A Dangerous Game

by Cybrid

Summary

Tom Riddle opens the Chamber of Secrets in Harry’s fifth year at Hogwarts. After a botched attempt to extract the Horcrux in Harry’s scar leaves their souls tied together, Tom is forced to kidnap him when he makes his escape.

A story of Horcrux hunting, adventure and unwilling attraction.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
It was a sunny morning in early May. The enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall showed a clear blue sky strewn with wisps of high clouds. It would be perfect weather for flying, had half of the Gryffindor Quidditch team not been summarily banned from the sport by the Hogwarts High Inquisitor.

Harry was sat at the Gryffindor table on the same bench as Ron. Across from them, Hermione was almost entirely hidden by a stack of textbooks that must have been at least a dozen volumes high. Up and down the table, and indeed, throughout the Great Hall, there were other students reading during dinner. O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were coming up, and the general atmosphere among the fifth and seventh years was that of restrained panic. Few of the revising students, however, boasted such an eclectic combination of books as Hermione Granger. Her stack included titles such as *Myths and Legends of Ancient Wizarding Britain*, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, and, of course, *Hogwarts: A History*.

Harry looked up from his plate when Hermione snapped shut her current book, *The Almanac of the Arachnid*, and threw it on top of the pile with a scowl.

“I just don’t see how it could be an Acromantula!” she huffed, tucking her frizzy hair behind her ear. “There’s nothing here that remotely links any kind of Acromantula to petrification: they incapacitate their victims with their *venom* and their *webs*!”

“It was an Acromantula enchanted by Slytherin himself though, wasn’t it,” Ron mumbled through a mouthful of mashed potato. He withered under Hermione’s glare, swallowed and quickly said; “That’s what Ernie Macmillan told me, anyway.”

“You don’t honestly believe that Hagrid was responsible!”

“You know I don’t! And anyway, no one could believe that, not after it got Eric Burns last night. How’s Hagrid supposed to have done that when he’s in Azkaban? I bet she’s shitting bricks.”

There was no doubt who was meant by "she". They all turned to look up at the top table. Umbridge was perching on the edge of Dumbledore’s chair in the centre. While all the teachers were in attendance (minus Hagrid and Trelawney), the chairs immediately to each side of her were pointedly unoccupied. The Headmistress herself had a furtive, nervous disposition. Her bulbous, protruding eyes frequently flicked up from the many letters and scrolls spread out on her table to survey the many whispering students in the Great Hall.

The sight made Harry grin - just a few weeks before, she had sat on that chair like it was a throne, smirking down at them all through breakfast, lunch and dinner.

“They have to let him out now,” Hermione said hopefully. “I was expecting to see it announced in the Prophet this morning . . .”

There was a long, uncomfortable pause as they all contemplated Hermione’s statement. Harry stabbed a carrot on his plate moodily. He was deeply worried about how his half-giant friend was doing, trapped in a too-small cell in Azkaban. Would the Dementors that guarded the prison have the same effect on him that they did on other wizards?

“I still say it’s Fred and George,” Ron said, finally. “This melodramatic ‘Heir of Slytherin’ stuff is right up their street - and the writing on the wall? Classic! When we were kids, they used to write
Poo’ everywhere in Impervious Ink, and then sign it ‘Ron’ to get me in trouble. ‘Course, it didn’t work, because I couldn’t write my own name at that age --“

“Surely you can’t still think that Ron,” Hermione admonished. “Not after Hagrid.”

"Why not? They didn't know that Hagrid had got in trouble for it fifty years ago - they probably just heard about it from a ghost or a book and thought it was a cool prank."

"A student died last time!"

"They probably didn't hear that part." Ron paused to think, and then raised a finger. "And they've kept the attacks going, see, to clear Hagrid's name. Bet you anything they stop when he gets out."

“Petrification isn’t like Stunning someone - it’s serious magic! It'll take months for Professor Sprout to finish the Mandrake Draught. Daphne Greengrass and Simon Wright are going to miss their exams!” Hermione was aghast at the very idea.

"I wish I could miss mine. Do you think if I asked nicely, they’d do me too?"

"That’s not funny!” Hermione slapped her hand down on the table, rattling the cutlery. But Harry was laughing. He loved watching his two best friends bicker - it distracted him from all the horrible things that had happened that year; Umbridge, the loss of his Firebolt, the discovery of the DA and the fact that it was his fault that Professor Dumbledore had been forced to flee the school . . .

"The pattern of victims doesn’t make sense for Fred and George anyway." Hermione mused as Harry and Ron's laughter died down. "Daphne Greengrass, attacked the week after Dumbledore left - she's a Slytherin” she said, ticking them off on her fingers. "Then little Olivia Daniels from Gryffindor in the last week of April, then Simon Wright, seventh year Ravenclaw, found the day after Olivia, one week with no attacks and now Eric Burns, another Ravenclaw."

"Yeah," Ron sighed. "Fred and George would have taken out the entire Inquisitorial Squad." He gestured vaguely towards Harry with his fork. "Speaking of, d’you still think it's Malfoy?"

“Yes!” Harry said firmly, ignoring Hermione rolling her eyes. "It has to be, unless it's one of the other Death Eater's kids. It's just got to be connected to Voldemort in some way." He dropped his voice. "In the graveyard, last year, he was boasting about being descended from Slytherin himself. Maybe there's another undercover Death Eater like Moody."

"Bet it's Umbridge!"

Hermione ignored Ron. "You’ve said all this before, Harry. We just keep going round in circles."

"But don't you think it means something? If Voldemort thinks he's descended from Slytherin, it explains the writing on the wall." Harry persisted "And the attacks started just after Dumbledore left - don't you think that's a little too convenient?"

"Yes, but then why petrify a Slytherin student?" Hermione crinkled her brow and rubbed her temples with her fingers. "It just doesn't make sense. I don't understand the motive: it seems like the person doing this is just targeting people at random, whoever happens to be around. And even if it is connected to You-Know-Who, and I agree that it probably is, there's no good reason to think it's Malfoy. You've been following him for how long now? Three weeks? And you still haven't found anything."

"He's acting weirdly," Harry insisted.
"He and Pansy just broke up last month, of course he's acting weirdly!" Hermione threw her hands up and went back to arguing with Ron, who was now advancing the far-fetched but highly entertaining theory that Umbridge was not merely working for Voldemort, but was, in fact, Voldemort himself in disguise.

They argued at length, but Harry kept half an eye on Malfoy, who was sitting alone at one end of the Slytherin table. He definitely looked extremely shifty, Harry decided. There were, perhaps, few outward indicators of this shiftiness (Malfoy didn’t look up from his Daily Prophet once) but Harry just knew that something was up, and that it was only a matter of time until he found out what.

The next morning brought with it double potions class. Harry struggled to stay awake as Snape lectured on the topic of the Befuddlement Draught. Every few minutes his head began to nod, prompting Ron to nudge him with his elbow to bring him back to wakefulness.

The night before Harry had lain awake in his bed until the early hours. When he had finally fallen into an exhausted slumber he had dreamt again of the long corridor that led to the Department of Mysteries. He had drifted weightlessly down the black tiled passageway, through the plain door at the end, and into the circular room lit with torches that shone with an unsettling cold blue light. Just as one of the handleless doors was gliding silently open, he had woken, shivering and filled with foreign excitement. Through the door there had been a dark, cavernous room filled with tall wooden shelves containing milky white objects . . . Harry had not seen precisely what they were . . . perhaps they were bottles of potions . . . Confusing Concoctions . . .

Harry jerked when Ron’s elbow dug into his ribs and he hissed in his ear “Wake up! The lecture’s over.”

His head snapped up. Snape had finished writing the long list of ingredients on the blackboard.

“-- And you will find the Chizpurfle fangs in the container on my desk. Each pair of students will take one fang - if you spill the venom while extracting it, both of you will receive Ts on this practical --”

There was a scraping of chairs and stools as students stood up and began preparing their cauldrons. Harry rose when Ron did, rubbing his eyes blearily.

“Did I miss anything?” he asked as Ron set Harry’s cauldron - which was considerably less rusted and pitted than his own - on their shared burner.

“Nah - he went on and on about how expensive Sneezewort is, and took ten points from Gryffindor when Seamus didn’t know how many times to stir the potion after adding the Scurvy Grass.”

“Git.”

“Yeah - he gave Parkinson twenty when she knew what ‘Lovage’ was. What’s up with you, anyway? You couldn’t keep your eyes open in that lecture.”

Harry dropped his voice. “I had another dream about the Department of Mysteries - I finally got through the circular room; the one I told you about. There was this sort of tall chamber with loads of shelves --“

Harry trailed off when Ron made a strange kind of gulping sound. He spun around to see Snape standing silently behind them. His lips were thin and bloodless and he was scowling down his long, hooked nose. Harry had the unfortunate feeling that he might have heard what he had just said, and
was furiously angry about it - they had not been on good terms (to put it mildly) ever since he had caught Harry in his Pensieve in their final Occlumency lesson.

“Weasley . . . Potter, I don’t think it is wise to permit the two of you to partner on this potion. The Befuddlement Draught is a particularly difficult brew, and likely beyond your abilities.” He spoke to both of them, but his eyes were boring into Harry’s. “Draco,” he said, raising his voice. Malfoy looked up from his own cauldron and trotted over, clearly delighted to be invited to watch them being told off. “Would you be so kind as to work with Potter? I’m sorry to pair you with such a . . . dismal . . . student, but I’m afraid Potter will spend the lesson gossiping if he is allowed to work with Weasley.”

Malfoy smirked at Harry. “Certainly, Professor. I’ll make sure he doesn’t touch anything important.”

“Five points to Slytherin. Potter, go fetch the ingredients for your partner.” Snape said imperiously, before turning away to menace Neville, who had spilt some green liquid down his trousers and was frantically trying to remove it with his wand before anyone noticed.

Harry gave Malfoy a filthy look before heading over to the store cupboard. Ron thumped him on the shoulder apologetically as he passed. A few minutes later, he thumped the pail of ingredients down on Malfoy’s bench and began begrudgingly crushing the Scurvy Grass stems with a mortar and pestle.

The atmosphere in low ceilinged, cellar-like classroom was fraught. It was the penultimate Potions practical before their O.W.L. exams began, and Snape was prowling back and forth in the corridor formed between the two rows of cauldrons, clearly in a foul mood. Harry could hear whispers as students tried to confer without drawing his attention. The fumes rising off the brewing Befuddlement draughts were not helping - Harry’s head felt heavy, and without meaning to, he had processed three times the required quantity of Lovage. The next cauldron over, Crabbe and Goyle seemed to have forgotten what they were meant to be doing entirely; Goyle was making small circles on his empty chopping board with his pestle and Crabbe was stirring their potion as it frothed out of the cauldron and onto the floor, all the while staring vacantly off into the middle distance.

“Are you done chopping that yet?” Malfoy demanded. Harry quickly hid the excess chopped herb and wordlessly passed the chopping board over. Malfoy strode over to his side of the table and took it with a sneer. The little silver ‘I’ pinned to his robes beneath his prefect badge gleamed dully in the low light. Up close, Harry noticed that Malfoy didn’t look so good. Although his hair and robes were still immaculately neat, he was paler than normal and there were dark circles under his eyes.

“What’s wrong with you?” Harry asked as Malfoy poured the Lovage into the cauldron and began to stir counter-clockwise. “Did daddy not buy you enough birthday presents?”

Malfoy didn’t rise to the bait, but his hand clenched on the ladle.

“Or . . . is daddy in trouble with Voldemort?”

Malfoy jerked so badly at the name that a few drops of bright orange potion splattered onto his neatly ironed robes. He hissed as they began to smoke, then vanished them with his wand. He rounded on Harry.

“How dare you--“

“So he is in trouble? What’s he done wrong now?”

Malfoy’s nostrils flared and his hands clenched into fists. But he apparently thought better of
responding. He turned back to their potion and began adding the venom from the Chizpurfle fangs with a pipette, stirring it in carefully one drop at a time. “Would you hurry up grinding that Sneezewort, Potter?”

Harry did not hurry up grinding the Sneezewort. Instead, he leant casually against the bench, and said, with a conciliatory tone carefully chosen to drive Malfoy mad: “So it is about birthday presents then? Don’t worry, Malfoy - I don’t think a new broom would help you against Gryffindor. After all, it’s not your broom that’s slow.”

“Fuck off. It’s not even my birthday til next month.”

Harry thought that was an exceptionally lame comeback. Malfoy apparently thought so too, because he flushed and gave their potion a particularly vicious stir.

“Is it really?” Harry scoffed. “I’ll be sure to write it in my diary.”

To his amazement, Malfoy blanched white and dropped the pipette. He didn’t even seem to notice the plume of noxious smoke rising from the potion, which had immediately turned rust red.

“It’s you --” Malfoy breathed. “You have it . . . of course . . . and you’re a Parselmouth . . .”

Harry took a step back to get away from both Malfoy, who was acting very creepily, and the fuming potion which was now bubbling violently and making crackling sounds.

“Potter!” Snape barked, as he cut through the students who, alerted by the strange sounds their cauldron was emitting, had gathered around to watch their potion self-destruct. “At the beginning of this class, I specifically instructed you not to add the venom all at once. That’ll be twenty points from Gryffindor, for your inability to follow the simplest of instructions.”

“Hey!” Harry cried. But there did not seem to be any point in protesting at the unfairness of it when Snape promptly vanished the potion.

“I’ll call an end to the brewing,” Snape said, turning to address the class. “You’ve all embarrassed yourselves sufficiently for one morning - I can only console myself with the knowledge that the vast majority of you will not be able to continue this subject at N.E.W.T. level. Bottle what you have - not you Longbottom - you’ll stay here during lunch to scrape that sludge out of your cauldron - class dismissed!”

Harry spun around furiously to confront Malfoy, but he was gone. He looked up and caught a glimpse as the hem of someone’s robes disappeared out the door.

“Bad luck, mate,” Ron said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“It wasn’t me - Malfoy said something stupid about his birthday, and I said something . . . I can’t remember exactly what . . . and he went really pale and dropped the whole fang’s worth of venom right in the cauldron!” Harry said distractedly as he tried to cast his mind back to their conversation. “He said something about me being a Parselmouth . . .”

“What a nutter.”

Hermione caught up to them as the class filed into the Great Hall for lunch, leaving a forlorn Neville behind. “Oh, I hope that one doesn’t come up in our O.W.L.s - I almost didn’t add the Sneezewort in time, and our potion ended up more of an egg yolk colour rather than lemon yellow!” she said, speaking very quickly. Behind her back, Ron exaggeratedly rolled his eyes at Harry.
Harry hardly heard her. His eyes were searching the Slytherin table . . . but Malfoy was not there. Where had he gone in such a hurry? Was he perhaps in the Owlery, sending a letter to his father about whatever he mistakenly thought he’d discovered? Or, Harry wondered, his suspicions about Malfoy’s involvement in the petrifications coming to the front of his mind, was he hurrying to the ‘Chamber of Secrets’ that the messages written in blood on the walls had referred to, to arrange another attack . . .

“I’m not hungry,” he said to Ron and Hermione. “I think all of those potion fumes made me lose my appetite. I’ll see you in Charms, yeah?”

His friends made sympathetic noises. Harry heard Ron telling Hermione “He didn’t sleep well.” as he strode out of the great arched doors and began trotting up towards the West Tower. He didn’t find Malfoy in the Owlery, although the eagle owl that Harry knew was his was gone. However, on his way back, as he was heading down the first floor corridor towards Gryffindor tower with the intention of taking a nap, he heard two people arguing in hushed voices ahead. He stopped, and carefully peered round the corner.

Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson stood there, halfway down the corridor. They were stood close together, and Malfoy was talking, fast and quiet.

“. . . to help me . . . . . . found something . . . Potter . . .”

Harry inched around the corner and crept a little way down the corridor. He knew that his body would be half obscured by the oversized suit of armour that stood to attention next to the door leading to the History of Magic classroom.

He could hear the conversation much more clearly from his new vantage point.

“. . . know how important this is, Pansy. Potter let something slip in Potions - and he’s a Parselmouth, I can’t believe I forgot - remember how he set that snake on Macmillan in second year? It all fits.”

Parkinson spotted him over Malfoy’s shoulder and her eyes widened. Malfoy must have noticed the change in her expression because he spun around, wand out.

“Eavesdropping, Potter?” Malfoy snarled the words furiously, but the hand gripping his wand was white-knuckled and shaking. Behind him, Parkinson disappeared around the corner.

Harry ignored Malfoy’s wand. “What do you think I’ve been doing?” he asked, burning with curiosity.

“Don’t play dumb - I know exactly what you meant by that taunt in Potions class.”

“Which taunt?” Harry cried, utterly frustrated. “I can’t even remember exactly what I said.”

“Don’t lie to me!” Malfoy shouted, and then ran a hand through his hair impatiently. “I don’t have time for this.”

Then, before Harry could do more than slip his wand out of his pocket, Malfoy fired a cutting charm at his bag, causing it to split down the middle. The contents, which included several heavy textbooks and a bottle of ink, hit the floor with a heavy thud and the crunch of breaking glass. The rolled up scroll containing Harry’s Charms homework and the gold galleon that Hermione had enchanted with the Protean Charm rolled away in different directions.

Harry watched in complete bemusement as Malfoy crouched, uncaring of either Harry’s raised wand
or the slowly spreading puddle of spilt ink, and began frantically rummaging through the pile. He swept several quills and a half-eaten packet of Liquorice Wands aside and began thumbing through the books, growing steadily more desperate as he failed to find whatever it was he was looking for.

Finally, Malfoy looked up, meeting Harry’s amazed eyes.

“Where is it?” he snarled, but there was a pleading note to his voice.

“What the fuck, Malfoy?”

“Oh Merlin . . . It has to be here . . . He’ll kill my father . . .” Malfoy whimpered, digging through the pile again. He seemed to be paying special attention to the textbooks and Harry’s wire-bound notepad. He turned each one over several times, and then flicked rapidly through them, as if he expected to find something hidden inside.

Harry’s mouth dropped open at this unexpected confirmation of his suspicions. He remembered what Sirius had told him that Voldemort was searching for, all those months ago at Grimmauld Place.

“A weapon. Something he didn’t have last time.”

“What is it?” he asked excitedly, crouching and grasping Malfoy by the arms. “What does Voldemort have you looking for? It has something to do with the attacks, right?”

But Malfoy wrenched out of his grip and backed away with wide-eyed terror. Without a word, he spun on his heel and sprinted down the corridor.

“HEY!” Harry bellowed, and started after him. But after a few steps he remembered that the contents of his bag were still scattered on the floor, and while some were innocuous, others, such as the Marauder’s Map, enchanted galleon and Sirius’ knife, were deeply incriminating.

“Damn it-Reparo!” He shovelled his most of his possessions quickly back inside, and stuffed map, knife and coin into his pockets before taking off again in pursuit. But when he rounded the corner there was a three-way junction and a flight of stairs.

There was no sign of Malfoy.

He cursed again, adjusting the strap of his bag on his shoulder.

“Language.”

Harry jumped in fright and spun around to see Pansy Parkinson leaning against the stone wall with her arms folded. He must have run right past without seeing her.

“Don’t sneak up on people like that!”

Parkinson raised an eyebrow, but didn’t respond.

Harry glanced up and down the corridor, then stepped closer.

“Tell me what’s going on - do you know what Malfoy thinks I have?”

“I can’t talk about that,” Parkinson said, pushing away from the wall and hitching her own bag higher on her shoulder.

Harry grabbed her arm before she could leave.
“You have to help me, Parkinson - Pansy;” he said, beseechingly. “I don’t know exactly what Voldemort has Malfoy looking for, but if he gets his hands on it, it won’t end well for anyone.”

Parkinson wrenched her arm away. Harry thought she looked torn; her fingers twisted the hem of her cardigan and her lips pursed. She peered nervously around the deserted passageway.

“Greengrass was your friend, right?” Harry pressed. “She was the first to be petrified.”

Pansy seemed to come to a decision. “I know,” she hissed intensely. “This has all gone too far . . . I want to tell you . . . ” She paused and bit her lip. Her eyes darted from side to side. “But we can’t talk here - anyone could come past.”

Before Harry could point out that she had been perfectly happy to argue with Malfoy about whatever task Voldemort had set him in the middle of the History of Magic corridor, she turned and strode off determinedly down the left-hand fork. Harry trailed after her eagerly, excited at the promise of some answers. Finally, after a year of being kept in the dark, of being told nothing of Voldemort’s movements other than that he was searching for some mysterious, unnamed weapon, he would know what was going on.

For someone with such stubby legs, Pansy walked fast. Harry struggled to keep up as she took two more left turns, and then a right that led to a slightly shabby, rarely used corridor. Halfway down, she came to a stop and pushed open a short green door on which “LADIES” was written in peeling gilt paint.

“Come on,” she said impatiently when Harry made no move to follow her through the door.

“Wait - Pansy, that’s a girls’ bathroom.”

“So?” she asked blankly.

Harry gestured vaguely at his body in an attempt to convey that he was not a girl.

Pansy rolled her eyes and stepped through. Harry grabbed the door before it could swing closed and, with a final glance to check that no one was watching him follow Pansy Parkinson into a bathroom, passed through with a mixture of embarrassment and curiosity.

Somewhat to his surprise, inside it looked like a normal Hogwarts bathroom, only with no urinals. There was a hexagonal plinth in the centre that contained a circle of sinks around a central column, and a row of cubicles along one wall. To Harry’s dismay, the door of one of the cubicles was closed and the dial on the front read “Occupied”.

“Don’t be shy, Potter, no one else comes in here because of Moaning Myrtle - that’ll be her in there.”

Harry breathed out a sigh of relief. He now vaguely remembered Hermione telling him about a bathroom haunted by a particularly unpleasant ghost. He turned back to Pansy, and stopped.

It might have been an effect of the soft greenish light filtering down from the mossed over skylights, but Pansy’s eyes were bright and lively. Her demeanour had changed somehow; where before she had seemed anxious and fearful, she now stood tall with a small smile on her face and one hand on her hip.

Her other hand held her wand.

Harry’s eyes flicked to it and he felt a twinge of unease, but then suppressed it. Pansy was consistently rubbish in Defence against the Dark Arts lessons: she cast spells slowly and predictably.
“Okay, talk. What is Malfoy looking for?”

Pansy cocked her head to the side. The gesture looked somehow alien on her. “Malfoy?” she said, as if she had forgotten why Harry was there. Her voice was light and relaxed. “Oh, he’s been looking for a small black book all year, but he hasn’t been having much luck.” She smiled mirthfully and drew closer. Harry took a slow step back, towards the sinks. “It’s terribly funny, actually; apparently Lord Voldemort asked his father to look after it, but he gave it to some poor girl a few years back - I think he wanted to get her father in trouble - and he hasn’t heard anything about it since! As you can imagine, the Dark Lord is not amused.”

“What does it do? It’s some kind of weapon, right?” Harry asked. Then, as his brain caught up with his mouth, he noticed that she had said Voldemort’s name. Harry had heard very few people say his name, and fewer still said it without a flinch.

Pansy’s eyes were on his forehead. She was staring at his scar, something which people always did and Harry hated. “What does it do . . .” she mused. “I suppose that it is a sort of weapon . . .”

A wide malevolent grin was spreading slowly over her face.

Something was terribly wrong. Harry took another step back, bumping up against the sinks. He tried to surreptitiously slide his wand out of his back pocket.

Pansy took a quick step closer to him and whipped her wand up before he could react. It dug painfully into his throat below his Adam’s apple. Harry suddenly registered that she was holding it with her left hand - he could have sworn that Pansy was right handed --

Pansy - or whoever it was who was wearing Pansy’s face, for Harry was suddenly certain that it was not her - smiled up at him. Harry’s hand was curled white-knuckled around his wand, but it was at his side, pointed down at the floor. The girl leant in, standing on tiptoe to whisper in his ear like a lover.

“~ Open ~”

There was a great groan from behind him and the sound of stone scraping past stone. The sink against Harry’s back seemed to slide away and upwards. Harry’s arms windmilled as he scrambled for balance - to his horror, a gaping black maw was opening beneath him, and his feet were halfway over the edge.

He tried to grab onto the sinks, the plinth, Pansy herself. His eyes found her face for a split second. It was disfigured by a malevolent, victorious smirk. She laid her small hand on his chest and pushed.
The Heir of Slytherin

Harry’s bed felt hard and uncomfortable beneath him. He lifted his hand to rub his eyes and to his
groggy surprise, encountered his glasses. He normally took them off to sleep . . . they should be on
his nightstand rather than crookedly perched on his nose.

There was something ominous lurking on the edge of his awareness, something vital that he couldn’t
quite remember . . . his heart began to beat rapidly in his chest as his body reacted to danger even as
his mind clung sluggishly to sleep.

The sound of dripping water . . .

Harry sat bolt upright and groaned miserably as a multitude of aches and pains made themselves
known. His head pounded viciously . . . he had hit it on something . . .

Agonisingly slowly, the events of the last few hours came back to him. The argument between Pansy
and Malfoy. Pansy luring him into the girls’ bathroom. She had been acting very strangely, and had
done something to make the floor open up beneath him . . . he had fallen down a steep stone slide,
tumbling, crashing into the walls . . .

Finally, he opened his eyes. Black spots bloomed across his vision. When they cleared, he saw that
he was sat on the cold stone floor of a great cavern. The space was illuminated at ground level by a
layer of unsettling green light that seemed to ooze out of the air itself. Stone serpents coiled around
mighty pillars, climbing out of the layer of luminescent air into the inky, inscrutable blackness that
concealed the ceiling of the hall.

It could only be the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry rubbed a hand over his scalp and found a bump at the back of his skull but no blood. He knew
that most of the puzzle pieces were there somehow - Voldemort, Malfoy’s task, Pansy and the self-
proclaimed Heir of Slytherin - but he could not seem to put them together. It was as if the central
piece was missing, and without it nothing quite made sense.

He got to his feet, stifling another groan as his shoulder twinged. He patted down his robes for his
wand but wasn’t surprised when he didn’t find it. He shivered, and not only because of the chill air -
standing out in the open in the huge, empty chamber without his wand made him feel horribly small
and exposed.

Rubbing his sore shoulder, he peered around, looking for a likely exit. He couldn’t see anything, but
then again, it was hard to tell because the strange green light faded beyond the ring of central
columns. He turned and saw a roughly hewn statue of truly awe-inspiring proportions presided over
the hall. It depicted an old man with a very long, thin beard and sweeping stone robes.

And at its feet lay a body, curled up on its side.

Harry stumbled over to it, splashing loudly though shallow puddles of still water. The person lying
on the ground had a head of mousy brown hair and a round, pale face. He dropped to his knees and
shook her.
“Parkinson -, hey, Pansy, wake up!” he hissed.

There was no response. Her arm felt cold under the sleeve of her robe. Terrified, Harry pressed two fingers to her throat, trying to remember how to find a pulse. After an age, he felt a sluggish beat . . . but it felt very weak. Was it supposed to be so slow? He hesitated, and then, blushing a little, rifled through Pansy’s robes for a wand, trying not to touch her too much. But it wasn’t there and neither was his. In fact, the only thing of note that Harry could find was a slim black book.

He took it out and looked at it. It was a little bit worn on the corners but otherwise in good condition. On the front, the year ‘1943’ was stamped in gold leaf. He frowned in puzzlement.

This had to be the ‘small black book’ that Pansy had said Malfoy was looking for. He flipped it over again but couldn’t see anything special about it. In fact, it looked more Muggle than magical. Inside, all of the pages were blank except the first, on which the name “T. M. Riddle” was written in beautiful, old-fashioned calligraphy.

His frown deepened. "Riddle" seemed familiar somehow, but he couldn’t remember where he had seen it before.

For some reason, it filled him with foreboding.

“Welcome, Harry Potter.”

Harry startled badly, dropping the book and cursing himself for not paying attention. Perhaps it was the knock to his head, but somehow he had not immediately registered what it meant that his and Pansy’s wands were both missing.

Someone else had been impersonating Pansy, like Barty Crouch had impersonated Moody last year. Someone else had kidnapped both of them.

He leapt to his feet, stumbling a little as he did, and whirled to face the owner of the voice. He expected to see a Death Eater so he was left gaping with amazement, completely thrown, to see that the voice belonged to a boy of about his own age. He was stood not ten feet away.

He was tall, unusually so. His hair was dark and fell in soft curls around his handsome face. A green and silver prefect badge was pinned to the neck of his neat Hogwarts uniform. And in his left hand, he held --

“That’s my wand!” Harry blurted.

The boy raised the familiar holly wand as if to examine it. “It is, isn’t it?” he said in a pleasant, conversational tone. “It’s rather nice - it suits me much better than hers does.” He gave it an experimental flick and black sparks crackled from the end.

Harry’s fists clenched to see him use it so casually.

The boy didn’t miss Harry’s twitch. His lips quirked into a small crooked smile. He twirled the wand mockingly, spinning it gracefully between his fingers in a practised, habitual gesture.

“Who are you?” Harry asked. “You’re not a Death Eater . . . ?”

“I’m no Death Eater,” the boy said softly. He carefully rolled back his sleeves to show his pale, unmarked forearms. “As for your first question, I am the Heir of Slytherin, Harry Potter.” He nodded at the statue behind Harry. “You stand at the foot of my noble ancestor.”
Harry’s brow furrowed. “You’re the one who’s been attacking people,” he said slowly. It was not a question. “But I don’t understand why - the victims were random . . .”

The boy looked a little offended, perhaps because Harry had ignored his boast about his ancestry. “I was in a bit of a hurry,” he said archly. “I would have liked to have been pickier --“

“But why? What on Earth were you trying to do?”

“Why, I wanted to meet you, of course,” the boy said simply, his dark eyes roving over Harry’s face as if trying to take in every detail.

Harry gaped. “Why?! What do you want with me?”

The boy stepped closer.

“There are so many things I want to know . . . things that only you can tell me . . .” he breathed.

Harry recoiled a little, thoroughly creeped out. “Like what?” he asked. His throat felt dry.

“Where to begin? How did you kill Lord Voldemort when you were a baby? How did he resurrect himself, and how did you escape from him? What did he say when he came back . . .?”

“Can’t you read that in the news? There was an article printed in the Quibbler a month or so ago.”

“I already know about that. I want to hear it from you.”

Despite the life-threatening situation, Harry couldn’t help but find the boy extremely annoying.

“Why?” he cried, throwing his hands up in frustration. “What does Voldemort have to do with you? Who are you anyway, and why are you wearing a Hogwarts uniform? You aren’t a student here!”

“How do you know I’m not a student here?”

Harry’s face went a little pink. The boy was the living embodiment of tall, dark and handsome. Harry would have noticed. Anyone would have noticed.

“I have a good memory for faces” he huffed.

The boy regarded him doubtfully, but let it pass. He raised Harry’s wand, and then, with firm and precise movements, wrote a name in the air in lines of red fire.

\[ \text{tom marvolo riddle} \]

“Very clever,” Harry drawled. “You could just say your name, you know. You don’t have to be so dramatic about it.”

The boy - Riddle - smiled mirthlessly and waved the wand again. The letters rearranged themselves.

\[ \text{i am lord voldemort} \]

Harry crossed his arms. He looked the boy up and down.

“No you aren’t,” he said with complete conviction. “Don’t be silly.”

Riddle sniffed and, with a flick of Harry’s wand, made the letters disappear.

“I am,” he insisted. “It’s a long story ---“
“I’ve seen Voldemort, okay? You don’t look much like him.”

Riddle seemed to consider this for a moment.

“~ Do I sound like him? ~” he asked. There was a distinct note of curiosity in his voice, and something else, something Harry couldn’t place.

“Not really; his voice is higher pitched and he --”

The boy had been speaking in Parseltongue.

Harry stumbled back a step, tripped over Pansy’s prone form and fell heavily, jarring his injured shoulder.

“Fuck!” he shouted, as he scrambled to his feet again, clinging to the toes of the giant statue behind him for balance. His hand went to his pocket again for a wand - an instinctual reaction - but of course there was nothing there.

Riddle, Voldemort, whoever, stepped closer until he was standing over Pansy. He bent to pick up the diary. He examined it, his long fingers tracing almost lovingly over the cover.

Harry stared at him speechlessly. How had Voldemort got into the school? And why wasn’t Harry’s scar hurting? It always hurt when Voldemort was close.

Swallowing to moisten his dry throat, he asked, “How - how do you look like that?”

“I suppose I could have Polyjuiced myself,” the boy said, pulling one of his perfect curls in front of his eyes with a thumb and forefinger, as if to inspect it for authenticity.

Harry shook his head in amazement. The boy was weird.

“You aren’t him,” he said firmly. “You’d have Crucio’d me by now if you were.”

“Oh? Crucio!”

Harry yelped, and dodged to the side. His knees knocked against the hard stone as he fell, but the red curse sailed harmlessly over his head, smashing splinters of marble out of the statue’s big toe.

“You’re fast!” the boy exclaimed. He did not seem to be angry that Harry had dodged his curse - in fact, he looked enthusiastic. Eager to play with him like a cat with a particularly energetic mouse.

“If you were Voldemort, you would already know that,” Harry responded through gritted teeth, as he climbed painfully back to his feet.

Riddle grinned, holding his hands up.

“Okay, okay, you’re right, I’m not really. I just thought I’d have a little fun . . .“

The Crucius curse wasn’t Harry’s idea of fun.

“What did you do to Pansy?” he demanded.

Riddle nudged her with his foot. Her head rolled limply to the side. The sight made Harry’s stomach lurch - was she even still breathing? He couldn’t tell.

“Dear old pug-faced Pansy,” Riddle said in a tone of horrible mock sympathy that grated on Harry's
nerves. “Nobody liked her, you know? Not her parents, not her boyfriend, not even herself . . . and here she lies on the brink of death, all because she wrote all her hopes, dreams and darkest secrets into a little black diary . . .” his eyes flicked up to Harry, as if to gauge his reaction, and he stroked the cover of the book again. “And the diary wrote back to her, comforted her when she moaned about her pitiful, boring life, and encouraged her to pour out more and more of herself into its pages.”

“She’s like this because she wrote in a book?”

“Oh yes,” Riddle breathed, tucking the diary carefully into an inside pocket of his robes. “But not just any book . . . you see, the book was a vessel, an artefact called a Horcrux, a container for a single sliver of Lord Voldemort’s very soul . . .”

He smiled. It was a very nice smile. He had dimples.

“Me.”

There was no sound in the Chamber other than the slow drip of water splashing down from the ceiling high above. Harry tried to process what the boy was saying, but he couldn’t seem to find a place for it in his mind.

“As Pansy poured her life and soul into me, I grew stronger as she grew weaker . . . I began to take little snippets of time from her, to make her do things for me . . . I made her kill the half-breed’s roosters. I made her write in blood on the wall to announce my return, and finally open the Chamber of Secrets, as I did myself fifty years ago, and unleash the monster. I knew that you wouldn’t be able to resist the mystery. And now I have you here, all alone, wholly at my mercy . . .”

He pointed the wand at Harry’s chest.

Harry just gaped back at him.

“You are Voldemort then. You’re him, from fifty years ago? When he was still at school?”

Riddle shrugged and nodded.

It was just wrong. Although Voldemort had mentioned his childhood when he was resurrected in that graveyard, in Harry’s mind he had never been young. He had come into being as a pale, hairless monster, much like the misshapen baby that Wormtail had carried at arm’s length to the cauldron. He could never have been a teenage boy with curly hair and a lovely dimpled smile, gawky in the way of someone adjusting to a recent growth spurt and dressed in fraying, slightly too-short robes.

Harry ripped his eyes away from him.

“So what?” he asked finally, his eyes on Pansy. He thought he could see a little puff from her lips as her breath misted in the cold air, but it could easily have been his imagination. “You’re going to try to kill me? That’s why Voldemort sent you, I suppose.”

“Actually, I haven’t heard anything from my other self since he entrusted my vessel to my friend Abraxas shortly before he left to travel the world. I have no idea what happened afterwards. Pansy found me in the Hogwarts Library lost property box a few months ago.”

“So Voldemort doesn’t know about you? About what you’ve been doing?”

Riddle rolled his eyes.

“Not at first, but I’m sure he figured it out when the Prophet ran a series of articles on the attacks. I
already told you that he had Abraxas’ idiot grandson attempt to find my diary, and of course the brat
didn’t think to suspect silly Pansy Parkinson.”

He twirled the wand again. There was something derisive about the gesture this time.

“But I’m not here to talk about that. I want to hear from you . . . I want you to tell me what you
know about Voldemort and what Dumbledore’s been doing since his return.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” said Harry in a tone that made it very clear that he was not, “but Dumbledore
has hardly spoken to me in the last year. And anyway, why would I tell you anything? You’re going
to try and kill me afterwards. And don’t think you can Imperio me into talking, that spell doesn’t
work on me.”

Riddle smiled. Harry had a feeling that he was enjoying their conversation. “It’s a pity you’ve fallen
out with Dumbledore, but I’m sure you know more than you think you do. As for why you should
help me . . .” Riddle’s smile grew sharper and his eyes brighter. He twitched the tip of Harry’s wand.
“It’s in your best interest to keep talking, Harry. After all, while you’re talking, you’re breathing too .
.”

Harry did not like Riddle using his first name. But he was right about one thing - if he could only
keep Riddle talking, there might be a moment of distraction . . . he might be able to tackle him, get
his wand back. Determined, Harry adjusted his grip on the statue while he tried to gauge the distance
between them. Pansy was in the way . . . he would have to jump over her . . . but then, Harry had
always been quick.

“How did he come back?” Riddle asked, taking his silence for assent. There was an eager note in his
voice. “How did he create a new body?”

“There was a potion,” Harry said grudgingly. “I don’t know exactly how he did it, but he needed
flesh from a servant, blood from me, his father’s bone --“

Voldemort’s Muggle father. Harry could have slapped himself in the forehead in that moment - that
was where he had seen the name Riddle before; it had been carved on that bloody tombstone!

“Blood from you?”

“Eh? Oh, yeah, blood from his enemy. He couldn’t touch me before, see, but after he took my blood
he could.”

“Why couldn’t he touch you before?”

“My mother.” When Harry didn’t say anything further, Riddle gestured impatiently for him to go on.

“When when he tried to kill me as a baby, she wouldn’t let him. He told her to step aside . . . but she
wouldn’t. She asked him to spare me, but he just laughed and killed her, and then turned his wand on
me. But his curse shot back at him. He hasn’t been able to - wasn’t able to touch me ever since.”

Riddle looked increasingly puzzled as he spoke.

“I don’t understand. Surely lots of mothers have sacrificed themselves to save their children . . . I’ve
never heard of something like that happening before.”

“Dumbledore says it was my mother’s love.”

Riddle scoffed. “Love - that’s pathetic! It must be something else. Maybe your mother did some kind
of ritual that needed a human sacrifice? No, it can’t be - Pansy told me she was a Mudblood.”

“She was Muggle-born, yes,” Harry said, his hands balling into fists. “What does that have to do with it?”

“It seems a bit farfetched to me - a ritual like that would be very advanced magic.”

“My best friend is a Muggle-born and she’s brilliant,” Harry said through gritted teeth. Riddle waved his hand dismissively. “The exception that proves the rule.”

“What does that even mean? And why do you hate Muggle-borns anyway? I know you’re a half-blood like me!”

“No I’m not.”

“You are - you told me yourself. You said that your dad was a Muggle who lived in a big house, but he didn’t like your mum anymore when he found out she was a witch, and when she died giving birth to you he didn’t want you so you were raised in an orphanage.”

Riddle looked aghast. “Why would I tell you all that?” he cried.

“I don’t know. I guess you just like to talk.” Harry said dryly.

Riddle sniffed and straightened his tie. “So again, if you’re a half-blood, why don’t you like Muggle-borns? Isn’t that hypocritical?”

“It’s just good sense,” Riddle said stiffly, still offended. “The purebloods have the money and the power. The Mudbloods have nothing useful to --”

“That’s it? No justifications - just ‘it was convenient’?”

“I don’t know why you’re all worked up over this insignificant issue.”

“You started a war over this ‘insignificant issue’!”

“It was never intended to be a war, it was meant to be a neat coup --”

“You’re bloody unbelievable --“

“Enough about that. What happened after Voldemort came back? What did he say to his servants?”

“You mean after he told me all about his disappointing childhood?”

“Cruc --“

“WAIT!” Harry cried, flinging his arms up. “Er - he was pissed at the ones who had stayed out of Azkaban but hadn’t tried to help him . . . he tortured a couple of them . . . and then he said how much he liked the ones who were in Azkaban - they weren’t in the graveyard of course - and then he talked about how he had been possessing animals in Albania . . . and about how he had died, and the potion that Wormtail had brewed --“

He stopped. Riddle was shaking his head incredulously.

“Honestly, Potter, is the inside of your brain as disorganised as what comes out of your mouth?”
“You asked me to tell you about it. I’m telling you about it!”

Riddle sighed. “How did you escape from him?” he asked finally.

“He had Wormtail cut me loose - I was tied to a tombstone - and then he tried to hit me with a Killing Curse.”

“And what? It didn’t work?”

“I cast a spell at the same time - the Disarming Charm - and the two met in the middle and all this golden light came out. It was our wands, see - they have twin cores - two feathers from the same phoenix.”

Riddle examined the wand in his hand with renewed interest. “Fascinating. It feels almost like my own . . . But mine is made of yew. What’s this made out of? Hawthorn? No - holly,” he said, answering his own question. He paused, then looked slyly at Harry. “It’s shorter than mine is.”

Just in case Harry mistook his meaning, Riddle’s eyes dropped to his crotch.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Are you ten years old?”

Riddle pouted. “I’m sixteen.”

“How did you put a piece of your soul in a book?” Harry asked.

“How?” Riddle seemed pleased to be asked the question. ”There was a ritual mentioned in a book. It was terribly difficult to recreate - I doubt that any wizard had done it in the last few centuries - I had to piece it together from scraps, eyewitness accounts and the like . . . the Arithmancy alone would have been impossible for most, and the spell was the most difficult I had ever attempted, but of course, I cast it flawlessly. Magic has always come so easily to me --“

Harry, who had up until then been nodding periodically and trying to look impressed, seized his chance. He sprang forward, leaping over Pansy’s body. Riddle’s eyes widened, but to his credit he didn’t panic - instead he aimed the wand at Harry’s middle and cast for the third time --

“Crucio!”

This time it hit.

Harry screamed. His feet just gave out beneath him and he landed heavily on his knees and elbows. He hardly even noticed the pain of the impact, because it was drowned out by the agony of the curse. It felt like he was being torn apart from the inside, his bones were being ground down to dust, his organs bursting . . .

He didn’t know how long Riddle held him under the spell, but when it ended, he gasped desperately for air like a fish torn out of the ocean and left to die on dry land. Distantly, he registered that he was lying on the floor on his stomach with cold water soaking into his robes.

Riddle crouched down next to him. His fingers were almost tender as they threaded through his hair. Then they curled into a fist and yanked Harry’s head up, forcing his neck to bend uncomfortably.

Harry groaned in pain, trying to make his limbs function again. He had bitten his tongue when he was in the throes of the curse. It was bleeding sluggishly in his mouth.

Riddle spoke into his ear.
“Oh Harry.” He said his name softly, like a lover. “You are going to regret that for the rest of your short life. I’ll tell you what’s going to happen next: you are going to watch me kill Parkinson and then I’m going to take my time with you. I’m going to make you beg.”

His fingers twisted tighter in Harry’s hair, pulling a pained gasp from his lips. But from his vantage point on the floor, Harry could see a narrow wooden object poking out of the side pocket of Riddle’s robes.

Pansy’s wand.

Harry had mostly stopped shaking. He got an elbow under himself, relieving the pressure on his neck. Riddle let go of his hair and stood. As he straightened, Harry’s hand snaked out and plucked the wand from his pocket.

Riddle did not notice.

Instead he stalked over to where Pansy lay, still holding Harry’s own wand.

“Are you watching, Harry?” he called mockingly. “Avada --“

Harry, who had pushed himself up to his knees, raised the pale wand and pointed it at his back. It felt wrong in his hand - there was no comforting warmth, no sense of connection when he held it. It could have been nothing more than a stick. The tip was shaking and Harry struggled to hold it steady.

“Stupefy!” he whispered. There was a moment of reluctance, but then the tip ignited and a red bolt shot forth.

Riddle seemed to have been alerted by a sixth sense. At the last possible moment, he spun. He was off balance and his eyes were wide, but even so the beginnings of a wordless shield charm bloomed from his wand. There was a sound like breaking glass when the spell crashed into the half-formed shield, but to Harry’s dismay, although the shield shattered it seemed to have absorbed the Stunner. Even so, the force was enough to make Riddle stumble back several steps.

He tripped over Pansy’s body.

There was a frozen moment in which Harry thought that Riddle would manage to keep his balance - he seemed to hang in the air, arms stretched out. But then it ended. Riddle gave a cry of alarm and fell, hitting the floor hard. Still holding Pansy’s wand out in front of him, Harry pushed himself to his feet while Riddle scrambled backwards, trying to regain his.

Harry’s teeth were bared and he snarled; “Not so smug now, are you --“

But Riddle was hissing something. Harry only caught the end of it.

“--greatest of the Hogwarts Four --”

For the second time that day, Harry heard the screech of stone on stone. He looked up and saw with horror that Slytherin’s great stone face was moving. The mouth was opening and within the great black maw something stirred --

Somehow, Harry had forgotten that the Chamber of Secrets was supposed to be inhabited by Sytherin’s monster. He caught a brief glimpse of lime green scales as something huge unfurled itself from within the statue --
“Don’t look into its eyes.”

Harry tore his gaze away from the massive serpent. Riddle’s tie was askew and his eyes were bright with anger.

“The gaze of a Basilisk is deadly.”

Before Harry had a chance to do more than wonder why Riddle was giving him advice, the other boy continued;

“I don’t want this to be over too quickly - I want to watch you scream as her fangs sink into your flesh . . .”

Harry didn’t know whether to believe him - it could be a cruel trick - but somehow the words rang true. Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them had been required reading for Lupin’s class in third year, and while it had left Harry more worried about Lethifolds (for a month after he hadn’t been able to sleep without checking under his bed), he vaguely remembered reading something about a serpent whose gaze could turn you to stone . . .

Without conscious thought, Harry’s feet were moving. They were carrying him towards the nearest pillar. Stupid. He should have run towards Riddle - the serpent would have had to have kept its eyes closed --

Then the floor beneath his feet seemed to leap and he stumbled. Something vastly heavy had hit the ground behind him. Just as he regained his balance there was a whoosh of air. Acting on animal instinct, Harry threw himself to the left, sprawling across the floor. The Basilisk slammed into the space where he had just been, hissing and spitting, and he scrambled back to his feet, not looking, not looking --

There was pillar right in front of him - he threw himself behind it, Pansy’s stubby wand clutched tightly in his sweating palm

“~ Fresh meat . . . where are you . . . it has been so long . . . ~”

The voice, deep and alien, sent shivers racing down Harry’s spine. He could see no way out . . . but it was dark beyond the pillars . . . maybe it wouldn’t be able to see him --

“~ I can smell you, little one . . . you cannot hide . . . ~”

Suddenly, in the midst of his panic, a plan came into his mind fully formed. The Horntail last year - the spell that Sirius had said he could have used --

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, gathering himself, clearing his mind. He concentrated on what he could hear - the movement of air, the slide of scales against stone --

It was getting closer. There was movement - he knew it had found him - it was drawing back to strike --

At the last moment, Harry flung himself round the pillar, wand held blindly out in front of him, and roared;

“Conjunctivo!”

There was a terrible scream and the serpent reared away, thrashing wildly. Harry opened his eyes . . . he had to see --
It was a lime green serpent, as thick around as the columns themselves, as the trunk of a hundred-year-old oak tree. Its sinuous body must have been a hundred feet long. It had reared up on its coiled tail, its head whipping from side to side.

Its eyes were red-rimmed and swelled shut.

Harry’s heart soared. His spell must have hit it somewhere on its face. It couldn’t see!

But as he watched, the Basilisk began to slam its gigantic head against the columns, mad with pain. Grey dust showered lightly over Harry’s face as cracks appeared and furrowed deeper in the ancient stone . . .

It was time to leave.

Riddle must have had the same thought, because Harry saw him sprinting towards the columns on the other side of the hall. Harry could now discern a low archway there, beyond the statue . . .

The statue of Salazar Slytherin, at whose feet lay . . .

“Oh fuck,” Harry breathed, and darted across the open space, dodging nimbly around the sweep of the serpent’s tail.

But before he reached Pansy, who he could now see was still there, still curled up on her side as if sleeping, there came a tremendous crash from behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw that one of the great stone columns was falling, as if in slow motion. It hit one of its neighbours which toppled also . . . he could hear the ceiling cracking above him . . . and then huge chunks of obsidian began to rain down, throwing sharp splinters of stone in every direction as they crashed into the now leaping floor . . . the noise was incredible . . . unbelievable . . .

A piece of stone the size of a double-decker bus was falling in front of him. It hit the statue on the way down, and suddenly Slytherin was leaning forwards, falling . . .

Harry sprinted to the side, following the path Riddle had taken. There was no way, no way he could get to Pansy, he thought frantically, horror licking up his insides . . . and no way he could drag her body through the Chamber as it collapsed . . .

He was in the archway. It led to a narrow tunnel, pitch black and claustrophobic. Behind him the pillars were falling like dominoes, the ceiling was caving in . . . and the place where Pansy had been was gone, filled with stone --

The archway itself began to buckle, crumpling like tinfoil.

Harry raced into the passageway, feeling along a damp slimy wall with both hands. The entrance was collapsing, and cracks raced down the walls of the tunnel after him. He scrambled along in the darkness, falling twice and grazing his palms and knees. His breathing was fast and panicky - he did not want to be crushed or buried alive like Pansy had been --

Then there came the loudest noise that Harry had ever heard, an ever escalating series of crashes and booms. It was indescribable. He stopped and clapped his hands over his ears as the Chamber of Secrets fell.

It seemed that it would go on forever, but eventually the floor stilled and the noise died. Harry let go of his head. His ears were ringing.

Coughing a little from the dust in the air, he raised Pansy’s wand.
“Lumos!”

The tip ignited. In the pale, flickering light he could see a great mound of rubble and broken stone blocking the entrance to the tunnel. It was so close that he could have reached out and touched it.

The only warning he got was the scrape of a shoe against stone.

A body slammed into his and shoved him forwards, face first into the rubble. He let out a startled, winded cry and tried to angle the wand around, but a cruel hand grabbed his wrist, fingers digging between the bones and painfully compressing his tendons. Harry’s hand opened involuntarily and he dimly heard the wand clatter to the floor. The light went out, leaving Harry in the darkness. One monster was dead in the ruined Chamber, but the other was still there, pressing tight against his back.
“That was a very stupid thing you did, Harry,” Riddle breathed in his ear, voice soft and laced with venom.

Harry could not respond. All his attention was going into panting desperate little half-breaths around the sharp spike of rock digging into his chest. After a moment, Riddle seemed to realise this; he eased up a little and Harry heaved in a beautiful lungful of air.

But rather than beg for his life, which was clearly what Riddle had been anticipating, Harry began laughing - giggling, really - as the cocktail of adrenaline and endorphins thrumming in his veins curdled into something resembling hysteria.

Riddle didn’t appreciate his amusement. He growled and shoved him back into the rubble and held him there. When he finally let him up again Harry’s laughter had died, leaving behind a cold simmer of rage.

“Stupid? You think?” he snarled breathlessly. “You tried to kill me - what did you expect me to do; lie down and wait to die?”

Riddle went still behind his back. Then, to Harry’s surprise, he let go of the arm he had twisted to such an uncomfortable angle. However, before Harry had a chance to do more than awkwardly shake it out, something traced down his spine, causing him to almost jump out of his skin.

His own wand . . .

“Incarcerous!”

To his horror, conjured ropes wrapped tightly around his wrists, pulling them together behind his back. He hardly noticed as Riddle stepped away - he was too busy tugging frantically at his hands. There was no movement whatsoever.

He whirled to face Riddle as light flared to life from the wand.

“Release me!”

“Don’t be stupid,” Riddle spat, absolutely scathing.

Harry glared at him silently, still pulling at the bonds. He couldn’t feel a knot or a loose end anywhere. He swallowed again, acutely aware of how vulnerable he was with his hands tied.

“I suppose Pansy is dead?” Riddle asked, his voice clipped.

Harry didn’t answer, but it must have been obvious. Pansy wasn’t there with them, so she had to still be in the Chamber. And no one who was in the Chamber could still be alive, after that. For some reason, Cedric’s face was in his mind, specifically, Cedric’s expression of pure surprise when he toppled to the ground in a flash of green light.

Riddle ran his hands through his own hair and began to pace. Harry slowly noticed that he did not look quite solid anymore - in fact, the light from the wand seemed to almost shine through his body. Harry’s eyes found his shadow on the opposite wall, larger than life and misshapen by the uneven surface. It was grey rather than starkly black.
“What’s wrong with you?” he asked before he could stop himself.

Riddle stopped his pacing and turned to him, wand raised. Harry refused to cower back. He kept his back straight and stared unflinchingly back, chin set mulishly. He didn’t care if Riddle tortured him. He was going to face his own death as bravely as his parents had faced theirs.

“I needed to kill her myself,” Riddle snarled hatefully, “To use her soul to cement my hold on this body. Without her, I will eventually be drawn back into my diary.”

Now he looked for it, Harry could see the rectangular outline of the book through his robes.

“And what?” he asked defiantly. “You’re going to use me instead?”

“If only I could . . . but it had to be her.” His eyes narrowed and he drew closer to where Harry stood, backed up against the wall. “Of course, that does not mean you are going to live. If I am going to lie in this passageway forevermore, your bones will too.” Riddle gripped his chin roughly with his free hand, tilting his head back so he could stare down into Harry’s eyes.

“I have not decided how to do it yet - do you have any requests?”

Harry tried to kick, but the other boy slid his own leg between his, trapping him. His fingers tightened, digging bruises into Harry’s skin.

Harry glared up at him, determined not to show Riddle any fear at all. The other boy’s dark eyes bored down into his own. Harry could feel his breath on his cheek.

“There’s an awful lot I could do to you with something as simple as a slicing hex”, Riddle said softly, not breaking eye contact. He raised the wand between them, tracing the tip beneath his eye. It slid slowly and deliberately up his temple and across his forehead, pushing Harry’s sweaty hair out of the way to expose his scar.

“Fuck you,” Harry spat.

But Riddle did not seem to be listening. Instead, he was gazing at his forehead. He had gone very still.

Harry struggled again, vainly. Riddle’s eyes snapped back to his.

“How can you speak Parseltongue?” Riddle breathed wonderingly. “Your parents surely couldn’t speak it . . . but it is a genetic trait. There’s no reason you should have it . . .” His eyes were roving over Harry’s face, gleaming in an excitement that seemed to have come out of nowhere.

Harry gaped, thrown by the sudden change in topic and mood. But then he closed his mouth stubbornly, determined not to answer. Riddle had already wheedled enough information out of him. He wasn’t getting any more.

Riddle let go of him and stepped back. He smiled charmingly down at Harry.

“Really, Harry, what is the harm in telling me?” he cajoled. “We are all dead men here . . . you may as well indulge my curiosity.”

Harry kept his silence. Riddle’s countenance darkened. He drew close again and raised the wand to Harry’s temple, looking deep into his eyes. At the last moment, Harry realised what he was about to do. He tried to close his eyes, but he couldn’t - the Slytherin’s eyes were dark pools of black, drawing him in --
“Legimimens!”

Harry tried to clear his mind, but it was impossible. His head was full of the fight in the Chamber, Pansy, and the quiet fear that he was going to die here, and never see Ron or Hermione or Sirius again –

He could feel Riddle moving inside his mind. Somehow, Harry could tell that he was less experienced than Snape – initially, he seemed aimless, poking nosily at random memories - Harry chasing Hagrid’s damned Monster Book of Monsters around his room in Privet Drive . . . Detention with Umbridge - Harry's messy scrawl on a long roll of parchment, and also stinging on the back of his hand . . .

But gradually, the memories became more relevant – the boa constrictor in the glass tank . . . the fiasco in Duelling Club in second year. Harry could sense Riddle’s wonder at hearing another human being speak the language of the snakes, his building excitement.

But how? How can you speak Parseltongue?

The question dropped heavily into his mind like a stone into water. A memory swam unbidden to the surface - an old man in vibrant purple robes decorated with little crescent moons . . . Dumbledore . . . a week after he’d been accused of setting a snake on Justin Finch-Fletchley, Harry had finally come to him with trepidation, to ask that same question . . .

“. . . Unless I’m much mistaken, he transferred some of his powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do, I’m sure . . .”

Riddle broke away, smiling. Harry blinked again and again, shaking his head like a dog, trying to clear away the buzzing. It was like Riddle had let loose a swarm of bees in his skull.

“Not just Parseltongue?” Riddle demanded, his voice hungry. “What other powers?”

“You just --“

“Legimised you, yes,” Riddle finished, very smugly. “I’m very good at it. I’ll do it again if you won’t talk. Of course, it will be tiring for both of us, but I assure you, it will be far more uncomfortable for you than for me. I won’t be so gentle next time.”

Harry carefully avoided meeting his eyes. He bit his lip, but when Riddle sighed and raised his wand to his temple again, he spoke reluctantly. He didn’t like discussing this topic with his closest friends, let alone with Riddle.

“His emotions. I sometimes feel what he’s feeling. And my scar hurts when he’s near.”

“Is it hurting now?”

Harry hadn’t thought of that. His scar wasn’t hurting, despite the juvenile version of Voldemort stood so close to him that Harry could count every eyelash. It hadn’t hurt in the Chamber either, not even when Riddle had been angry.

“No.”

“And when I do this?” Riddle touched a long finger to Harry’s scar. Although the gesture brought back the memory of the head-splitting agony when Voldemort had touched him in the graveyard, there was no pain. Harry could feel only Riddle’s skin, smooth and cool against his too-warm forehead, and then a slight numbing tingle that seemed to branch out from his scar, spreading down
his spine, to his lungs, his heart . . . it was electrifying, energising . . .

“. . . Harry? Are you still with me?”

Harry jumped.

“. . . huh?”

Riddle waited expectantly, tapping his foot. Oh yeah --

“What was that?”

“I felt it too,” said Riddle, almost to himself. He began pacing up and down again, clearly deep in thought. Harry looked down. Pansy’s wand was still on the floor in front of his feet. Perhaps if he crouched down he could pick it up even with his hands behind his back? But before he could attempt it, the other boy came to a halt in front of him.

“There’s something I need from you.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, but Riddle didn’t seem inclined to speak further.

“What?” he prompted after a moment, driven by reluctant curiosity.

“I promise it’s not something you’ll miss.”

“Oh, so long as you promise,” Harry said, drawing himself up to his full height. “Tell me what it is and I’ll decide whether it’s something I’ll miss.”

“I don’t think you’ll thank me for telling you --” Riddle began, but broke off when Harry growled in frustration.

“But if you insist . . .” he began, scratching his chin speculatively. “You experience Lord Voldemort’s emotions, his dreams --“

Harry was about to snap that they’d just been over this, to demand that Riddle get to the point --

“So do I.”

Harry was surprised, but not excessively so.

“Right,” he said. “I guess that makes sense because you’re a - what was it?”

“Yes,” Riddle replied, eyes bright. “I am a Horcrux. A piece of his soul. But the question is, what are you?”

For a moment Harry didn’t get it. Then it dawned on him what Riddle was saying and he felt as he did when the sinks had slid away hours earlier and a hole had opened in the floor beneath him. His mouth went dry and his eyes danced across the Slytherin’s face, as if there would be another answer there.

“I just got some of his powers,” he said, almost pleadingly. “When I got my scar. It’s not like what you’re suggesting.”

“What am I suggesting?”

Harry could not say it. The idea that had crawled into his mind was just too disgusting. He squirmed,
feeling unbearably dirty - which of course he was, since his robes were covered in dust, slime and
who knew what else. But he felt dirty inside - sullied in the most intimate way possible. The most
terrible thing was, it all made sense. Harry had never really understood Dumbledore’s explanation
and every year there seemed to be more freakishness . . .

“Don’t be upset, Harry, this is a good thing.”

Harry did not see how it could possibly be a good thing.

“We can help each other. You want the Horcrux out of you, correct?”

The desperate, wretched look on his face must have answered that question, because Riddle laughed.

“I thought you might. I don’t have enough of a soul to live on my own. But if I take out the piece
you’re carrying, well. I’ll be able to leave this place, and you won’t be a Horcrux anymore. You’ll be
a free man.”

Harry closed his eyes for a long moment, trying to slow his breathing. When he opened them again,
Riddle was still looking at him expectantly.

“Right, you take it and then you kill me.”

Riddle’s hand flew to his own chest. “You wound me! I’ll take it and leave. I won’t need to kill you
- all I want to do is leave the country and live peacefully --”

Harry stared at him, marvelling at his abrupt shifts in mood - from angry and hateful, to excited, and
now playful. Less than ten minutes ago he had been threatening to torture and kill Harry, but now he
was talking as if they were the best of friends.

“Like you aren’t going to go straight to Voldemort.”

Riddle shook his head dismissively. “He isn’t going to want another version of himself walking
around. Horcruxes are meant to be objects that can be hidden, not people with minds of their own.”

“And you expect me to believe that? How do you know he wouldn’t want you?”

“Because I wouldn’t trust another version of myself. I’m too intelligent, cunning and resourceful.”

Harry rolled his eyes in disbelief at Riddle’s unabashed arrogance.

“It’s not like I need your cooperation, anyway,” Riddle mused, serious again. “I can take what I
want, although it will be more pleasant for both of us if you let me have it.”

Harry was pressed back against the wall as far as he could go.

“What - how do you extract it?” he asked nervously, shifting from foot to foot as Riddle drew closer.

Riddle smiled broadly. “I knew you’d see it my way.” He gripped Harry’s jaw again, gently but
firmly, and tilted his face up.

“I - wait, what are you doing?”

Riddle was very, very close.

“Taking it out.”
“Do you have to stand so near? How do you take out a bit of soul anyway?”

“How do Dementors do it?” Riddle breathed. Harry felt his exhale on his cheek.

It clicked.

“NO! You are NOT kissing me - no way --”

“You’d rather I left it inside you doing Merlin knows what?”

Harry physically flinched at the thought. The other boy’s smile turned unbearably smug.

“Don’t fight when you feel it trying to get out, and whatever you do, don’t hold onto it. Open your mouth a little, this isn’t going to be some chaste peck.”

Harry fidgeted. Riddle did not back down - instead, he was waiting expectantly, his eyes on Harry's face. Reluctantly, not wanting this to last any longer than it had to, Harry opened his mouth the barest amount.

“Good boy.”

Harry’s eyes widened furiously, but before he had a chance to cuss at the condescending arsehole, lips were closing over his in a forceful, careless kiss. A tongue coaxed his mouth open further, and he grudgingly allowed it. For a moment nothing happened - nothing other than warm lips moving sensuously against his own, a hand angling his jaw. Harry’s hands bunched into fists behind his back at the thought that it might have all been a lie, that Riddle might just have been playing with him -

Oh.

Something shifted in his chest - wasn’t it supposed to be in his scar? - some small, spiny creature that had been quietly coiled up inside the cage of his ribs, wrapped tight around his heart, had woken from a long sleep and was trying to crawl up towards Riddle --

Riddle made a little noise and shifted impossibly closer, winding one hand around Harry’s waist, deepening the kiss.

But Harry could hardly even feel the lips moving against his anymore, his second-ever kiss, over the indescribably strange sensations in his chest as the little creature fidgeted and turned and seemed to scrape against the inside of Harry’s ribs, as if it was not sure how to get out, was not even sure that it wanted to leave --

But leave it did. There was a terrible tightness in Harry’s lungs, followed by a strange, electrifying tingle in his throat. Knowing instinctively what to do, he breathed it - the soul - into Riddle.

There was a brief, completely irrational pang of loss as his passenger left him.

Riddle broke the contact, raising a hand to his own mouth. “Oh. That was most peculiar . . .”

Harry nodded in agreement, raising a hand to his own mouth. “Oh. That was most peculiar . . .”

Harry nodded in agreement. He felt suddenly very tired and cold. He leant against the wall for balance, shivering a little.

“. . . did it work?” he asked, then coughed. His throat was sore.

“I think so,” Riddle said, patting down his own body experimentally. He looked much more solid - his outline was sharp and clear again; the contrast made Harry realise how blurred it had become while they had been talking.
“So what now?”

Harry immediately regretted the question. Riddle’s eyes snapped to his again. He smiled, sharp as broken glass, and there was a moment when Harry was sure that he was going to cast the Killing Curse, murdering Harry with his own wand.

But then he shrugged. He picked up Pansy’s wand from the floor in front of Harry and turned to go.

“You can’t leave me like this,” Harry cried, panicking. His hands were still bound, and it would be pitch black when Riddle was gone.

“You’ll be able to find your way out eventually,” Riddle called over his shoulder dismissively. “You might have a bit of trouble with the door, but I think you should eventually be able to open it without your hands. It leads to the Forbidden Forest - although, you might want to wait until morning. I won’t feel bad if you’re eaten by something.”

“Wait!”

“Don’t tempt me to break one of your legs.”

Harry shut up and anxiously watched Riddle (and the light) recede down the corridor. His knees were trembling - they had been since the kiss. He slowly slid down the wall, legs drawn up in front of him. How on earth was he going to get back to the castle? Had anyone noticed that he was even missing? Harry didn't know how long he'd been unconscious for, but given his comment about the forest at night, Riddle seemed to think that it was late in the day --

Then, with no warning, there came a horrifying tug, as if someone had wrapped steel wire around his heart and pulled. He gasped, choking, terrified - it seemed that all of the air was being drawn out of his body, as if his lungs were being squeezed by an invisible hand --

Either Riddle’s footsteps had stopped, or Harry couldn’t hear them over the blood rushing in his ears. With a great effort, he lifted his head and searched for Riddle with eyes that couldn’t seem to focus, because the boy must surely be the cause of this, he had said that he wasn’t going to kill Harry, but he had lied, and of course he had, because he was Voldemort!

But Riddle was leaning against the wall, not nearly so far away as Harry had thought, his face very pale in the flickering light of Harry’s stolen wand.

As if it took a great effort, Riddle pushed himself away from the stone and stumbled gracelessly back towards where Harry was sat . . .

As he moved closer, torturously slowly, the colour bled back into the world (and he hadn’t even noticed it was gone) and the pain inside his chest receded. Harry began to draw in great sobbing gulps of air. Dimly, he realised that Riddle was right in front of him. There was sweat beaded on his forehead and his eyes were wild.

Harry had been about to ask what he had done. But now, looking at Riddle’s face, he knew that he had been similarly affected. He hadn’t done anything to tug the soul out of Harry’s chest.

Anything other than walk away.
A Deal with the Devil

The boy was saying something.

Tom looked back down the tunnel, trying to estimate how far he had gone before he had felt the horrible sensation of his soul being tugged out of his body. It was perhaps thirty feet.

“Riddle --”

Harry was still sat on the floor with his legs curled up in front of him. His shoulders trembled a little as he pulled helplessly at his bonds. Tom sighed and rubbed his forehead, then waved the wand to remove the ropes.

Harry looked up sharply, surprised by Tom's unexpected generosity. He cautiously withdrew his hands from behind his back and pushed off the wall to get to his feet. “Thanks,” he said grudgingly, his voice still rough from their kiss.

“You're welcome. Put your hands in front of you, wrists together.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “You don’t have to tie me up!”

Because Harry was a gentle little lamb who wouldn't *dream* of fighting back.

Tom rolled his eyes, then grabbed for him. The Gryffindor dodged but wasn’t quick enough to evade the wand that jabbed under his chin. Slowly, resentfully, he extended his arms.

“This isn’t necessary,” he complained as Tom tied them together with his wand, leaving a long length of rope hanging loose to serve as a lead. He wrapped it twice around his own palm and used it to jerk Harry forwards down the passageway. The boy yelped in surprise at the sudden movement but did not fall.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked as Tom summoned a glowing globe of light to bob along in front of them.

“Unfortunately I can’t get rid of you right now.”

“But why? What was that, back there? It felt like . . .”

Like their souls were stuck together. Harry didn’t finish his sentence and Tom didn’t say it, but the words hung heavily in the air between them.

“How could something like that happen?”

Tom had no idea. In all the reading he had done about Horcruxes, he had never heard about something like this happening. While two parts of the same soul should gravitate together, different souls should repel. And yet here they were, tied together by an invisible rope of soul. What did it say about Harry, he wondered, that his soul had been so open, so accepting, that it had welcomed into itself a fragment of the man that had killed his parents?

“It’s your fault,” he answered finally. “Your soul merged with the Horcrux that’s been living inside your body. That piece of soul is in me now, but when I pulled it out of you the connection didn’t break.”

“Can’t you break it? How did you split up your soul in the first place?”
Breaking the bond wasn't the problem. There had been a spell in *Secrets of the Darkest Art* that could be used to make cuts in a soul. It had always seemed a bit useless to Tom since it couldn't be used for the creation of a Horcrux - the soul would mend naturally if the edges were not cauterised by the murder of an innocent. However, for their purposes, it should suffice.

“Are you listening to me? Hello?”

The questions were growing annoying.

“Silencio!”

Harry’s jaw dropped. He went red with fury and came to a dead halt. When an impatient tug on the rope yielded no result, a few Stinging Hexes got him moving again, glaring daggers at Tom’s back.

No, the real question was not whether he could separate them. Rather, he had to decide whether he wanted to separate them at all. At that moment, Tom had no Horcrux of his own. Even if there were more parts of his soul scattered around Britain, they would not anchor him to life, only their creator, Lord Voldemort.

His connection to Harry, however . . .

The trouble was that the Gryffindor was certain to be a most inconvenient Horcrux. Tom’s experience in the Chamber had taught him that he was both stubborn and resourceful. It was a dangerous combination: allowing him to wake before he had finished extracting Pansy’s soul had been a near-fatal mistake. It was just that draining the life out of someone had turned out to be much less exciting than he had thought . . . it had taken hours and hours, and all they had done was lie there, Pansy and the boy, and there were no books in the Chamber to read while he waited. So when Harry had stirred . . . Tom had given into temptation.

They walked on, their footsteps echoing strangely off the smooth, curving walls. The twists and turns of the peculiar little passage were familiar to Tom. In another life, he had used it to smuggle the artefacts he pilfered from the Room of Hidden Things (and just as often, from his unsuspecting classmates) to grumpy Burke in Knockturn Alley. He would sneak away late in the evening when he was meant to be doing his prefect rounds, his pockets filled with treasures.

They turned one corner, and then another. Eventually, the tunnel began to widen and they reached a place where the floor dropped away precipitously, leaving only a ledge skirting a jagged black chasm. It was clearly not part of the original design; Tom would have thought it a consequence of the ever-shifting skin of the Earth if it weren’t for the symbols carved into the smooth floor surrounding the break. He had always wondered if the pit, perpetually leaking a thin trail of yellow smoke, was not the result of a spell or ritual gone disastrously wrong.

Very carefully, he stepped onto the overhang. It really was very narrow. Now that he came to think of it, it would have been very difficult (if not impossible) for Harry to have navigated across it in absolute darkness with his hands tied behind his back. This thought had apparently occurred to the other boy too since he was staring at him accusingly and making no move to follow. Tom tugged the rope encouragingly.

A dozen slow, nerve-wracking steps later they were on the other side. A few hundred feet beyond lay the exit - a large metal circular hatch, free of rust despite its great age. He hissed “~ *Open* ~” and the door obeyed. He extinguished the globe of conjured fire and clambered through the hatch. The rope tugged in his hand as Harry scrambled awkwardly out after him.

Outside, the sun had not yet set, although the sky was beginning to darken into dusk. The tall
encircling trees towered over them, obscuring the horizon. Tom breathed in deeply, taking a moment to enjoy the scent of pine sap in the air and the sight of the dark, quiet woods. It was a perfect early summer evening in the Forbidden Forest.

Unfortunately, he could not linger. While Hogwarts' Anti-Apparition wards covered the Chamber of Secrets and the tunnel leading from it, they ended at the door. He pulled Harry to him, wrapping an arm around his waist while the other boy beat mutely at his shoulder with his bound arms, face red and distressed. Tom ignored him, concentrating hard on where he wanted to go.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

They landed with a muted crack in a clearing in a different forest. The trees were shorter and somehow less intimidating here. Their upper branches swayed in a gentle breeze, and above them, the land rose away into high, striking mountains clad in purple heather. The sea was out of sight, but the air still held the tang of salt. Within the glade, there sat a small cottage with a slate roof and a stubby chimney. It had once been painted white, but the moist sea air had long since stripped off the colour, leaving the rough stone walls exposed. No road or path led through the wild garden to the little safehouse - it was far from any civilisation, Magical or Muggle.

Absently, Tom let go of the boy, who immediately staggered away to the end of his tether gasping for air and bending over his knees. It was obvious he had never Apparated before. Tom stretched, watching as the setting sun met a mountain peak. By now, Harry and Pansy would have been reported missing at the school. Dumbledore would likely have heard already, and Voldemort would know within a few days. The decisions that Tom would make in the next few hours and weeks would be crucial to his survival. He had to assess the state of the cottage, see what had been left, deal with his hostage . . .

But before anything else, he had to check the Wardstones.

He could see a few of the minor ones from where he stood; squat rocks poking up through the long grass, marking a circle around the building. He tugged the rope to warn Harry, then set off through the garden with the other boy hastily following behind. They picked their way through patches of nettles and brambles, wild clover and blood red poppies.

At the northernmost point of the circle, the cardinal Wardstone lay, cradled by the roots of an ancient apple tree. It was taller than the others, a boulder of native stone as high as his knee, and covered with intricate, spiralling lines of runes. Tom had devised the pattern himself during dull Ancient Runes lessons and carved it into the rock with the tip of his wand. The stone anchored the spells that repelled Muggles and made the cottage Unplottable, and also an enchantment of his own invention, one that blotted out the Trace within the bounds of the wards. While Tom’s own Trace would have been deactivated when his counterpart turned seventeen, Harry’s was still a problem - the Ministry would be able to use it to track them if any magic was performed in his vicinity.

He laid a palm flat against the cool stone and was pleased to feel a steady hum of old, slow magic beating a steady pulse against his skin. He had no knife, so he used a bramble to draw a single bead of blood from the bed of his thumb. He pressed it to the stone, letting his blood seep into the grooves of the runes. For a few long seconds he felt nothing, just the rough texture of the stone and the breeze against his face. Then the magic beneath his hand stirred and shifted and the wards around the cottage flared to life. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see faint green and gold lines dancing in the air, before fading away, drawing back into the circle of Wardstones.

Satisfied, he stood. Harry was watching with naked curiosity and gesturing at his mouth with his bound hands, clearly wanting to ask. Tom ignored him, picked up the end of the rope again and led him over to the building. The low wooden door creaked on its hinges as he pushed it open.
Inside lay the main room of the cottage. It was not large or richly furnished. There was a single, cosy armchair facing a tall fireplace, a row of dilapidated kitchen cabinets, a rough table dotted with various burn marks and stains and two mismatched wooden chairs. An assortment of cauldrons cluttered the floor and kitchen worktops.

Home, or something like it.

Tom conjured a magical flame for the empty fireplace and tugged Harry over to the table, ignoring his silent protests. He secured him to one of the legs with the length of rope and, for good measure, attached the table itself to the floor with a Sticking Charm. This had the advantage of forcing him to crouch or kneel at Tom’s feet.

Wandering around, he took in the state of the room. Mostly it was as he remembered, although every surface was covered with a thick layer of dust and there was a new stack of sealed cardboard boxes at the back of the room. The tabletop was littered with a few editions of the Daily Prophet and the Muggle Times, all from a single week in January 1970. He picked up the first paper and skimmed the front page. A strange looking Muggle wearing a military hat had taken over some country he had never heard of. Discarding it, Tom moved to the kitchen area and slit open one of the boxes with his wand. The contents glimmered with preservation charms. Bags of flour and sugar, tinned vegetables and meat, packets of biscuits, and happily, a large box of teabags.

Humming contentedly, he Vanished the dust and settled into the squashy armchair. It was clear that while his counterpart had stocked the cottage with provisions so it could serve as a safe house, he had not visited since the beginning of the last war. For a while, he simply sat, basking in the warmth of the fire. It felt good on his newly created skin. So far as he could tell, his new body was identical in every way to his old one. Idly, he held up his right hand in front of his face - the lines across the palm had not changed, and he even had the small scar between his thumb and forefinger where Jill Davis had bitten him when they were both five. Almost fondly, he recalled pushing her out of a second-floor window the year after.

It was strange though, that he was wearing his school robes. He flipped the end of his green and silver tie between his fingers thoughtfully. It had been summer when he had created his Horcrux. He had been wearing Muggle clothes. What did it mean that he had been reborn wearing his school uniform?

It was not the only thing that he didn't understand. When he had - ah - created himself, he had never even dreamed that a Horcrux might be conscious, that it could be anything other than an inanimate, unthinking piece of soul. During the ritual, he had been horrified to feel himself being torn away from his body . . . it had been agony beyond comprehension.

But then he had been floating weightlessly out in the open air, watching from above as his body gasped and heaved, and then straightened, breathing hard, and wiped the sweat out of its eyes . . . and raised its wand and performed the complex incantation with confident movements. He could still remember the terrible fascination he had felt when he had been sucked into the diary, which suddenly had an immense, irresistible gravitational pull . . . and his terror when he had realised that he was going to be trapped, alone, for who knew how many lonely, powerless years . . .

Mercifully though, he found that when no one was writing to him and feeding him their magical power, he drifted into a deep black sleep. He had dreamed occasionally, although the details escaped him. Mostly of small, normal things, but occasionally he was carried on the tides of powerful, familiar emotions - joy, fury, obsession . . . he remembered seeing people and places he had never seen in his life - endless seas of sand, mountains that pierced through the sky, crowded exotic cites . . . and wizards in black cloaks and masks, a pretty witch whose glossy black curls danced when she
cast a red coloured curse . . . a skinny boy standing in front of a tall mirror . . . terrified and yet refusing to be cowed . . .

Yes, what to do with Harry? Tom drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. He needed to find some way to control him . . . or contain him . . .

He contemplated this, and finally, an idea drifted into his mind. Abruptly, he stood and strode over to the small wooden box where he used to keep completed potions. After a few moments of poking through the various little dusty bottles and vials, he found one filled with a pale opaque liquid. Slipping it into his pocket, he stepped through the empty doorframe that led to the only other room in the cottage. It was a bedroom, and much smaller than the other. Underneath the bed, which was tucked up snugly beneath the window, Tom found his old school trunk. He emptied its contents onto the floor.

Harry jumped when he dropped the object in front of him. Tom undid the Silencing Charm with an easy wave of the wand.

"You can speak," he said. "I won't silence you again."

"YOU ABSOLUTE F --" 

"Unless you're rude," Tom amended quickly.

Harry ground his teeth together to stop the insult from escaping. "Where are we?" he asked finally, his voice tight.

"An island just off the coast of Scotland," Tom replied absently, toeing the trunk open.

"I thought you lived in an orphanage."

Tom gestured around at the walls. "Oh, you're wondering about this place? I acquired it last year, when Mrs Cole - the matron - kicked me out." He tried to gauge whether Harry would fit. It would be a tight squeeze, but the boy was shorter than him and the trunk was twice as large inside as it was outside.

Harry looked puzzled, although Tom couldn't tell whether it was at the trunk or his statement. "I'm surprised that the teachers or the Ministry didn't make her take you back."

Tom hadn't been stupid enough to tell anyone.

"Er . . . What's that for?" he asked when there was no answer. He nodded towards the trunk.

Tom pulled the potion out of his pocket. "Have you ever heard of the Draught of Living Death?"

Harry looked puzzled. Then, as his eyes flicked between the open trunk and the potion, it twigged. Tom grinned.

"You are not putting me inside that! I won't let you!"

"Don't be a wuss about it. You'll be fine - you'll just be asleep."

Harry recoiled, backing up under the table as far as he could go. "I'll fight!"

"I'll just Stun you."

Harry bit his lip. "What if I wake up inside there?"
Tom hadn’t considered that. He blasted a halfpenny sized hole in the lid of the trunk with his wand.
“There you go -- you'll have air.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Harry said, staring almost pleadingly up at him. Tom took a moment to properly appreciate the sight of Harry on his knees, his big green eyes filled with fear. They really were a lovely colour. Clear, vivid, and terribly expressive.

“I have things to do,” he said regretfully. “I can't exactly drag you around all the time at the end of a rope. Also, I think you might try to escape.” He eyed a section of rope that had mysteriously begun to fray in the short time that he had been in the other room. Honestly, had the Gryffindor tried to gnaw it like a dog when he wasn't watching?

“Can't you just split us apart again?”

“No,” he lied. “It’s impossible.”

Harry looked horrified. Tom opened the vial with his thumb.

“I'll cooperate!”

“Good. Then drink this.”

“No! I mean you won't have to drag me around." The boy paused and seemed to struggle with himself. "I'll be helpful,” he said, finally, in a very quiet voice.

“In what way will you be helpful?” Tom asked, looking at him dubiously.

“I don't know,” Harry snarled, frustrated. “What do you want me to do? What are you even planning to do now you have a body?”

Tom shrugged. “I need to find out what my other self’s been doing. And I was going to look for some more pieces of my soul.”

“Why do you want more pieces of your soul?”

If Tom reabsorbed another Horcrux, he would have enough of his soul be able to split it again. He wouldn’t need Harry anymore.

“None of your business.”

“Right . . . I can help with that though. I'm pretty good in a fight.”

Based on his experience earlier in the day, Tom could concede that.

"And I can cook!"

Tom rubbed his chin thoughtfully. The offer was at least a little tempting. While he had learnt to cook and do laundry and other menial domestic tasks at the orphanage, he certainly didn't enjoy them. Of course, magic did make such things much easier.

“Won't it be very inconvenient to drag around a trunk everywhere?” Harry cajoled, pressing his advantage. “I’m heavier than I look. Your arm will get tired --”

“There's a Featherlight Charm on it.”

“Oh,” Harry grasped for another argument. “You'll look strange carrying it around? . . . Also, it
looks bulky?"

It was quite bulky. And it would be awfully boring hiding out here by himself all summer with no one to play with. While scrawny, Harry was not unattractive - Tom enjoyed his defiance and quick, fiery emotions. There might be other compensations . . .

With a heavy sigh, he put the cap back on the vial and pocketed it. He waved the wand to summon a particular book from the other room and sat cross-legged on the rug across from Harry.

The Gryffindor crawled a little way out from under the table.

"Is that a yes?"

Tom ignored him, opening *A Compendium of Magical Vows* in his lap and thumbing idly through the pages.

"A vow?" Harry’s voice was anxious again. "You want me to make a vow? A magic vow?"

Tom looked up in amazement.

"Of course you would have to swear a vow. What did you think was going to happen - that I was just going to trust you?"

Harry obviously had not thought about it at all

"I'm not going to er ... 'Honour and obey' you," he said, twisting his head to read the book upside-down.

"This is the marriage section anyway," Tom said absently. "Vassalage oaths are in the next chapter." He turned a few more pages while Harry spluttered helplessly. Eventually, he found an entry that might suit their situation.

"This," he said, turning the book around so that Harry could read the paragraph. "You swear not to attempt to kill or maim me, not to betray me to my enemies, and to help me achieve my goals."


"Everyone."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Everyone in the Wizarding World has reason to want me dead or back in my diary," Tom insisted. "Telling anyone who I am or where we’re staying will count as a betrayal."

Harry did not look convinced but nodded anyway. "If you say so. But there has to be a time limit. I'm not agreeing to do that for the rest of my life."

"There's a break clause," Tom said, pointing out the relevant part. "How about you swear for a year and a day?"

"What happens after that?"

Tom would break the bond, murder Harry and, if he had collected enough soul pieces to be able to spare one, create a Horcrux of his very own.
“After that, I'll break the bond and we can go our separate ways.”

“You said it was impossible,” Harry said suspiciously.

He had, hadn't he?

“Right,” he said, letting his eyes flick upwards as if he was thinking hard. “I've just realised that there is actually a spell that would probably do it.”

“So you lied.”

Tom just shrugged.

“Then why are you doing this?” Harry’s voice held honest curiosity. “Why not just get rid of me now?”

Tom considered fobbing him off, but then realised it would do no harm to come clean.

“I don't have any Horcruxes of my own. But while I'm connected to you, you'll act as a Horcrux for me, and vice versa I imagine.”

“Neither of us can be killed right now?” Harry asked slowly, turning the idea over in his mind.

Tom nodded.

The other boy looked down at his knees. Finally, he lifted his head again and looked Tom in the eye, jaw set.

“A year is too long.”

“I'm being very generous already.”

“I want to go back to Hogwarts after the summer.”

Actually, Tom knew he wouldn't need a year anyway. He'd probably find what he wanted within a few weeks. After that, he could get an International Portkey and leave the country.

“Six months,” he said with a put-upon sigh.

“Three months,” Harry countered bravely. He withered a little under Tom's gaze but held his ground nonetheless. Eventually, Tom broke into a big grin.

“Lovely doing business with you, Harry”

He couldn't shake the other boy’s hand since it was still tied to the table leg so he settled for patting him on the head instead. Harry scowled, jerking away. Tom smiled indulgently and used his wand to transcribe the vow onto a piece of parchment. He filled in their names, then released the boy’s bonds.

Harry rubbed his wrists. They were badly bruised and chafed raw - he pulled his sleeves down over them when he caught Tom looking. Judging by how he was shifting uncomfortably, he was probably quite bruised all over. It served him right - Tom was too.

“How do we do this then?” the Gryffindor asked, looking away.

Tom slowly reached out to take his left hand. Harry pulled it away, then reluctantly extended it again when Tom raised an eyebrow. His skin felt warm, albeit a little clammy from nerves. On the back of
his hand, the words *I must not tell lies* were carved - Tom vaguely remembered seeing them when he had Legilimised him. He pressed the tip of the holly wand to their linked hands - happily, no Bonder was required since the vow wasn't Unbreakable.

“You say the words on the parchment. Our magic will do the rest.”

“What happens if I break the vow?” Harry asked, picking up the parchment with his spare hand and skimming over it. There was a flush high on his cheeks.

Tom had wondered how long it would take him to ask.

“I get your magic.”

Harry’s gaze snapped to his. “You’re joking.”

“I suppose I might give it back if you ask nicely.”

The other boy did not seem to think this was likely. Privately, Tom agreed.

“You’ve come this far, don’t back out now.”

Harry worried at his lip for a while, but eventually, haltingly, he began reading out the words on the parchment.

“I, Harry Potter . . . swear on my magic that I will not attempt to kill or . . . maim Tom Riddle, or to betray him to his enemies, and that I will . . . help him achieve his goals, until the end of the 6th of August, 1996.”

Tom smiled broadly.

“I accept your vow.”

The wand pulsed and fiery lines shot from its tip and snaked up their joined arms. Harry jolted, reflexively trying to pull away, but Tom tightened his grip.

When the tide of magic finally ebbed, Harry sagged, visibly drooping with exhaustion. Tom didn't feel much better; making a magical vow took a lot out of a person. He let go of the boy and sat back, regarding his newest minion.

This was the time to be kind. While Tom enjoyed Harry's anger, he also liked good conversation and company. Unfortunately, he knew that he tended to crush the spirit and defiance out of the people he spent too much time with. Inevitably, he would do the same to Harry, leaving him so damaged and subservient that he became boring. If he wanted to have fun with him all summer, Tom would have to ration himself.

Rising, he used a Cleaning Charm on Harry's smelly robes, then fetched a roll of bandages from a drawer. Gently, he began wrapping the boy's damaged wrists in gauze while he watched numbly. Bewildered but too tired to pull away.

"Is there somewhere I can sleep?” Harry asked plaintively when he was done. He sounded more than a bit dazed.

"There's a bed in the other room if you don't mind sharing.” It wasn't generosity. Tom liked having someone in his bed who he could pet and touch as much as he liked.
Harry evidently did mind sharing, if the horrified look he shot him was any indication.

"You could sleep on the rug if you prefer."

He nodded. Fine - let him sleep on the floor. It would be dreadfully uncomfortable. Tom petted his hair again while the boy scowled and batted at his hands. It had an interesting texture - springy, but still pleasantly soft. Then he stood and headed to the bedroom, ready to try sleeping in his new body for the first time. He paused with his hand on the doorjamb and looked back. Harry had curled up on the floor where he had been sat, facing towards the crackling fire.
Harry was woken from a fitful sleep by a high pitched whistling noise. He uncurled a little from the armchair and rubbed his eyes. There was a kettle hanging over the fire in front of him, cast iron with a long, looped handle. From its sprout poured a trail of steam.

Foggily, he remembered drifting off to sleep on the rug, then waking and moving to the chair sometime in the early hours. He pushed his glasses further up his nose and Riddle came into focus - or rather, his back did. His arms were moving as he worked on something on the kitchen worktop. To Harry’s surprise, his feet were bare and he was still wearing his pyjamas - cotton drawstring trousers and a jumper. The curls at the nape of his neck were slightly sticking up, waiting for a comb.

Harry scowled. Despite Riddle’s disarmingly innocent appearance, he remembered the vow he had been forced into yesterday. The Slytherin was exactly as horrid as Harry would have expected the boy who grew up to be Lord Voldemort to be. But it was worse somehow, than dealing with Snape or Umbridge or Voldemort himself, because Riddle was his own age --

“Oh good, you’re awake. Would you make the tea?”

Startled out of his stewing resentment, Harry’s chin jerked up. Riddle had turned away from the counter and was holding up a green carton of long life milk.

“No, do you think this is alright to use?” the other boy asked dubiously. “I think the preservation spell was working, but really; ‘Long-life’ milk? Whatever will Muggles come up with next?”

Harry could only stare in response, but Riddle seemed to take his non-answer as a yes. He handed the milk to Harry who took it dumbly. “Mugs are under the counter on the far left. I take a bit of milk and no sugar.” He gave a quick smile and turned back to whatever he had been doing.

Harry gaped, utterly bewildered by his complete change in attitude. He had expected to be ordered around and bullied into doing things, but instead, Riddle was treating him like some kind of . . . roommate? Was this really happening? Harry looked around helplessly, waiting for his surroundings to lapse into the corridor leading to the Department of Mysteries, for bare stone to turn glossy, black and smooth, reflecting the light of flickering blue torches . . .

But it didn’t. Nothing happened. Above the fire, the kettle was still whistling, grating on Harry’s nerves. Not knowing what else to do, he stood and, groaning a little at how cramped he felt after a night in the armchair, lifted the bloody thing off its hook with a tea towel wrapped around his palm. It was very heavy and the heat radiated through the cloth. He hesitated for a moment, because there was a part of him - a large part - that wanted to take a few steps forwards and pour the contents over Riddle’s perfect, lying head.

But it would break their vow. Harry would be left a squib.

Scowling, he set the kettle on the worktop and made up two mugs of tea, surreptitiously watching Riddle out of the corner of his eye. But the Slytherin did not seem to be doing anything nefarious at that precise moment - in fact, he appeared to be making up a batch of porridge in a small cauldron, which he then hung over the fire. He was humming as he worked, apparently in a good mood. Harry quickly looked away, unable to watch his captor do something so domestic.

The tea was done. Harry sat down at the table, nursing his mug between his hands. He could still hear Riddle humming. How was this his life? He stared down into the depths of his cup, as if
expecting the answer to appear there like a Grim in the tea leaves. Of course, it was a little pointless to read a teabag . . .

Riddle set the cauldron down on the table with a thud. Close up, Harry could see that the words "FOOD ONLY!" were gouged into the side. The letters were slightly shaky. Riddle ladled out two portions and slid one over to him, snagging his own mug of tea in return.

Harry looked down at his breakfast. He didn't normally like porridge - it seemed a very old-fashioned thing to eat, and the texture bothered him. On the other hand, he hadn't eaten since morning the day before, and his stomach chose that moment to remind him that he was ravenous. He took a tentative spoonful, and then another.

They ate in silence for a while. Then Riddle looked up and caught his eye.

“How did you sleep?”

Harry put down his spoon in his bowl while he considered the question. Perhaps he wasn’t dreaming. Perhaps he was dead. He had been killed by the Basilisk, and hell had turned out to be making awkward small talk with your worst enemy over a mediocre breakfast.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” Harry said very slowly, as if explaining something to a small child. “I don’t like you.”

Riddle smiled charmingly. “Don’t be like that, Harry. If we’re going to be living together for three months, it’ll be very tiresome if we don’t get along. There’s no reason we can’t be friends.”

“You want to be friends, after what you just did?”

“What I just did?” Riddle asked innocently. “I only made you breakfast, I had no idea you would take it so personally.”

“You set a Basilisk on me!” Harry yelled, slamming his hands down on the table. The crockery rattled.

Riddle wasn't fazed by his outburst. He opened a jar of jam and deposited a spoonful on top of his porridge. “I admit that we got off on the wrong foot. I’m sure that once you get to know me, you’ll come to think better of me.”

He held out the jar questioningly. "Jam?"

Harry’s mouth was open, so he closed it. He looked around the room, as if searching for someone to back him up, then slumped back down in his chair. “What is wrong with you?” he breathed, almost talking to himself.

“Is it really so bad, being here?” Riddle asked, voice still light and charming. “Pansy told me you live with a couple of nasty Muggles - really, I’m doing you a favour, Harry.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“What else should I call you? The Boy-Who-Lived?”

“Just use my last name, Riddle.”

“Oh, I think we’re a little more familiar than that. After all, we already --“

Harry's eyes widened when he realised what he was about to say. “DON’T --“
“-- kissed,” the Slytherin finished with a wicked grin.

Harry clapped his hands over his ears and groaned.

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After the excruciatingly uncomfortable breakfast, Riddle cleaned the bowls and cooking things with magic then began rifling through the cupboards. He seemed completely at ease, unaware of any tension. Harry sat at the table, not knowing what to do with himself. Even though he was physically free, he knew he was held by more than one invisible leash. It felt wrong though, to just sit there, quiet and obedient and not trying to run away.

Eventually, he could bear it no longer.

“How are we going to find other er . . . Horcruxes?” he ventured.

“No longer sulking, are we?” Riddle asked, looking up. Before Harry could respond to that, he continued: “I’m certain that I will have left a Horcrux at Hogwarts, but that one will be too dangerous to remove. I know the location of a second, but beyond that, I have no idea.”

“How many do you think you made?” Harry asked with a frown.

Riddle shrugged. Harry had the impression that he knew the answer but was choosing not to say.

“You, me, one at Hogwarts, one somewhere else,” he said, counting them off on his fingers. “That’s at least four. Why so many? Wouldn’t one have been enough?”

“I planned to make spares in case some were destroyed, of course.”

Harry wrinkled his nose at his response. It seemed very careless to him, to go around leaving pieces of your soul all over the place, knowing that some of them would probably be killed off. Had some of them already been destroyed?

“Does Dumbledore know about your Horcruxes?”

“How should I know? I don’t see any reason he would, although the fact that Voldemort survived as a wraith after his body was destroyed will have puzzled him.”

Harry stared down at the woodgrain of the table. That had puzzled him too, but Dumbledore had never really elaborated on how Voldemort could still be alive. If he had figured it out about the Horcruxes, had he also known that Harry himself had been one? The Headmaster had been cold and withdrawn around him all year, ever since Voldemort had come back. Was that the reason why?

“The Horcrux whose location you know - are we going to collect it today?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Your Trace, of course.” Riddle sounded annoyed that Harry had even needed to ask.

Harry thought about that as he watched Riddle take a seemingly random array of small boxes and packages out of the cupboard and stack them neatly inside a dry cauldron. The summer before second year, the Ministry had known when Dobby used a Hover Charm near him. Shouldn’t they be able to detect Riddle now? But no Aurors were bursting through the low wooden door of the cottage . . .
Riddle noticed his confusion and snorted. “Remember the Wardstones? They block your Trace, but only when you’re within the circle. For us to leave, I need to brew a potion to temporarily get rid of your Trace.”

A potion to block the Trace? The idea was so exciting that Harry momentarily forgot about being angry with Riddle.

“Did you invent it?”

Riddle grinned. “I’m flattered, but no. The recipe was an open secret in Slytherin when I was there - I’m amazed you’ve never heard of it. The teachers turned a blind eye when the upper years used it. I don’t have any vials here, but I do have the ingredients. I’ll brew it today and let it simmer overnight.”

Harry leant back, balancing his chair on two legs. “So what am I meant to do today?”

“Sit on your chair properly, will you? As for what you’re doing today --“ Riddle straightened and summoned a large red book from the other room. He dropped it on the table in front of Harry - the title read Precautions for the Paranoid: Magical Home Defence. “You’re going to become the Secret Keeper for this cottage.”

In his surprise, Harry let his chair rock forwards. “You want me to be the Secret Keeper? Why?”

“When you don’t turn up, and there are no more attacks, Voldemort will eventually come looking for us here.”

“Right, but why me? Can’t you do it?”

“No. The spell works by concealing the secret within a single living soul. I don’t know for sure whether having just part of a soul would stop me casting it, but even if I could it wouldn’t keep Voldemort out.”

Harry flipped to the contents of the book which directed him to the last chapter. The incantation looked far more complicated than anything he’d studied in Charms. But then again, Peter Pettigrew had cast it, so it couldn’t be that hard.

For a while, he alternated reading with peering over the top of his book to keep an eye on Riddle. He had set up a cauldron on a burner, and was preparing ingredients and adding them in sequence. Harry leant his chin on his hand and watched him expertly skin a Shrivelfig. Riddle looked very comfortable brewing. He didn’t have the same worshipful flare as Snape but his movements were sure and workmanlike, and he seemed to work mostly from memory, rarely consulting the parchment on the counter.

When he had finished skimming through the section, Harry closed the book with a sigh and stood, deciding to explore the rest of the building. But as it turned out, there wasn’t much to see. The other room was very small and contained nothing but a single bed and a bookcase. The trunk Riddle had threatened to shut him in poked unassumingly out from under the bed.

He poked his head back through the door. “Where’s your bathroom?”

Riddle looked up from his potion. “There’s an outhouse round the back - oh, that reminds me --” He patted his pockets and withdrew Pansy’s wand, holding it out to Harry, handle first. “You can have this back - there’s no real plumbing, so vanish the mess when you’re done.”

“Can’t I have my wand?”
“No. If you’re good, at some point we’ll go shopping for a replacement for me,” he said, and turned back to his work.

Harry scowled at his back. “It’s weird not to have an inside toilet,” he informed Riddle.

“Have you seen this place? Nothing’s been done here in the last century.”

Harry gazed around at the house again. Something was puzzling him. “It’s a bit rustic, but even so, how could you afford to buy it?”

“Buy?” Riddle asked. His back was turned, so Harry couldn’t see his face, but his voice sounded amused. “An old Muggle lived here before me. I waited until he went out and then moved in.”

“He didn’t come back?” Harry asked dubiously.

“Well, the first thing I did was to put up the Muggle-repelling wards, so no.”

Harry’s mouth twisted sourly at the cruelty. Riddle looked over his shoulder at him. There was a sly look in his eye and Harry had a strong feeling that he had just said that to see what reaction he got out of him. It was scary, because Riddle obviously knew that making an old man homeless was wrong. He just didn’t care.

“I’m going outside,” he said, through gritted teeth.

“Take the book!” Riddle called after him.

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The outside air was wonderful; the scents of honeysuckle, fir and salt floated on the light breeze. Harry set the Secret Keeper book down on a flat rock just outside the door and walked cautiously forwards into the garden, determined to test the limits of the bond between them. The tug came before he was even a third of the way to the treeline. It was very faint - he wouldn’t have noticed it if he hadn’t been specifically waiting for it - and yet he knew that if he took even two more steps forwards they would both be in agony.

With a heavy sigh, he padded back over to the cottage and sat down against a stone wall, resting in the shade. Idly, he picked at the ground, ripping up odd blades of grass while he idly watched fluffy clouds pass overhead. There were no aeroplane contrails slicing across the sky and no car noise carried to him on the breeze. They really were in the middle of nowhere.

It had been more than 24 hours since Harry had gone missing. Would news have reached the Order? Did Sirius know? He hoped that his Godfather didn’t do anything rash, like rush out of Grimmauld Place to look for him. The thought made a lump rise in his throat; Ron, Hermione, Sirius, Lupin, Mrs Weasley . . . they would all be worrying over him. If only he hadn’t been so gullible - if only he hadn’t let Pansy - Riddle - lure him into that bathroom . . .

But there was no use wallowing in self-pity. Harry sniffed a little, then wiped his face with his sleeve. To distract himself, he took out Pansy’s wand and waved it unenthusiastically. He could tell it didn’t like him, and the sentiment was mutual. He wondered if it blamed him for the death of its mistress. He spent the next hour trying it out, casting the Hover Charm on leaves, transfiguring beetles into buttons and setting fire to twigs. It took a lot more effort than he was used to and the results were sporadic - several of his buttons scuttled away on stubby little legs when he took his eyes off them.

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Over a lunch of cheese, pickle and crackers, Riddle announced that Harry needed to understand where the cottage was in order to become its Secret Keeper. They set out after clearing the table, leaving the potion bubbling merrily away.

Together they left the circle and set off through the woods, their feet crunching over a soft carpet of pine needles. Not five minutes later, they reached a rocky shoreline. The tide was out and the waves were calm. Seagulls circled overhead, hoping for a crab or live shell. Down the coast, just visible beyond a protruding headland, Harry could just make out a village of small, whitewashed houses.

It would have been a nice spot - a little remote and desolate, but still nice - if it hadn’t been for the company. Luckily, Riddle didn’t try to make conversation. They walked back in silence, and stopped when they were just inside the wards.

“Do you think you could find it again?” Riddle asked.

Harry thought about it. He had a good sense of direction and had taken note of a few distinctive trees. Eventually, he nodded.

“Good,” Riddle said, and took the book containing the spell out of his bag. He opened it to the relevant page and handed it to Harry.

“Can I have my own wand back?” Harry asked again. “Just for the incantation.”

Riddle smiled indulgently and swapped wands. Harry suppressed a peculiar shiver as their hands touched. Then the other boy stepped back, out of the circle, and turned his back to Harry and the cottage. Harry was bemused.

“What are you doing?”

“Did you even read the book?” Riddle demanded, annoyed. “You have to cast the spell when no one is looking at the place, or else it won’t work. Think of a way to phrase the secret - but don’t say it out loud - and then cast the incantation.”

Oh. Harry practised the wand movements. Then, a little nervously, he raised the wand again and began the unusually long and complex incantation. “Et omnibus qui hoc sciunt obliviscius”, he read carefully. “Hoc arcanum ut salvus sit est, irepserunt intus corde meo, et universi qui scitis ut obliviscatur.”

When he lowered the wand, he wasn’t sure it had worked. Unlike most spells, there had been no kind of visual indication. Then Riddle turned around with a puzzled frown on his face. His eyes panned across the clearing but didn’t seem to be able to focus on the cottage.

“What can you see?” Harry asked curiously.

“Just the woods,” Riddle said slowly. “It’s so strange . . . I know it’s here . . .” He raised his arm and pointed to a spot some fifty feet from the building. “I think it’s somewhere round there . . . or there . . .”

“Er . . .”

“Tell me the secret,” the other boy demanded, turning back to him.

For a moment, Harry considered refusing. But then he realised that it would be counterproductive since they still be stranded in the middle of nowhere, stuck together. Also, he had a feeling that it might be against the terms of their vow.
He took Riddle’s arm and pulled him forwards into the circle. “We’re staying in a cottage a few minutes from the coast, just past the hollow tree –”

Riddle blinked, and his eyes focused on the cottage. A smile spread across his face. “Oh, well done, Harry,” he breathed. From anyone else it would have been a nice compliment, but somehow Riddle’s inflection reminded him of an owner praising a pet for doing a difficult trick. Harry dropped his arm in annoyance, but the boy didn’t seem to notice. He headed back inside without a backwards glance.

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The rest of the day passed in a similar manner. Riddle brewed and read while Harry practised magic and tried to stay as far away from him as possible. Riddle cooked dinner, but had Harry watch so he could learn where things were kept.

That evening, as Riddle changed into his nightclothes, Harry eyed up the uninviting rug in front of the fire.

“Don’t be stubborn.”

“Huh?” Harry asked, looking away from the rug.

“You aren’t seriously going to sleep on the floor again, are you? Just swallow your pride and share the bed. No one is going to know but us.”

Harry chewed at his lip. It was much more tempting than it should have been. He really wanted to sleep on a mattress with room to stretch out. He poked his head into the other room to consider the bed. It was fairly narrow - they would probably have to touch . . .

“Take these,” Riddle ordered, pushing a bundle of old-fashioned pyjamas into his hands. “There are other clothes in the trunk in the morning - you should borrow some. You can’t wear your Hogwarts uniform for the entire summer.”

Harry winced, but took the pyjamas. It was very strange to think about wearing Voldemort’s old clothes.

“What are you waiting for? Go get changed. Those should fit you - I last wore them when I was fourteen.”

“Funny,” Harry snapped.

Riddle grinned. “I’ll be in bed - come join me when you’re done.”

Before Harry could protest, he slid under the bedcovers, turning on his side to face the wall. He pointedly left half the bed unoccupied. Harry stared at his back for a moment, then stormed back into the main room.

He was not going to share a bed with Riddle, he thought furiously as he changed out of his slightly whiffy school robes. Riddle was not a good person. There was an ulterior motive somewhere - he was offering to share the bed to lull Harry into a false sense of security, or something.

Should he sleep on the floor or in the armchair? Did he want to be sore or cramped?

“Damn it!”
Red-faced, but for once more angry at himself than at the Slytherin, he crept back into the other room. Riddle hadn’t moved. Fuming, Harry climbed in too, turned his back to the other boy and pulled the blankets firmly up to his chin. They weren’t quite touching, but they were no more than an inch apart. Harry could just feel the heat of Riddle’s skin on his back.

The mattress beneath was a bit springy, but still felt like heaven to his tired bones.

“Blow out the candle, would you?” Riddle said sleepily.

Harry unhappily complied. He lay there in the dark, hyperaware of every movement the other boy made. Finally, he heard his breathing even out, but it took a long time to follow him into sleep.
He was gliding silently down a long, black corridor. Anticipation built inside him as he progressed. Soon, a plain, nondescript door came into view at the end of the passage and despite its unimpressive appearance, he felt his heart soar. He did not know what was behind, but he knew it was something terribly important, something he wanted desperately, frantically . . . he reached out an eager hand --

And woke, breathing hard.

What a peculiar dream, Tom thought, as his heartbeat began to slow. What did it mean? It was so clear, so richly detailed . . .

He lay there for a moment, comfortable in the small bed. He could feel a warm lump against his front and when he blearily opened his eyes he was greeted by a shock of messy black hair. He had cuddled up behind Harry in his sleep. It was no surprise; Tom had always done that, ever since he was little; the orphans slept three to a bed in winter for warmth. Of course, after Amy and Dennis . . . and the thing with Billy . . . and what he had done to Sarah, none of the other children would share a room with him, let alone a bed.

Idly, he moved his palm over Harry’s side, mapping out the sharp jut of his hipbone. His shirt had ridden up in his sleep, exposing his bare abdomen, so Tom ran his fingertips over the soft, vulnerable skin there next. There was no particular intention behind the touches - it was just nice, a sheer tactile pleasure to feel someone else’s warm skin. Shifting a little closer to the other boy, he encountered a trail of wiry hair leading down beneath the waist of his sleeping trousers. Tom followed it to the hem, teasing at the worn cloth . . . he wanted to see where it led . . .

Unfortunately, Harry chose that moment to stir, mumbling a little in his sleep. Tom froze, knowing that if he woke up to a hand in his boxers, he would kick up a fuss. He hoped to collect a Horcrux today, so it would be better to keep him in a cooperative mood.

Regretfully, he withdrew his hand and cautiously crept out of bed, climbing over the end so he didn’t disturb his companion. Outside of the cosy nest of blankets, the morning air was chill. He pulled a woollen jumper over his pyjamas, frowning at a loose strand, and padded into the other room to check on the potion.

It was a little darker in colour than he would have liked - periwinkle rather than sky blue - but he attributed that to the age of the ingredients. It was bubbling ever so slightly. Tom turned the heat up on the burner and tipped the bowl containing the dried frog hearts in. He stirred vigorously with the ladle, watching with satisfaction as the liquid thickened. It was finished. Working confidently, he decanted it into a collection of empty bottles and sealed their tops with wax and cork. It was an excellent yield; enough to last all summer.

Harry appeared in the doorway as he was labelling the bottles, grumpily rubbing at his eyes with his sleeve. He didn’t return Tom’s greeting, but seemed to have remembered it was his turn to make breakfast. He filled the food cauldron with water and set it over the fire, then cracked in four eggs, shifting from foot to foot to avoid the cold flagstones.
After a pleasant meal, Tom changed and lent Harry some of his own clothes. He looked up with amusement when he emerged from the small room again; the trousers were almost comically long on him.

“Not one word, Riddle,” Harry snapped, messily rolling up the legs and pushing the sleeves up to his elbows. Tom held his hands up in surrender, but the smirk on his face probably said it all. When Harry was finished, he handed him a vial of potion, which he warily drank.

“You’ll need a new dose every three days,” Tom told him, then grasped his arm. “Ready?”

“We’re going to pick up a Horcrux now?”

Rather than answer, Tom focussed his mind on their destination and turned on his heel, dragging Harry with him through nothingness. After a moment of discomfort, they landed on a narrow, steeply sloping road. It was bordered on both sides with high hedges that hid the view of the valley below.

Without passing a word between them, they set off down the hill. Every now and then a sleek, shining Muggle car whizzed past them on the way to the town. Tom surreptitiously stared after them; they looked very different to the boxy automobiles he was used to.

Eventually, they reached a gap in the hedge. Tom climbed over the fence and pushed the foliage aside. He could just make out a path, so overgrown that it would be invisible to someone who didn’t know it was there.

“You think Voldemort hid a Horcrux in a hedge?” Harry asked doubtfully as he clambered after him. “It’s not a bad idea, I guess. At least no one would think to look for it under a random shrub.”

Tom ignored him and set off down the path, bending branches out of the way. The shack was in the thicket somewhere, completely absorbed by the clump of trees and brambles that surrounded it. Some time and several nasty scratches later, his perseverance paid off when his hand met a decaying wooden wall. They worked their way round the corner and came to a door, hanging crookedly off rusty hinges.

Tom ran his wand around the lintel and doorframe, checking for monitoring spells on the entrance. There were three - the final one was so subtle that he wouldn’t have been able to detect it if it hadn’t been cast with his own familiar feeling magic. Working carefully, he disarmed the spells and tentatively pushed the door open. It creaked terribly and swayed on its hinges as it swung.

Tom lit his wand and entered. Twigs, broken glass and small bones crackled under his feet. He raised the wand to cast the light further. The shack was close in size to the cottage they had just left. However, that was where the similarities ended.

It was a wreck.

The roof had all but collapsed, and ivy cascaded down from the holes in the ceiling. There were few signs of human habitation - it could have been an abandoned animal shelter, were it not for a few ancient pans hanging on hooks. They were rusted almost to nothing, leaving bright orange vertical streaks on the wall below.

It was bizarre - to Tom, it felt like he had last seen it just a week or so ago. It had been filthy; the dirtiest, most disgusting place he had ever been, but quite clearly lived in. Now it was almost completely reclaimed by nature.

“I think the hedge would have been better. Why on earth would you put a piece of your soul in this dump?”
“It’s where my mother lived,” he said absently, poking around. He had planned to use the ring he had taken from his uncle for his second Horcrux - but where might it be? He didn’t want to dig through all of the rubbish for it.

“I thought your mum was a witch?” Harry asked, confused. Tom didn’t blame him. He had never understood how any magical person, let alone the descendants of Salazar Slytherin could have sunk so low. Magic made solving problems so easy - so why did they live in such abject poverty? So untalented, so weak . . . in some ways the Gaunts were scarcely better than his Muggle father . . .

He closed his eyes. He could perhaps feel something . . . it was like the lightest breeze on a still day. Slowly, trying to hold onto that feeling, he moved towards a mouldering lump of fabric and wood that had once been an armchair. He had secured Morfin to that chair, he recalled, and had passed a pleasant afternoon practising his fledgeling Legilimency on his unprotected mind.

“How did you find out about her?”

“I’m named for my father and grandfather.” It was not the armchair. Perhaps the hearth? Cringing a little from the dirt and soot, he cautiously felt around the chimney opening. But there was nothing unusual there. “I found a reference to Marvolo Gaunt in a genealogy book. When I came here, he was dead, but I met my uncle.”

“Did you kill your uncle too?”

Tom straightened up and frowned at him. Harry Potter was an exceptionally nosy person.

“What? You can’t blame me for asking. I know you killed your father!”

“No,” Harry said quietly, but with absolute certainty. His vivid green eyes were fixed on Tom’s. “I think you remember it. I reckon you’re already a murderer.”

Perceptive. Tom felt a smile twist across his face, wide and crooked rather than charming. Harry took a hasty step back, but all Tom did was crouch, examining the fireplace itself. There was something at the edge of his hearing . . . almost like voices whispering to him . . . hissing . . .

“Help me lift the hearthstone,” he ordered.

Harry stared at him, then his eyes flicked over to the fireplace. “You can’t lift it with magic?” he asked warily.

“I don’t want to do more magic in here than I need to, in case I’ve missed a detection spell.”

The Gryffindor shrugged, then drew closer and felt around the stone for a grip. Tom did the same on the other side. Slowly, they slid the stone away.

Underneath there was tightly packed dirt. The whispering was louder now. Tom traced his hands over the floor and stopped when he encountered a slight depression. He used a shard of pottery to dig until a small metal object was revealed.

It was a rectangular tin, the kind people kept tobacco in. Tom used the holly wand to check for enchantments but so far as he could tell, there were none. Just in case, he pulled his sleeve down over his hand, then picked it up and slid it into his pocket.

“You aren’t going to look inside?” Harry sounded disappointed. Tom supposed it was a little anti-
climactic.

“I don’t need to. I know it’s in there.”

“It’s too small to be a book.”

“It’s not a book.”

Harry led the way back through the clump of foliage. When they emerged, blinking in the sunlight, the branches opened out to a dramatic view of the valley. There was a village at the bottom with a river snaking through its centre. A church spire poked up out of the knot of buildings. Across the valley on the opposite slope, the big house where Tom’s father had lived was clearly visible.

“Oh,” Harry said, in a small voice. “This is . . .”

“This is what?” Tom asked impatiently.

Harry turned to him, his face haunted. “. . . It’s where Voldemort came back.”

Now that he was looking for it, Tom could see a graveyard peeking out behind the church. He strode over to the hedge bordering the road, pushed his way through and started down the hill.

“Wait - where are we going? Aren’t we Apparating back?”

“I want to see it.”

Harry hurried to catch up, mindful of the invisible tether between them. “No - I don’t want to! There’s nothing to see, anyway.”

“You can wait outside.”

The Gryffindor made a distressed noise, but followed.

It was midmorning on a weekday, so the village centre was quiet. There were a few Muggles going about their mundane lives; an elderly man shuffling with a frame and a woman with a twin pram, but neither paid much attention to the boys. They passed a corner shop and a post-box before reaching the church. It was more weathered than Tom remembered, and there was scaffolding around the base of the spire. Above the door, a brightly coloured banner read “Please donate to the church roof fund!”

Past the building there was a secluded walled graveyard, set on a slight slope and guarded by an ancient yew tree. Tom pushed open the wrought iron gate and entered.

“Where was it?” he asked.

“I think I was wrong,” Harry said quickly. “It must have been some other graveyard where he was resurrected.”

Tom smiled at the weak lie. “No, it was this one. I remember you saying that I used my father’s bone in the potion. That’s his house on the hill - where else would his grave be but here?”

He ambled down the slope and Harry followed reluctantly. His face was ashen and unhappy, and his
eyes were flicking from tombstone to tombstone as if expecting (or reliving) an attack.

The graves at the front of the graveyard were heavily overgrown and faded with age. However, as they progressed, the dates on the graves became more and more recent. As Tom was bending to inspect a chipped stone sarcophagus, he felt the bond tug. He turned around, looking for Harry.

He had stopped still, staring at a high marble headstone. Tom headed over.

Thomas Riddle
1901 - 1943

“It was here,” Tom breathed, drawing his fingers across the stone, torn between fascination and disgust. For all that it bore his hated father’s name, it was tangible proof of that night . . . not the first murders he had committed, but by far the most meaningful . . .

Revenge was a factor of course - the man had abandoned his mother, and left him to grow up in an overcrowded, underfunded orphanage while he himself lived in luxury. But more than that, it was a baptism of sorts - Tom had, in one fell swoop, cleansed himself of the taint of his father’s mediocrity and ensured his own immortality . . . he been reborn as Lord Voldemort --

“I don’t get it,” Harry said softly, interrupting his thoughts. “Didn’t you want a family?”

There was something longing in his voice. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, gazing wistfully up at the house on the hill. His messy hair moved a little in the breeze. He must have felt Tom’s gaze, because he looked away from the house and met it, flushing a little at the scrutiny.

Tom had always had a knack for working out how people ticked. It was a useful skill - once you understood someone, making them do what you wanted was a simple matter of pushing the right buttons. Looking at Harry now, as if for the first time, he saw the sweet nature hidden behind his fiery layer of defiance. Unlike Tom, this particular orphan had never aspired to anything greater than to be loved.

It was infuriating. How could his soul be attached to anything so weak?

“What use would I have for a pathetic Muggle?” he spat.

Harry’s flush deepened even as he bristled at Tom’s tone. “They must have been rich, to have lived in a nice place like that. They could have looked after you.”

“I don’t need looking after. I don’t need any inheritance except my magic,” Tom said coldly.

“Forget I asked,” Harry muttered, kicking at a dandelion with his foot.

But Tom was struck by the urge to punish him. He stepped closer. “Do you want to know what happened?”

Harry looked up. “Not if you’re going to --“

“It was the evening,” Tom interrupted. “I unlocked the door with magic and went in. I Disillusioned myself - none of the servants saw me pass."

“I don’t want to hear this,” Harry stated, stony-faced.

“I found them in the dining room - an old man and woman, and the man who was my father. They had just finished dinner. They had all sorts of things - roast mutton, fresh vegetables, berry pie and
cream. I closed the door behind me and locked it. It must have looked like it had closed by itself. The old man began to stand up, but I used a Sticking Charm to keep them in their chairs. Then I made myself visible.”

He smiled, savouring the memory.

“They understood who I was, of course. The resemblance was unmistakable.” He leant in closer, whispering the words like some wonderful secret. “I killed my grandfather first. I used the Killing Curse. The others screamed when he slumped over, face down in his dessert. Then I killed my grandmother.”

Harry’s eyes widened. He backed away, but there was nowhere to run. Tom followed him, caging him in against a tombstone and grabbing his wrists when he went to cover his ears. He pinned them against the stone and pressed in close. The Gryffindor glared up at him hatefully.

“I sat down in the chair next to her body, across from my father, and filled a plate - rationing, you know; no sense in wasting good food. He didn’t say anything - he just waited to die like the weak, cowardly Muggle he was.”

He caught the other boy’s horrified eyes, teasing him with the end of the story. Harry thrashed like a fish on a hook. Tom pressed even closer - it was exciting to feel a strong, wiry body moving against his own.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Harry demanded, finally wriggling free and pulling out his wand. He held it defensively in front of him with a white-knuckled, shaking hand. The sight of his red, furious face made Tom laugh until tears of mirth gathered at the corners of his eyes.

“Yes, you murdered your entire family, very funny.” Harry snarled.

“There’s no need to be so uptight,” Tom said when his laughter died away enough for him to talk. “It was just a story.”

Harry didn’t lower his wand.

“You’re insane.”

“It’s not nice to call people names, Harry,” Tom chided, neatening his own clothes. He glanced around the graveyard one last time, then held out his arm in a gentlemanly way. “Shall we be off? I’ve seen what I wanted here - it’s not such an impressive spot as I thought it would be.”

The other boy gaped at him, clearly bewildered by his change of mood. When he didn't move to take his arm, Tom strode forwards and grabbed his shoulder. Before he could protest, he Apparated them away.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

That night, Tom sat on the rug in front of the fire with the tin on the ground in front of him. Harry, who had been sulking, had been lured out of the other room by the prospect of seeing the Horcrux. He was perched on the armchair behind Tom, one leg folded underneath him and the other dangling off the chair. A book titled *Elementry Cursebreaking and Detection* lay beside the tin, already opened to the relevant page.

With a measure of apprehension, Tom opened the tin, careful not to let its contents spill.

The Horcrux sat innocently on a coiled navy blue handkerchief. The letters T.R. were just visible,
embroidered on one corner in gold thread. It had belonged to his father - Tom had taken it from his front pocket just before he left the Riddle House.

It was a strange piece of jewellery. The inky black stone was a peculiar geometrical shape, too large somehow for the ring. It seemed too perfect, too uniform to have been made by human hands. By contrast, the thick gold band was roughly crafted, dented and pitted by time. The symbol also puzzled him - the line, circle and enclosing triangle. It was Grindelwald’s mark, he knew, but the ring was ancient, far older than the revolution on the continent.

As his hand hovered over it, palm flat, he could feel something - a pull, a siren’s call, urging him to just touch it, to just slide it onto his finger . . .

He wrenched his hand away with some effort. It was most certainly a trap - the combination of the Compulsion charm and the ease with which he had found it confirmed it.

Picking up the book again, he turned the pages, until he reached the diagnostic spells. There were different classes of curses; fast or slow acting, affecting mind, body, or magic. Tom worked through the page of spells, casting slowly and with care. The curse on the ring was fast - very fast - and physical, intended to destroy or maim the victim’s body before they had time to discover the appropriate counter.

It was a thing of beauty, savage and deadly as a storm guarding a mountain peak.

He started with the generic counter-curses first, still working from the book. None of them worked, which was no surprise. Even at his current age, Tom could already cast curses far beyond the standard textbooks. He was very talented at devising powerful variants of common curses, combining them so their ill effects multiplied. It was a subtle and deeply enjoyable art, requiring proficiency in Arithmancy as well as the Dark Arts.

Enthused by the challenge, he raised the wand and began the process of picking the intricate curse apart. He wasn’t as skilled at curse breaking as he was at casting, but it was always much easier to dismantle a spell you had cast yourself. Even so, the work was so delicate and laborious that he hardly dared to breathe.

Finally, finally, the last few threads yielded and the curse was removed. He sat back, leaning against the foot of the chair and stretching his sore back. Carefully, he picked up the ring with the handkerchief, not touching it with his skin, then reached over and pressed it to Harry’s bare foot where it hung off the chair.

“HEY!” Harry cried and tried to yank his leg back. Tom caught his ankle before he could, examining the skin. There didn’t seem to be any ill effect. He let go of Harry, who shot off the chair like an angry cat. It was quite comical actually, the way he was torn between glaring at Tom and trying to inspect his own foot.

Tom took the ring out of the handkerchief, holding it in the palm of his hand.

“You just - you just --“

“I just what? The curse was gone.”

“YOU DIDN’T KNOW THAT! If you did you wouldn’t have needed to test it on me!”

Tom hardly noticed him. The pull of the Horcrux was stronger now that he held it in his hand. He was not quite sure how to remove the piece of soul - a kiss probably wouldn’t work, since it had no lungs to breathe the soul back into him, but if he could extract a little, it would probably be drawn
towards him, the soul’s desire to be whole too much to resist . . .

“~ Hello? ~” he hissed tentatively. Harry shut up and stared.

At first, nothing happened. Then a wisp of formless jet black smoke issued from the ring, then more and more, tendrils whipping around, as if spinning in a gale --

Tom breathed.

It was as if it noticed him for the first time. He could feel something stirring, some kind of consciousness being drawn forth, an insatiable hunger to inhabit a human body, with a warm, beating heart and a hand to hold a wand . . .

The smoke engulfed him, and Tom sucked in another breath. The back of his throat burned – it was the same as when he had taken in Harry’s soul fragment. He coughed helplessly at the prickling sensation in his chest even as the last of the smoke drained away.

When the pain faded, he waited anxiously, wondering if he would feel it in his mind. Tom himself was conscious and aware, so it stood to reason that at least some of the other Horcruxes would be too.

There was perhaps an echo of . . . something, in the back of his skull. Tom focussed on it, tracing it to its source. When he found it, he pushed his own identity onto the intruder with all his might, all of his determination to remain in control of his body. Slowly, slowly it withered away to nothing.

Someone was shaking his shoulders. Tom blinked, and the sounds of the crackling fire and his own fast breathing filtered back in.

“What happened? Was it . . . like you?”

“It wasn’t awake like I was.” The sleeping presence in his mind had felt familiar and foreign all at the same time. “It was older than me,” he confided.

“Did it talk to you?”

“No. I crushed it.”

“The one that was in me didn’t talk to me either, I don’t think,” Harry said quietly. He sat down on the rug next to him and picked up the ring with his free hand - Tom must have dropped it at some point. The sharp planes of the black stone glowed red-gold in the light of the fire.

“How much older do you think it was?” he asked softly.

“I don’t know. A couple of years, maybe? I probably made it when I left Hogwarts. I don’t think I would have risked another --“

“Another what?”
Tom shrugged.

“Another murder, after you killed a girl the first time you opened the Chamber,” Harry stated. His tone was thoughtful rather than accusing. “That’s how you make a Horcrux, right?”

Tom looked up, meeting his unwavering, curious eyes. He was quite the detective, to have worked that out from the few clues he had been given. It showed a quiet, intuitive sort of intelligence that was difficult to predict.

“Yes,” he breathed, sharing the secret. “That’s how I was made. But the girl was an accident - I used my father’s death instead.”

He let go of Harry’s wrist to pluck the ring from his fingers. With the holly wand, he conjured a length of black string and threaded the ring onto it. The other boy watched silently as he hung it round his neck, tucking it under the collar of his shirt.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is when this fic starts to earn its rating. I’m not going to be putting up individual chapter warnings, so if you’re concerned about anything in the tag list, PM me on fanfiction or tumblr and I’ll give you more information :)
When Harry was a child, he’d often seen cousin cry. Dudley would burst into noisy tears over a bruised knee or a broken toy, when a television series he liked was cancelled or if he didn’t like one of his presents. And whenever he did, Aunt Petunia’s sharp features would smooth out into something gentler and she would sweep him into her bony arms and rub soothing circles on his back. Harry often watched furtively, peering around the doorframe, and later in his cupboard he would wrap his skinny arms around himself and pretend that there was someone there to hold him too . . .

. . . And perhaps it was just wishful thinking, but as Harry drifted towards wakefulness, he could feel a warm arm slung over his stomach and a warm body pressed up against his back. It was so nice and comfortable and cosy, and Harry never wanted to leave . . .

. . . Oh.

Slowly, and with great dread, he looked down and saw a pale hand splayed across his abdomen. Instinctively, Harry tried to shift away, but Riddle made a sleepy little complaint and the arm around his waist tightened. Completely at a loss, Harry fidgeted helplessly. He could feel Riddle breathing evenly against the back of his neck, sound asleep. Harry didn’t think he could escape without waking him, and if he did, he would have to confront this horrifying, impossible situation. There was nothing he could do . . . nothing but lie there . . .

It wasn’t his fault, he told himself. He was quite clearly the cuddlee rather than the cuddler, and therefore blameless. And if he enjoyed it, it was only a natural reaction to someone else’s body heat. It was just a hug.

A hug that, unlike the quick embraces he received from Ron and Hermione and Sirius, went on and on, for as long as he wanted it to . . .

Guiltily, Harry settled back in and let himself drift. The rain was pouring down outside and before long, the peaceful sound lulled him into a doze.

It could have been anywhere between a few minutes and an hour, but eventually he felt Riddle shift behind him. Harry evened out his breathing, feigning sleep. Riddle would leave, and Harry would be able to pretend to be blissfully unaware --

Only, Riddle did not get out of bed. Instead, he shifted again and nuzzled at his neck. His hand travelled down and dipped under the hem of his pyjama shirt.

What.

Harry lay there, paralysed with indecision as the fingers moved almost leisurely across his stomach. His skin was prickling everywhere Riddle touched him; his fingers leaving trails of fire in their wake. But just as he was going to give up his pretence and smack the hand away, it withdrew. The bed dipped and creaked as Riddle sat up behind him and climbed over the end. A moment later, there was a soft whoosh as the fireplace was lit, followed by a clang as something - probably the kettle - was set on the hook above the flames.

What was that?

Left alone in the bed, Harry squirmed, supremely uncomfortable and blushing for no good reason.
Perhaps, he rationalised, Riddle had sleepily mistaken him for someone else? Maybe there was some other person that he slept with - a girl, perhaps, as weird and disturbing as that was - who didn’t mind being felt up first thing in the morning?

The best thing was to pretend it had never happened. He waited a while in the bed, listening to Riddle moving around. After the noises stopped, he climbed out of bed and crept into the other room. Riddle was sat at the table, with a heavy textbook open in front of him, as well as two steaming mugs of tea and a plate heaped with buttered toast.

He looked up when Harry entered. “Good morning.”

“Yeah --“ Harry stuttered, off balance and flustered by the sheer domesticity of the scene. “Morning.”

Riddle noticed his hesitation. “Are you alright?” he asked, his face conveying nothing but perfectly charming concern.

“I’m fine,” Harry said quickly, sliding into the other chair. “ Completely fine.”

Riddle pushed the second mug towards him. “You look a bit peaky. Here, have some tea.”

Harry took a tentative sip. He was mildly disturbed to find it was exactly how he liked it, milk and two sugars. He glanced at Riddle, but he had already gone back to his book. The cuddling that morning must have been unconscious - he clearly had no idea why Harry was feeling so awkward. It must just be something he did in his sleep. Harry tried not to shudder at the image of the bald, noseless version of Voldemort snuggling with Nagini. Feeling more at ease, he filched a slice of toast from Riddle’s plate and began spreading it with marmalade.

“What are you reading?”

Riddle raised an eyebrow but showed him the cover. It was the book on curses he had been reading yesterday. Harry’s nose crinkled.

“Don’t judge - some of the introductory material is covered in Defence against the Dark Arts at school. It’s my favourite subject.”

It was Harry’s too, but he was damned if he was going to mention it to Riddle.

“We never covered putting curses on objects.”

“You had that Umbridge woman teaching last year, didn’t you? Pansy didn’t make her sound very good.”

“Believe me, she wasn’t,” Harry said with feeling. “But we’ve had a lot of teachers because they keep getting killed, or kidnapped, or resigning or turning out to be Death Eaters in disguise . . .”

“Hmm?” Riddle hummed, mildly interested.

“You taught it once.”

“What?”

“Well, not you-you. In my first year, we had this weird stuttering guy called Quirrel who always wore this big purple turban. Later it turned out that Voldemort was possessing him - he was stuck to the back of Quirrel’s head.”
Riddle stared, open-mouthed. Harry felt smug to have finally got his composure to slip.

“You’re making this up.”

“I’m not.”

“But why?”

“Er . . . you were trying to steal the Philosopher’s Stone so you could get your body back. For some reason, Dumbledore was keeping it in the school. I’m not sure why; he didn’t explain it very well.”

“So Voldemort didn’t get the stone?”

“No. I . . . er . . .”

“You what?” Riddle asked, eyes narrowed.

“So, when he went to get it, me and Hermione and Ron - those are my friends - followed him. He caught me. The stone was being kept inside a mirror, and he tried to use me to get it out.”

Riddle was watching with rapt attention. “What happened?”

“Remember how I said he didn’t used to be able to touch me because of my mother’s sacrifice? I kind of touched his face . . . and he started burning. Voldemort escaped --“

“What about Quirrel?”

“He . . . er . . . died.”

“What?” Riddle asked indignantly. “You killed a teacher and you didn’t get expelled? That is so unfair - if I’d been caught killing a teacher, Dumbledore” - he spat the name - “would have thrown the book at me!”

“It’s not my fault! He was being possessed by Voldemort --“

“Yes, but even so --“

“Why do you hate Professor Dumbledore so much?” Harry asked quickly, hoping to forestall further discussion of Quirrel. He had died because of the shock of Voldemort leaving his body. Dumbledore had told him so.

Riddle examined his nails. “Who says I hate Dumbledore?”

Harry rolled his eyes at the unnecessary lie. “It’s obvious.”

“I have no opinion on Dumbledore.”

“Everyone says he’s the only one you’ve ever feared,” Harry said slyly, knowing perfectly well that it would draw a reaction from the Slytherin.

“What?” Riddle exclaimed, dignity affronted. “Scared of that old coot? There’s a difference between fear and caution.”

“If you say so,” Harry said sceptically.

Riddle fussily adjusted the cuffs of his pyjama shirt.
“Dumbledore gave me my Hogwarts letter,” he confided, after a moment. “He came to my orphanage. I got a little excited when he told me about magic and made a bad impression on him. Also, I think that my bitch of a matron told him lies about me. After that, he watched me like a hawk.” He took a sip of his tea. “He always had a reputation for playing favourites, did Dumbledore.”

Harry shrugged noncommittally.


“I told you already, he hasn’t spoken to me all year,” Harry said stoically. “And he was right about you all along, wasn’t he? You didn’t exactly do anything good with your life.”

“Rude.”

“No, I mean it. So far as I know, Voldemort didn’t do one positive thing. All you did was kill a load of people, before getting yourself killed by a baby.” Harry gestured at his scar for emphasis. “You can’t complain that Dumbledore was being unfair, because he wasn’t!”

He finished his tirade and folded his arms. He half expected to be hexed, but instead Riddle seemed genuinely enthused by the debate.

“What do you think of Wizarding Britain, and the people that run it, Harry?” he asked eagerly, sitting forwards in his chair.

Harry’s mouth twisted when he thought of Fudge, of Umbridge. The way that the Daily Prophet had turned on him when he tried to tell people about Voldemort coming back.

His face must have said it all, because Riddle smiled. “Exactly! Pureblood witches and wizards who were raised in it don’t realise how insular and backwards it all is. It’s ripe for a revolution! And of course, you can’t make an omelette --”

“-- Without breaking eggs, I get it,” Harry cut in. “But you weren’t just breaking eggs, you were burning down the whole kitchen! And don’t pretend it’s about making things better, because it’s not. You like hurting and killing people!”

Riddle grinned wider, but did not answer. Instead, he regarded Harry almost hungrily. “I suppose we can agree to disagree,” he conceded, after a moment.

Harry scuffed at the flagstones with his socked foot, face heating for no discernable reason. “What are we doing today?”

Riddle sat back. “I’m going to read this book. You’ll just have to entertain yourself somehow.”

It was a highly unsatisfactory response. It was not so much that he wanted a repeat of yesterday, but Harry was an active kind of person. Sitting around doing nothing rankled.

“We aren’t going to look for other Horcruxes?”

“I already told you that I don’t know where any of the others are.”

Harry scoffed. “You can’t even guess?”

Riddle didn’t look up from his book. “There are a couple of places that I want to check, but it would be better to wait a few days while the furore over your disappearance dies down. The Aurors will be
on the lookout.”

It was a clear dismissal. Harry rested his chin on his hand and took another piece of toast, gazing wistfully at the raindrops hammering against the kitchen window.

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After breakfast, Harry unenthusiastically picked through the bookcase in the other room. The lowest shelf contained textbooks - judging by their titles, Riddle had to be taking O.W.L.s in every subject but Muggle Studies - and a few tatty Muggle paperbacks. The other three shelves were filled with books on the Dark Arts.

Harry sighed and turned away. He would change out of his pyjamas first and decide what to do later. He pulled the trunk out from under the bed, flung open the lid and rifled through for something that would fit.

The fabrics of Riddle’s old-fashioned clothes felt thicker and rougher than modern ones. Most of the items were darned or patched in some way - Harry pulled out the leg of a pair of trousers and examined a row of slightly clumsy but still passable stitches where it had been taken up. Did Riddle do that himself? Despite himself, he smiled at the image of Voldemort sitting in a Death Eater meeting, taking reports while carefully darning his socks with needle and thread.

Harry dug deeper into the trunk, curious now to see what he would find. Underneath the clothes, he could feel other objects. He glanced at the open doorframe, not really wanting Riddle to catch him going through his things. He could just hear the sound of pages turning and the occasional chink as a mug was set down on the table.

Reassured, he pulled the bundle of clothes out and set it on the floor. Underneath, there was the usual layer of detritus that ends up at the bottom of a school trunk; boiled sweet wrappers, odd socks and opened envelopes. But there were other things too. Harry picked up a bundle of notebooks tied together with brown string.

He carefully undid the bow. The top notebook was wire bound and conspicuously Muggle. On the front, “1938 - 1939” was written in slightly smudged blue ink, and the first page was titled “Charms”. Harry couldn’t stop himself from grinning nostalgically when he saw the words “Wingardium Leviosa” printed carefully at the top of the page, followed by a really quite good series of stick figures demonstrating the spell’s characteristic swish and flick movement. Riddle’s very first lesson at Hogwarts had apparently been the same as Harry’s own.

Replacing the notebooks, he turned his attention to the other contents of the trunk. There were a few Wizard’s Chess pieces that were too battered to be used, a brown paper bag containing a modest quantity of Chocolate Frog cards and a couple of spare green and silver ties. And at the very bottom, there was a cardboard shoebox containing a strange little collection of tarnished jewellery and trinkets.

Harry spread them out in front of him on the rug. Eleven house pins, three prefect badges, several rings in various shiny metals and a clump of hopelessly tangled necklaces. A curious dark glass sphere that was filled with tiny gleaming stars and a golden snitch, its wings constrained by several brittle rubber bands. There were even a few odd pieces of cutlery decorated with an enamel Hogwarts crest - he recognised them as being the fancier ones from the staff table.

For some reason the little collection of pilfered treasures made him smile. For all that it was evidence of Riddle’s thieving nature, there was something rather childish about the magpie’s hoard of shiny, useless objects. He pulled the rubber bands off the snitch and held it up to the murky light filtering
through the rain-soaked window. Its delicate silver wings opened and beat softly. Where had it come from? Riddle didn’t seem the type to play Quidditch.

Harry slipped it into his pocket and shovelled the rest of the treasures back into their box. He sat back, reluctantly fascinated by the puzzle his captor presented. It might have come from his murdered father, but Riddle’s name fitted him well. He was a mess of contradictions - independent and self-assured, and yet so terribly childish. He obviously liked people; he enjoyed their conversations, Harry was sure of it, so how could he talk about killing his relatives with such relish?

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When he emerged from the bedroom dressed in a new set of clothes, Riddle was still reading his book. He frowned when Harry took the snitch back out of his pocket - he clearly knew where it had come from. Harry grinned at him, challenging him to bring up his little hoard, but he made no comment. Harry settled comfortably in the armchair and released the snitch, letting it buzz around his head. The moment it veered away, he whipped up a hand to catch it. He made a game of it, letting it fly further and further before lunging out, at times so violently that he nearly fell out of his seat.

The rest of the day passed with a peace that felt dangerous. Riddle had clearly been inspired by the cursed ring from yesterday because the table slowly accumulated cursed objects - bottle caps, pebbles, clothespins and the like. He looked up occasionally, whenever the snitch got loose and whizzed around him - Riddle never tried to catch it, but followed it with his eyes. Harry sometimes thought he could feel those dark eyes on him, but whenever he glanced over Riddle’s nose was buried in his book.

There was an easy atmosphere that reminded him of Christmas and Easter holidays spent in the Gryffindor Common Room. Quiet and a bit dull, as if the school itself was holding its breath, waiting to welcome its students back. Harry took a trip to the outhouse and returned soaking wet, much to Riddle’s amusement, and in the evening he cooked for both of them in the food cauldron. When the night rolled in and the cottage was lit only by the fire, he climbed into bed next to Riddle without complaint.

As always, the Slytherin faced the wall while Harry faced into the room. The inactivity of the day had left him feeling jittery and restless. He waited for Riddle’s breaths to even out, knowing that the peaceful sound would allow him to drift off himself.

Only, Riddle’s breaths did not even out. Instead, he rolled over and flung his arm over Harry’s middle. Then just like that morning, in a motion too deliberate to be unconscious, his fingers dipped under his shirt.

He was awake.

He was awake and touching Harry.

“What are you doing?” he hissed furiously.

“Do you want to?” the Slytherin murmured into his ear.

“Do I --?”

The hand slid under the waist of his trousers and into his boxers.

Harry let out an undignified squawk and grabbed for his wrist.

“Riddle, what the fuck --” he cried, utterly scandalised. He was glad it was dark in the room because
could feel his face had gone instantly red.

“Since we’re here all summer, we may as well,” Riddle said, matter of factly, as if asking Harry if he wouldn’t mind doing the washing up.

Harry was so stunned that he couldn’t think of anything to say. Riddle seemed to take his silence for permission, because his hand slid further into his boxers, and wrapped around his cock (which he was mortified to realise was not entirely soft) and gave it a long, damning pull.

It was the best thing Harry had ever felt in his life. Warm skin, dragging along his sensitive flesh, squeezing him just right - it was so, so much more wonderful than the familiar feeling of his own hand. A helpless little whine that he could not possibly have made was ripped from his lips.

Oh. Oh.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it,” Riddle breathed into his ear.

He definitely hadn’t thought about it. But before he could tell Riddle that in no uncertain terms, the hand around his cock squeezed --

Harry gasped, his hips stuttering forwards without his permission. Riddle’s thumb caressed his slit as his fingers curled around him - it was almost too tight, almost painful, but somehow that made it better --

No.

“W-We aren’t doing this!” he bit out, and his voice was wrecked. With a great effort, he dug his fingers into Riddle’s wrist and wrestled him away, then sat up in bed, holding the blanket up to his chest like a shield. He scrabbled at the nightstand for his wand.

“Lumos!”

Riddle sat up too, blinking in the light. He looked cross, which was wrong - he had no right to be annoyed when he had just tried to--

“What’s up with you?”

“What’s up with me!” Harry echoed, furious. “Why did you --?”

He couldn’t say it. Things like this simply didn’t happen to him. People didn’t look at Harry and his knobbly knees and Spellotaped glasses and want to . . . and want to . . .

“Like I said, if we’re spending the summer together, we may as well.” Riddle’s voice implied that Harry was the one who was being unreasonable. “I’m not going to live here like a monk.”

“I’m not doing - that - with you!”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Harry began counting the reasons on his spare hand, keeping the lit wand trained on Riddle. The tip was trembling. “You murdered my parents! You murdered Pansy! You set a hundred foot snake on me! You threatened to lock me in a suitcase, you are a horrible person, and,” he said, running out of fingers, and gesticulating with his whole hand instead, “I’m not gay!”

Riddle looked puzzled at that last one.
“I can tell you aren’t happy-“ he began.

“No, gay! Gay! - Homosexual!”

“Oh!” Riddle said as understanding dawned. “Don’t worry about that, I’m not either.”

“You just tried to have sex with me!” Harry shouted almost hysterically. Was he dreaming? Was this all a dream?

“Why do you have to be so loud?” Riddle complained. “I didn’t try to have sex with you, don’t be daft.”

“What would you call it then?”

Riddle’s face conveyed his complete disbelief.

“It was just a wank. Surely you’ve had a wank before?”

"That's something you do by yourself!"

Riddle rolled his eyes. "Not since third year --"

"What ?"

"Come on Harry, do you mean to say that you've done anything with one of your dorm mates?"

Harry’s jaw dropped. Dean. Seamus. Oh God, Neville. He clapped a hand over his eyes as Ron’s broad, freckled face came into his mind as if that would protect him from the terrible mental images.

“Wait,” Riddle said gleefully, when Harry wasn’t able to speak. “Have you never done anything with anyone? That’s so sweet. I promise I’ll make your first time good.”

Harry felt the bed move as he leant in. He opened his eyes just as Riddle wound an arm around his waist, pulling him in closer. In the low light, his irises were deep pools of black. Harry fought and pushed at his arm, wriggling out of his hold and the bed. He stood up gracelessly, keeping his wand trained on the Slytherin.

Riddle sighed and flopped down on his back on the mattress, his dark curls spilling across the pillow. Then, to Harry’s absolute horror, he slid a hand down his own stomach and into his drawstring trousers, very obviously wrapped it around his cock and gave himself a firm pull.

While looking straight into Harry’s eyes.

“What?” he asked languidly, as his hand moved rhythmically in his trousers and his breath hitched. Harry’s mouth moved soundlessly. “Just because you don’t want to have any fun doesn’t mean I won’t.” He groaned and arched his back ever so slightly, causing his shirt to ride up. Harry could see a pale strip of skin, his flat stomach, the jut of his hipbones --

Harry fled to the other room. He curled up in the armchair, drawing up his legs to his chest. He couldn’t, however, escape the sounds. There was no door between them, and he could hear every noise that Riddle’s hand was making, every low groan - he was being loud on purpose, Harry was sure --

The most humiliating and shameful thing was, his own cock was rock hard and straining against his underwear - it had been practically since the moment Riddle had touched him, and the thought of what Riddle had looked like on the bed, what Riddle was doing right at that moment was only
making it worse.

He wrapped his arms around his knees (not to stop himself touching his own prick, no, definitely not) and hid his head in between them. It was going to be a long night.
The next morning, Harry woke to the sound of Riddle moving about in the other room. He had slept on a hair trigger, but the Slytherin hadn’t tried anything during the night.

He plucked his glasses off the armrest and shoved them onto his face, and then unfolded himself from the chair, psyching himself up for a confrontation. Even the thought of mentioning last night felt excruciatingly awkward, and there was a part of Harry - a large part - that wanted to pretend it hadn’t happened. But, he told himself, he was a Gryffindor for a reason, and he’d been cooperative for long enough. He was going to make it very clear that what Riddle had tried to do could never happen again.

It was in this determined mood then, that he stormed across the room. But before he reached the doorway to the bedroom, Riddle appeared. He was still wearing his pyjamas, but his shoes were on his feet and a towel was slung over his shoulder.

“YOU--“ Harry began, drawing in breath for his tirade.

“Good morning, Harry. I do hope you slept well,” Riddle said, all sweetness and dimples and light, looking for all the world as if he had not put his hand in Harry’s underwear less than twelve hours ago. “I’m going to go wash. It’s too far to go alone, so you’ll have to come along too.

Harry was completely derailed. “I - you what?”

Riddle paid him no mind. Instead, he side-stepped Harry, swept a bar of soap and a bottle of shampoo off the counter and into a metal bucket, and left the cottage. Harry stared after him.

The bond pulled taut.

Harry swore, and raced to the door. Outside, he raised a hand to shield his eyes from the bright sunlight as he gracelessly hopped to slip his shoes onto his feet.

“WAIT - hey, where are you going?” he called after Riddle from the doorway. He was heading in the opposite direction to the sea, the pail merrily swinging from his hand.

“There’s a stream just outside the wards. I normally go there,” Riddle called. Shoes finally on, Harry trotted to catch up as he left the wards and started through the sparse trees at the edge of the forest. He could hear the stream before he saw it, and it finally came into view when they ambled over a low rise. It was more like a small river, narrow, but deep and fast flowing.

“About last night,” Harry started, as Riddle led them down the bank.

“It’s okay, Harry. No hard feelings.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “No hard feelings?” he echoed incredulously. “It’s not you that should be angry!”

Riddle stopped at a place where the earth dipped down to meet the water in a series of large, flat stones. He set down the towels and bucket, then turned to Harry.
“I just asked if you wanted a handjob,” he said blithely. “You’re so uptight - I thought it might relax you.”

“Like that’s all you wanted!”

Riddle scratched his chin as if he was thinking about it for the first time. “Well, I suppose it might have been polite of you to repay the favour afterwards.”

Harry spluttered, red with fury and embarrassment. His face grew even hotter when Riddle pulled his pyjama shirt over his head.

“What are you doing?”

Riddle kicked off his shoes. “Do I really have to explain the concept of bathing to you? You should wash too, Harry. Cleaning charms can only do so much.”

Before he could protest, Riddle stripped off his trousers and underwear. He was not at all shy. Harry half averted his eyes as he undressed, torn between embarrassment and caution. However, Riddle did not seem to have an ulterior motive. He fished the soap out of the bucket and waded out into the water.

Once his back was turned, Harry raised his arm and took a sniff. His nose crinkled.

Great.

The water looked lovely and cool under the hot morning sun. Harry eyed Riddle suspiciously, but the Slytherin seemed totally oblivious to Harry’s dilemma. Hesitantly, he unbuttoned his pyjama shirt and stepped out of his trousers. He left his boxers stubbornly on as he followed Riddle into the stream.

It was wonderful - the top layer was warmed by the sun but cold water flowed past his legs. Harry could hear the morning calls of the birds and the sound of the treetops swaying in the gentle breeze. It was a truly lovely spot, peaceful and untouched, with a view of the mountains in the distance. He just stood there for a long moment, enjoying the view and the feel of the water.

Riddle wordlessly held out the soap. As Harry went to take the bar, their fingers touched and he saw for the first time that Riddle’s eyes were not black, but rather a dark, deep shade of brown, only visible in bright sunlight. The spell was broken when Riddle half turned away and bent gracefully at the waist to dunk his hair. Harry watched out of the corner of his eye, unable to look away from the fine muscles moving under the alabaster skin of his back, his thighs . . .

His arse . . .

Biting the inside of his cheek hard, Harry turned his head resolutely forwards and ran the bar of soap over his own torso. It was Riddle’s fault that he was having these thoughts. If it hadn’t been for what he had tried to do last night, Harry wouldn’t even have noticed his body. He only felt flustered because Riddle had put the idea in his head.

His reaction was all the more infuriating because it wasn’t like he had never seen another boy naked! There were shower stalls in the boy’s Quidditch changing rooms, and Harry had never been embarrassed when other people used them or walked around afterwards clad in just a towel.

And also, it shouldn’t matter what Riddle looked like naked because Harry fancied girls. He was certain that he wasn’t lying to himself about that - he liked the way Fleur filled out her blouse, and Cho Chang’s big dewy eyes and sweet round face. He had even looked twice at Hermione during
the Yule Ball last year, with her shiny hair and floating ephemeral dress! So there was no reason at all for him to be sneaking glances at Tom Riddle in profile as he ran his long fingers through his hair, sending rivulets of water cascading down his chest, following the smooth planes of his body down, down, until they reached the sharp V of his hipbones--

“Are you done with the soap?”

Harry definitely didn’t squeak. Utterly humiliated, he deposited the bar in Riddle’s outstretched hand, then quickly dunked his head to hide his burning face. He was not quite fast enough, however, to miss Riddle’s unbearably smug smirk. He had seen where Harry’s eyes had gone. He knew what he was doing to him.

_Bastard._

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Harry tried not to talk to Riddle, but the other boy was skilled at drawing him into conversation. Reluctantly, he had to admit that Riddle was good company when he wasn’t trying to be awful - he possessed a quick wit and a wide repartee of slightly cruel anecdotes about his time at Hogwarts.

That night he slept in the armchair again and woke up before dawn, cramped, tense and with his cock straining against his underwear. He guiltily crept out and relieved himself in the outhouse, trying very hard to picture Fleur Delacour in the swimming costume she had worn during the second task. To his immense distress, her hair kept turning black, her mouth twisting into a wide, cruel smirk as she held out a bar of soap like the devil holding out a perfect red apple --

“Do you want to?”

He couldn't look Riddle in the eye when he emerged from the bedroom that morning.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Things came to a head after lunch. Harry, who had run out of things to do, was tidying up. It was amazing how much mess two teenage boys could make. After he’d finished cleaning the dishes with magic, he fished his school robes out from where he’d stashed them under the armchair on his first night in the cottage.

As he unfolded them, he felt something crinkle in one of the pockets.

Harry frowned, and, sparing a glance for Riddle, who was still writing out a complicated pattern of runes onto a scrap of parchment, slipped into the other room and pulled the object out.

It was the Marauder’s Map.

Harry dimly remembered stuffing it into his pocket, along with his other most valuable possessions after Malfoy split his bag open. It felt like a lifetime ago. He glanced at the open doorway, then unfolded it.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Thin lines spidered across the parchment, forming into corridors, classrooms and dormitories. He eagerly scanned the map, searching for Ron and Hermione. Just seeing their names written down would be a huge comfort, a reminder that the world did not consist of the cottage and Riddle.
But they weren’t there. In fact, no one was - there were no labelled dots moving across the paper. Harry held it closer, unable to believe his eyes. Eventually, he spotted just two people walking side by side down the fourth floor corridor - John Dawlish and Miriam Maddox. He recognised the name Dawlish . . . he was an Auror . . .

A lump rose in his throat. They had closed the school. It shouldn’t have been a surprise - how could Hogwarts stay open when two of its students had vanished into thin air?

But even so, where had all the students gone? What about O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s? Had they been cancelled? Hermione would be so disappointed . . .

Agitated, Harry made the lines on the parchment disappear and tucked the map back into his robes for safekeeping. He reached into the opposite pocket and pulled out the knife that Sirius had given him. There was something else too, something small and round . . . he withdrew his hand--

A golden Galleon lay innocuously in the centre of his palm. Harry’s thoughts dissolved into white static at the sight of it.

The Galleon.

The Galleon that Hermione had enchanted to allow him to send messages to the D.A.

Excitement roared into life inside him. He could get a message to the Order! Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George . . . surely at least one of them was still carrying their Galleon, and if they were not at school, they had to be at the Burrow or Grimmauld Place!

He scanned the digits of the serial number. There were twelve. He didn’t know how to make the Galleon send letters directly, but there might be another way--

Harry dug into the open trunk for a quill and paper. He ripped off the string tied around Riddle’s old notebooks and flicked through them until he found one with free space. On the back page, he hurriedly wrote down the letters of the alphabet and numbered them 01 to 26.

Six letters. But what to write? He tapped the end of the quill against his knee as he thought. He had vowed not to betray Riddle - he didn’t think he could get away with letting the Order know about him, or the Horcruxes, or where they were staying, but he could at least stop them worrying that he was dead . . .

He wrote down his message on the back page, then translated it into numbers. Crossing his fingers, he tapped the Galleon with his wand, changing the digits just as he had done dozens of times over the last year.

\[01\ 12\ 09\ 22\ 05\ 00\]

\textit{ALIVE}

Then he waited, fidgeting. He had to give them time to find the message and work out the code. If Hermione was receiving it, it wouldn’t take long. The seconds ticked by. When he thought ten minutes had passed, he changed the numbers again.

\[09\ 13\ 15\ 11\ 01\ 25\]

\textit{IMOKAY}

Message sent, he felt like a great weight of guilt had lifted off his shoulders. His friends wouldn’t
have to wonder if he was being tortured somewhere by Voldemort. Of course, they’d still be
wondering where on earth he was and why he didn’t come back, but it was something at least. He
had just begun writing in the notebook again, spelling out the word SORRY, when he heard a small
scrape.

Riddle was standing in the doorway. He was smiling politely, a pleasant veneer over the cold fury in
his eyes.

“Don’t stop on my account.”

Harry scrambled to his feet, holding Pansy’s wand out in front of him

“I was just . . .” he began, reaching for a suitable lie, “I was just . . . reading your diary. I’m sorry.”

Riddle advanced into the room. He gestured with his empty fingers and the Galleon shot off the floor
into his hand. He examined it, holding it between his thumb and forefinger.

“A Protean Charm. How . . . fascinating.” He tapped the coin with his wand, making the numbers
melt into a row of zeros, before slipping it into his own pocket. “What information were you sending
to your friends, Harry?”

His dark eyes were mesmerising. Harry gulped, knowing the game was up.

“I was just telling Ron and Hermione that I’m alive. That’s all. I just didn’t want them to worry--”

“How thoughtful of you,” Riddle said, in the soft voice he used when he was at his most dangerous.
His head cocked to the side, like a cat considering a mouse.

“Look--” Harry said, turning the diary around so that Riddle could see his two messages. “That’s all
I s--“

“Crucio!”

Harry’s wand moved without conscious thought. “Protego!”

His half-formed Shield Charm shattered on impact with the powerful dark spell, sending a numbing
shockwave through his arm. But Harry was already moving. He leapt onto the bed and scrambled
out of the open window into the garden. A second red curse shot over his head as he landed on the
dirt. Keeping low, he half ran, half crawled around the corner.

There was a bang as the front door was slammed open, the wood crashing against the wall. Harry
skittered back the way he had come - he really didn’t fancy fighting Riddle with Pansy’s wand while
he was hobbled by the vow. His only option was flight.

But how could you run away from someone you were bound to by an invisible, thirty-foot long
tether?

He heard Riddle’s footsteps and bolted back around the corner, realising that he could keep the
building between them. It was only a delaying tactic; Harry couldn’t very well run in circles for the
rest of his life, but Riddle might calm down in the meantime.

For about a minute or so it worked. Finally, he heard Riddle’s reluctant laugh from the other side of
the cottage and knew he had worked out what he was doing. Then quick footsteps sounded from the
left side of the cottage. Harry grinned - it was a trick; Riddle would have silenced himself and gone
in the opposite direction. He ran towards the footsteps--
“Pathetic!” the Slytherin spat, as Harry scuttled backwards, belatedly realising that he had fallen for a double bluff.

“Expelliarmus!”

Riddle laughed derisively and slashed his wand down, silently conjuring a glowing shield. Harry hated how effortless he made it look.

“Stupefy! Petrificus Totalus!”

The other boy looked almost bored as he blocked the spells, and the second Disarming Charm Harry sent after them.

“Wonderful. Now that we’ve established that you have an arsenal of exactly three offensive spells—Uermium Vermis!”

Harry didn’t trust Pansy’s wand to block the unfamiliar spell. He dodged instead, leaping nimbly over a wild rose, and the fizzing orange curse passed harmlessly to the side.

Riddle didn’t immediately cast again. Instead, he considered him almost speculatively. Harry grinned cheekily in response - Riddle was fast, but he knew he was faster. Finally, the other boy raised his wand.

“Incendio Inflecto!”

Harry jumped to the side.

The spell curved.

“Protego!” Harry shouted in a panic. But the wand in his hand baulked, emitting nothing but a puff of noxious purple smoke. Acting on pure instinct, Harry let his legs go out from underneath him, dropping like a stone as a tongue of fire licked just above his head, singing the tips of his hair.

Then he screamed. Knives were stabbing at his insides - he hadn’t heard the incantation, but Riddle must have got him with a Cruciatus. Mercifully, it was over almost before it began and, trembling a little, teeth gritted and absolutely furious, Harry rolled to his feet.

“Expelliarmus!” he cried again, whipping his wand forwards in a blur. Riddle cast his own spell in the same moment. The two jets of light, one red and one yellow, missed each other by a hair.

Riddle’s spell hit Harry in his wand-arm, making his fingers spasm painfully and open. But Riddle’s wand flew high in the air at the same moment. Harry ran forwards, reaching out his other hand to catch it, but Riddle barrelled into him before he could, shoving him to the ground. Harry hit the dirt and scrambled immediately back up.

Riddle strode forwards, eyes full of malice. “You are going to pay for that.”

“Am I meant to be scared? Your wand is all the way over there.”

Riddle’s dark eyes seemed to bore into his very being. A sensation like pins and needles erupted all over his skin, growing worse by the moment. Harry hissed in pain and rubbed at his arms.

“I don’t need a wand to hurt you, Harry,” Riddle whispered, low and delighted.
Harry blinked, then slugged him as hard as he could in the stomach. The prickling sensation disappeared.

“Looks like I don’t either, genius,” he crowed as Riddle doubled over, wheezing. Harry didn’t wait for him to recover. Pressing his advantage, he shoved him hard, making him stagger backwards.

There was a dark part of him that wanted to hurt Riddle. He wanted payback for every horrible thing the Slytherin had done over the last few days and months. And while Riddle was a good six inches taller, he was so narrow that they probably weighed about the same - Harry fancied his chances in an all-out physical brawl.

He drew back his fist and cracked him in the face, hitting him just under his right eye. Riddle’s head snapped back, but then he seized Harry by the shirt and kicked him hard in the shin. Harry howled, hopping on one leg. Riddle grabbed his sleeve, but rather than be pushed to the ground, Harry let himself fall forwards onto Riddle.

The Slytherin's eyes widened in surprise at the move. They fell together, and he let out a winded gasp as Harry landed heavily on top of him. Harry drew back his fist again, but Riddle wrapped a leg around his hip and used his leverage to roll them over, his knee between Harry’s thighs. He caught Harry’s wrist before he could let fly his punch and pinned it to the ground.

For a moment, they panted together. Harry was still flat on his back in the long grass, while Riddle knelt over him on all fours, his curls in disarray. Almost as an afterthought Harry tried to spit in his face, but missed, the spittle landing on the collar of his shirt. Riddle didn’t even blink - instead his eyes dissected Harry, gazing down at him like a butterfly pinned to a board.

Harry reddened at both the scrutiny and the position. Riddle's thigh was between his legs and to his mortification, his crotch rubbed against the rough material of the other boy’s trousers with every laboured breath. There was a bead of sweat running down the Slytherin’s neck - unwillingly, Harry was reminded of the river water running down his chest--

“You’re hard.”

"Am not!" Harry cried. And if he was, it was only the adrenaline.

Rather than answer, Riddle leant forwards, just so. Harry groaned, embarrassingly loud, as his thigh ground against his cock, sending electric shivers of pleasure up his spine.

“No,” he tried to say, but to his horror, it came out breathy. Riddle gazed down at him, his eyebrows drawing together, like Harry was a puzzle he was trying to solve. His eyes flicked to where Harry’s free arm lay limp in the grass.

Not fighting.

Not struggling.

Harry went red in embarrassment as those dark, sceptical eyes panned back to his own.

But Riddle did him the courtesy of not contradicting him. Instead, very slowly, very sensuously, his fingers traced up Harry's bare arm and closed tight around his wrist like a shackle.

Harry swallowed. He was completely pinned. Whatever happened next was not his fault. He met Riddle’s eyes again, and finally struggled in his hold.

In a complete coincidence, the movement rubbed his cock against Riddle’s.
The Slytherin growled and lowered himself down so they were pressed together, grinding forwards. Harry could feel his weight on him, feel his breath tickling his skin, feel that he was hard too--

It was exciting. The most exciting thing ever. Harry canted his hips up, finding a rhythm with Tom - with Riddle - and threw his head back, gasping, as they pressed together again and again. Riddle let go of his wrists, sacrificing the hold for better leverage, and Harry flung one arm round his waist while the fingers of the other wound through his hair. His curls were as soft and silky as they looked--

“I hate you,” he gasped out as Riddle moved between his thighs, shaking with pleasure and the sheer thrill of it. It was like running down a steep grassy hill as fast as he could, knowing that at any moment he was going to fall, that it was inevitable.

Riddle spoke into the crook of his neck. “I know.”

And he could feel Riddle panting, his hips moving faster. Harry moaned, the sound completely indecent, and slung a leg around Riddle’s so they could press even closer together, each of them hopelessly tangled up in the other. Harry was combusting, burning up under the hot sun--

Riddle shuddered on top of him as he came and not a moment later white bloomed behind Harry’s own eyelids as he followed him down.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Harry drifted down from his high like a leaf falling from a tree.

Riddle had rolled off him and was lying on his back next to Harry, almost shoulder to shoulder. At some point, he had wandlessly Vanished the mess they’d both made in their clothes. Harry ought to be fighting him and demanding explanations, for appearance’s sake if nothing else, but the sun was warm and the adrenaline from their fight had mellowed into a pleasant thrum of contentment in his veins. It was so pleasant to lie in the soft, fragrant grass, aching and satisfied.

He turned his head. Riddle was gazing up at the clouds passing high above, his head pillowed on his arm. There were grass stains on the elbows of his white shirt and a bruise blooming high on his cheekbone where Harry had hit him. He raised a hand to touch it, then paused and let it fall.

Riddle didn’t miss the aborted movement. “That was a good punch,” he said ruefully.

“Aren’t you going to heal it?” Harry asked. He almost didn’t want him to.

“I can’t.”

Harry’s forehead creased. He didn’t know how to himself, but he had seen lots of people heal bruises - Hermione, Mrs Weasley . . . Riddle seemed to know a lot of magic. Why would he make Horcruxes, but not learn to fix a bruise? It was so backwards.

“It’s the penalty for using Dark magic,” Riddle sighed. “It destroys your ability to use healing charms. A wizard’s magic recovers a little if they stop, but it can take years. I haven’t been able to fix as much as a paper cut since I was twelve.”

“What Dark magic were you doing when you were twelve?”

“None of your business.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Healing seems a pretty useful thing. Is it really worth it?”
“All the good offensive spells are Dark. Most Aurors can’t heal, although a few keep their magic clean so they can provide first aid in battle.”

Harry hummed noncommittally.

“I’m going to be an Auror,” he said after a moment. He ought not to be engaging in pillow talk, but the lazy mood was making him chatty. At least the pillows were metaphorical.

“Are you really.” There was something mocking in Riddle’s voice that made Harry squint at him.

“I don’t like your tone,” he complained. But there was a smile on his lips. He was getting used to Riddle’s caustic personality. It was strange: they’d met less than a week ago, but Harry felt like he’d known him forever.

Given the Horcrux in his scar, maybe he had.

“I’m going to conquer Wizarding Britain,” Riddle announced.

“When did you decide that?”

“I don’t know. Probably when I found the Chamber of Secrets.”

“How long were you looking for it?”

“A good three years.”

“Wow. How come it took you so long? Do you have a bad sense of direction or something?”

“I have an excellent sense of direction,” Riddle groused. “I just wasn’t expecting the entrance to be hidden in the Victorian era plumbing of the second floor girls’ bathroom.”

“What did you want to be before?”

“A teacher.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “You don’t seem the type.”

“Why do you want to be an Auror?”

“Because a Dark wizard killed my parents,” Harry drawled, voice laden with irony.

Riddle grinned back at him, not taking the bait. “You aren’t very good at duelling.”

“Excuse you! You try fighting using Pansy’s wand. It hates me. I want mine back.”

To his surprise, Riddle acquiesced. “We’ll go to Knockturn Alley tomorrow. If I can find a wand that works for me, you can have yours.” He folded his other arm behind his head too, basking in the hot sun like a snake.

“This can never happen again,” Harry said firmly, a few minutes or an hour later.

“One of course not,” Riddle replied. Harry turned his head just in time to catch him rolling his eyes.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The quiet, tenuous peace between them lasted all day, and when they went to bed that night, Harry didn’t sleep in the armchair. Riddle cuddled up behind him straight away, no longer keeping up the
charade of facing the wall. His hands roamed over Harry’s thigh, hip, chest, neck – the touches were somewhat sexual, but mostly just possessive. Staking a claim.

To Harry’s shame, he didn’t mind.

Chapter End Notes

The “Dark Magic rots your ability to heal” idea is inspired by Riddletobien’s excellent Keep Your Enemies Closer.
“Accio money” Tom tried again.

Nothing happened.

He muttered to himself in annoyance. It was only sensible to charm your things so other people couldn’t summon them, but it was a pest when they went missing.

“You still can’t find it?” Harry asked. He was sat at the table with his breakfast bowl in front of him, watching Tom hunt for his rainy day fund with an air of great amusement. “Where did you see it last?”

“I already told you, I left it under the bed. He must have moved things around.”

“Maybe he spent it all?”

Tom ignored that. There would definitely have been money left somewhere - it couldn’t have been more obvious that Voldemort had stocked up the cottage to serve as a safe house in case things went south in the war.

“Where have you checked?”

“The whole bedroom, the fireplace, everywhere in the kitchen, under the armchair and behind the loose stone beside the window.”

“What about the attic? There’s a hatch in the bedroom.”

Tom cursed and dragged a chair into the other room.

“Good luck!” Harry called after him. He was in high spirits; energised by the prospect of a trip out of the cottage. Tom had expected more awkwardness after what they had done yesterday in the long grass, but Harry, ever resilient, seemed to have reached his limit for embarrassment and given it up altogether.

He stood on the chair and levered the tiny hatch up until he could poke his head through. There was a familiar leather bag nestled between the floor joists directly in front of him. He sighed in relief, then grabbed it and let the hatch drop back into place.

Back in the other room, he sat down across from Harry and slung the bag onto the table. The coins inside clinked satisfyingly. He took a length of parchment from his pocket and began writing out a shopping list. A new wand. Bruise healing paste (thank you Harry), Essence of Dittany in case of further accidents and some more potions ingredients.

Perhaps a book on dream interpretation too? The strange dream about the black tiled corridor had been haunting his sleep for the last week. Last night, the door at the end had finally opened and he had caught a tantalising glimpse of a circular room ringed with yet more black doors. It just had to mean something. Perhaps it was prophetic? But he had never shown any latent ability as a seer – he rarely Saw anything in Divination lessons and even when he did, it was only small, unimportant things, frustratingly on par with his classmates.

He rested his chin on his hand and watched Harry finish his breakfast. His manners were terrible - everything was wrong, from his grip on his spoon to the way he wiped his mouth with his sleeve. In
Slytherin house, that kind of behaviour had been ruthlessly trained out of incoming first years by the prefects, but evidently, present-day Gryffindor house did not hold its students to the same standards.

But still, there was just something about the way he ate. Idly, Tom imagined those pretty lips stretched around his cock rather than a spoon, Harry’s furious eyes glaring up at him, hating him, as he pushed himself down his trembling, quivering throat . . . Tom had never had another boy do that for him before . . .

“Do you mind?” Harry complained, his cheeks brightening into a flush. Tom belatedly realised he had been staring. He tapped his quill on his shopping list.

“I was just thinking, is there anything you want to get?”

“More socks and underwear,” Harry replied immediately. “You don’t have enough and anyway it’s weird to share.”

Tom wrote that down without complaint, then tucked the list into one pocket and the money into another. He pushed back his chair and stood, then stretched, knowing Harry would watch. Tom felt his eyes on him whenever his back was turned. It was no surprise: everyone looked at him, girls and boys alike. At Hogwarts, Tom could have had anyone he wanted and often did, although pureblood girls were off limits – their powerful families wouldn’t have taken kindly to their little darlings being deflowered by a penniless orphan.

He pulled his winter cloak off the hook next to the door and gestured for Harry to stand. When he obeyed, Tom wrapped it around his shoulders and pulled the hood up. He tapped the holly wand on Harry’s head and watched with satisfaction as the cowl filled with impenetrable darkness, obscuring his face.

“What was that?”

Rather than answer, Tom conjured a mirror.

“Wow,” Harry said, poking at his face experimentally. The tips of his fingers seemed to disappear. “Won’t it attract attention though? I look kind of creepy.”

“It’s not exactly unusual to see disguised figures in Knockturn Alley. A lot of people don’t like to be seen visiting.”

“What about you? Someone might recognise your face.”

“It was a very long time ago that I looked like this, and I don’t think that my name is linked to Voldemort’s. You didn’t know who I was when you first heard my name and neither did Pansy. If anyone recognises me, they’ll probably think I’m my own descendent.”

Harry seemed to accept that explanation. Tom handed him a vial of the Trace potion, watched as he downed it, then took his hand and Apparated them away.

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They landed in the tiny soot-stained courtyard that was the customary spot for Apparition into Knockturn Alley. When Tom let go of Harry’s hand, he staggered but kept his feet.

“Do you ever get used to that feeling?”

“It’s less nauseating when you’re doing it yourself, not being Side-Alonged,” Tom said indifferently.
The narrow cobbled street was surprisingly unchanged. The upper stories of the soot-stained, medieval buildings that lined the Alley jutted out, allowing a mere sliver of light to penetrate down to street level. It gave the place a closed-in, almost claustrophobic atmosphere. While a sunny morning like this one would attract droves of visitors to the adjacent Diagon Alley, there were few shoppers about.

“Where did you learn to Apparate anyway? We aren’t allowed until we’re seventeen.”

“Really? It was fifteen back in my day.”

Harry seemed to have recovered. By silent agreement, they started down the street. Some of the shops were boarded up, but those that weren’t displayed a dizzying array of merchandise behind their windows. Harry’s head swivelled as they walked, taking it all in. They passed two bookshops, an apothecary and a flower shop whose upper floors were made entirely of tiny leaded glass panes. Several bedraggled wizards loitered outside the wrought iron steps leading down to a basement liqueur shop whose sign read; ‘The Cellars: You won’t find it cheaper!’. Nobody seemed interested in the boys, but Tom still averted his face when they reached Borgin and Burkes.

A low archway led to a wider, marginally cleaner section of the Alley. There, next to a hole in the wall that sold pies described only as ‘meat’, stood Ballywick’s - the second-hand shop where Tom hoped to find a new wand. Its thick, amber-tinted window displayed a motley selection of musty tomes and tarnished curios. He was familiar with the place from his very first years at Hogwarts, when he had still needed to stretch every Knut of his scholarship.

The bell tinkled as he ducked to get through the low door. Inside, the shop was huge, gloomy, and filled with a maze of mismatched tables stacked with all manner of merchandise. Tom picked up a wicker basket from the stack by the door and strode over to the counter.

The nice witch who used to run the shop was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a younger woman clad in bottle-green robes sat behind the till, engrossed in a copy of Witch Weekly.

He pressed the brass bell on the counter and the woman looked up, annoyed. The expression slid off her face when Tom gave her his best, most charming smile. She sat up higher in the chair, apparently not put off by the mysterious cloaked figure hovering anxiously in his shadow.

“Do you still sell used wands?” Tom asked. “I’m looking for a spare.”

“Third door on the right,” she said as she patted her mousy hair.

They made their way to the back of the shop. Like the street outside, it was quiet. There were only two other customers, both of whom were middle-aged witches. It would be much busier come August when everyone who couldn’t afford new school things was picking up their Hogwarts list here.

The room where the wands were kept was small and windowless. Half of the space was taken up by cardboard boxes stacked from floor to ceiling. Pushed against the other wall, a wobbly table displayed a modest selection of wands, some in cases, some loose. A paper sign was Spellotaped to the table.

*Assorted Wands – 3 Galleons each. You break it, you bought it.*

Tom scratched his chin, considering the selection. Two had their cores poking out of their ends, three more were very short and a sixth was starting to split along the grain. He set them off to the side and inspected the remainder, running his fingers lightly over each handle. Almost half of them seemed to
shy away from his touch when he reached for them, rolling towards the safety of their fellows.

“What’s up with those ones?” Harry asked. He had pulled his hood down and was perched on an upturned crate, watching with curiosity.

“Unicorn hair,” Tom explained. “That core doesn’t agree with me.”

That left five wands, most of which had little paper tags at the end of a piece of string. ‘9 inches, core unknown, ash or elm’.

Tom tried each in turn. Two were dead in his hand – they were so devoid of magic that they might as well have been twigs plucked fresh from the forest floor. The wand at the far right had an attractive design of vines carved on the handle, but when he cautiously allowed his magic to flow through it, a painful jolt shot up his arm. His fingers spasmed open, but Harry’s hand shot out and caught the wand before it could hit the floor.

“I take it this one doesn’t like you either,” he commented smugly as he inspected the tag Tom hadn’t bothered to check. “Rowan, 11 inches, Dragon Heartstring.”

Tom rubbed at his elbow angrily. “That’s the same wood as Dumbledore’s,” he muttered. He had made a point to find out everything he possibly could about his least favourite teacher.

“I think Professor Dumbledore’s is paler than this one,” Harry said thoughtfully, still turning the wand in his hands. “And it’s not smooth – it has these weird bumps all the way up.” He waved it experimentally, producing a puff of smoke that made both of them cough. Tom snatched it from him and dropped it back in its case.

“Sorry,” Harry said. He did not sound very contrite.

Tom sighed and turned his attention back to the task. The centre wand had no tag at all. It was unusually long and heavy, and dark in colour. Excitedly, Tom wondered if it might be made of blackthorn, a wood with a reputation for both the Dark Arts and Duelling. He gave it a hopeful wave but was disappointed when it produced only a couple of pale blue sparks.

The last was slightly shorter than his old yew wand and had a simple, unembellished hilt. The wood was red-brown with a slightly wavy grain – the tag read: ‘Sycamore, 12 inches, core unknown’. It wasn’t a wood Tom was familiar with, but the handle warmed pleasantly in his hand. That implied a phoenix feather core – dragon heartstring would not be so impulsive about a new handler. Wary after his experience with the rowan wand, he fed it just a thread of magic. It took the power readily enough and a tongue of jet black fire bloomed from the tip.

Harry clapped sarcastically, but Tom was too pleased to care.

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After picking up the rest of their shopping, they left the Alley and found a Muggle greasy spoon to have their lunch.

Harry sat back in his chair. He knew he had overeaten, but he didn’t care. In front of him, the table held two plates, picked clean, and a pot of tea to share. Riddle was sat across from him, his face hidden behind a copy of the Daily Prophet that he had brought from a grimy and unenthusiastic street seller for five Knuts. The paper was disguised inside a Muggle Metro newspaper so that the other patrons of the café wouldn’t see the moving pictures.

Happy enough to be ignored, Harry amused himself watching the Muggles hurrying to and fro


outside. It was a window table, and he had a good view of Charing Cross station. They all looked very busy and important, and several of them were talking on their mobile phones as they walked.

Behind his chair, his newly purchased rucksack contained their robes and shopping. They had bought socks, underwear, a boring-looking Divination textbook for Riddle, a book on Magical First Aid for Harry and an armful of trashy Muggle paperbacks. The cashier had given him a funny look when he had dumped them at the till; apparently mysterious cloaked figures rarely read Roald Dahl. His holly and phoenix feather wand was hidden up his sleeve – occasionally Harry let the handle slip down into his palm so he could enjoy the warm glow he felt at having it back.

Just as he was contemplating starting one of the books he had bought, Riddle folded the newspaper with a huff and passed it across the table to him. Harry opened it eagerly and dug through the Metro until he reached the front page of the Prophet. He was startled – although he shouldn’t have been – to be confronted with his own and Pansy’s faces. The headline screamed ‘The Hunt for Harry Potter and Pansy Parkinson Continues’!

It was an old picture of Harry, taken during fourth year when his hair had been longer. The photograph smiled nervously up at him, then ducked its head and rubbed the back of its neck. Pansy flicked her hair disdainfully. Not able to meet her eyes, Harry scanned the text at the bottom of the page.

*What happened to the Boy-Who-Lived? [pages 2-3, 7]*

*Hogwarts closed for the summer [page 4]*

*Headmistress Dolores Umbridge suspended, pending investigation [page 5]*

*Parkinson family home burgled! [page 6]*

*Falmouth Falcons in hoop-shrinking scandal [page 11]*

He turned to the next page. There were several different articles about his own disappearance. The Prophet didn’t seem to be able to decide whether he and Pansy were killed by whoever the Heir of Slytherin was, or whether Harry himself was the Heir and had killed Pansy and fled. Harry couldn’t bring himself to be surprised. He flipped through until he reached the page about the Parkinsons. Half of it was taken up by a photograph of a grand house with the front door smashed in.

*The Parkinson family home in Dorset was burgled late last night. Aurors were called to the scene in the morning when a family friend discovered the break-in. Luckily, Philemon and Alicia Parkinson, along with their youngest daughter Portia, were staying with their extended family while they wait for news of their eldest, Pansy, who was reported missing from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on Tuesday evening.*

“Did you see this?” Harry asked, showing the page to Riddle. “Who do you think it was?”

Riddle shrugged. “Who knows? Either Voldemort or your lot, I imagine, gone looking to see if they had any information.” He poured himself some more tea, then gestured to Harry’s cup questioningly. Harry ignored him, but Riddle refilled it anyway with the dregs of the pot.

“The Order of the Phoenix,” Harry said after a moment.

“Hmm?”

“That’s what ‘my lot’ are called.”
“The Order of the Phoenix,” Riddle mused. “It’s a bit melodramatic, don’t you think?"

“You’re one to talk! You called your people Death Eaters.”

“What’s wrong with that? It has symbolism.”

“It’s not exactly subtle.”

“I originally named them the Knights of Walpurgis,” Riddle said archly, as he pulled the bruise-healing paste he’d bought from the apothecary from his pocket. He unscrewed the cap and sniffed it dubiously. “But then loads of people didn’t know what Walpurgis was, and I didn’t like having to explain it all the time.”

He gingerly daubed the paste on his cheek. “Is it working?” he asked Harry.

“A bit?”

Riddle grumbled under his breath.

“What are we doing now? Are we going back to the cottage?”

“No. There are a couple of places we might as well look at while we’re here. I doubt very much that I would have left a Horcrux at the orphanage where I grew up, but I think we should check anyway. I was born there, after all. We’ll go when we finish our tea.”

Outside it was overcast; the clouds threatening rain that never actually appeared. Riddle seemed to know where he was going. About three-quarters of an hour’s walk to Whitechapel, he had said, and too dangerous to Apparate in case things had been moved around.

They set off east down a big road called the Strand. Cyclists whisked past in front of them every time they came to a crossing. Most of them were wearing tight Lycra. The traffic was slow, and they could walk between the standing cars.

“There are so many people!”

Harry nodded in reply. He had never lived in a city before. Londoners all seemed to be in a big hurry. Lots of the men were wearing suits and the women high heels. Riddle was scandalised by how short their skirts were, which struck Harry as funny, given that he was absolutely shameless. But when he mentioned it,

“But that’s different! These are ladies! And they’re out in public. Look at that one,” he said, nodding towards a teenager in a miniskirt. She was wearing headphones and had a CD Walkman clipped to the front of her bag. “I can see everything.”

He definitely couldn’t see everything. It came to her mid-thigh. “So how long should their skirts be then?”

“Do I look like an expert in women’s fashion? I don’t know, but past their knees at the very least and they should be wearing stockings. It’s not decent. And how do they walk on those spikes?”

Harry had been curious to see where Riddle grew up. But when they finally got there it was all office blocks and flats. There were a few handsome old buildings left around, but mostly they were steel
and glass, with some concrete relics from the sixties. Riddle kept getting lost – he would make a
certain turning down a narrow street, only to find that it was a dead end.

“That used to be a pub. The Printworks was over there – most people round here worked either there
or at the docks. It got bombed out during the war. And so did that building there, and the Methodist
Chapel too.”

Belatedly, Harry remembered that he had come from the forties. “Were you here during World War
Two?”

“Is that what they’re calling it now? Yes – it started in thirty-nine.” Riddle peered suspiciously at a
street sign. “I could have sworn this was Garret Lane,” he muttered under his breath.

“And the Blitz?”

“I missed it: I was at Hogwarts for the duration. They evacuated the other children.” He glanced over
at Harry. “Do you know when it all ended? Since you aren’t speaking German, I’m guessing we
won?”

“Yeah, we did . . .” Harry tried to cast his mind back to primary school. “I think it finished in 1945?
I’m not sure about that though.”

“So soon? I thought it would have gone on for longer.”

Harry shrugged. Something told him that it would be a bad idea to tell Riddle about nuclear
weapons. “I don’t know much about it,” he said instead. “They don’t exactly teach it at Hogwarts.
Mostly Binns – he’s the ghost who teaches History of Magic – talks about the Goblin Rebellions.”

Riddle laughed. “Fixated, isn’t he? He taught me too, back when he was alive.”

“Do you know any of my other Professors? Other than Dumbledore, of course?” Harry tried to think
who might be old enough. “What about Professor McGonagall?”

Riddle stopped dead. “Minnie McGonagall teaches at Hogwarts now?” he asked, delighted. “What
subject?”

“Transfiguration. You knew her?”

“She was in my year. Transfigs was Dumbledore’s old job - it figures that he gave it to her; she was
one of his star pupils.”

“What was she like?”

“Eh . . . pretty enough, but a bit stuck up. She let me put my hand in her blouse after I took her to
Sluggy’s last Christmas do, but she broke up with me when she found out what I did to Annabelle
Gibson’s cat.”

“You did what?”

“It was only a cat! And I didn’t know what the spell was going to do: I just thought it would swell
up--”

“No! I mean, you touched Professor McGonagall’s . . . er . . .”

“Don’t be a prude.”
“That’s not - it’s just, she’s really old now.” Harry was reeling. Voldemort had felt up Professor McGonagall. It was the most horrifying image in the world. “You haven’t dated anyone else I know, have you?”

Riddle just shrugged. “Who do you know?”

Luckily, Harry was saved when they rounded the corner. Riddle stopped in front of a nondescript concrete office block. There was a betting shop and a hairdresser’s on the ground floor.

“This where it was,” he said wonderingly. “This is where I was born.”

Harry had to suppress a smile. Perhaps it was the familiar surroundings, but Riddle’s refined accent now held an edge of cockney.

“What are you grinning at?” the Slytherin demanded.

“Er . . . I was just thinking that I couldn’t imagine a less likely place for Lord Voldemort to have come into existence.”

Riddle seemed to accept that. They gazed up at the building. Some of the windows on the upper floors were open. Harry could see fluorescent lights and polystyrene ceiling tiles.

“I wouldn’t have left a piece of my soul here.”

“Are you sure? We could ask the hairdresser if they have a Horcrux hidden in their backroom.”

“Funny.”

Riddle did not seem quite ready to leave. Harry supposed it must be disorientating to come back to a place and find it so completely changed. They wandered around for a while, and Riddle pointed out the church that the orphans had attended, and the wide street that had hosted a weekly market. Eventually though, they settled on a bench in a park they had passed earlier.

It was pleasantly leafy and secluded. Every now and again, a dog walker or jogger would pass them. There was a pond over to the left; a Muggle woman and her two small children were feeding the ducks with a loaf of sliced bread.

“I used to come out here sometimes,” Riddle said quietly. “I spent a lot of time outside when I was a kid. Mrs Cole and I had an arrangement – she wouldn’t try to make me do chores, and in return, I’d spend all day outside the orphanage. I used to leave after breakfast and come back for supper every day.”

“What about during winter?”

“I took my coat.”

Harry scuffed his feet against the ground. He knew what that was like. The Dursleys didn’t like him to be in the house either. “What else did you do?”

"I'd go and watch people shopping at the market or working at the docks,” Riddle said. “I like watching people. And I'd explore London. Sometimes I'd sneak into boarded-up houses to work on my magic. Mostly they were empty, but if I was lucky, sometimes there'd be a tramp I could practise on - don't look so disapproving, Harry, your face might stick like that. During summer I'd come to this park to look for snakes. I'd crouch down by a likely bush, and call for them, and if there were any they'd curl around my arm and whisper things."
“You could do magic before you went to Hogwarts?” Harry had noticed that Riddle often cast spells without his wand, and knew that children often did accidental magic. Harry had too, but he had never thought of controlling it. Actually, when strange things happened in Privet Drive, he often hadn’t even realised that he was the cause.

Riddle looked pleased to be asked. He leant back against the bench. “I was best at making things float. It’s the first thing I learnt to do - I could make things fall off counters when I was too short to reach them. And I could jump from high places and not get hurt. Later I realised that I could make animals do what I wanted - people too, sometimes. And I could hurt people, of course.”

Harry remembered that last one. “Did you learn how to do that to protect yourself?”

Riddle looked over at him, eyebrow raised. “Are you fishing for something?”

“I was just wondering how you turned out like--“

“Mmm. No, I wasn’t really bullied. I figured out what I could do very young – although it took a lot longer to have consistent control over it - and I wasn’t shy about showing it off to the other children. They learnt to fear me tolerably quickly.”

“You aren’t really like other people.”

“I’m special.”

“That’s not where I was going with that.”

Riddle grinned. “I know.”

“When . . .” Harry began, then trailed off, unsure how to phrase his question. He wasn’t sure exactly what was wrong with Riddle, or even if there was a name for it . . .

“When what?”

“Er . . . the way you are about other people - the way you don’t feel bad for hurting them. Have you always been like that?”

“Yes.” Riddle leant back comfortably on the bench, then elaborated; “I used to be much worse at hiding it.”

“You’re rubbish at hiding it,” Harry said, with feeling.

“That’s not fair - I haven’t really been trying. After all, I was planning to kill you when we met.”

“Charming.”

“Aren’t I just?”

He flashed Harry his perfect, dimpled smile. Harry made a very deliberate face of disgust.

“People are easy,” Riddle said after a moment. “If you watch them for long enough you can figure out how they work. And then if you want something from them, it’s just a matter of saying and doing the right things in the right order.”

Harry thought about that for a moment. “That’s pretty cynical. Is that really how you see people?”

Riddle shrugged. “I suppose.”
“Do you – do you even have feelings?”

“What a rude thing to ask!” Riddle cried with mock outrage. “Of course I have feelings. I’m happy a lot. And I get bored. And angry too, sometimes.”

It struck Harry that in some ways, Riddle was a very simple person. “Do you ever get scared?” he asked. “Or sad?”

“Well, I can’t die while you’re here, and I don’t have anything to be sad about.”

“Not now – I mean, ever?”

“Don’t be wet, Harry.”

“How is this being wet?”

“You want to sit here and talk about our feelings. You are such a girl.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. He shoved Riddle on the shoulder. Riddle shoved him back, but it was more of a token effort and silence fell between them. Harry watched the children feed the ducks.

“I didn’t like the place where I grew up either,” he said eventually.

“I honestly don’t care.”

In some ways, that made it easier to talk about it. Riddle wasn’t going to pity him.

“After Voldemort killed my parents I got sent to live with my Muggle aunt and uncle. They were horrible.”

“All Muggles are horrible.”

“My relatives are particularly bad.”

“I don’t see why you’re whining so much about spending the summer with me then if that’s the alternative.”

“It’s more the whole kidnapping thing. And my friends thinking I’m dead.”

“Well, they don’t anymore - you saw to that.” But there was no heat in Riddle’s voice.

Harry paused, then told him something he’d never told anyone.

“They used to lock me in the cupboard under the stairs.”

Predictably, Riddle felt no sympathy. “That’s hilariously awful,” he said. But then, almost competitively; “I used to get locked in the coal cellar when I was bad, back before I could control my magic.”

“I’ve had to cook breakfast for my relatives ever since I was tall enough to reach the stove.”

“They made the older kids look after the babies. I had to change nappies.”

“That’s nothing. Once, my uncle sent me up to the roof on a ladder to clear the gutters. I was six.”

“At the Muggle school I went to, each student who was late would get a half-dozen strokes of the cane across his hands.”
“My aunt hated my scar. One time, she shaved all my hair except my fringe.”

Riddle’s face did something very strange. Harry looked at him in concern, then realised he was trying to suppress his laughter.

“Harry,” he snickered, “Oh, how you would look with just your fringe!”

“It grew back!” Harry said hastily. “It grew back overnight!”

But Riddle threw back his head and laughed. He laughed so long and so loud that the woman over by the pond looked over at them disapprovingly, probably wondering why two teenage boys were sitting in a park in the middle of a school day. It was infectious – even though he was the butt of the joke, Harry chuckled reluctantly (although he hadn’t appreciated it at the time, it had looked very strange), then laughed with him. It felt good.
A storm rolled in off the Atlantic, and for a few days a blustering wind howled through the trees to rattle the window panes of the small cottage by the sea. It seemed that it would never end, but when dawn broke on the fourth day after their trip to London, the sky was blessedly clear.

Harry watched the sunrise through the window. He was lying on his back in the too-small bed with Riddle wrapped around him, breathing slow and even into the crook of his neck. His arm was flung over Harry’s stomach, a warm and pleasant weight, and their legs were tangled together.

It was the same every morning. Harry, who was the lighter sleeper, usually woke first. Although he too had been sleeping unusually well - for the first time in years he was not plagued by strange dreams, not waking in the middle of the night after a nocturnal excursion to the Department of Mysteries.

Perhaps it was the human contact. Riddle curled around him every night. There didn’t seem to be a nefarious purpose behind it; apparently it was simply something he did in his sleep. It was nicer than it should have been - Harry hadn’t realised just how much he had craved touch, but he drank it in like a flower turning to the sun. It made him feel grounded, more settled in his own skin.

Riddle made a little noise. Harry turned his head to gaze down at him as his eyelashes fluttered. A curl of anticipation lit in Harry’s stomach as he waited to see whether he would wake and slip his hand into his clothes again. But no: after a long moment Riddle just mumbled into his neck and went back to sleep.

His face looked different without its omnipresent smirk. Younger somehow, soft and angelic. His hands hadn’t roamed since that first night.

Harry stared up at the cracked plaster of the ceiling. It was frustrating, but he had to admit, if only to himself, that he couldn’t stop thinking about what they had done together in the long grass.

What it had felt like.

What it would have been like if he’d let Riddle keep touching him, that first time he’d tried. Curiosity had always been his weakness, and now Harry was burning with it.

Well.

Curiosity and arousal.

He was hard all the time - he seemed to spend half his life sneaking to the outhouse. And when he closed the wooden door and leant back against it and touched himself, all he could think about was Tom. Tom and his dark eyes and his quick, cruel smile and his clever hands . . .

And Riddle knew. That was the worst thing. Harry was certain that Riddle knew exactly what he
was doing in there, because every time Harry returned, red-faced and panting a little, he was greeted with a smirk and a smug enquiry about what could possibly have taken him so long.

But what Harry didn’t understand was why Riddle wasn’t pressing his advantage. Why hadn’t he tried anything since their fight?

Oh, he still touched Harry plenty, enough to drive him mad, but his touches were all light and innocent, and if his dark eyes lingered, they always flicked away when Harry caught him looking. Harry knew that he hadn’t lost interest though, because he kept changing his clothes in front of him, and ‘forgetting’ to wear a shirt to bed, and leaning against the kitchen counter in a way that emphasised he long, lean lines of his body.

Harry wasn’t being paranoid.

He was doing it deliberately.

. . . But Harry couldn’t ask for it. He just couldn’t. It would be a betrayal of everything he had ever stood for, the worst, most humiliating thing in the world—

Next to him, Riddle stirred again and nuzzled at the shell of his ear. His fingers tightened in Harry’s shirt.

Torture.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“Do you fancy a duel?”

Riddle had finished clearing the table after lunch. Harry was sat sideways in the single armchair with his legs over one arm and his back against the other. The new book on Magical First Aid was open on his lap. He was reading not out of any particular interest for the subject, but simply because he thought that one of them should know how to heal.

At Riddle’s words, he looked up from the page. The other boy was standing over him, twirling his new sycamore wand between his fingers, clearly itching to try it out.

“I’m fine thanks,” Harry said, just to make Riddle ask again.

“I know you’re bored. You’ve been whining about it nonstop for the last few days.”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea,” Harry mused, slumping down in the chair. “It’s not really fair to duel when the vow is limiting me like this.”

“How is it limiting you? It only stops you from trying to maim and kill me.”

Harry hummed, gazing back down at his book without seeing it. It was true that he was bored. But he was afraid that duelling Riddle would lead to them frotting on the ground again.

. . . Perhaps afraid was the wrong word.

He gave a put-upon sigh and extracted himself from the chair with what he hoped was a suitable display of reluctance. “Fine, but you can’t get upset if I beat you.”

“Such impudence.” But Riddle sounded delighted. “I do hope you can back those words up, Harry.”

Riddle led the way out into the garden. When he reached a spot he deemed suitable, he turned to
Harry. “We’ll have to take care not to get too far away from each other to avoid triggering the bond.”

Harry nodded. Riddle raised his wand. “Incendio!”

A tongue of fire leapt from the tip. Harry took a hasty step backwards, but it soared past him and around, burning the outline of a large circle into the grass.

“Whoever steps outside the line forfeits automatically.”

Harry rolled his eyes at the unnecessary dramatics, but nodded anyway. He took a place near the centre of the circle, opposite Riddle, and twisted his wrist to make his holly wand drop out of his sleeve and into his hand.

“And now, we bow,” Riddle said easily, twirling his wand again in anticipation.

“Bow to death, Harry.”

Voldemort’s high cold voice echoed in his head. Harry was thrust back into that night in the graveyard - alone, surrounded, his blood flowing like ice in his veins as Voldemort toyed with him, tortured him for the amusement of the encircling Death Eaters. He still clearly remembered the firm press of Voldemort’s magic on his spine, forcing him to bend . . .

“Yeah, no thanks.”

Riddle frowned. “Why not?” he asked, perplexed. “This is how things are done. It’s traditional, like shaking hands before a chess match.”

“There’s no audience. If you want to fight, let’s fight.”

“What’s got you in such a snit? Honestly Harry, keeping up with your mood swings is killing me.”

As if Riddle could talk about mood swings. Rather than debate any further, Harry raised his wand and cast a Disarming charm.

“Protego!” Riddle cried, and a light shimmer formed in the air around him. Out of the sharp, downwards parry of the shield charm, his wand rose into a curse, as if the two spells were a single motion, thoughtless and effortless.

Harry ducked, then had to block a second spell. The third shattered his shield, so he threw himself to the ground and rolled. He cast a stunner even as he was scrambling back to his feet, but Riddle shielded again.

Harry waited for Riddle to attack. But the other boy was standing completely still. His head was cocked to the side - the gesture he always made when he was curious about something.

“Impedimenta!” Harry cried.

Riddle wordlessly conjured another shield.

“Expelliarmus!”

Blocked.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

Blocked.
Obviously this wasn’t going anywhere. Harry lowered his wand, annoyed. “Do you want to fight or not--“

“It’s like you’ve never been taught how to duel,” Riddle interrupted. His voice was puzzled. “The basics are there - you cast quickly and accurately, and your spells are powerful, but you know absolutely nothing about tactics.”

Harry scowled. “I held my own against Voldemort last year!”

“You told me that was because your wands malfunctioned.”

“I did okay even before that happened!”

“I’m guessing there was a lot of running and dodging involved in that encounter?”

Harry didn’t appreciate the sarcasm. It had been good running and good dodging. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Being able to dodge isn’t wrong - some spells, such as the Killing Curse, can’t be shielded against. But it almost always puts you in a weaker position and leaves you open to the next spell. You need to rely more on your magic and less on your reflexes, however impressive they may be.” Riddle tapped his foot, getting into teacher mode. “But your biggest problem isn’t your defence - it’s messy and unconventional, but still broadly effective. Your offence, however, is abysmal. You don’t know any spells that are powerful enough to break through a well-cast shield, so a competent wizard could just stand there and shield indefinitely, as I just demonstrated.”

“I killed that Basilisk of yours,” Harry reminded him. He crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Yes,” Riddle acknowledged, “but the way you fight is so . . . inconsistent. You rely entirely on your instincts. You don’t plan, you just react. Is there not a duelling club in this time?”

Harry scuffed his foot on the ground. “My second year Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher tried to set one up, but then he was kidnapped by pixies a week after the first session. He turned up months later in the Forbidden Forest and got sent to St Mungo’s. I think he’s still there now.”

“Kidnapped by--” Riddle began, frowning in bewilderment, then decided not to press further. “But surely, someone must have taught you?”

“Well,” Harry said, red-faced, “how about you tell me now and we’ll work it out from there.”

Harry, had been expecting extreme smugness from Riddle at being asked to teach and was not disappointed. The Slytherin preened for some time, but became gradually less intolerable as he got into the flow of lecturing and demonstrating.

“It’s important to know a range of spells. You can’t just rely on things like Stunners and Disarming Charms - actually, you shouldn’t really be using Expelliarmus at all during a duel if you can’t cast it wordlessly.”

“Why not?”

“It’s five syllables long, and the wand movement is complicated. You could cast two other, stronger spells in the time it takes you to cast one Disarming charm. Now, the Cruciatus curse,” Riddle continued, smiling dreamily at the mention of his favourite spell, “has only three syllables, will break a shield if cast well, and is highly debilitating if it hits.”
“I’m not interested in learning how to torture and kill people, thanks. Teach me something that isn’t Dark.”

“It’s not only Dark magic that can kill - a well-aimed Severing charm can be lethal.”

But Harry was resolute. Riddle sighed in disappointment, but eventually began teaching him a new spell that would puncture a shield. He stood very close to Harry to guide his hand through the motions, his fingers lingering for far longer than was strictly necessary, until Harry was red-faced and stuttering.

The next duel went much better, although it could just have been because Harry was getting the hang of how Riddle fought. He was still breath-taking to watch - his long, gangly limbs deceptively graceful. He was obviously a very practised duellist; his wand never stopped moving - it flowed from a Knee-Reversal hex straight into a jinx with a Tarantallegra on the tail.

Harry laughed, dodged, then yelped in surprise and fell when the Dancing Feet spell hit him. Riddle got him with the counter-charm a few seconds later and Harry sprung back up, circling the edge of the boundary line.

“Perfringo!” he cried. It was the spell he had been taught, and it worked - Riddle’s shield burst like a balloon. He followed it up with a Stunner and made Riddle duck for once.

The grass was swaying in the breeze that came on the tail end of the storm. His wand-arm was singing with magic; Harry felt so alive, caught up and swept away in the fun of the moment and knew that Riddle did too - his eyes were bright and wild, and his handsome face was flushed with exertion.

He was beautiful.

Harry shivered despite the warm day as his mind travelled back to the last time they’d duelled. Riddle’s eyes snapped to his, as if he had felt the change in his mood.

The tempo of their fight increased until there was hardly time to think. Harry dodged a blue-white spell that he didn’t recognise and sent a Conjunctivitis curse in return. Riddle’s eyes were hungry, but Harry wanted to win – his pride had been hurt by their earlier duel.

An idea bloomed in his mind, and, grabbing the first happy thought that came to him (Sirius running after the Hogwarts Express, barking like mad), he cried “Expecto Patronum!”

Riddle startled and froze like a deer in the headlights as a massive silver stag erupted from Harry’s wand and barrelled towards him. But rather than hurt him, it passed harmlessly through him and cantered around them in a wide circle. Harry dashed forwards though, and for once it was Riddle on the back foot, Riddle struggling to cast a proper shield under the onslaught.

Adrenaline surged through Harry’s veins as he cast spell after spell. There was a wide grin on his face – he wanted nothing more than to tackle Riddle to the ground and just—

--And just what?

Was he going to hold Riddle down, straddle him and rock against him until they were both gasping? It was one thing for Harry to be the unwilling, protesting target of such actions, but it would be something else entirely for him to initiate them.

No . . . if Harry wanted that, he had to lose . . .
“Flipendo!”

Harry saw the spell coming, and there was perhaps a moment when he could have dodged or shielded.

But he didn’t.

His feet went out from under him and he landed in the grass on his back. He fully expected Riddle to follow him, to land on top of him and pin him and claim his prize--

But the Slytherin just stood over him, staring down at where he lay sprawled out in the grass. The edge of a smirk curled his mouth.

“Stop playing around, Harry. How are you ever going to learn if you don’t take this seriously?”

What?

Harry gaped up at him. He was already half hard.

“What were you expecting to happen?”

But Riddle knew exactly what he had been expecting. In a moment of horrified, frozen clarity, Harry realised what he was doing.

It was all a mind game.

Riddle had pushed and pushed and pushed, and when he finally got what he wanted, he backed off. He was going to force Harry to make the first move.

The Slytherin offered him a hand up, chatting amiably all the while. “Was that a Patronus? I’ve never seen one in person before. It’s very impressive - has it always been a stag?”

Harry just stared at the outstretched hand in numb horror.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Night fell, and Harry stood outside the door to the bedroom they shared, taking deep, calming breaths.

He didn’t have to. He had lived without sex his whole life. Doing it with Riddle was completely unnecessary and dangerous besides. He could wait. In his future, there was some nice girl with soft curves and long shiny hair. Someone kind and gentle, and not at all like Riddle, with his sharp angles and eyes and smile.

Harry nodded to himself. Yes, he would wait.

But, a sly little voice said in his mind. It already happened once. The damage is done. Does it really matter if it happens again?

Harry chewed on his lip at the tempting thought. When they parted ways at the end of the summer, Riddle to some distant corner of the world and Harry back to his friends and godfather and Hogwarts, they would never see each other again.

Riddle would just be his dirty little secret . . . and when he grew up, if he grew up, the memories would dim. The cottage was its own little world, remote from everything and everyone he had ever known.
And after all, the nice girl in his future did not need to know about Riddle.

The candle was burning on the nightstand. Riddle was already in his customary spot, lying on his side with his back against the wall. Harry hesitated, then blew out the flame and slid into bed.

Facing Riddle.

It was like time had slowed to a crawl. Harry felt every millisecond viscerally, like grains of sand slipping through his fingers to the point of no return. For as long as Riddle didn’t acknowledge it, it was reversible. Harry could turn over, blame it on tiredness, stupidity, anything--

“What happened to never again?” Riddle asked, quietly, teasingly.

“I’m not doing anything,” Harry breathed. The bed was narrow. They were so close that Harry didn’t know what to do with his hands. He laid them innocently on Riddle’s chest.

“It’s difficult not to take this as an invitation.”

“You can take it however you want,” Harry said, then realised how that had sounded. He gathered his courage and continued on regardless. “I’m your prisoner. I can’t stop you.”

“You are so greedy, Harry.” Harry couldn’t see the smirk, but he could hear it in Riddle’s voice. “You just want to have your cake and eat it too. You want to be able to go back to all your precious, innocent friends and be able to say, ‘None of it was my fault. It was all Tom; he took advantage of me. I didn’t want it.’”

“None of it is my fault,” Harry hissed. “This is all because of you. If you hadn’t - I would never have--“

He trailed off, still unable to voice it. His face was very red. He was glad Riddle couldn’t see.

“Is that so.” He felt the bed shift, then gasped as a fingertip ran teasingly up the length of his cock. “Is this my fault too?”

The sensation was dulled by the fabric in between them, but even the featherlight touch was enough to make Harry squirm helplessly. He was hard. How long had he been hard?

“Yes,” Harry whispered hoarsely. “Your fault.”

Riddle’s finger left his cock. Before Harry had a chance to mourn its loss, it hooked into the waist of his pyjamas and pulled them down at the front until he was completely exposed.

Then a hand.

Tom was touching him. Tom was running his fingertips leisurely up and down his cock, sending ripples of pleasure through his body.

Harry’s heart was beating out of his chest.

But Tom didn’t seem to be in a rush. His other hand crept over his hip, and then, to Harry’s utmost mortification, gave his bum a firm squeeze. It was lewd. So lewd. His hips stuttered forwards despite himself as he let out a startled gasp.

“Eager little thing, aren’t you?”
How dare he. Harry snarled at him, but before he could form words, Tom’s palm, slick now with precum, finally closed around his length.

It was pure, electric pleasure. His hands fist ed in Tom’s shirt as he set a slow pace, his thumb caressing Harry’s slit on each stroke –

But he wasn’t even trying to get him off. His touch was still too slow, too light, and when Harry jerked forwards, seeking a firmer grip, his hand slackened. Harry groaned in frustration and twisted his fingers tighter to stop himself from wrapping his own hand around Tom’s, from forcing him to do it properly.

“Is there something you want, Harry?”

Smug, always so smug, but there was a breathless note in Tom’s voice. Was he hard too? Harry needed to know. He rocked forwards, firmly this time.

Oh god, he could feel him--

Tom gasped, and his hand finally, finally tightened on Harry’s cock, pulling a choked groan from his lips. Then fabric rustled as Tom pulled his own cock out and surged forwards. He pressed close and wrapped his hand around both of them.

Harry burrowed his face into his neck to muffle the needy sounds he was making, even as he bucked desperately up into the hot, tight grip encircling them. He felt hot and shivery all over, pulled tight like the string of a bow. The world narrowed down to Tom, Tom and what he was doing. He thrust forwards one last time and came with a long, low groan.

Dimly, he heard Tom moan as he felt Harry’s cock pulse in his hands. He didn’t let up though, he kept on stroking them until he came himself while Harry lay there, panting and overstimulated, pawing at his chest in a half-hearted effort to get away.

The aftermath was wet and vaguely uncomfortable. Tom cleaned up – and if Harry could learn any wandless spell, it would be that one – and then petted him the way someone might pet a cat. Harry could tell he was very pleased; the smugness was practically radiating off him. Harry tried to scowl, but the expression kept slipping off his face.
They slid into a routine almost without noticing it. Every day that it wasn’t raining, they would duel in the garden. It was fun – an intricate dance of curse and countercurse. Often they would have sex after, converting the excitement from the fight into something even better. Sometimes it was equal, lazily touching each other in the grass, but often Tom (and it was impossible now, to think of him as Riddle) was in a darker mood. He would pin Harry to a tree or the rough stone wall of the cottage and ruin him, leaving him gasping and begging, red-faced and humiliated as dark eyes bored into him, dissecting, cataloguing every reaction.

Harry couldn’t seem to tell Tom no, but he couldn’t bear to say yes either. Which effectively meant Tom decided everything they did together. It didn’t help that almost everything Harry knew about sex came from the impromptu talk that Fred and George had given him and Ron when they had all shared a tent for the Quidditch World Cup. Most of their advice had been about having sex with girls, and was not really applicable to dealing with Tom.

It was still just hands though, and grinding against each other, although not for lack of trying on Tom’s part. He kept trying to push Harry’s head down to his cock. One time Harry had needed to break his nose to get him to stop, and it had taken half an hour for them to work out how to fix it, sitting together at the kitchen table with the first aid book. Tom had kept a rag held to his face to keep the blood from splattering onto the page.

And that wasn’t all. One rainy day in early June, when they had lain in bed together late into the morning, Tom had snuggled up behind him and begun lazily groping him. His hips, his bum. Then he slid his thumb down to the cleft of his arse. It would have been innocuous if he hadn’t done it again. And again. And then rubbed there, finding his hole through his boxers.

Harry lay there, torn between arousal and annoyance. “We are not doing that.”

“What are you doing?”

Harry wasn’t going to say it.

“Fuck, that’s what you mean?” Tom asked, still touching him places he shouldn’t. “You are such a blushing virgin.”

“You can’t have sex with me and tease me about being a virgin. You can have one or the other and you’ve already picked.”

“But you are still a virgin, Harry. Do you really think what we’ve done counts as sex? If you’d just let me fuck you,” – he accentuated the statement with a firm press of his thumb – “just let me inside of you, I’d make you moan and twist and come—”

“Fuck off.”

Tom gripped his shoulder and tried to shove him over onto his front. Harry fought him tooth and nail, but Tom just laughed in his ear. “Oh, I’m not going to do it now. But I know you Harry - one of these days you’re going to get curious—“

He pulled Harry’s underwear and straddled him so that his knees forced Harry’s thighs together. He
spat on his palm and then rutted between them, his cock dragging along the cleft of Harry’s arse. Furious and unbelievably turned on, Harry humped against the mattress while his fingers curled white-knuckled around the hilt of his wand. When he finally came, the sparks that flew out of the end set the pillow on fire.

Tom had extinguished it with an Aguamenti and teased him mercilessly for weeks after.

Other things were easier. Chatting over breakfast. Cooking together. Reading in the evenings, Harry curled up in the armchair, while Tom lay on his stomach on the rug like a satisfied cat. They were not precisely friends – Harry didn’t know what they were – but it was amazing how quickly you could get used to someone you lived with, and, in many ways, Tom was easy to live with. He did his fair share of the cleaning and was an easy and witty conversationalist. Harry was comfortable.

The cuddling was wonderful. Harry would, and did, put up with a lot for that alone. And living there was fun too, because if there was one unambiguously good thing about Tom, it was that he was never boring. Even though he still missed his friends and Sirius and Hedwig, it was working for him in a way Privet Drive never had.

He had to keep reminding himself not to think of the cottage as home.

It was July. Early in the month, Harry thought, although neither he nor Tom knew the exact date. Harry was first in the kitchen – Tom was awake, but still lolling in bed in post-orgasmic bliss. He hung the kettle over the fire and padded contentedly over to the counter. There, he pulled out two mugs and reached for the box of teabags.

It was empty. For a moment, Harry peered down into its depths uncomprehendingly.

“Hey, Riddle, we’re out of teabags!” he called to the other room.

“There’s another packet in the crate on the far left!” Tom shouted back.

But Harry had a feeling that he had already used those to replace the last box. He dug through the crate anyway, but it was filled with nothing but wrappers and the food that they’d been putting off eating, like cans of green beans and bags of lentils. They were running low on a lot of things; there was just half a roll of toilet paper left in the outhouse. But unspoken agreement, they had both been using progressively less over the last few days.

“I think we need to go to the shop,” he admitted.

Tom emerged from the other room, grumbling under his breath. His pyjama trousers were low on his hips and his hair was a mess. Harry had done that, he thought proudly.

Tom did not like the Muggle supermarket.

It was a small Tesco that served the village on the far side of the island. Harry pushed the trolley while Tom held onto the side like a small child who was afraid of getting lost.

It was a bit embarrassing, actually. Harry nodded apologetically to a middle-aged woman when Tom dragged the trolley abruptly into her path so that he could inspect the shelf labels in the bakery.
“What is this?” he demanded, jabbing at a label with his finger. It read; ‘Sliced Bread: £0.50’.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“What kind of money is that?”

“Oh!” Harry said as it dawned on him. “We don’t use shillings and crowns anymore. It’s just pounds and pence now. There are one hundred pence in a pound.”

Tom looked at him suspiciously. “How can bread cost half a pound?”

It seemed reasonable enough to Harry. “Well, how much do you think it should be?”

“No more than a penny!”

“Yeah, that’s not happening. Wait, do you have money to pay for this? You aren’t going to pull out a bag of shillings at the till are you? That would be awkward.” Harry tried to remember if he had seen Tom pay for their food at the café in London all those weeks ago. He was distressed to realise that he hadn’t. Did they walk out without paying?

“Don’t worry about that,” Tom replied shiftily. “Just put what we need in the trolley.”

Harry dubiously dropped in a loaf of bread.

Tom shovelled in four more. “Buy extra! I don’t want to have to come back to this horrible place.”

“They’ll go mouldy.”

“I’ll charm them so they don’t.”

As they wandered into the meat aisle, Tom looked increasingly bewildered. “There’s so much choice,” he marvelled. “How can there be so many types of chicken?”

“What was it like back in your day, old man?”

“Well, there was a butcher’s, a baker’s and a greengrocer’s. You’d go to each one and queue. When you reached the counter, the shopkeeper would take your stamps and wrap up your ration in brown paper.”

“Weird,” Harry remarked noncommittally. “Shall we get one? I think that we might be able to cook it in the cauldron if we cover the top with something.”

But Tom did not seem to have an opinion on the chicken. He was too busy inspecting the row of quietly humming fridges. Harry put one in the trolley anyway. They’d work something out. As a concession to Tom, he grabbed a ham too. That was old fashioned, right?

“WOULD A MEMBER OF STAFF PLEASE REPORT TO THE CHECKOUT?” the intercom boomed overhead. Tom jumped about a mile and grabbed onto Harry. Harry patted him on the arm in a comforting sort of way, enjoying a rare sense of superiority.

After that, Tom was too distracted to have much of an opinion on the food, so Harry chucked whatever he liked the look of in the trolley. It was fun, actually, picking out things that he’d never have been allowed to eat in Privet Drive: crisps, bars of chocolate, spaghetti hoops, tins of baked beans with little sausages and a big bottle of Pepsi.
They brought more practical things too – toilet paper, another bottle of shampoo, and modern toothbrushes and toothpaste. Harry picked out a few packets of seeds on a whim and a newspaper. To his great amusement, Tom blushed at the sight of the dirty pictures on the covers of the magazines on the top shelf. How was it that he could walk around naked with no shame at all, and then be shocked by the sight of something like that?

But the time they got to the checkout, the trolley was very full. He shovelled its contents onto the conveyor belt while Tom looked on, uncomprehending. He twitched when the belt began to move, but didn’t otherwise react.

When all their shopping was finally in bags, the lady behind the till looked up. “That comes to £62.53.”

Harry looked expectantly at Tom. Tom reached into his pocket, pulled out his wand and Confunded her.

She blinked. “Thank you. Here’s your receipt,” she said, holding out a blank piece of paper. Harry gaped at Tom, then looked around frantically for security cameras. Luckily there had been no one in the queue behind them.

Tom took it, and when Harry didn’t move, pushed the trolley towards the exit himself.

“Are you coming, Harry?” he called over his shoulder.

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After they packed the new things away, and had the unhealthiest lunch imaginable, Harry went out into the garden to plant the seeds he had bought. He found a sunny spot on the south side of the cottage, rolled his shirt sleeves up to his elbows, knelt down and began to dig out a shallow trench with his hands.

Even though it had been imposed on him as a child, he liked working in the garden. At Number 4 Privet Drive, he had mowed the lawn and looked after the flowers. They were all perfectly colour coordinated – a riot of pink and purple begonias, geraniums and hydrangea bushes, all chosen to blend in nicely with the neighbours’. Aunt Petunia cared a lot about the way things looked: when a young family had moved in next door and planted towering sunflowers, she had moaned to the other ladies on the street about how they clashed and how common they looked, and what would it do to the house prices?

The big white daisies that Harry was planting would have been completely unacceptable – his aunt would have sniffed disapprovingly and called them weeds. But Harry liked the picture on the packet. They looked cheerful.

Tom came out and joined him when the trench was almost done. He let out a heartfelt sigh when he saw what Harry was doing and flopped down on the grass next to him.

“What’s the point of that? You won’t be here to see them flower.”

“It’s enough just to know that they will,” Harry replied.

"I don't understand that.”

Harry pushed each seed into the trench, spacing them a few inches apart. The plants lived in their own uncomplicated little world where there was no Voldemort and no Dumbledore. There were no expectations on them, just the cool wind and warm sun, and the slow inevitable change of the
seasons. Even if Harry couldn't live in that world it was good to know it existed.

“They’re going to die,” Tom said, when Harry didn’t answer him.

“They’ll live first.”

"Why is everyone so accepting of death? You're going to die. You're going to rot in the ground, and it's like you don't care. Why doesn't anyone else fight to live?"

"Everyone else is fighting to live."

"But then they get old and frail, and their bodies rot out from under them."

"You're going to die one day too, Riddle."

"No I'm not."

Harry turned away from the flowers to look down at him. "At primary school, they said the sun will blow up, in like, a billion years. You'll die then."

Tom stared at the endless blue bowl of the sky. "There are other suns."

Harry shook his head incredulously. "But everyone you know will be dead," he said, slowly and clearly. "You'll have to start over every hundred years or so."

"So I'll start over. I'm not scared of change."

"No, just dying," Harry muttered.

"Being scared of dying is good for your health. You should try it, Harry."

"Don't you think that something happens after you die?"

Tom sat up then, legs straight out in front of him, leaning back on his hands. "What do you think happens?"

"... I don't know." Harry paused in his planting. "Maybe I'll see my family again..."

"At the orphanage, they made us go to church. We had a special set of clothes that could only be worn on that day. The vicar used to talk about heaven and hell, but when I slipped away from the matron one Sunday to ask for more details, he wasn't very good. It sounded made up to me... he was lying...

"You're a christian?" Harry asked incredulously.

"No, I was banned from the church when I was eight. I waited after Sunday School and used my magic to make the vicar piss into the flagon of communion wine."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Why would you do that?"

"It was a punishment being a liar," Tom said, as if that was the most obvious thing in the world.

"I'm surprised they didn't try to exorcise you."

"That's Catholics," Tom spat. "It was a normal church."

Harry held his hands out placatingly. There was dirt under his nails. Tom sniffed.
"So what do you think comes after death?" Harry asked, as he shovelled the earth back into the trench, covering the seeds.

"Nothing, of course," Tom said with complete certainty. "When you die, it's all over."

Harry's hands were mucky almost up to his elbows. He brushed them together to try and shed some of the dirt. "I need to go wash up."

But to his surprise, Tom hummed and took each of his hands in turn. He ran his wand along Harry’s arms, just brushing the light downy hairs, until only clean skin remained.

Something about it made Harry’s breath catch in his throat.

"You believe in souls, right?" he asked, hoping Tom didn’t notice how hoarse his voice had gone. “I mean, you must do, since you tore yours into who knows how many pieces. So how can you not believe anything happens after death? Where’s your soul going to go?"

“I don’t know,” Tom said quietly. He was still holding one of Harry’s wrists. His thumb drew a circle on his pulse point. “But it’s irrelevant now. From the first moment that I made a Horcrux, I’ve been past the point of no return. There’s no going back now. And I don’t want to either.”

"But you've been collecting up bits of your soul . . ."

Tom smiled mirthlessly. "Oh, it's not healed; the three pieces in me are just loosely held together. It’s not possible to heal a soul without feeling remorse for the murders committed to split it. I don’t regret murdering my father, and I don’t even remember the murders that created future Horcruxes.”

“How do you know remorse is the only thing that can fix it?”

“It was in a book.”

“And you trust this book,” Harry said flatly.

“It was written by Herpo the Foul!”

“Who?”

“Only the greatest wizard who ever lived,” Tom declared. He had turned disturbingly starry-eyed.

“Do you really not know about him? They touched on him in Defence classes.”

Harry shook his head.

“Herpo practically invented the Dark Arts – most of the curses we use today are descended from his work. But I will surpass him - after all, Herpo the Foul died.” The last he said scornfully, as if dying was some kind of terrible character flaw. “But the fact that he did means that he was probably right about remorse.”

“Or someone killed all his Horcruxes.”

Tom sniffed disdainfully. “He only had one. So far as I know, I am the first to have made more.”

That sounded dangerous to Harry. “How do you know it was safe?”

“I asked Sluggy about it a few months ago – er – back in 1943, that is, and he seemed to think it was a good idea.”
“Who is Sluggy, anyway? You’ve mentioned him a few times now.”

“Professor Slughorn – he’s the Head of Slytherin and also teaches Potions.”

“And he thought it was a ‘good idea’ to tear your soul into a load of pieces?”

“Well, he didn’t seem to think it would kill me . . .”

Harry sighed and they lapsed back into silence. Tom rubbed another circle on his wrist. “I don’t want to repair my soul, anyway. I’m going to split it again, once I have enough, and make a less inconvenient Horcrux than you.”

Harry snorted. “I know. Are you going to kill someone for it?”

“What if I said yes?”

“I guess I’d have to try to stop you.”

Tom let go of him and leant back on his hands again. “Murder won’t be necessary since the pieces haven’t healed back together. I can just extract one and put it in a container – my diary is still around somewhere.”

“You are going to keep track of it, this time, aren’t you? We don’t need another of you running around.” Harry grinned at the thought of another Tom living at the cottage with them, and then flushed as he imagined all three of them sharing the too-small bed.

“You just thought of something really dirty, didn’t you?” Tom probed, a spark of amusement lighting in his eyes.

Harry coughed. “No.”

To his relief, Tom let it go. “I was going to kill you,” he said, in the same tone one might use to comment on the weather. “After I had enough of my soul back.”

The only part of the confession that surprised Harry was the past tense. “‘Was’?”

“Now I don’t think I will.”

“Wow.” Harry held a hand to his heart. “I’m so flattered.”

“You should be.”

“But seriously, why?”

“Don’t go thinking I’m being nice. Voldemort will be so busy trying to kill you, he won’t have time for me. And I want you to go back to Dumbledore with the memory of everything we’ve done together. I want him to know I’ve dirtied up his saviour a little.” Tom grinned at him. The sun was shining full on his face.

Harry would never know exactly what made him do it. It was not even a decision, just a spur of the moment impulse.

He leant forwards, and, surprising even himself, pressed his lips to Tom’s.

It was the first time since that mockery of a kiss in the passage leading from the Chamber. The thought of kissing Tom hadn’t crossed his mind ever since – what they were to each other, what they
did to each other was so different from the blossoming, shy feelings he had had for Cho. With Tom it was always a struggle; bruises, dirt, grass stains, blood, gasping and heaving on the ground—

Tom was like a marble statue under his lips, and for a moment, Harry was certain he would be pushed away, that Tom would laugh at him. Dread sank like a cold stone in his stomach – how could he face him after that?

But then Tom sat up straighter and wrapped an arm around his waist. His lips were soft and warm, and his confident tongue coaxed Harry’s mouth open. Harry felt a rush of completely unwarranted jealousy to realise that, of course, Tom knew what he was doing, had probably kissed loads of people before him—

But he opened his mouth anyway, hesitantly, letting Tom guide him.

Something roared to life in his chest.

It felt like his very soul was vibrating, warmth spreading through him, from his heart to the tips of his fingers. Weightless – falling but not falling. He surged into the kiss, and Tom gasped – whatever it was, he could feel it too. But Harry didn’t stop to consider. He was chasing that feeling, that sense of indescribable wholeness and completeness, like a cup overflowing with clear water. And he could feel Tom, under his lips and grasping fingers, but also in the back of his mind. Curiosity, arousal, amazement, pleasure—

It went on and on, but when he finally regained some semblance of awareness, he was sat in Tom’s lap (when had that happened?), still kissing him, while Tom’s hand threaded through his hair to angle his head.

After an age, they broke apart. The brown in Tom's eyes was gone, swallowed up by his blown pupils. Harry leant his head on his shoulder and let out a needy, contented sigh, too lost in the sweet high to be embarrassed.

“...What?” he asked, speaking into the crook of Tom's neck. He was too dazed to even put his question into words.

But Tom understood. “Our souls, of course.” He spoke so softly that Harry would not have heard him if he hadn’t been so close, so tangled up in him. “This is how I extracted the piece from you in the first place. Really, I should have expected there to be some side effect. After all, the soul enters and leaves the body through the mouth.”

Harry sagged against him, letting him stroke up and down his back. It was terribly dangerous, the closeness, the lack of control, the way his heart felt like it was still vibrating in his chest, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Chapter End Notes

We’ve had a few (relatively) fluffy chapters, haven’t we? The plot is going to pick up again from next chapter onwards.

Thank you so much to everyone who’s left a kudos or a comment – you guys are amazing! I was really shy about posting this when I first started a couple of months ago, but I feel so much more confident about it now <3
The weeks passed like sand trickling through an hourglass. July was upon them before they knew it, and brought with it the hottest days of the summer, clear skies and still, humid air.

Tom wiped his forehead with his sleeve as he walked. It was mid-afternoon and they had been driven out of the cottage by the heat. They were ambling down through the forest towards the coast in the hope that the sea air might be cooler. Harry was ahead, striding along almost at the limit of their bond. He was in high spirits - leaping over logs and kicking stones. He had forgone his shirt, and Tom wished he could do the same, but knew that his fairer skin would burn in minutes if he tried.

"Are you sure it was this way?" Harry asked, pausing to let Tom catch up.

"Yes," Tom replied shortly. They were searching for a pebbly beach that he vaguely remembered as being somewhere to the east.

Harry grinned at him, wild and free. He had been more comfortable around Tom ever since that first time they had kissed, that day they had talked about death. Before, there had always been a quiet anger under the surface, an antagonistic tension between them. But now Harry was teasing, playful when he spoke. He was bolder in bed too - when they put out the candle each night and settled under the covers, his fingers were eager, questing things, mapping out Tom's skin with all the unbridled, undirected enthusiasm that came with complete inexperience.

The kissing had been a mistake. Tom shouldn't have allowed it in the first place, or all the times since, not once he realised what it was doing to them.

But it had proved very difficult to stop.

He had tried.

The problem was, it was so extremely pleasant. Harry's soul was bright and vital and inviting. The connection between them felt like coming home to a warm fire after a long day.

But dangerous, so dangerous. A Legilimency of the soul. It should have been impossible - but then, so many other things about Harry should have been too. It went far beyond the traditional Mind Arts: rather than seeing Harry's memories, he actually felt the echoes of his emotions.

It was a degree of exposure he had never experienced before.

When he and his closest friends made their first explorations into Legilimency, Tom had been the fastest to learn. For him, it had been almost effortless. His own innate talent for slipping into other's minds and ferreting out their deepest, darkest secrets was so great that there had never been any opportunity for his opponents to counterattack.

But the bond was not like that. It wasn't a fight or a struggle. Two equal halves, with no option to block it out when they kissed or limit the connection.

Maddening. Intolerable.
And yet impossible to stop.

Harry was not helping. He loved kissing. He was always eager, always pulling Tom in for a kiss, sometimes so quick that it was just a jolt of heat, and at others a long, drawn-out affair that left them both high on the ecstatic pulse of the bond between them. He had grown more confident. Exploring Tom's mouth with his tongue and groaning when Tom retaliated by holding his lip between his teeth and digging his finger's bruise-deep into his hips. Masochistic alright, but never submissive. Always wanting to be chased.

And Tom did like to chase.

It was difficult, actually, not to grow attached. Not to let Harry slip into the little box inside his head that he reserved for things that were his.

But of course, Harry was not his. He was a disposable tool. A toy. A passing amusement. This situation could not continue indefinitely.

. . . Even if there was a part of Tom that wanted to stun Harry and bring him with him wherever he went next, tie him up and hurt him until he swore another vow, swore to obey--

No.

Tom wrenched himself again out of the thoughts he'd been dwelling on for the last few days. It was far too dangerous. Leave Harry here. They wouldn't meet again, Tom was sure of it. Voldemort would kill Harry for his transgressions, and that would be that. Tom would read about it in some wizarding newspaper in Italy, or Germany, Kenya or Nepal, months after the fact.

The forest around them was becoming sparser. Tom could hear the sound of the waves. A few moments later, they passed the last straggly trees and the forest yielded to the coast.

Outside of the canopy, the sun was high in the sky. Tom slipped his wand from his sleeve and conjured a patch of shade to hover overhead.

"Muggles have this thing called suntan lotion," Harry said slyly, watching him from the corner of his eye. "We should have bought some."

Tom hit him with a Stinging Hex. Harry retaliated by smacking him on the arm.

A little further along the coast, they came to the pebble beach he remembered. It was a small, secluded place where the shore dipped into the water. Tom turned his face appreciatively into the breeze rolling in from the sea. He slipped off his shoes and socks while Harry flung off his trousers and rushed into the water ahead of him, groaning as it hit his heated skin.

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Almost an hour later, Harry sat down on a sun-warmed boulder and ran his fingers through his hair. Tom was still paddling in the shallows with his trousers rolled up to his knees. Harry had swum a little, although he hadn't been able to go out very far because of the bond.

As he watched, Tom bent fluidly to pluck a shell off the seabed. He straightened and examined it, turning it this way and that in his hand so that the sun bounced off its curving planes.

A curl of affection, unwanted but irrepressible, lit inside Harry at the sight.

"Another shiny object for your collection?" he teased.
"I wish you'd stop bringing that up," Tom said, looking up from the shell. Despite his words, there was a smile in his eyes. "It isn't nice to go prying through other people's things." He waded out of the sea and set the shell down in the wet sand at the tideline, then splashed back in, actively scanning the seafloor. The cool Scottish water was clear as glass.

Harry laughed at his antics as he laid a towel over his wet hair like the cowl of a cloak. "We can talk about all your diaries instead if you prefer?"

But Tom only snorted. "What are you cooking tonight?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I thought it was your turn."

Tom raised his head again. "You don't remember? You traded it away last night" - he let his voice go higher, in a completely inaccurate mimicry of Harry - "'I'll do anything, just don't stop-'

"Fuck off."

"I want baked potatoes," Tom informed him. "And some kind of filling. Be a dear, would you?"

Harry wrinkled his nose. Tom grinned, then spotted something else in the water. He bent to retrieve it, then held it out to Harry victoriously. The claw of a crab.

Harry shook his head. "You're actually having fun, aren't you? Where's the 'future conqueror of Wizarding Britain' now? I wish I had a camera . . ."

But Tom didn't rise to the bait. "I like the sea. It reminds me a bit of a place we used to go every year when I lived in the orphanage."

"Yeah?" Harry asked, kicking his feet against the rock.

"It was a village on the south coast, a little way along from Dover. We used to take the train down from Whitechapel station with a packed lunch in a brown paper bag. It was nice - the only time I ever left the city before Hogwarts."

Harry thought of that for a moment. If the Hogwarts Express, with its big windows onto wide fields and its trolley full of sweets had been a source of awe to him, to Tom it must have been incomprehensible.

"And did you paddle then?"

"Sometimes. Mostly I went exploring, looking for rockpools and such things. There was this cave . . ."

Tom trailed off. His eyes roamed along the coast to the distant cliffs; pale rock topped with greenery, slumping down towards the sea.

"A cave?" Harry prompted.

Tom did not respond. Harry shivered a little as a light breeze swept in and raised goose pimples on his wet arms. He pulled the towel down to his shoulders.

"Riddle? Hello, are you--"

"I know where to find another Horcrux," Tom said, his soft voice cutting effortlessly through Harry's. His eyes were still focussed somewhere off in the distance.
They left for the south mere minutes after getting back to the cottage. Tom was excited; there was a
measure of wildness to his face as he threw the bare essentials into the rucksack and passed it to
Harry.

"I can't believe I didn't think of this sooner!" he said, again and again. "It's so obvious!"

Harry grinned weakly back as he shrugged into a clean shirt. Tom only needed one more Horcrux.
After that, he wouldn't need Harry anymore. He would leave, and they wouldn't see each other
again.

Something twisted in his stomach. It felt a little bit like loss.

After the crack of Apparition, they stood on a high cliff overlooking the sea.

The weather was different. Harry admonished himself for being surprised; after all, they had travelled
the whole length of the country in an instant. The sky was filled with turbulent clouds, and far below,
waves crashed into dark rock, sending spray high into the air. The wind wrapped around them,
tousling their hair and whipping their clothes against their bodies, but it was playful rather than
biting. Exhilarating.

It was a bleak spot though, to bring a group of children. Dangerous as well, what with the
precipitous edge of the cliffs. You wouldn't get away with it in modern times, Harry didn't think.

Tom stepped forward until he stood at the lip, staring directly down into the roiling sea below. Harry
followed him tentatively and peered over the edge. He couldn't see anything like a cave, just bare,
windswept rock.

"It's not visible from here," Tom said, in answer to his questioning look. "It's only a few feet above
the low tide mark; we're lucky we got here when we did or it would be underwater."

"How are we going to get down there? Are you going to Apparate us inside?"

Tom snorted derisively. "It's almost certainly warded against Apparition," he said. "If I try, we'll get
splinched."

Harry scowled. "Right. But how are we going to get down then? Actually" - he paused as a thought
occurred to him - "how did you find it in the first place?" There was no shortage of handholds in the
rough, sharp-edged cliff face, but the slippery, exposed rock would be close to impossible for a child
to scale.

Tom smiled and held out a hand.

Harry eyed it suspiciously. "What?"

"I'll float us down."

At first, Harry thought he had misheard. That wasn't possible, he was sure. You couldn't cast a
levitation charm on yourself - they taught that in first year Charms.

"I learnt to do it as a child," Tom preened. "It's a strange thing actually; I read about it in a Muggle
book, before I even knew what my magic was. All you have to do is think of lovely, wonderful

"Peter Pan."

Harry had seen the film; it was on the TV sometimes at Christmas. But Disney was the exact last thing he would associate with Lord Voldemort. "You are kidding, right?" he demanded. "Tell me you didn't jump off a cliff when you were a kid because you read something in a children's book."

"I jumped off chairs first, until I had the hang of it," Tom said defensively. "It was meant to make me fly, but all I can do is fall more slowly."

Harry rolled his eyes heavenward.

"You know I wouldn't kill myself," Tom said, wiggling his outstretched fingers at him impatiently. Harry did know that. He dubiously linked hands with him. "Are you sure you can take both of us?"

"I've done it before - I brought two . . . friends down with me once."

"And do I have to do anything to, you know, make it work?"

"Well, it wouldn't hurt if you thought nice things too, but I don't know that it's necessary. It was only a Muggle book - it was an accident that anything came of it at all."

Harry nodded, still a little doubtful. Tom's warm, dry fingers tightened around his.


Harry closed his eyes; he didn't think he could do it if he was looking. He tried to think of something happy - but the image that floated into his mind was Tom earlier, as he bent to pluck a shell from beneath the shining waves--

"Three!"

Almost without meaning to, Harry stepped forwards. His foot met open air and he panicked. But it was too late to stop; his centre of gravity was already past the point of no return, he was falling--

Very slowly.

He opened his eyes and laughed in pure, childish delight. He could see the horizon, the waves, the rocks below . . . and they didn't look so threatening now . . . they were drifting down, falling like a balloon might fall, gently and leisurely. He twisted his head so that he could see the face of the cliff passing slowly behind of them, close enough to touch.

He turned to Tom, who grinned back at him, curls tangling in the wind. He could practically feel the magic singing through their joined hands. It was one of the most incredible moments of his life - what magic should be, free, unrestrained by wand movements and incantations.

Then there was a ledge. It seemed to appear out of nowhere below them, invisible until they passed an overhanging bluff. Tom's hand tightened on his as he guided them down to settle gently on the rock. It was slippery, wet with spray from the waves churning just below.

A wild place. A battlefield for the never-ending war between sea and stone.
Tom let go of his hand. "Fun?" he asked smugly.

"Yes," Harry said, staring into his eyes, breath gone.

Tom laughed again, like the marvellous, terrible creature that he was, face alight and alive. Harry wanted to kiss him --

But he had already turned away, towards the cliff face. There was a fissure standing some ten feet high. Thin, but wide enough to admit a normal-sized person without difficulty. Tom stepped inside, and Harry followed suit, clambering after him as the narrow tunnel opened into a small cave.

Harry, who had expected something grander, was briefly disappointed. Then Tom's fingers whispered across a smooth stone wall.

"The entrance was here," he said. He withdrew his wand from his sleeve and traced it along the path his fingers had taken. "Hmmm . . ."

"What is it?"

Tom turned back to him, eyebrows raised. "It requires a gift of blood to open. Would you mind terribly, Harry?"

Unease ran down his spine like a drop of ice-cold water. It was not lost on him that Tom was not offering up his own blood.

"How much blood are we talking?" Harry asked.

Tom smiled. "Not so much, I don't think."

Harry looked into his eyes for a long moment, then slowly held out his arm. Tom took his wrist in gentle fingers and turned it so that the soft skin of his forearm was visible in the low light filtering through the cave entrance. He placed the tip of his sycamore wand over the branching blue veins where the skin was thinnest.

"Diffindo."

A sharp stinging pain, and a cut appeared on the inside of his wrist. Blood welled up, thick and dark and surprisingly much. It ran in rivulets down from the wound. Before too much could spill, Tom pressed his wrist against the wall, holding it there even as Harry winced.

It took an age. Tom seemed unconcerned, but Harry waited anxiously. He was growing lightheaded. The blood flowed down the wall in thin streams, but sank into the rock before it reached the ground.

Eventually, an arched silver outline flared, and the wall melted into a doorway.

"Thank you, Harry," Tom breathed.

He released his wrist and stepped through the arch into the main cave.

Harry did not immediately follow.

He leant against a wall and took out his wand. It took three tries to get the healing spell to work, and by the time he was done, his sleeve was drenched. A lot of blood had leaked onto the floor. Or maybe it wasn't a lot. How much was in the body anyway?

Tom appeared in the doorway. "Are you okay?" he asked, eyeing Harry as he tried to wipe his wrist
on his jeans.

Harry nodded mutely, and pushed himself off the wall, pausing as black spots bloomed in his vision.

"I'm sorry," Tom said, catching his elbow when he wobbled. "I didn't realise it would be so much. I assumed that it was to test for magical blood to prevent a Muggle from accidentally entering - but perhaps it was also meant to weaken a potential thief."

He did not sound sorry. If anything, he was amused. Harry scowled at him and shrugged off his hand.

The main cave was far larger than the antechamber. The ceiling was hung with stalactites and the floor sloped downwards. It gave the eerie impression that they were standing just inside the open maw of some great toothed beast. The centre of the cave was filled with still black water; a lake so wide that he could not see where it ended. And in the middle of the lake, he could just make out a rocky island which glowed with a dim green light.

More than anything, it reminded Harry of the Chamber of Secrets.

He shivered, feeling suddenly cold. The blood loss probably wasn't helping. He turned to Tom--

And paused.

After weeks of feeling Tom's emotions through the bond when they kissed, Harry had become good at reading Tom's face. He knew him better, in some ways, than he did anyone else.

And now, looking at Tom's expression, Harry knew one thing for certain.

His mood had changed.

It was like watching the sun go behind a cloud. His smile was still there, but now it was a small and careful thing. His head was cocked to the side, dark eyes glittering. For the first time in many weeks, Harry was reminded of the Tom Riddle who he had first met in the Chamber, the boy who had been all too ready to torture and kill him on a whim, and who had, just days later, pressed him up against a tombstone and whispered sweet nothings about the murder of his own family.

Harry wasn't naïve. That boy had never truly gone away. Tom had not changed in any way - it was just that he had grown used to Harry, and saw him as a minion (albeit a temporary one) rather than an enemy and acted accordingly.

"I have such memories of this place, Harry." Tom's soft voice carried in the silence of the cave.

Harry did not answer. He lingered in the doorway, wishing more than anything that they had not come. He wanted to get the Horcrux, wherever it was, and be gone. "Where do you think it is?" he asked.

"Why, there, of course," Tom replied, raising a long, pale arm to point towards the island in the middle of the lake that was the source of the strange green light. "Where else could it be?"

Harry had thought so too, but had been hoping for another answer. "And how are we going to get across?"

Tom took stepped towards the shore and went down on one knee at the water's edge. Before Harry could stop him, he touched his finger to the mirror surface, deforming it with ripples. Harry looked on in horror. He did not know why, but every instinct he had was screaming at him that they should
not, under any circumstances, make contact with the lake.

And he was right. Moments later, a white shape broke through the surface just in front of Tom, rising up from the deep in a smooth, graceful motion.

A human head.

Harry's stomach lurched. It was a dead person. But not rotted; its skin was flawless porcelain, like the last stage of frostbite, a white mask of a face. From its scalp, straggly black hair streamed like weeds. It lurched up until it was level with Tom, staring at him with black, insectoid eyes.

But Tom was not alarmed.

He reached out a hand and cupped its hollow cheek. "You're mine, aren't you," he crooned, as if speaking to a beloved pet. "I can feel my magic living in you."

Harry pressed himself back against the slimy cave wall. There was a dead person living in the lake. Maybe many dead persons, for the water was no longer still - there were sporadic ripples further out, where there should have been none. People that Voldemort - that Tom - had probably killed.

And Tom was talking to it.

"Is there some way for us to cross?" he asked.

The head slipped back under the surface, then returned. A pale hand offered up a chain to Tom. Despite the decades spent in saltwater, the links were smooth and clear of rust.

"Thank you, you lovely thing." Tom took the chain, and the head, to Harry's utmost relief, disappeared again.

"W-What was that?" Harry asked, trying not to let on how creeped out he was.

"An Inferus," Tom breathed. "I've never met one before. They aren't at all easy to make." He rose to his feet and tugged lightly on the tether. A tiny boat rose silently out of the lake and bumped gently against the shore.

"Do you think there are more?" Harry pressed. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the water where the thing had been. The ripples were still there, in isolated patches, as far out as he could see.

"But of course! One wouldn't be much of a deterrent, would it?"

"Right," Harry said, nodding. "Of course you would need to kill lots of people to guard your Horcrux. That all makes perfect sense."

Tom must have heard how his voice was shaking because he set the chain down and turned to Harry. "Are you quite alright?" he asked. "You look a bit green . . ."

He stepped closer and made to cup his cheek as he had the Inferus'.

Harry jerked away from him, wide-eyed. Tom stared at him in surprise, then looked down at his hand. "Oh, I'm sorry about that," he said, wiping his palm on his trousers. "But they're really very clean--"

"We aren't going out on the water, are we?" Harry interrupted.

"They won't hurt us."
Harry nodded; not agreement, just acknowledgement. "I just don't think it's safe," he said, knowing as he did that his efforts were hopeless. Tom was determined that they would go out onto the lake filled with dead things in the tiny boat, and so they would.

"I'd let you stay here," Tom said regretfully. "But the island is far beyond the limit of the bond. Just bear with it for a little while. I promise the Inferi won't do anything; they recognise my magic as their master's."

Harry wanted to refuse point blank. He eyed Tom warily, seeing him, for the first time in months, as an actual threat. But then, even though he could fight Tom, there was the vow . . .

Tom took his silence for assent. "I'll hold the boat steady while you get in," he said, taking a firm grip on the stern.

Harry swallowed, but clambered inside, keeping every part of his body as far away from the water as he could manage. Tom had no such misgivings; he heaved the boat forwards into the lake, pushing until he was submerged up to his shins, and then leapt on board as the hull floated free. He did not seem to mind that water was splashing everywhere, but Harry shuddered, swiping at the droplets that landed on his bare skin with his sleeve.

Tom laughed at him once he settled into the boat, which almost immediately began moving by itself, silently tracing out a path to the island. "Where's your Gryffindor spirit?" he teased. "It's not like you to be so timid."

It was like Tom thought they were still playing around the way they had in the sea, hours earlier, like they normally did in the stream when they bathed, laughing and splashing water at each other under the hot sun, and was confused that Harry was not having fun. He didn't seem to understand how creepy and horrible the cave was.

Harry didn't answer him. He let the handle of his wand slip into his hand and gripped it until his knuckles were white, keeping his eyes fixed on the water.

The passage was agonisingly slow and the boat uncomfortably small, but eventually they reached the island. Tom jumped out first, into the water again, and pulled on the chain until they were grounded. Harry clambered after him as quick as he could. He should have been relieved to be on dry land again, to no longer be floating over a bottomless void of monsters, but instead he felt even more trapped and on edge.

The island was a small rocky outcrop which carved out a jagged circle in the lake. Tom approached the centre, and when he moved out of the way, Harry could finally see the source of the misty green light. It came from a stone basin raised on a plinth - it looked incongruously like a bird bath. Tom leant over it and peered down into its depths with a smile. The green, shimmering light highlighted his features, making them appear remote and cold. Disturbing in their perfection.

Harry drew closer, wanting to know what Tom was looking at.

The basin was filled with shining liquid. A dull glow, rather than the bright light he had expected. And at the bottom, there lay an oval golden object. Harry could just make out the shape of a letter "S" engraved into its surface.

"Salazar Slytherin's locket," said Tom in an awestruck whisper. His hand hovered covetously over the surface. Then he paused, expression growing puzzled. "Hmm--"

"What's wrong?"
"I can't feel this one. It's not like the ring, or what I felt from your scar . . . perhaps the potion is blocking me? But no- there would be no point . . ."

"What does that mean?" Harry prompted when he trailed off.

"I don't think it's real," Tom confessed. "It must be a decoy . . . but I don't understand; it makes no sense to set up all these protections for a fake. Unless . . ."

"What?"

"Unless it's already been stolen and destroyed," Tom said. He looked a little unsettled at the thought that a part of his soul might be gone forever.

Harry, however, was relieved. "Okay then, let's leave--"

"No."

"Why not?"

"If it's been stolen, I want to know who took it. There might be some kind of clue."

He took a pencil out of his pocket and poked it into the liquid. Rather than sinking into the potion, the point wobbled on the surface as if it was a sheet of glass. Tom tried to touch the potion with his finger next, and when the same result occurred, withdrew his wand and began casting spells.

Harry watched the lake water unhappily, hoping with all his might that the magic would not disturb its inhabitants, or somehow alert Voldemort. After all, if something did happen, the only possible means of escape was the boat--

"Oh!"

At Tom's exclamation, Harry turned back around. He had conjured a cup and dipped it beneath the surface, returning with a quantity of potion.

It took Harry a moment to process the implications.

Then his stomach lurched.

Tom was looking at him, eyes blank.

Harry's wand was out of his sleeve and trained on him in an instant. "I'm not doing it!"

"I haven't even asked yet."

"Well, don't."

Tom's lips pursed. "There really doesn't seem to be another way," he said. His voice was even and reasonable. "And it's logical, if you think about it. This setup is obviously intended to force the thief to drink--"

"I said no!"

"Don't be like that, Harry."

"Drink it yourself, if you want it so badly," Harry snarled. There was a strange ringing in his ears, but he couldn't tell if it was caused by blood loss or fury.
Tom regarded him flatly. He didn't answer, but then again, he didn't have to. They both knew that Tom had never even considered drinking the potion himself.

The mask was off, Harry thought hysterically. It was like the story of the frog in the slowly heating water, the frog that didn't leap out until it was dead. Cooked alive. He had let Tom bleed his wrist against the rock. He had let Tom cajole him into the boat. And now Tom was going to force him to drink whatever was in that basin.

"Just one cup, okay?"

No. No, no, no. Harry was going to hex Tom and somehow bring his unconscious body back across the water, and they were going to go back to the cottage and forget that any of this had ever happened. "Petrificus T--"

"Your vow, Harry." Tom's voice was as cold as ice. "You swore to help me achieve my goals. I intend to retrieve this . . . fake . . . so that I might discover where the true Horcrux has been hidden. If you will not help me willingly, you will forfeit your magic. How do you suppose you will fight me then, hmm?"

Was that the same mouth that had kissed him so tenderly?

Tom held out the cup to him. It was just half full, a shot of shining green liquid.

"Just try it. It won't kill you; Voldemort would have wanted to interrogate whoever attempted to breach the protections. He would have needed to know how they found this place, and whether they understood the nature of the thing that was hidden here. I expect it will just weaken you to the point where you are unable to flee by yourself. But since there are two of us, it will be fine. I'll bring you back safely and you can sleep it off tomorrow."

Harry's wand dipped. It was futile - they both knew he wasn't going to risk losing his magic by cursing Tom. "There's too much in the basin," he protested numbly. "There's no way I can drink all of that."

Tom thrust the cup impatiently in his face. "Just one cup, then we'll know what we're dealing with," he said.

Not knowing what else to do, Harry took it. His mind was spinning, searching in vain for a way out, for something he could say to stop Tom from doing this to him. He should never have sworn that vow . . . although, if he'd been trapped unconscious in a suitcase, Tom would have probably forced it down his throat anyway . . .

But at least then his chest wouldn't ache so much.

He set his jaw, looked Tom in the eye, and tipped the liquid back. It tasted like nothing.

But when it hit his stomach, he felt the effects immediately. His heart began pounding erratically in his chest and his breath came faster. Fear, thick and cloying, slipped insidiously into him, dripping into the crevices of his brain like dark treacle. He felt oversensitive - suddenly, he could see every minute detail of Tom's face, every pore, every eyelash. It was disturbing, the way each one cast a separate shadow like the legs of a spider.

. . . There was a dripping sound coming from somewhere.

Harry spun around, but he could not see the source. The lake was a mirror surface, undisturbed by any falling droplets.
Drip, drip, drip.

The sound was echoing in the open space, bouncing off the walls and the still lake and the unseen ceiling. They were extremely exposed out here. Harry felt like he could feel hundreds of pairs of eyes on him, watching him from just beneath the surface of the water, from the distant shore, as if an invisible crowd had gathered and was standing in a silent vigil--

A hand closed on his shoulder, and he yelped before he could help it. He bit the sound off quickly, not wanting the watchers to hear--

"Harry?"

The cup was not in Harry's hand anymore. It was in Tom's.

And it was full.

No. No, no, no-nonono--

Harry scrambled away from him, but there was nowhere to go. He stopped right at the water's edge - he was so, so thirsty, he suddenly realised; his throat was burning with need, but he couldn't touch the water, he couldn't--

He fancied he could see something pale beneath the surface, but the shadow cast by his own body obscured it--

"Just one more," Tom said soothingly.

But it was not just one more. It would take dozens of cups to empty that basin.

Tom approached, trapping him against the edge of the lake. "It will all be alright," he said. He gripped Harry's hair, pulling his head back, and brought the cup to his lips.

Harry slapped if from his hand. The liquid spilt, falling in a shining arc, then vanished in mid-air. Harry knew where it had gone. The cup clattered across the stone.

"That was uncalled for," Tom complained, as if speaking to a petulant child.

Harry grabbed his arm as he stooped to pick up the cup, fingers digging in deep enough to make him wince.

"No, Tom. No."

Tom sighed. "It's unfortunate that I have to do this to do this to you, Harry. I've grown to enjoy your company, and it will be a shame if we fall out over this."

"You don't 'have to do this. It's not a Horcrux in there. So don't force me!"

"The vow--"

"Fuck the vow!" Harry stood his ground as best he could, given his spinning head and the lurching, seasick feeling in his stomach. He could still hear the dripping sound. "If you use it to make me drink, that's it. You are going to have to use it to make me do everything. I am going to be uncooperative like you can't even imagine. I am not going to be touching your cock anymore. I am not going to be duelling with you. I am not even going to Vanish my own shit when I'm in your stupid fucking outhouse with no plumbing. That. Is. It."
When he finished his tirade his fists were clenched white and his body was vibrating with nerves and fury. Tom's mouth was hanging open.

"Harry--"

Harry stared him down. Tom could still force him, and they both knew it.

But would he think it worth the price?

If it had been a real Horcrux, Harry had no doubt that Tom would hold him down and force the liquid down his throat, no matter what damage it did. But for a fake? A forgery of a Horcrux that had probably already been destroyed?

The silence seemed to last forever. Harry was swaying on his feet. Tom looked down at the cup, still lying innocuously on its side on the ground, and then back up at Harry. Then a spark of something ominous lit in his eyes.

"A favour," he said offhandedly. "I won't make you drink, but you'll owe me a favour. Something you'll do willingly, without complaint."

Harry wanted to protest the rank unfairness of that. He breathed in through his nose in an attempt to calm himself. "What favour?" he asked.

"I haven't decided yet."

Resentment pulsed inside Harry at the words, burning and bitter, like acid in his dry throat. It was a lie, he was sure. Tom knew exactly what he wanted, but was withholding the information to convince him to agree. He wanted to spit, wanted to curse at Tom--

But the thought of the potion was worse. He nodded instead, tight-lipped.

Tom sighed and Vanished the cup with a flick of his wand. He turned away to take one last longing look at the object in the depths of the basin. Harry stared at his back without really seeing him. His eyes were hot and prickling with betrayal.

He had been so stupid.

Chapter End Notes

*Goes and hides under desk*: have at me, guys.
Harry shrugged Tom off the moment they materialised back at the cottage. He stumbled over to the row of kitchen cabinets, and, bracing himself on the surface, used his wand to fill a mug with water. He downed it, almost sobbing with relief, then filled another, and another, until the burning in his throat finally abated.

Tom was moving around in the room behind him. There was a scuffing sound as he toed off his shoes and a drawn-out scrape as a chair was pulled back.

Harry wasn’t ready to face him. He raised his eyes to the window in front of him. It was still bright outside; afternoon still, rather than evening. The sky was a perfect periwinkle blue.

Just as they’d left it, an hour or two ago.

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

Harry almost jolted out of his skin at the unexpected question. He whirled around just in time to see Tom lift the cast iron kettle from the worktop. Objectively, he knew it was the potion that was making him so jumpy. But the knowledge didn’t stop his heart from almost beating out of his chest.

"I’ll put enough in for both of us, how about that?"

Harry stared at him, uncomprehending. Tom seemed to be under the impression that Harry was in a mood, and that a little nice gesture would make them okay again.

It was a colossal failure of empathy. So much so that Harry was gobsmacked. Tom was normally better at this, at knowing what to say to make people (Harry) do or feel things.

But then again, Harry had a feeling that after hurting someone, Tom rarely hung around to clean up the mess.

"No," he said to Tom's back. "I don't want a cup of tea. What is wrong with you?"

Tom turned back to him, frowning. "Don't be a sore loser--"

Harry shoved him hard in the chest. Tom staggered and dropped the kettle. It hit the flagstones with a loud CLANG.

Harry stepped forwards until he was right in the Slytherin's face.

"A sore loser?" he shouted. "Do you think this is some kind of game? Like you can torture me, mess with my head, and then pretend that nothing happened?"

Tom's features were still, unimpressed. "Maybe you should go and sleep it off," he said coldly.

To hell with him.

Harry shoved his way past Tom, being sure to knock into his shoulder, and hurled himself into the other room. If there had been a door he would have slammed it - instead he settled for swiping a whole row of books out of the bookshelf and onto the floor.

Ignoring Tom's cry of "You better clear that up!" he stomped over to the bed and half fell onto it. There were black speckles in his vision and he was still dizzy and lightheaded. He panted for a
moment, then pulled his pyjamas out from where they were stashed under his pillow. It took some wriggling, but he managed to change into them without getting up. A good thing, since he wasn't sure he could.

Harry lay down on his side. It was still too hot for a blanket, so he pulled a sheet over his head instead and curled up into a tight ball, facing the window. He felt very light and far away somehow, like a helium balloon whose tether had been cut. When his eyes slipped closed, the speckles floating in his vision grew like inkbolts spreading across a page, resolving themselves into shapes... humanoid figures with long arms and clawlike hands...

It was the potion. Just the potion. To distract himself, Harry rubbed his thumb and forefinger together in soothing, repetitive circles, trying his best to think of nothing at all.

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He must have slept, because he woke up in half-darkness. Tom was curled comfortably around him with one arm slung over his middle.

Harry scowled down at the offending limb. Tom's fucking moods. Play with your captive, have fun and laugh together, and then force them to drink poison. And afterwards, yes, cuddle them again as if nothing had happened. He was treating Harry like a toy.

One he didn't mind breaking.

Annoyed, Harry extracted himself from the bed, taking care not to jostle Tom - he wasn't ready for the inevitable confrontation. He needed to think it over, get it all straight in his mind first, or Tom would talk circles around him until he didn't know which way was up.

He crept through the dark main room and slipped on his shoes at the door. The hinges he had been meaning to fix squeaked a little as he pushed it open.

Outside, it was a little brighter. Harry had expected twilight, so he was surprised to see the first rays of the sun peeking over the mountains to the east. It was morning: he must have slept for more than twelve hours. He wandered aimlessly around the side of the cottage and stopped when he came to the place where he had planted the flowers. The first shoots were poking out of the ground, unfurling shyly in the early morning sun.

Harry stopped and gazed down at them, remembering the conversation he and Tom had shared in the bright sunlight. The kiss. How bubbly and warm he had felt when they went to bed that night.

He nudged the nearest stem with his foot.

Then kicked, ripping it out of the earth.

Once he started, he couldn't stop. He kicked again, and again, and then crashed to his knees and tore at the dirt with his bare fingers, tearing the infant plants out of the soft, warm loam to die in the open, like a monster descending on their safe little world from above.

The ground was littered with grass and seedlings and torn roots. A sob forced its way up his throat. Then another, a horrible choking noise. Harry bit down on his lip to muffle the sound. His nose was running so he wiped it with his sleeve.

But it was no good. Once the tears had started, they wouldn't stop. Harry pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his dirty hands around them, making himself small and enclosed. He tucked his head in.
And cried.

It was cathartic.

His nose was stuffy, but he felt better. Harry unfurled a little and took off his steamed up glasses and tried, without much success, to rub them dry on the hem of his shirt. In the distance, the sun had risen a little way above the mountain peaks, burning away the morning haze.

That had been the first time he had cried in . . . well, it must have been months. Not since last summer, that first week in Privet Drive, when he hadn’t been able to get Cedric's face out of his head, or eat, or sleep.

His tears this time had been as much anger as grief. At Tom, yes, but also at himself. In the clear light of the new day, it was painfully, excruciatingly obvious what had been happening over the last few weeks.

Harry was infatuated.

Not in love, thank god, but he had definitely had a crush.

On Tom Riddle.

It was stupid, so stupid. Harry chocked out a wet laugh at the sheer idiocy of it all. A summer romance, he thought mockingly. Warm weather, kissing, living together. Waking up every morning with warm arms around him. And sex. Tom's lovely body and dimpled smile.

That was all it had taken for him to forget what Tom was.

Harry yanked angrily at a handful of grass. Tom had been able to control him so thoroughly. If the Slytherin had tried to slice his wrist open at the beginning of the summer, Harry would have fought tooth and nail, not meekly offered it up like a sacrifice.

In retrospect, it was no surprise what had happened in the cave. Tom had never pretended to be something he wasn't. It was Harry who had projected his own feelings onto him.

The thought did nothing to lessen the anger Harry felt for Tom, but it did put it in perspective. The seething resentment he felt now, he should have been feeling all the way through. He had let it slip through his fingers at some point, and without it, he had been vulnerable. His heart fertile soil for quiet, fragile feelings to take root in.

Harry caressed one of the shoots he had torn out of the ground, cradling the stem between two fingers.

It was a good thing. For the best. A much needed wake up call. If Tom had not shown his true colours again, what would it have been like when they parted? Would Harry have mooned over him? Would he have seen Tom's face projected over Voldemort's serpentine features?

A lump rose in his throat as he remembered how he had acted around Tom. How pathetic. How Tom must have laughed at poor, touch-starved little Harry, practically begging for some affection.

The only good thing about it was that no one else had seen, and Harry would never tell. What was one more shameful secret? He swiped at his face again, then sat back on his hands.
It would be okay. It would all be okay. Not good, but survivable. No mortal wound; just one more scar in a lifetime of scars.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Over the next few days, Harry was resolved to face Tom without embarrassment. To give him nothing but cold, steely cordiality. He refused to share the bed and was noncommittal when Tom tried to draw him into a conversation. Polite, yes, not actively fighting him, just reminding them of their respective places. Captor and captive.

It wasn't easy. Harry had to be very careful not to fall back into tune with him. There were moments when it would have been so, so natural. Tom, smiling. Asking if he wanted to duel. Cooking. Poking fun at something in the book he was reading.

Harry missed the easy camaraderie they had shared, warm arms around him while he slept. He missed the last few weeks, actually, despite all of the shame and self-loathing he felt for them.

He missed Tom.

Tom, his friend.

But Harry was determined.

Tom had noticed, of course. It was amusing to witness his mounting annoyance and frustration - Harry often caught him staring at him with a puzzled frown after he shrugged off his advances. He did not seem to know what to do when his superficial charm failed. But he didn’t apologise and Harry wouldn’t have believed him even if he did. Tom was not sorry he had done it, only dissatisfied with the results.

And then there was the favour.

Tom was holding it over his head like the sword of Damocles, using it to try and draw a reaction out of him. Harry was not taking the bait, but it was hard when Tom continually alluded to it in conversation, mused aloud about what he might want - he even had the gall to ask Harry if he had any suggestions.

It was almost like Tom was trying to get punched.

... But Harry had a good idea what he wanted: Tom wasn't nearly as complicated as he liked to pretend. He was just drawing it out, keeping Harry on tenterhooks for maximum sadistic enjoyment. It wasn’t a surprise; Tom was normally like that, teasing, needling, manipulative.

It was just that for the last few weeks Harry had been almost enjoying that behaviour. It was all a game, and he had learnt the rules. Yes, the stakes were real, and there was an element of danger, but that only ever made it more fun.

But Harry was not playing anymore.

And so, when Tom 'innocently' brought up the favour for the third time that day, he snapped.

"You know what?" he asked, wheeling around. "Fuck this. What do you want?"

It was late evening in the cottage. Tom was lounging in the armchair, reading one of his old diaries. He had been doing that a lot lately, scouring through his notes for clues about where one last Horcrux might be hidden. At Harry's outburst he looked up from his book, eyebrows raised.
"Did you just stamp your foot?"

Harry had, in fact, stamped his foot.

"No!" he snarled.

"It sounded like you did."

Harry closed his eyes and breathed in through his nose.

Tom leant his chin on the heel of his palm, surveying him like a mildly interesting bug. "Maybe I haven't decided what I want yet," he mused.

"Like hell you haven't! There's only a couple of weeks left on this vow - here's your chance, Riddle - make me do whatever horrible thing you've been fantasising about in your dirty little mind, so I can hate you in peace!"

When Harry finished his tirade, the silence between them dragged out. Harry was certain Tom was going to refuse, to leave him hanging endlessly on the precipice. But then--

"Kneel."

It was a coldly spoken command, an order from a king to his subject.

"That's it?" Harry blurted. The idea rankled, but all things considered, it would be getting off lightly.

"No, obviously not. But that's the first part of the favour."

"What's the second part?"

"Kneel, and I'll tell you."

Harry was not amused. He planted his hands on the armrests and leaned over Tom, crowding into his space and forcing him to tip back his head to maintain eye contact.

"Fuck. You."

A lazy grin spread across Tom's face. "Is it really so much to ask?"

"What, precisely, are you asking for?" Harry was going to make him say it.

"I want you to suck my cock."

The words hung in the air between them, heavy and obscene. Harry wasn't even surprised; Tom had wanted this for months. And now he was going to force the issue.

"What a shock," he spat, voice dripping with scorn. "Unpredictable as ever, Riddle."

Tom shrugged, not embarrassed. There was a bulge in his trousers, Harry noted with disgust. Even talking about this was turning him on.

"What if I refuse?"

Tom scratched his chin, feigning regret. "I suppose I'd have to take you back to the cave and force you to drink that potion. I take promises very seriously, Harry. But is it really so bad? All I want is your mouth. I could be asking for something worse . . ."
His eyes flicked down his body, making the implication clear. Harry's skin *crawled.*

"What a hero. Do you want a medal or something?"

But Tom only grinned up at him from the chair. His hand moved over his groin, idly stroking. "I can just imagine your pretty mouth around me," he breathed. "I bet you're so wet and hot inside. I want to feel your throat fluttering around my length--"

It was a tease, a challenge. Harry gaped, mortified by Tom's words and his sheer brazenness. He had the horrible feeling that a hot flush was creeping steadily up his neck.

"You want to do it, don't you?" Tom continued. "Something in you likes the idea of stretching your lips around me, tasting me on your tongue. Anticipation, wondering when I'm going to thrust down your throat and stop your breath."

Harry only stared. This was all a mistake; he should have covered his ears the moment Tom began speaking.

"**Kneel,** Harry," Tom pressed, voice sultry and inviting. "Get this favour off your back once and for all."

Harry was practically vibrating with tension. But not arousal. Definitely not. "I-In the bedroom," he choked out, finally. "Lie down on the bed, and I'll . . ."

He swallowed, working up the nerve to jump over the line, past the point of no return--

"I'll . . . do it."

Tom gave him a quizzical look. "On the bed? Why?"

"Are you really going to push your luck?"

"Yes," Tom replied, matter of factly. "I want to see you **kneel,** Harry."


Before he could talk himself out of it, he dropped to his knees on the rug between Tom's feet, ruthlessly suppressing a burst of humiliation, and glared up at the Slytherin.

Tom smirked. He grasped Harry's chin and brushed his thumb over his bottom lip. "Always so pretty when you're angry . . ."

Harry batted his hand away. Before he could second-guess himself, he grabbed for the waist of Tom's trousers and wrenched down the zip of his fly. He bit his lip, and, with a little more hesitation, pulled his underwear out of the way. Tom's cock sprang free, fully hard and hovering mere inches in front of his face.

Harry had never seen it so close before. When they messed around, it was normally in the dark, fully clothed. Even when it was his turn to stroke them together, he was too shy to spend much time looking down.

It was rather pretty, if a cock could be called that. Long too, like everything else about Tom, and straight. Harry's own had a strange upwards curve that he wasn't quite sure was normal.

Tom watched with rapt attention. Harry wished he would look away, but there was no point asking: Tom was a sadist. Doing his best to ignore him, Harry focussed on the task at hand. Slowly,
hesitantly, he touched the tip of his tongue to the head.

Warm, velvety skin. Harry moved his tongue over the slit and shivered at the sudden burst of saltiness. The flavour was strange, but not as unpleasant as he'd feared. Experimentally, he leant forwards and closed his lips over the whole tip, drawing it into his mouth.

It was an interesting feeling - warm and pulsing and heavy on his tongue. On impulse, he hollowed his cheeks and sucked.

Tom groaned, low and hoarse. He tried to thrust forwards, but Harry was quicker. His hands flew to Tom's hips, gripping firmly to hold him in place.

It was an unexpectedly powerful position. Curiosity growing steadily, Harry let the cock slip out of his mouth. Tom made a little plaintive noise, but sighed contentedly when Harry licked along his length, lathing it with his tongue. Getting it wet.

When he closed his mouth around Tom again, he didn't stop at the head. Harry slid his lips further, taking in as much as he could manage. He drew back, then did it again, running his tongue firmly along the underside.

"Fuck," Tom gasped. "I knew you'd be good at this; that dirty mouth of yours--" His fingers threaded through Harry's wild hair, twisting lightly to grip. Not pushing; just a wordless request. Harry relaxed his hold on Tom's hips and allowed him to thrust a little, trying to relax his throat.

It was surprisingly hot. Not just the cock in his mouth (erotic and intrusive, taboo in a way nothing else they'd done could match) but also Tom's reactions. Normally it was Harry doing the moaning.

As Harry’s confidence increased, he sped up the pace and began hollowing his cheeks as he bobbed up and down. Even though he could take only half of his cock, it must have felt phenomenal, because Tom was gasping desperately above him, hips jerking faster and more frantically.

Finally, the cock pulsed in his mouth. Tom groaned and bucked forwards once more--

Harry pulled off him with a wet pop.

He licked once at the swollen tip in a kittenish way; deliberately mocking, then smiled innocently up.

"Is there something you want, Riddle?"

Tom glared, face flushed and cock red and hard, steadily leaking precome. He looked like Harry probably did when Tom did this to him; worked him up just so he could hold him on the edge for minutes on end, fingers circled tight around the base of his cock to stop him from falling.

The shoe was on the other foot now.

"You--" Tom began furiously. The effect was ruined when Harry licked a wet stripe up the side of his cock. "Oh!"

Harry smirked, and then sucked the head - only the head - back into his mouth. He swirled his tongue lightly around the heated flesh.

The needy, helpless sounds Tom was making went straight to his own cock, until it strained against his jeans. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see his free hand clench rhythmically on the armrest. He waited, waited-- and then went to pull away again.
But this time Tom was ready. The hand that was lightly threaded in his hair fisted into an iron grip and forced his head down.

Too big, much too big. Tom mercilessly pushed his way down Harry's spasming throat while he gagged helplessly around him. He pulled back, then thrust again before Harry could draw a breath, fucking into his mouth.

Harry almost bit him, first in surprise, and then in anger. This wasn't how it was supposed to go! It hurt; Tom was being rough with him, bruising his lips and hitting the back of his throat over and over. Harry beat mutely at his sides with his closed fists. In desperation, he deliberately grazed Tom with his teeth, but the other boy only gave a long, drawn-out hiss, a sound that could almost have been Parseltongue - too far gone to mind the pain.

It seemed to take an age, but eventually Harry figured out the rhythm. When Tom next drew back, he sucked in a blessed lungful of air through his nose. His throat relaxed instinctively and when Tom thrust again, for once he didn't gag.

"Look at you," Tom gloated breathlessly. "Finally quiet and obedient."

Harry tried to put all of the fury he felt into his eyes.

He hated him, he hated him, he hated him.

But his own hips were making little aborted thrusts into empty air.

It was practically a Pavlovian response, Harry thought with exasperation. In the past, being furious with Tom had always led to being pinned against some surface and wrecked. Anger equalled pleasure. All now, even though he wanted to kill Tom, first he wanted to hold him down and rut against him until he came.

Two more domineering thrusts, deeper this time, and Tom's cock jerked in his mouth. He pushed in as far as he could go, until Harry's nose pressed against his groin, and came in a pulse of heat down his throat.

Tom didn't let him up straight away and Harry realised, with a rush of annoyance, that he was waiting for him to swallow. He did, grudgingly, and was rewarded when the hand in his hair loosened. He drew off and heaved in a deep breath, rubbing at his throat.

Tom was a sight. His pupils were dilated and he was still flushed and dishevelled. His limp cock was hanging out, framed by his open fly.

Harry was hard. And furious.

"Was that fun?" he demanded. "Did you enjoy that? Well, I hope you had a good time, Riddle, because that's the last orgasm you're getting out of me!"

Tom smirked, languid and satisfied, not taking him seriously.

It was a mistake.

Harry bristled and clambered onto the chair on top of him, being none too careful with his elbows and knees. Tom didn't seem to mind - he looped an affectionate arm around his waist.

"That's a dangerous look in your eye," he observed, pulling Harry's leaking cock out of his jeans and stroking him roughly. Harry had to bite back a moan of approval as electric shivers of pleasure
pulsed down his spine.

Tom grinned, obviously thinking he had got away with it. He leant up and tried to kiss the corner of his mouth.

Harry dodged and bit down on Tom's shoulder instead.

*Hard.*

Tom jerked beneath him, then let out a strangled cry as Harry's teeth broke the skin.

"Ow-- Harry, *stop!*"

Harry did not stop. Tom tried to let go of his cock, but Harry's hand clenched around his fist, forcing him to keep stroking. Tom shivered beneath him and plucked at Harry's shirt with his free hand. Not wanting to tear him off in case he made the damage worse.

It didn't take long. Moments later, Harry gasped out his climax. Come splattered across Tom's stomach and limp cock. He unlatched his teeth as he panted and trembled through the aftershocks.

"I can't believe you," Tom seethed, pulling down the neck of his shirt to inspect the neat oval of toothmarks. "You practically chewed my arm off!"

The cuts weren't deep - Harry had been hampered by the fabric in the way - but even so, it was going to leave a spectacular bruise.

"You're lucky it was just that. Believe me, it could have been much worse," Harry said as he laid his head contentedly on Tom's uninjured shoulder. Strangely, he felt much better. The favour had been like a piece of gravel in his shoe, an annoyance he just couldn't shake. And of course, vengeance was sweet.

"I need to put some Dittany on this," Tom grumbled when it became apparent that Harry had absolutely no intention of healing him. "It's probably going to scar."

Privately, Harry rather hoped it would. It would be good for Tom to have some kind of permanent, visual reminder, even if the bite was only a drop in the bucket compared to everything the Slytherin had done to *him.*

Harry shifted as Tom extracted himself. He stayed in the chair, legs hanging over one of the arms as Tom fiddled around with potion bottles in the kitchen. But when it seemed that Tom was finishing up, Harry climbed to his feet and made a beeline for the bedroom. Once inside, he cast a shield charm to block the doorway.

Tom gaped at him.

"It's your turn to sleep on the chair," Harry informed him cheerfully.

Tom's wand dropped into his hand. Harry's, of course, was already out. Each eyed the other warily through the shimmering barrier, weighing up their chances.

It was too close to call and not worth losing. Harry saw the moment when Tom realised this; his wand disappeared back into his sleeve with a frustrated huff.

"If I catch you sneaking in for a cuddle, I'll hex you!" Harry called as he climbed into bed, alone for once. He stretched out, enjoying the extra space. His throat was sore, his heart still pounding with
adrenaline and there was a strange taste in his mouth.

He was calling it a victory anyway.
In the wake of Tom's favour an uneasy sort of truce formed between them. Harry's fury had been blunted down, which left them dancing warily around each other.

It could have been his imagination, but Harry rather thought Tom looked at him differently. Appraising rather than complacent and patronising, as if Harry had inadvertently won some measure of respect by proving himself willing to fight on Tom's level.

Things were not yet back to normal - or what had passed for normal over the last weeks. They did not share the bed: instead Tom had transfigured the armchair into a rudimentary mattress (the ease with which he'd done this filled Harry with regret: how much could have been avoided if he'd thought to do the same?), and, without ever mentioning it, they took turns sleeping there.

They were, however, talking again, perhaps less out of an emotional thaw and more because it would have been practically impossible to have kept up the silent treatment, given the close quarters and lack of alternative entertainment.

. . . It was also a tactical move on Harry's part: freely giving Tom something he wanted, so that he would have something to lose if he tried to force matters elsewhere.

And it was working. Rather than simply reverting to type and pressing Harry up against the nearest flat surface, Tom was actually trying to coax him back into the horrible, wonderful mess that was their sexual relationship. A lingering look, an accidental brush of the fingers that lasted a moment too long, a clever turn of phrase calculated to make him blush.

It would have (had) worked on him at the beginning of the summer, but despite what Tom said about what counted, Harry was no longer the inexperienced virgin he had been when Tom first seduced him. He was determined, he told himself in the darkest part of the night, as he lay there in the empty bed, to disentangle his life from Tom's; to cut the threads that bound them together. It had been too much, too intense - they'd spent every waking moment in each other's company with no one else to talk to.

And if Harry sometimes caught his own hand sneaking down to his cock, well, there was no one else to know.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Harry fully expected things to continue in that manner until the end of the vow.

It was the Saturday morning three days after their reconciliation. They were walking down the river bank to the spot where they normally bathed. The pail with the soap swung from Harry's hand. When they reached the place, he set it down on the stone, stretched, clicked his neck, and looked around.

Maybe there was a wet footprint. A movement in the bushes that couldn’t have been the wind. A whisper, a sigh, a twig breaking beneath someone's boot.

Whatever the clue was, Harry's subconscious registered it before his waking mind. He grabbed Tom's forearm as he went to unbutton his shirt.

"Wait."
Tom turned to him, bemused. He raised his eyebrow in a nonverbal question.

Harry bit his lip, scanning the area to try and see what was off. The birds were singing in the trees and the river babbled cheerfully over stones. There was nothing strange about the scene at all - and he suddenly regretted bringing it up. Tom was going to laugh at him, call him paranoid--

A dim red light shone from the bushes on the other side of the stream; Harry caught it out of the corner of his eye.

Tom, who had seen nothing, tapped his foot impatiently. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Why--"

Without pausing to consider, Harry threw himself onto him. They toppled to the ground, and the spell - for that's what it was, of course, the red light had been a stunning spell - whizzed harmlessly over their heads.

By luck alone, they landed half in the shelter of a rocky outcrop. Harry pulled his legs and Tom followed suit just in time; more spells were flashing through the air, impacting their shelter in a cacophony of sound. Chips of stone were blasted away from the rock in a cloud of grey dust.

Tom grabbed his arm. His brow furrowed as he tried, unsuccessfully, to Apparate them back to the cottage.

"What's wrong?" Harry whispered.

"~They've put up Anti-Apparition wards,~" Tom hissed, using Parseltongue so their attackers wouldn't hear. "~Whoever's done it knows what they're doing; I can't break through them.~"

The onslaught abruptly ceased. Then a voice, low pitched and sinister, said; "There's no point in hiding, children. Come out of there and fight."

They looked at each other. "~Death Eaters,~" Harry hissed. "~It has to be.~"

Tom nodded tensely. His face was pinched: worried like Harry had never seen it, not since that moment in the passageway leading from the Chamber, when they had both thought they were going to die.

"~Did you see how many?~" Tom asked.

"~I didn't see anything. Just the spell.~" Harry strained his ears, listening for any movement, any clue that would tell them where their attackers were. "~Do you think they've pressed their Marks yet?~"

"~Maybe,~" Tom said quietly. "~But then, maybe not. They'll want the credit. Still, we need to get out of here -- reinforcements will come eventually. If we don't get back behind the wards of the cottage soon, we never will.~" He shifted his grip on his wand, then continued. "~We have to fight. You shield; you're better at it than me.~"

Another time, Harry would have gloated; Tom had never admitted that fact before, despite all of the sunny afternoons they'd spent playing together in the garden. Now though, he simply met Tom's eyes with determination.

"~On three, then,~" Tom began. "~One, two,--three!~"

Tom launched himself out from behind the rock, already casting the Cruciatus curse, and Harry followed a split second later.
"PROTEGO!" he bellowed, without even looking. The practice had paid off; his wandarm moved without thought, sweeping into a perfect, textbook parry.

Just in time.

Red light flared against his newly-formed shield. To his relief, it held, although cracks splintered across the surface from the points of impact.

There were two of them.

That was the first thing Harry registered; the number. They stood on the other side of the stream like phantoms rising up from the forest floor; one tall, the other shorter but bulky. Each wore a long black cloak and a golden skull mask to hide his features. Neither seemed to have been harmed by Tom's curse; the taller man was shielding both of them; wand held almost negligently out in front of him.

"Throw down your wands, children. Surrender and come with us. You will not be harmed." the same man said, in the same voice they'd heard before. He was obviously the leader.

"And if we don't?" Tom spat.

The Death Eater did not immediately answer. His offhand rose to his face and removed the golden mask.

With a shock, Harry recognised him. He had seen him before on the cover of the Daily Prophet: one of the Lestrange brothers (he couldn't tell which) - the fanatical supporters of Voldemort who had served thirteen years in Azkaban after his fall.

Lestrange smiled. He was handsome enough, although his cheeks were gaunt and pitted. "Our instructions are to capture the two of you, if possible, and if not, to use deadly force and bring your bodies to our Lord."

"I don't believe you!" Tom shouted. His wand was trained confidently on the shorter Death Eater. "Do you even know who I am?"

The Death Eater gave a miniscule shrug. "The Dark Lord specifically asked us to come here and wait to see if Harry Potter appeared," he said. "If there was a dark haired boy with him, he was to be killed too."

The world spun on its axis. Voldemort knew about Tom -- or at least he suspected. Perhaps there had been wards on the cave. Perhaps Voldemort had finally thought to check on the ring. Or perhaps, after months of no news about what had happened to Harry and to his Horcrux on that fateful day in May, he had tried to Apparate into the cottage to just check, just confirm that a living, breathing Horcrux did not reside there, and had been rebuffed by the Fidelius Charm.

"He wouldn't," Tom said, but he didn't seem very sure. It must be very disconcerting, Harry supposed, to find out another part of your soul was willing to kill you.

The tall Death Eater did not seem to care about Tom's existential crisis. He gestured to his fellow, who raised his wand. Harry planted his feet in preparation, keeping his eyes fixed on Lestrange's trunk; the place where a wand movement would show first. They were experienced adult wizards, but he and Tom were good too; quick and used to duelling together, even if they had only ever been on opposite sides. Perhaps they could take them.

But after the first few spells, it became obvious they could not.
Harry was forced to fight entirely defensively; dodging and then shielding Tom so he had time to cast. The masked Death Eater was not much of a threat - he used the Cruciatus curse almost exclusively and without any kind of creativity. Lestrange however, was another matter. His style; fast, fluid and varied, reminded Harry strongly of the way Tom fought. Perhaps it wasn't a coincidence - Lestrange could have been Voldemort's protégé at one time -- the older version of Tom might have taught him to duel.

The only advantage they had was that, despite their threat, the Death Eaters were trying to incapacitate rather than kill. Tom didn't have the same limitation; his face lit up green as he cast the first Killing curse of the duel. Lestrange jumped awkwardly to avoid it, and the bolt hit a tree instead. It withered instantly - brown leaves burst from its branches into the air, drifting down to rest in drifts on the forest floor.

As they duelled, Harry and Tom were being pushed up the bank, one step at a time - Harry's shield splintered and he cast a new one just as it shattered into a million insubstantial fragments; Tom spent a powerful curse flying towards the tall Death Eater, who repelled it with a lazy wave of his wand.

At least the stream was between them, fast flowing and waist deep in the central part; it would take their attackers at least a few moments to wade across. If Tom and he could just get into the forest, there would be no clear line of sight; they might be able to make a run for the cottage.

But the moment he'd had this thought, Lestrange paused and pointed his wand down at the water.

"Glacius!"

A pure white jet of light poured from his wand. The surface stilled as a thick sheet of ice spread outwards from the far bank.

It was time for them to leave. Harry seized Tom's sleeve as he went to cast another Killing Curse, and dragged him after. They scrambled up the bank, ducking as spells flew after them. Into the forest they ran, Tom's right hand in Harry's left.

"Apparate!" Harry demanded.

"I can't. I still can't," Tom said, breath coming fast. "They've warded the whole area."

Harry's stomach plunged. That would have taken time, he thought. The Death Eaters had probably been waiting for them to venture down to the stream in shifts, perhaps for days. Voldemort would have told them where to set the trap; of course he knew it was where Tom always went. If Harry hadn't noticed something was wrong, they would have been surprised while bathing . . .

Footsteps sounded, and a muffled shout came from behind them. Harry and Tom looked at each other for a split second, then sped off. It was a five-minute walk from the stream to the cottage. Two boys, quick on their feet, could probably make it in half that time.

They were fast - Harry had always been so, and Tom's long legs made it easy for him to keep up. For a single, glorious moment, Harry was certain they were going to make it. They were just a few hundred feet from the clearing--

Then a third Death Eater stepped out from behind a tree to block their path.

Harry and Tom stumbled to a halt. The trap had sprung shut.

A noise to one side: leaves crunching underfoot. Harry pressed his back to Tom's and raised his wand. They shielded in unison as two bolts of light came flying towards them. Lestrange had caught
up, although his fellow was lagging.

The new Death Eater was the shortest of the three. Harry pointed his wand at him, and, reverting to an old habit, cried; "Expelliarmus!"

It did no good - he simply batted it away. The two Death Eaters, one masked, one uncovered, circled them like dark birds of prey. Their manner was leisurely; they practically radiated confidence.

They were going to lose, Harry suddenly realised. They were going to be captured and dragged before Voldemort, where Harry would be tortured and killed and Tom would be ripped out of his body and trapped back inside a vessel.

Spells flew. He and Tom defended themselves desperately. Moments later, the bulky Death Eater caught up and bent over his knees, gasping for air.

It was a stupid and arrogant move on his part. "Avada Kedavra!" Tom cried, rounding on the newcomer.

The man didn't even have time to do more than glance up to see the bolt of green. His mask flew from his face as he fell: the magic holding it there had died with its owner. Underneath, he was an older version of Harry's housemate, Goyle. But Harry was too shocked to feel anything at that moment. Next to him, Tom staggered as the strain of casting so many Killing curses in such a short time began to show.

The two remaining Death Eaters shared a glance. The next bolts of light that flew from their wands were green, the first they had used. Harry had to let go of Tom's hand so they could dodge.

It was a losing battle. A cut on Harry's forehead bled a surprising amount; he had to keep wiping the blood with his sleeve to keep it out of his eyes. Tom let out a brief scream as he was hit by a Cruciatius curse. Harry dived in the way and cast a shield that was destroyed almost instantly.

"Expecto Patronum!" he yelled, pointing his wand at Lestrange. It was a trick he'd tried on Tom before; the Death Eater did not fall for it. He only laughed as the stag cantered towards him.

But as the Patronus left Harry's wand, he thought "Stupefy" with all his might and slashed it down into the movement for the Stunning spell. Nonverbal spells rarely worked for Harry - he hated practicing them when Tom insisted. Normally because it was usually just an excuse for Tom to show off his own skill and hit him with an array of painful hexes.

But this time it worked. And the Death Eater saw the stunner too late to stop it. His eyes widened, and he dropped. The last Death Eater, the short man who had surprised them in the forest, stared down at his comrade's form in dismay.

Tom and Harry shared an ecstatic glance, and took the offensive. Moving faster, working together. Tom's face was bright and wild and free as he fought.

The small Death Eater was quick, but outnumbered. They chased him past the unconscious body of the tall Death Eater. His spells grew sloppy: a jet of blue-white light missed Harry by several feet, flying past at the level of his shin.

He was trapped by his own Anti-Apparition wards. As he tried to yank up his sleeve to activate his Dark Mark, Tom hit him with a horrible spell that Harry knew from painful experience sounded like a million church bells inside one's head. The Death Eater stumbled and retched, eyes and ears bleeding.
Crack!

It wasn't a loud sound; felt rather than heard, a sharp impact in Harry's wrist. Then the pain hit him like a freight train; his stomach lurched and his wand dropped from limp fingers.

He spun to see Lestrange standing behind him. The blue-white spell that had missed was not meant for him -- it had been a *Remnervate*! Harry dropped to his knees to scrabble for his wand in the dirt.

"That wasn't so hard--" Tom bragged, half-turning to Harry. His eyes widened as he saw for the first time that Harry's wrist was bent at an unnatural angle, that his wand was not in his hand--

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

Harry did not even think to dodge. But the spell flew over his head, like a whisper of wings in the air, and hit Tom in the flank. He crumpled where he stood, sprawling onto the ground in an unnatural position. His eyes gazed sightlessly up at the sky.

It all happened so fast that, for a long moment, Harry wasn't able to process it. He stared uncomprehendingly at Tom as his mind whirred, blank, black and empty. Tom was dead. But that wasn't possible - Tom had said he couldn't die while Harry lived, so why was he lying there on the ground, still and unmoving, one hand open and stretched towards Harry?

There came a heavy footstep. Then another.

Harry wrenched his eyes away. His wand was in his hand. But it was the wrong hand, and Harry couldn't think, couldn't breathe . . . he raised it anyway and aimed at the approaching Death Eater. The tip was trembling so badly that he had no idea if a spell would hit even if he could actually cast one.

"There, there," the Death Eater said. By contrast, his own wand was trained unerringly on Harry's chest. "Put that down and I'll take you somewhere nice."

Harry shook his head mutely.

Lestrange tutted. "I know you can't kill," he said mockingly. "Little Saint Potter. I've heard all about what happened last year, the night the Dark Lord returned to us. Do you remember the curse he used on you?"

He swept his wand into the characteristic wand movement of the Cruciatus curse.

Harry was still on his knees. In this position, dodging would be impossible. His wand was still trembling in his hand, pointed vaguely at the Death Eater's neck.

"*Cruc--*"

"*Diffindo*!" Harry screamed, blinded by panic.

And then blood.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Tom drifted free, formless and insubstantial. He did not understand what had happened. He did not seem to have a body, but there was a terrible, prickling exposed sort of feeling anyway, as if he were suddenly naked in the Great Hall. That was not something that would have bothered him so terribly, but it was highly disconcerting.
His vision was not working well. Then a leaf drifted through the air, very close to him. He could see every vein under the surface, all the little capillaries where life moved... sensation and sight and sound were all blurred together somehow.

Had they once been separate?

He could not quite figure out what had happened... his mind felt sluggish, disconnected and somehow very far away. He drifted a little, then, idly, tried to move.

To his dim surprise, it worked. He sank a little in the air.

And underneath him, there was something very warm and familiar. A shape made of matter, heavy flesh and rich blood.

A body.

Tom-- and that was who he was, of course, suddenly felt a great attraction to the idea of that. Having a body to inhabit. Something safe and enclosed.

Flattening out his essence, he searched for a way in... eventually, he identified the mouth; lips slightly parted. With an effort of will, he stretched out a part of himself down a narrow constriction, two dark, empty caverns...

What now? Why wasn't it working? In a panic, Tom tried to spread out... there was a pulling sensation---

--- Bright, blinding light in his eyes. There was something in this throat; he compulsively took a breath, sucking in the rest of his soul, deep, long, until his lungs were burning, filled past capacity, and his eyes swam with dark blotches---

And there, that was all of it. Tom coughed, and it hurt. His throat felt abraded, as if he'd just breathed in fine sand.

He came back to himself slowly. His eyes were dry and itchy, so he blinked. The trees came into focus... every leaf...

Someone was shaking his shoulder.

"-om! Tom, Tom!"

With great effort, Tom lifted his head. A green-eyed boy -- Harry, his mind supplied immediately, focussing in on that one word. Harry.

There was a lot of blood. That was the third thing Tom noticed, after his eyes and his distraught expression. It was splattered across Harry's face and neck. His shirt was soaked through. Tom lifted his hand, uncoordinated, and touched a knuckle to his cheek.

"That's the first time you've called me that."

"What?" Harry asked wetly.

Tom realised he had said that out loud. "'Tom'," he clarified. There was a dreamy feeling in the back of his head. He moved his leg slightly, just to see if he could. "You normally call me Riddle."

"I thought you were dead!" Harry cried, ignoring his last statement. And then, perhaps realising how upset he sounded; "Not that that would have been a bad thing! I just wasn't expecting it, is all."
"I was dead?" Tom asked, trying to puzzle out what he meant. His eyes were beginning to focus better - beyond Harry, there was a black shape, sprawled on the forest floor, just feet away.

The last Death Eater.

His head was half-severed, lolling back like the Gryffindor ghost's. Harry must have seen where his eyes had gone, but he didn't turn round to look himself.

"I killed him," he said; eyes focussed on the middle distance, rocking a little. "I think he's dead."

He was definitely dead. Tom shook his head and his thought became clearer. The clarity brought with it a sharp spike of adrenaline. Tom seized Harry's hand where it held his shoulder.

"Did he press his Mark?" he demanded.

"What?"

He tried to sit up. The world spun as all the blood rushed to his head. He groaned and clapped his hand to his temple. Where was his wand?

"The Death Eater. Did he press it?"

"I didn't see--" Harry said, still dazed.

"We need to get back to the cottage," Tom interrupted. Voldemort would be coming.

It might have been possible to Apparate: the wards blocking them would have died with their caster, but Tom didn't trust himself to get them there in one piece and he'd never taught Harry how. Not that it would have helped: Harry was in shock, in a worse condition than him.

He stood instead, leaning on Harry when he wobbled. Supporting each other, they half-stumbled, half-ran back to the cottage. Tom's foreboding grew with every step. A storm was gathering in his mind; he had seen the flash of lightning: how long would the thunder take?

They came over a rise and the trees blessedly gave way to the clearing. A few more steps out into the open, and they were past the boundary of the stone circle. Harry crumpled, gazing down at the ground, and Tom leant a hand on his shoulder for balance, coughing hoarsely.

Something prompted Tom to turn around. He did, eyes scanning the forest. The sky had clouded over; dark thunderheads stood on the horizon.

There was a man standing at the treeline.

There had been no sharp crack of Apparition; he had appeared there silently. It was too far to make out much, but he was tall, very tall. His dark, hooded cloak moved in a non-existent breeze.

Harry, who had twisted his head when Tom turned, grabbed his hand. Tom suddenly realised that he had been stepping forwards towards the boundary, lured by the siren's call of another part of his soul.
This is why you never win

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to Mith for betaing this! They run an awesome Tomarry blog, if you want to check it out!

I've made a nerdy diagram to show the connections between Tom, Voldemort and Harry's souls - it's so hard to explain it in words! You can find it here.

Lord Voldemort.

His face was hidden by the hood of his cloak, but Tom knew anyway. There was an almost-physical pull towards the figure, felt not in his waking mind, but in the deepest reaches of his fractured soul. This was the Dark Lord, the spider sitting at the centre of a web of Horcruxes.

His own future.

Harry's hand was clenched around his wrist, tight enough to bruise. He knew too, Tom could tell.

Neither of them spoke, as if fearing that it would somehow attract his attention, give away their position. It was irrational, of course. He couldn't get in. He couldn't even see them. The Fidelius Charm Harry had cast all those weeks ago hid the precise location of the cottage: Voldemort could search the clearing for a thousand years, go over every blade of grass and fallen leaf, and still not find it.

And yet . . . it still seemed as if he was staring right at them.

Tom shivered as doubt spread like an icy breath on the back of his neck. What if Voldemort could use the connection between their souls to negate the charm? What if it had been poorly cast? It seemed to have worked well enough at the time, but Harry had not been confident. Perhaps Voldemort could see them, was just pretending ignorance, drawing the moment out sadistically . . . Tom wished, suddenly, that the magic took the form of a solid wall, or at least a shimmering magical shield. Anything visible would do. He swallowed hard and flexed his own fingers around Harry's wrist, gripping him in turn. If Voldemort took a single step towards them, he would Apparate them away, chance of being splinched be damned.

But Voldemort did not move. And then, between one heartbeat and the next, he was gone.

The disappearance was so quick and so silent that Tom flinched in surprise. His scanned the treeline frantically, then span around to check the garden, arm twisted awkwardly across his body to keep ahold of Harry.

Nothing. There was no one there, and the seductive tug had vanished as if it had never been.

Tom dropped Harry's hand and laughed in giddy relief. He pocketed his wand and rolled his shoulders; feeling, suddenly, all of the aches and pains from the fight and his unconscious tumble to the forest floor.

"Is he gone?"
"He can't get in," Tom replied. "If he could, he would have done so already." He offered a hand to Harry, who stared at it uncomprehendingly.

There was a light tremor to his shoulders and his eyes were wild, flitting from side to side, then down to the blood coating his own hands. Not fear of Voldemort, but rather a reaction to making his first kill.

Tom did not understand it. When his curse had hit the bulky Death Eater, all he had felt was power and triumph - the idea of feeling anything negative after killing was alien to him. After all, he only killed people for good reasons or by unforeseeable accident, so there was nothing for him to regret.

Harry did not seem to be about to move by himself. Tom crouched down and slotted his arms under his armpits to pull him to his feet. Harry didn't resist, and leant on him as they made their way through the garden to the front door.

Once inside the cottage, Tom hooked out a chair with his foot and dropped Harry into it. He set the kettle to boil and used his wand to fill a bucket with water. The soap had been left down by the stream, but there was a spare bar in the far left kitchen cabinet.

When he turned back to the table, Harry was slumped in his chair like a puppet with its strings cut. Tom sighed, and dragged the other chair around. He sat down facing him, full bucket held carefully between his knees. Harry watched limply as he raised a sponge bearing warm, soapy water to dab at the blood splattered onto his face. It was a chore he could have performed with magic, but Tom had an impulse to do it the Muggle way. A ritualistic, ageless act.

"I killed someone," Harry confessed, as Tom gripped his chin to angle his face. He swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing. "Do you think he -- the b-body -- is still there?"

"Voldemort has probably moved it." He kept his voice sympathetic, but inwardly he couldn't have been more pleased.

Harry was a killer now, just like him. Literally baptised in blood.

Tom had never met another one before. His friends had talked about it, of course, what they'd like to do to this or that uppity Mudblood, but Tom was the only one to actually turn his words into actions.

Harry nodded vaguely in response. It was a small motion, caged by the grip Tom had on his jaw.

"I didn't mean to do it," he said, closing his eyes as Tom removed his glasses and ran the sponge over the bridge of his nose. "I wasn't even thinking about it - I just wanted him to go away. He'd have been fine if I'd hit him somewhere else."

Privately, Tom doubted that. Harry had put an impressive amount of power behind that Severing Charm, if the results were anything to judge by.

"I know," he said instead. "But you did well, Harry. He was trying to kill us - he did kill me - so of course he had to die. It's only a pity it was so quick."

Harry's hand closed around his forearm as he went to move the sponge to his sticky hair. Tom stilled at the unexpected motion.

"You're happy about this, aren't you?"

Tom shrugged.
"Yeah, stupid question," Harry muttered. He sighed and let go of him. His mouth opened then closed again - apparently thinking how to phrase something.

"It’s not so much that I regret it," he said eventually, meeting Tom's eyes in a flash of green. "But I never wanted to be a killer. Can you understand that?"

"No," Tom said honestly. People killed all the time - plants, all manner of animals. Why was it so different to kill other people?

Harry's eyes moved over his face. Then he huffed out something that was almost a laugh.

"I shouldn't have expected anything more from you," he said wryly, and held out his hand for the sponge. Tom deposited it in his palm and watched as Harry rinsed off his own arms. He was smiling a little, but his mood turned sombre again as he stared down into the depths of the bucket. Beneath the sparse layer of bubbles on the surface, the water was red.

"Lestrange," Harry said abruptly, not looking up.

"Hmm?"

"The man I -- the tall Death Eater. That was his name. I recognised him from the Daily Prophet - there were two brothers: Rabastan and Rodolphus, who broke out of Azkaban a few months ago. I don't know which one he was. The one you got was called Goyle."

Goyle. Tom filed the name away for future reference. It was good to keep track of these things. "One of my dormmates was called Lestrange," he said, more to make conversation than anything else. Harry seemed to find talking cathartic. "Raphael - we all called him Rafe. I can see the resemblance, now that you mention it. He was a good duellist too."

"Were you friends?"

Rafe had been good fun. Abraxas shied away from the darkest of Tom's ideas, but Rafe was always ready to lend an ear or a hand.

"Yes."

Harry was silent for a long moment. "Are we friends?"

"Sometimes."

Harry nodded, agreeing with that assessment.

"And it doesn’t bother you that your friend's son is dead?"

"I liked Rafe. I didn't know the man you killed."

Harry stared down at the table grain. Was he annoyed? Tom felt that he was, but couldn’t think what he’d done to deserve it.

The kettle was whistling. Tom passed the bucket over to Harry and stood. At the kitchen counter, he poured out two steaming mugs of tea - just milk in his own, milk and two sugars in the other.

And maybe something else? Tom stole a glance at Harry. His hands were shaking and his mouth was still twisted into a scowl. Tom didn't want to deal with him if he was going to be moody. He measured out a teaspoon of Calming Draught and stirred it into his mug.
Harry looked up when Tom set it on the table in front of him.

"Did the other Death Eater - the survivor - see what happened, do you think?" Tom asked, sliding back into his chair. "Voldemort will question him."

Harry wrapped his hands around his mug pensively. "You mean: did he see you get hit by that Killing Curse? I don't know. Maybe. But I think he passed out very soon after you got him with that spell, and his head was facing away from us when we left."

They should have killed him, Tom thought grimly. It was a stupid oversight. Even if the Death Eater didn't remember, if his eyes had been open when it happened, Voldemort would be able to extract it from his mind. The whole encounter, actually: Harry and he fighting together, with no obvious coercion.

He took a sip of his tea. Harry unconsciously mirrored him, then frowned down into his mug.

"I think the milk is off."

"It tastes fine to me."

What would Voldemort think of what he learnt? It might have made some sense to keep Harry as a hostage, but it would also have been a terribly dangerous thing to do if Harry was not physically bound to him. The chance of him escaping didn't bear thinking about.

"What was it like?" Harry asked suddenly.

"What?"

"When you died. What did it feel like?"

Tom paused, trying to organise his thoughts. It was not easy, actually, to remember those moments in between being hit and waking up. Like the last vestiges of a dream.

"I can't really describe it," he said finally. "Very exposed? It wasn't a pleasant feeling."

"And . . . and did it hurt? When the Killing Curse hit you?"

Right. Harry's parents had also died that way.

"No - I didn't even realise it had happened. One moment I was just turning round to check on you, then I was drifting free in the air above my body."

"That-that's good," Harry said, very quietly. He took a long gulp of his tea, nose wrinkling at the taste. It must have been a good potion, because, almost immediately, the lines faded from his forehead and he straightened in his chair.

"How long was I . . . dead?" Tom asked. Time had meant nothing in the period that he was out of his body.

"Minutes. Maybe less, I don't know." Harry coughed to clear his throat. He didn't seem to want to meet Tom's eyes. "I wasn't thinking straight. I checked for a pulse, but I couldn't feel anything. You were completely still. Then all of a sudden you started coughing."

Tom nodded, not knowing what to say to that.

"Does it bother you that Voldemort is willing to kill you?" Harry asked. His tone was a little strange
"I--" Tom began, then trailed off, trying to work out what to say. He had been shocked at first, but in retrospect it shouldn't have been a surprise. From Voldemort's perspective, Tom had been walking around and probably sharing his secrets for months without making any attempt to contact him. And he probably still thought Tom was simply a tiny, expendable sliver of soul - he had no idea that they had been gathering up other Horcruxes.

"My first Horcrux was always intended to be an experiment," Tom said finally. "I wanted to see if I could get the proportions right - see, I didn't want to make six Horcruxes and leave myself with just a seventh of my soul - I intended to put one twelfth by volume into each vessel, leaving myself with a full half."

Harry's eyes had glazed over the moment he mentioned fractions. Tom coughed and moved on.

"The diary was meant as a weapon from the very beginning. And I suppose, next to the other objects he has used; the Gaunt ring - he patted the small lump still hanging around his neck - Slytherin's locket, his old diary must not have seemed such a sacrifice."

"I bet he's angry now," Harry said. "You get angry easily. If I was still a Horcrux, I know my scar would be burning." He went to raise his hand to his forehead, but then became distracted by the sight of his own fingers. He opened and closed them slowly in front of his face.

The Calming Draught might have turned, Tom reflected. They did tend to change with age, and that particular batch had been brewed more than fifty years ago.

"I do not get angry easily," Tom said as he tried to surreptitiously grab the mug from Harry, who scowled and cradled it closer.

"You get pissed off literally every time something doesn't go your way!"

That was blatantly untrue. Tom was very even-tempered. But perhaps now wasn't the best time to argue that - Harry was practically swaying in his seat. Tom sighed.

"Come on, let's lie down--"

Harry batted indignantly at his hands as he was pulled to his feet, but Tom's grip was firm, and after a minute Harry relaxed into his side. As ever, torn between pressing closer and pulling away.

Once he was standing, it was obvious how little coordination Harry had. Tom felt a stab of something that was not quite regret - obviously, he couldn't have known what the potion would do in advance - but mildly uncomfortable all the same.

Harry clutched at his shirt as Tom steered him into the bedroom. "Tom?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad I don't have to go and live in Albania."

"What?" Tom must have misheard.

"That's what Voldemort had to do when he lost his body. Wormtail milked a snake for him, did you know that?"

Tom had not known that. He dropped Harry onto the bed - ignoring his surprised "Oooph!" - and
ran his wand over his clothes to remove the rest of the blood.

Harry nuzzled into the pillow as Tom pulled off his shoes. His shirt was riding up and his cheeks were flushed warm.

There was a part of Tom that wanted to straddle him and jerk off onto his stomach while he was still sleepy and confused, but he settled instead for toeing off his own shoes and climbing into the head of the bed. He sat cross-legged against the headboard and pulled Harry up until his head rested on his lap.

Tom was tired too, but his mind was buzzing. Exhausted and overstimulated all at once.

He had died.

He had come back.

It was a heady thought. It was one thing to believe that his bond with Harry would keep him alive, but another thing entirely to actually experience it, to be torn from his body and float above it and then find his way back in . . .

All of his theories had been confirmed. The three fragments of soul that made up him - the piece from the diary and the two mindless pieces that had lived in the ring and Harry's scar - were joined together strongly enough that they did not fly apart when outside his body. And one of those pieces was merged with Harry's soul - that link anchored the rest of him.

It was not precisely the same thing as a Horcrux. Tom's connection to Voldemort was one-way. It couldn't keep Tom alive. But his connection to Harry was mutual and strong enough to physically bind them together. The thick strand of merged soul acted like a rope tied between two climbers on a high mountain ridge. If one of them fell, so long as the other kept his footing, both of them would live.

So far as Tom knew, nothing like it had ever existed before in the whole history of magic. The soul was relatively unexplored by wizards: its nature was one of the greatest mysteries of magic, and practical experimentation one of magic's greatest taboos.

How was he supposed to give that up? Tom chewed his lip, thinking about the situation. His vow with Harry ended in little more than a week. He didn't have enough of his own soul back to risk splitting off a portion, and unless he could find another of his Horcruxes very soon, he would be mortal again when he cut away the connection to Harry.

Alternatively, he could take Harry with him.

Tom stared down at Harry's face. His breaths were slow and even, ghosting out of his parted lips. One hand lay half-curled on Tom's knee.

It was, in some ways, a very appealing idea.

Harry was . . . unusual. Somewhat to his surprise, Tom had not lost interest in him in all the time they'd spent together. He normally broke people much faster than that, as the force of his personality ground them down until they were nothing but subservient little minions. But on the contrary, Harry was actually learning to push back, forcing Tom to work to maintain the delicate balance of power that existed between them. The continued lack of obedience should have been infuriating, but instead, strangely, the danger was what made dealing with Harry so addictively fun.

He was useful too - the fight that morning had been electric. Terrifying but exhilarating. Tom did not
like duelling with a partner - he hated the paired duels that Professor Merrythought insisted on running on the second meeting of every month. His classmates were inevitably slower and weaker than him, and frequently got in the way.

Harry though, was a good fighter, and compatible in a way no one had ever been before. Strong at defence where Tom excelled at offence and capable of looking after himself. Tom still won three practice matches in every four, but there was a marvellously unpredictable quality to Harry's duelling that showed most when it was a matter of life and death.

But he was controllable only because he was expecting to leave at the end of the summer. Would Tom really be able to coax or threaten Harry into swearing a second vow? Unlikely. But then Harry would need to be kept permanently drugged: otherwise he would eventually find a way to tip Dumbledore off about their location. And taking Harry with him would paint a target on their backs - Voldemort probably would not bother hunting Tom down, if he left alone for a remote corner of the globe without spilling his secrets - a Horcrux was still a Horcrux if it was in Tibet - but Harry he wanted dead. Tom was not really the type to forgive and forget, and Harry had lost him the war when he was a baby, and had apparently thwarted his plans ever since.

Tom stroked his springy hair idly, turning the possibilities over in his mind. Outside the window, a light drizzle had begun to fall: rain obscured the view of the mountains. Even though he could no longer feel Voldemort, at least one of his followers was probably still out there somewhere, ready to alert his master in the unlikely event that they stepped outside the wards.

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Harry woke up in stages, rising out of blurry, confusing dreams filled with bright lights and people shouting. When he finally opened his eyes, it was to an empty bedroom. To his puzzlement, he was still wearing his day clothes, even though his glasses were neatly folded on the nightstand. He put them on and sat up, blinking through the rush of dizziness.

The room was dim: through the window he could see a vibrant red sky and high clouds, lit from below by the setting sun.

Red . . .

Oh.

The fight. A panicked spell. Cartilage and tendon, cleanly sliced. White bone: the upper part of the spine showing through the severed flesh, and blood, so much blood, an arterial spray--

Don't think about it.

Harry pushed his legs off the side until his feet were flat on the floor. His blunt nails dug into the edge of the mattress.

Don't think about it. Think about something else instead.

Why had he fallen asleep in the middle of the day? Harry kneaded his forehead, wincing as he encountered the scabbed-over cut on his temple. Tom had washed the . . . Tom had cleaned him up. And after that they had talked, and then confusion and dizziness had overtaken him . . .

Harry frowned, trying to work it out. His mind was still waking up, apparently. He pushed off the bed and stood, brushed down his clothes and padded over to the door.

In the main room, Tom was standing in front of the fireplace, barefoot on the rug, and apparently
cooking dinner for them in the cauldron. His shoulders were relaxed, and he was humming quietly.

"What time is it?" Harry asked, leaning his back against the doorframe.

Tom smiled to see him. "Just past nine. Did you sleep well?"

Harry stared at him, trying to put two and two together.

"You gave me something."

The words slipped out of him without thought, but the moment they left his mouth, Harry knew they were true.

"No I didn’t," Tom said quickly, and with so much conviction that Harry would have believed it if he didn't know him so well. As it was, the lie annoyed him further.

"I don’t just pass out like that when I'm upset - the opposite, actually! You dosed my tea."

Tom, realising that Harry wasn't about to drop it, let go of the wooden spoon, which began stirring the food by itself. He stepped towards Harry, hands held out placatingly in front of him.

"Okay, yes, but it was just a drop of Calming Draught. It turned out stronger than I was expecting, but really, that was probably for the best. It's good that you slept it off."

Tom, always trying to make decisions for him. "You couldn’t be bothered to deal with my emotions, so you knocked me out," Harry translated, voice tight. Anger, repressed for weeks, months, was suddenly bubbling away inside of him. The favour, the cave, Pansy . . .

Harry wanted it all out in the open. Somehow, he had never properly confronted Tom about any of it - whenever it seemed that he might bring it up, Tom had always been able to defuse him, to distract him with something else.

But it was now or never. There were days left now - if Harry didn’t speak up, it would probably eat at him for years to come.

"Why didn't you just ask if I wanted it? Why can you never ask?"

"I already told you it was an accident!"

It wasn’t an apology, of course. Tom never apologised - instead, he just explained how whatever horrible thing he'd done was a Good Thing for Harry. And even if he did say sorry, it didn't mean anything. It was just a word he had learnt to smooth things over with people.

"It's not just about that! You're always doing this: taking my choices away, treating me like a pet that can just be trained to do this or that, praised when it does well, knocked out when it annoys you-.."

"Oh? Like when?"

As if he didn't know what Harry was talking about!

"Forcing me to drink the potion in the cave! And what you made me do afterwards--!"

"What I made you do afterwards?" Tom repeated, stepping into Harry's space. Harry had nowhere to go: his back bumped up against the wall. "You enjoyed that too, as I recall. You liked having me in your mouth, claiming you."
Tom was trying to fluster him. It was something he always did, steering the conversation towards sex, talking dirty, just so he could watch Harry blush and stutter over the words. But Harry was sick of shying away from talking about what they did together.

"You didn’t have to force me! I would have done that -" he paused, working up the courage to actually say it "- I would have sucked you off willingly, weeks ago, if you’d only asked nicely!"

"You would?" Tom smirked down at him. "I didn't realise you wanted an active role. You should have said so sooner - I thought you were enjoying pretending to be assaulted. Poor, innocent Harry, being forced to do dirty things by his bad, evil captor . . ."

There was an uncomfortable element of truth to that statement. It had been a convenient fiction for both of them. But Tom knew where the line was, and knew he had crossed it. And anyway, he was just trying to twist Harry's original argument into something he could win.

"It's all about control with you," Harry said stubbornly, refusing to be distracted. Tom's dark eyes bored down into his. "That, and hurting people. You hurt people all the time, even when there's no benefit in it for you, like there's some black hole inside of you that you have to keep on feeding. It's sad, Tom. You could have been anything you wanted. You're smart, you're brave, you're so fucking charming that half the time you're talking I don't know which way is up, but all you do is cause harm."

Tom's long-fingered hand was around his throat before he even saw it move. His face had twisted into a rare scowl. Not so smug now, was he?

"What are you going to do?" Harry sneered, fearless. "Choke me? Take out your wand and torture me? Cruelty is your biggest weakness, Tom. You fuck up all your own plans - like when you woke me up in the Chamber just so you could play with me, and when Voldemort gave me back my wand in the graveyard last year. It's impossible for people to trust you: we've been fucking for months and I know you'd still stab me in the back just to watch me bleed."

Tom's face was pale with anger when Harry finished his tirade. But there was surprise there too, written in the almost imperceptible widening of his eyes and the faint lines on his brow. Tom had to already know that his compulsive need to hurt and control others frequently hurt him too, but this was probably the first time anyone had called him on it.

His fingers, though, tightened on Harry's neck, applying just a whisper of pressure.

"Presumptuous, Harry," he spat. "Who are you without me, anyway? Without Voldemort? You have your own little talents, but in the grand scheme of things, you're nothing special. You were destined for a simple, mediocre sort of life - a boring wife, boring children, a boring job--"

"That's the life I want!"

"Oh really?" Tom shifted even closer, until they were chest to chest. He moved his thigh to press between Harry's legs - sexual, yes, but mostly it was a power play. "You don't like the excitement? You don't like the danger?"

Harry stared up into his eyes as his breath ghosted across his face.

"Proving my point, Tom," he said softly.

"And you're proving mine," Tom snapped. His fingers clenched and Harry gasped in a breath that wouldn’t quite come. "You pretend you don't like it, but you're always egging me on. Your life must have been so dull before I was in it--"
The sheer arrogance of that statement! Harry's wand was out of his sleeve and pressed into the underside of Tom's jaw before he knew it. They both stilled. Stalemate.

"I killed someone," Harry said hoarsely. Tom's hand was just about loose enough for him to talk. "I could kill you."

It was a new idea - shocking and unexpected.

"Oh yes?" Tom asked. His thumb stroked along Harry's neck; a threat and a caress. "What about your vow?"

"I can live without my magic. I'd kill you, burn your body so you can't come back, burn this cottage too--"

"It's not that simple, Harry. We proved that today -- you can't kill me without killing yourself. While we're bound, so long as you live, I live."

"There's a way to break the bond though, isn't there? You're going to be using it in a few days' time anyway."

"Maybe I won't," Tom breathed, lips just millimetres from his own, hand warm around his throat. "Maybe I'll keep you."

Unreasoning fury burst into life in Harry's chest at the implication Tom would go back on his promise. In the back of his mind though, he had known this was increasingly a risk - it had been the elephant in the room, growing larger and larger as each day went past without them finding another Horcrux. Tom was just finally putting it into words.

"Try it," Harry hissed, grabbing Tom's collar with his spare hand. The wand held in the other sparked red at the tip. "Just try it, Tom. But be warned - I will kill you if you do."

Tom's hand left his neck to wrench the heated wand away from him. Harry took it as an opportunity to shove his back off the wall--

But Tom's other arm came up to wrap around his waist, pulling him up until he was on his toes. They stilled, lips a breath apart.

And then there was no space between them at all.

Harry didn't know which one of them had closed the gap. Maybe it didn't matter. Tom fought him for control of the kiss until the bond sprang back to life between them, obliterating all thought.

Harry hadn't realised how much he had missed it until that moment. Warm, safe, weightless, a wonderful freefall that never seemed to end. Just as good as the first time. Better.

Tom's emotions were swirling around him: a hopeless tangle of frustration and reluctant fascination. A mirror of Harry's own.

He sighed into Tom's mouth and let go, let himself be drawn into that heady current, that place he went with Tom sometimes where nothing else mattered but the shining strand between their souls.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When they finally broke apart, the kitchen was lit only by the flickering fire. The setting sun had dropped below the horizon. Harry's heart beat like a trapped butterfly in his chest. Tom's hair was
mussed.

They said nothing for an age. Then:

"It was just a joke. I'll let you go. Nine days, Harry."

*Liar*, Harry thought, but didn't say. *Liar*. 
In the days that followed their fight, Harry could never quite shake the sensation of being watched. There were shadows in the woods sometimes, seen out of the corner of one's eye. Maybe the wind. Maybe a Death Eater under a Disillusionment charm.

Tom was just as jumpy. Without ever discussing it, they were almost always within touching distance, far closer than the bond between their souls demanded, ready to Apparate away at a moment's notice. It wasn't so bad inside the building - the thick stone walls provided at least the illusion of protection - but whenever Harry went to the outhouse, Tom always came up with some pretext to go at the same time as him. They took turns on the loo, making light, carefully casual conversation through the closed door. When it was Harry's turn to be outside, he tried not to look too closely at the trees.

The atmosphere would have been suffocating if they hadn't made up. There had been no apology from Tom, no promise to do better, but Harry hadn't expected there to be. He felt much lighter now that he'd said what he wanted to say.

And Tom was making an effort of his own. Two days after their fight, on Harry's birthday, Tom had woken him up and then crawled into the bed to do wonderful, terrible things to him with his mouth. He had clearly never done it before, but he approached the task with the same single-minded focus and determination he had for any new skill, and before long Harry was moaning and gasping and twisting the sheets in sweaty palms. When he came, Tom swallowed, probably more by accident than anything else, but didn't seem to mind. He climbed on top of Harry and rutted lazily between his thighs while Harry plucked at his sleeves, smiling a broad, hazy smile.

It was a particularly clever move on Tom's part. No more was said on the topic, but the next evening, Tom transfigured the creaky, lopsided mattress back into an armchair and snuggled smugly up behind a wary but unresisting Harry in the bedroom.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

But as the 6th of August drew closer without them finding another Horcrux, Tom's frustration grew. They talked over details of his life together, places he had visited. Tom, who was at first cagey with information, gave Harry more and more in the hope that he would spot something he couldn't.

One sunny afternoon found them sat across from each other on the rug in front of the empty fireplace with the contents of Tom's trunk spread out between them. Tom perused a stack of old letters, while Harry read through his seventh year diary. It was a strange object - written not by the Tom he knew, but his other part, the piece of his soul that had gone on to become Lord Voldemort.

Harry had been half expecting to find plans for world domination within its pages, but the reality was more mundane. Class schedules and homework deadlines, esoteric patterns of runes that spanned several pages and meaningless squiggles that were apparently Arithmancy equations. More
interesting was a list of passwords (for the Hufflepuff Common Room, if the doodle of a badger heading the page was any indication), and more than one long essay on Professor Dumbledore's many flaws, written in increasingly tiny font as space on the page ran out.

And everywhere, filling the margins, scrawled on the inside back cover, the blank spaces around the calendar, were little observations on his classmates' and teachers' daily lives.

"BR and SP talking to AB again," Harry said, holding the book sideways to read a few aloud. "NK broken up with AR . . . why bother writing all this down?"

"It's just good to keep track of what's going on at school," Tom said, sorting through a stack of warning messages from the Improper Use of Magic Office - apparently the Ministry had been more lax back in his day. "NK will be Nicola Kanaris . . . and AR Alexander Rowle. They got together just before I went into the diary."

"Fascinating," Harry said, turning the page. "And this? KoW meeting, 8 p.m., Classroom B27 ?"

"KoW stands for Knights of Walpurgis, obviously. And B27 is in the Dungeons: it's at the end of that little corridor to the side of the Potions classroom. No one ever goes down there, not even the House Elves."

"Do you think you might have hidden a Horcrux there?"

It was mostly a joke, but Tom, whose sense of humour had been growing increasingly tetchy over the last few days, gave him a scathing look. Harry held his hands up in a mockery of surrender.

"Okay, not B27." He snapped the diary closed and set it down on the neat pile of journals - one for each year other than 1943. "I don't think we're going to find anything in here."

"It has to be somewhere."

Harry gave a long sigh, but indulged him. "Okay . . . things Tom likes . . . impressive and magical places . . . dark caves . . . dangerous creatures, hurting people . . . shiny objects -- Oh!-" he snapped his fingers "-What about Gringotts?"

Tom glowered at him, nettled. "I don't like your tone. And it won't be Gringotts: I don't even have a vault."

"Maybe you opened one?"

"And I don't trust Goblins."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Of course not. What about The Leaky Cauldron?"

"You call that an impressive, magical place? It's a grimy pub."

"It's the gateway to the magical world!" The Leaky Cauldron had always seemed very impressive to him. It represented a new year at Hogwarts, escape from the Dursleys.

"No," Tom said.

"The Shrieking Shack?"

"The what?"

Oh right. It had been 'shrieking' because of Lupin's monthly transformations, in the sixties . . . or the
"What else?" Tom asked impatiently when Harry didn't suggest another option.

"You obviously don't like any of my ideas - how about you come up with some of your own?"

Tom set the letters down. "The problem is," he said, running a hand through his hair, "I've not been to many places in the Wizarding World. There are lots of things I'd like to see, but so far I've only visited Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley, Hogsmeade, and Hogwarts. Abraxas did wrangle his parents into letting me spend a week at his house the summer after Third Year, but I didn't like it all that much. Mrs. Malfoy spent the entire holiday looking down her nose at me." He paused, then smiled viciously, remembering something. "I got my own back though: she had all these little brightly-coloured songbirds, and one day I--"

"So did she think you were a Muggleborn then?" Harry asked, hoping to forestall the undoubtedly horrible story of whatever Tom had done to Mrs. Malfoy's songbirds. "Is that why she didn't like you?"

Tom sniffed. "Brax's parents weren't that liberal. No, she thought I was a half- or pure-blood just like everybody else."

"What?" Harry asked. "Why would people think that? I mean, no offence, but you turned up to Hogwarts in secondhand robes, and 'Riddle' isn't exactly a recognisable name . . ."

"I am a half-blood."

"Yeah, but you found that out recently, right?"

"I always knew," Tom said. "How could someone like me have come from Muggle stock? It's just that I used to think my father was the magical one, is all."

"But your classmates had no reason to believe that when you started . . . unless you kept it a secret where you grew up?"

"Oh no, I told everyone on my first day," Tom replied breezily.

Harry's eyebrows climbed. "Tolerant lot, Slytherins."

Tom laughed. "No, you don't understand. I told all my new housemates that when I was a little baby, I had been left in a horrible Muggle orphanage by a beautiful woman wearing a long cloak. She gave the matron a bag of heavy gold coins and my name, then left without another word. And then I showed off my Parseltongue. After that, everyone assumed I was the product of some sordid affair. It was scandalous, so naturally everyone in the school knew about it by morning."

"And that worked?"

"Of course it worked: people would rather believe an exciting lie than the boring truth. It was quite fun, actually. People spent years speculating on whether my father was a Muggle or a wizard, and if the latter, just who he was. My Head of House - Sluggy - even pulled me aside during my first Potions lesson, put his fat fingers on my shoulder, and said-' It would be dreadfully impolite to make inquiries, my boy, but I would dearly like to. Why, you look a little like Tiio Derwent, Head Healer for Bugs and Magical Diseases at St Mungo's . . . famous for his little indiscretions, you know . . .'"

Tom finished speaking, and puffed out his chest, as if expecting Harry to gush over his cleverness. It
was probably the first time he'd had the opportunity to brag about it.

"Congratulations?" Harry offered, as the silence stretched out.

"It was an excellent lie," Tom gloated, either missing Harry's tone or choosing to ignore it. "One of my best. I thought it up on the train, you know, after Igor Parkinson refused to sit next to a Mudblood." He took a sip of his tea and replaced it on the hearth. Harry unrolled a piece of parchment to find Tom's fourth year Transfigurations homework. 'Exceeds Expectations' was scrawled on the top right corner in shimmering purple ink.

"What was your first day like?"

Harry looked up at the unexpected question. "Overwhelming," he said, finally, thinking back to that first time in the Great Hall. "Everybody knew who I was as soon as my name was called for the Sorting. I hated it."

Tom was grinning. It wasn't a nice grin.

"What?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"You're shy, aren't you? I suspected, but it's hard to tell when it's just the two of us."

"I'm not!" Harry cried. And he wasn't. He'd run the DA hadn't he? He hadn't loved speaking in front of loads of people, but he'd done it anyway. "I just don't having lots of strangers whispering about me."

"Let them talk. What do their opinions matter anyway?"

Harry thought about that for a moment. "We should have swapped lives. I could have been a no-name orphan with no Dark Lord trying to kill me, and you could have revelled in being the famous Harry Potter. I bet you'd have loved it. I had to give interviews."

"I do like the sound of that," Tom said with a smile in his voice. "I don't know that you'd had made a good Dark Lord though."

He gestured to a stack of textbooks beside Harry. Harry passed them over without a word, brushing their fingers together as he did.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

But they didn't find a Horcrux that day, or the day after. And before long, Tom was leaning against the kitchen counter, watching Harry draw a line through August 4th on the calendar pinned to the back of the main door.

Tom did not like the calendar. Harry had drawn it on a spare piece of parchment the day after the visit to the huge Muggle greengrocer's that wasn't really a greengrocer's. All those neat little crosses seemed to be mocking him as they marched towards August 6th, which was circled in red ink. He also didn't appreciate the way Harry's fingers lingered on the page afterwards. He was probably thinking about all the people he wanted to see, the friends he occasionally spoke of with a wistful, far-away look in his eyes.

Harry, who was oblivious to Tom's mood, set down the quill and passed him on the way to bed. Tom suppressed an urge to catch him around the waist and press him up against the nearest surface, hold him still as his body tensed. Pinned, his attention fully on Tom.
Instead, he followed him silently into the bedroom. Harry slid straight under the covers, but Tom sat on the side for a while with his feet flat on the floor.

It was a strange feeling he was experiencing. Tom wasn't prone to stress or worry - normally he made a decision and acted on it. But now he felt paralysed with indecision, not knowing what to do about the vow, Harry, the Horcrux, Voldemort. Everything seemed to be racing towards an end, like an out of control car towards the lip of a cliff.

"C'mon," Harry murmured sleepily. Tom sighed, but blew out the candle and lay down on his side. Harry immediately shuffled back into him; not trying to start something, just a comfortable habit.

It was not yet fully dark in the room. The sky outside the window was navy blue. Most of the stars weren't out, but Mars hung above the trees, blinking at him like a fiery red eye. Tom lay there for a long time, long after Harry's breathing turned deep and even.

Horcrux

One was at school, he was certain, but retrieving it was an impossible dream. Tom couldn't risk dragging Harry down one of the secret passages into Hogwarts - the chance of discovery would be too great. And it might well have been hidden in the Chamber of Secrets and now buried under who knew how many tonnes of stone. He had searched for it in the time he was there, but the Chamber was huge and he hadn't been able to go far from Pansy's unconscious body.

What about the others? There were three more to find. Perhaps they had been left with Death Eaters? That was where his diary had been hidden: Tom still remembered the familiar scrawl digging into his pages:

Tom,

It is strange to write to one's own self, and stranger still to write to an echo of one's soul, but it seems only polite to let you know your own situation.

It has been seven years since we were one. So much has happened for me, but for you it is perhaps the merest blink of an eye. I am leaving now, leaving Britain in search of the magic we dreamed of together. This diary I will leave with Abraxas, the most reliable of my followers. It may be some time before I am able to retrieve you and give you a more permanent home.

You understand, of course,

Lord Voldemort.

Tom distantly remembered his curiosity and affront. But those two short, impersonal paragraphs had not been enough to wake him the way Pansy had done, decades later.

Unfortunately, Harry didn't know many of his followers, and those he had heard of had spent the last thirteen years in Azkaban.

Tom shifted, trying to find a cooler part of the pillow they shared.

Horcrux

The word echoed in his mind, almost like a prayer. When Tom was a child, the matron and the pastor had insisted the orphans all pray, down on their knees in the church he hated, begging some higher power to have mercy on them. As if God would care about such meaningless Muggle lives as theirs.
There was one in his arms right now, heavy and limp in sleep. Tom sighed again and nosed into Harry's neck. Outside the open window, owls were calling. A light breeze circled the room.

Behind Tom's closed eyelids, shapes were forming. An open book. A ring. A locket, glimpsed through a layer of green potion. A perfect facsimile, it shone like a star in the dim light, calling to him in a way it hadn't done in life. The emeralds of the snake's eyes twinkled, and then its curved body undulated, moving to face him.

Tom stared as its jaws cracked open, gemstones moving fluidly across the metal. Wider and wider they opened, until a fanged mouth filled his vision. Inside, its throat was dark . . . hard blue light glinted off black tile . . .

The familiar corridor stretched out in front of him, silent and utterly still, apart from the flickering of the torches. Tom reached out a hand to touch a cold, smooth wall. It felt real, but somehow he knew he was dreaming.

Strangely, that thought did not wake him.

Bemused, he twisted to look behind him. There was only impenetrable darkness: not sinister, just blank, as if the world began at the place where he was standing. At the other end of the passage, the black door beckoned.

Tom set off towards it, footsteps ringing strangely in the air. Normally, in these dreams he moved excruciatingly slowly, and slower still as he advanced, but now the tiles were blurring past on either side. Within moments he stood in front of the door.

The room beyond was circular and ringed by a dozen doors. The walls, floor and ceiling were perfect matte black. As he crossed the threshold, the door behind closed with a barely perceptible snick and the walls began to spin.

Tom waited patiently as the room spun faster and faster, doors merging into one, then came abruptly to a stop. There was something he needed to find. Something he had been looking for the longest time. It was so close, he knew it, just a little further.

That foreign thought drew his feet unerringly to the door in the 2 o’clock position, identical to the others in every respect save that it was the one. He applied the lightest pressure, and it opened for him.

Beyond lay a cavernous room he had never seen before, containing rows upon rows of wooden shelves that towered high above his head.

But Tom was not looking into the room, fascinating as it was. His eyes had focussed on his fingers, bone-white and skeletally thin. There was something wrong about them, but he couldn't work out quite what. He ran them over his body, trying to understand. He was clad in long robes made of some smooth black fabric that flowed like cool water . . .

"~ Tom ~"

A whisper of his own name, floating on the air like a dust mote. Confusion forgotten, Tom crossed
the threshold, drawn towards the voice like a moth towards the light.

He proceeded down the vestibule between the towering stacks. Each shelf contained hundreds upon hundreds of little glass spheres. They stared down at Tom like milky white eyeballs, watching his progress.

The room was large, and he walked for some time. Deep inside its belly though, the contents of the shelves began to change from orbs to other artifacts. Spindly instruments, ornate wooden boxes, shapes of grotesquely twisted black glass, human skulls. Tom wanted to stop and examine them, but something urged him onwards.

His feet stopped, then turned left, taking him down a narrow aisle. It looked just like any other, but excitement was building in Tom's chest. Halfway down, there came a sensation like an icy breath on the back of his neck. He halted, turned--

Right in front of him, at eye level, was a tiara.

It was a beautiful object, the kind you would expect to find on a velvet cushion rather than a dusty wooden shelf. Sweeping silver wings framed a flawless teardrop-shaped sapphire. A brown paper tag, knotted onto the delicate silver filigree dangled off the edge, turned slowly in a non-existent breeze.

Goblin-Made Diadem, 10th Century

CONTAMINATED

Tom wanted it more than anything in the world. It seemed to glow brighter than its surroundings, like a star trapped in spun glass. Exquisite and valuable, the kind of object an orphan from a soot-stained city would never even have been allowed to set eyes on.

And in the depths of the gem, something stirred.

Tom reached out a single covetous finger to touch--

But he never reached it. As his hand moved, the diadem seemed to retreat away. The shelves were moving too, stretching out on either side of him, bowing inwards so that they were out of arm's reach, a perfect circle around him, growing ever larger, and below him, pitch darkness was spreading, swirling--!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"--ry! Harry, wake up!"

But Harry did not want to wake up. He batted ineffectually at the hand shaking his shoulder.

"Harry!"

It was Tom, of course. Harry groaned in protest, not wanting to open his eyes. But he knew Tom wasn't going to give up . . .

"Wha' is it?" he asked, blinking. Tom was leaning over him, close to invisible in the darkness that filled the room. "I swear, Tom, if you've woken me up for sex again--"

"It's there."

"What?" Harry reached past Tom for his wand and cast the Tempus charm, squinting myopically as
shining numbers wafted from its tip like smoke. 3 a.m. Great.

"It's a diadem," Tom said, grabbing at his shoulders in excitement. "It's a diadem."

"What's a diadem?"

"It's a type of crown--"

"No, what is 'it'?!"

"My Horcrux!"

"You remembered something...? You've never mentioned a crown before."

"No, I saw it!"

Harry half sat up, leaning on his elbows. Tom was kneeling on the bed beside him.

"You were dreaming, Tom," he said soothingly, finally realising what had happened. "You saw it in a dream. This is night-time. You were sleeping. You had a dream. Now go back to sleep."

Tom ran a hand through his hair in agitation, the movement just visible in the moonlight filtering through the window. "It wasn't a dream!" he cried, then paused. "Or, well, I suppose it was, technically, but it was real too! Prophetic dreams exist, Harry. Don't you pay any attention in Divination?"

"No," Harry said truthfully. "It's a load of bollocks."

"That's not true! Divination is very well respected in many academic circles."

Harry flopped down on his back and ran a hand over his eyes. Tom wasn't going to drop it. He wondered if this was how Ron felt when Harry woke him up in the middle of the night to tell him about his own strange dreams. He made a mental note to say sorry to Ron when he next saw him, hopefully in a few days.

"Right, okay, we'll go with that. But why do you think this dream was prophetic?"

"It was so real," Tom breathed. "So clear. That's not normal for me, you know. I used to have to make things up to bring to class. But ever since I arrived here, I've been having vivid dreams, all night, every night."

Harry dimly remembered Tom mentioning something like that before, occasionally complaining about frustrating dreams over breakfast. He hadn't paid much attention.

"So if you've been having vivid dreams for weeks, what is it about this one that's got you all worked up?"

"Because I finally got past the door at the end of the corridor!"

"You what?" Harry asked, sitting bolt upright, a motion so fast it almost knocked Tom off the bed. "What's this about a corridor?"

"The corridor in my dream!" Tom cried, frustrated. "The one I always dream about, with the blue torches! And past it there's a circular room and then a large room--"

"Filled with loads of shelves!"
Tom stared at him. "I . . . how did you guess?"

"Because that's my dream, Tom!" Harry said, grabbing his sleeve. "I've been dreaming of that corridor all year! It leads to the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry of Magic - the weapon Voldemort is looking for is kept there, guarded by the Order of the Phoenix. But I never saw what it was . . . I never got past the doorway of the room with the shelves--"

"Spheres. There are lots of little white spheres on the shelves," Tom said. He flicked his wand, and it flared to life in his hand, illuminating their awestruck faces. "And past the spheres, there are other objects . . . my Horcrux is one of them: I felt it, like I felt the ring, like I felt you . . ."

"My dreams stopped," Harry whispered. "They stopped when--"

"When I took the piece of soul out of you," Tom finished.

Harry gazed into Tom's eyes; dark pools of black reflecting the light from the wand.

"It's not a weapon," he breathed. "It's a *Horcrux *"
They were too excited to sleep. Harry fetched cups of tea while Tom hovered around, fidgeting and too wound up to do anything useful. Then they went back into the bedroom. They spent most of the night sat cross-legged on the bed in their pyjamas, comparing notes and planning.

It was remarkable how similar their dreams were. Identical in every aspect, except that Tom had gone deep into the room with all the shelves, while Harry had always woken up before passing the threshold.

There was a Horcrux in the Department of Mysteries.

Harry was kicking himself for not realising it earlier. Voldemort had been dwelling obsessively on the place all year! But Harry had never brought it up because of what Sirius had said to Ron, Hermione, and himself last summer: that the thing stored there was a weapon.

It wasn't a weapon though. The Order was wrong. Perhaps Snape had even been deliberately feeding them false information, to give Voldemort time to get it back before they realised what they had and destroyed it.

He relayed this line of thought to Tom, but the other boy just nodded impatiently in response.

"I bet they don't even know which object it is," he said as he hunted for something in the drawer beside the bed. "Horcruxes aren't common, but they are notorious. Dumbledore would recognise what it was if he saw it -- Aha!"

Tom's small cry of triumph came as he retrieved a quill and a bottle of ink. He pulled out the stopper, inked the quill and balanced an open notebook on his knee.

"Now, what do you know about the Ministry building itself?" he asked. "I think you mentioned that you've been before?"

Harry had, for the occasion of his Hearing before the Wizengamot. He described the telephone box that was the visitors' entrance, the atrium with its great row of fireplaces, the golden lifts, the floors they had passed, and even the names of the Departments on the signs. Tom scribbled it all down, occasionally pressing for greater detail.

"We're going to break in, aren't we?" Harry asked, when Tom finally paused to survey his notes. They had talked for over an hour - outside, the very first birds were calling.

"Yes."

"It might not be easy; Voldemort's been trying to get in all year. He had one of the workers in the Department of Mysteries - Bodger, or Broderik or something - Imperioused until he got sent to St. Mungo's. Then he tried to have Nagini fetch it, but Mr Weasley fought her off - he was guarding the
door that night. There will probably be an Order member stationed there when we go."

"That's fine," Tom said, waving a hand negligently. "We'll be able to incapacitate whoever it is. We managed those three Death Eaters, didn't we?"

Harry wasn't sure Tom's dismissive tone was justified. Their duel with the Death Eaters had been a very close shave. However, there was no point in saying so; they needed that Horcrux.

"Incapacitate?" he asked instead.

"It means 'knock out'."

"I know what it means! And I wish you'd stop doing that, I'm not stupid. I'm just saying; you better not 'accidentally' kill whoever it is."

"Would I do that?"

The answer, obviously, was yes. Harry narrowed his eyes at him.

Tom held up his hands in mock-surrender. "Relax! It wouldn't be worth the earful I'd get from you."

He sounded sincere enough. Harry fiddled with the loose leaves of paper on the bed, stacking them in a neat pile as he thought about it all.

"What happens when you have the Horcrux?" he asked finally.

"The Department of Magical Transportation is in the same building, just three floors up. We'll go there and steal an International Portkey for me."

"And the bond?"

Tom's eyes caught his. "I'll break it. When I've got the Portkey. You can make your way outside and summon the Knight Bus or whatever."

It was a relief that Tom was no longer talking about taking Harry with him. Harry had been dreading the horrible, fraught encounter that would surely have occurred at the end of their vow otherwise.

But it was mixed in with a strange, hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. And as Harry sat and watched Tom talk over the finer details of his plan, waving his hands animatedly, it slowly dawned on him what it was.

Nostalgia.

A part of him had liked being so utterly connected to another human being. Harry had been lonely for a lot of his life, and the bond meant always having someone to talk to, no matter how infuriating. But now Tom was going to leave. He was going to go far away from Harry and have adventures, while Harry stayed. Perhaps he would even be sent back to the Dursleys for the last month of the summer, in the name of his own 'protection'.

Their relationship wasn't healthy. Harry knew that. And his feelings probably weren't even real (they certainly weren't justified) - just the inevitable consequence of the twisted, unequal dynamic that existed between the two of them. Captor and captive.

He'd get over it quickly, Harry told himself. Once he was back at school, sitting in lessons with Ron and Hermione, starting his NEWTs, his memories of Tom would fade and he'd have perspective again. Hell, he'd probably hate Tom.
'--and so we'll go tomorrow.'

Harry's head snapped up. He scrambled for the details of the conversation he'd missed, but to his dismay, he couldn't recall a single word.

"Sorry, tomorrow? Why not today?"

Tom rolled his eyes. "I literally just explained: today is a Friday. Tomorrow is Saturday. It will be safer to go then - there'll be less chance of running into someone."

"But that's a day and a half away! Are you sure you want to wait that long? And the vow ends tomorrow!"

Harry would much rather that they did not get to the end of the vow before Tom was safely away. He had no idea what he'd do in that situation. If he was free to sabotage or betray Tom with no repercussions . . . could he really let him get away? After all, Tom was tying Voldemort to life . . .

"It will be fine," Tom said blithely. "The vow doesn't end until midnight, remember? If we go early in the evening, we'll have plenty of time."

"Can't we go tonight instead though? We could leave at 3 a.m. I don't think anyone will be working then!"

"I said tomorrow."

It made no sense. Harry frowned at Tom, trying to puzzle out what he was up to. But Tom avoided his gaze, busying himself with tidying the papers onto the nightstand.

"Come, let's nap for a bit," he said, just as Harry opened his mouth to press further.

"But--"

Tom pressed a finger to his lips. "Not now. We should sleep."

He tugged on Harry's arm, encouraging him to lie down. Grudgingly, Harry allowed it, curling up loosely with Tom on the single bed, covers thrown off. He watched Tom's face as his eyes fluttered closed, lashes casting long shadows against his cheeks in the slanted dawn light.

"What are you thinking?" he whispered, when he was sure Tom was asleep. "What do you want?"

They slept late into the morning. Harry woke shortly before lunchtime, filled with nervous energy.

But there wasn't much for him to do. In an attempt to stay busy, he packed his few possessions - the school robes he had arrived in, two Muggle paperbacks, the Snitch he had stolen from Tom, and the Magical First Aid textbook - into the red rucksack they had bought in Knockturn Alley.

Then unpacked. Then packed again.

Tom had a bigger job, of course. By evening, the trunk he had once threatened to permanently lock Harry in was filled with books and neatly folded clothes. It lay open on the flagstones in the main room, as Tom sorted through the contents of the potions cabinet.

"Essence of Insanity or Draught of Delirium?" he asked, holding up two bottles. "Essence of Insanity is stronger, but the other has fewer side effects." He shook the second bottle and frowned as...
a little cloud of rust-red particles swirled within. "Oh, it seems to have separated."

He looked over to Harry, who was leant against the counter with his arms folded, as if expecting a comment.

Harry rolled his eyes in response.

"Good point. It's not as if I'm likely to care about the health of whoever I drug with it. I'll take both."

Crouching, he wrapped the bottles up inside a pair of socks and tucked them into the suitcase. Harry could just see the edge of his little box of treasures poking out from underneath a green and silver scarf.

"I think that’s the last of them," Tom said. He closed the lid, but left the straps undone. "I don’t think I'll need the Trace-blocking potion where I'm going, so you may as well take the last three vials. I’ll pack the last few things tomorrow."

"Tom," Harry said, grabbing his sleeve as he stood. "Why tomorrow? Why not tonight? We're ready."

"Stop asking, Harry. I've made my decision."

Harry scuffed his foot against the floor, annoyed. He hated waiting. The anticipation was the worst.

"Don't sulk."

"I'm not."

"You are. It's a bad habit of yours."

Tom's fingers moved, twisting to grip Harry's wrist in turn. "I'll do no harm to wait for tomorrow. And besides, there's something I want to do first."

"What?" Harry demanded, exasperated.

Tom considered him for a long moment, eyes flicking over his face. His fingers traced along the blue vein on Harry's inner wrist.

"It's not been so bad living here, has it?"

Harry frowned at the non-sequitur, and the new tone of Tom's voice: soft and light.

"I suppose it's been one of my better kidnappings," he allowed, when it seemed Tom was waiting for an answer. Not that it was hard to beat the time he'd been abducted from Hogwarts, tied to a tombstone and tortured.

"That's good," Tom said, stepping into Harry's space. Harry edged back, but bumped up against the kitchen cabinets before he'd gone six inches. "I've enjoyed your company too. I'm so glad I decided not to kill you in the Chamber."

As Harry remembered that encounter, he had tried, but failed when Harry killed the Basilisk and collapsed the roof on them. He said something to that effect, but Tom waved a hand, flicking those trifling details away.

"I'm just saying, it's a pity we had to meet under those circumstances."
Tom, Harry decided, was being very, very creepy. He tried to surreptitiously slide along the counter but Tom, smiling angelically, slapped his hand flat on the worktop, blocking his path.

"Tom, what--"

But Tom did not seem to be listening. The hand on Harry's wrist lifted to tuck a strand of unruly black hair behind his ear. The fingers lingered on the skin afterwards.

Harry stood stock still, like a deer in the headlights. If it had been anyone else, Harry (who was now a little less innocent than he had been at the beginning of the summer) would have assumed they were trying to get him into bed. But why would Tom bother? He normally went for the simpler option of grabbing Harry's hand and pulling it to his crotch, so why-- why--

Oh.

Tom didn't want a hand on his cock. He wanted something else. Something he'd wanted for weeks and weeks.

Harry's jaw dropped.

"I don't believe you! You've been delaying to give yourself time to - what - seduce me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tom said quickly. But of course he did; the smile had flicked off like a light, leaving only his familiar scowl.

"Oh, come off it, Tom. It's obvious."

Rather than respond, Tom straightened his collar and flicked at a non-existent fleck of dirt on the breast of his shirt, the picture of offended dignity.

Harry suppressed a grin. It was actually kind of funny, now he knew Tom's game. Tom had probably tried that exact same trick - soulful eyes, flattery, gentle caresses - on more than a few girls (and boys) back at Hogwarts.

"I can't believe you tried that on me," Harry said, trying and failing to keep the amusement out of his voice. "What were you thinking? I know you, Tom."

"I wasn't trying to seduce you!" Tom huffed. "Why would I need to anyway? I could have you any time I wanted."

"Charming."

"I was just being nice. I don’t understand why you must always take things the wrong way."

Harry leant back against the counter and raised his eyebrows.

"Right," he said. "If you don't want anything, let's go to bed. To sleep."

Tom opened his mouth, then closed it. Then his head tilted to the side.

Looking for a new angle.

"Oh no you don't--" Harry began, laying a hand on his chest to forestall him. "I'm not--"

"Have you ever thought about it?"
"Tom--"

"I've thought about it a lot."

To Harry's horror, Tom's voice had shifted into the soft, dark tone he used in bed.

"It?" he breathed.

The question was a terrible mistake: Harry knew as soon as the word left his mouth. Tom smiled and leant in until his mouth was less than an inch from Harry's left ear.

"Fucking you."

"What happened to 'I'm not gay'?" Harry murmured, failing to suppress a shiver.

"It's just one time. It doesn't count."

"You can come up with a justification for anything, can't you?"

"Yes."

Harry looked away, unable to meet the eyes boring into him. He needed to calm down, to get as far away from Tom as the bond would allow, and think. There was a right decision here and a wrong one, Harry knew, and if he just had a little time to consider it, he would remember which was which.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"Come on, Harry. I know you get curious. You're always going to wonder what it would have been like."

"Probably painful and humiliating."

Tom grinned like a shark who'd tasted blood. His breath puffed against the shell of his ear.

"Oh, but Harry, those are both things you like."

It was a dirty lie! A tidal wave of heat rose in Harry's face, and he shoved fruitlessly at Tom's chest.

"Let me do it,\," Tom urged, pressing his advantage. His other hand came down on the counter too, caging Harry in completely. "I've been in your mind, your mouth, your soul . . . what's a little further? Let me in."

"Maybe I should fuck you,\" Harry spat, before his brain could even process the words.

Tom drew back an inch, eyes widening at the unexpected challenge. His eyes roved over Harry's face, drinking him in.

"Is that what you want? Have you been thinking about that late at night, Harry? How filthy of you--"

"No!"

"No, you haven't. You want something else,\" Tom crooned, as he shoved a leg between Harry's thighs, pressing against his hard, aching cock. "What does this say, hmm? I know you like the idea of having me inside of you, opening you up, taking you."

Tom's fucking filthy mouth. It was the worst thing. Harry twisted his fingers in the collar of his shirt,
threatening to choke him with the material.

Tom didn't seem to mind. "This is the last night we'll spend together. This is the only chance you'll ever get to try it."

His thigh moved, just a little, sending sparks of pleasure arcing up Harry's spine. Harry gasped for air, trying not to let himself grind back.

"Come on. Just say yes."

But Harry couldn't. He couldn't say that, let, let Tom--

Tom's eyes were on his face, cataloguing his every reaction. After a moment, he seemed to recognise his predicament.

"I could force you, if you prefer?"

It was an actual offer, not a threat. Harry's eyes snapped up to meet his; dark, and filled with amusement.

Tom, it seemed, also knew him a little too well.

Harry licked his lips nervously. His wand stayed in his pocket. The air between them felt heavy. Charged, like the moment in a Quidditch match right before he steered his broom into a steep dive.

He tuckered his head down a fraction of an inch. It wasn't really a nod. Or maybe it was, but he was just nodding his head to clear it.

Tom grinned widely, all teeth. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw the wiry muscles in his forearm tense. He shifted his centre of gravity in response.

Predator.

Prey.

Tom grabbed his sleeve and hauled him away from the counter. Harry hissed at the bruising grip and slammed his foot down on Tom's instep - less effective than it might have been, given his socked foot. He was pushed roughly into the bedroom.

Tom stood in the doorway, blocking the exit.

Harry was breathing fast, adrenaline surging. It had been weeks since the last time they'd duelled out in the garden.

"On the bed."

"Make me."

Tom stalked forwards. Harry swung a fist but hit only his flank. An arm wrapped around his waist and pulled him in, up on his toes, until their lips were an inch apart.

A tease.

Tom smirked as Harry's eyes focussed on his mouth. He moved in as if to kiss.

And then shoved him, hard.
Harry hadn't been expecting it, which was stupid. The backs of his knees hit the bed, and he overbalanced, falling with a startled cry. His head narrowly avoided smacking into the wall.

"You idiot," he snarled up at Tom as he advanced. "What are you going to do if you give me a concussion? You can't exactly heal it yourself!"

"You're fine aren't you? Don't be such a baby."

Harry scrambled back on the bed as Tom crawled half on top of him. They paused like that: Harry reclined on his elbows with one knee drawn up defensively, Tom eyeing the leg warily and obviously wondering if he was about to get kicked.

But it wasn't enough to deter him. Tom grabbed for his zipper. Harry fought him like an angry cat, scuffling like they often did after duelling. He pinched Tom's sides and pulled at the collar of his shirt until two buttons ripped free, leaving tufts of white thread in their place.

Soon enough though, Harry was bare from the waist down, laid out on his back with one leg hooked over Tom's thigh.

"Like this?" he asked, as Tom chucked the balled up clothing into the corner of the room. His chest was heaving with exertion and exhilaration and his hard cock jutted up between them. There was a matching bulge in Tom's trousers.

"No. Turn over."

Harry liked the idea of turning his back on Tom about as much as he would a Blast-Ended Screwt, and said so, but Tom just rolled his eyes.

"It'll be more comfortable for you that way. That's what it says in the books."

"What the hell kind of books have you been reading?" Harry asked, fighting the urge to cover his cock. The problem was, he didn't trust himself not to stroke it instead. Then a terrible thought occurred and he sat bolt upright, almost knocking their foreheads together. "Wait -- wait, have you ever actually done this in real life?"

"I know the theory," Tom snapped, pushing him back down with a hand on his sternum.

"The theory--!"

But Tom used his grip on Harry's shirt to heave him over. Harry scrambled away but didn't get far. Tom slammed into his back, trapping him on his knees against the headboard, cheek pressed to the wall.

Harry squirmed, feeling Tom behind him. He must have undone his zipper at some point, because his cock rested heavy between Harry's bare thighs.

It was an exciting, terrifying position. Not as bad as lying face down on the bed with no leverage, but even so, Tom could touch as much of him as he liked, and there was nothing Harry could do about it. Shamefully, his cock twitched at the thought.

"You liar," he panted. "You're always boasting about all the people you've fucked. You're not a virgin too, are you?"

"I've fucked girls. Loads of girls. It's not that different."
"Unbelievable. How many is loads? Two?"

"At least four!"

Harry twisted his head to glare at him, then froze as a wand pressed to the small of his back. But no horrible spell followed. Instead, the tip traced down the line of his spine, over every vertebrae, until it met his tailbone. It rapped twice.

Harry jerked at the strange, clenching sensation in his gut. "What the fuck was that?" he demanded, as Tom laid the wand down.

He reached back to investigate, but his wrist was seized before he could touch.

"The first is for hygiene," Tom said. "The second--"

Two fingers shoved inside him without warning. There was no pain, just a slippery glide.

"--Is to make everything possible. See? I know what I'm doing."

But Harry hardly heard the words. His mind was focused wholly on the tight, unfamiliar stretch, the way his hole fluttered around the fingers, as if deciding whether to accept the intrusion.

It was the strangest sensation. Not so bad when they were still, but when Tom started moving, working his fingers in and out, Harry had to bite down on his lip to suppress a cry. They rubbed against his inner walls over and over, occasionally brushing against something that made Harry gasp and clench around him.

As the stretch eased into an almost-pleasant feeling of fullness, Tom withdrew his fingers and wiped them on Harry's shirt.

"Okay," he said quietly, as if psyching himself up. "Okay."

Harry turned his head again to look at him over his shoulder. Tom's eyes were black, pupils swallowing up the surrounding iris. A flush grazed his cheekbones.

It was perhaps the first time Harry had ever seen him nervous.

He shifted a little, spreading his knees further on the bed. Not an invitation, of course. Just getting comfortable.

Tom's eyes caught his, and his lips quirked up into a flash of a smile. One of his hands closed over Harry's on the top of the headboard, sweaty fingers twining in between his, and a moment later, the head of his cock found Harry's hole. Tom rocked forwards, gradually teasing his way inside.

Harry groaned aloud at the stretch. Even though it was just the tip, Tom felt huge, much, much larger than his fingers had been. He winced and shifted forwards, trying to ease the pressure.

Tom stilled. Then a hand snaked round Harry's hip and closed around his neglected cock.

It was a transparent attempt to distract him, and it worked. Harry moaned aloud and bucked into the tight circle of his fingers. His hips ground forwards, and then, without meaning to, back onto Tom's cock.

The head slipped inside, a sharp, tight burn. Harry made a strangled noise of protest, but Tom chose that moment to press his thumb into the slit of his cock and rub. Pure, melting pleasure shot up his spine, the perfect counterpart to the pain in his arse. Harry squirmed helplessly in his arms, caught
between the two contrasting sensations.

Tom didn't wait for him to adjust. He pushed all the way inside in one slow, inexorable movement, pressing Harry up against the wall and holding him there.

Harry's thighs trembled as he parted around Tom. That was it. All the way. He couldn't believe he was letting Tom do this; it was filthy, dirty, taboo-- but of course that only made it hotter.

It was too much, all at once. The strange, intrusive, full feeling in his arse, the sharp sting of Tom's teeth as he bit down on the nape of Harry's neck, leaving marks that would need to be healed later, the tight, wet constriction of the fingers around his cock--

But then they eased, grip turning frustratingly loose, just a tease of pressure. Harry growled in protest, but just as he was about to slip his own hand down there and force Tom to do it properly, Tom started moving.

Harry let out a startled cry as he drew out so that only the head was left inside, then thrust in hard, fucking him with the whole length of his cock.

It was terrible. It was phenomenal. Harry rested his cheek against the wall, cool against his burning flesh, and let him do it.

Tom was so, so long, so perfect, rubbing against him all the way down. And every stroke drove Harry's own cock into the loose, slippery circle of Tom's fingers - and Harry was going to kill him for that, because it wasn't enough, wasn't enough, wasn't -- oh!

Harry was mewling, a terrible, humiliating sound. But he couldn't seem to stop. Tom's hand left the headboard to grip his hip, fingers like iron. Holding him still, just a hole to fuck.

There was a quiet litany coming from Tom's mouth too. Harry tuned in and out. "Fuck, fuck, yes, I knew you'd be good Harry, I knew you'd be so, so tight. You're made for me, made to take my cock--"

And then, as Harry bucked against him, in rhythm, meeting him and drawing him deeper, hole flexing wetly, Tom's hand tightened around his cock.

It was like water falling onto hot, cracked ground. Harry's spine arched, arse pressing back into Tom. He couldn't feel the headboard digging into his chest anymore, or Tom's harsh breaths in his ear. Just own his cock pulsing, in time with those merciless thrusts--

His orgasm took him by surprise. His arse clenched down hard around Tom, so hard it should have hurt - but it didn't - and he moaned low and absolutely filthy. Wrecked.

It went on and on. Tom's hand moved hot and wet around his cock, milking him until he was totally spent, limp and loose, held upright only by the hand on his hip.

Tom kept going, thrusts coming in short, sharp bursts, until finally he pushed in as deep as he could go, and stilled. Harry moaned again as the cock pulsed inside him, an unfamiliar rush of heat.

They stayed like that for long, long seconds, pressed so close together they could almost have been one person. Then Tom wrapped an arm around Harry's waist and gently pulled him away from the wall, softening cock slipping out.

They crumpled on their backs on the bed, legs tangled together, sweaty and sticky and exhilarated. It was too warm in the room to cuddle; Harry felt overheated. Between his legs he was wet, dirty and
used, but there was no room in him to care.

A few minutes, or a few hours later, Tom shifted, then half sat up and stripped off his sweaty shirt.

"I can't believe I let you do that," Harry said, eyes drawn to the perspiration tracing the line of his collarbone.

Tom flopped back down next to him and nuzzled into his neck affectionately, practically purring with smugness and contentment.

Harry rolled his eyes at the ceiling. The plaster there was cracked, sagging a little towards the centre.

"I'm such an idiot. You're such an idiot."

"Don't overthink it."

Harry's arse hurt. Sore and still clenching around nothing. With a groan of discomfort, he levered himself up and rolled on top of Tom, straddling his hips.

Tom gazed up at him curiously. His sweaty hair was stuck to his forehead. Harry flicked a curl out of his eyes.

"You better not mention this to anyone."

"Who am I going to tell?" Tom asked. His fingers played with the bottom hem of Harry's shirt, just above his spent cock.

His face was flushed, bright-eyed, smiling. Harry leant down and kissed him lazily, keeping his mouth closed so they didn’t get lost in the connection. Trying to commit the moment to memory.
Harry folded back the covers of the bed and smoothed them out with his hand.

It was a funny thing, the urge to clean up now that they were leaving. He had probably not made the bed in the whole time he'd spent there, but it seemed wrong somehow to leave the cottage a mess. He finished tucking the sheets under the mattress, then drew his wand and Vanished the sweet wrappers littering the floor and the mostly empty packet of biscuits on the nightstand.

The room looked different. Smaller somehow, without the pile of discarded clothes that normally lived in the corner and the trunk under the bed. A few lonely books were left in the bookcase - mostly Muggle paperbacks and a few of Tom's first and second year textbooks. Harry had read all of them at least twice, even the bodice rippers and those that were third in a series.

Had the bed always been that narrow? It was large enough for a single teenager, but a small space for two boys to have lounged in and slept in.

And *fucked* in.

That thought brought a prickling rush of heat. Harry's eyes moved involuntarily to the headboard.

It was unmarked, unlike him.

There were little bruises on his hips. That morning, when Tom was cooking breakfast in the other room, Harry had taken off his pyjama shirt and inspected them. Little purple smudges, each the size of a penny. Fingermarks. Not painful, just *there*.

Harry smoothed his shirt self-consciously and busied himself with closing the window. Just as he was doing up the catch, Tom's voice drifted through the open door.

"Are you done in there? I wanted to be off an hour ago!"

"Yes," Harry called back. "And we could have been, if you hadn't forgotten where you'd left your Galleons!"

It had been quite a mess. Tom had thrown everything out of his trunk and onto the floor, then searched the whole house from top to bottom, growing increasingly agitated, only to find the bag wedged into a fold of the trunk's Undetectable Expansion Charm.

As expected, Tom made no answer. Harry rolled his eyes, but trailed out into the main room anyway.

Tom was stood by the door, trunk in hand. Despite his impatience, he smiled at the sight of Harry.

Harry scowled back. Tom had been terribly pleased with himself all day - in fact, that morning, Harry had needed to smack him on the ear to stop his 'polite' inquiries after his health - and in
particular, whether Harry was 'sore'.

"So, ready?"

Harry nodded. His eyes drifted around the room, lingering on the scarred wooden table, the small cauldron they used for cooking, the armchair, the rug. Memories rose like smoke: baking potatoes in the embers of the fire, Tom gesturing wildly with his hands as he failed to explain some Arithmancy he was working on. Playing with the Snitch.

Nostalgia was such a ridiculous emotion, Harry decided. It was important that he not forget the stress and boredom he had felt, living at the cottage. How he'd longed for his friends. Longed for privacy too; the ability to get more than thirty feet away from another person.

Tom pushed open the door. Outside, the garden was in full flower. The grass was as high as Harry's knees in places, and the breeze carried dandelion seeds into the air.

Tom stood there, just beyond the door, and held out his arm. Harry stared at him for a moment - the boy, the garden, the setting sun; then crossed the threshold, closed the door, and tentatively wrapped his fingers around the offered limb.

Together, they looked back at the unassuming building, lit orange by the setting sun.

Maybe, Harry thought, if the war ever ended, he would come back here alone. Open the squeaking door, light the fire with his wand, sit down in the armchair and remember the strangest summer of his life.

"Ready?" Tom asked.

Harry tightened his hold on his arm.

"Yes."

Crack!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Tom took them to the little courtyard in Knockturn Alley. They snuck down the little cobbled street, through the archway onto Diagon Alley proper, and then crept along until they reached the brick wall where the Magical world met Muggle London.

Outside of the Alley, the streets were crowded. It was a warm Saturday evening and young people were heading out to bars and clubs. Many were drinking from bottles or cans as they chatted excitedly to each other and called out to their friends.

The boys stuck close together as they weaved their way through the crowd. Tom stepped into the road to avoid being hit in the face with a bejewelled purse, then leapt back quickly as a black cab came in, horn blaring, to pick up a fare.

Harry was not accustomed to so much noise and light and movement after three months living in Northern Scotland. The sudden change gave him a strange, agoraphobic feeling. He also didn't like the curious looks they were drawing; the boys were a few years younger than most of the partygoers, and dressed in strange, old-fashioned clothing.

It took a long time to reach Whitehall. With Tom's help, Harry was able to find the station where he and Mr Weasley had emerged from the London Underground, but his memory of the route after was
fuzzy. After two dead ends and a full loop, Tom was so frustrated with his vague directions that he tugged him into an Alleyway, and, after a brief but heated discussion, Legilimised him for the images.

"You should have Apparated us closer," Harry grumbled as they stepped back out into the street, Tom now confidently leading the way. There was a dull ache behind his left temple.

"We'd have ended up inside a wall or eight feet underground, like as not. Too much has changed in this city. Left here, I think."

They found the telephone box just as the clocks were striking ten, filling the air with the peals of bells. The side street was unimpressive - littered with rubbish and bathed in the flickering orange glow of a faulty streetlamp.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Tom asked doubtfully, as he hooked open the door to the box. The phone was hanging off its hook and most of the panels of glass were broken.

"You literally just read my mind fifteen minutes ago! Yes, I am sure."

Tom nodded but did not move to enter the box. He stood there for a long moment, one hand on the door jamb, then abruptly turned around.

"You could come with me."

"I am coming with you, idiot."

"No." Tom scratched his nose. His eyes were focussed on the overflowing recycling bin to their right. "I mean: you could take the Portkey with me. They can carry more than one person easily."

"Tom--"

"There's nothing here for you. You're going to die if you stay."

"I'm not letting you kidnap me again!"

"I'm not talking about that!" Tom scuffed his foot on the floor, sweeping a discarded cigarette butt from side to side. "Forget it. I was just trying to do you a favour, is all."

A smile had crept onto Harry's face at some point, and he couldn't seem to make it go away.

"You are such an idiot," he said fondly.

"Hey!"

"Thanks though. That was nice. But--" Harry paused and ran a hand through his hair. "-- this is my war. I never wanted it, but I'm not going to run away and let Voldemort come after my friends. I'll die if I have to."

Tom's nose crinkled in distaste. "Have it your own way," he muttered, stepping into the box.

Harry caught his arm. "Wait, Tom--"

"What?"
"Send me a postcard."

Harry said the words very fast, as if doing so would make them less real. But, of course, Tom couldn't leave it at that.

"Send you a what?"

"A postcard! When you get to wherever you're going, and I'm back at school, send me a postcard!"

As expected, Tom laughed at him.

Harry's fists bunched. "That had better mean yes," he said warningly, as he climbed into the telephone box with Tom, and, with some difficulty, squeezed the door closed behind them.

"What now?" Tom asked.

Harry picked up the receiver and held it between them. His eyes flicked up as he tried to recall the sequence of numbers that Mr Weasley had dialled.

"Six . . . two . . . four, four . . . two--"

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

"Uh--"

Tom rolled his eyes and wrestled the receiver away from Harry.

"Tom Smith, here to find another part of my soul."

He passed the phone back to Harry, who clamped a hand over the mouthpiece.

"Another part of your soul?" he hissed. "You'll hide your name, but not that you're looking for a Horcrux?"

"There might be an alert on my name - and yours too for that matter, but no one's going to be looking for a motive that vague. Now get on with it."

Harry lowered his hand from the mouthpiece and groped for the first name that came to mind. Tom gestured impatiently.

"Uh-- Jerry. I'm here with him."

Apparently a last name wasn't necessary. Two silver name badges clattered down the chute into the coin-return compartment.

"Jerry?" Tom began heatedly but was drowned out by the woman's recorded voice.

"Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

"Tom and Jerry?" he complained again, as the telephone box began sinking into the ground. The street seemed to rise up around them. As the glow of the streetlight grew distant, a dim lantern flickered on overhead. "Oh, very funny. We had that cartoon in my time too, you know."

Harry ignored him in favour of retrieving their name badges.
"It just popped into my head," he said absently. "I didn't mean anything by it."

Harry offered Tom his badge but wasn't surprised when he smacked it to the floor with a disgusted look. He fastened his own on anyway, smirking a little as Tom fumed.

It was a funny thing. If, three months ago, someone had told him that they would be parting on good terms, Harry would have laughed his head off. But here they were, doing exactly that. Not friends, not lovers (and certainly not in love), but with a certain measure of mutual respect and understanding.

The lift dropped slowly, gears grinding their way through the earth. Eventually though, a chink of light appeared at the base, illuminating their shoes.

"Wands out," Tom commanded.

Harry nodded and withdrew his wand, serious again. He held it at chest height as open space appeared beyond the panes of glass, a Stunning Spell ready on his tongue. The box settled, and the doors sprang open with a chime.

"The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day."

There was no one there.

Harry's head whipped from side to side. He was unable to believe his eyes. Surely there would be some form of security? Even if just an alarm or a solitary guard?

They shared a glance, and, not knowing what else to do, stepped out of the box. The long room, with its many empty fireplaces, was a complete contrast to the busy streets above. It was utterly silent, but for the tinkling of the fountain and their own footsteps. Overhead, the ceiling was navy blue. Golden symbols flowed across it in a leisurely procession.

As they reached the security desk where wands were weighed and registered, Harry's unease grew. He did not know quite what he had expected, but he felt very strongly that there should be someone at that desk.

"That's strange, isn't it?" he asked, tugging on Tom's sleeve to halt him. "Shouldn't there be a watchwizard?"

Tom peeled off Harry's hand and approached. It was pristine, but for a neat pile of wand certificates.

"This place is warded against Apparition - I checked earlier, as I left the box - so maybe the fireplaces are also blocked at night?" he suggested. "Wizards can be terribly careless - the visitor's entrance doesn't seem to get much use, so perhaps they forgot about it?"

But when Tom, eager to test his theory, crossed to the nearest fireplace and, after a quick inspection, pulled on an ornate lever, a green fire flared to life in the grate.

"Oh . . ."

"Let's just get the thing and leave, okay?" Harry interjected. The whole situation was making him extremely uncomfortable. "Come on - the lifts are through here."

He turned his back on the fireplaces and led the way through the golden gates to the antechamber.
with the lifts. Comfortingly, all the carriages were down in the Atrium. He pressed the button for the nearest one, and it rattled open immediately.

Inside there was a vertical row of buttons. *Level 8: The Atrium* was lit. Above it were buttons for floors 1-7, and below, a single button labelled *Level 9: The Department of Mysteries*. Harry jabbed it with his thumb repeatedly and waited anxiously for the doors to close and the lift to begin its rattling descent.

Like the telephone box, the journey took many long seconds. As they dropped, Harry could practically feel the oppressive weight of the earth above their heads. But when the doors clicked open again, it was to the corridor of their dreams.

Tom and Harry stood on the threshold, staring out.

"That's--"

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Weird."

He stepped forwards, almost expecting his feet to glide. To his side, Tom touched a hand to the wall, wonder on his face.

Just as in the Atrium, when they reached the plain black door at the end of the corridor, there was no guard. Harry pushed it open with a shaking hand, and it swung to reveal the familiar ring of doors.

Harry stared through the opening and wondered.

*Was* he awake?

Perhaps it had all been a dream, and he was, in fact, safe in bed in Gryffindor Tower, sometime in April, before the Basilisk had roamed the school and Pansy had died. Tom could also be a figment of his imagination, albeit one that raised some rather pressing questions about his sexual identity. Time warped in dreams, stretched, shrunk . . . it was easy for things to feel far, far longer than they were.

Tom though, was in no mood to wait for Harry's existential crisis. He grabbed his arm and tugged him into the centre of the room. As they reached it, the walls began to spin. Faster and faster, until the individual torches became one great blue blur.

When they stopped, Harry looked around in puzzlement.

"Do you know which it is?" he asked Tom.

Tom shook his head. All the same, he strode confidently to a random door and pushed it open, revealing a long chamber filled with glowing green tanks.

Harry peered over his shoulder. "Okay . . . not this one. But how are we meant to know which ones we've tried? Won't the room keep spinning?"

Tom rolled his eyes, then raised his wand.

"*Confringo* !"

The orange jet of light blasted the door clean off its hinges in a spray of splinters.

"Ah."

They moved back into the centre of the room, and the walls spun again. Three more doors were
tried, peered through and then blasted away with no success. But when the fourth swung open, Tom's sharp intake of breath told Harry everything he needed to know.

The room was as tall as a cathedral and filled with towering shelves, each of which held hundreds of faintly glowing glass orbs.

Tom crossed the threshold before Harry could stop him, and began striding quickly down the aisle between the stacks.

Harry had to half-jog to avoid straining the bond. Tom's earlier watchfulness was gone, swallowed up by his excitement, but Harry's remained.

It was a strange experience, being the cautious one. Staring at Tom's retreating back, Harry felt a pang of guilt for all the times he'd ignored Hermione's requests that he just slow down, just think for a moment. It wasn't that he was wary by nature (the opposite in fact), but Tom was, at times, so exceptionally reckless that he pushed Harry into the role.

Or maybe reckless was the wrong word. More like pathologically self-confident and convinced of his own rightness.

Harry glanced anxiously from side to side as they progressed, and behind too. The room was dimly lit, and the aisles were especially shadowy. The end of each row was marked with a little brass plaque. The closest read:

15: Etheling, Edgar - Faye, Simon

About two thirds of the way down the room, Tom's footsteps slowed, then stopped. Harry caught up to him as he was turning on the spot, frowning in puzzlement. All the shelves in sight bore milky white globes - behind, ahead, to either side.

"Come on," Harry said. "It must be further on."

Tom nodded, still frowning, and they set off again, moving more slowly so as not to miss it.

But it wasn't further on. In fact, to Harry's extreme dismay, they reached the end of the hall and doubled back, now inspecting every shelf.

"It should have been here," Tom was saying. He had stopped again, in the same place he had the first time round. "Right here - one of these." He poked his head down one row, then the next.

The unease that had crept upon Harry in the Atrium was back in full force.

Was Tom's vision even real?

The setting was from Voldemort; that was abundantly clear. But could Tom have been so, so focused on finding a Horcrux that his mind had played a trick on him, warping the dream to show the thing he most wanted to find?

Harry bit his lip as Tom moved to the rows on the other side. He didn't really want to voice this theory to Tom. Actually, he was reluctant to speak at all - there was something about this place; the darkness, the shadowy corners, that made him feel as if dozens of eyes were trained on him, watching his every move--

"It's your name."
Harry jerked, and turned to where Tom stood, fingers brushing over a brass plaque.

"I don't understand," Tom said.

But Harry was not listening. He was walking along the dark aisle between the stacks. The shelves, great long wooden beams supported every few feet with wrought iron brackets, were dotted with yellowed, handwritten labels.

Patton.
Pino.
Peek.

*Potter*

Harry's heart was in his throat.

"Tom," he tried to say, but nothing emerged from his throat but a croak. He swallowed and tried again. "T-Tom! Come look at this!"

Two footsteps, and then Tom's arm brushed against his. Harry felt him go still as he read the label.

On the shelf above, sat a single glass globe. It was small compared to some of the others - a perfect sphere a little smaller than a tennis ball. Opaque white smoke swirled in its depths.

"What is that?"

"I don't know," Tom said absently, as he reached for the object. "The Dark Lord . . . that's me, right?"

Harry wasn't sure Tom should be touching strange globes in the Department of Mysteries, but nothing terrible happened when his fingers curled around it. He removed it from the shelf, and turned it this way and that, as if hoping that the motion would clear the smoke. Harry huddled in to peer over his shoulder.

A cackle, long and loud and uproarious, rang out around them, echoing off the walls, the shelves, the hard floor. Harry spun around, heart in his throat.

A woman stood at the end of the row.

She was tall, very tall. Her hair hung around her hollow face like a sea of black ringlets. Harry recognised her from the Daily Prophet, and the memory he had seen in Dumbledore's office.

Bellatrix Lestrange. One of the Death Eaters who had tortured the Longbottoms into insanity. The wife or sister-in-law of the man Harry had killed in the woods around the stream. Shadowy figures
crowded behind her, and Harry knew, in that instant, that there were many, many more--

Because it had been a trap.

Voldemort's dream had led them there. But Voldemort knew about Tom, knew just where to nudge, what bait to place so that he wouldn't be able to resist--

"Dear little Harrykins."

Harry's attention snapped back to Bellatrix. She had tilted her head so far over to the side that her ear almost touched her shoulder.

"You look just like your father," she breathed. "I remember him, Harry. A proud man. But you have your mother's eyes. So lovely and bright. I wish I'd had a go with her, you know, before the Dark Lord killed her. I would have plucked them out and pickled them in brine."

Harry took a step back without even meaning to. He just needed to get away from her hideous sing-song voice. But he bumped right up against Tom.

Tom's back was to him. That could only mean one thing. The other end of the aisle was blocked too.

"Now, come out of there. You're a very lucky boy, you know. The Dark Lord wants you alive."

The words 'for now' went unsaid.

The idea of more space was attractive. But standing where they were, only two Death Eaters had a clear shot. Out in the open, they'd be hopelessly surrounded and outnumbered. Harry swallowed, but firmed his grip on his wand and stood his ground. Bellatrix's smile slid off her face.

It was an impasse.

Tom's free right hand found his left and squeezed. And then again.

*On three*, he was saying. *On three*. Harry tried not to let anything reach his face, in that split second before Tom's hand clenched a third time.

'*Reducto!*"

'*Avada Kedavra!*"

Tom's wand had been pointed towards the unseen Death Eater at the other end of the aisle. He leapt back with a startled cry. Harry's, however, had been aimed to the side. The shelves there crashed outwards with explosive force, sending slivers of glass arcing through the air.

Harry sprinted forwards into the gap, hissing as little cuts opened up on his face. He dragged Tom after him by the hand. Glass crunched underfoot, the Death Eaters were shouting, spells were flying over their heads, and ahead, the shelves were still falling, knocking into one another.

And, above all of that, little ghostly figures were appearing on every surface, speaking in a cacophonous din:

"... *In the Year of Our Lord* 1452 ...

"... *The third passing of the comet will hail* ...

"... *Watch for the three-fingered man* ..."
A Cruciatus curse glanced past Harry and grazed Tom, making him stumble. Harry pulled him down an untouched aisle as more spells flew after them.

"STOP, YOU FOOLS! YOU'LL DAMAGE IT!"

Harry had no idea where he was taking them. Out. Away. A side door snapped into view. Harry grabbed the handle and rattled it -- locked --

"Alohomora!" he cast, with no result. But next to him, Tom gasped out the blasting curse he had been using earlier, one hand still on his ribs, and they were through.

The corridor on the other side was narrow, with strange, tilted walls. It gave Harry an almost seasick feeling as they ran down it, past glass panelled doors that seemed to lead to individual offices. He took the third turn at random, leading them deeper into the labyrinthine bowels of the Department of Mysteries.

There were shouts from behind them, and, round a corner, the red glow from some curse being cast. The acoustics were strange - the sounds of the pursuit seemed to echo from dead ends or empty offices.

Down another corridor - a T-junction. Harry turned, then yelled in surprise as a pair of arms folded around his middle.

"Hello there, Potter--"

Harry recognised the voice as Macnair's - the executioner who had almost killed Buckbeak. He struggled in his grip, trying to angle his wand--

Tom didn't pause.

"Crucio!"

The spell, which came perilously close to hitting Harry, got the Death Eater in the face. His arms released as he let out an ear-splitting shriek.

"Use a quieter spell next time!" Harry cried, as Macnair crumpled, still screaming. "Stupefy!"

The Death Eater went limp, and before Tom had time to argue, Harry dragged him onwards. He moved a little more warily now - Macnair's presence meant that the passages must loop somehow; there could be enemies round any corner--

There was an open stone doorway cut into the wall. Harry skidded to a stop in front of it.

It was unlike any of the other doors they had seen. An exit? He peered cautiously through it, but to his disappointment, it led only to a circular room. The ceiling though, was strange. Around the edge of the room, it was a fairly normal height. But towards the centre, there was a dark hole where it towered away out of sight, giving the room the impression of some enormous dark well.

There was another archway on the other side. Harry stepped over the threshold-- and, to his horror, found himself falling--

Upwards.

He twisted in the air and landed hard on his back. Gravity had inverted somehow - it now seemed to him that he was sat on the ledge surrounding a great dark pit. Tom's amazed face was peering at him,
some eight feet above and upside down.

"Harry, what on earth--"

Harry stood. He jumped, but to his horror, landed back on the ledge.

"I can't get down," he said stupidly. The wall was smooth - there were no handholds to climb, and
the top of the archway was just out of reach.

"I'll pull you back in," Tom said, holding onto the doorway and reaching out a hand. Harry strained
upwards, trying to reach him. Their fingers brushed--

Crack!

Tom's eyes widened, and he drew breath for a cry. Harry did not know precisely what had
happened, but the sound had been that of a bone snapping. Tom half staggered, half fell across the
threshold, and, as Harry had, fell upwards.

Harry just managed to catch him, knees buckling under the weight. Tom screamed as he landed - his
calf was twisted into an unnatural, nauseating angle. There were footsteps in the corridor, and then a
masked face, peering up.

"Stupefy!" Harry cried. The spell flew wide, but the head ducked back into the archway anyway.

"They're through there," they heard a man's gravelly voice call. "There's nowhere for them to go!"

It was true. Harry turned his head from side to side, searching for exits.

But there were none. Just the two doors to the room, now too high for him to reach, and the deep
hole in the floor that had been the ceiling. Harry let go of Tom, who groaned and shuffled over to the
edge. It was some twelve feet across, and so deep that he couldn't see the bottom.

A pit. But since they were upside down, it led upwards. Towards the rest of the Ministry.

"Come on," he hissed to Tom. When he didn't move, Harry hauled him upright and half dragged him
towards the lip.

"Hey--! What are you doing?"

"Think happy thoughts," Harry said, holding Tom around the middle. There was a commotion in the
corridor outside, raised voices arguing. "That's how it's done, right? You think happy thoughts like
Peter Pan."

Tom's eyes widened. "Harry-- Harry, wait--!"

But there was no time. Just as there came a flurry of movement from the doorway above, Harry
firmed his grip on Tom's shirt and threw them over the side.
Tom blinked awake.

He was lying on a hard surface at the bottom of a deep well. Everything hurt; his spine, his thigh, his arm, and fuck -- his leg. He tried to sit, groaning aloud as the movement stretched his aching body. He could see it -- his right ankle was twisted at a grotesque angle. The sight somehow brought with it a fresh spike of agony. Tom grabbed for his knee, as if he could somehow apply enough pressure to cut off the nerves.

"Tom?"

Harry was sat next to him, he realised, rubbing the back of his head.

"Yeah . . . are you alright?" Tom asked, as Harry flinched and withdrew his hand. There was a bloody smear in the centre of his palm. "You didn't actually fracture your skull, did you?"

"No -- I think I landed on my arse. Still managed to smack my head against the ground though. You?"

"Same as before," Tom let go of his knee and gazed up into the well of darkness overhead, remembering the long seconds of their fall.

They should both be dead. That had been such a stupid thing to do. Tom had never tried to float on the spur of the moment - the magic required a very particular mindset. It should have been impossible, and yet.

Here they were.

Somewhere, in the noise, and panic and movement, he had found the calm required to slow their fall just enough to let them escape without serious injury.

Up above, little lights were appearing. Lit wands, Tom realised.

Harry must have seen them too. "They'll find a way down -- up -- here," he said grimly. "There's sure to be a broom or something somewhere in the Department."

Tom nodded. Without another word, Harry heaved himself up. He helped Tom to his feet, supporting most of his weight to spare his bad leg. From the new perspective, Tom could see another stone archway. It was set a little lower in the wall than the other one had been. They slowly picked their way over to it.

"The drop's not too bad," Harry said, sticking his head through the opening. He withdrew his wand and aimed it at the unseen floor above. "Spongify!"
They were still upside-down, of course. Tom eyed the archway warily, but Harry seemed confident in his spellwork. He climbed onto the arch, then jumped.

There was a moment in which Harry seemed to hang in the air, gravity pulling equally in both directions. Then he fell upwards, away from Tom, flipped, and landed neatly on the floor. It was really quite impressive. Tom followed suit, moving slowly to accommodate his leg, and landed with rather less grace.

"That felt so weird," Harry said, reaching out to steady him when he staggered. "What do you think the point of it is?"

"An experiment, maybe?"

Harry nodded absently as he gazed at their new surroundings. "Do you think this is still the Department of Mysteries?"

Like those on the floor below, the corridor was black-tiled and lit by blue torches. However, it seemed much less well used; a dark substance was smeared onto the far wall and detritus littered the floor. A nearby office door had been left open, and though it Tom could see rows of chairs stacked on top of desks.

"Maybe," he said. "Yes, I think so."

"We should find somewhere to hide while I fix your leg."

Tom nodded gratefully. Harry pulled his arm over his shoulder and helped him down the corridor. They took one left turn and two right, then chose an office at random. Once inside, Tom slumped down against the closed door, sitting with his legs out in front of him. Harry crouched next to him, then cast Lumos and began digging through his rucksack.

"It's lucky I decided to pack this," he said, as he retrieved the book on Magical First Aid and began flicking through its pages.

Tom watched him pick a page and begin reading. He didn't know where his own trunk was. He had set it down, he thought, when he had plucked the glass globe from the shelf. It was probably still there, abandoned in the chaos.

The globe . . . Tom reached into his pocket and withdrew the little glass object. The swirling smoke inside almost seemed to be emitting its own light.

Harry looked up from the book. "Can you make it talk like the others?"

Tom turned it this way and that. He had just been asking himself that very question. The other globes had begun to speak when broken . . . but Tom was reluctant to do that. He withdrew his own wand from his sleeve and tentatively touched it to the glass.

At first, nothing happened. Then the smoke began to swirl more rapidly, a miniature hurricane inside the orb, and from its depths . . . a woman.

She was tiny, just a few inches tall, shining white and bedecked with all manner of shawls and beaded necklaces. Her strange, round glasses made her eyes seem somehow too big for her face. But when she opened her mouth to speak, the voice that echoed from her lips was surprisingly deep and powerful.

_The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches . . ._
born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies . . .

and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not . . .

and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives . . .

the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies . . .

With those last words, she drifted apart into a puff of white smoke, leaving silence in her wake.

Harry was the first to speak.

"That was Professor Trelawny!"

"Who?"

"My Divination teacher. She's rubbish. But was that?" he asked, nodding towards the orb.

"A prophecy," Tom said. He had harboured the suspicion ever since he had seen the little white figures rising from broken glass, and the content of the message confirmed it.

"Born as the seventh month dies . . ." Harry mused. "That's me, isn't it? But marked as his equal?"

"Your scar, maybe?" Tom said, reaching up to brush away his fringe.

Harry shrugged him off and flattened it back down self-consciously. "It can't be -- Voldemort didn't even mean to do it."

Prophecies were strange, dangerous things. Difficult to interpret and prone to coming true in unexpected and often ironic ways. When they'd covered them briefly in Divination last year, Tom had been excited. He had even wondered if a prophecy already existed about him -- if some seer had foretold his glory and rise to power. But this . . . wasn't what he had hoped for.

"And neither can live while the other survives? We're both alive, aren't we? Both living? How does that make sense?"

"It doesn't."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Yeah, this one must be defective."

But he did not sound convinced. One line hung invisibly in the air between them.

Either must die at the hand of the other

Harry cleared his throat and looked away, busying himself with the textbook.

"Put that away, would you?" he said, without looking up. "I'm going to try and set your leg. The bone is too big to use Episkey, which is a pity because the alternative is much more difficult and painful."

Tom shrugged. Pain was a part of life. Something to be endured, then forgotten. He pocketed the prophecy, then levered himself up the wall. Harry positioned the wand over his calf.

"Dirigere!"

Tom let slip a small, unhappy noise as the bone crunched back into place. But moments later, the
pain flowed into blessed relief. His leg was still broken, but at least now the bone was in the right place. Tom sighed and leant his head back against the cool wall, basking in it the sensation.

Harry knocked his fist against his shoulder in an unspoken apology, then turned his attention back to the magic. His wand traced a slow, waving pattern in the air, and a golden thread, thin as spider silk, trailed from its tip to sink into the fracture.

Tom watched with curiosity as he worked. Harry was utterly focussed on his task, and, despite his inexperience, his movements were confident and precise. Although he paused occasionally to consult the book, he mostly worked from memory.

. . . There was something else Tom needed to do. Moving slowly so as not to draw Harry's attention, Tom reached again into his jacket pocket and withdrew a small, golden object. He shielded it from view in the palm of his hand.

The galleon he had once taken from Harry was a work of art. A perfect facsimile, so good it could almost have been real. The weight and size were right, and the rampant lion on the face was replicated perfectly. The only flaw was the neat row of zeros around the rim. Tom surreptitiously tapped them with his wand, changing them to:

13 15 13 00 00 00

MOM. The Ministry of Magic.

A mayday call to the Order of the Phoenix.

Harry would protest if he saw; too noble for his own good. But with the number of Death Eaters Voldemort had sent, Tom knew they had little to no chance of getting out without a distraction.

Luckily, he didn't seem to have noticed a thing. Tom slipped the galleon away, then settled in to wait. The room was quiet, and the corridor too. The Death Eaters evidently hadn't found their way to this level yet.

He was certain the Order would come eventually - ever since Harry's bungled message to them, they would have kept their copies of the galleon close. But there was one huge problem with waiting.

Harry's vow ended at midnight.

. . . Tom did not know the time. He couldn't risk casting a Tempus and drawing attention to the matter either. He tried to work backwards -- 10 p.m. when they had entered the Ministry . . . and perhaps half an hour to find the correct room in the Department of Mysteries. How long had they spent searching the room? How long had the confrontation taken? And how long had Harry been working on his leg?

It could be anywhere between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. Adrenaline did strange things to time, stretching it out and speeding it up in unpredictable ways. His best defence, he thought, eyes moving to Harry, would be if Harry did not remember . . . he hadn't mentioned it, so perhaps it had slipped his mind . . .

The remaining pain in his leg was ebbing away like the tide going out, disappearing with each successive loop of golden magic. Finally, the last strand fell from Harry's wand and the light dimmed. The other boy sat back, blinking and rubbing his back.

"I think that's done," he said with quiet pride. "Try to move it?"
Tom experimentally wriggled his toes inside his shoes, then drew his knee up. The surrounding flesh was a little tender, but the stabbing pain was gone.

Harry must have seen it on his face. He grinned, then got to his feet and offered Tom a hand up. Tom took it, then leant against the wall and tentatively rested his weight on his leg.

"It feels good as new. Thank you."

Harry ducked his head. But Tom knew he was pleased with himself. He should be -- the Ravenclaw Tom normally bullied into healing his more suspicious injuries wasn't nearly so quick or neat. Harry wasn't much of a book learner, but he had a real knack for learning practical things.

They both froze as a noise came from outside, echoing from somewhere far down the corridor. Footsteps, a crash, then a shout.

Another crash. Another shout. Tom realised that it was the sound of a door being thrown open with such force that it slammed into the wall.

"Can you hear what he's saying?" Harry whispered.

Tom began to shake his head, but as he did so the noises grew suddenly louder. The intruder must have turned a corner.

Crash!

"Revelio!"

The spell would catch out anyone hiding under a Disillusionment charm. Clever. But still careless -- the crashes of the doors hitting the walls were too loud and too close together; they weren't checking for an ambush or attempting to hide the noise. Whoever it was expected them to hide rather than fight.

It was insulting. Even if they thought Tom's leg was still broken.

"Do you think there's more than one?" Harry whispered.

"I don't know," Tom replied, pressing his ear as close to the door as he could manage. "I can't hear anyone else."

"Me neither."

There was a closer bang. They probably had less than a minute left.

"You get the one who opens the door. If there's someone else in the corridor, they're mine."

Harry did not answer but planted his feet confidently and aimed his holly wand at the door. His green eyes were bright and ready -- almost eager.

There was just something about Harry, Tom thought. The way he too, thrived off the adrenaline, the danger of the fight. Neither of them was meant for the quiet life.

Tom wanted him.

He liked them strong and spirited and clever. The more difficult it was to bring someone to heel, the greater the reward. He wanted Harry gazing up at him in admiration, Harry laughing as they duelled.
Harry kneeling on the bed, shirt rucked up, arse bare, face red and embarrassed, wanting--

CRASH!

It was the next door down. Tom snapped his eyes away from Harry and braced himself. Shadows played in the light filtering under the door. Then the handle twisted in one quick motion and it was thrown violently open.

A masked Death Eater stood there. But Tom hardly saw him, or heard Harry's shouted spell. A streak of white light shot past him, and the man fell backwards, arms snapping to his side in a full Body-Bind. Tom leapt over him, out into the corridor--

--And came face to face with a very small, watery-eyed man.

"Avada Kedavra!"

But to his amazement, before the spell could hit, the Death Eater emitted a high-pitched squeak of fear and began to shrink. The green spell flew harmlessly over his head.

"WORMTAIL!" Harry bellowed, bolting out of the room.

But he was too late. The Animagus was fully transformed -- a brown rat scuttled down the corridor, weaving from side to side, and disappeared around the corner.

Harry set off in pursuit before Tom even had time to call after him, to remind him of the length of the bond. But he returned a moment later, mouth a grim line.

"He's gone. Found a hole in the wall. Fuck."

"We need to move then," Tom decided. "He'll report our location. But first--" Tom turned to the paralysed Death Eater. "Avada--"

Harry slammed him against the wall, gripping the collar of his shirt.

"What are you doing?"

Tom was amazed. "Killing him, of course."

"He can't move!"

"You want to release the curse first?" It didn't sound like a good idea to Tom, but if it would make Harry stop fussing--

"I want you not to kill people when you don't need to!"

"I do need to. What the curse wears off and he comes after us?"

"We'll deal with that if it happens."

Tom shifted, taking a moment to enjoy the feel of Harry's wiry body against his. He appreciated too, that Harry had to look up to meet his eyes - the sight of his angry, upturned face was extremely pleasant. But sadly there was no time for this kind of play.

"Fine," he said. "You are such a bleeding heart."

Harry rolled his eyes, but let him go. "Right," he said. "That's settled then. Which way now?"
Tom gestured vaguely in the opposite direction from which the Death Eaters had come. "Let's try that way."

Harry ducked back inside the room to grab his rucksack, shouldered it and set off. Tom paused, then looked over to the Death Eater, still laid out flat on his back.

He had read once that you should put immobile people on their sides.

"Nauseo," Tom whispered, flicking his wand towards the man's throat. His Adam's Apple bobbed, and, behind his mask, his eyes widened in helpless terror, but, of course, he couldn't make a single sound.

Tom pressed a finger to his own lips, then turned and trotted after Harry, trying to look suitably dejected.

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It wasn't easy to find their way out of the upper level of the Department of Mysteries. The layout of the corridors seemed almost as if it was designed to frustrate a casual visitor, with many dead ends and loops. Most of the offices were sealed with magical shimmering tape, and, in some cases, decorated with warning posters. Eventually though, they came to a humble black door, identical to the exit on the level below.

Tom tentatively pushed it open. To his surprise, it was not locked.

The space outside was much brighter and cheerier than the Department of Mysteries had been. The wood-panelled corridor was lit not by blue torches, but by the enchanted glass ceiling overhead. Despite the late hour, fluffy clouds drifted across a perfect blue sky.

"What floor do you think we're on?" Harry asked as the door swung shut behind them.

Tom strode over to a nearby door. "Miriam Melliflue," he read aloud. "Office for Far Eastern Relations. All of the international stuff was on Level five. If so, the Portkey Office should be the next floor down."

"Right." Harry peered around, as if expecting an elevator to pop up out of nowhere. Tom sighed and pulled him along by the elbow.

It was quiet on the level, but in a way that was comforting rather than sinister. They wandered for a few minutes before the corridor opened up into a larger, circular space. It must have been some kind of gathering room; benches were placed around the edge and the walls were decorated with paintings of faraway landscapes and important wizards shaking hands.

"School trip is it?"

Tom spun around, bringing his wand up. But there was no one there.

"Over here, boy!"

The voice came from a portrait of two wizards, seated together on a baroque velvet sofa. One was fast asleep, his head lolling on his fellow's shoulder, but the other, a rather large man clad in a gold-trimmed waistcoat, smiled jovially back.

"Are you lost, by any chance?"
Tom and Harry shared a glance. "Yes," Tom said after a moment, lowering his wand and flashing the portrait his most trustworthy smile. "We got separated from the rest of the class on the floor above. We were meant to be meeting in the Department of Magical Transportation to hear the lecture on flying carpets, but we have no idea how to get there."

"Thought so, thought so," the man boomed, jostling his companion. He pointed to one of the doors leading off the room. "That corridor -- turn left and you’ll find a little stairwell that takes you down. Don't be too embarrassed now; this place is a maze. Took me months to learn my way around when I started here, back in 1741."

Tom smiled politely in thanks, then turned on his heel.

"Quiet today, isn't it?" said the portly man, nudging his fellow awake.

"Hmm?"

The stairs, which turned out to be a spiral of very steep and narrow stone steps, led down from an alcove. Tom went first, wand raised and moving as silently as he could manage. The cramped quarters of the stairwell made him uncomfortable -- it would be very difficult to fight if ambushed. To his relief though, there was no one waiting at the bottom.

By silent agreement, Harry did not speak when he joined him on the level. Unlike the floor above, the atmosphere felt tense, like the air before a thunderstorm. After a moment of consideration, Tom cast a Disillusionment charm on first himself, then Harry. They clasped hands to ensure they did not become accidentally separated, then set off again.

They passed door after door; offices for Floo travel, enchanted Muggle vehicles, Apparition . . . but no Portkeys.

Finally though, just as Tom was beginning to panic, the corridor twisted and brought them to an open space filled with neat rows of desks, each bearing a typewriter. Visible at the end of the vestibule was a set of wide double doors. The sign above them read

The Reginald MacMillan Portkey Library

Est. 1481

Harry squeezed his hand. They moved together between the lines of desks, walking faster and faster. Through the glass of the double doors, they could see filing cabinets, dozens of them. Each one would contain a Portkey, Tom was sure. He did not, at that moment, care about the destination; France, Russia, India, Brazil . . . anywhere, so long as it was away.

But, precisely halfway between the safety of the corridor and the double doors, a slow handclap sounded.

Tom froze in place. His Disillusionment charm was excellent; the shimmer would show only if they moved--

"Don't try to hide -- we set up a tripwire spell as soon as we got here, and you just walked over it."

A movement in the shadowy corner of the room. The woman from earlier stepped forwards and strode to stand blocking the doors. Another Death Eater followed from the opposite corner, and from behind them came a small scuffing sound as a third revealed himself in front of the exit. He was the only one to be masked.
"You may as well come out," the woman said. Her heavy-lidded eyes were fixed on the exact spot where they stood.

Three wands were trained on them. Tom reluctantly dispelled the charm.

"Oh yes," the witch breathed. "Yes . . . it is good to see your face in the light . . . it's just as he said . . . ."

Tom said nothing. The unmasked Death Eater looked familiar; a handsome, broad-shouldered man with a head of dark brown hair. His cold eyes were fixed unblinkingly on Harry, who tensed in discomfort.

Oh. The brother--

The woman was still speaking. "He knew you would come here," she gloated. "He knew you would be invisible. The Dark Lord knows you better than you know yourself, Tom."

At the sound of his name, Tom's attention snapped back to her. Did she--?

"Yes . . . I know what you are. The Dark Lord confides in his most loyal, most trusted servants." She paused to shoot a dirty look over to the Death Eater by the door. "And Lucius too, I suppose. You are an old magical experiment, a flawed copy of himself at sixteen."

She moved forwards, stalking around them like a predator hunting cornered prey.

"Such potential . . . such raw, untrained talent. I recognise you . . . the structure of your bones, the shape of your eyes. We have served the Dark Lord for decades; he did not always look as he does now . . . ."

Tom shivered. He did not fancy his and Harry's chances against these three. It was in the way they carried themselves - confident, but not reckless. No openings, wands steady, eyes fixed on their opponents. It would be very, very difficult for two teenagers to fight their way to the Portkey room.

They needed to stall. It was their only chance.

"You know my name," he said. "What's yours?"

The woman grinned, all teeth. Tom had the uncomfortable feeling that she knew precisely what he was doing. But she indulged him anyway.

"Yes, where are my manners? I am Bellatrix Lestrange, and this is my husband Rodolphus."

Tom could not quite put his finger on it, but there was just something off about her. Her movements were jerky; speed followed by absolute stillness, joints twisting through strange angles. Her smile was a touch too broad, her eyes too wide and too still.

"Tom," she said, savouring the name. "This does not have to be difficult. The Dark Lord can find a use for you. If you come willingly, pledge yourself to him, all can be forgiven . . . ."

"What is there to forgive?"

"Don't be cute with me!" she spat, mood changing in an instant. "Of course he's not happy with you. What secrets have you been spilling to his enemies? Why is Harry Potter still alive?"

"Maybe he likes the way I look," Harry said dryly.
A snarl twisted across Bellatrix’s face. She paced back, over towards Harry. "How dare you, filthy half-blood--"

"He’s a half-blood too. Did he tell his most loyal, most trusted servants that?"

Tom winced. He appreciated that Harry had picked up on what he was trying to do, but there was a lot to be said for his methods. He nudged the other boy in the ribs, but Harry ignored him, apparently warming to his theme.

"He didn't? Really? I'm amazed -- I thought he told his life story to everyone he met! He's told me twice now--"

Tom had only told Harry his blood status because he'd been intending to kill him, and thought it very unfair he was sharing it now. "Harry, would you stop that?"

"Can't get him to shut up about it, really."

Bellatrix had reached her limit. She hissed, low and furious, and raised her wand. The tip was shaking.

"You wretched little creature," she spat. "How dare you speak of your betters that way? Crucio!"

Harry was ready.

"Protego!"

The shield that bloomed from his wand shattered on impact. It took most of the force of the torture spell, but what was left was enough to make Harry stagger and cry out in pain. Tom's eyes widened -- Harry's defence was good, which meant the curse had been that much stronger--

"STOP!"

The cry had come from the third Death Eater -- Lucius. "No spells! You'll destroy the prophecy, and then where will we be?"

"Shut up Lucius," Bellatrix spat, rounding on him. "Who asked you, hmm?"

"The prophecy," Rodolphus said abruptly, as if woken by the word. His eyes finally left Harry. "You have it."

Tom kept his face still as he reached his free hand into his pocket and withdrew the sphere. Bellatrix moved forwards like a moth drawn to a light. Tom's wand jolted towards her, but she did not seem to care; she had eyes only for the object in his hand.

"Yesss . . . that's it. Give it here. Give it to me, that's a good boy. He can be generous, you know, generous beyond your wildest dreams."

"So generous that he let you rot in Azkaban for fourteen years," Harry quipped.

Her attention snapped to him. "Shut up, little half-blood. Your betters are talking. Who wants to hear from you? What do you--"

"It was our pleasure to serve him in Azkaban," Rodolphus interrupted, quiet but intense. "I would go back, live there a thousand years at his command. That place was a crucible -- it burnt away all the weakness, leaving only that which was pure."
"And now we have returned to him, he has *honoured* us as no others," Bellatrix breathed, anger forgotten. Her eyes met her husband's with open, disgusting tenderness, and her hand moved to rest over her belly. "Even given us our hearts' desire."

*Oh*, Tom thought, mind blank.

It took a moment longer to click for Harry. When it did, his jaw dropped.

"*What?*" he demanded, looking between the hand, the couple, and Tom. "Oh, you *didn't*--!"

"I have nothing to do with any of this! It wasn't *me*." Tom complained.

"Yes," Bellatrix said exultantly. "Yes, my Lord came to us one night--"

Lucius coughed pointedly. "Thank you, Bella, but you've graced us with the sordid details more times than I can count. Can we please get back to the mission?"

Bellatrix's face twisted into an ugly scowl at the interruption, and, to Tom's amazement, her wand found the other Death Eater.

"I swear, *Lucy*, if you weren't Cissy's husband--"

"Bella," the husband said, laying a hand on her arm. "Bella, not now . . . deal with him later . . ."

Harry nudged Tom. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second.

"*Impedi*--"

"I'll have none of that, thank you!"

Bellatrix whipped her wand across, and a dart of orange fire whistled through the air to cut across Harry's cheek. He cried out in pain and clamped his hand over the welt.

She was fast, Tom thought dazedly. *So, so fast.* Faster than Harry, even, and he was one of the quickest duellists Tom had ever fought.

"*Enough!*" she snarled. "Enough little lies from you, enough delaying. Give me the prophecy."

"I'll trade it for a Portkey," Tom said quickly. "You take it to Voldemort, and then he can hunt me down at his leisure."

Bellatrix threw back her head and laughed, loud and brash.

"*Oh,*" she said, when she recovered, eyes glistening with tears of mirth. "Or what? How are you going to stop us from simply taking it, little one?"

"There will be no deals," Rodolphus said, voice hard.

"*Oh really?*" Tom asked, holding the prophecy up higher. "And if I smash it? What will your master say then?"

Silence.

Tom smiled, projecting confidence he didn't have. "Now, a Portkey--"

"Clever boy, aren't you," Bellatrix interrupted. "Of course you are. I bet a clever, curious boy like
you would have worked out how to make the prophecy speak in the hour or so you've had it."

Cold fear trickled down the back of Tom's neck. Bellatrix smiled broadly.

"Go ahead and smash it," she said. "We will drag you before the Dark Lord, and he will rip it from your mind."

Checkmate.

Tom and Harry raised their wands as Bellatrix and Rodolphus raised theirs. It was hopeless, Tom knew, and so cruel that they should be caught here, when the Portkeys were only yards away, trapped behind magically toughened glass--

"Depulso!"

The spell came from behind them. Tom whirled in time to see the Banishing Charm hit Lucius. It sent him crashing backwards into a row of desks.

Wizards, cloaked but not masked, were spilling into the room from the corridor. A grizzled old man with a shockingly blue spinning eye, a witch with purple hair--

The Order of the Phoenix.

Tom dropped the prophecy into his pocket and seized Harry's hand. They sprinted forwards, towards the double doors as the Death Eaters scattered, shields blooming from their wands. Twin yellow bolts of light flew past his head, but Tom was past caring. He threw open the doors to the Portkey Library--

"Bellua Ignis!"

Tom yelped and leapt back as a hyena formed entirely of blood-red flames dashed past them. It crashed headfirst into the nearest shelves, igniting them instantly. The fire hissed and spat, and sparks leapt, forming into birds with burning wings. They glided through the air and alighted on chairs, tables, filing cabinets, spreading fire wherever they went.

Not fire. Fiendfyre.

Tom twisted to see Bellatrix Lestrange standing behind them, curved wand raised, face lit red by the light of the flames. She slashed her wand downwards, but, before she could complete her incantation, it flew out of her hand. She whipped another out of her sleeve, hissing in fury, and turned to face the Order member who had engaged her.

It was chaos. Noise, movement, the heat of the fire at their backs. "You crazy bitch," Lucius was shouting as he struggled free of the desks. "You'll burn the whole building down!" Spells were flying everywhere, red, gold, green--

Harry pulled him along by their linked hands. "Come on, Tom, we need to move-- Protego!"

They skidded through the room. Fiery birds were now flying overhead, spreading the fire out into the main room.

"Crucio!"

Tom dodged. His skin prickled as the spell glanced over his shoulder. Rodolphus -- he stood blocking their escape.
Harry didn’t pause. He scrabbled at Tom's jacket pocket, withdrew the prophecy and hurled it at the Death Eater.

Rodolphus' eyes widened. He caught the globe, fumbled, almost dropped it, then caught it again.

But by then, Harry and Tom were already past him and into the corridor. They dived round the corner just as a fizzing blue spell, sloppily aimed, flew over their heads and took a chunk out of a painting to their left. Its occupants screamed and ran for cover.

"Wait," Harry said, as Tom dragged him along. "That was Moody back there, and I think I saw Lupin too! Fuck, how did they know to come?"

"I don't know, but we need to get down to the Atrium," Tom replied. "The Floo might still be open."

"No! We need to go back and help!"

Tom was incredulous. "They're adult wizards. They don't need us butting in."

Harry though, wrenched his hand free. "I'm going back to help," he said mulishly. "Break the bond."

"No! There will be curses flying everywhere! I'm not doing this without a Horcrux."

Harry paused. His head cocked to the side.

"What time is it?"

Tom grabbed for his hand again. Harry shook him off and raised his wand.

"Tempus!"

12:17

It was past midnight, Tom realised, with dread. Of course it was. Harry was free.

They stood in silence for a long moment, processing the implications. Then Harry rolled his shoulder and turned to him, eyebrows raised. "Break the bond," he commanded. His wand was still up. It looked a lot more threatening than it had a minute ago.

Tom chewed on his lip, eyes flickering over Harry's face. There was no leverage here - they could fight for it, Tom could try to knock him out and drag him along, but it would cost time they simply didn't have.

"Just help me, okay?" he said, unable to keep the pleading note out of his voice. "The Atrium is only two floors down -- it'll only take a few minutes. I'll let you go the moment we reach a fireplace and then you can dash back up here and get yourself killed."

Harry considered this. Tom shifted his weight from foot to foot, anxious to be off. There were noises further down the corridor, shouts, spells, and an ominous red glow.

"What's the magic word?"

Tom's jaw dropped. Harry had the audacity to smile.

"You're kidding me!"

Harry shrugged, giving nothing away.
Tom ran a hand through his hair, trying very hard not to strangle him. The seconds ticked on.

"Please," he said finally, through gritted teeth.

Harry grinned widely but didn't fight when Tom grabbed him by the elbow and dragged him away. They jogged through the corridors. Luckily, they were deserted. The other Death Eaters and members of the Order were probably scattered throughout the building, searching for them. The fire would buy them some time -- the counter-curse was not easy and required the coordination of several competent wizards.

Another corner, and the golden lifts were in front of them. Tom chose a button at random, and then stood, tapping his foot impatiently as the cage rattled its way up from the Atrium.

He could hear footsteps, quiet, but growing louder.

"Come on . . . come on . . ." Tom urged.

Finally, a chime sounded and the lift doors opened. The boys rushed inside. Just as the cage was sinking back through the floor, someone - Order or Death Eater; it was impossible to tell - skidded into the vestibule containing the lifts. Then they were gone, swallowed up by the shaft.

The Atrium too was deserted. Tom made a beeline for the fireplaces, passing the golden arches, the tinkling fountain, the empty security desk. He sighed in relief as he reached the nearest one.

But just as his fingers closed around the lever that would release the Floo Powder, green flames flared in the grate.

Tom looked at his own hand. The lever hadn't moved.

Harry grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him away. A moment later, Tom saw why.

A person was moving in the depths of the fireplace, unfurling out of the flames. They were tall, so, so tall, and clad in black robes from head to toe. And in their hand . . . a familiar pale wand.

Lord Voldemort had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

Edit: I've had a few people ask in the comments where we are in the story. I'm (afraid? happy?) to say we're not even at the halfway point yet xD ❤
It was like looking through a warped mirror. What Rodolphus Lestrange had said about the bone structure, the face . . . it was true. Monstrous, but still recognisable.

But his power . . .

It was a physical thing, like a pressure in the air, an impending storm. Overhead, the navy ceiling had darkened to pitch black night.

Tom tried to Apparate. He focussed his mind on an image of the cottage, the neat, empty bed tucked beneath the window, willing himself and Harry, whose hand was still tangled in the back of his shirt, away.

Nothing. The Ministry’s wards were an impenetrable wall. The fireplaces were empty and dead, and the Visitor’s Entrance might as well have been on the moon, for all the good it would do them at the far end of the Atrium.

The trap had finally sprung shut.

Tom swallowed. His mouth was very dry, but his mind was whirring, searching for something he could offer Voldemort, some deal he could make. Anything, anything to stay in the body he had fought so hard to gain. He didn’t want to spend eternity trapped inside a vessel, an inanimate object to be hidden away from prying eyes. If that happened . . . he might as well be dead.

Voldemort was watching. There was something leisurely in his manner – a willingness to take his time. His eyes moved slowly over the pair, taking in the way they stood; close together, wands trained on him.

Then his eyes found Tom’s.

Red like coals in a fire, arterial blood spilling from a wound. Such a brilliant colour, made even more shocking by the pallor of his face. And with that contact, a lure, an almost gravitational pull.

Tom sucked in a breath. It sounded terribly loud in the silence of the room. His feet wanted to move forwards towards the other part – the *main* part – of his soul.

He wasn’t going to do it, he told himself stubbornly. He clenched his fists, digging the nails into his palms.

Voldemort cocked his head to the side, curious.

“Come to me,” he commanded softly.

Harry’s fingers tightened in his shirt. But it wasn’t necessary. Tom gritted his teeth and stood his
“I know you feel it,” Voldemort said. “And yet you can resist. How strange. I have far more control over dear Nagini.”

Behind him, Harry was shaking. Or maybe Tom was. It was hard to tell. The adrenaline was rushing through him, urging him to run.

Voldemort knew. His lips twitched – daring them to try.

“Sixteen . . .” he said softly, when Tom didn’t move. “My youngest Horcrux; my first tie to immortality. I did not believe it at first . . . I assumed that my diary held only a memory, an echo . . . I believed that it had killed Harry Potter and the Parkinson girl down in the Chamber of Secrets, and then, work done, lapsed back into sleep. But I was wrong . . . you are more than a memory, aren’t you, Tom?”

Tom twitched at the sound of his name, but said nothing. Voldemort smiled lightly, and continued.

“And yet,” he said, “my unease grew. You were careful, Tom, very careful, but even so, there was something wrong. I began to receive fragments of strange dreams . . .”

With that, his eyes slid to Harry.

“. . . Very strange dreams.”

Harry made a very small, very strangled sound and let go of Tom’s shirt.

“Quite,” Voldemort said drily. “And so, slowly, I began to entertain the possibility . . . to think about what a theoretical living Horcrux might do . . . might go . . . and then, one night, I attempted to Apparate into the derelict cottage where once I had passed my summers . . .”

He twirled his wand idly between his fingers.

“But I was unable to.”

The words hung in the air. The wand, Tom’s wand, thirteen inches of yew, spun round and round, before abruptly stilling, tip pointed at them.

"You have disappointed me, Tom. You should have come to me.”

Tom laughed with no real humour. “You would have locked me up.”

“I suppose I would have . . .” Voldemort said thoughtfully. “For your own safety, if nothing else. But you had options, leverage with which you could have bought yourself a better deal. Perhaps a pleasant suite of rooms rather than your diary; and, eventually, an opportunity to gain my trust. But no . . . I understand. No version of me would be content with a cage.”

He paused, and began to pace. Not drawing closer, just marking out an arc around them, like a wolf stalking cornered prey. Tom twisted on the spot to keep him in view.

“And yet, this was always the plan. You should be happy, Tom. I have travelled, learnt, lived . . . I have achieved our wildest dreams and more . . .”

“This wasn’t the plan!”

“Oh?”
“I wasn’t meant to be—”

“Conscious? Yes, I suppose you are right. I admit, I never—we never spared a thought for precisely what would go into that diary. We assumed it would be like cutting off a finger; a sharp spike of pain and then a separate, unconscious thing to be stored safely away.”

It was true. It was just luck, Tom suddenly realised, that he was here and Voldemort was there. It so easily have been the other way round; either of them could have gone into that diary.

A whirring sound. Tom jumped as the sound of grinding gears echoed through the Atrium, drowning out the soft tinkling of the fountain. Voldemort spun on his heel and waved his wand in a quick spiralling motion.

The lifts at the far end of the hall exploded, sending fragments of molten metal soaring through the air.

“That should hold them for a while,” Voldemort said, with mild satisfaction, as if he had not just blown up half the room. “We need no interruptions . . . whether from the Order of the Phoenix, or indeed my own followers. They can be a little overenthusiastic.”

His attention was still on the lifts. Harry nudged Tom in the side, but Tom didn’t need the cue—

“Avada K—“

Voldemort did not even turn around. A negligent flick of his wrist, and the floor at their feet swarmed into black stone serpents. Tom was forced to abandon his spell to leap away.

“Disobedience,” Voldemort said, the word a lethal hiss. “I expect nothing from Harry, but you, Tom, I am most displeased with. Consorting with the enemy, sharing my secrets, killing my servants . . . is there no end to your treachery? Crucio!”

There was not even a moment where Tom could have dodged. Pain, so immense and so endless that it was like floating in a vast sea. But instead of water, it was lava, scalding hot, burning him up but somehow not killing him. His limbs were contorting; Harry was yelling; he was on the floor, but none of that mattered, next to the pain--

"PROTEGO!"

Relief. Tom gasped and heaved for air. His forehead was damp with sweat. Harry . . . Harry was standing over him, fingers gripped tight around his wand, maintaining the shield charm.

“Harry Potter,” Voldemort said. “Do you truly think yourself ready to face Lord Voldemort?”

To his credit, Harry didn’t flinch. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Such arrogance! You have been very lucky Harry, very lucky . . . perhaps Dumbledore has told you about the twin cores of our wands -- yes, I know about that too -- perhaps you think it will protect you. But you are overlooking something.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry demanded, full of bravado.

Voldemort smiled, holding his hands out: a clear invitation to attack.

Harry must have known it was a trap. But the Dark Lord waited patiently.

“Expellia--“
Voldemort gestured; a single, sharp motion. His magic hit Harry with the force of a powerful backhanded slap, sending him sprawling to the ground. His wand flew from his hand and rolled across the floor.

“Why would I even need to use my wand?”

They were hopelessly outmatched, Tom thought despairingly, as Voldemort turned back to him and gestured for him to stand. Tom did so, warily. He tensed when Voldemort drew closer, but stood his ground. He wasn’t going to embarrass himself by fleeing and being dragged back like a child. There was nowhere to go, anyway.

Voldemort -- his future self -- was even more monstrous up close. His skin was unnaturally white, paler, even, than Tom’s, and there were thin slits where his nose should have been. His pupils were slitted like a cat’s, and he moved with the same grace and coiled power.

Voldemort stopped in front of him. His hand raised -- slowly, telegraphing his movements -- to grip Tom’s jaw. He turned his face this way and that, inspecting him with curiosity.

“I’d nearly forgotten that I used to look like this.”

He didn’t regret the change. There was no longing in his voice, just a distant sort of nostalgia. After all, what was physical appearance next to power? It was such a small price to pay.

“You’ve been gathering together my Horcruxes. After I discovered your existence, I checked on those that were accessible. Some were asleep . . . but not all. And not all were there . . .”

He trailed off. Tom’s heart thudded in his chest when he realised Voldemort had spotted the thin cord hanging loosely around his neck.

With a sudden rush of violence, he tore it away, pulling on the cord until the string snapped. Tom gasped at the short, sharp pain -- he was sure there would be a red line there tomorrow (if there was a tomorrow) -- but Voldemort paid him no mind. He held up the broken ends of the string so that the ring dangled in front of his eyes, rotating slowly.

“Empty,” he mused, as the light in the Atrium glinted off the sharp planes of the stone. “You have absorbed it. But even so, how could such a small scrap of soul inhabit a body? It should be impossible . . .”

He paused in silent contemplation. Tom’s wand was still in his hand -- he warred with himself as the silence stretched out, weighing up the possibilities--

“I wonder . . .” Voldemort said suddenly. His eyes moved slowly to Harry, who froze like the proverbial deer in the headlights.

“I was most surprised when I learnt that Harry Potter still lived. I know you, Tom, know your sense of self-preservation. You would not expose yourself to that kind of risk, no matter the . . . compensations. And there has always been something strange about Harry . . . .”

He turned back to Tom. And suddenly, his eyes were an ocean of red, a colour of impossible depth. Tom’s peripheral vision dimmed; the room spun; his heart was beating butterfly-fast in his chest--

“Show me, Tom.”
Harry watched from the floor as Tom swayed forwards. Voldemort was using Legilimency, he realised with a mixture of fear and mortification. He was going to see everything. The fight in the Chamber of Secrets, the cottage, the things they’d done . . .

And the bond.

Harry wrenched his eyes away. He needed his wand. Looking around, his heart sank when he spotted it some ten feet away-- he scrambled over anyway, but had to stop when a sudden wave of lightheadedness surged over him. It was just out reach. Harry reached for it, pushing against the bond and wishing, suddenly, that he’d had Tom teach him a little wandless magic, just enough to make it roll across the floor---

A laugh broke through the silence. Harry spun around at the sound.

Voldemort was done, it seemed. He released Tom, who bent over and heaved, holding onto his knees.

“How ironic,” came his high, cold voice. “What an amusing surprise. But it all makes sense . . . the Parseltongue . . . the dreams . . . really, I should have guessed. I will deal with you, Harry, but first--“

Harry had just enough time to shout a warning. Tom’s head snapped up just in time to deflect the hex that sprang from Voldemort’s wand. He sidestepped a second, wobbling as he did so, but the third knocked him off his feet. Voldemort gestured, and his wand flew from his hands.

“Incarcerous!”

Thick black ropes wrapped themselves around Tom’s ankles. Voldemort lowered his wand and turned his attention to Harry, who stood wandless, trapped at the limit of the bond.

Voldemort’s lips twitched. He knew.

He drew closer, content to take his time. Harry hated that he recognised the expression on his face: Tom, at his most sadistic. He made a leisurely gesture with his wand.

Harry’s feet left the floor. He kicked out, startled, but there was no leverage to be had. His body rose a few scant inches then stopped, floating just off the ground.

Voldemort halted right in front of him, close enough to touch. Harry held himself still, trying to will away the panic he felt, the painful vulnerability of this position.

But then, quite deliberately, Voldemort’s eyes dropped. His gaze moved slowly over Harry’s body; his chest, his belly, his--

Harry didn’t just want his feet back on the ground. He wanted to sink right through the floor and keep going, forever.

Voldemort caught his eyes. There was a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. Amusement and enjoyment, cruel pleasure in watching Harry squirm. He was just playing off the memories he’d seen, purposely trying to unsettle him, but Harry’s face was still aflame at the implication.

“It’s a pity . . .” Voldemort said. “If I’d only learnt what you were when we stood before the Mirror of Erised, or even last year, in the graveyard, you could have been protected. I would have found a safe place for you, much as I will find a safe place for Tom. But now it is too late . . .”

The heat seemed to be leaching out of the room by increments. Harry couldn’t suppress a shiver.
And when Voldemort spoke next, his voice was cold as ice.

“You aren’t a Horcrux anymore. My soul no longer lives behind your eyes . . .”

His long, pale finger touched Harry’s scar. There was no pain for either of them. Voldemort was protected by the blood he had stolen; Harry by the removal of the Horcrux.

“All that’s left is a thin cord. And cords can be cut.”

A sharp motion, and Harry hit the ground hard. He had no time to recover his balance before Voldemort seized him by the hair and began dragging him towards Tom. Green flames flared wandlessly to life in the nearest fireplace.

He was going to take them away!

Harry struggled against Voldemort’s hand, but his grip was brutal, his fingers like iron. Through watery eyes, he could see Tom shuffling backwards as best he could, stymied by the ties around his legs. Voldemort pulled him across the room, dragging him closer and closer--

“Yes,” Voldemort hissed, relishing his fear. His hand twisted tighter in Harry’s hair, viciously pulling him up to stand on his toes. He could feel Voldemort’s icy breath as he leant in to speak. “If you’re good, Harry, perhaps your stay with me will be short . . . perhaps I will be merciful . . .”

Tom was shouting. Harry fought against Voldemort’s grip. The world was a whirl of pain, movement, fear--

Fire.

Harry gasped in pain and flung up his arms to protect his face, thinking, for one frantic moment, that the Fiendfyre on the level above had somehow made its way down to the Atrium. He wrenched away, and to his surprise, Voldemort let him go. The Dark Lord stood tall, unaffected by the flames, fury on every line of his face.

“Dumbledore!”

He was right. Hope swelled in Harry’s chest -- the flames that had appeared in the middle of the Atrium were clearing to reveal the Headmaster, Fawkes perched on his shoulder.

He looked as he always had, clad in purple robes with his long white beard tucked into his belt and half-moon spectacles perched on his long nose. Every inch the quintessential storybook wizard.

Except for his eyes. They were harder and colder than Harry had ever seen them.

"It has been some time, Tom."

He was speaking to Voldemort, who laughed derisively. There was no mirth in his voice, however; his body was tense and his wand was poised.

“You have grown old, Dumbledore,” he said, as Fawkes took off to swoop around the hall. “I knew, but seeing it in the flesh is a different matter. Are you frail? Do your fingers shake? Do you see your own death on the horizon yet?”

“All of the above,” Dumbledore said gently, withdrawing his long, oddly shaped wand. “Old age, while occasionally inconvenient, is nothing to fear. I am quite ready to die. Not you, however. Your fear is your greatest weakness, Tom.”
His eyes flicked briefly to where Tom -- Harry’s Tom -- sat on the floor, struggling with his bonds.

“A Horcrux. I first suspected it when you regained your body last year. But I never would have guessed that you mutilated yourself while still at school.”

Voldemort did not respond. He paced slowly, stalking around Dumbledore. Spoiling for a fight.

Dumbledore smiled and inclined his head in acknowledgement.

And then they began.

Harry couldn’t even tell who had cast the first spell. Tiles ripped from walls, grew wings and beaks and descended upon Voldemort as a swarm of ceramic birds. But the Dark Lord conjured a wind with a twist of his wand. It whirled around him like a hurricane, shattering them against the walls and sending shrapnel flying everywhere. Harry ducked, and ran across the Atrium.

Tom was watching open-mouthed when Harry reached him, caught up in the wonder of it. Harry leapt over him, retrieved Tom’s sycamore wand from where it lay on the floor a few feet away, then skidded to his knees next to him. He pressed the wand to the bonds.

“Severing charm,” Tom instructed, finally tearing his eyes away from the duel. “Aim it well.”

Harry, who had not used that spell since that day they were ambushed in the forest, blinked. There was blood coating his hands, thick and viscous and startlingly red.

Then he blinked again.

It was gone.

“Hey!” Tom said, waving his hand rudely in front of his face. “Pay attention!”

Harry scowled, but resisted Tom’s efforts to pluck the wand out of his hand.

“Difindo.”

The wand leapt in his hand, willing and eager, and the bonds parted. Tom wasted no time. He was on his feet and moving almost immediately, heading towards the closest fireplace. But not a moment later, he was forced to drop to the ground as a black whip of fire arced from Voldemort’s wand, circled overhead, and constricted down around Dumbledore.

The Headmaster showed no sign of alarm. He raised his own wand, lightly, as if to point out something on an imaginary blackboard, and caught the stream of magic at the tip. Lilac fizzed through black, spreading rapidly, until Voldemort was forced to jerk his own wand away, breaking his connection to the magic just before it reached him.

They were breathtaking.

But he had no time to admire the fight. A crash echoed down the Atrium from the direction of the lifts. Harry spun on the spot.

The Order and the Death Eaters had managed to bludgeon their way through the debris Voldemort had left for them. Dust and rubble was spewing out into the hall and with it, black-clad figures. Harry could hear shouts, see red and green flashes of light--

Tom grabbed him by the upper arm and heaved him towards the fireplaces.
“NO!” Harry shouted over the din, struggling against Tom’s hold. He dug his heels into the floor. “I’m not going to let you kidnap me again!”

Tom hissed in frustration and tried, once again, to wrench the wand away from him. Harry batted at his hands and kicked him hard in the shin. Tom yelped, but clung on.

“Where are you even going to go?” Harry demanded. "The Floo will be tracked, the Portkeys are all destroyed. Voldemort knows about you and Dumbledore too. And if you think I'm swearing another vow, you're delusional."

Tom did not seem to care. He shoved forwards, trying to topple Harry, who angled his wand just in time--

"FLIPPENDO!"

The wand jerked in his hand, unwilling to turn against its master. But although the spell it produced was weak, it was still enough to knock Tom to the ground. He landed hard and rolled. Harry shielded as he leapt back up, face contorted in anger.

The shield was just in time. A stray stunner glanced off the shimmering sphere, followed by a stronger hex. The fight was coming to them. Harry hesitated, torn between backing away and shielding Tom too -- the latter option came with its own risks.

But he couldn’t just leave him there, out in the open.

“One wrong move,” he warned, stepping forwards and holding his wand half on Tom, half in the direction of the combatants.

Luckily they didn’t seem to have been noticed, amid the chaos. The fight between Dumbledore and Voldemort was still going on. The air around them boomed with power, a magical barrier none of the Death Eaters or Order members dared to pass. The dozen or so witches and wizards prowled around the edges, engaged in a confusing multi-sided duel. Harry spotted Tonks and Kingsley; the latter bleeding freely from a cut on his forehead, fighting Rodolphus Lestrange. Bellatrix was laughing, casting spells in all directions, almost as much a danger to friends as to foe--

And Sirius.

Harry cried out as he recognised his godfather. His face was wild with the joy of the fight, eyes bright and wand flashing spell after spell. He blasted a masked Death Eater with an Impedimenta then ducked an incoming spell only to walk almost into the path of a Killing Curse. Lupin tugged him out of the way at the last possible moment.

“Drop your wand!”

Harry turned. The words were not aimed at him. Mad-Eye Moody stood there, peg leg singed but stable. Tom, whose hands were in the air, was leaning away from the wand jabbed under his chin.

"I don't even have it-- HEY!"

Harry winced as the scent of burning flesh reached his nose. The tip of Moody’s wand was apparently very hot. Tom leant back further, glaring hatefully down at the much shorter man.

Harry didn’t know what to feel. An instinct, ingrained after weeks together, was urging him to help Tom. But that wasn’t right -- Tom was an enemy--
“For Merlin’s sake, keep shielding, boy!” Moody barked.

Harry jumped, and spun back to the fight, renewing the charm. The duel in the centre of the room was heating up, if that was possible. Dumbledore and Voldemort’s wands flowed from spell to spell, faster than thought. Fawkes swooped around them, weaving skilfully in and out of a swarm of transfigured objects, occasionally letting out a cry that sounded like the peal of a bell.

Dumbledore had the upper hand, Harry decided, after a moment watching. Voldemort was a marvellous duellist, but somehow he didn’t seem able to penetrate Dumbledore’s defences. For his part, the Headmaster met raw power softly, turning it back against its caster.

Suddenly, with a cry of frustration, Voldemort gave up. He broke away from Dumbledore, and, in one smooth motion, cast a spell straight at Lupin. Harry watched in horror as it hit him dead in the centre of the back.

But it was not a fatal curse, apparently. Lupin arched, screaming in pain, as fur sprouted on his face and neck. His arms lengthened until his hands, which had curled into claws, almost dragged on the ground. Sirius took several fast steps back as his friend dropped to all fours and growled.

Satisfied with the distraction he had created, Voldemort turned sharply on his heel.

CRACK!

It was the loudest sound. Like shattering glass, but magnified a thousandfold. Golden fractures spread through the air, as if space itself was cracking apart. Harry clapped his hands to his ears. Lupin, now fully transformed into a werewolf, sat back on his haunches and howled.

Voldemort was gone. He had Apparated right through the Anti-Apparition wards. Tom, still held in Moody’s rough grip, was open-mouthed, staring at the spot where he had been.

"That isn't possible,” he breathed.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The Death Eaters were following their master. Kingsley took aim at Rodolphus as he Disapparated through the broken wards, but was forced to turn his wand on Lupin instead when the werewolf, enraged by the noise and bleeding freely from his ears, leapt towards him.

“Stupefy!”

The first spell came from Dumbledore. One by one, the rest of the Order of the Phoenix followed suit. Lupin heaved against the first few Stunners, but he was hopelessly outnumbered. Soon enough, his legs gave out and he collapsed to the ground.

Sirius knelt beside him, feeling for a pulse, then visibly sighed in relief. Harry watched as Dumbledore strode over to him. He bent at the waist to ask Sirius something, and then made a small gesture with his hand.

Towards Harry.

Sirius turned, eyes wild with hope -- and spotted him.

Harry was already starting forwards as Sirius leapt to his feet and flew across the room. They met at the limit of the bond, and, without a word, Sirius wrapped his arms around him in a big bear hug, squeezing him tight, as if never wanting to let him go.
Harry buried his face in Sirius’ shoulder and cried. Joy was bubbling inside of him like water from a brook, washing away the pain and stress and exhaustion. His limbs were heavy and he was so, so ready to sleep, but none of that mattered, because he was safe and with his godfather.

“I thought you were dead,” Sirius was saying, over and over. Harry’s throat was clogged up. He clapped him on the back in a wordless reply. Sirius gave a hoarse sob and squeezed him tighter.

Other people were gathering around. He could hear footsteps, voices.

“Wotcher Harry,” Tonks said, as she thumped him on the shoulder. Harry looked up just in time for Mr Weasley to ruffle his hair. As if from far away, he could feel his own lips moving, hear himself babbling questions about Ron and Hermione, about the summer, and telling them how happy he was to see all of them, alive and safe and with him.

Finally, Sirius’ arms loosened.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked quickly. “You didn’t get hurt in the fight?”

“As if! I’m fine, you idiot. Better to ask about yourself—” He felt around the back of Harry’s head, and frowned at the dried blood that came away on his fingers.

"It's just a scrape," Harry said self-consciously. "I knocked it against something."

Sirius pulled him in for another quick hug. Over his shoulder, Harry could see Dumbledore speaking to Moody and a particularly surly Tom. The Headmaster glanced up in time to catch Harry’s eye. He patted Moody once on the shoulder, then made his way over to them.

“I’m sorry, Sirius, but I need to borrow Harry for a bit.”

"Can't it wait?" Sirius demanded.

“I’m afraid not,” Dumbledore said gravely. “I’m taking him -- and the other boy -- to my office at Hogwarts. He may as well stay overnight in the Hospital Wing afterwards so Madam Pomfrey can check him over. I’ll bring him to Grimmauld Place tomorrow morning.”

Sirius was clearly not happy, but he nodded anyway. He gave Harry’s hair one final, careful ruffle.

"You’re such a good kid. I never got to tell you that."

Harry grasped wordlessly at his sleeve, still sniffling a little. His heart felt too big for his chest, completely filled up with emotion. It had been so, so long since he’d seen Sirius. Harry had missed him terribly.

Dumbledore gently drew him over towards Tom.

It was busy in the room, Harry realised dimly. Up and down the Atrium, the fireplaces were flaring green, and people were emerging, many still in their nightclothes, talking to each other in low, concerned murmurs. Somewhere, a camera bulb flashed.

What about Tom?

Somehow, Harry had never even entertained the idea of Tom being captured. It was incredibly stupid in retrospect, but he had actually thought their plan would work, that the only risk was Tom trying to kidnap him again. Now that it had happened, he had no idea what to expect.

Dumbledore activated the nearest fireplace with a wave of his wand, then turned to Moody.
“I need to speak to Fudge,” he said. “You take them ahead. Severus should be there waiting for you.”

“I’ll do that, Albus,” Moody said gruffly. “Hold onto me, Potter.”

It was easier said than done; Moody was gripping Tom's upper arm with one hand and keeping the wand jabbed into his neck with the other. Harry awkwardly took a fistful of his robes. The three stepped forwards into the flames.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve had a couple of people ask if we’re near the end -- don’t worry, lol, we aren’t even halfway through this story. I’m sorry the updates have been slow lately; I’m a PhD student, and summer is the season of deadlines xD

Also, thank you so much to blop, who made a gorgeous piece of art for Chapter 15 (ages and ages ago, and I forgot to post the link here *sweats*) and to glowcloud, who made an wonderful moodboard!

See you guys soon!
A wall of cool green flame, and then the familiar circular office was opening up in front of them. Harry followed Moody out over the hearth.

It was dark outside the windows; perhaps one or two o’clock in the morning. The gilt-edged portraits of the previous Headmasters and Headmistresses were dozing in their frames, filling the room with a susurration of sighs and quiet snores. A few, dotted here and there, were rousing at their entry. They watched with bleary curiosity as Moody pushed a protesting Tom forwards towards the great claw-footed desk that dominated the room.

"Who is this?"

It was Snape's voice. Harry spun around to see him standing by the door, arms folded. His eyes met Harry's briefly but then swiftly moved onto Moody and Tom, as if the sight of his most despised pupil, missing for months on end, was of no more interest than an escaped Flobberworm.

"Evening to you too, Snape," Moody said, as he shoved Tom into one of the wooden chairs in front of the desk. He leaned down and began patting at Tom's clothes in the hope of finding hidden weapons.

"Ow!" Tom yelped, wriggling away from his hands. "Stop that! Where do you think you're touching?" Moody leaned down further still, so their faces were inches apart.

"CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he barked. Tom froze in shock.

Snape strode across the office towards them, dark robes billowing. The green light of the fire was unkind to his already sallow complexion and his hair hung limply around his face. Harry realised belatedly that he had probably been waiting in the office ever since Dumbledore had left for the Ministry; his position as a spy would have prevented him from joining the duel on either side.

"Who is the boy?" Snape repeated. He towered over the grizzled ex-Auror, who, apparently satisfied that Tom was not hiding anything in his trousers, had straightened up.

"Mind your own business," Moody said gruffly as he conjured chains to secure Tom's wrists to the armrests.

"Oh?" Snape raised a single brow. "And you do not suppose that the Headmaster will tell me when he arrives?"

"I'm sure you'll find out from one of your masters," Moody said under his breath. He turned to Harry before Snape could retort. "What are you still doing over there, boy? Come and sit down."

Harry wasn't going to complain. He crossed the room and sank gratefully down into one of
Dumbledore’s chintz armchairs.

"And where is Dumbledore," Snape asked coldly. "Is he still at the Ministry?"

Moody grunted in what might have been assent. Then he turned on his heel and began to pace to and fro in front of the fireplace. The minutes passed in tense, passive-aggressive silence. Harry sank down further in the chair, carefully avoiding everyone's eyes.

It really was very comfortable. Much better than the one in the cottage (which had never really recovered from its brief stint as a mattress). Harry was tempted to toe off his shoes, curl his legs underneath him, and fall asleep right there and then.

Moments later, or so it seemed, the fireplace crackled again, showering green sparks across the hearth. Harry jolted out of a light doze just in time to see Dumbledore emerging from the flames with Fawkes perched on his arm.

"Good evening," the Headmaster said pleasantly. Fawkes launched himself into the air and fluttered over to his perch. "Thank you, Severus, for waiting; it is most appreciated. I had hoped to arrive earlier, but it took me some time to convince Fudge not to arrest Sirius on the spot. I'm afraid the Minister is quite hysterical."

Snape made a derisive noise, which Harry took to mean that he would not mind seeing Sirius arrested. Dumbledore smiled at him, then turned to Moody.

"Lupin needs to go to St Mungo's, and Kingsley too - he has a cut on his leg that won't stop bleeding. I've left Tonks handling Fudge, but I'm afraid that he - along with the reporters from the Daily Prophet - might be too much for her alone. Would you mind terribly -- ?"

"Of course not," Moody said. He limped over to the hearth, peg leg clanking against the flagstones with every step. "Are you alright with the boy?"

"Thank you Alastor," Dumbledore said lightly. "But I am confident that Severus and I can manage one unarmed teenager."

Moody gave a huff of amusement. He tipped an imaginary hat to the Headmaster, then stepped through the fireplace to confront the Minister for Magic, holding his wand (which was unusually thick, and more like a Muggle policeman's baton than anything else) out in front of him.

The flames turned yellow again. Dumbledore made his way across the room to his ornate chair behind the desk, clapping Harry's shoulder briefly as he passed.

"Well?" Snape demanded the moment he sat down. "What happened?"

Dumbledore sighed and removed his half-moon spectacles. "Please sit, Severus. It has been a long evening, and I don't think I can bear to crane my neck at you."

Snape did not move immediately, but it quickly became apparent that Dumbledore was determined not to say anything until they were all seated. The stalemate lasted for long seconds until, with great dignity, Snape drew up another armchair on the opposite end of the desk to Harry and perched himself on the edge like some great black vulture. The four of them were arranged around the desk; Dumbledore and Tom facing each other across the long edge, Harry and Snape on the two ends. The setup reminded Harry a little of Courtroom 10; a semicircle of wizards facing a prisoner bound to a wooden chair.

"Much has happened in the last few hours," Dumbledore began, as if there had been no pause.
"Harry, as you can see, is back with us. Several Ministry departments have been partially or wholly destroyed by marauding Death Eaters. And finally, Lord Voldemort himself entered the Ministry to duel first Harry and then myself. He was witnessed by half a dozen Ministry employees, including the current Minister for Magic, who arrived mere seconds before he Disapparated."

"I see," Snape said. His face was perfectly impassive. "And who is this other boy?"

"I think it would be for the best if he told you himself. I trust you still carry a vial of Veritaserum on your person?"

There was a sharp intake of breath from Tom. The two professors ignored him. Snape reached inside his robes and withdrew a small vial of clear, colourless potion.

"I'm not drinking that," Tom said quickly.

"You think not?" Snape asked with distant curiosity.

It was, in fact, perfectly obvious that they could make him drink it. He twisted in his seat and met Harry's eyes in a wordless plea for help.

Harry shrugged back, unsympathetic. Tom had forced him to drink more than one unpleasant substance over the summer. Veritaserum, at least, was harmless.

Snape's robes rustled as he rose to his feet. He flipped off the cap of the vial with his thumb.

"Would you like to drink this with some dignity?"

Tom didn't move. There was a stubborn cast to his face, and Harry had the strong impression that he was tempted to force Snape to pry his jaw open with magic out of pure spite.

But then his eyes flickered first to Dumbledore and then to Harry, potential witnesses of his humiliation. His mouth opened the smallest amount.

Snape didn’t waste the opportunity. Quick as a flash, he grabbed Tom's jaw, forced his chin back, and tipped the contents of the vial down his throat. Tom spluttered, but wisely stopped short of actively spitting the potion out.

Dumbledore replaced his glasses on his crooked nose. "What is your name?" he asked, as Snape regained his seat.

The words seemed to spring out of Tom faster than he could think to check them.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"And how did we meet?"

This time Tom fought it. His knuckles turned white where they gripped the armrest, and his mouth twisted as if he could somehow seal away the words. But they came out anyway, one by one.

"You delivered my Hogwarts Letter to Wool's Orphanage."

"When you were a child," Dumbledore began, steepling his fingers in front of his face. "There was an incident with a rabbit belonging to one of the other orphans. What did you do to it?"

"It was a Sunday. All the other children were at church. I snuck into Billy's dormitory and lured the thing out from under the bed. I knew that Billy would rush up to check on it as soon as he came
back, so I brought it to the second-floor landing, right over the stairs. Then I tied a noose around its neck. I made the rope float, up and up, until the end wrapped around the rafters." He smiled suddenly, sunny and bright, right at Dumbledore. "Then I let it go."

Dumbledore gazed back at him steadily. Tom's lip curled.

"Did Mrs. Cole tell you that one?" he demanded. "I don't see why she was complaining; it all ended well enough. The cook cut it down and made it into a stew. 'No point in wasting good meat,' she said. Everyone but Billy ate it and it was delicious."

"Thank you, Tom," Dumbledore said. "I am glad to see that the potion is working. A skilled Occlumens can resist Veritaserum, but that art never came as naturally to you as Legilimency did."

Harry wondered then, why he was bothering with the potion. After all, Dumbledore was a Legilimens too. Some of his confusion must have shown on his face, because Dumbledore smiled at him and said;

"You are wondering, of course, why I do not simply pull the information out of Tom's mind myself?"

"Yeah."

"Tom's mind is not, as I recall, a particularly pleasant place: I would rather spend as little time in it as possible. And I believe you should hear what he has to say for himself rather than hear it secondhand from me." He paused, then inclined his head to Snape. "I can see that you too are bursting with questions with me, Severus. Very well; we shall cut to the chase. You are Lord Voldemort's Horcrux, Tom?"

"Yes."

This was news to Snape. He sat bolt upright in his chair, eyes roving over Tom's face much as Bella's had. Harry wondered what he was seeing. Tom did not look like much. Handsome, yes, with lovely dark eyes, but still a skinny, gangly teenager in old-fashioned Muggle clothes. One of the buttons on his shirt was mismatched, and his collar was torn and stained with blood.

To his credit, Tom ignored the scrutiny. He sat straight, confident, like a prefect called to the Headmaster's Office for a casual chat.

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "It was quite a shock for me too, to see you standing there as if plucked directly from the past. Who did you murder to create your vessel, Tom?"

"My father."

"Your father," Dumbledore repeated. "Yes, I thought that might be it. It would have appealed to your sense of grandeur, your need to create a myth for yourself. I imagine that you left the Riddle House immediately after murdering your father and grandparents, and conducted the ritual elsewhere?"

"Yes."

"What happened during the ritual?"

"Pain. Terrible pain. It seemed to go on forever, but then something tore and I was floating outside my body. My counterpart cast a spell and I was drawn into my diary. I don't remember much afterwards."
Amusement brightened Dumbledore's eyes. "A diary?" he asked. "Such a humble object, Tom? I must confess, I was expecting something a little more grand."

Tom flushed red with anger. "What do you mean, 'more grand'?' he demanded. "I used that diary when I was searching for the Chamber of Secrets! It represents my mother's legacy -- proof that I am the Heir of Slytherin!"

He had puffed out his chest a little, Harry noticed with amusement. Probably he had been dreaming of the moment when he would finally reveal his glorious heritage to Dumbledore.

"Yes yes, most impressive," Dumbledore said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. "I am glad you have brought up the Chamber of Secrets, Tom, I will have more to say to you about that in a moment. But first we must tackle the events that led you there once more. How did you fall into the possession of Pansy Parkinson?"

"I don't know. I think I was with my counterpart for a time, and then with Abraxas Malfoy. I don't really remember it though - I wasn't really conscious inside the diary unless someone was writing in my pages, feeding me their magic. Something must have gone wrong though, because I ended up in the Hogwarts library lost property box. Pansy found me sometime in March when she was rooting around in there for things to steal."

"I see. So Pansy took the diary and began to write. You woke up within its pages and made the decision to manipulate her, possess her, and drain her life. You had her daub threatening messages on the wall, then open the Chamber of Secrets and instruct the monster within to attack other children. You did this, I imagine, out of sheer sadism, just like the first time you opened the Chamber."

"There was a reason!" Tom complained. "I wanted to lure Harry Potter down to the Chamber so I could speak to him!"

"Oh? And it was necessary to attack students to do that? Harry is -- if you'll forgive me for saying so, Harry -- the sort of person who often finds his way into dangerous situations. You could have brought him down to the Chamber without any of the dramatics."

Tom did not reply. Harry had to smile at the sulky expression on his face. He had known, of course, that Tom hated Dumbledore with every fibre of his being, having been privy to his frequent rants about the Headmaster, which ranged from his choice of clothing (too bright and tacky), to his unfairness in class (he took House Points if he caught Tom torturing or killing the animals he transfigured), to spying on Tom outside of lessons. But it was interesting to witness it in person. And although Dumbledore hid it better, the dislike was obviously mutual. A fundamental personality clash.

"What happened on the sixth of May?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry watched as Tom recounted the entire tale of their fight in the Chamber of Secrets, visibly squirming when Dumbledore pressed him on this or that. When he reached the part where Harry had hit the Basilisk with a Conjunctivitis Curse, Dumbledore's eyes regained their familiar twinkle. Harry sank lower in his chair, embarrassed by the unspoken praise.

The mood, however, quickly grew dark again. It was painful to hear the clinical, disinterested voice in which Tom spoke about how Pansy had died in the Chamber of Secrets.

"I will tell the family tomorrow," Dumbledore said softly, when Tom finished. "They did not hold out much hope, but perhaps the news will bring them some closure. At least I will be able to tell them
that her death was painless--"

"No," Snape interrupted. "I will do it. I was her Head of House." Dumbledore inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Harry fidgeted, thinking about Pansy. He could still see her in his mind's eye, smirking in potions class, tucking her hair behind an ear, leaning in to whisper to Daphne Greengrass.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "And then? What happened next?"

"I waited in the passageway while the Chamber caved in," Tom said. "I assumed that Harry had died too, but when the noises stopped, I realised I could hear someone moving around. I crept closer in the dark and caught him just as he lit his wand."

"What did you intend to do to Harry?"

"Kill him, of course."

"I see. But you did not kill him. Why?"

"Because I found out that he was a Horcrux."

Tom's words dropped into a pool of silence. The portraits, many of whom had been muttering and whispering to each other up to this point, hushed.

Harry did not look up. He could not bear to see the expression on Dumbledore's face... on Snape's face... as they learned this horrible truth about him. Suddenly he realised that everyone was going to know; Mrs. Weasley, Ron and Hermione, Sirius. What would they think of him? Would they be disgusted?

Dumbledore stood. He waved his wand to summon a crystal decanter and glasses from a nearby spindly table. The decanter tipped once, twice, three times, pouring out generous measures of a warm amber liquid. Two glasses landed in front of Snape and Harry. The third Dumbledore took for himself.

"Madam Rosmerta's finest oak-matured mead," he said. "Drink up, Harry. I find that it settles the mind."

Harry looked blankly at the glass for a moment, then picked it up and took a tentative sip. The liquor burned going down but left behind a pleasant warmth and rush.

"I owe you an apology, Harry," Dumbledore said, sinking back into his own chair. "I must confess, I began to wonder about the possibility earlier this year, after the dream in which you witnessed the attack on Arthur Weasley. That you had seen it through Nagini's eyes was highly revealing; it implied to me that there might be more to the link between you and Voldemort than I had ever suspected."

He paused for a moment in contemplative silence, then continued.

"Forgive me, for my actions afterward constituted cowardice of the highest order. I did not seek to confirm that first, sneaking suspicion, for the implications of it were too terrible to contemplate. Instead, I ignored the problem -- and you yourself -- for months."

Dumbledore trailed off, looking at Harry expectantly. But Harry had no idea what to say. He understood.
He had been confused and hurt by Dumbledore's avoidance at the time; of course he had. But there had been a piece of Voldemort's soul inside him. It was only natural that Dumbledore hadn't wanted him to know things about the Order, hadn't wanted to include him in his plans. He lifted his head and gave Dumbledore a tentative smile.

Fawkes gave a little trill. Dumbledore's eyes were suspiciously bright. Harry looked away quickly, although not fast enough to miss Tom's exaggerated yawn.

"And when were you planning to share these suspicions of yours with me?" Snape demanded, voice absolutely glacial. His glass sat in front of him, untouched.

Dumbledore turned to him and spread his hands. "What could you have done if I had, Severus? What could any of us have done?"

"Then what is the use of telling me now?"

"I believe the situation has changed. I very much doubt that Harry is still a Horcrux . . . or at least, a Horcrux of the traditional sort."

"Oh?"

Rather than directly answer, Dumbledore turned back to Tom.

"We left your story with the two of you in a passageway leading from the Chamber of Secrets. How did you discover that Harry was a Horcrux?"

"I could sense it when I was close enough."

"And when you discovered the fragment of your soul inside him, what did you do?"

"I took it out," Tom said. A flicker of a smirk crossed his handsome features and, with a rush of embarrassment, Harry realised he was thinking of the method he had used.

"What happened afterward?"

"Well, it stuck to my soul, just as I had hoped. But it also stayed stuck to Harry's."

"You told me some of this in the Atrium, when I asked Alastor to take you through the Floo alone."

"We can't get very far apart," Harry said quietly. "No more than thirty feet. If we go further, we both pass out."

"I see. And when Tom discovered this, he decided to take you with him, to serve as a Horcrux of his own?"

"Yes. We walked through the passageway until we reached the Forbidden Forest, then T--- I mean, Riddle Side-Alonged us away to a cottage he knew in Scotland."

"Oh?" Dumbledore asked. But Harry did not respond. It had suddenly dawned on him that they were entering a dangerous part of the tale. He did not want Dumbledore or Snape to know more than they needed to about his summer with Tom, but he didn't see how it could be avoided.

"A cottage in Scotland?" Snape drawled. "No wonder you were unable to escape from such a formidable dungeon."

Harry flushed, but Dumbledore held up a hand before he could retort. "How did you control Harry,
"Control?" Tom said, looking slyly over at Harry. "He agreed to help me."

That statement, while technically true, was a complete misrepresentation of the situation.

"Agreed?" Harry demanded, placing his empty glass back on the table with a thud. "He blackmailed me into swearing a vow!"

"I just explained what I would logically do if you refused," Tom said breezily.

"You threatened to lock me in a suitcase!"

"Firstly, it was my school trunk," Tom said, rolling his eyes, "not a suitcase--"

"Like that makes a difference!"

"And secondly, I would have drugged you first."

Harry was about to retort, but Snape got there first.

"I'm sorry to interrupt this little . . . domestic," he said. "But do you mean to say you swore a magical vow to the future Lord Voldemort, Potter? I must congratulate you. I did not think you could sink any lower in my estimation, but you have surprised me once again."

"I was kidnapped!" Harry protested. How dare Snape talk about it like that? He hadn't been there! He didn't know what it was like--

"Oh?" Snape's eyes moved over him. Harry was suddenly very conscious that he was dressed much the same as Tom was, not thin or bruised - other than the injuries he'd sustained in the Department of Mysteries - and bickering comfortably with his kidnapper as if they were close, if rather antagonistic, friends. "A terrible fate indeed."

Tom laughed. There was a malicious glint in his eye that Harry recognised - the one that always appeared right before he stirred up trouble.

"Actually, Harry could be convinced to do all kinds of things," he said. "With his hands . . . with his mouth . . . ."

It could not have been more clear what he meant. Harry could feel a bright flush rising in his cheeks, an ugly mixture of humiliation and betrayal. No one had even asked. Tom had wanted to boast about it, had done so at the very first opportunity, even though Harry had told him over and over again that it was private! Typical, thoughtless, selfish behaviour, doing things without once thinking about how they would affect Harry!

Tom was not even looking at him. He was smirking at Dumbledore in a very self-satisfied way, like a cat who had just batted a treasured possession off a high shelf.

Dumbledore regarded him steadily. "I know your proclivities, Tom. I had the great misfortune of teaching you for seven long years." He raised his voice to address Snape, who was staring at Harry as if he had just poured a large bowl of Bubotuber pus all over his shoes. "And I would strongly prefer it if there was no more discussion of this subject inside or outside this room. Tom Riddle was a master manipulator even at this age, and quite capable of tricking witches and wizards much older and more experienced than Harry. As I recall, he delighted in causing severe psychological damage to those who caught his attention. Harry is not responsible for anything that happened during his
captivity."

Tom snorted. Dumbledore rounded on him.

"That is quite enough from you on that subject, Tom," he said, voice infinitely colder than it had been before Tom's revelation. "We shall get this over with. How many Horcruxes did you intend to make?"

"S-Six," Tom said, clearly thrown by the abrupt question.

"Six," Dumbledore repeated, with utmost contempt. "I thought that might be the case. There was something you said to Harry last year; that you had 'gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality'. You were not content to mutilate yourself just once: you would not rest until you had utterly destroyed your own soul."

"I was making it better," Tom muttered.

"So much better, in fact, that it split again, against your wishes, on that fateful Halloween night fifteen years ago. Harry must have been made into a Horcrux then - the murder of Lily Potter and the attempted murder of her infant son tore what was left of your soul apart."

Tom did not show any sign of regret.

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "I tried with you, Tom," he said. "You had chance after chance. But you have chosen cruelty above compassion at every fork in the road. Fine. We will speak no more of your personality - tell me more about the cottage you took Harry to. Where was it?"

For the next half an hour, Dumbledore quizzed Tom about the events of the summer. To Harry's relief, he skipped lightly over the details of daily life at the cottage, concentrating instead on their search for the other Horcruxes. He wanted to know about all the places that Tom had considered looking, the valuable objects that he had either had access to or coveted, and their excursions to the Gaunt shack and the cave by the sea. Tom grew increasingly testy and nervous as the interview went on, and he was forced to reveal more and more information. He tried to interrupt on several occasions, but Dumbledore spoke over him.

Harry sank back into his chair, trying to avoid Snape's eyes. The rubber sole of his left trainer was peeling away from the upper and his laces, now grey with age, had been knotted many times where they'd snapped. He dropped back into the conversation just as Dumbledore was concluding a long series of questions about the ring Voldemort had taken from Tom earlier that night.

"And do you think the whole thing was a Horcrux? Or just the stone?"

"I already told you," Tom said through gritted teeth. "I don't know. And what does it matter anyway? It's not even a Horcrux anymore."

Dumbledore smiled enigmatically. "I think that's all I need to know, Tom. Do you have any questions, Harry?"

It was left ambiguous as to who Harry was being given permission to question: Tom or Dumbledore. Tom's eyes widened: the Veritaserum would force him to answer, and honestly.

Luckily for him, Harry didn't have the energy to deal with him right at that moment. Instead he asked Dumbledore something that had been nagging at him.

"How did you know to come to the Ministry tonight, sir?"
"How?" Dumbledore repeated, eyebrows rising. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a shining golden Galleon which he slid across the table to Harry. "Why, Miss Granger's marvelous invention, of course. Did you not send the message?"

Harry picked it up. It took his tired brain a moment to register that the serial number around the edge was no longer a row of zeroes.

Tom had called the Order. Harry did not know when -- no, wait, it must have been while his leg was being fixed, or shortly after. He had done it behind Harry's back, because he knew Harry would have stopped him.

"That reminds me," Dumbledore said. "They found a dead Death Eater on the fifth floor of the Ministry."

"What?" Harry asked. There was a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"According to the Aurors who went to check, he choked on his own vomit while paralysed by the Full Body-Bind curse."

Harry sat there in numb, horrified silence. He had killed a second person by accident.

"Harry," Dumbledore said, quiet but firm. "I doubt very much that it was your fault. A Vomiting Jinx would have done the trick, I imagine."

It took a moment for Harry to understand what he was saying. Then his head whipped round.

Tom didn't bother to deny it. "I told you it was stupid to leave him behind."

"We agreed!" Harry cried. The Death Eaters were terrible people, and Harry had nothing but disgust for anyone who chose to follow Voldemort, but that man had probably been someone's husband, someone's father. To be killed in such a way; unable to move or cry for help--! Harry couldn't imagine anything more horrible.

"You're too soft-hearted! One of his Death Eater friends would have woken him up, and he would have come after us."

Harry dropped his head into his hands. That made three betrayals in once evening; the galleon, the murder and the things he had implied to Dumbledore and Snape. But there was no point being angry at Tom: Tom wasn't capable of learning. Harry should be angry at himself instead, for trusting him, for not watching closely enough.

"We've talked about this," he said quietly, not looking up. "About you being cruel when you don't need to. You can come up with a dozen excuses, but really you did it because you like killing, didn't you?"

It was a direct question.

"Yes," Tom said, unapologetically. Harry made a little inarticulate noise of frustration.

"The hour is late," Dumbledore said, breaking the silence. "I think I've heard everything that I needed to hear."

His voice was very calm. Something about his manner or his words seemed to spook Tom, whose eyes flickered from Dumbledore to Snape, then back again. But Harry barely noticed. He was too tired - too done - to deal with any more of Tom's antics.
"There are lots more Horcruxes to find," Tom said quickly. "At least four. And I can sense them when I'm close -- tell them, Harry!"

"Only when you're really close," Harry mumbled. "It took us ages to find the ring."

"No!" Tom protested. "No it didn't -- no more than a few minutes--"

"And you made me drink that potion even though you couldn't feel anything from the locket."

"Are you still going on about that? I said sorry ages ago!"

He had never apologised, but Harry wasn't going to press the point.

"And Voldemort is seeing some of my dreams. I could trick him, just like he did to us!"

"Yes Tom, very helpful," Dumbledore said.

Tom twisted in his seat. "Harry, don't --"

"Somnus profunde."

The beam of white light leapt from Dumbledore's wand to hit Tom in the chest. He sagged in his chair, eyes slipping closed.

"Thank you for the interview, Harry."

"I-- oh right, yeah," Harry said, thrown by the sudden, unfamiliar spell. He glanced at Tom, whose chest was rising and falling slowly.

"I know you must be tired after the last few hours and months, but I'm afraid I have one final task for you tonight."

"Er," Harry said. "Yeah, of course."

Dumbledore reached into his pocket again and, to Harry's astonishment and delight, withdrew a familiar holly wand. He held it out to Harry, handle first.

Harry took it gratefully, smiling at the warm, happy magic surging under his fingers. "Thanks Professor! But what's the task?"

"The time has come, I believe, for you to break the bond."

It shouldn’t have been as surprising as it was. Obviously the bond needed to be broken, and indeed, Harry had been prepared for it to happen hours ago. Even so, he couldn’t suppress a brief pang of regret. The wonderful, terrible sensation of kissing Tom, the feeling of another soul surging against his own . . .

Harry would never have that again. How long would it take him to forget it? Weeks? Years? His whole life?

But he couldn't voice any of this to Dumbledore. He didn't want the pitying look, the contempt from Snape, the slow, careful explanation that his feelings weren’t real; just the natural result of his captivity with Tom.

"I don't know how," he said instead.
"That is quite alright, for I do," Dumbledore stood, strode to one of the bookshelves that lined the walls, and returned with a thick tome. He opened it and laid it on the desk before Harry could glimpse the cover. "The spell is a little complex, but I'm sure you will manage."

Harry skimmed the page as fast as he could - he did not like reading when others were watching. Dumbledore was right about it being complex; it would have been a tricky spell to pull off on the first go even if he wasn't mentally and physically exhausted.

"Can't you do it, sir? I don't want to mess it up."

"I'm afraid I can't," Dumbledore replied. "The spell can only be cast on one's own soul."

"Oh," Harry said, looking back down at the book. The wand movement wasn't too bad, but the close, mediaeval lettering made it hard to read the incantation. "What does it do, exactly?"

Dumbledore reached over and flipped the cover of the book partway closed so Harry could see the title.

"Secrets of the Darkest Art"

"That spell is the first step in the creation of a Horcrux." He held up a hand to still Harry's protest. "Please trust that I would not ask you to use it without very good reason. It is designed to create a small cut in the soul. A subsequent murder will tear the soul neatly along that line, limiting damage to the rest of the soul. It will cause no permanent harm, I assure you; if the latter parts of the ritual are not completed, the cut will heal in a matter of weeks."

"Oh," Harry said. He was still not sure that he was comfortable using such an evil spell. "Why didn't you have me do this before though, when you first realised I might be a Horcrux?"

"That is a good question, Harry; very astute. Unfortunately, it would not have worked. It is only possible now because Tom has pulled away the bulk of the Horcrux. The join is thin, stretched out, and most importantly, easily identifiable. I do not even have to make the souls visible; aiming in Tom's direction will do the trick."

"Will it hurt?" Harry asked. There was a strange sort of tension in the room. Snape was unusually quiet; watching the conversation with a fixed black stare.

"You will likely experience a deep but fleeting pain. Tom is in a deep sleep and will feel nothing."

"Okay," Harry said, reassured. He ran through the spell in his mind once more, then raised his wand. Tom didn't stir. He had been trying to say something before he'd been knocked out. The words nagged at Harry - who knew when they'd speak next?

"What's going to happen to him after? He won't be sent to Azkaban will he?"

Dumbledore did not respond immediately. Harry turned just in time to catch him exchanging a look with Snape.

"Not Azkaban, no."

Harry nodded, relieved. No matter how he felt about Tom (and his feelings at that moment were a mess of hopelessly tangled string, knotted so many times he couldn't even find the ends) he wouldn't wish that fate on anyone.
But Tom couldn't exactly be left walking around freely, could he? a little voice said in his head. He had killed at least four people - six if you counted the two Death Eaters.

"So where then? He's dangerous."

Snape made an impatient noise. "Stop procrastinating, Potter."

Harry held his ground. "I'm just asking. Will you keep him somewhere in Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore said nothing.

It took Harry an embarrassingly long time to understand. Then his stomach sank.

He had been so stupid.

It was, in fact, extremely obvious what would happen to Tom. So obvious that Dumbledore hadn't thought it worth mentioning. Tom was keeping Voldemort alive. While he lived, Voldemort was invincible.

Unkillable.

"Oh," he said. "Oh right. You're going to kill him."

That was why Dumbledore had asked him to break the bond. It was keeping Tom alive.

Dumbledore flinched at his tone. "Harry," he began. "Harry--"

"Yeah," Harry said, rising from his chair. He paced across the room to the semicircle of tall windows that looked out over the lake.

"He's not real," Dumbledore said quietly. '"Think about it, Harry. How could such a thin sliver of soul be truly sentient? He is an echo, like a ghost or moving portrait."

Harry nodded distractedly. A ghost or a moving portrait. Right.

The only problem was that Harry did not - could not - think of Tom like that.

He gazed out over the dark grounds. Light spilled from the castle's many windows, illuminating the closest areas. Harry could just make out the towers of the Quidditch pitch; patches of black against the navy sky.

"How are you going to do it?" he asked finally.

"Severus will administer a potion. It will be completely painless."

"And after? What will happen to the b-body?"

"It will be buried quietly."

Harry turned back to him. The Headmaster's face was pale and lined. He looked as if he had aged ten years in the space of two minutes. But his blue eyes were steady.

Harry trusted him. Harry didn't trust Tom. Tom had killed Pansy. Tom had killed that Death Eater even though Harry had asked him not to. Tom had killed his father and grandparents. Tom would keep killing people. Because he liked it.
Harry tried to concentrate on that, all the horrible things Tom had done. But his mind kept drifting into memories of Tom laughing, wild and free. Pulling Harry in for a kiss, waking him up in the morning because he wanted a hand on his cock. Petting his hair like he was some kind of favoured pet. Cooking breakfast, burying potatoes in the embers of the fire to bake. Stealing one of Harry's Muggle paperbacks to read outside on a sunny day.

Dead and lifeless, being carried out to the Forbidden Forest for burial in an unmarked grave.

Would Dumbledore tell him where it was? Would Harry lay flowers there?

Big white daisies, maybe.

Harry crossed back to the desk. He laid his wand down on the surface, shaking his head wordlessly.

"Weak," Snape jeered. "You are willing to risk the lives of every one of your friends, every witch, wizard and creature in the Wizarding World for this simulacrum of Lord Voldemort?"

"Severus, please," Dumbledore said.

Snape took no notice. "Do you suppose he would stay his hand if your positions were reversed?" he continued. "No. If you had been captured by Lord Voldemort tonight, he would have cut you loose without a moment's hesitation. Others have sacrificed so much, and you repay them like this? You are not even being asked to soil your hands with blood, just to make a single, sensible decision and leave."

Harry folded his arms, scowling stonily back at Snape. He was, to his surprise, completely settled and certain in his decision. Harry did not know if Tom deserved to live, but he was not going to be the one to kill him. And no matter what Snape said, breaking the bond now would be the same as killing him.

"Enough, Severus," Dumbledore said. "You will leave us this instant."

Snape's face turned an ugly, blotchy white. For a moment it seemed that he would argue, but then he rose to his feet, gave Harry one last scathing glance, then turned on his heel and strode from the room in a whirl of robes.

Dumbledore rubbed his forehead. "Sit down, Harry."

Harry did as he was told. He watched numbly as the Headmaster poured out two more glasses of mead.

It had been easier when Snape was yelling at him. Now he was gone, a wave of conflicting emotions was rising in him: anger at himself, anger at Tom, fear that Dumbledore was disappointed in him, that everyone would be disappointed--

"War makes monsters of us all."

Harry looked up. There was compassion in the lines around Dumbledore's eyes, he thought. Maybe guilt too. "Were you really going to kill him?" he asked. "He's not -- well, he's bad, but he's a teenager like me. He doesn't even have any of Voldemort's memories."

"I know."

"Voldemort can't die while Tom's alive," Harry said. "And Tom can't die while I'm alive. So are you going to kill me?"
"Never," Dumbledore said, quiet but intense. "Never, Harry."

Harry nodded mutely, suddenly overcome with a flush of emotion.

"For the last six months, I have been tortured by the idea that - if you were what I suspected - this war could only end with your death. I turned over plans, mad things, fool’s bargains, that held almost no hope of success, just to give you a chance at life. I cannot begin to describe the joy I felt when I learned that the Horcrux had been fully extracted, that there was another way. Between you and Tom, I would choose your life in a heartbeat."

"I can't let you kill him," Harry said, looking at Tom again. "I don't like him; I hate what he does to people, but I can't stand back and let him die."

"It is fate's little joke," Dumbledore said, swilling the golden liquid around in his glass, "that a person's greatest strength is so often also their greatest weakness. Your compassionate heart, your desire to save everyone, is what makes you so extraordinary and so different from Lord Voldemort. Tom, however, is past the point of no return. He has made himself unsaveable."

Harry opened his mouth - although to say what he had no idea. But Dumbledore continued before he could speak.

"It is alright, Harry. I am not saying this to chastise you or to convince you to reconsider. Your decision is a noble one."

"You're not angry?"

"Of course not."

Harry met his eyes. Dumbledore smiled gently back.

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked after a moment of silence. "I mean, since you aren't going to kill me."

"I don't know. As Tom pointed out, Voldemort has many Horcruxes. This decision can be deferred, if necessary, until his other ties to life are destroyed."

"Is it really necessary to kill Voldemort? Can't you lock him up instead?"

"I'm afraid that there is not a prison in existence that could hold Lord Voldemort. We have succeeded in keeping Gellert Grindelwald in Nurmengard thus far, but his grasp of wandless magic is a pale shadow of Voldemort's."

Harry sat for a while, trying to think of another alternative.

"There are other things I need to discuss with you," Dumbledore said gently, when he did not speak. "The prophecy in particular. But they will have to wait until another day. Madam Pomfrey is expecting you."

He rose to his feet. Harry blinked stupidly up at him for a moment, then followed suit, remembering just in time to grab his wand off the desk. Dumbledore removed the chains wrapped around Tom's wrists, then levitated him over to the fireplace with *Mobilicorpus*.

The hospital wing was very bright compared to the cosy office they had just left. Madam Pomfrey was sitting behind her desk at the end of the ward. She sprang to her feet at the sight of them and bustled over.
"Albus! Oh, and Mr. Potter too!"

There was only one bed made up, but it was easy enough to pull over a second. Dumbledore levitated Tom into it, while Madam Pomfrey sat Harry down and fussed over his bloody head.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you!" she said, closing the wound with her wand. "Lift your shirt up now; I want to check you for internal bleeding -- oh my!"

She broke off at the sound of a chain clinking into place, securing Tom's wrist to the steel bed frame.

"Just a precaution, Poppy," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "This is Tom. He is under the influence of a potent sleeping charm, but it should wear off in a matter of hours. I will need to make other arrangements for him in the morning, so do let me know when he awakens." He turned to Harry. "Harry, I am terribly sorry to ask, but may I borrow your wand for a while? I'm worried that Tom will get up to some mischief if he is able to take it from you."

"Yeah," Harry said. He handed his own wand back to Dumbledore and then fumbled around in his pockets for Tom's. "I had a rucksack too," he said as he passed it over. "I lost it somewhere in the Atrium. And Tom had a trunk which is probably still down in the Department of Mysteries."

"I'll make enquiries," Dumbledore said. "And Harry, I should have said this earlier, I am so glad to have you back."

Harry gave a weak smile. Dumbledore patted his shoulder once more, then left. "The Ministry," he called, as he stepped back into the flames.

"Well I never," Madam Pomfrey said, staring after him. She must have been curious about the unknown Hogwarts-age boy who had suddenly appeared in her domain and been chained to a bed, but to Harry's immense relief, she did not interrogate him. Instead she finished tending to his various bruises, cuts, and burns, talking quietly all the while about the weather, a short trip she'd taken to visit Professor McGonagall in Edinburgh and a girl who'd managed to transfigure her nose into a red and white mushroom sometime back in May. She did not seem to expect Harry to respond, so he sat there and let the words wash soothingly over him.

Eventually, she finished with him and moved onto Tom.

"I've been keeping this place open over the summer, you know, even after the School was closed," she said, while Harry changed into a set of the white cotton pyjamas that were standard in the Hospital Wing behind a curtain. "For the Petrification victims - they're all cured, by the way, Sprout had her first batch of Mandrakes ready in June - and for the Order."

"You're in the Order?" Harry asked, startled. He had never seen her at Grimmauld Place.

"Yes dear, but in a supporting role. Healing is quite a specialised skill, even if I do say so myself. Some injuries are just too suspicious to be taken to St Mungo's, and after what happened to Broderick Bode in the Spell Damage ward back in January, well. Albus didn't want anyone to risk it unless it was absolutely necessary."

"Oh right," Harry said as he stepped back around the curtain, holding his sweaty, bloody clothes in his arms. "That makes sense."

"I'll deal with those," Madam Pomfrey said, taking the loose bundle from him. "It's half past three in the morning - you should try to get some sleep. I doubt that your friend will wake up in the next eight hours, but if he does, I'll be in the bedroom behind the office. Call if you need me."
Harry nodded, climbing into the bed next to Tom's. His bruises were gone, Harry noticed, and he had been changed into a pair of pyjamas that were identical to Harry's.

Madam Pomfrey closed the door behind her and the lights flickered out. Harry lay there in silence, in that strange state where one is desperate to sleep, but unable to work up the will to do so. Harry looked over to where Tom lay on the other bed, no more than two feet away. He could just make out his features in the moonlight filtering through the gauzy curtains.

They had both come very close to death tonight. Real death, permanent death. If things had gone differently; if Dumbledore had arrived just a few moments later, Harry could be locked in a dungeon now, being tortured by Voldemort. Or the other bed could be empty, its current occupant still upstairs with Snape and Dumbledore. Harry might not have realised; could have left in the morning for Grimmauld Place and not been told the news for days and weeks later; that Tom was gone and wouldn't be coming back.

He looked strange sleeping on his back. Tom always slept on his side. Harry slid out of his own bed, movements dull and clumsy with weariness, and turned him over into a more normal position. It was tempting, so tempting, to climb into bed with him and pretend for one more night that nothing had happened, that he was back in the cottage with Tom.

He didn’t. He put his glasses on the nightstand and lay down in his own bed facing Tom. Despite the turmoil in his mind, it did not take long for him to drift off into a black, healing sleep.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end of Arc 1! *throws confetti*
It's been such a wild ride; thank you so much for sticking with me this far 💗💗💗. I'm going to be taking a few months off now to rest, finish up some oneshots and transcribe a load of Arc 2 material out of the dozen or so notebooks it currently lives in. I'll still be around on ao3, ffnet and tumblr - see you soon!
Chapter Summary

In the last few chapters:

Tom and Harry, who had reached an uneasy truce after the incident with the potion in the cave, set off for the Ministry to investigate Tom’s dream. They had hoped to find a Horcrux in the Department of Mysteries, but instead they find a trap—Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix and Rodolphus surprise them as Tom lifts the prophecy from the shelf. Tom and Harry flee, trying to make their way down to the Atrium to use the Floo. Just as they reach it, Voldemort arrives, followed closely by Dumbledore. The two wizards duel, until Voldemort realises he can’t win and Disapparates, taking his Death Eaters with him. Tom is captured and he and Harry are taken to Dumbledore’s office. Dumbledore asks Harry to break the bond so that the Order can kill Tom and Harry, though conflicted, refuses.

Chapter Notes

I’m back! It's been so long, but welcome to arc 2 *throws glitter*

I had a question about what happened in second year: Lucius Malfoy still slipped the diary into Ginny's cauldron, but she didn't find it until she started at Hogwarts. She assumed it belonged to someone else and she left it in the Lost Property box. Dobby, who knew about the diary, still tried to warn Harry of the "terrible danger" at Hogwarts, so that plotline still played out. And the curse on the Defence against the Dark Arts position was still active, so Lockheart still ended up having a bad time -- he was kidnapped by Cornish pixies in his first lesson and taken to the Forbidden Forest. He was found months later, quite mad.

Mith is doing nanowrimo, so this chapter was beta’d by the lovely Miraculous ❤.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light filtered into the Hospital Wing through gauzy curtains. It brightened as the sun rose higher in the sky, illuminating the dozing gilt-edged portraits, the hard lines of medicine cabinets, the long row of beds.

Most were empty, neatly made up and waiting to receive students when the new school year began. Only the two at the end were occupied. In one, a dark-haired boy slumbered on, curled on his side with one leg drawn up.

The other boy was awake. He stared up at the ceiling, head pillowed on his arm. It was beautifully decorated; a thing of swirls and cornices, like the frosting on a wedding cake. But Harry did not see it. He was lost in thoughts, worries about the future.

Tom was alive.
Alive and here.

He shouldn’t be. Tom should be someplace far away, not sleeping in the next bed, on a collision course with Harry's normal life.

What was it going to be like? Harry tried to imagine Tom meeting his friends. Sirius. Tom at the Dursleys'. Tom at Hogwarts.

Would Dumbledore even let him go back to Hogwarts if it meant Tom had to come too?

Harry let out a gusty sigh and kicked his leg out of the blankets. The silence was unsettling. He was used to the Hospital Wing in term time, used to hearing chattering students in the corridor outside, the bell ringing for class, laughter from the grounds, the quiet voices of the other patients. All he could hear now were the faint calls of the birds in theForbidden Forest and the almost-silent grind of the staircases shifting above.

And Tom, moving.

Harry turned his head and watched Tom's hand slide up and grope at the mattress in front of him. A tiny frown marred his brow when he found it empty.

There was always something momentous about watching Tom wake up. Perhaps it was the way emotions flowed freely across his normally-guarded face. He could have been any other teenager, sleeping in after an exciting night.

"Hi," Harry said, when his eyes finally flickered open.

Tom’s eyes found him at once, then darted past to take in their surroundings.

"We're in the Hospital Wing," Harry informed him.

"I can see that," Tom said. He sat up, freezing when his chain rattled against the rail of the bed frame. "Oh--"

"Dumbledore put that there," Harry supplied.

Tom's nose wrinkled in distaste.

Harry smiled at his expression. He sat up too and swung his legs over the side of the bed, facing Tom.

"I'm alive," Tom said softly, almost to himself. "I thought for sure . . ."

His eyes moved over Harry, the room, the bed, the chain. With a sinking feeling, Harry realised he was working it out, that his powerful mind was slotting all the separate pieces into a single, damning whole.

"I'm here because I was knocked out. But why are you still here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you weren't badly injured so there's no reason for you to be here, unless . . ."

"I wonder where Madam Pomfrey is," Harry said desperately, casting around as if hoping she would pop up from behind a bed and save him from this conversation.
But it was too late. A wide, cruel smile was already spreading across Tom's face.

"Oh, Harry."

"Fuck off."

Tom's grin widened further. "You didn't break the bond, did you? Dumbledore asked you to and you said no." His eyes roved over Harry possessively, looking at him like something he would like to own.

Or maybe something he already did.

"Don't go getting any ideas," Harry said quickly. "I'm not in love with you or anything."

"Oh? Then why save my life? I realised what Dumbledore was leading up to right before he knocked me out."

"It wasn't personal," Harry grumbled. "I just don't like killing. I would have done it for anyone."

But even as he said it, he knew it was a lie. If he'd faced the same dilemma at the beginning of the summer, he would have broken the bond. Oh, he would not have liked it. He would have felt bad. But this was war. People were going to die. In fact, people were already dying at Voldemort's hand. Better they be his enemies than his friends.

"What did Dumbledore say when you told him no?" Tom asked, gloating. "Was he angry? I bet he was . . . after all, you were his obedient little hero--"

"He wasn't angry," Harry said firmly. "I am though. You shouldn't have told them what we did this summer. There was no need -- you just did it because you thought it would be fun."

"'What we did this summer'?" Tom repeated. "That's adorable. You're so repressed you can't even say it."

"You can't tell anyone else. And I'm not letting you push me into doing things anymore."

"'Push you'? Is that what I've been doing?"

"Yes," Harry said through gritted teeth. None of it was his fault. Dumbledore had told him so.

Although, said a little voice in the back of his head, no matter how they'd started, Harry had been happily reciprocating for months. He had not minded, for instance, exchanging lazy handjobs late in the morning, or rutting against Tom after a particularly challenging duel.

Tom was smirking. "Poor, innocent Harry," he needled. "It must have been so terrible for you. Did you lie back and think of Hogwarts? I hope Dumbledore appreciates your sacrifice."

Heat rose in Harry's face. In his visions last year he had seen how Voldemort tortured his Death Eaters to let off steam, and now Tom was doing the same. He was angry and frustrated, taking it out on the only accessible person.

But Harry was not playing.

"I mean it," he said. "I really do. Try something like that again and I'll break the bond and let Dumbledore do what he wants with you."

"I don't believe you," Tom said, whip-quick.
"Oh yeah? Do you understand why I didn’t break the bond last night?"

"No," Tom said. "Why?"

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again without making a sound. He did not know how to explain the concept of mercy to Tom. Of friendship, of accepting hardship to help someone you cared about, simply because they needed it.

"I don't know," he said finally. It wasn’t an answer, but Tom nodded anyway.

"I've seen people do that before," he said pensively. "Elise Torrigan used to take the blame when I didn't do my chores in the orphanage. Abraxas told Headmaster Dippet that he was the one who cursed Bethany Spout just so I didn't get into trouble." He met Harry's eyes. "But I don’t understand what you get out of it."

"A headache, apparently."

Tom snorted.

They sat in strangely companionable silence. Tom did not move, so Harry gazed down at his own hands. They had been dirty last night; the palms grazed from the fall in the inverted room. Now they were clean.

He felt numb. It was as if the wave of stress he had been riding had crested and left him washed up on a beach somewhere. All around him, he could see the wreckage of his old life; his relationships with his friends, with the Weasleys. School. Tom. Soon, he would have to get up and pick through the pieces, salvage those that were salvageable and find places for them in his mind.

But for now, he could sit here on the clean, comfortable bed and breathe deeply--

--Was something burning?

Harry looked up. Tom was inspecting the manacle on his wrist again, staring at it with intense concentration. A thin trail of smoke rose from the metal lock.

"Stop that!" Harry hissed, leaping out of bed and hovering over Tom. Should he shake him? Would that break the spell he was casting?

"I don't think I will," Tom said. "Why should I?"

Harry made a noise of frustration. "Why? What's the point of trying to escape? You've got no wand, no money, and nowhere to go!"

"We can escape through the Floo," Tom said easily. "I bet there's powder somewhere. Let's go back to the cottage -- I know you liked it there."

"No! If you want me out of this castle, you're going to have to physically drag me!"

Tom did look up then. His eyes swept over him from head to toe, as if estimating how much he weighed.

"MORE THAN YOU CAN CARRY!"

The door to the office clattered open. Harry scrambled back onto his own bed and pulled the blanket over his knees, just in time to see Madam Pomfrey emerge, pushing a metal trolley on castors before her.
"I'm glad to see you both awake," she said cheerfully when the trolley rattled to a stop at the end of Harry's bed. Two trays sat on the top shelf, each laden with a full breakfast of bacon, sausages, eggs and beans, a glass of pumpkin juice and a large mug of steaming tea.

"Morning Madam Pomfrey -- oh, thanks!" Harry said, accepting a tray.

"Good morning to you too Mr. Potter. And Mr. . . .?"

"Riddle," Tom said, all dimples. "Tom Riddle. It's lovely to meet you, Madam Pomfrey. Thank you so much for taking care of me."

She responded with a smile of her own, obviously charmed.

"I don't understand why I'm here though," Tom continued. "The last thing I remember I was in the Ministry of Magic; I had waited after hours to pick up some documents. There was a battle, a terrible battle, and I was caught up in the middle of it. Then a spell hit me and I woke up in this bed. And I don't understand this," he finished, tugging once more at the cuff.

It was a masterful performance. Tom's cruel mood was gone as if it had never been, and what was left was so bright and honest and genuine that Harry almost believed him.

"Albus put that there," Madam Pomfrey said, pursing her lips. "He didn't say why. It's most irregular, I admit. I'd take it off you . . . but he'll be here in a little while anyway. Better to let him sort it out himself."

Tom's shoulders sagged convincingly. "Am I in trouble?"

"I'm sure it's just a precaution," Madam Pomfrey said. "Now, just let me check you over, and then I'll give you your breakfast."

Tom nodded. He sat obediently still as she took her wand from the pocket of her apron and cast a sequence of charms on him. Glowing lights wheeled above his head, then coalesced into pastel coloured shapes that Harry vaguely recognised from Hermione's Ancient Runes textbooks.

While Madam Pomfrey was distracted, Harry rolled his eyes at Tom.

Tom smiled innocently back.

"You don't seem to have suffered any harm from the sleeping charm," Madam Pomfrey said eventually. "Any dizziness? Confusion?"

"No ma'am."

"I can see your leg has been recently set?"

"Harry did that," Tom said. "He was very good."

She turned to Harry, eyebrows raised appraisingly. "He did, did he? That isn't on the curriculum."

"I read it in a book," Harry said. He liked the way Madam Pomfrey was looking at him, for all it made him squirm in his seat.

"That was excellent work," she said finally. Her eyes lingered and Harry knew she was burning with curiosity. He did not offer anything more, however, and Madam Pomfrey did not ask. She merely wrote something down on her chart, then rewarded Tom with a tray of his own. Harry noticed that the food was already cut into bite-sized chunks, appropriate for someone whose dominant hand was
chained to a bed frame.

"I said breakfast, but it's almost noon really," she said. "Both of you slept like logs. It must have been a very exciting evening for you."

Tom and Harry shared a glance.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Very exciting."

They ate in comfortable silence. The food was delicious -- there really was nothing like the Hogwarts kitchens. Madam Pomfrey bustled around, laying out their laundered clothes on the ends of their respective beds and opening the curtains to let in the sun. When Harry was done (well ahead of Tom, who was picking at his food) he changed out of his pyjamas behind the screen.

Dumbledore arrived just as he was slipping on his trainers, making a grand entrance through the double doors at the end of the room.

"Good morning all," he said when he reached them. "I'm not interrupting, am I?"

"Not at all," Madam Pomfrey said warmly, turning to him and so missing the flash of cold that crossed Tom's face. "They're just finishing up their breakfast. Can I get you a cup of tea while you wait?"

"If you don't mind," Dumbledore said, sitting down on the end of Harry's bed and drawing his wand. Tom tensed, but Dumbledore merely waved it once to Vanish the manacle, then stowed it back in his sleeve and smiled benignly around at them all.

Harry tried very hard not to laugh at the expression on Tom's face.

For the next five minutes, Dumbledore sipped his tea and made polite small talk about a pair of socks Dobby had gifted him for his birthday and a new Christmas pudding recipe he had learned from a Muggle magazine. If Harry had not known the Headmaster so well, he would have assumed he had chosen his topics purely to wind Tom up -- the Slytherin glowered at Dumbledore and pushed his plate away half-eaten.

When Tom too had changed back into his day clothes, Dumbledore made his goodbyes to Madam Pomfrey and led the two of them out of the Hospital Wing the way he had come.

"Are we still going to Grimmauld Place, sir?" Harry asked as they walked down towards the Entrance Hall.

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "You are wondering, I presume, why we did not simply take the Floo directly from the Hospital Wing?"

Harry nodded.

Dumbledore smiled. "It would have been perfectly possible, but a terrible waste of the beautiful day outside. I must confess, I have spent the better part of twelve hours popping in and out of fireplaces all over the country. No sooner had I shaken the soot from my hat than I found myself setting off again."

They passed the Great Hall on the right; a silent, open space lit by tall stained-glass windows. At the far end, Gryffindor's hourglass was empty of rubies, while Slytherin's was full, forever frozen on the brink of winning the House Cup. A single lonely ghost drifted across the aisle.
Dumbledore had been right, Harry thought, when the huge oak doors of the castle swung open in front of them. It was a perfect summer's day. A periwinkle blue sky arched above them, scattered here and there with fluffy clouds. In the distance, a single owl circled lazily over the Quidditch Pitch, catching a thermal into the warm, clear air.

They proceeded down the winding drive as it looped around the castle, following a path worn smooth by centuries of students trooping down to Hogsmeade. Tom trailed several paces behind as if pretending not to be with them. Harry could not begrudge him his sulky mood: Dumbledore, who had tried to kill him just last night, was striding on ahead, humming tunelessly.

Harry broke the silence as they drew level with the lake. "What's happening at the Ministry, Professor? Did you go back there last night?"

"Yes I did," Dumbledore said. "And it's all rather as you can imagine. Fudge is fighting for his political life, but I would be surprised if he manages to cling onto power for much longer."

"Are they going to arrest Lucius Malfoy? We saw him--"

"They tried. A team of Aurors was sent to Wiltshire before dawn. Unfortunately, they found themselves unable to locate Malfoy Manor, which is quite improbable, as it sits on some six hundred acres." Dumbledore raised his voice a little. "Lord Voldemort has apparently copied your trick, Tom, and had one of his followers put it under the Fidelius Charm."

"Oh," Harry said when Tom did not reply. He wondered suddenly about Draco Malfoy. He'll kill my father, he had said, that day he ripped Harry's bag open. Voldemort had evidently not carried through on that threat, but would he now, after another failure . . .

The Death Eaters had the Prophecy at least. Perhaps that would be enough to keep Lucius Malfoy alive. Had Voldemort listened to it already, heard those ominous words -- neither can live while the other survives --?

Before Harry could ask about it, Dumbledore drew them to a halt.

"The wards are just ahead," he said, indicating a spot where a pair of flat stones marked either side of the path. "Before we cross them, there is a minor precaution we should take."

He drew his wand and strode over to Tom, who, to his credit, stood his ground.

"This won't take a moment," Dumbledore said pleasantly. He pressed the tip to the hollow of Tom's throat, just above his bobbing Adam's apple, then launched into a long incantation in an unfamiliar, musical language.

For the next minute or so, nothing happened. Tom glared balefully up at Dumbledore while Harry hovered anxiously behind. Then a thread of gold, thin as spider silk, appeared around Tom's neck, tracing out an intricate lattice in the air. It brightened to the point where Harry had to raise his arm to shield his eyes, then sank invisibly into the flesh.

Dumbledore stowed his wand. Tom touched his fingers to his own neck, puzzled.

Then he froze. Shock flickered across his expression, followed by renewed concentration.

Nothing happened.

Tom rounded on Dumbledore. There was a wild look on his face, wild and furious.
"What did you do?"

"It is nothing to worry about, Tom. I have merely blocked your magic--"

"How dare--!"

"You can do that?" Harry interrupted. He had never heard of such a thing being possible. Why did they not use it on the prisoners in Azkaban then, and spare them the Dementors?

"It is very, very difficult," Dumbledore said, ignoring Tom's rage. "And even I would have difficulty in suppressing the magic of more than say, two or three proficient witches or wizards at once. It takes tremendous skill and insight because each block must be tailored precisely to the target's magic. Luckily, I am quite familiar with Tom's from my time as his teacher."

"Take it off!" Tom demanded.

"You cannot imagine that I would take you outside Hogwarts' wards without some kind of containment?" Dumbledore said lightly, smiling as if Tom had made a mildly amusing joke. "Why, what is to stop you absconding with Harry again?"

Tom did not seem to have an answer for this. He glared silently at Dumbledore's back as the Headmaster took off once more down the path, heading to the place where the wards ended. Harry shrugged apologetically at him, then followed.

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Dumbledore Apparated them to Grimmauld Place. It was Harry's first time being Side-Alonged by someone other than Tom, and it felt quite as uncomfortable as he remembered. When the sensation of being whirled around in a long, tight tube finally gave way to a gentle breeze, Harry staggered, trying to keep his balance.

"Where are we?" Tom demanded. He was less affected, and had let go of Dumbledore's arm the moment they landed.

Harry straightened. There was a small park behind them, a slightly wild space with a clump of trees and two wooden benches. In front was a line of tall terraced houses. It was obviously a Muggle area, and a nice one at that; the road was clogged on both sides with large, shiny cars. Harry spotted a BMW, a Porsche. Somewhere a window was open; a jingle from a children's cartoon spilled out onto the street.

The house directly opposite them stood out like a sore thumb. It could not have been more different than its neighbors; its façade was a monolith of smoke-blackened brick and grimy windows. Several tiles were missing from the roof and the tiny front garden was overgrown with dandelions. The only sign of life was the thin trail of smoke rising from the chimney.

Tom could not see it. His eyes moved straight from Number 11 to Number 13, taking in what must have appeared a bafflingly mundane scene.

"We ought not to dawdle," Dumbledore said. He stepped between two of the parked cars, paused as a freckled youth on a moped zipped past, then strode across the street towards Number 12. Harry followed, pulling Tom gently by the arm while he peered myopically around like a ninety-year-old trying to read a number plate.

When they reached the steps leading up to the front door, Dumbledore paused, turned to Tom, and spoke;
"The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is located at Number 12, Grimmauld Place."

Tom's eyes widened comically. Harry hid his smile in his sleeve. He knew what Tom was seeing -- the house was squeezing itself into existence, jostling its neighbors until they made room.

Dumbledore did not bother with the snake-shaped door knocker. He opened the door and led them into the perpetual gloom of the hallway.

The house was well occupied, Harry thought, as he pressed himself to the opposite wall to squeeze past the dozens of cloaks hanging from the hooks beside the door. From below, he could dimly hear the murmur of conversation, mugs thudding into wood.

"Who else is here?" he asked.

"Just a moment, Harry," Dumbledore said over his shoulder. He took them down the hallway, past the door into the disused dining room and the grand staircase to the upper floors. For a moment, Harry thought he was going to go all the way down to the basement kitchen, but then the Headmaster stopped and pushed open a nondescript door at the very back of the house.

It had clearly been a study once; a dusty mahogany desk took up much of the space, along with a wooden chair and a cast-iron fireplace. The only window looked out onto the backs the houses on the next street. Harry could see washing hanging on lines, several open windows, children playing on a tiny trampoline.

Dumbledore gestured for them to wait outside. He stood in the centre of the small room and waved his wand above his head in a peculiar swirling motion.

The effect was immediate. Dust and grime disappeared, the desk shuffled back and wedged itself into a corner, and, with a loud pop, a single bed sprang into existence along one wall.

Tom made a noise of outrage. Harry looked closer and saw why. The bedspread was patterned with hundreds of little white rabbits.

"I think it would be for the best if you were to stay here for the time being, Tom," Dumbledore said pleasantly as he erected a shimmering shield over the window. "I'll ask Molly to magic meals upstairs for you. Oh, and here--" A quill holder shook out its contents and leapt off the desk, enlarging into an ornate metal chamber pot. "It will just be a few days, while we work out what to do."

Tom was pale with fury, but said nothing. He stepped into the room at Dumbledore's direction, eyeing the wand in his hand warily.

The Headmaster smiled serenely, then moved into the corridor and closed the door in Tom's face. He locked it with the same charm he'd used on the window -- the shimmering shield flickered, then disappeared, leaving nothing but plain wood. Harry did not doubt it was still there.

The two of them stood outside for a long moment. Conflicting emotions warred in Harry: satisfaction (had Tom not threatened to lock him away on multiple occasions?) and a vague sense of discomfort that he didn't like to examine too closely. By contrast, Dumbledore beamed at the closed door.

"You must allow me a moment," he said when Harry went to speak. "I must say, locking Tom Riddle in a small room where he can do no harm to anyone has been a long-held ambition of mine. I am finding it quite therapeutic."

Harry managed a smile in return. Dumbledore took a few moments longer, then turned to him.
"I must get downstairs -- I have called a general meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. Is there anything you'd like to ask before I go?"

"Are you going to tell them about--" Harry began, then trailed off when he could not think of an ending to his question that was anything short of mortifying.

Luckily, Dumbledore took his meaning.

"I do not think the precise details of your relationship with Tom are relevant to the Order," he said thoughtfully. "I will explain briefly about Tom, the events that led to your kidnapping, and your summer. I will also tell them about Voldemort's other Horcruxes -- there is no point keeping that a secret; the Kneazle is already out of the bag."

"T-Thanks," Harry said. "And-- And the bond?"

Dumbledore regarded him for a moment through his golden half-moon spectacles. "I think," he said eventually, "that I will tell them I was unable to break the bond, and that Professor Snape and I are currently looking for another option. It is the truth, after all."

It was a stark relief. The Order would not know what Harry had done -- what he had refused to do. He nodded at the floor.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Dumbledore said brightly, patting down his robes. A moment later, he withdrew Harry's red rucksack from an improbably small pocket, looking for all the world like a Muggle magician producing a long line of handkerchiefs.

Harry laughed and took it from him.

"Regarding your other possessions, the school trunk you left at Hogwarts is in the bedroom you normally share with Ronald Weasley. Your owl, Hedwig, spent the summer at the Burrow -- she is still there now, I believe. Tom's trunk was located too, but I'm afraid I am still going over its contents. It would not surprise you, I'm sure, to learn that a substantial fraction are highly illegal."

It was not a question, but Harry nodded anyway. Dumbledore patted him on the shoulder, then turned and took his leave through the door that led down to the kitchen. Voices filtered out, no longer muffled. Harry recognised Mrs. Weasley's voice, then Sirius, replying.

Then it swung shut. Harry stood there in the hallway, rucksack over his shoulder, utterly unsure what to do with himself. He would have quite liked to have opened the door again, listened to those familiar voices. But the thought of being caught, of being in a room with so many people, filled him with an unfamiliar anxiety.

Tom's room was quiet. Harry touched his fingertips to that door instead, wondering if there was a Silencing charm woven into the charm. Tom would be pacing, Harry was sure, like he often did when he was stressed, striding up and down in the small space, kicking the chamber pot, trying to open the window. A few days, Dumbledore had said.

"Harry!"

The sound came from above, an odd cross between a cry and a hiss. Harry craned his neck; two people were leaning over the bannisters on the upper landing. One red-haired, one bushy brown.

Ron and Hermione.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for waiting so patiently -- I should have the next chapter done sometime next weekend. In the meantime, I did end up writing a couple of one-shots if you want to take a look!
While you were gone

Chapter Summary

I am spoiled, both because this chapter was beta'd by RedHorse and Miraculous and because blop did a couple of wonderful sketches of Harry's summer holiday at the cottage—I absolutely adore them ❤️.

Harry flew up the stairs, taking the steps two, three at a time. As soon as he reached the landing, Hermione flung her arms around him.

“Harry,” she said into his shoulder, voice quiet but filled with joy. “Oh Harry!”

A lump rose in Harry’s throat, blocking off his words. He squeezed her tightly instead, trying to put everything he was feeling into that one gesture. She was shorter than him now, he registered dimly, and her hair smelled like her familiar shampoo.

“Where have you been?” Hermione was saying. “We—”

But Harry did not hear the end of her sentence, because Ron chose that moment to burst into noisy sobs.

Harry released Hermione and turned to him, aghast. Big fat tears were squeezing out of the corners of Ron’s eyes. His face was blotchy and he looked absolutely mortified at himself.

“Ron?” Hermione asked. “Ron, are you alright?”

"No!" Ron snapped, swiping furiously at his face with his sleeve. "You were supposed to be the one crying!"

“I was supposed—what? What are you talking about?”

“You’re the girl!” Ron said indignantly, as if Hermione had broken some solemn pact between them. “And don’t laugh at me, you prick!”

The last words were directed to Harry, who, admittedly, was doing a poor job of hiding his laughter. It was more relief than anything else—relief that Ron and Hermione were here, and safe, and happy.

"Not here! You'll wake Mrs. Black," Hermione hissed, grabbing Harry's arm and dragging him towards the stairs. "Boys, I swear . . ."

They stumbled together up the next flight. Harry paused a few steps below the landing, suddenly mindful of the bond. How far away was Tom? It hadn't mattered much in the cottage, but Grimmauld Place was much larger—

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked, when she noticed he had stopped. "You're not injured, are you?"

"I'm fine," Harry said, and took the last steps cautiously. There was no answering tug from the bond. Ron and Harry's bedroom was a little larger than the one Tom had just been locked in, two floors
directly below. There was a wardrobe, a chest, and a twin bed on either side of the sunny window. An enormous ginger cat sat curled at the pillow end of the messier bed. One of his beady amber eyes cracked open when the three teenagers entered the room and closed the door behind them.

Harry's heart soared at the sight of his Firebolt leaning up against the wall. He took it in his hands, feeling along the grain of the wood. It could do with a polish, and the tail needed trimming, but otherwise it was unscathed by its incarceration in Umbridge's office.

"Thought you'd like that," Ron said, grumpy with embarrassment. He sat on his bed while Hermione scooped Crookshanks into her arms and cuddled him to her chest, cooing. "And you'd better not tell Fred and George I . . ."

"I won't," Harry promised. He leaned the broomstick back against the wall and sat down on his own bed, opposite Ron.

"I wasn't going to react like this."

"It's okay."

Ron grumbled and rubbed again at his eyes. Harry just sat there, drinking in the sight of his two best friends. They looked good. Tired, but healthy and well fed, dressed in the Muggle clothes they normally wore over the summer.

"I've missed you," Harry said quietly. "So so much. I'm so sorry—"

"Don't you dare," Hermione said. "Don't you dare say sorry. No one blames you for anything. Harry, I'm so happy you're back. Can you even imagine how I felt when we got the news? How it feels to know you're alive?"

Harry looked down at his knees, blinking hard. "I'm glad too," he said thickly. "You look good, both of you—"

"You too," Ron said. "Fuck, you've grown a good three inches over the summer!"

"You're one to talk!" Harry said. Ron was almost as tall as Tom, and certainly broader.

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "Yeah, mad isn't it?"

Harry nodded. He felt suddenly unaccountably shy—Ron and Hermione were the same, but they were different too. Or maybe it was Harry who was different. A half-beat out of step with everyone he'd left behind.

Luckily Hermione seemed to understand. "We found out really late last night," she said gently, relieving him of the burden of making conversation. "The Galleon went hot just as we were going to bed."

She let Crookshanks down and retrieved the coin from a drawstring pouch around her neck. Harry took it from her had turned it over in his hands, admiring the way the gold glinted in the light. The serial numbers read thirteen-fifteen-thirteen. M-O-M.

"I've been wearing it ever since your first message back in May," Hermione said. "I leapt up and ran to get Sirius without even taking the time to look at it. But just as I reached the stairs, Lupin burst in through the front door, shouting that the Galleon Ron had lent to Dumbledore had activated, that you were at the Ministry, and everyone needed to go straight away."
"He woke up Sirius' mum too, it was bedlam—"

"Tonks was in the guest bedroom—she came out in her coat and pyjama bottoms and went right through the kitchen fireplace," Hermione continued. "Lupin tried to stop Sirius from going—he'd have been arrested for sure if he'd turned up at the Ministry for a false alarm—"

"Sirius almost hexed him," Ron said, rolling his eyes.

"But eventually they both followed Tonks through the fire. Lupin sealed the Floo behind him to stop us following, so we waited on the stairs for ages and ages after we got Mrs. Black's curtains closed."

"Sirius came back well after midnight—" Ron said.

"—Oh Harry, he was so happy—"

"—and he said that they'd got you, and you were safe with Dumbledore! Mum turned up about half an hour later and ordered us to bed, but we waited on the landing and listened through Extendable Ears—"

"Not that we heard much," Hermione admitted. "The only pair we have left are pretty worn out, and Fred and George won't give us another." She paused then, and sat down next to Ron, regarding Harry with brown eyes several shades lighter than Tom's. "But what about you, Harry? Where have you been? All I know is that you were with us that morning for Potions class, and all the way up to the Great Hall, and then you were gone! The last thing I remember is you saying you were going to take a nap."

Harry thought about the question for a while, turning the Galleon over and over in his hands. May was a lifetime ago.

"I lied," he admitted finally. "I followed Malfoy instead—"

Hermione groaned.

"Because he was acting weirdly all through Potions. I know you don't believe me, but he was. So when the lesson finished, I went up to the Owlery to see if he was sending a letter. He wasn't, but I caught him on the way back down, having an argument with Pansy Parkinson. He saw me and legged it, but Pansy stayed behind—she told me that she knew something about the attacks, but would only tell me in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. So I followed her."

"You went into a girl's bathroom?" Hermione said, raising an eyebrow.

"She said it was okay!"

"I don't mean that—Harry, didn't you think something was wrong?"

Well, it was all embarrassingly obvious in retrospect, wasn't it?

"No," Harry said flatly. "Not until I was inside. Then she started acting . . . well, she got her wand out and backed me up against the sinks, and said something in Parseltongue that made the floor open up beneath me."

"You're kidding!" Ron said disbelievingly. "Pansy Parkinson was the Heir of Slytherin?"

"No," Harry said. "Pansy's dead."

Hermione took a sharp breath. Harry continued before anyone could speak. He wanted to get this
Harry explained about Horcruxes, then took them through the fight in the Chamber of Secrets, the bond, and the summer that followed, giving them a truncated version of what Tom had told Snape and Dumbledore the night before. He tried to keep it as impersonal as possible, to make it sound as if he and Tom were distant housemates who rarely spoke to one another. In particular, he invented a second bedroom in the cottage in which he had slept, and a bathroom where they had bathed separately.

There was silence when he finished. Hermione sat down next to Ron, taking it in.

"So that boy you came in with . . ." she said finally.

"You saw him?" Harry asked. His voice was a little high.

"Just the top of his head. He's the Horcrux then? Riddle?"

"Wait a moment," Ron said, looking nervously between the two of them. "The kid version of You-Know-Who is downstairs?"

When Harry nodded, he leaped up and stared wildly around, as if expecting Tom to float up through the floor and murder him.

"Well, yes he is, but he's not dangerous," Harry said, then winced at how much of a lie that was. "I mean, not magically—Dumbledore sealed it away, then locked him in the room."

"Right," Ron squeaked, eyes still on the carpet. "Right."

"And you've been stuck to him all summer?" Hermione asked, ignoring Ron's antics. "What was that like?"

"Fine," Harry squeaked. "I mean, he's a bit . . . um . . . well, he has kind of a bad personality . . ."

"I bet," Hermione said wryly.

"Does he look like You-Know-Who?" Ron asked.

"Not really—he has dark hair and brown eyes. And a nose." It was a very nice nose. "He's pale, but not so white as Voldemort. His cheekbones are the same though, and he's almost as tall."

"Wow," Ron breathed. Hermione though, was giving him a sympathetic look. Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that she was taking his general reluctance to talk about Tom as evidence of trauma.

"It must have been so terrible living with him," she said, brimming with compassion. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Terrible."

None of them could think of anything to say to that. Crookshanks, who had been under the bed, rubbed against Harry's leg. He leaned down and stroked his head, glad of the distraction.

"When you didn't turn up for Charms we figured you'd overslept," Ron said eventually. "I went up to Gryffindor Tower to wake you when the lesson finished, but you weren't there." He paused,
twisting his hands in his lap. "I started to have a really bad feeling about it for some reason. It was weird that your bed was made. I'd have figured you were skiving if it was Defence with Umbridge, but you like Charms. I ran straight down and caught McGonagall just before class and told her about it—she agreed it was dodgy, so she let me and Hermione off Transfiguration to search for you."

"We checked the room of Requirement first," Hermione said. "Then the passageways out of the school. But there was no sign you'd ever been there, no footprints in the dust or anything. The teachers began searching during dinner, and they reported you officially missing a couple of hours later—I think we all assumed you were Petrified somewhere."

"Fudge swaggered in the next morning with a bunch of Aurors," Ron said grimly. "But they couldn't find you either, not for days and days. Eventually, he made an announcement during breakfast that Hogwarts was closing early for the summer. He said that owls had been sent to our parents, and we should all go pack because we would be leaving on the Hogwarts Express first thing after lunch."

"The exams were cancelled," Hermione said in a hushed voice. "O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. I don’t know what's going to happen about them, but it's such a shame—all that studying, wasted." She paused, readjusted her cardigan, and continued. "Not that I cared about that at the time, of course—I was worried about you—"

"You cared quite a bit," Ron muttered.

"Well, it's very disruptive! How are we supposed to start on our N.E.W.T.s without even sitting for our O.W.L.s?"

"What are you complaining for, you know you'd have got all O's—"

"No! No, I don't know that, Ron, and I won't—"

"Were you here all summer?" Harry interrupted, hoping to forestall the argument. "I mean, in Grimmauld Place?"

"On and off," Hermione said, turning back to him and thankfully letting it go. "I phoned my parents from Kings Cross to ask if I could stay at the Burrow before the holidays officially started. It was a good thing I did too, because it meant that I was there the first time you sent a message on the Galleon."

"Hermione worked out the code straight away," Ron said proudly. "Dad called Dumbledore, then brought us here for an emergency meeting—they let us sit in and everything. But Harry? That message of yours wasn’t a whole lot of help. Couldn’t you have said where you were?"

"I already told you about the vow," Harry sighed. "And it wouldn’t have done a whole lot of good anyway, even if I had, since I didn’t know where I was, beyond 'some island in Scotland'."

"Do you know now?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Skye." Tom had mentioned it a few times. "It's a big island apparently, but we were in a really remote part of it. Riddle's place didn’t even have running water or lighting—we had to use magic for everything."

"I think my parents went there on their honeymoon," Hermione said thoughtfully. "They said it was very pretty."

Harry nodded. It had been very pretty, particularly down by the ocean, and in the garden when the
sun was setting on the mountains.

Ron cleared his throat.

"Rita Skeeter wrote a load of crap about you."

"Ron!" Hermione cried, turning to him.

"What? He's going to find out sooner or later. Better he hears it from us?"

"I thought she was on her best behaviour?" Harry said nervously.

"We think she cut a deal with Fudge," Hermione said. "She was rehired by the Prophet about a week or so after you disappeared."

"It was pretty bad," Ron said, shaking his head. "I'm not sure you even want to know the details—"

"You brought it up!"

Ron sighed. "Well, the gist of it is, she was trying to pin all the 'Heir of Slytherin' stuff on you, trying to make out that you'd done something to Pansy, then gone into hiding. She kept going on and on about you being a Parselmouth—hell, there was even an article about the genetics of it all, where she made some really— and I mean really— disgusting insinuations about your mum, and well, You-Know-Who . . ."

Harry's mouth was hanging open.

"I know mate, I know," Ron said, rolling his eyes sympathetically. "But anyway, a couple of days later, her flat in London got broken into—totally ransacked. There was no Dark Mark, but the Order knows it was the other side."

"I guess V-Voldemort didn't appreciate the articles either," Hermione said. "They never found a body though, so maybe she got out in time."

"After that," Ron went on, "the Prophet decided you and Pansy were dead, and that something or someone else had murdered the both of you. And then, all of a sudden, you were Saint Harry, who saved us all from You-Know-Who. They ran all these obituaries for you, real fawning stuff, and printed pictures of the mountains of flowers left at Godric's Hollow. There was even a Boy-Who-Lived souvenir edition—you should ask mum, she probably kept it."

"It was absolutely disgusting," Hermione huffed. "The sheer brazen hypocrisy of it all! They let Hagrid out of Azkaban around then, no apology or anything."

"I can't wait to see what they do now though," Ron said. "They can hardly do another about-face on you, and after what happened at the Ministry last night . . ."

"There were pictures of the aftermath in the morning paper," Hermione said. "Not Voldemort of course, but they got a good shot of Dumbledore talking to Fudge, and the back of your head. Oh Harry, he's in so much trouble—"

"Fudge? Dumbledore thinks he's going to lose his job."

"Good riddance," Ron said, with feeling.

The conversation trailed off. Harry looked at own fingers. There was something he had to say while he had the chance, something he dreaded.
"What I told you," he began quietly, "about me being a Horcrux—"

"It actually makes a lot of sense," Hermione said. "Dumbledore's explanation for your Parseltongue always did seem a bit odd. And when you add in those dreams you had last year . . . well."

"Yeah," Ron said, shrugging. "It's out now anyway. Do you feel any different?"

Harry could not speak for a moment—it felt as if his heart was swelling in his chest. They did not seem at all disgusted—perhaps it wasn’t as bad a thing as he had thought?

"N-No," he said finally. "Or, well—" he pushed back his fringe to show them his forehead. "My scar doesn't hurt anymore. That went with the Horcrux."

"Wow," Hermione breathed, leaning forwards. Her fingers hovered above his scar. "It's not red anymore—did you notice? It always used to look swollen and painful, as if you'd only just got it. Now I can hardly see it."

Harry felt along it self-consciously. It did feel fainter, a thin raised line against his skin.

"What I find most incredible though is that souls actually exist," Hermione said. "I mean, they're physical things that can be cut? Harry, that's amazing."

"You haven't read about them in a book?" Harry was a little disappointed; he had been hoping Hermione would be able to tell him more about them.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I mean, I've seen them mentioned in passing, of course, but I assumed it was conjecture, like when Muggles do it. And there are books about ghosts of course, but they're all frustratingly vague. Your actual soul. Wow. The theological implications—"

"Can we talk about the theological implications later, Hermione? More importantly, Harry, does that mean you're stuck to him downstairs?"

"Yeah. I can't get more than thirty feet away—if I tried to go upstairs, I'd probably pass out."

"How do you go to the bathroom?"

Harry looked around incredulously. "I'm here with you now, aren't I?"

"Oh right," Ron said, flushing. "I guess. Can't Dumbledore split you up though?"

"No," Harry said. It wasn't a lie. Dumbledore needed Harry to cast the spell himself.

Ron whistled through his teeth. "That's a mess."

That was putting it mildly, Harry felt.

Hermione though, was frowning. "So Riddle can't be killed while you're alive?" she asked.

Harry nodded.

"And Voldemort can't be killed while Riddle's alive?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted. He did not like where this was going.

"Oh," Hermione said. "Oh no."
"But he could still be locked up," Harry said quickly. "They could catch Voldemort and put him in Azkaban or something."

Hermione shook her head dismissively. "Harry, you must know that wouldn’t work. Voldemort is immortal—it might take decades, but eventually he'd escape and start this all over again."

Harry scowled at his feet. It was upsetting how quickly Hermione, like Dumbledore, had discarded his idea. Harry thought it was a real option.

"I’m sure Dumbledore will come up with something," Hermione muttered. "There has to be some way of splitting the two of you up."

Harry nodded half-heartedly. He didn’t like to think about what would happen with the bond in the future, about what his refusal might eventually force the Order to do.

"Does that go both ways, though?" Ron asked. "Not being killable?"

"I haven’t tested it obviously, but I think so."

"So if you jumped out of that window now, you wouldn’t die?"

Harry looked at it dubiously. "We aren't that high up; I'd probably just break both my legs."

"Okay arsehole, what if you jumped off the top of this building?"

"I've already said I can't go any further upstairs."

Ron snarled in frustration. Harry grinned and took pity on him.

"I don't think I'd die. Not while Riddle's still alive."

"Awesome."

"It is not!" Hermione snapped. "In fact, this is an extremely dangerous situation for Harry!"

"Yes I know, but—"

"And you shouldn't be making light of it!"

"I'm not!" Ron protested. "I'm just not being all doom and gloom like you are. You've got to admit that it's cool."

"No, I d—"

But she was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Bet it's Mum," Ron grumbled. "COME IN!"

But when the door swung open, it was to reveal Fred and George Weasley, wearing wide, identical grins.

"Harry! Fancy seeing you here," Fred said.

"Been good I hope? We've just heard all about your exciting summer from Dumbledore."

"Not all of us can run away to Scotland and escape all our worldly responsibilities. Still, it's good to know you've had a holiday."
Harry grinned weakly back at them. That joke cut a little too close to the bone.

The door closed behind them. George sat down on the bed next to Harry and offered him an innocent-looking stick of chewing gum, which Harry refused. Meanwhile, Fred flung open the doors to the wardrobe and pondered the clothes inside.

"Get out of there," Ron grumbled.

"Just having a little look. My my Ronald, I'm surprised you kept these pyjamas. We always used to tease Percy about them, but perhaps you have a higher tolerance for anthropomorphised snails."

"Nice of you to knock," Harry said. "Last year you were always Apparating in on top of us."

George clutched his heart in mock-outrage. "Apparating in? You wound me, Harry. We're distinguished adult wizards nowadays, and quite above silly pranks like that."

"They're up themselves because they think their shop is going well," Ron translated grumpily. "They haven't even opened it yet."

"The grand opening is the day after tomorrow, little brother," Fred said, wrenching his nose back out of the wardrobe. "Really, we should be down there, taking inventory, organising displays—"

"Boring adult things children like you couldn't hope to understand."

"But we can take time out of our busy schedules for Order meetings, now we're full-fledged members of the organisation."

"Who else was at the meeting?" Harry asked.

"Oh, the old crowd," George said. "Dedalus Diggle, Mad-Eye, Sirius, Mum, Dad, and Bill. Kingsley was there—he was released this morning, but Lupin's still in Saint Mungo's. Dumbledore gave us the news about you and what you've been up to, then told everyone to bugger off—"

"Although he phrased it more politely—"

"—so that you wouldn't be overwhelmed. Mum sent us up to tell you to come down for lunch whenever—it's only soup and bread."

Harry nodded. He wanted to press for more details about what Dumbledore had said, but Ron leaped in before he could speak.

"So did you hear about him downstairs?"

"Baby You-Know-Who?" George asked. "Yeah, very spooky."

"Fancy going around chopping yourself up into little bits," Fred said. "Riddle, Dumbledore called him. Funny name, that . . ."

"He's called Tom," Harry volunteered. "Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"Tom?" Fred said, letting out a great hoot of laughter. "You're pulling my leg!"

"I'm not!"

Fred was delighted. "Dark Lord Tom," he marvelled. "Well, that's something. No wonder he changed his name then, can't exactly strike fear into the hearts and minds of the Wizarding World"
with a name like *Tom.*"

Ron looked a bit green. But Hermione was grinning and Harry was too. It *was* a pretty funny name, for all that Tom would have Crucio'd him if he'd laughed about it before. He was aware suddenly, of how tightly wound he was, how nervous he'd been of disappointing his friends. How cornered he'd felt in Dumbledore's office last night.

That wasn’t who Harry was. No matter what Tom said, he wasn’t actually that shy, particularly around his friends.

George slapped him on the back. "Go on then, tell us a funny story. I bet you've been dying to complain about him."

For a moment, Harry couldn’t think of a single thing. And then—

"I had to take him to a Muggle supermarket once, when we ran out of food," he confided. "He was very upset by the intercom, apparently they didn’t have that back in the forties—"
The five teenagers spent the rest of the afternoon in the upstairs bedroom. Ron and Hermione sat on one bed, while Harry, Fred and George took the other. Harry found it easier and easier to open up as the conversation flowed—it was as if he was slipping gradually back into sync with his friends, catching up on all the jokes and stories he had missed.

“—So, the tilt was getting worse and worse. I mean, the Burrow’s always leaned a bit, but Ginny’s room was at a full seventy degrees and swaying in the breeze. Mum kept telling Dad to fix it, but he ummed and ahhed until the chimney pot fell off the roof and missed Aunt Muriel by six inches!”

“Who’s there now?” Harry asked, while the others laughed. He was hit with a sudden rush of nostalgia for the Burrow—the precarious little house was the cosiest and most homely place he knew. “Have you made up with Percy?”

George snorted. “Not a chance. He’s still not talking to anyone except Dad, and that’s only because he brags to him in the elevator when they run into each other at work. His nose is so far up Fudge’s arse that—”

“Anyway, Dad always comes home fuming,” Fred said. “So I don’t think there will be any movement on that front. Charlie was at the Burrow earlier in the summer for a few weeks—something about a Welsh Green that had got off its reservation and was hunting Muggle hikers in the Brecon Beacons. Oh, don’t worry,” he continued when he caught Harry’s alarmed expression. “No one actually got eaten, other than a few sheep. Charlie went back to Romania once they caught it, but Bill’s at home, and so is Ginny.”

“Ginny’s probably going spare,” Ron said smugly, “at being stuck there with Fleur while we all get to see you.”

“Fleur? Fleur Delacour?”

“You know someone else called Fleur?” George asked. “Yes of course Fleur Delacour.”

“She’s been working at Gringotts with Bill,” Fred said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. “In the back office.”

“Fancy having that bring you papers,” George sighed. “Zese are for you, Mr Weasley . . .”

“Anyway, they’re getting married?”

“Married!” Harry exclaimed. He looked between their faces, trying to see if they were joking.

“Yes, married,” Fred said, very slowly and clearly, as if Harry was a bit hard of hearing. “It’s what happens when a man and a woman love each other very much and conspire to drive their future mother-in-law insane—”
“Mrs Weasley doesn’t like Fleur then?”

“Not one little bit,” George said cheerfully. “It’s arctic at home, don’t know how anyone stands it. Of course, Fleur’s totally oblivious—”

“Or just too dignified to mention it.”

“That’s why Hermione and I have been back and forth all summer,” Ron said, leaning forwards. “We’ve been bouncing between Mum and Fleur there and Sirius here like a Quaffle.”

“What’s wrong with Sirius?” Harry asked, startled.

Ron paused and exchanged a wary look with Hermione.

“What?”

“Well, you know how he is,” Hermione said gently.

“Yeah, a right moody sod.”

Hermione glared at Fred. “That’s not fair! He really has been trying. But Harry, he took it really hard when you disappeared.”

“But I sent a message! I told you guys I was okay!”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “And we appreciated that, mate, but it was back in May and we didn’t hear from you for weeks after. And then, with what happened in July—”

“In July? You mean the Daily Prophet articles about me?”

There was a long pause. Hermione’s fingers stilled in Crookshanks’ fur.

“Right,” Ron said eventually. His voice was a little too loud. “Yeah, those. Must have brought it all back for him.”

Harry had a strong feeling that they weren’t telling him something. None of them would meet his eyes, except Hermione, who was looking at him in a way that was almost fearful. But before he could ask again, there came a knock at the door.

Fred leapt up and opened it.

“Mum!” he said, with an air of great relief. “Hi, how are you?”

“Oh hello Fred, I thought you’d all be in here,” Mrs Weasley said. She was a short witch with the same red hair as her children. Her face was flushed from the climb and a wooden spoon was poking out of the pocket of her apron, next to the handle of her wand. “I know I said to come down whenever you wanted, but I’m about to put supper on and want the soup pot off the hob.”

“Sure!” Ron said. “I’m famished, completely forgot about lunch.”

Harry nodded too. Mrs Weasley caught the motion and smiled, eyes crinkling up at the corners, and held out her arms. Harry stood awkwardly and was immediately pulled into a hug.

“Oh, Harry dear, it’s so good to see you! I swear, you’ve grown a good three inches over the summer, just like Ron. But you’re so skinny!”
“You always say that,” Harry said, grinning.

“Boys,” she complained. “You all grow like beanpoles. Come on everyone, let’s—”

“We need to beg off, sorry Mum,” George said, as he shrugged back into his bright purple jacket. The letters WWW were embroidered on the left breast in gold thread. “We have shop stuff to do. Are you and Dad coming to the opening?”

“Oh, is that happening soon?” Mrs Weasley asked. She drew the wooden spoon from her pocket and waved it over a tear in the sleeve of Harry’s shirt. “Reparo!”

Nothing happened. Mrs Weasley flushed, replaced the spoon and repeated the spell with her wand.

“Yes,” George said, with an air of complete exasperation. “It’s on Wednesday. We told you about it weeks ago.”

“Oh,” Mrs Weasley said absently. “I suppose I must have forgotten to put it in the diary. After all, Arthur and I weren’t sure how it was all going to pan out.”

“Yeah, we know,” Fred muttered.

Mrs Weasley’s eyes narrowed. “There’s no need to take that tone with me, young man! It’s a very risky venture.”

“Can we come too?” Ron asked quickly. “I haven’t even had a chance to see the shop yet!”

Mrs Weasley considered this, then withdrew a little tattered notebook from the neckline of her blouse. She flicked through it to one of the last pages.

“I suppose we can take you for an hour or so,” she said. “But it would have to be the afternoon—Arthur’s working and I’m not comfortable taking the children to Diagon Alley without him. I expect Ginny will want to come too, and you, Hermione?”

“Oh yes please!” Hermione said.

Mrs Weasley’s smile turned into a sympathetic frown when she looked at Harry. Harry understood the unspoken words—there was no way they could let him go to Diagon Alley with Tom in tow.

“I know,” he said quickly. “It’s fine—I only just got back. I don’t mind staying here.”

Mrs Weasley patted him affectionately on the shoulder. “Thank you Harry. Well, I’ll go downstairs and put the kettle on. Don’t be too long.”

She left the room. They all listened to the old staircase creak.

“She’s been dropping hints all summer that she doesn’t approve of our shop,” Fred whispered, when he was sure his mother was out of hearing range. “She reckons we should scale it down, do something more sensible with our lives.”

“Don’t spend all that money at once!” George said, imitating a shrill voice that sounded very little like Mrs Weasley’s. “Why don’t you try getting jobs in a shop first? You can work your way up!”

“She’ll change her mind when we start turning a profit,” Fred said grimly.

They nodded at each other, then looked at Harry.
Anyway, it’s been good to see you again,” said George, tipping an imaginary hat. “We’ll be around for dinner after the opening—I’ll bring you a bag of merchandise then.”

“Can we have some more Extendable Ears?” Ron demanded.

“Alas, no.”

“Who knows what you lot might get up to with them,” Fred said. “Been spying on Order meetings again, have you?”

“You taught us to do that!”

“That doesn’t sound like us, does it George?”

George shook his head sombrely. And with that, the twins stepped over the threshold after their mother and Disapparated with a pop.

“Gits,” Ron said fondly.

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The kitchen smelt wonderful when the trio finally made their way down. It was a large, low-ceilinged room at the bottom of the house, and decorated much more humbly than the upper floors. Presumably, the Blacks had had servants and House Elves to do their cooking. There were a pair of ratty armchairs in the corner and a huge central fireplace.

To Harry’s relief, there were only three people present. Mrs Weasley was ladling out three bowls of soup, while a couple of mugs washed themselves in warm soapy water in the sink. Another two dozen sat drying on the draining board; the Order had apparently been and gone. The other two occupants were Mr Weasley and Sirius, who were sat at the far end of the long wooden kitchen table. Their heads were close together, talking.

“—Well, I can’t see why not,” Mr Weasley said. “After all, no one has a stronger claim than you. The paperwork should be fast enough, just as soon as—”

But then he caught sight of the three of them and broke off. Sirius looked up too, and his entire demeanour brightened. Harry grinned, reminded absurdly of a dog when one of its humans came home.

“Excellent!” Mr Weasley said. “Hello Harry, it’s marvellous to see you.” He stood and shook Harry’s hand. “Come on, sit down, sit down.”

Harry did, taking the empty bench next to Sirius. Hermione and Ron took seats further down the table.

“What were you talking about?”

“Paperwork,” Sirius said gruffly, pulling him into a brief, one-armed hug. “Nothing you need to worry about. I’m unofficially under house arrest until the Ministry sort out a trial for me.”

“A trial?” Harry asked, stomach swooping at the memory of his own hearing before the Wizengamot. “You’re not going to go, are you?”

“Albus is confident,” Mr Weasley said wearily. There were dark shadows under his eyes and his Ministry robes were stained with what looked like coffee. “And Sirius needs to go if he wants his
original conviction overturned."

“I was locked up under the Death Eaters Act,” Sirius said. “They didn’t have enough evidence for a proper trial, just a finger and a few Muggle witnesses—and we all know how easy those are to obtain.”

“Can I help?” Harry asked quickly. “I saw Wormtail at the Ministry—I can testify about what he did!”

“Plenty of people saw him; that’s why Albus is so sure this is a good idea,” Mr Weasley said, as he swept a pile of papers that had been left after the meeting out from under Ron and Hermione’s curious noses. “He was one of the last Death Eaters to Disapparate.”

“Peter always was a bit slow,” Sirius said derisively. “It took him until Easter to learn how to Apparate when we were taught in sixth year. Nervous disposition, the teacher said.”

They were interrupted by Mrs Weasley. She placed a bowl of soup on the table in front of Harry with a clunk, along with a steaming mug of tea.

“Thanks!” Harry said, as he, Ron and Hermione tore chunks off the loaf of bread that had appeared in the middle of the table.

Mrs Weasley smiled at him, then patted her husband on the shoulder.

“Why don’t you go and take a nap, Arthur?” You were up half the night.”

Mr Weasley yawned. “You know, Molly, I might do just that. Sirius, would you mind if I used one of the rooms upstairs?”

“Course not,” Sirius said, waving him off. “Use whichever one you want.”

Mr Weasley nodded. He stood, kissed his wife on the cheek, then trundled up the stairs.

Harry took a sip of his soup. It was chicken, rich and delicious and meaty. He had read once that chicken soup was supposed to be a comfort food, and wondered if Mrs Weasley had chosen it for that reason.

In fact, his whole day seemed a little too convenient. Had it been Dumbledore’s idea, to reintroduce Harry to his friends first, then Fred and George, then a few of the adults he knew best? Harry scuffed his feet on the tile floor; he didn’t want to be coddled . . . and the fact that it might be justified made it all the more annoying.

“I suppose you’ll be taking your Apparition lessons this year,” Sirius said wistfully.

“I guess,” Harry said. The question made his mood worse—he wasn’t sure if he’d even be allowed to go back to Hogwarts while still attached to Tom, and didn’t want to think about it.

Sirius must have picked up on his sudden gloominess, but thankfully he didn’t say anything. He turned to Hermione instead.

“Did you know that that cat of yours brought in a dead mouse this morning?”

“He didn’t, did he?” Hermione asked, looking up. “Oh, I thought he’d stopped doing that!”

Sirius rubbed his chin. “I suppose it could have been Kreacher,” he said. “He’s been doing things like that lately.”
“Where is Kreacher?” Harry asked, suddenly interested. He had not seen the House Elf since he had arrived.

“He’ll be somewhere around,” Sirius said darkly. “He’s probably lurking in the upstairs toilet—it’s where he goes when the house is busy.”

Harry nodded. At the counter, Mrs Weasley was pouring out a fourth bowl of soup. For a moment, Harry thought it was for Sirius, but then she put it on a tray with a slice of bread and vanished the whole lot with her wand. With a jolt, Harry realised she was sending it up to Tom.

“This is really nice,” he said quietly.

“Thank you, Harry.”

“Have you been doing the cooking here all summer?”

“Every now and again,” Mrs Weasley said absently. She levitated a bag of potatoes out of the larder and set them to peeling themselves over the sink.

“She doesn’t trust me to feed the kids properly when they’re over,” Sirius said dryly.

Mrs Weasley turned to him with her hands on her hips. “I know perfectly well that you live off instant noodles when I’m not here, Sirius! I found the packets in the bin.”

“I cook!”

“We can feed ourselves just fine anyway,” Ron grumbled. But Harry could not help but notice that he had already finished his soup, and was wiping out the last dregs with a chunk of bread.

Mrs Weasley hummed sceptically and turned back to her cooking.

“We did look for you,” Sirius said in a low voice, several minutes later. There were new lines on his face, and his robes looked just as rumpled as Mr Weasley’s had.

“I know.”

“We broke into loads of Death Eaters houses, and those that belonged to people we knew were sympathisers. We found plenty, just not you.”

“It’s fine,” Harry said again. “I’m sorry for making you worry about me.”

Sirius laughed, and Harry thought he sounded a little sad. “I’m your godfather. Of course I’m going to worry about you.”

Harry met his grey eyes and smiled tentatively. Sirius smiled back. It was a moment of reaffirmation, their friendship springing back into place.

Harry ducked his head, uncomfortable with the amount of emotion he was displaying. Had he always been like this? Or had living with Tom made him more cautious?

“So what have you been up to, when you weren’t moping over me?” he asked, more to make conversation than anything else.

Sirius laughed his bark-like laugh.

“Brat,” he said affectionately. “I’ve been fixing up my bike, mostly. I got it back from Hagrid in
exchange for Buckbeak—he’s called Witherwings now, by the way. I haven’t had a chance to fly it yet, but maybe I will soon.”

“What is it?”

“Up in my room—it was an absolute pain getting it up four flights of stairs. I’m guessing that’s too far for you to come and see it?”

“Yeah, my range is about thirty feet,” Harry said, nodding in the direction of Tom’s bedroom.

“Dumbledore said it was something like that.” Sirius mulled it over. “How has that been?”

Harry knew that the question was a proxy for all the other things Sirius wanted to ask. He consciously relaxed on his chair and met Sirius’ eyes again.

“It’s been okay,” he said. “I mean, I can’t exactly go out for walks, but then I suppose you haven’t been able to do that either.”

“You’d be surprised,” Sirius said with a sly grin. “Ron and Hermione have been taking me out as Padfoot.”

“Really?”

“He likes to chase the pigeons in the park,” Ron grumbled, through a second helping of bread. “Right bloody nuisance—he almost pulled my arm out of its socket the last time he saw a cat.”

“It’s very important to act natural,” Sirius said, dignified. “I’ve been watching other dogs, learning their ways . . .”

“I wish you wouldn’t,” Hermione said, without looking up from the book she had brought down to read. “Some of what you do is really quite disgusting.”

“Oi, Sirius,” Ron interjected. “Have you told Harry about the Grindylow in the water tank yet?”

“A Grindylow?” Harry asked, remembering the small, slimy creatures that had once tried to drown him in the Great Lake. “What happened? How did it get in?”

“No idea,” Ron said cheerfully. “We only noticed it because Hermione spotted tentacles coming out of the plughole. Dad wanted to pour salt into the system to flush it out, but Hagrid was having none of it. Sirius had to talk him out of going up into the attic himself!”

“No offence to Hagrid, but I doubt the rafters would have supported his weight,” Sirius said.

“So, in the end, Lupin went up there and caught it using a Muggle net. You should have seen it when he brought it down—it was white all over and snarling and hissing like a Kneazle!”

Harry nodded appreciatively and gestured for Ron to go on. The rest of the day passed like that, gathered around the kitchen table, sharing stories. After a while, Ron fetched a pack of cards from upstairs, and the four—Harry, Ron, Hermione and Sirius—played Exploding Snap while Mrs Weasley watched, occasionally Vanishing the conjured soot.

After dinner though, Harry found himself tiring quickly. It wasn’t just the sleep debt from the night before—there was a quiet longing to be on his own, to have some space for himself.

Luckily, Ron noticed him yawning.
“You want to turn in early?” he asked. “I don’t mind—I hardly slept last night either.”

They said goodnight to the others and took the stairs back up to their shared bedroom. As Dumbledore had promised, Harry’s trunk was underneath the bed. He dragged it out and opened it—to his delight, his Invisibility Cloak was neatly folded on top of his clothes and textbooks.

It was nice too, to be able to change into fresh pyjamas that actually fit him, rather than Tom’s old-fashioned cast-offs. Harry pulled a set over his head and snuggled down in his bed. Ron clicked out the light.

Harry lay there in the dark, listening as Ron’s breathing evened out. Between them, the small window was cracked open. He could hear traffic in the distance, the odd siren, the hoot of an owl. The normal noises of a city at night.

Despite his tiredness, Harry couldn’t seem to drift off. The bed felt wrong somehow, too large and too cold, which was ridiculous given that it was mid-August.

Perhaps he had become too used to sleeping with Tom. Their bed at the cottage was narrow—it had been impossible to find a position where they were not touching. And no matter how they started, Tom inevitably cuddled in his sleep. Harry had wondered, more than once, if it stemmed from something in his childhood, some unmet desire for human contact that lived only in his unconscious mind.

It was ridiculous to miss him.

Harry thumped his pillow, and then, in a fit of frustration, whipped it out from under his head and wedged it against the wall. He turned over, to the accompanying creak of ancient bedsprings, and shuffled back into it, wrapping his arms around himself in a parody of his normal sleeping position.

Hadn’t he slept, all those nights he had taken the armchair? Not well, it was true, and not deeply, but he had done it.

Outside, a clock was striking twelve.

Harry wondered if Tom could hear it too. He focussed on the idea of the bond, trying to feel something from the other side. Hi, he thought, as strongly as he could, picturing the it like a thread in his mind and pressing the word down. How are you?

For a moment, Harry thought he could feel something stirring, a twinge of sleepy confusion. But then it was gone again, drifting apart like a puff of smoke.

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Harry must have slept at some point, because he woke when the sun was just over the horizon. Ron’s bed was empty, which was strange, since Ron normally slept in later than him. It wasn’t enough of a mystery to keep him awake though, so Harry turned over and slipped back into sleep.

He drifted in and out of dreams like a stone skipping across a lake, and when he woke again, it was fully morning.

The kitchen was occupied when he wandered down in search of food. Sirius stood in front of the stove, tending to a frying pan of bacon and eggs. Kingsley sat in the seat closest to the fire, reading the Daily Prophet. There was a plate of toast in front of him.

“Good morning,” he said, when Harry slid into the seat next to him.
“Are you okay?” Harry asked. “I heard you got hurt at the Ministry.”

“Not too badly,” the tall Auror said. He folded down the embroidered sleeve of his robe to reveal a long, twisted scar.

“They can’t heal that?”

“They gave me some ointment for it,” Kingsley said doubtfully. He finished his tea in one great gulp and pushed the paper towards Harry. “Here, take this; I need to be off. Sirius, I’ll catch you later.”

Sirius waved his spatula at him as he disappeared through the fireplace. Harry picked up the newspaper and turned to the front page.

_The Wizengamot calls for Ministry Vote!_

After an overwhelming vote of no confidence in current Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, the Wizengamot has called for nominations to fill the office. The bookies’ current favourites are Rufus Scrimgeour, current head of the Auror office, and Nicoza Pearce, the witch who spearheaded the prosecutions following what we must now call the first Wizarding War.

“It’s all very fast”, said Bertie McAuldrich, ex-secretary to the Wizengamot, when our trusted correspondent spoke to him at his Norfolk home last night. “And a real pity that they haven’t managed to convince Dumbledore to come back as Chief Warlock—that would have lent some legitimacy to the process. I do hope Amelia Bones knows what she’s doing.”

_Alus Dumbledore, readers will remember, is the newly-reinstated Headmaster of Hogwarts and Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Witches and Wizards. For months, he has been derided by Ministry sources, who have seen fit to spread malicious lies and rumours to the otherwise-blameless institution of the Daily Prophet itself, under the direction of the beleaguered Mr Fudge [Cont. page 3]_

Below the article there was a grid of nine faces. Several smiled and waved at Harry, while a few more avoided his gaze or slinked to the edges of their frames. Fudge was in the bottom right corner—he rubbed the back of his neck in a rather sheepish manner.

“Fudge is out then?”

“Technically he’s still in,” Sirius said, coming over to read the paper over Harry’s shoulder. “He’s one of the candidates, but everyone knows he’s on borrowed time.”

“Does everyone get to vote?”

“No, just the Wizengamot.”

Before Harry had time to ask anything else, however, the fireplace flared again, and Mr Weasley’s head appeared.

“Ah, Harry! I hoped I’d catch you,” he said, as the rest of him followed. Without even pausing to take off his pointed hat, he laid his briefcase on the table and withdrew a very large, very old-fashioned camera from its depths.

“Smile!”

Harry did nothing of the sort, but Mr Weasley did not seem to mind. He pressed a red button and the bulb flashed bright enough to illuminate every cobweb in every corner of the room. The camera
clunked and whirred, then finally produced a photograph amid a worrying volume of black smoke. Mr Weasley held it up to the ceiling light, waving it from side to side to dry the ink.

“What was that for?” Harry demanded. He did not like having photographs taken, particularly this early in the morning, and while he was still wearing pyjamas.

“The Prophet,” Mr Weasley said cheerfully. “No one got a good shot of you at the Ministry, and they’re starting to murmur. Here—” he slid it across the table so Harry could see.

The photograph blinked in the light, looking quite shell-shocked.

Mr Weasley whipped it back before he could protest and dropped it in his briefcase. He nabbed a piece of buttered toast from Kingsley’s abandoned plate and stepped back into the fireplace in the same motion.

“The Ministry of Magic!”

Sirius gave Harry an understanding grimace and served him a plate of eggs.

If Grimmauld Place was the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, the basement kitchen was the command hub. People were constantly coming in and out of the fireplace, or else up and down the stairs from the front door. A few minutes after Mr Weasley had left, an unfamiliar man dropped off some papers and a lumpy bag that appeared to be full of glass marbles. Sirius Vanished them with a flick of his wand. Ron and Hermione finally made their entrance when Harry was finishing off his breakfast.

“Oh hi Harry, how did you sleep?” Hermione asked.

“Fine,” Harry lied.

Mundungus came through half an hour later. When he saw Harry, he snatched his patchwork hat from his head and held it to his chest, apologising over and over. One eye remained on Sirius. When he had deposited a squirming burlap sack on the floor next to the back door, Ron leant over.

“Old Dung there ended up behind a Muggle fireplace night before last, just like we did when we went to pick you up for the Quidditch World Cup,” he whispered. “You should have heard Mum lay into him when he got back—she doesn’t believe it was an accident; she reckons he did it on purpose to avoid fighting the Death Eaters.”

Hermione, meanwhile, was leaning against one of the kitchen units, talking earnestly to Sirius about Muggle systems of governance.

“You see, in the Muggle world, the Prime Minister is chosen by a popular vote every five years! I don’t understand why the magical world doesn’t have a similar system.”

“I think magic would make it too easy to fix a vote,” Sirius replied. “How do you test everyone to make sure they haven’t been Imperiused or Confounded? And besides, we have all sorts of idiots I wouldn’t want voting—”

“But that’s the point!”

“Why don’t you ask Minerva about it when she gets here? She’s a half-blood, so I’m sure she knows more than I do—”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, checking his pocket watch. “She’s due any moment.”

Ron nodded, then grabbed Harry by the arm. “Come on, let’s go upstairs.”

“Why? I like Professor McGonagall.”

“I did too, before she gave us a roll of holiday homework thick enough to crush a Flobberworm. She said it was to cover the month of school we were missing, but everyone knows we would have been sitting our O.W.L.s then anyway! Maybe if she doesn’t see you, she won’t remember to give you any.”

“Harry can’t hide from her forever,” Hermione said, folding her arms. “And it wasn’t even that bad; I thought the essay question on Schlaange’s law was particularly interesting.”

Harry made a face. “There are essay questions?”

“Really really boring essay questions. And who’s Schlaange?”

“Ron, have you even looked yet?”

“Enough to know that it’s boring! Come on Harry, let’s get out of here.”

They climbed the stairs to the entrance hall. The door swung shut behind them, blocking out Hermione and Sirius’ resumed conversation. Tom’s room was to their right, and silent.

Ron noticed where they were, a moment after Harry did. He flinched away from Tom’s door.

“He can’t get out,” Harry said, amused.

“I know, I know,” Ron muttered. “The idea makes me so jumpy though.”

Harry hummed. His eyes were on the ornate brass handle. It was so tantalisingly close. Harry was struck by the sudden, impossible urge to open the door, to see Tom and go sit next to him on his bed, to tell him about Ron and Hermione and Sirius, and how it felt to be back.

“Let’s . . . just go up to the drawing room,” Ron said, edging away. Harry sighed and followed.

The drawing room was on the floor above, overlooking the street. It was a handsome room, and very much changed from the last time Harry had seen it. The heavy velvet curtains were gone, replaced with light cotton, and the walls had been painted a pale cream. The carpet and much of the dark wooden furniture had been removed.

The only remnants of the past were the tapestry showing the Black family tree (whose survival was probably a testament to the Permanent Sticking Charm Sirius’ mother had employed) and half a dozen black bin bags lined up against one wall. Harry stooped to inspect one: it contained a mixture of books and tarnished cutlery.

“Are you throwing this stuff out?”

“Mum wants the Dark Arts books gone; that’s everything Snape didn’t scrounge for himself.” Ron pinched the plastic of the closest bag between his thumb and forefinger. “Have you seen these before? Hermione brought a whole roll of them from her parents’ house. The material is so thin—and just look at how it stretches.”
“That’s cool,” Harry said. He didn’t have the heart to tell him. “When did all this happen? It looks so different.”

“Told you Mum has us working. She seems to think we’ll get into trouble if we have too much free time. She’s being nice now, but just you wait, she’ll be cracking the whip again in a day or two.”

“I don’t mind a bit of work,” Harry said, looking around appreciatively. Even the fireplace had been scrubbed. “It might even be nice.”

“You’ll mind it when you’re doing it six hours a day,” Ron grumbled. He wandered into the centre of the room. “I’m really glad you’re back, mate. It’s not been the same without you.”

Harry grinned. “You’re not going to cry again, are you?”

Ron made a noise of outrage, grabbed him by the arm and tried to ruffle his hair. Harry wriggled out of his grip. He deflected the first easy jab Ron sent at his side, but almost tripped over the coffee table as he did so. Ron took advantage of his distraction to shove him. They tussled for a few minutes, then let go, laughing.

“Were you always this much of a prick?” Ron asked as they collapsed back onto a sheet-draped sofa. He was breathing hard.

“Were you always this unfit?”

Ron laughed louder and draped an arm along the back of the sofa. For a little while, they just waited in companionable silence.

“You seem okay,” Ron said finally. “You were spooked at first.”

“You noticed?” Harry asked.

“Course I did.”

Harry thought about that.

“I feel weird,” he said eventually. “Everything’s the same, but it’s all different too. I guess I’m just too used to talking to Riddle.”

“You did that a lot then?”

“What, talked? Yeah, there wasn’t much else to do.”

“Fair.”

Harry sighed. “He’s actually okay company, when he’s not going out of his way to be horrible.”

“If you say so,” Ron said doubtfully.

Harry nodded, mostly to himself. Outside of the tall windows, the day was overcast. An old lady was making her way down the pavement, dragging a polka-dot shopping trolley behind. Harry’s mind drifted, as it so often did these days, to Tom. Was he angry? Was he scared?

And, most importantly, when were they going to let him out?
I miss Tom; I promise he'll be back next chapter <3
The room was precisely three paces by six. The window did not open, and neither did the door. There was nothing to be found inside the little fireplace; Tom knew because he had carefully felt around in there, then wiped his sooty fingers on the carpet.

He looked around, assessing his options. If he couldn’t get out by the door, the next things to try were the walls and the floor. These old houses often had secrets under the plasterwork like covered-over openings, crumbly mortar, missing bricks. Tom ran his hands over the internal wall next to the door, tapping occasionally to test for hollowness. When he found a likely spot, he turned to the desk, picked up the wooden chair by its back and brought it down on the floor, hard. He repeated the motion once, twice, three times, until the chair came apart with a great, splintering crack.

Tom smiled. The noise did not matter—he was certain that Dumbledore had charmed the room against sound. It was almost uncannily silent; Tom could hear nothing from the hallway or the rooms above and below. The window, though old and ill-fitted, let in nothing but a warm draft of summer air.

He bent and selected a chair leg from the wreckage. It was finely-carved mahogany, sharp on one side where the wood had split.

Tom walked back to the wall, peeled back the mouldering wallpaper and chiselled away until he met unyielding brick.

No escape there. Tom dropped the chair leg, disappointed.

It was difficult not to give into frustration at that moment. It rose up inside Tom like a great seething tide. He wanted to kick the door, batter at the window, shout for Harry to get back here. But he had done all these things already, in the moments after Dumbledore had left.

Tom breathed deeply, trying to push it down, focus the rage, channel it into something productive. He always made mistakes when he was angry. Tom remembered Voldemort’s icy control. Having power over others required power over yourself.

The floor next, Tom decided. He looked around, then crouched in one corner of the room and pulled back the ornate carpet. Beneath lay blackened floorboards. They were close-fitting and held down with iron nails; he would need something sturdier than the chair leg if he wanted to lever them up.

Tom stood, walked back over to the desk and tried the drawers. The top one was locked. Tom jiggled it for a minute and then gave up. In the second one though, he found sealing wax, some yellowed letters about bank accounts and investments, and a fine brass letter opener in the shape of a dagger. Tom applied it to the floor, carefully prying up one floorboard, then its neighbour. It was difficult, time-consuming work, and his palms were red by the time he was done.

The space between the floor joists was filled with hundreds of years worth of soot and rubble. Tom
scraped it out of the way until he could see the pale grey plaster of the ceiling of the room below.

Tom grinned and shuffled to the edge of the hole he had made, allowing himself, for one triumphant moment, to imagine dropping down into the room below, finding Harry, dragging him out the front door. Even if his chances of actually escaping were minuscule, there was honour in having tried. He raised his knee, aimed, and then stomped down on the plaster with all his might.

THUNK

Shock reverberated up his leg. Tom fell onto his side on the carpet, holding his knee. The plaster had flared electric blue when he’d struck; there was some kind of invisible magical barrier.

“Fuck!”

Tom thumped the carpet with a closed fist, furious all over again. Dumbledore had anticipated him. He lay there for long moments, fantasising about what he would like to do to the old professor. Pry out his eyes with the letter opener like he had the floorboards. Force the sharpened chair leg down his throat until it pierced his organs. He felt a burst of resentment towards Voldemort too—his counterpart had had fifty years to kill Dumbledore; why had he not done the job already?

Tom thought of the duel he had witnessed. The intervening years seemed to have only made Dumbledore stronger. Not that Tom had ever seen him duel when he was at Hogwarts.

He rolled onto his back, breathing out the hatred. The ceiling was high. Georgian or Victorian. Tom thought of the façade of the house, the posh street it sat on. He had wandered to places like this before, when he’d been a child. He had visited Parliament once, and Downing Street, and marvelled at the wealth of the people, the clean gutters, the absence of beggars and stray cats. Tom liked stray cats. He liked to pick them up and hold them close to his chest and pet them while they yowled. Sometimes he even let them go.

It was boring in the room. Tom tilted his head back further, until he could see the clouds drifting past the window, upside-down. How long had he been in here? It felt like hours and hours, but judging by the angle of the sun, it couldn’t be later than mid-afternoon.

When would they come to fetch him? What would happen when they did? It will just be a few days, while we work out what to do, Dumbledore had said. Do what? What if they found some other way to break the bond, that didn’t require Harry?

Tom tried to call on his magic, as he had tried on the path leading to Hogsmeade, and when they had Apparated, and at the front door, and in the hallway. It was a habitual response, he knew, to touch it whenever he felt nervous.

But there was nothing there.

Tom hated it. It was horrible, what a missing limb must feel like. He had not realised, before, how very often he called on his magic to do things like open doors and curtains, summon objects or make them lighter when he lifted them. When he reached for it, he could feel the blockage, a perfect sphere around the place he normally went. Tom wrinkled his forehead, trying to push past it.

By the time he admitted defeat, his head was pounding. Tom groaned and rubbed his temples, feeling thoroughly sorry for himself. He was still on his back on the carpet, so he stood up, grudgingly, and kicked the floorboards back into place.

There were no books in the room. Tom sifted through the knickknacks on the desk—they included a preserved spider inside a glass pyramid, an empty inkwell made of some dull, heavy metal, and a
very large, very old silver coin that found its way into his pocket—then sat on the conjured bed, gazing absently out the window.

A meal appeared, deep in the afternoon. Tom ate it, then experimented with throwing things into the chamberpot. It had apparently been charmed to make its contents disappear. He tried the remaining knickknacks, the cutlery that had come with the meal, and then, in a flash of inspiration, the offensive duvet cover. That last one did nothing—it sat scrunched in the bottom of the pot, stubbornly refusing to vanish.

When the light outside began to die, the gas lamp in the room flickered off. Tom lay down on top of the now-bare duvet, thinking of Harry.

He had not liked the way Dumbledore and Harry had talked to each other—Harry’s obvious admiration and affection for the old professor was nauseating. It was not nice either to think about what Harry might be doing at that very moment. Was he laughing with his friends and godfather somewhere, pretending like Tom hadn’t fucked him just two nights ago?

Tom dwelled on that last thought for a long time, turning it over and over in his head. Harry, flushed, embarrassed but defiant, looking over his shoulder while Tom touched him. How tight he had been, how warm inside. The way he had tried to hold back the little helpless noises he was making.

Harry had loved being fucked and hated himself for it.

Tom slid a hand down his stomach, popped the button of his trousers and palmed his cock. If Harry were here, sleeping beside him, Tom would wake him up. Harry would grumble like he always did, but would be too sleepy to really protest while Tom positioned him how he pleased, then slid his cock between his thighs.

He liked Harry fully awake too. Awake and furious and fighting him. Tom liked the fight almost as much as he liked the sex.

His cock jerked in his hand. Tom hissed through his teeth and tightened his fingers, squeezing almost to the point of pain, trying to recreate the feeling of being inside Harry. He wondered if Harry was thinking about it too, wherever he was. Was he thinking about Tom and touching his own cock? Was Harry thinking about how much he liked to be fucked? Because he did, he had, just like Tom had known he would—

Orgasm surprised him. Tom came into his palm and panted, chest heaving, body too warm. He wiped his hand on the bedspread and blew his sweaty fringe away from his forehead. It was getting long. He needed a haircut.

Harry had saved his life. How many times was that now? Tom remembered the incident in the forest, the man Harry had killed. The primal delight he had felt at waking up to find Harry covered in someone else’s blood.

Something had shifted in his head. Tom frowned, trying to work out what it was.

Curiosity. Sharp curiosity. Every time he thought he knew Harry, he shifted again, did something unexpected. No one else had ever held his interest for so long.

And now Harry was his literal lifeline. Tom needed to keep him on his side. Actually on his side, not just begrudgingly keeping him alive, but an ally of his own free will.

He needed to make Harry fall in love with him.
Tom groaned aloud at the thought and stuffed his pillow over his face. It was far too late for that. Harry knew him much too well for Tom pretend to be infatuated.

There was no point in crying over spilt milk, but Tom felt a rush of annoyance for how he’d handled the potion in the cave. He’d had Harry, and had ruined it, because at the time, Harry’s feelings hadn’t served a purpose.

No, if Tom tried to seduce him, Harry would suspect immediately.

He should act as he normally did, Tom decided. Harry probably wouldn’t help him escape, but Tom couldn’t see him breaking the bond and letting him die either, now that he’d committed to it. Harry was decisive.

But there was a clock on that.

Tom worried at his lower lip. While the other Horcruxes were out of the Order’s reach, Tom did not matter . . . but if the Order were to find more, and destroy them, Tom’s position would become increasingly tenuous.

At some point, they would be forced to kill Harry to kill Tom. Even if Dumbledore didn’t do it himself, someone else would. It would be necessary. Tom needed to escape before that happened.

And this time, he was taking Harry with him.

There was no point in planning it—Tom would just have to seize opportunities as they arose. Happily, that was something he’d always been good at.

It was fully dark outside. Tom dragged the duvet over his legs. Harry was no more than thirty feet away, but it might as well have been the other side of the moon.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

They came to fetch him two days later. Tom was sat cross-legged on the bed, reading a rather scandalous letter from a halfblooded clerk to Arcturus Black. It was one a bundle he had found in the locked top drawer of the desk when he’d levered off the front with the letter opener that morning. It was a pity—Tom would have loved to have been able to hold this over Orion’s head.

Then there came a sound from the door. Tom looked up, startled by the first outside noise he’d heard since being locked in. A moment later, it swung open to reveal Dumbledore; tall, wizened and stern-faced.

Tom was uncannily reminded of their first ever meeting, the time when Dumbledore had come up to his room in the orphanage to give him his Hogwarts letter and found him reading on the bed. And perhaps Dumbledore had the same thought; there was a flicker in his blue eyes, a tilt of his chin. The weight of their history lay between them, a mutual animosity that had only deepened in the intervening years.

Then a rustle broke the silence. Harry was behind Dumbledore, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of Tom. His antics seemed to wake Dumbledore from the haze of memory he’d been caught in.

“Good afternoon, Tom.”

Tom did not reply.

Dumbledore nodded as if he had. “We are going to Hogwarts to discuss the bond,” he said, gesturing
for Tom to stand. “If you would be so kind?”

There was no repeat of the walk. Dumbledore led them down a dingy staircase to an empty basement kitchen, then through the fireplace into the Great Hall.

It was bright. The enchanted ceiling overhead showed a blue sky. Two people stood on the dais, waiting for them; the ugly teacher who had been present at the interrogation and a tall, grey-haired woman in severe green robes.

The woman moved to greet them.

“Mr Potter,” she said, mouth twitching into a small, rather stern smile. “I was sorry to miss you yesterday.”

“Hi Professor McGonagall,” Harry said, scraping his foot.

Tom was almost lost for words. “Minnie?” he demanded. “You’re Minnie McGonagall?”

She gave him a look of intense dislike. Tom did not care. She looked so different from the fifth year prefect Tom had known. Minnie McGonagall wore her mousy hair in a ponytail and was always rocketing around, poking her nose into everyone else’s business. It felt like he had last seen her a few months ago, when he had been boarding the Hogwarts Express with Abraxas and Rosier. She had caught his eye across the platform and scowled; Tom had smiled broadly and waved, then turned to Rosier and made a joke which made him howl with laughter.

“Riddle,” she said. Her voice was absolutely arctic, as it had been ever since he’d covered for Rafe, who had rather stupidly pushed a second year off a moving staircase right in front of her.

“Harry told me you teach Transfiguration here?” Tom said, looking around. “I always thought you wanted to go into the Ministry.”

She said nothing. Tom smiled.

“I suppose not everyone can follow their dreams like me.”

For a single, delighted moment, he thought she would hex him. Her hand twitched towards her wand; hidden, apparently, in the pocket on the right-hand side of her robes. Then her face soured, and with what was obviously a great effort, she turned away from him and spoke instead to Dumbledore.

“Professor Snape and I would like to speak to you, Albus.”

“I thought we had gone over all the options yesterday,” Dumbledore said wearily. “Unless you have come up with new objections overnight?”

The hook-nosed teacher—Snape—and McGonagall shared a look. Dumbledore sighed, waved the boys towards the long tables and ascended to the dais, where he was immediately drawn into conversation.

Left to their own devices, Harry and Tom wandered over to the end of the Ravenclaw table and sat across from each other, close enough to eavesdrop. The debate on the dais was quiet but heated—more than once, Snape jabbed a finger in Tom’s general direction.

“So, how have you been?” Harry asked.
Tom shushed him. Dumbledore had said that they were going to discuss the bond . . . he did not like the sound of that. What if they had come up with some way to break it?

“Tom? Hey—“ Harry waved his hand in front of Tom’s face.

“I’m trying to listen.”

“I know. I’m distracting you. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

Tom turned to him. “Do you know something? Why are we here?”

Harry shrugged.

“Dumbledore talked to me before we came to pick you up. He said he wanted to take a look at the bond.”

“Take a look at it how? Did he mention breaking it?”

“No—and I think he’d have warned me if that was the plan.”

“You think he’d have warned you? Really? Like he warned you about being a Horcrux?”

Harry scowled.

“He didn’t know for sure. And there was no point in him telling me, because he couldn’t do anything about it.”

“You’re making excuses for him. Really, you’d have liked to have known.”

Harry shook his head but didn’t try to justify Dumbledore further. “I saw you’d wrecked your room,” he said eventually.

“What did you expect?” Tom grumbled. “There wasn’t anything else to do.”

Harry hummed.

“What?”

“Oh, I was just thinking that it must have been so terrible, being locked up. I can’t imagine how it would feel to not be able to go or do whatever you want.”

There was a sly smile playing on the corner of Harry’s lips. Tom frowned.

“I never made you piss in a chamber pot.”

“Oh right, yeah, you were so much more compassionate.”

Harry’s eyes were bright and playful, albeit ringed with dark circles. The grey shirt he was wearing was a little too large for him—the neckline gaped, revealing a strip of collarbone.

It shouldn’t have been nearly as appealing as it was.

“How are you sleeping?” Tom asked. “You look tired.”

“Fine.”

It was Tom’s turn to hum doubtfully. “Are you in one of the rooms upstairs?”
“Yeah—two floors above you, sharing with Ron.”

So Harry’s friends were in the house too. Tom scowled—he had already guessed as much, but he didn’t appreciate the confirmation.

Harry caught his expression.

“You’re not jealous, are you?” he asked incredulously. “I have friends. You knew that.”

“Of course not,” Tom scoffed.

“Hermione is staying too. And Fred and George Weasley are there sometimes—they’re Ron’s older brothers.”

“I really don’t care.”

“You’re going to be awful to them, are you?” Harry sighed, resting his chin on his palm.

Tom raised his eyebrows.

“Will I get the chance? Did Dumbledore say something about letting me out?”

“Well, you’re pretty harmless right now.”

Tom soured at the reminder of his blocked magic and turned back to the dais. Snape was speaking, gesturing forcefully with his hands.

“—I don’t understand why you will not even allow us to try it! The Imperious Curse—“

“You know how hard it is to use that curse to force someone to do something they know will be fatal—particularly given Riddle’s instinct for self-preservation.”

“Potter then!”

“Harry is resistant to the Imperious Curse.”

Snape gathered himself up. “You are avoiding this, Albus,” he hissed. “You said it yourself, mere days ago—Riddle is nothing but a shade, a memory—“

“I have told you already that it will not work. I have asked you here today to explore an alternative—we need to know just how strongly bound the two of them are. I hold out very little hope, but if Tom’s soul is less damaged than I think it is, or if the bond is very tenuous, it might be possible to break it by physically dragging the two of them apart.”

Dragging them apart! Fear rushed through Tom, thick and cloying like tar in his veins. He wanted his wand very badly, but did not even know where it was. Harry had had it last, but presumably Dumbledore had taken it from him—

“Come on Tom, let’s talk about something else.”

Tom ignored him. He wanted to batter at the wall separating him from his magic, but was afraid that Dumbledore might be able to feel it somehow. After all, he was the one maintaining the spell—

“My godfather is getting a retrial.”

Again, Tom made no response. Harry sighed.
“Fred and George’s shop is opening today—right now, actually. Dumbledore came through the fireplace about ten minutes after everyone left.”

“—I think a look will be sufficient,” Dumbledore was saying. He moved over to the teacher’s table and removed a piece of cloth, revealing one of his spindly silver instruments. “It should be immediately obvious—”

“So, I hear you’re going to be a father.”

There were very few things Harry could have said to draw Tom away from that conversation. This was one of them. Tom turned to Harry, aghast that he would say such an untrue thing.

“No I’m not!”

“You don’t think so?” Harry said, smug at having got a reaction. “Bellatrix was pretty convincing.”

“That doesn’t count—it’s his, not mine! I wasn’t even involved in the fun part of making it.”

Harry’s nose wrinkled. “‘The fun part’? She’s really old, and, you know—“ he made a gesture with his hand. “—crazy.”

“He’s really old too, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“Do you think it will look like you?”

“No, it will probably be small and wrinkly.”

“You know what I mean,” Harry said, resting his palm on his chin. “I suppose better it looks like you than like Voldemort. Imagine if it came out without a nose . . .”

“It’s not mine,” Tom said again. “It’s as if my identical twin was having a baby. I’m its uncle, if anything.”

“Teenage dad Tom Riddle,” Harry marvelled, completely ignoring him. “Who’d have thought it—OW”

Tom had kicked him viciously under the table. Harry bent over and rubbed his shin, grumbling. Tom was annoyed too. Harry’s defiance had been more endearing when he was under Tom’s thumb.

“You’re different,” he complained.

“What did you expect? Did you have to kick me so hard?”

“Yes.”

They were silent for a few moments. Just as Tom was about to turn his attention back to the professors, Harry spoke.

“Have you been feeling anything through the bond?”

It was an intriguing question. Harry wasn’t keen to meet Tom’s eyes—the surface of the table had apparently become very interesting to him.

“No,” Tom said slowly. “It tugs sometimes, when you move around near its limits. Why? Should I have?”
“Not really.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “Were you trying to sense me through it?”

“No . . . well, okay, yes, a bit. I tried the first night after we arrived.”

“I didn’t feel anything.”

Harry’s shoulders drooped almost imperceptibly. “Oh,” he said. “I thought I felt something from your end. I guess I was imagining it.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” Tom said, rubbing his chin. “It makes sense that we would be able to communicate—after all, that’s how Voldemort sent all those dreams to me.”

“That’s what I was thinking!”

“I suppose he’s a lot better at Legilimency than you are.”

“Mmmm.”

They lapsed into thoughtful silence.

“There’s probably no point in experimenting,” Harry said eventually. “After all, it’s still temporary.” He must have seen the look on Tom’s face, because he continued hastily; “I’m not going to help them break it, but I don’t want to be attached to you for the rest of our lives. You don’t want that either, do you?”

Tom thought about that, then shifted and touched Harry’s calf with the toe of his shoe. Harry froze, expecting to be kicked again. But all Tom did was drag his foot up Harry’s inseam, slowly, sensuously, enjoying the flush that rose in Harry’s cheeks, the way his muscles bunched. It was power, intoxicating—

“Harry . . . Tom, would the two of you kindly step onto the dais?” Dumbledore said loudly, from no more than six feet away.

They both startled. The conversation was apparently over; McGonagall and Snape had taken seats at the teacher’s table. Tom took some comfort from their sour expressions—it seemed that they hadn’t got what they wanted from Dumbledore.

Harry and Tom stood and climbed the steps at the side. Dumbledore directed them to stand across from each other, then picked up the instrument on the table. It reminded Tom of a child’s balloon—a thread dangled from the base of a glass sphere which was about the same size as a football. From the thread, hung a horizontal silver rod, balanced precisely in the air. Dumbledore positioned it between the two of them at about chest height, then let go. Tom, who had been half expecting it to shatter on the ground, was disappointed when the globe bobbed in mid-air, rod wobbling beneath.

“What is that?” Harry asked. “What does it do?”

Dumbledore smiled at him. “This, Harry, is a curious little device that I picked up many years ago, in a country that is now known as Azerbaijan. It was in the possession of a warlock who had been on the run from the International Confederation of Wizards for so long that they had completely forgotten about him. I chose not to reveal his secret, and in return, he gifted me this.”

He nudged the rod until it was pointed between the two of them like a spear, then twisted the orb, setting it spinning like a top in the air. Rather than slowing, it picked up speed, spinning faster and
faster, while the gas inside the sphere brightened to opaque white.

“It reveals souls,” Dumbledore said softly. “Normally, its range is small, but I have spent most of the morning tinkering with it, and am hopeful that it will work on the two of you at once.”

And he was right. There was a shadow on Tom’s left, like a mote in the corner of his eye. He brushed a lock of dark hair out of the way, only to see it again, from the other direction.

“Splendid,” Dumbledore said. “I do believe it is working.”

The wisps grew thicker and thicker, until, all of a sudden, something condensed out of thin air around Tom. It was black as the sky in the darkest part of the night, swirling around him like smoke. Tom let out an involuntary gasp and turned, trying to understand the shape of it.

His soul.

Wisp and strands, torn edges where it had been cut. Here and there, there was a join, a piece that was holding very tenuously to its fellows, bound with thin black strands. He couldn’t quite make it out; it was a bit like a ragged cloak, formless and ever-shifting.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said, voice was very grave. “This is the violence you have done to your soul.”

But Tom did not care. He reached out a hand to touch and laughed as his fingers went straight through. There was nothing to feel, but his soul swirled around that spot playfully, then spun, circling him faster and faster and faster. Tom looked to Harry, grinning, wanting him to share in the fun.

Then paused, amazed.

Harry was on fire.

Red and gold flames encased his entire body, licking harmlessly up his legs, his chest, his face. The fire was soft and friendly, the kind that danced behind the grate in the cottage, or kept travellers warm from inside a circle of logs. It was his soul, and unlike Tom’s, it was whole; as perfect as it had been on the day he was born.

Harry caught Tom’s eye and laughed, alive with energy and amazement and joy.

Tom just stood there, transfixed. He had never really thought of Harry as beautiful before; his face was pleasant but unremarkable, and his eyes, which were arguably his best feature, were normally hidden behind his glasses.

But in that moment, beautiful was the only word that fitted.

And between them, there was a strand of soul.

Tom’s eyes caught on it almost by mistake. It was as thick as his arm where it left him, a ribbon of dense black smoke reaching out across space. A similar strand of fire spun from Harry. They met in the middle, twisted so tightly about each other that Tom couldn’t even see where his own soul ended and Harry’s began.

Dumbledore stepped closer and looked down at the join with pursed lips. Tom heaved a sigh of relief; no words needed to be said—he could tell by the Headmaster’s expression that this was what he had expected to see, that it was a lost cause. He would not be splitting them up today.

Harry was still staring at Tom.
“It’s a storm,” he said softly. “That’s what yours looks like. It’s like the wind.”
Snape brought them back to Grimmauld Place through the Floo. The kitchen was empty; Ron and Hermione were still at the shop opening and Sirius was probably upstairs, doing whatever it was that he did in his room.

The three of them climbed the stairs to the ground floor in silence. Harry's mind was still whirling, filled with images of what they had seen in the Great Hall.

Tom, caught in a hurricane of black pennants. His shattered soul had swirled around him, twisting faster and faster, always on the edge of spinning apart, but somehow holding together at the end of each rotation. Dark and cruel and vicious, but undeniably playful too.

He did not know what to make of his own soul either. Warm, golden as galleons snug in their vault, flickering with hues of red under the torchlight. The way it had leapt around him, responding to his emotions. It was probably doing it even now, though he couldn’t see it.

Snape halted outside Tom's room. Harry almost walked into him, but then caught himself and leapt back. Snape gave him an unimpressed look, then opened the door to Tom's room.

"Dumbledore, in his infinite . . . wisdom . . . has chosen to let Riddle roam the house freely in the weeks before term starts."

Harry and Tom looked at each other, surprised.

"Before term starts?" Harry repeated. "We're going to be allowed to go to Hogwarts?"

"That has not yet been decided. I have advised Dumbledore against it, of course; you deserve no reward for your intransigence, Potter, and the less said about Riddle, the better."

He turned to Tom.

"There are rules, naturally."

"Oh?" Tom did not look particularly interested. In fact, he was looking up and down the corridor, as if eager for Snape to leave.

"You are not to leave the house. You are not to attempt to break the restriction on your magic. You are not to use the Floo. You are not to attempt to pass a message to the Dark Lord or any other party. You are not to have sex with Potter."

Harry made an aborted noise of protest, horrified that this was being said aloud. Snape rounded on him in a whirl of black robes.

"And you, Potter, are not to have sex with Riddle."
"I wasn't goin—"

"Oh yes," Snape interrupted. "I know Dumbledore has absolved you. But I know teenagers: I have the misfortune to work with you disgusting little animals every day. Always trying to filch vials of Amortentia, flirting when you're supposed to be working . . ." he paused, flat black eyes boring into Harry's " . . . fondling each other under the table."

Harry looked down at his scuffed trainers.

"Quite," Snape said, drawing out the word, and then the silence after it. "So do not insult me, Potter, with the suggestion that you were not a . . . co-conspirator."

He gestured at the open door behind them.

"You are to sleep here, Riddle. Potter will sleep upstairs. Failure to abide by any of these conditions will see you locked up again . . . indefinitely. Do you understand?"

Tom's expression hadn't shifted throughout Snape's entire speech.

"Don't try to escape, don't fuck Harry," he drawled. "Are you going now?"

Snape's mouth twisted sourly. He spun on his heel and strode down the hall to the front door. When it closed behind him, Harry sighed. He felt tired, emotionally used up even though it was only the middle of the afternoon.

By contrast, Tom seemed energised. He craned his neck to look up the stairs, then went to the front door and jiggled the doorknob. It didn't turn. Tom didn't seem too upset.

"I'm guessing this is Orion and Lucretia's house," he said thoughtfully, taking in the half-full coat rack, the troll's leg umbrella stand and the row of House Elf heads.

"Who?"

"Orion and Lucretia Black. They're in Slytherin with me."

"It belongs to my godfather Sirius."

"Oh," Tom said. He poked his head into the disused dining room. "Is he Orion's son? He's let it get into a bit of a state."

"He was in Azkaban."

"I think you mentioned something like that." Tom rifled through the coats. Harry sighed when he realised he was going through the pockets.

"Hey, stop it—" he said, grabbing his sleeve. "Have you been here before? It seems like you recognise it."

"No . . . I knew Orion lived in London, but he always found excuses to avoid having me over during the holidays. He was too polite to say why, but I expect his parents would have had palpitations if he'd invited someone like me to the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black."

"Someone like you?"

"A half-blood," Tom said carelessly. He disentangled himself from Harry and strode past him to the grand staircase to the upper floors. "I would like a bath. Presumably there's one up here?"
There was, a massive freestanding porcelain tub in the bathroom two floors above. They climbed the stairs—slowly, because Tom found some pretext to poke into most of the rooms along the way—and then closed and locked the door. Luckily, Sirius was still nowhere to be seen; he must not have heard them come in.

It was a bit like having a panther loose in one's home, Harry reflected, as he sat on the closed lid of the toilet seat, watching Tom experiment with the taps that ringed the bath. There was a sense of wrongness about seeing Tom in these familiar surroundings.

Dumbledore didn’t do things for no reason. He must have let Tom out because he believed the bond was permanent, unless Harry broke it himself.

Harry wondered if Tom had the self-control necessary to stay out of trouble.

Given that Tom had attempted to break one of his rules within two minutes of being given it, probably not.

"You're awfully quiet," Tom said. He tightened a tap that was producing nothing but almond scented foam and opened one on the far right instead. Clear steaming water poured forth.

"I'm just thinking."

"That makes a change."

Harry threw a roll of toilet paper at him. Tom didn’t bother to dodge; it bounced harmlessly off his shoulder.

"Always so violent," he sighed.

"Says you!"

Tom sat on the edge of the bath, waiting for it to finish running.

"Okay, go on, what are you thinking about?"

"Are you going to hurt anyone here?"

Tom shrugged. "I don't have my magic. What do you expect me to do; steal a knife and go around at night slitting their throats?"

Harry hadn’t imagined anything so graphic and was disturbed that Tom had. Tom must have seen the look on his face.

"Ha! Do you really think I'd do something so stupid and unproductive?"

"Yes."

Tom frowned. "Well, you're wrong. And if you can't trust me, you can at least trust my self-preservation. I know perfectly well that you'd let Dumbledore kill me if I seriously harmed your friends."

The bath was done. Tom unbuttoned his shirt, then stripped off his trousers and underwear, leaving them folded over the back of a chair. Harry didn’t bother looking away as he climbed into the bath; he was no longer flustered by nudity.

"Mmm," Tom said, as he settled back against the rim of the tub. "That's nice. The stream at the
cottage is tolerable, but there's nothing like hot water."

He enjoyed it in silence for a few long minutes, then rolled his head to the side to look at Harry.

"Do you want to come in? The tub's big enough for two."

Harry snorted. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Suit yourself."

Harry sat. There was a painting of a butterfly landing on a peach on the opposite wall. At first he almost thought it was Muggle, but then the butterfly flapped its wings and took to the air.

It was more appropriate than the portrait of the giggling mermaid in the Prefects bathroom at least. Harry said as much to Tom, who cracked open an eye.

"What were you doing in there? You aren't a prefect... did you sneak in?"

"Someone gave me the password."

Tom sat up. "A boy?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at Tom's possessive tone.

"Yes, actually. Would you prefer it was a girl?"

"Hmmm."

"It wasn’t like that anyway; I only thought I was interested in girls back then," Harry said. Honestly though, he had no idea how it all worked. He had been putting off thinking about it, because it wouldn’t really matter anymore when Tom was gone. But now he was staying... "When... how old were you when you realised..."

"That I liked boys too?" Tom said, sitting back against the wall of the tub and watching the steam make spirals in the air. "Always. For as long as I knew I liked girls. It's all the same really, isn't it?"

Harry looked at what he could see of Tom's body. He was lean, tall, flat-chested...

"Er..."

"It's sex, Harry. The only difference is, you can talk about girls in public. " He walked his fingers along the edge of the bath, then cast a speculative look at Harry. "Will you come to my room tonight?"

Harry had been expecting something like this.

"I already said we weren't doing that anymore."

"To sleep, then," Tom clarified. "You aren't sleeping well by yourself. Come sleep with me."

"Sometimes I don't sleep well. It happens."

Tom smiled. "Such lies, Harry."

Harry knocked the back of his head against the wall. "Are you trying to get locked up again? You heard what Snape said. If I'm caught sneaking down to your room—"
"Don't get caught then," Tom said. His voice implied that Harry had suggested something very stupid.

Harry thought about it. It was tempting, and Tom knew it. That's why he was dangling it in front of him, like bait on the end of a sharp steel fish hook.

"You wouldn't try to touch me?"

"It's a small bed."

"You know what I mean."

Tom gave him a wide, toothy grin.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Harry muttered. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Ah, you're no fun. Fine, I won't."

"Hmm?"

"I won't try to fuck you unless you say I can."

Harry looked at him sceptically. Tom smiled back, the very picture of innocence.

"I don't believe you."

Tom laughed.

They didn’t speak again. Tom took his time with his bath, but Harry didn’t mind waiting. He had almost drifted off against the cistern when the front door slammed downstairs. He sat up fast—he could hear boots, voices—

Ron and Hermione were back.

It would look very strange, Harry realised, caught in a sudden whirl of panic, if they were to find him in the bathroom while Tom bathed. Very very unusual, very very suspicious.

"Get out," he said to Tom, then crossed over to the door and pressed his ear against the wood. He couldn't hear anyone climbing the stairs yet, but it was only a matter of time; they had minutes . . .

"Why?" Tom asked.

"Because my friends are back."

"Oh? That's nice."

"Just do it."

Tom gave a put-upon sigh and stood. He stepped out of the bathtub; rivulets of water streaming down his chest and legs.

Harry threw a towel at his head. "I'm going to wait outside."

"If you like," Tom said, looping the towel around his neck and beginning to dry himself very slowly.

The landing was empty when Harry cracked open the door. He stepped through and closed it again quickly, then leant back against the wall with a sigh of relief. The air was pleasantly cool and dry
after the humid bathroom.

A minute or so later, the clomp of feet on the stairs heralded Ron and Hermione's arrival. They seemed to be in high spirits; both were grinning, red-cheeked, and laden down with armfuls of brilliantly purple bags.

"Oh, there you are, Harry! We looked for you downstairs."

"Hi, Hermione."

"The shop was awesome!" Ron said. "It's huge, and they have all these different sections—"

"It really was very impressive," Hermione admitted. "Fred and George must have been inventing loads more than they showed us. And it's not all useless stuff either—they're selling these 'Shield Hats'—hats with a Protego charm woven in. Look, I brought one back—" She produced a rather fetching blue witch's hat from one of her bags and showed it to Harry.

"Wow, that's really cool," Harry said, without really looking. "Hey guys, listen—"

Ron stepped forwards and offloaded several bags into his arms. "These are for you, from Fred and George."

"Oh, thanks," Harry said, distracted. It felt as if something was scurrying around in the bottom of one of them and several brightly-coloured cylinders were poking out of the top. "Wait, are these fireworks?"

"Yeah! George said not to light them inside."

"R-Right. But Ron, wait, I need to—"

"I don't know why he put those in," Hermione said, frowning. "And you should have seen how many Hogwarts students were in the shop—it's going to make our job as prefects even harder than it was before—"

The door to the bathroom opened, and Tom stepped out onto the landing. He hadn't done a very good job of drying himself; either for dramatic effect or out of haste to join the conversation he had surely been eavesdropping on through the door. His hair was a mess of wet curls, and he was still doing up the top buttons of his shirt.

Hermione had frozen mid-sentence. Ron looked rather like a fish; his mouth was open and his eyes bulging. He took a step backwards that unfortunately went over the top step of the stairs. His arms windmilled until Harry, jarred out of inaction, stepped forwards and grabbed him.

"Um," Harry said into the silence. "Dumbledore came round earlier. I guess no one told you."

Hermione gave a minute shake of the head.

To Harry's great distress, Tom smiled.

"You must be Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger," he said, stepping forward to greet them. "It's a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance; Harry talks about you all the time."

He did not offer a hand to shake, which was probably for the best since Harry was certain no one would have taken it.

"You're—"
"Tom Riddle."

He said it quite easily, and his body language matched his words. Smiling, hands open, full of ease and charm, as if he was a friend that Harry had invited over for tea.

Hermione ignored him in favour of rounding on Harry.

"Why is he out?"

"I just said. Dumbledore—"

"But why?"

"I don't know," Harry said, annoyed. It was not his fault that Tom was out. "I guess it was inconvenient for Mrs Weasley to keep sending meals up to him."

"But Dumbledore doesn't expect . . . he doesn’t think . . ."

"I'm sure we can all get along," Tom said, sidling close to Harry and laying a hand on his shoulder. "I'm afraid that this might be a rather permanent arrangement."

"No!"

Tom turned to Ron.

"I hear you're a superb Keeper," he said, "and that you play wizard's chess very well. We'll have to have a match sometime . . . although I warn you, I'm not particularly good—"

"Don't talk to him!" Hermione cried, grabbing Ron's arm. "Or me, or especially Harry!"

"I'm sorry?" Tom asked, politely taken aback. "Why not?"

"Why not? Why not? You're a monster!"

Tom sighed.

"I've heard about Voldemort," he said, raising an eyebrow when Ron squeaked in terror at the name. "But really, I can't be held responsible for everything my future self has done in the last fifty years. You're a logical person, you understand. No one ever knows how their life will turn out—I might be completely different to him."

"I'm talking about things you've done! You let a Basilisk—a Basilisk—out into a castle full of children. You kidnapped my best friend and did who knows what to him! Harry won't even speak about it!"

"Hey!" Harry protested. He had too spoken about it. And if he had left out one or two things, it was because they were private and none of Hermione's business.

"I am sorry about the whole affair with the Chamber," Tom said, now conciliatory. "I absolutely shouldn’t have done that. But, you see, there was something of a misunderstanding—"

"A misunderstanding?" Hermione seethed. "What is there to misunderstand? A Basilisk is a quintuple-X rated magical creature! You knew exactly what you were doing."

Tom looked at her for a long moment, face still and expressionless. Then his manner shifted. He put his hands in his pockets and cocked his head, and when he next spoke, there was a vaguely
threatening edge to his voice.

"Yes," he said softly. "It was a misunderstanding. You see, I was under the impression that I wouldn’t get caught."

Hermione took a step back.

Harry sighed. He was now used to Tom's capricious mood swings, but he remembered how disconcerting they had been the first few times.

"Now that I have, though," Tom continued. "We may as well all make the best of our circumstances. If you don't like me, perhaps you could avoid me? Go back home to your lovely Muggle parents?"

"Don't talk about my parents!" Hermione hissed. "You don’t know anything about them. They're wonderful and kind and do good things for the world!"

"Oh yes. Harry said they were dentists. How . . . nice."

Hermione turned to Harry, betrayed.

"It was a long summer, okay?" Harry cried, holding his hands up. "Stuff came up in conversation!"

Hermione glared at him, then at Tom, then turned on her heel.

"Come on Ron, Harry, I'm going downstairs to wait for dinner."

"I'll stay here," Tom said unnecessarily. His eyes were on the closed door to Harry and Ron's room.

Harry looked at him, looked at his friends' backs, and swore. He raced down the stairs and caught Ron and Hermione on the lower landing.

"Wait, Hermione, I really don't want to leave him unsupervised."

"I can't believe Dumbledore let him out! It's so irresponsible—"

"Well, what do you expect him to do? Lock Riddle in Azkaban? We're kind of a package deal right now; they'd have to put me in the cell next door."

"Why can't he stay in his room?"

"I don't know," Harry said firmly. He was getting a bit fed up with this conversation. "If you want to ignore him, fine. But I can't; if no one talks to him, he'll make his own fun." He started up the stairs again, ignoring Hermione's protests.

Unsurprisingly, Tom was in Harry's bedroom. Harry's trunk, which had been tucked under the bed when he'd left it, was open in the middle of the floor. Tom stood over it, holding his Invisibility Cloak.

"This is nice," he said, draping the material over his arm and watching it disappear. "I suppose that all of this bulk gets in the way when you're walking around, but the invisibility is better than a Disillusionment charm and rather less prone to wearing off. Can you cast spells through it?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"
"My father." Harry leant against the door jamb and crossed his arms. "You're going to be a pain, aren't you?"

"I'm on my best behaviour."

"That isn't saying much."

"Your friends seem nice," Tom said. "Weasley is rather timid for a Gryffindor, but I liked the girl."

"Please don't say that in front of her."

"Would I do that?"

"Yes."

Tom folded the cloak and put it aside. He crouched and began going through the rest of Harry's possessions, beginning with The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5, whose table of contents he read with a rather judgemental air.

Harry sat on the bed behind him. It bothered him how easy and natural conversation with Tom felt. He was torn between two poles; the person he was supposed to be—Harry, Gryffindor Seeker, leader of the DA, Hermione and Ron's best friend—and Harry, Tom's roommate/captive. Now that he was free, he should set a new dynamic, but instead he was following right along with the old one, like the cartoon coyote running over the edge of a cliff.

"I don't think much of this modern curriculum," Tom commented. "Where are the navigation charms? You don't just learn 'Point me', do you? And what about different types of shield?"

"No idea. You might as well put that down and look for some clothes in there," Harry said, nodding towards the trunk. "Dumbledore still has your things."

Tom looked him over sceptically.

"I'm not sure anything will fit."

Harry rolled his eyes. Tom was tall, but narrow. Most of Harry's clothes would probably be okay.

"You could let down the hems," he offered. "I know you can sew."

"Do you even have a needle?"

Harry shook his head. Tom shrugged and continued picking through his suitcase.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Dinner that evening was uncomfortable. Fred and George were there, as well as Mr and Mrs Weasley, Ginny, and Sirius. They must have been pre-warned by Ron and Hermione, because when Tom and Harry sidled in, they were greeted with stony silence.

"Hello," Tom said.

No one answered, but he didn’t seem to mind. Harry sat down on a bench in the middle of the table, and instantly regretted it when Tom slid in next to him, just close enough to be obvious.

"What are you doing?" Harry hissed.
"Sitting. What are you doing?"

Mrs Weasley had cooked again. As she served them all sausage and bean casserole from a massive pot, stilted conversation resumed up and down the table. Apparently there would be no repeat of the earlier confrontation.

"How did it go?" Harry asked Fred and George, who were sitting opposite. He did not particularly care at this point, but talking felt better than eating in silence.

"Good—Fantastic really," Fred said, without taking his eyes off Tom.

"There was a queue down the lane when we opened the doors," George said. "Not massive, but respectable, particularly with all the stuff that's been happening lately."

"Just wait until we get closer to the new school year, stuff will be flying off."

"What kinds of things do you sell?" Tom asked.

Fred paused, and Harry could tell he was caught in a quandary. He had no reason to like Tom, but at least he was a fresh audience who hadn’t heard about the shop five times already.

"It's a joke shop," he said finally. "We sell most of the normal stuff—fake wands and exploding cauldrons and the like. We've got a good few lines of our own products too though, like sweets you can take to make yourself look ill enough to get out of class."

"That's clever," Tom said, using the pretext of listening to shuffle closer to Harry on the bench. "The world really has moved on, hasn't it? We didn't have joke shops in my time, just a stall run by the old man who lived above the odds-and-ends shop."

"You're from the forties, aren't you?" Ginny interrupted, leaning around Harry to get a better look at him. She was freckled from the sun and her long red hair was tied in a braid. "Did you play Quidditch?"

"No, I've never been much good on a broom," Tom said cheerfully. "One of my friends is—was—a Beater though. He held the school record for the most debroomings in single match."

"That's interesting," Ginny said. "And when—"

"Ginny," Mrs Weasley said very firmly. She was sat at the far end of the table with her husband, Ron, and Hermione. "Ginny, I need to talk to you about . . . about your booklist—"

"No you don't, it hasn't even arrived yet," Ginny said quickly, then turned back to Tom and Harry. "So when did you decide to kill all th—"

"Ginevra!"

"What? I'm just talking!"

"I told you not to!"

"It's not fair," Ginny complained. "Ron and Hermione got to talk to him earlier! Why can't I—"

Harry turned away before it could become a full-blown argument. Tom resumed talking to the twins.

"—when I was in second year, we used to put boot polish on the eyepieces of telescopes, and that sort of thing."
"Right!" Fred enthused. George nudged him in the ribs "Ow—I mean, that's okay, I suppose."

"Harry said Binns still teaches? We used to have a good time with him: one of my classmates had this little bell that he'd enchanted to sound just like the one they rang for class. He'd slip out ten minutes in the lesson, saying he was going to the loo, and ring it outside the classroom door. Binns would always pause in his sentence and say—" Tom deepened his voice "—The end? Already? And we'd all say, oh yes Professor, doesn't time fly when you're having fun? It worked every time we tried it, until Professor Fortinbras caught Rosier in the corridor and dragged him to Dippet by the ear."

Fred raised a speculative eyebrow at George.

Sirius gave a bark of laughter that contained no humour at all.

"Oh yes, very funny. We got up to all sorts of tricks too . . . but it wasn’t so fun towards the end of school, what with everybody dying, or leaving the country, or running off to join a side. Put a bit of a downer on the whole thing."

Harry remembered what Ron and Hermione had told him about Sirius, about how hard he'd taken Harry's disappearance. He had a particular reason to dislike Tom.

But to Tom's credit, he did not seem at all afraid, either of Sirius, or of this whole situation. He might have been trapped in a house with people who wanted him dead, but you would never have known to look at him.

"You must be Harry's godfather," he said politely. "I think I knew your father."

"That wouldn’t surprise me. He was a terrible bigot."

"Oh," Tom said, casting around for another angle. "Harry's always talking about you, you know. He says you're the person he always goes to for advice."

"He does?" Sirius asked, caught off-guard. He looked at Harry, who flushed. In truth, he didn’t think he'd ever said those exact words to Tom, although they were arguably accurate.

"Oh yes," Tom sighed, piling more broccoli onto Harry's plate. Harry tried to push him away, embarrassed. "—No, don't complain, you never eat your vegetables." And then, to Sirius: "Apparently you're an Animagus? I never met one before . . . I hear it's a terribly difficult piece of magic. Is the transformation painful? Did it take you a long time to learn?"

Sirius looked nonplussed; disarmed by the barrage of questions mingled with cunning flattery. Slowly, he began to answer, and Tom nodded along, practically radiating admiration and interest.

Harry sighed and poked at his food, partitioning the extra vegetables onto one side of the plate.

After dinner, when Mr Weasley had taken Ginny back to the Burrow through the Floo, Tom leapt up and intercepted Mrs Weasley as she went to clear the table.

"Let me do that," he said, taking the pile of dirty plates from her hands. "I bet you've been run off your feet all day."

She protested, but was not able to stop Tom from putting them in the sink and running the water. Harry stood up and leant casually against the counter, close enough to supervise.

"There's something quite peaceful about doing chores," Tom was saying. "And I always much
preferred washing dishes to laundry, when I lived at the orphanage."

"The orphanage?" Mrs Weasley asked, her stern expression fading.

Tom glanced at her for a moment, then looked away, bashful.

"I suppose you wouldn’t know . . . he must keep it a secret." He swallowed. "My Muggle father abandoned me after my mother died, so I grew up there."

Mrs Weasley looked at him soulfully, then took a tea-towel from a hook on the wall and began drying the crockery Tom placed on the draining board.

"I didn't know that," she said softly.

Someone gave a low whistle. Harry turned to see George.

"Very nice," he said in a voice low enough that Tom and Mrs Weasley wouldn’t hear them. “That's the right tactic to take with Mum. She's a real sucker for a sob story. And if you have her in your pocket, you don't need Dad."

Harry nodded. They watched in morbid curiosity as Tom embellished his tragic childhood for a rapidly thawing Mrs Weasley.

"—and of course, the other children never liked me. They could tell straight away that I was different, and all of my accidental magic only made things worse—"

"You didn’t mention how extremely attractive he is."

"Is he?" Harry said, keeping his face and voice carefully neutral. "I hadn’t noticed."

There was a long pause. Harry looked at George.

"Of course you hadn't."

"What are you implying?"

George didn’t answer. "I wish I had big brown eyes like that," he said. "I'd be able to get away with murder."

Harry nodded grimly.

"Then again, I suppose he already has. How many is it now?"

Harry thought about it. His father and grandparents, whoever he had killed the first time he'd opened the Chamber, Pansy, the Death Eater in the clearing and the one in the Ministry.

"Seven."

George clicked his tongue.

"Precocious little fucker."

"I saw him—me—at the Ministry," Tom said in a hushed voice that nonetheless carried all the way to Harry. "He's ugly . . . like a monster out of a children's book. I don't understand what went wrong. I like Muggleborns . . . and I'm a half-blood myself! All I wanted to do was travel the world and learn more about magic."
He paused, teeth gritted, looking down into the sink.

"But I know I did it. And . . . I'm not even that surprised. I get so angry sometimes, and I can't seem to help it or stop myself. I just . . . I just wish I'd grown up somewhere better, that I'd had parents . . . a mother who could teach me right from wrong . . ."

Tom was laying it on with a trowel. No, not just a trowel. He had gone out and hired one of those industrial diggers, and was using it to pour his lies right over Mrs Weasley's head.

And she was eating it up.

"Oh you poor thing," she said. Harry was disturbed to see the glimmer of tears in the corner of her eyes. "You're a child, of course no one blames you—come here—"

She pulled him into a spontaneous hug. Tom made a startled noise—his hands had been in the bowl of water and were still wet and soapy—but he stood still nonetheless and let her wrap her arms around his middle.

The hug went on for a long time, long enough for everyone at the table to notice. Ron's mouth was open in horror, and, next to him, Fred gave a slow handclap.

Tom rather ruined it by flashing Harry a smug grin over the top of Mrs Weasley's head.

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By the time they turned in, Harry was exhausted just from watching Tom sweet-talk everyone. Hermione was downstairs, Sirius up in his room and all the other Weasleys at the Burrow. Ron turned out the light and lay on his bed, facing Harry.

"He looks so normal."

"Oh now you can talk," Harry muttered.

"Come off it Harry, you know how people feel about him in our world. He's You-Know-Who!" Ron thumped his pillow. "Blimey, how are we supposed to be able to sleep with him downstairs? They could at least have locked him in."

Harry shrugged. He had always managed fine. And despite his anxiety, Ron slipped into slumber after less than ten minutes. Harry lay there, awake, listening as his breathing deepened.

His problem was the same as Ron's, but for very different reasons.

*He's right down there. They could at least have locked him in.*

Harry pulled the quilt up to his chin, as if doing so would form a physical barrier that would stop him doing something terrible. He closed his eyes, trying to will himself into sleep . . . which was stupid, it never worked . . .

He could see Tom behind his eyelids. The lively tilt of Tom's head when he talked, his awful brilliance today, his fearlessness . . .

Could you be addicted to a person? They had talked several times today, publicly and privately, but somehow it wasn’t enough. Tom was like an itch in the middle of his brain, one he couldn’t scratch, that grew more and more noticeable in the dark and quiet of the night.

Harry sat up. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, feeling the bare carpet beneath his toes.
Ron sniffled but did not wake.

Pathetic.

Harry did not instruct his feet to move, but they did anyway. He crept over to his trunk, just visible in the light filtering through the curtains, and clicked open the clasps one at a time. His Invisibility Cloak was on top, just where Tom had left it. Harry drew it over his head and drifted towards the door, silent as a ghost.

It was pitch black in the corridor. Harry closed the door softly behind him and took to the stairs, keeping the rhythm of his footsteps irregular to stop the creaks sounding in a pattern. Down, down, down, past Hermione's room, past the drawing room, past the portrait of Sirius' mother, anticipation building with every step.

Maybe Tom would be asleep, he thought hopefully. Harry could just open his door and slip into bed with him, no confrontation, no drama, no trouble.

But it was not to be. There was a chink of light visible underneath Tom's door. Harry stared at it for an endless moment, and then, with a heavy heart, raised a hand and rapped softly on the wood.

Silence. Then a rustle of paper, the sound of a book being closed, quiet footsteps. The door opened, leaving Harry blinking.

Tom stood there, frowning at the empty corridor. He was not wearing a nightshirt and the drawstring trousers that Harry had lent him were low on his hips.

Harry pulled the cloak over his head and held it bundled to his chest.

"Oh," Tom said. "Of course. What took you so long? Come in."

He stepped back just far enough that Harry would have room to pass.

Harry hesitated. Out in the corridor, Tom was on his best behaviour, spinning out the same fictional version of himself that he had been all day. The nice boy in the kitchen who liked to wash dishes.

Behind closed doors, however . . .

Tom's mouth quirked as he realised Harry's dilemma. He turned to the desk and began arranging a pile of books, feigning disinterest.

Harry stepped over the threshold while his back was turned. There was a new lamp beside Tom's bed, an ugly object made of beads and tiny bones. Probably he had filched it from somewhere else in the house, along with the books. Hopefully, those had not come from the bin bags in the drawing room.

The door closed behind him with a soft snick. Tom stilled for a fraction of a second at the noise, but did not turn around.

There was electric tension in the air, the sharp tang that heralded a storm. They'd been alone in the bathroom, but that was different. Tom was a creature of the night.

He turned slowly and looked at Harry. There was no particular expression on his face, but his eyes were hungry.

"We aren't doing anything," Harry said quickly.
"Of course not."

There was no more than four feet of space between them in the tiny room; a no man's land neither dared to cross.

"And if you try anything, I'll shout. Wake up the whole house."

Tom cocked his head to the side, curious.

"Oh? And how are you going to explain what you were doing down here?"

It was a polite enquiry to which Harry didn’t have an answer.

Tom took a slow, measured stride towards him, like an trainer confronting a dangerous animal. Then another. Harry held up a hand to halt him, and Tom stopped a breath away, so close that Harry could feel the heat of his chest. He smelled of almonds.

They had not touched, skin to skin, in days. Funny, how the suggestion was exponentially more powerful than the thing itself.

"I'll hit you," Harry said, tilting his head back to meet Tom's eyes. In the dim light cast by the lamp, they were as black as his shattered soul.

Tom smiled.

"Is that something you want, Harry? Would you like to hurt me?"

Yes.

Harry swallowed. "I'm here to sleep, like we agreed earlier. Take it or leave it."

A shadow passed across Tom's face; the desire to surge forwards, push him against the wall, force a leg between his thighs. His instinct for cruelty was never far underneath the surface.

Harry waited, hardly daring to draw breath.

But then Tom's demeanour lightened. "Have it your way," he said, stepping back.

Harry blinked after him. His body was still singing with tension; Tom's sudden capitulation felt anticlimactic.

Tom smiled as he climbed into bed and shuffled back against the wall, pointedly leaving space for Harry.

Harry looked at the foot or so of empty mattress for a long time. Perhaps this was different kind of danger; a temptation offered softly. The jaws of a baited trap.

Finally though, he approached. He took off his glasses and put them on the desk, on top of Tom's books, then climbed into bed. It reminded him strongly of the first time they'd shared, on that second night in the cottage. Harry had felt similarly nervous then, and for good reason.

He waited. Had it all been a ruse? If Tom tried to push the issue, Harry would fight him.

But when Tom moved, it was only to lean over and click off the light. He settled back into bed and slung a familiar arm around Harry's stomach, shuffling closer to mould himself to his back.
"I don't mind that you're being difficult," he said softly. "I missed you too. I like it better with you here."

"You're a piece of work, aren't you?" Harry asked, even as his heart skipped a beat.

Tom hummed into his neck. His arm tightened.

It was so wonderfully warm.

So nice, really, to feel Tom's chest against his back, to tangle their bare feet together under the covers. Harry could feel his body relaxing, settling in after a hard few days. His eyes closed.

And it was in this state, in a dark room on the edge of sleep, that Harry had a sudden moment of clarity.

Dumbledore had said that wishes could be dangerous things. Looking into the smiling faces of his family reflected in the Mirror of Erised, Harry hadn’t understood.

But he did now.

It hadn’t been his family, in particular, that he was wishing for. Harry hadn’t known any of those people. He didn’t remember his parents or grandparents, his second cousins or great uncles. He loved them all in an abstract way, but truly, he had wanted them for what they represented. People who would care for him, accept him, no matter what.

Because Harry's deepest, most desperate desire was to be wanted.

And Tom knew. He knew that Harry couldn’t give up this easy contact, the warmth and camaraderie. Not when he offered it freely.

Tom was manipulating him, just like he was manipulating everyone else.

And the worst thing was, Harry couldn’t even bring himself to care.
Occlumency is by far the subtlest of the mind arts. Magical strength is no help; instead, the student must have a calm, ready mind and excellent self-awareness. Sit, examine each thought in turn, and then let it go, until the mind is still.

It was all very vague. Tom read the paragraph again, then let the book fall on his lap. He closed his eyes, trying to follow the instructions.

. . .

The problem, he decided, some ten seconds later, was that he was really too clever to be much good at Occlumency. After all, there were lots of interesting thoughts in his head, and he was naturally unwilling to let go of them. Probably it was much easier for slow-witted and frivolous people.

Tom opened his eyes again. He was sat in bed with his back against the headboard. Harry was next to him; lying on his front with his head pillowed on his arms. He must have kicked off his blankets in his sleep, for the quilt was pooled around his waist.

Harry was part of the problem. Tom didn’t want to learn Occlumency. He would much rather roll on top of Harry and do something much more entertaining.

Perhaps Harry sensed the scrutiny. One green eye cracked open and regarded Tom, wary like a waking dragon.

"Sleep well?" Tom asked, even though he already knew the answer. Harry had slept like a log.

"Mm."

Tom threaded his fingers through his springy hair, petting him like a cat. Harry endured it for a few moments, then groaned and rolled onto his side.

"I overslept, didn't I?"

"That depends. What time did you want to wake up?"

"Before it got light. I was going to slip—" Harry broke off to give a great long yawn "—going to slip back into bed before Ron noticed I was gone. He's probably already up by now. What time is it?"

"I don't know. I haven't stolen a clock yet."

Harry sighed.

"It's a big house," Tom said, by way of consolation. "Probably no one will notice. Just say you were reading somewhere."

"Like you? What are you reading?"
"It's boring, you wouldn't like it."

Harry considered that, then reached out and made a playful grab for the book. As always, he was startlingly quick, but the angle was awkward enough that Tom could hold it out of reach.

"Oh come on, let me see!"

Tom grudgingly showed him the front cover. Harry's eyebrows shot up at the sight of the front cover.

"Occlumency . . ."

"I don't want Voldemort feeding me false information again."

"That's good. I don't want you feeding information to Voldemort either," Harry said, then checked himself. "I mean, not that we're . . . well, you know . . . doing anything anymore."

Tom sighed. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate Harry's tendency to be ridiculous—he did, very much—but this particular joke was growing rather old.

"Save the theatrics, Harry."

"What?"

"The denial."

Harry couldn't have looked more betrayed if Tom had stabbed a knife into his heart.

"I'm not in denial!"

"See? You just did it again!"

Harry thumped him on the leg.

"You want this," Tom continued stubbornly. "You want me. You want to have sex with me. That's why you're here."

"No I don't!"

Tom leant forwards and lifted the quilt covering Harry's hips.

Harry jerked it back down with both hands. "That's normal! It's the morning!"

"Have you been abstaining?"

Harry made a sound of great annoyance and leapt out of bed, taking care to keep his back to Tom. He snatched his glasses from the bedside table, then groaned, patting down his clothes.

"Oh fuck, I'm in my pyjamas."

"Put your cloak on, idiot," Tom said absently, as he raised his book again and turned to the next page.

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He read for most of the morning, and didn't bother to leave the room until it was practically noon. When he finally sidled down to the kitchen in search of food, the only other person there was Black,
who was sat at the end of the long table reading a newspaper. He looked up when Tom entered, but said nothing.

Tom watched him out of the corner of his eye as he prepared toast for himself at the kitchen worktop. Sirius Black was a tall man in his mid- to late-thirties. He wore his wavy hair in a messy bun at the back of his head. There was an air of restlessness to him; his foot was tapping and his hands crinkled the paper.

"Good morning," Tom ventured. He sat down at the table, a few polite spaces along.

Black grunted in response.

It had been a bit of a rush last night, Tom reflected. There had been too many people to talk to for him to have done a really good job on any one of them, particularly without his magic. People also tended to reset a bit overnight; he'd have to tread lightly today to avoid losing all the progress he had made.

Since Black wasn't in a chatty mood, Tom looked around the table for something to do. There was a small collection of what looked like ordinary pebbles, a telescope and a pile of letters. Tom took a bite of his marmalade-laden toast and picked up the top one. It was empty, unfortunately—the seam had been torn and the letter removed. He turned it over to see the address.

12 Grimmauld Place, London.

Without looking up, Black leaned forwards and plucked it from his hands.

"I didn't realise you could send letters to a house protected by the Fidelius Charm," Tom said innocently. "Don't you worry about them being intercepted?"

"Dumbledore's the Secret Keeper."

Tom nodded, taking the cryptic statement to mean that it wouldn't matter unless Dumbledore had written the address himself. If someone got hold of the letter, they could probably find the street, but not the house. He reached for a pebble instead.

Black sighed. He folded the paper and studied Tom for a few long moments. Tom pretended not to notice the scrutiny.

"Did you harm my godson?"

That was direct. Tom took another bite of his toast to buy time. A lie would backfire, as would the truth. He settled on evasion instead.

"Harry's fine, isn't he? I only took him because of the bond; I would have let him go otherwise."

Black's jaw tightened. Tom could tell that he was angry—fuming, even—but not likely to hurt him in cold blood. He was probably used to dealing with people he hated; Black had likely been in the next cell over from Death Eaters in Azkaban. Tom wondered if they'd talked.

Of course they had.

"Shoo," Black said finally. " Moody'll be through the fire in a few minutes and he won't be happy to see you lurking around here."

Tom grumbled, but snagged his last piece of toast and left the table.
He did not, however, head immediately for the stairs. Instead, he loitered around the back of the kitchen. It was narrower than the rest of the room—more a corridor, really—and lined with a number of doors. One led upstairs, while another was obviously the main back door of the house. Tom squinted through its grimy pane of glass. He could just make out the bare, rubbish-strewn courtyard that was visible from his room.

He glanced over his shoulder. Black was occupied clearing the table. Tom gingerly pressed down on the door handle. To his surprise, it turned all the way and clicked

Unlocked.

The information wasn’t immediately useful, however. Just as carefully, Tom released the handle, restoring it to its proper position.

There wasn’t much else to look at. There was a forlorn strand of tinsel hanging from the ceiling; a relic of a previous Christmas; and several clean rectangles on the greasy walls where photographs had been removed. But just as Tom was bending to inspect the empty boot rack, he felt a tickle on the back of his neck.

He turned around quickly. There was no one there.

Tom checked the back door again, wondering if a draught had got in through a gap. He couldn’t feel anything.

Had he imagined it?

Curious, Tom stepped forwards and tried the other doors. One was a pantry, filled with stacks and stacks of tins. Another was a broom cupboard, and the third housed the boiler.

Just as he was about to close the door, something moved, uncurling in a gnarl of bones and skin beneath the tank.

A very ugly, very ancient house-elf.

"What's he doing here?" it muttered. "Another nasty little Mudblood, come to disturb poor old Kreacher? In and out they are, at all hours of the day with no rest . . . and he lets them in, even those that would not be fit to serve at Master and Mistress' table, would not be fit to clean their boots—"

The house-elf stilled suddenly, peering myopically up at Tom. Then its eyes bulged comically and it hissed, squeezing back underneath the boiler.

Tom stood there, confused. He had never met the elf, so far as he could recall. Perhaps it remembered his future self?

Then again, it might simply be mad.

The fireplace crackled. Tom closed the door quickly and darted onto the stairs, out of sight.

"Morning, Sirius," said a gravelly voice a few moments later. "I've brought the documents for the meeting. Albus is delayed; he said something about a new teacher."

"For Defence?" Black whistled. "He'll be lucky."

"I volunteered to do it myself, for real this time, but he turned me down. Apparently he already has a candidate in mind." There was the sound of something being dropped on the table. "Now, Minerva's
still down in Wiltshire, but—"

"Wait a second, Alastor. I'll check the door."

Tom dashed up the stairs and into his room. He heard footsteps, then a click as the downstairs door closed.

It wouldn’t do to get caught eavesdropping so soon.

Tom sat down on his bed. He wasn’t sure what to do with himself. He wanted to explore some more, or maybe go outside for a walk. But he couldn’t, not without dragging Harry along.

The bond had never felt so much like a chain.

Before, it had been Harry who had to nag Tom to move if he wanted to go to sea or the stream or the woods. Tom could choose to grant his request or not, and if he didn't, Harry had had to wait.

Tom sighed and picked up the Occlumency book again. He could get through the next section, and then go see where Harry was.

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But just half an hour later, Tom was interrupted by a great cacophony of noise out in the hallway. It sounded like many heavy objects being dropped, followed by colourful swearing which was immediately drowned out by a bloodcurdling screech.

"How dare you deface the house of my ancestors? Defilers! Scum! Children of half-breeds and muggles—"

Abandoning his book, Tom leapt out of bed and into the hallway, where he nearly tripped over one of the large tins rolling across the floor. The noise was coming from the long, moth-eaten curtains that had adorned the far wall. They were open now, and behind them was an old, sallow-faced woman. She looked vaguely familiar.

Someone brushed past him; a rather stern-looking woman who had evidently just come in through the front door. She was wearing the maroon robes of an Auror.

"Alright, alright, that's enough now, Mrs Black," she said, taking hold of one of the curtains and attempting to draw it over the portrait. The fabric was improbably resistant though; it stayed in place as if secured at both ends. The woman leaned back, putting all her weight into it.

"YOU!" the portrait screeched. "YOU! Spawn of my whore of a niece, Mudblood, shame of my line —!"

"Yeah, Mum sends her regards too, you crazy bitch."

There was a commotion on the stairs. Harry bounded down the last few steps, followed by Granger and Weasley. He seized the curtain, and together, the two of them were able to pull them over the portrait. The screaming cut off abruptly.

"Thanks, Tonks!"

"No, thank you Harry, I set 'er off. I dropped a great pile of crap in the hallway."

"You look . . . er . . ." Harry said, gesturing towards her face.
"Oh, this?" she laughed, and to Tom's amazement, her dark hair turned electric blue, and her square
jaw pointy. "I was just at the Ministry, giving a report before the Wizengamot. They take me more
seriously when I look like that, but I can't imagine why."

"You're a Metamorphmagus," Tom said.

She turned around, and studied him with great interest.

"Yes I am. And I suppose you're Riddle."

"Yes."

"You don't look like I was expecting," she said thoughtfully.

Tom shrugged. The people he had met so far seemed to fall into three camps; fear, hostility and
curiosity. 'Tonks' was apparently in the third.

"What's this for?" Harry asked, picking up one of the cans. "Paint?"

"Oh yeah," she said, grabbing several cans herself and pushing them into Weasley's arms. "Molly
gave it to me to bring over. You kids are painting the upstairs room today."

"No we're not," Weasley blurted. Apparently the threat of manual labour had eclipsed his fear of
Tom. "She didn’t say anything about that."

"Well, she said it to me. Is Sirius around?"

They were saved the trouble of answering when the stairs to the kitchen creaked and Black
appeared.

"I thought I heard you come in, Tonks," he said dryly. "Come on down."

"Be with you in a pop. Molly wants the kids painting."

"No!" Weasley said again, appealing to Black. "It's not fair to Harry. He only just got back."

"Just do it," Black sighed. "I don’t want to get told off again."

And with that, he turned and started down the stairs again. Tonks followed, giving them all one last
apologetic smile.

"It's not like he ever helps," Weasley grumbled when the door had closed again. "And it's his fault
the room is so torn up."

Harry shrugged. Tom picked up one of the bags Tonks had left. It was full of brushes and rollers.

"You aren't helping," Granger said sharply. "No way."

Tom shouldered past her. "She said kids. That's me too."

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'The upstairs room' turned out to be the master bedroom on the second floor. Tom hadn’t been in
before, so he looked around curiously while Harry placed his tins on the floor.

It was a large space, made larger still by the lack of furniture. The carpet had been removed, as had
the wallpaper. Behind, the wall was badly gouged and hastily repaired. Tom ran his fingers along an inch-wide scratch.

"What kind of monster did you have in here?" he asked Harry. The other two were in the far corner, ignoring him. Weasley was still complaining as he poured paint into a roller tray.

"A Hippogriff."

Tom frowned.

"Why—"

"Don't ask."

Harry wasn’t in a particularly chatty mood. Probably, he was still stewing over what Tom had said to him earlier.

Tom wandered over to the window instead. It was at the front of the house, overlooking the street. The sky above was crisscrossed with dozens of fine white lines. Contrails, Harry had told him once, from modern Muggle aeroplanes. They had been a rare sight at the cottage.

"Aren't you going to do anything?"

Granger was tapping her foot. Her bushy hair was tied in a ponytail and, like most of the women in this time, she was wearing boy's clothes.

Tom didn’t bother arguing. He took a brush from the pile, loaded it with white paint and got to work on the nearest wall.

For a while, the four of them worked in silence; Weasley and Granger on one wall and Harry and Tom on another. However, the task quickly grew boring and Tom more slapdash. He dunked his brush twice in the can, then slapped it onto the wall, just for the pleasure of watching the paint run in drips down to the skirting board.

Harry sighed and rollered over it.

"I don't understand why we're doing something so pointless," Tom sighed.

"You're the one who insisted on doing it. You could have stayed downstairs."

Downstairs was boring too.

"Do you know how long it would take to paint this room with magic?"

Harry shrugged.

"About three minutes." Tom folded his arms. "Take out your wand, Harry, I have a spell to teach you."

"No thanks."

"Oh come on, it's a nice one."

Harry’s mouth twitched in amusement. Tom could tell he was being drawn into the conversation despite himself.
"I can't. It's the summer holiday."

"The Trace has plenty of loopholes. No one is going to notice your magic in a wizarding house."

"Still no." Harry said. "What's wrong with doing it the slow way? Do you have something better to do?"

Touché.

"Reading," Tom said. "Looking around the house . . ."

"I thought you said your book was boring."

"I could find something better."

"Given what you find fun, I'm not sure anyone would let you read something 'better'."

"Deny me access to education? That would be inhumane."

"Because you're all about human rights."

"I let you read."

"I was reading Roahl Dahl, not hunting for Eleven Ways to Disembowel Your Enemies."

"That sounds interesting, do you have a copy?"

Granger gave a very loud, very deliberate cough.

Harry flushed. He backed away from Tom, then turned and vigorously applied his roller to the wall. It would have been more effective if he hadn't forgotten to load it with paint.

Tom, however, was annoyed at being interrupted. "Are you alright?" he asked Granger, voice sickly-sweet. "It's quite dusty in here; I can't believe that lazy elf let it get into such a state."

"The elf," she repeated.

"I thought I saw one earlier. Or perhaps it was a member of the esteemed Order of the Phoenix. I'm sure they accept all sorts of creatures."

Granger's nostrils flared. She took a deep breath, then another, obviously trying to calm herself down. She half-turned to her painting, then paused and turned back.

"I wasn't going to say anything—"

"So don't."

"But I wanted to let you know that I saw you last night, smarming your way around. I practically expected you to leave a trail of slime."

Tom grinned. He liked her vicious tongue.

Weasley grabbed her arm. "Hermione, don't—"

Granger shrugged him off. "Don't what? Confront the elephant in the room? You might be happy to pretend we aren't sharing a roof with a racist, murdering psychopath, but I can't."
"I'm not a psychopath," Tom said quickly. "I'm very well-adjusted."

Granger gave a laugh that was more fury than anything else.

"Of course not. Perfectly normal. As if you don't despise Muggle-borns for no reason at all!"

"No reason? Muggle-borns refuse to integrate. You people just want to take your education and go back into the Muggle world, risking the Statute of Secrecy as you do."

"That's not true!"

"Isn't it?" Tom laughed and looked around at Harry and Weasley, as if asking them to share in the joke. "What magic are you going to do for your parents when you're of age? What books have you given them to read? Have you brought them to Diagon Alley to gawk at the witches and wizards in their funny clothes?"

"You hypocrite!" Granger spat, marching forwards. "You grew up in the Muggle world too! Harry told us all about it."

Tom rounded on Harry, annoyed. "No one likes a tattletale," he said. "What else did you tell your friends? Did you give them a complete picture?"

Before Harry could say anything, Tom turned back to Granger. "And that doesn't matter anyway, because I am descended from Salazar Slytherin himself!"

"Oh god, not this again," Harry muttered.

Granger didn't hear him. "SO? It was a thousand years ago! Probably everyone in Britain is descended from him."

"Not you," Tom sneered. "You're descended from dentists. What a nice, respectable profession. I bet you've never wanted for anything in your life. Did you have a nanny? Did you play the piano? Go to a fancy school? Of course you did. It must have been such a nasty shock for you, when you joined the wizarding world and realised you were starting from the bottom."

Granger whipped out her wand. Her hair was coming loose from her ponytail; some of it was standing up on end, alive with static electricity.

"STOP!" Harry cried, leaping in between them. "Stop, Hermione, he's trying to wind you up! He's bored and he thinks it will be fun." To Tom, he said; "It won't be fun—she will actually hex you."

Tom was counting on it. Being illegally hexed while magicless would win him the sympathy of the adults in the house. He cast around, searching for something that would push her over the edge.

Then his eyes landed on Weasley, who was hovering at Granger's shoulder with his fingers wrapped white-knuckled around his wand.

Bingo.

"Perhaps you could keep your woman under control, Weasley?"

Granger made a noise of pure hate. Sparks burst from the tip of her wand and sailed over Harry's shoulder. Tom dodged—and it was a good thing he did, because the stream of uncontrolled magic left a fist-sized scorch mark on the newly painted wall beside his head.

Granger turned on her heel and rushed from the room.
Tom patted himself on the shoulder for a job well done. And also to put out the embers eating their way through his shirt.

Harry gave him a scathing look.

"What?" Tom asked.

"I'll go get her," Weasley said quickly.

"No, I will," Harry said. "You stay here in case someone comes to check on us."

"What? No! Don't leave me—"

But Harry was already out the door. Tom gave him an apologetic shrug.

"Women. You never know what will set them off."

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Hermione wasn’t on the hallway or the stairs. But just as Harry was about to go and check her room, he heard a noise from above. He bounded up the stairs, cursing himself all the way.

Of course Tom would behave like this. And Hermione too; she was the kind of person who could not let things go. She always had to confront people when they were doing something wrong.

Harry found her on the upper landing. She was sitting with her back against the door to one of the spare rooms, knees drawn up to her chest. She swiped at her eyes with her sleeve when she heard Harry approaching.

"I'm not crying," she said quickly. "Not really. Frustration always makes me tear up."

"I know," Harry said, sitting down next to her.

Hermione thumped the carpet with a closed fist.

"God, he's awful. How did you put up with him all summer?"

"I guess I got used to him," Harry said. He paused, then continued tentatively; "If it helps, he doesn't actually care about half the stuff he says. I don't think blood purity even means that much to him; he hardly ever mentions it."

"You say that, but he did actually grow up and put it into practice."

"I think that was more about convenience than anything else. He just wants—"

"Power," Hermione finished grimly.

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry I told To—Riddle about your parents," he said, after a moment. "I didn’t think the two of you would ever meet."

"Oh, just say Tom."

"I—what?"

"You keep stuttering over his name," Hermione said irritably. "It's because you normally call him Tom."


"No," Harry began. Then he remembered who he was talking to. This was Hermione. Clever, brave, occasionally vicious, and so loyal that she had once set a teacher on fire to stop him (supposedly) cursing Harry's broom.

When had he become so used to lying to people?

"Okay," he admitted. "Yeah, I do."

Hermione nodded. "You're friends, aren't you?"

Harry's heart thumped in his chest.

"Not really," he replied, looking away.

"No, you are, I can see it. You're comfortable with him."

"It's not like that. I'm not sure he even knows what friends are."

They sat there in pensive silence. Hermione was turning something over and over in her hands. With a start, Harry realised it was the golden galleon.

"Have you ever heard of Stockholm syndrome?" she asked finally.

Harry shook his head.

"It's actually a pretty well-known phenomenon. Sometimes, when people are kidnapped and held for long periods of time, they become emotionally attached to their captors. It can even get to the point where they don't escape when they have the opportunity to, or refuse to cooperate with the authorities after they're rescued."

Harry listened with a sinking feeling. When Hermione finished, he looked down, unable to meet her eyes.

"You don't want to hear this, do you?" Hermione said softly. "No—you don't need to hear this. You already knew, even though you didn't know it had a name."

Sometimes Harry hated how perceptive Hermione was.

"Tell me more about it?" he asked. "Is there a cure?"

"No. Counselling maybe?"

Harry thought about that. There was a smear of paint on his shoe. He rubbed at it with his thumb.

"Then how do you know it isn't real? Of course someone is going to seem human if you spend lots of time with them."

"Would you have liked Riddle if you'd met him at Hogwarts?"

"No."

"See!"

"But maybe I would have, if I'd got to know him!" Harry met her eyes again, frustrated. "It was fun sometimes. We duelled a lot—and I mean a lot—and went for walks, and read together, and cooked —"
"Harry . . ."

"I mean, he was a shit at times," Harry said quickly. "Particularly at the beginning . . . and for a while in the middle. There were several weeks when I wasn’t talking to him. But, well, it wasn’t the worst summer I’ve ever had, all things considered."

There was a pause.

"You always come back thin," Hermione said, very softly. "I’ve always wanted to ask, but I didn’t want to force you to talk about it."

Harry didn’t want to talk about it now either. He was annoyed suddenly—part annoyed and part amused. He’d come up here to comfort Hermione, and she’d turned it around on him. She’d always been good at that.

"Well, I’m glad you’re feeling better," he said, getting to his feet.

"Harry!"

"I’ll see you downstairs," he called over his shoulder.

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Tom was already in bed by the time Harry crept down that evening. The room was dark, lit only by the light of the moon.

Harry climbed in next to him without turning on the lamp. They lay there in silence for a few long minutes.

"Do you think I have Stockholm syndrome?" Harry asked finally.

“What’s that?”

Harry stared at the ceiling, trying to remember the words Hermione had used. “It’s when you get . . . attached . . . to your kidnapper.”

Tom made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

"What?" Harry demanded, turning onto his side so he could see Tom’s face better. His lips were twitching.

"Nothing."

Harry flopped onto his back again and pulled the quilt up to his neck.

In retrospect, Tom probably wasn’t the right person to ask.
Cheat, the card game mentioned in this chapter, is called Bullshit in the US and other parts of the world. Thank you to Mith, RedHorse and Miraculous for betaing, and all credit for Tom's t-shirt goes to glowcloud 😊.

Harry was lying in his own bed on the second floor. It had been six days since he'd arrived at Grimmauld Place, but he'd slept in it only twice.

It was morning, and dim grey light illuminated the small space. The twin bed next to his was an empty nest of ruffled sheets—Ron had been gone when Harry had crept up after sunrise. Another time, Harry might have wondered about it (Ron was by no means an early riser), but at that moment, it was the furthest thing from his mind.

He couldn’t get what Hermione had said about Stockholm syndrome out of his head.

It couldn’t all be that, could it? It rang false to Harry somehow; naturally, if you spent a lot of time with someone, you would come to see them as human. And just as naturally, once they were human, you would start to empathise with them. It did not have to be anything sinister.

Harry sighed, eyes fixed on a spot on the wall. Without his glasses, it was too blurry to make out, but he rather thought it might be a ladybug.

His situation reminded him somehow of one particular cloudy afternoon in June. He and Tom had stumbled on a sandy cove, far down the coast from the cottage. They'd spent a pleasant few hours there. After Harry was done with his swim, he lay at the water's edge, feet pointing out to the Atlantic, letting the incoming tide swamp him with each wave. It was a game; how long could he stay there before the water covered his mouth and nose?

Tom had sat behind him, out of reach of the tide, and flicked pebbles and bits of driftwood onto Harry's chest.

It wasn’t sustainable, what he was doing. He couldn’t keep holding Tom at arm's length during the day and then spending every night with him. And there was another problem too:

"You want me. That's why you're here."

Tom had said it, and it was true. Harry wanted to have sex. He was used to having sex. They'd been doing it at least once a day at the cottage, and sometimes more. Harry seemed to be hard all the time, and often at vastly inappropriate moments—like when Tom made a show of dropping something and bending over to pick it up, or else chewing on his quill when he made notes in the margins of his book.

It was deliberate.

It was absolutely deliberate.

The worst thing was, Tom had tried this exact trick before, back at the cottage. And it was working
now just as well as it had worked then. Every time they went to bed, Harry lay there in the dark, consumed by an all-too-familiar torture.

. . . and Harry was hard now too.

His fingers were on his stomach, moving in slow, soothing circles through the wiry hair leading down from his belly button. He needed a wank. He hadn’t got off in ages, and it was messing with his head.

He could wank without thinking of Tom, right?

Right?

Almost without conscious thought, Harry's hand dipped beneath the waistband of his pyjama bottoms and closed around his cock. It felt nice in his hand, comforting somehow. Warm, dry skin, stretched taut. He played with it for a little bit, just stroking up and down with a loose fist, letting the warmth build slowly and evenly.

Cho, he decided. She was a neutral choice, and exactly the kind of person Harry should be thinking of at this moment. Pretty, kind, (female), had never tried to murder him or anyone he cared about . . . He pictured her smooth hair, round face and dark eyes. Cho, leaning in to kiss him, a soft, gentle press of lips against his. Moving with him, not trying to take control, or grope him or knock his legs out from under him—

Harry stilled, frustrated.

There was something missing. Cho wasn’t turning him on like she normally did; he could have been imagining grass or bridges for all his cock responded.

With a rush of acute self-consciousness, Harry realised the answer. He'd never actually done anything with a girl. He could vaguely imagine what Cho might look like under her clothes, but it was abstract, not backed with real experience.

A boy then. Thoughts of Cho inevitably led to Cedric. Harry remembered the satisfying edge of jealousy in Tom's voice when he'd mentioned the Prefect's bathroom. Well, what if, rather than simply telling him the password, Cedric had come with him to open the egg? Harry imagined Cedric pushing him against the slippery tile while warm, fragrant water swirled around them. Harry, moving against Cedric, pulling him in by the waist, looking up into those grey eyes, warm in the way Tom's were cold—

And, just like that, Cedric dissolved into Tom, as if he'd been lurking just beneath the surface, ready to come out at the slightest thought. The tile at his back became the cold stone of a grave; Tom, caging him in against a tombstone in Little Hangleton. His crooked smile as he leaned in and whispered murderous nothings into Harry's ear. It had been a mere handful of days since they'd first met, before they'd done anything together, before Harry had even been thinking about it—

But Tom had.

As soon as the thought popped into his mind, Harry knew it was true. Tom had always planned to fuck him, probably from the very first moment he’d offered that vow.

His fingers tightened around his cock, sending heat rocketing through him. Fuck, yes, like that; Tom holding his wrists, grinding against him, licking up the shell of his ear.

And then spinning him around, brutally shoving his face against the tombstone and pulling down his
Harry groaned. His hand was wet with precome. He swapped to his left and moved his right down, down, until it reached the crack of his arse. The skin there was soft and wrinkled, slightly raised and surprisingly sensitive. Harry had never touched this part of himself before, never had reason to, but Tom had. This was what Tom had felt when he'd *fucked* him.

Did he dare?

Harry pressed, not trying to breach, just enough to bring up that memory of pressure—fuck—of his own traitorous body opening up for Tom, as if welcoming him home. Harry's left hand sped up on his cock, squeezing, rubbing along the sensitive underside with each stroke. How filthy it all was . . . what Tom would say if he could see him like this, what terrible things he would utter with that silver tongue—

(or even, viciously, what it might be like to turn the tables and do this to Tom, to have him moaning underneath him, as helpless as Harry always was, uncomfortable and turned on and still wanting more—)

Click.

The door opened. Harry froze, right on the cusp of orgasm. He hadn’t heard the handle turn; he'd been too engrossed—

It was Ron. He was creeping in quietly, still in his pyjamas. He crossed over to his own bed and pulled back the covers. For a moment, Harry thought he wouldn’t see, that the light would be too dim for his unadjusted eyes.

But then Ron stilled and turned his head.

"Um," Harry managed.

There was a long, frozen moment in which Ron took in Harry’s hands under the covers, Harry's raised knee and guilty expression. Harry followed his eyes, dying of mortification.

"Hi!" Ron said in a high voice, thankfully choosing to play this as if he hadn't noticed. "I've just been—been refilling my glass of water."

Together, their gazes moved to the half-full glass on the bedside table.

"Oh, there it is. Must have forgotten to take it down with me." Ron grabbed it, the same way a drowning man might seize a buoy. "I'll go do that then."

He turned and hurried out of the room, pausing only to grab the jumper he'd thrown over the back of the chair the night before. When the door closed behind him, Harry pulled his hands out of his pants and smacked the back of his head repeatedly against the pillow. This wasn’t the Hogwarts dorms. The beds had no curtains. Ron had known exactly what he was doing.

He got up, still half-hard and cursing Tom for it, even though this humiliation was entirely self-inflicted.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Harry avoided Ron for the next couple of days, until Ron caught his arm in the hallway and said; "Oh, fuck off Harry, we all do it."
There was a certain, uneasy routine in the house. The teenagers were at leisure in the morning and evenings, but busy with chores in the afternoon. The rest of the Weasley family, in various combinations, were frequent guests at dinner, along with other members of the Order of the Phoenix.

Tom was perfectly polite to all of them. Harry could tell he still missed his magic though; a wistful, frustrated look appeared on his face every time someone took out their wand. Several times, Harry caught him trying to lift something without touching it, or holding out his hand for the salt shaker, as if expecting it to zoom across the table to him.

McGonagall was there at the weekend. There was no escaping her; she came upstairs and ambushed Harry as he was painting the skirting boards. "I took out one of the essays in light of the limited time left until the start of term," she said as she piled his summer homework into his arms, "but I expect you to do an excellent job on the remainder."

She left then, deaf to Harry's protests that he did not know if he was going back to school, or even taking Transfiguration if he did.

Lupin arrived that same afternoon, pale, bruised, and carrying a battered case that Harry recognised from their first-ever meeting on the Hogwarts Express.

"You look like death warmed up," Harry commented, as he took Lupin's cloak and hung it on the rack beside the door. "Oh—I mean, sorry—"

Lupin smiled to see him. "I'm fine. Just a little tired. It was the full moon last night, and making the transformation twice in one month has taken a bit of a toll."

"Are you staying? I think Sirius cleaned out the spare room."

Lupin nodded, gave Harry a careful one-armed hug, and then limped up the stairs with his case.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Late evening found all the permanent residents of the house gathered in the drawing room. Harry, Ron and Sirius were playing cards on the coffee table, while Tom and Hermione were reading. They were on opposite ends of the same sofa, Hermione had sat down first, and Tom had followed her, disregarding the empty armchair. It was a transparent attempt to irritate, and it was working; Hermione's foot tapped on the ground even as she read her book.

Tom had a book of his own, but seemed less interested in it than the card game—he kept glancing over the top of the page. There had been a pack at the cottage, but neither he nor Harry knew any good games for two.

"Want to join in?" Harry asked, when they finished a hand.

Tom made a show of looking up, then glanced at Sirius, who was shuffling the cards. Sirius gave a one-armed shrug, so Tom slid off the sofa, coming to sit beside Harry on the rug.

Harry watched in bemusement. Sirius was in a good mood today—he often behaved like a big kid when the other adults were gone, delighting in spending time with Harry and the others. It varied though; he was also prone to intermittent fits of surliness, which he normally spent hidden in his room. Harry wondered if it was driven by anxiety about his upcoming trial, now scheduled for the second-to-last day in August. He and Tom tended to dance around each other politely for the most part.

"The game is called Cheat," he said now, dealing out thirteen cards to each of them. "The aim is to
get rid of your hand the fastest. When it's your turn, you play cards face-down and declare what they are out loud." He put down two cards to demonstrate. "See: I play these and say three jacks. If you think I'm lying, you can say Cheat and make me turn them over. If you're right, I pick up the pile, but if you're wrong, you pick up the pile. Now it's Harry's turn—he can put down tens, jacks and queens on top of a jack—go on Harry."

They played out a few turns for Tom, then retrieved their cards and began in earnest. Unsurprisingly, Tom took to the game like a fish to water. He had an uncanny knack for knowing when any of them was lying, particularly Harry, who he called out with alarming regularity and accuracy.

"Cheat."

"How are you doing that?"

"You always put your cards down too fast when you're lying," Tom said.

Harry did it slower. Tom called him again.

"WHAT?"

Even Ron laughed at Harry's dismay. Harry grumbled to himself as he sorted his new cards into his hand. He had too many now to have a shot at winning, but he might still be able to torpedo Tom's chances in return.

Ron kept calling cheat on Tom. He had grown less afraid of him as the days had passed and everyone in the house remained unmurdered, but still treated him with the suspicion he reserved for every Slytherin he met.

Tom only smiled and showed him the exact cards he had claimed. He became more and more smug as he lost his cards, until Sirius caught him putting down five at once.

"You can't put down more cards than you've claimed," he said, pushing the pile towards Tom. "You can take them all back."

"It's called cheat," Tom grumbled.

The game continued until Sirius got an exceptionally lucky run—or was a better liar than Harry gave him credit for—and managed to lose his last five cards within two turns. He raised his hands in triumph while Ron dropped his cards onto the table, annoyed.

"That was fun," Tom said. He looked surprised when Sirius passed him the deck to shuffle.

"You deal us out. I'm going to go check on Moony."

He pushed himself up and left the room. A moment later, the stairs creaked.

It was a surprisingly domestic scene; Harry was struck once again by the surrealism of it all. Hermione was still reading on the sofa with her legs drawn up under her. It was a Muggle book by the look of the cover, probably a classic. Ron was poking through the rest of the games in the box, counting out a number of ivory chequers pieces to see if there was a complete set. Crookshanks was underfoot; he brushed up against Tom's side as he knelt up to shuffle the cards.

Tom looked nice. His unruly curls were sticking up at the back and he was wearing a t-shirt Harry had lent him. It was one of Dudley's cast-offs; green, with a faded print of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles on the front.
"You're in a thoughtful mood," Tom said, without looking.

"Can you blame me?"

"I really like this game."

Harry laughed. "You've said that about four times."

Tom flashed him a grin, pleased.

Sitting there, Harry came to a sudden realisation.

They were going to have sex again.

It didn’t matter how many times Harry said they weren’t. He couldn’t stop sneaking down to Tom's room, couldn’t even wank without thinking about him. He was obsessed with Tom, constantly focussed on him, seeking him like a compass needle seeks the north. It was only a matter of time before Tom pushed and he gave in.

But this was what had gone wrong the first time. Action by inaction; refusing to exert any control over his own relationship. Harry had sleepwalked into it, disclaimed all responsibility and blamed Tom for everything.

But that didn’t make sense anymore. Harry wasn’t the prisoner here.

Tom was.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

That night, Harry sat on the bottom step of the stairs for a long time, watching the light under Tom's door. He thought about what he was going to say, how he wanted to play it. He was still in his day clothes—he'd been so absent-minded that he hadn’t changed out of them when he'd gone to bed. When he'd got up again and put on his Invisibility Cloak, he hadn’t wanted to risk disturbing Ron.

Finally, Harry took a deep breath and stood up. There were still butterflies in his stomach, but the turmoil of the last few days was gone.

Tom wasn’t asleep. He was reclining back against the pillows, waiting for Harry. His eyebrows climbed when he took in Harry’s expression.

"That's an interesting look on your face," he said. His voice was quiet; mindful of the people sleeping above.

"We need to talk," Harry said, sitting down on the edge of the bed, just out of grabbing range.

"Oh?"

"What are we?"

"Human beings . . . mammals . . . Horcruxes . . ."

"No. Us. What are we doing?"

Tom sat up further on the bed. Curiosity was stirring behind his eyes, along with a lively glimmer of anticipation.
"What do you want us to be?" he asked.

"I don't know." Harry fidgeted with his hands in his lap. "But this is daft, isn’t it?"

He didn’t specify what he meant, but Tom seemed to understand. "Very."

Harry looked down at his hands again, then back at Tom. Be brave, Harry. Take control of the conversation, Harry.

"Are you my boyfriend?"

Tom laughed.

"Good," Harry said. That word felt weird to him too.

"We can be friends, can't we?" Tom said, when he'd regained his composure. "It's like I said ages ago; friends can just have fun together. It doesn’t have to be complicated."

"Right," Harry said. "It's casual, not..."

He trailed off, unable even to say the word *romantic*. It was impossible to associate that with Tom somehow; it brought to mind candlelit dinners and Valentine’s Day, singing gnomes and Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop, men and women holding hands. But could the two things—sex and romance—really be separate?

"It's a shared activity people do together," Tom agreed. "It's perfectly normal."

Harry nodded. "Sure. Like going to the cinema. Or playing golf."

Tom's lips quirked. "A two-hole course."

Harry thumped him on the arm. Tom hit him back, then leant forwards and tried to pull him in by the waist, obviously regarding it as a done deal.

Harry shoved him. "Wait, I have conditions."

"Oh? Let's hear them."

"You stop winding Hermione up."

Tom let out a long-suffering sigh. "Fine."

"And you don't kiss me."

"What are you, a prostitute? You love kissing."

"I'm worried about what it's doing to the bond," Harry said, even as his face heated. He did love kissing, which was why it was so dangerous. What was it doing to his emotions?

Tom nodded reluctantly.

"And you owe me a favour."

Tom frowned. "You're kidding—that's three favours in total!"

"How is not kissing me a favour?" Harry demanded. "I don't have to let you kiss me if I don't want to. And anyway, I should be asking for three favours. Hell, I should be asking for a lot more. How
many times have I saved your life?" He jabbed Tom in the chest with his index finger. "Who dealt with that Death Eater when you were swanning around outside your body? Who fixed your leg in the Ministry? Who helped you get down to the Atrium? Who refused to break the bond and saved your life? You owe me, Tom."

There was a mulish set to Tom's chin by the time Harry finished. "I think you'd do this anyway," he hedged. "I think you want this enough. You want me. You want my cock—"

"They were going to poison you," Harry interrupted, deliberately brutal. "Dumbledore and Snape were going to kill you while you were still unconscious and bury you in an unmarked grave. A favour is the least you owe me."

Tom's eyes widened. He had probably assumed something like that already, but it was different to hear it out loud.

"Fine," he said. And then, quickly—"But you have to use it before September."

"Oh?"

"I had the decency to use yours when you asked for it."

"Nothing about that favour was decent."

Tom smiled slowly. "Do you remember it?" he asked, dropping his voice to a husky whisper. "Would you like to spend it now? I could do the same for you."

Heat pooled in Harry's stomach at the thought of Tom's mouth on him, for the second time ever. They'd done it on the bed before. Harry could get Tom to kneel, could have his fingers digging into his hips, his lying tongue running along the shaft of his cock—

But . . .

Harry took a slow, cooling breath. "No deal. You'd have done that anyway, just to get me to touch your cock again."

Tom's sighed, but he held out a hand. "So, your terms are, be nice to your easily-offended friend, don't kiss you, and an unspecified favour to be used in the next two weeks. Shake on it?"

Harry looked down at the hand. Tentatively, he reached out and clasped it with his own.

When Tom released him, Harry swallowed. It felt like a monumental change between this moment and the last. Harry had just agreed to . . . to . . .

Tom shuffled closer on the bed. He reached for Harry's waist and drew a hand up his side, over his clothes. Harry shivered and met his eyes. He was at a loss for what to do; normally it was all a great rush, as if going slow would break the spell, make it all seem unbearably consensual.

But this time it was consensual. Probably, it always had been.

Tom's fingers reached his chin and tipped it up. It was mocking somehow, in the way Tom's gentleness was always mocking. He knew Harry's dilemma and was waiting for him to act, drawing out the moment sadistically.

Face flaming, Harry laid a hand on Tom's chest. He hardly ever touched him like this; normally Tom decided what to do and Harry decided whether to fight him. He moved slowly, feeling his body
through his shirt. Not muscled, but lean and fit from all the running around they did.

Tom laughed, and then finally took some control. He hooked his fingers through the belt loops of Harry's jeans and dragged him in, until he was straddling Tom's lap.

Harry froze, fingers shaking with excitement. They were the same height like this. Tom's arm was around his waist, holding him in place.

Too many clothes. Harry pulled at the hem of Tom's shirt until Tom dragged it off over his head and threw it on the floor. But when Tom went to do the same to him, Harry grabbed his wrist.

"Wait, turn off the light."

"Why?"

"I don't want you leaking this to Voldemort."

Tom grumbled, but stretched back and did it.

It felt different in the dark; paradoxically safer. Harry could hear the wind outside the window. It reminded him of the forest rustling outside the cottage, like some great benign beast settling around them.

He pulled off his shirt. Tom squeezed his butt cheek, hard enough to make Harry hiss and jolt against him. The motion rubbed him against Tom's lap.

Tom laughed breathlessly—confident now he knew Harry wouldn't run. He guided Harry's chin up again and nipped at his neck, just above the hollow where it met his collarbone. He rose higher and higher, leaving little painful bites in a line.

Following his jugular vein.

Harry's breath stuttered when he realised. He allowed it, shivering in Tom's lap, hands kneading his bare shoulders to distract himself from the stinging pain, until Tom shifted up again, leaving marks on places that wouldn’t be covered by the collar of his shirt.

"Hey Tom, stop—"

Tom didn't. Harry pinched him viciously in the side.

Tom broke away to laugh, then shoved him backwards. Harry gave a stifled yelp as he fell off Tom's lap, onto his back on the bed, legs splayed and head towards the foot. Tom was on him in an instant; he ripped down Harry's fly, then pulled his jeans and underwear off while Harry fought. Once they were gone, he lay on top of him, legs between Harry's, denying him any leverage. He nosed his chin back once more and continued.

Harry couldn't get Tom off of him, no matter how he struggled. Finally, he went limp and twitched underneath him as he nipped and bit, not breaking the skin, just drawing the blood to the surface. His legs were wrapped around Tom's waist, socked feet crossed at the small of Tom's back.

By the time Tom was satisfied, Harry could hardly stop his hips from making little needy thrusts up against Tom's body.

"Fuck," he panted. "Oh my god, you absolute shit. I am going to kill you."

"You're the one who said no kissing," Tom said, lapping at the trail of bites. They were going to
look terrible in the morning. He had pulled his underwear below his hips at some point, and his cock was as hot as a brand against Harry's own. Harry thrust up again, so aroused that he couldn't even work out what to do, how he wanted to move.

Tom paused, then moved back deliberately, holding himself out of reach.

"Do you want something, Harry? If you do, you'll have to ask."

"Fuck you."

"We don't have any lube, so I'm afraid that's not possible," Tom said regretfully. "Maybe you should bring some olive oil next time."

Harry let out a moan of pure frustration. He tightened his thighs around Tom's waist and used them to pull himself up. They both gasped as their cocks rubbed together again; delicious friction and heat.

"Do it do it do it," Harry said. "Do it you bastard, just—"

"Just what?" Tom asked, enticing, although Harry could tell he was excited too, hardly holding himself back. "I thought about this, you know, when I was trapped in here. I thought about holding your arms down and fucking you. Sliding inside while you squirmed and whipped your head from side to side. Quick enough to hurt, stretching you before you were ready. I'd lick the tears right off your cheeks."

"Fuck, you're sick," Harry gasped, even as his insides melted from the dirty fantasy. He bucked up again and whined piteously at the lack of friction.

Tom took pity on him then (or couldn't hold out any longer). He thrust down against Harry, grinding them together, sweaty and wet and wonderful. Harry tried to match him, thighs clenching, fingers tangled in Tom's hair. So, so close—his legs began to tremble as orgasm approached and warmth concentrated in his cock, a sharp, delicious heat. It pulsed, burning through him; Harry's mouth opened in a soundless scream—

And then he was gone.

Tom had the courtesy to let go when Harry pushed him away, oversensitive. He jerked off onto Harry's stomach while he lay there, limp all over and dizzy with euphoria. When he was done, he lay on top of him, resting most of his weight on Harry and trapping the wet patch in between them.

"Oh my god," Harry said, when he had words again. "I thought you were on your best behaviour. What the fuck was that?"

Tom made a noise. A moment later, Harry realised he was laughing. He pushed him in disgust, until Tom rolled off of him.

They lay side-by-side on the bed, Harry sulking, Tom quietly cracking up next to him.

"Do you know, I didn't even plan that?" Tom managed eventually, still chuckling. "I just find you —"

"What?"

"Inspiring."

Harry rubbed his own throat, torn between annoyance and reluctant satisfaction. He could feel raised
skin under his fingers. A neat line of bites, all the way up, almost to his chin. "How am I going to hide this?"

He felt Tom shrug.

"Wear a scarf."

"It's August."

"I didn’t even break the skin. And anyway, it serves you right. I still have a scar from when you bit me."

Harry turned to him. His eyes had adjusted enough that he could just make out Tom's features, greyscale in the darkness. On a whim, he felt along Tom's shoulder.

Tom guided his fingers down. Harry could feel a few little dimples on the meat of his shoulder.

It was hard to stay mad at Tom in the afterglow. Ruefully, Harry supposed he should have expected the aggression—Tom had been so good all week. He needed to let out all the pent-up awfulness.

"Do you have any tissues?" Harry asked finally. The air was cooler than their bodies, drying the come on his stomach into a sticky mess.

Tom grumbled, but groped on the floor beside the bed for a box. He passed several over and took one for himself. Harry dabbed at the mess, missing Tom's magic, in that moment, almost as much as Tom did.

"We're the wrong way round."

"I can't be bothered to move," Tom said, although he did sit up a little to slide the quilt out from under him. With a bit of wriggling, they managed to pull it over themselves. It was too warm, really, to cuddle, but Tom rested his hand on Harry's stomach.

"You know Granger and Weasley are fucking?" Tom said, a few minutes later, when Harry was on the edge of sleep.

The words didn’t register for a comically long time. Then Harry turned his head to look at Tom.

"What do you mean?"

"They're fucking," Tom repeated patiently.

"Why do you think that?"

Tom stretched like a cat. "It’s obvious."

Harry was fed up with his antics. "Indulge me then," he snapped. "Make me feel stupid."

"It's the way they look at each other. They're always sitting too close. Their eyes find each other first when they enter a room."

"They're friends."

"And her room smells like him."

Harry frowned. "What were you doing in her room?"
"That's not important."

Snooping then.

"There are lots of innocent reasons for Ron to be in Hermione's room," Harry said.

"Like what?"

"Well, like talking . . . ?"

"Without a chaperone?"

"Um, yes?"

"I don't understand this decade," Tom muttered, shaking his head. "But it didn’t just smell like him, it smelt like sex."

"How could you possibly smell that?"

Tom grabbed a tissue and held it under Harry's nose. Harry pushed him away. "Ew!"

"Exactly."

They lapsed into silence. Tom smug, Harry pensive. He remembered suddenly, Ron's absence a few mornings ago. Ron hadn’t been there on the first morning either, and hadn’t said anything about the fact that Harry was hardly ever in the room.

But if Ron and Hermione were a couple, why hadn’t they told him?
"You haven’t been sleeping here," Harry said.

Ron went still. He was on his own bed with his broomstick across his lap and a polishing rag in his right hand. Harry, who had followed him up the stairs after lunch, was standing in the doorway of their shared room.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked. He didn’t look up, but Harry could still see the flush climbing up his freckled neck. "Where else would I be sleeping?"

Harry folded his arms, waiting. Finally, Ron lifted his head.

"Er . . ."

"Are you dating Hermione?"

Ron leapt to his feet, uncaring as his beloved Cleansweep Eleven clattered to the floor. He hurried over to Harry and poked his nose out into the hallway. He looked left and right, then, satisfied that there were no eavesdroppers, closed the door firmly.

"You are, aren’t you?" Harry said to his shoulder. Tom had been right. How annoying that he had guessed it first.

"It's not like that."

"What is it like then?"

"It's not—we're not *dating*. We're just—"

Oh. Fucking. Like Harry and Tom.

"Not that I don’t want that!" Ron said quickly, misinterpreting Harry's raised eyebrow. "I do, but it just happened, and I don’t know how to bring it up with her."

Harry grinned. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," Ron said gruffly. He rubbed the back of his neck. "You aren’t angry?"

"Why would I be?"
Ron turned fully to face him and briefly met his eyes. "I was worried that you . . . maybe liked her too."

Harry laughed in surprise. "Why would you think that? I dated Cho last year, didn’t I? I even asked Hermione for advice. I wouldn’t do that if I fancied her."

"Yeah, you did," Ron muttered. He picked up his broom and stowed it under his bed. "That was pretty silly of me, huh?"

Harry understood what he was feeling. He knew Ron felt inadequate a lot, what with all his talented older brothers.

"You're mental sometimes," he said gently. "I think it's great."

Ron shot him a shy grin. He sat down on his bed and Harry did likewise.

"Did you know I liked her?"

Harry had been asking himself that too. He'd never thought about Ron and Hermione getting together, but when Tom had mentioned it, it felt natural, like a puzzle piece slotting into place.

"Maybe not consciously. But it makes sense. You kind of suit each other."

"Really?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Well, you get on, don't you?"

Ron shrugged. And actually, now that Harry thought about it, maybe they didn’t—Ron and Hermione’s friendship was largely built on mutual exasperation. But some people liked that, didn’t they? Harry bickered with Tom all the time, but both of them enjoyed it.

"Does anyone else know?" he asked.

Ron nodded. "Ginny does; she figured it out when she came to stay a few weeks ago. But other than that, no. Who would I tell? Fred and George would take the piss. Dad would tell Mum—he doesn’t look it but he's actually a terrible gossip. And Mum . . ." Ron shuddered.

"Would she mind?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Are you kidding? She's old fashioned; doesn't think any of us is old enough to date, even Bill and he's twenty-five. She thinks that because she and Dad waited until marriage, that should be good enough for us too."

"I'm sure it wouldn’t be that bad . . ."

"She's nice to you," Ron said flatly. "No offence Harry, but you're not her direct responsibility. It's different. You won't tell her, will you?"

The last words were a plea.

"I won't, don't worry."

"Good," Ron said, with pathetic relief. "That’s good. Not that I thought you would, obviously, but it's just . . . I keep thinking that it's going to get out eventually. There are so many people around."

Harry nodded, suddenly worried. Was Ron right? Could he keep his own relationship secret for the
next two weeks?

"So, er, how did you and Hermione get together?" he asked, not ready to dwell on that line of thought.

"It was July," Ron said. "Um, after . . . well, during the time we all thought you were dead. We'd been staying here with Sirius, hoping for news. One night, Hermione came up here, and she was crying, really crying—sorry," he said, noticing Harry's expression, "didn’t mean to make you feel bad—and anyway, I hugged her, like, rocking her in my arms."

He rocked on the bed to demonstrate, arms out, cuddling an imaginary Hermione.

"And then?" Harry prompted.

"And then she kissed me," Ron said, with wonder. "I couldn’t believe it. I hadn’t been thinking about that at all, even though I’d liked her for ages, ever since the Yule Ball. Remember? That blue dress? She says she liked me before too, but she won’t say when."

"Why didn’t you tell me?"

Ron gave him a guilty look. "I was going to. I thought we’d talk about it when you first got here—I kept waiting for Hermione to bring it up. Turns out she was waiting for me. Then Fred and George butted in and it kind of felt like I’d missed my chance, like it would be weird to say it."

Harry couldn’t help but smile at his mournful expression.

"It's okay."

"Really? You forgive me?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Thanks," Ron said with relief. "Really, thanks. I've been feeling shit about keeping it from you, but I could never think of what to say."

He stood up. "I should go tell Hermione. You know, just to tell her that you know. Just so we're all on the same page."

Harry nodded again. Ron grinned, then spontaneously pulled him to his feet and hugged him. Harry smiled weakly into his shoulder—there was a growing sense of unease in the pit of his stomach.

How could he accept Ron's apologies, Harry thought, as Ron left the room, while keeping something so huge from him? Didn’t that make him the worst kind of hypocrite?

And anyway, how long would it be before someone noticed? Ron's comment about this being a small house echoed in his mind. Tom had seen what was going on between Ron and Hermione after he’d been out of his room for no more than a week. Hermione was perceptive too—she couldn’t be far behind.

And . . .

Harry touched the Gryffindor scarf wrapped snugly around his neck. Tom wasn’t being careful, and he, Harry, wasn’t either. He'd been increasingly lazy about coming back to the room in the morning. Ron had probably only failed to notice because he hadn’t been there either.

What would Ron think when he realised Harry had accepted his apology while keeping such a huge secret? Wouldn’t he feel betrayed?
Harry's stomach squirmed. Yes. Yes he would.

He walked over to the window, taut with indecision. Then back to the open door. Then the window again. He stopped in the middle of the room, fighting his impulse.

No, he was going to do it.

Harry turned and hurried down the stairs before he could second-guess himself. He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans, then rapped on the door to Hermione's room.

"Hello?" a voice said. Harry opened the door to see the two of them, sat on Hermione's bed, heads close together.

"Harry?" Hermione said, surprised. "Ron was just telling me that you'd talked."

Harry closed the door behind him and looked around, noting that Hermione had done more with her room than Ron had. There were books neatly stacked on the spare bed, and a small potted plant sat on a saucer on the windowsill. The window itself was open. Harry pushed the books out of the way and sat down.

For the longest time he couldn't speak. He sat there awkwardly, trying to figure out what to say.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, shuffling forwards. She now looked concerned. "Harry?"

"I need to talk to you about something," Harry said, then stopped.

"Oh?" Hermione prompted. "What is it?"

Harry swallowed. "It's about Riddle."

"Oh," Hermione said, in a completely different voice. "What's he done now?"

"It's not so much something he's done. Well, I mean, I guess it is, but . . ."

Hermione now looked gravely concerned. "Whatever it is, you can tell us," she said, moving to sit on the bed beside him. She gazed soulfully into his eyes. "Harry, don't worry, we won't judge you."

"Really?"

"Of course not. To be honest, I've been expecting something like this ever since you got back."

"You have?" Harry asked, puzzled. He'd expected her to be much more upset than this.

Hermione nodded. "I've been reading about post-traumatic stress disorder—I even had my parents send me some books." She gestured, and to Harry's horror, there were indeed a number of hefty Muggle books stacked at the far end of the bed. Dozens of little post-it notes protruded from between their pages, marking passages that Hermione had found especially helpful. "They all say you need to talk about it in order to be able to heal. Now you've had a chance to process it, you shouldn't hold it in, not in front of us."

Harry buried his head in his hands.

"There there," Hermione said, as she rubbed a soothing circle on his back. "There there. It's okay, Harry. Just tell us. Nothing is so terrible that you can't talk about it, I promise."

Harry needed to get this over with.
"I've been having sex with Riddle," he said in one breath.

"Eh?" Ron said. "What was that mate?"

When Harry didn’t answer, he looked at Hermione. "Did you hear what he said?"

But Hermione's hand had stilled mid-circle.

On reflection, this was a terrible idea.

Harry stood, intending to flee. But before he could, Hermione yanked him back down by the sleeve. Her small hands were surprisingly strong.

"What did you just say?"

"I said I needed to go to the bathroom."

"No you didn’t!"

"Yes I did."

"You said—" Hermione swallowed. "—I heard you say something about sex."

"What?" Harry could feel a flush creeping up his face. "No, of course not."

Ron looked utterly mystified.

"Sex? Sex with who?"

"He's been having sex with Riddle," Hermione said grimly. She was shaking. "That's what you said, Harry."

Ron's jaw dropped.

"Um," Harry said, cursing himself for having not taken the time to think about how this scene might go. Had he really expected Hermione to say 'that's alright then,' and let him go? "Um, I lied when I told you about the cottage. There was actually just the one bed, and, um, we—"

"I'm going to kill him," Hermione said, searching her pockets for her wand. She found it and held it in front of herself like a sword.

Harry gaped.

"What? Why?"

"WHY?" Hermione stared at Harry, amazed. "Harry, he r—sexually assaulted you!"

"It wasn't like that," Harry said quickly. He looked at Ron and immediately wished he hadn’t: he had frozen like Dudley's computer. "I mean . . . I didn’t mind."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU DIDN’T MIND?"

"Can we forget I said anything?" Harry said plaintively. "Can I just say that I'm happy you two got together? I think it's great."

"Don't change the subject!"
Harry tried to smile. "Look, Hermione, it happened months ago. It's not a big deal."

"Months ago?" she asked suspiciously. Her eyes roved over him until they landed on his neck. "Why are you wearing a scarf?"

Harry gulped. "I told you this morning, didn't I? I miss Hogwarts."

Hermione made a grab for it. Harry gave up all pretence and wrestled with her.

"Harry!"

"What?"

"Show me!"

Harry, seized the ends and held them firmly. "No! I don't want to."

"Oh my god," Hermione said. "You have a hickey, don't you? You're still doing it."

Harry winced. Hermione turned to glare at Ron. "Say something!"

Ron seemed to come back to life. "Eh?" he said. "Oh. Oh right."

Hermione waited impatiently. Ron looked at her, then at Harry.

"So . . ." he began. "You've been sleeping with baby You-Know-Who?"

Harry was red-faced and still holding his scarf. He nodded reluctantly.

"And you're still sleeping with him?"

"Y-Yeah."

"That's great," Ron breathed.

"What?" Harry said.

"WHAT?" Hermione cried.

He turned to her, eyes wild, an expression of terrible wonder on his face. "Hermione, don't you see? Don't you understand what this means?"

Hermione and Harry shared a bewildered glance, driven briefly to the same side by Ron's sudden insanity.

"Ron, what—"

"Mum isn't going to care about us! This is so much worse!"

"RONALD WEASLEY!"

But Ron was lost in his own world. "I've been so worried," he breathed. "Can you imagine the Howlers she'd send? But now she'll probably hardly even notice."

"You are the most selfish person I have ever met!" Hermione cried, absolutely furious. "Your friend has been attacked and you're worrying about being sent a Howler?"
Ron seemed to come back to himself a little. He looked Harry up and down, as if just noticing him.

"He's fine, isn’t he? You're fine, aren’t you, Harry?"

Harry nodded.

"He is not fine! He's obviously been brainwashed! Maybe even Confunded!"

"I'm not Confunded!" Harry protested. He was growing a little annoyed with Hermione. "Why is it fine when you have sex, but not me?"

"You've only just turned sixteen!"

"Ron's only four months older; what does that make you?"

"What about Riddle then?" Hermione demanded. "How old is he?"

"He's sixteen too! Is it because he's a boy? Is that why you're so angry?"

Hermione looked genuinely shocked.

"No! How could you think that, Harry? I don’t care that he's a boy. I'm angry because you were a prisoner! You didn’t have a choice!"

"Yes I did! He couldn’t have forced me, Hermione, he wanted me to cooperate."

"Oh, so he always asked?"

Harry hesitated.

Hermione read it on his face. "I'm telling Sirius," she snapped. "No, Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore knows."

Hermione gaped at him.

"And anyway," Harry continued, deciding to tell a little white lie. "It's not a big deal—we're just doing . . . you know . . . hand stuff."

"Oh hand stuff," Ron said, nodding sagely.

Hermione glared at him. "That doesn’t make it okay! That's still sexual assault, Harry."

"No it isn't!" Harry said. He thought back to what Tom had told him, that first time he'd tried to touch Harry's cock. "No, Hermione, that's normal for boys."

"Is that so?" Hermione asked coolly. She turned to Ron. "I suppose you've been jacking off Dean all this time?"

"Um," Ron said.

Hermione turned back to Harry.

"DO YOU THINK I'M AN IDIOT?" she shouted, while Ron tried to shush her, casting worried glances towards the door. "THAT'S STILL SEX!"

"It is?" Harry asked. He'd thought it might be, but hadn’t been sure. Tom certainly didn’t seem to
count it, what with all his snide remarks about Harry being a virgin, weeks after they'd started putting their hands into each other's underwear. When had he lost his virginity then? Part of him hoped it was before Ron had lost his.

"Yes. Harry, oh my god."

"Tom said it was normal."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Hermione said, fingering the handle of her wand.

"But you can't attack him!"

"Why not? I thought everyone already knew."

"Only Dumbledore and Snape."

Ron took a sharp breath. Their eyes met, and in them Harry saw unspoken sympathy for that unspeakable horror.

Hermione paced up and down the room. "I can't believe Dumbledore is allowing this," she said to nobody in particular. "I thought he was irresponsible before, but this is just terrible."

Harry shrugged, not wanting to say Snape had banned it. Hermione would go straight to him. "Just don't mention it, okay? I don’t want Sirius to know."

Hermione breathed in deeply, nostrils flaring, then turned to Harry.

"You know how I've always supported you in everything, Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Well I don't support you in this! He's absolutely vile!"

What followed was a certain amount of shouting. Harry sat through it all glumly, as Hermione flicked through her books and read passages to him, growing steadily more frustrated at Harry's lack of response. Finally, she ran out of steam and sat down on her bed with her head in her hands.

Ron sat silently through it all, trying not to draw her ire. Harry had the feeling that he actually had been shocked when Harry had revealed his secret, but had pushed it down out of loyalty. Harry felt a sudden flood of gratitude towards him.

"You really don't mind that he's a boy?" Harry asked, when the room had been quiet for a few minutes.

"Nah," Ron said, utterly unbothered. "Happens, doesn’t it?"

"It does?" Harry asked. Even Hermione looked up from her hands.

"Yeah . . . though maybe it's more common with wizards than Muggles. There's not so many of us, see? We don't have so much choice, particularly if you're being fussy about . . ." he coughed, and Harry knew he was avoiding the words 'blood status'. "Anyway, no one says anything if two witches or two wizards decide to shack up together."

"Oh."

"I did think you liked girls though," Ron said thoughtfully.
"I do. Or, I think I do."

"You might be bisexual," Hermione said.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"Someone who likes both men and women. It's common." She frowned. "Or, perhaps not common, but at least a small fraction of the population. Some scientists even think that most people are bisexual, just to different extents."

Harry was stunned by this new information. There was a name for it? There were other people like him?

"Really?" Harry asked, stunned by this new information. There was a name for it? There were other people like him? "I was worried I might be gay."

"There's nothing wrong with being gay!"

Harry shrugged. No one ever seemed to say anything nice about it, at least not around him. Uncle Vernon had always been particularly scathing when it was mentioned on the news. Even Tom insisted that he wasn’t gay, and Tom was shameless.

"I'll get you some leaflets," Hermione decided. "My parents gave me a load when I turned sixteen, just in case. You should read about it."

Harry nodded and got to his feet. Hermione seemed suddenly to recall her anger.

"No, wait, Harry—"

But Harry was already gone.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

He found Tom downstairs, chopping vegetables for dinner. It was part of his campaign of normality, Harry knew. Hearts and minds.

"What are you making?"

"I'm not sure yet, do you have any suggestions?"

Harry looked through the shelves. He found an unopened box of spaghetti in the back of one of the cabinets and a packet of minced beef under a Cooling Charm in the pantry.

"How about spaghetti bolognaise?" he asked. Tom shrugged his assent, and Harry readied a pan over the stove.

They worked in silence for a few minutes, Harry cooking mince, Tom chopping onions. It was nice. Harry liked frying things—it was exciting and made an interesting sound. He added several cloves of garlic and battèd them around the pan with his spatula.

"This is very exotic," Tom commented.

"It's Italian food, how is that exotic?"

"Well, it's not British, is it?" Tom leant over and tipped his onions into the frying pan. They were a particularly strong batch; Harry had to wipe his eyes with his sleeve. By contrast, Tom seemed..."
unaffected. Did he not have tear ducts?

"Did you really not have pasta in the forties?"

"In restaurants, maybe. I wouldn’t know."

There was a noise on the stairs. Harry looked around to see Hermione, two of her books under her arm. She saw them and froze, a frosty expression appearing on her face.

"Did you tell her?" Tom whispered, with delighted amazement.

Harry nodded.

"Oh," Tom said. He wiped his hand on a tea-towel, smiled at Hermione and then put it on Harry's bum. Hermione's nostrils flared, then she turned on her heel and rushed back up the stairs.

Harry grabbed Tom's wrist, annoyed.

"I said no winding Hermione up! You promised!"

"Oh right," Tom said, as if just remembering.

Harry frowned and turned back to the pan before anything could burn. "You really don't have a good understanding of consequences, do you? Between that and what you did to my neck . . . what if Snape finds out? Are you happy to be locked up in your room again? Don't think I'll argue; you deserve it."

Tom flicked the end of Harry's scarf. "Fix your bruises with magic."

"You know I can't."

"I know you can. You're being a coward, Harry."

"Are you goading me?" Harry asked. "Hang on . . . was all this about trying to get me to use magic? Is that why you bit me?"

Tom shrugged.

"Why?" Harry asked, baffled. "What's the point? It doesn’t help you if I'm arrested."

"You aren’t going to be arrested," Tom scoffed. "I already explained that there's no way the Ministry could detect it here. And yes. If I can't use my wand, you had better be using yours. We're helpless otherwise."

"We, is it?"

Tom shrugged and began slicing carrots. Harry stood there, watching him. He almost wished he hadn’t said no kissing; otherwise he could use the bond to find out what Tom was feeling. He had been more and more possessive lately. It had started with the incident at the stream—that's when all of Tom's little comments about “keeping him” had begun—but it had exploded after Harry had refused to break the bond. There was a new, dark undercurrent to all their interactions, as if Tom had turned this into a permanent arrangement in his head and neglected to tell him.

To his surprise, Harry didn’t hate it. No one had ever been possessive of him before, that he could remember. There was something oddly flattering about it, which was dumb, because it was likely to become extremely inconvenient.
"I'm not your minion," he said carefully.

Tom flashed him a dazzling smile. "Of course not."

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That evening, Harry was up in his room with Ron again. It was dark outside, and between them lay the unspoken understanding that neither of them would be sleeping there that night. Ron paced while Harry reclined against his headboard, ostensibly reading, but in truth just waiting for the rest of the house to fall asleep so he could slip out.

"Thanks," Harry said quietly.

"For what?"

"For not . . . for just accepting it. I know it's a lot to take in."

Ron gave him a crooked grin and stretched his arms over his head.

"I wasn’t lying—I am glad that Mum will have someone else to shout at. And it's a bit of a relief anyway, to be honest, because I was worried you'd feel like a third wheel around me and Hermione. I guess that's not a problem now."

"I guess not."

"And it's good not to have to keep sneaking up here at a miserable hour of the morning. When did you notice? I was a bit lazy recently."

"I didn’t—Tom noticed."

Ron blanched. "Oh god."

"He's going to be so smug when I go down there," Harry said glumly. "He's always smug when he's right about something."

"Hermione's going to rant about you," Ron said, in the exact same tone. They shared a moment of silent camaraderie.

"Still, must be nice to date someone who's actually your friend. Someone who's not constantly looking for an advantage."

Ron shrugged. "I don’t know. Maybe it would be easier if we weren't friends. It's so awkward sometimes."

"Really?"

"We argue a lot. She's always getting offended about stuff and I never know what I did wrong. And it's no better when she explains it either, because I'm dumb and don't get it. And then, when we're in bed—"

Ron paused and glanced at Harry, as if suddenly doubting that he should share. But Harry put his book to one side and sat up further in the bed, interested. It wasn’t sexy to imagine his friends in bed together, but he was desperately curious, he realised, to know what Ron thought of sex. He'd not had a chance to speak to anyone about it before.

Ron must have had the same thought. They eyed each other for a few moments.
"You first," Ron said.

"No, you."

Ron grimaced. "You won't tell Hermione I said anything? She can't know."

"I promise."

Ron sat down on his bed. "She's a bit of a backseat driver," he confessed. "Is that the Muggle phrase? Seems like whenever I do something, it's wrong. But when I say, 'so you be in charge then, if that's what you want', she gets all embarrassed."

"Oh," Harry said. He could see that happening. "Like when she set up the D.A. and then forced me to lead it?"

"Exactly like that!" Ron said, with delight. Then he flushed, and looked furtively from side to side, even though there was no one else in the room. "And . . . er . . . she keeps making me wear something on my . . . you-know-what."

"You mean your dick?"

Ron frowned at his tone. "Don’t make fun of me—it's weird saying this stuff out loud."

"You've said dick before," Harry said. He was starting to enjoy himself; there was something thrilling about talking to someone who was more flustered that he was. Was this how Tom felt?

"Yes, when I'm talking about your personality! This is different."

"So what's she making you wear on it then? Has she knitted you a little bobble hat?"

"No," Ron said shortly. "No, it's some Muggle thing. It comes in a shiny wrapper and she rolls it on—won't let me touch it, says I'll do it wrong. I don't want to tell her that I don’t know what it is."

"That's a condom," Harry said wisely. He'd seen them discarded in the park. "It's so she doesn’t get pregnant."

Ron's face drained of all colour.

"Is that the first time you've thought of that?" Harry asked, unimpressed. "She's a girl, idiot."

Ron took a great gulp of air, then another. He looked like he was going to be sick.

"Hey, calm down. You wore it, didn’t you? You're fine."

"Don't scare me like that!" Ron said, hand on heart. "Mum would actually kill me."

"I still don't believe you about that. Your mum is so nice."

"Fred caught hell from her when she found out he was fucking the girl from the corner shop in the village. Me and Ginny heard her shouting."

Harry shook his head.

"Speaking of," Ron continued, with a voice that was almost normal, "do you remember what he and George told us at the Quidditch World Cup? It was all rubbish, turns out girls don't like that at all."
Harry thought back. There had been a lot of advice, and Fred and George had kept pausing to laugh hysterically and fall off their camping chairs. "Which bit?"

"You know, about suckling on their belly buttons?"

"That one was obviously a joke. Why would you think it was a good idea?"

"Hey!" Ron complained. "I'm not the one having to wear a scarf in the middle of summer. I can't believe you have a hickey."

It was Harry's turn to flush.

"He wasn’t supposed to do that," he said, straightening his scarf self-consciously. Ron's eyes were drawn to the movement.

"Can I see?" Ron asked.

Harry bit his lip and slowly unwound the scarf. The bruises weren't so bad—he'd looked at them in the bathroom mirror that morning—a neat trail of red marks marching up his pulse point.

Ron whistled quietly.

"What did it feel like?" he asked as Harry rewound the scarf.

"Ask Hermione to give you one, if you're so curious."

Ron looked startled. "I can't just ask for things!"

"Why not?"

"Well, do you?"

"Uh," Harry said. The honest answer was, not really. Harry tried to imagine it, asking Tom for something in particular that he wanted. Waking Tom up in the morning and asking for a hand on his dick, like Tom was always doing to him.

"He just . . . does stuff. If I don’t like it, I hit him. That seems to be working."

"Wow," Ron said, without judgement. "I almost wish Hermione was like that. Except, you know. Not homicidal."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Harry kicked him on the shin, not hard. Ron laughed, then waggled his eyebrows at him.

"When you said it was all hands . . ." he said.

"What are you asking?"

"I won't tell Hermione, I promise. But do you and . . . you know . . ."

"You-Know-Who?"

"No! I mean, you and Riddle, have you . . ."
Harry grinned. "Have we what?"

"Damn it Harry, you know what I'm asking! You never used to be such a troll; Riddle's rubbing off on you."

"He does that sometimes."

Ron groaned. "No, I mean—"

"You mean, have I let You-Know-Who put his you-know-what in my you-know-where?" Harry finished dryly.

Ron made an anguished sound and rocked forwards on the bed. "I don't want to know—"

"Oh, I thought you did . . ."

"Not if you're going to laugh at me."

Harry did. Ron scowled, but waited until Harry stilled, fingers twisting the edge of the quilt.

"Um, no," he said finally. "We haven’t . . . fucked."

After all, it was only one time.

Ron looked both relieved and disappointed. His expression gave Harry the sudden powerful urge to show off.

"Okay," he said, shuffling forwards on the bed. "Don't tell Hermione this, but I kind of . . . sucked him off once. And he did the same for me."

"Oh my god." Ron stood and paced back and forth across the length of the room. Then he whirled to face Harry. "Was it good?"

Harry's smile said it all.

"Wow," Ron said, so impressed that it brought warmth to Harry's chest. "That's . . . wow."

"So Hermione hasn’t . . . ?"

Ron shook his head. "I wouldn’t dare. I have no idea why she's willing to be with me anyway. She's incredible. Everything about her is incredible." A dreamy look came over his face. "She's got tiny fucking feet, did you ever notice?"

"Er . . ."

"And the way she tucks her quill behind her ear? And the ink that's always on her fingers? She even smells good when she wakes up, which I didn’t think was possible. And I love her laugh, it's just so . . . ahhh . . ."

Ron trailed off, staring out of the dark window as if looking at her face. Harry shook his head. Poor Ron.

The clock struck eleven outside. Ron stood up.

"I'll go down first," he said, shoving a pillow under his quilt to imitate a human form. "How about you wait ten minutes?"
Harry nodded, and Ron left quietly. His socked footsteps were just audible as he crept down the stairs.

Harry sat there on the bed, waiting. His eyes were drawn to his own wand, sat innocently on his bedside table.

Would it matter if he fixed his bruise? The idea of using magic was immensely tempting; Harry had been casting spells all summer without a break, and it was almost painful to go without. He wanted the feel of his wand in his fingers, the power racing through him, eager to leap out into the world. Healing too, was something he was quietly proud of. He was probably even better at it than Hermione by this point, which was both rare and wonderful.

Harry looked at the closed door, then picked it up. He swallowed, unwrapped his scarf for the second time that evening and pressed the wand to his own neck.

"Episkey."
Chapter Notes

This one turned out to be much longer than usual 😊. As ever, thank you to RedHorse, Mith and Miraculous for beta reading.

"Anything?" Harry asked.

"No."

Harry glared at Tom, but the other boy didn’t look up from his book. He was sitting up in bed with his back towards the headboard. Harry lay half-sprawled across him with his head towards the foot, trying to penetrate his mind through the bond. They’d been at it for over an hour, and Tom was becoming increasingly unhelpful.

"This was your idea," Harry pointed out. "You're the one who needs a partner to practice Occlumency with."

"And you're the one who doesn’t want Voldemort spying on us. I don't care either way."

Harry couldn’t be bothered to challenge the lie. He dropped his head back to the mattress and closed his eyes. He’d show Tom. He’d give him the headache of his life.

He pictured the bond in his mind, and tried to push all of his annoyance down it in one great tide. It had almost worked once, hadn’t it? That time in bed, while Tom was still locked up?

This time, Tom didn’t even twitch.

"It's not working," Harry said. Tom didn't respond, so Harry prodded him with his foot. "I'm done. I'm going to stop."

Tom sighed. He folded down the corner of his page, laid the book on the nightstand, and crawled on top of Harry. Harry grunted at the weight.

"We should kiss," Tom said matter-of-factly. "We know that works. Kiss me, and I'll try to stop you feeling my emotions through the bond."

"No," Harry shifted uncomfortably on the bed. It was hard to breathe with Tom on top of him, and worse, his cock was beginning to take an interest.

"Why not? I know you miss it."

Harry didn’t say anything. Tom lay there for a few moments, then lent down and licked a broad stripe up Harry’s cheek.

"EW!"

Tom laughed as he rolled onto his back next to Harry, one leg still thrown over his.
"You bastard," Harry growled, swiping at his face with his sleeve. Yuck.

"My parents were married." Tom brushed Harry's fringe away from his scar. "Voldemort can get into my head through the bond. Why can't you?"

"You try it then, if it's so easy."

Tom said nothing. Harry knew he had tried, and that he couldn't do it either.

He closed his eyes again, concentrating on the feel of Tom next to him, the rise and fall of his breath, the warmth of his skin. Tom was frustrated, right? Frustrated and amused, gleeful at mocking Harry. Harry tried to sense those emotions, find a path to them in his head.

Nothing.

"What are you thinking about?" Tom asked.

"Would you shut up? I'm trying to use the bond again."

"I've been feeling something."

Harry opened his eyes. "Through the bond? Why didn't you say so?"

"No—it's not that. I keep feeling a breeze."

"Wear a jumper."

"I'm not cold. I think there's a Horcrux in this house."

Harry rolled onto his side to look at him. "No kidding."

"I don't mean me! I think there's another one."

His face was perfectly serious. Harry frowned. "You think you'll randomly run into one? I think your Horcrux sense is broken."

"You don't take me seriously enough," Tom grumbled. "Remember when you used to fear me? I liked that."

"Did I ever fear you?" Harry wondered.

"Anyway, I knew you were one, didn't I? And I found the ring."

"It was a tiny little shack. You'd have found it anyway."

"It's a Horcrux," Tom said stubbornly. "I know what I'm sensing."

Harry sighed. It seemed that Tom wasn't going to be dissuaded. "Have you looked for it?"

"Of course I have! But I can't pin down where the feeling is coming from. It isn't consistent—I sense it and then it disappears a moment later. And the house is so busy that I can't search properly; if I'm caught with it, Dumbledore will destroy it straight away."

"Oh?" Harry studied his face, curious. "And what would you do with it? What's your grand plan now?"

This was something he'd been wondering about for a while. Tom wasn't the type to stop plotting,
even when he had no power at all.

Tom looked at him sceptically.

"You've already told me this much," Harry said cajolingly. "You might as well tell me the rest. You need me to help you search, right?"

"I'd reabsorb it like I did the ring," Tom admitted. "That's the only way I can keep it safe, and the more of my soul I have, the more bargaining power I have with Voldemort."

"Very comforting."

"It should be." Tom smiled at him. "Maybe I'll bargain for your life."

Harry laughed. "Voldemort hates me much more than he wants you."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Well, I did slightly kill him. And I stopped him getting the Philosopher's Stone and embarrassed him in front of all his mates when he was resurrected. And—" Harry swallowed, "—there's the prophecy too."

Tom sat up. Harry sat up too.

"We haven't talked about the prophecy."

Harry almost wished he hadn't said anything. "Bit awkward, isn't it?" he said, avoiding Tom's curious eyes. "Since we're destined to murder each other."

"Is that what you got from it?"

Harry looked at him. Tom looked honestly surprised.

"I dunno."

"Do you remember how it went?"

"Most of it. I couldn't repeat it word for word, but I got the gist."

Tom's eyes flicked to the ceiling, trying to remember.

"'The one who will vanquish the Dark Lord approaches,'" he began. "'Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies'—they must be sure that's you; your name was on the sticker. 'And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. Either must die at the hands of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.'"

Harry nodded, remembering that dark, underground room, Professor Trelawney rising out of a glass globe like a tiny ghost. "I don't know what power I have, but the last bit is pretty clear, isn't it?"

"Do you think so?" Tom asked curiously. "I thought it was very unclear."

"How?"

"Well, 'neither can live while the other survives'" Tom gestured at the two of them. "What are we doing right now?"
"Oh." Harry frowned. "Maybe we aren't really . . . living? Like, because we're stressed or something?"

Tom looked unimpressed. Honestly, Harry felt the same way. A little thrill of hope ran through him.

"That label on the shelf . . . A.P.W.B.D must be Dumbledore. Prophecies are taken from the memories of their witnesses, which means they're subjective. They can be misheard."

"I don't think Professor Dumbledore would mishear something so important."

Tom sighed. "How old is he now? He was middle-aged when I was at school, and drunk half the time too. He must be almost two-hundred now."

"I don't think he's that old—and what do you mean, drunk?"

"Oh, he was famous for it. Always down at his goat-fucking brother's pub."

"You're making that up—and anyway, I don't think he misheard it. Maybe you did—"

"No, I'm sure it was that."

"—and anyway, what does it matter if one bit is wrong?"

"Are you joking? One wrong bit throws the whole prophecy into question!"

Harry shrugged.

"But anyway, that doesn’t matter at the moment," Tom continued, perhaps realising that Harry needed more time to think about it. "We need to start looking for the Horcrux."

"How could there even be one here?"

"This house belonged to the Blacks, right? I already told you I was friends with some of them; I bet they became my followers when I rose to power. Perhaps I gave a Horcrux to them for safekeeping, like I gave my diary to Abraxas."

Tom looked perfectly earnest. Harry tried to puzzle it all out in his head.

If there was a Horcrux in Grimmauld Place, and the Order found it, Tom was probably right that it would be destroyed. The idea gave him a strange, squirmy feeling—it wasn’t pleasant to think of a piece of Tom's soul being gone forever. But if Tom found it and absorbed it . . . was that really a good thing? There would be one less Horcrux tying Voldemort to life. And once there were too few . . . Tom would be in danger from the Order again . . .

"Don't think so hard," Tom said, laying a hand on Harry's forehead as if to check his temperature. "Look, you're already getting warm."

Harry scowled. "Do you like me hitting you?"

Tom laughed. Unlike Harry, he was in a pleased, easy mood. He retrieved his book and lay with his head in Harry's lap, one arm wrapped around his thigh.

"What are you waiting for?" he said, turning back to his page. "You promised to keep trying with the bond for an hour. It's not even been half of one yet."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~
Professor McGonagall arrived that afternoon. She had a bulging carpet bag with her, and once she'd gathered the four teenagers in the kitchen, she placed it down on the table with a loud 'clunk' and began rooting around for something in its depths.

Harry didn’t like the look on Hermione's face. He caught her eye and tried to communicate wordlessly that he would never speak to her again if she tattled on him.

"Just a moment," Professor McGonagall said. "I have so many bits of paper in here. Oh, here we are —"

She withdrew a small stack of envelopes. At the sight of them, Hermione let out a gasp of delight.

Professor McGonagall gave Hermione a rare, thin-lipped smile, then handed out envelopes to the four of them.

Harry marvelled at the thick parchment in his hands, transported back to that cold night five years ago, when a half-giant had battered down the door and given him a letter and a crushed chocolate cake. He turned the envelope over, admiring the red wax seal stamped with the Hogwarts crest, the address written on the front in emerald green ink—

Mr H. Potter

The Ground-Floor Bedroom

12 Grimmauld Place

London

Harry's stomach dropped. He glanced furtively around, but, to his relief, no one seemed to have noticed. Hermione and Ron were busy opening their letters, and the front of Tom's envelope, thankfully, was blank. Professor McGonagall must not have spent enough time at Grimmauld Place to know which room he was supposed to be sleeping in.

Harry ripped open the envelope and shoved it into his pocket. The letter inside was made up of two sheets of parchment. The first contained the usual reminder that term started on September 1st, followed by several long paragraphs. Harry turned to the next, which appeared to be the yearly booklist. As expected, The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6, was at the top of the list, followed by Confronting the Faceless, which Harry assumed was the book for Defence. But the third item was The Concordance of the Heavens, followed by several books on obscure nineteenth-century wizarding politics. Harry turned the sheet over. Every subject he had been taking an O.W.L. in was represented.

"I don't understand," Hermione said, looking up from her own booklist. "I was going to drop Muggle Studies . . ."

"I am aware," Professor McGonagall said. "It's all explained on the first page of your letters, but since I'm here, I'll summarise. As you will recall, you were unable to take your O.W.L. examinations last term because of—" she looked pointedly at Tom "—unforeseen circumstances. All current sixth years will retake their exams in December, and in the meantime, you should pick subjects you believe you will achieve the entry grade for. If your results are worse than expected, I will discuss your options with you in January."

Hermione nodded eagerly, excited by the prospect of more exams. Ron looked moodily down at his parchment.
Harry did the same, mind racing. He wanted to take Defence against the Dark Arts, of course, and Charms and Transfiguration and Herbology.

But what about Potions?

Harry crinkled the corner of his booklist, conflicted. He needed Potions if he wanted to be an Auror, but there was no way he could get the Outstanding O.W.L. that Snape required. And even if he did, was it worth it? Did he really want to suffer through two more years with Snape?

Could he even still become an Auror?

Harry glanced at Tom. He didn’t know how long they were going to be stuck together. What if the war dragged on so long that they graduated Hogwarts together? There was no way that Dumbledore would just let Tom go free, and even if he did, Tom would have plans of his own. He might not be willing to tag along with Harry to Auror training . . .

"Take Potions, Potter," Professor McGonagall said brusquely. "You won't have trouble with the entry requirements."

"But Snape wants an O!"

"Professor Snape. And I can't say more now, but there are going to be some changes to the class this year. I think you'll find it a more—" she paused, eyes twinkling "—congenial environment."

"Did S—Professor Snape get fired?" Ron asked eagerly. Professor McGonagall gave him a look that caused him to wither in his chair.

Hermione didn’t seem to have noticed their conversation. She was chewing on the feather of her quill, lost in her own world. "Arithmancy, of course," she muttered, "and Runes, but should I take Care of Magical Creatures or Astronomy? Oh, and what about History of Magic?"

"No need to decide now—just make sure you arrive at the school with the correct materials for your chosen classes. Now," she said, more sternly, as she turned to Tom and produced a small parcel from her carpet bag, "your new identity."

Tom took it. Harry watched as he untied the string and unwrapped the paper with nimble fingers, then placed the contents of the parcel on the table.

It was a curious collection. On the top of the pile was an aged piece of parchment, and beneath, two small books. The first was a Czech phrasebook and the second a Muggle tourist's guide to Prague.

"You cannot attend Hogwarts under the name 'Tom Riddle' for obvious reasons. Therefore, Professor Dumbledore has kindly arranged a new birth certificate for you. From now on, you are Tomáš Novák of Prague, the Czech Republic. You were born on September 1st, which happily absolves us of the need to find a legal guardian for you, since you'll be of age when you start school." Her lips thinned. "Professor Dumbledore trusts that you will come up with a suitable lie to explain your sudden presence in the school year, your inability to leave Harry's side and your obvious similarities to the Tom Riddle who graduated in 1945."

"He's really going back?" Hermione asked. "Is that safe?"

Professor McGonagall looked doubtfully at Tom, who was already paging through the tourist guide. He hadn’t thanked her.

"It was not my decision," she said. Then she sighed and turned to address Ron as well. "I trust the
two of you are happy to continue in your roles as Prefects?"

They both nodded. Professor McGonagall then looked at Harry. She reached into the pocket of her tartan robes and withdrew a small, shiny object. With a surge of elation, Harry realised it was the Quidditch Captain’s badge.

He took it eagerly when she offered it, turning it to admire the red and gold shield, crossed broomsticks and ornate "C". His father had worn a badge like this—maybe the very same one. He looked up with a grin.

Professor McGonagall wasn’t smiling. A moment later, Harry realised why.

Seekers had to be light and agile, able to dive or climb or roll on a moment’s notice. Even if Tom could coax Tom onto the back of his Firebolt, there was no way he would be able to play effectively. If he took the badge, Gryffindor would lose the Cup. With a heavy heart, he handed the badge back.

"Maybe next year," he said. "If that's alright."

"I thought that might be your decision, Potter," she said. "I wanted to offer it to you anyway, though, because if anyone deserves it, it's you. I'll see if Katie will take it instead."

Harry nodded. Professor McGonagall gave him a sad, rather knowing smile, then raised her voice.

"Now, if you four don't have any more questions, I need to be off."

They all nodded. When she left, Hermione and Ron looked at Harry sympathetically, but to his relief, didn’t comment. Tom didn’t either, not even to thank him (which was a pity, because Harry would have liked a little gratitude at that moment). Instead, he just gave him an inscrutable stare.

Annoyed, Harry snatched his new birth certificate. "Tomáš Novák," he read aloud, trying to copy McGonagall's pronunciation. "Are you going to shorten it to Tom?"

"Of course," Tom sniffed. "And I don't see why Dumbledore had to give me a foreign name with so many silly letters. I've never even been to Czechoslovakia."

"It's the Czech Republic," Hermione said, without looking. "It split from Slovakia a few years ago. And you shouldn't complain—presumably it's so you have an identity that British wizards can't easily check."

Tom sniffed again.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The rest of the day was occupied with intermittent negotiations about which subjects to take. Tom, naturally, wanted to take everything.

"You said prophecies were unreliable," Harry said, when Tom advanced the merits of Divination.

"That prophecy was rubbish. Reading from the stars, however, sounds interesting. Isn't that how Centaurs do it?"

"The teacher is a Centaur," said Harry, who could tell from the textbook that Firenze was still on the staff.

"Oh," Tom said, much less enthusiastically.
"Do you really believe in all that half-breed crap your followers peddle? I told Hermione you didn’t."

"Why did you do that?"

"And anyway," Harry said, moving on, "I'm not being dragged around to a bunch of extra classes. I'll sit in on one extra N.E.W.T., but it can't be History of Magic—that was bad enough at O.W.L."

"I wouldn’t take History of Magic anyway," Tom muttered, "not if Binns is still teaching. How about Arithmancy, Runes and Astronomy?"

"Can you not count?"

Tom scowled.

Harry sighed. Runes and Arithmancy were Tom's favourite subjects, aside from Defence. He wasn’t going to be able to talk him out of it. At least Hermione would be there too—he'd be able to sit next to her instead.

"Runes and Arithmancy then," he conceded. "I'm not doing Astronomy—I had enough of midnight classes."

Tom looked pleased, and Harry realised, with an internal sigh, that this was the outcome he had wanted all along.

Mrs Weasley was at breakfast the next morning.

"I see you all have your letters," she said, nodding at Hermione, who had taken to carrying hers everywhere she went. "I thought you might; Ginny's came through the post yesterday."

"When are we going to Diagon Alley for our books?" Ron asked, filching another slice of toast from the plate in the middle. Mrs Weasley smacked him on the hand with her wooden spoon.

"Leave some for the others! And I'll take you and Hermione today, if you like. We can pick up Tom and Harry's books and robes and things while we're there, but oh—"

"Can you take the gold from my vault?" Harry said quickly. "I'll go fetch my key after breakfast; I think it's in the bottom of my trunk. And—" he glanced at Tom, feeling suddenly rather shy "—can you use it to pay for Tom's things too?"

Tom gave him an appreciative look. Harry flushed. Normally, people were offended when he offered them money.

"Very good then," Mrs Weasley said, serving Tom a second helping of eggs.

When they were done eating, she took their measurements and cut their hair, one by one on a stool in the middle of the kitchen. Hermione was the only one to decline.

"I always go to my parents' hairdresser," she said quickly. "I have an appointment for next week."

"Don't worry Mrs Weasley, I trust you," Tom said, hopping up onto the stool with a towel around his shoulders. "Can I have it short at the back?"

"Of course you can, Tom," Mrs Weasley said, her frown turning into a smile. Other than Harry and Dumbledore, she was the only person who called Tom by his first name. They'd struck up something
of a friendship over the last two weeks, built largely, Harry suspected, on Tom's pretty face and Tom's good manners. She snapped the scissors once, then got to work.

Harry tried not to look too forlorn as Tom's dark curls fell to the floor. They were down to his collar, so he wasn't surprised he wanted a cut, but still . . . it had been nice to pull.

While he waited, a floating tape measure spun around him, measuring his height, the length of his arms and the width of his shoulders, and more esoteric things too, such as the distance between his nostrils and the exact circumference of his head. Harry stood still and resisted the urge to flinch away. Next to him, Ron endured the same.

"All done," Mrs Weasley announced. Harry took Tom's place on the stool and let her struggle with his wild hair. She was quick and efficient about it though, and in no time at all, she was conjuring a mirror to show him the back. Harry thanked her—although, to be honest, he hardly cared how it was cut. His hair was so messy that it stuck up no matter what was done with it.

"You'll be needing new robes," Mrs Weasley said, consulting the floating clipboard that had apparently been recording all their measurements. "When did you get your last set?"

Harry tried to remember. "I think it was the year before last."

"Yes, definitely then—you were much shorter in fourth year." She looked him up and down with a critical eye. "And what's your shoe size?"

"Eight."

Some half an hour later, the three of them—Mrs Weasley, Hermione and Ron—departed through the Floo. They returned in the early afternoon, weighed down with bags and bags of shopping, which they unpacked in the drawing room.

"These are nice," Tom remarked, holding his new dress robes up to his chest. Mrs Weasley had chosen well; they were black with glittering jet buttons, cut to suit his long, lean frame. Harry could already tell that they would look absolutely devastating on him.

Harry pulled his new school robes over his head to check the fit. The hood was lined in red. Tom set his dress robes aside and pulled out his own. Unlike Harry's, they were black and grey, even his tie.

"We had to get generic ones for you, since we don't know your House," Mrs Weasley said. She was hovering around, trying to get Ron to try on his new hat. "Well, no, I suppose we do," she corrected, perhaps remembering that Tom had daubed chicken blood on the walls and declared himself the Heir of Slytherin. "But you can hardly sleep down in the dungeons while Harry is in Gryffindor tower. Hopefully Dumbledore will sort something out."

Tom shrugged, supremely unconcerned. He laid his robes out on the sofa next to Harry, and dug through his things, stacking the books on one end, next to his copper cauldron. There were new shoes too, bought to replace his old ones, which were badly scuffed from running around the garden with Harry.

"This is the first time I've had new things for school," Tom confided in him, pleased.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Days passed, and soon enough, Ron and Hermione were saying goodbye before heading to their respective homes for the last week of the summer holidays.
"My parents want to see me," Hermione said. Her hair was tied back by a pink band, and she was holding onto the handle of a glossy wheeled suitcase. "I think they're feeling a bit abandoned. We're spending three days in Tuscany, then going down the coast to Rome. Oh, I'm so excited—apparently there's a wizarding district there too, a really ancient one, with an entrance off the Piazza della Minerva. I can't wait to see it!"

The house felt very quiet after they left. There was less reason for Mr and Mrs Weasley to visit, and Sirius was preoccupied with preparing for his trial. Lupin seemed only to be in the house at night; Harry and Tom often heard him coming through the front door after midnight. They were left mostly to their own devices, which meant, largely, having sex and searching for Tom's imaginary Horcrux.

Harry was beginning to wonder if it was all a pretext for Tom to pilfer things from around the house. Objects had begun accumulating under their bed; several books, a silver letter opener, a tiny crystal hourglass. They found a Pensieve memory when they were searching the bin bags in the drawing room, a wisp of silver trapped in a glass vial. After some debate, and much mutual curiosity, they poured it out into a bowl borrowed from the kitchen. For a moment, nothing happened. Then Tom shook the bowl and two little figures—two women, rose up from the surface and engaged in something scandalous.

Tom tried to make it play again, but the liquid sat inert in the bowl. It had turned a dull grey.

"I suppose this is why people use a Pensieve," he said, disappointed.

They checked the kitchen on the third day. After they had tried all of the cabinets and little cupboards in the kitchen proper, Tom pulled him into the pantry, leaving the door cracked open.

"What is it with you and dark spaces?" Harry grumbled, when it became apparent that Tom was more interested in putting his hands under his clothes than searching for the Horcrux.

"You were game enough this morning," Tom said. He pressed Harry against the spice rack, forcefully enough to make the little dusty bottles rattle in their frames.

Harry grabbed his arms. He was trying to be more assertive with Tom, but it was hard.

Very hard.

Tom laughed and nipped at the shell of Harry's ear while his nimble fingers worked on the button of his jeans.

However, just as Harry was on the edge of giving in and allowing Tom to jerk him off, a whooshing sound came from the kitchen proper.

It was the Floo.

Tom reacted quickly. Without pausing to look, he withdrew his hands from Harry's underpants, leant back and closed the wooden door of the pantry. The small space was plunged into total darkness; the only light came from the keyhole and the gaps where the door met the frame.

The intruder didn't seem to notice. Harry heard footsteps, then a rattle as the kettle was moved off the stove.

"Did you see who it was?" he whispered.

Tom didn't answer, which Harry took for a no. He didn't recognise the person's stride, but he thought it was a man, or possibly Tonks, wearing the solid, blocky build she adopted for Ministry
business. He did up his fly, then stood very still, hoping the person would leave again.

They didn’t. Instead, Harry and Tom heard the scrape of a chair being pulled out.

Harry cursed silently, wishing he’d thought to bring his Invisibility Cloak. He didn’t much fancy being discovered in a dark cupboard with Tom.

A few minutes later, the stairs creaked. The person at the table hadn’t moved; it was someone else, coming down.

"Oh, Severus, you're here. We weren't expecting you for another half an hour."

"Lupin," replied the intruder in a horribly familiar drawl. "Still squatting, are we?"

Harry closed his eyes. Of course it was Snape.

"I'll go fetch Sirius," Lupin said. "I see you've made yourself at home."

This prompted no response from Snape. Harry and Tom heard the thump-thump-thump of Lupin climbing the stairs again, and then his return a few minutes later, followed by Sirius.

"The meeting isn't until eleven, Snivellus."

"Indeed not, Black. So kind of you to come and keep me company while I wait. I imagine you're quite busy now that babysitting has been added to the lofty responsibilities of dusting your house and talking to your late mother's portrait."

Another chair was dragged across the floor.

"How are your charges, by the way?" Snape continued. "I do hope you're keeping a very close eye on them."

"None of your business."

"Really? I would say it is very much my business. Have they been behaving themselves? No... inappropriate behaviour?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Nothing, I'm sure."

Lupin sighed. "How are you, Severus?" he asked, in a conciliatory tone. "You look tired."

"Thank you for your concern, Lupin," Snape replied icily.

Sirius made a noise, but before he could speak, the fireplace whooshed again.

"Hello, hello," called a high, cheerful voice. "Good morning all!"

"Morning, Dedalus," Lupin said.

"Oh, Remus! It's jolly good to see you out of Saint Mungo’s. How well you look! I do like your hat."

"Thank you," Lupin said gravely. "Let me pour you a cup of tea."

"Don't mind if I do! I've had a busy morning already, you know—I popped over to Suffolk to look at
that troll they've found under the bridge. I feel a bit sorry for the poor bugger; the Ministry'll send him straight to the reserve in Scotland, when they can be bothered to go out and get him—"

"Are we all here then?" Snape demanded. "Let's start the meeting early."

"We're still waiting on Minerva," Lupin said. "She said she'll be over when she gets a chance. I expect she's still out delivering letters—there are a lot more Muggleborns this year than last."

Snape made a derisory noise.

"You have a problem with that, Snivellus?" Sirius demanded. "I think you might be spending a little too much time with your friends on the other side."

"Oh?" said Snape, with a voice like the point of a stiletto. "And do you think it is a good idea to be bringing new, innocent eleven-year-olds into the wizarding world in the middle of a war? A war that threatens their very existence? I've told Dumbledore many times that it would be better to delay for a year or so."

"That is a point," Diggle said after a moment, sounding much more downcast. "But I suppose Albus has a plan. They can always be evacuated with the other students if it comes to that."

A third whoosh. Now Harry was listening for it, he could hear the sparks crackling through the air. The next voice that spoke was Professor McGonagall's.

"Carry on, carry on," she said hurriedly. "I need to be off after."

"Fine," Sirius said, thumping the table. "Let's start then."

Harry's eyes had adjusted to the dark. He looked into Tom's equally astonished face. They were about to accidentally eavesdrop on a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix!

"Go on, Snape," said Sirius. "What's your news? You've been with Voldemort and all your Death Eater pals this week, haven't you? What are they up to?"

"I make my report to Dumbledore, not you, Black."

"You've seen Albus recently then, Severus?" Diggle asked. "He's not been around."

"Once, four days ago," Snape admitted.

Professor McGonagall sighed. "I shouldn't comment, but his sudden disappearances are beginning to grate. Albus is always doing this; leaving for weeks on end, sometimes during term time, no word on whether he's dead or alive—"

"We'd know if he was dead," Lupin said grimly. "The Hogwarts wards would have fallen. But yes, I do remember from my own time on the staff."

Snape made a noise of reluctant assent.

"I expect he's hunting down Horcruxes," Sirius said. "That's what we all ought to be doing, now that we know."

"It's not as easy as that, Black."

"Oh? Do share."
Tom's ear was pressed to the crack between the door and the frame. Harry leant up around his chest, wanting to hear too. He could feel his breathing, his racing pulse. Tom grinned down at him, basking in their mutual excitement.

Perhaps Harry should have felt bad. But, a sly part of him said, if they hadn’t been so eager to keep him in the dark, in shooing him away from Order meetings or occupying him with pointless DIY, he wouldn’t be so ready to eavesdrop now, would he?

"Oh come on, Severus," said Diggle. "Be a good sport."

There was a pause. Harry could imagine all the adults looking at Snape. He could almost sense their frustration, and Snape's too.

"The Dark Lord had a head start on us," Snape said finally, "He knew Riddle was alive and searching for Horcruxes weeks before we did. He will have already moved the remainder."

"Four," Lupin said. "That's what Dumbledore told us. You can't do anything about the snake, I suppose."

"No. He is keeping Nagini close to his side at all times, both for her protection, and his. His recent experiences with sentient Horcruxes have taught him to be wary."

Harry could feel Tom's indrawn breath, the tension singing through his body. For a moment, he didn’t understand. Then—

Nagini.

Oh.

"As for the Horcrux Riddle tried to collect from the cave on the south coast, Dumbledore went to look immediately after Potter was retrieved. The lake was dredged, the Inferi destroyed with Fiendfyre. Someone was in a bit of a mood."

"Have you heard about any more, Severus?" Lupin asked.

"Do you think I dare ask?" Snape sneered. "The Dark Lord is not talking about his Horcruxes to his general Death Eaters—which is wise, given that pure-bloods have superstitions about meddling with the soul. I believe that he has given Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange the gist of it, however, and has created contingency plans should his body be destroyed again. He still has the bones from his father's grave, and those two would be delighted to cut off their body parts for his convenience. They've been insufferable ever since that damned pregnancy—they behave as if the two of them have been chosen by their god to bring his heir into the world. You would not believe the number of times they've tried to tell me the details of—"

"So we're stuck then," Sirius summarised. "We have no leads."

"We should use Riddle," Diggle said thoughtfully. "Get him to infiltrate You-Know-Who's mind to find out what he's thinking."

"I can see half a dozen things that could go wrong if Riddle is encouraged to start poking at the link," Lupin said. "What if he attempts to make a deal with Voldemort? What if Voldemort starts sending false information back? He’s done it before—that's how he tricked Harry and Riddle into coming to the Ministry in the first place."

"The Dark Lord is very interested in Riddle," Snape said quietly. "Very, very interested. Whenever I
see him, he has . . . questions. And about Potter too—he is fascinated by the concept of the bond."

"And what have you been telling him?" Sirius demanded.

"The absolute truth, obviously. Do you think the job of a spy is so easy?"

"How is Riddle?" Diggle asked. "I haven’t met him yet—I admit, I'm curious."

"He seems surprisingly normal," Sirius said. "I was ready to throttle Dumbledore when he let him out, but he doesn’t seem to be causing trouble. Harry seems okay with him too—they get on."

Snape gave a choking laugh.

"What?"

"I wouldn’t have guessed you'd be so easily hoodwinked, Black," Snape jeered. "As I recall, you were more likely to hate a Slytherin on sight. That boy has killed many people. He would happily kill you too, and, if it was convenient, Potter."

Sirius made a noise of vague disagreement, although perhaps more out of a desire to be at odds with Snape than any actual affection for Tom.

There was a metallic **flick** as someone checked a pocket watch.

"Does anyone mind if I leave early?" Professor McGonagall asked. "I really do have to be off."

"Of course not, Minerva," Diggle said. "It's been a pleasure, as always. Good luck with your students!"

They heard her push back her chair, take the container of Floo powder from the mantelpiece, and step into the fire, shouting "Diagon Alley" as she went.

"I should be going, too," Snape said, when the fire stopped spitting. "I need to finish writing my lesson plans."

Sirius snorted. "Haven't you been teaching Potions for years?"

"I **have** been teaching Potions for years," Snape said. For some inexplicable reason, his voice sounded extremely smug.

"Wait, Severus, let's finish the agenda," Diggle said. "It'll only take a few minutes. What's next—oh, recruitment."

"We should start doing it openly," Sirius said quickly. "Some of the older generation who wouldn’t join up the first time might now—they've got more to lose. And plenty of people have left Hogwarts in the last fifteen years. They're fully-fledged witches and wizards now."

"I don't know . . . I hate bringing young people into this," said Diggle. "I really, really do. If we'd done a better job the first time around, if we’d dealt better with the clean-up, this would never have happened. All those Death Eaters who dodged conviction, or were let out of Azkaban early, or escaped . . . we should have pushed harder for the Dementor's Kiss—"

"I'm glad you didn't."

"Oh, yes, right, sorry Sirius, I didn't mean it like that. How is your trial going, by the way? It's the old courtroom, isn't it? I'll try to get a seat in the viewing gallery, cheer you on."
"I think it will be fine," Sirius said. "But it's not the trial that I'm dreading—I still haven’t told Harry about—"

"Wait, you've not told him?" Lupin asked, sounding aghast. "I didn’t realise. You're lucky I didn’t let something slip accidentally."

"Sorry, I forgot to mention it. But there's just been no right moment, and I keep putting it off. He was so shell-shocked when he came back; I didn’t want to make it worse." He sighed. "Perhaps I'm being daft; I don’t even know if he’ll care—his relationship with them wasn’t the best . . ."

"He'll care," Lupin said. "That's the kind of boy he is."

Snape pushed back his chair. "Well, forgive me if I don't stick around to talk about Potter's delicate feelings," he drawled. "Although I must say, I didn’t expect you to be so cowardly, Black. You should just _tell_ the boy his family is dead."

Harry went very still.

What?

"Not here—we'll talk about it later," Lupin said, as Snape's footsteps made their way towards the fire. "We should organise protection for Scrimgeour too, now it looks almost certain he'll ascend—"

What family? Lily and James Potter had died years ago. They couldn’t mean—

Tom grabbed his elbows. Harry realised he was shaking. Quick, impulsive tremors bubbling up from his core—

"—The Dementors haven’t deserted Azkaban yet, but—"

Harry scrabbled for the inner handle of the door. Tom cursed under his breath, but was too late to stop him. Harry seized the handle and turned it, then burst out into the room, blinking in the light.

They all turned to stare at him. Diggle's hand flew to his mouth.

Harry stared back without speaking.

"Excellent," Snape sneered, from his position next to the fireplace. "Well done Black. Keeping a close eye on your charges, are you? I'm so glad we have you around to stop them from getting up to general delinquency . . . eavesdropping on matters that have nothing to do with them . . ."

"Shut up!" Sirius snapped, without looking away from Harry. "Harry—"

"What did you say?" Harry asked Snape. "Did you—did you mean my aunt and uncle?"

Snape smirked at him. "You should ask your godfather, Potter. It was his job to tell you—he volunteered for it, _demanded_ that he be the one."

"Sirius?" Harry asked, lost. "Is it true? What happened?"

Sirius looked stricken. His face was drawn, his eyes sunken in their sockets. For a moment, he looked just like the man on the front page of the _Daily Prophet_, the escaped fugitive who had served thirteen long years in Azkaban.

"Sit down, Harry," Lupin said gently.
Harry did not sit down. Snape folded his arms and leant against the mantle. His face showed just the barest hint of expression, but Harry could tell he was enjoying himself tremendously.

"Tell me," Harry said. "Just tell me."

Sirius and Lupin exchanged a glance.

"It was July," Lupin said finally. "It was the very beginning of July when the wards broke on Privet Drive. We weren’t expecting it, hadn’t thought to look. Voldemort realised before we did—he must have had someone watching the house. They were no more than a couple of hours ahead of us, we think, but it was enough. When we got there, all we found was rubble. I'm sorry, Harry."

"They're dead then?" Harry said flatly. He didn't know what he was feeling; it felt like white static blooming across his mind, spots across a reel of film.

"Yes. And Mrs Figg too."

"Mrs Figg?" Harry echoed. "Why?"

"We think she tried to signal us," Sirius said. "She died a hero, Harry."

Harry nodded. Of course. A hero. She had tried to signal the Order. And now she was dead.

"What about Dudley?" he asked. "My cousin. Is he dead too?"

"Harry, I'm so sorry—"

"Did he hurt them first?"

Sirius and Lupin looked at each other again. Harry read volumes in that glance. He grabbed onto the back of a chair for balance.

"Come on, sit down," Diggle said, guiding him into it by the elbow. "You've had a shock, Harry."

Harry sat. He looked around for Tom, but he wasn’t there. He must have slunk back into the shadows of the pantry when Harry opened the door.

It felt so wrong, to think of the Dursleys, dead. Did they have a funeral? Was it gaudy and horrible? Did they invite Uncle Vernon's boss? Did Aunt Marge cry?

He had hated his family, that was true. But Dudley, Dudley might have grown up and been a different person. He might have had a job and a wife and a child. And Aunt Petunia had fed Harry from a bottle. She'd changed his nappies, bathed him, fed him—

(—hated him, resented him, locked him in, pushed his food through a cat flap)

"Why?" Harry asked.

"What do you mean?" Sirius said.

"Why did the wards break?"

There was silence.

Harry looked up. He realised, with a shock, that he'd asked the one question they least wanted to answer.
"Why?" he pressed. "Just tell me!"

"Actually, I'd like to ask you that."

It was Snape, speaking from his position by the mantel. His black eyes were glittering.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Snape said, as if explaining a very simple concept to a very stupid pupil, "the blood wards on Privet Drive were keyed to **you**, Potter. Did Dumbledore tell you the conditions on them? I think he did. They were designed to hold while you were under the age of seventeen, so long as you still thought of the place as home. Naturally, when they broke, we all assumed it was because you had died. Black here was quite distraught."

He cocked his head to the side.

"So, imagine our surprise when you turned up safe and sound a few scant weeks later, after a long summer of... playing house."

Lupin leapt to his feet. His face was transformed; Harry had never seen him so angry. "Get out, Snape!" he shouted. "Get out, right now!"

*Playing house.*

Harry felt lost. He looked for Tom again, but he still wasn’t there.

"I don't understand," he said.

"You always were a bit slow, Potter," Snape said, then drew his wand to match Sirius'. "I'm warning you, Black, **don't test me.**"

"Severus!" Diggle squeaked. "How dare you?"

*Playing house.*

Did he mean—?

"Oh, I can see I'm not welcome," Snape crowed. "I'll leave you to the teenage dramatics, Black. As you can imagine, I get enough of that with my job." Without looking away from Sirius, he snatched a handful of Floo powder, threw it in the fire, and, with a final nod to Diggle, stepped through.

Harry hardly even noticed.

He understood what Snape had been trying to tell him. Perhaps he had understood, subconsciously, from the moment he had burst out of the pantry. The wards on Privet Drive had broken because, somewhere along the way, Privet Drive had ceased to be his home.

Because somewhere else had replaced it.

Harry looked at Sirius' agonised expression. They all knew. Every adult in the Order knew. They'd known all this time, known that Harry's captivity hadn't been some horrible, miserable trial—that, for whatever reason, Harry had **liked** it.

"Harry..."

Harry turned on his heel and ran. He sprinted up the stairs to the ground floor, rounded the bannister
and then raced up the next flight too. He heard Sirius cursing below, heavy footsteps behind him, but didn’t care.

The first tug of the bond came on the stairs to the second floor. Harry doubled over in pain, legs going out from under him. Colour bled from the world; his vision darkened at the edges. He felt as if he was being torn, ripped from his body—

Then it ceased. Tom had moved.

Harry didn’t wait. He hauled himself up the last steps by the handrails, panting, almost sobbing. Sirius was on the landing below him.

"Harry!" he cried. He was drowned out immediately by a blood-curdling screech—Mrs Black’s portrait had awoken.

"Fuck! Remus, can you—"

Harry didn’t listen to the rest. He tore open the door to the second-floor bedroom he had shared with Ron, then closed it behind him and slid down, back against the wood, knees drawn up to his chest. He put his hands over his ears to block out the screams.

Finally, it stopped. Harry lowered his hands.

"Harry?" Sirius said softly, from right outside the door. "Harry?"

Harry ignored him.

"Harry, I'm so sorry. I'll skin Snape. You weren't supposed to find out like that. I was going to tell you, I promise—I just wanted you to settle a little bit before—"

"Like that would make it any better," Harry spat. His voice was croaky and he didn’t know how audible his words were, through the wood. "It's all my fault and you knew! You knew all this time!"

"It's not your fault! Harry!"

Harry didn’t want to talk. He clutched his knees tighter and hid his face in them. Dimly, he heard two new sets of footsteps on the stairs.

"He won't let you in?" Tom asked. He sounded a little breathless, either from the climb or the sharp tug of the bond.

"Where did you come from?" Sirius growled.

"He was lurking downstairs in the pantry," Lupin said.

"Well, he can go back there."

"I can't reach it," Tom said.

"Shoo!"

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"Elsewhere."

"I'll take him down to the drawing room and see Diggle off," Lupin said.
Tom muttered, but left with Lupin. Sirius stayed, talking quietly to Harry through the door.

"Thanks," Harry said eventually, just to make him go away. "Thanks, I feel a lot better now. Can I be on my own for a little while?"

There was a noise of helplessness from Sirius.

"Please," Harry said, voice wavering.

"Okay," Sirius sighed. "Come find me when you're ready, okay? I'll be there."

Harry waited until he heard his footsteps on the stairs, then buried his head in his knees and sobbed.

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There was another knock on the door ten minutes later. Harry knew it was Tom by the light, confident pattern his knuckles made against the wood.

"Go away."

"So you can stew in self-pity?"

"Yes."

"Boring."

The door flexed almost imperceptibly, and Harry knew that Tom was leaning against it. He imagined him, out in the corridor, arms folded, relaxed and unruffled, while on the other side, Harry was curled up as small as he could go.

Without really thinking about it, Harry stood up and opened the door. Caught by surprise, Tom fell backwards. He grabbed the doorframe for balance.

Harry glared at him.

"Have you been crying?" Tom asked.

"Fuck off."

"You're the one who opened the door." Tom pointed out. He pulled himself up and closed it behind him. "I don't understand why you're so upset. You didn't even like them."

At the mention of the Dursleys, a lump rose in Harry's throat. His eyes stung and his throat felt stuffy, and oh god, he was going to cry in front of Tom. It felt so wrong, like cutting open your arm while swimming with a shark.

"Awww," Tom said mockingly, reaching up to swipe the tear leaking from the corner of Harry's eye. "Again?"

Harry wished he had never let him in. Had he really expected Tom to be kind?

Oh, wait.

"I'm calling in my favour."

"Oh?" Tom asked.
"I want—" Harry swallowed. "I w-want you to comfort me."

As he said the words, he realised it was true. He did want that, desperately. Not Sirius or Lupin, or even Ron or Hermione. He wanted Tom.

Tom was what he deserved.

"Comfort you?" Tom scratched his nose. "What would that entail, exactly?"

"You can start by hugging me."

Tom looked doubtful, and for a moment, Harry thought he would refuse. Then, he gave a small shrug, as if to say that he thought Harry was being very, very stupid, and pulled him into his arms.

It felt nice. Warm and pleasant and utterly familiar. A sense memory, an unconscious association between Tom and comfort that went contrary to all rational thought. It was Tom who he was used to touching, Tom whose arms he woke up in every morning. Harry tucked his head into Tom's shoulder, basking in the feeling. "Tighter," he instructed. "And—and rub my back."

Tom shook slightly—trying not to laugh—but deepened the hug. His hand moved on Harry's back, stroking him like a pet.

"Like this?" he asked.

Harry nodded, hands fisted in Tom's shirt. He smelt nice, like soap and the old paper of the books he read.

"Tell me it'll all be okay?"

"It'll be okay," Tom repeated obediently.

"Now keep doing that."

Tom sighed, but obeyed. "It'll be fine . . . you'll be okay . . ."

It felt good, so long as he ignored the sarcastic tone. Harry stood there, reminded, as he had been so many weeks ago, of the way Aunt Petunia used to hold Dudley.

Spoiled pig-faced Dudley who had probably died screaming.

Harry choked back a sob. He wished suddenly, that Sirius had given him more details. Surely the truth was less horrid than the images in his imagination?

Right?

"Tell me it's all my fault."

Tom pulled back, surprised. Harry flushed. His request had slunk out of some dark part of himself, the part that found it cathartic to be in pain. If something was rotten, the cure was to cut deeper, wasn’t it? Cut it all the way out.

"Are you sure?" Tom asked. "Normally when I tell people it's all their fault, it makes them more upset, not less."

"Is this a favour or not? Just do it."
Tom sighed and pulled Harry close again. "It's all your fault," he droned. "It'll be fine . . . it's all your fault . . ."

It was all his fault, wasn’t it? Harry thought viciously. What they must have thought of him, the Order, Ron and Hermione. Weak. Pathetic. He wanted more.

"Now say, 'Dudley is dead because of you'."

"I don't think I've ever met anyone as masochistic as you," Tom said thoughtfully.

"Say it!"

For a long time, Tom was silent, still stroking his back. Finally, after an age, he said; "Your cousin is dead because your Aunt and Uncle were terrible people."

"It is my fault!" Harry protested. "You were there; you heard what Snape said—"

"Do you think I'd lie to protect your feelings? I don't care if you're crying. I bet you were a sweet kid. If your relatives had been nice to you, it wouldn't have been so ridiculously easy for you to stop thinking of their place as your home. They brought it on themselves."

Harry stared at him.

Tom's face showed no particular expression, but his fingers were gentle, carding through his hair. Harry tucked his head back into his shoulder, and let himself cry.

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Harry was a warm lump in his arms. Tom had moved them to the bed, once it became clear that Harry wasn’t going to stop anytime soon. He was sitting with his back against the wall, Harry straddling him. He had stopped crying, but was still hiding his face, probably out of embarrassment.

Tom was surprised at his own reaction. He hated crying, had hated it his whole life. He'd grown up with it, non-stop, babies wailing because no one would come to hold them. Abraxas had cried too sometimes, which had disgusted Tom. He had punished him for it afterwards. If someone was going to do something so ugly and humiliating, they should have the decency to do it in private where no one had to look at them.

He tilted Harry's face up by the chin, and plucked the glasses off his face, the better to examine his teary eyes. There was a red mark on the bridge of his nose where they had dug in.

"Don't look at me."

"Why not? You're the one who asked for this." Tom stroked his hair, enjoying the change in texture. It felt different, short.

"I don't even know if I'm sad," Harry said finally. "Maybe I'm just shocked. Would that make me a terrible person, if I wasn’t sad?"

"I don’t know why you would be sad anyway. I was happy when my relatives died."

"That's because you killed them." Harry gave a wet, choking laugh that held no real humour. "You've killed my whole family now, and yours."

"Oops."
"They all knew," Harry said, after a moment. He sounded lost. "Sirius, Lupin, the Weasleys. Ron and Hermione too—they almost slipped up when they were telling me about their summer. July, they said. Something about July."

"When was that?" Tom asked idly. "What were we doing?"

"I wasn’t keeping track," Harry said, looking down, playing with the hem of Tom's shirt. Tom could feel his socked feet pressing into the sides of his knees. "Maybe it was when I planted those flowers. Do you remember?"

"Yes. What did we talk about then?"

"You told me that you'd decided not to kill me. It was very charming."

Tom hummed. Harry's shirt was so thin that he could feel every vertebra of his spine.

People were made of meat. If Tom cut Harry open, he wouldn’t find anything strange. Just red blood and white bone, the grey matter of his brain. There was nothing extraordinary under his skin. He wasn’t cleverer than Tom either, or more resourceful, or a better fighter.

So why then, did he make Tom feel so . . .

Curious. Distinctly curious.

"Thanks," Harry said. "I feel better."

"Are you sure? Have you indulged your instinct for self-flagellation enough today? I could smack you around a bit, if you'd like."

"Pass for now," Harry said.

Tom kissed him.

Harry stilled. Tom pressed closer, following his instincts.

Then, gradually, by stages, Harry gave in. His body, which had tensed, relaxed against Tom's, and his mouth opened, coaxed by Tom's eager lips.

The bond was slow at first, like the first bars of a song. Then it roared to life inside of him, growing sweeter and sweeter and sweeter, until Tom could hardly bear it. He deepened the kiss instead, chasing the feeling.

It was wonderful.

Oh, how he'd missed it. He could feel Harry's emotions, feel the endorphins left over from crying, like the sweet release that came after sex or running for a long time. He felt like the fertile ground after a summer thunderstorm. And Tom could feel his own curiosity reflected back at him too, and Harry's melancholy, and another emotion, an unpleasant one that Tom didn’t recognise.

He pulled back.

Harry heaved in a breath, face red, eyes wide.

"You're breaking the rules," he complained.

"What was that?"
"What?"

"That thing you're feeling."

Harry actually smiled. It lit up his whole face. "That's guilt, you idiot. Of course you wouldn’t recognise it."
He leant again against Tom's chest, apparently deciding not to fight him at that moment. "You're wrong, so so wrong. I don't know why I like you."

Tom held him. Harry's words hung in his mind, specifically the last sentence, circling around and around, like water going around a drain.

Do you?
Harry slid out of his warm bed, careful not to disturb Tom. The morning air was chill outside of their nest of blankets. He pulled on his jumper and socks, then looked around for the Invisibility Cloak. They were back in their room on the ground floor; they’d crept down together late last night, more out of habit than anything else.

He felt better. More steady, somehow, settled in his own skin. His eyes were still a little red and tight—he’d cried a little during the night, on and off—but now he could almost pretend that the Dursleys had just moved to Canada or something; packed the house up without telling him and left. He wouldn’t even have minded.

Harry found the Cloak stuffed down the foot of the bed. He pulled it over his head and opened the door.

Sirius was standing in the hallway, leaning against the wall next to his mother's portrait.

Harry froze. For a split second, he contemplated just slinking back into the room again. It was a magical house; it wasn’t impossible that a door could have opened by itself, right?

Sirius raised an eyebrow which said, quite clearly, *I know you're there*.

With great reluctance, Harry stepped over the threshold and closed the door softly behind him. He tugged off the Cloak, holding the light fabric in a bundle in front of him.

Sirius did not look remotely surprised to see him.

"I—"

"Not here," Sirius said. His tone was completely neutral.

He led the way down the stairs to the basement kitchen. It was warmer than the hallway. A cast-iron kettle hovered above the lit stove, spout emitting a thin trail of steam. Harry slid into a chair near the end of the table, while Sirius took the handle of the kettle in a tea-towel-wrapped hand and poured out two mugs. He placed one in front of Harry, then sat down next to him at the head of the table.

“How did you guess?” Harry asked. He wouldn’t insult Sirius by pretending he hadn’t been caught red-handed.

“Remus caught Riddle coming out of the pantry yesterday, after you ran upstairs,” Sirius said neutrally.

Harry wrapped his hands around his mug. He had heard Lupin say something like that through the door, but hadn’t realised the implications. He almost wanted to laugh—he knew how it looked, but for once they hadn’t been sequestered in a dark corner for sex.
Not that sneaking around and looking for a Horcrux under the Order’s noses was much better.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked.

"With you? Of course not. With Riddle? I don’t know.” Sirius caught Harry’s eye. “Did he rape you?”

Harry couldn’t answer for a moment. The word was shocking to hear out loud. “No,” he finally managed. “No—I mean, he wasn’t a gentleman or anything, but it wasn’t—that.”

Sirius looked doubtful.

“It was just an accident,” Harry continued, unsure how to explain that they’d gotten into a fight that ended in Tom humping him until they both came in their pants. “I’ve tried to stop, but—”

Sirius made a small choking noise. Harry looked up, just in time to see him clap a hand over his mouth and turn his laugh into an ill-disguised cough.

“What?" Harry demanded, rather affronted.

“Oh Harry, it’s just—”

“*What?*”

“Well, you can be so mature sometimes that I forget how much of a teenager you really are.”

“What do you mean?”

“Going after the bad boy?” Sirius snickered. “Dating someone totally unsuitable, knowing that everyone will disapprove? Really, I’m only surprised I didn’t guess earlier; you’re overdue a teenage rebellion . . .”

“That’s not what this is!”

“He’s not bad?” Sirius teased.

“Well, he is, but—”

“He’s not a boy?”

Harry crossed his arms.

“Really, it would be more surprising if *nothing* had happened,” Sirius lamented. “I mean, your age, the fact you spent months alone together in the middle of nowhere, how comfortable the two of you obviously are together . . .”

Sirius was obviously determined to misunderstand. Harry glowered at him.

“And I’m not going to tell you to stop, if that’s what you’re hoping for,” Sirius continued. “I know that will only make you want to do it more. I think teenagers have to be allowed to make their own catastrophic relationship decisions.”

“I’m not in a relationship,” Harry ground out.

Sirius rocked back in his chair, balancing it on two legs. “It’s not like I don’t understand. At school, *I* was the bad idea. I thought I’d be a pariah when my parents disowned me, but no, you would not
believe the effect it had on my love life. Prissy pure-blood girls were throwing themselves at me, hoping that we’d date and news would get back to their parents. I had more s—”

“Thanks,” Harry interrupted. He didn’t much appreciate being compared to a prissy pureblood girl. “But—”

Sirius frowned suddenly. “Has anyone talked to you about it how it all works?” he asked, letting his chair fall back onto all four legs. “We got a visit from the school nurse in seventh year, to tell us all about the birds and the bees . . . or the bees and the bees, as it were.”

Harry pushed back his chair and stood. He wasn’t staying if Sirius was just going to mock him!

Sirius grabbed his wrist.

“Oh sit down, sit down,” he said. “I’m sorry for poking fun.”

Harry did, reluctantly.

“You’re really okay?” Sirius asked. “He’s not pressuring you into anything? I can get him locked back in his room, if you want.”

“I’m fine,” Harry said. He felt incredibly awkward. It had been easier, somehow, talking to Ron and Hermione, perhaps because they were the same age or knew him better. It didn’t help that he admired Sirius and wanted him to have a good opinion of him.

Sirius seemed to understand.

“You aren’t really one for sitting and talking, are you? You’re more the active type.” He looked around the kitchen. “How about we do last night’s washing up together. We can talk then, if you like, or else just do it quietly.”

That sounded like a good idea to Harry. He gulped down the rest of his tea, then helped Sirius gather up the plates and glasses left on the table. Sirius put the washing-up bowl in the sink and began filling it with water. Together, they scraped off remnants of food into the bin, then Harry picked up a sponge and began washing. Sirius stood next to him with a tea-towel ready.

For a little while, they worked in silence. The menial task was soothing.

“You don’t mind that he’s a boy?” Harry asked, eventually.

“Nope.”

Harry cleaned the rim of a mug and put it on the draining rack. Sirius picked it up, dried it, and put it on the shelf.

“Ron said it was more normal in the wizarding world than in the Muggle one.”

“It is, but for the wrong reasons.”

Harry looked at him, and Sirius elaborated.

“Blood purists see homosexuality as a better alternative to letting their children marry Muggleborns. And with how small the population is, and how inbred we all are, that’s a very real possibility. My dear old Mum would occasionally even let gay relatives stay on the tapestry, so long as they were discreet about it.”
“Oh.” Harry looked back down into the bowl. “And about what Snape said yesterday—"

"Snape said a lot of stuff, most of which was bullshit."

"But about the wards breaking . . . you didn’t guess . . . ?"

"Guess what?” Sirius shrugged. “That you’d stopped thinking of your Aunt and Uncle’s places as home? No, I didn’t, and I don’t think hardly anyone else did either, until Snape opened his nasty, sneering mouth. To be honest, I was so relieved to have you back that the thought never crossed my mind."

"Really?"

Sirius was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was hoarse. “Can you imagine what it’s been like for us, Harry? What it’s been like for me? We thought you were dead. There was a funeral, a big, flashy thing the newspapers insisted on holding in Godric’s Hollow. I went as Padfoot."

“Sorry,” Harry said, very quietly.

Sirius bumped his shoulder, accepting his apology. “Don’t worry about it. You have a very nice gravestone, by the way. I’ll take you sometime.”

Harry was surprised into a laugh.

“It’s not your fault the wards fell,” Sirius said, after a moment. “Riddle, Voldemort, your Aunt and Uncle—I blame them, but not you. You never had a home of your own; that trap was practically designed for you.” He paused, and twisted his neck to glance at the door. “In fact, if anything, I blame Dumbledore.”

Harry thought he’d misheard. “Dumbledore?”

“Last summer, I asked Dumbledore if you could stay with me for the whole holiday. He said no, that the wards on Privet Drive were more important. It didn’t make too much sense to me at the time—particularly given that you were attacked by Dementors there anyway—and it makes even less sense now, given how fragile they were. In fact, a part of me wonders . . . ”

“Wonders what?” Harry breathed. He felt thrilled to be included in this adult gossip, but afraid of what Sirius was getting at.

Sirius turned to look at him.

“Well, did he know about the Horcrux? And if so, when did he find out?”

“He told me that he worked it out this year, after I dreamed about Nagini attacking Mr Weasley.”

“Hmm.”

“You don’t believe that?”

Sirius put down his tea-towel and ran his hands through his hair, combing it into a loose ponytail that he secured with an elastic band from around his wrist.

“I don’t know. Perhaps I’m just being paranoid about the whole thing. I’ve never quite forgiven Dumbledore for the part he played in putting me in Azkaban without a trial.”
“Could he have got you a trial?”

“He had the Wizengamot in his pocket back then. He apologised after, but it’s a hard thing to forget.”

Harry scrubbed a cereal bowl, deep in thought. “Would it even matter if he knew I was a Horcrux beforehand?” he wondered out loud.

“I don’t know. Part of me wonders . . . well, you grew up very isolated, didn’t you? And you’re very self-sacrificing, unhealthily so.” Sirius shrugged. “But then I keep second-guessing myself. How could Dumbledore have predicted your personality? And if he knew all along, why didn’t he just kill you?”

Harry shrugged, uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry—don’t let me spook you,” Sirius said. “My problems with Dumbledore are my own; I shouldn’t be gossiping to you. And even if there was a plan, it doesn’t matter now, because the Horcrux is out of you.”

“He wanted to kill Tom,” Harry said.

Sirius snorted. “You know I don’t necessarily disagree with that, right?”

The water was dirty. Harry poured it all away and began refilling the bowl.

“I wish things were simpler again.”

“That’s growing up for you,” Sirius said wistfully. “The choices get harder. People you trust turn out to be complicated human beings. People you hate turn out to have redeeming qualities. You can only do the best you can, never knowing if you’re right.”

“Did you know I killed someone?” Harry asked, eyes on the rising water. He wasn’t quite sure what made him say it—he hadn’t thought about it much at all, except at odd moments. This felt like the right time though, somehow.

“No.”

“It was a Death Eater,” Harry confessed. “Tom and I were ambushed when we left the house to bathe. There was a fight; I used a cutting curse. I’m not sure where I was aiming, but it hit him in the neck.” He swallowed. “There was a lot of blood.”

“There’s hardly a single person in the Order who isn’t a killer,” Sirius said.

“Really?”

“Really,” Sirius confirmed. There was a faraway look in his eyes. “I remember my first. It would have been—god, 1977, just a few months after I joined the Order. James and I had signed up together. He was an Auror trainee, and had a little bit of formal training under his belt. I hadn’t bothered to apply; I’d flunked my Herbology N.E.W.T. and was waiting for June to roll around again so I could retake the exam.”

He turned and leant against the counter, hands gripping the edge of the worktop. Harry dropped his sponge back into the bowl, interested in the story.

“We were guarding Eleanor Winkleworth’s house—she was a reporter who’d written some critical
articles about Voldemort. She wasn’t that big a target, which is why they sent us. According to the plan, I was supposed to be concealed in the bushes round the back of the house while James covered the front. In reality though, we spent most of our shifts together in the front garden, smoking cigarettes and talking about James’ relationship drama. Lily had just broken up with him for the third time.”

“The Death Eaters came at the stroke of midnight, vertically out of the sky on brooms. They must have unpicked the sentry wards from above, because the only warning we had was the flash of the Dark Mark. It was more terrifying than I could have imagined from the papers, this great, malevolent skull which lit the whole night up green.”

“How many were there?” Harry asked.

“Four. Two descended down the back of the house, two down the front. James and I heard the ones at the back blast the door off its hinges, but we couldn’t do anything about it, because at that time we were already fighting for our lives. They were good fighters—the other side always seemed to have better recruits and training than us. I forgot most of my D.A.D.A. lessons on the spot, just cast stunning spell after stunning spell while James shielded. We couldn’t Apparate away; we were trapped by the wards our own people had set up. They advanced and we retreated, back towards the house.”

Sirius gave a grim chuckle. “That is, of course, until I tripped over a shrub and fell on my arse. It left me outside the range of James’ shield. I rolled to avoid one curse, then another, which took a chunk out of my arm. Your dad though . . . I don’t know if it was quick thinking or sheer panic, but he took his Animagus form. That surprised the Death Eaters, alright—he got a reputation for it later, but back then, no one knew. He speared the closest Death Eater in the chest with his antlers. I used the distraction to get to my knees and cast the killing curse at the other one, just as he was about to cast one on me. It’s a miracle it worked—I’d never even practiced it before.”

“And then?” Harry asked breathlessly. “What happened next?”

“It was panic, utter panic. James was bleeding, I was bleeding, the guy James had gored was bleeding. Not dead, mind you, just kind of wriggling about on the grass and screaming. Wickleworth was screaming too; we could hear her through the open window. James transformed back. We took one look at each other . . . and legged it to the edge of the wards. So much for Gryffindor courage, eh? By the time we’d gathered reinforcements and come back, Wickleworth was dead and the Death Eaters were gone.”

Harry nodded. He wanted to know if Sirius had thought about the man—or woman—he’d killed afterwards, but it felt too personal to ask. Also, absurdly, his mind kept circling back to what Sirius had said about his parents.

“Did my Mum and Dad fight a lot?”

If Sirius was surprised by the question, he didn’t show it.

“Oh yeah, all the time,” he said with a fond smile. “Particularly in those early years. They knocked a lot of sharp corners off each other.”

“Whose fault was it?”

“Six of one, half a dozen of the other. James was an idiot, never thought before he spoke, constantly taking jokes too far. Lily was quieter, more measured. She was interested in old magic; spells that were too ancient or too obscure to be classified by the Ministry. James was brought up to see that
stuff as dark; he didn’t want it in the house.”

“Was it dark?”

Sirius spread his hands. “Who knows? Lily fixed a broken finger for me once, but that was after you were born.” At Harry’s quizzical look, he clarified. “Magical pregnancies can clean out your magic, among other things.”

“Tom can’t heal,” Harry said.

“After making a Horcrux?” Sirius laughed. “Yeah, I bet he can’t.”

They stood in companionable silence for a few moments, while Harry filed away the new information about his parents. People normally tried to paint them in a flattering light, but it was better, in his opinion, to hear about them as normal people.

“Well, I was just thinking . . . I mean, since you’re still sixteen, you’ll need a guardian when you go back to school. I was wondering if you . . . if I . . .”

Harry’s heart seemed to leap up and lodge itself in his throat. For a moment he couldn’t speak. Sirius misinterpreted his expression, and his face fell.

“I mean, I’m sure the Weasleys will offer,” he said quickly. “Molly would be glad to have you.”

“Sirius—”

“Or we could sort out a Ministry guardian! After all, it’s only for one year—”

“Sirius!” Harry said, grabbing his arm.

Sirius paused.

“Would . . . would you do it?” Harry asked.

Sirius’ grin was like the sun rising. He gripped Harry’s shoulder and shook it affectionately.

“Yes. Yes of course I fucking would.”

Harry beamed back.

“But actually,” Sirius continued, “guardianship is just a fostering system. Your guardian signs your papers and so on, but the official relationship ends when you come of age. What I actually wanted to ask was . . . Harry, would you let me adopt you?”

Harry couldn’t find any words. He nodded hard instead, so hard it felt his head might fall off. Sirius pulled him into a tight hug.

“Thank you,” he said into Harry’s ear. “Thank you so much. I did wrong by Lily and James when I went after Peter rather than going to you. Thank you for giving me a chance to put it right.”
“You really want me?” Harry asked disbelievingly. He felt giddy and delighted, and afraid too, as if this moment was too perfect to be real.

“Of course I do, you idiot.” Sirius released Harry and wiped his eyes on his sleeve, smiling despite his tears. “I’ll take the adoption paperwork to the Ministry when I go for my trial. I already asked Arthur—hope you don’t mind—and he said he’d run it up to the Office of Family Affairs the moment I’m cleared.”

“What do I call you?” Harry asked.

“Whatever’s easiest,” Sirius said, smiling broadly. “But perhaps we should stick with ‘Godfather’; I can’t take your Dad’s place.”

Harry nodded and hugged Sirius again.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

For the rest of the day, he walked around as if the sun was shining out of his chest.

He was going to have a family. A strange, non-traditional family, it was true, but a family nonetheless. How many times had he dreamed about it? Whenever Privet Drive’s doorbell had rung on his birthday, he had dashed out of his cupboard, certain that this was it, that there would be a long-lost cousin or uncle or grandparent standing on the doorstep, ready to take him away.

Tom, who had obviously expected Harry to be pathetically grateful and clingy after the events of the previous night, was quite put out.

“What’s gotten into you?” he demanded, when Harry leant over him to open the window.

"Nothing. It's just such a beautiful day, isn’t it?"

Tom tilted his head to get a better view of the thunderheads building overhead. “Do you think so?” he asked doubtfully.

Harry beamed in response. He wasn’t going to tell Tom about the adoption. Tom would only try to ruin it. In fact, he decided, as he trooped up to the first floor to run a bath for himself, if anyone were to offer to adopt Tom, Tom would probably be offended.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Mundungus arrived in the middle of the afternoon. Harry, who had been doodling pictures of cars and Thestrals and a series of lumps which rather resembled Grawp, dropped his notebook on the sofa and bounded down the stairs to open the door.

“‘Ello Harry, you look chipper,” Mundungus said. He was wearing his customary large overcoat and stovepipe hat. This close, Harry could see that both had been patched many, many times.

“What’s up, Dung?” said Sirius, who had just come up from the kitchen.

“Diggle said you ‘ad some bags you want dealt with.”

“In the drawing room,” Sirius said, gesturing with his thumb over his shoulder. “Up the stairs, first door on the right.”

Mundungus tipped his hat to them both, then sidled past, leaving Harry and Sirius in the hallway alone.
“Are you up to anything this afternoon?” Sirius asked.

Harry shook his head.

“Want to see my bike then? I’ve pretty much finished working on it.”

“Yes!” Harry said. “But hang on; I’ll have to get Tom to move first. The bond won’t stretch all the way up to your room.”

“Your ball and chain,” Sirius said wryly. “Go on then.”

Tom was in his room, reading. Harry poked his head in.

“I’m going up to see Sirius’ motorbike,” he announced.

Tom looked up, and quite visibly pondered the benefits and potential drawbacks of being difficult.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm going to go anyway. You can either come or pass out down here."

Tom got out of bed resentfully. He trailed behind them all the way to the upper landing, then sat down on the top step and buried his nose in his book again. Harry tried not to look at the cover; anything that had Tom so engrossed was likely to start an argument.

Sirius held open the door to his room.

Harry had not been inside before. It was a large enough space, but the ceiling sloped sharply towards the window. Posters covered almost every square inch of the walls and door, proudly displaying images of women, broomsticks and Muggle fighter jets.

The bike stood in the centre of the room, surrounded by miscellaneous tools. The body was painted a bright, glossy red.

“Wow,” Harry breathed.

“Right?” Sirius said, as he ran a hand over the leather seat. It was easily big enough to fit two or three people. “I repainted it and changed the oil and tyres, but most of the work that needed doing was magical. The levitation charms were never designed to cope with—well, Hagrid. They needed a complete overhaul.” He beckoned Harry forwards. “Well, go on. Sit on it.”

“Really?”

Sirius nodded. Harry looked at the bike again, then grabbed the handlebars and swung his leg awkwardly over the seat.

"Your foot goes there," Sirius said. "Hand on that—that's the accelerator. You turn it gently forwards if you want to go faster. Hang on a mo', I'll start the engine for you."

"Wait, I don’t want to fly into a wall!"

“It’s not even in gear,” Sirius said, laughing. To Harry’s terror and delight, he produced a key from his pocket, put it into the ignition and turned it. The bike roared to life under Harry, vibrating like some great, growling beast.

“I'll hold the clutch for you. You turn the accelerator—gently now—”

The bike revved. Harry laughed, twisting the handle forwards and backwards, trying to get a feel for
“How do you make it fly?” he asked breathlessly.

Sirius leant over and pointed at the other pedal. “See there? Put your foot on it. Hang on, I'll turn the engine off first—this doesn’t need a gear to work.” He twisted the key again, and Harry felt a vague sense of loss as the bike whined and shuddered to a halt.

“You press down to ascend. Foot off will let you slowly descend. It's a little tricky; you have to glide down while managing your forwards speed. It's much easier if you land on a road.” He smiled, remembering something. “James and I once overshot your grandparents’ house on our way back from a party and landed in a muddy field. The front wheel struck something—a buried rock, maybe, and we went flying over the handlebars together. Your gran caught us wheeling it in at 4 a.m. covered in mud.”

Harry nodded.

“Sorry,” Sirius said, “I keep talking about your dad. Seeing you makes me think of him, you know?”

“I like hearing about him,” Harry said quietly.

Sirius squeezed his shoulder, then took a helmet from the hook on the back of the door and placed it on Harry’s head. Harry adjusted the straps nervously.

“Okay, we’re going to do a little experiment,” Sirius said. “I’ll start up the bike again, and you press as lightly as you can on the flight pedal. If you can do it without bashing your head on the ceiling, I’ll let you take it around the room.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“What were you doing in there?” Tom demanded, when Harry came out, bruised but exhilarated. He peered past Harry into the room, which was, admittedly, rather wrecked. "The door was locked, and the noise—"

"Nothing much."

"I'll go down and make dinner for the two of you," Sirius said airily, brushing past them and heading down the stairs, taking them two at a time. Harry and Tom followed behind, much more slowly.

“You’re acting weird,” Tom said.

“What do you mean?”

Tom didn’t reply.

“I do have other interests besides you,” Harry pointed out. “I mean, not that you’re one of my interests. Or interesting at all—”

“Did you tell Black?” Tom interrupted.

“Tell Black what?” Harry asked, wishing Tom wasn’t quite so perceptive.

"You know what."

They were down to the first-floor landing. As they passed the drawing room, they almost bumped into Mundungus, who was coming out. Harry stopped, surprised. By his reckoning, they had been
upstairs for more than an hour; much more time than would be needed to move a few bin bags.

“Oh, ‘ello again, Harry,” Mundungus said, shifting from foot to foot. One of the bin bags was still in his hand.

Tom’s head turned as he tried to move past them, like a dog hearing an inaudible whistle. He thrust his book into Harry’s surprised hands, then grabbed Mundungus by the collar and shoved him into a wall.

It was so fast and unexpected that Harry was left blinking.

“Oh! Get off me! What the fuck?”

"You smell awful," Tom informed Mundungus. He grabbed his sleeve when he went for his wand. They struggled for a moment, but then Mundungus started coughing great, hacking coughs. Tom leant back, disgusted.

“Harry, take out your wand,” he ordered.

Harry did no such thing. “Tom, what are you—”

“The fuck?” Mundungus spat. His voice was low and hoarse. Harry was surprised he wasn’t shouting for Sirius.

"You took something," Tom said, eyes on the bag clenched in Mundungus’ fist.

"Course I did, that's what I'm 'ere for."

"No," Tom said. "It's been ages, and there were only a dozen or so bags in that room. You've been poking around the house, haven’t you? Stealing things—"

"I ain't done nothing!" Mundungus said, thrashing from side to side. “Let go of me, you little cunt—I'll tell Dumbledore on you, see if I don't. You ain't supposed to be threatening people!” His bloodshot eyes found Harry’s. "Oi, Potter! Get ‘im off me!"

Harry hesitated.

"Get his sack, Harry,” Tom said coolly.

Harry looked between the two of them, conflicted. He wasn’t impressed by Tom, but he had the sneaking suspicion he was right. Mundungus had probably waited for Sirius to pass, then crept out of the room when he heard the kitchen door close downstairs, not realising that Harry and Tom were idling behind.

Harry grabbed the bag, and, after a brief tussle, wrenched it from Mundungus’ hand. It was much heavier than he expected.

“That’s mine!” Mundungus barked.

Harry undid the knot at the top and peered inside. There were some books, but also golden picture frames and candlesticks, and a fine silver lamp.

“This stuff wasn’t in the throwing-out pile,” he remarked.

“Yeah, well, I gotta eat, don’t I?” Mundungus said. Tom let go of him to inspect the contents of the sack. Mundungus straightened his coat, then looked nervously down the stairs for Sirius.
“Why would you bother stealing some of this stuff?” Tom asked, wrinkling his nose at a tiny monkey’s hand in a clear glass jar.

“Get out of me bag!”

"Don't worry, I don't want the junk you've been stealing from Black, I just want—ah."

Tom pulled out something gold. For a moment, his face was transfigured by wild joy. It was so creepy an expression that Mundungus sidestepped away, disturbed.

“You’re mad,” he said. “I’ll tell them about you.”

“Tell them what?” Tom said absently, sliding the golden object into his pocket. “That I’m a bad person? They already know that.”

He offered Mundungus the bag. Mundungus grabbed it. He spat on the floor at Tom’s feet, whirled, and rushed down the stairs.

“What was that?” Harry demanded as the front door slammed behind Mundungus. “What did you take?”

“Not here,” Tom said. He went down the stairs and into the small bedroom they shared, Harry following behind. Once inside, Tom looked over his shoulder to check that the door was closed, then pulled the object out of his pocket. It looked like a large golden locket on a thin chain.

“If you’d told me you wanted a necklace, I’d have bought you one,” Harry said. “You didn’t have to mug Mundungus.”

“This isn’t just any necklace,” Tom breathed, stroking his long fingers over the gleaming surface. “This is Salazar Slytherin’s locket, Harry.”

Harry moved closer. Reluctantly, he could admit that it was a gorgeous piece of jewellery; a perfect oval of gold bearing a fine carving of a snake. The snake’s single emerald eye gleamed.

“How can you be sure?” he asked, curious despite himself.

"I've seen illustrations of it in books."

“Bit tacky isn’t it? A big bit of gold like that.”

Tom looked up for the first time. “What’s got you in a mood?”

“You mean, other than you just randomly attacking someone? What if Sirius had—”

“It’s a Horcrux,” Tom said. His wild joy was back; he smiled at Harry, as if inviting him to share in it. “I’m surprised you can’t sense it yourself, now you’re so close. This is it. This is what I’ve been feeling all this time.”

“That?” Harry asked. It felt as if Tom had just poured cold water over his head. Somehow, he had not thought about what would happen if they found it.

"Of course,” Tom breathed. "What better place to put a piece of my soul?"

He admired the locket one more time, then held it out to Harry. It was a surprisingly trusting gesture. Harry hesitated, then took it from his hand.
The metal was warm. More so, perhaps, than it should have been. Harry turned it over, looking for a clasp. There was none, but the locket didn’t open, even when he ran a nail under the seam where the two halves joined.

“I think I’ll use Parseltongue to open it,” Tom said. “That worked with the ring.”

Harry hardly heard him. The longer he held the locket, the more he became convinced that it was pulsing in his hand. He shuddered and handed it back to Tom, trying to convince himself that it was just his own heartbeat, or else his mind playing tricks on him.

But either way, there was no more doubt in his mind that Tom was right about what it was.

“A ring, a necklace, and maybe a tiara too,” Harry said, forcing a smile. “What’s next, Herpo the Foul’s cufflinks?”

"I don’t think they had cufflinks in Herpo's time," Tom said, absently. He held the locket up to the watery light coming through the window. "Well, I suppose I should—"

He raised it to his lips.

Harry startled. "You're going to do it now?"

Tom turned to him, surprised. "When else? There's a chance that ugly little tramp will snitch on me. If we're discovered, they’ll destroy the Horcrux before I have a chance to absorb it."

"Can you even do it without your magic?"

"I'm sure," Tom said. He turned from Harry and raised it to his lips.

Harry felt unaccountably nervous. For a moment, he could have sworn there was a cold breeze blowing on the back of his neck. He looked around, just to double check that the door was shut behind him. It was. By the time he turned back, Tom had hissed something and pressed his lips to the metal.

Something dark seemed to bloom in the space between them, like a cloud passing across the sun. Then it lifted, and Harry could see Tom again, standing silhouetted in half-profile against the window.

How long had it been? Harry tried to count the seconds. It had only taken a moment for Tom to absorb the ring, right? He had pressed the Horcrux to his lips, breathed in sharply and then slumped forwards.

He did none of that now.

. . . three elephants . . . four elephants . . . five elephants . . .

Tom gave a compulsive shiver. His eyes snapped open, looking down at the object in his hand.

“Tom?” Harry ventured.

Tom didn’t move. Harry stepped closer, away from the door.

“Tom?”

Tom jerked at the sound of his name. He looked up from the locket and turned to Harry, face open and utterly familiar.
His eyes were a bright, arterial red.
Harry jerked backwards.

Tom tilted his head, looking at him like one might look at a mildly interesting painting.

"Your eyes . . ." Harry said.

Tom raised his fingers to his face quizzically. "Oh?"

Harry didn’t reply. Something about this situation was making him profoundly uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure what was wrong—besides the obvious—but he could not shake the feeling that something was.

Tom slipped the locket over his head, then paused, attention caught by his own hands. He examined them meticulously, from the ink stain on his left index finger to the tiny scar on the web of his thumb. Then, bizarrely, he ran them over his own torso, as if feeling the shape of his body.

"How old am I?" he asked, voice floaty and far away. The question did not seem to be directed at anyone in particular. "Sixteen, perhaps? Seventeen? It's been a while since I was this skinny."

It felt as if the floor had given way beneath Harry. This wasn’t Tom. Tom wasn’t there. Or, if he was, he wasn’t in control of his own body anymore. The person speaking . . .

. . . was the locket itself.

Very slowly, Harry moved his hand to the right pocket of his jeans, where he kept his wand. His hand closed around the hilt—

A slitted red eye flicked to him.

For a moment, neither of them moved. The Horcrux looked at Harry, and Harry looked at the Horcrux. The room was silent.

Harry’s fingers twitched.

The Horcrux crossed the two steps to him and seized his wrist just as he withdrew the wand. He wrenched it up, level with his head, and squeezed the tendons so brutally that his hand opened involuntarily. The wand clattered to the floor. Harry tried to twist out of his grip, but before he could, the Horcrux’s other hand closed around his throat. Harry panicked and bucked against him, but the Horcrux only held him tighter, close to his body like some grotesque parody of a slow dance.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Harry couldn’t answer. His blunt nails were scrabbling at the hand around his throat. The Horcrux—Riddle—frowned. He slackened his grip enough to let Harry draw breath.
Riddle sighed and cut off Harry's air again. He waited patiently while his face grew redder and redder, relenting only when Harry was on the edge of passing out.

"If you scream again, I'll choke you until you're dead," he said pleasantly. "Nod if you understand."

Hating him, Harry inclined his head as much as he was able to. Black spots bloomed across his vision at the movement.

"Good." Riddle's thumb stroked his pulse point, like a reward for a pet. "Now, answer me. Who are you?"

"H-Harry."

"Harry," Riddle repeated, rolling the name on his tongue. "And how do you know me, Harry?"

"I don't."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying!"

"Oh?" Riddle cocked his head to the side. "So we've never met?"

"No."

"Funny then, that you would call me Tom."

Fuck.

"No I didn't," Harry said weakly.

Riddle smiled. Then, to Harry's horror, he leant in close and took a long sniff of his neck, nudging his chin up with his nose.

"You smell like me."

Harry glared at him. His throat hurt and he was scared and upset and profoundly creeped out, but increasingly angry too. This was all Tom's fault—how could he have been so stupid and reckless? Why hadn’t he waited to absorb the Horcrux? It did not matter, in that moment, that Harry hadn’t said anything either—it was Tom's job to know all this stuff! All those horrible books he read about dark magic and Horcruxes and whatever else . . . hadn’t he even thought about the possibility that the Horcrux might take him over?

He drew on that anger now, breathing on the hot coals until it burned steadily inside his chest.

Riddle saw it in his face. "That's a good expression," he said, pulling Harry up by the neck until he was standing on the balls of his feet, gasping for air. "The previous owner of this body is fighting me too. I can only guess at the circumstances that led him here, and evidently to your bed, but it is so convenient for me. Was he my diary or my ring, do you know?"

Harry didn’t answer. Riddle laughed. "No matter . . . I can prise those secrets from you later. First, where are we?" When Harry still said nothing, the hand on his throat tightened a hair. "I'll Legilimise you if I need to."
"London," Harry admitted reluctantly.

"Where in London?"

"My Godfather's house."

"Oh?" Riddle cast a glance over his shoulder. "Is your Godfather a Muggle?"

"No," Harry said, puzzled by the question. Couldn’t Riddle see Tom's spellbooks on the desk?

"That's strange. I can't sense any magic . . ."

Harry's knees went momentarily weak with relief. He had completely forgotten about the magical block Dumbledore had put on Tom, but evidently it applied to Riddle too. Riddle couldn’t do anything—he could choke Harry as much as he liked, but he couldn’t kill him, not if he couldn’t break the bond. And he couldn’t kill Sirius either, or torture him, or probably even leave the house—

"Is something funny?" Riddle demanded.

Harry gave a rather breathless chuckle.

Riddle frowned. He seemed to have realised that something was wrong. Then, before Harry had a chance to prepare, Riddle released his wrist and throat and shoved him back.

Hard.

Harry collided painfully with the door. Riddle swooped to snatch his wand off the floor.

"I can't feel my own magic," he muttered, sweeping the wand in a downwards arc. It produced not a single spark.

Harry righted himself and rubbed his sore throat, watching Riddle warily. His hand found the doorknob, and he stood there, indecisive. Should he call for Sirius? He wasn’t sure he wanted to bring him into this. For one thing, it would involve admitting his part in searching for and retrieving the locket, and the fact he’d let Tom—

Harry swallowed. Was Tom even still alive? Riddle had said he was fighting; was he still?

"Colloportus," Riddle said, pointing his wand at the door. Nothing happened.

"It's blocked," Harry said helpfully.

Riddle's face twisted with anger. A moment later, however, it was replaced with icy focus. "I see that."

"You might as well let Tom out again, because you're not going to—"

"I've read about such things," Riddle said. He didn’t seem to be listening to Harry anymore. "Putting a block on someone's magic is no easy task. The spell takes a lot of energy and is surprisingly delicate; a block designed for one wizard will not fit another. This one only works on me because my magic is similar to the younger Horcrux it was created for."

He paused, twirling the wand between his fingers. "Similar, but not the same. I am older now. Older and cleverer and far more powerful than when I was a boy." He twirled the wand again, thoughtfully, and this time something glinted at the tip. "Ah, there we are—"
Harry didn’t take time to think. He just pushed off the door and launched himself at Riddle.

Riddle was caught by surprise. He dodged Harry’s first clumsy swing, but the next one connected with his ear. He cursed, then caught Harry’s arm and swung him around, shoving him forwards into the desk. Paper scattered everywhere, filling the air like a flock of birds taking off. Harry ignored the pain blooming in his hip, twisted and kicked with all his might. Riddle staggered backwards and almost tripped over the battered chamber pot Dumbledore had conjured some three weeks before.

Lately, Tom hadn’t been picking up his room.

Riddle staggered backwards but didn’t drop the wand. He levelled it at Harry as Harry charged towards him, and cast—no spell, just raw power and fury. The air rippled with heat.

It was too late to dodge. Harry gave a scream of pain as it scorched up his arm. His momentum carried him forwards, however—he hit Riddle and they both fell to the ground. They grappled, but then Riddle rolled them over and jabbed the wand under Harry's chin.

"That was a mistake," he said, eyes bright red and furious.

Harry reared up and smashed his forehead into Riddle's.

**CRACK**

The pain was blinding. For a moment, Harry was terrified that he'd fractured something. Dimly, he heard the Horcrux gasp in pain.

Harry shoved him away and opened his eyes. The world was blurry— and a moment later, he realised the spellotape on his glasses had broken. They fell away in two separate halves.

Riddle was on his back. His forehead was bleeding freely; rivulets of blood dripped down his face. He tried to sit up, but his movements were jerky, uncoordinated. He looked up, and Harry thought he saw a flash of brown in his eyes.

"TOM!"

Riddle jerked at the name. Harry grabbed his chin and wrenched it up. Riddle snarled, red-eyed again, and tried to seize his throat with his empty hands.

"Oh no you don't," Harry growled, peeling back his fingers. He grabbed Riddle by the neck of his shirt and hit him in the face.

"No," the Horcrux said, grabbing Harry's arm. His other hand clawed the carpet in search of the wand. His movements were slow and confused. "No, you—"

The words didn’t even seem to be directed at Harry.

Harry hit him again, and again, and again. He couldn’t even feel the pain in his knuckles and forehead. Then there was a wet crunch, and Harry realised dimly that he'd broken Tom's nose.

Riddle's back arched. He spasmed beneath Harry. Harry sat back on his knees, watching him. He should have been scared, or anxious, or angry, but instead he was in that strange state where adrenaline drowned everything else out. His wand was next to him on the carpet; he picked it up and trained it on Tom with his violently shaking hands.

Tom shuddered again, then went still. Harry shook his shoulder and his eyes flickered open. They
were dark, a much darker colour than Riddle's red. Harry made a noise that could have been a sob or a sneeze—he didn’t know himself.

"H-Harry?" Tom said. He looked utterly shocked. His nose and forehead were bleeding freely. "Harry—"

A knock on the door made Harry almost drop his wand.

"Are you alright in there?" Sirius called.

Harry looked at Tom, who stared back, uncomprehending. He said the first thing that came into his head.

"I broke a lamp!"

"Do you need help?" Sirius asked. Then, to Harry and Tom's mutual horror, the doorknob began to turn. Harry got to his feet and staggered across the room, grabbing it before Sirius could open the door.

"No!"

Sirius went silent. Then;

"Are you naked in there?"

"NO!"

There was a doubtful silence that made Harry feel awful. Then footsteps, heading away.

Harry turned back to Tom, who had sat up, holding onto the fireplace for balance. He was dabbing his nose with the sleeve of his shirt. Harry moved closer, just enough to be able to reassure himself that Tom's eyes were brown.

"Is he still in there?"

"What?"

"Your fucking Horcrux!"

"He wasn’t mine . . . he was Voldemort's," Tom said. He sounded disoriented. Harry had very little sympathy.

"The locket! Is he still there?"

"I think he's gone. He couldn’t fight both of us at once." Tom looked around at the state of the room in amazement. "You made a mess."

Harry ran his hands over his face, then pulled Tom up to sit on the bed, since he didn’t seem able to do it under his own steam.

"It's like all my balance is gone . . ."

"Did you know that could happen?" Harry demanded.

Tom looked up at Harry. For the first time, Harry registered how shocked and scared Tom looked. Hair mussed, pale under all the blood, nose visibly skewed.
"Of course not," he said, slumping to the side. The locket swung innocuously against his chest.

"How much of that did you see? Did you hear what he said?" Harry asked. He swapped the wand to his left hand, and, with some difficulty, healed the wound on his forearm.

"I didn’t see anything," Tom said. He pointed vaguely in the direction of the window. "I was standing there, and then I wasn’t anymore. I wasn’t anywhere." He shuddered. "I felt him though. He was older than me; mid-twenties, maybe. And so, so strong . . ."

"What a bright idea that was," Harry said scathingly. "It'll be fine, Harry. Well, it wasn’t fine!"

"How was I supposed to know that?" Tom asked. He wobbled where he sat, then fell onto his side on the mattress.

Harry heaved him back up by the arm. Then, with a sigh, he sat down and let his very disoriented friend lean on him.

"Why did it happen? The ring didn’t—"

"The ring wasn’t awake." As if noticing it for the first time, Tom grabbed the locket around his neck and pulled it off, heedless of the red line the chain made on his skin before it snapped. He looked at it, then held it out to Harry.

"I'm good thanks," Harry said dryly.

Tom shrugged and dropped it. He had probably been aiming for the bed, but it landed close to the edge and slipped off, hitting the floor with a clang.

"I think he was drowsing," he said. "Just drifting along, drawing tiny amounts of energy from the magic of the house. I remember what that was like, sort of, from when I was in the diary at Hogwarts. When Pansy first wrote in me, I couldn’t understand where I was or what had happened. It took me a long time to properly wake up." He looked around. "How long has it been since—?"

"About ten minutes."

Tom wiped his face, smearing the blood everywhere. He winced when the movement disturbed his nose.

Harry took pity on him. He retrieved the pieces of his glasses and joined them back together, then went to work fixing Tom's face with his wand. Tom slumped over as soon as he was done—not asleep, perhaps, but not properly conscious either. He seemed utterly exhausted.

Harry could still see the Horcrux's red eyes in his mind.

He shuddered. There had been something wrong with Riddle, something that went deeper than his age—a level of cruelty that Tom aspired to but never quite reached. Tom had always seen Harry as a peer, at least to some extent, but Riddle . . .

Harry shuddered again. He removed the blood from his clothes with magic, then left the room, closing the door with a shaking hand. He was used to life-or-death situations, but he didn’t expect them to happen in his own bedroom.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Harry was avoiding him.
Tom had woken up alone, wounds healed. Harry hadn’t spoken to him at dinner, just nudged his food around his plate with his fork and left before Tom was halfway done. Black had given the two of them an exaggerated eye roll, but made no comment.

He hadn’t come down to sleep either.

It was past midnight. Tom sat on his own bed, lights off. His mind was too much of a mess to practice Occlumency. It felt like a river in flood; all eddies and whirlpools, each current taking his thoughts in a new and uncomfortable direction.

Tom slid out of bed and left the room with no particular intention. He wandered up to the first floor, then paused on the landing, eyes caught by the view of the night sky through the drawing room window. He entered the room without turning on the light, then sat on the sill, one knee drawn up to his chest, curtains around him like a shroud.

There was a porch light on down the street and several lit upstairs windows. The yellow glare of the streetlamps was partially obscured by the ash trees that lined the pavement. A man loped past, body casting a long, distorted shadow. Tom watched him until he rounded the corner and disappeared from view.

It had been dark when the Horcrux took him over, dark and cold, like falling into an endless well. There had been a single moment of warning, a realisation that something was not right, before the ground gave way beneath him and he was sucked into blackness. It was not at all like being Legilimised.

This threat had come from inside.

It had been him, but not him. They had not spoken, not exactly, but Tom had screamed as he fell and felt smugness back.

Tom pressed his forehead to the glass, wishing he could feel the cool night breeze on his face. How long had it lasted? Harry had said minutes, but it could have been seconds or hours. It had been like being in the diary, but worse, because it felt not as if he was dropping into unconsciousness, but rather . . .

Death.

His body had seemed more and more distant. At some point, he hadn’t been able to hear Riddle anymore, or see any light. When he reached out, he couldn’t feel a wall. There was nothing but the sensation of falling, and even that began to fade . . .

What happened when a Horcrux died?

In the months before he made the diary, the question of death had plagued Tom relentlessly, stalking him like a Thestral, invisible to everyone else but tangible to him. He had feared dying; feared a bomb or an invasion or the Dementor’s Kiss. Splitting his soul was supposed to make that feeling go away—and maybe it had, for Voldemort.

Tom didn’t know how he was so sure that the locket was dead, and the ring, and the piece of soul that had been inside Harry, but he was. And he would have been dead too, if the locket had won. Where did a Horcrux go? Was it the same place where normal souls went? Or did they all just fade out into blackness, as if they never existed in the first place?

It hadn’t happened though.
The first thing Tom had felt was pain. It was vague, far away, as if it belonged to someone else. Then cracks began to form in the space above him. Hairline thin at first, they spread, joined together into great fissures. Spurred on by the Horcrux's mounting fear, Tom threw himself towards them, willing his body to rise.

And it had. He hurtled up towards the light. All of a sudden, he could feel his own body again, even though it still moved without his permission. He could see Harry, hear him. He had felt the Horcrux too, felt his confusion and anger. It had been like seeing his own reflection in a warped pane of glass; close enough to be uncanny. More so than Voldemort had felt—the Locket had Tom's own way of thinking, Tom's self-confidence, but with the experience to back it up. And pride, so much pride. Tom had thrown himself at him again and again, asserting his identity over his. He pushed the Horcrux back into the depths of his mind, into the same place he'd tried to send Tom.

Tom shivered, although the night wasn’t cold. If the Horcrux had been just a little more awake . . . if he’d had a little more time to get used to Tom's body . . . if Harry hadn’t intervened . . .

The stairs creaked.

Tom looked around. For a moment, he thought it was Harry, but then he recognised Black's heavier tread. He stayed quiet as Black entered the drawing room and sat down on the armchair. He lit the lamp, gave a long sigh, and opened his book to his bookmark.

Then, drawn by some sixth sense, he looked up to see Tom's eyes on him.

"Fuck!"

Tom smiled as Black quite visibly leapt out of his skin.

"Fuck, you're creepy! What are you doing sitting there in the dark like that?"

"I can't sleep."

Black sighed and released his chest. "I can't either. My trial is tomorrow."

Tom shrugged. He didn’t care about Black's personal drama.

Black looked at him for a long moment, then closed his book. The mood grew solemn, and Tom realised, to his chagrin, that Black was about to say something extremely tiresome.

"You know, we haven’t really had the chance to speak—"

"We ate dinner together," Tom reminded him.

"I mean alone," Black said, looking very constipated. He ran a hand nervously through his hair. "I just want to say, if you hurt Harry—"

"Don't be trite," Tom snapped. "Do you think I care?"

Black looked shocked at being talked back to. Tom raised a mocking eyebrow in return. The approval of the adults in the house had been important right after he'd arrived, when presenting himself as a normal, harmless teenager might have bought him voices to speak in his favour if Dumbledore tried to off him again. That no longer seemed imminently likely, however, so Black's opinion was of no consequence.

Black recovered quickly, however.
"There you are," he said, in a quite different tone. "I've been wondering if I'd get to meet you—the real you—before you left."

Tom looked back out the window. Unfortunately, the view of the street was muddied by the light in the room. All he could see was his own face.

"I don’t know if you've noticed," he said, "but your godson is a masochist. If he didn’t like being hurt . . . well, he's had opportunities to end it."

"I'm adopting him," Black said, after a pause.

Tom rolled his eyes. Did Black seriously think he hadn’t figured that out already? Harry wasn’t nearly as good at hiding things as he thought he was. It was the most logical course of action, now that all his relatives were dead.

"How happy for the two of you."

"Does that make you jealous?"

Tom turned back to him incredulously. "Of not having an opportunity to experience your clumsy attempts at parenting firsthand? No."

"No, I meant, are you jealous over Harry?"

"There's something quite special about being an orphan," Tom said, ignoring the question. "No one gives you anything. It makes you . . ."

"A brat, apparently."

Tom was startled into a laugh. Black sat back in his armchair, and, strangely, Tom had the impression that he was more comfortable with him than he had been before.

"Now fuck off," he said, not unpleasantly. "I'm going to read and I can't do that with you perched there like a vulture."

Tom shrugged and slid off the windowsill. He went out into the corridor, closed the door behind him and let his eyes slowly re-adjust to the dark.

Now, down to his bedroom or up to Harry's?

It was an easy choice. Tom climbed the stairs, keeping his tread light enough that Black wouldn’t hear which direction he was going in. He prised open Harry's door and snuck inside.

Harry was sleeping. Tom drew closer and lifted the covers to reveal that he was curled around a pillow.

A smile found its way onto his face; foreign and familiar at the same time. How could someone be so irritating and so endearing?

However, just as Tom was sliding into bed with him, Harry jolted so violently that he was almost knocked to the floor. Harry sat up and fumbled for the lamp. He turned it on and stared into Tom's eyes.

Tom stayed obediently still.

"What are you doing here?" Harry demanded, apparently satisfied that Tom was still himself. He
grabbed his glasses from the nightstand and jammed them onto his nose.

"You didn’t say I couldn’t."

"I thought that was too obvious to say!"

This wasn’t going the way Tom had imagined. He lay down on his back, looking up at Harry, trying to make himself look non-threatening. What words would Harry want to hear?

"I'm bored. I don't like sleeping alone."

Harry dropped his head into his hands. Sensing victory, Tom closed his eyes and wriggled to get comfortable. However, he was surprised a moment later when Harry climbed off the end of the bed and grabbed him by the arm, heaving him violently up.

"Get out!"

"No!" Tom said, trying to pull his arm back.

"I'm not bluffing, Tom. Today wasn’t fun. I didn’t like being choked until I almost passed out. I didn’t like how you rushed into absorbing the locket. I don’t like the person you grow up into. I want some time to myself, without you. Now, do I have to get my wand, or are you going to leave by yourself?"

"You were cuddling your pillow!" Tom said, reluctantly getting out of bed. How could Harry pretend he didn’t want him there? He obviously did.

"And I'll keep cuddling it. I don’t need you!" Harry said as he shoved him out the door. "And don't come back!"

The door closed in Tom's face. A moment later, he heard Harry lock it with magic. Tom kicked it, then stood in the hallway, fuming.

A small scratching noise made him whirl around.

The house elf was standing at the end of the hall, near the bathroom. Its claw-like hands twisted the material of the filthy tea-towel it wore.

"What are you looking at?" Tom hissed.

"What's it doing out of bed, the nasty little thief?" the elf muttered. "Sneaking around the house, looking for things to steal, is it? Oh, we know what it keeps under its bed in my poor old master's study."

Tom was tempted to kick the creature too, but then reconsidered; it might scream and disturb Black on the floor below. He stormed down the stairs—quietly—then lay back down on his own bed. He wasn’t even sure if all his ire was directed at Harry, but it was easier to focus on him than anything else.

Angrily, he pictured the bond. He imagined it, a thin line of black, red and gold that rose up from his core, through the ceiling and the empty room above, into Harry. He tried to follow the line with his mind, focussing on it the same way he did when he practised Occlumency. Even if he couldn’t get into Harry's room physically, Harry couldn’t stop him doing this.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~
Black left for his trial the next morning, clad in doxy-eaten dress robes. Harry was tetchy and irritable all day, which, to be fair, might have had more to do with his Godfather's legal problems than the incident with the Horcrux or any strange dreams. Tom watched him pace back and forth across the room, only stopping when Black arrived back, late in the evening.

His huge grin told the two of them everything they needed to know.

Unfortunately, being cleared of all charges occasioned a great deal of obnoxious hugging and declarations of affection, which only grew worse when Black produced signed and stamped adoption papers from his bag. Tom raised his book higher so he didn’t have to look at it.

To his surprise, Black pushed it down with a rolled-up newspaper.

"Do you boys fancy some fresh air?"

Harry rushed over like a puppy and grabbed onto Tom's armchair. "Really? You'd take us outside? Is that allowed?"

"I'm a free man now," Black said proudly. "We need to celebrate, and how can we do that without beer? We can go down to the off-licence and pick up a few bottles. It's not like Riddle can run off without his magic."

They'd been stuck inside for three weeks with nowhere to go but the tiny concrete courtyard at the back of the house. Tom stood up, reluctantly excited.

Outside, it was a cool, clear evening on the cusp of sunset. The breeze that wafted the tops of the trees carried the scents of honeysuckle, lavender, and cigarette smoke. Tom hung onto the railings as they walked, delighted by the feeling of paint flaking off beneath his fingers. Harry stooped to pick up a leaf. He grinned at Tom, differences momentarily forgotten in their shared delight.

Their route took them down two more streets. The houses were similar to Grimmauld Place: great tall terraces with dignified facades. Black led them through a deserted park, then out onto a busier street. On the corner stood three shops. One was shuttered, but the takeaway and off-licence were open.

"You should wait outside," Black said. "No, actually, wait across the street by that bench. I don’t want them to think I'm buying alcohol for you."

He went into the shop while Harry and Tom crossed the road. Tom sat on the bench and stretched out his legs. Harry kicked a pebble back and forth.

"I can't believe how much I've missed this," Harry said.

"Me too," Tom admitted. He hadn’t realised how badly the confinement had been weighing on his mood, but now that he was outside he felt instantly lighter.

A car went past, then a woman walking her dog. She gave the two of them a doubtful look.

"Did you dream of anything last night?" Tom asked.

"Like what?"

"Anything."

"Did you try something?" Harry asked suspiciously. "No, wait, of course you did."

Tom said nothing.

"Maybe. I don’t remember well enough to say."

Harry nodded.

"Sorry," Tom said eventually, even though nothing was his fault.

Harry gaped at him. "What did you just say?"

"I'm not repeating it."

"No, go on, I really didn’t hear," Harry said. Tom didn’t miss the smile lifting the corners of his mouth. When Tom didn’t reply, he sighed. "I know you're only saying that to manipulate me."

"So?"

Harry kicked the stone again. It landed in the bushes, out of reach.

"I'm not even sure if I'm angry with you," he said thoughtfully. "It was more . . . the reminder of who you really are, I suppose."

"He didn’t feel quite like me," Tom confessed. "Like me, but also like a different person."

Harry picked up on his tone. "Oh? That upsets you?"

"What if I turn into someone I don't want to be? What if I've been . . . changed . . . by this whole experience?"

Harry laughed. "I didn’t know you were self-aware enough to worry about that sort of thing. C'mon, do you really want to be Voldemort? He's ugly."

"And you're shallow. Am I just a pretty face to you?"

"That's about 98% of the appeal, yes."

Tom laughed. Sometimes he forgot how fun Harry could be. "It doesn’t matter how I look. I want to be powerful."

"I'd like to be powerful too, maybe," Harry said wistfully. "But in a different way."

Tom shrugged. Power was power.

Black came out of the shop a few minutes later, carrying two bulging plastic bags. They took the long route back, around the park. Once in Grimmauld Place, Black unpacked onto the coffee table in the drawing room while Harry and Tom sat on the sofa across from him. He had bought a lot of beer, and a clear glass bottle Tom thought might be gin. He snapped two cans out of the plastic holding them and tapped them with his wand to cool the liquid inside. Droplets of perspiration appeared on the metal.

"This one is mild," he said, cracking open a can and handing it to Harry. He opened another for Tom, then twisted the cap off a brown bottle with his bare hand and took a long swig. "Merlin, I've missed this. Remus stopped buying me beer months ago."

He raised the bottle in a toast. Tom and Harry reluctantly copied him.
"To a fresh start."

Tom took a sip, then scowled. It tasted absolutely disgusting. Harry did the same and shared a look with him.

Black roared with laughter. "Kids! I should have brought you some fruity ciders or a WKD or something. Believe me, you'll like it when you're older."

"Yeah, because it would burn your tastebuds off," Harry muttered.

Black waved a hand.

"It tastes like piss," Tom commented. "Why would you drink this?"

Black rolled his eyes. "I might have some lemonade downstairs for the two of you to mix it with. Hang on—" he raised his wand lazily. "Accio lemonade!"

A crash sounded downstairs. Then another. Then a large bottle, which was thankfully plastic, zoomed into the room. Black caught it deftly by the neck. "Okay, hand over your drinks."

He collected their cans and took them over to the sideboard, where he poured out lemonade and a token amount of beer into a pair of jet-black tumblers. He passed one to each of them.

"The glassware is black, of course," he said. "Do you get it? Black? My family was so clever."

Tom took a sip. It was better, but still not exactly pleasant.

"It's not as good as Butterbeer," he said.

"Butterbeer's alright, but too sweet," Black said. "I'll take you over to Molly's tomorrow—she wants to see the two of you before you go back to school. The kids are getting the train the day after. I imagine Dumbledore will Apparate you or take you through the fire." He stretched out an arm over the back of the chair. "I feel like I should say something wise. Something about growing up . . . sex education . . . not murdering random people . . ."

They'd had one candid conversation, and it was like Black had decided they were friends! Tom rolled his eyes at him and they fell into a lazy, companionable silence. Black drained his bottle and poured himself a measure of gin.

Tom looked down into his own cup and wished he hadn't. The dark glass made the liquid appear pitch black. It reminded him of the way the darkness had swallowed him up, burying him alive in his own mind. He shivered without meaning to, suddenly cold.

End Notes

I adore comments and constructive criticism is always very welcome♡

My tumblr

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