strategically placed mirrors.

To his surprise, the Room did not even remotely resemble a bedroom. For one, there was no bed, though the cushy looking couch on one side would probably serve the same purpose. There were a couple of shelves with books, but not enough to distract a bibliophile, and an impressive fireplace with a fur rug and a pair of chairs placed close together facing it. The back wall opened into a large window with a view over the lake, and before it was a spindly table set for afternoon tea and cake.

Harry couldn’t help his snort of laughter.

“Who would have thought,” he teased. “All the things the Room could give you, and you just want to share a cuppa with your girl. That’s so sweet.”

“What’s it to you?” Avery said, smile turning into a frown again and shoulders hunching forward.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Actually I’m really glad you didn’t turn this place into a… Well,” he trailed off with an awkward shrug. “By the way, I assume that after this, I won’t have to smuggle your girlfriend into our dorm on Valentine’s Day. It really isn’t worth the risk when you have all you need right here.”

“Oh, Valentine’s Day is still up in the air. Why didn’t you tell me about this room in the first place, if you knew about it all along? You wasted a lot of my time.”

Harry frowned, amusement forgotten.

“I’m not obliged to tell you all my secrets, you know.” A little voice pled him to leave now before he lost his temper, but it was smothered under his frustration. Instead, he closed the door behind him, shutting them away from prying ears. “Look, I’m sorry I saw you that night. If I could somehow go back and not look, believe me, I would. But you know what? I have all this blackmail material on you, and no matter how many ‘you owe me’ s you pull on me, there’s nothing you can do to stop me from using it. I haven’t, because we’re friends, but I could have, so would it kill you to say ‘thanks’?”

For a long moment Avery looked like he was going to snap at him again, fists clenched at his sides and lips parted ready for an indignant retort, but eventually he shut his mouth and looked to the side without a word.

Harry stubbornly stood his ground and waited for him to say something, and was eventually rewarded. Avery shifted his weight tensely and said, “I guess I’ve been acting like a twat.”

“It’s just,” he continued and paused, at a loss for words. Apparently to distract himself, he wandered over to the tea set and slumped down to sit in one of the chairs. “You said it. You know the one thing about me that I don’t want anyone to know. And I don’t understand how you can be so cool about it. Anyone else would lord it over me.”

“Are you sure about that? You have a lot of friends,” Harry said, sitting down opposite him.
Avery snorted. “I’d do the same. Well,” he amended, “maybe if it were you, I might consider letting you off the hook. It’s like you’re from a completely different stock – it would be like kicking a kitten or something.”

“I resent that.”

“A mighty lion cub.”

“What are you implying?”

“Nothing. I’m just saying that it’s different with the others. We’re friends, but it’s not about trust and mushy things. Things like this are fair game.”

That was actually kind of sad. Harry guessed he was lucky nobody wanted to risk giving him a hard time about Tom. Well, aside from Marcus McKinnon. “They aren’t fair game to me.”

“I guess I should have realised that.”

An awkward silence followed, during which Avery fiddled with a butter knife on the table and neither of them would meet the other’s eyes.

“So,” Harry said when the moment finally became unbearable. “Now you know about this place. I should leave so you can bring Dorcas in here.” He got up and headed to the door.

“Wait,” Avery said before he could reach for the doorknob. “Thanks. It’s a great room.”

Harry smiled, remembering DA. “Yeah, it is.” He closed the door behind him as he left.

* * *

Later that night, when Avery was probably holed up in the Room with his girlfriend and the rest of the gang were playing cards in the common room, Harry and Tom were pretending to read up on their joint Defence Against the Dark Arts project, but were actually just taking the chance to lie around in their dorm with no one else around. Well, Tom looked like he was actually reading, but Harry had his mind on other things.

“Doesn’t it bother you that I was in Gryffindor before I came here?” he asked after a long stretch of studious silence. “You’re the only one who knows, aside from some of the professors.”

Tom let his book drop face down on his chest and looked over at him from where he was lying on his bed.

“Not really.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not a Gryffindor anymore.”

“But doesn’t it say something about me that I was sorted into Gryffindor before?”

“It says you’re brave, and I already knew that from the day we met. You said you weren’t afraid of me.”

“So you think if I told the others, they’d be alright with it?”

“I wouldn’t vouch for all of them. What brings this on?”
Harry shrugged noncommittally and kept staring at his textbook.

“Are you planning to tell them? I wouldn’t recommend it, but I’m sure they’ll get over it eventually.”

“No, I don’t plan on telling them.”

“…Okay.” Casting one last puzzled look at Harry, Tom flipped the book upright again and resumed reading.

Before Tom could turn a page, Harry broke the silence again.

“If I were still in Gryffindor, would you have ever paid me a second glance?” he asked teasingly.

“I doubt it,” Tom said dryly, looking at him over his book. His expression was unimpressed, but his tone showed his amusement. “Believe it or not, despite your dashing good looks and perpetual bedhead – alluring as they are – it wasn’t love at first sight for me. I had to get to know you first, and if you were a Gryffindor, I wouldn’t have any reason to do that.”

“But if for some reason you had got to know me, you *would* have paid me a second glance, despite being a Gryffindor?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “I don’t know. I suppose I would have. But if you were in Gryffindor, would you have let me anywhere near you in the first place?”

“Touché.”

“There you have it. We should both just be happy that we’re in the same house.”

“I guess. Hey, how did your sorting go? I mean, what did the Hat say to you? If it’s not too personal.”

Tom shrugged. “I don’t remember word for word. It’s been years.”

“Nobody remembers exactly,” Harry prompted.

“Well…”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“Hold on, I’m just trying to recall. Let’s see – the Hat said that I had a thirst to prove myself and that my ambition knew no bounds. It praised my intellect, but said that Ravenclaw wouldn’t be enough for me. What else? Oh, it said that I had potential to be great, but not only that, I had the means and determination to realise that potential.”

“That’s some soaring praise. Are you sure you aren’t leaving something out?”

“Why would I tell you if the Sorting Hat had unflattering things to say about my personality? I don’t want to undermine myself. Besides, it was almost five years ago. People change.”

“The Hat had nothing new to say about me when I was resorted,” Harry argued.

“There’s a remark I could make here, but I won’t, because I don’t want to injure your pride. Wait,” Tom narrowed his eyes at him. “You were resorted into a different house. How could the Hat have nothing new to say about you?”

“Ah, well,” Harry stuttered, hesitating, before berating himself for his reticence. He had never told
anyone about what the Hat had really said to him during his sorting, aside from Dumbledore, but Tom’s judgment of him was hardly going to get worse for knowing. “It did say I would do well in Slytherin to begin with. I asked not to be put there, because, you know.”

Tom looked surprised, but pleased. “So, you were never a real Gryffindor, after all?”

“I was a real Gryffindor,” said Harry defensively. “And I was proud of it. I never once regretted being sorted there.”

“I guess you would be proud, if you deliberately refused Slytherin. Didn’t you ever feel like you were lying to yourself?”

“No. Well, at first I felt a bit guilty, but then someone told me that it’s our choices that make us who we are. I chose Gryffindor – therefore, I was a Gryffindor.”

“Then why did you choose Slytherin this time?”

“I didn’t,” Harry said dryly. “The Hat played a trick on me. It confused me with all sorts of cryptic remarks and then announced its decision before I could get a word in edgewise.”

“Most people don’t get a say in their sorting at all, so maybe it was only fair that you didn’t get to choose twice.”

“Are you sure about that? The Hat seemed very accommodating the first time. Have others tried begging?”

“You begged? Slytherin must have done something really terrible to you.”

“Well, there was this one complete tosser who was sorted before me, and he went to Slytherin. I really didn’t want to share a dorm with him,” Harry said lightly.

“What did he do to you?”

“He thought he could dictate who I could be friends with. I don’t take kindly to that.”

“What a twit. What is the Gryffindor Tower like?”

“You don’t know? Are you telling me nobody has snuck in before?”

“I expect somebody has. I haven’t.”

“Well,” Harry said, considering his answer, “it was a bit different. Brighter. You know – red and gold, and we actually got sunshine sometimes. You could hear the rain, Merlin how I miss that. It was great falling asleep listening to the rainfall. Thunderstorms were really spectacular up there. The heating worked in winter. I never realised I should be glad about that at the time.”

“Would you rather still be there?”

Harry was silent for a moment, thinking about how things had changed – how he had resented his sorting in the beginning, and how he had felt like coming home, returning to the dungeons after Christmas. Then he thought of Ron and Hermione and how nothing could ever compare to sharing Hogwarts with them.

“I guess, maybe. No. I don’t know,” he said. “Obviously I never wanted go fifty years back in time. I was happy with my friends, and it still kind of hurts to think about them, knowing that I’ll never have them back. But I think I’ll get over them eventually. This isn’t a bad place to be. I have a lot of
good things here that I didn’t have back then.” He had a large group of friends and a family to return to between school terms, and he had Tom. Harry knew they weren’t equal trade for his best friends, the Weasleys, Sirius, and everyone else he had left behind – they were priceless – but he also knew that in losing one treasure, he had found another. There was no point in comparing the two.

“Well,” Tom said after a long, sombre silence, “the dungeons can hardly compete with sunshine and thunderstorms, but we do have a lovely view of the bottom of the lake.” This earned a smile from Harry. “And hopefully your friends in Slytherin will come to mean to you as much as the friends you had in Gryffindor.”

“Aren’t you including yourself in that?”

“Am I not your friend?”

“I suppose, if you want to be vague. The strange thing is how different the definition of friendship is in Slytherin than in Gryffindor.”

“What do you mean?”

Harry thought of Avery, who had to hide from his friends for fear of being judged.

“You can’t trust them as much. Some things just aren’t sacred.”

“I think that depends largely on who your friends are. Or did everyone in Gryffindor have your unconditional trust?”

“No,” Harry conceded. “But there are certain things you can expect from someone who calls himself your friend. I guess I meant that those expectations are different.”

“Humph. Now you’re the one being vague,” Tom said, but, as though sensing that the topic was sensitive, didn’t press for Harry to elaborate. “There are things that one just can’t trust with other people. You can’t expect others to understand everything that’s important to you, because the significance of things comes from a combination of happenstance that only you can know.

“So, if you’ve been thinking about coming clean about your Gryffindor past to our friends, then you can expect them to get used to the knowledge eventually, but you can’t expect them to understand how you manage to reconcile the two houses and still think of yourself as a ‘real Gryffindor’. Don’t expect them to forgive the fact that you once chose Gryffindor over Slytherin and yet here you are like none of that ever happened.”

Feeling strangely chastised, Harry shifted where he sat on his bed. “I said I wasn’t planning to tell them,” he grumbled.

Tom considered him at length before seeming to accept that he wasn’t lying. “Good,” he said. “I don’t want you facing any prejudice when you don’t need to.”

Harry supposed he was fortunate in that way – he didn’t need to face the prejudice. Avery was a different story, though, and he was only now beginning to realise how unfortunate the other boy’s predicament was. He may be adamant about hiding his girlfriend from the rest of Slytherin, but Harry couldn’t see how the relationship could last when it was based on so much secrecy. Avery really seemed to care for the girl, so he would have to make some kind of choice soon.
Valentine’s Day approached, and the Slytherin gang were all personally invited to a party in Professor Slughorn’s office. “I expect all of you to show up, and bring dates! Such handsome boys – it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Avery took the first chance to pull Harry aside. “You have to get me out of going. I have other plans, I can’t go,” he said with a hint of desperation.

“Just say you weren’t feeling well.”

“That won’t do. He’ll see right through it.”

“Then what do you expect me to do?”

“I’ll think of something. But you have to promise you’ll help me.”

“Sure, sure. As long as it’s nothing too outrageous, or dangerous.”

As soon as Harry had extricated himself from Avery, his arm was commandeered by Rosier. “You have to help me find a date,” he pleaded.

“Ask one of the girls,” Harry said, waving his hand at the group of girls gossiping in a corner of the common room. When Rosier looked over with a conflicted expression, Harry continued, “Why don’t you ask Ariadne?”

“She’s dating Urquhart.”

“What about Trudy?”

“I’d lose face. She’s a slut.”

“Well, Nancy’s nice.”

“No way in hell!”

Harry was taken aback by his vehemence. “Why not?” he asked. Nancy Higgs used to be Harry’s Divination partner. She seemed perfectly likeable to him, and she was pretty.

“I went with her to Slughorn’s beginning of the year party – that was before you arrived. It was all fine until she got her hands on the champagne. Then she was all over me.”

“Most guys would like that,” Harry pointed out.

“Trust me, they wouldn’t. I’ve never felt so violated in my life.”

Harry had been quite happy not knowing this about Nancy Higgs. “Alright, she’s out. That leaves Constance Warrington and that girl who never talks to anyone, in our year. I suppose they won’t do, either.”
“Yeah, Warrington’s chubby.”

“You’re really picky. What about the other year groups?”

“I can’t ask an older girl, they’ll laugh at me. And if I take a fourth year, she’ll be too young to drink.”

“You just said that Nancy became a groper after she drank.”

“Yeah, but if she can’t drink, then I can’t have any, either. Slughorn has the best punch.”

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying not to feel impatient. “Then just ask a girl from one of the other houses. I don’t see what you need me for.”

“I don’t know who to ask!”

“This can’t be the first time you’ve had to find a date for a party. What did you do before?”

“Went with Nancy. Potter, it’s only fifth years and above who get invited, because there’s booze. We can bring younger dates, but the kids don’t get invitations.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t know who you could ask, either. You know the other houses better than I do.”

“Goddammit, Potter, I’m a friend in need. Have a heart.”

“Fine. Let’s go to dinner and take a look around in the Great Hall.”

They joined Tom and Avery on the trip upstairs and met the sixth years at the Slytherin table.

“Did you hear about Slughorn’s Valentine’s Day party?” Rosier immediately asked them as they sat down.

“Yeah. Sounds lame,” Dolohov groused into his roast.

“He doesn’t have a date,” Lestrange explained.

“Neither does Mulciber,” Dolohov pointed out defensively.

“Who are you going with?” Harry asked Lestrange.

“Walburga,” Lestrange said promptly. “We have a contract.”

“A contract?”

“She has unwanted suitors. Sadly, most of them are kind of important to inter-family relations, so she can’t turn them down as rudely as she’d like. This way, she can say she already has a date.”

“You’re not interested in her, then?”

“Nah. I’ve known her since we were babies. She peed in my bed when we were five.”

Harry thought of Walburga Black’s mad, screaming portrait in Grimmauld Place and felt a bit gleeful with his new knowledge.

“Some of us aren’t lucky enough to have contracts with pretty girls. Now, who do I ask?” Rosier said, turning to scan the other tables. “Not Carmichael, that’s for sure.” He had been turned down by Ellis Carmichael from Hufflepuff before Christmas.
“You’re looking into non-Slytherins? What’s wrong with Constance Warrington?” Dolohov said wickedly.

“Why don’t you ask her if you’re so keen? It would work – you two are about the same size.”

“Oi! Don’t compare my brawn to her fat.”

“And where are you hiding all this brawn? Because I’ve yet to see any, and I see you change every day,” said Lestrange.

“You’ve watched very closely then, have you? Well, watch any closer and I’ll let you get up close and personal with my fist. Then you can tell me where I hide my brawn.”

“No fighting, please,” Tom said with a bored tone, not looking up from his stew. Lestrange and Dolohov sat back immediately, but not without sending scowls at each other.

“I still don’t have a date,” Rosier reminded them.

“I could tell my sister to ask around in Ravenclaw for you,” Mulciber offered.

“Maybe as a last resort. That’s bit pathetic, I think.”

“Damn right it is,” Lestrange said. “What’s the big deal? Just pick a girl and ask her to the party. It’s not like you’ll have to marry her.”

“You’ve never had to ask a girl, so shut up!”

“Alright,” Harry interjected, trying to keep the situation from escalating, “let’s give this some thought. You’ll have to act soon, because you can’t expect the pretty ones to stay available to the last minute.”

He had learned that much from the embarrassing events leading up to the equally embarrassing Yule Ball. “It’s best if you make a schedule – something like, ‘by tomorrow night, I’ll have a date to the party’.”

“I know that. I still don’t know who I should ask.”

“It’s easier if you ask someone you don’t have any feelings for,” Mulciber said.

“That’s true,” Harry agreed, thinking about how he had made a fool of himself in front of Cho, and how easy it had been to walk up to Parvati.

“That doesn’t really narrow down my options.”

“Well, if you don’t care who you go with, then just ask someone who’s not likely to get competing offers,” Lestrange butted in again. “Warrington is looking better and better.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Mulciber said. “Ask a nice girl, someone who probably won’t say no if you appear sincere. Let’s see.” He craned his neck to peer at the Hufflepuff table. “I’d say go for either Euphie Selwynn or Maggie Liesl.”

“You sound strangely familiar with younger Hufflepuff girls,” Harry said.

“He used to date Persephone Smith,” Dolohov explained, sounding slightly envious.

“Anyway, neither of them is in the Slug Club, so I bet they’d love to be asked.”
“Alright. This is great. I have a target. Liesl is cute, so I think I’ll ask her.” Rosier stared determinedly at the girl in question, before visibly cowering in his seat. “I’ll ask her tomorrow.”

Harry clapped him on the shoulder reassuringly. “Just don’t put it off for too long and you’ll be fine. It doesn’t matter if you embarrass yourself a little.”

“Yeah, she’ll probably find it endearing,” Mulciber said.

* * *

Two days later Rosier still hadn’t asked Maggie Liesl to the party. He had an excellent opportunity to do so during break before Herbology as the mixed Slytherin and Hufflepuff class loitered in the Entrance hall before having to go outside.

“Maybe I should go with Nancy again,” he said, eyeing the Hufflepuffs nervously. “I’ll just have to make sure she doesn’t get drunk.”

“No, you shouldn’t. Look, there’s Maggie Liesl now. Go ask her,” Harry said, pointing at the girl who had moved slightly away from the group to look for something in her school bag.

“But I don’t want to,” Rosier whined. “All these people would be watching.”

“Tell her that you want to talk to her in private. You can go into that corridor and ask her there.”

“Won’t she think that’s creepy?”

“Of course not. Her friends will probably know what you’re up to, but at least they won’t be staring at you.”

“I don’t know…” Rosier hedged before shaking his head and turning his back on the Hufflepuffs. “No. If she says no then everyone will know. I’ll ask when she’s alone.”

“We don’t know if she will be.”

“Still. I’m not doing it now.”

“Fine,” Harry sighed. “Let’s go to class, then.”

The bell would ring in a few minutes, so they tucked their cloaks closer around them and ventured out into the cold.

At lunch, Harry dragged Rosier out of his seat when Maggie Liesl got up to leave the Great Hall, but he managed to dig his heels in until they lost sight of her. “I thought you wanted my help,” Harry said as they returned to the Slytherin table to finish their lunch.

“You aren’t helping by pushing me,” Rosier said crossly, sitting down and huffing at the plate that had cleared itself while he had been gone.

“Did you want me to go ask her for you, then? I could do that, but I figured you don’t want to look pathetic.”

“I bet you wouldn’t be so smug if you didn’t automatically have a date.”
“Whoever told you that he automatically has a date?” Tom interjected casually.

Harry’s insides went cold, until he caught the teasing glint in Tom’s eyes. “…I don’t?”

“Surely you realise that you must ask?” Tom said.

Well, two could play this game. Harry plastered a sickly sweet smile on his face and batted his eyelashes at Tom. “Oh, Tom Riddle, my heart, will you be my Valentine this year and escort me to the party?”

The burst of laughter from the Slytherins garnered guarded looks from the other tables.

“Looks like the joke’s on you, no offence, Riddle,” Dolohov chortled.

“I feel tempted to decline,” Tom deadpanned.

“Is that a yes then?” Harry asked innocently.

“I wouldn’t let you go with anyone else.”

“So, there’s less than a week left until the party and three of us have found dates,” Dolohov said once the laughter died down. “Although I’d say all of you cheated, but whatever. What’s your situation, Mulciber?”

“I’m taking Kendra. Didn’t I tell you?” Kendra Goyle was another sixth year Slytherin. “I asked her earlier when you went to the loo.”

Dolohov swore.

“What about you, Avery?” Rosier asked over his profanity.

“I’ll find someone,” Avery said mildly.

Harry was fascinated to watch how easily everyone who had looked up with interest was willing to give up questioning him, merely offering shrugs and wishes of good luck. Harry had to admire Avery’s skill at deflecting attention away from him.

After classes finished the next day, when there was a lull before dinner, Avery pulled Harry into their dormitory when nobody was looking. “I’ve figured out how to skip Slughorn’s party,” he said after locking the door with a spell.

“Great. Let’s hear it then.”

“I’m going to drink poison.”

Harry stared at him. “Isn’t that a bit extreme?”

“No, hear me out,” Avery said, going to his trunk and rummaging inside. He pulled two books from under a haphazard pile of black Hogwarts robes. “I need to make it look like I got sick, but it has to be just right. It can’t be a common cold, because I would have noticed that early and you can cure it in minutes with a Pepperup Potion. It also can’t be anything too outrageous, or it’ll be obvious that it was self-inflicted. So, it follows that I must mimic a relatively common illness that comes upon the patient suddenly and requires overnight treatment. I’ve chosen the draconic influenza.”

“What’s that?”
“Dragon flu.” He handed one of the books to Harry, opened on the right page. Harry took the book and glanced at the cover, seeing that it was an encyclopaedia of magical maladies. “Symptoms include high fever, delusions, localised muscular inertia, and coughing scorching air. The incubation period can range from three to seven days, at the end of which the symptoms often appear entirely unexpectedly and all at once.”

“Don’t influenzas usually come in epidemics? I haven’t heard of anyone who’s been sick.”

“Ah, but we did just have a Hogsmeade weekend. I could have caught it from one of the villagers.”

“Fair enough. So you’re going to drink poison to fake the symptoms?”

“That’s right. There isn’t any single potion that has all the right effects, but I found two separate potions that, when combined, should serve the purpose.” He hefted the second book in his arms and flipped through the pages. “The first one will cause my body temperature to spike and also induces hallucinations. The second will take care of the scorching breath. I think I can fake the cough, and the localised inertia, if I have to.”

“Okay. You’ll have an antidote ready, right? I’m assuming you don’t want to actually go to the infirmary.”

“Of course I’ll prepare an antidote. You’ll be in charge of administering it.”

“Oh. So, after you’ve drunk your poisons and get sick, I’ll pretend to take you to the infirmary, but actually I’ll just take you somewhere else and give you the antidote?”

“That’s right. I also have an old note from Madame Bobbin, from when I had a cold last month and had to be late for Charms. I always make copies of those, just in case. I’ll just make a few tweaks to the note and you can give it to Slughorn at the party as proof that I really am sick.”

“Okay. How can you know that nobody will insist on coming with us to the infirmary?”

“You’ll have to make sure that they don’t.”

Well, that was encouraging. “What if Slughorn and Madame Bobbin have a chat and he asks her about you?”

“I doubt that will happen. Madame Bobbin practically lives in the hospital wing. She doesn’t even eat in the Great Hall. And I heard she brews most of her own potions. She’s from a family of potioneers.”

“Okay. It looks like you have everything covered,” Harry said after a moment of thought, scanning the open entry on the encyclopaedia. “You’ll still need a date, you know – even if you won’t actually take her to the party.

Avery sighed. “I know. I guess I’ll pretend to leave it to the last minute and then ask Trudy Gamp. Nobody wants to take her because she isn’t respectable enough.”

Just then, the doorknob rattled, followed by a confused silence before somebody knocked on the door.

“Why is this door locked?” Rosier’s voice drifted in, muffled by thick wood

Harry and Avery shared a wide-eyed look before Avery hurried to hide the books in his trunk again and Harry went to unlock the door.
“Sorry,” he told Rosier as he opened the door. “We didn’t realise it was locked. It must have slipped somehow.”

“What were you two doing in here?” Rosier asked suspiciously, looking between Harry and Avery.

“Heavy petting,” Avery deadpanned, straightening up next to his trunk, his Herbology textbook clutched in his hand. “Please, don’t tell Riddle, or he’ll be devastated.”

Rosier snorted and seemed to shrug off the oddity. “Come on, let’s go to dinner.”

The three of them headed out of the Slytherin dungeons. Tom had excused himself earlier to study in the library and would probably wander into the Great Hall sometime well into the dinner service. When they reached the Entrance Hall, they spotted a chattering group of Hufflepuffs emerging from the passage leading to their own underground lodgings, Maggie Liesl among them. Harry nudged Rosier in the side insistently. “Go on. Three days until Valentine’s Day!”

Rosier took a step back in alarm, but Harry wouldn’t let him cower. “What are you afraid of? I thought you didn’t like her.”

“I don’t. I just don’t want her to say no.”

“Well, she will for sure if you wait any longer.”

Rosier looked like he was about to argue again, but then he seemed to slump down before clenching his fist determinedly. “You’re right. I should get this over with.” And, with a last wavering hesitation, he took off towards the gaggle of Hufflepuffs at a light jog and managed to reach his target before she could enter the Great Hall.

Harry and Avery watched raptly from afar as Rosier caught Maggie Liesl’s arm, prompting her to stop and look at him. Harry couldn’t hear what he said to her, but he could tell from his tense frame and the way he waved his arms around awkwardly that he was probably stuttering with nerves. The two of them moved to the side of the doorway while Maggie gestured for her friends to go on without her.

A long minute passed during which Rosier and the girl talked. Maggie’s face was obscured by Rosier’s back, so Harry struggled to discern what was being said. Finally, she took Rosier’s hand in both of hers for a brief squeeze before turning around and sweeping into the Great Hall. Rosier stood in place for a few beats before rousing himself enough to return to his friends.

“How did it go?” Harry asked him immediately.

“She’s already going with someone,” Rosier said, though he had a strangely cheerful grin on his face.

“You’re taking it rather well,” Harry said slowly, observing him carefully.

“She said she’s free on the next Hogsmeade weekend.”

“That’s great! But, we’re not going to Hogsmeade again for another month.”

“In the meantime, she’ll let me help her with her Divination homework.”

“You don’t take Divination.”

“Exactly.” He looked even more pleased now. When both Harry and Avery whooped and clapped
him on the back, his grin became sheepish and his cheeks turned pink.

“I thought you didn’t like her,” Harry said again as they continued their way into the Hall, his tone teasing this time.

“I don’t,” Rosier maintained stubbornly.

* * *

Valentine’s Day was on a Sunday this year. Normally, a Hogsmeade weekend would have been scheduled to coincide with the holiday as a treat for the students, but Professor Slughorn had talked the Headmaster out of doing so, in order to guarantee attendance at his soiree.

On Sunday morning, certain Slytherins still hadn’t found dates.

Rosier, as it happened, had already admitted defeat and asked Nancy Higgs to accompany him again. “Just as friends, understand,” Harry had heard him stress to her. "I've got a girlfriend now, sort of, so we'll be going as friends."

Dolohov, on the other hand, was still looking. He had been turned down by two girls over the past couple of days and was feeling quite despondent. They were counting hours until the party when he became desperate enough to ask Constance Warrington – a notion at which he had scoffed only a few days earlier. Constance slapped him for leaving her with so little time to prepare, but agreed to go with him anyway.

The gang politely held their sniggers until she had disappeared into the girls’ dorms to get ready, but Dolohov wasn’t spared from their needling.

“You’ll make a handsome couple,” Lestrange said, grinning.

“Oh, shut it,” Dolohov grumbled. “At least I won’t have to turn up alone. That would be even more embarrassing.”

“You’re being a little too hard on Constance,” Harry said, feeling bad for the girl. He didn’t think she was that ugly. Then again, anyone would look slim compared to Dudley.

At that moment, the entrance to the common room ground open and Avery wandered in, his nose in a book.

“Where’ve you been, Avery?” Rosier said. “Slughorn’s bash starts in three hours.”

“It’s today?” Avery said, looking up from his book and blinking owlishly.

“Yes, it’s today. It’s Valentine’s Day!”

Avery swore under his breath, looking convincingly contrived. “I completely forgot about it.”

“How could you forget? What, don’t you have a date yet?”

“No.”

There was an immediate outcry.
“How could you forget?”

“Even Dolohov has a date by now!” (“Oi!”)

“Who do you think you’ll find at this point?”

“Never thought I’d see you of all people flying solo.”

“Guys, guys, calm down!” Avery raised his voice. “Morgana’s knickers! Give it a break.” He turned to face the common room at large. “Who wants to go to the party with me?” he shouted, spreading his arms.

Most of the Slytherins looked up curiously before turning away again, some tutting, some shrugging apologetically, and many of the younger girls looking somewhat intimidated. However, one hand rose into the air.

“I'll go!” said Trudy Gamp with a wink.

“Thank you,” Avery said, inclining his head. He turned back to the gang, who were staring at him with mixed expressions. “There you have it.”

Harry mentally applauded him for the performance.

Two hours later, they all moved to their respective dorms to get ready for the party. Harry touched the small phial of antidote in his pocket, nervously wondering when Avery would get a chance to drink his potions, and whether he, Harry, would be able to complete his part of the plan.

Avery was in the conjoined bathroom, supposedly combing his hair, when Harry heard the telltale stumbling. The others had hardly noticed anything yet, which was just as well. Harry went to the half-closed door and knocked without looking inside. "Are you alright in there, Avery?"

Violent coughing was his response. Harry pushed the door open and went inside.

"What's going on?" Rosier asked behind him, but Harry ignored him.

Avery was leaning heavily on a tiled wall, bent over and coughing into a towel that already looked singed. Smoke came out of his nostrils and his skin was red. The sight alarmed Harry more than he could have expected – he had known that by taking the potions, the symptoms would be real even if the sickness was not, but still he had somehow stupidly expected the escape to be a matter of playacting. He didn't have to feign concern as he rushed to Avery's side.

"You're burning up," Harry said, trying his forehead and finding it too hot for his liking. Avery coughed miserably and little flames sprang up from the towel pressed to his face. Harry grabbed it from him hurriedly and tossed it in the sink, switching the tap on to douse it with water. Then he conjured a glass and filled it from the running tap. "Drink this, maybe it'll help. I have to get you to the infirmary."

By this time, both Rosier and Tom were peering into the bathroom from the open door. Rosier had his hand over his mouth in shock and even Tom wore a troubled frown.

"Avery's sick. I'm taking him to the hospital wing," Harry said to them.

"I'll help," Rosier said immediately.

"No, I'll manage. You shouldn't leave Nancy waiting."
"But –"

"We'll be fine," Harry said, hopefully not too emphatically. "You stay here and get ready for the party. Tom, if I'm not back in time, you can go up without me."

"No, I'll wait for you," Tom said, expression schooled. Harry hoped that he hadn't guessed what was going on.

Harry turned off the tap and wrung the now soaked towel until it no longer dripped, before handing it back to Avery. "It won't catch fire now. Can you walk?"

With Harry supporting Avery, they managed to limp out of the dorms and through the common room, where they garnered some worried exclamations. Thankfully, nobody insisted on accompanying them, and those who offered backed down on Harry's assurances.

It was slow going, because Avery tended to veer off in strange directions, clearly hallucinating things that he wanted to have a closer look at, and Harry had his hands full keeping them on course. Avery's skin was burning even through his clothes, and his breathing was so laboured Harry worried that they wouldn't reach their destination. Once, Avery managed to set Harry's sleeve on fire, at which point there was a lot of flailing until Harry calmed down long enough to cast Aguamenti.

They had agreed earlier that venturing further than the dungeons was unnecessary for their charade, so once they had left Slytherin territory behind and Harry had made sure that nobody was following them, they ducked into an unused storage room on the level below the Entrance Hall.

To Harry's surprise, Dorcas Meadows was there waiting for them. She stood up from the crate she had been sitting on when Harry and Avery shuffled into the room.

"Here, let me help," she said, and together they helped her boyfriend sit down on the same crate, leaning back against the wall behind him.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here," Harry said to her.

"Ichabod told me about the plan only this morning. I said I wanted to help. I feel bad enough already, for all that he has to go through because of me. Do you have the antidote?"

"Yes, of course." Harry pulled the phial out of his pocket and removed the stopper.

"Let me," Dorcas said and took the bottle from him, careful not to spill the contents. Harry watched as she gently tilted Avery's head back and urged him to drink the antidote. She had a lovely face, if a little plain, and she wore very little makeup. Her shoulder length hair was curled in the fashion that many young women favoured in these days.

"How did you two meet?" Harry asked to break the awkward silence as they waited for the antidote to take effect. Avery sat between them, slumped against the wall with his eyes moving rapidly under closed eyelids. His breathing was shallow and he was twitching intermittently even as the redness of his skin faded little by little.

"We both take Ancient Runes," Dorcas said, drawing her knees up where she sat on the floor. "It's a small group, so the professor paired us together for a translation project."

"How did that go?"

"Not well, at first. But once we got to know each other, it didn't matter where we came from, anymore."
The awkward silence returned. "Avery seems to care about you a lot," Harry said after a while.

"I know. I care about him, too. Harry, isn't it?"

"That's me."

"Thank you, for being so understanding. I'm really sorry about what happened in the library, but you've been really decent about all of this."

"Well," Harry said, feeling awkward. "I wouldn't be a very good friend if I went shouting from rooftops, would I?"

"Even so, thank you. Ichabod has told me about how things usually work in Slytherin. Most of my friends would give me a hard time, too, if they found out."

"Do you reckon you'll be able to keep it a secret, though?"

Dorcas shrugged, looking down. "We'll have to try. As long as we can, we'll try. I guess it'll either end or become public at some point, but we'll deal with that when it happens."

They sat in silence for a long time, watching as Avery's eye movement slowed down and his breathing became less laboured. Still, he was too exhausted to lift his head yet.

"You're the one who told Ichabod about that room, weren't you?" Dorcas said suddenly, with a smile that made her eyes twinkle. "Thanks for that. It's a treasure. I had no idea such a place could even exist."

"It was no problem. Though, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell everyone you know about it."

"Cross my heart! I'd like to know how you came to find that room, but I'm not going to ask."

"Good, because I wouldn't tell you if you did," Harry said with a cheeky grin.

"You know, it's rude to have a conversation over somebody's head," Avery croaked, still not opening his eyes. Harry snorted.

"I think I can take it from here," Dorcas said, and Harry took his cue to stand up and dust off his robes. "Thanks again for all your help, Harry. Have fun at the party. I guess you're going with Tom Riddle?"

"Yeah, he's waiting for me in the common room. I'd better hurry up and go get changed. Good luck to both of you."

After peeking discretely from the doorway to see whether the coast was clear, Harry left the storage room and retraced his steps to the Slytherin dungeons. Tom was, indeed, waiting for him in the common room. The party in Slughorn's office had already started, so the rest of their friends were long gone.

"How is Avery?" Tom asked when the wall closed behind Harry. There was a shrewd look in his eyes that gave Harry pause. With a sinking feeling, Harry realised that Tom suspected something.

"He's going to be fine," he said. "The nurse said he needs to stay in the infirmary overnight. It's dragon flu."

"Good. It's a shame he has to miss the party, though. Gertrude was very disappointed."
"Yeah," Harry said, trying not to shift uncomfortably under his piercing gaze. "It couldn't be helped, though. He must have caught it in Hogsmeade."

"Indeed." Tom stepped closer and smiled teasingly at him, apparently dropping the subject. "We, on the other hand, can get away with only being fashionably late if you go change into your dress robes now. Off you go." He placed his hands on Harry's shoulders and gently pushed him towards the dormitories.

* * *

Slughorn had gone overboard with his invitations again. The expanded office was teeming with guests both young and old, too many of whom had taken the theme of the day literally and wore garish shades of red and pink. A few had even taken to assaulting strangers with hugs and kisses. Nobody had assaulted Lester as of yet, and nobody would, if he had his way. With Walburga on his arm and glaring haughtily at anyone who got too close, he felt mostly safe.

"Oh crap," Dolohov said, staring into the crowd over his date's shoulder. "That witch over there is in my mother's book club. I better not do anything stupid, or my parents will know about it by morning."

"Don't gawk, you ogre," Constance Warrington hissed and pulled him to face another way. She cleaned up surprisingly nicely, though she must have enchanted her dress to make her look slimmer. Despite her date's manners, she looked like she could hardly keep from beaming, as she looked around at all the people, the lavish decorations, and the rich catering. It was her first time at one of Slughorn's famous parties.

"My mother goes to Mrs Dolohov's book club," Nancy Higgs said. "She isn't here, though."

"Oh, right. I think I've met her," Dolohov said distractedly. "How is she?"

"She's fine, thank you for asking."

A tense silence followed as everyone tried to think of something to talk about. Lester wished that they could send the girls away so that they could all fall into their natural cliques and have a good time. Even Walburga was fidgeting with her lace gloves.

"We should get drinks," Nancy said, looking around for a serving elf. "Are any of you thirsty?"

"I'll go get us some drinks," Rosier said immediately and disappeared into the crowd before anyone could blink.

"What a gentleman," said Nancy.

Lester exchanged amused looks with Dolohov and Mulciber, but sadly, they couldn't have a good laugh over Nancy's grabby hands with her standing right there.

"Where are Riddle and Potter? Shouldn't they be here by now?" Rosier said after returning with two glasses of lemonade.

"It's a long way from the dungeons to the hospital wing," Lester pointed out, "especially when you're
half carrying a person."

"Still," Rosier grumbled.

"I hope Avery gets better soon," Constance said, eyeing a passing tray of appetisers.

"It's mighty convenient that he got sick right before the party," said Mulciber.

"It isn't convenient for poor Trudy," Nancy said, frowning at her lemonade.

"Not for Trudy," Lester said, though privately he wondered how disappointed the girl could possibly be after Avery's complete and utter lack of effort. "But Avery has never liked attending these shindigs."

"Yeah, he hates crowds and Slughorn even more so," Dolohov agreed.

"But he wouldn't make himself sick because of that," Rosier said, ever the defensive friend. "You didn't see him earlier – it looked really serious."

"Maybe there was another reason," Mulciber said.

"Like what?"

"How should I know? I'm just saying that it's far too convenient to be a coincidence."

"Whose side are you on, anyway? Isn't Avery our friend?"

"Sure he is, but that doesn't mean that he isn't hiding something from us. If he wasn't, he would have asked us to tell Slughorn he was too sick to attend, and we would have done it," Dolohov said.

They fell into a sullen silence, until a minute later Riddle and Potter finally made an appearance. Lester felt a stab of envy as he saw them approach – they were able to come together, just two fellows, without girls dragging them down and making conversations awkward.

"Hi guys," Potter said as the two joined the circle.

"How's Avery?" Rosier asked immediately.

"I took him to the infirmary. Madame Bobbin said it's dragon flu. It's not too serious, but he has to stay in the hospital wing for the night."

He was a passable liar, Lester reckoned. Potter remained calm and didn't stutter or fidget, and even added a helpless little shrug to show that this was all he knew. There was still room for improvement, though – he seemed a little too nonchalant for someone whose friend had unexpectedly had a frightening fit and had to be dragged to the infirmary. Riddle wasn't convinced, either – Lester noticed that he was studiously looking away and pursing his lips, as though he wanted to make a comment but chose to restrain himself.

"We should go visit him after the party is over," Rosier said.

"I don't know," Potter hedged. "Whatever that was Madame Bobbin gave him seemed to knock him out pretty thoroughly. I think he needs to rest."

"Oh. Well, at least we'll see him in the morning."

At that moment, Professor Slughorn chose to descend on their group. "There you are, my favourite
"Slytherins!" he exclaimed as he appeared between Kendra and Nancy.

"Tom, my boy, don't think I didn't see you and Harry creeping in like thieves just now. What were you two busy doing? Perhaps it's better that you don't tell me, ha ha! But no matter, no matter – better late than never. Are all of you enjoying yourselves? Have you tried the punch? It's a recipe I learned from Emile Bouchard, who is head chef at Café Dictame. Excellent with a knife, and not a bad punch either."

The Slytherins practically tripped over each other to praise their Head of House.

"We're having a great time!"

"Oh yes. Fantastic!"

"I love the roses and the lanterns."

"Where can I find that punch?"

"You really know how to throw a party, Professor."

"That's good to hear," Slughorn chuckled, smoothing his moustache with a pleased smile. "It's always good to hear that you youngsters enjoy my humble entertainments. But where is young Avery? I don't think I have seen him yet."

Potter spoke up then, "He couldn't make it. I have a note from Madame Bobbin." He pulled a folded piece of parchment out of his pocket. Lester watched with interest as Professor Slughorn took it and perused it with a frown. It must be a fake note, and Slughorn was no fool, no matter how flamboyant his act.

"What wretched luck," Slughorn finally said as he looked up from the note. He folded it twice and tucked it into his waistcoat. "That poor boy, to go down with the flu like that. I hope there won't be an epidemic."

There was appropriately concerned murmuring from the Slytherins.

"Well, I guess this means that the rest of you must have Avery's share of fun tonight!" Slughorn exclaimed, waving his hand as though tossing all worries over his shoulder. "Why are you all so huddled up here? That's no fun. You should go meet the other guests. Go mingle! You won't get anywhere in life if you don't mingle, you know." And, with a last apology, he took his leave, ambling away to entertain the next cluster of guests.

After that, the group of Slytherins had little choice but to separate and wander off in different directions with their dates. Walburga tugged on Lester's arm and they headed towards the dance floor, where they lingered on the edge and watched others dance. Walburga would tell anyone who asked that she didn't like dancing, that dancing was for commoners, or that other dancers were uncoordinated baboons who got in her way and bumped into her, but Lester knew that she was rhythmically challenged. He didn't mind, of course. Slughorn's guests may all be people who were very successful at what they did, but that did not mean that they weren't uncoordinated baboons on the dance floor.

"Aren't we supposed to be mingling?" Lester said idly when Walburga pulled out a pocket mirror and started fixing her hair.

"We don't need to mingle."
That was true. Occasionally, people felt the need to mingle with them. Both of them had enough family backing to get them anywhere they wanted without help from any of Slughorn's contacts.

"So, how many offers did you get this time?" he asked her.

"Four." She said it with a haughty sniff, but Lester saw that she was happy about the number. She may not welcome the advances she got, but she liked knowing that she was attractive to wizards. "Eugene Selwynn, of course – he just keeps asking. He seems to have figured out that you and I aren't actually together. Ambrose Montague – you know, Ariadne's brother who was sorted into Hufflepuff but insists that he's a Slytherin inside. That Dearborn fellow from Ravenclaw. I don't know what on earth he was thinking. As though I would show my face with a half-blood. And lastly," Walburga snapped her mirror closed and met Lester's eyes with a smug grin, "Didi Greengrass."

"Didi Greengrass?"

"I know! I didn't even know she was like that. I saw she turned up with a wizard, so I'm still not entirely sure what she's about."

"I think I'm jealous." Lester wasn't lying. Greengrass was the hottest girl in Ravenclaw. "What did you say to her?"

"I said I was flattered, but that it would be unfair to her if I accepted. Though, can you imagine? I actually had a dream about her when I was fourteen."

"I had a dream about her last week."

"Oh, you sleaze!" Walburga bumped him with her elbow.

It was nice to be reminded of why he had originally agreed to Walburga's contract. Boys and girls didn't really mingle in Slytherin, but if there was a girl Lester could be friends with, it was Walburga.

"We should probably start walking before someone thinks we look idle and decides to talk to us," Lester said after a few songs.

"You're right."

Walburga slid her arm under his and they started at a slow pace towards the punch table. Lester caught a glance at the two of them against the darkness outside on a nearby window and had to admit that they looked good together. Walburga in her gown of flowing, bruise-purple spider silk and her hair in a fashionable loose bun on the nape of her neck looked like a fine young witch, and he didn't look bad, either. It was almost a pity that they would never marry, but Lester knew that Walburga was too good for him. One day she would be the head of a household, if not a House, and she deserved a husband who wouldn't fight her for that power.

By the punch bowl, they met Rosier and Nancy. Nancy was holding a cup and chatting cheerfully with a wizard Lester recognised as a recent graduate, while Rosier leaned against the table and gazed forlornly at the crowd. Lester exchanged a couple of words with him as he and Walburga both filled a cup, but Rosier was in a grumpy mood. They made a hasty retreat as soon as they had their drinks.

The punch was alright, but Lester had tasted better. On their return trip, skirting along the opposite side of the dance floor, Walburga pointed out Mulciber and his date Kendra dancing a lively swing number and – surprisingly enough – not making fools of themselves. Who would have thought that the tall and gangly Kendra Goyle could dance? Lester made sure to whistle when the song ended. He got a smack on the arm from his date for that.
When they passed a window deepening half-obscured by a heavy red curtain, Lester got an eyeeful of Riddle and Potter snogging the living daylight out of each other. It must have been one hell of a kiss – he spied a few buttons undone on Potter's robes – but it was something he had never wanted to see.

"Oh my!" Walburga said, resisting Lester's pulling as he tried to drag her away from the scene. "There's a sight I might have paid to see."

"Who's a sleaze now?" Lester grumbled as she finally allowed him to lead them away. He was tempted to draw the drapes fully closed over the couple, but they would have noticed if he did that. He wasn't in the mood for a hex.

"At least they weren't Constance and Dolohov," Walburga teased.

"Where are those two, anyway?"

"I haven't seen them."

They made their way around the room, scanning the crowd for their friends. They finally stopped and stared when they found what they were looking for.

Constance stood in the middle of a group of important looking wizards and witches, who all had their attention on her as she talked. Laughter followed a joke she told, and she in turn seemed entirely on board with the political banter of the group. Dolohov stood alone far to the side, poking sullenly at the plateful of appetisers in his hand.

"Well, at least one of us has taken the chance to mingle," said Walburga into the stunned silence.

At that moment, while they were distracted, a fat older witch came up behind them a grabbed them both into a crushing hug. "Happy Valentine's Day, kids!" she crowed with a slur before smacking wet kisses on their cheeks.
During breakfast, the Potter family owl, Ethel, landed next to Harry’s plate with a letter tied to her leg. He was surprised. He had exchanged a couple of letters with his grandparents over the past few months, but they had been rather brief and conservative descriptions of everyday life, and he wasn't expecting a letter now. He untied the envelope from Ethel's leg and rewarded her with a piece of bacon.

"What is it?" Tom asked next to him when he saw him frown. He didn't try to read over Harry's shoulder like certain others would. Harry glanced at Lestrange, who sat on his other side, but he was engrossed in his own mail this time.

"It's nothing," Harry said, waving off Tom's concern. "My grandmother wants to know if I want to spend Easter with them in London. I'd forgotten about Easter."

"How are you going to respond?" To anyone else, the question would have appeared entirely casual, but Harry immediately sensed the tension in him.

"I'm not sure," Harry hedged, feeling torn. On one hand, he felt obliged to his family, especially when Iris sounded so hopeful in her letter, and Christmas at Candeed Court had been wonderful. However, on the other hand, he felt reluctant to let Tom spend the week alone at Hogwarts. He fingered his robe collar as he considered his options. "I kind of want to stay here."

"You should stay and study for the O.W.L.s," Avery commented absently from behind his History of Magic textbook. "That's what I'm doing. A whole week without distractions! I'd sleep in the library if I could."

"I'm so glad that we're between nationals," Dolohov said. "I'm going home and sleeping the week through. Don't bother contacting me, because I probably won't respond."

"I'd stay and study if I could," said Rosier. When Avery looked up and gave him a deeply unimpressed look, he crossed his arms defensively: "What? We have family traditions."

"And they simply can't take place if you're not there? I didn't know your parents were so selfish they'd prioritise a roast lamb over their son’s future."

While Rosier and Avery bickered about priorities, Harry leaned closer to Tom. "I meant I kind of want stay here with you. I just don't know what I should write to Iris. I don't want to let her down."

Tom leaned his elbows on the table and bumped his shoulder against Harry's in a silent 'thank you'. "Take Avery's advice. Tell her you need to study."

“I guess that will do it,” Harry agreed, meeting his smile.

Ethel had finished gobbling down her bacon, so Harry scratched under her beak to get her attention. “Go up to the Owlery and take a nap. I’ll be there with a response later.”

Ethel hooted agreeably before spreading her wings and flying away.
“Mind you, you probably should spend some of that time studying,” Tom said.

“You say that like you aren’t taking the O.W.L.s with me.”

“I could take the O.W.L.s right now if they asked me to.”

“Show off.”

Harry waited until after dinner that evening before sending his response, partly to let Ethel rest and socialise with the school owls, and partly out of guilt. He felt bad as he watched her go – the Potters would understand, but they would be disappointed. For that matter, he had lied to them about his reasons. Of course he would study for the exams, but unlike Rosier, he had everything under control in that department.

He couldn’t be the first teen at Hogwarts to make excuses to stay at the castle over holidays, Harry reasoned as he watched the owl disappear behind one of the mountains. He fiddled with his collar again, sliding his fingers inside until they touched warm metal. With a fond smile, he recalled Valentine’s Day.

* * *

After Slughorn had told them all to stop cowering in a huddle and socialise with his guests, Harry and Tom ended up skirting the side-lines of the party.

“I think I did enough mingling at Slughorn’s last party to last me a lifetime,” Harry murmured to Tom as he steered them away from the crowded areas around the punch bowl and the dance floor. He shuddered as he remembered his welcome celebration and the onslaught of nosy people who wouldn’t leave him alone.

“That was a half-baked farce,” Tom agreed. “But look how short these people’s attention spans are – they barely even recognise you anymore!”

“I’d rather they forget I exist at all,” Harry said.

They grabbed a few snacks from a passing house-elf and chatted quietly as they ate. They kept an eye on the people around them, and occasionally had to relocate hastily when an overexcited guest came too close with their hugs and kisses.

When they were dusting the last crumbs of cucumber sandwiches from their fingers, Tom cleared his throat.

“There’s something I want to give to you,” he said. “Let’s go over here.”

Harry followed him to a nearby bay window that was half-hidden by a velvet curtain, surprised and curious. Once they had sufficient privacy, Tom turned to him and pulled something out of his pocket, keeping his fist closed over the object.

“It’s not much, and it’s not a courting gift, per se, though I did find it appropriate to wait until today before giving it to you,” he said. There was an underlying nervousness to him that Harry found entirely endearing.

“What is it?” Harry asked, glancing between Tom’s face and his fist.

Tom opened his hand, and on his palm laid a small, red and gold lion crest.
“A Gryffindor pin?” Harry said, hovering his fingers over Tom’s hand and looking up at him inquiringly.

“That conversation we had stayed with me,” Tom explained. “I hadn’t realised what a great part Gryffindor has played in making you who you are. You still think of yourself as a real Gryffindor, don’t you?”

When Harry merely stared at him, he continued, “I know you can’t wear it openly, but I thought, if you’d like to, you could pin it on the inside of your robes. Then, you could wear it proudly without anyone the wiser.”

Harry was momentarily struck speechless. Tom had, of his own volition, got him a thoughtful gift when it wasn’t expected of him. Harry was so touched that he felt a bit overwhelmed.

“It’s great,” he finally managed. “Thank you! I love it.”

He took the pin from Tom with careful fingers and tipped it to catch the light, admiring the way the gilding gleamed. The lion shook its mane and roared silently at him. A tiny part of his mind was reprimanding him for getting sentimental over such a small thing – he had used to own a pin much like this one (and had rarely worn it), so he knew that the thing couldn’t be worth more than a couple of Sickles. Even so, he found himself beaming a rather besotted smile at Tom.

Tom smiled back at him, and Harry didn’t think he imagined the quietly relieved look in his eyes.

“Would you like to put it on?”

“Right now? Sure.”

Tom surprised Harry again by lifting his hands to Harry’s collar and beginning to unbutton his dress robes. It was a strangely intimate moment, and Harry’s grin faded as they looked into each other’s eyes. Tom only opened two or three buttons, enough to slip the pin inside and attach it discreetly on his breast, and the shirt Harry wore under his robes made sure there was no skin contact. Yet, Harry’s heart pounded under Tom’s slight touch.

“There,” Tom said quietly when he was finished, withdrawing his hand from Harry’s robes but leaving it resting lightly on his chest, over the place where the pin was now concealed.

“Thanks,” Harry murmured back. Suddenly, he felt bashful and looked down, and in his nervousness he ruined the moment. “Where’d you get it?”

“I found it,” Tom said with a casual shrug and a smirk.

“Are you questioning the sincerity of my gift?”

“I’d never,” Harry said with an exasperated shake of his head.

Normally, he would frown and lecture, but it was only a trinket – and such a meaningful gift. He would let the transgression slide. He looked at Tom and felt the besotted grin returning. Harry couldn’t help reaching out and pulling his boyfriend in for a well-earned kiss.

* * *

“You should get an owl of your own when summer comes,” Tom observed. He was standing by the
Owler entrance, waiting for Harry to finish sending his letter. “That way, you’ll be able to stay in touch with everyone at your own discretion, without disrupting your family’s mail delivery.”

“I guess you’re right,” Harry said, sparing a wistful thought on Hedwig. “I’ll have to ask, though. I don’t have any money of my own, strictly speaking. Will I be able to send an owl to you at the orphanage? Would the Muggles notice?”

“They aren’t very observant,” Tom said with an unconcerned shrug.

They started to climb down the stairs, leaving the drafty tower room behind.

“I’ll come and visit you,” Harry decided.

“We could meet in town,” Tom countered.

“We can do that, too,” Harry said with an easy smile. When Tom glanced at him with a frown, he said, “You have nothing to be ashamed of. Any place is worth visiting when you’re there.”

“It’s not a pleasant place,” Tom argued. “It’s bleak and cold, and the people are tedious at best, and plain nasty most of the time.”

“Even so,” Harry insisted, mind made up. “I want to see where you come from. It won’t reflect badly on you, no matter what it’s like there.”

“I don’t want your pity.”

Harry stopped in his track to stare at him. “I don’t pity you,” he said emphatically. “Tom, I didn’t have a happy childhood, either, and I don’t pity myself. Why would I pity you?”

Tom contemplated this for a moment before smiling. “Well, if you insist, you may visit.” He took Harry’s hand in his own, and neither of them let go on the way down to the dungeons.

When they reached the common room, they were met with an unusual scene. A large group had gathered in the middle of the room, upperclassmen as well as several curious lower years. In the middle of the gathering were Dolohov, Mulciber, and Lestrange. Lestrange was sitting on the floor with several girls, who were all petting and cooing at a cat.

There were several cats in Slytherin house, for many students had them as pets, and they could sometimes be found underfoot, or hogging perfectly good armchairs, or peering with luminous eyes from their hiding spots underneath furniture. This one, though, Harry had never seen before. It was longhaired and sleek-looking with its impeccably white, fluffy fur – probably a purebred of some sort.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked.

“Potter! And Riddle,” said Lestrange, looking up with a grin. “Look – it’s Leslie Turner’s cat!” He gestured widely at the feline currently nestled in Lucretia Black’s lap and basking under her petting hands.

“Let me hold her! It’s my turn,” her little brother Orion was whining next to her, making grabby hands at the cat.

“Leslie Turner’s… What’s it doing here?” Harry asked, squatting down next to Lestrange. He remembered the sixth year Gryffindor whose aristocratic Muggle ancestry was a personal insult to Lestrange, Mulciber, and Dolohov.
“We snuck into Gryffindor Tower and catnapped her. Get it? Catnapped. Well, Mulciber did. He has an invisibility cloak.”

“…Why?”

“Show him,” Lestrange urged Dolohov, who picked up a fur hat lying next to him on the couch and gave it to Harry for inspection. It was white and fluffy, just like the cat.

“We’re going to send that to him anonymously in a few days, once he’s properly worried about his missing pet,” Lestrange explained.

“That’s terrible!” Harry blurted, clutching the hat. “He’s going to think you’ve killed his cat!”

“He’ll only think that. We haven’t actually killed her. Besides, he won’t know it’s us. At least, he can’t prove it.”

“But he’ll think he’s cat is dead. Slaughtered and skinned and turned into a hat!” Harry looked around disbelievingly. He saw a few troubled faces, but most of the people gathered around didn’t seem to care.

“Relax, Potter,” Dolohov said. “We’ll set it free near Gryffindor after a week. It’ll find its way back home, and Turner will get his cat back.”

“That’ll teach him a lesson,” Mulciber agreed.

“What lesson?” Harry said, but didn’t wait for an answer. “This is one of the meanest pranks I’ve ever heard of.” In fact, it was second only to the trick Sirius had pulled on Snape when they were in school, involving a full moon and a werewolf.

“Turner’s a bloody pain in the side, and it was always debatable whether he should be allowed a wand at all,” Lestrange said spitefully. “But guess what we heard him say before Charms the other day? The Gryffs were talking about what they wanted to do after Hogwarts, and Turner declared he was going to return to his family’s estate in the Muggle world.”

“We’d be celebrating, but guess what again?” Dolohov continued, leaning forward. “He was bragging how, with all the magic he’s learned, he’s going to have an advantage over all the other Muggle filth. He’s going to use magic to make more money and get more fame. That’s what he does – he comes here out of nowhere and acts like the lord of the castle, gets the same education as every pureblood witch and wizard whose families have loyally attended Hogwarts for generations, and then goes and leaves, taking that education with him instead of putting it to use for the good of the community! A Muggle using magic among Muggles.”

“A Muggle-born wizard,” Harry corrected him. “And I’m not sure if that’s legal, using magic against Muggles to make money. Maybe you should tell him that, instead of stealing his cat and letting him think it’s dead.”

“Of course it’s illegal. Doesn’t mean people don’t do it,” Dolohov dismissed.

“And like I said, the cat is fine and Turner’s going to have her back eventually. We just want to give him a scare.” Lestrange said.

“What if the cat leads him back to us?” one of the lower years in the crowd asked worriedly.

“Don’t worry about that. There isn’t a drop of Kneazle blood in her,” Lestrange said, leaning over and taking the cat from Orion’s lap and cuddling her to his chest. Orion made a plaintive sound but
didn’t protest. “That’s right, you’re as magical as a bag of nails, aren’t you? Yes, you are! Give me a purr, you fluffy little ball of fluff, you,” Lestrange cooed. He scratched the cat behind the ear and chuckled fondly when she started purring.

Even Harry’s lips twitched upward at the sight. “I still don’t like this,” he said.

“Tough,” Dolohov said, shrugging. “At least we’re doing something about the Mudbloods. Not everybody here can say the same.” He cast a narrow-eyed look at Riddle, who was standing next to Harry’s crouching form. “Riddle, didn’t you say you would get back at Keegan Towler for Confounding Potter back in January? That was months ago and we’re still waiting.”

“All in due time,” Tom said.

“And when will that be, exactly? One would think that, since it’s about Potter, you’d take this seriously, but apparently not. Think of the message you’re giving Harry.”

“It’s a very nice message,” Harry said hurriedly. “I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“Watch your tongue, Dolohov,” Tom said coldly. “You are in no position to offer critique. Or do I need to refresh your memory on your own role in the incident? I’m sure Mulciber still remembers the counter curse.”

“There’s no need for that,” Dolohov grumbled, ducking his head submissively, but still not backing down entirely. “I’m just saying – Rosier was practically frothing at the mouth for revenge, so you might want to give him a chance at it, if you don’t have anything planned.”

“Well, you can tell Rosier not to get hasty,” Tom said. “I have everything under control.”

“You’re just lulling him into a false sense of security, aren’t you, Riddle?” Lestrange said loyally, playing with the cat on the floor. “You’ll strike when he least expects it. That takes a lot of patience. I respect that in a wizard.”

“Yes, I’m glad that at least someone around here still does,” Tom said dryly. “Do make sure that the cat doesn’t come into our dorm. I don’t want white hairs all over my things.” He offered a hand to Harry to help him up.

Harry didn’t need help, but he took the hand anyway. There was no point in undermining Tom’s authority in front of the whole house for no reason.

“I have to patrol the corridors after curfew, so I’m going to rest now while I can,” Tom finished, and the crowd parted to let him pass to the dormitories. He still had Harry’s hand in his grip, so Harry followed.

“I thought you’d forgotten about what happened that time,” Harry said when they reached the dorm and closed the door behind them. “I was relieved.”

“I wouldn’t forget something like that.”

“Tom,” Harry said with a warning tone, making sure that he was listening. “I told you before – I don’t want you to hurt him.”

“I’m not going to hurt him,” Tom said. Seeing Harry’s underwhelmed look, he stepped closer and looked intently into his eyes. “I won’t hurt him,” he repeated emphatically. “I do have a plan, but it doesn’t involve Keegan Towler getting hurt.”
He appeared earnest, and at this point Harry didn’t think Tom would look him in the eye and lie through his teeth. What was the point of lying? Harry would eventually find out if he was telling the truth anyway.

“Good,” Harry said. “It’s not that I care about him, because I don’t even know him, but it’s about principles.”

“We have different principles, Harry,” Tom said, not unkindly.

Harry sighed, sitting down on his bed. “I know. You don’t want to appear weak to the other houses.”

“No. I can’t let anyone hurt you and get away with it. If it were just about intimidating the other houses, I would have dealt with it quickly and publically. When you make them wait, it becomes personal. There’s also a message: ‘I remember what you did’. Tom Riddle never forgets.”

“How come you have such a frightening reputation among the students even while all the teachers worship the ground you stand on?” Harry asked curiously.

Tom snorted, taking off his shoes before stretching out on his bed.

“A lot of things can pass under the professors’ noses before they take any notice. When they look at a pupil, they only care about two things: his grades, and how much respect he shows them. Once you make a good impression on both accounts, it will take hard evidence to change their opinion of you. The other houses might try to tattle on me for various transgressions that I may or may not have committed, but as long as they don’t have proof, the professors won’t believe them.

“Being in Slytherin can be a burden when people immediately assume the worst of you, but to me it’s a blessing. When a Gryffindor approaches a professor to accuse me of rule breaking without evidence to support his claim, the professor will chalk it up as house prejudice.”

Harry had never thought of the house rivalry in that light. It was actually rather clever.

“Dumbledore’s different, though,” he pointed out. “He’s always suspicious of you. What happened there?”

Tom’s expression turned sour and he scowled up at his canopy. “I made a bad first impression on him.”

He didn’t say anything more for a long moment as he stewed on thoughts of Dumbledore. Finally, he elaborated:

“He was the first wizard I ever met. He came to the orphanage to give me my Hogwarts letter. I made the mistake of telling him that I was already able to control my magic somewhat, enough to get petty revenge on the children who tried to harass me. Dumbledore seemed to think I shouldn’t stand up for myself. ‘That sort of behaviour is not tolerated at Hogwarts,’ he told me. Ever since then, he has been trying to catch me red-handed.”

Harry felt a fierce stab of indignation on Tom’s behalf. Five years was a long time to target someone for something they had done as a child. To Harry, it seemed just as bad as the way Professor Snape had bullied him because he reminded the man of James Potter. He got up and crossed the distance to Tom, sitting down on the edge of his bed.

“But he hasn’t caught you yet,” he said, resting his hand on Tom’s waist. “Spotless record, am I right?”
Tom smiled deviously up at him. “He can look, but he won’t find,” he agreed.

“There’s still an hour left before curfew,” Harry said, feeling the rise and fall of Tom’s breath under his palm. “Are you intent on resting, or…?”

“I’m wide awake.”

* * *

After Tom had left for his prefect patrol, Harry returned to the common room. The fuss around the cat had mellowed down and the crowd dispersed. A group of Slytherinettes had adopted the cat in their care and were entertaining it with some transfigured toys in a corner of the room.

Harry met Rosier, who was sitting at a table and yawning even as he tried to study.

“Hey,” Harry said, pulling up a chair for himself. “How are you doing?”

“O.W.L.s,” Rosier said, rubbing his face tiredly. “Just got back from the library, but no time to sleep. I made a schedule, and I still have two chapters of this rubbish left to revise today.” He showed Harry the cover of their Astronomy textbook.

“Glad to see you taking the exams seriously,” Harry said. Rosier had been slacking for most of the year, but the looming O.W.L.s seemed to have finally instilled the fear of failure in him.

Rosier grunted noncommittally. “Distract me. Please. This book is about to eat my brain.”

Hiding a fond smile behind his hand, Harry took pity on him. “How’s your girlfriend?”

“She’s studying, too. One of her dorm mates had a nervous breakdown. The nurse had to sedate her. The dorm mate, not Maggie. This is not a good time to be dating, you know?”

Harry thought of what he and Tom were doing in the dorm only fifteen minutes ago and silently disagreed.

“I guess you’re both too preoccupied,” he said aloud.

“Don’t get me wrong – it’s nice, being with someone. I like spending time with Maggie and talking, and she’s cute and dainty, and, well, a pretty good kisser. But, with all this stress, it seems like a lot of trouble. It’s not like we know each other inside and out, so it’s always like prodding the ice to see where it’s okay to stand. I can’t relax like I can with the guys, and sometimes it’s just so exhausting constantly trying to impress her.”

“Normally you’d have time to go on proper dates and get to know each other.”

“Yeah. We study for the O.W.L.s on our dates. She’s really hard-working.”

Harry felt absurdly guilty. He didn’t have to work nearly as hard in order to prepare for the O.W.L.s as Rosier. He had already taken the exams once, and now that the professors were loosening the leash a little on the fifth and seventh year students’ written homework to give them more time to revise, Harry was reaping the benefits. He felt confident that he would do well. Maybe he would even get a few O’s for subjects other that Defence Against the Dark Arts.

This was also good tidings for his love life. If Harry were in Rosier’s position, he was sure that he would be too wound up for hour-long petting sessions with Tom. Tom, of course ‘could take the O.W.L.s right now if they asked him to’, so he was always up for it.

Harry shrugged, definitely not thinking about the petting session. “I’m fine.”

“On second thought, don’t tell me. Don’t think I didn’t notice you coming out of the dorm five minutes after Riddle left.”

Harry felt himself turn red.

“Are you two sleeping together yet?” Rosier asked curiously.

“You just said you didn’t want to know.”

“Lapse of judgement. Very brief.”

“No, we’re not having sex. Per se.”

“Per se? That’s interesting.”

“I’ll leave you to ponder on that.”

“Alright, I won’t ask for details. Sounds like fun, though. I don’t think Maggie’s that kind of girl.” He sounded a little wistful.

It was a lot of fun, but Harry didn’t want to rub it in for Rosier. In fact, these past couple of months had been some of the happiest of Harry’s life. It wasn’t just about the snogging and other things, either – everyday, it felt like Harry was just a little bit more smitten with Tom than the day before. Secretly, he wondered if this was what it was like to fall in love.

“Just, uh, how far have you gone, exactly?”

Harry gave him a flat look.

“Sorry, sorry. You don’t kiss and tell, obviously. For some reason, I just get this urge to live vicariously through my friends, and since you and Riddle are the only people I know who are living… And obviously, I can’t ask Riddle.”

If only he knew about Avery and Dorcas Meadows. If that scene in the Ancient Runes section several months ago was anything to go by, those two lived vicariously indeed.

They hadn’t been found out yet, but Harry suspected this was largely because the Slytherins generally respected each other’s secrets. Valentine’s Day had garnered Avery some rather shrewd looks. Harry supposed it had been too much to hope for that nobody would notice something amiss with his convenient bout of flu right before Slughorn’s party. Avery was treading on thin ice, though. If he acted too suspiciously, someone was bound to take it upon themselves to find out what he was up to. Harry helped when he could by providing excuses for Avery’s absences, but there was only so much he could do for his friend.

“Well, imagine Tom’s reaction if he found out I’d been sharing specifics about what we do together.”

“You’re right, of course. Sorry for asking.”

Rosier fiddled with the corner of his Astronomy book, looking over the text he was supposed to be reading with a pained expression. Harry could relate well – Astronomy wasn’t his favourite subject, either.
“Do you want me to quiz you?” Harry offered, holding his hand out for the textbook.

“That’d be great,” Rosier said with a relieved smile, pushing the book forward. “Anything to get out of reading another sodding chapter.”

They revised together until they were both starting to nod off and the common room was nearly deserted, at which point they drowsily got up and called the day.

It was after midnight and Harry was settled under the covers, hovering on the edge of sleep, when he distantly heard somebody enter the dormitory. He paid this no mind and was just about to drift off when the hangings around his bed were tugged to the side. Harry sighed and rolled onto his back to see who was disturbing his sleep.

“Harry,” Tom whispered, leaning over him. “Did I wake you?”

“Almost,” Harry said, rubbing his eyes.

Tom seemed to take this as an invitation, because he climbed onto the bed, pulling the hangings closed behind him and murmuring an incantation to make them sound-proof.

“What are you doing?” Harry said, pushing up to his elbows and squinting futilely at Tom through the pitch dark.

Tom pushed him back down gently before leaning in for a long and hungry kiss. Harry kissed back instinctively, lifting his hands to grasp Tom’s shoulders. He was still wearing his robes – they felt soft to the touch and smelled as fresh as a dewy meadow, even though he had worn them all day.

“I feel wonderful tonight,” Tom murmured into his ear after breaking the kiss. Harry could feel his smile against his cheek. “I feel as though I could burst if I don’t share this. Let me make you feel good, Harry.”

Harry shivered at his words as he realised that Tom was thrumming with barely contained excitement where he was straddling Harry’s hips. He was wide awake now and felt himself responding to the promise, but a dampening feeling of uncertainty had him pushing at Tom’s shoulders.

“Tom, I don’t know if –”

“Shh, don’t be afraid. Just lie back – this is for you.”

Tom shifted and shuffled to get under the comforter, ignoring Harry’s protests, and before Harry knew it, he had tucked the covers completely. Harry was confused for all of two seconds, until he felt those demanding hands push his pyjamas aside and warm breath caress his abdomen. Wide-eyed, he stared up at the dark canopy. This was something new.

All thought of struggling left him and he pushed the comforter down so that he could reach Tom. He could barely see his outline in the dark, but he could certainly feel him. His breath hitched and an embarrassing moan escaped him at the unfamiliar heat.

“Where’s this – ah – coming from… all of a sudden?” he asked, but stopped caring about the answer soon enough. He ran his shaking hands through Tom’s hair, enjoying the way the cool strands tumbled through his fingers – an anchor for his senses as the night faltered around him.

He wished he could see Tom, but in the absence of sight, the sensations became stronger. He was aware of every scrape of cloth against his skin, could hear every shift and rustle, every heaving breath and keening moan seemed to resound in the confines of the warded hangings. And Tom, his
hands burned where they held him, pinning him to the bed by the mere warning splay of his palms. It was clear to Harry that Tom was as inexperienced at this as he was, but his touch was confident and earnest. The sincerity was heart breaking, and Harry shuddered and gasped and nearly cried as, with this simple act, Tom held his heart in the palm of his hand.

As fantastic as it was, it was over all too soon. Harry was so blindsided by the flood of sensations that when he came, it was sudden and jarring and altogether embarrassing. He lay in the dark, gasping like a track runner, in a twitching tangle of inert limbs, while Tom hacked and sputtered.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, glad that they couldn’t meet each other’s eyes.

Tom conjured a glass of water between coughs. He sipped from it and then he threw his head back and gargled, before spitting back into the glass. Harry covered his face in deep mortification.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tom said, voice slightly raspy, after disposing of the glass. He crawled up next to Harry and lay down on his side. “Was it good?”

He sounded so inconceivably smug that he jarred Harry out of his mortified stupor.

Harry let out a breathless laugh, lowering his hands. “It was okay, for a first try.”

Tom made an indignant sound that only made Harry giggle more. Harry mustered enough energy to pull him in for a kiss.

“It was amazing. I have no words. Thank you. What brought this on?”

Tom shrugged one shoulder. “I was feeling spontaneous.”

“I love this new side of you. Should I…?”

“You can return the favour later. You should sleep now. I did wake you up, didn’t I?”

“You’re always free to wake me up for that.” Harry rolled to his side to face him properly, drowsily tracing his hand down Tom’s front. Tom tried to bat the hand away once, but didn’t fight him further.

Eventually, they both fell asleep, Tom still in his now quite rumpled uniform.

When Harry woke up in the morning, Tom had moved to his own bed and the sound-proof charm was gone. Harry grinned up at the canopy, a thrill running down his spine as he thought of last night. He sank deeper into the bed and spent a few long minutes luxuriating, the memory still tangible in his well-rested muscles. Finally, a niggling sense of buzzing, impatient energy drove him out of bed to get ready for the day.

Tom still looked smug when the Slytherins headed up for breakfast, though he did make an effort to look casual. He certainly did a better job than Harry, who could hardly look at him without a sheepish grin tugging on his lips.

“You look… happy,” Lestrange had said when he had seen Harry in the common room. He had glanced at Tom, who was giving him a level look that somehow still managed to convey smugness, and then ducked behind Mulciber to hide his reaction. Harry had seen his shoulders shaking, though he had managed to suppress the sound.

Harry slipped his hand in Tom’s as the two of them lagged behind the rest of the group on the way to the castle proper.
“I’ll return the favour tonight,” he murmured into Tom’s ear, feeling the flutter of nervous anticipation at the thought.

When they reached the Entrance Hall, they found the castle in a commotion. Some people were shouting, one girl was crying. Professors Beery and Giddymeadow were herding the younger students into the Great Hall, against many protests, and glancing worriedly towards the marble staircase. The stairs saw heavy traffic, as students swarmed up to the first floor. More professors appeared to be blocking the way, shouting at everyone to stand back and stay calm. The din was deafening as the chatter, exclamations, and cries echoed in the hall.

Harry’s good mood evaporated and a foreboding feeling took its place. The Slytherins stood dumbstruck for a moment, until Dolohov took action.

“Come on, guys,” he said. “Let’s find out what’s happening.”

They moved across the Entrance Hall and up the marble stairs, Dolohov clearing the way with his bulk where the Slytherins’ intimidating presence alone wasn’t enough. Harry’s heart was in his throat as they pushed through the crowd gathered on the first floor near the stairs. He elbowed past Mulciber when they got to the front and stopped, stunned.

On a stretch of wall a little to the side of the landing, in plain view of anyone who ventured to the upper floors, a message was written. The sunshine flooding the corridor from windows lining it on one side made the grotesque red paint gleam starkly.

**SLYTHERIN’S LEGACY HAS BEEN CLAIMED.**  
**ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE,**  
**FOR THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS LIES OPEN AT LAST.**

Professors Slughorn, Dumbledore, and Merrythought stood as a barrier preventing the students from getting close to the scene, trying to get their voices heard over the clamour. However, somebody had managed to get past the teachers. Harry looked closer at the figure standing with his back to the message, calmly looking out a window. There was something off about him. With horror, Harry saw the way he was turned halfway to leave, with the toes of one foot barely touching the floor. Frozen in place, as though forever sensing danger.

It was Keegan Towler.

Shock numbed Harry’s senses and he could hardly feel the people jostling against him or hear the mutters and exclamations and shouted questions of the crowd. All he could do was stare at the petrified boy, feeling cold inside.

Absurdly, his first coherent thought was, ‘So, this is why Tom was feeling spontaneous last night.’

Suddenly he felt dirty and had the urge to curl around himself. He couldn’t, because even as betrayal and anger washed over him, an enchanted repose settled over his features. It weighed him down like a leaden cloak, pushing his feet against the floor and pulling his palms down to rest against his sides. He realised with a sinking feeling that there was nothing he could do or say to stop this, because the Oath would keep his silence.

The Slytherins were nudging and cajoling each other, whispering excitedly. Students from the other houses were already casting suspicious or fearful looks their way and subtly establishing a distance
around them. Harry could offer no reaction, though inside he was screaming.

“Potter,” Rosier said, touching his shoulder. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Harry said.

“Are you sure? You look…” Rosier waved a hand in front of his face. Harry tracked it sluggishly with his gaze. “Blimey! We have to get you out of here.”

Rosier looked around to make sure they weren’t causing a scene. “Riddle! We should probably retreat now.”

Tom appeared at Harry’s side. Harry looked at his concerned face and wanted to punch him, or scream at him, or cry. He could only stare.

“All right, all Slytherins!” Tom said loudly, raising his hands for attention – ever the conscientious prefect. “This is a crime scene, not a zoo exhibit. Let’s all stay calm and move back down the stairs. No running! Follow me, and we will gather in the Great Hall for further instructions.”

Of course, every Slytherin in the vicinity submitted to his orders quietly. Prefects from the others houses belatedly followed Tom’s example and the crowd began to disperse.

Harry had no choice but to follow in Tom’s wake. He stared at the back of Tom’s head and thought of last night, and the past months – all the hours they had spent together, all the little things. How could that wonderful wizard, who had shown him such care and been so genuine – who had even stolen a Gryffindor pin for him because he thought Harry missed his old house – be the villain who would unleash a Basilisk on unsuspecting students? Harry felt raw – disappointed, betrayed, and angry. Angry at himself.

How could he have let himself go like this? How could he have allowed himself to feel for someone who was always destined to be evil?

The school gathered in the Great Hall and Headmaster Dippet spoke gravely about what had happened. Towler would be moved to the infirmary and examined, but nobody was sure what had affected him yet. Dippet encouraged the perpetrator to come forth or risk severe consequences. Preliminary instructions were given for tightened security. The day’s classes were cancelled. Harry listened to all of this with barely half an ear, staring glassily at a jug of milk.

After this, the professors escorted all students back to their common rooms, where they were told to remain while the adults launched their investigation.

As soon as the wall slid closed behind the last cluster of Slytherins, the gang flocked around Tom and pulled him aside and into a private little circle. Their eager whispering tripped and fell over itself.

“It was you, wasn’t it! You’re a Parselmouth, you’re Slytherin’s kin!”

“I never should have doubted you about Towler. That was bloody wicked!”

“How did you do it?”

“Did you really find the Chamber of Secrets? It thought it was a myth!”

“How did you find it? Where is it?”

“What’s the monster?”
Harry stood stock still, feeling sick at their glowing excitement. Even the Oath could not make him pretend he was one of them. He turned around and headed to the dormitory.

“Potter?” he heard Rosier call after him, sounding concerned, but he ignored him.

He was contemplating his still rumpled bed and wishing that the enchantment would at least let him vent in private, when the door opened behind him.

“Harry?” Tom said.

Harry closed his eyes briefly to gather his strength before turning around to face him.

“Harry…? I know you must be upset, but this is none of your fault. Finding the Chamber of Secrets has been my quest for years.”

Harry struggled to find words that he could say. “You said you wouldn’t hurt him,” he said.

“I didn’t. He’s petrified – he isn’t in pain, and when he is revived, he will barely even remember what happened.”

Harry stared at him. Of course, he should have realised that Tom would twist definitions.

“Keegan Towler will be fine. For all that I have gained, his sacrifice was well worth it. Harry, I’m Salazar Slytherin’s heir – the last of his line. All I’ve ever wanted to was to know that I have a history. I couldn’t have asked for better ancestry!”

Harry had nothing to say.

“Why do you look at me like that? Stop it!”

He must have known that the Oath of Unspeakability had crippled Harry’s facial expressions, but the placid gaze seemed to unnerve him a great deal.

‘Good,’ Harry thought viciously and looked away.

“Don’t just look away from me.” Tom grabbed the sides of Harry’s head and forced him to face him. “Do you fault me for this? The Chamber is my heritage, the only inheritance I will ever have – I have every right to it! I alone! Slytherin wanted it opened, and the beast inside to roam free. This was meant to happen. Say something!”

There were many things Harry wanted to say. There was a long, tense silence before he managed to pry his mouth open.

“I’m going to London for Easter.”

Tom’s eyes widened and he reared back. “What do you –? You can’t! I had every right to –! Don’t you dare leave me over this! After everything I’ve done for you, everything we’ve had. What is that Mudblood to you? Why do you care?”

He waited for an answer, chest heaving and with a wild look in his eyes. When the seconds passed and Harry had none to give, Tom pulled himself straight, slowly and menacingly. The temperature seemed to drop as he glared icily at Harry.

“Fine,” he said. “You would have me give up my inheritance. You would be so selfish. But I have worked too hard to let you stop me now. The Chamber stays open, and I will finish what I started.”
Harry could say nothing and do nothing as Tom turned and walked out of the dormitory. The door closed behind him with resounding thud.

Harry had never felt so alone.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I'm afraid that this is the end of daily updates, because I've run out of finished chapters. Updates will be relatively sporadic, though I can assure you that I'm writing actively and Words Fail is never far from my mind. Thank you for all the support!

Chapter 19

The train ride to London was awkward. Harry was poor company, and his depressed mood made everyone in their compartment uncomfortable. Eventually, the gang split in two when Lestrange, Dolohov, and Mulciber wandered off for a game of Exploding Snap, while Rosier stayed behind to keep an eye on Harry. He even stuck to his side when they had reached King's Cross, making sure to pass Harry safely into his grandmother's care.

Iris met Harry at the station alone.

"There you are, Harry darling. It's so good to see you!" she exclaimed and pulled him into a warm hug. Harry patted her back uneasily, forcing a smile on his face when he drew back.

"I'm so glad you changed your mind about coming," she said, squeezing Harry's hand before finally letting go of him. "Howard is, too. He wanted to come pick you up, but he's very busy at work and couldn't make it. I promise we won't distract you from your studies – you can have all the peace and quiet you need. You even have our permission to practice your spells while you are in the house. Just don't tell anybody!"

"That sounds great. Thanks," Harry said. Iris' smile dimmed a little.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"I'm fine. Just... worried about the exams."

"Well, we had better get you home, then, so you can get back to your books. Let me take your trunk."

They headed to the Apparition point near the entrance to Muggle London, and moments later, they were hanging up their cloaks in the foyer of the Potters' townhouse.

"It’s terrible business, what happened at Hogwarts. Those poor children. Have they found out what happened to them yet?" Iris said, brushing the last wrinkles off her cloak before closing the cupboard door over it.

"No," Harry said.

"Do you think it was really one of your house mates? This ‘Heir of Slytherin’?"

Harry shrugged. He wished she would stop talking about the Chamber of Secrets. He felt guilty,
having known about this and not being able to stop it. He knew she was trying to help, but it only made things worse.

Another student had been attacked: a sixth year Hufflepuff. She had been found petrified in the Trophy Room, where she had been serving detention. The caretaker had been fired for leaving her unsupervised, though he claimed that he had only stepped out to use the loo.

Harry felt terrible. He knew what would come – a girl was going to die. In the Great Hall, his eyes searched out Myrtle, the small third year Ravenclaw who sat alone at the crowded table, shoulders hunched and face obscured by her hair. She picked at her food, but rarely looked up from her plate.

Harry wanted to warn Myrtle, or better yet – he imagined going to the girls’ lavatory and sealing the hidden entrance to the Chamber with a volley of Blasting Curses. If that failed to cave the place in, he imagined going in and killing the Basilisk. He would break into Dippet’s office first and steal the Sorting Hat – hopefully he was still Gryffindor enough to pull the sword out of the hat like he had in second year. He would probably die killing the beast, because Harry wasn’t sure if Fawkes was around yet, but that was okay. He wasn’t afraid of dying.

“Are you hungry? Dinner is at seven, but I think there’s still some soup left from lunch.”

“I’m fine. I think I’m going to study.” The thought of food made his stomach turn and he wanted to be alone. “Thanks for picking me up.” He managed a strained smile, but couldn’t bring himself to look his grandmother in the eye. He headed up the stairs, his trunk floating behind him.

“Alright,” Iris said, watching him go with worried eyes. “I’ll come get you when dinner is ready.”

“Thanks,” Harry called over his shoulder.

He reached his room on the second floor, and let his trunk lower itself to the floor with a thud. He didn’t want to be here, but he had felt miserable at Hogwarts.

He and Tom were over.

They still sat next to each other in classes and worked together on school assignments, because if they suddenly flew apart, Dumbledore would know what was going on. Neither Tom nor the Oath would allow that – and, if Harry was honest, neither would he.

Tom was cold to him. He hardly spoke to Harry, and when he did, it was cruel. Harry, in turn, could not speak. He could not rage, nor shout, nor plead, nor explain. He couldn’t even frown or glare, and he knew that the placid, uncaring shroud only hurt Tom worse.

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this. Maybe they could move on from there.

The worst part was that he had known all along that this was going to happen, and yet he managed to be horrified. When he had first arrived here and met Tom, he had thought of little else than the imminent events, and he had no trouble believing that Tom was capable of murder. But now…

Now he cared about what made him do it. He wanted to understand, and he wanted desperately to do something so that Tom no longer felt like he had to kill. He had thought things were going well—he had been so happy with Tom, and he had thought Tom was happy, too. It offended and frustrated him that Tom had done this behind his back, without breathing a word to him about his intentions. He thought of all the times that Tom had disappeared to the ‘library’ to do research, asking not to be disturbed. All term he had been doing that, and now Harry realised that he had probably been searching the castle for the entrance to the Chamber. He wished he could talk. If only he could talk to Tom, he might be able to fix this.

Harry lost his sense of time as he sat at the desk, staring out the window. A knock on the door roused him from his reverie, and he looked around just as Iris poked her head around the door.

“Dinner is ready. Oh, Harry, where are your books?”

Harry looked belatedly at his trunk, which still sat unopened by the door.

“Um. Sorry,” he said.

“It’s alright, dear. You’ve had a long trip.” Iris gave him a reassuring smile, but it looked tense at the corners and she was twisting her hands together anxiously.

“Howard is working late at the office, so it’s just the two of us. I hope you don’t mind eating in the kitchen.”

“It’s fine.”

Dinner was roast beef with onions. Normally Harry would have loved it, but now he picked at his food, feeling uncomfortable under Iris’s gaze.

“Are you having trouble with your boyfriend?”

The question jarred Harry from his thoughts and he looked up at Iris, shocked. “How do you know about him?” He hadn’t mentioned Tom in any of his letters.

Iris smiled wryly at him. “Many of my friends attend Professor Slughorn’s parties. I heard several accounts of how you turned up on Valentine’s Day with a dashing young wizard.”

“Oh.” Harry should have guessed.

“What’s his name?”

“Tom Riddle.”

“He gave you a Christmas present, didn’t he?”

“All of my friends gave me Christmas presents.”

“Yes, but his was special. I remember.”

Harry remembered, too. He had discarded his old scarf and mittens and worn the ones Tom had
given him all winter.

“It doesn’t matter. He’s not my boyfriend anymore.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Iris was quiet for a moment, observing him from under her fringe. “Did he kiss another boy?”

Harry snorted mirthlessly into his roast. “No.”

“Did he hurt your feelings?”

Harry shrugged. It was far more complicated than that, and his feelings were the last thing that mattered.

“And you ended the relationship?”

Had he? Harry had never said ‘We’re over’, but even if he had been able to speak, he wasn’t sure what he would have done. Maybe he would have broken up with Tom fair and square. But, that was neither here nor there, because Tom had drawn his own conclusions that amounted to the same thing.

“I guess we were both angry at each other,” he finally said.

“Oh, Harry,” Iris said. “Couples fight. It doesn’t mean you have to break up. If there’s a way to forgive, there is always a future. Do you still have feelings for him?”

Harry twirled his fork in his hand, staring resolutely at his plate. A part of him rebelled against having this conversation, but the rest of him remembered how he had been trapped within himself for the past week, unable to voice his troubles even to himself.

“Yes. Of course. I… Of course.”

“Then, do you think that you might be able to forgive him for whatever he did?”

Harry thought of Keegan Towler and Gladys Fischer, the girl who still held a polishing rag in her fist, and Myrtle. And he thought of Tom – vicious, sweet, wonderful Tom. No matter how guilty Harry felt for it, even thoughts of the unsuspecting Myrtle could not make his memories of Tom any less precious.

“I don’t know,” he said dully. His gaze, still fixed on his cooling roast, had grown glassy as he thought of the Basilisk’s victims.

“Well,” Iris said after a short silence. “Take your time. I don’t mean to tell you what to do, but maybe you should try talking with Tom.”

Harry wanted to laugh at the suggestion, but the enchantment was still working on over-drive.

The next day Harry set to work on his studies. He felt better when he was studying – when he was busy cramming Transfiguration theory, he could forget about the Chamber of Secrets and Tom. It was only at night, when sleep refused to come, that his thoughts strayed back to Hogwarts and the depression returned.

They could have had the castle to themselves if things hadn’t gone sour. Harry imagined him and Tom lounging together in the common room, kissing in the courtyard, putting the Divination section
to better use… Instead, they were both alone. Tom was stuck alone in the cold castle, and Harry was here, doing his best to avoid his grandparents and pretend he wasn’t a wreck.

He recalled Tom’s face that terrible morning in the dormitory with a pang of guilt. He hadn’t meant to break up with Tom, not really – he had felt angry and betrayed and he had been utterly unable to express any of it. A simple, unrelated statement was the only thing that the Oath would let him voice in his state of turmoil, and frankly he could not spend a week alone with Tom after what he had done. It was typical that Tom would jump to conclusions without stopping to consider what Harry might be going through.

Maybe it was better this way. Obviously the relationship wasn’t supposed to work in the first place. He had been stupid to think that anything good could come out of getting close to the boy who would become Lord Voldemort. How stupid of him to hope that he might be a good influence on Tom, that Tom would let anyone influence him. How stupid of him to fall in love with Tom – now he suffered the consequences. He had brought this on himself, so he had no right to whine.

He couldn’t even blame Tom, because Tom was just being himself.

Towards the end of Easter, Howard invited Harry for a game of pool.

“I don’t know how to play,” Harry said, anxious to return to his room.

“I’ll teach you. It’ll be fun.”

Harry couldn’t say no without being rude. Reluctantly, he followed his grandfather into the game room.

Howard spent a few minutes explaining the game to Harry and showing him how to hold the cue stick, and they had a short practice game. Harry was terrible at the game, but he couldn’t find it in him to be put out by that.

As he arranged the object balls back into the starting formation, Howard broached the subject that he had brought Harry here for.

“So, tell me about this Tom.”

Harry sighed. “What about him?”

“What’s he like? Describe him.”

“Look, I don’t want to talk about what happened.”

“I’m not asking you what happened. I don’t need to know what you fought about or how you broke up. I doubt I would be able to help. But, I want to know what this boy is like. He must be special to make you mope like this.”

Harry eyed him warily, but he just raised his eyebrows at Harry expectantly.

“I’ll take the first shot,” Howard finally said when Harry remained silent. He bent over the pool table and, with expert moves, sent the cue ball hurtling into the triangle of gleaming object balls, sending them scattering all around the table. One of them disappeared into a pocket. “You’re solid. What is he like in school?”

Harry relaxed a little at the safe subject, going around the table to reach the cue ball.
“He’s brilliant. Top of the class in every subject, without even trying.”

“Really?”

“The professors love him.”

“Wow. I hate him already.”

Harry surprised himself by chuckling. He struck the cue ball and winced when it barely grazed its target.

“What about his personality?”

That was a trickier question. Harry shifted his weight uncomfortably as he thought about his answer.

“Well, he’s really smart, obviously. And… independent. Holds his ground, doesn’t let anyone push him around. And, hmm. He can be really charming, like you wouldn’t believe, but… he isn’t very friendly to most people. Some people find him intimidating, and I don’t blame them.”

“Er. Sounds amiable.”

“I know what you’re thinking, and really, you’re kind of right. He isn’t a very nice person when you first meet him, unless he wants you to think he is. But, when you get to know him… Not many people do, but I did, and once I got to know him, he was really sweet. He’d make these thoughtful little gestures when you least expected him, and he’s protective. Not that I needed protecting, but anyway. It was kind of nice.”

“Oh, I see. He’s a walnut. Just needs a gentle nutcracker.”

Harry smiled weakly, his briefly lightened mood faltering. If Tom was a walnut, then Harry had failed to crack him open, and now he had blown his chance to try.

Howard pocketed a striped ball, his second in a row. Harry watched with growing desolation as he lined up a third shot. The cue ball hit a yellow stripe, which hit a green stripe, which fell neatly into a corner pocket.

“So he was good to you?”

“Yeah, he was.”

Tom had been kind and considerate and… amorous. As long as they had been together, he had never patronised Harry like he did the rest of the gang. And Tom had never hurt him intentionally. When Harry had been reckless or insolent, Tom had never done worse than shoot him a glare and a few threatening words before letting it slide.

Even Keegan Towler’s petrification had been intended as a twisted sort of gift to show that Tom cared. Harry could see how Tom would find it appropriate, even though he couldn’t agree with the notion.

Gladys Fischer, though, was a different matter, as was Myrtle. Harry could not possibly forgive Tom for hurting innocents, no matter how much he loved him. How could he forgive? How could he forgive himself if he forgave Tom?

“How long were you two together?” Howard asked when he failed to pocket the fourth ball and it was finally Harry’s turn.
“Since Christmas.”

“And you share a dorm?”

Harry rolled his eyes, watching his solid orange ball hit the edge of the table and bounce back harmlessly. “Yes, and so do four other boys. Nothing happened.” He tried not to think about the night before the message on the wall.

“I wasn’t worried about that,” Howard said, his voice not entirely convincing.

“Well, nothing did, and nothing will.” The burning loss and sinking depression had returned. Harry placed the cue stick on the edge of the pool table with numb fingers.

“I forfeit. You win. Can I go now?”

“Harry, I didn’t mean to…”

Harry didn’t listen to him, heading out the door in a sort of haze. He climbed the stairs up to his room, barely feeling his legs move for the queasy feeling of emptiness in his chest.

His grandparents saw him to the train station a couple of days later. Harry felt bad for being such a skulking raincloud all holiday, but when he tried to apologise, Iris only hugged him tightly and handed him a care package full of freshly baked sweets.

When he got back to Hogwarts and trudged into the dungeon common room with the other Slytherins, Tom met him with an icy glare. Harry hadn’t expected anything else, but it still hurt.

Later, Avery muttered complaints into his ear. “I don’t think he cracked open a single textbook during the holiday.”

“He already knows the material for the O.W.L.s,” Harry said dully.

“Yes, but he was creepy. I wouldn’t say he was moping, but something like it. It’s like he was seething. On a low boil. I’d leave to the library in the morning and he’d be sitting there glaring into the fire, and I swear, when I came back in the evening, he was still there. Hadn’t even moved.

“I wish you two could get back together. I liked him better when he was getting laid.”

“If that’s the case, you might as well just buy him a prostitute,” Harry said bitterly.

Avery opened and closed his mouth, irritation replaced by sudden chagrin. “I’m sorry, that was really crude.”

It looked like he was going to offer more platitudes, so Harry picked up his things and left.

Rosier was in an awkward position, caught between being a faithful friend to Harry and a loyal crony to Tom. He tried to reason Harry into patching things up with Tom.

“You were both happier when you were together. Why do you do this to yourselves?”

The fifth years were heading towards the Great Hall for lunch after a double session of Defence Against the Dark Arts. Tom stalked ahead with Avery reluctantly sticking to his side, while Harry and Rosier hung back a few steps behind them.

“Really, I don’t see what the big deal is,” Rosier continued the whispered conversation. “It’s not like anyone’s really been hurt. I think it’s wicked that the Chamber of Secrets is open. This is just
payback for all the discrimination Slytherins have had to deal with for the past millennium.”

“If we want the discrimination to stop, this is not the way to do it,” Harry muttered back.

“I said payback, Potter. It means revenge. The discrimination isn’t going to stop.”

Harry reckoned that the situation with Slytherin was better now than it was in the 1990s. The Gryffindors still hated Slytherins, but the Ravenclaws seemed indifferent, while Slytherin and Hufflepuff were downright friendly. Apparently, there were unusual numbers of pure-blood scions currently in Hufflepuff.

“What did Fischer ever do to undermine Slytherin?” Harry said.

“Well, it was just a demonstration, wasn’t it? She was unlucky to be convenient.”

Harry was about to respond indignantly, but a chilling sound made him freeze, stopping in his track.

“Hungry… Blood… Tear, kill… Let me kill…”

Harry stared at the wall, where the sibilant sound was coming from, moving upward and growing faint. His face had become a blank mask, hiding his horror, and his fingers twitched feebly at his sides as he fought for control. His instincts screamed at him to sprint after the voice, find the nearest stairs and climb, follow, don’t let the Basilisk near the students. But he was rooted to the spot.

“Potter? What’s wrong?”

Tom and Avery stopped and turned to look at Rosier’s question. Tom frowned at Harry, glancing between him and the wall.

“Nothing,” Harry finally said, forcing his legs to move and continue down the corridor towards the Great Hall. He refused to look at Tom.

Harry couldn’t eat at lunch. His insides were churning with worry as he kept glancing at the doors, expecting someone to dash in at any moment, crying that another student had been attacked. It chilled his bones to think that Tom allowed the Basilisk to roam the castle without the Parselmouth’s supervision.

By the end of lunch, no word had come of an attack. When classes were finished and dinner rolled in, still there was no sign of a new victim. Harry was confused. Had the Basilisk been merely wandering the pipes aimlessly? He spent the evening until curfew skulking about the corridors, straining his ears and peeking around corners through his fingers, hoping that he wouldn’t find any living statues.

The next day in double Herbology there weren’t enough Fanged Geraniums to go around, so Harry and Tom were assigned to prune Professor Beery’s favourite *Hibiscus Vulgaris*, a large plant with an umbrella-sized orange flower hanging from the greenhouse ceiling. Their task was to trim off excess vines that were starting to choke the other creeping plants inhabiting the slanting glass panes.

“I’m sorry, boys, but somebody has to do it. You’ll get extra credit,” Professor Beery said.

“Whatever you do, don’t touch the stamens. This beauty is pollinating,” he added, indicating at the thatch of tentacle-like protrusions leering at them from the centre of the flower. They were covered in a thick layer of yellow fuzz.

They were given a ladder and a large pair of shears. Without even a by-your-leave, Tom grabbed the shears and climbed the ladder, leaving Harry to stand around awkwardly. Eventually, Harry picked
up a burlap sack, figuring he should clean up the cuttings that fell to the floor. He looked up at Tom and winced. Tom’s face was blank, but the way he snipped away with the shears indicated that he was probably imagining Harry’s fingers instead of the vines.

Harry looked away with a twisting feeling in his gut and bent down to scoop up leaves and wiggling bits of vine. They worked in tense silence, listening to the noise the rest of the class were making on the other side of the greenhouse. After a while, Harry heard a muffled grunt from Tom. He looked up again to catch him rolling his shoulders before bringing the shears up again to continue pruning.

“We can switch,” Harry said hopefully. “I’ll pick up from there.”

Tom looked down at him with a closed expression that barely hid his contempt, before climbing down. He handed Harry the shears when he reached the floor and Harry readied himself to climb up in his stead.

“Careful, they’re sharp,” Tom said snidely.

“I think I can handle myself, thanks,” Harry said.

Before he knew it, Tom had grabbed the front of his robes and pulled him sharply up against the ladder, glaring at him through the rungs.

“You’re a Parselmouth,” he hissed, in English this time, face twisted in a furious expression. “Why did you never tell me? Are we— are we related?”

Shocked, Harry stared dumbly. He hadn’t realised that they had lapsed into Parseltongue. He cursed himself for not noticing – he had always had trouble distinguishing between Parseltongue and English. Beneath the fury, Harry thought he saw a hint of genuine hurt in Tom’s eyes.

“No, we’re not related,” Harry said with emphasis. “And I didn’t tell you because I forgot.”

“How could you not tell me? You must have known I’m a Parselmouth, too. It’s common knowledge to the rest of our circle.”

“I…” Harry stuttered, bringing his hand up to touch Tom’s arm. He hesitated and left it hovering in the air. “I’m sorry. I swear, it just never came up.”

"Four months and you never told me. I can't believe you!"

Tom pushed him off, letting go of his robes. The expression on his face was disgusted.

"You have a job to do. Get on with it," he said, jerking his head up at the *Hibiscus*.

Harry stared at him, disquieted. He hadn’t been trying to keep his ability to speak Parseltongue a secret – he was telling the truth when he said it had never come up. There weren’t any snakes in the school, because students weren’t allowed to have them as pets, and while there were plenty of snake carvings and other images in the Slytherin dungeons, many of them even animated, they weren’t sentient enough to speak Parseltongue.

He could see why Tom was upset. Tom had shared many of his secrets with him that Harry was sure he had told nobody else, and now he had stumbled upon a secret that Harry had apparently kept from him, something they had in common and that could have brought them closer together. Harry should have thought of this before, he should have told Tom. He had messed up and it made him feel completely awful.
"I'm sorry," he said, knowing it sounded hollow. He grabbed a rung and scrambled up the ladder to escape Tom's glare, dragging the shears with him.

When he had reached the top of the ladder, he let go with his hands, testing the weight of the shears as he reached for the tangle of vines that needed pruning. His hands shook from the churning feeling of guilt in his stomach.

He had barely made a single cut when the ladder suddenly quaked under him, the previously firmly planted legs of the structure tilting to the side. Harry yelped and swung his arms around to regain balance, his heart skipping a beat in panic. One of his wind-milling arms hit the huge flower hanging from the ceiling, and the next second he was blind. The ladder righted itself and Harry clung to the top, gasping with fright. A ten-foot fall from the ladder was no laughing matter.

After he had calmed down a bit, Harry realised that he hadn't gone blind. Confused, he took off his glasses and squinted at the gunk covering the lenses. Looking down, he saw that his black Hogwarts robes had become yellow with sticky pollen. So had his hair and every bit of exposed skin.

"I told you not to disturb the stamens!" Professor Beery cried. "Look at all that wasted pollen! Twenty points from Slytherin, and you can forget about the extra credit, Potter."

The tentacles, now free of the fuzz, wiggled lewdly at Harry from the centre of the flower.

Harry looked down at Tom, who stood at the foot of the ladder, but he couldn't see his face without his glasses. Impotent fury turned his knuckles white around the ladder even as the rest of the class howled with laughter. Tom had pushed the ladder – Harry was sure of it. He only wondered bitterly why Tom hadn't let him fall and break his neck.

"Get down here and let Mr Riddle do the rest. And don't even think about spelling yourself clean! You can stay like that and think about what you've done."

Humiliated, Harry got down from the ladder. He glared at Tom as he passed him. Tom gave him a malevolent smirk before jerking the shears from his grip and climbing the ladder again.

Harry spent the rest of class huddled on a stool in a corner of the greenhouse, lacking only a dunce cap. He glowered at Tom from beneath his yellow fringe, stewing in bitter thoughts. Tom was the one who had ruined the plant's pollination cycle, yet the professor praised him for doing an excellent job. Tom could have killed him with that ladder trick, yet Harry was punished for carelessness. What was worse, Harry couldn't even point fingers without ruining the charade that everything was alright between them.

For the first time, Harry had experienced the cruel side of Tom Riddle first-hand. He guessed he was lucky to escape with public humiliation instead of, say, his corpse rotting in the Chamber of Secrets, but knowing this didn't make him feel any better.

When class let out, Professor Beery gave Harry a potion that would get the sticky pollen out of his hair.

"Vulgaris pollen has the nasty habit of sticking to you like a lecherous old man. Use this if you don't want to find yellow hairs for the rest of the term. A few well-powered Scourgifys should take care of your clothes."

Rosier and Avery tried to cheer him up on the way to the castle.

"We weren't laughing at you – we were laughing at the situation!" Rosier said.
"Everybody screws up sometimes. Beery shouldn't have made you sit in the corner, but he does that to anybody who messes with his favourite plants," Avery said.

They reached the castle's East entrance. On the ground floor near the entrance, there were public showers for students like Harry who made a mess of themselves in Herbology and didn't have time to go to their house quarters for a bath. Their group filed in to the boys' changing room.

"Now strip, Potter. We'll get your robes clean while you're in the shower."

At first, Harry felt even more humiliated than before, but his friends' no-nonsense attitude put him at ease. He spent a good while scrubbing his hair in the shower, listening to Rosier and Avery's bickering in the next room.

He was squinting at his hands, trying to discern a hint of yellow in the suds, when he heard Avery ask, "Where's Riddle? I thought he came here with us."

"Huh. Is he in there with you, Potter?" Rosier called teasingly.

"Ha, ha," Harry said.

He turned off the shower, the unpleasant mix of feelings flooding back and making his stomach turn. Then, he heard it – the voice that had been swallowed by the running water.

"Hunt... Tear, kill... Blood... Give me blood... Kill... Yes, kill!"

Sudden, primal fear gripped him. Paralysed, he couldn't even think as he listened to the Basilisk move through the pipes, unable to tell which way it was heading. Had he been too quick to count himself lucky?

He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly before calling to his friends, "Guys? I think this is going to take a while – this pollen just won't come off. You can head off without me and I'll catch up later."

"Uh, do you... Do you need help?" Rosier called back, sounding reluctant.

"No, no, I'll manage. You two go to lunch, there's no point in all of us going hungry."

"Okay, if you're sure. Your robes are on the bench," Rosier said.

"See you in the Great Hall, I hope," Avery added. The two of them left the changing room.

Harry grabbed the shower head and tilted it so that he could see the door behind him reflected on its gleaming back, and he waited. The room grew cold around him as the steam dispersed. The Basilisk still hissed within the walls, but the sounds were growing distant. Harry wouldn’t let his guard down.

After what felt like a very long time, he allowed his stance to relax. He wasn't the Basilisk's next victim. His relief was short lived before he began to worry about who was going to take the brunt of Tom's wrath. He turned the shower back on to wash away the suds, and remained under the hot spray for a long time after, wishing that he could wash away his fear as well.

Lunch was over and Harry was going to be late for Potions when he finally got out of the shower and headed further into the castle. When he reached the Entrance Hall, he found out that Potions had been cancelled.

"Another Mudblood has been petrified," Rosier said. He and Avery were part of the crowd milling
in the Entrance Hall. "Gryffindor, sixth year. Veronica Valentine. They found her on the ground floor near the Ancient Runes classroom."

"Oh," Harry said.

He was relieved to hear that the girl had only been petrified and not torn to pieces by the Basilisk, but he had the terrible feeling that this attack was his fault – that he had made Tom so mad that he had to take it out on the first Muggle-born that got in his way. He wondered what had saved Veronica Valentine's life.

“We heard Professor Merrythought say that they’ll probably have students supervised between classes, if the monster has started attacking during the day,” Rosier said.

“That’s bullshit,” Avery said passionately. “If the teachers have to escort us everywhere, when do I get a chance to go to the library? Miss Spencer can’t keep an eye on everyone who steps foot in the library. What about our O.W.L.s, aren’t they thinking of that?”

“This is going to be a pain. I won’t be able to see Maggie,” Rosier grumbled.

The two Slytherins exchanged disgruntled looks, probably thinking that Tom had gone too far.

“Anyway,” Avery said to Harry. “The afternoon classes have been cancelled. I don’t see why – it’s not like it takes the combined effort of all Hogwarts professors to move Valentine to the infirmary – but I’m not complaining. There’s still food being served in the Great Hall, since lunch was interrupted. Do you want to go grab a bite, seeing as you haven’t eaten?”

“I’m afraid, Mr Avery, that students are instructed to return to their common rooms,” a voice interrupted. Professor Dumbledore had crept up behind them. “Although I’m glad that you are taking this crisis so calmly, I would recommend showing greater caution while Slytherin’s monster is running loose.”

“Of course, Professor, I’m sorry,” Avery said, feigning contrition. “We didn’t know about the instructions. We’re heading to the dungeons now.”

“Mr Potter,” Dumbledore said before they could leave. “It seems that you haven’t had lunch. We can’t have children going hungry. Would you care to join me in my office for some sandwiches and a pot of tea?”

Harry had no choice but to accept. He bid goodbye to Avery and Rosier and followed Professor Dumbledore up the marble staircase.

In the professor’s office, Harry sat down in the uncomfortable visitors’ chair, thinking that this conversation had been coming for a long time. He waited tensely as Dumbledore summoned a huge tray full of sandwiches and pulled a steaming teapot out of his sleeve.

“Help yourself, Mr Potter,” Dumbledore said.

Harry forewent the sandwiches and poured himself a cup of tea. It was easier to fake drinking from a cup than biting into a sandwich.

“Mr Potter, I am… worried,” Dumbledore said after Harry had taken a close-lipped sip, surprising Harry by not dancing around the subject. “The situation with the Chamber of Secrets is baffling the staff. Professor Slughorn is working on the Mandrake Draught that will revive the petrified victims, but we fear for the students’ safety. The so-called Heir of Slytherin is growing bolder.”
Harry waited for him to continue, but Dumbledore was gazing out the window with a troubled frown.

“Professor,” Harry said carefully, “I can’t help you with the Chamber of Secrets.”

“I know. I’m sorry, my boy,” Dumbledore said closing his eyes briefly before looking at Harry again. “You are bound by a magical oath. But you do know something about the crisis.”

Harry stared at him blankly.

“You seem distant lately. You need prompting to answer questions in class and you don’t socialise with your friends. Your connection with Mr Riddle appears to have suffered.”

“It hasn’t,” Harry said, glad that his hands were steady around his teacup. “It’s just… difficult for me, with so many things on my mind. The enchantment makes it worse.”

“Yes, knowing must be a terrible burden when you cannot use your knowledge for good.”

Harry made a non-committal sound, faking another sip from his cup.

“I noticed that Mr Riddle was absent from lunch, too,” Dumbledore said casually after a short silence.

Harry almost froze, but managed to keep stirring his tea. He glanced at Dumbledore through his fringe. The man’s expression was calm and open, as though he were making idle small-talk, but Harry knew that this was an interrogation. Cold sweat broke under his collar as his mind raced. Tom always took meticulous care not to implicate himself in any crimes – it seemed ridiculous that he would attack a student at a time when his absence was easily noted. Had he made a mistake? Was Harry to blame?

That was when Harry had a moment of perfect clarity. Suddenly, the torturous inner conflict that had battered his emotions since the writing on the wall resolved itself, and he knew with absolute certainty what he was going to do. It was shocking, yet he felt like he had known all along. Feeling like a huge burden had been lifted from him, Harry looked into Dumbledore’s eyes.

“You suspect him, don’t you? Well, I can tell you right now he was with me,” he lied, staring boldly at Dumbledore, counting on the assumption that the man wouldn’t use Legilimency on a time traveller. It was a risk, but he had to take it if he wanted to appear sincere.

Then, as though his nerve had faltered, he clutched his hands tightly around his teacup and looked down awkwardly. He drew from his most explicit private memories to affect embarrassment and felt his cheeks flush.

“We were… We were in the showers by the East entrance. There was an accident with a plant in Herbology and all this pollen got in my hair. Tom... well. Um. He stayed to help. Nothing happened!” He cleared his throat, scratching at his still damp hair. He imagined Tom naked in the shower with him, and his face burned red.

Harry chanced a glance at Dumbledore, who looked uncomfortable and slightly mortified. Most importantly, he seemed distracted from the interrogation.

“Oh. Well,” Dumbledore said. “Hem. As long as nothing happened. It wouldn’t do to defile our public bathing facilities.”

“Of course not! I swear.” Harry made sure not to meet his eyes this time.
“You haven’t eaten anything,” Dumbledore said, changing the subject.

“I’m not really hungry. I can still smell the pollen in my nose.”

“Well then, I think I’ve taken up enough of your time. I shall escort you to the Slytherin common room. Tightened security, I trust you understand.”

Walking behind Dumbledore, Harry allowed himself a silent sigh of relief.

He had realised under the professor’s subtle interrogation that he would do anything to protect Tom. Even if all the Basilisk’s victims were lined up in a cemetery, he would lie to Dumbledore until he was blue in the face, if it had the slightest chance of preventing Tom’s capture. It didn’t matter that Tom had humiliated him in front of the whole class, or that Tom probably wouldn’t have him back if he begged, because Harry loved him, and that wasn’t going to change.

A part of him was appalled that he could ever condone murder, even in the face of love, but for the first time in nearly three weeks, he felt something akin to peace. Both determined and resigned, but no longer conflicted.

They reached the hidden entrance to the Slytherin dungeons and Dumbledore bid him goodbye. Harry spoke the password (pre-eminence) and entered. The common room was full, as the Slytherins had all been herded in while he was with Dumbledore. He found Tom and the gang gathered in a tight group in a corner. Tom wore an irked expression and it looked like the others were letting him know how much they appreciated the new security measures.

“Tom,” Harry said, stopping to hover outside the group. “Can we talk? If you don’t mind.”

“I do mind,” Tom said flatly.

Harry tried not to feel hurt.

“It’ll only take a minute, and you won’t have to say anything.”

Tom stared at him, looking unimpressed. Harry stared back, ignoring the way the others shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

“Fine,” Tom finally said, pushing himself up from his armchair with a longsuffering air. He led the way to the dormitory and Harry followed.

“Dumbledore called me to his office just now,” Harry said after closing the door behind him. “He asked me questions. You weren’t at lunch when Veronica Valentine was petrified.”

Tom crossed his arms and glared icily at him. “It must have killed you to be under an oath of silence.”

“I told him you were with me. I’m on your side, Tom.”

Tom frowned at him, which Harry guessed was better than glaring.

“Just wanted to let you know. I know you aren’t happy with me, but there’s nothing you or anyone else could do to make me turn against you.”

Tom said nothing, still staring at him through narrowed eyes.

“And, I’m sorry about not telling you about the Parseltongue. I really didn’t mean to keep it a secret. I hope you can stop hating me so much at some point, because things could get awkward if this drags
on. Also,” he added, “I told Dumbledore we were having sex in the ground floor showers during lunch. I don’t know if he bought it, but we might want to pretend we’re together at least a little longer, just to make it more believable.”

Tom’s expression had become unreadable, but still he remained silent. Harry wished he would say something, but knew not to expect anything.

“Right. I guess that was it. Any time you have thoughts to share, let me know.”

He turned around and walked out of the dormitory, leaving Tom to stand there rigidly. He found himself an empty desk in the common room and pulled out his textbooks, not feeling up to socialising with anyone.

The afternoon passed slowly. Harry managed to revise a good portion of *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*, through sheer force of will. At dinner, Tom refrained from inching his chair away from Harry, but otherwise didn’t acknowledge him. Even a glare would have been nice.

Unable to take it any longer, Harry turned in absurdly early. He told himself that he only sound-proofed his bed hangings to get some peace and quiet – he wasn’t at all worried that someone might walk in and hear him crying. So, of course he didn’t notice that Tom snuck out of the Slytherin dungeons after curfew, or that he returned to the dorms in the wee hours of the morning.

Harry only noticed something amiss the next morning when Professor Slughorn came to escort his house to the Great Hall for breakfast. The man seemed disturbingly jolly, considering the state of crisis in the castle. He hummed a tune on the way up to the castle and wouldn’t answer any questions when prodded, simply smiling enigmatically.

After all four houses had found seats in the Great Hall, Headmaster Dippet stood up from his ornate seat at the staff table, causing silence to fall.

“I have very good news to all of you this morning,” he said. “The person responsible for the recent assaults on students, the so called Heir of Slytherin, has been caught.”

There was an explosion of whispers and gasps – a great susurrus of noise amplified by the acoustics. Harry’s jaw would have dropped open if the enchantment hadn’t kicked into gear again.

Dippet held his hand up for silence before continuing, “A student, Rubeus Hagrid of Gryffindor, has been expelled for harbouring a dangerous Dark creature within the castle. The beast has now been banished and we can all sleep well at night once more.

“For all of this, we have one person to thank. Our very own, beloved Slytherin prefect Tom Riddle will be bestowed an Award for Special Services to Hogwarts for his courageous initiative, unerring diligence, and consummate loyalty to the school.”

Harry stared at Tom as he stood up from his seat and inclined his head demurely at the acknowledgement. Shock, joy, dismay, and disbelief warred in him, making him speechless. He hardly heard the rumble of confused applauds, exclamations, and heated gossiping around him.

As Tom sat down again, his eyes finally met Harry’s, and there was something almost warm about them. He offered his hand to Harry, palm up, and Harry realised that his olive branch hadn’t gone ignored after all. He placed his hand in Tom’s palm and smiled, squeezing the hand tightly to make sure it was there. Tom squeezed back and then surprised Harry by pulling him into a heartfelt kiss. It was chaste and gentle, and joy ballooned in Harry’s chest. The Slytherins clapped even harder and Lestrange whistled loudly.
“I never hated you,” Tom whispered into his ear, hugging him close after ending the kiss. Then he pulled away and told everyone to quiet down and get back to their breakfast.

Harry was left swaying with relief – Tom had forgiven him, and there would be no more attacks. His gaze strayed to the Ravenclaw table, where Myrtle sat. He felt a thread of worry when he looked at her, realising with a sinking feeling that her survival had thrown history off course. He wondered how this could have happened – he had forgiven Tom and given him leave to go on killing spree if he wanted, and in doing so he had saved a life.

Once the excitement had died down in the hall and Tom was no longer the centre of everyone’s attention, he shifted his chair closer to Harry and distracted him from his worried contemplation.

“I’m picking up the award from Dippet’s office today after dinner,” he said. “Come with me? We can spend the evening together afterwards, just us.”

“I hope you’re not too proud of that award,” Harry murmured back with a frown. “An innocent student was expelled for it.”

“I don’t want the award. Dippet insists I take it.”

Harry looked at him and knew that he couldn’t hold this against him, either. Hagrid’s fate had always been to suffer the blame for the attacks. Harry didn’t like it, but he had already accepted it.

“I’ll come with you,” he promised.
The plaque was small and modest. Dippet had suggested a trophy, but Tom had adamantly refused. Not only did a trophy fit ill with his modest and conscientious image, but Tom also felt slightly embarrassed for the Headmaster, who had so readily fallen for his half-hearted diversion. How anyone could believe that Rubeus Hagrid was the Heir of Slytherin eluded Tom. He felt indignant and it pained him to discredit Slytherin’s name like this, even as he reaped the benefits of the half-breed’s expulsion.

“Here it is, then, my boy. You have earned it,” Dippet said as he presented Tom with his Special Award for Services to the School. At Tom’s behest, the bestowal was conducted in the privacy of the Headmaster’s office. The shield was encased in a velvet lined frame and protective glass and bore only Tom’s name and a date. This was also at Tom’s insistence – he didn’t want to advertise to the world that he had ‘caught’ the Heir of Slytherin.

“Thank you, sir,” he said demurely as he accepted the award. He held it gingerly in his hands, shifting his weight as though he didn’t quite know what to do with the plaque. “Would it be possible to place it in the Trophy Room? I don’t have anywhere to put it.”

Dippet smiled softly at him, and Tom felt a flare of resentment at the pity.

“Of course, my boy, if you wish. You may collect it whenever your accommodations allow it. Hmm. Perhaps it is good that the other students can come and admire your award. You are an inspiration to your peers, Mr Riddle.”

“I would much prefer an out-of-the-way corner of Trophy Room, sir. The sooner people forget about this whole debacle, the better.”

“So modest. Well, of course you will have your wish.” Dippet beamed at him with a starry-eyed look. “I have never been prouder of you, my boy – or of any student.”

Dippet was easily impressed. The man was entirely removed from the students he oversaw – had been many years ago when he still taught Arithmancy, an unpopular elective, and was even more so now that he spent his days cooped up in his tower. Tom knew that the Headmaster kept a log in his desk that showed how many house points each student earned and lost, and liked to keep an eye on the top ten listings. This was as close as Dippet came to interacting with his students, aside from the occasional troublemaker that was sent to his office to receive discipline.

Tom’s name had always been in the top ten of house points earned. In fact, he consistently contended for the first place. This was why Dippet had grown fond of him, and it was also why he was so easily impressed. To someone who was accustomed to judging people based solely on statistics, unexpected heroics were like an *Aguamenti* to the face.

Tom couldn’t decide whether Dippet was his favourite or least favourite professor in the castle. He was by far the easiest to deal with, because all Tom had to do was earn house points, which he did anyway simply by going to class. On the other hand, the man was so pitifully weak that Tom could almost feel his own talents shrivelling in his presence.
After praising Tom some more, the Headmaster led them both out of the office, heading towards the Trophy Room so that Tom could pick a spot for his award. Harry was waiting for him outside the stone gargoyle and pushed away from the wall he had been leaning against when the statue moved aside.

“Ah, Mr Potter. You were waiting for Tom? We are just going to take his award to the Trophy Room. Will you accompany us?”

“Oh. Um, sure. I’ll come with you. Sir.”

Tom was always amused by the belated way in which Harry used honorifics when addressing authority figures. He thought it was rather fitting, seeing as most of the professors at Hogwarts didn’t deserve the respect.

Their group set off towards the Trophy Room and Harry sidled up close to Tom. He tugged on the frame tucked under Tom’s arm.

“Can I see that?”

Tom handed the award to him and watched his expression as he inspected the shield. There was a twinkle of amusement in Harry’s eyes.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

Harry snorted and leaned in to murmur in his ear so that Dippet wouldn’t hear.

“A friend of mine puked slugs over this when he was serving detention in the Trophy Room.”

Tom’s face scrunched up in disgust and he glanced between Harry and the award.

“He cleaned it up afterwards,” Harry said with a placating tone. “He said it took him an hour to get rid of the slime.”

So, the award would still be at Hogwarts in Harry’s time. Tom had known this – he had no intention of ever retrieving it from the Trophy Room. But was Harry trying to say that he had known Tom would close the Chamber and frame someone for being the Heir of Slytherin? The plaque didn’t explain what he had done to earn the award, but Tom was fairly certain that Harry had known Hagrid in the future. It was possible that the half-breed had told him. It would make sense considering Harry’s reaction to recent events. He had been disgruntled about Hagrid’s expulsion, but there was a notable lack of outrage that indicated that Harry had known it was necessary. In contrast, Harry had been inordinately delighted about the closing of the Chamber.

Had Harry somehow used his knowledge of the future to manipulate Tom into closing the Chamber earlier than he had intended? Certainly, Tom didn’t know how far he would have gone to take revenge on Slytherin’s enemies if Harry weren’t here.

“Well, I’m sure one day I will be ready to forgive him.”

Harry laughed and gave the award back to Tom.

In the Trophy Room, Tom chose a glass cabinet that was tucked into a secluded corner of the room. There his award joined company with several tarnished medals for academic merit, an old Gobstones trophy, and an Award for Excellence in Charms. After that, Tom and Harry bid goodbye to the Headmaster and had the rest of the evening at their disposal.
The light of a nearby torch sent stark shadows across Harry’s face. He stood stiffly next to the glass case, fidgeting with his cuffs and staring at the Gobstones cup instead of looking at Tom. He looked thin and tired, and Tom knew that direct sunlight would reveal a pallid complexion and dark smudges around his eyes. This was the first time they had been alone together since the day he laid his claim to the Chamber of Secrets.

Their separation had been bitter. Tom could never have expected how much Harry’s rejection would hurt him. He understood that the Oath of Unspeakability had been mostly to blame for Harry’s cold silence, but knowing this hadn’t made him feel any less spiteful at the time – Harry had made his thoughts clear by leaving to London after they had made plans to spend Easter together. Yet, even as he stewed in his hurt and fed the growing fury inside him, he couldn’t bring himself to harm Harry. If anyone else had wronged him, they probably would have found a new home in the mental ward of St Mungo’s hospital. Instead, the worst Tom could do was to turn his ex yellow. How shamefully he had fallen. It was just as well that none of the Slytherins had realised that he had made Harry lose his balance on the ladder.

“Hey,” he said softly, taking Harry’s hand and lacing their fingers together. Harry looked away from the trophy case and at their interlocked hands. Tom knew that he had to approach him carefully. Harry was a fiercely ethical wizard and he was probably still agonised over compromising his morals for Tom’s sake. Having cooled his head, Tom could see why Harry had been distraught over the petrifications – though he privately maintained that he had overreacted – and so was able to appreciate the sacrifice he had made.

“Are you alright? I know this wasn’t the ideal solution, but there had to be some form of closure before the school could let these events rest.”

“I know,” Harry said. “I just wish Hagrid didn’t have to suffer for it. He doesn’t deserve it. He’ll be fine, though.”

“I heard Dumbledore has already taken his case. He’s thirteen – they won’t do anything worse to him than snap his wand. He can probably get a new one and start over if he moves to live in another country.”

Harry shrugged noncommittally. “At least nobody was really hurt. That’s what matters.”

He finally looked up at Tom, and their eyes met. There was still pain in Harry’s eyes, but there was acceptance, too, and something Tom couldn’t name. The smile he gave was weak, but sincere. It was that acceptance, ringing with the words he had spoken before – “There is nothing you could do to turn me against you” – that made Tom’s chest feel too small.

He wrapped his arm around Harry’s middle and pulled him close, trapping their still interlocked hands between their chests, and kissed him. Harry opened willingly for him, and for once didn’t fight him for dominance. Less than three weeks apart had been enough to make Tom forget the profound intensity and joy of kissing Harry. A knot unravelled in his chest and the last shreds of uncertainty left him as he wound his tongue around Harry’s, tasting his hot, yielding mouth. Sensing Tom’s need, Harry gave and gave, pouring out his acceptance and forgiveness for Tom to devour. In his hunger Tom chased after Harry until they staggered a few steps and collided with the trophy case. They untangled their hands and Tom slid his fingers deep into Harry’s luxuriously thick, rough hair.

Tom hoped that he could convey his gratitude and make Harry understand how special he was. Nobody had ever accepted Tom for who he was or made him feel like he didn’t have to pretend. It was worth closing the Chamber for this.

They broke apart, a thin string of saliva connecting their mouths before Tom flicked it away with a
swipe of his tongue. Harry opened his eyes, unfocused, a ring of emerald barely visible around his blown pupils. The desire in those eyes made Tom feel heady and reckless. He thought, ‘There’s nothing I can do to put him off’, and leaned in again, burying his nose in Harry’s hair and whispering in his ear.

“Do you want to see the Chamber of Secrets?” Harry became taut in his arms, but didn’t pull away. “I’ll take you there. I’ll show you. You’ll be safe – the Basilisk is sealed in and she takes my orders. Yours, too – you’re a Parselmouth, she won’t hurt you.”

Harry relaxed and leaned back in his arms, not to get away, but far enough to make eye contact.

“Alright,” he agreed, a little too easily in Tom’s opinion. He had expected at least a small waver of hesitation. “As long as you don’t let the Basilisk into the castle again.”

“I promise. You won’t regret this,” Tom said, giving him one last brief kiss before pulling away from the embrace to draw his wand from his pocket. “We should Disillusion ourselves first. The entrance is located in a place where we shouldn’t be seen.”

“We’re going right now? Okay.” Harry brushed a few wrinkles off his robes in a nervous gesture before offering his hand to Tom. “We should probably hold hands again. The last time you Disillusioned us we became completely invisible.”

“You read my mind,” Tom said, taking his hand and lacing their fingers together again. He brought his wand up to rap Harry on the top of the head. It took a fierce spike of concentrated magic to make the Disillusionment Charm work so thoroughly, but Harry had been impressed with his casting before and he didn’t want to disappoint him now.

When they were both invisible, Tom led the out of the Trophy Room and down the nearest flight of stairs to the second floor. It wasn’t curfew yet, but the hallways were mostly deserted. He slowed down when they approached the girls’ lavatory, feeling vaguely embarrassed about the location.

“What made you look for the Chamber of Secrets in a girls’ toilet?” Harry whispered in his ear, sounding amused, as Tom cracked the door open and peered in to make sure that the coast was clear.

“It had to be in a place that was connected to the plumbing network,” Tom muttered back stiffly. There was nobody in the bathroom, so he pushed the door open wide and pulled Harry inside, making sure to close the door behind them. He cast a mild Engorgement Charm on the door to expand it in its frame just enough to jam it. This would buy them time if someone tried to get inside.

“Over here,” he said, stopping in front of the sink that hid the entrance. He brought Harry’s hand to the tap, where the image of a tiny snake was carved. “Look. Open.”

He wished he could see Harry’s face as the tap started glowing and the sink sank into the wall to reveal the gaping pipe leading down to Slytherin’s legendary Chamber.

“Wow,” he heard Harry say.

“I think we can take off the charm now,” Tom said. “It’s better not to stumble around in the dark like this when we get there.”

When the Disillusionment Charms were gone, Tom found Harry standing next to him, looking curiously into the black maw of the pipe. He didn’t seem intimidated at all, which Tom found strange. Even someone who had once been in Gryffindor should feel apprehensive about stepping foot in gaping hole that lead to an unknown destination. Tom himself had thought twice before
jumping in when he first found the entrance.

“I assure you, it’s safe,” he said. “You should go first, and I’ll close the entrance behind us so that nobody will find it while we are inside.”

“That makes sense.” Harry stepped closer to the edge, and finally Tom saw him falter hesitantly.

“Just to warn you, the way down is long and swift. Imagine a steep slide with many jolting twists and turns. Don’t be alarmed – as I said, it’s safe, and I’ll be right behind you.”

“I’ll be fine,” Harry said, shooting a smile at him. He leaned in to give Tom a quick peck on the cheek before saying, “See you in a minute!” and jumping into the hole with a reckless lack of caution.

Tom let out an exasperated huff before climbing in after him, holding himself braced over the steep decline long enough to hiss, “Close!” and make sure that the sink ground back into place in the girls’ lavatory. Then he let go and submitted to the indignity of the way down.

Harry was waiting for him down in the tunnel, straightening his dishevelled robes.

“That was actually pretty fun,” he said. “How are we going to get back up?”

“The Basilisk will give us a boost,” Tom said, adjusting his own hems, which had ridden up during the slide down.

Harry paused to give him an alarmed look. “Seriously?”

“Absolutely. I told you, she obeys my commands.”

“Ah. Okay. I suppose it can’t be much different from riding a Hippogriff. No, wait. What am I saying?”

Tom snorted. “Come on, we’re not in the Chamber yet. It’s this way.”

He held up his wand and cast a powerful *lumos* to light the tunnel ahead. Harry came to his side and easily slipped his hand into Tom’s palm.

“It’s in surprisingly good condition, considering this place has been abandoned for a millennium,” Harry mused.

“I cleaned it up a bit.”

An understatement. The amount of waste in the tunnel alone had made even Tom feel queasy: animal remains, discarded skins, faeces, and who knew what else, and all of it crawling with bugs. Not all insects were smart enough to flee before a Basilisk. The pipe had also been covered in slime and some disgusting form of fungus that didn’t appear in any textbook or encyclopaedia Tom had checked. He had eventually killed it with Dark Magic.

Now the tunnel was empty and clean, and their footsteps echoed from the bare, roughly hewn walls. Tom felt his heart rate speed up in anticipation as they neared the main chamber. Never, in all the years that he had searched for the Chamber of Secrets, had he imagined sharing his discovery with someone else. Who could be worthy of such an honour? Certainly none of the sycophants who only wanted to leech on his glory. Before he met Harry, there hadn’t been a single soul who didn’t seek his company for selfish benefits.
Harry had proven himself to be selfless, so Tom felt that he could afford to do something magnanimous and share the Chamber of Secrets with him instead of hoarding it to himself. Besides, was there any better way to prove his claim to Slytherin’s legacy? Most of the school’s populace still remained sceptical about the mere existence of the Chamber, and none of them knew that it belonged to Tom Marvolo Riddle, excluding his closest associates. Of course, Harry didn’t need convincing, but it felt only right and appropriate that he should see with his own eyes the majesty of Tom’s heritage.

They reached the entrance to the main chamber, barred by seamless stone doors. The sentinel serpents carved into the doors stared down at them with gleaming emerald eyes.

“This is where we enter the main chamber. The Basilisk should be sleeping in her nest, but just in case she is out and about, you should close your eyes when I open the door.”

“That sounds reassuring,” Harry said, but obligingly brought his hand up, ready to shield his eyes. His grip on Tom’s hand tightened slightly.

Tom squeezed back and spoke, “Open.”

The entwined stone snakes began to move, untangling slowly and revealing a widening crack between the heavy doors. Tom held his own palm in front of his face, squinting cautiously through his fingers. Seeing that the chamber was empty, he lowered the hand and urged Harry to do the same.

“Welcome to the Chamber of Secrets.”

Tom watched Harry’s reaction avidly as he looked upon the magnificent hall with its massive carven columns and mysterious green glow. Harry gave an appreciative whistle, but the look in his eyes was not as overwhelmed as Tom had hoped for. How dare he be less than awed by Slytherin’s secret chamber?

“It’s great,” Harry said, looking around as they stepped inside and walked between the rows of columns towards the back of the chamber. “It looks like the snakes are watching us.” He pointed at the snake carvings decorating the pillars.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they were,” Tom said, stepping up to the nearest column and running his fingers over the coils of one of the serpents. “There seems to be a trace of old magic here. I get the feeling that they used to be animated, but the charms have faded over the centuries with nobody around to renew them.”

“It seems amazing that it took a thousand years before one of Slytherin’s descendants found this place. There must have been others before you who attended Hogwarts. Didn’t they ever look?”

“Countless people have looked for the Chamber of Secrets over the past millennium, and I imagine there were a few of Slytherin’s line among them. However, the entrance is very cleverly hidden – it took me nearly five years of constant searching to locate it. Anyone else would have given up on ever finding it.

“Besides,” Tom added, tamping down on a sense of shame, “I’m the first of Slytherin’s direct line of descendants to attend Hogwarts in centuries. I’ve looked through many records, and everything points to the line becoming derelict and falling to obscurity sometime during the 17th and 18th centuries. It still exists, but as far as I know, those who are left of it live in poor conditions. I don’t know why they stopped sending their children to Hogwarts, though. Hogwarts doesn’t turn down magical children just because they are poor.” Tom should know this. What little money he had, came
from charity or the various goods he collected from his fellow students and sold on Knockturn Alley.

The pin he gave Harry on Valentine’s Day had been a sacrifice from a full set of collectible Hogwarts House pins from the years 1938 to 1942. Tom had made sure to replace the pin to complete the collection, and once he had a set for all of his seven years at Hogwarts, he would try to sell them. There were people who paid good money for that sort of thing – and who knew, if he grew sentimental, he might even keep the collection.

“Maybe they’re embarrassed,” Harry said. “It seems stupid, though – if you’re poor, then the only way to become rich is to get an education and a well-paid job.”

“Well, there are other ways, but that certainly is the most conventional route.”

They reached the back of the chamber, where Salazar Slytherin’s huge statue loomed.

“So, what do you think?” Tom asked. He wasn’t nervous. He didn’t need Harry’s approval, but he did want him to be impressed.

“I think he may have been compensating for something,” Harry said, looking up at the statue.

“That might be true,” Tom said, the corner of his lips twitching up despite him. “But, I wasn’t talking about the statue.”

Harry looked at him then, and Tom admired the greenish gleam of his wild, black hair in the murky light of the chamber. There was a lopsided grin on his face, amusement lingering in his eyes, but it faded into a soft smile as he looked at Tom.

“It’s unbelievable, Tom,” he said. “Well, this place is kind of dank, but it’s unbelievable that you discovered it. Even after years of coming up with nothing, you still kept looking and never gave up. You deserve this. If there’s anyone in the world who deserves such a great, historical legacy, it’s you.”

Of course, that was true. Harry said nothing that Tom didn’t already know. However, hearing him say these things with that earnest look in his compelling green eyes was somehow completely different from knowing. To hear that Harry appreciated his perseverance and understood why the Chamber of Secrets was so important to him made him feel strange, as though something heavy had lodged itself into his chest, making it a little hard to breathe. Annoyed at himself, he exhaled sharply to clear the obstruction.

“Well, I’ll grant you that the chamber is somewhat desolate after centuries of neglect, but there is one thing that you haven’t seen yet, and I’m sure you will find it thrilling.” He turned to indicate up at Slytherin’s image. “The Basilisk sleeps beyond the statue. If you’ll allow me, I shall summon her before us and introduce you. As a Parselmouth, you will have full authority over her.”

“Oh, um. Sure. Fine. If you’re sure,” Harry said, clasping his hands together nervously and eyeing the statue warily. “Does she have a name?”

“If Slytherin ever named her, she has forgotten about it since. I saw no point in giving her a name, because she wouldn’t respond it anyway.”

“Are you sure she won’t try to eat me? I may be a Parselmouth, but I’m no heir of Slytherin. No relation whatsoever. Can’t she smell that?”

“If you were ‘no relation whatsoever’, you wouldn’t be a Parselmouth. Perhaps yours is a latent talent from an obscure branch of the family tree.”
Tom was fairly sure that his own explanation was wrong. Parseltongue was a gift that was known to be exclusive to Slytherin’s direct line of descendants. There was more to Harry’s gift than met the eye, and Tom was almost willing to bet his wand that it had something to do with their connection. He was also sure that if questioned about it, Harry would give no answer.

“She won’t try to eat you,” he continued. “I will forbid her. She obeys me. Now, close your eyes before I summon her.”

With one last glance at Slytherin’s statue, Harry huffed a breath and muttered, “Fine.” Then he closed his eyes, brow furrowed in concentration.

Tom eyed him uneasily. He looked exceedingly vulnerable standing there with his eyes scrunched shut. Making a swift decision, he cleared his throat.

“On second thought, take off your glasses,” he ordered. Harry opened his eyes.

“Why?” he asked, looking confused.

“Just take them off.”

Harry pulled the round spectacles off his face and folded them neatly into his pocket. “Now what?” he said.

Instead of answering, Tom stepped up close behind him and placed his palm over Harry’s eyes, making sure they were completely covered. Harry yelped indignantly, which Tom ignored, wrapping his free arm securely around Harry’s waist.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you to keep your eyes closed,” he explained. “I just don’t want to take any risks. The briefest eye-contact would mean instant death.”

“This is ridiculous,” Harry grumbled but stopped struggling, one hand gripping Tom’s wrist where his hand was covering his eyes.

“Now, beware,” Tom said before closing his eyes and speaking in Parseltongue, “Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four.”

Harry grew tense in his arms as they listened to the scraping sound of the statue’s mouth grinding open. There was a moment of silence before they could hear something moving above them, the low, dry hiss of scales against stone. There was a slight tremor and a quiet splash when the Basilisk landed on one of the shallow pools of water gathered in uneven dips of the ancient chamber’s floor. For a giant snake, the Basilisk could move with astounding stealth.

“Master has brought food,” the Basilisk hissed excitedly and Tom could almost feel its forked tongue taste the air only a foot away from Harry’s face. “Delicious, warm blood.”

“Shield your deadly gaze, mighty serpent. Close your eyes and do not open them without your master’s leave,” Tom ordered with his most commanding inflection. He tightened his hold on Harry’s waist, pulling him closer to his chest. Harry was very still, hardly even breathing.

“As master commands,” the Basilisk hissed with a sullen note.

Tom opened his eyes cautiously and, seeing that she had indeed obeyed him, lowered his hand from Harry’s face. Harry fumbled his glasses out of his pocket and placed them back on his nose, looking up at the looming serpent with fear that only emphasised his courage.
“I have not brought food,” Tom said imperiously, frowning at the serpentine tongue that fluttered out dangerously close to the wizard in his arms. “This is my mate.” He almost winced at the description, but there was no other word for what Harry was to him in Parseltongue. “When he speaks, you will listen. Every command he gives you, you must obey. Those are my orders – your master’s orders.”

The Basilisk reared back, whipping her tail agitatedly and hissing as though he had burned her. “I serve only one master!”

“Now you serve two. Your master’s orders.” Into Harry’s ear he whispered in English, “Say something to her. Assert dominance.”

Harry stood frozen for several seconds, eyes wide with panic. Tom wrapped both arms around him tightly to reassure him. Then, he seemed to get a grip and lifted his chin.

“Listen to me, Basilisk. My word is your master’s word. To harm me would be to harm your master. This is my place. Obey me.” He spoke with command, but the anxious glance he gave Tom betrayed his nerves.

“Insolence!” she spat, writhing impotently around her own coils – she couldn’t strike with Tom pressed so close to Harry. Her resistance was worrying – Tom had been sure that the magic that gave Harry Parseltongue would be enough to pacify her.

“Bow to my mate now, serpent, or I shall trap you within your nest forever, and there you will die of hunger!”

Finally, the Basilisk submitted, albeit with the worst grace Tom had ever seen. She hissed unintelligibly, sounding like a bucketful of water tossed over hot coals, and bent her head down. Her blunt nose wasn’t even close to touching the floor, as it did for Tom.

“As master commands,” she said. “I shall obey his mate.”

“Good. You must not harm him or threaten him with harm. When he calls for you, you must come.”

“Yes, master.”

“You may leave. I will call for you later.” Tom had wanted to show her off some more, but it was better to dismiss her than to risk her ire.

With one last disgruntled hissing sound, the Basilisk turned away and stretched up to return to her nest behind the statue.

Tom let go of Harry and stepped back to give him space. Harry swayed a little on his feet and let out a nervous laugh as he watched the statue’s mouth grind closed behind the serpent.

“I don’t think she likes me,” he said.

“She’s used to being independent,” Tom said, though privately he was disturbed by the Basilisk’s vehement protests.

“Why didn’t she just kill us both? Obviously she hated every second of that. Why does she take orders from you if she doesn’t like them?”

“There is magic that binds her to Slytherin’s blood. She cannot harm me, and she’s obliged to obey me.” Tom shifted his weight and crossed his arms with a frown. None of this was going as well as he
had planned. “I’m sorry if she scared you.”

“What, scared? Me?” Harry said, blowing his fringe out of his eyes with a crooked smile. “I was just admiring what big teeth she has.”

“I didn’t bring you here to intimidate you.”

“I know.”

A silence stretched between them, and to Tom’s frustration, he didn’t know how to break it and make things right.

“I’m not intimidated,” Harry finally said, stepping closer. “Are you worried about that? I’m not afraid of you, Tom. I’d never – I trust you. The Basilisk, though? Well, anyone would be just a little bit wary. You seem to have her under control, so really, I’m not afraid of her, either.” He held Tom’s gaze insistently. “I know you. In some ways, I know you better than you know yourself. I know things you haven’t done yet, things you can do, things you could do… And none of it bothers me, at least not anymore.

“Or, you know. I bet there will be loads of things we don’t agree on, because we see things so differently and have such contradicting values. There’ll be a lot of things I need to make peace with, but I think we can work through all of it when the time comes. I mean, if you’re willing to work with me. I certainly want to work with you – every part of you, even the scary bits that might push others away. Because it’s all you, who you are, and every bit of you is worth …” He furrowed his brow and waved his hands inarticulately. “… all of it. All of this. All of… what I have. I lied to Dumbledore for you, through my teeth. You know how bad I am at lying, but I really should have won an Oscar for that, if I say so myself. I’d do it again. I’d lie to anyone for you; I’d hex anyone if it kept you safe. I’d take the blame for you. Nothing you could ever do can change that. Really, you’ll have to go all out to shock me.”

A silence followed during which Tom, to his horror, found himself unable to look directly at Harry or keep his hands entirely still. He clenched them into fists to stop the fidgeting. Harry was the only person who had ever made him feel like this – pleased, flattered, and proud, but abashed and wrong-footed at the same time.

Harry shifted his weight awkwardly and drew in a breath to say something more, but let it out in a sharp exhale. He tried again and said, “I told you this before. Why did you… Not that I don’t appreciate this; I really do, more than you know – but why did you close the Chamber when you knew I didn’t hold it against you anymore?”

At the question Tom relaxed his hands and looked at Harry. He considered what answer to give – he had several reasons for sealing the Basilisk back inside the Chamber and framing Hagrid. There was, of course, the inconvenience of the improved security measures. While Tom was perfectly capable of sneaking around behind the professors’ backs, the other Slytherins had been less than pleased with him when they found out that they wouldn’t be allowed to move about the castle at their own discretion. Attacking Veronica Valentine during lunch had also been a slip on his part. Tom doubted that he would have been placed under investigation even if someone had pointed out to the headmaster that he had been absent from the Great Hall, but even the slightest doubt was too much to risk.

These were both reasons that Harry could undoubtedly figure out on his own – he didn't need or want to hear them. He wanted to be reassured of Tom's character. Tom could give him that.

"I had nothing left to prove," he said with a small shrug. "I had already laid my claim to Slytherin's
legacy, as publically as conceivably possible. The Muggle-borns didn't matter, in the end. No matter how many students the Basilisk petrified, there would always be people who doubt that the Chamber of Secrets even exists, and very few would ever know that I am Slytherin's heir. It was a pointless endeavour, but in my anger and resentment, I didn't realise that. I didn't see that I already had my proof – it's right here." He swept his arm in an arch to encompass the Chamber of Secrets.

"You did a selfless thing when you put aside your morals to stand beside me," he continued honestly. "It was an impressive and inspiring gesture – I know how important moral integrity is to you. I couldn't just continue as before after you had taken such a significant step to meet me half-way."

Harry stared at him with some indecipherable emotion, before looking down.

"Thank you," he muttered. "You didn’t have to do it, but you did anyway. I really do appreciate that."

The air between them had grown awkward again. This was a conversation that had to happen, Tom knew this, but such serious topics and so much opening up made him uncomfortable in ways that he had never felt before. Frankly, he wished that they could go back to snogging each other senseless against a wall – that, he knew how to deal with.

"Well, I'm glad we understand each other again," he said. "These past couple of weeks were…"

"I know," Harry said. Neither of them could look at each other.

"Do you want to return to the castle?" Tom asked after another moment of silence. "I'm sorry for bringing you here – I should have realised this place would put you ill at ease."

"I'm not ill at ease," Harry hastened to reassure. "Not really. I mean, I wouldn’t call this place cosy, but it’s very impressive. I bet it’s really useful, too, if you want to get away from everything or if there’s something you don’t want anyone to find. A place just for you. I’m glad you brought me here."

"It could be a place just for us," Tom blurted without thinking. A second later he regretted his words. "I mean," he continued hurriedly, but ran short. He frowned and started over, "I don’t mean we should turn the Chamber into a love nest. I don’t want that. I mean that now you have access to this place, too, and the Basilisk is under orders to obey you. You may come and go as you please, and if ever there’s a time when we can’t find a moment of peace anywhere else, we can come here."

Harry was watching him with an amused expression as he spoke.

"I think a love nest would need some rudimentary comforts, at least. The dormitory will do for now, if you ask me." When Tom glared at him, he made an attempt to pull his face straight. "The rest of it sounds fine to me. I’m not sure if I’ll ever feel the need to talk to the Basilisk on my own, but I won’t mind coming here again with you, if that’s what you want."

"It’s just a possibility. I don’t intend to leave the Chamber neglected, even though I’ve closed it off from the rest of the school."

"That would be a pity, yeah."

The unbearable silence returned again. Tom was eyeing Slytherin’s statue, tempted to call the Basilisk to take them up the pipes back to the castle, when Harry shifted his weight from foot to foot and let out a frustrated huff.
“This is really awkward,” Harry said. “How about we stop talking and just snog, okay? That pillar looks pretty comfy.”

Tom couldn’t agree quickly enough.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Hello, hello – what is this? An update, after all this time? It’s not abandoned folks, perish the thought. This chapter fought me like a wounded badger. It’s no joke when I say that 19,721 words worth of scrapped scenes were sacrificed so that what you see before you could exist.

I’m really sorry for making my readers wait for so long. It wasn’t my intention at all. A very difficult chapter combined with exciting new fandoms and turmoil in my personal life are all to blame, as well as honest laziness. There were times when I didn’t want to so much as think about this fic at all, but not once did I consider abandoning Words Fail altogether. I won’t do that – I have too many awesome plot twists planned for the future. I’ll do my best to get the next chapter out as soon as possible and set a respectable pace after that.

Many thanks to Jazz, my beta, for sticking by me and exchanging so many excellent ideas to further this story!

Chapter 21

A week after the closing of the Chamber, Hagrid’s hut appeared overnight at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. When the Slytherins heard of it, they took the first opportunity to crowd around an overlooking window to ogle at the structure.

“I can’t believe it,” Lestrange said, biting his knuckle mirthfully. “That’s the funniest thing I’ve seen in ages. Look at the size of that hovel!”

Harry hated to admit it, but Lestrange had a point. Before, Hagrid’s cottage had always looked small and lonely against the magnificent backdrop of the Hogwarts grounds, but now standing next to the current groundskeeper’s modest dwelling, the building looked absurdly large.

“I can’t believe that he’s still here at all,” Dolohov complained. “He was supposed to be expelled!”

“These half-breeds need a firm hand,” Mulciber said. “First we let them nest – next thing we know, they start breeding and then we have a pest problem on our hands.”

“I wouldn’t put it past Dumbledore to go looking for a mate for him next,” Rosier agreed. “Can’t have his pet troll becoming lonely. This is so typical. Dippet has no backbone at all.”

Harry bit his tongue, keeping his eyes on the hut. It was the same house he knew so well, but completely different. No moss grew on the roof and the stones had seen no weather. The windows were dark, lacking curtains, and the chimney was cold. There was no clutter around the doorway and the vegetable patch was missing. There wasn’t a single sign of life to the hut, and Hagrid himself was
nowhere to be seen. Harry guessed that was for the best.

It was funny how he had always thought that Dumbledore had been very kind to let Hagrid stay at Hogwarts after his expulsion. It had never occurred to him that it must have been terribly painful for Hagrid to stick around as a serving hand while his old classmates went about their studies, all the while weathering the resentment, vitriol, and vicious gloating of the student body who thought him guilty of the attacks. All of his dreams and plans for the future had been dashed in a horrible show of injustice. If Harry were in Hagrid’s shoes, he couldn’t imagine feeling grateful for anything.

“I hate to say this, but this time it wasn’t really Dippet’s fault,” Lestrange said, sobering up and folding his arms with a frown. “I wrote to Father and asked if he could do something, since he’s on the Board of Governors. He looked into it but there’s nothing he can do. Apparently, Dumbledore got to Mr. Stern and made him offer Hagrid an apprenticeship at his own expense. It follows that Hagrid’s not employed by the school at all, so the Board can’t touch him, and neither can the Headmaster.”

“Are you serious?” exclaimed Dolohov. “If I know Mr. Stern at all – and I’ve served seventeen detentions with him, I keep count – then he would never volunteer to take Hagrid under his wing. Never mind that he’s an ogre; Stern can’t stand incompetence, and Hagrid hasn’t got any degree, he doesn’t even have a wand! Dumbledore must be blackmailing him.”

“Or paying him,” Lestrange said. “Probably both. I have to hand it to him, but that doesn’t mean I hate him any less.”

“This sucks,” Rosier enunciated. “If it had been a Slytherin, they would have been blasted from here to bloody Cape Town and good riddance before they could say ‘not guilty’. What the hell will it take to get rid of one snivelling Gryffindor around here? This doesn’t really encourage me to do right by others or whatever. Just saying.”

“If we could get Stern fired, that would get rid of Hagrid as well,” Mulciber speculated.

“Exactly how much dirt do we have on that guy?” Lestrange said, shaking his head. “He’s been working here for seventy years – he’s like the overlooked cornerstone of Hogwarts. It would be really difficult to get rid of him, and Dumbledore would be expecting something like that from us anyway.”

“Your defeatist attitude is starting to piss me off,” Dolohov warned.

“Learn how to pick your battles! No wonder you’ve served so many detentions. We can’t win every time and that sucks, but look at what we have, instead,” Lestrange insisted, lowering his voice. “The Chamber served its purpose and Riddle is a hero. The ogre was expelled as a bonus, and yeah, he shouldn’t be here, but at least he’s properly humiliated this way.”

Harry couldn’t stand this anymore. Dolohov had a heated retort to Lestrange’s argument, but Harry didn’t listen. “I’m going to class,” he muttered to anyone who might hear and pushed away from the window. Tom, who had stood silently next to him, looked at him with a concerned frown and grabbed his sleeve. The anger Harry was trying to suppress flared and he yanked his arm out of Tom’s grip, casting him a glare. Tom didn’t step back, but his expression shuttered and he stared levelly after Harry as he stalked down the hallway and around a corner.

Harry knew it had to happen – Tom had been meant to frame Hagrid for his own evil deeds. He had already gone over this and accepted that he couldn’t and shouldn’t meddle with Hagrid’s situation, and he had chosen to have Tom’s back in the matter, but it was impossible to keep a stiff upper lip when his friends kept saying such horrid things about someone who had never done anything to
deserve their hatred. There was something wrong with a situation where letting an innocent suffer was the responsible thing to do.

Another responsible thing to do would be to tell the Unspeakables about Myrtle. Guilt had almost forced him to pick up a quill and write to the Supervisor several times, but he simply couldn’t do it. He was terrified to think what the Unspeakables would do with the knowledge that a girl who should have died was still walking about. They might hire an assassin to kill her, or whisk her away to their underground halls, never to let her out again. Perhaps they would Obliviate anyone who had been in contact with her after the closing of the Chamber. Harry could not let that happen to Myrtle, no matter how distorted the timeline would turn out otherwise. No little girl should endure something so cruel, and Harry refused to be responsible for that.

Moral high ground did not make him feel less guilty, nor did knowing that Hagrid would eventually be happy and take pride in his work. He wished he could close his eyes and all the responsibilities would disappear. On most days he could pretend that the Chamber of Secrets was closed and buried for good, but something always slapped him in the face to prove him wrong.

Class wouldn’t start for fifteen minutes, so Harry was the first student to arrive at the Potions dungeon. He tried the door and, finding it unlocked, cracked it open cautiously.

“Harry, my boy! You’re early,” Professor Slughorn exclaimed. He was holding a piece of chalk in his pudgy fingers, notes for today’s lecture half-way written on the blackboard. “No brewing today, I hope you recalled.”

Harry suppressed a cringe, knowing that he couldn’t go back into the corridor now. “I did, sir. I left my cauldron in the dorm,” he said, pushing the door open the rest of the way and stepping inside. He went to his usual workstation in the second row.

“Good, good. We’re talking about acidity balance in antidotes – exciting stuff. It will be covered in your theory O.W.L., so try not to fall asleep.”

“It might be a struggle, but I think I’ll manage, sir,” Harry said, falling into the pattern of flattery that he had learned over the past months, but not feeling the amusement.

“What brings you here on your own? Did you have a fight with your friends?” Slughorn asked, bringing the chalk back to the blackboard and continuing to write.

“No. Everything’s fine.” Harry busied himself with pulling out his notes and arranging his writing utensils on his desk.

“Are you sure? A Head of House is sworn to confidentiality, you know. I’m here to help.”

“Yes, I’m sure. Thanks for your concern, though, sir.”

“Alright. I’m glad. Do you have Herbology today?” Slughorn changed the subject, grinning at Harry over his shoulder as he waved his wand over the blackboard. The notes written there sank under the surface, to be brought back later.

“No, sir. We will tomorrow, though.”

“Oh, pity. Today you would have had a free period. Herbert tells me that the Mandrakes are ripe for harvesting. He’s busy with it right now, and in the afternoon I will go down to Greenhouse Three to help prepare the roots for the draught. The brewing will have to wait until tomorrow, and if luck will have it, the Petrified children will be up and about before weekend.”
“That’s great!” Harry said, not feeling as enthused as the news called for.

“Yes, it is. Mr Riddle will be happy to hear that his good work is coming to a conclusion. We’ll finally be able to put this unpleasantness behind. Though, of course the victims will have to adjust to the weeks they have missed. Mr Towler will need some special arrangements with his O.W.L.s to accommodate his circumstances, and the sixth years will need some leeway as well. Professor Dumbledore thinks that they should be exempted from the end of year examinations altogether, but I think that would be too much of a good thing.”

As time neared the beginning of class, Harry’s classmates started to trickle in and take their seats with sluggish reluctance. Theory lessons never inspired much enthusiasm in the students. Avery and Rosier turned up with Tom trailing behind them and descended around Harry with vigour.

“What happened, mate? Nobody saw you leave. Did you go to the loo or something?” Rosier said, dropping his satchel on his workstation with an irreverent smack.

“Yeah, that,” Harry said, glad for the ready excuse. “Thought I might as well come to class early while I was at it.”

“You missed the reaming Dolohov got from Professor Merrythought for trying to hex Lestrange,” Avery said. “Her timing was priceless! One second we were alone, and the next, Dolohov’s wand was flying down the hallway and then there she stood, dangling it around like so.” He mimed holding something away from him with the tips of his fingers like it smelled something awful. “She docked twenty points from Slytherin, but man if it wasn’t worth the look on his face.”

“It would have been funnier if she had given him detention instead, but beggars can’t be choosers,” Rosier agreed. “Riddle will win the points back by wowing Slughorn with his profound understanding of toxicity or whatever.”

“Acidity balance, Mr Rosier,” Slughorn exclaimed from the blackboard, where he was putting the final touches on a complicated chart. He flashed a teasing grin at Rosier. “Thank you for demonstrating your lack of preparation. Now I have someone to ruthlessly needle with questions.”

“Oh no,” Rosier whimpered, only half-joking.

While Avery and Rosier settled obliviously at their work stations, Tom moved his stool closer to Harry.

“What is the matter with you all of a sudden? I thought you were happy with how I handled the Chamber,” he murmured with an annoyed frown.

“Yes, I appreciate that you closed it,” Harry whispered, “but excuse me if I don’t point and laugh at the poor bloke you threw under the bus.”

“How long are you going to hold that over my head? It had to be done.”

“Look, I’m not holding anything over your head. It’s my own morals I’m struggling with – feel free to ignore me while I’m at it. But don’t expect me to laugh along when you’re busy preening over your conquest.”

“When have you ever seen me preen?” Tom hissed, affronted.

Darkly, Harry thought of the diary he had found in second year and how it had shown him the memory of how Tom had framed Hagrid for opening the Chamber, and the way Tom’s apparition had spoken within the Chamber of Secrets itself. Tom had seemed quite smug then.
His silence seemed to provide Tom with an answer, because his face darkened into a scowl. “I see. It doesn’t matter what you’ve seen me do, because you think you know me so well.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Harry protested, but Tom was already dragging his stool back to his own workstation and sitting down with more distance between them than strictly necessary.

“Alright, boys and girls, welcome to Potions Theory! I hope you all have your quills and notebooks ready, because we have little time and a lot of things to cover.”

Harry was left gritting his teeth uselessly as Slughorn demanded the students’ attention.

Potions class passed slowly for Harry, whose mind could not focus on acidity balance in antidotes. Tom did not look his way once, somehow also managing to act normal, alertly taking notes, participating, and earning back the points Dolohov had lost and then some. Knowing Tom, this silent treatment could last for days. Harry could not believe that this had suddenly turned into a situation where he was supposed to apologise to Tom.

When class was over and the students thundered out for the break, he fell into step with Tom, who glared at him from the corner of his eye.

“Er,” said Avery, looking confused – and no wonder, because he and Tom were heading upstairs for Arithmancy, and Harry had never bothered walking with them before, instead choosing to spend his free period in the dungeons with Rosier.

“Do you mind finishing that conversation?” Harry said to Tom.

“I’ll just go ahead then,” Avery said, hearing trouble in Harry’s voice. He sped up his stride until he was almost jogging to get out of sight while Tom stopped to face Harry.

“You’re right, I haven’t seen you preen,” Harry said without preamble. “You’ve been a perfectly modest and I didn’t mean to imply otherwise. I was just upset about Hagrid. I know why you had to do what you did, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’s just a kid and you stole his future and his dreams from him.”

“We are not talking about this out in the open,” Tom said through gritted teeth, grabbing his elbow and jerking him further into the dungeons and down an unused path. When he deemed them sufficiently alone, he rounded down on Harry. “Don’t insult me with your platitudes,” he growled. “I know you think I’m heartless, that I used Hagrid out of spite, and you’re not entirely wrong. I don’t care about Hagrid. I don’t care what the poor thing is going to do now that his wand is in pieces and his already poor reputation is ruined beyond repair. Why should I? I’ve never had a single interaction with him and none of his friends are my friends. The same could be said for most of the people in this castle. But – and it seems like you didn’t realise this – Hagrid, unlike most other students, would have been expelled anyway whether I used him or not. I chose him because he was already guilty and he had the least to lose.”

This gave Harry pause. “What do you mean?”

“The Acromantula,” Tom said, huffing impatiently. “I know you know about it. He was harbouring a quintuple-x rated creature in the castle. That’s not mischief – that’s a crime. If I had reported him as soon as I found out, he would have been kicked out months ago, and even if I had let him be, someone would have discovered the beast eventually, or it would have escaped from its crate, or grown too big to be contained. He would have been expelled anyway,” he enunciated.

Harry stared at him, feeling numb with the realisation that Tom was right. How had he not thought of
it sooner? He had always been so focussed on the injustice of Tom’s scheme that he had been blind to the Acromantula in the dungeons. He knew Hagrid well enough to know that he wouldn’t have had the heart to set the spider free into the forest without someone there to speak reason to him. Aragog would have grown too big for his box and escaped. Half of the school’s children lived in the underground levels – who knew what kind of carnage would have followed? Students had been expelled for less; Harry would have been expelled for less in the past if not for Dumbledore’s favouritism.

“Still,” Harry said, forcing the words through his suddenly dry mouth. “Now people think he’s been attacking Muggle-borns.” He shook his head to clear his thoughts. “What’s done is done. There’s no point in arguing about this.”

Tom looked unimpressed. “Well, the next time we fight and you bring this up again, I’ll make sure to remind you how you wanted to drop the subject and leave it to rot between us. If you can’t forgive me, then there’s nothing we can do, because I’m sure as hell not going to take my award back to Dippet and confess everything. That will never happen.”

“I forgive you – I forgave you ages ago! I wouldn’t even be with you if I hadn’t. But I don’t particularly want to dwell on the subject, if you don’t mind. I don’t have to listen to our friends mock Hagrid and discuss how he hasn’t been wronged and humiliated enough as it is.”

“That’s not how forgiveness works. You can’t say ‘I forgive you’ and still maintain that what I did was wrong.”

“What?” Harry said, hardly believing his ears. “That’s not true. You forgive people for doing things that are wrong, or else there was nothing to forgive in the first place. You did something wrong. I forgive you. Now we’re even, but that doesn’t mean that what you did wrong is suddenly right. Get it?”

A tiny, confused frown appeared between Tom’s eyebrows. Harry sighed exasperatedly, wondering what made this so difficult to understand.

“It means that I don’t want to punish you for what you did anymore. So, I’m not going to bring up Hagrid in any irrelevant arguments, because that would be the same as punishing you.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Tom said, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

“Yes, it does. This is a basic concept – I can’t believe I have to explain it to you.” Harry knew he had made a mistake when the confusion on Tom’s face made way for a dirty glare.

“I don’t need you to explain anything to me,” he snarled. “If that was all, I’m late for Arithmancy.” With that, he stormed off with a snap of his robes.

Tom gave Harry the silent treatment and refused to hear his apology for the rest of the day. Harry felt slightly bad for his last comment – he knew how closely Tom prided his intelligence – but he could not wrap his head around such ridiculously simplistic logic. How could someone so smart be so stupid about the things that actually count?

“What on earth did you say to him? He was insufferable in Arithmancy,” Avery asked Harry quietly as Harry sat down next to him in Defence Against the Dark Arts. They both looked at Tom, who had snubbed Harry by going to sit next to Constance Warrington of all people. The new seating arrangement had caused silent chaos in that corner of the classroom as the Slytherin girls were forced to shuffle around and renegotiate their partnerships. Poor Constance was discreetly fanning her flaming face with her hands.
'We argued,” Harry muttered evasively.

“Really? I couldn’t tell,” Avery said snidely.

Harry glared at him and remained silent.

“It must have been dramatic. Look at that!” Harry followed Avery’s pointing finger with his eyes and saw Trudy Gamp and Ariadne Montague clutching each other’s hands and whispering excitedly, all the while casting speculative looks between Tom and Harry. “You better watch out – the vultures are already circling.”

“I thought Montague had a boyfriend,” Harry said, scowling at the girls.

“She does, but I’m sure she would dump Urquhart if Riddle showed any sign of interest in her,” Avery said uncharitably.

“Well, it hasn’t come to that, and it won’t,” Harry said firmly.

“That’s the spirit,” Avery said, leaning forward to make eye contact with the offending girls past Harry’s front. When they were looking at him, he slashed his finger across his throat and added an incredibly rude gesture before jabbing his finger straight at the pair. Ariadne gasped audibly and Trudy launched up from her seat in outrage.

“Everybody sit down,” Professor Merrythought's voice cracked down like a whip. “Mr Avery, I saw that. Fifteen points from Slytherin for gross vulgarity, and you must apologise immediately.”

Avery made a face but subsided. “I’m very sorry. That was unspeakably rude and a ghastly lie no less,” he recited piously. Professor Merrythought eyed him suspiciously, but apparently deemed this a sufficient apology. When her back was turned, Avery leaned forward again and indicated in no uncertain terms that the threat still stood.

After Defence Against the Dark Arts Avery hung back with Harry on the way down to lunch.

“Seriously, if you want to talk about it, I swear I won’t tell Riddle. I know he can be sensitive about his privacy, but sometimes a man needs to bitch and moan,” he said to Harry, keeping his voice low.

Harry glowered at Tom’s back, frustrated at his behaviour. “He’s digging up corpses that were resting in peace,” he muttered back. “He thinks that I can’t say I’ve forgiven him and still think that he did something wrong. Does that make any sense to you?”

Avery was thoughtfully silent for a moment. “That sounds like a clusterfuck,” he finally said. “Want to have lunch in the cellars?”

That sounded like a good idea. Harry wasn’t looking forward to another spectacle where Tom bumped him over to sit on the other end of the table in front of the whole school. It was bad enough that word about their fight was probably already travelling up and down the grapevine. “Sure, let’s go,” he said.

“There’s a nice enough store room near the kitchen – me and the girlfriend have had dinner there a couple of times,” Avery muttered, glancing around furtively to make sure no one heard him.

It was easy enough to depart unnoticed from the milling throng heading into the Great Hall and slink down the passage leading to the kitchen and, further down, into Hufflepuff territory. They encountered few Hufflepuffs, though, as it was the middle of the day, and those who came their way paid them no mind.
“Have you been to the kitchen before?” Avery asked Harry.

“I have, a couple of times.”

“Then this is nothing new.” They reached the man-sized painting of a fruitbowl that hid the kitchen entrance and Avery reached out to tickle the pear. The pear giggled and wiggled to escape his touch before turning into a door handle, which Avery wasted no time twisting and pulling.

A cacophony of noise assaulted them as soon as the door was cracked open. When they looked inside, Harry was awed and humbled by the controlled chaos of a hundred and more house-elves working in dizzying, helter-skelter unison to feed the school. Huge pot after wide tray after deep bowl heaped high with the delicious stews and roasts and potatoes and pies and salads and rolls that Harry was used to taking for granted were hoisted on the five long tables by tiny hands and bony arms, only to be emptied before their eyes and replaced with newly brimming vessels. Huge ovens and rows of stoves burned with carefully tended fires, heating the massive room so that Harry broke a sweat just standing outside in the hallway.

“Maybe we shouldn’t disturb them while they’re so busy,” Harry said with a dry mouth, realising with dawning guilt how much toil it took to keep the self-replenishing serving pots and platters in the Great Hall replenishing themselves.

“Nonsense,” Avery said, stepping into the kitchen. Several elves jumped to their service with squeals of excitement, swarming around Avery with bobbing bows and curtsies and pulling Harry in the rest of the way by the arms.

“Young Masters! Yous are looking for food? Yes? Will you eat here or want basket?”

“Lunch for two, and we’ll have that basket,” Avery said. “Make it something that won’t make a mess. Some sort of pie, a bottle of pumpkin juice, and… what-have-you on the side. You know what to do.” He glanced at Harry for confirmation, which Harry gave with a nod when he saw that the elves had already jumped into action, dashing this way and that to get everything put together.

It took less than a minute before a large, covered basket was thrust at them amidst more bowing and curtsying. Harry uttered a hasty thank you and hurried out after Avery, who was already leading the way to his hideout. This turned out to be a secluded storage room packed with large rolls of cloth stacked on wide shelves and propped up in corners. Some of the fabrics Harry recognised from curtains around the castle. There was a low, gridded cutting table in the middle of the room – perfect height for a house-elf – and this was where Avery placed the basket and started unloading the contents. Soon they were sitting on the floor to reach the table, chipping into the extensive lunch that the over-zealous elves had packed for them.

“So, what happened?” Avery asked as he dug into his second slice of quiche.

“Tom thinks I haven’t forgiven him for getting Hagrid expelled, because I still think that it was an immoral thing to do. I have forgiven him, though it’s kind of hard not to be angry when he’s being a twit about it.”

“Well, you may colour me surprised that you don’t have a problem with Hagrid’s lot in this,” Avery said. “You can be such a bleeding heart, though personally I think that there are plenty of arseholes our own age at Hogwarts who would have deserved to go more than he did. Poor bastard hadn’t even taken his O.W.L.s. There was no way he could have kept his wand, and now he’s crippled for life.”

Harry scowled. “I didn’t say I don’t have a problem with it. There’s nothing debatable about
anything in this whole Chamber business – it was all patently wrong. But I can get past that, because I knew what I was getting into. I’ve had plenty of time to make peace with Tom’s many moral failings.”

“When you put it like that… I suppose it was evident from the start that you knew things about Riddle.” Avery frowned thoughtfully, tearing pieces from a bread roll but not eating them. “If we were talking about anyone else, I’d say he probably feels guilty and can’t imagine that you could have forgiven him, but I think we can both agree that this isn’t the case with Riddle.” He glanced at Harry warily. “You know what I mean?”

“Well, he doesn’t feel guilty, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, it’s more likely that he just doesn’t care that he made Hagrid suffer so that he didn’t have to, and he can’t imagine himself in a situation where he can just get past the horrible things that people have done to him and forgive them. I’ve never seen him forgive and forget. There were certain people in Slytherin who heaped a lot of ridicule on him the first few years, and they all regretted it later, and they kept regretting until the day when they graduated and could get away from him for good.”

Harry was silent as he contemplated this.

“I don’t suppose Riddle actually knows what forgiveness even means,” Avery continued. “Obviously, if he really thinks a wrong suddenly becomes a right when it’s forgiven. That’s weird, but I’m not entirely surprised. He, uh…” He looked uncomfortable as he met Harry’s eyes briefly. “I’ve always kind of figured there a lot of things he doesn’t understand, for all that he’s top of our class in every subject. Maybe it’s because of the orphanage. It can’t have been a good place to grow up. Maybe he was just born like it; I don’t know. But there’s always been something… cold and removed about him.” He trailed off awkwardly, eyeing Harry to gauge his reaction.

Harry stared at his pie, an unpleasant feeling in his stomach. This was something he didn’t like to think about, but it had to be acknowledged. Tom’s capacity for cruelty alone spoke of a certain lack in his understanding of human emotions. The thought that Tom might not understand simply because he didn’t have many emotions of his own was devastating, because that would mean that he had been pretending all this time that he cared for Harry. “I know what you mean,” he finally said.

“He’s been a lot better since you’ve been in the picture,” Avery added hurriedly. “Honestly, when he first started flirting with you, I was more surprised by the fact that he was interested in anyone at all than the fact that he’d picked you. What’s more, I really think that he honestly cares about you. He puts you before everyone else, he smiles at you – real smiles – and he seeks you out when before he would have holed up somewhere, getting up to Morgana knows what. And you’ve had fights and he’s been pissed at you, but he’s never done anything to you. Anyone else would have been jinxed at the very least, I can guarantee that. This is the best thing I could have imagined happening to Riddle.”

Harry smiled wanly, but he did force himself to consider all the evidence that Avery was presenting to him and remember all the good things he had shared with Tom. Maybe Tom wasn’t the mushiest and most demonstrative of blokes, but Harry wasn’t complaining – in fact, he found this comforting. He rather figured that if Tom wanted to con Harry into falling in love with him, he would have swept Harry off his feet and charmed him so he could hardly see straight. He did that all the time to the professors, with uncanny success. And while Avery was mistaken in saying that Tom had never done anything to him in anger – Harry remembered the pollen incident in the greenhouse very well – it was true that Tom had never actually hurt him and had shown restraint when he had clearly been tempted to do so. From what Harry had seen, he wasn’t usually in the habit of censoring his
displeasure.

Harry wasn’t doing himself any favours by doubting Tom’s sincerity – he might as well break up with him right now if he went down that road. Tom never seemed false when he was actually there, and Harry liked to think that he would be able to tell if Tom wasn’t really into him.

“I know,” Harry said. “Although I’m not exactly an exception to the way Tom tends to treat other people. He sure doesn’t keep his mouth shut when I do something stupid, and he’ll let me know if he thinks that I’m not trying hard enough.”

“Riddle has high standards,” Avery said musingly. “Usually he just quietly disdains everyone who doesn’t reach his standards, but in a way it seems like he’s trying to make sure that you’ll reach them whether you want it or not.”

“That sounds like Tom,” Harry agreed.

There was a brief silence as they contemplated this tangent, until Harry shook himself and brought them back to the main topic. “Anyway – now he isn’t talking to me because I said he should know this stuff like a normal person, and he took that as a slight against his genius. Maybe I should have checked my tongue, but I was kind of shocked that he could be so obtuse.”

“You should apologise,” Avery said immediately, nodding his head sagely. “His genius is his greatest treasure – he hoards it with one hand and shows it off with the other. Calling him stupid wouldn’t usually gain any reaction from him, because clearly he knows that he isn’t, but when you point out something that he really, actually doesn’t understand and call him stupid… Well, I’d say you’re lucky to get the silent treatment from him.”

The feeling of regret grew in Harry’s chest with Avery’s analysis, eclipsing his annoyance. Apparently, he had found a chink in Tom’s armour and promptly stabbed right into it without even realising it. He leaned his elbows on the table and pressed his forehead into his hands with a groan.

“But hey,” Avery said cheerily, “this is nothing compared to what you’ve bounced back from before. If you can get over how Riddle framed Hagrid for opening the Chamber of Secrets, then I’m sure he can get over you calling him simple.”

Harry was about to respond to this, but froze when he heard the door squeak open behind him. He looked to Avery, who was staring over his head, eyes wide and guilty and his jaw hanging open.

“Dorcas,” Avery said, flustered and helpless. “What are you doing here?”

Harry whipped around to see Dorcas Meadows framed in the doorway. She was holding a small pile of sticky, sweet pastries wrapped in a handkerchief, but judging by her horrified expression, pudding was the last thing on her mind now.

“I saw you heading this way earlier,” she said blankly. “I thought I’d surprise you. Did you just say... that Hagrid... didn’t do it?”

This shook Avery into taking action. He jumped up from his seat on the floor and rushed around the low table to pull Dorcas fully into the room. He stuck his head out into the hallway to make sure that nobody had heard anything before pushing the door shut and casting a Sound-Proof Charm on it for good measure.

“How much did you hear?” Avery asked urgently.

Dorcas seemed to snap out of her shock, glaring at him dirily. “I heard you say that Hagrid was
framed. I heard you say that Tom Riddle covered up for Vicky’s real attacker and threw an innocent boy to the wolves. My best friend is in the infirmary, petrified out of her mind, and the one who put her there hasn’t been punished. Who is it? Who are you covering for? Tell me right now!”

Harry climbed to his feet shakily while Dorcas was shouting. He could not believe that the secret had been found out in such a ridiculous manner. He allowed a faint sense of relief at the fact that Dorcas didn’t know that it was Tom who had opened the Chamber, but it did little to lessen the misfortune.

“I can’t– I can’t tell you, I’m sorry! Look, it’s been taken care of, honestly!”

“Taken care of? Is that what you call this? A crime was covered by piling another crime on top of it! Is the whole Slytherin House in on this? Is this the ‘solid front’ you’ve talked about – remain loyal even when one of you turns out to be a homicidal, raving maniac?”

“Now hold on – no one was killed!”

“That’s all you’ve got so say to that?”

Avery looked helpless and pitiful, but Dorcas showed no pity and barrelled on.

“You lied to me – you know perfectly well how hard this has been for me, with Vicky in the infirmary, and you said nothing, you let me think...! Just earlier, at lunch, I was telling my friends how they shouldn’t have let Hagrid stay on the grounds, that they went too easy on him, and now I hear that he’s innocent and you knew all along. What is this? What sort of conspiracy is this? It’s no joke, Ichabod. Tell me who it was.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry, I really can’t. I wish I could tell you, but...”

Harry couldn’t keep watching this. He had to do something – to help his friend, but also to make sure that things wouldn’t get out of hand because of Dorcas.

“It’s because of me that we can’t tell you,” he said, stepping forward and gaining both of their attention. Avery looked confused, and Dorcas glared at him like she had just realised that he was there and just as guilty as Avery.

“I’m under strict orders from the Department of Mysteries to do everything I can not to disturb the timeline. I even swore a magical oath. Listen – everything that happened was supposed to happen, but no one was supposed to find out. I’m sorry about all of it, and if I could have changed things, I would have. I wanted to interfere at the time, I really did, but I physically couldn’t, and it wouldn’t have been wise anyway. It wasn’t wise then and it isn’t wise now. It’s my fault that you found out this much, and I’m sorry, but I can’t let you know more.”

Dorcas gaped at him before snapping her jaw shut. “You mean you knew beforehand what was going to happen? The Chamber of Secrets and the petrifications and Hagrid’s expulsion?”

Harry nodded, maintaining steady eye contact with her.

“How would you know? I doubt people will still be talking about this fifty years from now.”

“Something like this is bound to be written down in Hogwarts: A History,” Avery answered, having surpassed his confusion and appearing very informed indeed.

Dorcas eyed Harry up and down sceptically, as though doubting that he had ever read a book like Hogwarts: A History. Harry couldn’t blame her, because he never had got around to reading Hermione’s favourite book, but he looked challengingly back at her nonetheless.
“If you read it in a book, then how did you know that Hagrid was framed?” Dorcas asked shrewdly.

This gave Harry pause as he thought of the adult Hagrid and Tom’s malicious diary, neither of which he could talk about under the magic oath’s influence.

Avery saw his eyes becoming glassy and recognised the sign of the enchantment putting pressure on Harry. “Well, obviously he’s can’t talk about it because of the Oath of Unspeakability,” he said reasonably. “But if you think about it, it’s not so strange that he would know. Where is Hagrid now? He was given a job at Hogwarts – they even built him a house of his own to live in. Stern will probably retire in ten years or so, and as his apprentice, Hagrid will naturally succeed him as groundskeeper, and it’s likely that with his lack of education, he’ll never find another job elsewhere. Clearly this means that Potter knew Hagrid in his own time – and I bet Hagrid will tell anyone who stands still long enough how he was wrongfully expelled for something he didn’t do.”

That was quite close to the truth – Harry was rather impressed that Avery had thought of it on his feet.

For a moment the expression on Dorcas’ face was complicated and vulnerable, but she steeled her eyes and the frailty was gone. “How am I supposed to believe such a convenient explanation? You’ve lied to me before.”

“I’ve never lied to you,” Avery assured her immediately. “I haven’t. I may have left things unsaid, but they weren’t my secrets to share. It’s bigger than us; the Unspeakables are involved.”

“I really don’t want to report this to the Department of Mysteries,” Harry added. “They’ll probably have you Obliviated if they find out you know something you shouldn’t. I won’t tell them if you promise not to tell a soul about what you’ve heard or what we’ve talked about here.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“I’m just giving you fair warning.”

“Is that so?” Dorcas bowed her head, though her eyes still sparkled with acrimony and hurt. She seemed to chew on her next words bitterly before speaking them. “I suppose you can consider me warned, then. They do say that bad things happen when an Unspeakable speaks up.” She stepped forward and placed the bundle of pastries on the cutting table. “There. Blackcurrant tarts from the Gryffindor table. Dig in – I don’t feel like having pudding now.” She straightened up and levelled a disenchanted look at them before turning to leave the room.

Feeling incredibly guilty, Harry called after her, “I’m sorry about all of this.”

“Excuse me if that doesn’t make me feel better,” Dorcas muttered through gritted teeth, hand on the door handle.

“Your friend will wake up soon. Slughorn told me that they’ll brew the Mandrake Draught tomorrow.”

Dorcas inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement but didn’t face them again or utter a word. She pushed the door open, breaking the Sound Proof Charm in doing so, and left. Harry and Avery listened to her retreating footsteps in chagrined silence.

“That didn’t go very well,” Avery said with no humour in his voice.

“It’ll be fine,” Harry said, hoping that he was right. “She won’t talk.”
“I’m more concerned that she won’t come back.”

Neither of them felt up to blackcurrant tarts, but they didn’t have the heart to leave them untouched.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Another update, and so soon after the last one! Don’t get used to it though – it probably won’t become a pattern.

A nod to my beta Jazz for coming up with such good ideas for this chapter.

Chapter 22

Veronica Valentine insisted on shaking Tom’s hand after her revival.

“I can’t thank you enough for catching the person who did this,” she said, eyes sincere and sombre. “Not for revenge, you understand – I don’t care for such things. What I mean is that now we don’t have to be afraid anymore. Those of us who were targets to the Heir, we really did fear for our safety. It’s a terrible thing when you can’t feel safe in your own home.”

Harry couldn’t have felt more awkward as this exchange took place, though Tom displayed the very face of graciousness and bashful modesty. Harry kept his expression carefully neutral and looked around the Entrance Hall, where many students stopped on their way to Saturday dinner to watch the scene. Dorcas stood a few steps behind Veronica. She was frowning at the floor, arms folded around her middle, but it looked like she was committed to keeping the secret.

“To think that one of my own house mates would turn against his own like that,” Veronica continued. “It seems fitting for a Slytherin to put a stop to his evil doings, considering it was Slytherin whose name he defiled with them.”

“House loyalty had little to do with it,” Tom said. “I’m just glad that no one else was hurt.”

“A lesser man would want revenge.”

“I could say the same for lesser women,” Tom said with a teasing smirk. “I recall that you don’t care for such things.”

Veronica blushed. “Oh, hush. All I did was lie there unconscious and wait for rescue.”

“Honour doesn’t come from great deeds,” Tom said. “It’s good to see you well again, and if I was able to help, then I’m all the happier.”

“W-well,” she stammered, flustered by his charming smile, before clearing her throat and visibly gathering herself together. “Yes, well, I just wanted to thank you. I doubt that Keegan will, and ‘thanks’ isn’t in Gladys’ vocabulary, but I know they’re both grateful, too. You did a good thing.”

“You’re welcome, then,” Tom said with a congenial bow of his head.

Veronica beamed at him. “I’ll see you around, then,” she said, curtsied, and continued her way to the Great Hall, her numerous fawning friends swarming around her.
Harry couldn’t recall her being so popular before the attacks.

“Well, that was ironic,” Lestrange murmured, coming to stand next to Harry, hands in his pockets. He watched the retreating horde with a sardonic smirk. “Who would have thought? Mousy Miss Valentine likes Voldemort!”

Harry was tempted to kick him in the shin, but settled on casting a sideways glare at him.

“What?” Lestrange said. “It’s funny because she’s so prissy.”

Harry rolled his eyes and turned on his heel, heading to the Great Hall as well.

Tom caught up with him before he reached the double doors, throwing his arm around Harry’s shoulders and hissing in his ear, “Don’t act so jealous – you’re making me look bad.”

“I’m not jealous,” Harry said, frowning.

“The flirting was for her benefit only.”

“I don’t care about the flirting,” Harry said, pushing the arm away and walking between the Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables to find seats for them. “The whole situation was disturbing enough.”

Tom took the seat next to him at the table, casting him a cool look. His temper had settled somewhat since their argument two days ago, but his pride clearly still stung. “Well, there was certain irony present, but no one appreciates a hero who can’t receive a simple thank you.”

Harry thought of all the strangers who had insisted on shaking his hand over the years, thanking him for something that happened when he was a baby. They had always made him extremely uncomfortable and he had tried to escape the situation as fast as he could. He supposed that he had been rather rude to those people, but he couldn’t feign a smile as convincingly as Tom could. He liked to think of his honesty as a virtue.

“It looks like the Heir did an inadvertent favour to his victims,” Dolohov said, pulling up a chair next to Harry while Lestrange, Mulciber, and Rosier sat down across from them. “Valentine has a veritable fan club now, and it looks like even Fischer has suddenly gained new friends.”

“Fischer doesn’t look very impressed with them, though,” Mulciber said, craning his neck to peer at the Hufflepuff table. “I have to admit, I’ve always liked her attitude.”

“Yeah, those ditzies usually treat her like a leper,” Lestrange sniffed, observing the scene as well. “She’s better off without them.”

“Do you know her?” Harry asked, confused. He hadn’t expected any sympathy from the three of them for any of the Muggle-borns.

“Her mum’s a whore,” Lestrange said matter-of-factly. “Oh, for– don’t look at me like that! She said so herself. Ask her what her parents do for a living and she’ll tell you that her mum’s a prostitute in Sheffield and her dad payed for making her and hasn’t been around since. She’s not ashamed of anything.”

Dolohov and Mulciber murmured in agreement. Their tone was surprisingly respectful.
“I haven’t seen Towler yet, but I heard that the first thing he did was take his broom to the pitch,” Rosier said. “Talk about a one-track mind.”

“It’s a shame he didn’t miss the final,” Dolohov said wistfully.

“At least he hasn’t practiced in a while,” Lestrange pointed out.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong – to him, the last practice was probably yesterday. Petrified people don’t notice the time passing, do they?” Rosier said, waving his fork at him.

“But he has missed a month’s worth of Quidditch strategy. He probably won’t be able to catch up before the game next week.” Mulciber said.

“As if the Seeker needs to know the rest of the team’s strategy,” Rosier scoffed. “All he does is fly around out of everyone’s way and look for the Snitch.”

“That’s not true,” Harry couldn’t help interjecting, his Quidditch pride stinging from the dismissive remark. “The Seeker has to pay a lot of attention on the game itself. Keeping track of the Bludgers alone is crucial, but there’s also loads that he can do to help the rest of the team. Half the time when a Seeker dives in for a chase, he hasn’t actually seen the Snitch and he’s just doing it to distract the opposing team’s Seeker or breaking their Chasers’ formation. He has to be aware enough of his team’s strategy to know when they have things under control and when they might need a hand. Keeping in mind that he has to constantly divide his attention between the game and looking for the Snitch, it’s a pretty demanding position. Not to mention the pressure – the whole outcome of the match depends on the Seeker’s performance and the game won’t end before the Snitch is caught.”

There was a brief, startled silence as everyone stared at him.

“Have you played Seeker before?” Dolohov asked.

Harry straightened his spine self-consciously. “I have. And I’m not half bad at it.”

“But you said you didn’t play for the Slytherin team in the nineties,” Rosier said. “We talked about it pretty soon after you got here, remember?”

“The Slytherin team isn’t the only team in the world,” Harry pointed out, wishing that he hadn’t blabbed his mouth to Rosier all that time ago. He couldn’t claim credit for playing on a house team without admitting that he had belonged to a different house.

“Well, Heather Atkins is graduating, so the Seeker position will be open next year,” Mulciber offered. “You could try out.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, thinking of his Firebolt wistfully. Quidditch would never be the same without the fast brooms, but perhaps he could get past that and enjoy the game again if he gave it a chance.

“Hey, has anyone seen Avery?” Rosier said suddenly. “If he dawdles any longer, he’ll miss dinner.”

“I haven’t seen him since lunch. He said he was spending the afternoon in the library,” Lestrange said. “He looked twitchy. Maybe he found a course book from third year that he’d forgotten to review for the O.W.L.s.”

“There’s less than a month left until the exams, so he’s under a lot of stress,” Rosier said. “Though he’s been a bit distant. He didn’t even say ‘goodnight’ to me last night.”

“Your dorm habits are disturbingly domestic. Do you tuck each other in and read bedtime stories as
well? Rub each other’s feet?”

“Oh, ha ha.”

Harry was glad that he had his back to the rest of the Great Hall, because otherwise he would have been tempted to crane his neck to find Dorcas at the Gryffindor table. He knew that Avery had tried talking to her yesterday after classes, but he didn’t know how the conversation had gone. Avery had indeed gone to bed early and his bed hangings had been tightly shut by the time anyone else had entered the dorm.

“I’ll take something up to him if he doesn’t show up for dinner,” Harry offered, thinking that this would be a good chance to see how Avery was faring.

“You’d do that? That’s great,” Rosier said. “I don’t really have time to go looking for him. I’m behind on my Transfiguration revision by three chapters, because I got lazy yesterday.” He pulled out his diary and perused it with a distressed frown. “I was supposed to get some Potions crammed tonight, but I guess I’ll have to squeeze that into tomorrow’s schedule.”

“Avery has raised you well, I see,” Mulciber said, eyeing the efficiently colour coded, strict time table over Rosier’s shoulder.

“Avery has nothing to do with this. I need six N.E.W.T.s to get into law school and I won’t even get into the necessary courses if I don’t get good grades on the O.W.L.s. This stuff doesn’t come naturally to me, so I have to crack the whip on myself or it’ll never get done.”

Glancing at the time, Harry spooned the last dregs of his stew into his mouth and started looking around the table for something that could be easily carried out of the Great Hall. He ended up fashioning a few sandwiches from bread rolls and cuts of roast chicken and transfiguring a napkin into a brown paper bag for them.

“That’s quite accommodating of you,” Tom commented mildly, watching Harry’s preparations.

“It’s just a friendly gesture,” Harry said, pausing in his packing. “If he misses dinner, he’ll go hungry.”

“Avery knows where the kitchen is, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

Harry narrowed his eyes at him suspiciously. Tom must have noticed him and Avery heading towards the kitchen the other day, too. “Well, I’m returning a friendly gesture.”

“Exactly what do you and Avery talk about when you’re alone together?” Tom asked, lowering his voice to keep the conversation private. “There seem to be a lot of secrets between you two.”

“There aren’t any secrets, and even if there were, it wouldn’t be my place to tell you about them,” Harry said, splitting another bread roll after judging that there was room for one more sandwich in the bag.

“Oh good, so at least they aren’t your secrets,” Tom said. “Does this mean that I don’t have to be jealous?”

Harry lowered the roll and looked at Tom, the beginning of an incredulous grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Jealous? Because of Avery?” He chuckled. “He’s just a friend – a completely straight friend that I’m not the least bit attracted to.”

Tom looked at him critically, but apparently he liked what he saw on his face, because he smiled
next. “Well, Avery’s secret is safe from me, as long as he doesn’t cause you any trouble.”

“I’m not in any trouble, don’t worry,” Harry assured him. He returned to the unfinished sandwich and picked up the butter knife.

Tom was silent for a moment, watching Harry’s profile as he worked. “I’m sure you can handle yourself if it comes down to it,” he finally said, “but if you do ever get in trouble, let me know.”

Harry looked up again, startled by the serious tone of his voice. Tom’s eyes no longer held a trace of animosity. A splash of warmth spread in Harry’s chest and he smiled at Tom. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Go find your secretive friend,” Tom said, nudging him gently with his elbow.

“Thanks,” Harry found himself saying, not really sure what he was thanking Tom for. He packed the last sandwich into the paper bag and moved to get up, but then, at the last second, he darted forward on impulse and landed a peck on Tom’s cheek. “See you later,” he said. He caught a glimpse of Tom’s surprised face before standing up and leaving the table.

Harry went looking for Avery in the library and once there, it didn’t take him long to find him. Avery had taken over a table in the Potions section, piles of books mostly hiding him from view. He didn’t notice Harry’s approach, so absorbed was he in his intense study of what looked like a headache-inducing ingredients chart.

“Mind if I interrupt?” Harry said. Avery jumped in his seat, looking up with a startled expression. His hair stuck up in tufts where he had run his hands through it and forgotten to pat it back down and his eyes were red from lack of sleep.

“What?” he said.

“You missed dinner. I brought you sandwiches,” Harry said, presenting the paper bag enticingly.

“Food isn’t allowed in the library,” Avery pointed out blankly.

“So, let’s go outside. Weather’s nice.”

Avery looked at the numerous books occupying his table. “I don’t know, I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“You can come back later if you want, but you should at least eat something. I’ll help you return these to their shelves. Come on.” Harry picked up a stack of books and peered at the spines. They were all Potions books, and none of them were necessary for the O.W.L.s.

“Ugh, fine. I guess I could use a break,” Avery said, pawing around for a bookmark. After sorting the books into those he didn’t need anymore and those he would check out of the library, he herded Harry through the aisles and directed him on where each text belonged.

Avery was subdued and lost in thoughts on the way to the grounds. Harry passed the paper bag to him and Avery stuck his hand in. He looked unimpressed with the lopsided chicken sandwiches but bit down without comment.

They took a walk down the path leading around the lake. The weather was warm, though dark clouds over the Forbidden Forest promised rain later. “So, how did things go with Dorcas?” Harry asked.
Avery tore out a piece of chicken and popped it in his mouth, chewing mechanically. “She isn’t happy with me. She wants to keep some distance for a while.” He sneered at the word ‘distance’.

“Why is she angry with you? I told her it was my fault that you couldn’t tell her about Hagrid.”

“It’s because I sounded ‘flippant’,” he said, making quote marks with his fingers. “When she overheard me saying that Hagrid was framed, I said it ‘flippantly’. Clearly that means that I think it’s funny that one of her house mates was blamed for something a Slytherin did, and that I’m a bigoted blood purist who has something against freakishly tall people. Of course it couldn’t have had anything to do with the context of the conversation on which she eavesdropped.”

“Oh,” Harry said, trying to think of something positive to say. “But, you’re still together, right? She didn’t break up with you?”

Avery’s shoulders sagged. “No, but it’s hanging by a thread. She said she doesn’t know if she can trust me anymore.”

“She’s just upset. She’ll calm down and realise that there’s nothing you could have done differently.”

“Except not be flippant about it,” Avery grumbled sullenly. “Seriously, that’s the most ridiculous reason to be mad at me. She won’t even bother listening to what I have to say – I don’t have anything against Hagrid. You heard me say that I think it should have been someone else who got the boot. He may be huge but he’s still a kid. We’re supposed to look after the kids and not take advantage of them. But when I tell her that, she thinks I’m full of it. Why is it so hard to believe? Am I really such a massive jerk?”

“Maybe she’s projecting her own prejudice,” Harry offered.

“Maybe. It’s not like Gryffindors are actually any more noble or virtuous than the rest of us, no matter what they’d like to think. How many friends did Hagrid even have in that house? None that I know of. It’s so frustrating,” Avery continued, kicking a pebble fiercely. “I didn’t do anything wrong and she’s accusing me of all these things!” His voice cracked and Harry was horrified to spy a glimmer of moisture in his eyes. However, before any tears could fall, Avery wiped them away angrily with his sleeve.

Feeling awkward, Harry couldn’t think of anything to say that wasn’t an empty platitude. They walked in silence while Avery ate his makeshift dinner. The last sandwich he threw into the lake, where the Giant Squid whipped out a tentacle and snatched it up with a splash.

“Well, it looks like it’s going to rain, appropriately enough,” Avery said, crumpling the paper bag into a ball and vanishing it with a wave of his wand. “Now that I’ve bitched and moaned in turn, I think I’m ready to go back to not thinking about my wretched love life. Thanks for the fare.” He turned around and started tracing his way back to the castle, and Harry, knowing that his company was no longer welcome, went to finish the lap around the lake on his own.

Keegan Towler was notably absent from Potions the next Monday, and when he turned up later for lunch, looking windswept and still in his Quidditch robes, it caused much outrage at the Slytherin table.

“Dumbledore is giving him a free pass from classes to practice for the final!” Rosier snarled, slamming his fist on the table and rattling cutlery. “That’s outrageous!”
Even Slughorn could be seen shaking his head up at the staff table.

“And they’re giving him an advantage in the O.W.L.s,” Avery said, scowling. “Maybe if he went to class, he wouldn’t need it. How are they justifying this? He could easily have a reserve flier play in the final, so the exams should come before Quidditch practice.”

Harry had to agree. If he had been Petrified and woken up only to realise that he had missed almost a month with the most important exams of his life so far just around the corner, he would have made the tough decision and bowed out of the tournament in order to study twice as hard.

“I swear, if he shows his face in Creatures, I’ll make sure he won’t be able to play at all,” Rosier said.

As it happened, Towler did make it to Care of Magical Creatures. As soon as Rosier saw him, he narrowed his eyes, rolled his sleeves, and strode over to face him with choice words on his tongue. Harry and Tom stood back to watch the confrontation with vague embarrassment.

“Do you think he realises how outnumbered he is?” Harry muttered, eyeing the gaggle of Gryffindors standing protectively around Towler.

“He has righteous fury on his side,” Tom replied dryly.

The arrival of Professor Kettleburn dissolved the impending dust-up before Rosier could issue his threats.

“Alright, everyone, there has been a slight hitch in our plans,” he announced, slamming the door of a large cage behind him. “Two of our dear Clabberts have fallen ill over the weekend. That means we only have one healthy individual to work with today, which is not good at all. So many of us at once would make her feel threatened, and then none of us would get anything done. So, this is what we’re going to do.” He picked up a bucket from the ground next to the cage and cast a quick \textit{Scourgify} on it. “Everybody, write your name on piece of parchment and put it in the bucket. Only five of you will be allowed to approach Clarice, and the fairest way to decide who they will be is to draw lots.”

Everyone hurried to pull out their writing utensils and do as they were told. There was some commotion when one student couldn’t find her quill and another punched a hole through his parchment trying to write against his thigh, but soon enough everyone had dropped their name in the bucket. Professor Kettleburn rummaged through the bits of parchment, picking out five and setting the bucket back down.

“Miss Gamp, Mr Rosier, Miss...ter Gudgeon – yes, I see what happened there. You should have held back on the flourishes. Let’s see. Mr Riddle and Miss Carlisle. Congratulations, you are with me and Clarice today.”

Harry suppressed a groan as both Tom and Rosier stepped forward, leaving him standing on his own.

“For the rest of you, I have a list of chores tacked to that post over there. I will let you all choose to either complete a task from the list or write twenty inches on one of three different topics, all of which you can also find on the list. Write your name next to the item you’ve chosen. The essays must be turned in no later than Friday’s lesson.”

Harry definitely didn’t want to write yet another essay, so he made his way to the list determined to snatch an easy chore. However, he didn’t get there first and by the time he could squeeze to the front of the crowd with his quill, only the least appealing tasks were left unclaimed. With a sigh, he
scrawled his name next to Cage 7: scrub trough (no magic), empty & clean litter box, and sweep rushes (remember to compost!).

Cage Seven was home to a bunch of Jarveys that were nice to look at but tended to chase admirers away by shouting obscenities at them. Thankfully, Professor Kettleburn had moved them elsewhere so that the cage could be cleaned. Scrubbing the watering trough was hard work, because it had clearly doubled as a swimming pool for the ferret-like creatures, and by the time Harry was finished, the front of his robes was soaked through and he had a blister on his palm where he had gripped the brush. He took a moment to stretch his back and shake out his arms before drying his clothes with a charm and turning to the litter box. The instructions had said nothing about not using magic here, so he cast a quick *Evanesco* at the box, followed by a *Scourgify*, before picking up a push broom to sweep the floor.

The zoo was a flurry of activity when he finally stepped out of the cage, kicking the pile of used rushes into shape. Most of the students had opted to do chores over homework, so he had to dodge under several rakes and shovels and make way for a wheelbarrow as he headed to the compost heap by the vegetable garden, arms full of straws.

He heard voices talking in the garden as he neared the compost, but thought nothing of it. He was struggling with his burden, with rushes escaping from his arms and leaving a disjointed trail behind him. He only looked up as he reached his destination, and wished that he had been paying more attention when he found himself standing face to face with Rubeus Hagrid, who was kneeling on the ground, elbow deep in a rhubarb bush.

“Hello,” Harry said awkwardly, another straw falling gently on his foot as he stared.

“Afternoon,” said Mr. Stern, whom Harry hadn’t noticed standing behind Hagrid. His weathered face pulled into an expression that could have been a smile or a grimace, and then he turned back to his apprentice. “Can I trust you to handle yourself from here?” He barely waited for Hagrid to nod before scurrying in the direction of his cottage. Mr. Stern wasn’t known for being a people person.

Harry didn’t know who was more uncomfortable in the situation – he or Hagrid. Harry shifted his weight, only to scatter even more rushes at his feet, while Hagrid wiped his dirty hands on his trousers, shoulders hunched forward. It always felt strange looking at the boy’s beardless, youthful face. The way he hid behind his bushy hair, refusing to meet his eyes, made guilt twist inside Harry’s chest.

“I just came to dump these here,” Harry finally said, hefting the pile and tossing it into the compost. Half of it ended up on the ground. Swearing, Harry crouched down to gather up the loose rushes. He thought he heard an amused snort from Hagrid, but when he looked up, his face was grim again.

“So, Professor Kettleburn made yer class do his spring cleaning fer him?” Hagrid said suddenly, returning to his weeding. There was a wry tilt to his voice that made Harry feel a little better.

“That might actually be his agenda, though I doubt he made the Clabberts sick on purpose,” Harry said, lips twisting into a smile as he threw the straws into the heap.

“To be fair, it’s a lot o’ work fer one man.”

“That’s true. And I don’t think he lets the house-elves come near his creatures.”

“He doesn’ like critters doing an hones’ wizard’s work. I think he’d rather observe the house-elves in their natural habitat,” Hagrid chortled. “Yeh missed a few,” he added, indicating at the trail of rushes leading back to the zoo.
“Oh,” Harry said and headed back to clean it up. When he returned and dusted himself off, Hagrid was struggling with a particularly stubborn weed. Harry watched him until he fell back with a curse, clutching a bunch of leaves while the roots remained in the soil.

“You’ll want to get a grip right near the roots and pull at an angle towards yourself,” Harry offered helpfully. He put his hands up in surrender when Hagrid glared at him. “I did a lot of weeding in my aunt’s garden.”

Hagrid looked at him suspiciously before shrugging and trying Harry’s tip. “Never had ter weed in Herbology,” he grumbled.

“I think Professor Beery uses some kind of magic weed-killer in the greenhouses.”

“Stern should borrow some o’ that.”

“Maybe Beery will slip you some if you ask him.”

“Yeah, righ’, ‘cause he’s so eager ter help me.” Hagrid ducked his head and for a moment it looked like he would try and convince Harry that he wasn’t the Heir. However, he visibly held his tongue, probably thinking that the endeavour was useless. “Nah, I need to learn this stuff. Can’t rely on magic anymore.”

Harry felt doubly guilty and awkward. He squeezed his hands into fists to stop them from fidgeting. “Well, there’s nothing wrong with weeding by hand,” he said. “It can be relaxing, if you don’t have someone breathing down your neck.”

There was another uncomfortable silence during which Hagrid scowled at the rhubarb bush and Harry just stood there.

“I should go back,” Harry finally said, glancing at his watch. Class was almost over. “I guess I’ll... see you around.”

Hagrid’s mouth quirked into a sardonic smile. “I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

“Bye, then.” With that, Harry left Hagrid to his devices and made his way back to Cage Seven.

As he dragged the cleaning utensils back into the tool shed, Harry reflected on the encounter. Hagrid seemed to be taking his situation relatively well. He clearly wasn’t happy with his lot, but he wasn’t broken and he could still find humour in things. He still had a long way to go before he could make peace with the injustice, but perhaps the cheerful Hagrid Harry had known wasn’t so far in the future. Harry could only hope so.

By the time he returned to the class clearing the exclusive lesson appeared to be over, because Tom was standing off to one side, having a conversation with Professor Kettleburn, and Rosier had cornered Keegan Towler against a chicken wire cage. At least he had caught Towler alone, so Harry wouldn’t have to go and rescue him from mother-henning Gryffindors.

“You think just because you had a bit of a lie-in you’re some big, tragic victim,” Rosier was growling at Towler as Harry approached them. “Well, you’d better enjoy the coddling while you can, because our team won’t go easy on you out on the pitch.”

“I don’t need your pathetic excuse for a team to go easy on me,” Towler said with a smirk, though his crossed arms and defensive posture betrayed his nerves. His back was pressed against the cage and Harry could see him glance around furtively, looking for an escape route.
“I bet you’ll regret saying that when you’re too busy dodging Bludgers to look for the Snitch.”

“You sure you can spare your bruisers just to bully little old me? I think your Beaters will have their hands full stopping McGonagall from reducing your Keeper to tears.”

“McGonagall? We aren’t worried about McGonagall. What’s your one competent Chaser against three of ours? She’ll have to carry those two nose-picking playmates of hers on her back, what were their names again? I seem to forget, because no one ever mentions them. Even you didn’t mention them, so I assume you realise how useless they are.”

“Every single one of our Chasers is worth more than all three of yours put together,” Towler said hotly. “Besides, what do you know? You don’t even play!”

“I have better things to do than fly around juggling balls all day, but if you keep strutting around the place like the rules don’t apply to you, I’ll get on that pitch personally and tan your filthy Mudblood hide with your own broom handle. You’re not the king of the castle and neither is Dumbledore. Your days are numbered.”

Harry had heard enough. He stepped up to Rosier and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I think he gets the message. Don’t you, Towler?” He raised his eyebrows at the Gryffindor, who looked outraged and mutinous. Harry didn’t wait for his response, instead shifting his grip down to Rosier’s elbow and starting to lead him away. “How was the lesson? Did you take any notes?”

Rosier cast a parting glare at Towler before sniffing haughtily and going with Harry. “I did, but you should borrow Riddle’s. He took reams of notes just for you.”

“You know, you really shouldn’t have done that,” Harry said, lowering his voice. “It’s not really Towler’s fault that Dumbledore gives him special privileges. Besides, if Kettleburn had noticed, he would have given you detention.”

“Kettleburn was occupied. Really, Potter, we can’t let them grow too smug. Towler’s arrogant enough as it is and Merlin knows he has no reason to be. I’m doing him a favour by showing him his place.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Why can’t you just live and let live? It’s not like he tends to be underfoot a lot. It would be easy enough to ignore him.”

“He’s caused us trouble before.”

“And he was dealt with. Remember? Let it go.”

Rosier huffed. “Fine, Potter. You’re such a saint.”

“No, I’m not. You’ve been a bad influence.”

“Clearly not bad enough. I feel unworthy of your presence.”

When the bell rang to signal the end of class, Harry was grinning.

The Quidditch Cup Final between Slytherin and Gryffindor had the whole school in high spirits when the weekend came around. Unlike on any other Saturday morning, the common room was
alive with loud chatter, laughter, and raucous singing when Harry got out of the dorm, and the giddy excitement of the Slytherins travelled with them to the Great Hall. Harry couldn’t help being affected by all of it and found himself looking forward to the big game, grinning widely and listening avidly to the animated discussions. This anticipation was a very different creature to his pre-game nerves as a player on the Gryffindor team, and he liked it a lot.

“No, no, no – don’t you see? It doesn’t matter – it doesn’t matter that Selwyn’s save rate is worse than Blunt’s. That’s what the Beaters are for, isn’t it? Our Beaters are good on the offensive and they’ve a keen eye for the cracks in, you know, the enemy’s formations, whereas Gryffindor? Their Beaters are soft. They play on the defensive. They think they’re only there to defend their team, and I’m just saying – if our Keeper is a weak link in our chain, then Gryffindor’s Beaters make two in theirs.” Rosier sat back in his seat proudly, having made his point.

“Selwyn isn’t a bad Keeper,” Dolohov insisted. “The scores after the Hufflepuff game may look bad, but you have to remember – no, Lestrange, listen! – the match lasted for almost three hours. Letting in 24 goals over three hours isn’t that bad, especially considering how Slytherin scored 19 goals before catching the Snitch.”

“Well, since you insist on using Hufflepuff as a measuring stick,” Lestrange contended, “I’d like to remind you that the exact number of goals Blunt let through in Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff was – wait for it! – four.”

“That match ended within fifteen minutes – you can’t compare them.”

“Yes, I can and I will, because I think it was the stupidest thing Gulliver could have done to kick Parkinson off the team and make Eugene Selwyn Keeper. Our Chasers are good, but so is Blunt, and if our Keeper can’t step up to the game, then we’re in trouble.”

“Parkinson stole Loxley’s bat and broke Gloria Bloom’s cheek bone with it – if Gulliver hadn’t kicked him off the team, Professor Slughorn would have done it for him,” Rosier rebuked. “At least this way the Captain gets virtue points for having initiative and a sense fair play.”

“Parkinson had spirit,” Lestrange said stubbornly. “More importantly, he kept the goal hoops empty.”

“Complain all you want – it won’t bring him back onto the pitch.”

“Speaking of the pitch, I think we should get moving,” Avery butted in, glancing at his pocket watch. “If we go now, we’ll be able to find good seats that are next to each other.”

“If you hold a seat for me, I’ll make a run to the kitchens to get some snacks for all of us.”

“You’re a sweetheart, Dolohov,” Rosier said.

They gobbled down the rest of their breakfast and got up with a lot of screeching of chair legs against the floor. Tom straggled in the back of the group. He clearly didn’t share in the Quidditch excitement, but due to his position in the house, he felt duty-bound to attend the Slytherin team’s matches. Harry fell into step with him and nudged him in the side.

“Come on. It’s Slytherin versus Gryffindor! It’s bound to be exciting. And violent, probably – I bet the team will go all out against the Gryffindors.” Judging by all the talk, this Slytherin team fought just as dirty as the one Harry had played against in the nineties. Harry had seen the Slytherin versus Hufflepuff match, which had indeed dragged out quite a bit when the Snitch had proven elusive, but the houses were quite friendly with each other, so everyone had played nice.
“You try to entice me with promises of recreational violence. My, my – what should I think of that?”

Harry’s response was interrupted when running footsteps caught up with their group before they could step out of the castle.

“Hey guys, wait up!” They stopped and turned to face a flushed, beaming Nathaniel Nott. “Mind if I join you in the stands?” he said, brandishing a Slytherin banner.

“Yes, we do. Only Slytherins allowed,” Rosier said haughtily before breaking into a grin. “Here I thought you’d completely forgotten about us.”

“Gah! This is the first break I’ve been able to take in ages,” Nott said, joining the fold. “If you think the O.W.L.s are breaking your back, try taking them in Ravenclaw.”

“Poor lamb!”

“There’s peer pressure, then there’s Ravenclaw.”

“Well, now you’re with the house mates of your soul, and we’re very laid-back.”

They headed down to the Slytherin stands, which were still half-empty, but slowly filling up. They found the seats with the best view and spent a minute arguing over their seating arrangement before settling down. They dug their colours out of their pockets and bags to hold at the ready, antsy with anticipation.

“Most of my dorm mates said they aren’t coming, even though it’s the championship game,” Nott said. “I’d understand if they were just disappointed that Ravenclaw isn’t playing, but mostly they were just looking forward to having peace and quiet in the common room.”

“That’s horrible. Who’d rather study than come to the Quidditch Cup Final?” Lestrange said.

“I know someone,” Harry teased, leaning against Tom’s side with a grin.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Tom said, giving his banner a conservative wave.

“I’ve never wished I was in Slytherin more than I have this semester,” Nott said. “Usually I like it well enough in the Tower, and the study groups are fun, but I really hate how competitive everyone is.”

“It must be torture for your mates to know that no matter how hard they study, they’ll never have the best marks in our year,” Rosier said, casting a smirk at Tom.

“That’s true, that’s very true. Oh, thanks,” Nott said, accepting a bag of peanuts from Dolohov, who had just arrived from his trip to the kitchens. “In fact – you won’t believe this – not too long ago, Kevin Lynch said to me, ‘Hey, Nate, you’re friends with Tom Riddle, right? Do you ever study with him?’ I told him that it’ve been a while. And he said, I kid you not: ‘Would you be able to borrow his Defence notes sometime, just for a while?’” He looked meaningfully at Avery, whose jaw dropped.

“Borrow his notes for a while? Did he really think he’d get away with that?” Avery said, scandalised.

“I don’t get it,” Harry said.

“It’s a Ravenclaw thing,” Nott explained. “It’s a lesson everyone in our house learns pretty quickly, usually through hazing. If someone asks to borrow your notes, saying they’ll return them to you later,
they’re guaranteed to sabotage your material. You know, make little changes in your notes so you’ll give the wrong answers in an exam.”

Harry was suddenly glad that he wasn’t in Ravenclaw.

“So what did you say to Lynch?” Avery asked.

“I called him out. He tried to play it off as a joke, but now I know that he is desperate.” Nott’s smile was gleeful and evil. “He fancies himself top of our year in Defence, but no one takes him seriously, because, well, he isn’t.”

“Well, if he wants to be the best in Defence, he’ll have to borrow Potter’s notes along with Riddle’s, because those two are a monolith. Merrythought loves them – together or separately, it doesn’t matter,” Rosier said.

“Really?” Nott said, looking at Harry appraisingly.

Harry felt himself blush under the scrutiny. “It’s my strongest subject,” he said.

“A true statement, but he’s being modest,” Tom butted in unexpectedly. “Harry’s grasp on unmixed Light magic is even better than mine. He can cast a corporeal Patronus.”

Nott looked impressed – whether by Harry’s skill with the Patronus Charm, or by the fact that Tom had praised him at all, Harry didn’t know. “Is that so? What form does it take?”

“A stag.”

“It’s very imposing,” Tom added.

“Huh. I’ve never known anyone who could produce more than a wisp before now, except for Professor Merrythought, of course.”

“You just need a really happy memory.”

“That’s what it says in the textbook, but it hasn’t helped me.”

“I had a teacher give me private lessons,” Harry admitted. “I guess it takes a personal breakthrough to make it take form, but if you get it once, you’ll get it every time.”

Nott opened his mouth to say something, but in that moment, the loudspeakers blared to life. The stands had filled out around them and the game was about to start.

“Good morning Hogwarts! Welcome to the Quidditch Cup Final, where Gryffindor is challenging Slytherin for this year’s championship! Are you all having a good time?”

Loud cheering met the commentator from the gathered crowd.

“Let’s welcome the Slytherin team to the pitch – give a big cheer for GULLIVER, CARROW, URQUHART, LOXLEY, ROWLE, SELWYN, aaand ATKINS!”

The Slytherin stands erupted in deafening cheers and loud stomping of feet as the team marched onto the pitch. Harry scrambled to wave his green and silver banner in the air while next to him Rosier whooped loud enough to hurt his ears and Dolohov accidentally kicked the back of his chair.

“Now to usher in the Gryffindor team, let’s howl for MCGONAGALL, CHERNOVA, JONES, DINGLE, DONOVAN, BLUNT, aaand TOWLER!”
The loud booing around him drowned out the cheering from the Gryffindor end of the pitch before it could reach Harry’s ears. He leaned forward and squinted at Minerva McGonagall, the Gryffindor team Captain. He saw her from a distance every now and then, but he had never had any reason or excuse to talk to her. He had been surprised when he first heard that she played Quidditch, because he had trouble imagining his old Head of House on a broom, but then again, Professor McGonagall’s passion for her house team’s success made a lot of sense now. McGonagall already wore her signature rectangular glasses and her black hair was pulled tight, though it hung in a ponytail instead of the bun she would favour later in life.

Harry compared the two teams as they stood on the pitch listening to the referee’s recital of the rules, and smiled nostalgically. The Gryffindor players, most of whom were female, looked small and delicate next to the Slytherins, who seemed to have been recruited for their brawn. The only witch on the Slytherin team was the Seeker, whom Harry knew to be petite, lean, and mean.

Then, the Captains were shaking hands, the players got on their brooms, the whistle blew, and the game was on.

“Gryffindor has the Quaffle! McGonagall passes to Chernova, back to McGonagall, over to Jones, Slytherin’s Carrow intercepts! He passes up to Urquhart, who flies with it, tries for the goal hoops, but Jones is right below him, McGonagall pinches from above, and Jones has the Quaffle again.”

The brooms were certainly slower than in Harry’s time, but Harry found that he liked watching a game that he could actually follow. He remembered the Quidditch World Cup Final, where everyone had ridden Firebolts and the game had been so fast paced that he could barely keep up with who was doing what and where.

“Who’s commentating the game?” Harry asked Rosier, leaning over to shout in his ear.

“Huh? Oh, that’s Ian Macmillan, Hufflepuff. They always ask him to do the Slytherin-Gryffindor matches, because he stays objective, unlike everyone else who has ever had the job. See, there was this riot in the stands back in ’39…”

“– A Bludger from Rowle breaks Gryffindor’s formation! Slytherin has the Quaffle. Gulliver to Carrow – ooh, nicely averted! – Chernova misses and Carrow still has the Quaffle. He escapes with it! He seems to be aiming for the left hoop, Blunt is looking sharp, Carrow throws – for the middle hoop! But Leona Blunt saves – no goal for Slytherin.”

The Gryffindor crowd cheered while the Slytherins groaned.

“And the Quaffle is back in the game. McGonagall to Jones, Jones dives under Urquhart, darts past Carrow, he passes – ouch! A Bludger to the shoulder makes him drop the Quaffle, Gulliver picks it up. Who sent that Bludger? …Rowle again. That’s Slytherin’s Obadiah Rowle, ladies and gents – third year and the youngest player in the air today!”

The Gryffindor stands cheered and Rowle twirled his bat with a grin.

“Urquhart has the Quaffle now, but no, he loses it to McGonagall. She drops down and pivots, heads for the goal hoops, she dodges a tackle from Carrow. The goal hoops are empty! No, Selwyn is there. McGonagall aims – and scores! Gryffindor scores, ten-zero!”

“What did I say about Selwyn?” Lestrange complained from his seat behind Tom.

“It’s just one goal,” Harry said.

“The game is back on and Gulliver has the Quaffle. He passes to Urquhart, who swerves around
Chernova, tackles Jones out of the way –“ The Gryffindor supporters cried out indignantly. “– Chernova moves to intercept, Dingle covers her from a Bludger, Urquhart passes to Gulliver, McGonagall goes for a grab, Gulliver feints, drops to Carrow – nice Porskoff Ploy! – Carrow goes for the hoops, but Blunt saves again!”

It looked like the Gryffindor Keeper lived up to her reputation. Within quick succession, she saved three more goals before letting one in, and meanwhile Gryffindor scored twice, both with McGonagall heading the formation.

“The game becomes brutal as Slytherin starts feeling the heat,” Macmillan commented as Loxley bashed a Bludger at Lyudmiya Chernova, hitting her in the back and almost knocking her off her broom, while Gulliver darted upward and gave Ainsley Jones a face full of bristles to drive him off his tail. This earned Slytherin a goal when he managed to get past Blunt’s defences by swerving in from behind the posts and dunking the Quaffle in the middle hoop. “That’s a second goal for Slytherin. 30-20 for Gryffindor.”

Harry sat back and folded his arms, watching the game intently. It felt strange to be on the side of the brutes and he was reluctant to cheer his house team on. Yet, it gave him a sense of satisfaction when the Slytherin Chasers managed to claw the scores relatively even despite the lacking skills of their inexperienced Keeper. They all seemed to have an uncanny talent for toeing the line of foul without actually crossing over and costing penalties. Rowle and Loxley chased after the Bludgers with dogged determination and when they went for a swing, their aim was deadly accurate. Gryffindor’s Beaters could barely get a bat in edge-wise and had their hands full defending their team from the barrage.

Tom wasn’t having a good time, Harry noticed. He slouched in his seat and appeared to be playing tic-tac-toe against himself by drawing on the edge of his cloak with his wand, where the noughts and crosses appeared in blazing letters, to be erased with a swish.

“You really don’t like Quidditch, do you?” Harry said.

“It’s a pointless activity,” Tom said, shrugging. “Fourteen perfectly capable wizards and witches scuffle over a bunch of differently shaped balls whilst adhering to an arbitrary set of rules that ban all of the most efficient methods of achieving victory. It’s only marginally more interesting than football, and only because it’s airborne.”

Harry snorted. “I guess, when you put it like that. But then, all sports seem silly if you really start thinking about them. That doesn’t mean they’re pointless.”

“Gryffindor scores, 80 to 50! It looks like Ridley Parkinson’s fit of violent rage in the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match has cost direly for the Slytherin team, as Keeper Eugene Selwyn struggles to keep up with Gryffindor’s Chasers.”

“Fuck you, too!” Parkinson yelled from the back row, almost loud enough to be heard over the stadium.

“But the game isn’t over yet. The Quaffle is back in. Gulliver flies with it, passes to Carrow. Carrow dodges around Jones, carries the Quaffle half-way down the pitch! Donovan beats a Bludger his way, but Loxley protects. Carrow back to Gulliver, McGonagall moving in from below! Where is Urquhart? Gulliver tosses the Quaffle back to Carrow, but Carrow loses his grip and McGonagall has it now. She darts around Carrow and heads for the Slytherin goals. The queen of the pitch, will she score her eighth goal of the game?”

McGonagall flew through the air, ponytail streaming and red robes fluttering. Chernova and Jones
fell into formation, one below McGonagall and the other within passing distance to the left. So intent were they on the goal hoops, where Selwyn circled with a hunted look, that they didn’t see Urquhart speeding towards them, flat against his broom and aiming straight for McGonagall. He came in from behind and under, shielded from sight by the flapping edges of McGonagall’s robes, and slammed his fist on the Quaffle under her arm, making it fly out of her grip. McGonagall yelped and and flailed, thrown off-balance and trying to find her grip. Urquhart shot after the Quaffle, ramming into McGonagall’s side on the way. He didn’t look back as a piercing shriek split the air, too busy speeding after the red ball.

Harry stood up, his breath catching in his throat as he watched Minerva McGonagall be thrown to the side from the force of the blow. Her one-handed grip on her broom slipped and, in a flurry of flaring scarlet robes, she fell. Her scream silenced the stadium as the crowd watched her plummet thirty feet to the ground in horror.

*“ Arresto momentum!”* Harry could hear the referee shout, brandishing her wand wildly at McGonagall’s falling form, and though the spell appeared to slow the fall, it came too late. The sickening thud of impact was audible to the stands.

There was a moment where everyone stood still, the stands silent and the players suspended in the air. Even Urquhart had stopped and turned to look once the Quaffle was safely in his arms. Then, belatedly, the referee blew on her whistle and the pitch became a pandemonium of activity. The players all landed on the green, the Gryffindors throwing their brooms aside and rushing to McGonagall’s side where she lay on her back. People from the stands streamed onto the field, staff members pushing to the fore to stem the tide. The Slytherin team stood back, clustering together well away from the commotion. Harry saw Captain Gregor Gulliver yelling at Urquhart before wrenching the Quaffle from his hands and bonking him over the head.

Harry sat back down numbly, tuning out Macmillan’s frantic babble. McGonagall couldn’t have been too badly hurt, could she? This had happened before and she would be alright and go on to become Professor of Transfiguration, right? Harry hadn’t screwed up somewhere without knowing it and somehow caused her early demise... right?

*“ Man, this sucks,”* Rosier said next to him, fidgeting with his banner worriedly. *“ I hope Slytherin won’t be forced to forfeit because of this.”*

*“ But it was clearly an accident,”* Nott said, though he sounded concerned as well. *“ Anyone with eyes could tell Urquhart only meant to take the Quaffle from her.”*

For a few anxious minutes the crowd milling around the accident site blocked the situation from view, leaving everyone in the dark. Finally, the crowd parted and Professor Dumbledore could be seen guiding McGonagall off the pitch on a floating stretcher. She was conscious, which became apparent when Harry spied her hands moving as she gave instructions to her team mates, who walked by her side as far as the edge of the green. With an immensely relieved sigh, Harry slumped backward in his chair.

*“ Alright, this just in,”* Macmillan’s voice rang out. *“ Minerva McGonagall has suffered a concussion and what appears to be several broken ribs, but was spared from any life-threatening injuries. Thank Merlin for that – or better yet, thank Madam Honey and her timely casting for slowing down her fall. “*

*“ I’ve been informed that the Gryffindor team will continue playing even with their Captain incapacitated. Reserve Chaser Norma Carlisle will be taking McGonagall’s place as soon as she can make it onto the pitch. Ulysses Urquhart’s tackle has been ruled as a foul and Gryffindor will be afforded one penalty shot when the game recommences.”*
The Gryffindor supporters weren’t happy with this ruling, judging by the shouting and fist-shaking. Around Harry, the Slytherins relaxed, some even patting each other on the back in congratulations.

“This is fantastic,” Dolohov said behind Harry, a relieved grin in his voice. “Now that McGonagall is out of the game, we have it in the bag.”

“Don’t forget about the Snitch,” Rosier said.

Losing McGonagall had shaken the Gryffindor team thoroughly. When the whistle blew again, Ainsley Jones lined up to make the penalty shot and managed to shoot the Quaffle through the left hoop, bringing Gryffindor’s score to 90 points, but after that the Slytherin Chasers dominated the game. Together with their aggressively efficient Beaters, they made a relentless force, and even Leona Blunt was forced to bend under the barrage. Keegan Towler made brave attempts to distract the game with feigned Snitch chases, but his efforts had little effect.

It was almost painful for Harry to watch the game, though the crowd around him cheered with feverish exhilaration.

“Slytherin scores again, 180 to 90!”

“Soon we won’t even need the Snitch!” Rosier exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear.

“This is a slaughter,” Harry muttered, low enough for only Tom to hear.

“I thought you were looking forward to the violence.”

Harry frowned at him but didn’t deign to answer. “It just seems unsporting to fly circles around them.”

“But if Gryffindor caught the Snitch now, Slytherin would still lose,” Tom pointed out.

“I know,” Harry said, sighing. It would take him some time to internalise the fact that Gryffindor was the enemy team. Especially if he decided to try out next year, he would have to let go of any solidarity he felt toward his old house.

The game dragged on, and by the time the Snitch finally made an appearance, the scores were such that Gryffindor had no hope of winning. The chase was intense, though, both Seekers fighting tooth and nail for every fraction of an inch they could gain on the other. Gryffindor may have been beaten, but they hadn’t lost their pride or their determination, and in the end it was Keegan Towler who caught the Snitch, bringing the final score to 300 to 240 in Slytherin’s favour.

“Can you believe it? We would have lost the Cup if Urquhart hadn’t taken care of McGonagall early in the game!” Nott enthused as they were walking back to the castle after the game was over.

“You mean we would have lost it,” Avery teased. “Your team lost the Cup ages ago!”

“Oh, but you all know that I’m really a Slytherin infiltrating Ravenclaw to learn their secrets.”

“You should come to the party in our common room!” Rosier exclaimed, skipping with his overflowing energy.

“We should break out our stash!” Lestrange crowed, and belatedly looked around to make sure no teacher had heard him.

“We’ll make a punch,” Dolohov agreed.
“Oh! Before I get too drunk and forget,” Nott said, turning to Harry. “I know a lot of people who’d like to learn how to cast a corporeal Patronus. I was going to ask earlier – do you think you wouldn’t be too intimidated by a crowd of Ravenclaws to join our Defence Study Group in the summer?”

“In the summer?” Harry said, blinking.

Nott laughed. “Oh, right – I forgot. You don’t do summer study in the other houses. But seriously, you wouldn’t have to attend every meeting. If you could just show up to give us a few tips, that’d be great. What do you say?”

“And you claim to be a Slytherin in disguise,” Rosier quipped.

Harry thought of D.A. and the satisfaction of coaching his students into summoning their first corporeal Patronuses. “That sounds like fun, actually,” he said, eliciting a beaming smile from Nott.

“That’s great! Really great! I’ll let everyone know so they can get properly excited. We assemble at my place, because we have the most room and there are a lot of people around so we don’t have to worry about the Trace. I’ll give you the details later when I know them, okay? Date, time, Floo password – all that stuff.”

Harry returned his smile, feeling windswept in the wake of his enthusiasm. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“So will I. Now, let’s go celebrate and get drunk!”

“Hear, hear!” the Slytherin crowd around them cheered.
“I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to do this.”

“Relax. Take a deep breath.” Avery inhaled deeply to demonstrate, held the breath, and let it out slowly, gesturing outward with his hands. “If you go in there already feeling panicked, it won’t be pretty.”

Rosier wheezed in a huge breath and held it in, eyes wide and face turning red.

“Let it out! What did I just show you?”

He exhaled explosively, gasping for breath.

“You’ve been studying really hard. You’ll be fine.”

“I need to pass or I’m finished. I’ll end up cleaning the toilets at the Three Broomsticks for the rest of my life.”

“You won’t be cleaning anyone’s toilet even if you fail all your O.W.L.s,” Avery said, rolling his eyes.

“I’m going to fail all my O.W.L.s!” Rosier cried shrilly.

“You are not going to fail all your O.W.L.s! Get a hold of yourself!” Avery commanded.

Harry rubbed his temples, trying to ignore Rosier’s breakdown. This may be his second time taking the Charms O.W.L., but that didn’t mean that he could take the exam lightly. He had to be able to stay calm and focused.

The Entrance Hall was a hub of nervous, jittery energy as the fifth- and seventh-years waited for the double doors of the Great Hall to open and bid them to sit their first written exams. Rosier wasn’t the only student coming apart at the seams with nerves and the hall was abuzz with distressed, whispered conversations. Others preferred solitude in their mental preparations – some students were frantically going through their Charms notes one last time, others paced, and a few stood very still with their eyes closed in concentration.

“It’s just Charms,” Avery said, holding Rosier firmly by the shoulders. “You only need an Acceptable to get into Giddymeadow’s N.E.W.T. class. You can afford to make a few mistakes.”

“It’s not so for every subject, though, is it? It’s all well and good if I pass Charms, but Dumbledore only accepts E students, and so do Slughorn, Merrythought, and Sargas. How the hell am I going to get an E in Astronomy?”

“Focus on Charms and stop worrying about bloody Astronomy.”

Harry looked at his watch and willed the hands to move. Waiting was the worst part of the exams – he wanted to get this over and done with.

“You have nothing to worry about,” Tom said to Harry. He seemed to be the only person in the
crowd who was completely at ease in the situation. “We’ve studied together and I know you know the material.”

“Will you dump me if I don’t get an O?” Harry asked wryly.

“No, but we will have to sit down and talk about what went wrong. It’s Charms, after all.”

Harry smiled weakly. He felt that he had done well on the Charms exams the first time, and this time he was definitely better prepared, but there was no guarantee that he would get an Outstanding. Any question on the written exam might cause him to freeze and forget everything he had learned, and it wasn’t unusual at all for an O.W.L. candidate to fail at casting the simplest of spells when an official examiner was breathing down their neck.

“I’m not with you for your brain,” Tom said, seeing the doubt in Harry’s expression.

“Well, thanks.”

“I’m with you for your body,” he finished with a smirk. Harry smacked him lightly upside the head, but he was smiling.

“Okay, okay. Let’s try this,” Avery was saying. “Think about what you’ll do in the evening after the exams are over. Imagine the relief! One O.W.L. down.”

“I’ll have to study Transfiguration,” Rosier said.

“But before you start doing that, there’s time to feel good about Charms. Think about that and breathe with me.”

Harry watched as the two of them stood close together, foreheads pressed against each other, breathing in synchrony. They made an endearing sight, but at the same time Harry was glad that he hadn’t been roped into calming Rosier down.

“We won’t be attending any N.E.W.T. classes with Rosier if he starts every exam like this,” Tom muttered.

“He’ll get a grip once he sees what it’s really like,” Harry said with some confidence. “He’ll wonder what the fuss was all about.”

In that moment, the doors opened majestically and Professor Giddymeadow stepped out, holding a long scroll of parchment at the ready to call them in.

The exams soon settled into a hectic routine. Spanning over two weeks, the fifth-years tackled their O.W.L.s one subject at a time, one day after another. Their mornings were spent in the Great Hall, the hushed silence only broken by the frantic scribbling of quills and discreet coughs and sighs. In the afternoons they demonstrated their skills in the practical examinations. For Harry, going through the O.W.L.s the second time was definitely less exhausting than it had been the first time. He still felt nervous before the exams, but once he saw what was being asked of him, he was able to relax because he had a good handle on the magic. Even Rosier had managed to get over his terror of the exams and trudged through them with determination, though still with an air of tragedy.

The order in which the exams took place was the same as it would be in 1996, which meant that Harry was lucky enough to have Friday of the first week free while Tom and Avery sat through their Ancient Runes examination. Harry took the chance to sleep in that morning, only rousing long
enough to wish his friends good luck when they left the dorm. When he woke up it was already past ten. Rosier wasn’t in the dungeons, so Harry moseyed around the drowsy common room with his *Uctions and Elixirs: a Brewer’s Guide Grade 5* for a bit before tucking the book under his arm and heading out, thinking that a bench on the courtyard might be a more stimulating place for reviewing Potions.

As it happened, he lost himself to basking in the warm sunshine until the tolling of a distant bell shook him out of his reverie. The Ancient Runes exam was over. He got up and entered the castle again, and immediately spotted Tom standing in the Entrance Hall and waiting for the Great Hall to be rearranged for lunch.

“How did it go?” Harry asked him, coming to stand next to him.

“It went well,” Tom said calmly, by which of course he meant that he had trounced the exam and would probably receive a perfect score.

“That’s great! We’re half-way through now. Where’s Avery?”

“He went to the loo,” Tom said, nodding towards the corridor where the ground floor toilets could be found.

“You know – I should probably go there and wash my hands before lunch. I just came from outside.”

“Go ahead. I’ll wait here.”

“Okay. Will you hold this for me?” Harry said, showing his Potions book to Tom, who took it obligingly. Then he crossed the Entrance Hall and hurried down the Eastern hallway, peering at his cuticles critically as he did.

When he approached a turn in the corridor, he heard Avery’s voice talking in hissed conversation.

“What do you want me to say? I don’t get it – what the hell do you want me to say that I haven’t already said?”

“The words come out of your mouth, but you don’t mean them. That’s the problem,” Dorcas said. The two were arguing in the corridor outside the bathrooms. “I can see it in you. You don’t feel one shred of remorse for helping your house mates cover up a crime.”

“Keep your bloody voice down!”

“There’s nothing you would have done differently,” Dorcas continued, lowering her voice marginally. “If I hadn’t overheard you talking about it, you’d still be acting normal, like this is what really happened, like Hagrid was caught fair and square and we can all rest easy. And I’d buy the act because you were so good at it.”

Harry’s face darkened into a frown as he listened to this. He looked around to make sure there was no one else around to overhear this.

“It wasn’t my place to do anything differently,” Avery said with an exasperated tone, as if this was an argument he was tired of repeating. “There was nothing I could have done. Potter told you about the situation with the Unspeakables, and besides, I couldn’t have gone against my house. In Slytherin, you either stick by the house or you aren’t part of it.”

“A house that expects you to compromise your morals for it isn’t worth being part of.”
“Well, this is the reality,” Avery snapped. “I’m a Slytherin, through and through. That’s where my place is. You knew that when we started this, and now you either deal with it or you don’t. It’s your choice.”

There was an extended silence.

“I don’t, I don’t… You’re usually such a good person; I don’t understand why you would choose like that—”

“Did you really expect me to willingly become an outcast in my own house for you?”

“Not for me – I had expected you to do the right thing because it’s right!”

“Do the right thing no matter what it takes, I get it. Well, I don’t want to be a martyr – they tend to die.”

Harry decided that it was time to cut this conversation short before anyone else wandered in at random. He scuffed his shoe loudly against the floor and strode around the corner. Avery and Dorcas fell silent and turned to look at him as one. Harry faked a smile. “Oh, hi! How was the exam? I just came to wash my hands.” He stepped between them and placed his hand on the men’s room door handle. Dorcas shifted uncomfortably, taking a step back as if ready to escape the scene. Before Avery could take her example, Harry cast him a meaningful look. “Avery, do you have a moment?” he said, opening the door and jerking his head towards the bathroom.

Avery frowned but followed Harry without a word.

Harry did a quick search of the stalls to make sure they were all empty before returning to the door and casting his best locking charm on it, followed with a sound-proofing ward. Then he turned to Avery and spent a moment chewing on the words he needed to say.

“I couldn’t help but notice that Dorcas was talking about Hagrid in public in a fairly loud voice,” he finally said. “Does that happen a lot? Only, I wouldn’t count that as ‘keeping her mouth shut’, considering how anyone could have just happened to walk by and overhear. Like I just did.”

“I told her to keep her voice down.”

“Anyone could have heard – thank Merlin it was just me. Is this how she always treats secrets?”

“What are you getting at? She hasn’t told anyone.”

“Is that what she told you? How can you know for sure, when she clearly doesn’t care if any number of strangers might hear her airing our secrets out in the open?”

“I trust her! She said she wouldn’t tell anyone.” Avery’s body language was in direct opposition to his words – his arms were crossed and his shoulders hunched, and his gaze darted around, evading Harry’s eyes.

“Even you don’t believe a word you’re saying,” Harry accused. “Why haven’t you done anything about this? I thought you had her under control. I assumed she’d kept her mouth shut like she promised.”

“We don’t exactly live in each other’s pockets these days, as you know very well. How am I supposed to know what’s going on with her when she insists I give her space?”

Harry groaned, feeling immensely stupid. How could they have let Dorcas run around knowing such
sensitive secrets, with nothing but a promise and no way of keeping an eye on her? “We can’t let this
go on,” he said. “I can’t even conceive of how much trouble it’ll cause if word gets out because of
her. You have to Obliviate her.”

Avery’s arms dropped to his sides as he straightened his back indignantly. “I’m not going to
Obliviate her like some Muggle who caught a glimpse of a racing broom!”

“How else do we make sure she doesn’t talk any more than she already has?”

“She hasn’t talked about Hagrid with anyone but me.”

“Even if that’s true, it doesn’t exactly put me at ease, based on what I just saw. I can’t let her get
Tom and all of us in trouble because of this – it’s not supposed to happen.”

Avery shook his head. “She’s known for weeks. Don’t you think that if she was going to cause
trouble, she would have done it already?”

“It’ll only take one person walking by at the wrong moment while you two are having a domestic. I
thought you at least would have known better than to have your fights in the hallway.”

“Fine, it was my bad. But I’m not going to Obliviate her.”

“Well, I don’t want to do it. I’ve never modified anyone’s memory before. What if something goes
wrong?” Harry thought of what became of Lockhart after his Obliviate backfired on him and
shuddered internally. He didn’t want to be responsible for something like that.

“If you think I’m going to let you practice your casting on her –”

“I’m not going to,” Harry cut in, making a decision. “If you won’t do it, Tom will. I’ll explain the
situation to him – I’m sure he knows how to cast the spell properly without hurting her.”

Avery’s eyes widened in panic. “What? No, you can’t tell Riddle! He’s not going to care about not
hurting her.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to let him hurt her. Would you rather I actually wrote to the
Unspeakables? I don’t think even they could get away with waltzing in here and Obliviating one of
Hogwarts’ students without people questioning what that was all about. Tom would be discreet, at
least.”

“I don’t want him anywhere near Dorcas.”

“Tough,” Harry said, knowing that he sounded cruel but feeling that this was the only way. “I’m not
going to stand aside and hope for the best anymore. If she changes how the events take place, I have
no idea what will happen, but I’m sure it won’t be pretty.”

“He won’t settle for Obliviating her,” Avery argued heatedly. “If you give him any reason to think
that she’s been telling people he framed Hagrid, he won’t settle for making her forget and not hurting
her.”

“I’m not going to let him hurt her,” Harry repeated. “I’ll go with him to make sure. Unless you’ve
changed your mind about doing it yourself?”

Avery hesitated, but before he could say anything, Harry caught a crafty glint in his eye and
interrupted him. “You know what? I don’t think I can trust you to Obliviate her and do a thorough
job of it. I’ll talk to Tom and we’ll have it done today.”
“I won’t let you.”

“What do you think will happen,” Harry demanded, raising his voice as he lost his patience, “if things get out of hand and Tom gets in trouble, and he finds out that it was her fault – and yours! You tell me what he’s likely to do, because I haven’t even seen him that angry yet.”

Avery opened his mouth to dispute him, but nothing came out. He balled his hands into fists, knuckles turning white, but Harry could see his resolve yield under his, Harry’s, argument.

Knowing that he had won, Harry turned to the sinks and began to wash his hands. He kept an eye on Avery through the mirror. For a moment Avery stood very still and stiffly, his internal struggle visible in his eyes and his clenched jaw, but then his shoulders slumped and he buried his face in his hands.

“I don’t like this,” he said, voice muffled by his hands.

“I don’t like it either, but she’s a big risk to us like this.”

“She just can’t help sticking her nose in business that’s bigger than her.”

“I guess that’s a Gryffindor trait,” Harry said. He thought of all the exploits he’d had during his years in Gryffindor. Thinking back, some of the things he had done seemed rather foolhardy – running head first into sticky situations like saving the Philosopher’s Stone and fetching Ginny from the Chamber of Secrets, not to mention rescuing Sirius from the Department of Mysteries… He had barely spared a thought on all the ways that things could go wrong. He hadn’t really cared if he was hurt or even killed if it meant he was doing the right thing. Really, Harry didn’t think he had changed all that much since then. He and Dorcas had a lot in common, but he couldn’t afford to feel too sympathetic towards her and compromise his judgement.

“You’d think that it wasn’t so hard to understand each other, seeing as we’re all people,” Avery said.

Harry switched off the tap and pulled a paper towel from the dispenser to dry his hands. “People are all different.”

“I suppose.” Avery was silent for a moment before turning away and going to the door. “Do what you have to do. Just make sure she isn’t hurt,” he said before unlocking the door and walking out. Harry hurried out after him and saw him heading down the corridor, in the direction leading away from the Entrance Hall, towards the castle’s East exit.

Harry sighed and started walking back towards the Entrance Hall. Tom was waiting by the now open Great Hall doors, looking impatient.

“You took your time,” he said when Harry got back, handing the Potions book back to him.

“Avery isn’t coming to lunch,” Harry said. He looked through the double doors and spotted Dorcas sitting at the Gryffindor table. “Look, I need to talk to you, right now.” He took a step towards the dungeons and gave Tom a meaningful look. Tom frowned and glanced at the Great Hall before acquiescing.

Harry led him down a flight of stairs and picked a storage room at random. They ended up in a room filled with unmarked stacked crates. Harry gave the surroundings a cursory glance before repeating the warding that he had used on the bathroom door.

“What’s this about?” Tom asked.
“There’s someone who knows that you framed Hagrid.” Tom stirred at that, but Harry barreled on before he could say anything. “She doesn’t know that you’re the Heir of Slytherin – only that Hagrid isn’t.”

“Who?”

Harry fought the urge to gulp at the anger in his voice. “Dorcas Meadowes. She– listen, she’s Avery’s girlfriend. That’s what he’s been hiding – that he’s dating a Gryffindor.”

“Avery told her?”

“No! She overheard him mention it to me in a conversation. We didn’t know she was standing outside the door and we hadn’t thought to use the Sound-Proof Charm. I’m sorry. I made her promise not to speak of what she’d heard and I told her it had to do with the whole Unspeakable thing, that all of this was supposed to happen and that’s why it was important nobody found out. But now I don’t think she can keep her mouth shut, because I heard her arguing about it with Avery out there in the hallway where anyone could have heard her.” Harry sucked in a deep breath after he finished talking, searching Tom’s face warily.

Tom stared at him for a moment before closing his eyes, biting his teeth and breathing deeply. “You made her promise not to talk,” he said, voice dangerously calm. Apparently he couldn’t check himself completely, because next he jeered, “Did you at least make her swear on her mum?”

“I’m sorry! I thought I could trust her. Avery trusted her.”

“You can’t trust Avery’s judgement on the girl he’s bedding! Do you even know her at all?”

“I don’t– I said I was sorry! I made a mistake, but I’m trying to fix it now.”

Tom rubbed his forehead long-sufferingly. “Alright. When did this happen? How long has she known?”

Harry did a quick mental calculation. “A little over a month? A month and a half, I think.” He cringed when he saw the enraged look on Tom’s face.

“A month and a half! And in all this time, you have no idea how many people she has told?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think she’s told anyone, or else word would have come back to us. I just think she’s not being cautious enough with the information and she might let something slip. That’s why I want to have her Obliviated.”

“You should have done that in the first place!”

“I know, I probably should have,” Harry said, shoulders slumping. “I guess I hoped it wasn’t necessary.”

“You can’t trust other people on their word alone. If you want someone to keep a secret for you, you have to make them stay quiet, one way or another.”

“That’s a very paranoid attitude.”

“Harry, you may be the sort of person who always keeps his promise, but most people aren’t like that. Most people wouldn’t hesitate to betray a promise the moment it became too inconvenient for them to keep.”
“Are you sure you aren’t just talking about yourself?” Harry said, incensed. “If that’s how little you think of the people around you, then why don’t you just find a hole in a rock somewhere and become a hermit?”

“Because I would conquer the people around me before letting them conquer me,” Tom said. “I’m humbled by your ability to trust, but only someone without any common sense would place their trust in a stranger.”

“I’m not trying to justify how I handled Dorcas – I just don’t believe in immediately assuming the worst of every person I meet.”

“You’re putting words in my mouth. Assuming the worst of everyone is very different from practicing caution when dealing with people who haven’t proven themselves to be trustworthy.”

“Alright! You’ve made your point. I was an idiot and this is all my fault. Can we talk about what we’re going to do now?”

Tom exhaled sharply and gave him a narrow, annoyed look before shaking his head and visibly forcing himself to put the argument behind him. “So, you want me to Obliviate her?”

“I don’t know how to do it myself. I mean,” he corrected himself, “I know the theory, but I haven’t actually done it before, and I don’t want this to be my botched first attempt.”

“That’s wise. Erasing a memory that has been on her mind for such a long time will be a delicate procedure.”

“But you can do it, right?”

“I can do it. I have plenty of experience with memory charms.”

Harry decided not to ruminate on the implications of this statement.

“I need you to describe the situation to me in as much detail as you can, so that I can perform the memory charm as accurately as possible.”

Harry did as he asked, trying his best to recall exactly what had been said during the incident in the cellars and leaving nothing out, though he felt awkward admitting to Tom that he had discussed their fight with Avery.

Tom was silent for a moment after Harry finished his retelling. He twirled his wand between his fingers thoughtfully. “The Obliviate is doable enough. The problem is that we don’t know if she has told anyone, and if she has; how many people and whom. I’ll have to interrogate her.”

Harry had a bad feeling about this. He crossed his arms and met Tom’s eyes determinedly. “I want to be there.”

“Don’t you trust me?” Tom said, grinning wickedly.

“I told Avery I’d make sure you don’t hurt her.”

“Don’t worry – I’m not going to torture her. But I’m not going to censor myself on your account, if you insist on coming.” He looked at his watch. “We shouldn’t waste any more time. Meadowes should still be in the Great Hall and we might not be able to find her after lunch is over.”

“Right now? Okay,” Harry said, trying to calm his suddenly pounding heart as he unlocked the door.
“How are we going to catch her alone?”

“I’ll take care of that,” Tom said. He took the lead as they entered the hallway and headed back up to the castle proper. It didn’t take long to get to the Entrance Hall, which to Harry’s surprise wasn’t deserted.

There were some students milling in there, enjoying the cool summer breeze coming in from the open doors. Tom steered them to the marble stairs where they sat down, blending in with a group of seventh-years revising for their N.E.W.T.s.

“How do you want me to quiz you on Potions?” Tom asked amicably, extending his hand for the textbook that Harry still carried.

Feeling slightly puzzled but figuring that Tom knew what he was doing, Harry handed over the book. Tom opened it at a mind-numbing list of agents and magical reactions and proceeded to quiz Harry just as he had offered. He had angled himself perfectly to keep an eye on the Great Hall doors, but he didn’t seem to be looking that way at all.

Harry was in the middle of describing why hellebore alone was poisonous, but combined with fluxweed could be used to treat clinical depression, when he noticed Tom discreetly lifting his wand behind the cover of the book.

“Imperio!” he whispered, staring steadily past Harry’s shoulder. Not a muscle on his face twitched to betray his calm countenance. Harry nearly stuttered to a halt, shocked to his core, but managed to pick up his explanation again when Tom shifted his gaze back to him, lifting an eyebrow as though nothing had happened. Behind him, Harry could hear Dorcas’s voice.

“Girls, I’m sorry – I forgot I was supposed to have a word with Professor Sargas about the Astronomy Practical. I dropped my telescope and I think it broke a lens. I’ll see you later in the common room?”

“Okay, well, we might be a while. We thought we’d study outside by the lake while it’s warm.”

“Bye, Dory!”

The next moment Dorcas climbed straight past them up the stairs, not sparing a single glance at the two of them. Harry looked at Tom with wide eyes.


“Lion- Lionfish spines? Well, they…” Harry cleared his throat, gathering his scattered thoughts. “They can go two ways too, depending on the combination of ingredients. Combine it with salamander blood and it can have a healing effect, but if there’s Horklump juice in the potion, it’s poisonous – though it’ll only make you ill and not kill you. Most herbicides use the combination of lionfish spines and Horklump juice.”

“Can you name an example that uses lionfish spines in conjunction with salamander blood?”

“Well, the Wiggenweld Potion, of course, which can counteract the Draught of Living Death and other magically induced deep-sleeps.”

Tom flicked through the pages back and forth, eyes roving and searching for the next item to throw at Harry. Instead of picking one, he made a decisive sound and snapped the book shut. “I don’t think there’s anything more to gain from quizzing you – you already know all of these. Brewing may not
be your strongest point, but at least you have the theory down to pat.”

“That’s one Outstanding that won’t be gracing my score card,” Harry said glancing nervously up the stairs. Dorcas was out of sight.

“Just keep your head cool in the Practical and an O won’t be out of your reach.” Tom stood up, giving the book back to Harry. “Let’s go to the library.”

Harry followed him up three flights of stairs, but they didn’t go to the library.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Harry hissed at Tom as they walked down a deserted hallway. “And in front of all those people, too!”

“Nobody noticed a thing,” Tom muttered back. “I only told her where to go.” He stopped at an innocuous looking door and unlocked it with a charm.

The room was an unused classroom with most of the desks and chairs pushed against one wall. There was one exception: a lone school desk stood where the front row would have been, facing the teacher’s dais. At the desk sat Dorcas, ankles crossed neatly and hands folded on her lap. When they rounded the desk Harry could see that she was still under the Imperius Curse – her face was serene as she stared vacantly at the blackboard. Tom stepped up close to her and slid her wand out of her pocket, hiding it deftly in his robes. Then he went to stand in front of her, leaning back against the teacher’s lectern. He looked at Harry, who dithered for a moment before picking a desk at the edge of the room and hopping up to sit on it.

In the next moment, Tom turned his attention back to Dorcas, and she blinked rapidly, shaking her head slightly to clear the last traces of the curse as it was lifted. She looked around, rearing back in her seat with an alarmed gasp. Then her gaze landed on Tom and her hand flew to her pocket, only to freeze when she found it empty. Her eyes narrowed.

“What’s going on? What did you do to me?”

“I understand that you’ve stumbled upon information that wasn’t meant for your ears,” Tom said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dorcas said. Tom made a displeased sound and deliberately looked to the side. Dorcas followed his gaze and saw Harry. Harry raised his eyebrows at her.

“Now, I also understand that, despite being warned of the dire importance of keeping this information to yourself, you have neglected to practice the necessary level of caution by discussing the subject in a public setting.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Dorcas said reflexively. She glanced between Harry and Tom, her wand hand clenching into a fist against her thigh. “You have no right to be threatening me. I’m the only person in this room who hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“In this room, I’ll be the judge of what is wrong and what is right. Let’s hope that I won’t find you lacking. Have you told anyone about the conversation that you overheard between Avery and Harry?”

“No, I haven’t, though it would have served you right if I had gone straight to Dippet with it,” Dorcas spat.

“You’re lying,” Tom said immediately with cold certainty.
“I’m not! I’ve only talked about it with Ichabod, and those were *private*” – she glared at Harry – “conversations.”

“You should have your private conversations *in* private,” Harry said. “I didn’t even have to sneak around to hear you loud and clear.”

“Who have you told?” Tom demanded, pushing away from the lectern to loom over Dorcas, hands pressing down on her desk.

“I told you – I haven’t told anyone!”

“You’re lying. Tell the truth!” He slammed his palm against the desktop, but more powerful was the raw magic that rang from his words, making Harry startle on his perch. Harry watched Dorcas with fascination as she flinched backwards and bared her neck submissively, hands held up in surrender.

“I told Julie!” she squeaked.

“Julie who?”

“Julie Pickford! From my dorm. But she hasn’t told anyone, honestly! She knows how to keep a secret.”

“Anyone else?”

“No. She’s the only one of my friends who knows about me and Ichabod.”

“Have you ever discussed the matter with her in a place where someone else could have heard?”

“Only in our dorm.”

“Did you ward the entrance against eavesdroppers?”

“No.”

Tom hissed with displeasure and took a step back from her. “Where is Julie Pickford now?”

Dorcas stirred, her eyes clearing from their haze as she looked up at him and straightened up slowly. “You’re not going after her,” she said defiantly.

A sly smirk crept onto Tom’s face. “Ah, but I think I already know where she is.” He turned his back to her and walked leisurely to one of the windows lining the South-facing wall of the classroom. “She’s outside, isn’t she? Taking advantage of the sunny day to study for the O.W.L.s while enjoying the refreshing breeze coming from the lake. I think I see her now, under that willow. The red-haired one, am I right?” He turned slightly to cock an eyebrow at Dorcas, as smug as could be. Dorcas looked horrified.

“Look, I’m sorry if I’ve caused you trouble,” she said, with the feverish air of grasping at straws. She stood up slowly, pushing the chair under the table and keeping the setting between herself and Tom. “I admit that I can get a bit hot-headed. I’ll take full responsibility. Julie hasn’t done anything and I swear you can trust her. She won’t speak a word. Do what you want with me, but please just let her go.”

“Poor thing, are you afraid of me?”

Dorcas set her jaw and glared at him hatefully.
“There is no need,” Tom said pleasantly, wandering back across the room to run the pads of his fingers along the edge of the desk. He frowned at the dust that clung to his fingers and flicked it off. “I have no ill feelings toward you personally. I’m afraid that you and your dear friend Julie are both quite beneath my notice, so I hope you’ll forgive me when I say that I have no desire to lay a finger on either of you.”

Harry thought this was laying it on a bit thick. “Won’t you get on with it, Tom?” he said.

Tom cast him a fleeting glare but turned back to Dorcas, pulling his wand out of his pocket. “So you stand by your word that Julie Pickford is the only person to whom you have told what you heard?”

“I haven’t told anyone else.”

“I believe you. Obliviate!”

Harry assumed that the ‘delicate procedure’ Tom had mentioned took place on a mental level, because this looked just like any other quick-fire memory modification he had seen before. Dorcas’s eyes lost focus and her face relaxed into sleepy neutrality. Before she could come around, Tom jabbed with his wand again, this time incanting, “Verto Recordatio!”

“What did you just do?” Harry asked, sliding down from his perch and going over to them.

“I altered her memory of what happened after she left the Great Hall with her friends,” Tom said, slipping Dorcas’s wand back into her pocket. He grabbed her elbow and Dorcas, still completely dazed, followed him docilely to the door. Tom poked his head out into the hallway, looking around, before shoving her out and closing the door again. “We’ll just wait for her to get back on her way and then we can leave.”

Tom waved his wand and the lonely desk lifted into the air, gliding back into its place by the wall, the chair following closely behind it.

“Is she going to see Professor Sargas about her telescope? I mean, that sounds like an excuse that’s pretty easy to verify.”

“Oh, I didn’t invent that excuse. I told her to give a reason for separating from her group. I suppose that she really did break her telescope,” Tom said, sniffing like he disapproved of Dorcas’s inability to take care of her possessions.

“I think I should state for the record that I don’t approve of the use of the Unforgivable Curses,” Harry said dryly.

“And I think that the only thing that is unforgivable about any form of magic is irresponsible casting,” Tom responded without missing a beat. “The Imperius Curse was the most efficient way of getting her alone. We should be safe to go now.”

“The Aurors aren’t going to care what you think if you’re ever caught using the Imperius Curse,” Harry said, giving the room a last look-over to make sure everything was in place. Tom pulled the door open and strode out nonchalantly, Harry at his heels.

“The new caretaker should learn better locking charms,” Tom commented idly as he relocked the door behind them, ignoring Harry’s concerns.

Harry rolled his eyes. “What was that thing you did earlier with your voice? Some kind of wandless Compelling Charm?” he asked, changing the subject as they started walking down the hall.
“Something like that. I’ve always been able to do it, since long before Hogwarts.”

“That’s pretty amazing.”

“It doesn’t always work on fully trained wizards. Listen, Harry. I’m going to look for Julie Pickford now. I’ll have to ask her some questions to find out if she has told anyone in turn, and if she has, I’ll have to find them too and repeat the process. It’s very tedious business, so I’m sure you’d rather go back to the dungeons than come with me.”

Harry hesitated. He had told Avery that he would be there to watch over the memory modification, but they had only discussed Obliviating Dorcas. After seeing Tom’s interrogation technique, which he thought was rather mild – all things considered – Harry didn’t think he’d be damming anyone to a horrid fate if he let Tom take it from here on his own.

“I’ll get it done sooner if I go alone,” Tom pointed out when Harry didn’t answer.

“Fine,” Harry relented. “Don’t be too harsh on her.”

“No more than necessary. I hope you’ve learnt something from this ordeal. If you had told me a month and a half ago, all of this could have been avoided and we wouldn’t have missed lunch.”

“I’ll make a priority of learning to Obliviate,” Harry said, lowering his voice as they neared the marble stairs and the busy traffic therein.

“It’s not as difficult as one would think. Ask Mulciber and Dolohov to teach you – I’m sure they’ll have a few hours to spare, since their exams are over and they have nothing better to do for the rest of the term.”

“Don’t you want to teach me yourself?”

“No offence meant, but I don’t much fancy being your ‘botched first attempt’, either.”

“But it’s okay if it’s Mulciber or Dolohov,” Harry said wryly. “I see.”

“I said no such thing. Mulciber happens to have an exceptional understanding of magics that deal with the mind. You couldn’t find a better teacher in the whole of Hogwarts.”

Harry snorted and bumped his shoulder against Tom’s.

When they reached the Entrance Hall, Tom took his hand and squeezed it briefly before letting go again. “Go grab something to eat from the kitchens before returning to the common room,” he said.

“You’d better do the same when you get back,” Harry agreed.

Tom was gone for several hours, which made Harry think that Julie Pickford might have been a gossiping sort. The afternoon passed into the evening and dinner came and went. Mulciber was in the middle of lifting Harry’s latest attempt at the memory charm from Dolohov when Tom finally trudged into the common room, looking exhausted. Harry got up from his chair to meet him. When Tom saw him, he jerked his head toward the boys’ dorms, wanting to have a word with him. They didn’t go further than the corridor, out of the range of prying ears in the crowded common room.

“I’m going to test you on that memory charm once you’ve learnt it,” Tom said, face pinched in an irritated scowl. “If I ever have to clean up after you again because you ‘hoped it wasn’t necessary’ to wipe someone’s memory, I won’t be responsible for my actions.”
“How bad was it?” Harry asked, cringing.

“Some of them were very hard to find.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think so many people would know.”

Tom sighed, letting his head fall forward and rubbing the back of his neck tiredly. “At least most of them didn’t take the gossip seriously. Of course, there might still be people out there who know, because there have been indiscreet discussions, but there’s nothing we can do about that. No gossip can hurt us if they don’t have any evidence. I think we’re safe.”

“Thanks for doing this, Tom, really. I’m sorry it turned out to be such a mess.”

“As long as it doesn’t happen again.”

“I’m working on the Obliviate right now. I’m sure I’ll get it down to pat soon enough.”

“Good.”

“Potter!” Dolohov shouted from the common room, waving his arm expansively to get his attention. “That one almost worked!”

“Oh?” Harry said stepping back into the common room with Tom.

“You were trying to make me forget what Mulciber said, right? He said, ‘Kendra saw Didi la Diva going down on Nina Davies in a girls’ toilet’, but after you charmed me, I thought he’d said, ‘Kendra saw la Diva going on Davies’ toilet.’ You’re getting there!”

“Slowly but surely,” Tom muttered, sounding amused.

“You’re creeping when you could be running,” Mulciber lectured. “You’re doing everything right, but you’re holding back. You can afford to put a good amount of power behind the charm – you won’t turn his brain into jelly unless you stick your wand up your nose and try casting without using your hands.”

“So Riddle, I’m curious to know why you’re giving your boyfriend homework when he already has his hands full with the O.W.L.s.” Dolohov said lacing his fingers together over his belly as he sat back in his armchair.

“Whoever said I gave him homework?” Tom said, glancing at Harry.

“My powers of deduction.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“I’d say it is, seeing as I’m the one being Obliviated.”

“Your sacrifice has been duly noted.”

Dolohov narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips into a thin line, but knew when to stop pushing.

“I think I’ll turn in early. It’s been a long day,” Tom said, stretching casually and turning to retire to the dormitory. “Goodnight, everyone.”

“Goodnight,” Harry said, Mulciber intoning with him.
Dolohov huffed and turned back to Harry. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me what this is all for?”

“Sorry,” Harry said, shrugging.

“Didn’t think so,” Dolohov sighed, rolling his shoulders as he straightened his back. “Care to have another go?”
“This is ridiculous,” Harry said, folding his school robes into his trunk. “I know the prefects have to patrol the train, but you’d think he’d have some time to spare before we reach King’s Cross.” Even Hermione had made sure that she and Ron spent part of the journey with Harry after the two of them became prefects.

“Why don’t you go looking for him, if it bothers you?” Nott said, rummaging through a pile of shirts in his trunk, indecisive of what to wear.

“It’s a straight corridor, so it shouldn’t be hard to find him,” Rosier said. He was admiring his faint reflection in the compartment window. “It feels so strange, wearing my own clothes again. It’s like suddenly I have a personality.”

“It’s nice to wear some colours for a change,” Avery agreed, tugging the hems of his russet robes into place.

Harry nodded in vague agreement, before slamming the lid of his trunk shut. “I’m going to look for Tom,” Harry said decisively. He shoved his trunk near the door, where it would be easy to grab when the train arrived at the station, and, sliding the door open, stepped out into the narrow hallway. He quickly closed the door behind him to preserve his friends’ modesty.

Harry made his way through the mostly open corridor to the front of the train, where the prefects had their own compartments. He stopped the first prefect he came across.

“Excuse me, have you seen Tom Riddle? Is he in a meeting or something?”

“We finished our meetings hours ago. I suppose he’s patrolling,” she said, shrugging.

“Okay, thanks,” Harry said, letting her squeeze past him on her way. He frowned, looking up and down the corridor and wondering if Tom might have gone into one of the compartments. Surely there wasn’t enough trouble to be found on the train to occupy him for hours on end? Harry set off toward the other end of the train, deciding to check the bathroom.

When he pulled open the door between two carriages, he ran into someone he had hoped he wouldn’t see again before the holiday.

“Harry!” Dorcas exclaimed before looking around furtively to make sure that they were alone. “I’m glad I ran into you. Do you think you could get Ichabod to come meet me before the train arrives at the station? I’ve been kind of wandering back and forth, hoping I’d catch him out in the hall, but I’ve been out of luck.”

“I managed to secure an empty compartment, so if only you could get him to leave the one he’s sharing with you guys, I could have a proper goodbye with him,” she continued, blushing slightly.

“I don’t know… What kind of excuse could I give him?” Harry hedged. The truth was that the
Obliviation fiasco had been really hard on Avery, who felt so guilty about the whole thing that he had started avoiding Dorcas in the hallways. Harry didn’t blame him. Facing Dorcas like this was difficult enough for him; he couldn’t imagine pretending everything was normal while she was trying to kiss him.

“I don’t know. Tell him you want to have a word with him. Just act natural and the others won’t think anything of it.”

“You recon they won’t think anything of it if he disappears to have a word with me, returns who knows when, and afterwards neither of us has an explanation for what was so important to talk about?”

“Oh come on, Harry, have a heart. I know!” Dorcas said suddenly, snapping her fingers as her eyes lit up. “Tell him that the trolley witch restocked on Liquorice Wands. He loves Liquorice Wands and the trolley witch didn’t have them earlier.”

“Fine,” Harry said, trying to hide his reluctance as he turned to go back the way he had come.

“Great! I’ll wait here.” She gave him a beaming thumbs-up.

Harry returned to his compartment and allowed himself only a tiny moment of hesitation before sliding the door open and poking his head in.

“Avery, if you still want Liquorice Wands, now’s your chance because I heard the trolley witch has restocked.”

“Now? Is she getting senile?” Avery said, getting up from his seat and patting his pockets for his money pouch. “You’d think she would stock up before doing her rounds – not after.”

“I guess she found a box she hadn’t noticed before.”

Avery stepped out of the compartment and closed the door behind him. Harry grabbed his sleeve before he could walk away.

“Listen, there aren’t any Liquorice Wands,” he murmured. “Dorcas asked me to get you alone for a while and I couldn’t tell her ‘no’.”

“Oh,” Avery said, shoulders tensing before he forced himself to relax. “Where is she?”

“Next carriage, that way. She said she found an empty compartment.”

“Right.” Avery straightened his robes and moved to step past Harry to meet Dorcas.

“Avery, I’m sorry,” Harry couldn’t help saying.

“Don’t say anything to me,” Avery snapped, pulling his arm out of Harry’s reach. “You’ve done enough.”

Harry watched him walk away and slam the carriage door closed behind him. He felt terrible, but he couldn’t bring himself to regret having Dorcas Obliviated. If the gossip had got out of hand, something even worse would have followed. A few memory charms and an irritated Tom were a small price to pay in Harry’s books when the alternative was Tom’s payback in the form of anything from mysterious poisons to nasty Dark curses.

He hoped that Avery would come around eventually. He was one of Harry’s closest companions and
losing his friendship was an unbearable thought.

Harry shook himself out of these dispiriting thoughts and continued his search for the elusive Tom. He still had yet to check the bathroom. To his surprise, there wasn’t even a line in the corridor.

The boys’ loo appeared deserted at first, but a closer look revealed that one stall was suspiciously occupied. The lock was red but Harry couldn’t see any feet through the gap under the door and there was no sound coming from inside. Harry hesitated outside the door, hand held up ready to knock – if it wasn’t Tom inside, this could turn into an awkward situation. In the end, he steeled himself and knocked on the door.

“Everything alright in there?” he asked.

A moment passed, and then the lock turned green. Harry waited for a further reaction, but when none was forthcoming he braved the door and cracked it open with care. He took a look inside and straightened up, throwing the door wide open.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. Tom was sitting on the gleaming tiled floor of the cubicle, which meant the empty stall had been just an illusion. He was leaning his back against the partition wall, arms on his bent knees. His wand dangled carelessly from his elegant fingers.

Tom shrugged, tilting his head back against the wall to look up at Harry.

“Brooding?” Harry hazarded, judging from his expression.

“It’s my last chance to use magic like this before the holidays,” Tom said, waving his wand in a lazy circle, indicating at the cubicle.

Belatedly, Harry looked around and saw a brilliant mosaic of the Hogwarts crest, a green-shaded lamp that could have been stolen from their common room, and – of all things – a fire poker stand wrought from cast iron snakes that slithered and twisted around each other sleepy. Something clenched in Harry’s chest at the sight of it all. He stepped into the stall – which was much bigger on the inside than it was supposed to be – and closed the door behind him, turning the lock as he did. He sat down next to Tom on the floor.

“I’ll come and visit you as often as I can, you know,” Harry comforted. “I’m sure my grandparents will want to invite you for dinner, and I bet you’ll be in and out of the house a lot. Maybe they’ll even let you stay over for part of the holiday.”

“It won’t be as bad as most summers,” Tom agreed, but he sounded apathetic rather than optimistic.

Harry didn’t know what to say. He knew what it was like to dread the summer holidays – being forced to stay with Muggles he hated and not even having his magic to defend himself with. No amount of encouraging words could have made him feel better about returning to Privet Drive; he was sure that Tom was no different when it came to the orphanage. But maybe he could take Tom’s mind off the orphanage for a short while.

Harry shifted so that he was facing Tom. “Look, we’re still at Hogwarts, technically,” he said. “There’s almost an hour left before we have to leave. That’s plenty of time.” Tom looked at him from under his fringe; Harry reached out his hand to brush it aside and sink his fingers into Tom’s hair. Tom leaned into the touch slightly, which was enough encouragement for Harry to press his lips against Tom’s own. Tom kissed him back, opening his mouth to let him in. Then Harry felt him chuckle into the kiss and he pulled away to give him a querying look.

“No, I’m glad I didn’t go on a raging rampage in here instead, though it crossed my mind,“ Tom
said with wry amusement in his eyes.

“I dunno – a quickie might have calmed you down.” Harry laid his hand on Tom’s ankle, moving it up his calf and under the hem of his robes.

Tom lowered his leg, stretching it out on the floor to give Harry’s hand better access. Harry followed the inseam of his trousers, pushing Tom’s robes up as he went, but stopped teasingly just shy of the desired destination.

“Come on – you have to do more than just sit there,” he said.

“I thought you were going to comfort me because I’m so sad,” Tom said cheekily, but reached for Harry’s belt buckle without hesitation.

“I’m not as selfless as that,” Harry murmured against the curve of Tom’s jaw as he brought his hand up the rest of the way.

A while later Harry had lost his glasses to the vicinity of the poker stand and he had Tom firmly pinned against the floor. In their excitement he had quite forgotten where they were, so it took longer than it should have for the sound of the door opening outside the cubicle to filter in through the haze. The footsteps were impossible to miss, though, and Harry froze in horror. He tried to push himself up, but Tom grabbed his robes and kept him in place.

“He can’t see us, or hear us,” he said. “I’ve charmed the stall.”

“But I can see him,” Harry whispered frantically, staring through the narrow gap under the door with wide eyes. His vision was dreadful without his glasses, but even he could make out the blurry shadows of the mystery person’s feet as he walked past them to the urinals. “And hear him,” he added, grimacing and squeezing his eyes shut when the splashing sound reached his ears.

“He’ll leave soon,” Tom said, sounding entirely too amused by the situation.

“He’s going to see the lock is red,” Harry pointed out. He braced himself on his hands to look down at Tom. “He’ll think it’s odd that nobody seems to be inside.”

“He – like any other wizard – will think that whoever is inside wants to be left alone,” Tom said, quirking an eyebrow at him.

“...Oh,” Harry said, feeling stupid. “Well, you didn’t have to open the door for me.”

“I didn’t mind when it was you.”

The person moved to the sink to wash his hands, taking his time. Tom grew tired of waiting and stuck his hand between them, wrapping his fingers around them both and squeezing pointedly. Harry moaned and thrust into the grip before he could help himself.

“He’s still out there!” he hissed, forcing his hips to stay still.

“And he still can’t hear us,” Tom said, setting an unrelenting rhythm. “Have some faith in my casting.”

“Your casting isn’t the problem,” Harry choked out before giving up and moving with him. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

Tom laughed quietly, but was soon too busy gasping for breath.
When they were done, the bathroom was deserted again, the only sounds disturbing their privacy the faint clunking of the moving train and the creaking of the green-shaded lamp on its chain. Harry lay down on his side next to Tom, feeling boneless with satisfaction.

“That was fun,” Tom said with a breathless chuckle.

“This will go down as the weirdest place where we’ve ever done that,” Harry said.

“Doesn’t the Chamber of Secrets count?”

“That was all hands, though, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, my mistake. We’ll have to go back, and this time we won’t use our hands.”

Harry giggled helplessly into Tom’s shoulder. Then he caught sight of his wrist watch and sat up quickly. “Oh bugger – the train will reach the station any minute now, and you haven’t even changed out of your uniform yet.”

Tom groaned and closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again, the last trace of contentment replaced with gritty determination as he pushed himself upright. “We should get going, then,” he said.

Harry fought a feeling of disappointment as he fetched his spectacles from the corner. Tom had been distracted for a while, and that was all that counted.

They cleaned up with a few well-placed spells, straightening their clothes before Tom turned to face the warped cubicle. He waved his wand, non-verbally lifting all of the charms and conjurations he had cast there. The decorations vanished and Harry had to take a hasty step closer to Tom as the walls closed in on them. The floor lost its clean sheen and became a grubby grey that made Harry wrinkle his nose.

“Let’s get out of here,” Harry said and unlocked the door.

The train was slowing down marginally as it approached King’s Cross, and the corridor was now quite crowded as the most impatient were already preparing to disembark. Harry and Tom hurried through the carriages, wiggling around loiterers and climbing over trunks, and arrived at their compartment with a few minutes to spare.

“What took you so long? We’re almost at the station!” Rosier said as they entered and Tom went straight for his trunk, flinging the lid open.

The compartment had become a cramped chaos, as the boys had taken their luggage down from the racks. The clutter occupied most of the floor space and half of the seats. Avery, who had returned to the compartment before Harry, sat squeezed between the window and a suitcase, while Nott perched on top of a pile of trunks.

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“We lost track of time,” Harry said. Rosier looked suspiciously between him and Tom. Belatedly, Harry touched the back of his hand against his cheek, finding his face still flushed. Rosier rolled his eyes with a smirk.

Tom pulled his uniform robes off and stashed them in his trunk before closing the lid again. Then he pulled a padlock out of his trouser pocket and snapped it in place. Harry knew it must have galled him to strip his trunk of all of its advanced locking charms and jinx traps and use a Muggle mechanism to secure his belongings instead.
“Ready to go?” Harry asked him.

Tom rolled up the sleeves of his white dress shirt – if it bothered him that he was the only boy in the compartment not wearing a wizard’s robes, he didn’t show it. “I think we’re better off waiting in here until the crowd has thinned a little,” he said.

The train pulled up to the station and the students began to disembark. When their group had clambered down to the platform, Lestrange came bounding over to them. He, Mulciber, and Dolohov had travelled in a different part of the train, because they couldn’t all fit in the same compartment.

“This is it, fellows – the moment of sentiment,” he said with a grin before turning and waving his arm at Dolohov and Mulciber, both of whom had already met their parents on the platform. “Oi, you losers! Light a fire under it! Or did you forget about your friends already?”

Harry could see Dolohov rolling his eyes before kissing his mother on the cheek and excusing himself. A moment later he and Mulciber joined the group.

“As I was saying,” Lestrange said, “this is goodbye, then, isn’t it? No more eating every meal together and living like a family.”

“Oh, come off it,” Rosier scoffed. “If we’re a family, then you’re the embarrassing uncle who turns up drunk to every gathering.”

“Oi, I’m trying to have a moment here. Anyway, we’ll be seeing each other over the summer, if I have any say in it.”

“You mean like last year? I thought you got into trouble with your parents for that,” Dolohov said.

“Yeah, but this time I’m going to ask for permission before throwing a house party. I’m sure they’ll agree to it if I don’t invite Flint and Parkinson and we stay in the East Wing.”

“Well, even if you don’t get permission, we’re still going to keep in touch over the holidays. There’s Floo, and if nothing else, we can write,” Rosier said.

“I’m going to Morocco with my family on the nineteenth,” Avery said. “We’ll stay for the rest of the holiday.”

“But everyone else is staying in the country?” Lestrange asked. “Great. I’ll try and arrange the party before you have to leave, Avery.”

After that and a last round of goodbyes the boys all drifted their separate ways, reuniting with their families. Tom grabbed one end of his trunk, clenching his jaw. Before he could take a step towards the portal leading to Muggle London, Harry placed a hand on his elbow.

“Come on, let’s find my grandparents and I’ll introduce you,” he said.

Harry could feel Tom’s shoulders relax marginally, though to a casual observer he wouldn’t have appeared tense in the first place. “Alright,” Tom said. Harry let go of his arm and hefted his own trunk, looking around for his grandparents.

He spotted them standing nearby and they waved at him, like they had been waiting for him to notice them the whole time. Harry guessed they hadn’t wanted to intrude on his friends’ goodbyes. Harry waved back and started dragging his trunk towards them.
“Harry, welcome back! It’s so good to see you!” Iris exclaimed, folding him into a hug.

“It’s good to see you, too,” Harry said, smiling.

“How have you been?” Howard asked, laying a firm, fatherly pat on his shoulder. “You haven’t written since before your exams.”

“I’m fine. This,” Harry said, taking a step back and indicating at Tom, “is Tom Riddle. Uh, I told you about him.”

Iris’s smile widened when she saw Tom, her eyes lighting up with joy. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr Riddle. Or may I call you Tom? I am Iris Potter,” she said, offering her hand to be shaken.

“The pleasure is all mine, Mrs Potter. And yes – please, call me Tom,” Tom said, turning on his most charming smile as he shook her hand.

“Then I must insist that you call me Iris. This is my husband, Howard.”

“How do you do,” Howard said, taking his turn shaking hands.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr Potter,” Tom said.

Harry observed the introduction, watching his grandparents’ faces carefully. He was relieved to find mostly positive signals in their expressions. He had written in one of his letters that he and Tom were back together, but he had been vague on the exact circumstances of how they had made up. He had been worried that after witnessing the dreadful aftermath of his and Tom’s break up, Iris and Howard might be a bit leery of Tom on principle. Fortunately, that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Tom will be staying in London during the summer, as well,” Harry said. “We’ve talked about keeping in touch and visiting…” He drifted off, unsure if bringing up the orphanage would be stepping on Tom’s toes.

“I’m sure the matron of the orphanage won’t mind visitors coming as often as they please, and I’m usually allowed to come and go at my own discretion,” Tom said with a smile that betrayed none of the loathing he felt for the orphanage and every Muggle that ever stepped foot in it.

To their credit, both Iris and Howard managed not to show their pity on their faces.

“Oh, but you must come and have dinner with us in our home,” Iris said immediately.

“I would love to, if you would have me.”

“And it won’t do for you boys to loiter about in the city, just the two of you – it isn’t safe these days, especially in the Muggle neighbourhoods. If Harry wishes to invite you over to our house and no trouble comes up, I’m sure we can find an arrangement that satisfies everybody.”

“Does lunch on Saturday sound good to you?” Howard interjected, addressing Tom. “We would like to get to know you better, first.”

“Saturday works well for me. Thank you for the invitation.”

“We’ll be glad to have you.”

“Would you two like a moment alone to say goodbye?” Iris suggested.

“Thanks, that’d be great. Why don’t I walk you to the gate?” Harry said, addressing the latter to
“It was an honour meeting you, Mr and Mrs Potter,” Tom said before going with Harry.

“That went pretty well,” Harry said when they were out of ear shot.

“They seem like decent people,” Tom said, but the charm had gone out of his voice and the words came out as a brooding statement.

“Try and hang in there. I’ll come and drag you out of that place as often as I can.”

“I know, and I look forward to it,” Tom said and gave him a reassuring smile. It was strained but genuine and Harry was glad he didn’t feel the need to pretend everything was alright when it was just him and Harry.

“And I promise,” Harry said, lowering his voice and pulling Tom closer with a teasing smirk, “that the next time won’t be on the Hogwarts Express on the way back to school.”

“Well, I should hope not – we’ve already done that,” Tom quipped, earning a grin from Harry.

“I hope we won’t have to sneak around too much,” Harry said as they stopped to stand next to the barrier leading to platforms nine and ten. “I don’t think I fully appreciated how lucky we were to sleep in the same dorm at school.”

“We’ll manage, somehow. I should go now.”

“I’ll see you soon – tomorrow or the day after.”

“Don’t hurry on my account. I don’t want to keep you from your family.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Harry said and tugged him into a kiss. He kept it chaste but lingered in the touch before pulling away. “See you later. Take care.”

“Later, then,” Tom relented, smiling slightly. He adjusted his grip on the handle of his trunk and walked through the barrier with his head held high.

Harry sighed and turned away after the last trace of him had disappeared. He returned to his waiting grandparents.

“Oh Harry, he’s so handsome!” Iris enthused when he came back. “I couldn’t have imagined such a good-looking young man!”

“He’s polite, too,” Howard said. “Or was he just laying on the charm?”

“I’m sure he genuinely wanted to make a good first impression,” Harry said.

“We were ever so happy when we read your news that you two had resolved your argument,” Iris said.

“Yes, well, I’ll reserve my judgment until I meet him properly,” Howard said. “Are you ready to go home?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

The return to Number Seven, Candeed Court was a happy occasion. His family sat him down for tea and insisted on catching up, asking questions about the O.W.L.s, the leaving feast and who had won
the House Cup (Gryffindor), and his friends and what plans they had for the summer. They also asked about Tom, and this time Harry was more forthcoming on the subject than he had been previously.

The next day Howard had to go back to work and Harry had lunch alone with Iris in the kitchen. Before he could awkwardly bring up his desire to run off to Muggle London instead of spending the first day of summer break with her, Iris smiled mischievously and asked him where in the city Tom lived and if Harry needed a lift.

“I can take the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron and go from there. It’s a bit of a walk, but nothing I can’t handle,” Harry said.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going? Muggle London is so big and confusing and you haven’t been there since you came here, have you?”

“Tom gave me directions and they seem pretty precise,” Harry said, pulling the slip of parchment Tom had given him out of his pocket. Iris took it from him and looked it over.

“Well, this looks thorough. He even drew a little map. But be careful out there – the Muggles are at war, too. Be sure to have your wand close at hand; if there’s a dangerous situation, I’d rather you break the Statute of Secrecy than risk getting hurt. I’ll give you some money in case you decide to go to Diagon Alley.”

That was how Harry found himself standing outside Wool’s Orphanage. He eyed the cast iron gate, the complete lack of a tended yard, and the dreary façade with apprehension. No wonder Tom didn’t want to come back here. Eventually he shook himself and pushed the gate open, stepping up to the door. He rang the doorbell and waited, feeling slightly nervous.

The door was opened by a young woman – only a few years older than Harry – in a faded but neatly ironed black dress and a white apron. She paused when she saw Harry, looking at him up and down.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“I’m looking for Tom Riddle.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Who’s asking? Why do you need him?”

“Harry Potter. I’m a friend of his from school.”

“No friend of his has ever come asking after him before.”

Harry tried not to feel annoyed by her scepticism. “I’m asking after him now. I told him I’d visit, so he should be expecting me.”

She looked at him mistrustfully before shrugging in a stiff approximation of nonchalance. “Fine,” she said, opening the door wider. “Come in.”

Harry stepped into the foyer, looking around. The room was gloomy and everything from the scuffed black and white tiled floor to the peeling paint on the walls looked a bit shabby. These weren’t signs of neglect, though, because everything was also clean and tidy. Even the feeble bars of light coming from the narrow windows revealed no dust particles in the air.

“Lucy!” the woman barked. A teenage girl who was passing through the foyer carrying a mop and bucket froze before turning around reluctantly. Unlike the woman, she wore a drab grey skirt paired with a blouse that hung off her skinny frame. “Go and tell Tom Riddle there’s a guest for him.”
“What! Do I have to?” Lucy exclaimed, accidentally splashing soapy water on the floor.

“Just go tell him to come down, it won’t kill you.”

“But he’s scary.”

“You big pansy, when will you grow a spine? I don’t have time to argue about this. You stay here and clean that up and I’ll go fetch him myself.”

“Yes, Miss Alice,” Lucy said as the woman stalked up the stairs impatiently. She set the bucket down and started mopping up the puddle she had made. She eyed Harry with furtive curiosity and mopped her way to where he was standing.

“Why do you want to see Tom Riddle? Does he owe you money?” she asked.

“Uh, no. We’re friends,” Harry said.

“Oh.”

“Why would you think he owes me money?”

“Well, you look rich.”

“Do I?” Harry looked down at himself. He was wearing the clothes he usually wore under his school uniform – a simple white shirt and a pair of slacks.

“Oh, yes – those are tailored,” she said, pointing at the outer seam of his trousers and the shoulders of his shirt.

“You have sharp eyes.”

Lucy shrugged. “We get a lot of families coming and going. Rich couples, mostly, looking for a baby to adopt.”

“Oh,” Harry said awkwardly.

“I didn’t know Tom Riddle had any friends.”

“He has loads of friends at school,” Harry said a touch frostily.

“You’re the first one to come and visit him in all these years, though.”

“He doesn’t want most of his friends to see where he lives.”

“I see.” Lucy lifted her chin stiffly at the slight. “I guess he has to try and fit in with his betters at that posh school of yours. Which school is it, anyway? For all he acts high and mighty, he’s all too reluctant to tell anyone where he’s getting his superior schooling.”

Before Harry could retort, Tom’s voice interjected smoothly from above: “It’s a very exclusive public school that you could never hope to attend.” Both Harry and Lucy looked up to see him descending the stairs. “Only those who are personally invited may enrol.”

Behind him came Alice, who had picked up a pile of linens somewhere along the way and appeared very busy indeed with her brisk walk and heavy frown. “Nobody likes a braggart,” she said. “You’ll need Mrs Cole’s permission if you want to bring your guest into your room.”
“That’s unnecessary – we’ll be heading out now. Right, Harry?” Tom said. He came to a stop when he reached Harry and Lucy, giving the girl a cool look down the nose. Lucy ducked her head behind her mop, biting her lip anxiously.

“Yeah, I’m fine with that,” Harry said.

“Good. Let’s go.”

They left the building, Harry scurrying to keep up with Tom’s swift strides. It was like Tom couldn’t get away from the orphanage soon enough, which was probably true.

“What have you got there?” Harry asked, pointing at the satchel Tom was clutching to his hip.

“Just some things I need to sell.”

“Oh?”

“The Hogwarts fund for the underprivileged is a noble concept, but in practice it’s woefully lacking and hardly provides for a year’s worth of school supplies.”

“So, what sort of things do you have in there? Where are you going to sell them?” Harry didn’t have to ask where Tom had acquired his wares. He sure couldn’t have bought them with honest money.

“Lost and found things,” Tom said with a wry smile. “We’re going to Knockturn Alley.”

“Knockturn Alley? But we’re dressed like Muggles! Or did you pack robes in there, too?” Harry said, eyeing the satchel again.

“We aren’t dressed ‘like Muggles’,” Tom lectured. “It’s a hot summer day, so we’ve foregone our extra layers because we are not allowed to use Cooling Charms out of school. You will find that the people on Knockturn Alley don’t worry too much about the appearance of their business associates.”

“I thought the people on Knockturn Alley would be the first to judge a bloke who isn’t dressed like a proper wizard,” Harry remarked.

Tom snorted. “Why would they? They may be wizards and witches, but hardly any of them could call themselves proper.”

They walked to Charing Cross Road, where the Leaky Cauldron appeared squeezed between a bakery and a barber’s shop.

“Care for a drink?” Harry asked when they entered the pub.

“Maybe later.”

So they made their way straight to the grimy backyard and the portal into Diagon Alley. Harry stopped short at the brick wall.

“Hang on,” he said. “Can we open the passage with magic without getting official warnings for underage casting?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “This is wizarding London. The likelihood of other wizards interfering with our Traces while we’re here is absolute, so the Ministry won’t know which spells are ours and which are not.”

“Oh, right,” Harry said, pulling out his wand and tapping the correct brick to open the portal. “It’s so
unfair that magic-raised kids are basically exempt from the underage sorcery law, but if you live in a Muggle neighbourhood, you get bombarded by Ministry owls even when someone else happens to cast a spell nearby.” When his friends had explained to him how the Ministry tracked underage magic, he had been outraged beyond belief.

“It sounds like you’re speaking from experience,” Tom remarked mildly. Harry humphed noncommittally.

They entered Diagon Alley and Harry looked around curiously. While he had visited Knockturn Alley before, when his friends had insisted on going there for their Christmas shopping, he hadn’t yet stepped foot on the Diagon Alley of the 1940s. At first glance everything looked the same. Colourful signs, abundant displays, chattering folk, and casual use of magic met the eye. However, when he looked closer, the differences became apparent. The Apothecary was still there and so was Flourish and Blotts, but Potage’s Cauldron Shop was gone, replaced by a robe shop; Florean Fortesque’s Ice Cream Parlour housed a tea room, and where once there was Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions there was now a shop selling stationery. Quality Quidditch Supplies was where it was supposed to be, which made Harry smile. There was a Comet 180 and a Tinderblast in the display window.

Tom wasn’t interested in the shops and stalls of Diagon Alley. He barely spared a glance to the wares that the peddlers and shop owners had arranged welcomingly out on the street, winding his way around the milling traffic at a casual pace but with determination that left no room for distractions.

“Oh, Cauldron Cakes! I haven’t had those in ages,” Harry said, veering for the display outside of Sugarplum’s Sweets Shop. “The trolley witch had run out of them yesterday on the train.”

Tom slowed down to a stop and turned reluctantly to wait for him. “I’d rather get this errand done first, if you don’t mind.”

“Do you have an appointment with someone you need to get to?” Harry asked, picking up a box of Chocolate Cauldrons that was displayed next to the cakes.

“Harry, I can’t spend any money until I’ve sold this stuff.”

Harry froze before forcing himself to relax. “Oh,” he said, putting the box down. He wanted to tell Tom that he didn’t have to worry about money if there was something he wanted to buy – Iris had given him plenty of gold to spend and treating Tom wouldn’t be an issue. However, he knew Tom was too proud to accept such an offer from him. He’d probably think of it as charity and take offence. “Alright. Let’s come back here later, though. I want to buy some of those chocolates for my grandmother.”

They continued down the alley and Tom paused a short distance from the entrance to Knockturn Alley, pulling his wand out discreetly.

“Frequenting Knockturn Alley isn’t a crime and all the establishments there are completely legitimate, at least on the surface, but we still wouldn’t want the wrong people paying attention to us. Especially you – I’m sure your family would disapprove if they found out I took you there.”

“What’s your plan, then?” Harry asked. “We aren’t exactly dressed like mysterious strangers.”

Instead of answering, Tom waved his wand in a circle between them and murmured an incantation that Harry didn’t catch. “That was a mild Attention Repellent,” he explained. “People will see us there, but they won’t find us interesting enough to look closely unless we address them first.”
“That’s useful. You’ll have to teach me later.”

Knockturn Alley didn’t seem so bad in the summer sunshine. The muck and grime was still there and shadows clung stubbornly to nooks and crannies, but the atmosphere was sleepy rather than threatening. Harry followed Tom into a junk shop and watched him barter a wobbly set of scales and a few potion phials with mismatched stoppers for what amounted to less than a Galleon. Privately he thought that this was quite pathetic and started making plans for bullying Tom into letting him pay for everything. However, when they left the junk shop, Tom headed deeper into the alley and took them to a seedy-looking pawn shop.

“Are yeh pawnning or selling?” the broker asked as he inspected one of a pair of fancy pocket watches Tom had presented to him. Harry wondered if he had nicked them from the Slytherin dorms or if he was hiding some impressive skills at pickpocketing.

“Selling.”

“I dunno, lad,” the man said, lowering his monocular and shaking his head. “These things tend to pile up.”

“Oh? Well then, if you don’t care for clutter, I don’t suppose you have any interest in diamonds.”

“Now, wait a sec,” the man said when Tom started to gather the watches back into his satchel. “What diamonds?”

Tom raised his eyebrows and halted his movement. “Are you sure you want to waste your time? Your jewellery collection is already quite extensive.” He glanced at the small display arranged on one end of the counter, holding a few thin, tarnished chains, a tacky tiara, and a grotesque wax hand sporting a miscellaneous selection of rings.

“Don’t mind those,” the man said, batting his hand dismissively at the display. “I keep my more valuable merchandise outta sight. If yeh got gems, I’d take a look at ‘em.”

Tom relented and pulled something out of a side pocket of his bag. Harry’s eyes widened when he opened his palms, spreading out an exquisite necklace to catch the light – a chain of tiny diamonds with a big blue jewel in the middle.

The broker leaned in to look closely, eyes gleaming with delight. “A-ah!” Tom said when he reached out a hand to touch the necklace. “I need to know that you’re interested in buying.”

The man straightened up, regaining his professional air. “If the gems are genuine, then I would definitely be ready to make an offer. If I may?” Tom let him take the necklace and he bent over to peer at the diamonds through his monocular. “Are there any enchantments on it?”

“No.”

“Better no enchantments than dodgy enchantments,” the man muttered as he continued inspecting the gems.

In the end, the pawn broker bought both the necklace and the watches, which Tom managed to include in the sale by insisting on a package deal or no deal at all. Harry watched the gold switch hands suspiciously, feeling pretty sure that the wares were worth more than what the man paid Tom.

“Where did you get that necklace?” Harry asked as soon as they were out of the shop.

“It was a gift.”
“A gift?” Harry said incredulously.

Tom smirked impishly. “A gift, yes. I’m sure Ignatius Prewett won’t mind that Lucretia misplaced one of his numerous wooing gifts. I doubt she has even noticed that it’s missing.”

Harry groaned and rubbed his eyes under his glasses. “So you snuck into the girls’ dorms to steal Lucretia’s jewellery.”

“She had no use for it. She doesn’t wear jewellery.”

“I’m not going to report you to anyone, but this level of theft makes me really uncomfortable.”

“Next year I’ll have my O.W.L.s on paper, so I’ll be able to find a job for the summer,” Tom said. “I won’t have to steal.”

Harry was silent for a moment as they ambled down the street towards Tom’s next destination. “You know, he’s probably going to sell that thing for much more than what he paid you for it,” he finally pointed out.

“Naturally. That’s how it works,” Tom said. He glanced at Harry sideways, seeing his nonplussed expression. “Why did I let him haggle down the price – is that what you’re thinking?”

“Well…” Harry said. Tom was a persuasive personality, in more ways than one. It surprised him that he hadn’t tried harder to make the broker part with his gold.

“I could have Confunded him or even used the Imperius Curse, but it’s likely that he has some kind of wards placed on his shop to detect that kind of magic. He would have at least found out afterwards if I had swindled him, and then I would not have been welcome to do business here again,” Tom explained, waving his hand lazily to encompass all of Knockturn Alley.

They visited a couple more shady establishments where Tom sold the rest of his wares (a few penknives, a magical camera, a Remembrall, and three telescopes) before they returned to Diagon Alley. Harry felt rather awkward about what he had just witnessed, but he figured that he preferred knowing exactly where Tom had got his money from over wondering silently and imagining him picking pockets or robbing strangers.

After an hour or two of wandering the shops of Diagon Alley, they retreated to the Leaky Cauldron for sandwiches and some cold butterbeer. Tom leaned his chin pensively into his palm and flicked crumbs across the table.

“What’s it like at the orphanage?” Harry asked to break the silence after gathering his courage.

Tom looked at him from under his fringe and said nothing.

Harry wrapped his hands around his bottle, waiting.

“I feel crippled there,” Tom finally said, quiet enough that Harry had to lean closer over the table. “I can’t afford to receive any official warnings for underage casting, so I wouldn’t dare to even use wandless magic.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any way to get around the Trace?”

“There is, but even Dark Magic can only buy a few hours’ window of freedom,” Tom murmured, conscious of the other customers sitting nearby. “The Trace is a very powerful mixed enchantment, more Dark than Light in nature, that dates back to a time when legislation and moral discipline were
both stricter and looser than they are today.”

“You mean people practiced the Dark Arts more?” Harry mumbled back, barely above a whisper.

“Exactly.” Tom grinned sharply behind the cover of his hand. “Think about it: all of our precious magical children are being systematically cursed by the very people who should be protecting them.”

Harry’s fingers tightened around his bottle at the thought. He remembered clearly how it had felt to read those cold, impersonal Ministry letters accusing him of breaking the law when he hadn’t done anything wrong. A Trace that couldn’t distinguish who cast which spell was inherently flawed and should never have been approved for universal use. The enchantment was another blatant example of prejudice against Muggle-borns: magic raised kids got off scot-free for underage casting while those who lived with Muggles were watched constantly like the Ministry was just waiting for an excuse to snap their wands.

“I’m a wizard – that’s who I am,” Tom continued. “But that’s exactly what I’m not allowed to be when I’m forced to go back to that place. I’m forced to be like them – I must look them in the eyes and talk to them, take orders from them and follow their rules. I hate it. I’m better than them – just walk among them and look at how they live their lives, listen to their conversations, and tell me I’m not better than them. None of them have any ambition to become more than what they are. I might excuse them for not having magic – they didn’t choose to be born without it – but even among Muggles they are scrapings off the bottom of the barrel, and, worst of all, they are complacent in their place. They whine and they wish that someone would come and take them to a better life, but they aren’t willing to lift a finger to help themselves. Even before I found out that I’m a wizard, I knew I wasn’t like them. I would have done anything I could to overcome my circumstances, with or without magic.”

Harry swallowed, staring at the table. He felt like he ought to insist piously that Tom was no better than the Muggles at the orphanage and claiming otherwise insulted their human worth, but he couldn’t help sympathising with Tom. It was unfair that he, Harry, could go home and use magic as he pleased with his grandparents’ indulging permission, while Tom – who was superior to him when it came to magical talent – had to return to a place that was completely void of magic and people who couldn’t even begin to understand him. The orphanage was Tom’s Privet Drive, and if Harry was being honest, he considered himself better than the Muggles in his life, too, though for different reasons than Tom.

“Can’t you stay here, at the inn?”

“I have better uses for my gold than spending it on a room when I already have a free bed to sleep in not far from Wizarding London. This and the pittance I get from Hogwarts will have to last me for a year.”

Harry felt the gold burning in his pocket again. The Leaky Cauldron wasn’t an expensive inn – he’d probably be able to pay for the whole holiday up front right now and Iris wouldn’t even wonder where he had spent the gold.

“Don’t even think about it,” Tom said with steel in his voice. “I have no use for your pity or your charity.”

Sheepishly, Harry stilled his fingers, which had been unconsciously tapping against the side of his bottle. “Fine – I won’t give you any money if you don’t want it.”

“I’m perfectly capable of providing for myself.”
“I saw that, yes,” Harry said dryly. “Though, I hope you won’t get all sensitive about this if my grandparents decide to let you stay for part of the summer. You had better impress them on Saturday, by the way. I think Howard still needs some work.”

The corners of Tom’s mouth quirked up slightly. “I’ll be on my best behaviour.”

“And for Merlin’s sake, don’t steal from them. That would be really awkward for me.”

A bark of laughter returned good humour between them. “Your grandmother’s silverware is safe from me.”

“Just in case they don’t like you, though, we’ll have to make contingency plans. How’s the soundproofing in your room at the orphanage?”

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