The All Seeing Eye Glass

by seacaptain

Summary

When Harry lands himself in 1942 he officially stops caring. Surrounded by witches and wizards that are blissfully ignorant that there's a time-traveler in their midst, Harry resolves to make his own changes, which results in some interesting and unexpected consequences.
In 1997 Hermione Granger found her favorite red, suede armchair in the Gryffindor common room. Curling up in it, the bushy haired girl summoned her favorite leather-bound book, Hogwarts: A History. She’d re-read it on three separate occasions. Now she’d be re-reading it once more.

Ever since that student had disappeared, Gryffindor house had been in shambles. The savior of the wizarding world had all but left them for dust. Of course, Hermione Granger knew better. The student was fine, even if he was the most irresponsible, foolish, idiotic boy she’d ever had the misfortune of knowing. Hermione traced her index finger along the table of contents, and turned to the back of the text. She was searching for one name in particular. Harry Potter. If Harry was being as impulsive as she knew him to be, Hermione could soon begin expecting changes. She frowned wondering just how much damage Harry could possibly inflict. She’d warned him of the deleterious effects warping with the past could have on the present. For all she knew the present Harry could cease to exist. Hermione shook her head. No, no it wouldn’t do to mull over the worst case scenario, especially now that there was so little she could do.

“Aha!” Hermione mused. She was oblivious to the curious glances other students threw her direction. Hurriedly, she turned to page 2,466 and scanned its contents, eyes catching on Potter.

“Oh Haaaarry” she moaned as she read the short paragraph available, and read it once more. It was incomprehensible what she’d just read.

"Harry Potter better known as Harry the Mad is the only living wizard who claims to have time traveled more than a decade into the past. Such claims have been ongoing since the 40s and having not provided irrefutable proof his claims have gone largely ignored except by a few zealous fans, such as Xenophilius Lovegood, editor of The Quibbler. In 1942 Harry Potter made acquaintance with his long-time partner and intermittent lover, Tom Riddle, a brilliant magical-physicist, groundbreaking rune-master and one of the greater politicians of the wizarding world. Inspired by Harry Potter, Riddle invented the all-seeing-eye glass. Though detested by many a seer, such a magically powerful object has gifted wizarding civilization with omniscience and has allowed wizarding society to shape its own history as it happens. Many a crisis has been avoided thanks to the likes of Tom Riddle and his muse Harry Potter. Note: turn to chapter 42 for more information on the all-seeing-eye-glass”

A few minutes passed as Hermione contemplated the ludicrousness of her friend’s situation. Long time partner and intermittent lover? Hermione raised her eyebrows. Well then, there was one question about Harry that she now had the answer to. Though who would have thought of all things Harry would seduce Lord Voldemort. It was too unimaginable. It was ridiculous. They were mortal enemies. Moreover, Harry wasn’t exactly seductive was he? She surmised it all had to have been accidental. Still though, wasn’t this better than the alternative?

“Neither can live while the other survives” Hermione muttered, eyes gazing at the words: all-seeing-eye-glass

Hermione thoughtfully hummed and was about to turn her book to chapter 42 when…
Out of nowhere she felt very, very confused. as if she’d forgotten something very, very important. What had she been doing?

Hermione looked down at the book in her lap and furrowed her eyebrows. how many more times could she possibly read Hogwarts: A History. She looked at the page she was on. Really, there was only so many instances she could read about the time Harry the Mad had fought with the Brilliant Tom Riddle in the Hogwarts courtyard before it became monotonous. She sighed, reclining back in her seat. She wondered how her old DADA professor was doing. Harry the Mad was a kindly middle-aged wizard with dazzling green eyes, messy hair that began greying in her fourth year, and round glasses. A bit bonkers though. She recalled how he’d even given the Weasley twins that small fortune when they’d graduated. They had tried to refuse but he’d insisted. Told them to consider it an investment. Such a sweet man and one of the better professors she’d had, even if he never quite assigned enough homework for Hermione’s taste. He’d since retired and eloped with Riddle for the fifth time. Somewhere in India this time around.

As if in a trance Hermione hazily closed the book. She felt a headache coming on and she really needed to get started on her herbology essay. Hermione set Hogwarts:A History aside unbeknownst to how much her life had just changed from a mere minute ago. She didn’t pause to ponder if everything had always been this way. It just was.

It was 1942 and like many days before, Tom Riddle had found solace in the Hogwarts library. He’d spent approximately five minutes speaking to Madame Quincy, conversing about his in depth research on dark wizards of the 1600's when she’d at last let him scour the restricted section. Madame Quincy was so wholly dedicated to his learning, that she never suspected a thing.

"Sensum Pro Repo: In short, a curse to confuse the senses and nerves. Most often used as an interrogation technique between warring municipals at the start of the 18th century, this curse caused many a wizard to lose their mind. This curse elicits an extremely loud form of tinnitus along with prickling pain all over the body and an overall sense of dread in whomever it is cast on. The curse can be raised and redrawn repeatedly. Sir Dunsmuir the second who claimed to have died and come back to life on five separate occasions described hell as “one hundred people stuck in a very small room, all with sharp needles sticking out of every pore of their body.” To make someone experience a special kind of hell was exactly what this curse was designed to do. To use it, though yours truly does not recommend it, one must simply flick their wand upwards and then-“

“What are you reading?” a voice inquired from over his shoulder.

Tom would have jumped if he weren’t half expecting it. At the mere thought of the boy, Potter had a most irritating tendency to suddenly appear.

Everyone at Hogwarts knew that the new student, Harry Bleeding Potter was barmy. But that didn’t
explain why the unfortunate Tom Riddle had to be repeatedly subjected to his madness. It was like he had it out for him, Tom speculated. But he quickly threw that notion out his mental window. Potter lacked the forethought and contrivance for that. For whatever reason though, ever since Potter had transferred to Hogwarts at the beginning of the school year, he’d attached himself to Tom’s hip. Of this, Tom was certain.

The fifth year Slytherin swiftly shut the book on morally-ambiguous curses he’d wheedled out of the restricted section. He leaned back casually, folding his arms and crossing his legs… but not before he drew his school bag closer. As usual, Potter stuck his nose where it didn’t belong.

“Brushing up on my Transfiguration” Tom replied

Edging around the table, the sixth year Gryffindor grabbed the book lightning fast. Fast enough that he rendered Tom unable to do anything but reach to stop him. Tom’s hands paused midair as Potter examined the book’s spine.

“Curses that aren’t yet illegal, but probably should be, by Bazzie Bowers” Potter read out loud.

“Hmm yes,” he mused.

“I remember when I studied this in transfiguration last year.” He announced this somberly, with a completely straight face.

“You didn’t attend Hogwarts last year” Tom seethed. Not to mention Bazzie Bowers was hardly on the curriculum… But Tom wasn’t about to admit that now that Potter had played along with his unbelievably awful lie. Potter was just toying with him, he had to be.

“My great Aunt err Mum-no great Aunt… great Aunt-Mum”

“Your great Aunt Mum, that doesn’t make a lick of sense potter” Tom interrupted. The scathing tone of his voice would’ve singed anyone-else, but as per usual Potter was immune to Tom’s hateful demeanor. Frequently, Potter was the only one on the receiving end of it anyway. Keeping his façade up around someone so astoundingly irritating, so outright bizarre exhausted Tom. At some juncture, Tom’d grown tired of bothering. Besides, Potter was mad. No sane wizard would believe him no matter what he said.

“As I was saying, my great Aunt Mum… errr… Marge, sat me down at a table, much like this one. And she SLAPPED this book down in front of me.”

Another infuriating thing about Potter was that he never spoke as if he genuinely wanted to convey his thoughts and feelings. He was only filling the silence and wasting Tom’s time. The lack of validity and cohesion in his statements made him impossible to manipulate.

With one hand, Potter had begun opening a library window as he told his immensely fascinating tale, the other still clutching the publication close to his side. Tom only glared at him, eyes flickering between the messy-haired boy’s face and his precious book.

“I became a transfiguration genius last year, when she made me study every detail, every word, every period. Even the appendix… She wouldn’t let me leave until I memorized the whole thing. And with my newly acquired knowledge I accomplished many things. Many great things… I even
won a few awards. Best home-schooled magical custodian was one, I still have the 11th place ribbon somewhere.” Potter sighed wistfully, book still clutched in both his hands as he appeared to stare far into the distance out the library window. An incoming breeze blew Potter’s hair back.

Tom didn’t know where to start. On top of not speaking a word of sense Potter was blatantly speaking a load of shit as well. After his madness, Potter was infamous for his irredeemably lacking transfiguration skills. Rumor amongst the sixth years had it, Dumbledore had been forced to give him a Troll on the last exam. Dumbledore, whose preferential treatment of Gryffindors bordered on fanatical. Dumbledore.

Tom had been about to point this out when abruptly Potter tossed “Curses that aren’t yet illegal, but probably should be” right out the window. Down, Down the book fell, and the two of them could hear a few surprised yells as the book fell onto the courtyard lawn. Tom’s jaw nearly fell open in shock, but he quickly composed himself. He stood up, clenching his fists. It hadn’t been easy getting his hands on that work, it hadn’t been easy finding it among all the fodder of historical texts and biographies. Underneath Madame Quincy’s watchful eye it was near impossible to discover anything substantial. Yet Potter had just unceremoniously tossed it out of a window. A bloody window.

“Potter, this... this misconduct of yours... As a prefect... I cannot stand to-”

Did Potter just roll his eyes?

Abashed, Tom continued.

“I cannot stand to witness this any longer, I’m afraid I will have to punish-” He could not get any further as he was then hindered by the screeching librarian.

“HARRY POTTER!!!” Madame Quincy shrieked, her hands thrown up in the air.

Potter briskly pointed at Tom... almost as if prepared. “It was his fault Madame! Riddle made me do it!” Potter wore a convincingly apologetic expression. Tom squinted at him. It was instances like this that made him wonder if there was actually a method to his madness.

Madame Quincy lifted an eyebrow. Doubt found its place in every crevice on her face.

“Mr. Potter, unlike yourself, I have known Riddle for every year he has attended Hogwarts. Ever since he was a wee little first year.”

Tom grimaced at her humiliating description of himself.

“I trust Mr. Riddle. He has never once disappointed me in his respect of literature.” Madame Quincy shook her finger at Potter. She was trembling with held back rage. Tom smirked. Potter would be getting his just desserts.

“Suffice to say, I am not impressed Mr. Potter. Now that’ll be detention for you. And I never want to see something so vile... so absolutely disgusting from you again.” She lectured as if Potter had pillaged an entire village. Tom could've lost it.

“I swear, Riddle made me do it. He dared me to!” Harry Potter insisted though he was losing some of his earlier urgency.

Keep trying Potter. It’s your word against mine, and I’m far more credible to a foolish old bat like Quincy, Tom thought. For once Tom would be telling the truth as well. It was refreshing to not even have to do anything.
“Miss, Potter has been harassing me all afternoon. I see now he is hoping to land me in trouble.”
Tom explained gently. “I’ve no idea why. I’ve done nothing wrong”
For added effect he feigned a hurt and indignant expression. “I wish I could understand why you dislike me so, Harry” he turned to the other boy and looked him right in his vivid green eyes. Potter looked supremely unimpressed.
Madame Quincy nodded, seemingly taking Tom’s word. “I’ll be contacting your head of house, and he will come up with a suitable punishment” she said to Potter. She walked away but not before shooting Potter an especially nasty evil eye.
Potter glowered after the librarian, and turned his pinched face to Tom.

Tom fought back the urge to laugh, his lips twitching as he folded his arms and looked gaily at the older boy. He leaned against the table, next to his bag. “Just what were you attempting, Potter?” he drawled

Potter merely considered Tom for a moment. Then, without a word, he just… just GRABBED Tom’s bag and then he just… ran away with it. He’d knicked Tom’s bag and was sprinting between the grand bookshelves. Tom gawked after him. What was wrong with Potter? A nifty accio should subdue the dunce. Tom felt along himself, looking for his wand, heart falling by the second as he realized it’d been in his bag the entire time. Tom groaned. Surely Potter wasn’t about to make him follow him. But it appeared so as the athletic Gryffindor dashed out the library door, only stopping to stick his tongue out and childishly push his thumb into his ear and wiggle his fingers.

A rare sunny Sunday afternoon had finagled its way early into the month of October. The Hogwarts halls and courtyards were interspersed with socializing and lazing factions of students. They spoke of studies, future plans and of course, gossip.

“Did I just see Tom Riddle… run” Said one long haired Hufflepuff.

“Impossible. Riddle never runs… strides or paces purposefully perhaps,” replied her friend.

“No no… Look, he’s running”

Sure enough, Tom Riddle was bolting across the green courtyard, avoiding congregations of surprised scholars. Someone would swear later that he even pushed someone aside as he ran after what appeared to be Harry Potter. It would take several spins through the rumor mill before someone began claiming it was a student’s visiting grandmum Tom had pushed. In due time that would be the only thing Harry Potter said in 1942 that the other students actually believed. It’d actually been Abraxas Malfoy, but alas he was too ashamed to admit that he’d been pushed face-first into the lawn. Letting someone’s fictional grandmother take the fall for his literal fall and letting Tom Riddle take the blame would be a secret he’d die with. The students all watched, amused, for this was the most entertaining thing to happen all day. Potter was attempting to run and scavenge through a schoolbag
at the same time. Teetering and tottering and just minutely avoiding Isobel Ross, he tossed Tom 
Riddle's secondhand schoolbooks behind himself. Potter came to a stop as he pulled out a black 
journal. Harry Potter had only barely flipped through it when Tom Riddle charged at him full force, 
knocking him over.

Hogwarts students went mum with shock as Riddle jumped on and tackled the Gryffindor boy, 
trapping him with his knees. Harry Potter laid beneath him, panting and grinning madly, clutching 
onto the journal. Riddle was attempting to coax it out of Potters fists, but the other boy refused to 
loosen his grip.

“Potter let go!”

“How about… No” wheezed Harry

“I don’t want to. But if you continue testing me like this... I might just have to kill you, Potter.” 
Riddle scolded him. Students all around gasped. Never had they ever heard their debonair prince 
speak in such a manner. But at that moment they only smiled fondly. It appeared Tom Riddle was 
more human than they had initially thought. It was exhilarating to see Mr. Perfect exhibit such anger. 
Of course, they were completely unaware of how Tom had desired to kill Harry Potter since the start 
of September. Been plotting it really...

“You always tried, and failed and failed and failed over again. Really, either I’m invincible or you’re 
more incompetent than everyone thinks”

“What???”

Indeed what. That was the beauty of Harry Potter. He always spoke as if he was speaking to 
someone else. Always referred to family members nobody had and instances that had never 
happened. The student body had long learned to just accept this part of him, as it was the only way to 
sufficiently deal. Fortunately, for many Hogwarts students, Harry spent his days heckling the golden 
boy, Tom Riddle, inadvertently saving them from the pain of interacting with him.

Harry Potter had just called him incompetent. Momentarily, shock enveloped Toms body. Tom 
couldn’t believe it. He’d been called many things. Intelligent, gifted, handsome, precocious, 
strapping and so on. But never ever “incompetent.”
That was it. Tom had had enough of Potter. He’d been biding his time, plotting ways to eventually 
exterminate the Gryffindor pest at some opportune moment but the sixth year had finally crossed the 
line. He NEEDED to be punished. Without a thought, and forgetting every single person 
surrounding them, Tom fitfully backhanded the older boy.

Hard. His violent slap resounded throughout the courtyard.

Their spectators inhaled sharply. Briefly, Tom wondered if he would regret marring his perfect
image, but it felt good. It felt amazing to hit Potter. Even if regret came to him later, Tom couldn’t regret this now.

Potter's face had turned to his right from the impact of Tom’s hand. He shifted it back, this time with a split lip and a bright red mark sullying his clear skin. He didn’t look dismayed, but rather as if Tom had just given him exactly what he wanted. Perhaps, Tom realized, he had. He had certainly given Potter an excuse. Perhaps this was what Potter had originally desired when he stole Tom’s belongings. What he'd originally desired, when he'd thrown an entire tome out a window.

With a smirk on his countenance the Gryffindor spit blood out of his mouth. Letting go of Tom’s journal, he grabbed Tom by the green collar of his robes and smashed his head against Tom's.

A throbbing ache circulated throughout Tom’s face, but more than that, rage encompassed Tom. So Potter wanted to brawl. Blinded by his fury, Tom growled. He’d grown up in a hardened orphanage where fighting for scraps of food was a regular occurrence. He wasn’t about to let this toothpick of a boy best him. No-one would hit Tom Riddle and get away with it. Thus, Tom threw himself at the Gryffindor. Potter may not die just yet, but Tom would insure he’d suffer.

The boys had only wildly thrown fists, kicked legs and wrestled for a few minutes before several professors ran forth and broke them apart. Tom had had Potter in a headlock and was slowly suffocating the purple boy when Professor Ryan grabbed him and pulled him backwards. Tom instantly simmered down, realizing what had just ensued, what he’d just done. He stiffly looked around at the astonished student body, attempting to garner their opinions. Potter, of course, was still having a hissy fit. He was kicking and spitting around himself as Professor Slughorn dragged him backwards, hands beneath his armpits. Potter cursed rashly and crudely at Tom, stomping his feet as Slughorn held him up. “Throw you out the window next Riddle!” he finished shouting before Ryan cast a silencio.

“Headmaster?” Ryan said to the older professor.

“Regretfully” Slughorn agreed. "Isobel Ross?” he called. "Yes, Professor?” the Ravenclaw headgirl replied. "Do be a dear and clean after the mess these two made. The Houseelves should deliver Riddle's belongings to his quarters.”

The professors lugged the two boys all the way to Headmaster Dippet's office, and Tom could’ve mourned as they passed his book of curses laying open and face down on the Hogwarts grass. Professor Ryan picked it up dutifully, examining it's pages with concern. He grabbed Tom’s biceps once more and pulled Tom through an archway. Tom was now beginning to regret what had transpired.

“Harry Potter. Your behavior has been especially egregious since you’ve enrolled here,” Dippet began.

Tom Riddle and Harry Potter awkwardly sat side by side in the headmaster's office. Potter had a black eye and bruised, broken lips that Tom thought suited him surprisingly well. Tom couldn’t breathe through his nose and had a pulsating headache. “We cannot afford to continue giving you chances. You must change your behavior, Mr. Potter.”
“Yes professor” Potter mumbled, his eyes downcast.

“And you, Tom Riddle” Dippet turned his balding head and beady eyes toward Tom. “Never in your Hogwarts career have I, your professors, and your fellow student body ever witnessed you act in such a reprehensible fashion. We expect far more of you. Both as this school's brilliant academic, and a prefect. I’m afraid your prefect's badge will have to be temporarily suspended.”

Tom nodded faithfully. Inside he was boiling, but he’d figured as such. He unpinned his prefect badge, leaving it on Dippet’s mahogany desk. His eyes followed every movement of Dippet’s as the man picked Tom’s inklings of power up and examined the glistening badge, before haphazardly shoving it in a drawer of his desk. The badge didn’t belong there. Tom resisted the urge to slap Dippet upside the head.

“I’m truly sorry Professor. I don't know what came over me, and I understand there is little I can do to atone for this but I will surely not let it happen again. It’s true, what you said. Hogwarts deserves better behavior of me. I acted childishly, and I will grow from this experience to become a better, superior student” Tom looked willfully at Dippet, considering whether or not he should bow his head. He found the thought of it distasteful.

Dippet nodded, already keen to accept Tom’s apology.

“Well, if anyone deserves a second chance, it is certainly you. You're a decent boy, Riddle, you'll go far with an attitude like that.” Dippet responded, and then cleared his throat. “In time, you will get your badge back. Two weeks I think, should suffice. As long as you are on your best behavior.”

“Of course, professor.” Tom abhorred it. Being treated as some good little boy. As if his badge had to be earned and did not rightfully belong to him. In time Dippet would understand just how below Tom he was, but for now Tom played along. It was only the means to reach an end.

“The two of you will serve detention sanitizing the fourth floor trophy room each Thursday night until the first of December. If such a circumstance repeats itself, there will be much harsher sentences to serve for the both of you. Potter, you will have to see your head of house, Deputy Headmaster Dumbledore on account of your actions in the library earlier today” Dippet frowned. “For now though, the two of you should check yourselves into the hospital wing and have your injuries resolved.”

“Yes, professor” the boys replied in unison.

“I do not wish to see the two of you for such a thing again. Ensure that this does not happen.”

“Yes, professor,” they repeated.

“Dismissed.”

Tom and Potter left the Headmaster's office together. Potter was not a model student. He was not
even remotely sorry. Of course, neither was Tom. Potter walked a few meters in front of Tom and
reaching inside his pocket the sixth year pulled out a snitch and began tossing it. Throwing it up in
the air and catching it gracefully. Potter was not a quidditch seeker as far as Tom knew. At least not
at Hogwarts. But he was adept, catching the winged ball with practiced fluidity. What was wrong
with Potter? Tom thoughtfully examined Potter's gait, walking behind him. he came to a conclusion
when Potter did a small little skip. Potter was far too cheerful for someone who’d just earned himself
multiple detentions and a busted face.
At the nearest tapestry, Tom grabbed the hood of Potter's robes and dragged the older boy behind
him. Tom pressed the Gryffindor up against the wall. “My snitch!” Potter cried as it flew away.

Tom pulled his head back by the hair. The angle he was pulling Potter's head at must have been
painful. It excited Tom. Potter, who was already below him by half a head was forced to look up into
his eyes as Tom cornered him against the castle wall and lodged his knee between the Gryffindor's
legs.

“Tsk, priorities...” Tom sneered.

“Don’t make me bash you again, Riddle” the shorter boy growled as Tom only pulled tighter on his
hair. Tom ignored him, watching in fascination as the older boy’s eyes began to water. “I don’t want
to. But I will” Potter warned. Potter did want to bash him if the expression on his face was anything
to go by.

Tom scowled down at him. “You’re always lying, Potter” About horrendously doltish things too.
Potter was aimless and too damn chaotic.

“Pot meet kettle.” The boy retorted.

“I’d been brushing it off, chalkling it all up to a personality quirk. Potter’s just a nutcase, he couldn’t
possibly have any other intentions. I can admit it. I underestimated you.”

Potter’s expression was blasé, uncaring, but he seemed to refuse to look away from Tom’s eyes. In
fact, Potter's eyes were positively boring into him. Most others couldn’t bear to look into Tom’s eyes
for more than a few seconds. That was another curious aspect of Harry Potter.

“There’s more to you, isn’t there?” Tom hissed.

Potter was unresponsive.

“Why,” Tom's free hand came up, brushing against Potter's throat. “Why do you keep following
me? Why. Why won’t you stop bothering me. Why can’t you stop being such a bloody nuisance?”
his upper lip curled at the last word.

Delicately, Tom’s hand enclosed around the Gryffindor's neck. He wanted to see fear enter the light
in Potter's green eyes. Wanted to feel him quiver and shake beneath his hands. Wanted to see and
hear him cry. Most of all, he wanted to see Potter give up his last shred of control, and his last
semblance of pride. Potter only stared back at him with the same reckless abandon, that stubborn
look on his face that said he wanted Tom to know just how unafraid he was. Tom held tighter to
Potter's throat. Not enough to strangle, but certainly enough to feel it.

“Why, Potter, won’t you leave me alone?”

Potter jutted his chin. “You really want to know Riddle?” he sang.

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be asking you!” Tom spat.
Potter smirked mirthfully. He displayed a strange cross between amused, bitter and angry.

“Tom... Marvolo Riddle. You killed my parents. You robbed me of a family, a happy childhood and the one chance to live out a normal, content life. And now, here I am... stuck with you.”

What? Tom released Potter’s neck. Once more, the Gryffindor devolved into nonsensical language. It was no use attempting to understand his absurdities.

“I’m going to sabotage you at every chance I get, Riddle.” Potter assured him. “You won’t accomplish a thing as long as I’m around”

Pushing Tom out of the way, Potter shot one last derisive glare over his shoulder and stalked away.

Nagini pleasantly greeted Tom from his night-stand as he entered the Slytherin dormitory. Sparing her only a short nod, Tom loosened his tie, rolled his dress shirt up to his elbows and collapsed onto his four poster bed. Tom eyed the possessions the Hogwarts Houseelves had returned to the foot of his bed. Deliberating over his long day, Tom grew weary. He threw his arms above his head in a relaxed position, stretching languidly and examined his patched up fists. Tom flexed his fingers, fondly remembering the cracking sound Potter's jaw had made on Tom's second or third punch. Augustus Bulstrode ambled in next. Fortuitously, he knew what was best for him, and put in effort to not disturb Tom. Tom exhaled and drew his jade curtains closed. He ruminated over his awful, bothersome day. He lamented his imprudent actions, but ultimately Tom determined Potter was to blame. Potter needed to be dealt with and quickly.

With that last thought Tom Riddle nodded off completely and utterly unaware that one especially essential object of his had not been returned.

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Something of Harry's

Chapter Summary

When Harry lands himself in 1942 he officially stops caring. Surrounded by witches and wizards that are blissfully ignorant that there's a time-traveler in their midst, Harry resolves to make his own changes, which results in some interesting and unexpected consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good”

Harry chewed thoughtfully on his last morsel of licorice snap and recast a lumos. His eyes followed every movement happening on his map of Hogwarts. It had been a relief when the Marauder's Map had turned out fully intact. It proved that Harry could in fact bring something back into the past decades before it was created and have it still work. Harry doubted muggle devices fared as well but all his magical possessions had turned out to be in tip top shape.

Tom Riddle had likely discovered his diary gone by now judging by the pacing his feet were doing in his quarters. Harry was smug. Tom Riddle’s diary was a long shot away from the horcrux he’d turned it into back in Harry’s timeline. Harry hadn’t expected he’d be so fortunate to land his hands on it. He should have stolen Riddle’s bag earlier. Harry’d only skimmed through it thus far. The diary recorded Tom Riddle's past three years back to 1939. Harry knew much more than the average person about Tom Riddle after all. Hell, he knew what Riddle was to do before he’d even done it. Very little of what Harry had read surprised him. Riddle expressed a large well of ambition, recounted who he’d manipulated and how he’d done it, disclosed his interest into his parentage and his disappointment at figuring out his father to be a muggle. It was nothing Harry didn’t already know.

To think though, the sorts of confessions he had on his hands. No murder confessions yet, but two counts of the crucio, three of the imperio, and five of the obliviator. If Harry so wished, he could easily turn the evidence into the headmaster or the ministry and see what they made of it. Harry had put enough thought into it though, and he’d come to the conclusion that at best Riddle would likely fall under minor protections. At most five years in Azkaban for something an adult wizard would get 10 to life and that was assuming aurors would even accept written word as evidence. Those were the positives of being a blooming, underaged psychopath. That on top of Riddle being goodlooking and calculating enough to charm the boots off just about anyone, there was no way he wouldn’t manage to snake out of it. It was only enough to slow Tom Riddle down, but it wasn’t particularly fond of the idea of waiting for Tom Riddle to commit any more crimes just so Harry could catch him in the act and get him behind bars. It was unethical and inhumane towards Riddle’s future victims.

Harry fell back onto his pillows, he held the Marauder's Map above him, watching Tom Riddle's figure scavenging all around his dormitory. Harry chuckled softly. It was hilarious really, just imagining how frazzled he might be. Well as frazzled as Riddle could be which for him probably just meant a well concealed internal temper tantrum. Harry wished he could be there right now and
witness it. Smacking his lips and patting his stomach Harry resolved to make better use of his invisibility cloak next time.

Harry did not anticipate the Gryffindor red curtains around his bed being drawn open suddenly and hastily made an effort to conceal his map. Harry winced as blinding morning light shone through His glasses.

“Potter, you’re gonna be late” Terry abbott said. He had donned his school robes instead of his usual baby powder blue nightgown.

Bollocks. Harry waved his hand and stubbornly leaned back further into his mattress.

“I’m skipping.”

“Didn’t you get detention yesterday night. Are you trying to get expelled?” Harry considered Terry’s words for a moment. He wasn’t really. Harry’s short term future had just stopped mattering so much ever since he’d slipped into the past. Things like exams, attendance, good behavior and social graces just seemed fruitless opposed to the days he spent at Hogwarts in the nineties. Harry didn’t belong here. His future was almost sixty years ahead of him. At once it was both frustrating and freeing. His days here in the forties were aimless if not for the looming threat of Riddle’s ascension to power. it was still nothing compared to the Lord Voldemort of Harry’s present. Everything here was so… idle compared to the constant threat Harry seemed to live under throughout his first six Hogwarts years. He didn’t have dark lords out to get him, wasn’t fighting dementors off, wasn’t participating in life-threatening tournaments, wasn’t having dangerous and misleading dreams. In a way Harry had actually gotten what he’d always wanted since he came to Hogwarts. For once he was just harry.

Then again, Harry deliberated, if he wished to continue following Riddle around he should probably get his act together.

“Alright” Harry said “I’ll be there, but don’t wait up for me.”

Abbott was not paying attention to him. He was looking past Harry at the boy’s nighttable.

“What?” Harry asked.

Suddenly Tom Riddle’s journal flew past Harry. “Oh no you don’t” Harry jumped off his bed and apprehended it before it’d even gotten halfway past the room. That would be Riddle’s accio charm then.

Terry Abbott watched him warily as Harry pulled the flapping book back into bed with him, the journal fighting him with every step.

“Potter…” he began slowly and furtively. As if Harry were some kind of wild animal really.

“Did you steal something?” Tom Riddle’s journal continued fighting in his hands and at some point managed to smack Harry in the face.

“What? Nooo! This book just does this sometimes. You know how objects in the wizarding world are” Harry said as his nose throbbed. His face was taking a lot of damage lately.

Riddle’s journal had stopped temporarily and was catching it’s breath it’s binding expanding and deflating. “Sometimes they just get a personality of it’s own” The diary began struggling once more.

“Right” From the sight of him, Terry was entirely unconvinced, but the other Gryffindor clearly didn’t want to delve into it.
Terry nodded at him, said “Well I'll be off. If you wait much longer you’ll miss breakfast” and left.

Taking his glasses off and rubbing his eyes with one hand Harry regretted staying up all night. He’d switched between reading Riddle's diary and obsessively watching his map the entire time. He’d originally planned to sleep in and then somehow follow Riddle into his third period, since any interaction between him and Slughorn would need to be watched closely.

“Look,” Harry told the wheezing journal in his hands. “Perhaps one day I’ll return you, but for now you’re staying with me until I figure out what to do.” Harry cast a weighting charm on it and began getting ready. He took the journal with him as he left.

Hogwarts never changed by the decade. Except the missing whomping willow the grounds seemed exactly the same. No matter what the castle always managed to give Harry comfort. He enjoyed peering out the castle windows as he made his way through its stone corridors. Morning dew had settle over the Hogwarts grounds and a sliver of sun was managing to peek through a cloudy sky.

Harry saluted Riddle at his Slytherin table as he entered the great hall. The fifth year glowered venomously in response. At each side and opposite him at the table, Riddle was surrounded by his future death eaters. For someone who managed to be as alone as Riddle was, he sure had a lot of followers just waiting to be walked all over. Avery waited on him hand and foot, pouring the boy’s tea out for Riddle and Lestrange clearly had the hots for him. Those baleful eyes and the drool that would ever so often surreptitiously slip out the corner of his mouth said it all.

“Alright there Hagrid?” Harry’s belly grumbled as he clumsily found a spot next to the third year at the Hufflepuff table, various Hufflepuffs sweetly making room for the Gryffindor. At twelve Hagrid already dwarfed Harry.

The Hagrid of the forties deviated from the Hagrid Harry knew in his time. He spent much of his time brooding. He was nothing like the jolly man he’d grow up to be. His half giant parentage singled him out in a time where blood tensions were once more rising. His size and booming voice scared any possible friends off before they’d even given him a chance. Harry wouldn’t say Hagrid was bullied, but he’d certainly become a social outcast at Hogwarts. It was no wonder he currently had an acromantula egg hiding in his school trunk. Hagrid was unhappy.

Harry wouldn’t tolerate that. The Hagrid of the nineties had a penchant for bad cooking and befriending dangerous creatures but he was also the first kind face Harry met in his life. Harry had received a lifetime’s worth of abuse, neglect, bullying and being outcast in his first eleven years before Hagrid came along. He would not stand to see Hagrid receive the same treatment, especially not in a world that should have no reason to be anything but accepting of him.

“I'm alrigh' Harry” the third year mumbled, looking meekly down at his plate. His shaggy mane covered his eyes. He sullenly poked at his eggs with his fork.

“You got care of magical creatures today?” Hagrid wasn’t good at speaking with him but he most always piped up if Harry brought up his interests. “Professor Kaddlewack has got us workin’ on flobberworms this week. ‘s a bit boring if yeh ask me” Hagrid pouted.

“Yeah it'd be better if they brought in something like hippogriffs right?”

Hagrid’s eyes rounded out at just the thought, like harry had suggested something fantastic that he’d
never in a million years come up with himself. If only he knew. Harry hid his smirk, taking a long sip of some pumpkin juice.

“Harry, yer a genius” Hagrid exclaimed.

Hagrid’s fellow Hufflepuffs gawked at the both of them, aghast.

Harry leaned forward, eyes casting all around himself at the appalled faces. Some students were still pretending not to be listening. Harry admitted it, it gave him a secret thrill just talking about his experiences candidly. It was something Harry frequently could not discuss in his own period lest he be gossiped about or put his friends at risk. Here, Harry was just a kook and nothing mattered.

“I flew one once or twice” he imparted to the students surrounding him, watching the way Hagrid’s face lit up with admiration.

“No way,” Azrel Diggory spoke up. “You’re making shite up again Potter.” Wherever Cedric Diggory had gotten his fair and laid-back nature from, Azrel Diggory wasn’t it. The hufflepuff headboy reminded Harry vaguely of Justin Finch Fletchley in the way he constantly expressed his doubt and derision. It was a good thing Harry had long stopped caring about being likable. Rather than the awe Hogwarts students in 1997 held for Harry, students in 1942 tolerated him at best and ridiculed him at worst.

“The first time was in a school lesson. Yeah, home-schooling can get preeetty wild. The second time I was breaking my godfather out of a cell after he was sentenced to a Dementor’s kiss“ Hufflepuffs all around sighed, raised their eyebrows and rolled their eyes. Harry had a habit of capturing everyone's attention and then disappointing them as they soon concluded he was lying again.

“Nurture:1, Nature 0. How comforting to know your madness was passed down from a convict,” echoed a voice from nowhere. It was Tom Riddle. Students began snickering. Azrel Diggory turned purple from held in laughter and nearby a Hufflepuff girl had done away with niceties and was guffawing.

Tom Riddle was standing right behind Harry. Harry turned in his seat to see the Slytherin looking down on him scornfully, his book bag slung on one shoulder, and one hand in his pocket. “Potter,” Tom addressed him, once their eyes had met.

Harry grit his teeth. The nerve of him.

"I'll have you know, my godfather was a brilliant man. An innocent man."

Tom shrugged at this, indifferent.

“None of my concern. I’m approaching you for another reason altogether. Come. Speak with me.” It wasn’t a suggestion, and Riddle wasn’t asking him. Despite himself Harry obediently followed the other boy out of the Great Hall.

Harry should have known better. Tom Riddle dragged him to the nearest abandoned corridor and before Harry could say or do anything, Riddle roughly turned him around. he pressed harry against a wall, casting a leg locker curse. Humiliation spread throughout Harry. How could he be so gullible to think Riddle wouldn’t try anything. With one hand Riddle held Harry’s wrists behind his back, with the other he began searching harry.

“Where is it Potter?” he snarled. He ran his palm between Harry’s shoulder blades, along his sides,
down his legs and embarrassingly so along Harry's buttocks.


“Check my pants,” Harry joked when he felt Riddle’s hand once more on his thighs. Riddle kicked his ankles and Harry stifled a yowl of pain. “I’m not checking your blasted pants, Potter”

“You sure? I could lift up my robes for you if you let me go. You could just have at it Riddle. You seemed quite taken with my arse just a minute ago” Harry taunted causing Riddle to clock him in the lower back.

“OW FUCK! Are you aware of the concept of a fair fight? You can’t just pound on someone when they’re restrained without coming out looking just a tad pathetic you know.” Harry flinched already preparing for whatever Riddle would do to him next.

“Harry? What are yeh doin’ Riddle. What’re the two of yeh doing?!!” Hagrid implored. The older boys turned to look at the surprised third year.

Riddle raised his curse on Harry. “I’ll see you around Potter” he nodded his head, “Hagrid.” Riddle dauntingly strode off, as if he hadn’t just assaulted Harry.

Hagrid held two schoolbags with him. “You fergot it mate”

“Brilliant.” Harry grabbed the one Hagrid held out for him.

“Harry, what was tha’”

Harry patted himself down, he brushed the feeling of Riddle’s invisible hands all over him off. “Oh Riddle’s just gotten it into his head that I’ve stolen his diary”

Hagrid peered down at Harry uneasily. “Well have yeh?”

“Well… Yeah.” Harry said, rummaging through his bag and taking out the black journal just to make sure it was still with him. Was it luck or recklessness that was on his side? Nevertheless Harry had never been so thankful to forget something. Without thinking Harry kissed the binding.

“Harry! Why ever would yeh do that!” Hagrid bellowed.

Harry explained nothing, simply choosing to walk on ahead of the third year. “You’ll understand one day Hagrid”

By Wednesday Harry had lost much of his earlier resolve from the week and instead downed some fever fudge in the supplies closet of the potions dungeon. He’d decided he would pay Tom Riddle a little visit, as he’d done an almost inhuman job of avoiding Harry since his confrontation on Monday. The Weasley twins would be most pleased to know just how much of their merchandise Harry’d brought back with him. He even had a portable swamp saved for a later date.

“Professor Slughorn, I don’t feel so well.” Harry mumbled to the opportunistic professor. Harry had already spent an entire school-year with the professor back in his own timeline. He was redoing his sixth year, not that anyone-else was aware. Slughorn had been fond of Harry when he was the boy-who-lived, the chosen one, a potions genius… as opposed to the innocuous Potter child he was now. Now Slughorn couldn't care less. It wasn’t as if Harry wanted to be invited to the man’s slug parties.
Harry could still find in himself a feeling of relief at not having to deal with all that… social-climbing. The snootiness of it all had been so suffocating. There was of course, the issue that Riddle was a regular at them and would in the course of time begin his research into horcruxes, if he hadn’t already. Harry knew that soon he would have to get into slughorn’s favor whether he liked it or not. For now Harry had other intentions.

“Are you sure, Potter?”

“I have a fever sir”

"Not trying to skive, are you? You have a most unsavory habit of not coming to class."

“No professor” Slughorn turned his skeptical eyes towards Harry. Harry fought the urge to back away when Slughorn placed his big, clammy hand on Harry’s forehead, brushing his hair back.

“A most peculiar scar,” he noted and then pressed his hand to gauge Harry’s temperature.

“Thanks, got it when a dark lord tried to kill me.”

Abel Bones who had been stirring his armadillo bile mixture overheard him and snorted. Slughorn pursed his lips together. “Very well, Potter go see Madam Rosewood. To make up for today, please write an essay on the many uses of armadillo scales. You can drop by my office any time after 3 in the afternoon before next Thursday to present it.”

Harry leaned outside next to the door of History of Magic and downed the other half of his fever fudge. Professor Binns could still drone on and on, oblivious to his many snoring students but Harry couldn’t make out much what he was saying. Probably something about the many giant wars. Harry considered just walking in and sitting down and claiming to be a fifth year. It was actually a possibility that Binns would neither notice or care. He’d been about to do so when he heard a voice that was distinctly Riddle’s. Harry almost emptied the contents of his messy schoolbag out onto the castle’s stone floor in an effort to find one of his extendable ears faster.

He couldn’t afford to interrupt Riddle. He carelessly fed one of the ears under the door and inserted the end of the string into his own ear.

“The Chamber of Secrets?” Binns asked. “Where did you learn of such a myth, Riddle?”

“It may have been mentioned in a footnote of Hogwarts: A History professor.”

“Well it holds no historical basis or fact.”

“Please professor, a legend has to come from somewhere. I figure you must know much more than me. If you could spare the class this… tidbit of knowledge however infactual it may be?”

It was all so reminiscent of Harry’s second year. Harry sat back against the castle wall, stretching his legs out. Harry was quite the sight. His book bag was upturned with half its contents spilled out around him in disarray. Harry waved a wandering first year away as he listened intently.

Professor Binns harrumphed. “Very well then Riddle.” His ghostly voice paused for a millisecond.

“Well as we all know, Hogwarts has a very long history. It was founded over a thousand years ago
by Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw, Helga Hufflepuff and Salazar Slytherin. When choosing students Godric Gryffindor wished to have only the bravest, Rowena Ravenclaw those who pursued knowledge… Helga hufflepuff, those who were most loyal and hardworking, and Salazar Slytherin those with ambition and of course… those of the purest blood. Blood relations have always been an issue for wizarding society. Salazar Slytherin wished for Hogwarts to only accept students from wizarding families, but the other founders disagreed, believing muggleborns and half-bloods should get to learn magic.”

Harry nodded along. He knew the story well.

“And so, Salazar left the school permanently. But it was believed that before doing so he created a secret chamber at Hogwarts, within which he housed a monster. The legend claims that the chamber can be opened and its monster released, but only by Salazar Slytherin’s direct heir.”

Silence washed over the classroom as Professor Binns finished. It seemed even the dozing students had woken up. Just as before students were enthralled with the legend.

“Of course,” Professor Binns continued once more. “It’s not true. None of it is true. Many, many Hogwarts headmasters over the centuries have ransacked the castle for such a chamber and none found so much as a hidden broom closet. Now let’s move on.”

“Wait professor,” Riddle cut him short. “You said by Salazar Slytherin’s true heir? What of his descendants then, would they still be around? It’s said that he had an ability… parseltongue. Surely his offspring and their offspring and so forth would inherit such a gift” Riddle was getting excited in his speech, his voice was raised and his words were quicker. Harry’s eyebrows knit together. Riddle sounded as if he were making a breakthrough.

“Enough!” on rare occasion Professor Binns would get angry. Usually at historical inaccuracies. This time because Riddle had so clearly taken the lesson off its course and away from his control. “That is enough Mr. Riddle, if you wish to trace his lineage you shall start with the Hogwarts library, Madame Quincy should have some things on record now I need to return to the 1612 goblin rebellion. “

“Yes, my apologies professor. I acted imprudently.” Even being scolded, Riddle managed to come off as suave. Harry frowned at the knowledge Riddle was researching his heritage and was already pursuing the Chamber of Secrets. It was bound to happen but it did make Harry uncomfortable that by next year Riddle would have killed his namesake, opened the Chamber of Secrets and have thus gotten Myrtle Warren killed and Hagrid expelled. Cleaning up after himself, Harry hitched it to the library.

“Miss?” Harry queried after Madame Quincy at her round desk located smack in the middle of the Hogwarts library. If looks could kill, Harry would be dead and buried.

“I gather you haven’t forgiven me yet.”

“Mr. Potter, shouldn’t you be in class?”

“No I’m off sick.”

“Then you should be in the infirmary being treated by Madam Rosewood.”
“She gave me some pepperup potion and sent me off.” With this small lie, Harry was reminded at once of his fifth year and the scar on his hand. He grew angry with himself. He didn’t like casually lying but he also didn’t like letting Umbridge’s despicable punishments affect him.

“What detention did Dumbledore assign you then?” Madame Quincy simpered. Dumbledore actually hadn’t given Harry much. He’d seemed quite apt with Harry’s tale when he explained what he’d done to Tom Riddle. Apparently the thought of throwing books out of a window greatly amused him. “He had me reshel the books in his office.” Dumbledore had ever so often reminded Harry to keep the windows closed with a twinkle in his eyes as he did so.

The librarian stared at him incredulously. “That’s it then is it?” She looked insulted.

Harry decided to change the topic before she could start lecturing him again.

“Miss, I was wondering if you had any books or records… so that I could trace the lineage of the Hogwarts Founders.”

“Perhaps I do, perhaps I don’t.” Madame Quincy put her hands on her hips. “Depends, why are you interested in such information?”

“I’ve been fascinated by the Hogwarts founders ever since that time I once held Godric Gryffindor’s sword.” Harry shrugged nonchalantly.

“No you didn’t. Very few people in this world have so much as touched that sword let alone held it”

“A phoenix gave it to me to help me fight a basilisk”

“That didn’t happen.”

“I actually slayed the basilisk. It's poison fang pierced my arm and I nearly died. It's still lying dead somewhere in the Chamber of Secrets, in 1997 mind you. Basilisk bodies must not decompose because you would think that four years after, the smell would begin to permeate the castle.”

Madame Quincy just gaped at him, finally speechless.

“Anyway, why wouldn’t I want to trace the lineage of the Hogwarts founders. It should be quite fascinating, right?”

Madame Quincy scowled at him. “I feel like you’re up to something again child,” she sighed. “but I won’t stop you in your pursuit of knowledge. The Hogwarts library keeps records at the back, so I will return shortly.” Just before leaving she added, “Have you considered seeing a mindhealer, Potter?”

Thus Harry Potter checked out every single record on the probable lineage of Salazar Slytherin before Tom Riddle even had a chance.

Harry usually dedicated his Thursday afternoons to spending time with Hagrid as both boys had a rather short schedule that day of the week. Harry had gloomily explained to Hagrid that he had detention today so it would have to be curtailed today.

“Harry,” Hagrid started after Harry had skipped his fifth stone across the great lake, watching it skid
“Why do yeh keep following that Tom Riddle if yeh hate ‘im so much? ‘Specially now that yeh’ve gotten inter trouble ‘cuz of it. ‘ts just not productive is it?”

“If I don’t I can’t prevent him from doing bad things” Harry placed a stone in Hagrid's oversized palm. It looked like a galleon in Hagrid’s hand.

Hagrid didn’t understand of course. Much like the rest of the Hogwarts alumni Hagrid believed Tom to be decent and upstanding. Even after seeing how Riddle had treated Harry in that corridor Hagrid believed that Harry wouldn’t have gotten such treatment if he just hadn’t stolen something precious of Riddle’s. He had no clue that by spring of next year Tom would attempt to frame him for the opening of the Chamber of Secrets and thus get him expelled.

Not if Harry had a hand in it though. Harry didn’t know how much he could prevent but Hagrid would be getting a full Hogwarts education as far as Harry was concerned. Harry could feel his face twisting into something angry and nasty as he imagined Hagrid's wand getting snapped into the pieces that eventually became his pink umbrella. There was no way Harry could let that happen to Hagrid now that it was in his control, repercussions be damned.

“What could he possibly do?”

“Well…” Harry responded. “Riddle is capable of many things. For example starting two wizarding wars, murdering his father, his grandparents, along with thousands of others… torture… splitting his soul into pieces. Things like that.”

One thing about Hagrid that Harry hadn’t gotten the chance to appreciate in his own timeline was that even if he thought Harry was full of it, he respected him enough to not call him a loon. Hagrid accepted on some level that Harry was speaking his own truth, even if it all sounded like lies to his large ears. A small smile found it's way on Harry's face as he remembered how Luna Lovegood had drove Hermione absolutely mad. Harry imagined that if Hermione were in this timeline, and had not known him, she probably wouldn’t be able to bear him either.

“Yeh don’t… really think he would do that harry… do yeh?” Hagrid skipped another rock. It flew a much greater distance than any of Harry's had. Harry did not have to squint to see the large splashes the small rock made despite how far away it was.

Harry gazed at the great lake, throwing a rock up and down and catching it in his fist. The sun was hiding behind the scottish mountains now and was no longer catching and glinting on the water. The lake’s surface had turned dark and haunting. Harry was at once reminded of the water in that great cavern by the seaside Dumbledore had taken him to. The way Dumbledore had desperately begged Harry to stop making him drink the fluids in that bowl. How harry had continued just so they could reach a fake horcrux. Harry threw his rock, imagined it hit one of the inferius that had been hiding beneath that small lake.

“I know he would, Hagrid.”

A deep silence followed as Hagrid comprehended Harry’s grave tone. Harry could tell he needed to lighten things up a bit. “You know there’s merfolk in here?”

Hagrid who had been about to skip a giant boulder dropped it in surprise. It made a loud sound as it hit the Hogwarts grounds, just barely missing Hagrid’s foot. “WHAT?” the large boy boomed.

Hagrid looked absolutely devastated “Yeah…” Harry responded. “Perhaps we should stop skipping rocks. They’re pretty scary when they’re angry” Hagrid who’d been unaware that he could’ve been
hurting someone was now sulking, looking like he was about to blubber. Harry sidled up to the boy and reached up to wrap his arm around Hagrid’s waist. With anyone-else it would be their shoulder but well, Hagrid was a big boy.

“There now, its alright Hagrid. They’re probably fine. Real fast they are,” Harry consoled him. ” The grundylows or the giant squid though…”

“WHAT?”

The sun had almost gone all the way down. “Jeez would you look at that sky. I’d better get to detention.”

“Evening Riddle,” Harry pleasantly strolled into the trophy room and greeted the Slytherin.

“You’re late,” Tom snapped.

Harry had to wonder if having two boys who’d only just attacked each other a few days ago serve detention together was a smart idea. The more Tom Riddle was stuck to Harry the better though.

“Ten or so minutes right?”

“Forty.”

Harry whistled examining the cleaning supplies the caretaker had likely left in the trophy room for them along with a note that said ‘Strictly no magic. Hands only. No fighting. Detection charms are activated’. Riddle was sourly shining the Slytherin House cup of ’21. “Time sure flies” Harry said breezily.

“For you, I’m sure it does.”

Harry ignored him and picked up a towel to begin. They let a few minutes pass by in quiet, filled only by squeaking sounds and the night air. Occasionally a few students might pass by the trophy room's archway loudly conversing. Harry could probably bear an all-consuming silence better than the average person but he still found the atmosphere stifling. Perhaps because he could feel Riddle's resentment radiating off him. It was making every hair on his body stand up.

“I had a punishment almost exactly like this in my second year” said Harry. Riddle set another cup aside to begin another one. “Except my friend was puking slugs the entire time” Riddle disregarded him.

“Broken wand backfired on him you see. Happened after we crashed a flying automobile into a whomping willow.”

“Again with your tall tales,” Riddle said darkly. He seemed to be deep in thought, rubbing his cloth furiously across a framed photograph of the 1927 Hufflepuff quidditch team. Harry took that as a warning. Harry wasn’t afraid of Riddle. The Tom Riddle he was met with now was just an insolent, power hungry teenager with a sadistic streak. He was serving detention with Harry, like a normal schoolboy. He was nothing in comparison to the Voldemort that greeted him in that graveyard, slicing Harry open, filling Harry with cruciating pain all after having his friend and fellow competitor murdered before Harry’s eyes. That Tom Riddle still gave Harry nightmares. That Tom Riddle was how Harry had become an expert at brewing sleeping draughts. This Tom Riddle was insignificant.
Still, there were times such as now, where young Tom Riddle reminded Harry so much of Lord Voldemort that it sent shudders racking through his body. It was Riddle's unfolding future that petrified Harry.

“Tell me, Harry Potter…“ Riddle sneered. Harry resolutely stared at a goblet in his hands. He could feel Tom’s eyes all over him now. “The other night you claimed that I had killed your parents. Ever so dramatically you blamed me for an unfortunate childhood of yours. And yet your latter name, Potter begs to differ. You come from a wizarding family, potter. The details aren’t… completely clear. All sources point to you being Henry Potter’s progeny conceived with a nobody mudblood mother.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. Well Riddle had done his research, however wrong he was.

“You have a half-brother at least twenty years older than you and your father serves on the wizengamot. It’s likely you were raised by your mother, and perhaps a witch aunt, correct?”

“Sure” Harry replied flatly.

“You see while you went and checked out every single scroll on Salazar Slytherin I decided to do some lineage tracing of my own. The valiant house of Potter’s family tree is impressive. Yet, you’re nowhere to be found on it. Because they don’t want you, yes? Is it because your mother is muggleborn or because you were born of an affair? I never killed your family, Potter. I could but it hasn’t come to that yet. And you should know, seeing as you have my journal.”

Harry was more than amazed at his assumptions. Tom Riddle had actually come up with a background story about Harry, that he could legitimately use the next time someone asked. It was all very convenient. So far Harry’d just been winging it. He’d told Professor Slughorn, “it’s complicated” when the middle-aged man had probed him about his background and he’d just told the divination professor that he was a time traveler to her disbelief.

“I don’t have your journal.” Harry wanted to admit it at a later date, when Riddle didn’t have a well-sized rag he could strangle Harry with. Preferably at a time when Tom Riddle could do nothing but sit and plot Harry’s demise. Then again, maybe they could fight and he could just land Riddle with more and more detention. It sounded very appealing.

“The life you lead Potter. On top of being a lunatic liar you’re a bastard son of the esteemed potter family, your mother’s a mudblood and you spend what little time you're not stalking me with a third year half giant mongrel.”

Harry couldn’t understand him. He was a half-blood himself but he dared to show contempt for Hagrid’s parentage. Harry had managed to maintain some pretense of decency thus far but Tom Riddle was really pushing the envelope. Harry could tell Tom was only trying to get him riled and it was working. It was one thing to insult and belittle Harry and another entirely to do it to his friends.

He shined the same spot on a trophy repeatedly. Harry’s reflection was scowling back at him.

“Leave hagrid out of this, Riddle” he growled at the younger boy. “And don’t call me a liar when you’ve made a bloody sport of it. Everyone believing you doesn’t make it true. At least I see right through you.” They spent the rest of the detention in an enraged silence.

By Friday Harry was positive Nagini was following him. “You’re bloody kidding me” he muttered
under his breath as he saw her appear by a window out of the corner of his vision. She was much smaller than Harry was used to. Small enough to go almost unnoticed, if Harry hadn’t been able to hear her talking to herself anyway. If Riddle wanted to prove Harry had the diary that bad as to set his murderous snake on him, well Harry would show him. Harry took a bathroom break in which he walked all the way from seventh floor divination to Riddle’s second floor arithmancy. The snake slithered along the wall a couple meters behind him the whole time. When Harry stopped she curled in on herself to make herself small.

Harry grabbed Riddle’s diary and dropped his bookbag on the floor. He opened the large wooden door to the Arithmancy classroom and stood in the opening briefly. He hadn’t given much thought beyond this point. A class of fifth year Ravenclaws and Slytherins ignored him except for a few hushed whispers. Harry just awkwardly stood there with a book clenched in one hand. Professor Tabitha hadn’t yet noticed, despite the loud creaking the door had made. She was absorbed with writing numbers on her chalkboard.

Tom Riddle sat at the front next to a window at the far end of the classroom. He was engrossed in his notes, his sleek head bowed down.

“Riddle!” Harry called. He turned red as the classroom’s attention turned to him.

Professor Tabitha fixed her reading glasses and her large fuschia witch’s hat. “Student... What are you doing?” she uttered in confusion.

“I wish to show Tom Riddle something… M’am ” he added. Every inquisitive eye was on Harry but he felt Riddle’s the most.

“And you couldn’t have waited until a better time. During break for example?” The elderly witch asked. Despite Harry’s rude interruption she had not become angry. Rather she was as curious as the rest of the class.

“No professor, I couldn’t.”

“Well what’s your name, student? I wish to know who has the gall to do this.” Professor Tabitha had set her chalk down and seated herself on top of her desk. Harry thought the old witch acted much younger than she was.

“Potter. Harry Potter, professor.”

“And your acquaintance with Mr.Riddle is… ?” The class buzzed and mumbled at this inquiry.

“Well if I were to put a word to it… enemies I suppose?” Professor Tabitha blinked at his unexpected reply.” The class tittered, beguiled with Harry. “Our Tom Riddle has an enemy?” she turned to Riddle who was sitting at his desk, and glaring daggers.

“Mr.Riddle what do you make of this?” “He’d have to be my equal to be my enemy professor. Potter is inadequate, he has yet to reach my level and I don’t believe he ever will.” For the second time that week Tom led students into roaring with laughter at Harry.

“Yes, well enemy or not, he positively hates you doesn’t he, Harry Potter?” The Arithmancy professor said once the room quieted down.

“Err yes?” Harry wasn’t sure of how to answer to such a statement. Professor Tabitha had certainly stated the obvious.

He found himself losing his earlier confidence and instead fidgeted gracelessly.
"Oh I meant no offense, Harry Potter. I just think it's impressive. Why I've never seen Tom Riddle openly despise anyone"

“Very well then,” professor Tabitha continued. “What is it you wish to show us?”

“Right well.” Harry held up Riddle’s journal for everyone to see. “I wanted to let Tom Riddle know that I stole his journal”. Riddle’s fury was visible even from his corner of the room. “And that he doesn’t need to set his snake on me to prove it. I also wish to let everyone know that over the span of the week I read the whole thing and that it was simultaneously the most boring and incriminating piece of reading material I have ever read. Also that you shouldn’t trust Tom Riddle. Also I’m not giving the book back, Riddle. You'll have to pry it from my cold, dead hands.”

“Completely bizarre.” Someone was overheard mumbling from the back. "It's Harry Bonkers. What d’you expect?"

“Well… Alright, thankyou Harry Potter for sharing with the class.”

“You’re welcome” The whole interaction was too surreal. Harry couldn't think he just felt embarrassment slowly seeping into his bones. Harry bid the arithmancy class farewell and sprinted out the classroom. He ran up every single staircase, through every corridor and he didn’t stop until he’d returned to divination out of breath.

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At suppertime, Tom knew now was the time to do something. Harry Potter had brazenly disgraced Tom in front of his entire Arithmancy class. If he couldn’t force his belongings out of Potter than he’d have to take something the Gryffindor held dear, and from there he could mislead Potter into a ‘compromise’ or two. When all the other Hogwarts student were gathering in the Great Hall Tom quickly made his way up to Gryffindor tower.

“Viola Ross?” Tom called after a trio of Gryffindor girls just as the portrait of the fat lady swung closed behind them. Viola Ross was the Gryffindor quidditch captain and keeper. Tom’s night polishing trophies had come into use if only because her name was the only one he knew out of the group of girls. Tom needed to use someone and soon.

The Gryffindor girls all stopped, whispering and giggling. They pushed their friend forward.

“Yes?” said Viola Ross. She wasn’t outright flirtatious like the other girls that batted their eyelashes whenever they so much as laid their eyes on Tom.

“May I impede on you for just a few?”

“Yes, of course” Viola Ross moved closer, looking up at him. She tucked her hair behind her ear.

“You see I thought you might be the best person for this.“

Viola smiled. “Well why would you think that?”

“You’re brave, gracious… pretty of course.”

“You don’t need to suck up to me to get what you want Riddle, I’m quite fine doing you a favor of my own will.” She was an impudent girl but she had clearly taken the compliments to heart with a pleased beam on her face.
“I need to return something of Harry Potter’s… without him knowing”

“Well then just give it to me then, that’s a job I can easily do.” She held her hand out readily.

“Well it’s something Harry might be embarrassed about if anyone else… saw it”

“Oh, are you close to him? He’s a bit loony you know” She warned him. Oh Tom knew. “Close to him, hardly, he just left his things in the library the other day,” Tom lied smoothly.

“The day the two of you assaulted each other in the courtyard you mean?” The girl was trying to tease him and though Tom kept his outer visage cordial, he didn’t take kindly to it.

“You know how it goes with boys, Viola. Bit of fun and games is all, it just went too far after he stole my bag.”

“Riight” Viola Ross chortled in the presence of the handsome boy. She was neither trusting or suspicious. It was obvious that on some level she doubted Tom but it seemed she only cared for his attentions and Tom made sure to trace his lascivious gaze all along her. “Noone’s ever seen you behave like that Riddle. In a way it kind of made you more approachable.”

Being approachable was the last thing Tom needed. In the matter of two months Potter was destroying his reputation.

“Well I can’t tell a slytherin the password, so if you could cover your ears” Viola said, as she turned towards the fat lady. Tom played along. The fat lady opened up and they entered the Gryffindor dormitory. Immediately Tom’s eyes were assaulted by an overwhelming amount of red. Red and gold tapestries hung on the walls, red carpets covered the stone floor. Red chairs and loveseats surrounded A large fireplace crackling next to tall, wide windows overlooking the grounds. Two tourets led up to what tom figured was the dormitories. Tom had to admit it most suited a Gryffindor’s taste. It lacked the polished and luxurious interior that was the Slytherin common room, but had that certain cozy, homely feeling that no doubt a Gryffindor would fall over themselves for.

“Which leads up to the boy’s dormitory?” he asked Viola Ross.

“The right should do” She pointed him out. “Sixth year dormitory should be on the sixth level”

“Thankyou, Viola. Your help and company has been a pleasure”

“Uhhh, right!” Viola blushed and brushed back her hair again. Tom left her and ascended up the stairs.

He pointed his wand as he entered round quarters with four-poster beds all along the walls and a circular fireplace in the middle. The room was completely empty.

“Direct me to Potters” He willed his magic into his wand. The red curtain of a bed shook and lifted itself as if to wave at him. Tom traipsed forward.

Potter’s bed was right next to a window, had a nighttable that had every surface covered with schoolbooks and scrolls. Tom went through them one by one. “I’ll keep this, thankyou” he said once he found Salazar Slytherins scrolls. Tom pocketed them all into his bag and turned to Potter’s trunk.

His trunk was at the foot of his bed. Tom toed it with his foot, and bent down to feel along its ridges. Completely unlocked. Was Potter a fool? Not even a first year level locking charm?
No matter. It only made it easier for Tom. He dragged Potter’s trunk and threw it’s top open. He needed to hurry. Tom wasn’t sure what would happen if any sixth years walked in. Tom quickly threw harry’s various muggles clothes and robes out, looking at all that was left. About a lifetime’s worth of goods from a wizarding company Tom had never heard of. Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes. 6 whole knitted sweaters, all with a big H on them. A broom compass and a quidditch book. Yet another snitch. Tom’s eyes blazed. As foreseen, Tom’s black diary was nowhere in sight. The closest thing was a conspicuous folded up piece of paper.

Tom went to pick it up when out of nowhere a miniature dragon flew out.

About the size of his fist it looked like a Hungarian Horntail. The model dragon spat a tiny fireball and tom leaned back onto the pile of clothes he’d made on Potter’s bed. He went to grab it and his foot slipped on a sheer fabric that seemed to have slipped out from the pile.

The model dragon landed on a nearby windowsill and sat down on its hindlegs.

Tom had balanced himself using one of the pillars of the bed. He peered down at the fabric.

“Captivating,” he breathed out.

Breathtaking really. Marvelous.

Tom picked it up. This had to be it. An invisibility cloak. Potter had been hiding an invisibility cloak among his possessions.

Tom wrapped the cloth around himself and looked down. Like that, everything but his head had disappeared. Tom took the cloth off and held it in his left hand. With his right he muttered a clean up spell, ignoring the tugging of the invisibility cloak as it attempted to get back into its trunk. If Potter was going to keep Tom’s diary, he’d having to keep something himself as retribution. It was only fair. When the spell stopped, Tom put the invisibility cloak back on and left, heedfully avoiding a 6th year boy slouching in.

Chapter End Notes

Thankyou to my readers and commenters last chapter. I will try more to avoid errors in my grammar and punctuation but this story is unbeta-ed. Another note. I can't believe Hagrid is a gryffindor. All this time I'd had him pegged for a hufflepuff. I decided to keep it that way for this story. inter-house interaction is just more fun
Hogsmeade

Chapter Summary

When Harry lands himself in 1942 he officially stops caring. Surrounded by witches and wizards that are blissfully ignorant that there's a time-traveler in their midst, Harry resolves to make his own changes, which results in some interesting and unexpected consequences.

See end notes for warnings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In 1990 Tom Riddle sat down for tea in the Potter kitchen. Godric’s Hollow had been painted in vibrant golds and red with the early arrival of Fall. A powerful wave of nostalgia swept through Tom as Lily Potter set a plate with a scone down before him. He’d been here too many times before. “Another fight with Harry I presume? He’s upstairs, sulking.”

Tom shrugged, sipping from his china and flipping through the daily prophet casually. “Nothing that will last.” He eyed lily, who was rolling her eyes. One would think Tom would be grateful to the woman who gave birth to Harry. Instead her ignorance baffled him. At best Tom could muster a certain feeling of protectiveness for the woman, but primarily because Harry’s happiness was a priority. He couldn’t imagine caring about her otherwise. Tom suspected the feeling was mutual. Tom’s discussions with Harry’s mother were frequently short and clipped. Comparable to a teenage Harry, Lily held an ample amount of distrust towards Tom. Tom couldn’t blame her. He doubted they would even speak to one another if it weren’t for social convention. Lily allowed Tom one last apathetic glimpse and left the room.

Tom rubbed his freshly shaven jaw thoughtfully. James and Lily Potter were so clueless. Tom didn’t understand how a man who’d spent decades letting the entire wizarding world know that he’d time-travelled and to be labeled daft for it, couldn’t even tell his parents they were his parents. Instead Harry’d taken place as James Potter’s quirky uncle, becoming so beloved by him that he and his dear wife had even named their son after him.

Speak of the devil and he is sure to appear. Tom set his teacup down as a ten-year-old Harry James Potter bounded into the room. He was the spitting image of his namesake but far more excitable. Tom beheld the Harry that wasn’t his with hidden distaste. No-one could predict what kind of man the child would become, but it wasn’t Harry. Not his Harry. Their experiences would be far too divergent for this Harry to ever be remotely similar to his Harry. This was already evident by the lack of a lightning bolt scar on his head.

Harry would hold what Lord Voldemort had done to him in his own timeline against Tom for all eternity, forever holding Tom accountable in his need for something to blame. Harry’s accusatory glances waxed and waned throughout the years, sometimes softened with passion… or emboldened with it. It was something Tom had grown to accept and cope with, even if he didn’t think it particularly fair.

“Uncle Tom!” the boy caught sight of Tom and barreled into Tom’s arms with bruising force. His
bright eyes shone expectantly as the boy tilted his head to peer up at Tom’s expressionless face. “You’ve come to take me to Diagon Alley like you promised?!”

His small hands gripped onto Tom’s forearms. He did share a sort of boldness with Tom’s Harry that was so unmistakably... Potter.

“I don’t make promises I can’t keep,” Tom paused. “But I promised to take you with Uncle Harry.”

The ten-year-old pursed his lips, deftly registering Tom’s intentions. Intelligent boy. “Just convince your Uncle Harry to come down with us, and we’ll be on our way.”

“Why can’t you do it,” he pouted.

“Because Uncle Harry is upset with me right now.” Tom slid his arms out of the boy’s grasp and instead held his hands gently.

“Why is he upset with you?”

Funny that. Tom had only suggested for the umpteenth time that Harry come clean to Lily and James as the time traveler he was. Harry never took it well but it was probably suggesting it on the anniversary of his parents’ death that did Tom in. It had not been one of Tom’s most sensitive moments.

“I gave him advice he didn’t want.”

“Why didn’t he want it?” Tom clenched his jaw in his effort to maintain his patience. The child never grew out of that curious phase so common with toddlers.

“Because it was bad advice,” came Harry Potter’s reverberating voice. The man stood in the archway between the kitchen and the lounge. He leaned oh so casually against the wall, arms folded and legs crossed. Almost fifty years later and his mere presence could still shake Tom. Even for a wizard, Harry possessed youth far younger than his years. From this distance only his grays betrayed his age. He wore a partially buttoned, white dress shirt untucked over a pair of wrinkled, worn jeans Tom gathered belonged to James. Tom couldn’t hold in his sigh. He leaned back in his seat and took in the man he hadn’t seen in a week. Later, in a moment of weakness, Tom predicted he would admit just how sorely missed Harry had been. Presently, Tom only cocked his head in acknowledgement.

“Tom,” Harry nodded coolly as his clone darted to greet him. “Uncle Harry!” The boy was oblivious to the frigid atmosphere.

The kid stared at Tom meaningfully before grabbing Harry’s hands and pulling the man into the room. “Will you come to Diagon Alley with us?!” Even to Tom’s ears the question felt like a demand. Had it been him... Tom would have relished it, but that kind of hope wouldn’t be easy for Harry to crush. Tom took another taste of his tea to hide his smirk. Harry looked helplessly between Tom and his nephew. Hell would freeze over before Harry could ever say no.

Harry sucked his teeth stubbornly. “Fine! Did I even have a say in the matter?!”

1942

Tom loathed being invisible. Rather, he enjoyed the power his persona at Hogwarts had gained him. He was no showoff, but Tom Riddle was powerful and intimidating in his perfections. When he was invisible, he was nothing. Harry Potter’s cloak had rapidly lost its value. Being invisible meant he
had to diligently avoid passing bodies instead of naturally letting them stand aside to make way for him. Being invisible meant no one depended on Tom for advice and opinions, that Tom didn’t particularly like sharing, but did like knowing that people waited on them. However, invisibility did come with many, many advantages. Publications and textbooks that Madame Quincy wouldn’t have let him near unless he was a seventh year were now in his hands. One in particular Tom had studied from front to back. Hidden amongst his books on dark potions, mythical texts on the chamber of secrets, curses and necromancy was a thin, very old patch-worked book on the art of legilimancy.

Tom thirsted for it. He’d ignored the word in passing mentions in other textbooks in all his years before. Now that he had a working definition and direct access, why the thought of invading someone’s mind was positively delicious. To know what somebody planned before they put anything into action. To understand on the most intimate level, someone’s insecurities, fears, deepest darkest desires. To know what made them sentimental, what still made them embarrassed, what kinds of griefs haunted people no matter how many seasons passed. There was no greater tool for manipulation. Nothing else guaranteed Tom success like this did.

"Leglimens"

Pascal Avery’s milky eyes revered Tom. His mouth gaped open and his wide eyes followed every movement Tom made like a dog. Pascal sat on his bed obediently, his hands on his knees as he waited patiently for Tom to search his mind. Avery had been most pleased when Tom elected him and ordered the remaining fifth years to leave the Slytherin dormitories. He assumed it made him special, beloved by Tom. He didn’t realize that it was solely because he was the easiest to obliviate. Avery believed Tom was opening up to him by divulging his failures. As if Tom would let him rest comfortably having witnessed Tom’s struggles. How truly naïve. As anticipated, seventeen attempts in and Tom’s efforts had amounted to nothing. After each, Avery would speak softly and soothingly, trying to assuage Tom. It was demeaning, being treated like some angry child.

Tom focused his energy into Pascal’s memory. To search someone’s past was for novices. To construe their emotions and decipher their thoughts just as they appeared was the kind of expertise Tom prepared to master. Still to no avail, Tom’s eighteenth attempt came up empty.

Nagini scrutinized him as he crumpled on the posterbed opposite Avery’s. Tom pulled his hair in frustration. Eighteen tries was barely anything. Tom had attempted the crucio and the imperio far more times on unsuspecting creatures on the outskirts of Hogsmeade before he’d ever even managed it. The difference was they didn’t mentally exhaust him and they didn’t give Tom a splitting headache.

“Throwing a temper tantrum…” Nagini spat, her tone was jubilant. She was laughing at him. Tom threw a dirty look at the viper.

“Rome wasn’t built in a day, Tom. I’m sure you’ll manage with enough hard-work” It was despicable when others used Tom’s name. Paired with that muggle phrase it was putting an awful taste in his mouth. Tom sat straight up. He was being disgraceful and Pascal… Pascal was taking pity on him. He sneered at the realization.

“I don’t need you to tell me that I’ll manage. Of course I’ll manage” Tom spat the word vehemently. It suddenly held various connotations, none of which made Tom content. “What I need you to do, Avery, is to sit back, wait, and say absolutely nothing.” Tom struggled to keep his tone steady. Pascal Avery had some nerve. Avery had witnessed this face of Tom before but Tom could tell it still frightened him. Tom was not protecting the half blood from Slytherin derision like he had before. Was not soothing his worries, assisting him with his schoolwork. It always spooked people once Tom’s true nature dawned on them. He couldn’t search Avery’s mind but he could see the realization
happening in the terrified whites of his eyes.

Tom stood up once more.

Determinedly, he pointed his wand. “Legilimens”

Tom caught a brief snapshot of Avery’s day from his breakfast from that morning to his walk down to the Slytherin dungeons to retire for the night. It was common. It was something but it wasn’t enough. Tom wanted to witness Pascal at his most vulnerable. He didn’t realize or appreciate how the boy prostrated himself before him at that very moment. Cursing underneath his breath, Tom lowered his wand.

“I think you got something there, mate” Avery opened his accursed mouth. From the back of his head to his temples, Tom’s head throbbed. Avery’s loud voice did nothing to appease it. “Silence. I only asked you last time. Now this is an order. Be Quiet, Avery.”

Avery snapped his jaw shut.

“Silence won’t help you anyway” Nagini teased, slithering in circles around the candlestick on Avery’s dresser. She had a most obstinate habit of getting on Tom’s nerves when he most needed to concentrate. “Just cast a silencio,” she suggested.

Tom grinded his teeth and ignored her. “Legilimens”

Nothing.

“Legilimens!” he repeated.

“Legilimens!”

Over and over he said it. His earlier success was clearly a fluke. Disappointment and displeasure rested their weights on Tom’s shoulders.

“Tom,” Pascal spoke meekly. “I think it’s time to rest for the night.”

Tom leaned against a poster-bed, studying the other boy. Tom twirled his wand in deliberation, lips pursed and eyebrows knit together. Avery looked up at him from beneath his pale eyelashes. Avery was so very docile and while Tom found his brand of subservience to be a generally desirable trait…it could get incredibly stale sometimes. So Tom cast a stinging hex in Avery’s direction. Watched it hit the boy, how his cheek swelled. The evolution of his expression from surprise, to hurt and finally betrayal was magnificent.

Avery cupped his cheek. His eyes were already beginning to water. Tom wondered how big his capacity for pain was. That Potter could probably handle far more. “Tom?!…. w-why?”

“Why not, Pascal?” Tom rolled his sleeves up and crossed his arms. Avery looked down. It was a light punishment by Tom’s standards. “Avery, reconsider how you’ve been speaking to me all evening. Your idea of support comes across as belittling. Your voice is grating. Perhaps you should learn legilimancy as well, so you can enjoy the feeling of someone that won’t stop speaking while your ears ring and your skull bursts out of your skin.” Tom reached down and grabbed Pascal by the chin, canting his head up. Tom’s thumb and index finger pressed into Avery’s chubby cheeks. He forced the other Slytherin to meet his eyes. “I can forgive you, but you must apologize first.”

“I’m sorry.” Pascal mumbled.
Now he was quiet?

“Are you really?” Tom murmured.

“Yes. I’m sorry” he repeated.

It was unfortunate Tom had to obliviate him. He thought Pascal would do well to remember this lesson.

“Obliviate.”

“What happened?”

Tom was brushing Avery’s hair back and tilting his chin up. He softly cast a healing charm and stroked Avery’s cheek. “The swelling should go down soon. You fell and hit your face on the edge of the bedframe. You passed out.” Tom grabbed a tube of ointment out of his night-table and dabbed it gently onto the boy’s face.

“I did? I don’t remember…” Pascal watched Tom produce a change of clothes for him, all the while with a dazed, vacant expression. “I want you to sleep this off Avery, and feel better in the morning.”

“Well… okay.” Avery stumbled as he got up and began to get changed. Tom sat on the bed opposite, monitoring Avery the entire time until he’d tucked himself in. “Goodnight Tom.”

“Goodnight”

“Ruthless and two-faced,” Nagini hissed, slithering her way onto Tom’s arm. From her, this was a compliment.

Rodolphus Lestrange had lain himself across a loveseat and was reading an astronomy book. Augustus Bulstrode was slouched over his past due essay. Julius Mulciber had fallen asleep on a rug by the fireplace, his large mouth fallen open and his bushy eyebrows relaxed. And Antonin Dolohov was pacing the common room muttering frantically to himself. Antonin paused and nearly tripped when Tom precipitously appeared at the common room entrance. “Tom!” Antonin called in surprise. Julius let out a roaring snore and woke himself. “Wha-? Who goes there?!” Julius bellowed, squinting bleerily around the commons. Rodolphus chuckled behind his book and Augustus Bulstrode ignored all of them, so intently focused was he on his scrolls. Bulstrode was the thickest in their year, but Tom could respect how he continued to put in labor.

“My apologies to have kept you waiting,” Tom told them. “Oh no worries mate,” Mulciber sleepily assured him. He was barely keeping awake, his hooded eyes blinking with the speed of a sloth. “I know how it goes, brilliance needs discipline some….” He trailed off and began snoring again. Tom quirked an eyebrow.

Tom resumed his speech, choosing to dismiss the boy’s antics.

“The dormitories are open again, thankyou for your patience tonight. It meant a lot to me and helped me tremendously.”

And where’s Pascal?” Dolohov’s concern was superficial. Antonin had jealousy issues on par with a large dog. Pascal was the lapdog. “It… took more out of Avery than I initially thought it would. He’s
sleeping it off.”

Antonin had a triumphant expression on his face and began pacing carelessly again. He ran his fingers through his long, black hair and added an elated hop here and there as he celebrated his friend’s defeat. “Couldn’t handle it, eh? Well… I reckon we all should have expected it. Avery is fragile like that!” Tom barely tolerated his monologuing. “What is he, like 170 centimeters?”

“He’s in that range, yes.”

“So small, so defenseless. Must’ve been child’s play getting into that head of his, right?” Tom held his tongue. He wished not to disclose his lack of success.

Rodolphus was observing the two of them from behind his textbook. The swirling of the embroidered andromeda galaxy of his book-cover concealed his face. All Tom could see were his attentive, hazel eyes running back and forth between he and Dolohov.

“What, pray tell, are you going on about?”

“Oh nothing at all,” Rodolphus crooned. “Say, this new ability of yours, naturally you’ll be planning to use it on that Harry Potter, yes?”

“It’s worth consideration.” Tom spoke shrewdly. Obviously he would. As soon as he actually could.

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“Tom likes his men small, Dolohov,” Rodolphus noted. Tom jut his chin, offering the boy his aggressive gaze. Lestrange knew his leanings… and while his sexuality wasn’t uncommon in the wizard world, Tom didn’t appreciate any wisecracks about it. Due in part to growing up like a filthy muggle, Tom preferred no one to speak of it at all. Lestrange’s eyes were dancing in the dimly lit chamber. Tom just knew Lestrange had a shit-eating grin on behind that book.

“What, pray tell, are you going on about?”

“Oh nothing at all,” Rodolphus crooned. “Say, this new ability of yours, naturally you’ll be planning to use it on that Harry Potter, yes?”

“It’s worth consideration.” Tom spoke shrewdly. Obviously he would. As soon as he actually could. Tom diligently met Lestrange’s stare in his inherent need to exert power. Finally, Rodolphus looked away. Tom didn’t like the look of Rodolphus, who was taking some secret enjoyment in his remarks and excluding the other Slytherins out of his inside joke. “Well, I hope you’ll share with us your findings,” Lestrange sang.

“What’s this tension?” Dolohov scowled, mystified at the two of them.

“Tha’s a beautiful quill, Professor Merrythought,” Julius Mulciber slurred unexpectedly, diverting everyone’s attention. Strangely, Tom felt relieved. “What is it? Peacock. Blimey now tha’s stunning. Say, would ya like to go to the ball wit’ me?”

If Potter noticed his cloak gone, he didn’t present any signs of it. It was disconcerting to see him so calm. Tom awaited a public call out at best or a brawl at worst. He half expected Potter to stampede in at any moment and throw himself at him. At the very least a confrontation on the same level of what had happened in arithmancy. Potter remained quiet and unassuming and it was putting Tom on edge. Tom consistently kept the cloak on his person. If he could just so easily steal it from Potter’s trunk, it was likely the fool thought he could return the favor. Still, who knew what Potter would try next. Tom applied a sticking charm to his schoolbag at all times. Harry Potter would definitely run past and seize it if given the chance. He’d already done it once.

Finding a way to control or discard Potter was a necessity now that he had Tom’s diary in his hands. Tom had never cast an illusory charm on it, not wanting the muggle object to taint his magic. His dorm-mates were well aware of his proclivities anyway. Sure, he’d softened his temperament, but beyond that and his blood status, Tom had never withheld much from them. Now he was dealing
with the consequences. Tom fantasized periodically how he could do away with the older boy. He was no closer to discovering the Chamber of Secrets than he’d been at the beginning of the year. Tom was even beginning to doubt its existence, just a rumor spread amongst the snakes, though he’d believed so reverently in it previously. Still, the thought of feeding Potter to the monster within was enticing.

Tom spent his Saturday morning poring over Salazar Slytherin’s lineage in a third floor study. It brushed on Peverell and ended with Gaunt. Tom even noted with interest that the Potter family was recorded. Tom recalled the first year he’d spent at Hogwarts perusing every book he laid eyes on searching for something. Foolishly his search at the time started and ended with the name Riddle. It took a shamefully long time before he even considered his mother. Tom had long suspected his father a mudblood, or even a muggle. The last Gaunt listed though, was born in the late 1800’s and was male.

When Tom had been eight, he’d broached the topic of his mother with Mrs. Cole. His timing had been flawed. At the end of the checkered hall next to the kitchens had been the cupboard disobedient orphans were kept in when they’d been wicked. It was Mrs. Cole’s preferred penalty. She wasn’t fond of corporal punishment like Martha was. The cupboard was where Tom was kept when he’d done something but nobody could prove it. Billy Stubbs had been horror-stricken after he’d unwittingly stepped on Dennis Bishop’s nose in the yard. Dennis Bishop’s nose stuck so far out that it had saved him when Tom had buried him alive. Conveniently, Dennis had lost his voice for two weeks after. It had put Mrs.Cole in a most foul mood. In time she’d grown fearful of Tom, but at eight he was still a brat to discipline and a child to be chewed out. Tom recollected Mrs.Cole’s wispy voice as she’d savagely informed him that his mother had been unseemly and that she had died an hour after cursing the world with Tom.

Tom crinkled his nose at the memory. His knuckles turned white as his nails dug into his palms. He fixed his eyes on the window, focusing instead on the great lake. It was like medicine how easily Hogwarts abated Tom’s spirits. It was when Tom spotted Hagrid’s great looming figure and a small speck on the shore that Tom had a change of plans.

Tom found a spot beneath a wild oak tree that had a favorable view of the duo. Potter was attempting to teach Rubeus Hagrid to fly with a very enlarged broom. The Hufflepuff was largely disinterested, obviously assenting with it for Potter’s sake. Tom observed them in silence, hidden beneath his cloak. Tom wilted when he realized how banal his spying session was. Potter and Hagrid rambled from one bland topic to another. The bulk of it, Potter’s consideration for quidditch and Hagrid’s great love of all things dangerous and beastly.

It was so mundane Tom found himself instead fixating on the line of Potter’s back. He assessed the sharp contrast Potter’s narrow waist artfully held to his shoulders. Tom’s eyes leisurely traced over the slope of Potter’s rear and down his legs in appreciation. Potter was no prize, but Tom realized he liked what he saw.

Tom’s stirring attraction didn’t catch him off guard. He was riddled with hormones and his trysts, while infrequent, tended in the direction of fucking men with qualities he detested. Weak, homosexual muggle men outside London had suited Tom’s tastes all summer before he’d returned to Hogwarts. Tom understood it was because Potter had become so loathsome that the idea of manipulating his body was beginning to circle his mind. Tom entertained the thought, musing over how disgusted the older boy would be were he to come on to him. He couldn’t help his lips perking up, twitching with held back laughter as he imagined Potter’s mortified face. Tom leaned further against the oak, resting his head on the palm of his hand, his mood suddenly marvelously lighter.
It was rare someone actually reviled Tom as much as Potter did. Even the children in wool’s orphanage admired him to an extent, willing to look past whatever strange incidents Tom periodically caused. A few, like that Amy Benson, willingly subjected themselves to Tom’s cruelty. All because they found him aesthetically pleasing. The Gryffindor was rage-inducing, yes… but Tom could admit he was stimulating. Tom was struck out of his reverie by Potter’s loud yell.

“What?”

“You can’t go to Hogsmeade?” Potter was taken aback. Looked almost offended at the thought. The oaf, Hagrid twiddled his thumbs and ducked his head. He looked guilty at Potter’s reaction, as if he were blaming himself. Tom puzzled over why he was doing this. Spying on Potter initially seemed like a rational idea, as if he would actually garner a weakness or two from their interactions. It seemed only Hagrid was Potter’s weakness. He had a strange attachment to the third year.

“Me permission slip could never be signed. Dad died last year” Hagrid hunched over in his seat on a boulder.

Potter’s features softened. “I experienced something… similar. I’m sorry for you, mate.” He sat down beside the kid.

“Ts not like ts your fault” Hagrid grumbled, clenching his fists in his lap and looking mulishly anywhere but at the sixth year. The boy squinted his face up. The expression reminded Tom of the face Billy Stubbs made when his rabbit turned up dead. “My godfather died… a little over a year ago. I considered him the closest thing I ever had to a father. And someone that was something like a grandfather in June… It’s the most difficult thing I’ve ever done, having to let someone go. At times…” Potter inhaled and let out a heaving, shuddering sigh. “At times I still haven’t. I’ll catch myself thinking, like they’re still here. I’d turn to write a letter to Sirius and realize my owl had nowhere to go.”

It was an awkward interaction, witnessing the two refusing to look at each other but continuing on. Had Tom been anyone-else the voyeuristic nature of the experience would have put him off. Instead, the pained look on Potter’s face as he spoke of his loss fascinated him.

“I’m still angry over it… over everything that happened.” Potter leaned forward, clasping his hands together and resting his elbows on his knees. “And guilty…”

“Hagrid, our experiences might be different… but… but if you ever want to talk to me about it, I’m here. Or if you just want to talk about your dad, I’d love to hear about him” Tom knew the markings of someone unfamiliar with offering words of comfort. An inability to meet the eyes and awkward posturing of the body. Potter was putting in an effort, and was clearly well out of his comfort zone because of it.

Hagrid’s shoulders wobbled. “My dad was as grea’ as a father could be. Life as single father couldn’ have been easy. But he always managed jus’ fine”

Hagrid smiled, even from a distance Tom could see his eyes all welled up. He held up his pinky, “tiny man Dad was. Y’know I never took after him much in the physical sense… but I reckon I sure got a lot of his personality.” Tom imagined so, if Hagrid’s father had chased a giant woman.

Potter listened thoughtfully. “I’m gonna get you into Hogsmeade, Hagrid. Your dad would have wanted it for you. He would have signed that slip.”

“An’ how do yeh plan to do tha’” Hagrid scoffed doubtfully.
Potter leaned closer. “How much do you really know about Hogwarts, Hagrid?”

“As much as anyone, I s’pose.”

“Personally, I don’t believe anyone has ever truly known Hogwarts completely. Behind the one-eyed-witch statue there’s a secret passage… and behind Gregory the Smarmy. One day,” Harry pointed at an empty space not far from them “Right there, there’ll be a whomping willow. And beneath it will lead to a shack in Hogsmeade. We’ll use one of the first two I suppose.” Potter eyed Hagrid’s size. “Perhaps we should look into shrinking charms or a disillusionment if we’re going to sneak you in.”

“Harry, how would yeh know so much about Hogwarts? You’ve hardly ever been here…”

A fantastic question. Potter had been here two months and apparently knew more about the vast Hogwarts grounds than Tom himself. Tom would assume he’d be fibbing, had he not been attaching promises to his lies. Though Tom wasn’t an expert on all things Harry Potter, making promises he couldn’t fulfill seemed… unlike him.

“Well… I went here of course. Once upon a time.”

The playful curve of Potter’s lips drew Tom in. If Potter hadn’t made it his sole goal to take the piss out of him, Tom thought that perhaps he could have appreciated the mystery Harry Potter had to offer.

“Harry, you said you were hometaught.”

“Which answer do you prefer? One that’s easy to understand, or the truth?” They stared at each other for a few moments, Hagrid’s silence undoubtedly due to confusion. Potter waved his hand.

“Nevermind. My parents went here. And my godfather, all my dad’s friends. They were all something of explorers I suppose. I learned a lot from them.” The Gryffindor sat down on the tall, autumn-ravaged grass and leaned back on his palms, uncaring of dirt and dew.

Harry Potter’s impressive knowledge of the castle begged one important question. How much did he know about the Chamber of Secrets?

“Books and scrolls have been going missing” It was as if a dark cloud hung above Madam Quincy. The french-born witch was tight-lipped and her usual rolls were replaced by a strict, tight updo that pulled her eyebrows upward. “Someone’s been stealing from the restricted section.” She finished filing her library cards, picking Tom’s inconspicuous return on advanced transfiguration up. She waved her wand over it, putting it on a floating stack of books nearby.

“I’m sorry to hear that. It seems Hogwarts has been stock full of troublemakers… this year.” The librarian detected none of Tom’s implications. Steering the conversation in the direction of a certain ratty haired boy was proving difficult. Tom laid his book on 14th century potions masters on Madame Quincy’s counter next.

“It’s got to be those Gryffindor students. They weren’t this bad when I attended hogwarts” Convenient.

“Well Harry Potter’s making a name for himself. He burst into my arithmancy lesson the prior week. You don’t by chance, suspect him do you?”
Of course she wouldn’t. Who would? Potter was so clearly a light wizard, but Tom did have a few cards up his sleeve. “He’s been investigating the lineage of Salazar Slytherin after all…”

“So have you.” Madame Quincy smirked at him. She was quizzical.

“I am only saying. Madness and dark magic? We both know between you and I, I’m of the opinion that neither are harmful when alone… but I don’t consider that the most favorable of combinations. I don’t think Potter should be trusted.”

“Turning into quite the gossip aren’t you Mr.Riddle? You’re reminding me of that Rodolphus Lestrange.”

Tom could’ve blushed. Occasions like this was why he needed to master legilimency. He could just cut past all the meandering and get right to the thick of it. The librarian was adding insult to injury by comparing him to the likes of Lestrange.

“I like the side of you he’s brought out though.” Her lips twitched and her eyes shone behind her glasses. “Seeing you so passionate makes for a lovely and rare sight. You’re so… diplomatic the rest of the time. N-not that that’s a bad thing of course.”

No-one had ever complained before.

“Yes,” Madame Quincy continued, “He was in here the other day. He couldn’t have stolen anything though. My eyes were on him the entire time. Except…” Madame Quincy tapped her chin. “Well I suppose when I went to go retrieve his records for him. But he only talked nonsense. It was not as if he knew where I kept the records. He seemed only intent on taking anything remotely Slytherin related out”

“Nonsense like what?” It was only Potter but Tom felt… eager just to know the details.

“The same kinds of nonsense he always says. The same old Ill-conceived brags about adventures he never had. Would you believe it if I told you he was in here claiming to have fought a basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets? With the sword of Godric Gryffindor nonetheless.” Madame Quincy harumphed. “The boy could put his imagination to better use as a children’s author. I haven’t heard these kinds of tales since my mum read me Tales of Beedle the Bard when I was a child”

It was the last thing Tom expected to hear. He wasn’t even sure what to think. As usual potter was unbelievable, but to have so explicitly spoke of the Chamber of Secrets. Tom thanked his lucky stars to have leads just drop in his lap. Tom surmised the sixth year had to know something.

“Mr. Riddle?” Madame Quincy peered at him inquisitively when Tom did not respond, lost in his own thought. “Are you alright?”

Hogsmeade had been all Tom looked forward to throughout the week. Tom hadn’t cared before, assuming it would be just the usual activities consisting of entertaining and cajoling his companions. A stop at Honeydukes and Scrivenshafts and he would acquisition some suitable gifts for Lestrange’s upcoming pureblood rite of passage. Dolohov and Mulciber had an almost Gryffindor-ish streak in their love of cruel pranks. Naturally they’d whine until Tom led them to Zonkos. Afterwards Bulstrode would wander off to spend time with his wife, leaving the other Slytherins behind. Some dueling practice would probably commence on the outskirts of the town if Tom could sway the others to it. Naturally they’d retire at The Three Broomsticks and depart for Hogwarts before sun down.
But the thought of seeing unexplored crevices of Hogwarts was shedding an exciting light on Tom’s upcoming weekend. Even if it wasn’t the Chamber of Secrets. With midterms arriving, between his owl preparation and leglimancy practice, Tom hadn’t managed to fit any more spying sessions on Potter and had only seen him in the great hall throughout the week. Though he’d seen Potter pass the ajar door in defense against the dark arts on Tuesday. Once, poking his messy head in and giving Tom the two fingered salute. Thursday had been a stuffy and quiet affair. He and Potter had arrived to the trophy room to find all their hard work from the previous week gone. A centuries worth of dust had collected on everything by magic. Other than snide jabs here and there the period passed in silence. Potter hadn’t even mentioned his invisibility cloak. It were as if he never even noticed. Tom was quickly growing frustrated.

“Harry are yeh sure about this?” Tom held in a snort. He had the impression that Harry Potter had never re-evaluated a decision in his life. Two full body diminuendos later and Hagrid had barely shrunk at all. The two boys stood in an empty 7th floor corridor, completely unbeknownst to the other in their presence.

Potter frowned, “I suppose one more couldn’t hurt.” He stroked his chin, looking Hagrid up and down. “And a disillusionment charm for good measure.”

Three minutes subsequently found Tom discreetly following the two down the staircases to the third floor into gunhilda’s corridor. Potter led Hagrid to a statue of the one-eyed witch.

“We’re only doing this this one time Hagrid, “Potter suddenly warned the Hufflepuff. “I did… something similar to this once or twice and nearly got caught. I just believe this is an experience you deserve to have until we can get you in honestly. But I don’t want you to have to face detention.”

Even with Hagrid’s figure chameleonized, Tom could tell the third year disliked Potter making these decisions for him. To top it off, the Gryffindor was utterly oblivious to it.

“Alright,” Potter licked his lips and fixed his stance, he looked both ways, making sure no witch or wizard was in sight. With a brandishing of his wand he tapped the hump on the statue’s back and said, “dissendium.”

Tom perked up, observing in fascination the way the one eyed witch’s hump opened up and the two other wizards climbed in. He watched the hump close and waited a moment more.

“Dissendium” Tom repeated Potter’s earlier actions. Tom stepped inside and was startled when he found himself unceremoniously sliding down a tunnel. He felt along the compressed walls for support, digging the toes of his oxfords into the ground, but it was fruitless. Tom slipped and slid further down in complete darkness, clutching Potter’s invisibility cloak behind himself after it was pulled off.

Tom slid to an abrupt stop and caught his breath, feeling around himself for his wand and cloak.

“Did yeh hear tha’?” Hagrid’s voice echoed from a short distance away. The flickering of a lumos charm could be seen several meters ahead. “Is someone followin’ us?” Despite his silencios, Tom hadn’t accounted for the noise his body might make falling down a blasted slide.

“Oh for sure,” came Potter’s voice as Tom erected himself, pushed his wand into his robes and dusted himself off.

“Hold on, I thought this might happen’
Some rustling noises and Tom rearranging Potter’s cloak later, Tom heard Hagrid’s rumbling voice.

“What is that?”

“I thought we might need this anyway. Been awhile since I’ve been down here…” Potter sighed and said “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.” Tom held his breath.

“Well I know that” Hagrid replied. Potter hummed.

“As I thought.”

“What? What is it?”

“I’ll show you later. Follow me, Hagrid.”

The two cast another lumos and trudged on. Tom shamelessly trailed behind them. If Potter knew he was following him, then Tom could only prepare for another confrontation. He had no plans to turn back now that he was on undiscovered Hogwarts grounds.

The three traversed on for an hour before Potter stopped them beneath a trap door. After conjuring a ladder, Harry Potter urged Hagrid to move on up ahead. The third year was hesitant, not wanting to be alone, but with some gentle coaxing and Potter instructing him to hide behind Honeydukes, Hagrid finally climbed the ladder.

Potter’s diminuendos must have worked to some extent. Tom watched in disbelief as Hagrid managed to fit up into the small opening. He shut the trap door behind himself and what little light that was shining down into the tunnel went out, leaving only the fading green of Potter’s lumos. Tom listened, perplexed when he heard Potter speak out loud to no one in particular.

“Mischief managed.”

Tom readied himself, pulling the cloak off and holding his wand steady.

“Lumos,” Tom said. The tunnel came alive, and Tom was caught off guard to see just how close Potter was. The sixth year was shoving a large piece of parchment into a schoolbag. Upon finishing, he tilted his hand and his wand came sliding out of the sleeve of his robe and into his palm. Potter held the wand up. Briefly, Tom was impressed at the fluidity of the movement.

“Riddle,” Potter calmly greeted him.

“I thought this may happen. You’d been evading me all week. It was superhuman how easily you were suddenly untraceable.” They held their wands pointed at each other. “I found other ways. Enjoyed your tour?” Potter gestured around the passage. Tom didn’t fail to notice his green eyes flitting over the invisibility cloak still in his hand. “You knew,” Tom raised a leery eyebrow. “How long?”

Still with his wand arm raised, Harry Potter took cautious steps, circling Tom. “Saturday ring a bell to you?”

Tom hadn’t been a slob. He’d cast his silencing charms, and the cloak could still fit over his height, albeit barely touching the floor. If not for the missing cloak Potter would’ve been none the wiser. It was Potter acting as if he hadn’t noticed it’s absence that gave Tom a false sense of security.
“Of course. I would have been a suspect from the start.”

Potter’s left hand began fishing into his school bag again. It made for an awkward sight. The entire time he kept his eyes and wand on Tom. Tom considered it just enough of a distraction.

“Expelliarmus,” Tom said under his breath. Potter’s wand flew into his hand.

“Hmm would you look at that?”

Potter shot a nasty glare and continued, his arm down to his elbow in his bag. He sorely lacked the look of panic that would be on anyone else’s face. It was disheartening. “I dare you, Riddle”

“What shall I do with you?” Tom rotated his wand and shot a small gust of breeze through Potter’s hair. He was minutely entertained at how miniscule a difference it made. “Just hold on,” Potter snapped. And then… “A-HA!”

Tom had counted on it but he still hadn’t expected Potter to throw his journal on the stone ground and promptly step on it. Then he held his open palm out.

Tom frowned and dug his fingers into the silky fabric of Potter’s cloak. “You stole my belonging first, so it’s only suitable that it would be returned first.” The cloak had suited Tom well but he’d gladly exchange it for his journal. Potter was trying to run the show though, and that wasn’t sitting well with Tom.

“Too bad. I don’t trust you”

“I have your wand, Potter. Should I keep it?” Harry Potter had to know what a disadvantage he was at. Why, Tom could do anything. Using the imperius was imminent if Potter’s bullheadedness persisted, though Tom had always preferred the challenge of persuasion.

“Me first, and then you. That’s the deal, take it or leave it. I’ll gladly leave my wand behind.” A feeble bluff.

“I don’t see any other choice then… Imper-“

Potter’s hand shot out of nowhere and slapped Tom’s wand right out of his hand before Tom could even finish. The two of them looked at the wand, it’s tip slowly fading with it’s forgotten curse. Immediately the two boys scrabbled across the ground and in a minute Potter had him backed up against a wall, pressing Tom’s own wand into his neck. He kicked Tom’s journal further behind himself.

“Don’t even fucking try it, Riddle. Now. Lower the cloak”

“Really think you’ve had me, huh?”

“You still think I’m not your equal? I’ve seen you at your weakest, Riddle. If this is making you feel vulnerable, there’s much worse to come. Give me my bloody cloak back.” This was the same boy Tom had spoken to behind that tapestry that Sunday evening. The one that was cold and calculating… instead of barking mad.

Tom cursed inwardly as he glared down at the shorter boy. He could feel his hot breath fanning against his chin. It was his own wand, Potter couldn’t use it against him. And yet he could feel power pulsating from the wand. He gripped Potter’s own wand, contemplated snapping it in half. With a snarl, Tom dropped the cloak and hastily kneed Potter in the stomach.
“Oof.” The Gryffindor bent over and Tom lifted his leg and kicked him. The older boy reared up as if to sock him but Tom dodged the blow.

He held Potter’s wand up in both hands, as if to break it and slowly backed away. Tom raised his eyebrows, just daring Potter to try something.

“No. I gave you yours, now I’ll take what’s mine.”

Tom squatted down for his diary. Relief flooded him when his palm finally touched it’s leatherbound cover. Tom cracked his book open, noticing with displeasure just how many pages had been dogeared. “Couldn’t be bothered to use a bloody bookmark?” He scowled at the git. Potter glowered from his little corner of the tunnel, shoving his cloak into his bag. In a moment of graciousness Tom threw the boy his wand. A true seeker, Potter caught it instantly.

“What was it you said about my journal? I’ll have to take it from your cold dead hands? Why aren’t you dead, Potter?”

“I’ll admit I should have known better, or at least considered how underhanded you really are. Stealing right out of a dormitory... I guess a wanker like yourself deserves some more credit.”

“Well?” Potter threw Tom’s wand onto the floor in response. It clattered at Tom’s feet. That… hadn’t gone how Tom had imagined. He’d wanted to corner Potter. He’d planned to interrogate him on the Chamber of Secrets. Instead the Gryffindor abruptly disapparated. It was unprecedented and Tom was confident that was a move most sixth years wouldn’t have studied until spring. Or one that any student below 17 could manage in Hogsmeade, due to the age-restriction charms...

“A squib, a mudblood and a warlock walk into a pub…” Dolohov was saying on the sidelines. Tom staunchly ignored him. Dolohov, Avery, and Mulciber were chatting while they watched Tom duel his latest contender. Once the duel started, their job was to shout various critiques but half the time it was jokes and idle chat. Tom was exceptional in dueling. He was comfortable in it by now that he didn’t bother obliviating his competitors even if he lost. He’d spent the last half hour blowing off steam from his encounter with Harry Potter and his fury was finally cooling off. Dueling on these trips was a tradition the boys had kept since third year, after the Slytherins had found a clearing out a kilometer west from Hogsmeade.

Tom bowed last, glancing up to witness Lestrange licking his lips eagerly. He scowled at the boy, who’d been a nuisance all week. Rodolphus was like that. The kind of nosy gossip that caught onto something before anyone-else. It was useful, except when you were the subject. Then you couldn’t catch a bloody break. Tom could only take a gander at what Lestrange had observed that had his teasing meter skyhigh. Tom stepped aside fluidly as Lestrange lobbed the first curse. He shot a warm-up confringo in Rodolphus’ direction. Rodolphus gracefully blocked it and sent a Reducto. Lestrange wasn’t quite on Mulciber’s level, who was the only one Tom considered a challenge but he was decent enough for casual, thoughtless practice.

“Lestrange,” Mulciber called out. “Your stance is lacking.”

“You say that every time,” Lestrange shot back.

“And yet, you never fix it” Tom told him, after dodging what looked to be a particularly nasty relashio and landing in a half kneel. He winced as the earth floor dug into his knee. “Stupefy!” he pointed his wand.
“I heard Grindelwald is recruiting again” Dolohov brought up to the other boys sitting beside him. Tom narrowly dodged an amplified stinging hex while Mulciber groaned. “Don’t remind me, Tiberius is seriously considering it. Mum’s worried sick, but he’s fanatic. He hates muggles with a passion, no offense Avery…”

“None taken,” Pascal murmured halfheartedly. Tom wielded his wand and a branch raised itself behind Lestrange, who ducked in perfect time.

“Your brother’s a knob, Mulciber,” Lestrange blurted out as he sent another hex Tom’s way. “He’s all brawn, no strategy. He wouldn’t last a week.”

Tom took smug satisfaction in watching his stunner finally hit Lestrange square in the chest. Lestrange tumbled back, falling on his bottom. “Lestrange is right…” Tom interjected. “To an extent,” he added, when Lestrange pumped his fist and laid back onto the leaves and dirt. “One has to wonder if Grindelwald’s cause would even be worth fighting for, for someone like Tiberius.”

Tiberius had been the average schoolyard bully when he’d attended Hogwarts. His grades had been subpar, and while he hadn’t been ugly, there wasn’t a single girl in Hogwarts that wanted to settle down with the brute. Personally, Tom thought joining Grindelwald’s forces was just a last ditch effort to make something of his life. Tiberius would never make it up the ranks.

“He’d be just another life taken,” Tom attempted to discern Mulciber’s feelings on the matter. Mulciber’s mug remained blank. Not overtly offended then. Though he’d never been close to his brothers. “Then again,” Tom continued, “Tiberius and Titus always did enjoy pointless violence. Perhaps he’s found his calling, however shortlived.”

Tom threw his school robe off and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. “Now…who next?”

Lestrange who was still finding comfort on the earth perked up immediately as Julius stood up and brushed off his trousers, pulling his wand out of his open robes.

“Any pointers?” Tom raised his eyebrows at the others as Julius got into his stance.

“Yeah Tom, you’ve got to exercise your shield charms more. Sure, you’re skilled. But it’s very muggle like isn’t it?” Lestrange spoke up

“Sure it is,” Tom gleamed as Mulciber bowed low. “I was considering maybe we ought to train in muggle combat” Mulciber raised his head, startled.

“Are you serious, mate?” Lestrange was appalled. Tom bowed.

“You’ve never felt vulnerable without your wand? Impedimenta!” Tom threw the first curse.

“Yes well, that’s why things like wandless magic come into play” Rodolphus grouched. Tom enjoyed dueling Mulciber. Julius gave as good as he got and when Tom defeated him, he didn’t quit, like Lestrange did. He always returned for another duel, set in his determination. “Did that fight with Potter reawaken something within you, Riddle?” Rodolphus questioned.

Tom blocked a confundus. “I suppose you’re an expert at wandless magic then?” Magic needed a wand to center itself. A wand acted like a conductor, attracting energy from around it. Otherwise magic was uncontrollable. Tom had a better grip on it than the average wizard, spending his school days learning to set fire to things, make objects disappear with just his mind. Even then, Tom had been aware that he was doing magic. Lestrange had a point. Wandless magic could come of incredible use to a trapped wizard, but it was incomparable to a wand and at times unreliable. Physical combat was unseemly, and barbaric compared to wizarding dueling but Tom believed it had
its uses, especially if a wizard’s magic was weakened. Lestrange blanched as Tom sent a blast of
strong wind towards Mulciber, propelling the boy backwards. “Well… no”

Mulciber’s back hit the trunk of a large, wild elm. He slid down momentarily, and the boys observed
with bated breath as his nose began to bleed. But Mulciber always recovered remarkably. He wiped
his nose and with re-kindled fire, began shooting curse after curse at Tom.

“Suppose you’re stuck in a magic-repelling room? Enemy forces have gotten hold of you and have
you held captive? You’re completely helpless,” Tom continued as he dodged a second blast of
lightning. Perhaps his fight with Potter had reawakened something other than blind rage. The lack of
power he’d felt when Potter had held Tom’s wand had certainly triggered him. And that
confrontation earlier… Tom couldn’t stand how he’d stood idly by and let Potter call nearly all the
shots. He hadn’t felt that amount of susceptibility in years. Memories of Martha snapping a ruler
against Tom’s knuckles reared their ugly heads.

“You’re dead anyway, those rooms are always skewed so they don’t affect the captors. One torture
curse later would you even be capable enough to slug someone?” Lestrange argued. “Should we
practice it then? I wonder, can an immunity to the crucio curse be built up?” Tom suggested frostily.
He hadn’t been serious but he enjoyed how it shut Rodolphus up.

“What about special cases?” Mulciber brought up, in Tom’s favor after he dissolved Tom’s fireball.
“My uncle lost his magic for two whole years once. The healers concluded it was his depression,
_Diffindo_!”

Mulciber paused in his administrations coming to a standstill and lowering his wand. Likewise, Tom
took it as a cue for a short break.

“But really my uncle’s always been melancholic and his mindhealer refuted the diagnosis. Noone’s
really sure why that happened. And two years was a bloody well long time. We’d thought he’d
turned squib” Tom shuddered at the thought of losing his magic. He turned to Lestrange, who looked
just as fearful. “You see, Lestrange? Is it even stable for wizardkind to depend on magic as much as
we have? What if that happened to you?”

“So what, let’s just do away with magic and live like dirty muggles?”

Tom’s upper lip curled in disgust. “Of course not you prat. But something should be said for a
wizard that’s learned basic skills beyond magic,” he hissed. “Well fortunately for myself, like all
purebloods, I’ve got myself a house-elf. And elves don’t lose their magic.” Lestrange’s pinhead was
full of complete codswallop. To rather have a house-elf attend to your every need than procure a
sense of independence, however muggle it may be… It was pathetic. Their dispute was suddenly
interrupted by Dolohov singing.

“Patty cake, patty cake, bakers man, bake me a cake as fast as you can” Tom watched in
befuddlement as Antonin sang the muggle nursery rhyme, clapping his hands perfectly against
Pascal’s. Evidently while Tom, Julius and Rodolphus had been dueling and debating, the other two
had grown disinterested. “Pat it, and prick it, and mark it with a B-“

“Dolohov,” Lestrange barked, “What _are_ you doing?!”

Pascal and Antonin continued clapping. “Avery’s teaching me foolish muggle games to pass the
time, wanna play?”

Tom hadn’t made his blood status known in all the years he’d been at Hogwarts. Foremost because
he hadn’t known, and now because he suspected he was a half-blood. Pascal was of the second
lowest rung on the Slytherin social hierarchy, just above the muggleborns. Tom couldn’t stand to lose anyone’s respect, not after it had been rightfully earned. Avery was reduced to teaching his friends children’s games. Tom balked at the idea of seeing himself in Pascal’s place. Lestrange’s blatant repulsion and Mulciber and Dolohov’s united sniggering said it all. Tom would never get anywhere as a half-blood, unless he could prove he was Slytherin’s heir.

Myrtle Warren was a mousy young muggleborn. Specs, spots and fringe distracted from her childlike features. Hardly ever was she on Tom’s radar. Except in instances such as now, where she was involved in yet another spectacle. That was the life of the school punching bag. Tom could admit she was the perfect target for the average teenage sociopath needing an outlet for their sadism. No friends, no relatives in the school, not even a teacher’s pet. The fourth year lacked protection on top of being just ugly, small and socially inept enough to attract a bully’s attention. The kind of bully that didn’t enjoy a challenge and wreaked misery for nothing to gain. But Myrtle’s misery was usually suffered under Olive Hornby’s hand, not Abraxas Malfoy’s.

Students stood still as Abraxas Malfoy ran past followed by a breathless, wheezing Myrtle. Tom could feel the wave of secondhand embarrassment settling over his fellow students. Abraxas had sped by, but the asthmatic Myrtle stumbled slowly.

Abraxas jumped from side to side, elegantly dodging Myrtle’s hands. He held her letter at arm’s length, twisting and turning with his Malfoy flourish.

“Give it back, Malfoy!” Myrtle Warren screeched. The sensitive type to hide and cry over one snide comment, this reaction seemed rather excessive. Myrtle Warren wasn’t one to stand up for herself. Although she delighted in complaining about her treatment as soon as her predator was out of sight. Tom was forced to come to a standstill when Lestrange and Dolohov stopped and every other boy in the group followed. By now, a large crowd had gathered.

“You’ve been stalking me for years darling, I’d say that it’s about-“ Malfoy was taken by surprise when Myrtle abruptly pushed him. Alas her stature had nothing on the sixth year. Abraxas Malfoy tripped back a few paces but soon composed himself, brushing his palm down the front of his expensive robes. His upper lip curled in distaste and he shot a nasty evil eye her way.

“You’ll regret that, mudblood”

With a wave of his wand, he cast a jellylegs jinx. Myrtle floundered around in humiliation.

Meanwhile, Licking his fingers, Abraxas unfolded the piece of parchment. “I’ve suspected a long time you may have held a flame for me… I can’t blame a mudblood for trying, but it’s best to know your place. A bird like you… you just don’t have the right breeding. Now, let’s see what you have in this shoddy letter shall we?” Myrtle’s face crumbled while Abraxas glowed, basking in the attention that was otherwise reserved for Tom. Tom’s schoolmates all held their breath in excitement as Abraxas read Myrtle’s love letter. The Hogwarts school body had a hankering for drama.

Momentarily, Abraxas Malfoy’s face fell and then he turned scathing eyes towards Tom. “Of course,” he began “How could I have been so foolish?” A bad feeling rose in Tom’s gut. “What girl doesn’t fancy Tom Riddle here?” Nearby girls began to giggle or mumble in agreement.

“Read it!” someone shouted even as Myrtle’s lips trembled and her legs shook helplessly. Tom thought she looked like a pot about to boil over.

It wasn’t as if Tom wasn’t well accustomed to girls mooning after him. It didn’t make it any less
irritating and exhausting when they confessed and thus expected anything other than his disregard. Tom grit his teeth as resentment settled into his bones.

Recovering from his earlier disappointment, Abraxas raised the letter. “Shall I?!?”

A few people in the crowd whooped, but enough apparently felt a sufficient amount of pity to keep their traps shut.

But that wasn’t enough for the pureblood boy, who in Tom’s experience, had an insatiable need for theatrics.

“Well shall I?!?!”

Tom mulled over involving himself. He didn’t want to. If Tom had it his way he’d have led his group to a window table in The Three Broomsticks by now, where they’d be discussing wizarding politics and blood relations with a healthy showering of current affairs and Grindelwald’s onslaught. Frankly Tom couldn’t care less if Abraxas Malfoy destroyed Myrtle Warren so publicly. Unfortunately, he’d been put into a tight spot. As Tom Riddle’s reputation upheld, he couldn’t just let cruelty happen before his eyes and do nothing about it, not without someone making note of it and turning it into chitchat. Even when idiots like Myrtle Warren so clearly deserved whatever hole they’d dug themselves into.

Before Tom had a chance to do anything yelps came from behind him. Turning around, Tom witnessed several students being knocked over by the badly camouflaged Hagrid, with Potter in his stead, striding forward with the same look of determination he’d had when he pranced into Tom’s arithmancy class. Potter spared Tom a mere glance as if Tom were just a bit of dirt on his shoe. As if Tom didn’t matter. As if they hadn’t been trading hostage property just a few hours ago, so casually did Potter look away. Potter stilled once he entered Malfoy and Warren’s circle and stood before Abraxas. He lifted Myrtle’s jinx while Hagrid’s camouflaged figure stayed in the sidelines. The girl, finally able to stay still, broke down and collapsed onto the turf.

“Give it here, Malfoy.” Potter held his hand out like he had for his cloak.

Abraxas puffed his chest out. He stood nearly a head taller than Potter. Malfoy was utterly useless with and without a wand but it still somehow looked laughable how ready Potter looked to duel him. Tom had fought with Potter though, and he knew better than anyone there that Potter had a nasty right hook.

“Or what?”

Potter sighed. “Fuck it. Expelliarmus.” He caught Malfoy’s wand and pocketed it.

“Incendio.” Myrtle’s love-letter burst into flames in Malfoy’s hand. Shrieking, the ponce dropped it.

Potter turned to Myrtle while Malfoy blithered and nursed his hand in the background.

“Errr, are you okay?”

She scowled up at him. “What do you think?” her attempt to keep some semblance of pride was offset by the quivering of her lower lip. Hagrid’s figure came forward, probably sensing the emotional support she clearly needed that Potter so lacked in. He helped her up and other than a call of surprise, Myrtle let the invisible figure. They walked off with Potter awkwardly shuffling after them.

“HEY! My wand?! Potter?! Potter!!!” Abraxas Malfoy realized a minute too late. He called after
Harry Potter’s figure. Potter stood still and yelled back:

“How about this, Malfoy? I’ll return your wand, when you apologize!”

“WHAT?” Malfoy blustered. The three figures ahead dashed off. Tom swore he could hear them cackling.

That was that. Students dispersed in disappointment and Malfoy desperately ran after Potter and company.

“Quite the hero…” Dolohov mumbled. “Expected from a Gryffindor of course.”

“It reminds me a bit of Tom,” Avery said. Immediately the others turned skeptical and borderline offended gazes his way. Avery shrugged defensively. “Obviously Tom was far more sophisticated about it, but first and second year he always used to come to my aid like that y’know… on account of my being a half-blood and all…” Avery mumbled quietly, refusing to look the incredulous Slytherins in the eye.

”And on account of my pureblood mum. You know how people are when a pureblood woman takes up with a dirty-blooded muggle man. It’d be different if she was a man. Tom was a bit like my hero back then…” he trailed off awkwardly, looking down and kicking the toes of his shoes against the earth. They used to call Pascal Avery’s mother “The Muggle’s Whore” in the Slytherin chambers. The group turned reticent. Tom knew they were all recounting their own experiences and he inwardly smirked.

“I’m not your hero,” Tom began, looking pointedly at Avery and the others in his group. Mulciber, who’d grown into a thuggish Slytherin beater. Whom Tom had defended from the violent grasp of his older brothers when he’d been sick and frail. Dolohov, whom Tom welcomed after he was disowned from his own dogmatic pureblood family for being sorted into Slytherin. Lestrange and Bulstrode had come after, not quite rejected by Slytherins, but not accepted either. At the time, Lestrange had been too deviant to be remotely likable, and Bulstrode too dense to amass any respect. They’d needed someone to follow and Tom had accepted them with open arms. Now there wasn’t a Slytherin around that didn’t want to be a part of Tom’s inner circle.

“You’re my friends, my equals. And whatever ways in which I’ve supported you… Well I’m no savior. I fully expect the favor to be returned” It was exactly what the others wanted to hear. Slytherins didn’t like owing anyone anything, and it was this line of thinking that had gained Tom such faithful loyalty.

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“I suppose you know all about what’s going to happen next.” Harry grumbled. They were reclining on a bench outside of Fortescues and watching their great nephew blow animated bubbles at a stall a few meters away. One bubble took on the shape of a fairy and was dancing ballet.

Tom’s all-seeing-eye glass was safely residing in the department of mysteries after the ministry had decreed future knowledge of time shouldn’t be in the average folk’s hands. Tom still had his ways. Witches and Wizards assumed it was an old pocket watch but with one turn of a miniscule knob, Tom knew about five different versions of the next twenty-four hours. Two twists and he had the next week.
“So tell me, am I going to forgive you or not?” Harry had folded his arms again and was jiggling his foot restlessly.

How amusing. In four out of five universes, Harry already had. Tom couldn’t fathom why he still bothered with appearances.

“Oh go on already!” Harry growled when Tom didn’t reply. “Always smiling to yourself like that! We get it, you know everything!”

Tom didn’t even blink an eye at Harry’s insolence. If he were young again, he’d be dismayed, but Tom was far too used to it by now. Only Harry Potter could get away with it.

“You’ll forgive me,” Tom began.

“In a little while we’ll take Harry to Madam Malkin’s. While he gets fitted for new dress robes for the annual ministry ball, you’ll be having a look at the ties. You’ll either pick an emerald green or crimson tie. I’ll compliment you on either but the green is the one I will mean.”

Harry snorted and Tom couldn’t help but grin in response. “Good to know. I’ll go with green”

“We’ll wander aimlessly for a while. But then we’ll stop at the owl emporium when you spot a snowy owl hanging outside.” Harry’s face fell at this. Just as Tom thought.

“Her name is Hedwig, and supposing that what I’m telling you now doesn’t change the events of today…” Tom slid his hand along his trousers, feeling the outline of his watch. “You’ll stop. And you’ll stare. For a longtime you’ll consider her, but you’ll change your mind when Harry either tells you he’s getting tired or hungry.”

Harry listened in silence. Tom’s eyes traced his delicate features, from the noble bridge of his nose to the curvature of his lips. Harry’s eyelids were thin now and sprinkled with traces of crow’s feet. But his dark eyelashes and thick eyebrows still framed his eyes handsomely. He was a beautiful man.

“We’ll return to Godric’s Hollow after the sun’s gone down. Harry will go inside and greet his parents, but we’ll stay out underneath the willow tree in the garden. You’ll comment about feeling like a teenager again. You’ll be shivering and in some inane attempt to be a gentleman, I’ll offer you my coat.” Harry cracked a tender smile at this.

“Of course, you’ll reject me. Ever so prideful, you’ll go as far as to deny even being cold. You’ll make spiteful remarks about marrying a sociopath. Quite petty for a man your age… but expected. At last, we’ll skim the topic of whether or not you’re returning home with me.” With this, Harry looked curiously into Tom’s eyes.

“Not tonight.” Harry’s visage turned cloudy. “But you want to, and you will.” Harry’s pride was debilitating at times.

“Tomorrow morning, I’ll skip work. Unheard of, I know. In a week you’ll be returning to Hogwarts and you’ve turned me into some pathetic, desperate shell of my old self. I’ll return to Diagon Alley, and I’ll go to Eyelops Owl Emporium. And I’ll get that owl for you.”

Harry pressed his lips together, turmoil spread across his countenance.

“I believe you already forgave me, Harry. I suspect you just need an excuse to do it openly now.”

“Oh shutup,” Harry snapped. His words held no heat. It wasn’t as if they hadn’t been through this before.
“When I arrive at the Potter doorstep, you’ll bring the owl inside, and I’ll follow. You didn’t invite me in, but you let me. Lily’s at work and James is making Harry brunch in the next room. You’re losing it. It’s been decades since you had Hedwig after all. At some point, we’ll kiss.” Like they had so many times before.

“Of course we will,” Harry shook his head.

“And… that’ll go on for a while.” Tom had the feeling of Harry’s lips pressed against his memorized. If he closed his eyes he could feel them now. Warmth filled Tom when Harry began to laugh. His earlier rigid posture had slouched into relaxation and Tom welcomed the familiarity of it.

“And awhile… and awhile. Poor James will encounter us and after some horrified squawking he’ll tell us to get a room. We do, after you come home with me.” As with every other altercation, their passion dramatically reignited by the end.

“You’ll come home with me. And you’ll forgive me and I haven’t looked that far ahead but I imagine we’ll be content until the next time.” Tom wanted to say happy, but in his experience happiness was fleeting and love was something you had to work for.

“I want to stay mad at you,” Harry exhaled. “I’m 66, but I still can’t forget these things, Tom. Am I being foolish? Sometimes it feels outlandish. That this is how we… how I ended up. You don’t know, you’ll never understand because for you it never happened.” Harry slid his hand into Tom’s despite his cold words.

It was invariably bittersweet like this. Tom was trapped in a loop, wondering if Harry could ever accept Tom as his family on the same level Tom had Harry, while knowing what some version of himself had done. How could Tom ever be Harry’s family when he’d literally killed his chances? 

Harry Potter was in an endless spiral of embracing Tom one moment and distancing himself the next. The worst part of marriage, Tom thought, was having to consider the possibility of loving his other half more than he loved him. That Harry’s feelings would always be sullied by a past wrong was unbearable.

Tom squeezed Harry’s hand as the older man rested his head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Harry.” Tom swallowed the lump in his throat. Tom rarely apologized and a large percentage of the time they were but empty words. Tom realized he could apologize to Harry Potter a thousand times over and still be genuine.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: very brief mentions of underage sex and animal abuse

I’d originally intended this chapter to be around 5k words. and then it came out to be a whopping 11k. oh well, i hope that makes up for the lengthy amount of time i took to update.
“Consider this!”

Antonin Dolohov had enchanted an old chalkboard to levitate in the Slytherin common room. Various years passed by, leaving for dinner and casting keen looks at Tom Riddle’s group. They were acclimated to Tom’s biweekly meetings and those with worthwhile opinions had the option to join when they wished to. Very few ever did, as the notion of encountering Tom’s judgement was intimidating to most. Even when they had someone like Dolohov to be compared to. The Slytherins groaned at the sound of Dolohov’s chalk scraping against his chalkboard. Tom sat in his green armchair, arms comfortably laid out and legs crossed in a dignified manner. It was unspoken amongst the Slytherins that that chair in particular belonged to him. Embarrassed coughs from the group ensued when they saw that Dolohov had drawn a stick figure with a comically large head attached to it. It had a bolt of lightning taking up half its face.

“How plausible,” Tom spoke dryly. Mulciber conceded, slow clapping, “you’ve convinced me, mate. Something about that left arm you forgot to add just really runs it home.” One corner of Tom’s lips lifted.

Dolohov ignored the two. “I believe he’s a spy for Grindelwald.”

Tom flicked his hand. “Elaborate.” Tom could hear him out at the very least.

“One: A few weeks ago, you informed us that Potter disapparated in Hogsmeade. Only wizards seventeen and above can do this in Hogsmeade. And yet, Harry Potter is a sixth year? But sixth years haven’t even studied apparition yet!” Apparition was impressive for someone who’d supposedly been home taught.

“Potter’s age remains a mystery. He could have turned seventeen already and learned apparation individually. That’s well within the realm of possibility without him being… a spy” Tom’s eyelids fluttered in an effort to maintain a serious expression. Dolohov was at times almost as ludicrous as Harry Potter. Fortunately, he had immeasurable wealth and an esteemed bloodline to redeem him.

“Or…” Dolohov raised an index finger, “He could be thirty and making good use of some de-aging potions”

“He could be polyjuicing. He could be your great grandmum for all you know,” Bulstrode jested.

“Shutup, Bullstrode! You hadn’t even been there when Tom told us all about it!” Bulstrode glowered back at the boy. Dolohov was prone to excitement whenever he gave presentations. Ordinarily he presented Tom with extravagant conspiracy theories and the occasional in depth analysis on the current state of wizarding economics, but evidently some fever dreams had stewed in the past three weeks.

Antonin took a long, deep breath and advanced. “Two: He’s in Gryffindor. And because of that, he nearly always serves detention under Professor Dumbledore. And Potter gets detention a lot. Now, Dumbledore is one of the greatest wizards currently alive whether we all want to admit that or not.”
Nearby fourth years booed. Their heads ducked timidly back into their potions essays when Tom espied them.

“We all know that when Grindelwald’s forces eventually breach Scottish borders, Dumbledore will have no choice but to battle Grindelwald. Assuming Dumbledore doesn’t approach him first. Seers are predicting we have about a year, year and a half left before we reach that critical point. What would Grindelwald be doing in the meantime?” Using operatives to gain intelligence, according to Dolohov. Tom shifted in his seat. The concept was certainly compelling, but Dolohov’s claim was flawed.

“You know better than anyone, Dolohov, that you can’t choose what house you go into. Explain to me, how he would just so conveniently be sorted into Gryffindor when even you couldn’t manage that.”

Dolohov had morphed into a goldfish, his lips shutting and opening as whatever words he found were lost on the tip of his tongue.

Avery raised his hand. “Yes, Pascal?”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to rope Dippet into this somehow. Is he a spy too now?”

Antonin flushed scarlet but Tom couldn’t revel in his humiliation, not when Dolohov’s argument had just become engaging. “You don’t need to explain, if you find that you can’t. I would like to hear what more you have,” Tom coaxed him charmingly. Antonin slackened his shoulders, throwing Tom eyes full of gratitude.

“Three: Tom has made us aware that Potter possesses an almost bizarre knowledge of the castle interior. He knows of at least two underpasses and we suspect that’s just the tip of the iceberg. What would a spy do in his first month here? Scope out and map the place! And we’ve all noticed just how often he skives. What’s he doing in that time?” It was absurd, how logical Dolohov was making this sound. Could this explain Potter’s knowledge of the Chamber of Secrets? Tom suppressed his excitement.

“Perhaps he is mapping me, Dolohov. Since he spends the core of that time obsessively shadowing me, if you hadn’t noticed,” Tom countered.

“Mapping you, eh?” Lestrange wolf-whistled and Tom immediately incanted a mild stunner, eyebrows twitching. Lestrange fell to his side, clutching his chest with a cheeky grin plastered to his face. The other Slytherin boys had plugged their fists into their mouths, holding in their snorts desperately. Unlike Rodolphus, their preservation instincts were intact.

“How would you explain his tangents on blood worth?” Mulciber inquired when the group regained their composure. “Just yesterday he was loudly inferring at the Hufflepuff table, how mud-blood is imperative for the longevity of the wizarding race. You’re telling me someone like that would work for Grindelwald?” Potter couldn’t align himself with Dumbledore, if their political views so strongly crossed. There was no way a sly old dog like Dumbledore wouldn’t realize. If there was anything Tom could expect from Dumbledore, it was that he would gladly welcome a spy into his abode, if only to keep a sharper eye on them. So… perhaps it was sensible for Potter to be in Gryffindor after all. Dolohov’s theory was shoddy at best, granted it was the only explanation offered for Potter’s curious apparating abilities.

It was unlikely but worth further examination. Tom had remained neutral on the subject of Grindelwald even as his power multiplied the past years. Tom disliked how the dark wizard posed a threat to his day to day life, even if he could commend his steady rise to power. What Tom would
not tolerate though, was Grindelwald so much as attempting to raid Hogwarts. As far as Tom was concerned, that was his territory.

Tom ran his thumb over his bottom lip, weighing his options. A plan of motion was already forming in his head.

“There’s a swamp in my favorite lavatory still. It’s been nearly a month,” Myrtle moaned and collapsed at the Hufflepuff table. Which had become home to one Harry Potter, Rubeus Hagrid, Myrtle Warren, and peculiarly enough, Abraxas Malfoy. Hagrid of course, was the only native. Other Hufflepuffs had taken to giving the quartet dirty looks, but Harry never asked for Myrtle and Abraxas to have attached themselves to his hip the way they had. Myrtle had taken his heroics as her own form of life insurance.

And Malfoy…

Harry wasn’t sure. Like Myrtle, Abraxas Malfoy was short of friends, and his snatched wand became the perfect excuse to glue himself to Harry. Between Abraxas and Myrtle, there couldn’t be two people less alike, except they both harbored a concerning obsession with Tom Riddle. (Hagrid had duly noted that they shared this with Harry, much to Harry’s dismay.) Abraxas Malfoy had had the notion that Myrtle Warren had been stalking him since she’d first stepped foot on Hogwarts and it had all come to a head at Hogsmeade last month. He never stopped to consider if in fact they’d both been tailing Riddle from the very start.

“Really? The fourth floor one? That’s a pity.”

Harry scrutinized his map, hidden behind his class schedule. Tom Riddle had opted to skip breakfast that morning and was spending an exceedingly long time in the prefect’s bathroom. “Guess you’ll have to come down here and cry over your porridge the next time Olive Hornby has a go at you.” The swamp was one of Harry’s more inspired ideas. Tom Riddle would never reach the chamber of secrets if he had to weather a dirty swamp, and Moaning Myrtle wouldn’t spend all her time there if she had to be waist deep in algae.

Harry had to admire the Weasley twins’ brilliance. Even professors in the nineties had been no match for the portable swamp, and that was after locomotive illusions had been concocted in the seventies. Harry’s swamp had left the Hogwarts professors stupefied, though Harry thought it dubious how Professor Dumbledore so conveniently had other matters to attend to whence the others called for assistance. It was keeping the swamp up that had become Harry’s latest priority. His detentions with Tom Riddle had ran their course to completion, only to be replaced. Harry had been diverting attention from the swamp through other tricks and attempting to frame Peeves, some successful… and some not.

A mass of dungbombs going off too early last week was going to have Harry scrubbing infirmary bedpans well into Christmas break. Harry almost felt guilty on behalf of the Hogwarts caretaker, Rancorous Carpe, who had been back and forth all month and by the look of his eyebrows, which had fallen out, was slowly losing his mind. Still, Harry didn’t think it too bad a trade in considering what could happen instead.

Harry lamented that it could only go on for so long. Eventually the professors would dispel of the bog, and Harry would have to turn to other solutions. The Weasley Wildfire Whizbangs, he imagined, would be far too destructive, and Harry had nearly run out of Peruvian instant darkness
powder. He thought that if Ron and Hermione had been here, the three of them would have managed to find a much more lucrative distraction, and one that would have Hermione in accordance. She hadn’t even been born yet and Harry could still hear her grousing over his highjinks.

Harry’s thoughts were interrupted by a flurry of feathers entering the great hall. Harry looked up when a school owl landed directly in front of him and stuck its leg out. Harry regarded the owl with bewilderment. Who could possibly be writing to him? The owl hooted as if to respond.

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it,” Myrtle pouted, failing to notice when the owl pooped right by her bowl.

“Huh? Oh are we still talking about that?” Harry occupied himself with untangling a scroll from the owl’s claws.

Myrtle turned her nose up. “Do you ever listen to me, Potter?”

“Err do you want the truth or what would be most considerate of your ego?”

In his month of knowing her, Myrtle Warren had lived up to the nickname of her ghost. Myrtle Warren could moan about anything and everything.

But… she was preferred over Abraxas.

“Morning, mudbloods!” Abraxas Malfoy cheerily greeted them after strolling into the great hall. The two of them ignored him even as he clapped their backs and forced his way into the diminutive space between them on the bench. “You’ve got to stop calling us that, Malfoy.”

Abraxas frowned. “Why? I meant it as a sort of… petname!” A petname? Oh Hermione would just adore him, Harry thought sarcastically. He was like Draco Malfoy on steroids. Harry had been tolerating him, because on some level, he pitied Malfoy, but Draco’s grandfather really had his days where Harry’d rather see him tossed into the nearest volcano. Not even Tom Riddle could grate on his nerves as well as Abraxas had managed. “Of course I mean it literally for you, Myrtle, but for Harry, it’s endearing.” How flattering.

“It’s bigoted, Malfoy” Harry bit out. “It doesn’t matter in what way you mean it, stop calling us that”

“Bigoted?” Malfoy chortled mockingly “Why that’s just a word darling muddy-bloods like yourselves fall over for isn’t it? How adorable of you to think superiority is not a given in this world.”

“If you’re going to hang about us, the least you could be is respectful of our blood status.”

“What?” Malfoy squawked cluelessly. “It’s only the truth. Some people are poor, some people are rich. Some people are beautiful,” Malfoy gestured towards himself with a piece of toast. “And some people are abominations,” and towards Myrtle.

“Some people are intelligent, and some are brainless. Some people are wizards, some are witches. And finally, some people are purebloods. And some, are not. It’s just the natural state of things, some wizards are just born better. and tossing around made-up insults? Why that won’t accomplish anything. We’ll have to do away with any gloating next if you haven’t realized it exists solely on a foundation of inequality.” It was mindboggling to have jumped into a decade where wizards weren’t remotely offended at the insinuation that they were intolerant. Instead, they wore it proudly.

“What a load of rubbish!” Myrtle barked. “It’s purebloods like yourselves deciding what’s superior, not the natural state of things!”
“If no one set standards the world would descend into chaos.”

“Who says they’re the right standards hmm? Why does purescum like yourself get to decide?”

“We’re right! Don’t tell me you believe anyone would ever set you as a beauty standard!”

“Oh it’s always back to calling me ugly with you isn’t it! Have you taken a look in the mirror lately, Pinnochio?!”

“Who in Merlin’s beard is Pinnochio?! Is this some muggle nonsense again?”

Harry quickly withdrew from the conversation, anticipating another hour-long squabble ending in crude name-calling, nerves being touched on, and Abraxas tearfully storming out of the hall. Myrtle could get unexpectedly vicious. It was too bad she couldn’t channel that energy towards Olive Hornby. Harry turned his attention back to the scroll in his hand, but not before attempting to shoo the school owl away, which was still clacking around on the Hufflepuff table, knocking forks off. The owl hooted indignantly and instead roosted stubbornly next to Harry’s pumpkin juice, puffing its chest out.

“Hagrid would have crushed you in his fist by now, if he weren’t so soft” said Myrtle. Harry didn’t think Hagrid would take kindly to his giant heritage being used for her verbal battles, but he didn’t say anything. He only listened to their bickering as he untied the forest green ribbon from his small scroll. Harry unrolled it, finding that the edges of the parchment had been dipped in silver, and ornamental calligraphy lavished its surface. Harry fixed his glasses.

“Where is he anyway?... OHH!” Abraxas exclaimed happily as if he hadn’t just been waxing poetical about his blood superiority. He’d suddenly noticed Harry’s scroll and completely forgotten all about Myrtle and Hagrid. “Look at that, you’ve gotten the invite too?”

Harry peered up at him. “Invite?”

“Rodolphus Lestrange’s Rite of Passage! That’s quite the bestowal! Not just anyone can attend. You’d be the only half-blood next to Avery then.”

“Then why would he invite me?” Harry asked before immediately concluding it had something to do with Tom Riddle. “Riddle,” Harry grimaced, raising a glass of pumpkin juice to his lips.

“Did I tell you? He thinks you’re Grindelwald’s spy. Or more like Dolohov does, and he’s convinced the rest of them to go along with it.” Harry spat his juice out. “What?!”

“They were in the Slytherin common room discussing it last week.”

“And it took you till now to tell me?!”

“Well, are you Grindelwald’s spy? Because if you are, I know about three pureblood radicals that need good references for their job search, who would just love to work with him.”

“They can die unemployed in their pureblood mansions,” Harry replied and turned back to his invitation.

“Dear Harry Potter, you are cordially invited to the pureblood rite of passage of one Rodolphus Lestrange as well as his coming of age inauguration and ball afterwards.

Place: Broom Closet of the 6th floor
Harry wasn’t one to go to balls but if Tom Riddle was to be attending, then it was a necessary evil. The owl flapped its wings at Harry. At last, he noticed a meager piece of parchment folded in half and attached to one claw. “Sorry,” he told the bird, which hooted impatiently, flying away once Harry had retrieved his note.

“Harry! Top Secret! You mustn’t tell Myrtle or Malfoy. Aragog’s about to be born! Be here sharpish! -Hagrid”.

Harry had grown fond of the Hufflepuff commons. It was all sunny colors and honey wood with soft light filtering through its round windows. The vast expanse of yellow was balanced out by a diverse selection of potted and hanging plants. Harry nodded towards the few Hufflepuffs left as he breezed his way into the third year boy’s dormitory. Hagrid’s bed must’ve been twice the size of the others. The entire room had been expanded to suit Hagrid’s larger than life presence. Harry warily inspected his surroundings before shutting the disk-shaped door behind himself, leaving himself and Hagrid completely alone.

“I got your note, Hagrid”

“It’s finally happenin’ Harry!” Hagrid exclaimed from the trunk he was kneeling over. The third year could barely contain his enthusiasm. His cheeks and bulbous nose had turned a cheerful red. Harry struggled to keep a neutral face. Hagrid was seconds away from jumping for joy… and all Harry could muster was disgust.

Harry edged forward next to Hagrid and squatted, looking over into his trunk. Aragog’s egg looked the size of a beachball. It would have taken up a significant amount of space had it been anyone else’s trunk. It’s soft, squishy shell had a puny opening at the top.

“How long do you suppose it has left?” asked Harry. As if to hear him, Aragog trembled in his shell and jiggled a few centimeters to the left.

“The handbook I got on acromantulas said it took ‘bout eight weeks, an’ then the hatching would happen over the matter of an hour.” Harry had to say something. He had to speak up. He recalled his second year, stuck in that forbidden forest. He and Ron would be dead had it not been for Mr.Weasley’s automobile. Aragog would soon cast a shadow on Hagrid’s innocence and Hagrid would be done for if Riddle managed to open the Chamber of Secrets. A surge of self-loathing settled over Harry. He knew it would break the third year’s heart.

Harry opened his mouth when Hagrid abruptly burst into tears. “Yeh know I always wanted a little brother. An’ guess what we’re gonna share the same birthday. Can yeh believe it?”

Harry pinched his lips together, beginning to fidget as he watched Hagrid’s joyous tears. Harry firmly steeled himself, swearing he’d acquire some stone-solid sweets for the boy from the kitchens later. It was better to do it now than to let things get out of control. “Hagrid.”
The tip of a pincer broke through the opening of the cream shell. It shook and stretched the shell around it. “Oh would yeh look at tha’!”

“Hagrid!” Harry bellowed in his urgency. The large boy looked curiously at Harry.

“Hagrid, you have to get rid of him. Or free him into the forest. Soon.” Hagrid turned confused. “Harry, why would yeh suggest such a thing?”

“If you don’t,” Harry exhaled. “It’ll come back to bite you in the arse. . .”

“Codswallop! He’s jus’ a baby!”

“He’s dangerous, Hagrid.”

“I dunno where yeh get off saying something so ruddy. Acromantulas are some seriously misunderstood creatures, Harry. Jus’ look at him, he hasn’ even been born yet. What’s he gonna do to anybody!”

“If you get found out, you’ll get expelled.”

Hagrid glowered. “an’ it would be well worth it, if I could rest with the peace of mind knowing he grew up safe and sound. An’ that’s not about to happen if I jus’ set him free in the forest. He would die out there.” Hagrid’s voice was slowly rising.

“You can’t keep him around for much longer,” Harry declared. He should have reconsidered the patronizing tone of his voice. “I’ve seen it, Hagrid. Your wand gets turned into an umbrella, you go to askaban decades later because of one accusation in your youth. It- It can all be prevented! And Aragog grows up fine… in the forest!”

Hagrid abruptly boomed, standing up and towering over Harry. He threw his hands in the air. Harry resisted the instinct to back away.

“I DUNNO WHERE YEH GET OFF ACTIN’ LIKE MY DAD OF SORTS, JUS’ CUZ YER A BIT OLDER, BUT YEH DON’T GET TO DECIDE WHAT I DO NO MATTER IF YEH THINK YEH CAN SEE THE FUTURE. I’M KEEPING ARAGOG AND THAT’S THAT”

It was to Hagrid’s vocal raging, that Aragog’s pincers finally surged out his egg. The great spider wriggled out of it’s slimy shell, it’s lanky legs struggling to stand upright. Hagrid hurried to it’s side holding his hands down for the spider to climb onto. The creature cried softly. Harry shuddered when Aragog’s many eyes landed on him. Ron would have an embolism. “Harry, if yeh can’t make friends with Aragog, how could yeh have ever made friends with me?”

“I—“

“Aragog and I are a great bit alike,” Hagrid rumbled. “Everyone petrified of us, ‘fore they’ve even gotten to know us. You jus’ need to learn to understand him, like I’ve learnt to understand you. If yeh can’t manage that, then how are yeh supposed to be my mate?”

All week, Hagrid remained angry with Harry. He’d taken to staunchly evading the older boy. He was even more furious once he found out Harry had been invited to a pureblood rite of passage. Myrtle had taken great joy in informing Harry, that Hagrid thought he was cavorting with enemies. If
it weren’t so frustrating, Harry would be impressed at Hagrid’s ability to pretend he didn’t exist. Harry’d attempted to bring him an oversized birthday cake only to be immediately shut out. Harry considered apologizing but it was only for Hagrid’s own good, or so he’d tried to covertly tell him at the few mealtimes Hagrid appeared at.

By Thursday Harry had instead concerned himself with the various witches and wizards arriving at Hogwarts on their own time. It had reminded him of owl examinations, but Abraxas happily enlightened Harry that it was for Rodolphus Lestrange’s ball. Two witches and a wizard, stylishly arrived one night, to thundering applause from the Slytherin table. The first, a tall, reedy witch with spectacles that magnified the size of her eyes. She wore a full body, velvet set of robes. She led the group in a single line formation. Following her was a lithe wizard with slicked black hair, and a thin beard, who had chosen to don a muggle suit. A chubby witch with wavy, brown hair down to her knees completed the trio.

“Who are they?” Myrtle asked before Harry had to.

 Abraxas Malfoy took great pride in explaining pureblood customs to the two of them. Abraxas liked explaining anything someone didn’t understand. Harry reckoned it made the sixth year Slytherin feel more intelligent than he was.

“Cassandra Trelawney, Roscoe Wu and Amaltheia Carras, only the greatest diviners of this century. I had Amaltheia at my rite of passage. Made some real profound predictions, she did. Mum couldn’t schedule Trelawney or Wu though. I imagine some significant capital has been exchanged for the Lestrange’s to get all three.”

The trio of diviners found seats at the professors table and no one introduced them. They greeted headmaster Dippet and it were as if they hadn’t just made waves walking into the hall. “Why diviners? And why a rite of passage?” Harry hadn’t ever recalled Ron having a rite of passage though he was beginning to suspect that might have had to do with the Weasley finances or that the only capable seer in the nineties was Professor Trelawney. Harry smirked as he imagined how that might have gone down. Professor Trelawney at Ron’s sixteenth birthday proclaiming some imminent tragedy... And then she’d take out her teacups... Hermione would go out into the yard to scream. It was priceless.

“It’s tradition for purebloods to get our fortunes read on our sixteenth,” Malfoy dismissed him. “I don’t know why, it just is.”

At 9:00 on Friday, Harry Potter walked into Hermione Granger’s waking nightmare. The broom closet had been transformed into an opulent hall a hundred times it’s original size, it’s wooden door transfigured into a tall archway. The tables were gone except one long one next to aperture windows, laden with various expensive looking delicacies. The rough stone had turned into polished white marble embellished with greek motifs. Jewel tone tapestries had been hung and a stage bedecked with two pillars and a long, cotton veil had been raised. Two house-elves sat on stools by the archway. One played a lyre, and the other a flute. Various houseelves were situated throughout the hall, holding platters on their head and pureblood nobility crowded the place.

Harry realized how out of place he was. He’d chosen to wear his bottle green robes from the yule ball, but they looked strange compared to the dress robes they wore. They favored sheer silk and chiffon that was lavished with mobile embroidery or encrusted with assorted semi-precious jewels in just the right places to protect their dignity. Harry admired the stirring of an embroidered swan taking up the entire back of one wizard’s sheer robes. Witches and wizard alike had come to show off just how much wealth they possessed. To top it off, various wooden booths were set up. An aged
Cassandra Trelawney sat at one, a physiognomist named Roscoe Wu at another, and the famous Amaltheia Carras that Abraxas had spoken of had set up her palm-reading booth. 1940’s Pureblood nobility, it turned out, thought very highly of divination.

“What are those?” Abraxas Malfoy looked Harry up and down with disdain.

“They’re robes.” Harry shrugged.

“They look muggle.” Abraxas wrinkled his nose. “It’s good they suit your eyes at least.”

“Yes well, they’re muggle inspired.” “Muggle-inspired robes? How ghastly! Why you should have asked me if you needed anything!” Malfoy had donned one shoulder, Persian blue robes with intricate gold details along the hems. Harry had to admit that they were dazzling, but he couldn’t imagine himself wearing anything like them.

“Malfoy, what exactly does a pureblood rite of passage entail?”

“Personally, I believe this is something you have to witness for yourself. It’s hard to explain. But really it’s the party that comes after that matters for the rest of us.”

As if on cue, the veil to the stage lifted to reveal Rodolphus Lestrange nervously sitting on what looked to be the oldest chair Harry’d ever seen, in what had to be the oldest robes he’d ever seen. Unlike the other guests, he looked underdressed. “Druidic robes it looks like. Family heirlooms are a must for the occasion,” Abraxas whispered out the corner of his mouth. The guests had all turned to watch Lestrange, except for Trelawney, Carras and Wu who all rose, and ascended onto the center stage.

“He wishes for Wu to go first,” Trelawney spoke. She had applied a voice amplifying charm and her words boomed throughout the hall. Trelawney and Carras took a step back and Mr. Wu strode forward. The wizard gently grasped Lestrange’s face and tilted it in every which direction. He hummed and mumbled for a painstakingly long time, but it appeared every pureblood around Harry was entranced.

Harry scoured the room, looking to spot Riddle, who was nowhere to be found. Harry bemoaned leaving his map in the dormitory. Just when Wu had lost Harry’s attention to what looked like a pair of military personnel, Wu spoke up. “Strong nose, gentle forehead… He will maintain his ancestor’s wealth!” The man announced to clamorous applause.

“That’s it?” Harry asked skeptically. “He’s an only child, so that’s all that matters isn’t it? It’d be better if he cultivated it but at least he’s not going to waste his inheritance away. Only family gets the whole reading anyway.” Malfoy gestured to a group of people situated just before the stage. Roscoe Wu stepped down and brought them to a ring of seats. While the other readings proceeded, he appeared to be appraising the Lestrange family of every minute detail.

“Carras next!” Trelawney proclaimed. Amaltheia Carras took one look at Lestrange and conjured a stool. Rodolphus Lestrange hesitantly held both his palms out. Like the wizard before her, Amaltheia Carras took her time, meticulously examining each hand. This time, the period stretched out much, much longer and the crowd around Harry grew anxious. Purebloods whispered conspiratorially all around Harry.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s rarely good if a palm reader takes this long. I mean… It can be good, but it usually brings some rather unfortunate news.” Up on his chair, Lestrange looked as if he were about to cry.
Cassandra Trelawney spoke once more. “My friend, Amaltheia has given Rodolphus Lestrange the option to choose whether or not he wants to hear his news. What do you choose, child?”

“Oh that’s not good, that’s not good at all” Abraxas muttered.

“Rodolphus has agreed to have his news heard!” the crowd clapped, this time, significantly subdued.

Amaltheia Carras stood up and acknowledged the crowd. “I bear the unfortunate news that Rodolphus Lestrange is magically sterile. He will have no children.” The previous hushed whispers of the guests devolved into an eerie silence.

“Magically sterile? What’s that?” Harry whispered to Abraxas. Malfoy shot him a look of disbelief. “I thought your mum was a witch…” he rolled his eyes. “It means that were he to choose to have children despite Amaltheia’s news, he would only have squibs to show for it.” What a tragic side effect of inbreeding. Harry could have snorted. This was what had the purebloods mum with shock? That Lestrange’s children would live like muggles?

Suddenly a lavishly dressed woman shot up from her seat with Roscoe.

“YOU’RE LYING!” she screeched. “YOU’RE LYING, YOU’RE LYING!” She vindictively pointed a many-ringed finger at Amaltheia, who began profusely apologizing. Her husband held her back by the arm but she continued screaming at Amaltheia and Rodolphus. “No son of mine is sterile! No son of mine!”

Harry had erroneously believed that a rite of passage was supposed to be a merry celebration. He concluded that it could in fact, go deeply wrong. Harry was stunned to watch Lestrange’s face crumble. Lestrange burst into tears, covering his face as his shoulders shook with the heave of his loud sobs.

Cassandra Trelawney held her hand up and instantly silenced Lestrange’s bawling mother as well as the muttering patrons. The silence was broken only by Lestrange’s quiet weeping. “There’s hope for you yet, Mrs. Lestrange. We have not finished.” Harry was unsure what she could tell the Lestrange family to possibly make up for Amaltheia’s news but the witch looked unflappable.

Cassandra stepped towards Lestrange and he hopefully held out his shaking hands. She seized them, closing her eyes. It was a longshot away from Harry’s own experience with Sybil Trelawney in third year. It was as if she could do it on command. Still holding hands with Lestrange she opened her eyes and everyone gasped. The whole of Cassandra’s eyes turned pitch black. Shivers ran up Harry’s spine and every lantern in the hall went out, except for one by the elves. It reminded Harry of the veil he’d seen in the department of mysteries. He could hear thousands of whispering voices circulating the hall, but not a peep from the guests. Cassandra heaved and witches and wizards murmured fervidly. Coming to, the witch let go of Lestrange’s hands. She flicked her wrist, and the light returned.

“The spirit of his great, great, grandaunt, Celestine Lestrange possesses him. He will have received all her luck as well as her barrenness. You will not continue your line, but your line will be continued. Congratulations, you have a brother on the way!”

“Really?!” Mrs. Lestrange cried out. “Yes. I don’t believe he is conceived yet, but his soul is coming.” “Oh, thank Merlin!!” Mrs. Lestrange sobbed and jumped into her husband’s arms. Rodolphus Lestrange only sat in his chair, staring bonelessly off into space, as the crowd around him applauded.
“May I have this dance?” Harry nearly dropped his plate of treacle tart. His eyes traced the large palm held out to him, up to the man’s face. A young man vaguely reminiscent of Viktor Krum was looking down at him. He was tall with broad shoulders, black bushy eyebrows hanging over hooded eyelids, a short hairline and a face that was almost handsome. He reminded Harry of a hawk, dressed in his sharp red military robes. Harry looked around himself, finding only empty seats. “Uhhh. M-me?”

“You.”

“Well I think I’d like to know your name first, at the very least.” Harry stared longingly at his treacle tart, fiddling with his fork. It would be rude to eat while the man spoke.

“Tiberius Mulciber.” Harry startled at the man’s surname. “And you?” It was a reminder that Harry wasn’t famous in this timeline. Wizards actually had to ask after his name now.

“Neville Longbottom,” he replied.

“Well… Neville. Would you dance with me?”

“I uh, I don’t generally dance with blokes, mate.” Harry didn’t dance at all, but that was beside the point. He was not interested in the man approaching him.

Tiberius raised his eyebrows. “It’s a perfectly platonic gesture, I assure you.” Yes, because inviting someone to dance was the perfect platonic way to get to know them. Of course Tom Riddle would fail to attend, and instead have one of his underlings do all his dirty work. “Yes… but my tart.” Why couldn’t he just sit and talk? Harry sulked.

“Neville. Dance with me, please. I insist.”

Harry grudgingly put his plate down and took Tiberius Mulciber’s hand. With well-practiced grace, the man pulled him to his feet, and in a minute flat had one hand on Harry’s waist and the other holding Harry’s arm out.

Harry cleared his throat. “So. Uh, why me?” May as well make small talk if he was stuck here. It was ridiculous. Harry was dancing with a deatheater.

“I saw you sitting alone, from across the room.”

“So you pitied me?” Harry had been doing just fine, thankyou very much. Alone, or stuck with Abraxas it was a suffocating affair. Harry would have been perfectly splendid left all on his lonesome. When Tiberius took a step back, timed with the music, Harry noticed the badge on the right breast of his high collared robes. Tiberius drew closer, switching arms. Harry’s eyes narrowed into slits. “You work for Grindelwald.” Harry speculated what he’d done in a past life, for there to be dark wizards everywhere he went. “Not directly. Though I’m detecting some enmity on your part… Is that a problem?”

“Oh no. Not at all. By the way, I’m a halfblood.” Other than Pascal Avery, Harry was the only halfblooded wizard there, and he’d bet a leg and an arm there wasn’t a single muggleborn present. He stared up at Tiberius piercingly, just counting on a snooty, prejudiced reply.

“Really?” said Tiberius. “Because I had the impression that the Longbottom family has been pureblooded for at least fifteen generations, no less.” Harry ignored the prying into his fake blood status, instead finding entertainment in the way they were both shamelessly lying to eachother. “But if you are that bothered, A lot of mudbloods have worked with Grindelwald. It’s really muggles that concern him.”
“Have we met before?” asked Harry. He was neither the Mulciber Harry had met in the Graveyard or Riddle’s accomplice in school. Tiberius kept a distinctly pleasant mask across his face. But something about the tightness of the corners of his lips, or the way his smile never reached his eyes felt familiar.

Tiberius spun him. “Well I expect you’ve met my younger brother. Over there,” Tiberius cocked his head and Harry looked in the direction. Julius Mulciber was whispering to Augustus Bulstrode by the windows and they were both vigilantly observing Harry and Tiberius.

“Are you well acquainted with them? They’re watching us.” Tiberius smirked. The elves stopped playing, and moved into the next celtic melody. “Their friend perhaps.”

“Oh? Which one? Lestrange? Tom Riddle? Not that spaz, Dolohov surely” Harry grunted when Tiberius pulled him exceedingly close. The pressure of his hand on the small of Harry’s back was crossing from firm to crushing. Harry caught his breath. “Personal space, mate” he cautioned the older man, pressing his hand to his chest. “My apologies,” Tiberius drawled. He hadn’t even tried to sound authentic.

“Tom Riddle, if you could call it well acquainted. I wonder where he is actually.” Harry gazed around the ballroom. “You’d think he’d fall over himself to be at a pureblood occasion like this one.”

“And why is that?”

“The self-hatred runs strong in him from what I’ve seen.” Harry knew full well he was talking smack about Tom Riddle to one of his informants of all people. He privately hoped this would get back to Riddle.

Mulciber, whom had been so elegant, shockingly missed a step and the two of them stumbled momentarily. They came to a halt with Tiberius holding Harry upright by the elbow. Tiberius cleared his throat as Harry collected himself. “Excuse my lumbering… How… exactly is my brother’s friend self-hating?” How wasn’t Lord Voldemort the poster boy for self hatred? A half-blood that ends up leading legions of pureblood extremists, tossing the wizarding world into chaos. Harry didn’t care if he affiliated with them for power or wealth, he’d still done it hadn’t he? His acts of selfishness had killed thousands and that was leaving out the evils he’d committed in person.

Afresh, Harry took Mulciber’s hand and they resumed dancing. Harry had no qualms about revealing what had to be Riddle’s biggest secret to one of his subordinates. Harry wondered for a flash, if that was cruel of him, but he also thought it just. “Tom Riddle’s a half-blood, didn’t you know?”

Mulciber’s furry eyebrows ceased together. “And how have you gained knowledge of that?”

“I know him very well. Much better than you I expect.”

Tiberius paused. “That’s a very bold claim... Where did you acquire such audaciousness?”

“Genetics… Lifestyle, things like that. It must have been after I competed in the triwizard tournament that all of this sparkling personality of mine really solidified.”

“The last triwizard was in 1792,” Mulciber corrected him.

“Not in the nineties,” Harry grinned.

Mulciber hummed as the music moved into something cozier. “I don’t think you’re prepared to speak with me sincerely.” Oh Harry was plenty sincere.
“Go on. I’ll be honest.” Mulciber looked grumpy. “Here, I’ll prove it. My real name is Harry Potter. See? Completely sincere.” Like Harry thought, not a sliver of surprise offered itself on Tiberius Mulciber’s visage.

“So you’ve been lying to me about your name from the very start? How do I even know you’re not lying now?”

Harry shrugged. “You knew. Don’t play me for a fool, Mulciber. Why else would you have approached me if you hadn’t? Or did you ask me to dance because you genuinely thought I looked dashing in my robes?”


“I want to know more about you, Harry Potter.” Somehow, Harry was doubtful of that. Mulciber was just Riddle’s rat.

“Go on then. I’ll tell you all I know. Of course, it’d have been better if Riddle himself could have approached me. Then he would’ve gotten a full length autobiography, complete with a portrait on the cover and a signature on the inside.” Mulciber’s eyes flashed.

“Well let’s start easy… You’re a Gryffindor, aren’t you? I was Slytherin myself. Graduated last year.”

“I was almost sorted into Slytherin believe it or not.” Harry told him.

“Really?” Mulciber perked up immediately. “How did that go.”

“Well. I told it I wanted to be put in Gryffindor.”

“Why? I hadn’t thought it possible to sway the hat…”

“I had a friend in Gryffindor.” It was more complicated than that. Harry couldn’t stand the thought of being grouped in with a parade of classist quacks. Draco Malfoy had reminded Harry far too much of the Dursleys.

“Friend? from what I’d heard, you don’t have an-”

“Don’t have any what?” Harry interjected. “Friends in Gryffindor? Not at the moment, no.” His fellow Gryffindors hadn’t quite accepted him as well as they had in his own timeline. And now that Riddle had recovered his prefects badge they had even less a reason to. Riddle took to revenge like a fish to water. The Gryffindor hourglass had never looked so desolate and they all had Harry to blame. Harry had never realized before how much his fame and quidditch prowess had salvaged him in the nineties.

“So, why did the sorting hat want you for Slytherin?”

“Oh. Plenty of reasons. Probably because I’m a parselmouth.” Harry’s mouth twitched as he conveyed this vital piece of information.

“What?!” Mulciber shook his head.

“And a snake charmer. I can play quite the tune on the pungi. Calms them right down,” Harry quipped.
“If you can speak parseltongue, then prove it.”

“Yeah, want to hear? Why? It’s not as if you’ll understand.”

“Try me.” Mulciber’s hand gripped Harry’s achingly. The man gazed down at him so willfully… so expectantly. It was as if he wanted nothing more than for Harry to really be a parselmouth. Harry felt a rush of power flow through his veins.

“orraysay atemay, iyay asway ustjay okingjay. Oops.” Tiberius stepped away from him letting go of his hand, he scowled down at Harry.

“Pig latin,” Mulciber scoffed, disappointment set across his strong features. “Hilarious.” Harry couldn’t help it. Was it the betrayed expression or the fact that the man had been so willing to believe him even after Harry had admitted to lying? Tiberius was unexpectedly gullible and it was thrilling, brazenly admitting a potentially incriminating truth only to lead his companion to believe it a lie. Harry tossed his head back and laughed uproariously as the man led him in dance. He could just imagine Mulciber reporting back to Riddle.

Harry was still impishly snickering a few minutes later, his dance partner spiritlessly enduring it. Harry merely found his disaffected air even more entertaining. It became crystal clear that Tiberius was only humoring him because he had an objective to reach, and Harry took an almost sadistic pleasure in sabotaging him. He eventually descended into hiccups and stopped the man. “Hold on, Hold on. I need to wipe my eyes, oh Merlin.”

“That was very… juvenile of you, Potter” Mulciber informed him gloomily as Harry dabbed at the tears that had slipped down his cheeks. They stood in the middle of the ballroom with countless couples around them dancing and frolicking. With his glasses off, dress robes spun in a rainbow flurry. For the first time that night, Harry thought he might’ve been enjoying himself.

Harry smirked, putting his glasses back on. “Didn’t your brother warn you I was a loon? Halfwit? Numskull? Mad? I’ve heard them all.” Harry jumped when the elves introduced a slow song and Tiberius daringly moved both hands to his waist. Holding him secure, he hauled Harry closer. “Shoulders, Potter,” Tiberius instructed him.

“Er, right.” Harry brought his hands to the man’s strong shoulders. Harry’s history with dancing hadn’t been the most pleasant. He recalled Parvati Patil, whom he’d danced with once. The both of them had had enough after he’d stepped on her toes multiple times during the yule ball opening. Harry considered that it was perhaps, almost decent if someone-else guided him. Tiberius Mulciber skillfully sidestepped Harry’s two left feet with such ease. Harry conjectured it had to be due to that affluent pureblood upbringing.

“I don’t believe you’re crazy.” Tiberius imparted to him. His voice was a rich baritone. Mulciber’s eyes bored into him. Briefly, Harry lost his thought and all sense of space and time as he stared into the man’s orbs. When Harry came to, he reddened, realizing how intimate it all suddenly felt. He’d almost forgotten that the man was a political extremist. That he worked for Grindelwald and that he would conceivably become a deatheater.

“So… what do you think of me?” Harry raised his eyebrows. When he’d first arrived, no one had believed him when he’d sat in that ministry office. Again, when he’d sat in Headmaster Dippet’s office. That had yet to change. Wizard society still thought Harry berserk. Harry bitterly remembered how Ministry officers had concluded that he’d lost his memory in an attack on a nearby wizarding village. They’d added braindamaged on top, suggesting mindhealers and handing Harry name and address cards. They hadn’t even believed Harry’s name was his name. They thought they were being gracious by letting Harry use it. Not even Dumbledore had let on to anything. Time travel of this
level was impossible after all. If wizards could just travel fifty years back in time, surely they’d be aware of it. If Harry hadn’t been crazy to begin with, then it had been the unsettled gazes and the mistrustful glances that had drove him so.

“You take too much delight in yourself. It’s like a game to you, seeing what you can make someone believe, testing how much you can confuse them. No. I expect you’re just a liar, a bad one. And there’s nothing more to you than that.” Mulciber was so… dismissive. Harry’s posture turned rigid. It’d been the first time he’d come to 1942 that being called a liar actually felt this insulting. At least he understood the society here had a reason to doubt him, but Mulciber had meant that to cut.

His entire fifth year had been comprised of people calling him a liar. It’d been infuriating. He’d been trying to warn people and they took his words with a grain of salt. Here, at least Harry didn’t have the weight of being the boy who lived following him. It was a clean slate, and Harry had chosen to tell the truth, and to have fun with it at times. Perhaps it was his own small retribution to his many disbelievers. It had its repercussions, but Harry found that it was easiest as a time traveler, to simply hide in plain sight. “Well. You can believe that. But I’m not,” Harry replied hotly.

“Sure.” Mulciber cast him a distrustful look. “While we’re on this, someone has arrived that I wish you to meet.”

Had Riddle finally arrived?

Looking at him with resigned eyes, Tiberius Mulciber suddenly twirled Harry around, and was pushing him through the crowd of dancers. People gathered to the side, shocked by the speed at which Tiberius thrust him forth. “Wait. W-what are you trying to do here!” Harry dug his heels into the transformed marble. “Tiberius!” Tiberius led the two of them to the refreshment table.

Tiberius Mulciber came to a grinding halt in front of a skinny, shaggy maned wizard, whose hair stuck up in every which direction. In Gryffindor red robes, if it wasn’t the big brown eyes, that made Harry realize just who he was looking at, it was the pair of spectacles adorning the middle aged man’s face.

No. No no no no. Dread settled in Harry’s stomach. Tiberius gripped his bicep with bruising force as Harry desperately yanked around, sputtering. A piece of roasted acorn squash dropped limply out of Henry Potter’s mouth when he laid eyes on Harry.

“Hello, Mr. Potter, It’s great that you made it for Rodolphus’s rite of passage.” Tiberius held one hand out and they nimbly shook.

Tiberius settled his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “This is Harry Potter. Oh. But he likes to go by Neville Longbottom. Right, Neville?” Harry refused to say a word. “I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors by now. That there’s unrecorded Potter-spawn here at Hogwarts? Anyway, it’s come to our attention that you just may be his father, and he your son.” Tiberius dramatically exhaled. “A family reunion, how exquisite. Well, I’ll just leave the two of you to it then.”

Tiberius Mulciber released Harry from his hold, and did a traditional pureblood bow, crossing one arm behind his back.

“Oh. I forgot to introduce myself” he said to Henry when he stood back up. But he was looking straight into Harry’s eyes. “I go by the name of Riddle. Tom Riddle. Really. It was nice meeting you, have a good evening.”

Wearing Tiberius Mulciber’s skin, Tom Riddle cockily sauntered away.
Henry Potter had turned ashen-faced. Harry wondered if his soul had left his body. Henry looked suspiciously around himself as if he thought everyone in attendance was watching. Actually some might have been. Riddle had created quite the scene. Henry Potter lugged Harry out of the great hall by the wrist. He dragged Harry around the castle until they were out in the fresh breeze, looking at the night sky.

“How old are you?” he immediately asked Harry once they were alone.

“S-sixteen.” Harry lied, expecting the worst. For Henry Potter to start asking why he claimed to be his son, and how he looked the way he did, when it was impossible for Harry to be his son. Harry braced himself, if it came to that, he would tell the truth as he had before. Like the others, Henry would surely ridicule him for it. Instead, something else happened. Henry Potter’s eyes widened perilously. “Are you a son of Eartha?” He grabbed Harry’s shoulders. He shook him when Harry didn’t answer. “Tell me, boy!”

“Yes! Sorry!” Harry didn’t know what else to say or do. Apparently Henry Potter had had an affair exactly sixteen years ago. What choice did Harry have but to take advantage of it?

Henry pressed his lips together. “Listen… boy. You tell that woman I am giving her no money. Do you hear me? You may be of….” Henry looked him up and down. “Relation to me. But you are no son of mine, as I have not partaken in the raising of you. As luck would have it, you are almost of age.” Henry rubbed his palms over the front of Harry’s robes. His anger had faded, replaced by fascination. “You-you look more like my uncle than your mother. That hair of course… it’s there no matter how many generations pass.”

“Uhh yeah. My mum always said something like that. Well not that I look like your uncle. But y’know. ‘Oh Harry, you look nothing like me!’” Harry miserably imitated an unknown woman and Henry Potter feigned amusement. Their snipped laughter stagnated off into stifling silence. Harry scanned the older man’s appearance, searching for a resemblance. Besides his signature Potter hair and stature, he only shared eyes with James.

“What can I do to keep you quiet, boy?” Henry asked faintly. He knew he was suggesting something off-color. The man couldn’t even look Harry in the eyes. It reminded Harry vaguely of Uncle Vernon, the way he kept calling him boy. This was supposed to be his great-grandfather? Harry felt the secluded beginnings of disgust for the man. “Please. I have a wife. My son’s an adult, but it’d ruin him to know what I did to Dorothea,” the man pleaded.

“Harry. My name is Harry,” he corrected the wizard.

“Alright, Harry. Can we come to an agreement?”

Harry couldn’t believe it. He’d come face to face with a Potter, but he couldn’t convoke any feelings of love. It was what he’d always wanted, right? It didn’t help that the man was blatantly rejecting him. He was barely a step above Petunia. It was twisted. Harry was a direct descendant of this man. Had he been alive when Harry had born, he surely would have accepted Harry. Harry wondered if somewhere out there a woman named Eartha really had a son or daughter. What if they went by a different surname, and attended Hogwarts? Henry Potter wouldn’t even know. It felt insulting that Henry had a family, and that this was what he did to them, while the closest thing Harry considered a family was stuck in the distant future. Harry thought that Henry Potter took his loved ones sorely for granted.
“Is your son married yet?” Harry asked. Henry’s eyes bulged. “Y-yes… but why should that matter? You can’t tell him!”

“His wife… What’s she like?”

Henry Potter fumbled with a brooch on his robes as he spoke. “She’s intelligent, handsome. Quite good at quidditch, I think it drives Fleamont a bit mad.”

“And Fleamont?” Henry straightened up.

“ Took him awhile to get there, but he’s brilliant. I couldn’t wish for a better son.” Harry shouldn’t have slipped into his role as well as he did. He was getting offended on behalf of a son that he wasn’t. “Do- Do they have children?”

“Not yet, but I imagine it can’t be taking much longer. But what’s this got to do with anything?” Harry filled with wonder, when he considered the possibility of meeting his father in this lifetime, even if he was just a baby. Henry Potter hadn’t a clue.

“Well?” Henry Potter pressed, losing his patience. “I can’t have you wasting my time any longer, I promised Dorothea I would return before midnight. Now, can we come to an agreement or not?”

“Look, if you want to call it an agreement, you can. But moreso, I think it’s me deciding I want nothing to do with you. Not you deciding you want nothing to do with me. Don’t worry. I won’t ever knock on your doorstep. I won’t ever write to you or floo you. Perhaps I’ll even change my surname. Would that put you at ease?” Harry asked dauntingly although he had no plans to ever change his name just to suit Henry. “You want to know what you can do to buy my silence? Buy your wife some godforsaken flowers, every day, for the rest of her life. And I mean for the rest of her life. If you die first, I fully expect your arse to return as a ghost and fulfill your duty. And send me the bloody receipts. You’re not a man someone can trust.” Harry fixed his robes and took off.

On second thought… Harry turned on his heel.

“One more thing. When your daughter in law bears her son… Name him James. No matter what, James is the best name for him.”

With one last glare, Harry stalked back to the hall in the broom closet.

Harry reasoned that he’d fetch another slice of treacle tart and retire for the night. His meeting with Henry had put Harry in the mood to forget. Malfoy was nowhere in sight in the hall and the festivities had mellowed. Knackered couples were slow-dancing or getting their facial compatibility read by Mr. Wu. Cassandra Trelawney was signing autographs, stuck in an attempt to leave. Harry was a few meters short of the refreshment table when Amaltheia Carras beckoned him from her empty booth.

Immediately Harry searched the room for the nearest escape. Like everyone else avoiding her booth, Harry didn’t want his palms read after what had happened. Harry did not wish to hear what terrible news Amaltheia Carras could have in store for him. But the witch curled her fingers and Harry was suddenly dragged to her booth by the front of his robes. Harry toppled into the stall and the long-haired witch sidestepped him. Sparing one last glance out at the hall, she drew a pair of curtains closed, obscuring the room. One flickering candle on a table lit the booth. The music the elves played faintly penetrated the curtains.

“Harry Potter,” Amaltheia said, with the kind of awe he’d only ever heard in his own timeline. Harry
“Let me see your hands,” she commanded. Had Harry not experienced the imperius curse before, he’d have thought she was practicing it on him.

Amaltheia whistled when he reluctantly held them out. She grabbed them and stretched the skin of Harry’s palms. Skillfully, the witch tilted and turned his palms, noting every line.

“You’re a time traveler,” she smiled. Harry gawked at her.

“I thought… I thought you may have been, or at least that you believe you are. I’m a leglimens, you see. I was born that way. Can’t help it sometimes, some people’s thoughts, like yours, just hurl themselves at me. OH!” Harry choked on his saliva in his own shock. The witch clapped his back. Harry’d been telling just about anyone that would listen and here this woman was—actually believing him without him saying a word.

When Harry’s coughing fit subsided, the witch continued casually. “Yes, yes. Someone’s already been attempting to get inside that little nougat of yours,” she sighed. “Didn’t get much though. An amateur, I suspect. That’s a good thing. You should practice your occlumency, I predict it’s a steep improvement from here for him.”

“H-How-“ Harry stammered. She ushered him into a seat, swiftly taking the one across from him. “Your hands, Harry, Look. Oh, just look at your lines, it’s sublime!” She seized his hands again, forcing the backs of them down onto the cherrywood table separating them. Harry looked at his palms. He didn’t see anything particularly special or of note, and Professor Trelawney had never once announced anything other than what a spectacularly short life he’d lead, whenever she had examined them.

“Um, what exactly am I supposed to be seeing?”

“Here,” Amaltheia dug her index finger into the lifeline of his right palm. “Here, and here.” And followed with his heart and his fate. “On one hand, it is as if you have two palms. Your lines are all split into two. I hadn’t been sure, but this confirms it. You will lead two lives, and not the kind your great grandfather has.” Harry’s stomach dropped. Tracing her finger along his lifelines, she stopped at the beginning of a second one. “This is where you are now. You’ve begun your new life.”


“How did you do it, Harry?” The witch gazed into his eyes again and this time Harry could feel his mind transmitting the knowledge without his consent. Amaltheia gulped. “You used standing stones. I had thought that just a myth. That’s very arcane magic, Harry Potter, your friend is a very gifted witch to have made something so old new again. It’s unfortunate that you foolishly took advantage and mishandled it.”

“Do… Do you know if I can return?”

Harry had never made it back before twelve. But he’d assumed he’d find a way eventually. That in the meantime he’d focus on other things. On Tom Riddle. On Hagrid. Moaning Myrtle. That in a few years Ron, Hermione and Ginny might welcome him home with open arms. That in the case that they might not, he would at least return to find Hagrid leading a fulfilling life, Sirius tending to his motorcycle, Dumbledore in his study, feeding fawkes… Myrtle Warren would be alive and well and there would be no dark lord. Nothing would have ever come of Tom Riddle.

“Return? You can’t. You belong here now.”
“No.” Harry bared his teeth. “I don’t. I belong in the future. I was born there for pete’s sake. I shouldn’t even exist here.”

Amaltheia carefully studied his face. “Time… true time doesn’t work that way. I’ve made a life divining people’s destinies. I would know. In this timeline there is no present… There is before, and there is after. A magical life can predict, and in some cases even change the after. And a magical life can travel to the before, but a magical life can never go back, because from that moment on, that before is their after. Of course, You could always go further back, if you preferred it that way. I’ve always wanted to go back to founding times.”

Harry gaped. “What?”

Amaltheia gestured around herself. She got up and drew her booth curtain open.

“This. Is your future now.”

The witch sat back down, leaning back in her seat and watching Harry absorb her words.

“There now, it isn’t so bad here. Dangerous times, yes, both wizard and mugglewise, but I imagine you’re quite used to that by now. You’ll be just fine.” Harry found that hard to believe.

“I don’t have anyone here. I can’t just start over.” Harry became astutely aware of his helplessness in this decade. Once summer started, he wouldn’t even have a home. “I can’t…”

“Well don’t barter with me, I can’t change anything. You’re the one who made a deal with the universe. Besides, who says you can’t? You sure didn’t have anyone at eleven either.” Harry was too busy swallowing his epiphany to admonish the woman for her mindreading. It had only taken someone to believe him for Harry’s troubling circumstances to finally sink in.

“My mates? Will they be okay? Will they…” Harry paused as he began to fearfully contemplate the outlooks of his friends. He had foolishly believed he would one day meet them again, but Amaltheia was casting doubt onto that assumption of his. “Will they still exist,” He ducked his head, speaking in a hushed tone. Harry had meditated over just how much he could be altering, but his experience with the time turner in third year had cast that worry aside. If it was meant to happen, it happened. And Harry’s friends were meant to exist. Or so he thought.

Amaltheia folded her hands across her plump belly. “Perhaps you should have considered that earlier.” She tutted. “Before you greedily took the future into your hands with the grace of a five-year-old.” Her frown diminished when she saw Harry’s perturbed face. “You need not be too concerned. That is more Cassandra’s expertise, but most seers are of the mind that a soul can never cease to exist. You might… encounter them with different faces and different names, but that does not mean they are no longer with you. You might not encounter your friends again at all in your lifetime, but that does not mean you won’t in another. If you find yourself in such a predicament, when you meet someone new, listen closely to their words, that is how you can recognize your loved ones.”

Disbelief washed over Harry. Fuck that. Fuck waiting around for people he might not even recognize. The very thought filled Harry with despair. “I’ll find a way,” Harry squared his shoulders, refusing to take Amaltheia’s words for gospel. “I’ll make it back. No offense, but you or the universe can’t tell me what I’m capable of. Don’t tell me what’s not possible. I wouldn’t have even thought my being here possible just a few months ago…and frankly my life has been stock full of impossibilities, and I don’t think that’s about to stop any time soon.”

Amaltheia was not as defensive as Harry had estimated she would be. She simply bowed her head.
“Anything is subject to change. If my help is ever required, Harry Potter, you can always write me. I am on your side, believe it or not.”

At half past eleven, Tom Riddle toppled weakly into a loveseat of the empty Slytherin common room. The lower years had all gone to bed, and the higher were still out. With the exception of a roaring fireplace, the room was absent of light. Tom panted heavily, running his palm across his forehead and pushing his hair back.

“Fuck,” It was so hot. It was so bloody hot. Breaking into a sweat, He shakily shifted out of the military robes, Julius had procured for him. Tom had transfigured himself into a likeness of Julius Mulciber’s brother. He was a far cry from Tiberius but Tom hadn’t the time for polyjuice, and Potter hadn’t a clue. Tom had needed something that would last. Regrettably, holding a full body human transfiguration as long as Tom had, could weaken the nervous system of someone that wasn’t a metamorphmagus. It was considered dangerous for wizards to attempt what Tom had. Tom felt sick to his stomach as he undressed down to his trousers. Tom’s fingers trembled while he unbuttoned the collar of his dress shirt. It’d been living hell, quelling his nausea enough to grill Potter. It had been almost a relief, when Tom had gazed into Potter’s eyes and only seen memories of a brown witch in a saree instead of a confirmation of Dolohov’s beliefs. Disappointing, when he’d found nothing of the Chamber of Secrets. Potter’s compartments had been a mess. Potter’s mind was like the owlery, just birdshit everywhere.

Tom fumed as he recalled how he’d almost enjoyed the evening despite his sickness. Potter had spent the entire time besmirching Tom, and Tom knew he should have taken offense, instead of quiet amusement. But Potter had ruined it all. He’d nearly charmed Tom, but went on with his usual tricks. At least Tom left the sixth year in quite the dilemma. Tom imagined that confrontation with daddy dearest couldn’t have gone pleasantly, if Harry had been completely expunged from Potter records.

Rodolphus Lestrange clumsily ballroom danced with an invisible partner into the room, humming a tune the entire time. With a picturesque twirl he fell back into an armchair and looked balefully at Tom. “Oh I had the time of my life!” he crowed sarcastically. The dried tearmarks on his cheeks reminded Tom of Potter’s hysterical laughter. “So you know all about me! Sterile! Whoopdee-fucking-doo! I’ll probably never get married! But it’s okay, because apparently I have a little brother on the way! Never mind that that makes me obsolete! And how were you?! Mulciber told me you hung on for three whole hours? That’s really impressive, mate, how you were out interrogating your dingy little boyfriend while I was getting humiliated in front of every pureblood here to France!”

Tom mustered the strength for a cooling charm and sank back into the couch cushions, laying on his back. Every muscle in his body was beginning to become sore. Tom reluctantly considered words of comfort, it was what Lestrange needed, but had Tom averse. He couldn’t bring himself to sympathize with Rodolphus. Tom spoke softly, tiredly.

“Children don’t matter, Rodolphus, but if it means so much to you, magic will always find a way. And I wouldn’t let a stupid old bat tell me anything about my future. Don’t listen to her, and fulfill your own prophecy.”

Lestrange pursed his lips bitterly. “What would you know? You’ll never have a rite of passage. You don’t say anything, but we all know that you’re a mudblood.”

Lestrange recoiled at the expression on Tom’s face, immediately regretting his hostile language. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, Tom. I swear,” Lestrange trembled.
He’d meant it. Tom ignored him, vowing to teach him a lesson in respect later. Like when Tom could walk.

“So? Anything?” Rodolphus tipishly changed their discourse. He was still humming to himself and twirling a strand of hair. His cheeks were pink and his robes were on backwards. Evidently he’d finally lost his virginity on this special day. Tom deduced he and the other Slytherins would be made subject to all the gritty details the day after, when Lestrange would regain his usual peppy mood. That was… if his sterility and state of being on the brink of disownment didn’t become the talk of Hogwarts. Tom turned a lazy gaze towards the other boy’s face.

“A little rabbit told me you danced with Potter. Danced” Rodolphus jeered, his eyes turned up mirthfully. Tom rubbed his temples in exhaustion. Why was Mulciber becoming Lestrange’s informant now? His alliance lied with Tom but it appeared that that failed to prevent him from blabbering about him to the school gossip.

“You said nothing about dancing with Potter when you ordered me to invite him. Oh, but I should have guessed you had other intentions. Does tommy boy have a little crush?” Rodolphus wagged his eyebrows. His play at lightheartedness fell flat. There was a dead look in Lestrange’s eyes that hadn’t been there before. Tom knew he was perverse for savoring it, but he didn’t feel remorse often.

“Dancing was the most effective way to corner him,” Tom sniffed. Even Tom couldn’t believe his own justification. He had wanted to dance with Potter but he wasn’t about to admit it. Something about those bizarre robes and Potter’s aloof attitude as he had perched, abandoned in that ballroom had temporarily driven Tom out of his mind.

“Sure it was. I wouldn’t have taken him for your type though. Don’t you like muggles?” Muggle men had their… charms. Tom could appreciate the level of vulnerability they held when underneath a wizard. Tom could do anything when he had a muggle man. He couldn’t say the same for the few wizards he’d bedded. “You finally fancy a wizard and he’s either barmy or a spy for the darkest wizard seen this century. Or worse, both,” Lestrange sneered. “I’ve got to hand it to you, mate, your taste is certainly unique.”

“I am modestly attracted to him, and I am aware that I have made this painfully obvious to you. But I would never go as far as to say I fancy him,” Tom snarled.

“So? What are you going to do about it?” Tom screwed his face up. Why was Lestrange so shortsighted?

“Why would I do anything?” he heaved a sigh, weary and half-lidded.

“But... but you danced with him?” Lestrange drunkenly frowned, muddled. Sometimes Rodolphus was so virtuous it shocked Tom. “Shouldn’t you be... y’know testing the waters, just to see how far this flame lasts? It’s what anyone-else would be doing.”

“Lestrange… You actually expect I’ll ask him out? Expect I’ll hold his hand, hold him, kiss him?! I can barely stand him. And suppose I actually could. You think that I would date him?” Tom could have laughed. “Lestrange, you have deeply misunderstood me. You may mistakenly believe you know me, but you’ve been misled. Even if you do happen to know I’m a dirty fucking mudblood.”


“You can’t just… choose not to. It’s a beautiful thing to experience… why would you… not want to?” he hiccuped. From the moment Tom had been born, love had never been in his life. Tom
couldn’t blame Lestrange’s ignorance. Lestrange would never understand that to Tom, love was a privilege and humanity, a burden.

Chapter End Notes

Another long chapter ending in tom angst. i hope this explains a few questions you guys might be having but its probably raising a few more in the process. lol sorry guys. again thankyou to all the people leaving comments and kudos.
1997 Harry’s timeline

“Harry!” A clear, ringing voice roused Harry from his slumber.

Cold had dug a hole and settled in Harry’s bones that morning, but the locket remained hot over his heart. Harry couldn’t berate himself for failing to cast a warming charm. There wasn’t much he felt like doing lately. His future was weighing heavy on his shoulders. Harry’s eyes drearily opened from his bed in the expandable tent to see Hermione standing at the cloth opening, looking more excited than she had in weeks. Hermione couldn’t quite maintain her air of optimism after Ron had left. Wind blew at her back, pushing her bushy curls into a halo. Likewise, Harry hadn’t taken a comb to his hair in almost two weeks. The two of them looked like a pair of lions.

Harry turned over dispassionately. “What is it?”

“You need to see this,” replied Hermione. The tone of her voice reminded Harry of when he’d towed Ron to see the mirror of Erised in first year. Harry was dumbfounded at what could have raised the woman’s spirits to such heights. Nevertheless, Harry reluctantly slid out beneath his covers. He couldn’t even make himself curious for Hermione’s sake.

“My earrings changed color,” Hermione brushed her hair back, displaying her pointy ears and fidgeting in her place. Hermione couldn’t keep calm.

“Oh?” Harry couldn’t understand why he should care. He apathetically foraged the tent for his wand.

“You don’t know how long it’ll last.” How long what would last? Harry frowned, layering a heavy cloak over his pajamas and sluggish pushing his feet into his trainers. What had gotten into Hermione? “Take the locket off first,” Hermione demanded when he spun around. “Your turn?”

“No. I don’t want either of us… affected for this.” Harry shrugged, removing the necklace and leaving it in his pocket. Hermione lost her patience and clutched Harry’s wrist, dragging the two of them out into the Forest of Dean. They cast their protective and disillusionment charms before leaving their safe wards.

Daybreak shone through the thick treetops and a heavy layer of snow had accumulated on the forest floors. Lead-footed, Harry stamped through the slush, following Hermione. It felt aimless, the various twists and turns the witch took, but she strode forth confidently. They passed the snatchers camp out a kilometer east. Uncertainty permeated Harry as Hermione took them out farther and farther. He began to wonder if Hermione was an apparition when she led them uphill. Perhaps she was an over-zealous death-eater leading the savior of the wizarding world out of the forest right into an ambush. Alastor Moody must have rubbed off on him because paranoia flooded Harry. The real Hermione could be dead in that tent right now, concealed beneath her covers. He hadn’t exactly been of clear mind when whoever this was pulled him from the safe confines of their abode.

When Hermione guided him to some stepping stones Harry yanked his arm back. Hermione turned on her heel helter skelter inspecting him with wide, shocked orbs. They had been led far away from
the forest by now and stood on a snowy hill. From Hermione’s step, she stood taller than him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hermione, what did Hagrid’s brother Grawp call you?” Harry immediately interrogated the witch.

“Hermy.” The witch folded her arms. Harry still wasn’t convinced. He slipped his hand into a pocket of his cloak, clutching his wand secretly.

“What does S.P.E.W stand for?”

“Oh honestly Harry!”

“What. Does. S.P.E.W stand for?!?” Harry bayed. In mere seconds he had the tip of his wand lined up with her nose. He raised his feeble occlumency shields, looking into Hermione’s soft brown eyes. Harry had learned over the years just how much a ruse vulnerability could be.

“Society for the promotion of elfish welfare.”

“Your patronus?”

“An otter. Happy now?” Hermione raised a haughty eyebrow.

Harry shamefully lowered his wand. “You were… you’re acting strange ‘mione. Sorry,” he grumbled. It wasn’t laughable to think what Harry had. The feeling of never knowing what was to happen next had penetrated the both of them.

“I… I get it. I’m sorry. I should have explained more. Well, we’re almost there anyway!”

The witch pulled Harry higher on the hill and the earth floor smoothed into stability. “We couldn’t have just **apparated**?” asked Harry overlooking the forest from behind himself. Hermione blushed.

“Muggle habits die hard I suppose.” She linked arms with harry. “Look behind you,” she whispered.

A seemingly perfect circle of standing stones welcomed Harry. It was like the sundial garden back at Hogwarts, but they stood taller and stronger and covered in moss. They had withstood the tides of time flawlessly. Not an edge had crumbled off.

“You brought me here for some **rocks**?” Harry’s thighs were beginning to ache from the long hike Hermione had forced on him. Harry’s belly grumbled with hunger and his pajamas were soaked with precipitation. Harry grew more irritable by the minute just looking at the standing stones.

“**Menhirs,**” the witch corrected him. “Look,” she pulled Harry closer. Hermione took her gloves off, smoothing a bare hand over the surface of one. She dug her nails into moss, tearing the green flesh away. “**Runes,**” she noted. Harry took a step closer and found that like she said, the backs of all the stones had all been inscribed, completely covered in ancient runes. Hermione dusted off the large patch she ripped off. A spider shaped rune took up the majority of the menhir. “An acromantula.” Harry stared vacantly. What was so significant about that?

“So?”

“You really should have taken runes while you had the chance,” the witch chided. “It means eight, for the eight eyes of an acromantula.” She gestured to a stone a meter away. “That one was seven. And next to it, six. Harry, this could be a means for measuring time.”

“So?” Harry repeated, narrowing his eyes. There were only nine stones.
“It’s not just that, Harry” Hermione blurted. She was bouncing on the balls of her feet again. “This is what you really need to see.” Hermione began burrowing around in the snow like a mad woman.

“Err what are you looking for?” Asked Harry, rubbing his hands together and blowing on them.

“A twig... a small stone, anything minuscule that you wouldn’t mind losing really… something that wouldn’t make waves” Hermione paused. “Oh sod it!” She took one of her gloves and threw it into the stone circle.

And then… then she just stood there and watched like she’d turned on the telly.

This was it. Hermione had finally lost it. The pressures of the war had gotten to her and she’d broke.

“It’s gone, Harry.” Hermione’s breath made fog in the frigid air. She had a look of child-like wonder that Harry didn’t get to see very often nowadays. But her glove had vanished. Harry cast his eyes around the hill. Hermione must have misplaced it somehow. This was the kind of trick Fred and George might have pulled, with Ron or Ginny feasibly tagging along. But not Hermione. Hermione slapped his bicep. “It’s not here Harry. It’s gone! It’s well… it’s in the past! It has to be.” Harry’s eyes could’ve bulged out his head.

“You know that for sure?” An object disappearing in the wizarding world usually had a perfectly reasonable explanation, and it was never that it had time-travelled. It sounded like an excuse a wizard like Mundungus might use when approached by the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office. Still, Harry trusted Hermione’s judgement. Her skill in magic was remarkable and she wasn’t wrong often.

“Well, I’ve been testing it out. I couldn’t be sure of anything until my earrings changed color this morning. They’re green now, see?”

“Hermione, I have never once noticed the color of your earrings.” They had always been green as far as Harry was concerned. He bit back a playful smile. “So… this entire time, while you’ve been claiming to be hunting for amenities and what-not, on your own time you’ve been what, coming here and throwing sticks at a circle?” Harry began to chortle at the silliness of it. Maybe Hermione really had lost it in her own special way.

“Well you make it sound so stupid when you put it like that.”

“Maybe you ought to graduate to quaffles and try quidditch, ‘Mione”

“Harry!” Hermione pushed him and Harry staggered back, continuously snickering. “It’s not just any kind of time travel, okay. This is far from your average timeturner and transcends everything wizardkind thought possible.” Her serious expression was sobering, causing Harry’s levity to extinguish.

“Harry, for something as small as a stick to change even something like jewelry… Haven’t you ever heard of the butterfly effect? It has to be going back much, much farther to be making these kinds of waves. A twig being tossed into yesterday isn’t going to change much of anything that happens today. I’m saying this goes back at least… years.”

Years. But that was impossible.

“And you just found this?” Harry asked skeptically.

“Well, it wasn’t here before. It… it appeared. Much like the room of requirement that way.”
Its eyes were scratched out. Tom couldn’t look into them as the sword dug up inside the creature’s mouth, piercing its upper palate and coming out at the cap of its head. Tom winced as one bloody fang punctured his arm. The venom released into Tom’s blood and a prickling sensation washed over him. The basilisk screamed in agony, swinging its head as its body swayed. Horrified, Tom watched as it plummeted into a murky black pool, flooding the gloomy, dripping chamber.

*What about the pipes.*

Tom was rendered immobile. Unexpectedly he’d found himself on the mattress of his four poster bed far away from the basilisk. He urged his fingers to twitch, pushed to wiggle his toes, and yet… nothing. Panic-stricken at his own vulnerability, Tom’s eyes raked back and forth around him. Tom might have jumped if he could. Tom could blearily make out bodies lying beside him. What kind of awful practical prank was Dolohov pulling now? But he couldn’t convince himself this was anything his dormmates had done. Not as his heart beat into his throat.

The grey, rotting flesh of a once handsome boy greeted Tom first. He laid lifeless, with his arms folded over his heart. Beside him was a long-haired, scruffy man who reminded Tom distinctly of Orion Black, whom had graduated two years before Tom. Nausea swept through Tom when he looked to his left. Dumbledore laid peacefully… and ancient. Every ginger hair on his body had turned pure white, and his tall nose much larger. Like the handsome boy and the scruffy man his arms were across his chest. Though old, he appeared much fresher than the other two. One hand had turned rotten and shriveled black and on his index finger rested a gold ring inset with a black stone and engraved with a mysterious emblem. Tom’s chin ducked down in an effort to look at his feet, which felt like they were being crushed to dust by a bulky weight by the minute. Tom blanched, discovering that from the waist down he was buried in soil, with worms wriggling around him. Tom struggled between the dead men, pleading desperately for his paralyzed body to move. Tom couldn’t breathe. The soil felt heavier and heavier and death felt imminent. Abruptly it dawned on Tom that he was asleep… and if he couldn’t wake up, he was going to die.

*Wake up!* He yelled internally at himself, his pulse racing faster. Tom felt like a rabbit, on the brink of dying from its own fright.

*Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!* It echoed over in Tom’s mind as the soil grew and spread to his chin.

Tom struggled to breathe.

Tom was suffocating to death.

Tom was dead.

Tom’s eyes snapped open and he surged up in his bed, his heart still pounding. Relief flooded him when he found not a body in sight. Nagini, who had been curled asleep on his stomach, rolled off to the side and began complaining. After rubbing his hands along his torso and checking his pulse, Tom drew his curtains open, peering about the dormitory. The room was devoid of light and would be of sound if Bulstrode could remember his silencing charms. Tom quietly hissed at Nagini to settle down as he attempted to recollect his vivid dream. Its contents deserted him. It was only the gory image of his ruby adorned sword being pulled away from a gash and the feeling of paralysis that remained with Tom. Tom grabbed his wand and cast a lumos, giving his arm a onceover, expecting to see it drenched in blood with a great, big fang protruding. Instead, he was met with the smooth, alabaster skin of his forearm. Tom leaned back against his headboard, still wrapping his head around his dreadful dream. Tom hadn’t had nightmares since he’d been a child. Back then, Martha used threats of God to instill good behavior in the orphans and his dreams had revolved around an endless
suffering of helplessness under Satan’s wrath. Tom had quickly come to terms with his going to hell, but for a period of time it nearly kept him outwardly moral. (Granted, the only thing able to cure his kleptomania was age.) When his magical abilities increased, that notion evaporated and rumors circulated with the older orphans that he was a demon, or an angel, depending on whom you asked. Tom had willingly embraced that one. Being a demon in hell, held far more perks than the human facing retribution for their many sins. Of course, Tom’s introduction to the wizarding world had changed everything.

It was two days before winter break. Hogwarts students had wrapped up their exams and Tom’s companions would soon be boarding the train home, leaving Tom completely alone. Mulciber usually stuck around, but this year his mother was frantic after his older brother had joined Grindelwald’s delegation. All of Slytherin house would be leaving with the exception of third year Tertia greengrass and her younger brother, Florus.

Folding over, Tom grabbed an old watch from his night table, thumbing its face. Three in the morning…

Tom threw his covers off, noting in mild amusement how Nagini had now found solace curled around his foot.

“It’s cold” the snake complained. Tom picked her up and mercifully cast a warming charm on her. Compressed together she was barely the size of a basilisk fang, Tom noted with interest. Tom set nagini down by his pillow and slipped out. Tom toed into his trousers, putting his slippers on, and incanted a disillusionment charm on himself. He moseyed out of the dormitory. Tom would begin with the boiler room.

One look into Lestrange’s eyes found him mulling over his dim future prospects. Contrary to his external demeanor, he had yet to recover from Amaltheia’s tragic prediction. Meanwhile, Avery was agonizing over what to get his mother for Christmas. Mulciber was reading The Daily Prophet, enchanted by broomstick ad. He ogled over the smooth handle of the new cleansweep, fantasizing about its turn speed. It had been charming to discover just how much Mulciber’s makeup reflected his inside. The other boys had their secrets but Mulciber was an open book and it gave Tom a newfound respect for him. As much as they idolized Tom, the others all resented him in some way. Lestrange because of his handsome face. Bulstrode for how easily schoolwork came to Tom. Dolohov, because Tom’s charisma was hard to come by. And Avery, because he could still garner respect despite being so clearly mudblooded. Tom had expected it, but coming face to face with it was a completely different ordeal.

Tom had discovered that far from Lestrange’s recent tales about his flashy sex-life, he’d broken under the stress and never got past heavy petting. Tom had already suspected it, for in his humble opinion, anyone that talked about it that much was compensating for something. Dolohov’s secret was darling. Tom had saccharinely promised him his lips were sealed. Dolohov fancied a muggle girl in his town of tutshill. This of course, Dolohov had already divulged privately to Tom at the start of term. What he hadn’t told Tom, was that he was already seeing her. And Avery’s mum was destitute. Disowned from her pureblood family, they’d made it this far on her birth inheritance through strict rationing. They were set to run out by next year and let’s just say the muggle money Pascal’s dad earned as a lowly mill worker didn’t translate well to wizarding coin. Hell, it didn’t translate well to muggle coin. Bulstrode… Tom grimaced as flashes from Bulstrode’s night after the ball intruded on his mind. He’d had a good old time getting into his wife’s knickers.

And wasn’t that impressive. Bulstrode was burdened by the prospect that Solis Bulstrode may be
pregnant. Her menstrual cycle was late. He should have used his protective charms. Tom dug his fork into his eggs observing the students in the great hall.

Two months into studying legilimancy and Tom had reached a proficiency that would have most wizards in awe if only because of the incredible speed at which he improved. The headaches had passed but he’d yet to master it by his own standards. He could do it wandless and silently, something he found increasingly necessary for legilimancy. But he’d managed that with all his spellwork. Tom had advanced enough that no one noticed when he practiced the forbidden art. Regrettably, he still hadn’t managed to do it without having to look into his victim’s eyes or from a far distance. Tom’d taken to practicing on Mulciber from across a courtyard lately and soon anticipated attempts from another room.

There were a few people whose minds stayed shielded or well tampered with. To no surprise, Dumbledore’s mind was shatterproof and by his discerning blue eyes he was well aware of Tom’s attempts. Dumbledore only shared what he wanted to share, which Tom found happened to be a distressing amount of lemon drop recipes. Professor Merrythought was impressive as well. She’d managed such a blank slate of a mind that it had Tom marveling whether she was even human. A few upper years had dabbled in occlumency. Not enough to hide the events of their week or their less than conservative opinions but enough to have deeply buried their dark secrets. And Tom felt like he should have expected it. Of course the one person he was keen to use legilimency on was a struggle. He’d managed to salvage snippets and pieces out of the mess that was Potter’s mind but they were all futile. It was no better than what he’d siphoned out of Potter at the ball. They largely consisted of a girl with bushy hair and a whole family of gingers and were severely lacking in context.

Potter’s consciousness was near impenetrable and though Tom’s skill grew it didn’t become any less so. Tom hazarded a guess that Potter had become cognizant of Tom’s abilities by his thorough avoidance of meeting Tom’s gaze.

Potter’s friends however…

Myrtle Warren looked up from her morning porridge. Her mouth fell open and her meal dribbled out of her spoon when their eyes connected. One quick look inside her mind’s eye found Tom sitting across from Harry Potter and Rubeus Hagrid, with a perfect view of himself at Slytherin table.

“I can’t believe it,” Came Potter’s voice. One unappealing aspect of Legilimency used this way, was that Tom held no control over where Myrtle’s vision drifted. He could hear her friends, inherently know her thoughts, but he couldn’t manipulate what she saw or what she said. And Myrtle had been struck motionless at the beauty of Tom. He had no choice but to stare at himself. Tom concluded combining legilimency with the imperius curse was overdue. If no one else had found a way, then Tom would have to do it himself. Just being in someone’s head wasn’t enough if he couldn’t control them.

“Never trust a Gryffindor to keep a secret, sixteen years must be a record.” said Potter. Out of the corner of Myrtle’s eye Tom could spot a scroll in Potter’s hands. He was recognizable if only because of the peculiar scar on his left hand, reading: “I must not tell lies.” Potter’s relatives must have taken as much issue with his trickster ways as the rest of society, Tom surmised. “What is it, Harry?” asked Hagrid.

“He told her, he actually told her. After he spent last week trying to convince me to keep his affair quiet. The next thing he does? He tells his wife? What’s the logic in it?”

“Well let’s hear it then,” came Abraxas Malfoy’s braying voice. Potter had a gift for making friends with the odd ones out. Inevitably he’d accrued the company of Tom’s resident obsessive antifan.
Abraxas just had to tone down his blood-worth rants and the two would be a match made in heaven.

“Dear Harry Potter,” Harry read aloud.

“My name is Dorothea Potter. Last week, the morning of the eleventh, my husband informed me of an affair he had sixteen years ago. What he did not know is that at that time I was very much aware. Foolishly, I knew, but turned a blind eye for the sake of my marriage and perhaps what I believed was my dignity. What I was not aware of was the child conceived, and neither was Henry. My husband was very shaken by you when he met you. So much so that he confessed to a sixteen year lie. I was impressed. It takes a powerful personality to move a man like my husband. You may not be my child, but you are Henry’s. He will not admit it, but I believe he already feels an attachment towards you. I’ve never been one to sit around and just let things be. So I’ve decided to arrange a meetup with you and your mother, Eartha Davies. The two of you are invited to meet me, as well as my family in the Potter family home in Godric’s Hollow on the 31st for our new years eve celebrations. I look forward to meeting you,

Sincerely Dorothea.

P.S. Thank you for the flowers.”

Malfoy whistled loudly from his seat by Myrtle. “That is a power move if I ever saw one. Exactly what you’d expect from the daughter of a Black. Good luck, mate. You and your mum are gonna need it.” Tom’s inviting Henry Potter to Lestrange’s rite of passage had set forth a windmill of events.

“What do you think she’ll do?”

“I have it on good authority-”

“So your mum then,” Potter interrupted.

Malfoy ignored him, “From a credible source-”

“Your mum-”

“Shutup Potter, I’m trying to help you here!

ANYWAY, she once held a banquet for the Crabbes where she served only red wine. I’m not joking, she advertised it as a full course and only came prepared with wine. At the end she gave a speech and told everyone invited that one glass had been spiked with belladonna and she was uncertain which. Now, she may have married a Potter, but Blacks have a reputation. So now every pureblood wizard in Britain is fleeing to St. Mungos or strangling each other to get their hands on the nearest bezoar. It nearly started a riot at Mr.Mulpepper’s apothecary. Since every guest survived, to this day no one knows whether she actually poisoned a glass or if she pulled a stunt like that just to be a pain in the arse. “

“So I take it, don’t drink the wine.” Potter’s hand folded his parchment and thrust it haphazardly into a pocket of his robes.

“My mum is of the mind she meant to poison only one person, but unfortunately slipped up.”

“So it was your mum,” Potter sniggered, his blurry figure effortlessly dodging a crumpet Malfoy’s hand threw. “What a caveman! Did you see that, Hagrid?” He feigned shock. “This is an outrage! Where did all that elite pure-blood breeding go?”
“Murderous an’ clumsy wouldn’t be the best mixture,” The third year commented while the two sixth years bickered. “CAN THE TWO OF YEH SETTLE DOWN?!?” he boomed when Malfoy’s incoming hand nearly knocked over his large mug of tea.

“So are yeh gonna go, Harry?” asked Hagrid as if his roaring hadn’t just silenced the entire Hufflepuff table.

“Well… I don’t think she’s given me much of a choice.” Tom thought Potter’s voice sounded disturbed, hesitant at the thought of attending. “Are you okay, Myrtle?” Potter asked the fourth-year girl.

“I think she’s drooling,” said Hagrid. “Myrtle, What’s gotten inter yeh?”

Malfoy’s manicured hand waved across Myrtle’s peripheral vision. “Are you with us, Warren?!”

“Riddle… T-Tom Riddle is looking right at me.” Goodness, his hair is beautiful. Myrtle’s inner voice mooned. Tom observed with interest as his own eyes rolled. “I can’t look away.” Tom sorely hoped she would. Even Tom knew he was a sight to behold, but it was disconcerting to see his hair parted to the left, instead of the right as he was accustomed to.

Deciding he’d had enough, Tom ziplined back into his own mind. He knocked back gillywater and tuned into his friend’s conversations as if he hadn’t just been prying into Potter’s daily life. He assumed the identity of a harmless boy, acting as if he were completely unaware of Potter’s gaze now boring holes into him.

“Taking a guess, an o in potions, e’s in transfiguration and dada, a in charms and arithmancy, and p’s in everything else,” said Dolohov. Dolohov could obsessively do the calculations of every single exam he took and dissertation he submitted, and nine times out of ten, he pinpointed the correct grade percentage. “You, Mulciber?”

Mulciber had taken out his coinpurse and was counting his galleons and muttering under his breath. Apparently that broomstick ad had impressed him. Like Tom, schoolwork came easily to Mulciber. Unlike Tom, he had the attention span of a fly and studied once in a blue moon. Mulciber’s gradesheets were usually stockfull of e’s. As long as Mulciber didn’t try, his grades stabled out at average. It was enough to keep him on the Slytherin quidditch team, which was all Mulciber valued. “Dunno, don’t care, the only thing I can expect is that Dumbledore’ll have given me a grade below everyone-else as he does every year.” Mulciber grunted and shoved his money back into his robes.

Pascal slouched in his seat, slopping over onto the table beside his breakfast of cornflakes. “Mum won’t be happy, Dumbledore’s theoretical destroyed me. If OWL’s are anything like that, I’m screwed.”

The other boys perpetually had complaints whenever exams arrived. Tom had grown bored at how little a fight his testing had put up. Hogwarts had long stopped being a challenge. His peers had never learned for the sake of the power of knowledge like Tom had. Because of it, they never established a solid magical foundation for learning, and their ability to improve stagnated. Tom had considered whether their magical upbringing had to do with it. Purebloods frequently scoffed at magic, took it for granted. They mocked the mudbloods that floundered in their first year. As if it weren’t them that had gotten an eleven year headstart and done absolutely nothing with it. By the time seventh year rolled around the top students were all mudbloods, a fact that the spoiled purebloods refused to acknowledge year after year. Surely Tom’s intelligence had to do with it, but Tom imagined he’d be safely residing at Mulciber’s level had magic never held such alluring power. Some people were gifted with intelligence and talent, but they could only learn if they wanted to.
“And of course, no one needs to ask the two of you how your finals went,” Lestrange piped up, looking between Tom and Augustus. The quiet boy stiffened beside Tom. “The worst in our year, and the best in well, the entire school really.” Could Lestrange go a day without stirring drama? He knew Bulstrode’s intelligence, or lack thereof was a sore spot. Bulstrode lacked critical thinking on top of dyslexia his pureblood family proudly ignored.

Speaking of…

An idea hit Tom.

“Bulstrode, your family lives in Godric’s Hollow, yes?” He turned to the other Slytherin. Bulstrode hunched further over his black pudding. “Yes, why?” Bulstrode had once mentioned in passing a relation to Dorothea Black. Tom could definitely use that to his advantage. Augustus peered up at Tom and Tom felt a flash of Bulstrode’s hesitance. There had been a reason he and the others had never been invited to the Bulstrode manor over the various summer and winter breaks throughout the years. It was for the same reason he insisted on Solis sitting at Ravenclaw table. Augustus did not wish to be compared to Tom. Bulstrode thought that his parents would take one look at a brilliant mudblood like Tom and label their son a failure of a pureblood. Well, he wasn’t wrong. Tom said nothing of what he saw in Bulstrode’s mind. Instead, he postured himself in a more open and friendlier manner.

“Invite me to your home, would you?”

“What? I- I don’t know…” Bulstrode looked around in confusion. Bulstrode emanated both feelings of reluctance and fluttery happiness at being picked out of the crowd.

If he was going to deny Tom, it was too late. Dolohov had already caught on and shot straight up in his seat. “I’ve never been to Bulstrode’s! Oh I’ve always been curious about you mate” Lestrange soon joined him, “What’s your mum like? Is she pretty?” Augustus had never been any good at saying no. “I’ve only been to Godric’s Hollow a few times. Usually for charity balls and such, and my Uncle Dimitrius has a summer home there.” Augustus looked around helplessly as the other boys chattered eagerly.

“Don’t fret, Bulstrode, I’ve no plans to force my presence on your family for the entirety of winter break... I was thinking a few days and overnights. Would arriving on the 29th and leaving the first suit you?” It was going to have to, regardless. It was best to give Bulstrode no choice, otherwise the feelings of his parents on the matter would come into the mixture, and Tom couldn’t care less. If they had an objection, then they could deal with the aftermath.

“I think I’ll pop on by as well. You should write your parents, the sooner they know, the better.” Said Lestrange. Antonin agreed. “Mulciber?”

“Avery mumbled into his goblet of pumpkin juice. Avery wouldn’t attend. The extra travel fees would get to him. There was no way he could request some extra change of his overbearing mother. Not with how the Avery finances were going. At least Tom was a poor little orphan boy. Even running on the school scholarship, he’d been finding muggle work during the summers since third year to keep pace with the extravagance the purebloods in his house were prone to. Sometimes he got his money in less than socially acceptable ways, and the closest supervision he had was Martha and Mrs.Cole, who were either none the wiser or too scared to say anything. Tom couldn’t imagine impotently letting someone run his life the way Pascal let his mother. Then again, his mother wasn’t around.
“What was that?”

“I said I might make it… but it’s not likely.” The other boys shrugged, oblivious to Pascal’s wiles.

“It’s a date then.”

On the night before winter break began, Tom received a summoning to the Headmaster’s office. When he’d arrived, Dippet was nowhere to be found. Tom sat impatiently in the empty room, tapping his fingers on the squeaky leather of an armchair and listening to the ticking of a magical cuckoo clock. Portraits covering every space on the surrounding wall all peered down at him, pretending to sleep whenever Tom so much as looked up.

Abruptly the door to the office burst open and a whole triad of adults barraged in bearing none other than Harry Potter with them. Dumbledore, Slughorn and Dippet had all entered the room and perhaps because of the tall back of his chair, they had yet to notice Tom, making his attempts to see into their minds fruitless. Only Potter had. Potter stood in the middle of the professors, his hands in his trouser pockets, spiritlessly studying the room and making a face when he was met with Tom.

“It is our last option,” Dippet kindly told Slughorn.

“I will not have it! The boy is set to compete in the 1943 E.T.T, between prefect duties and OWLS he can’t have any more distractions.” Jolly as he was, Slughorn had already heavily invested in Tom’s future and it was one thing he could get dead serious about. Tom was a goldmine in waiting and Slughorn was set to strike it rich with connections when Tom inevitably won the European Transfiguration pot, something Tom had nearly forgotten he’d entered the year prior. Slughorn lived for Tom’s influence but Tom found his opportunistic ways revolting, however hypocritical that was.

“I do believe this is a decision Tom can make for himself,” replied Dumbledore.

“Yes, and if I could be so kindly informed of what decision this is, professor?”

At last the professors noticed him.

“Oho! Early I see, that’s what I can expect from m’boy!” exclaimed Slughorn. Early? They were late. Tom sneered. Slughorn’s gaffe never failed to insult Tom.

Potter stood idly by in the whole mess, examining his nails, and going through the contents of his robes. What had he done now, that even Tom had to be involved?

“What’s going on, Professor Slughorn?” Slughorn turned his gooseberry eyes towards Tom and was instantly caught in his web.

A quick inspection of Slughorn’s brain and a recollection of the hefty man walking in on Potter brewing a potion in an abandoned classroom was discovered.

*Despite the open windows, the distinctly familiar fumes had led Slughorn down the stone corridor and into the old alchemy classroom. Slughorn had recognized what he’d smelt immediately. He regularly supplied the school nurse, Madame Rosewood, with it after all.*

“Is that- Are you brewing dreamless sleep potion, boy?!” In the midst of adding copious amounts of valerian root, Potter jumped with surprise, causing a chopping knife to clatter onto the floor.

*Slughorn was set in his disappointment. How could that boy dare to call himself a Potter? Oh,*
Slughorn had heard all about him. Losing his memory, only to be referred to the school by the ministry. They hadn’t wanted to deal with this… stranger any more than Dippet had. Sure, the hair fit the identity but no records had come up! The student was an impostor if you asked him! And now that Slughorn thought about it, it must have been him stealing from Slughorn’s supply! The arrogance of that child!

“You must know It’s against school rules to carry dreamless sleep on your person. That is something that can only be administered by Madame Rosewood within the confines of Hogwarts!”

“I-Professor! It’s… it’s”

“It’s exactly what I think,” Professor Slughorn harrumphed. He could identify a sleeping draught even by the sound it made. “Come with me, Harry… I’m taking you to see Dippet.”

Potter had lost his memory? Tom raised his eyebrows at this tidbit of knowledge. He somehow doubted it.

Dippet cleared his throat and Tom zoomed back to reality, averting his eyes from Slughorn and barely heeding Dumbledore’s perceptive gaze. The headmaster conjured more armchairs, ushering the professors and Potter into seats adjacent to Tom. He took his chair behind the desk and placed his palms self-importantly upon the wood.

“On account of Potter’s incoming poor results in his exams, and Slughorn’s discovery of Potter’s err… dependence, Professor Dumbledore has suggested a rehabilitation project of sorts.” Tom turned towards Potter.

“Your grades are so bad they had to hold a meeting for it?” Bulstrode had apparently met his match.

“Get stuffed.” Potter flipped Tom the bird. Dippet and Slughorn coughed, overlooking the rude hand gesture while the traces of an amused smile graced Dumbledore’s face.

“Harry is an intelligent boy, but I expect with the loss of his memory, much knowledge and motivation has escaped him. It’s my belief he is still experiencing aftereffects and what may be post-traumatic stress. Harry only needs the proper… encouragement and guidance to reach his potential.” Said Dumbledore. What a load of nonsense. Dumbledore had never once considered Tom trustworthy enough to guide anyone. He’d regarded Tom with distaste all last year, when he’d been tutoring fifth and seventh year purebloods in preparation for their OWLS and NEWTS. As usual, Dumbledore was up to something dodgy.

“He doesn’t submit his schoolwork, his skiving has set a new record, and he only shows up for exams for which he somehow manages e’s. On top of that now he’s an addict at sixteen. Guidance isn’t going to cut it.”

“I’m not an addict,” Potter finally offered his input, looking furious at the accusation.

“You had two months’ worth brewing!”

“I need it!”

“And I suppose an addict’s never said that in his lifetime!”

“Now now, Horace, are any of us in any place to judge? You have your own crutches. Harry’s are simply heavier than a glass of malt and a shot of firewhiskey.” Dumbledore suggested lightly and the potions professor reddened.
“Alcohol is a world away from potions dependence.”

“That is why I am suggesting that in place of his detentions, Harry is instead placed in mandatory tutoring a few days a week. Every day, if necessary. That will be determined by his prospective attitude and grades. And in the meantime, as his head of house, I will keep a close eye. Harry only needs to be kept busy. Perhaps he can join some extracurriculars. The frog choir is still searching for an able tenor” Potter looked terrified at the thought of singing. “It will help him overcome his cravings and his knack for destruction.” Dippet nodded along with Dumbledore, folding his hands in front of his nose. “That, I think, would largely reduce our incident rate. And poor Mr.Carpe could finally rest easy.”

“Yes, he certainly needs to, but he refuses to if you hadn’t noticed,” Slughorn blustered. Tom had never seen the cheerful man so heated.

“Right,” Potter said, slumping in his seat and folding his arms across his chest. “And why does it have to be Riddle exactly?”

“Obviously you’d be unaware, Mr. Potter, but Mr.Riddle spent his entire fourth year doing remedial DADA and Transfiguration lessons. He’s the best student in his year as he has been every year.” Tom had used the money he’d earned from pureblood families, investing heavily in his collection of dark objects and academic texts.

“And that,” said Dippet. “Is why he’d be the perfect man for the job, Slughorn.”

“I believe what really matters, is whether Tom is up to the task.” Up to the task? Tom narrowed his eyes. Dumbledore made it sound as if he thought him incapable. Dumbledore’s twinkling eyes held a competitive glimmer in them. The old man was goading Tom. And like before, Tom couldn’t help but fall for it. It didn’t help that Potter subtly kicked him in the shin. Tom suddenly wanted nothing more than to rain hell down upon him. Oh when he was done with Harry Potter, just the thought of a basic Transfiguration theorem would have him trembling in his boots.

“What do you say, will you do it, boy?” asked Dippet.

“Of course,” Tom replied.

Harry Potter gaped. “What?! You’re supposed to say no! Don’t I get a say in this?”

And miss out on the chance to have Potter under his thumb? Tom thought the fuck not.

“I will gladly whip Potter into shape, Professor.”

“Whip? Whip?!”

“Very well. At the beginning of the new term Harry’s detentions will now be spent studying in the library as well as mandatory sessions Mondays and Thursdays. You two will be under the careful watch of Madame Quincy to assure no fighting. I do hope the two of you can form a sense of camaraderie.”

Potter snorted, muttering camaraderie under his breath and Professor Dippet gave him a stern look. “Do keep in mind Potter, that if you should fail to change your behavior, you will be expelled.”

The week passed slowly when the Slytherins left. Tom’s group had eagerly promised to see him next week, just before boarding the Hogwarts express. It was… dull. Greengrass and her brother spent
their fickle time arguing and playing wizards chess leaving Tom to read in the dormitory. He’d picked up a copy of The Dream Oracle from the library, hoping to find some explanation for his vivid dreams but all it had told him was that he had latent desires, face blindness and divining abilities on par with a common gecko.

Winter break became the perfect time to ransack the castle. Only about ten students in total remained for the holidays, including Tom. Half the staff had left as well. The long tables in the great hall had been replaced with one smaller one for mealtimes. Tom could circle the entire castle twice and still not encounter anyone. Tom had spent a few nights out of bed as a first year, just exploring the castle, quitting soon after lest he run the risk of losing Slytherin points. But it had never hit him how truly vast Hogwarts was till now. Like everything in the wizarding world, it defied logic. Rooms appeared where they should not and while the exterior was already gargantuan, the interior dwarfed it.

Tom had investigated nearly half the castle over the span of the week. Starting from the boiler room in the dungeons he’d reached until the fourth floor boy’s bathroom. Tom had avoided the girls lavatory, which was still flooded and word had it, had begun dripping from a ceiling leak into the numerology classroom. But he didn’t know what he’d do if he went through the whole castle and came up empty. He’d spent the greater part of thirty minutes staring at the body of a large pipe on Thursday morning with mounting excitement after he’d heard banging from beneath it’s metal surface. It’s screws had trembled with the force.

“Hello?” he earnestly hissed in parseltongue. It was irrational, Tom knew. The basilisk hadn’t even been freed from the chamber, but he couldn’t help but hope.

And then Peeves had slipped through the alloy, cackling. The poltergeist floated towards the ceiling, pretending to tap dance, making the windows snap open and closed to an imperceptible tune.

“Oh, HELLO TIMOTHY!” He kissed his hand and blew a raspberry. Tom cringed at the awful nickname Peeves had coined third year. Trust the obnoxious poltergeist to make his name somehow worse than it already was. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Suffice to say, Tom was disappointed. “Hullo, Peeves.”

“I saw you admiring my new home.” Peeves swept down, and pretended to lean against the pipe with one arm. He batted his eyelashes, leaning closer to Tom’s face. Mulciber had theorized once, that since Peeves was a tangible embodiment of Hogwarts student mischief, it was possible that he also embodied other things. For instance, the many schoolgirl crushes throughout Hogwarts. Or that was how he explained Tom seeming to be the only student with immunity to Peeves’ horseplay. Or as Lestrange had so crassly put it, Peeves had a big, fat hankering for Tom. Tom felt nauseated at the thought.

“You live here?”

“I resided comfortably in the attics until Potty framed me and Rancid Carp booted me out. That reminds me, I was going to set his pants drawer on fire. Do you by any chance have some matchsticks?”

“Framed you for what?”

“The dungbombs in the fourth floor trophy room,” Peeves mock-cried gloomily, pretending to wipe at his eyes. “The firecrackers out of the third floor turrets, the darkness still looming in that fifth floor corridor. Oh it’s no fun getting all the credit for chaos you didn’t create! Believe it or not, I like to live up to my name, fair and square.”
“Oh, I’m sure.” If Peeves caught the disinterested tone of Tom’s voice, he didn’t say anything. Peeves took out a red handkerchief, pulling it when a yellow handkerchief came out attached to it. And another. And another. Peeves had turned his despair into a loud, muggle clown trick. Finally, he blew his nose, with his long, colorful rope, so powerfully it caused a nearby iron chandelier to crash onto the stone. Tom took a wary step backwards.

Tom had racked Potter’s shenanigans up to attention-seeking, so it was peculiar that instead he went to the effort to blame Peeves.

Tom thought it was high time for a visit.

The sixth year was sprawled on his mattress, his sock clad feet crossed atop each-other, against one of the pillars of his four-poster. Tom discreetly stepped into the room, going undetected since Potter’s face was buried in an old tome.

It appeared that Potter’s organizational skills had gotten worse since Tom had last seen his dormitory. He’d hung clothes and towels all over his headboard. But what stood out was the stacks upon stacks of books surrounding his bed. There was only a small space allowing for his trunk and the Gryffindor to get to his bed. Tom ran his fingers along the spines, catching how every single one was on Ancient Runes or the history of menhirs. Potter didn’t strike Tom as the kind of man to aimlessly study in his free time, unless there was a goal at hand.

“Does Madame Quincy know you’ve been checking out the entire library?” Tom was convinced a good fraction of them were late returns. It was amazing the woman hadn’t murdered him yet. Potter bounced on his duvet, his book falling away from his face, ricocheting off the mattress and onto the floor with a flat thud.

“Merlin’s balls. What the bloody hell are you doing here?”

“Albrecht Spinnet let me in.”

“Okay, you’re giving me the who and the how, but I’m completely missing out on the WHY?”

Tom waved his wand, effortlessly moving a stack of books so he could sit at the foot of Potter’s bed. The Gryffindor scrambled away, backing into his headboard and glowering at him with disgust. Tom restrained a smirk. It was pleasing to know he could have such a strong effect on Potter.

“I was hoping you might have some old coursework you could give me. So that I could see just where you’re at in the curriculum and just how inadequately you’re doing it. I’ll be constructing lesson plans all winter thanks to you, the least you could be is complacent.”

“I’m a year ahead of you,” Potter grumbled, picking his text up. He laid down again, stubbornly pretending he couldn’t see Tom and lifting his book back over his face. “That’s where I’m at”

Tom raised a nearby sock into the air by the tips of his fingers. “Have the houseelves completely abandoned you?” Repulsed, he tossed it across the room. “And you being a sixth year won’t be an obstacle. I tutored several seventh years just last year.” Being ahead of the course material had been a given since second year. “With you taking OWLS, it would be best to go over the fifth year syllabus anyway."

Potter turned a page, crossing one leg over the other and neglecting Tom. He was completely absorbed in his reading.
All the other sixth year Gryffindors had left empty beds behind, but Potter’s wing of the dormitory was well lived in.

Tom noticed a makeshift cauldron brewing besides a low set lattice window. It looked as if it’d been transfigured from some old newspaper. He must have cast at least a dozen anti-flammable charms. Tom made a wry expression, observing the dripping bottom hovering over a singular flame. It looked like it was about to collapse in on itself. Just how desperate was the Gryffindor?

“So it’s true, Professor Slughorn confiscated your cauldron.”

“It’s to be used only in his lessons, underneath his close supervision. Doesn’t matter. I’ll just get another one” Potter frowned. “Some way, somehow. I’m quite broke at the moment.” Potter looked at him expectantly and Tom detected a large pair of purple bags hiding behind his spectacles. “Go ahead. Take some points then. Purposefully going behind a professor’s back, endangering students by brewing illegal potions with a counterfeit cauldron. I reckon there’s something for you there.”

“Gryffindor would be in the negatives if I took any more from your house, Potter.” Tom leaned back on one hand, sinking into the plush bed. The other boy cast him an offended look, lifting a leg as if threatening to kick him. “Don’t go getting too comfortable, Riddle.” Tom didn’t say it aloud, for fear it might jinx the moment, but this might’ve been the only instance they were alone together that didn’t devolve into a row. He had seemed rather solemn since the ball but perhaps it was the final threat of expulsion keeping Harry’s fist from slamming into Tom’s jaw.

“Why do you need Dreamless Sleep?” Tom asked, looking at the fuchsia elixir bubbling over the rim of Potter’s homemade cauldron. A seventh year had been expelled once, following the discovery of their heavy dependence on Felix Felicis. Jebediah Farley’d broken multiple statutes with that one and Hogwarts, which seemed able to forgive just about anything, couldn’t let it go this time and submitted him to the ministry. If Tom recalled correctly, he only had a few months left of his sentence in Azkaban. But Tom thought Dreamless Sleep rather odd. The muggle equivalent was basically cold medicine. Potter was addicted to something he couldn’t even experience, or rather something that nullified his experience. The Divinations professor would claim dreams were a quintessential part of the wizarding experience, that they could unlock the secrets to one’s own fate. Healers would say Potter’s actions were starving his magic of the ability to heal his inner psyche.

“That… is none of your concern.”

“You must suffer from nightmares.”


“What kind?” Tom recalled his own from the other night and how effectively it’d reminded him of his fragile mortality. He wanted to know every infinitesimal detail that had Potter afraid to experience normal sleep. After all, Potter hadn’t seemed the fearful type. Tom wondered just what kinds of evils haunted the noble Gryffindor. “Monster under the bed? Naked in school? Or something more sinister? The kind where you can’t move or speak and everyone you know and love is dead? Perhaps you’re at the mercy of some invisible demon, subjugating you, and forcing you into submission while it robs you of your life force. Incubi dreams, Mulciber calls them”

Potter snapped his book shut. “Listen to yourself. You’re getting off on it, aren’t you?” Tom couldn’t deny the thought of a frightened potter was exciting him. Imagining him scared witless, waking up sweaty or with tears in his eyes sent Tom’s heart aflutter. Tom hadn’t imagined the other boy could be so… weak.

“It’s a simple question.”
“Well, here’s a frequent one I get. You’ll love it, it’s a classic.” Potter turned a pair of omniscient eyes Tom’s way. “I’m in a graveyard and I’m standing on your father’s grave. I’m trapped behind the scythe of a statue, and unable to move. My friend is dead, laying on the ground just a few meters away. And you killed him. Yes, you’re there. You and all your pathetic minions are there. Mocking my pain, my misery, my parents. I’m helpless, and at your mercy. You free me from my binds only to crucio me, and use the imperius on me. You humiliate me, you make me dance for your entertainment. And you make me duel you. Sometimes I wake up before you kill me. Before my expelliarmus fails. But most days I find myself rotting next to Cedric, unable to return his body to his parents. Our bodies decay, and sink into the earth alongside your father. We never pass on, or reincarnate, or become ghosts. We’re stuck there forever, reliving our last moments.”

“Does it make you feel special, Riddle, knowing I dream about you? Or is it making you hot?” Potter sneered. “Are you jealous, of the you I dream about? Are you wishing you could commit such acts. Wouldn’t you just love it, if you could actually do all that to me? I know you’ve thought about it.”

Tom was gobsmacked. Not for the first time, Potter had struck him speechless. The bitter tone of Potter’s voice had certainly sounded sincere but it was another one of those moments where Tom had to separate the lies from the half-truths.

“It bears repeating that you’re mad as a hatter, Potter.” The Gryffindor grinned mirthfully. “Yeah… I guess so.”

“What if I told you I could supply you your Dreamless Sleep, at no cost?”

Potter barked, resting an arm behind his head and pushing a hand up his shirt, scratching his stomach. He was clothed but looked so very naked. Potter had a better idea what Tom was capable of than anyone-else, and here he was, impertinently revealing an unarmored abdomen and a bare throat. At that, he was observing Tom with something akin to entertainment. Tom furtively thought it sensual.

“And you would do that how?”

“The Carrow black market is wide-spread. Less accessible dark potions ingredients are more their arena. Locks of hair, toenails, exotic venoms, body parts occasionally… but a basic sleeping draught shouldn’t be difficult to come by.” All Tom had to do was ask and the Carrow’s would begin production. Though he imagined he would garner some funny looks for demanding something as basic as a sleeping draught. “By the beginning of next term I can give you immediate access, whenever you require it. No worrying about brewing time, or getting caught again.”

“No cost, you say?” By gods, Potter actually looked interested. Tom had expected rejection right off the bat. “So what’s the catch?”

“Help me find the Chamber of Secrets.”

“HA-“ Potter began, stretching languidly. “HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA. And I’m supposed to be the mad one. No. The Chamber of Secrets doesn’t exist Riddle.”

Was it the finality of Potter’s voice that was grating on Tom’s nerves or his cold, unamused laughter? He reminded Tom all too much of Mrs.Cole’s early attempts to discipline him. It was a special brand of disbelief mixed with derision and a dollop of entitlement that people so often used on those younger than them. But Potter didn’t even sound like he believed it himself. “You’re a bad liar, Potter”

“It’s a hoax.”
“It exists, and I’m going to find it,” Tom firmly retorted.

“No. You’re not. Because it doesn’t exist.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to come by your Dreamless Sleep another way,” Tom snarled.

“Yeah. I guess I will. I’ve no intent of helping you. Ever.” Potter returned to his book. He glanced at Tom from behind his pages, ducking his head when Tom huffed.

Abruptly an epiphany hit Tom like a ton of bricks. Potter knew, he realized. He knew exactly where the chamber was. He didn’t have an inkling, or a clue because he wasn’t just guessing or making up stories about basilisks. He actually knew. And for some reason he wanted Tom as far away from it humanly possible. That explained why he was acting like Tom was moronic. And that Tom realized with ever mounting glee, as he put two and two together, must be why there was a swamp in the fourth floor girls’ lavatory. Why else? Why all month, Potter had been creating diversions just so coincidentally around its surrounding floors. And why else was he attempting to pit the blame on Peeves when he’d already made a bad name for himself, if not to avoid arousing Tom’s suspicions? Tom said nothing, pretending Potter hadn’t just foolhardily handed him all the information he’d needed to know with his refusal.

Tom slid his hand into his robe, grabbing his wand to center his magic. Somnus, he repeated in his mind, imagining the circular hand motions as he minded Potter’s figure. Somnus.

Potter’s textbook fell open over his face and Tom welcomed the sound of muted snoring. That would do it. Potter would have to thank Tom later for the solid night of bewitched sleep he’d get.

Potter’s insistence that Tom would fail instead turned him hell-bent on finding the chamber. He’d attempted to make Tom feel foolish for believing in the Chamber of Secrets. Well, thanks to none other than himself, Tom was about to prove the sixth year wrong.

Tom approached the fourth floor girl’s lavatory with growing apprehension. The possibility that the Gryffindor had really gone and built an entire swamp with the intention of preventing Tom from reaching the Chamber of Secrets was both impressive and inconceivable. He wrinkled his nose, noticing how the flood had reached out of the bounds of the bathroom now. A large puddle took up a good fourth of the corridor. Tom cast an impervius and made his way through. By all means, wasn’t it a tad ridiculous that no one had resolved the mess yet? All attempts by Rancorous Carpe had only resulted in the swamps seemingly exponential growth but surely Dumbledore was capable of this much. Tom reckoned that like his starred baby blue robes, the bog was another eyesore that Dumbledore had grown fond of. And felt the need to force on everyone-else.

Moonlight filtered in through the gothic windows, and a lumos became unnecessary. It reflected off the large puddle.

When Tom opened the door to the washroom he was greeted with an outlandish sight. Entire stalls had disappeared and algae had overgrown over all the walls. Tom seethed, closing his eyes in disgust as he took a step inside and immediately found himself knee-deep in the water.

Tom was this close, nothing could stop him now.

Tom toed an oxford off and watched it float to the surface. Flicking his wand, he backed up for his shoe to transfigure into a small canoe. Tom took careful steps into the boat. Waving his wand he guided the canoe around the room, looking for anything that didn’t belong. Tom needed to resolve
the swamp before he could even get to the chamber. Tom predicted the bog was an issue that needed a mudbloods hand. If the caretakers barrage of charms and cries of evanesco hadn’t worked, then it needed to be looked at from another angle entirely. One that most purebloods were unqualified for.

“Aguclareo!” Tom flourished his wand.

The algae dissolved leaving crystalline water behind. Satisfied, Tom rested a hand on his hip. The swamp had made the entire bathroom sink, and yet the bog had stayed level with the outer Hogwarts floor. It was captivating. It also defied every theory on illusions taught at Hogwarts. Tom knit his brows, resolving to look into it as he observed the bathroom.

There!

By the edge of a stall there was a thin, out of place lever lodged into the base of a toilet. Tom grumbled, realizing what he’d have to do. He disrobed down to his jumper and trousers, and dove in without a second thought. Tom swam through the bog, the liquid weighing his clothes heavy. He was glad he’d incanted an impervius. He held his breath, paddling closer to the lever.

Reaching out, Tom jerked the lever. For a moment, nothing happened. Tom rose to the surface gasping for air, as he waited and wondered whether he’d been wrong. But then the water drew up into the air, forming a whirlpool. Tom watched in abject horror as it churned around him draining into the lever. Tom held stiffly onto the door of a stall but the impact of the water picked up in pace. The water rolled, lifting Tom with it and spinning him within the bounds of the pool. Tom slapped his hands against the washroom walls in his attempts to ground himself. He choked as he accidentally inhaled the swampwater. Stall doors were ripped off and dislodged as the water sank further down.

Finally, Tom was left disoriented, with beads of repelled water all over him, sitting like a patchworked doll on the lavatory floor. His wand was forgotten next to him and his makeshift canoe was lodged between a sink and a shower stall. His discarded robes had somehow attached to the lantern hanging from the ceiling in the process. Tom caught his breath, still spitting up water.

The lever bristled and disappeared with a loud apparition like pop, catching Tom’s attention. It left behind a bright orange piece of parchment which read in violet scrawl:

Thank you for using Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. Save for later usage, or throw it away. We don’t care. Reuse with a counterclockwise wave of your wand directly over this paper and say the words: Percy is a prat. Three times, if you will.

Of its own volition, the paper folded itself in half and flew into Tom’s pockets.

That… that was some potent magic. Tom thumped back onto the floor in a daze, briefly forgetting all about the Chamber of Secrets being moments within his reach. What kinds of wizards did Potter associate with exactly?

1997, Harry’s Timeline

“What does it say on the side here?” Harry unscrewed a bottle of firewhiskey. He took careful steps around the menhirs, squinting and squatting down to examine them. Over two days he and Hermione had moved their tent to the location, set up their wards and spent the rest of that time, tearing moss off and cleaning the backs of the rocks. A few scourgify’s later and most of the dirt had been reared up and out of the runes, but Hermione had still taken an old toothbrush to a few and was scrubbing
incessantly. She carefully made sure not to enter the inner circle. That was something neither of them wanted to see the result of.

Were they willfully using the rock formation they’d found as a distraction? Definitely, Harry had realized. They’d wholly dedicated themselves to unraveling its workings instead of searching for the sword of Godric Gryffindor as had been planned. It set Harry’s nerves alight whenever he thought about it. That he was here, doing this instead of what he should have been doing. He had a constant sense of impending doom, and procrastinating wasn’t helping it any. Hermione was obsessed though. She’d gotten it into her head that it would come as a very important tool later on. They’d collected dozens of kindle and had been testing it. Harry thought he’d seen a whole tree’s worth vanish into thin air by now.

“Which Menhir?”

“Nine.”

“Where is it? Harry are you drinking? You should be copying the runes down!” she gestured to a nearby notepad Harry had abandoned an hour before. Harry took a stubborn, loud slurp, amused at how it made the woman scowl. “It’s towards the bottom, on the back.” It looked like fine print compared to the other runes decorating the stone bodies. “What?”

“Come look.” With a groan, Hermione stood upright, dusting off the knees of her jeans to no use, as they had two wet patches. Staggering with her tired legs next to Harry, she bent down and conjured a magnifying glass.

“Serpent eyes, troll bat-” Hermione paused and raised her wand. “Accio Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms.” A book flew from the tent, and Hermione gracefully caught its spine with one hand.

“No. I might be wrong, but…” She flipped through the pages of her book.

“Essentially,” Hermione furrowed her eyebrows. “It’s translation to English is basically: right your wrongs, or right what has been done wrong”

“It appears this was made with the actual intent to- to change one’s own timeline.” What else would it have been made for? Harry looked at her unimpressed.

“Don’t look at me that way! It could have been created by very advanced ancient historians with the intent to say, record the events of past. That this was actually created with the purpose of tampering with a timeline is completely demented, Harry. Whoever brought this into the world has no consideration for humanity whatsoever.” Hermione explained impatiently.

“But me-” Harry continued, “The many wrongs in my life can go back decades”
“Before you were born possibly…”

A shiver ran up Harry’s spine as Hermione looked meaningfully at him. Even the world had a feeling of ominousness. Dusk suddenly approached far too soon, and the wind picked up, swirling around the both of them.

“Don’t even think about it, Harry” Hermione softly scolded him.

But she’d thought it first

Chapter End Notes

Even peeves likes Tom.

Again, thankyou for your comments and kudos! im kind of shy when it comes to responding and reaching out to those who have left feedback but it really does mean a lot to me, so thankyou!
Muggle Hunting: Part One

Chapter Summary

When Harry lands himself in 1942 he officially stops caring. Surrounded by witches and wizards that are blissfully ignorant that there's a time-traveler in their midst, Harry resolves to make his own changes, which results in some interesting and unexpected consequences.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for mentions of drug abuse and casual murder.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1976

Harry Potter couldn't remember opening his eyes. He only woke to the blurry vision of his lantern casting an amber glow throughout his Hogwarts quarters. Harry'd acquired a decent room on the Hogwarts ground floor once he became the DADA professor. Coming with a bathroom and a kitchenette, it was spacious enough that Tom occasionally shared it with him. Although Tom being an elective professor allowed for more time away from Hogwarts which he chose to spend on activities at the ministry. Until recently, Harry hadn't been seeing much of Tom though.

Harry's expansive window was wide open, and his golden drapery danced under an incoming breeze. Over the horizon rose just an inkling of dawn. Harry shivered as the cool, spring air drifted across his bare skin. He shifted, belatedly noticing the arm firmly sheathed around his waist.

That was right...

Harry looked to his side, squinting and wandlessly conjuring his spectacles. It was an immutable habit of Tom's to cling to him in sleep. As an adolescent, Harry'd expected all cold intensity and Tom's fervent passion had left him dumbfounded. Tom was much too aware of his own mortality, and by extension, Harry's. Thus, he loved as if either one of them would die tomorrow. A boyish smile bloomed on Harry's face as he gently smoothed a stray curl from Tom's forehead. It was when Tom's finely sculpted features softened in rest that all of the man's cruelty and manipulative ways could be forgotten.

Harry hadn't anticipated inviting Tom to his quarters that night. Then again, a month-long separation was an achievement for the both of them, no matter how tumultuous their relationship was. It was only a matter of time before one of them surrendered.

Harry squirmed abreast the man, mischievously trailing his lips across Tom's collar-bone and pushing his hand underneath the sheet. He wickedly trailed his fingers along Tom's abdomen, watching as the dozing runes professor stirred and turned his head to the side, exposing his nape. Tom would be
appalled at the vision he made. He despised baring his vulnerabilities. But Harry treasured it.

Harry's lips had only just grazed the man's jawline when the arm on his waist drew tight, pulling him closer and aligning his body atop Tom's. Harry's toes curled as deliberate fingertips dragged down the curve of his spine, along his lumbar, eliciting gooseflesh. At last the appendages stopped between the dimples of his lowerback and kneaded in tender, circular motions. Harry's eyelids fluttered at the titillating pressure as they lazily ground their groins together. Tom had skillfully mastered his body throughout the years. He could string Harry along like a puppet now.

Tom had woken, and was gazing up at him with langorous, half-lidded eyes. Harry extended a hand and caressed his cheekbone with his thumb, relishing how the younger man leaned into his palm. Or how their breath intertwined. With his free hand, Tom clasped Harry's wrist, turned his face inward and laid a chaste kiss on Harry’s palm.

'I love you' Harry wanted to say, as easily or as liberally or as casually as Tom could say it.

Instead, he quietly admired his partner.

"Enjoying yourself?" Tom's drawl was husky with sleep.

In response, Harry kissed Tom's temple and burrowed his face into his neck. He sunk into Tom, chest to chest, and delved his nose into the younger man's skin. Harry inhaled the aroma of Tom's lingering musk cologne, finding tranquility in the familiarity it's scent offered. Shutting his eyes, Harry wondered whether he could fall back asleep like this.

Tom made other plans. Harry groaned when the man's hand glided up his back to the base of his skull, tangling his fingers in Harry's bedhead. Tenderly, Tom pulled his tresses and uprooted Harry's face from the home it was making in his neck. He cupped Harry's jaw, ardently capturing his lips in a wanton kiss. Harry melted into Tom. He'd nearly forgotten how good this felt, how naturally this came to them.

It was when Tom hoisted him closer by the thighs, that Harry reluctantly broke off. If he didn't stop now, Harry'd lose himself to his passion.

"We can't. it must be at least five and I need to grade papers in the morning." he objected. Tom's hands stubbornly drifted up to his rear instead.

"Need I remind you it was you who carelessly woke me." Tom's eyebrows knit together. "Don't seduce me like this if you're afraid to suffer the consequences."

Harry chortled briefly, but was subdued by Tom's savage gaze. Consequences? When had Harry ever been afraid? "Don't get ahead of yourself now."

Tom abruptly sat up. He manhandled Harry into his lap with practiced ease and gripped his hips.

"Give in," he demanded, speaking into Harry's ear and fervidly running his hands along his thighs. "I recognize that look in your eyes. You want this as much as I do."

"Yes, but responsibility is calling my name." Harry sang. It was his own fault actually. The essays were supposed to be returned last week. As a DADA professor, Harry'd long preferred practicals over theoreticals, but he did occasionally adhere to Hogwarts guidelines.

"I can call your name better," Tom replied. Not even embarrassed to say it. Were it Harry, he'd have begun laughing before he could even get the words out. Sometimes Tom still shocked him with his shamelessness in these matters. Harry snorted, wrapping his arms around the other man's shoulders.
Was Tom actually competing with his job now?

"You've got to stop leading me into temptation like this." Harry fussed, though he hypocritically made no effort to leave Tom's warm, comforting embrace. Instead, he ducked his face back into his partner's shoulder.

"Must I always shoulder the blame for your desires? Is it too much for you to finish what you started?"

Harry lifted his head, his mind racing for a solution to their predicament."Perhaps... perhaps if we get the position right I could do my papers now. And then I wouldn't have to worry about-" Harry faltered at his partner's bemused expression.

"What?"

"You're suggesting you grade papers while we have sex," Tom recapitulated incredulously. Was it that weird? They'd done stranger things. Let's be honest, marrying a man that murdered his parents in an alternate timeline wasn't exactly setting either of them up for a normal relationship.

"Well, you'd have to do all the work, but I think you prefer it that way anyway." Tom didn't respond. He regarded him quietly, laying a peck on Harry's clavicle and snaking his hands back to the older man's arse. Tom had a dangerous gleam in his eye. One that meant he wouldn't retreat until he'd gotten his way. Harry's breath hitched when the wizard bit playfully into him. On second thought, perhaps Harry ought to give the students all e's and be done with it. The notion became more alluring by the minute.

It didn't matter. Harry didn't get that option. Because mere seconds later, an entire stag jumped through the window.

James Potter loudly galloped into the room, arriving just in time to ruin everything.

1942 December

According to plan, Tom left Hogwarts on the 29th and flooed into Godric's Hollow from Hogsmeade. The Bulstrode Manor was a thirty minute stroll out of Godric's Hollow, half of which consisted of it's sprawling, over-sized yard, which would better be described as a forest. Lestrange had unnecessarily explained that it was likely to keep the few muggle inhabitants from the town away.

"Perhaps it's for the best that Pascal couldn't attend" Dolohov muttered darkly.

"What gave you that brilliant impression? Is it the stuffed muggles mounted on the wall?" came Mulciber's cutting retort.

Tom, Mulciber, Lestrange and Dolohov had convened in the Bulstrode vestibule, which Tom discovered was a high-ceilinged room with rich, olive painted walls. And the macabre sight of fifteen dismembered, taxidermied human heads ornamenting their clear expanse. They didn't look dead. Tom half-expectted their bodies to be sticking out from holes in the walls of the next rooms. Their glassy eyes had been magicked to slowly blink, and they still inhaled and exhaled as if they had a pair of working lungs.

Tom watched as Lestrange had the nerve to approach the nearest head. Rodolphus examined the muggle woman's skull as he would a slab of meat in a butcher's shop. He stroked her long, hanging
blonde hair and pinched her jaw open between his thumb and index finger. The group beared witness to the sight of bubbles of saliva still on her tongue and her pearly whites.

"Ugh, uncanny that is," Dolohov griped. "She's looking me right in the eye." Indeed, the woman's unnaturally shiny orbs flickered from face to face, stopping at Tom's. Tom wouldn't be remotely surprised if she was still sentient. He couldn't imagine being cursed to such an existence, stuck to someone's wall, fated to being reduced to a mere decoration. Tom nearly pitied the woman.

"My Uncle Corvus mugglehunts," said Lestrange. It was vulgar the way Rodolphus went as far as to stick a pair of fingers into the woman's mouth, having a feel around like he was a dentist. "But none of his muggles are preserved this well, so he just cooks them." Tom was uncertain what to think at such casual mentions of cannibalism. "He's got one he likes to bring out during Beltane that can sing the entire chorus of God Save the Queen though. Ruddy awful, it looks. One of it's eyes pops off if you slam the westwing doors." Lestrange grimaced, removing his fingers and wiping them on the front of his garish robes.

"Why didn't Bulstrode tell us his family hunts? Corvus has been looking for a hunting mate for years."

"Bulstrode never really tells us anything does he? But I reckon it's for the same reason it's good Pascal wasn't invited." said Mulciber "I can just imagine his dad pulling up in one of those muggle contraptions. Pascal's dad would be on this wall next."

"Furthermore, isn't mugglehunting s'posed to be illegal?"

"It isn't." The boys in Tom's inner circle jumped at the deep timbre of an unfamiliar voice. "If the muggle is imported." Mr. Bulstrode clapped their backs forcefully. "It's a sweet, little loophole the ministry set aside for upstanding purebloods like myself. She's a beaut isn't she? Norwegian." A great shadow loomed over them. The teenagers turned around.

Mr. Bulstrode was very broad-shouldered, and very, very tall. He stood at what must have been at least seven feet and had a particularly fat head. He reminded Tom of a few summers ago, when he'd knicked Billy Stubbs's film tickets to go see a Mary Shelley adaptation called *Frankenstein*.

"Angus Bulstrode, pleased to make your acquaintance," the man introduced himself. He exhaled, appraising the teenagers with a pair of discerning eyes. First, landing on Julius. "Ah," he said, with a wry smile. "Hooded eyes, bushy brow, compact forehead. Now you must be a Mulciber. I could recognize that brooding expression anywhere." He held his hand out, which Mulciber hesitantly shook. "Natural born warriors, the lot of you."

Angus Bulstrode rapidly drew Tom's ire. He'd been through this many times before. That first apprehensive meeting with a pureblood... Purebloods found enjoyment in attempting to deduce one's ancestry by their features alone. If they subscribed to that physiognomy mumbo jumbo, like Roscoe Wu's devoted fans, then they went as far as to attempt to determine one's magical prowess, destiny and even their virility. An anomalous face like Tom's, though handsome, muddled them.

"Strong ski slope nose, defined cupid's bow... Your mother is a Prewett, is she not?" Lestrange blushed. "Yes. She married a Lestrange."

"A Lestrange! Wonderful! My great grandmother was a Lestrange." The man's eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't by any chance happen to be Rodolphus Lestrange would you?"

"Yes, I would."
"My apologies, for your recent news." Lestrange drew up into a defensive stance, silent as Angus Bulstrode obliviously turned to Dolohov. "You Dolohov's do like to grow your hair out don't you. I can always spot your father in the ministry. Hair down to his waist!"

Finally, Mr. Bulstrode's eyes settled on Tom.

"Now you. You're an interesting fellow. Handsome. But I can't recognize you at all..."

"You wouldn't. My name is Tom Riddle."

"Riddle... Riddle..." the wizard snapped his fingers in thought. "Doesn't ring a bell. Say, what's your lineage? What family does your mother fall under?" The other Slytherins shared tentative glances, holding their breath.

"I don't know, sir. I'm an orphan," Tom explained. As expected, immediately the man's eyes turned from cordial curiosity to a familiar look of disdain.

To a pureblood, an unknown was as good as a mudblood. Not to mention, It was a stereotype amongst purebloods, that orphaned wizards were frequently the half-blood products of rape from witchhunts past. It probably held some truth... a few centuries ago. That Tom was most likely a half-blood, he chose not to disclose. Naturally, Mr. Bulstrode assumed the worst.

"An orphan? Why, you could be anything!" Soon, Tom would reveal to his companions that he was Salazar Slytherin's heir. Discovering the Chamber of Secrets and summoning the basilisk a mere night ago had proven it. But until then, Tom had to bear the humiliating scrutiny of yet another ignorant pureblood. Overnight, Tom's rank would soar. Pureblood or not, an heir of Slytherin would hold immense influence over wizarding Britain. Tom was holding power in the palms of his hands. If only it had been known from the very beginning. It would have been his birthright. If only he'd discovered the Chamber of Secrets earlier. Tom should never have had to lift a finger to gain the respect he so deserved.

"I hope that doesn't intimidate you, Mr. Bulstrode." Tom intimated knowingly, shaking his hand. Of course it did. One look into the man's psyche revealed twenty something different complexes. He might've been large on the outside, but he certainly was not on the inside. Angus Bulstrode was a small, small man.

Mr. Bulstrode spluttered. "Intimidate?! Why ever would I be intimidated?"

"Oh not you, of course." Tom lied through his teeth. He'd considered letting his vague insult lay dormant at the back of Bulstrode's mind and eat away at him, but he knew it would be best to appease Angus, lest this first impression stick. "In my experience... it has certainly scared lesser wizards. But not you sir. Power radiates off of you, if you don't mind me saying it." Behind him, Mulciber quietly snorted.

Angus blushed, preening under Tom's gaze. Even middle-aged men were vulnerable to Tom's piercing eyes. "Yes, well. I have heard that once or twice. You're alright, Riddle. Even if you stand the chance of being a mudblood." Tom imagined cracking a nearby vase over the man's skull.

Tom ignored the backhanded compliment as the man beckoned the boys through a pair of stained glass doors into a circular hall, which contained a grand, spiraling staircase that ascended three stories.

The walls were indigo, and like the stained glass doors, the ceiling was alight with intricate orange and red patterned windows. The Bulstrode manor was neither as opulent as the palace Lestrange
called home, or as venerable as the archaic Mulciber abode. But Tom found the decor admirable, though it could have done without the severed heads. Bulstrode's home was lavished with deep hues of blues and greens and garnished with radiant corals and scarlets. Peering into the large archways circulating the ground floor of the hall, Tom saw that like the rest of the home, the rooms were all bedecked in an art nouveau style and filled with priceless works of wizarding art. Mr. Bulstrode's love of hunting didn't just extend to muggles. He'd cultivated a fine collection of stuffed wings of phoenixes, hippogriffs and fairies which had been flattened to the hall walls. The collection was polished off with a large, angelic pair of pegasus wings hanging from the ceiling, poised just so, to look breathtaking beneath the stained glass windows, which cast rosy hues upon it's splayed wings. The place reeked of magic.

This. This was the kind of home that belonged to Tom. This should have been his. Not his dilapidated, suffocating, little room back at Wool's which would only be Tom's for as long as he remained underage. At times like this, Tom was firmly reminded that the closest thing he'd ever have to a home was Hogwarts. And even that was temporary...

"Augustus!" Mr. Bulstrode had stopped at the spindly rail of the staircase. He received no reply.

"AUGUSTUS!" he shouted again. A nearby portrait of a Bulstrode ancestor playing a cello paused in his playing to scowl at the group.

"Whaaat?" A door on the second floor opened and Tom heard the low groan of his burly friend.

"Gallopin Gargoyles! It's two in the bloody afternoon, boy! Your schoolmates are here! Give them the full tour, would you!" Mr. Bulstrode paused. "And wake Solis! Your mother wants help with supper tonight!"

Time passed quickly in Bulstrode's home. Lestrange had teasingly implied that Tom was even enjoying himself. Tom didn't deny it. Admittedly his gang made for better company than the Greengrasses and although it wasn't Hogwarts, it was a preferable alternative to Wool's. They wiled two days away, dueling in the stained glass Bulstrode solarium and holding discussions in the rec room.

Tom had yet to inform his friends of his exploration of the Chamber of Secrets. It was likely Lestrange would be doubtful and wanting of proof. Tom wished to do so in a more effectual manner. One that would leave an impression. When school was back in session. Tom wanted every Hogwarts inhabitant to stand witness to the power of the Slytherin heir. No, Tom wanted people to know when the Chamber of Secrets was opened. Imbeciles like Potter couldn't dare to cast doubt on it's existence when the mere sight of the basilisk's eyes could strike them dead. So until the completion of winter break, the Chamber of Secrets remained closed and his confidants blissfully unaware.

Not to mention the prospect of what would no doubt be Harry Potter's dramatic reunion with his family kept Tom busy.

Better than Tom had suspected, not only did the Bulstrode's hold a relation to the Potters, but Angus Bulstrode was none other than Dorothea Potter's cousin. Even more conveniently, the Bulstrode's would be celebrating their New Year's Eve with the Potters and Tom was invited. Tom couldn't have asked for better. The Bulstrodes had informed Tom of a yearly celebration that gathered the sacred twenty-eight pureblood families together. Not all attended, in fact, attendance had been dwindling over the past century. But each year, the responsibility fell upon a different family to host it. And 1942 fell on the Potters. Tom could hardly wait. That Dorothea Potter had invited her husband's
mistress and bastard progeny to such an important event, could only mean one thing: public humiliation.

Even when Mulciber had gathered the others for makeshift games of quidditch out in the frigid air, Tom found solace in the grand Bulstrode Library. Like Tom, Angus Bulstrode held a considerable fascination towards the dark arts. He'd amassed a large array of forbidden texts that put even the Lestrange library to shame. The days Tom didn't spend constructing lesson plans for Potter (Having retrieved copies of Potter's exam answers from all the professors, Tom increasingly found that Potter wasn't stupid so much as incredibly lazy, or unmotivated as Dumbledore had called it.) or exploring the magical home with his companions, he spent in the library. Tom studied up on theories of illusions, finding nothing to explain the mysterious Weasleys and their swamp.

Tom also discovered more informative publications on legilimency, but became distracted by a rare tome detailing ancient Canaanite necromancy rituals. It described everything from raising the souls of dead relatives, to traveling to the underworld, to summoning creatures that fit the religious bill of what could only be called a demon. If Tom happened to tear a few pages out, Angus Bulstrode was none the wiser.

On the evening before the Potter New Years celebration, Mrs.Bulstrode and Solis, with the help of a house-elf aptly named tiny, cooked an abundant feast. Dolohov had returned home that afternoon for his familial festivities after his mum had firecalled the day before. Lestrange and Mulciber had departed in the morning, leaving Tom completely alone with the Bulstrodes. Tom was unsure he liked it. Mrs.Bulstrode was pleasant enough. Any prejudices she may have held were pacified by Tom's appearance. Like many pureblood women and some men, it was easy to look past dirty blood or a mysterious surname if the mudblood in question looked like Tom.

Augustus need not have ever worried about his gracile wife being led astray. It was a rare occasion for her to spend time with the gang since her arranged marriage with Augustus the year previous. Tom hadn't the chance for a thorough examination of her personality until now. Solis was one of the upper years who'd dabbled in occlumency, but Tom had seen enough to deduce that she was thoroughly jaded by... everything. Yes, she did find Tom easy on the eyes but she was a sullen woman who only found happiness in her books and was left displeased by her husband's inability to match her intelligence.

Perchance, she'd occasionally look at Tom and fantasize about Tom being dazzled by her brilliance, joining her on her mission to understand the world one book at a time. She imagined Tom sweeping her away to a faraway land and saving her from the responsibilities of tending to the Bulstrode household. It was a common theme that played in heterosexual women's minds. To Tom's relief, she was far too timid to ever solicit his attentions, and her recent pregnancy scare had rendered her even more withdrawn. Tom didn't divulge Augustus of any of this. Augustus had skirted the subject, curious what his wife thought of him and hoping Tom's newly acquired legilimency skill would be of assistance. Tom thought it best for all three of them, if Augustus remained unwitting.

It was Mr.Bulstrode that Tom was wary of. Angus maintained a facade of pleasantry, and while Tom spoiled him with a particularly thick layer of flattery- one that had even Mulciber and Lestrange skeptical of him- the Bulstrode patriarch spoke to Tom with thinly veiled insults. Not deliberately. No, he was just a callous, old buffoon. Tom's patience was wearing thin. It wasn't that the man hated him. Tom suspected he liked him even. It was only that Tom's mysterious blood status hung everywhere he went.

Angus Bulstrode spoke of Tom like one would of a prized pet, or of a circus animal that'd been
coached to jump through hoops.

Intelligent, for a mudblood.

Gifted, for a mudblood.

Impressively civilized, for a mudblood.

*Mudblood* *Mudblood* *Mudblood*. A day into his stay, Tom concluded that Mr. Bulstrode didn’t believe in exceptions. Tom's cryptic lineage usually slipped past pureblood minds once they realized that Tom was inherently superior to them. The purebloods that did latch onto his bloodstatus were so far in denial of Tom's superiority they even convinced themselves Tom was an Anastasia-like pureblood. Some last known survivor of some pureblood family long dead. (And they wouldn't be too far off, if Tom really turned out to be a Gaunt as he suspected.)

This was not the case with the Bulstrode patriarch. Tom could create the world in seven days and that would still be overshadowed by his blood status. He almost wished Pascal were there to take the brunt of it. It became progressively more difficult to preserve an even temperament around the wizard.

Mr. Bulstrode was as aggravating as Harry Potter, but not nearly as captivating. And Potter was never condescending, at least not in regards to Tom's blood. Tom had taken that for granted. Potter overestimated Tom, even. By the second day Tom found himself even *longing* for Potter's various accusations. Potter thought Tom capable of *something* even if that something didn't cast a flattering light on him. Angus Bulstrode genuinely thought Tom would amount to nothing. It was the first time Tom had encountered a pureblood that blinded, that they couldn't see anything else. Fuck, even Lestrange's great granddad had warmed up to Tom in third year, and the geriatric wizard's own mum had been a victim of a belated witchhunt.

Tom regretted ever pandering to their assumptions. He entertained the pureblood family, telling exaggerated stories of being raised by muggle mongrels. Tom turned the story of him hanging Billy Stubbs' rabbit from the rafters onto it's head, instead, recounting some butchered version in which the prejudiced muggle, Billy, spliced Tom's childhood garden snake open. It garnered Mrs. Bulstrode's amiable pity and exclamations of "*You poor baby!*". But Mr. Bulstrode found it hilarious, cackling at various intervals throughout the tale. He was like Tom, in that he sorely lacked compassion. Unlike Tom, he didn't have the common sense to hide it.

It was when Augustus mentioned in passing at the dinner table, that Tom's birthday coincided with New Year's Eve, that something... *different* occurred.

A well kept secret in pureblood culture was just how *obsessed* they were with the divining arts. And just how extreme some would take in their pursuit of enlightenment. There was also an element in it they linked to druidic goddesses no longer celebrated. More than anything, purebloods yearned to uncover some hidden truth, some higher knowledge. Tom had successfully infiltrated their society since he'd been a bumbling little first year and since then he'd witnessed towering tarot collections, full-moon crystal ball gazing, and natal transit chart debates galore. The more outrageous shows of pureblood insanity Tom'd seen was attempted necromantic, death-to-life rituals. Or in other words, suicide with every failing intention of returning. Often such missions lapsed, because the recreants fled last minute. But there had been one tragedy in Tom's second year in which a group of experimental purebloods sent some hapless mudblood to his early grave. When interrogated by
aurors, they'd called it a hazing ritual, and it'd been all over The Daily Prophet for months. Purebloods knew better. They stored the truth deep in their closets, only ever letting a select few, such as Tom or Avery, in on it.

Students like Cassius Selwyn had been attempting to get their hands on an alleged resurrection stone for years now. Purebloods believed that only in death could foresight be achieved and a fundamental truth realized. Dolohov was a staunch believer in this theory and possessed a massive assemblage of near death biographies in which wizards recounted the afterlife and whichever empyreal key to the universe they claimed to have discovered.

But this... This was something not often practiced within the confines of Hogwarts. Tom had heard of it, yes. Even seen it once. Lestranges father had been high out his mind, having seizures on his Persian carpet, and spitting bile the last time Tom had seen him.

But never had Tom been invited to experience it.

It was pure wizarding hallucinogen, plain and simple.

Solis Bulstrode had a look of condemnation in her eyes as she stubbornly set a miniscule brass cauldron down on the kitchen table in front of Tom. Solis's minute cauldron couldn't have been any larger than the average mug. It was clear she thought it a waste on him. She'd worked an exceedingly long time on this potion, and solar eclipses didn't come often in one's lifetime. That Mr. Bulstrode demanded she gift it to Tom was simply unfair. Mr. Bulstrode downed some firewhiskey, grinning at Tom. This wasn't something just any mudblood had the honor to experience, so Angus was monitoring Tom with amusement. Like he was watching a cat swim.

Solis cast a flame beneath her cauldron and waved her wand over it.

"Our Solis is a budding potions genius..." Mrs. Bulstrode bragged. The seventh year hadn't made a name for herself, but Tom wasn't surprised. Most Ravenclaws wasted their days away doing something innocuous like modernizing wizarding objects, inventing spells and potions, but couldn't for the life of them put their knowledge to a more self-serving purpose. Their brilliance rarely went recognized, for their ambition was severely impaired.

"Took quite the galleon to secure our Augustus a Macmillan," Mr. Bulstrode lit a pipe, taking a long drag. He was unlike many pureblood wizards his age, in that he exhibited a wild disregard for behavioural norms. He slouched in his chair, stretched his legs out unabashedly, even putting his feet on the table. He didn't concern himself with any of that traditional pureblood etiquette. Which Tom supposed was just another reason the man had him on edge. He'd zealously studied pureblood formalities in an effort to gain a social standing since first year. It had made his encounters with pureblood nobility remarkably smoother. Angus Bulstrode was a different specimen altogether.

"You bought her?" Tom cautiously inquired.

"Don't be silly. What a muggle concept. It's her dower." Mr. Bulstrode blew smoke into Tom's face. Tom hadn't made the mistake of asking a pureblood a question in a long time. It was always better to masquerade as someone who understood their every custom. He shouldn't have let his curiosity get the best of him. Still, Tom quietly brimmed with held-back rage at the cutting tone of the man's voice and the blue smoke making his eyes water.

"Well she did take the best offer..." said Mrs. Bulstrode, conjuring a wineglass and pouring liquid from her wand. "So it's as good as, isn't it, Angus? Nine suitors the lovely thing had. Lucky girl. Out
of all pureblood options, I had the choice between you and a wizard thrice my age." Augustus' progenitors spoke of their daughter in law as if she wasn't in the room.

"Argh," Angus Bulstrode waved an affronted hand. "Shut it, you old wench." A wounded look on her face, Mrs. Bulstrode took a long sip of her wine. Angus nodded towards Solis who stood obediently, with perfect posture and her hands folded across her midsection.

"Show him the ropes then." Angus gestured at Solis

"She's got something she's been working on. Augustus failed to tell me you would have your sixteenth, so we couldn't procure any gifts in time. But we do have something else. Obviously a Rite of Passage is off-limits to mudbloods, but we can provide... a similar experience." Tom preferred not to receive gifts at all from purebloods. The wealthy kind anyway. It would denote he'd be obliged to reciprocate with something just as extravagant as their bestowals tended towards. It was burdensome to keep pace with and often put Tom at their mercy. Tom would rather receive nothing at all.

Solis conjured a mason jar, which had been rolled into what would be a resplendent cloth were it not for dirt caked to it's surface. She set the jar next to the cauldron and Tom examined it's contents. It was repulsive. The potion was chunky, murky and looked like something akin to polyjuice.

"What did you use?"

"Mugwort, valerian, sage, poison of exotic toad... cost me a fourth my inheritance that one did, spiders web, silkworms cocoon, just a drop of diluted belladonna extract, blue lotus flower, hibiscus root, jasmine for scent all brewed under a blood moon. Sugar, barley, coffee bean, salt... last. mixture left to ferment underground for nine months," Solis took a deep breath.

"When unburied... I added rationing of a pickled hippocampus of a fifteenth century seer," Solis sighed "Just a tablespoons worth. That was the other fourth of my inheritance. Follwing that with earth from the highest mountain top, water from the deepest sea, a shaving from the oldest tree known... all combined during last year's solar eclipse. And then left to store in a cupboard until a later date."

Solis poured her mason jar into the cauldron, and the contents immediately began bubbling. Tom resisted the urge to flinch back as Solis flourished her wand and approached him with a pair of summoned tweezers.

"Eyes steady," she told him. and then proceeded to pluck multiple eyelashes from each eye.

"Nail clippers!" Solis commanded, and her husband immediately supplied a pair.

"Hands!" Tom held his hands out.

"Nine nail clippings, nine eyelashes, nine hairs of head." She yanked on Tom's hair and sprinkled all of her ingredients into the small cauldron.

Solis presumptuously grasped Tom's arm, and Augustus strode forward with sorry puppy-dog eyes, cutting a length down Tom's palm. Tom bore into his face, agast at what felt like his betrayal. "Nine drops of blood from the fate line." They tilted Tom's hand over the cauldron's boiling surface.

"What do you say, boy?" said Mr.Bulstrode as his son and daughter in law cast healing charms on Tom's blood covered hand. He leaned forward, taking the smoking pipe out his mouth and blowing rings of smoke again. "It's an unforgettable experience, I'll tell you that much."

Tom wasn't given a choice. If the mixture didn't kill him, surely he was in for an abundance of
unpleasant ailments. Without asking Tom's consent, the purebloods had included Tom in one of their
deranged little pastimes. What could he do? He couldn't say no. He reviled the family for heedlessly
putting him in such a susceptible position.

"We have a bezoar on hand, dear." Mrs.Bulstrode affectionately assured Tom. That didn't put Tom
at ease. If anything, it proved his notion correct. "And it's not addictive. Unless you count the coffee
extract, but that's only to hasten it's effects." Solis added.

Solis dipped a tiny vial into her cauldron, scooping up it's revolting mixture. "One drop underneath
the tongue is all you need." Reluctantly, Tom allowed the woman to tap the solution into his mouth.

Everything appeared in glowing sepia and tuscan tones. Crashing waves of an ocean that should
have been blue, instead, glinted gold under the luminous sunset. Not far off was a flax hued
mountain. It was blindingly bright. Standing in the ocean was the figure of a man clad in Gryffindor
red robes. It was the only unique color to emerge from the overbearing gold of his
surroundings. Tom couldn't for the life of him get a proper look at the stranger's face.

"Come on! get in the water!" the stranger beckoned Tom. Fully clothed, Tom waded into the sea.
There was a foreign feeling in Tom's chest. Tom knew he was intrinsically overjoyed to meet this
man. It was the sort of elation Tom felt on his first day returning to Hogwarts every year, but
multiplied by ten. And yet there was a tinge of anguish there. Why did Tom feel like crying... Without
a second thought Tom trekked through the waves right into the man's arms and embraced him. The
lower half of the stranger's face smiled back at him.

Tom knew him and he didn't. He wished he could peer into his eyes, so he could grasp what this
feeling within himself was.

"I missed you. I missed you so much," cried Tom unintentionally, clinging onto him. The words just
escaped from his mouth, leaving of their own accord.

"I know. And you're doing a fine job without me." The man stepped away, placing his hands on
Tom's shoulders.

"Where are we?" Tom asked. Letting go, the man twirled around, stretching his arms high above
him and releasing a long, drawn-out groan.

"Lord Howe Island."

"Where?"

"Somewhere off in Australia. This was where I spent half your fourth year. Just me and buckbeak
and some tourists every now and then..." he sighed. "Beautiful place. I suppose my heart was set on
returning when I was going stir-crazy, stuck in Grimmauld Place. I came here with James once."

"Really?!" Tom asked excitedly, as if he knew who James even was.

"It was the best summer of my life. Just me, James, the sun, the surf. Rode our brooms around
Mount Lidgbird there," the wizard gestured towards the nearby mountain. "Third year. Just a year
or so before Voldemort staged a coup on the ministry and everything went to shit."

"Voldemort..."

The name rolled off Tom's tongue. What a fantastic thing to call oneself. Tom wished he'd thought of
"Let's... Let's not talk about him," said Tom full of distaste. Tom could appreciate the genius of the name, and yet it made grief, and anger wash over him. It was bizarre. How could just a name have these effects on him? Especially one he hadn't heard until now?

"I've been watching over you. I've seen him. He's only a boy."

"Don't be fooled. Already, he can't be trusted" Tom cautioned him knowingly.

"Oh I don't doubt that for a second. He'll always be a tyrant, even if you'll one day claim otherwise. Come, walk with me." The man splashed out the water, and Tom accompanied him. He and the wizard wandered aimlessly along the shoreline, and Tom scanned the ocean, and the tawny sky. He hadn't noticed that there were actually many people in the water. He had felt alone with the man. Most were standing unattended, but a few were entertaining visitors.

"What are you doing?" catechized the man, after a momentary silence.

"You mean?"

"I mean, why are you acting like a bull in a china shop? Don't get me wrong, it's the most entertainment I've been provided in years. But you're going to get yourself killed acting like that. Just because I'm gone now, doesn't mean I've shed my responsibilities." the man clutched his hands behind his back, taking short, leisurely steps. "Yes, it's hypocritical of myself to say, but it's reckless of you."

"When have i ever been known to act recklessly?" Tom sarcastically responded. "It's what got you killed after all."

"That's not your fault. Don't ever think that. Don't ever say that again," the man replied quietly, bitterly. Full of shame, Tom evaded the man's gaze, which he could feel, but was still powerless to see.

"Perhaps this time, I'll get the right person killed." Tom joshed, though there was no humor there.

"You don't have to do it anymore. Just put the wand down. Just think about it, consider where you are now. You don't have to be a hero anymore"

"How? He's still going to grow into... that slits for nose monster. And now there's another dark lord on the rise. Am I supposed to just sit back and let lives get taken? And I'm supposed to stay there? What about Hermione? Ron? Ginny? What about Lupin? Everyone I left behind. Believe me, when I say I'd like to. I'd like to go to Australia too. Sip some butterbeer on the beach. But I can't. I can't enjoy my own life if theirs are still getting destroyed." Guilt would consume Tom if he even dared.

Somehow, Tom had merged with another being. He wasn't where he belonged. This was unlike any out of body experience he'd ever heard of. Words came to his mouth smoothly and a windfall of emotions Tom had never even experienced before surged through him. Who was Tom?

"They're actually..." the man trailed off. "What?!" Tom demanded, dread rising in the pit of his stomach. Oh what if he'd really blown it now? "What about them? D'you know how they are?! Are they alright?!" He was going into fully-fledged panic mode.

"They're good... They're amazing really. Far better off than we've ever been." The man grinned radiantly. "Lupin and Tonks just had a baby. Lupin's still a were. Couldn't keep that from happening. But he's alright. Your..."
The stranger let out a shuddering sigh. As if he couldn’t come to terms with what he was to announce.

"Partner..." he continued. Oh?

"Got him a job at the ministry. Hermione... Hermione's going to be brilliant. Just wait. Ron. Oh Ron. From the year you left, Ron's only eight now." He began chuckling. "I dunno how you did it mate, but somewhere on the timeline his parents conceived him much, much later. Still pretty wicked at chess from what I've seen though. And me! ME! You'll never guess!" He held his hand to his chest erratically.

"You?!" The news was magic. Tom had never felt this ecstatic, or more relieved. Everything felt okay in the world. Whoever he was, Tom hypothesized this wasn’t something they felt often.

"Well... another me. So not me... But kind of me! Oh, how I envy him." The man pulled Tom into another hug, this time spinning him around and Tom blissfully jumped along, disoriented as he was. "Let's just say flying motorbikes are really taking off in the wizarding world!"

"That's brilliant!"

"It is! It really is! Which is why I wanted to tell you something. I want you to know It's okay to be happy. Where you are." He stepped back.

"OF COURSE," the man added noisily, running his palms down Tom's arms. "It'd be okay to be happy in the midst of another wizarding war, fighting for your life with Ron and Hermione at your side. That's okay too. Whatever choice you make, your happiness is all I want for you. James and Lily would agree, were they present. But I want you to know, that where you are now, it's okay to be there. Everything is going to be fine. If not better."

"Are you alright?"

Tom was writhing on the herringbone floor of the Bulstrode kitchen. A moment later, when Tom's vision focused and his body stilled, he discovered four faces peering invasively down at him. Mortified, Tom realized there were tears in his eyes. The vision was so unlike the dream he'd had the week prior, where he'd only felt relieved to wake up. Briefly, before Tom came to his senses, he'd wanted nothing more than to escape and return to that dream world. To see that mystery man in the red robes again and embrace him. It felt miserable to wake up and find himself where he was now. Tom wanted to lie there until he died. That was what he felt like doing. Instead, Tom endeavored to banish his feelings, which he understood didn't belong to himself. They were only the aftermath of becoming a stranger.

Tom sat up, wiping at his eyes while he tried to make sense of himself and regain his composure. His cheek burned, as if someone had slapped him. Suddenly nauseous, Tom turned over, and retched onto the Bulstrode floor.

"Oh dear. That happened to me my first time as well," Tom heard. "Evanesco!" the sick disappeared. Augustus, who had never seen Tom in such a state before, regarded him with amazement. He held a hand out, helping Tom to his feet. "Y'okay, mate?" he asked, eyes wide open.

"Take him to the cellar. I believe we've got some chocolate on hand, that could come in use," said Mrs. Bulstrode.
Once in the cellar, Tom dizzily reclined against the wall. Bulstrode searched through food and wizarding goods his family kept below, mumbling and muttering to fill the stifling silence. Still dazed, Tom costively examined his hazy surroundings. The room could be a wartime bunker and had a small wooden door on it's right. It possessed none of the poshness visible in the rest of the manor. Across from Tom was a cracked mirror, which under the dim lighting of a hanging lantern, reflected back multiple pallid faces. Tom looked awful. Though they were beginning to reclaim their former color, Tom could tell his lips had turned blue... Tom looked like he'd died. Recalling his vision and how the man had mentioned being killed, Tom wondered whether he had. It felt foolish to think he'd seen the afterlife, but Tom looked as if he'd dug his way out a grave. There'd been at least two poisons in that concoction and who knew if it'd even been fermented properly, Solis' supposed genius be damned.

"Augustus," he began. "While I was out, what happened to me?"

Augustus froze in his search. Displeasure festered inside Tom at the blatant disregard for his life the Bulstrodes had shown him. They could have killed him. They might have killed him from the sound of it. Purebloods were blazing mad.

"You fell off your chair. Experienced a seizure. Nothing we hadn't seen before. Well. There was this weird minute where..."

"Where what?" Tom coaxed him onward.

"You became still." Still.

"Still" Tom echoed, folding his arms. He traced his eyes from the crown of Bulstrode's head to the the toes of his feet, emanating enough scorn to have the other boy fidgeting.

"I mean Dad checked your pulse! and then you were back up again! Your eyes were open, and they'd turned green and you were mumbling gibberish and shaking. Because it went on for so long, and you were turning blue, Solis tried to slap you awake. I suppose it worked..."

"Be clearer. Did I die?" Ultimately Tom's life was the most important thing he possessed. It was the only thing he had really. It was insulting how lightly the purebloods had treated it. Tom guessed that was the life of some irrelevant mudblood. Who was Tom really, if his surname didn't matter? They'd reduced him to a nobody. They might have sought after Tom's attentions, but at the end of the day, Tom's life wasn't as important to them as a pureblood's would be. It was high time Tom made it so.

"For a second, we thought you had. But you were alive for most of it mate." Deceit. Tom had to have been out for longer.

"Aha! here it is."

Bulstrode had uncovered an enormous bag of chocolate pellets. They must do this often. Intoxicating themselves with dangerous substances and puking up on their kitchen floor... Family get-togethers must be utter mayhem, Tom thought malignantly. Bulstrode placed a semi-sweet morsel into Tom's palm. Reluctantly, Tom took it. Anything to feel better.

"Tom, may I ask?"

"You wish to know what I saw, yes?"

Meekly, Bulstrode nodded. Tom could've scoffed. He imagined telling Augustus how he'd possessed
someone's body and ran into a man's arms on the beach. In the ocean. Fully clothed. Oh, and it might have been the afterlife. In Australia. He hadn't even said it aloud and it sounded absurd. Instead, Tom found an opportunity, and he lied.

"I saw myself discovering the Chamber of Secrets. I... I was a basilisk. I'd been imprisoned within the head of a statue of Salazar Slytherin for at least a thousand years. I saw myself from her eyes. I saw myself opening the chamber and freeing her."

Bulstrode gaped at Tom. Disbelief. Confusion. It didn't matter what he thought. Tom was only setting the grounds for introducing his inheritance.

"Augustus, I believe I may be the heir to Slytherin."

Regrettably, Tom's last words didn't have as strong an effect on Bulstrode as he'd desired. Because the wooden door to their right began banging loudly. Tom heard what distinctly sounded like a Turkish man frantically screaming from the cupboard and then Bulstrode cast a silencio.

"Bloody thing always wears off," he tucked his wand back into his robes bashfully.

At Tom's inquisitive gaze, Bulstrode ducked his head nervously.

"You're keeping a man in there."

"It's well... Dad wanted it to be a surprise, but you might know already anyway, legilimens and all."

No, Tom hadn't known.

"You know how I don't invite any of you home?" Like quickfire, Tom immediately understood what he was getting at. Inside Augustus's mind's eye was the gory memory of an arrow piercing the throat of his very first victim. At nine years old. How laughable of Bulstrode to attempt to protect his classmates. That was only the half of it. Tom should've comprehensively searched Bulstrode's mundane mind, instead of allowing him that last shred of privacy. "Dad likes to mugglehunt during Holidays. Druidic, Roman, British. The whole works. He- He likes to make it a competition. Whoever kills the muggle first usually gets winnings. He's going to invite you to join us on New Years Day."

1976

"Harry. What did you do?" Tom hissed upon seeing James Potter's animagus.

"Who says I've anything to do with this?" Harry croaked unconvincingly. The stag brayed deafeningly. He was staggering around the bedchamber, knocking over a room divider. Harry's curtains had stuck to his antlers, and in an effort to throw them off, James toppled over his desk, destroying a candlestick in the process.

Ignoring Tom's judgemental stare, Harry rolled off the man and grabbed the sheet for coverage. He crossed his arms and heaved a weary sigh, watching James destroy the room. Tom wouldn't understand. Tom had no empathy for Remus whatsoever, believing it disagreeable to let the marauders run free on these nights. If Remus spent his full moons rampaging the forbidden forest and getting stampeded half to death by the centaurs, Tom couldn't care less. Of course, Harry'd stupidly forgotten it was a full moon. Of course, he foolishly brought the runes professor back on the very night he'd agreed to let the marauders use the room last month. When he and Tom had only just
reconciled. Of course, of course, of course. That was Harry's life. Harry wanted to slug himself for his inattention. He'd been too distracted by Tom yesterday afternoon to even recall the commitments he'd made to his nephew slash father.

"Your favoritism shows no bounds." Tom swiftly began nagging. Harry cast him a withering glare. "Turning a blind eye is one thing, but to actually conspire with your students is overboard, Potter." Tom always resorted to surnames when upset with him. As if holding Harry at a distance could erase more than thirty years spent together.

"Remus needs them!"

James Potter finally transformed from deer to boy and lurched over, pretending to hurl upon seeing his uncles in their birthday suits.

"Guh! My eyes!" James stumbled over a fallen scroll, covering his eyes with the palms of his hands. He lifted a hand, to peer at them with one eye. Harry waved sardonically, wiggling his fingers, all the while his sheet barely covered his manhood. James feigned terror impeccably and slapped the hand back on. "They're bleeding! Someone get me a healer!" Harry thought James could find a stable career in acting.

Sirius jumped in next. The big black dog shook water off his fur, puffing up spectacularly. He hadn't quite mastered the transfiguration process yet. He still had a furry tail attached to his behind, that frequently took a half hour to recede back into his body. Sirius fixed his coat and ran his hands along his scarf, grinning goofily at James and his uncles, his tail wagging the entire time.

"Hullo Professor Potter, Professor Riddle. In a bit of an exhibitionist mood, eh? I thought the two of you separated for good last month... I see that that fell through," Sirius joked, swaggering around the room and casting a reparo on the items James had destroyed. Tom stiffened beside Harry, evidently not taking kindly to Harry's former godfather having the gall to comment on their love-life. "You cannot even begin to fathom the complexities of our relationship, Black... You'd do well to keep your commentary to yourself, when you know not what you speak of." Sirius shrugged, oblivious to the professor's scathing remark, which bounced off him like rubber.

"And how is Lupin?" asked Harry, brushing off Tom's recalcitrant stare.

"He's alright. Bit beat up, but that's the usual. We cast his healing charms. Somehow dear old Prongs here becomes an even bigger wanker in stag form," Sirius winked.

James ignored them. He was too busy acting out a one-man show. "My eyes sullied, my mind debased, my innocence- STOLEN. Are the two of you happy?!" he wailed.

"Immensely," Tom intoned flatly. He'd sat up against Harry's headboard so confidently it were as if he weren't virtually naked. Having retrieved it from Harry's nightstand, he was twirling his wand in that familiar way that meant imminent suffering.

Finally, Peter Pettigrew petered in, hopping from windowsill to the mantelpiece of Harry's fireplace and arriving at Sirius's foot. Twitching, he transfigured back into the mousy boy he was. His transformation was quiet compared to the shitshow that was James's or the sleek though imperfect version that belonged to Sirius.

"Well..." Tom began. "Now that you've all gathered, let's begin with point deductions."

"I knew we should've just depended on the invisibility cloak" Peter whined.

"Yes, well Prongs just had to have a growth spurt over summer."
Eyebrow twitching at the marauders, Tom continued:

"Fifteen points from Pettigrew. Ten from James, whom is lucky he happens to be... family." James made a strangled noise at the word, while Harry fondly noticed the subtle pink coloring Tom's ears. Adorable. "I assure you, I would subtract far more were it not for your relation. And twenty from Black. That should teach you to stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

five? Harry glowered, skeptically mouthing the word at Tom. That Tom withdrew more from Sirius than a traitor like Pettigrew was blasphemous. Harry wasn't petty often, but he had no qualms against his spouse taking small revenges on his behalf, as long as it never rivaled Snape's brand of poison. Tom found pleasure in it anyway. He pretended he wasn't, but Harry was well aware of the periodic cursed objects Tom had been sending to Vernon Dursley's post every year. That the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office hadn't caught on yet was just another testament to Tom Riddle's stealth.

"My apologies, Pettigrew. Let's make that twenty-five." The other two marauders gawked furiously at Tom, while Peter only shrugged, all too accustomed to it by now.

"That's no fair!" bellowed James. "Why are you always picking on poor Peter like that?!" "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers," Sirius began muttering in the background, grinning madly and nudging their diminutive friend with his elbow, who beamed.

"Five more points. There's no need for me to explain something beyond your comprehension." It hadn't yet dawned on the boys that point deduction was just the beginning. Well... perhaps James knew, but the tarzan of a boy had grown far past the point of caring. James had become impervious to Tom's discipline over the years. Just no fucks given. You'd think that Tom could instill a much-needed sense of responsibility in him, but James only cultivated his rebellious temper. "Ten points from Tom Riddle for being a vague git." James boldly shot back.

"You dare use my name?"

"I will never call you uncle, remember that," James rudely pointed at Tom.

"I bought you your first broom, I gave you your first lesson in dueling, you brat." Morgana forbid James ever discover Harry was in actuality his son. Harry could just imagine the son-in-law gags Tom would endure. Why Tom insisted on James knowing the truth was beyond him.

Tom leaned back into the headboard. "Let's discuss detention. a few months shovelling thestral waste would build some character," he threatened.

"No worries, mate. I'll have a grand old time sneaking it under your duvet. When you least expect it. When you've long forgotten all about it." James sassily rolled his neck. "You'll find it, or feel it... if we're going to get specific. Dried up, old thestral dung under your pillow. Or in your bookbag. In your shoes. In your pantry. You can't see it, but the smell will follow you. Everywhere. It'll permeate your life. Slowly but surely you'll grow mad... der... You'll quit your Hogwarts job, but the stench will still be there. In a last ditch effort to escape, you'll jump off the nearest cliff. Oh but even in the sweet, sweet relief of death, I'll find a way." James had never appreciated that the small, green-eyed man sitting cross-legged on the bed was the only thing keeping him alive.

Tom, too used to James' antics by now to reply, instead turned his attention to Sirius and Peter, who had been cackling at their interaction. "Your friends can assist you on your brave and noble quest." Their jaws dropped, their guffawing silenced. When his shock wore off, Sirius pointed a finger at Harry. Gryffindor or not, Harry frequently suffered the blame by students too intimidated to confront Tom. That even a young Sirius Black fell under this category was rather disappointing. Harry had expected more. "Professor! How could you betray us like that! Thestral dung! Thestral dung!" If
Sirius noticed Tom's enraged snarl, he said nothing.

"I'm sorry Sirius... I well... I forgot. Tom wouldn't know a thing if I hadn't gone and made a mess of it. For that, I've got to apologize." Harry shamefully looked down and Tom glowered at him. So what if he was only sorry he'd gotten caught?

"Don't let Black guilt-trip you like that, he's completely manipulating you!"

"Guilt-trip? Manipulate? I would never, professor. But he did promise us!"

"Yes, too bad he forgot." James raised his fingers, representing quotation marks. "I guess shagging a two-faced git takes precedence over Remus," James quipped. Harry rubbed his temples, urging himself not to lose control. The capricious teenager was only trying to get a rise out of them. James enjoyed irritating Tom nearly as much as he did harassing Severus Snape. He claimed it was out of love, but considering that only Snape, his lifetime victim, was comparable, Harry wondered if Tom's sadistic nature hadn't rubbed off on James.

James agilely swerved a flying hex which just singed the tips of his hair. James opened his mouth as if to say "Ha-you missed!" But upon seeing the demonic expression adorning Tom's visage, he promptly shut the fuck up. Well, at least he'd learned something. James had mastered artfully dodging Tom's many curses, but he'd yet to grasp the concept of not gloating about it. Harry suddenly recalled the wreckage that was James' fourteenth birthday bash and the devastated faces of Euphemia and Fleamont Potter as they watched Tom exchange hexes with a teenager... while an entire gazebo burst into flames behind them. Yes, if Harry could drive Tom mad, then James was him but on speed.

"Don't you ever speak to your uncle like that!"

Harry hid his smirk behind a well-positioned hand when he saw the livid expression on his husband's countenance. In another lifetime Tom had killed James in cold blood. To think that in this one, he was doling out school punishments... When had Harry's life become such a parody?

"I think I have the right after what I've seen! The both of you've scarred me!" James exclaimed. "I'm traumatized! I'm a changed man! Will I ever be able to recover from this? Only time can tell!"

"I've heard Professor Riddle's knob can do that" Sirius whispered to Peter, thankfully just barely out of Tom's earshot. The two were fortunate Tom didn't practice his legilimency as often as he'd done in his youth.

"A changed man?! Man?!" Oh Merlin. Tom had taken the bait, rising up from the bed (to James' screeching and an American accented 'Yowza!' from Sirius) and summoning his clothes back on. Harry rapped the base of his skull against the headboard, preparing for an exhausting morning and just daring the universe to put him out his misery already. His eyes drifted to Sirius and Peter just in time to find them shrewdly tiptoeing out the room. Sirius turned one last time, saluting him goodbye. Harry waved the two away, rolling his eyes while he listened to Tom's spiel. He wished he had the luxury to just walk away. "Your voice hasn't even cracked yet, you complete child. When I was your age-"

"Wah wah wah!" James immediately interjected. He'd lifted a hand and was clapping his fingers against his thumb as if to imitate Tom's yapping. He was too much sometimes. "My age? My age?! the last time you were my age you were clubbing boulders with a rock and screaming ooga booga, you complete fossil!" Did they realize they sounded exactly like each other sometimes?

Unexpectedly a routinely empty portrait of Dorothea Potter had burst out laughing. Harry's great
grandmother was bowed over a tea table pounding it's surface shrieking. Harry noted in amusement that she'd been joined by none other than Sir Cadogan, who'd gone limp in a painted chair and was holding his chest and wiping the eyes of his plated helmet. And apparently experiencing a heart attack at the hilarity of it all.

"Levicorpus!"

"Oh-" Harry groaned as the hex landed on James's chest, promptly suspending him upside down in the air by his ankles. Well... the insolent boy could only escape punishment for so long. Hitherto, Harry thought Tom had been remarkably tame. James hung, swinging back and forth like a pendulum as his open robes fell around him.

"Uncle Harry! Help me!" he cried, only to be silenced by Tom's wand.

Harry raised his eyebrows. If Tom was a fossil, what did that make Harry?

"Sorry James, I think you deserve this one." Unsubdued by Tom's spell, James began mouthing foul language and was turning purple in the face. Harry thought he'd caught the word "twat" seven times. Tom grasped the back of James's jumper and began swinging the boy's upside-down body. James's arms flailed about, still attempting to put up a fight. "Tom, that's childish..."

"Is it?" Tom gave James a particularly hard push when the teenager attempted to slug him in the bollocks.

"You're going to make him sick-"

Harry was caught off guard by a clanging, metallic thud against the wooden floor of his quarters. Tom shared a suspicious glance with Harry, and they caught sight of a glistening, copper pocket watch glinting under the light. Harry's jaw collapsed. Oh, there was no saving James now. Not even Harry could wheedle him out of this, as he had on many occasions.

Nonchalantly, Tom crouched, gathering the watch and examining it in his hands. Harry held his breath. Likewise, Dorothea and Cadogan were holding their mouths shut and James' eyes had gone wide with terror. Tom rose to his feet, clenching the object in his fist.

"You knicked my seeing-eye-watch."

Chapter End Notes

-Fills dark chapter with casual mentions of murder, cannibalism and drug abuse and serious issues of class, some spots of mild sexism as well-
-Ends it with complete crack-

But honestly I can't imagine a teenage James Potter interaction (where he isn't dead anyway) with Tom Riddle that doesn't end up being complete crack.

Anyway, I hope you guys liked the chapter and want to thank you for your support.
"I received your copy of Witch Weekly." Harry'd sat James atop a student desk in his DADA classroom, examining his wounds in place of Madam Pomfrey. Harry dripped Essence of Murtlap onto the raised welts of James' wrists, shaking his head when James hissed exaggeratedly. Harry wasn't concerned. In his experience, James had grown into the kind of boy that complained incessantly for the sake of it. When it came to what truly pained James, you rarely knew if he was struggling, for not a peep would escape him.

"You nominated Tom for Best Smile. He's going to be livid. Also, when have you ever seen him smile? At least nominate him for something you've actual experience with. Like best dressed..." James flashed a mischievous grin. "Did he win? He'll never live it down. Padfoot nominated you for most swoon-worthy locks by the way. So you should probably check on that, mate."

"Swoon-worthy locks, huh? How flattering." The two of them shared a look and chuckled. They both looked as if they stuck forks in electrical sockets on a daily basis. Fleamont regularly recommended his sleek-eazy pomade, but the two of them had long decided they preferred to leave it as is.

"I reckon you'll place fifth at least on account of relation to Tom. I dunno if 'Harry the Mad' would make it without his infamy."

"When I was fourteen, I was on the cover of Witch Weekly every other Monday. I could do just fine without Tom's help." James barked at Harry's reply, oblivious to the tender smile on his uncle's face. Years later, on occasion, Harry could still find amusement in his old antics.

Harry returned his attention to James' forearms, frowning. "He really ravaged you this time, didn't he?" Approximately once a year, James committed an act that Tom deemed heinous enough to inflict pain. (It could put quite the strain at family reunions.) When he'd been twelve, he'd caused the roof of the Ravenclaw tower to cave in after attempting to transfigure lewd insults onto its tiles. (He'd lost his first game, his first time as Gryffindor seeker. He'd been a rather sore loser in his tweens.) Thirteen, he'd cast an engorgio on a niffler, letting it loose in the castle. James asserted that one was an accident, but Harry'd suspected otherwise, when it'd decimated the Slytherin hourglass, leaving the other three untarnished. Fourteen, he'd flown his broom through ongoing O.W.L.S. And now at fifteen, he'd committed what Tom considered the most atrocious act of all. "I'll have a talk with him." Looking at James' injuries was giving Harry a headache. Tom's predilection for corporal punishment was never something either of them could see eye to eye to.

"Why bother. Like that'll change a thing."

"He'll at least apologize." Tom wouldn't mean it, but James would revel in it anyway. An apology from Tom was as good as a surrender.

"It was only a watch anyway. He's a complete nutter to have gone apeshit like he did!" James grunted, furrowing his brow and sticking his lower lip out.
It wasn't *only a watch*. The ministry had forced their hand over the original eye glass. It'd been an exquisite, brass kaleidoscope offering infinite inevitabilities. It'd been a breakthrough on Tom's part, but law, an undemocratic one at that, dictated it be handed over to authorities. Tom'd been covertly handcrafting the second prototype since. The forerunner had taken a decade. Moreover, even it's more modest counterpart would take a great deal of time as well.

For once, Harry could *almost* agree with James' punishment, despite the severity. He'd ignorantly endangered them all.

Conjuring bandages, Harry swathed them rigidly around James' wrists.

"Argh! You're going to cut off my blood supply!"

Harry'd yet to even broach the subject of whether James had *seen* anything in the seeing-watch. It was a bothersome notion. Harry wasn't prepared to reveal the truth. He wasn't sure he'd ever be. He wasn't sure the Potter's would even believe him. And most days, Harry was content with his current circumstances. Happy even. He had James. He had Lily. Perhaps in not the way he'd wished for as a boy, but he had a family. He'd made a scattered, strewn everywhere family. It was one that made it easy to forget where he came from and who he'd left behind.

"So. You never figured out how to use it?"

"I can read time perfectly well, Uncle Harry," was James' snooty reply, turning his nose up. Harry could've laughed with relief.

"Really? That's slick coming from the boy who hasn't been punctual in my class since he was eleven."

"It's just a perk of having you as a professor." James rolled his shoulders. "Kind of like how showing Lily Evans your baby album is a perk of having her as a student, right?"

"You didn't."

"I've my own ways of discipline, James. I even showed her..." James held his breath.

"Your third birthday bash"

"No."

"Oh yes. The one where you stripped to your nappies and ran around the garden."

"NO."

"Gave your mother a load of trouble, you did."

"NO," James wailed. "Harry, you've *ruined everything!* I was just getting Lily to see me as a man!" Harry held in a snort. "Last week she opened the dungeon door for me! *Without slamming it on my back!*"

"And then Tom cast a levitation charm on you," Harry continued. He sighed nostalgically, recalling a baby James floating through the air, laughing wildly and swinging his arms and legs about. "I'd almost miss it. But you were even more annoying a baby than you are now."

"Sometimes you're just as much a wanker as Tom!"

"I am not."
"Are too."

"Am not."

"If Tom likes to torture me physically-

"Merlin's balls- it's not torture! He canes your wrists once or twice a year. My uncle kept me in a cupboard and fed me once a week year in, year out" James had no clue how much Tom'd watered his sadism down for him. No clue how much Harry protected him on the daily. No clue how much cruelty Tom Riddle was actually capable of.

"Then you do it psychologically-" James finished, doggedly poking Harry in the chest.

Harry looked down. In some ways, he had failed James. And now that Fleamont and Euphemia had fallen sick, the pressure to raise him into someone decent and upstanding had increased- drastically. All it felt like Harry could do lately was offer James the same blind acceptance he did Tom.

A moment of silence ensued, when out of the blue, James asked:

"Why are you still with him, when you leave him so often, Harry? In all honesty, we really thought it'd be for good this time. 'ts like... Make your mind up already."

"Well..." Harry commenced thoughtfully."To begin, he understands me." Once upon a time he would've been horrified to witness himself now. "And I know him. Completely. Wholly. I suppose being accepted for one's flaws, past, potential future... and all... it forms a durable bond. One that I will always hesitate to break." Tom and Amaltheia were the only two who truly saw Harry as he was. Even after all these years. Hagrid was a close third... And Harry loved James and Lily. Fleamont and Euphemia. Dorothea, even. Harry thanked his stars every day that he actually got to meet them. Before seventeen he would never have hoped. But they didn't know him. They didn't know anything about him and it was exhausting. It made coming home to Tom worth something.

"Because you know him..." James scoffed. Harry knew it resonated terribly to James' ears.

"Never take it for granted, James" Harry warned. "You get to be yourself, and you get to be loved, and admired for it even." Without the repercussions. Even when Harry had been nothing but Harry Potter and not Harry the Mad, or Harry Bonkers, he still had reporters sticking their noses into things, and presumptuous outsiders looking in constantly. James wrinkled his nose, shooting Harry an all too familiar expression that said he thought him cuckoo. It wasn't common for Harry to receive it from James though. "And who doesn't?" James questioned obliviously.

Harry's mouth fell ajar. The egocentric nature of a teenage James Potter was disquieting at times.

"Sirius, James! And Remus! Sirius goes home every summer, and he gets the option of choosing between being himself and being rejected for it, or adhering to the prejudicial standards of his family- that which he will never believe in! He's on the verge of being kicked out, or running away!"

Chagrined, James scrutinized his wrists, finding sudden fascination in them as Harry continued his diatribe. "And Remus! You already understand the two lives he leads. We've come a long way since werewolf camps, but if you think for one second he'd be permitted to attend Hogwarts with his condition known- "

"Alright! Alright" James interrupted fiercely. "I get it! "

Harry finished his administrations on James' wrists, cantankerously tying a final knot on his bandages so viciously that James flinched.
"Being genuine without any consequence is a luxury, James. There are those of us too... twisted, that a mask is essential to our quality of life." Harry thought of Tom. "And some people are frank and honest, and- and- scorned for it!" and himself...

"It's unfair to the rest of us! Learn to appreciate it!"

"Alright! I'm sorry!"

January 1st, 1943
7:32 A.M.

Tom realized why Angus Bulstrode insisted on owning his very own forest now. He'd woken Tom and Augustus just minutes earlier, leading them out to the forestation and into a clearing, which had been magically freed of it's snow. Augustus, still hungover from the night before, was kneeling on the earth, picking arrows from his quiver and examining their sharp points. Every once in awhile, he made nauseating, hurling noises as he kept last night's appetizers in. Tom had politely refused refreshments all evening long. Following his vision, he shunned the concept of being inebriated and surrounded by strangers, purebloods at that.

Tom inspected the limbs of his bow. Elderwood with runes inscribed for ease of use. For beginners, as Angus had so snidely put it. It'd been Augustus' first bow.

Nearby, was the the man he'd overheard in the Bulstrode cellar. The muggle had a large iron cage ensnaring him. He had a full grown beard and was dressed in rags. And while Angus explained the ins and outs of muggle-hunting (bows only, no wands- unless you catch the muggle. In which case, sparks should be shot into the sky to alert the others.) Tom wondered just how long they'd kept him for the occasion. He was kneeling, despair turning him boneless. Not all hope was lost. He occasionally cast green, pleading eyes at Tom. As if Tom would help him. As if he saw something in Tom, that he hadn't in the Bulstrode men.

With his bruised skin and visible shivering, his puffs of exhalation just drove it home how alive he was.

He was doe-eyed.

He was powerless.

He was different from Billy's rabbit. He was so... human. His mortality felt more apparent than any mere animal before.

He defined everything Tom didn't want to be, and Tom resented the stranger. For putting himself in his position. Perhaps if he hadn't been captured by muggle traffickers, perhaps Tom wouldn't have to meet his panicked gaze. Wouldn't have to see the geriatric mother he had, that he probably didn't deserve. Wouldn't have to see what kind of life he'd led, and what kind of life he envisioned for himself. He was weak.

Tom met his gaze contrarily, following Mr. Bulstrode's detailed steps and stringing his bow.
The 31st arrived all too soon. It helped that Harry had been under a sleeping-beauty spell thanks to the liked of Tom Riddle. Hagrid, whom had been spending most his Christmas break reclused in his Hufflepuff dorm, bottle-feeding Aragog and researching ways to create an acromantula stable environment inside his expanded trunk (to Harry's alarm. But Harry had yet to broach the issue again, for fear of agitating Hagrid.), had ambled in that afternoon. He'd bellowed about how he'd thought Harry dead, how it'd taken him a day and a half to get Albrecht Spinnet to let him in, ending his rhapsody with 'wher've yeh been?!', only to discover Harry snoozing away with 'Historic Menhirs: A Forgotten Magic' splayed open on his face. Once woken from the curse, Harry, stunned, had glanced around, teary-eyed, and vaguely recalling Sirius' voice and smile. But Harry'd no time to recall the details of his dream, though it'd been the only pleasant one he'd experienced in months. Nor could Harry dwell on how miserable it felt to be awake after witnessing it's beauty, for Hagrid had versed Harry on the date and time, and the Potter New Years celebration was upon him.

Three things were immediately apparent about the Potter estate.

1. Despite the snow blanketing the rest of Godric's Hollow, the Potter residence had evidently charmed itself into a perpetual state of early summer. Crickets chirped, and Harry had to shed his cloak the minute he stepped past the arched gate leading into the yard. In an instant, Harry regretted donning his Weasley sweater over his thick trousers, as well as the heating charm he'd inlaid into them. He was positively melting regardless of the night air.

2. The cottage was humble, demure. The Potter's were wealthy, but they didn't bare it. The yard was vast, and though Harry had arrived after sundown he could tell it was bestrewn with with plantlife including begonias, hydrangeas, and an impressively large willow tree. The cottage was covered in ivy visible even from behind the hedges.

3. If Harry had anticipated a small gathering akin to what the Dursleys held for their Holidays in which the singular Aunt Marge was in attendance, he was misguided. Harry arrived to a boisterous party. In place of lanterns or stringed lights, a sizable, faux moon hovered over the yard giving the appearance of two full moons that night, and casting a yellow glow onto everything present. Harry noticed that unlike Lestrange's Rite of Passage (which had been flooded with teenagers from school), the gathering consisted largely of adults, many of which, were elderly.

Harry's expectations were shattered. He weaved through groups of intoxicated adults, gradually growing uneasy. It left a bad taste in Harry's mouth seeing that half the people in attendance were clad in masks eerily similar to the ones the death eaters had fondly worn. Although many of the elderly attendees had chosen instead to don what could only be parts of human skull on their faces or bull's and goat's horns on their heads. Instead of wands, some proudly wielded staffs. They looked far more intimidating than Dumbledore had ever, or even Longbottom's grandmother (and the woman wore a vulture atop her head every time Harry had seen her!)

For Harry, it was just another reminder that he didn't belong in this time.

Guests giggled behind their hands, and ogled rudely at him. Harry heard people curiously asking :

"Is that him?"

"What's his name again? Harrison? Horace?"

"It's Horatio!" someone snarled.
Harry frowned. Even with his hair, Harry didn't think he should be that recognizable. And then... Harry became unmistakably aware of a pressure on his scalp. He felt along his head, jolted to discover that a hat had magically appeared of it's own volition.

A hat that was ringing. A hat with bells on it.

"Excuse me?" Harry queried a nearby house-elf attempting to serve guests (whom were all devoutly refusing, and borderline hiding behind each-other whenever an elf with a platter so much as looked in their direction. Dorothea's reputation preceded her.)

"Could you please direct me to the nearest loo?"

A jesters hat. With spindly, purple and red striped arms. And bells.

A horrid, little thing that Peeves might have lovingly worn.

Even worse, Harry spent the better part of ten minutes attempting to pull it off, to which It's brim responded by tightening it's grip around his forehead. And Harry might have sworn he'd heard it hiss and jingle at him. When Harry turned to his magic, something more bizarre developed. Harry's wand turned limp in his hand, doing nothing as he attempted loosening charms, vanishing charms and the likes. He'd shook it, pleaded with it, stroked it, sang to it all to no avail.

"What the bloody fuck." Harry spoke into the mirror, pocketing his wand. His image shrugged back and Harry rolled his eyes at the charmed mirror.

Glaring at his reflection, Harry gave one last tug of the hat. He bent over, pulling as hard as he could. "C'mon you piece of work!" Harry urged the hat while it squealed, reminding him more of a grindylow than an actual hat. He pulled at the cloth desperately. And then Harry cursed, releasing the kinds of colorful expletives that would leave Fred and George Weasley impressed.

And that was when a woman arrogantly swayed through.

"Err, I'm using th-" Harry became speechless, seeing that she too had been forced into a hat just as hideous as his.

She halted, and raised her carefully drawn eyebrows.

"I suspect you're Harry Potter, yes?"

"Err, how'd you know?" Harry asked witlessly, before connecting the dots. Until then, he was the only guest in a jesters hat. "E-eartha Davies!" he pointed.

"Correct." She brushed past him, leaning closer to the mirror and analyzing her skin. She was a bombshell of a woman, who, without her hat, would otherwise look dashing in her deep green wrap dress accompanied by matching gloves and clutch. "Don't bother with the hat, nor your wand. It's another ugly pureblood custom. Inviting a few mudbloods to a pureblood celebration. The hats signify impure blood and trap your magic. You can't use it on another wizard or magical object until you set foot off the property. Usually for Saturnalia, but I suppose that incompetent bitch, Dorothea is trying to humiliate me again."

Harry thought that many women that'd been cheated on, might certainly want to humiliate the other woman if not the cheating man. He surmised that Aunt Petunia would have, anyway. Still, it was unfair that Harry's false relation had pulled him into it. Harry'd only been trying to shake off his
experience with Henry.

And somehow that'd led him to watching a bitter witch reapply her makeup in his bathroom instead.

"So. Where's your mother? Your real mother?" her reflected eyes met his as she applied another layer of the reddest lipstick Harry'd spotted since he'd entered the forties. With her perfectly coiffed hair, she looked more like a vintage muggle movie star than a witch.

"She's... well. Dead." Or not alive yet, if Harry considered his circumstances.

"How... unfortunate" She didn't sound remotely sympathetic. "So, you thought it alright to rope me into your strange, little lie then?" she asked.

Amaltheia Carras had taken to writing Harry multiple weekly letters since they'd first met at Lestrange's Rite of Passage. Most read like a vague stream of consciousness, except one in particular which had warned Harry to avoid poached eggs on a Tuesday. Being the only witch fully aware of Harry's time predicament, he'd taken to her for advice on what to do about a certain Eartha Davies. She'd only told Harry, that should he attend, he would receive a wish he'd always longed for.

Whatever that meant.

Out of curiosity, and despite the looming threat of being exposed, Harry had gone out on a limb. Even if Henry had been disappointing, Harry couldn't quell his interest. Meeting Dorothea would have seemed impossible in the 90's.

"I... Well. No. Henry made his own assumption. That's all." Harry explained. Eartha recapped her lipstick. "And you let him. I must say, I wasn't shocked when I heard the rumors. I'd a series of flings with him years ago. Turns out he had another mistress on hand. Or two. Or three. He was a dog even in his school years. Any girl in Gryffindor tower could have him. All she'd have to do is lift her skirt a single centimeter."

Eartha slung her purse back on. "So, Harry Potter, how do you feel about putting on a little show? Dead mum and all. Who else but me? I'll clean you right up. Make Henry regret not ever recognizing your existence."

Eartha never gave Harry a choice.

Harry soon discovered that Eartha was using him simply for her own devices. With a steel grip on his elbow she guided him around the party, introducing him to old schoolmates (or enemies, from what Harry'd gathered) and bragging incessantly about her Venetian wizard of a husband and Harry, her son. She circumvented Mason Spudmore into believing that Harry was top of his class. Another wizard, whom Eartha called Maurice, listened disinterestedly as she recounted Harry's god-like quidditch abilities. (Harry was relieved that this one at least had a foundation of truth.)

Harry even had to tolerate Eartha recounting falsehoods to none other than Horace Slughorn (who remarked his surprise to see Harry and at Harry's relation to Henry) as well as the Diggory family. Harry evaded his professor's gaze, still bitter about his twice ruined potion. With his dreams, he hadn't had decent sleep in weeks. Harry ignored the majority of conversations, choosing instead, to peer around the yard. He imagined growing up there. Instead of in his cupboard. Privet drive couldn't hold a candle to the Potter cottage. Perhaps this was another reason Harry had attended. It was an experience itself, to see the cottage so full of life instead of the wreck he'd witnessed with Hermione, a mere week before he'd left 1997.
This was his dad's home. Lily had birthed Harry here. Harry became keenly aware that had the series of events that forever changed his childhood not occurred, this would be his.

It was when Eartha finally pulled Harry to the garden behind the cottage. "There she is, Harry" Eartha groused, nodding towards a cluster of two women, three men, and two boys. Harry was surprised to spot a recognizable face other than Henry. There standing in the group was Roscoe Wu, Augustus Bulstrode from school... And-

And Tom Riddle. Harry startled to see that he and Roscoe had been forced into a jester's hat as well. Harry imagined he was beside himself, having his blood status exposed, though none of that rage showed on his countenance.

By the arm, Eartha dragged Harry closer, shamelessly calling out: "Henry! How lovely to see you again!"

And interrupting Roscoe in the midst of a face reading with Augustus.

Henry blanched. He looked like he wanted to hide behind his wife, who was smirking at the newcomers serenely."Hello, Eartha." Henry greeted, wincing when Dorothea jut her chin up at him. "Harry," he greeted Harry.

Eartha stopped, Harry reluctantly in tow, his face heating up when seven sets of eyes curiously landed on him.

"Is this him?" Dorothea spoke in a muted, husky voice. She was a compact, full-bodied woman, with sleek, black hair and owl-like, black eyes. Harry wondered if wizards that didn't know she was fond of poison or had never stood witness to the evil eye she was giving Eartha, might have called Dorothea cute. Despite that, she'd donned traditional full-length black robes completed with long, black nails. She didn't look like she'd take well to the word cute. Henry nodded obediently, quiet, under the watchful eye of his wife.

"Gallopin' Gargoyles," the lone man Harry couldn't recognize, but suspected was Bulstrode's father-laughed under his breath. "Women can sense guilt, you complete daisy."

Sudden tension descended over the group. Henry scowled at Mr. Bulstrode who sneered in retaliation. Dorothea and Eartha were caught in a staring contest. Meanwhile, Roscoe, Augustus and Mrs.Bulstrode had all held their breath.

So of course, Riddle decided that was the moment to speak.

"So. This is your mum, Potter?"

"Yes" Harry replied, staring resolutely at Henry instead.

"You're very beautiful, Mrs...?"

"Davies," Eartha replied. Harry watched in consternation as she reached out to shake hands and Riddle instead lifted the back of her hand and kissed it. Even worse, Eartha wasn't unaffected. A light dusting of peach graced her cheekbones as he stared intensely into her eyes. If there was one thing Harry could be thankful about the jester's hats, it was that he reckoned Riddle couldn't use his legilimancy with it on.
"Do the two of you know each other?" Dorothea piped up, looking between Harry and Riddle. "Yes, how do you know my Harry?" Eartha added.

"I'm a year below Harry. I'll be tutoring him in the new year." There was a sly curve at the corners of his lips. Disgusting. Riddle liked introducing himself as Harry's teacher. Probably made Tom feel above him. The thought turned Harry sour.

"Tutor? You didn't tell me you needed a tutor, Harry," cried Eartha ever so convincingly.

"I don't," Harry bit out, albeit his exam results had been the poorest yet in his 1942 school career. Harry'd depended wholly on his already having attended a sixth year, giving no thought to the changed curriculum in favor of studying runes and menhirs. It was what held more importance at the moment. If his decisions held unforeseen consequences, so be it. That was just Harry's life. "And Riddle fails to mention the multiple detentions we've held together or that he spent half a Hogsmeade trip stalking me."

"Stalking?" Riddle balked. "How ironic considering you've made it your life's work to train..."

Dorothea strode forward, silencing the boy. Harry's smile was smug. He was petty, he could say it. Dorothea cast Eartha a scathing look before doing a traditional pureblood curtsy towards Harry. "It's lovely to meet you, Harry. I'm Dorothea. I've heard a lot about you. Unfortunately Fleamont, or Euphemia were unable make it... as they have more pressing business, but," she turned towards the other guests "My husband, whom you've already met, Angus Bulstrode, a beloved cousin of mine, his wife, Darlene and his son Augustus. And of course, Riddle, could all attend." Roscoe Wu cleared his throat.

"Oh, and of course Mr. Wu!" she added as an afterthought.

"We were just having him read my son's face for the new year!" Darlene Bulstrode chirped cheerily.

"And what did he say?" inquired Eartha.

"His nose is bigger. He can expect a child in five years and more luck in 1943. His parents should watch over their health, as well as Solis' parents. An inheritance is expected very soon." Angus grumbled, shifting restlessly and staring Eartha down. Harry had the feeling he disliked her.

"Interesting" Eartha monotoned, peering at Mr. Wu momentarily before saying:

"Have a look at my Harry then, would you, Mr. Wu? Hmm? What's his face say?" She nudged the hesitant Harry his way and Harry stumbled into the ring as Roscoe drew closer.

Roscoe took one gander at Harry and said, "You've a shard of soul inside you. Wherever you go, it's owner will follow."

"Err... Thanks?" Harry apprehensively replied, not quite understanding the lithe wizard. The circle of guests were reticent, staring at Harry peculiarly.

"Do you mean to say there is a soul other-" began Mrs. Bulstrode, before Roscoe waved his hand, subduing her.

Still speaking to Harry, Roscoe followed with. "Draught dependency visible on your thin-skinned temples and undereyes. Asymmetrical. If you stop sleeping on your left, your nightmares will diminish." Harry scrutinized the man, who sipped on gillywater he conjured into his empty wine glass, as if he hadn't just exposed Harry's handicaps to an entire crowd. As abruptly as he'd spoken, Roscoe left the group, called away by a nearby pureblood wanting her career prospects for the new
year read and everyone gaped, open-mouthed after him.

At once, Harry wished Hermione were there to witness it. Here this man was, making extremely specific statements. Extremely **accurate** statements. Hermione would always despise divination. It leaned too heavily on intuition for her to bear. But Harry conjectured she might've been impressed were she present.

"Roscoe is always like that. He told me I would miscarry my firstborn at my engagement party." Mrs. Bulstrode said, eyes glistening. Dorothea, in what Harry suspected was a rare show of empathy, wrapped an arm around the woman's waist, cooing.

"Did you?" Eartha brazenly inquired.

"No. But I did, my secondborn. Augustus would have a younger sister. We were going to name her Lucilla." Mr. Bulstrode frowned, clenching his glass as his wife spoke of her misfortune to what Harry gathered he thought a dirty mudblood.

"Where did you get that scar anyway?" questioned Dorothea. Harry wondered whether it'd been out of true curiosity or to break the stifling silence that followed Mrs. Bulstrode's confession.

"A dark lord cursed me." Harry said simultaneously as Eartha replied "Cracked his skull open on a kitchen top when he was six. I tried to make him fix it when the scar later arose. But he **insisted**, said he **liked** it. Which I guess he would. It's rather unique isn't it?" Eartha yanked him closer by the shoulders while Harry rubbed his scar, irked. Eartha was a disturbingly proficient liar.

Darlene tittered behind her hand, while Dorothea took a sip of her mulberry wine, and Riddle leered unblinkingly at Harry, who was increasingly feeling like a petri dish under a microscope. "A dark lord cursed you, or you cracked your head on a tabletop? What's the truth, Harry?" he challenged.

Harry's lips twitched. "A dark lord cursed me to smack my head on tabletops. For the rest of my life. Happens every year at the end of school year, like clockwork. I dunno quite how to make it stop. It's magnetic this thing" He pat his forehead affectionately, causing the party goers to chuckle (in particularly, Mr. Bulstrode, who seemed to find the thought of Harry's skull cracking comical). Except Dorothea, Riddle, and Eartha (who dug her nails into his bicep and hissed at Harry to behave himself. )

"HARRY?"

Unexpectedly, a familiar face butt into the faction causing Darlene and Augustus to jump.

"So you really **are** a Potter!" wheezed one Elphias Doge while the others beheld him in bewilderment.

"Err, Hullo Mr. Doge. Didn't expect to see you here."

When Harry had landed in the 1940's, Elphias Doge had been the wizard that had suggested placing him in Hogwarts. Elphias referred to himself as a Triple W. Otherwise known as a Wizarding Welfare Worker. Somehow in Harry's timeline, he'd worked his way to being a juror, but it was in this timeline he'd used his Dumbledore connections to secure Harry a bed at Hogwarts. He'd a pockmarked face, grey eyes and an inquisitive disposition. "My apologies for ever doubting you!" He ambled forward, cramming Henry out the way. He was also tactless.

"So, you found your mother then?" He nodded towards the arm Eartha had octopused around Harry. He earnestly kissed the back of Eartha's other hand. "Elphias Doge."
"Eartha Davies."

"Ah!" he said, peering at their twin hats. "A muggleborn! So that's why we couldn't find dear Harry in our records." Sure. That was why. Eartha stared at Harry, interest anew.

"Erm, yes. That's why..." Harry looked around at the guests nervously, rejecting a glance with Tom Riddle, who was boring holes into him. "How's your..." Elphias not completely oblivious, looked around secretively, and then twirled his index finger in circles beside his ear. His discretion was lacking. Every witch and wizard present noticed, some snorting, others looking concerned. Now a wizarding official had officially confirmed Harry's state of madness.

"Mind?" Harry deadpanned. "Completely unhinged. Thanks for asking."

"Harry, you never told me about Mr. Doge-" Eartha began

"Yes," said Riddle, staring at Doge. "How do you know each other, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Well- a bit... odd of you to neglect to tell your mother, Harry" said Elphias.

"I didn't want her to worry."

"Oh, Harry" Harry cringed as Eartha left lipstick marks all over his cheek, pressing him against her voluptuous chest. "Darling, you need not worry about me!" Harry grimaced, thinking he'd probably never worry about the woman. Ever.

"A few months back, we discovered your son wandering outside of Gloucester." Eartha gasped. "Don't tell me-" she said, concern surprisingly laced into her words as she held her free hand to her chest. "Harry!" she said, wide-eyed. Back then, Harry'd wandered there from the standing stones, intent on finding out just what year he'd arrived in. But he'd found something-else. The city was in total disarray. Destroyed buildings, and crying, displaced civilians had surrounded him.

Elphias nodded, confirming Eartha's fear. "Right after that particularly gruesome attack by Grindelwald's Army. Now in times of war, it's part of my job to detect wizarding refugees, rehoming them or assigning home assistance wizards for repairs, and providing them with food or shelter and whatnot, or directing healers their way. As well as directing obliviators to unfortunate muggles. That was when I met your Harry." Amidst all the rubble, Harry'd been distracted, assisting a muggle child in her desperation to find her parents, when the wizard had approached him. "Now, forgive me, but he introduced himself as Harry Potter. We knew our fair share of Potters, but no Harry. A Henry. A Harriet two generations ago. But never a Harry. He knew neither the year, nor our current minister for magic. We assumed he may have been the victim of a defective memory charm... It's relieving to know his memories have returned to him, they have, haven't they, Harry?"

"Yeah. All of them."

"Good... good."

"So, Potter. What were you doing in Gloucester?" Harry knew what Riddle was thinking. His story didn't quite add up. And being near the scene of a Grindelwald attack was again putting him into a questionable light. Harry thought on it momentarily. How Abraxas Malfoy had informed him that Riddle's inner circle had concluded him a spy for Grindelwald.

Let him think what he wants, Harry decided. He shrugged. "Just hanging about."

"Hanging... about." Riddle spoke deliberately, in a judgemental tone vaguely reminiscent of Severus Snape.
"Attacking poor muggles. Pretending to be a victim of war. Writing saucy love-letters to Grindelwald. Of course, what would a visit to Gloucester be without a little time travelling. You know. The usual." Eartha and Elphias coughed behind their hands, while everyone-else was left shocked.

"Harry!" Eartha scolded.

"I'm only joking," Harry assured her.

The night rattled on. Small talk continued. Harry grew weary of Eartha's mom act as well as playing along.

Harry soon found that Dorothea's words did not reflect her actions. She spoke charmingly, but that did not change the fact she'd cast a charm that revealed his blood status to dozens of prejudiced purebloods. Instead of hiding her husbands disloyalty, when the rumors of Harry spread, she'd adopted them. She did not care that Harry was viewed as and whispered about- as some pitiful bastard child. She only wished to maintain her pride, and humiliate Harry, Eartha, and her husband in the process. Harry realized sullenly, that Dorothea had never wished to meet him at all. He'd only been the means to an end.

Throughout the night she and Eartha exchanged cutting words which sounded pleasant if you went by tone alone. Until you realized Dorothea insinuated Eartha was a whore and Eartha likened Dorothea's lipstick shade to cat sick on a pancake. Eventually Eartha's attention was led completely astray from her false son. Instead she and Dorothea got into a heated verbal battle while Henry stood twiddling his thumbs on the sidelines. When the Bulstrode's left with Tom in tow, Harry saw it fit to leave and find a place to rest as well.

The night was exhausting. Even moreso than Lestrange's Rite of Passage. Harry bitterly admitted to himself that dancing with a disguised Tom Riddle suddenly held far more allure than being passed around the party like an appetizer. He could still feel Eartha's bony fingers clinging to his elbow.

Harry had found refuge squatting behind the lanky willow tree, sipping butterbeer and watching Tom Riddle entertain a circle of pureblood adults when a pair of gladiator sandled feet invaded his vision. Raising his eyebrows at what to be at least a dozen toe rings, Harry looked up.

"Amaltheia!" he bellowed, and then with a second thought, he added "What happened to receiving something I'd always longed for?" He fumed feeling along one of the spindly arms of his jesters hat.

Amaltheia hummed. Her long hair had been teased for the ceremony. She looked like a muggle interpretation of an evil hag crawling fresh out the forest. "Why, thankyou, Harry." she said, primping her wild curls and causing him to redden. His rudimentary occlumency skills had improved somewhat and with thorough avoidance of eye contact, he could successfully evade Riddle's knowing gaze, but he still couldn't hold up against a natural born legilimens. Without further ado, she swept her long skirt aside and slumped onto the grass next to Harry. "I'm glad you attended, Harry. Even if your experience thus far has been unpleasant."

Harry picked at blades of grass."Why are you here anyway?" Harry spotted Roscoe again. He was across the courtyard, twiddling his straw like mustache and counting the hairs in a woman's eyebrow.

"And Wu?"
"Job of a diviner. We make predictions at most holidays, parties purebloods consisting of most our audience. My old mentor attended 123 years worth before her passing."

"So where's Trelawney?" Harry regretted asking it. Amaltheia heaved a great sigh.

"In Hungary. She's been commissioned by Gellert Grindelwald for her new years prediction...She'll be presenting to he and all his closest followers. Rumor has it, he's even bought celestina warbeck for the occasion." Amaltheia rubbed her temples while Harry gawked.

"The Grindelwald?". Harry hadn't thought divination that important that dark wizards had to get involved. At least not as long as they weren't making life threatening prophecies. What had happened between now and the 90's?

"It's not good is it? Even the ministry is involved, she has no choice, lest it become a national security issue. You must be wondering why your grandparents aren't here, yes?"

Harry nimbly nodded.

"Aurors are attending alongside her, in case things go astray. Fleamont is one of them. She's a worrisome friend. Great responsibility comes with a gift like Cassandra's. I fear it puts her in grave danger sometimes. Because seers must take an oath of honesty, I'm worried she may say something potentially damaging. Roscoe and myself possess learned skills, that while useful, cannot compare."

A shiver ran down Harry's spine. He knew exactly what Amaltheia was getting at. In his experience, Predictions had never fared well in the hands of a dark lord.

"Precisely." Amaltheia replied solemnly. "And it wouldn't be just you. Magical history has been wrought with dark lords using diviners for their egotistical schemes."

Amaltheia stopped"Forgive me, Harry. I'm unloading all of my worries on you. How are you doing? How is your research coming along?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Harry huffed. Harry’d not discovered much apart from what Hermione had told him. His runes reading was elementary. Harry rued not transcribing the runes off the menhirs at Hermione’s behest. He was going by memory alone. And even with what he already knew, it was pathetic attempting to unravel the workings of timetravel when he couldn't even understand the language it'd been written in. At this rate, Harry was considering taking a Runes class. It wouldn't take months. It would take years...

"It wouldn't be good to do away with social etiquette just because I know everything."

Harry watched as Augustus Bulstrode's father smoked a pipe and blew air into his company's face. He'd wrapped an arm around Tom Riddle, and was showing his company around the party, pointing to Riddle's jester hat and laughing uproariously.

"Your friend is as uncomfortable as you are"

He was NOT Harry's friend.

"Acquaintance, I might've said mortal enemy, but from the looks of it, you might actually hate Draco Malfoy more... Bit funny, you are." she dug a baby quiche out her tote and popped it into her mouth. Grabbing another, she offered him one. "Quiche? I've heard bad things about the food here. Roscoe said he saw Elphias Doge heaving by the bathroom. I believe Dorothea may be poisoning guests again" Gratefully, Harry took it.
"Have you noticed, Harry? The difference fifty years can make on the wizarding world establishment?"

Somewhat. Harry thought about Abraxas' delusional blood rants. He sounded barmier than Harry sometimes.

"So, you've not yet witnessed what miserable institutions we purebloods have put in place. You might not think so, but your muggleborn friend was very fortunate to be born in her time."

"Alright," Harry leaned back against the willow tree, his lower back complaining. "Try me."

Amaltheia managed to sound friendly in her letters, but Harry found once more that in person she was rather patronizing. Being a palm-reading legilimens, she seemed to think much of the world was set in stone.

"Eartha's told you she has a Venetian husband."

"Yes," though like much of what Eartha said, Harry doubted it's validity. Eartha was enough of a liar that Harry reckoned he'd have a stable scapegoat the next time he needed a fake mother.

"In reality, Eartha slaves her days away as a domestic servant in muggle Edinburgh. For muggleborns, employment is sparse in the wizarding world. Purebloods own most business. I would liken it to your friend, Lupin's treatment."

Sensing Harry's disbelief, Eartha added. "Here, werewolves have the choice between internment camps or excommunications from the country upon infection."

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat.

"That's... that's bloody awful," he croaked, wondering what Lupin might have done were he born only a few decades earlier.

"At eleven, muggleborns are whisked away. Shown this immense, marvelous world of ours. But with that, they're robbed of their muggle education. Their abilities and time spent away from their muggle peers drives a wall between them. And unless they come from muggle wealth, upon their graduation date, they soon discover there is no place in the world left for them, but at the bottom rung of society. In actuality, like many muggleborn women, Eartha married a muggle man to secure her livelihood. But he died in a war, of trench foot. Something a witch might have been able to help, had she been there."

It was awkward, watching Amaltheia tear up, as she watched Eartha Davies fix her cakey makeup by a three-tiered fountain on the other side of the Potter yard. Harry's first impression of Eartha was that of a superficial, cold-hearted woman. But Amaltheia felt sympathy for whatever she saw in Eartha's mind, though little of it showed in her words, which were clear and unwavering.

"But he did leave her with a squib son. She wouldn't mention him here either. Why, a schoolyard enemy like Dorothea would just laud it."

It would prove every pureblood magical prejudice correct.

"Because of course a muggleborn woman would bear a squib son." Harry said angrily, being reminded of every time he and Ron had to defend Hermione from Malfoy. Still. He thought if he'd had a squib son, he wouldn't hide him from his wizarding peers.

"She doesn't have a single knut on her, Harry. All she has is her pride. He's over twenty years old now, and his differences with his witch mother have distanced them. He left at eighteen, and all she
knows is that he's studying to be a banker."

Harry began to realize how Tom Riddle had ended up a mere salesman in Borgen and Burkes in his early twenties, despite the prolific accomplishments of his early youth. What had seemed quaint to Harry initially, suddenly became remarkable. If muggleborn and unaffiliated wizards were rejected back into the muggle world upon adulthood, Riddle had rose above, despite every circumstance against his favor. Dumbledore had pitted it all on Tom's obsession with the dark arts, but Harry realized there was clearly more to it. Harry wondered whether there had been more to Dippett denying Tom a DADA position than simple inexperience. Harry almost found himself impressed that the hypocrite had gone and become the darkest wizard of his time, acquiring success that muggleborns here, couldn't even dream of.

And suddenly Mr. Bulstrode's affection didn't seem so innocent anymore. He'd even wheedled Riddle into holding his plate for him. Harry revered how Riddle could even maintain such a straight, incorruptible visage throughout his endeavors. Harry grit his teeth, becoming disgusted at himself, for feeling even an inkling of pity towards Riddle.

Amaltheia tucked a knee to her chest, nonchalantly wrapping an arm around it.

"This Tom is different from your Tom, Harry. It is understandable to pity him on occasion. He still possesses the shards of his soul for one."

"Yeah, and somehow, there's not much a difference is there? Less frightening. Has a nose, thank Merlin," he retorted icily.

"Dreadfully handsome too," said Amaltheia

"No."

"You were thinking it yourself."

"Some thoughts should stay buried."

"It's okay to be honest."

"He killed my parents."

"Not yet, he hasn't."

Harry didn't grace her with a reply. Instead, he adamantly observed Riddle across the courtyard and pulled hunks of grass out of the earth floor. By now, there was a considerable barren patch next to him.

"Believe it or not, Harry, There's a difference between the boy today and the monster tomorrow. Many wizards that study legilimency become a skilled occlumens, but I can still see his emotions and desires, and I've garnered enough of his personality to know that this Tom Riddle would never commit the acts his Lord Voldemort counterpart did to survive. Drinking unicorn blood, living off the back of a man, having to survive off the help of Peter Pettigrew? The him of today would consider that below him"

Desperation is a funny thing that way.

"The only thing that can trump Voldemort's ego is his fear of death. He'd do anything to survive," Harry replied.
"But the boy now- can feel pity and affection, in his own twisted, sadistic way. He even appreciates the companionship his schoolmates have to offer, if only to soothe his boredom. He can feel emptiness, abandonment. Betrayal and rejection isn't only insulting to his pride, it genuinely injures him. Though he resents it, he even feels attraction and has more carnal desires."

At Harry's revolted expression of horror, Amaltheia let out a raucous cackle.

"No worries. The Lord Voldemort I've seen in your mind could never. He isn't capable of it. Tom doesn't want to be praised... or worshiped like your Lord Voldemort, though he doesn't mind it either. I think he wishes to be valued... which is a very distinct, very complex desire, in this world where he is both an orphan and a half-blood. And in his case, it is separate from wanting to be wanted, or loved or treasured."

"So, what are you trying to tell me? you're trying to tell me he's human? That he's worth pitying? Is that it?" Merlin, spare him the Tom Riddle is innocent act. Harry already had to endure it with everyone else. Myrtle could go on an hour-long tirade on why Tom Riddle was an angel. Even Abraxas, who jumped at every opportunity to slander Riddle, thought him incapable of evil. Harry'd erroneously thought Amaltheia would know better. Sure, Riddle was human. He was the worst kind.

"What I'm trying to tell you, is that because he's not yet shed his mortality, he's not yet cast his weaknesses aside. And he's fiercely hidden it, but that means he's still malleable."

Harry was startled at the astonishingly cunning suggestion. Or that Amaltheia would even suggest manipulating a master manipulator. It seemed a bit out of the reach of Harry's abilities considering he hadn't even thought of it.

Huh...

"Were you by any chance a Slytherin in school?"

"Not going to let it cloud your judgement, are you?" Amaltheia wiggled her eyebrows, letting loose a shit-eating grin. Under the faux moonlight, Harry thought she looked rather demonic.

"Rather rude of you. I put my best face forward today. I wore all my toe rings!"

"You've really got to stop doing that," Harry grumbled, though a small part of him could appreciate how he'd never had to explain anything to Amaltheia. She just knew. It was just unfortunate that his dignity was often sacrificed alongside it.

"Speaking of dignity!" Amaltheia raised her index finger while Harry flushed scarlet. "I'd nearly forgotten!"

A minute later of her foraging through her tote, she secured a miniature bowl. It resembled the aged mortar Harry regularly utilized in his potions lessons.

"It was a family heirloom... but I think you need this more than me." She placed the minuscule bowl into Harry's palm, and Harry belatedly computed it's use.

"It's a pensieve!" Why would Amaltheia give him such a gift?

"Just cast an engorgio to use it. Call it a late Christmas gift. I think you'll soon realize why you need it."

With that, Amaltheia rose to her feet, groaning loudly as her ankles cracked.
"They say wizards age slower, but i don't believe that's the case. Die slower... certainly, but Morgana! My body must have fell apart in my forties." She grabbed her bag and with a flourish of her wand the time appeared in red smoke. "A quarter till twelve. I'd best be on my way to tell the new year's fortune."

"Ah! One last thing!" Amaltheia turned on her heel.

"Riddle may have a finely tuned mind, but I can't say the same for his companions. I think it is worth you knowing that Angus Bulstrode fully intends to have Tom accompany him for a game of muggle-hunting tomorrow morning." She paused to let the words sink in, leaving Harry in shock. "I will floo-call aurors, but with the majority in Hungary- well..." She paused. "However you might refute it, Harry, It's my belief that Riddle still has some last remaining innocence, that perhaps a wizard like yourself can salvage. You can't come back from killing someone. Who knows what might come of him if he never gets the opportunity? Just some food for thought."

What?

Harry's eyes fixed onto the empty pensieve, surprised when a few galleons and another baby quiche appeared inside.

"So you can find a place for the night," Amaltheia said, before disappearing out of sight.

January 1st 1943

Tom could admit it. There was a second where he hesitated. Where the muggle did him in. Where he'd backed the muggle against a mound too high to climb up. He'd clung to the earth, and the roots as if it could save him. Tom could have released his arrow, and punctured his heart, or his lungs. Instead he drew closer, arrow still drawn, until he was mere meters away.

It wasn't pity... or sympathy. It was just that in that moment, where the muggle fell to his knees, and rubbed his palms together, and prayed in his mother tongue, occasionally fitting broken english in. He looked at Tom like he was a God. He begged him to be merciful. His fate was in Tom's hands. Tom tilted his head, looking down at him. The thrill of power was coursing through his veins. It was intoxicating compared to how low he was made to feel the night before.

Tom thought about Mr.Bulstrode making him fetch him firewhiskey and appetizers all evening the night prior. Thought about Augustus' sorrowful eyes. That the other teenager had the audacity to pity him felt abominable. That Tom had had to bear with it, and do nothing for appearance's sake had been maddening.

Tom lowered his bow, thrusting his arrow back into the quiver strapped to his back.

"Don't you want revenge?" he drawled, staring into his pupils. The man didn't understand him. If it were Tom, he'd be enraged. Though, Tom would never put himself in such a position. And should he find himself in it, he'd wheedle out. He wouldn't be weak like the muggle man. Even if he didn't have magic.

Tom kicked the man over, who continued to plead.

"Don't you want to hurt them?!" He gestured around himself. The muggle was looking at him with confused, tearful eyes. He kicked him again, this time in the abdomen. The man curled in on himself, rolling over into a fetal position. "They, who did this to you? They deserve it, don't they? They
deserve pain. Suffering!

Tom bent down, grabbing the muggle by the roots of his hair and dragging him up onto his knees. He stepped backwards, pulling the man and his tresses along with him. The man cried out at the pain in his scalp, reaching up to scratch uselessly at Tom's hand. It was useless. He'd been starved into weakness.

"Why do you just lay there? to just cry and whine. don't you get it?! You're going to die, you stupid bastard!" Tom droned, yanking and shaking the man's head.

It was rage-inducing.

Tom breathed heavily. In, out. In, out as he stared down at the defenseless muggle. He released his hair, and the man collapsed onto the earth, gasping for air through his tears.

"You're pitiful. Pathetic..." he mumbled to the man. "You should have ran faster," he intoned.

Tom would have ran faster. If the Bulstrode violence had extended to mudbloods, and halfbloods, and orphans instead of just muggles and magical creatures, Tom would have ran faster. He'd have never allowed himself to be in this man's position. Even if Tom was a half-blood, even if orphans were top notch for garbage like traffickers. It wouldn't be Tom, it'd never be Tom. And he certainly wouldn't be begging for mercy.

As if sensing the chip in Tom's armor, The muggle perilously clung to his leg, begging again. This time, hysterically. Tom faltered when his eyes met with the man's emerald. Those eyes determined Tom's next decision.

"If you want mercy, I am getting something out of it."

Tom shucked his bow and quiver off to the side. The muggle looked stupidly at the objects, neglecting to spring into action like Tom would have. He returned his absent gaze to Tom, curiously blinking. Merlin, did Tom have to do everything?

"Well! GET THEM!" He raised his eyebrows threateningly, kicking the man again and pointing. Finally getting the idea, The man scrambled towards the objects on his hands and knees.

With the muggle's posterior turned to Tom, the teenager wandlessly cast the final curse. He flicked his wrist, hand raised, and said:

"Imperio."

January 1st 1943

Did Harry have a hero complex? He asked himself this question when he woke at 6 in the bloody morning. He asked it while he spit his toothpaste into the inn sink. He asked it while he shifted into some robes and tied his trainers on. He asked it when he found himself stamping through snow while trespassing into the vast expanse of the Bulstrode estate.

He especially asked it when he eventually came face to face with a bearded muggle, with familiar glassy eyes. Harry'd seen it before. Once in the forbidden Forest with Barty Crouch Senior, and again during the Triwizard Tournament.

"Merlin..."
His eyes looked past Harry as if not seeing him. But it wasn't that, nor the dirty rags he was clad in that Harry cursed at. In his hands he held an elderwood bow and arrow, with runes enscribed on it's limbs. He was at the ready, completely still and silent, hiding behind a tree.

When Harry waved his hand in front of his eyes he took what he saw to be true. He blew fog into the man's face and still garnered no reaction. The man was cast under the imperius. A twig snapped and the muggle drew an arrow immediately, casting his vision around the woods, and completely ignoring Harry.

If this was the muggle Amaltheia had referred to, something had gone utterly haywire. Or perhaps Angus Bulstrode preferred a fair fight? Doubtful. Sticking his arrow back into a quiver, the muggle ambled gracefully through the woods. It looked odd on his sickly, barely clothed body. Harry trailed him, wishing he'd had his invisibility cloak.

Especially when ten minutes in he narrowly dodged a whizzing arrow. Harry's heart thumped as he ducked behind a tree. Harry peered out at the muggle, in awe as he marched forth from where the arrow shot, seemingly impervious to the several more coming his way. By all means every single arrow should have pierced a vital point in his midriff. And yet Harry could have sworn he saw one swerve in the other direction and another break right in half. It were as if someone had cast a mobile imperturbable charm on him.

What the hell was happening?

The wind picked up, rattling a few last leftover leaves from autumn off a tree.

"Stand back!" Someone yelled "Stand- ARGH!" Harry scurried after the muggle, whose distance had greatened. He'd his bow and arrow raised. "AGH- NO- WAIT!"

Harry apparated a few meters closer, ending up a ways behind the Bulstrode men. He'd a perfect view of the muggle striding forward.

Harry raised his wand toward the oblivious muggle. But he couldn't help but pause as the muggle pulled his arm back once more, firing an arrow that the Bulstrode patriarch just minutely dodged. The Bulstrode's had not yet noticed him, despite their staggering back desperately. The both of them had abandoned their bows in favor of flourishing their wands all to no avail. Angus Bulstrode had blood pooling down the back of his robes and his son, a broken arm.

Harry'd come to save the muggle, and instead found himself defending the very people that thought it acceptable to hunt other humans.

Harry pondered whether the Bulstrode's even deserved it, clenching his jaw and bunching his fists together as his wand arm shook furiously. This was no better than Lord Voldemort killing Cedric Diggory. Worse, possibly, because they'd turned their prejudice into some sick game. But Harry could not consider the ethics of the situation much longer. The chance to save the Bulstrode's was all but snatched out his hands. For suddenly by magic, Harry was pulled backwards, meters through the forest by the nape of his robes.

He'd just heard one last cry when with a sharp turn, his back was pushed against the broad trunk of a tree. Tom riddle loomed over Harry, resting his palms against the tree and trapping the older boy between his arms.

"What are you doing, Potter?"

"The real question here, is WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Harry hollered into his face. Riddle
grimaced as Harry's spittle flicked onto his chin. With one hand he wiped his face off, shooting Harry a revolted glare. Harry took the chance to push him off, instantly racing towards the Bulstrode's again. But Riddle clutched him by the hood of his robes, dragging him back into his chest, and wrapping an arm around Harry's neck. "You dare apparate, you're next. You wouldn't want that would you?" He said into Harry's ear. Harry struggled recklessly, biting and kicking, until Riddle finally pushed him off to which Harry turned around and firmly socked him.

"Fuck!"

Riddle heaved himself at Harry, who'd attempted to run once more. Punches were thrown and a bout of wrestling and Harry's broken glasses later Riddle had him trapped on the forest floor, straddling him and holding his arms over his head. Harry wondered why it was he always forgot to use magic with him. Riddle truly brought out his worst side. He hypothesized that a bat bogey hex just couldn't compare to throttling Riddle barbarian style. It was too bad Riddle had his wrists trapped in a circulation cutting grip.

Harry stubbornly bucked his hips.

"Stop struggling. You're staying with me."

fuck fuck fuck fuck

"The fuck I am! You're about to kill them!"

"I'm not fucking killing them, Potter." Which was an ironic thing to say, since at that very moment Mr. Bulstrode let out an ear-splitting screech. "A bit of crude torture, yes. But straight murder. Of a wizard? That's much harder to clean up." How... jarring that that was what concerned him most, and not... y'know... killing someone.

"Why- why would you-" Still straddling him, Riddle clamped a hand over Harry's mouth, listening to the distant cries of pain for a moment. Asking Tom Riddle why was stupid. Cruelty was in his nature. Their faces were inches apart and Harry tenaciously looked anywhere but at him, instead focusing his eyes on a tree squirrel nibbling at an acorn.

"Why would I set a malnourished muggle on them? Simple. I'm helping him get vengeance. He deserves it. After everything he's been through. Don't you agree?" he spoke silkily. With one hand he trapped Harry's wrists, the other moving from mouth to neck. Riddle was such a fucking creep.

"Helping him get vengeance? Or helping yourself?" Harry snarked, eyes still glued on the squirrel. Harry cringed as he realized his molars had lacerated his cheek in their brawl. The acrid taste of blood was gradually saturating his mouth. "I saw the way Bulstrode treated you. You finally snapped, I gather."

Still. It was outlandish to imagine Riddle, or Voldemort sparing anyone. Harry thought he'd enjoy the sport. Shooting at dirty muggles and all. Instead, he was viciously turning on his pureblood companions despite their obvious road to power.

"For the first time, maybe my intentions are muddled. I admit, I honestly pitied him. But first and foremost, Angus Bulstrode needs a lesson. Some men never learn... at least not without strict, swift, and painful interference." Riddle paused.

"You... You're turning out to be a difficult case. You don't learn despite what trials and tribulations your own impunity puts you in."

Harry rolled his eyes. He'd turned his cheek to the other side and was determinedly watching a
caterpillar struggle to inch up a nearby tree. He named off broomstick models in his head. He didn’t focus on Riddle’s hot breath fanning against his cheek, the hand still enclosing his neck or the thumb dauntlessly stroking a line from his mouth along his jawline. Riddle’s almost tender (Harry gagged to even think it) actions, clashed disparately with his early, brutal behavior.

"I wish you’d look into my eyes" Riddle broke Harry’s thought-filled silence. There was a dancing, bemused lilt in his voice. Harry turned stock-still when he felt the younger boy's lips moving along the shell of his ear. Could feel his voice reverberating inside his eardrum. The hairs on his neck rose. It poured pure dread down his spine.

Harry spit the blood out his mouth in response. The reddened dribble hit the sleeve of Riddle's robes. Harry might have smirked at Tom's repulsed growl, had he not been having flashbacks to the graveyard. Two wizards were crying off in the distance while a possessed muggle did merlin knows what to them. Meanwhile, Riddle him pinned and was spewing some corny, border-line romantic codswallop. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"I wish you'd die."

To which Riddle replied by... stroking his face. Harry remained frozen. Riddle's hand trailed up his face, flicking his bangs back, his fingertips tracing his scar. From previous experience, Harry winced, expecting immediate pain. Instead, he got nothing.

Riddle grabbed Harry by the jaw, forcibly turning his face in his direction.

"Open your eyes," he hissed.

It was mortifying how Harry's lips trembled. He clenched his eyes, hands scrabbling for purchase along the earth floor- with his wrists still held in that death grip. Despite the cold air, Harry registered sweat dripping down his neck as he felt Riddle's hot breath against his lips. He might've sworn Riddle'd been about to... to well. Kiss him. It was ludicrous. The notion sounded like some absurd nightmare he might divulge to Hermione in complete secrecy, at his most vulnerable and honest. Harry shook violently, shaking his head. For the first time since he'd met a young Tom Riddle, he could actually associate him with fear on the same wavelength he'd felt with Voldemort. Not the kind of fear he'd felt in the Chamber of Secrets second year. But a kind he couldn't put his finger on. He was on the precipice between comfort and the unknown.

Harry resolutely pressed his lips together, breathing heavily through his nose as Riddle drew closer.

Merlin, he could smell him. This was wrong, this was fucking wrong.

It was one last mournful, quiet cry in the distance that broke their spell. Harry came to his senses. He focused his power into a spot a meter away. He apparated and it were as if it'd never happened. He blinked, rubbing his wrists, looking at the teenager and suddenly feeling like his fear had been imagined. Why ever would Riddle kiss him? How stupid of him. The close proximity must have kept him paranoid. Riddle picked himself up off the ground, sneering while Harry cast an Oculus Reparo on his glasses.

Riddle did not scold Harry for apparating. He'd directed all his attention to the Bulstrode's, evidently keeping Harry distracted just long enough for his deed to be done.

"They've gone silent. Good." Except for the Turkish muggle suddenly screaming in horror at what he'd perpetrated.

At Harry’s pallid face, Riddle scoffed. "They're not dead, Potter. I made sure of it."
Riddle made quick strides through the forest towards the sound, and Harry, seeing no other option, briskly followed. As Riddle sauntered, he cast spells, transfiguring a button into a gruesome arrow sticking out his abdomen. A large bloody gash suddenly spilled from his shoulder, staining the entire front of his robes.

"What are you doing?" Harry snapped beside him as he combed the forest for the muggle man.

Riddle had reached up with a palm, massaging his jaw and wincing as he felt along his bruised eye. "Perhaps there's a silver lining to having to see your face," he sassed, simpering when Harry scowled. "I originally intended to obliviate them. Then I'd obliviate Augustus' mother, and his wife. All plans for this little outing and my being there, erased. But along with these injuries, you've given me a much more useful alibi. One that should keep them reporting the attack. I predict only some minor memory tampering should suffice for what suspicions they'll have left."

"And what alibi is that?"

"Being the inexperienced, useless mudblood I am, when I cornered the muggle... I felt a brief flash of... weakness." Riddle furrowed his eyebrows, and continued. "He used this against me. Like any mongrel muggle, he attacked me, and off my guard he managed to get a hold of my weapons. His miserable experiences made him deadset on revenge. He wounded me before I could use my wand."

Riddle transfigured another gash into his neck and blood, oozing from his mouth. "Just barely missed my jugular." Riddle slid his hand along the percolating blood from his shoulder and dampened the back of his head with it. "I fell back. I hit my head on a sharp stone. I passed out while he went on to destroy them."

"I'd thought you too prideful for that." To pose himself as someone who could be bested?

Riddle glanced at him. "I've prostrated myself before Angus Bulstrode all week long. He's reduced me to a neutered dog. Most middle-aged and elderly purebloods are like that, I'd think you'd know that by now. Even so, I've surprised myself with my own patience. I can handle a little more if there's a means to an end."

"And that end would be?"

"I become their savior." He replied, with a triumphant smirk. "Due to my moment of weakness, and my passing out, my wounds were less invasive. The muggle left me and moved onto more... interesting things."

Harry listened as Riddle spun a story off the top of his head, feeling as if he'd wallked into the twilight zone. He was shamefully fascinated. Voldemort had a love of explaining his master plan—something Harry had experienced frequently. He'd just usually been on the other end of said plan, and had never been walking alongside said master-planner as he explained himself. This must be what it was like to be a death-eater. Without half the terror of serving under a madman anyway.

"I woke up, cast a weak healing charm on myself. And I found them."

"And you healed them." Harry finished.

"Saving them from bleeding out, I'll drag them back to the mansion and floo them to St.Mungos"

"You're despicable."

"Mr. Bulstrode will be less impressed. He'll claim my meandering, orphan ways put them in that predicament, no clue that it was really me. His wife though... she'll be eternally grateful. Likewise, a
dimwit like Augustus won't think to suspect anything. When Augustus leaves the room, I'll make an offhand complaint that my scholarship can't afford the expense of repairing my robes, she might even suggest that the muggle-hunt winnings, 100 galleons- go to me."

"So it's money you want." Harry shook his head.

"I earned it."

"By torturing them? And let's not act like you couldn't mend your clothing easily." Harry thought he might have seen Riddle preening at his inadvertant compliment out the corner of his eye.

"They don't know me well enough for that. Either way I win. Bulstrode will be mentally scarred. Perhaps too much to dare to ever mugglehunt again." Harry considered the situation, wondering if because Riddle hadn't yet unearthed the truth behind his conception, his hatred for muggles had yet to expand.

"And what's to stop me from telling them the truth of what you did?" Harry threatened

"Well, we could begin with your reputation. Who would believe you? But in all honesty, you won't, will you, Harry?"

Riddle stopped and turned towards Harry, who immediately averted his gaze.

"You'll keep my little secret. On some level you agree with me, don't you? Angus Bulstrode's cruel treatment warranted my punishment. The ministry isn't about to incarcerate him for his savage treatment of a muggle. As long as he works for them and the muggle's not our nationality, they don't care. If not me, than who? You don't have the heart to commit to what I could. And thus, his behaviour would continue, wouldn't it? You're relieved, aren't you? There's no casualties. And I took all the hard work off your hands." Riddle sidestepped around Harry, attempting to capture his gaze, who was continuously looking in the opposite direction. But finally he'd caught him by the shoulder, turning Harry towards him. Harry's breath hitched, getting caught in the web of Riddle's eyes.

"I saved the muggle. And you didn't have to. You hesitated to protect the Bulstrode's, yourself. You wondered whether they were worth it. It'd have been too much for your moral compass" Riddle's discerning eyes flickered over Harry's face. "Part of you is thankful. Part of you reviles yourself for such gratitude."

"A small part of you might even believe some people are better off dead." Bellatrix Lestrange's laughter echoed in Harry's head as he recalled his attempt to crucio her.

"Stop that." Harry couldn't tear his eyes away. Harry thought he might've seen his eyes widen just marginally. Just so. Harry trembled, wondering what he could've possibly seen as Riddle's grip turned crushing.

"You really are mad? Aren't you, Harry?"

There was no opportunity to continue.

The bedraggled muggle abruptly ran from behind a tree, squealing when he spot Riddle. He blubbered and cried, grabbing for Harry's hands as he asked for what was no doubt help.

Eventually, he collapsed into a heap on the ground as the two boys watched him break down. Harry, horror-stricken, and Tom, bored. Harry shifted out his cloak, throwing it over the shivering man, grimacing when he looked at his snow-eaten feet.
Harry attempted to conjure water, but the man dodged away from his wand with terrified eyes.

"Why don't you apparate somewhere safe with the muggle, Potter? He looks in dire need of some sustenance. Some food would do him good" Harry looked between the Turkish man and Riddle. He was right. Riddle looked the muggle over, who had begun rocking himself, crazy-eyed and clutching his hair.

"Went from captivity and torture, to assumed murder. He might go mad"

"Why should you care?" The teenager was an enigma. Just when Harry'd thought he had him pinned down, he went and did this. Harry thought of Amaltheia claiming the Slytherin boy was malleable. If Riddle could spare someone, what could Harry get him to do... and how far could he take it?

Riddle shrugged.

"I don't"

Still, he dismissed Harry from the hysterical muggle. Riddle grabbed the man by the locks he raised his wand, pointing the tip to the muggles forehead and muttered "Obliviate." The muggle blinked once and the misery so apparent on his countenance before, vanished.

"I have one question... Why haven't you obliviated me? After everything I've witnessed" Harry gulped, speculating whether he'd just walked into his own demise by voicing it aloud.

"I don't want to."

"Why?"

"I like you knowing."

"What? For the thrill of it?" Harry twisted his features in incredulity. There was no logic in it. Anyone would say Riddle was setting himself up for disaster by leaving Harry in the know, like he did over and over again.

"Something like that," Riddle murmured.

"You're a bleeding lunatic-bastard, you do know that?" Harry said, reaching down and grabbing the disoriented muggle's wrist. He pulled him into a stand. The clueless muggle spoke again, this time, alarmed by Riddle. He waved his hand over his own face, gesturing to Tom's state of disarray.

Harry flinched back at Riddle's predatory grin, so very white against the blood drenching his face.

"Takes one to know one, doesn't it? I'll see you around, Potter."

Then, he turned around, and took off towards the Bulstrode's, leaving Harry and the muggle flabbergasted.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. I am sooo glad this chapter is over with. I'm sorry for the delay you guys. For
me this was a particularly difficult and long chapter to write, because there was so much
i wanted to put into this one chapter and it's supposed to be the setup for many things to
come as well as the turning point in Harry's view on Tom. And I finally get to get on to
the fun stuff. Anyway, thank you for all your feedback and support!
January defied Tom Riddle's expectations. A month passed quietly. Potter attended his lessons, both those consisting of his classes and his rudimentary sessions with Tom. Potter did not stick his head up, his neck out, or his toe over a line. Harry Potter still avoided eye contact with Tom in the same way Dolohov avoided coherent thought and Lestrange, keeping a secret. There was a lull between them and it was gradually driving Tom mad with paranoia. Harry Potter flying under the radar never resulted in anything good. It felt like time had stopped, and Tom found himself almost pining over thrashing around the Bulstrode woods with him again. It was a growing problem.

Tom was obsessed with Harry Potter.

Tom suspected it one night, with his bed curtains drawn and his hand wandering under his sheets. Envisioning nameless, faceless, filthy muggle men or Billy Stubbs' tearful, red-rimmed eyes didn't quite do it anymore. But the reality of Tom's dilemma didn't strike him until one night, weeks later.

"Queen of wands" Lestrange slapped his new card upon the foot of Tom's bed. On all sides, he was surrounded by Dolohov, Avery, and Mulciber. Tom was letting them play. He sat in his four poster and corrected Potter's charms essay, while watching them out of his peripheral vision.

"Yeah. That means your Mum is angry with you, mate," remarked Dolohov, resulting in a groan of despair from Avery. Lestrange had received a handpainted cartomancy deck for Christmas, and Dolohov had been yearning to try it out. To Tom, it served as a reminder that his companions would need to be prepared for what was to come. Antonin had a childlike immaturity to him and Rodolphus was plain spoiled. Accompanied by Avery's sheltered ignorance and Mulciber's occasional bouts of brutal honesty, Tom couldn't conceptualize introducing them to the Chamber of Secrets, let alone the flesh hungry basilisk contained within it's depths. There was a theme to Tom's inner circle. Frequently wealthy, with an esteemed name- both these were near necessities. They'd satisfied Tom's needs, when he'd been an inane nobody of a first year.

But upon further examination, Tom wondered whether they were capable of what Tom needed them for in this present day and age.

Were they able to commit the same acts Tom could with ease? At that, even if they couldn't- where did their morals end and their loyalty to Tom begin? Then again... perhaps Tom was undermining them. There was Bulstrode. Seemingly the accomplice Tom had doubted most, had already killed- under the guise of "hunting". Something even Tom hadn't managed to do when he'd been faced with the option.
Tom crossed his legs, recalling the last time he'd seen Augustus. He scratched notes onto Potter's essay, remembering Augustus' trembling, blood-soaked hands. Bulstrode had clung to Tom as he'd dragged his mangled body to St. Mungoes. Tom's revenge had been... exhilarating. If Tom felt a flash of regret when the healer insinuated Augustus would need an eye replaced, it was mitigated when his mother thanked Tom in just the way he'd predicted. With one hundred galleons in his Gringotts account, Tom had placed a hefty order at Borgin and Burkes. Coincidentally, Augustus would be arriving the very same day as Tom's parcel. An eye was a steep price to pay for the sins of his father. But Augustus had mistakenly betrayed Tom, and for that, he would suffer.

"Tom's turn!"

"I've no questions for your precognitive deck of cards," Tom impulsively replied. Tom hadn't told them so- but cartomancy reminded him too much of his pre-hogwarts days. It was so very... muggle. It prompted memories of tarot decks and ouija boards and hours of wasted time attempting to hone his magic, when he'd thought he'd been alone in the world.

"Please?" whined Dolohov, visibly sagging. Tom did a second take when the boy actually wiggled.

"What do I get out of it?"

"My undying allegiance?"

"I already have that, Antonin," Tom teased. Secretly he was as much serious as he wasn't.

"Please?" Tom peered around the group. Their bright eyes were fixed on him. Intuitively, Tom understood that refusing to cooperate would look ill-mannered. Disrespectful to their pureblood values, even.

"Right then," Tom conceded, twirling his quill. "Describe the heir of Slytherin."

A test. Tom was a staunch believer in most branches of divination- and admittedly pureblood superstition had rubbed off on him. But if Tom was to get irrefutable proof that cartomancy wasn't just a foolish game, asking it questions he already knew, was the first place to start.

In minutes, Lestrange had a 3 card display laid out. "Knight of swords, king of wands... the tower," he read off.

Rodolphus stared at the formation momentarily, before picking the knight of swords out.

"Determined, witful- but impetuous..." Lestrange tapped the card." King of wands means they're a charismatic leader. With a well of ambition. Combined with the knight of swords- it is safe to say they"

"He," interrupted Tom, internally daring the boy to just ask.

Lestrange did no such thing.

"He," Lestrange instead corrected himself, simply casting Tom a curious look. "He's a harbinger of change. Good, Bad... This is someone capable of molding the world to accomodate their own desires."

"And the tower?" Tom eyed the last card. An artistically painted lightning bolt was repeatedly hitting a high tower that beared a striking similarity to the astronomy tower's exterior. The lightning bolt was not unlike that on Potter's head either. Tom's eyes carefully memorized it's jagged edges.
"Like a pot breaking on the floor."

"And that means?"

"A tower can mean power. Honour. But it can also mean a fall from grace. He is guarded. Noone knows him. He is prone to radicalism, and it follows him. An Iconoclast, if you will. He can bring chaos, disaster, tragedy into the lives of others. Not to mention his own. If he were to fall from grace, then it would be by his own foolishness."

Tom frowned and refurled Potter's essay. The cards hadn't told him what he wanted or needed, and now they were borderline insulting him. "Thankyou for your explanations, Lestrange, but that'll be quite enough. I think we are all growing weary, aren't we?"

"Wait! I have another question," Dolohov raised a meek hand. "Really, Antonin? You've been asking it questions all night," Mulciber snickered.

"But I thought of a good one! In relation to Tom."

"Go on then." Tom looked up, watching Dolohov. Rapid spitfire, "Who will be Tom's darling?" shot out of him. It took the group a minute to decipher his words, and when they did, Dolohov blushed while the other boys contemplated him. "Darling?" Julius chortled, eyes turned up.

"Darling?!" Mulciber repeated. The normally restrained boy fell onto his side, clutching his stomach, and sniggering. Lestrange shared his amusement, noticeably smirking.

"I-I mean. What are they like... At this moment in time?" Running his hand through his hair, Dolohov's eyes flickered around the room.

Why was everyone so invested in Tom's lovelife? Tom couldn't resist the temptation to ridicule the other boy.

"Are you daft, Antonin?" he spat, causing Dolohov's ears to turn scarlet.

"He's quite the romantic, isn't he?" Lestrange mused. "He asked that same question but in regards to himself, yesterday. When he wasn't looking, I drew the death card just to wind him up."

"Arse," Dolohov groused. Still in one of his more buoyant moods, Mulciber sat up and latched onto Dolohov. Julius octopused himself around the other boy, capturing him in a bear hug and dragging him backwards.

"Argh! Get off me!"

"My darling!"

"You're strangling me! I can't breathe! Tom! Help me!"

"My love!"

"Let go!"

"My beloved, my eternal flame!"

Rodolphus shook his head at their antics. Despite Tom's clear judgement, Lestrange had gone to work, reshuffling his deck and laying out another three card formation along Tom's duvet.

"Who knows, Tom. Perhaps the results might interest you." The Dumbledore-esque twinkling of
Lestrange's eyes made Tom visualize pushing him out a window.

Still. When Rodolphus turned the cards over, Tom's eyes magnetically attached themselves to their faces. Tom was curious, he wouldn't lie to himself. Something as asinine as the concept of love wasn't on the books for Tom. But perchance his future self foolishly fell into that trap- he'd at least like to know what they were like. After all, someone that could entice Tom, couldn't be just anyone, could they? Not that Lestrange's deck of cards held any accuracy to them, if they were implying Tom could ever fall from grace.

Tom straightened his back against his headboard, listening as Rodolphus interpreted his deck.

"Hanged man usually means they sacrifice for the greater good. A martyr perhaps? Five of pentacles. He'll feel isolated. He's carried a heavy burden. His tale is one of loss. So he's frequently lost things, or people he loved. Maybe felt without a home or unwelcome in one."

Lestrange sighed.

"And then there's the world... " Lestrange tapped the card thoughtfully. "Rather unique. Perhaps this indicates a successful union? No... That can't be it. It's about a person, not a relationship. Maybe they're experienced? Worldly?"

"He's famous," said Avery, catching the group's notice. Mulciber had stopped attempting to wrestle Dolohov (who was heaving and catching his breath, and laying splayed on the floor) in favor of paying attention.

"Everyone famous ever, gets that card in their birth reading. Dumbledore, Roderick Plumpton, Celestina Warbeck, Derwent Shimpling." Avery listed various celebrities off, using his fingers. "Legend has it, Merlin and Morgan Le Fay had it too."

"That's not just any kind of fame," Mulciber chimed in. "That's groundbreaking, earth-shattering levels of it. He wouldn't be your ordinary run of the mill star. The card belongs to someone who's been born into greatness."

"A celebrity that has loved and lost... and also has self-sacrificing tendencies. Yeah. Can't think of anyone, mate," said Lestrange. The other four boys shared nervous glances. It became apparent then, that they'd all expected a different description than the one they received.

Tom was terribly... unsurprised. An isolated, unhappy, masochistic man with the weight of responsibility on his shoulders... Who just so happened to have enough success and bearing to his name, that being his partner might virtually guarantee Tom the same? Were Tom to actually have a preference, that was precisely it. So why did Tom feel so... disenchanted? He despised the sound of the man already.

For Harry, winter break's demise arrived all too early. Harry mourned his first week back when Rancorous Carpe, the school custodian, returned from his mental break. Carpe stood before the great hall and took credit for demolishing Harry's swamp. The news had broken to a grand applause from Hogwarts' entire female population. Harry had his doubts about Carpe. Most especially because of the scowl Tom Riddle wore whenever he passed the brand new plaque hanging above Carpe's office. Harry'd taken to liberally using Carpe's name in their shared lessons, just to witness that
furrow between his thick eyebrows.

It brought new worries to light. Namely that Riddle had discovered the Chamber of Secrets. Harry'd yet to accuse him of it, frankly, because he'd admit to knowing about it— which was a dangerous thing to do in Riddle's presence. There were a lot of dangerous things to say to Riddle, as Amaltheia was periodically reminding Harry in their correspondence.

"Dear Harry," Reads Amaltheia's latest letter. Harry sleepily unfurled her scroll after feeding Amaltheia's owl a treat. Myrtle stabbed her egg yolk with her fork repeatedly. She was gazing off into space again. Malfoy grumbled behind his issue of The Daily Prophet. Abraxas skipped breaking news in favor of the crosswords every morning. Malfoy gave little notice to "Grindelwald occupation in wizarding Bordeaux" emblazoned across its front. And neither did Harry. Grindelwald hadn't touched Britain since Gloucestershire. And perhaps it was callous of Harry, but it was simply easier to ignore war when he wasn't at the heart of it.

Harry couldn't withhold a furtive smile, listening to the Slytherin muttering off seven lettered newt breeds under his breath. Inexplicably, the quartet's morning ritual had become comforting. Harry returned to his post, looking up once to nod towards Hagrid, who was dragging his feet, having arrived late again.

"Dear Harry," he reread

"You'll be pleased to know your friend is well. With Cassandra's help, we found a translation charm. His name is Haluk. He is quite alright! We've been taking him sightseeing. He expresses quite a bit of confusion over his whereabouts, but is enthralled over our caravan. It expands on the inside, you see. He is rooming with Roscoe until we can take him to muggle relations at the ministry. If all goes according to plan, soon Haluk will return to his hometown (Ürgüp, if you were wondering) via portkey alongside a wizarding welfare worker and an obliviator.

As for the Bulstrodes, I am unable to find much on their condition. The youngest is still hospitalized but Angus has left. Here is a suggestion I imagine you will wildly reject. Perhaps you should ask Tom Riddle himself. Don't tell me you've been been sitting through all your lessons in complete silence?"

Without warning, shame washed over Harry. He wondered how the witch had known and couldn't help but peek around the great hall. Returning to his letter, Harry half expected to witness a flash of brilliant, long hair disappear.

"Speaking of Tom Riddle, Roscoe told me something interesting over tea yesterday— that in your situation might be worth considering.

Roscoe believes it is the circumstances that make someone capable of change. Thus, Harry, instead of mulling over the aspects of Tom Riddle's nature that are potentially malleable, perhaps consider those he surrounds himself with.

Respectfully, Amaltheia"

"Guess, what I've heard" chirped Abraxas when Harry set his mail down, turning his attention to his plate. Evidently the Slytherin had finished his crossword. Harry quietly noted the spider bite on Hagrid's hand. It had swelled to the size of a golf ball. Saying nothing, Harry meaningfully met
Hagrid's eyes and raised his eyebrows. The halfgiant obstinately looked away, pulling his sleeve down.

"What've you heard, Malfoy" asked Harry, grabbing a piece of toast and beginning to butter it.

"It's been confirmed," he jeered gleefully. "I was right! I've always been right!"

"What is it?" Harry wouldn't admit it aloud, but Abraxas was grabbing his attention.

"I heard from Gabriella who heard from from Belladonna who heard from Prudence who heard from Macmillan that at the Potter New Years Eve bash that--" Harry paused in his administrations. He'd a sinking feeling that he knew where Malfoy was getting at. If anyone from school other than his followers and Harry had seen Riddle, then his blood status was on the verge of exposure. Dorothea Potter's jester's jinx was disgustingly cruel.

"Get to the point. This is about Riddle, isn't it?" Harry egged Malfoy on.

"Did someone say Riddle?" asked Myrtle, suddenly very present in the conversation.

"Another discussion about Tom Riddle," droned Hagrid. "How very surprising of yeh three."

"Riddle's a dirty mudblood!" Malfoy explosively crowed, causing a few Hufflepuffs to turn to the quartet in interest. Harry's butterknife slipped across his toast. He'd expected it, and somehow he was still surprised.

"So what if he is?" Harry demanded, after casting a muffliato on the surrounding Hufflepuffs. It was unusual. By default, he'd found himself rushing to Riddle's defense. Almost two months previous, he'd attempted to reveal such a secret at Lestrange's rite of passage. But if someone were to hate Tom Riddle, it'd be because he was indecent, maddening, deceitful, and capable of murder. Not because he was of mixed lineage.

"It all makes sense now. All his secrecy. You could never get a straight answer about his parentage. Is he an orphan, is he some half blood bastard, or is he some long lost pureblood heir from a dead line? No! He's just a mudblood!" Malfoy let out a bark of laughter that inexplicably made Harry ball his fists. "It explains everything!" The Slytherin continued.

"The way he acts, the way he walks, the way he talks, the way he looks."

"What's wrong with the way he looks?!" Myrtle piped up. "Riddle is dashing!"

"He's a dreamboat," Hagrid faithfully nodded along, before wilting underneath Harry's accusatory stare. "Well I've got vision, don' I, Harry?!" He bellowed defensively.

"Just because it's true doesn't mean it should be said! Someone like Riddle shouldn't know he's handsome! He'll take advantage of it!" Harry protested. Deep down, Harry knew it was too late. Tom Riddle was clearly and painfully aware that he'd been blessed. He'd long discarded the secondhand robes one would expect an orphan to wear. Tom's robes were impeccably fitted with money only Merlin knows where from. Tom donned the latest wizarding fashions when not in uniform and even his hair was meticulously styled to suit the period. Riddle knew he was goodlooking, and he was already altering his appearance to further suit his needs.

Myrtle gasped. "Harry finally admits it! Riddle's handsome!"

"Nevermind handsome! He doesn't look pureblood, plain and simple." Malfoy frequently failed to remember the blood status of his current companions. Or he convinced himself that Harry, Hagrid
and Myrtle were somehow 'different' from the others. Harry secretly compared him to Aunt Marge's pet bulldog. It sounded like pureblood rhetoric to just think it, but it was the way Malfoy was bred, wasn't it? It wasn't Malfoy's fault he was so bloody awful. Well... it wouldn't be, if he managed to grow into someone halfway decent.

"And what's that supposed to mean?!" Myrtle spluttered. "Not looking pureblood?!"

"Take it as a compliment, Myrtle" said Harry, returning to his toast. "What Malfoy means is that Riddle doesn't look inbred. If Malfoy can't look at him and see his mother's nose, his uncle's mouth and an ear on his forehead, then something must clearly be wrong with Riddle."

"HA HA. Very Funny," spat Abraxas.

"Thank you," replied Harry "I try, honestly. Is it true your cousin was born with a tail?"

Abraxas rolled his eyes and returned to his breakfast. His earlier jubilation had all but disapparated. He seemed to belatedly realize that if he was going to celebrate the exposure of someone's blood status... then a halfblood, a muggleborn and a half giant were the last people to do it with. But the topic at hand reminded Harry of a question he'd been itching to ask since he'd first met Abraxas Malfoy.

"Why do you hate Tom Riddle so much anyway? Yet you're obsessed with him. It can't all come down to breeding, can it? I mean look who you've surrounded yourself with." Harry gestured towards the rest of the group. Malfoy's descendants would have licked Voldemort's boots if he'd given them the opportunity. So it came as a shock that Abraxas despised his alter ego. Harry'd always imagined him at the forefront of the deatheaters.

"Yes I don't know what mummy will say when she finds out who I've been hanging about with," Malfoy replied, knitting his brows together.

"Perhaps she'll jus' be thankful yeh've actually gone and got friends." Harry nearly celebrated Hagrid's wicked insult, until he saw the hufflepuff batting his eyelashes, waiting for an honest response. So innocent, so pure... Harry felt an overwhelming urge to protect the oversized boy.

Abraxas harumphed, turning up his nose in the other direction.

"Am I the only one who thinks it's obvious?" said Myrtle.

"Clearly," said Harry.

"Malfoy isn't very popular, is he?" she continued.

"No. He's not."

"I'd say that despite being a Malfoy, the Slytherins positively hate him."

"Why else would he hang about us," Harry agreed. "He's gone mad from his loneliness."

"Helloooo! I'm right here!" Malfoy flapped his arms.

"Obviously none of us were there those first two years, so we don't know just what occurred between Malfoy and Riddle... but just consider it. Why would any Slytherin hate a Malfoy? They're purebred and they clearly hold significant influence in the wizarding world."

"Thankyou!" Abraxas smiled, suddenly pleased and completely missing the crux of Myrtle and
Harry's gossip. "My mum has tea with the minister for magic every Sunday," he abruptly bragged. The Gryffindor and Ravenclaw ignored him.

"Even if they do hate a Malfoy- you'd be hardpressed to find a Slytherin that would openly show it- Unless" Myrtle raised an index finger, "They changed their allegiance."

Harry nearly applauded the fourth year."You're completely right Myrtle!"

"Hellooo!"

"Somewhere along the way, Slytherins decided they liked Riddle more than they did Malfoy," replied Myrtle, ignoring Malfoy's screeching.

"And Malfoy must've made a complete fool of himself!"

"As he always does. And instead of joining Riddle's faction, like any other Slytherin with a survival instinct, he just became a bully and an outcast."

"HELLOOO!"

"Brilliant. How miserable. This is why we let him stay, isn't it? You just pity him."

"Completely." Myrtle agreed.

"I hate both of you." Malfoy whined, glumfaced. "You're complete mongrels." The expression on his face caused Myrtle and Harry to burst into laughter, all the while Hagrid scarfed down his breakfast, eyes flitting between the older students.

Harry and Myrtle continued to tease Malfoy, until he shot back a few brilliant one-liners. Myrtle snorted her pumpkin juice out at least twice.

Their merriment that morning managed to continue until Riddle and his disciples strode past. As was custom, Riddle doing something as mundane as strutting, could cause the great hall to fall into a hush. He looked Harry up and down again, eyes slithering along Harry's form. The expression on his face as he did so, was becoming disturbingly familiar. Briefly, Harry met Riddle's eyes, before looking away. Riddle's followers all nodded towards Harry as they passed. Some even greeted him. Dolohov and Avery mumbled curt "Hello, Harry"'s as if they had a right to be on a first name basis with him. But nothing was as distressing as the forced, tight-lipped smile Mulciber wore.

"It's bizarre how they all do that now," Myrtle whispered to Harry. Yes. It was peculiar. It was as if overnight, Riddle's followers had all concluded Harry was worth acknowledging. Yet, Harry'd hardly spoken to any of them.

Lestrange was the last, following Mulciber. He nodded towards Harry. And then, his eyes flitting downwards, he appeared to notice something.

"Brilliant shoes, Warren" Rodolphus Lestrange said in passing to Myrtle.

That was the exact moment Harry deduced that he'd actually died when he'd entered the ring of menhirs four and a half months ago. That had to be it. Harry'd died and gone to wizarding hell. It certainly explained how he was friends with Malfoy.

Myrtle sat straight in her seat. Letting out a little squeak of a thankyou, she turned cherry red. Myrtle turned to Malfoy, who shared none of her delight, and squealed. He bit into a slice of apple, sneering openly. Little did Harry or Myrtle know the potential those three words had.
Lestrange having a say about the penny loafers Myrtle'd received for Christmas had been the highlight of her week. It'd been all Myrtle had spoken of since. What little validation Myrtle received from Lestrange was enough to shove her into full-blown crush territory. In a fortnight, the fourth year had moved on from Tom Riddle. It made sense now, thought Harry, how her ghost ended up perving on prefect boys.

The girl looked for any excuse to reveal her approved shoes. In her efforts, she'd even unintentionally knocked over Malfoy's pumpkin juice and set him off into a vocal rage once.

It all felt rather foolish to Harry. He did not see receiving Lestrange's compliments as anything worth celebrating. But Harry didn't tell Myrtle so. Malfoy though, took great lengths to.

It was concerning for Harry though. With Harry's bog gone and Abraxas terrorizing Myrtle's emotions, she lived, breathed, ate in her favorite lavatory once more. One morning had ended in a public shouting match between Harry and Abraxas, after Abraxas informed the Ravenclaw that Lestrange had been sarcastic. That the state of her muggle shoes had simply assaulted his wizarding sensibilities, and he'd no choice but to be fascinated.

Myrtle's plight aside, Harry had no confirmation that Riddle knew the rumor mill was spinning until days later. By sheer luck, Harry encountered him, after returning 'Menhirs of Eastern Europe' following a scathing Howler from Madame Quincy about stealing from libraries.

Saturday evenings in late January found the library empty, excluding the spare Hermione or two. The library was expansive enough, that Harry could understand why Riddle might assemble his cronies in one of it's more private chambers on a late night. The likelihood of anyone encountering them made Harry's chance feel like fate.

Harry's body recognized the deep timbre of Riddle's voice before his mind did. The hairs on the nape of his neck stood up, and he paused from behind the bookcase, from which he'd heard him from- before it finally clicked. Harry leaned closer to the bookcase, listening to the fifth year speak. There was a muted command in Tom's tone, that he didn't often reveal in front of the professors, or his casual acquaintance, or... Harry realized... in front of Harry himself. Riddle controlled everything in his inner circle.

"I hear it, Julius. In the corridors. In the common room. The great hall. Even here, in the library."

Harry's stomach sunk.

"What do you think?" What a precarious question, thought Harry. Julius Mulciber must've agreed, by the pregnant pause that followed, before Mulciber's dulcet tone broke the suffocating silence.

"Gossip will always follow you. What you do with it will determine your character."

"So if I believe Hogwarts needs to be punished?" Harry's heart jumped. Was this it? Would Riddle admit to opening the Chamber? Had he really discovered it?!

"Then you would be completely justified."
Harry could almost hear, Riddle's pleased smile. Could almost feel it on his own face. And suddenly, dizzyingly, Harry felt disembodied. As if he weren't himself. He'd felt it before, but never in this time period. Not until now.

Harry was staring into Mulciber's hooded eyes. Dread tingled down his spine, as he fathomed what had happened. 'Oh no. Oh bloody hell. NO' Harry thought, surveying the changed appearance of the bookcases around him- The portrait of a seventeenth century wizard that shouldn't be visible unless one was in the history of wizarding warfare branch of the library. Harry- No... Riddle was leaning over Mulciber, a mere few inches taller than him. But it made all the difference. Riddle used his thumb and index finger to tilt Mulciber's chin upwards. Mulciber gazed up at Harry. He wore a brave expression, but his eyes looked scared to blink.

Until Riddle said: "I am thankful, Julius. To have been born in the same world as you is a blessing." The compliment did not leave Mulciber wanting, by the charmed curve at the corners of his lips.

It was alarming for Harry to comprehend that anything that had happened in the nineties had as much potential for happening again. If Riddle ever realized that Harry could see through his mind's eye, the consequences would be disastrous.

Riddle released Mulciber's chin. Harry felt him clasping his hands behind his back. Turning around, Harry had a direct view out a window overlooking the great lake.

"As you know, I'm an orphan. My mum died in my orphanage. A muggle one. Not one of your squibberies for wizardborn orphans. On the second floor, she gave birth to me, next to the room where the newborns, and the infants and the toddlers are kept. I've been told she wished for me to resemble my father."

Harry had the slightest notion that this was not information Tom relayed to everyone in his inner circle. This was special. Or Riddle only spoke in such a manner, to make Mulciber feel chosen. Unique.

"Did you know, Julius, that of the seven newborns left at Wool's the year I was born, I was the only one to survive to this day? Half of them perished before the age of three. Muggles blame it on a lack of love. An infants need for motherly attention is so great, that the institution cannot cover all their needs. And so- the weak ones wither away, until they die."

Mulciber was lost for words. "I... I'm sorry, Tom."

Tom rounded a writing table, until he stood closer to the library window.

"What for? It is not my fault, and nor is it yours. I've witnessed many deaths since then. Muggle children purely do not have the advantages to survive epidemics like a wizarding child would. You were curious, weren't you? All these years, and I tell you this now." Harry frowned at the pride he could feel blooming in Riddle's chest. Riddle considered those he'd grown up with the mere casualties of life. By surviving, Riddle was victorious. "I'm glad that you were patient."

"Why are you telling me now?"

"I have a question."

"Go on?"

"Pureblood convention holds it that orphaned wizards are halfbloods."

"That's... an outdated stereotype."
"And if I am a halfblood? What, would you say then?"

"Then that is it. There is nothing wrong with being a halfblood. It defines you no more than it does Avery."

"And yet I remain an orphan, Julius. Suppose- Do you think my father raped my mother." The apathetic way Tom posed such a shocking question put a sour taste in Harry's mouth.

"See, I once believed my mother was a muggle. Why else would I be placed in a home for muggle children where I so clearly do not belong. But my father is not a wizard. There are no records of him here, or in the ministry. What if I am a muggle-born, Julius? Do you believe I'm a mudblood?" It was another of Tom's dangerous questions. The kind that sounded more like a statement and held formidable implications. Harry wondered how anyone could bear to be in his presence when he turned this... this persona on. For Harry, it was insufferable. In the face of all the mischief permeating Hogwarts, Tom was the only student acting and speaking like an adult. It was discomforting.

"No," Mulciber finally replied.

"Good. Neither do I. So that would make my father the muggle in this equation." Harry could feel the revulsion Riddle felt at sharing a name with the muggle, just flowing through him. "And that means my mother is the pureblood. My mother... who left me at a muggle orphanage. Not with a wizarding family. Not with a wizarding institution. Nor at St. Mungo's."

Riddle turned around, and Harry saw that Mulciber was watching them- him... with careful, unblinking eyes again.

"She didn't even leave me with a wizarding name. Is that not peculiar? One would think my mother wanted me to be a muggle."

"You wouldn't know if that were true unless you spoke to her personally."

"You might be right." Tom concurred, though to Harry, it did not really feel as if he did. It moreso felt as if Tom was merely ending the conversation.

"How is Tiberius?" asked Riddle seemingly out of the blue.

"He is... Alive," Mulciber obediently responded.

"He is still in Grindelwald's faction, I take it."

"And Titus?"

"Your recommendation worked. He's working with the Carrows."

"Tell your brother I have a task for him to complete."

Harry felt dizzy listening to them again. Harry's first thought when his vision blurred, was to search for his glasses. Until he found himself behind that bookcase again. His hand visibly shook on the book spine it clung to. Harry could still hear the distant discussion the Slytherin boys held. But Harry couldn't concentrate. He was still comprehending the absurdity of his unfortunate situation. Rattled, Harry had stumbled out of the library and straight to the Hufflepuff common room.
Myrtle looked how Harry felt.

"What's in the Hogwarts water?" Malfoy grumbled when he looked up from his book and laid eyes on Harry. Harry slumped into the yellow loveseat between him and Myrtle. Hagrid took up the entirety of a lounge chair across from them. He played adoringly with Harry's miniaturized Hungarian Horntail, lightly catching it in his splayed palm.

"Really? You three? Here? Again? Hagrid, I've told you to stop giving the password away!" From beside the Hufflepuff fireplace, Azrel Diggory, stood up from his armchair, throwing old newspaper into the fire and ranting under his breath about Hufflepuff house becoming pariah headquarters. He stomped out the common room leaving the quartet alone, save for a pair of seventh years studying for their newts with a silencio cast around them.

Harry ignored Diggory, slouching further in his seat. Next to him, Myrtle wiped her eyes with a handkerchief Harry suspected she'd received from Hagrid. The Hufflepuff themed fabric had to be the size of a tablecloth.

"What happened?" Harry asked Malfoy, when his shock from the library wore off. Malfoy looked up from his book on modern pureblood politics.

"Olive Hornby stole her shoes. The ones Lestrange complimented?"

"Why?"

"Hates Myrtle. Why else? Sometimes I suspect she fancies Lestrange, but I think she just needed a reason," Abraxas replied. "When I was seven, Hornby stabbed me with her mother's hairfork. Myrtle'll be dead by the end of the week."

At Malfoy's commentary, Myrtle let out a moan of misery, flopping over the arm of her side of the couch. She buried her face into her arms, refusing to look up, even after Malfoy reached over Harry and prodded her repeatedly in the back.

"So. What troubles you, Potter. You look like you've been kissed by a dementor."

Harry didn't have a Hermione or a Ron to speak with. Sure, he could write Amaltheia- but some immediate advice on the looming threat of being linked into Tom Riddle's mind would be convenient. Harry settled on the next best thing. There wasn't much to lose after all.

"Suppose..." Harry began cautiously "That you could see inside someone's mind."

"Like legilimancy?" Malfoy blinked at him.

"Yeah. But not just anyone. A specific someone. And at inopportune times, but usually in your sleep. You're dreaming about Cho Chang one minute"

"Who is-"

"The next you have scales and you're ripping your best mate's dad to shreds. " Over and over again, Harry saw Sirius falling through the veil. He tilted his head back, staring at the Hufflepuff ceiling. Harry tried to focus on the wooden beams covering it's surface- and not the sense of dread still curling in his stomach. He tried not to think about Mr.Weasley sitting in that hospital room. He bypassed thoughts of Sirius' shattered mirror and conversations with Nearly Headless Nick about death and ghosts.

" Doesn't sound plausible, Potter."
"Sh." Harry groaned. "Just listen. Now suppose this person also holds the potential to do the same for you. But... I'm assuming they don't know it yet."

"Some twin bonds are like that. Vaguely, mind you. Titus and Tiberius Mulciber used to claim they could feel it when the other was hurt before they left last year," said Malfoy. Harry startled at the familiar names. "So Claudius Rosier would slug one randomly and claim he was sending a message to his brother."

Myrtle sat up from her self induced tantrum. "I remember that! Hard to believe Riddle let such fools hang about him."

"Right then. Before we swerve off into Riddle territory... In this... er, Bond. Imagine you're a time traveler and he doesn't know he's your enemy and that he killed your parents."

"Sounds like a pretty fucked up brotherly bond," said Malfoy, seeming to lose interest.

"This? Again?" Myrtle groaned, flopping back into the couch. "You're barmy, Harry. For the last time, Riddle didn't kill your mum and dad."

"But let's pretend he did- and that now the both of us have some awful telepathic connection."

Myrtle guffawed. "Write a book, would you? You could become well off selling to the muggle market."

Harry felt as if he were playing a game of squash by himself. Hagrid could disclose to Harry during late nights- the remaining memories he had of his father's dragon pox. He'd looked to Harry for comfort whenever he recalled the green tinge of his father's skin or his bloodshot eyes. Myrtle regularly mourned Olive Hornby's reign of terror. She depended on Harry's advice, despite never following it. Even Malfoy once revealed his deep seated terror his mum would abandon him the same way his father, Brutus had up and disappeared three years previous. He'd made Harry swear his secrecy. Harry didn't get that. Harry received pats on the head and rolls of the eye, snide laughs and concerned gazes. Harry's troubles were unparalleled, and because of that, noone believed he was accountable. Sometimes it caused him to feel very, very alone.

"Well. Yer ought to find a way to control it, shouldn't yeh?" Hagrid, bless his heart, finally spoke up. "And by that, you mean...?"

"If yeh think it's legilimancy, than yeh ought to study the opposite, shouldn't yeh?"

Occlumency. It always came back to occlumency nowadays.

Harry had haunted flashbacks of sitting on that stool in Snape's dungeon. It made him want to bash his head against the wall. Foolishly, he'd thought he would be safe from that concern in the forties. How wrong he'd been. His need for occlumency grew by the minute.

"My cloak works. My map works. My Weasleys products work. Of course the stupid mind connection works" Harry stared at the roaring fire- recalling the years all leading up to fifth year. Perhaps it was the warmth of the fire or his earlier panic- but Harry could feel the sweat behind his ears growing cool now. It reminded him of the twigs and the snow digging into his back while Riddle shoved him into the floor of the Bulstrode forest. If Harry closed his eyes, he could still feel the other boy's thighs straddling him or the thumb tracing circles along his cheekbone. Harry recalled the smooth tips of Riddle's fingers as he brushed Harry's fringe away from his forehead. Harry's eyelids fluttered open. Harry jumped forth from the couch- causing both Myrtle and Malfoy to let out a shriek of surprise. Hagrid blinked, sitting still.
"What is it, Harry?"

"So why doesn't my scar sting anymore?!"

During the days that followed, Harry didn't have time to mull over the mysterious behavior of his scar. Nor his occlumency, menhir studies, his swamp, and least of all, his next lesson with Riddle.

Myrtle's shoes disappearing was the least of her concerns when she discovered a blast ended screw in her trunk the next morning. That wasn't the end of it. After lunch, someone had managed to transport handfuls of maggots into her book bag. Tuesday, the same form of grisly torture followed. Her clothes were stolen in the baths, and her hair had been jinxed into snakes while she slept. Peeves had taken to following Myrtle around, hanging from the chandeliers, and calling her "Moaning Medusa". To Myrtle's horror, the nickname was catching on. Wednesday was no different, when she'd been suspended in midair and had had to float to each class. Thursday had been Myrtle's breaking point, after she was hexed with a tongue slip jinx and spouted her thoughts as they came to her, throughout the corridors. Harry'd been perplexed but pleased when Myrtle'd told him that a secret part of her believed his stories. Of course, that satisfaction was short-lived when she'd then informed Harry that the sound he makes when he chews made her want to stab him in the eye.

Harry'd doltishly believed his presence would shield Myrtle from there on out last term. Noone wanted to associate with crazy after all. But Hornby's rage had been viciously renewed. And once more, Myrtle found herself a target.

"Why are we doing this?" muttered Abraxas. Harry and Abraxas huddled together outside the fourth floor lavatory. How convenient that when Harry's swamp was demolished it was followed with the worst bout of bullying, he'd seen, well... ever. What Myrtle had experienced last term and every year before, was nothing compared to her current hell.

"Because. This is what you do. Malfoy, have you ever even had a friend?"

"I think you're just obsessed, Potter. You really think Myrtle will drop dead if she sets foot near a bathroom."

"Yes. She'll die, become a ghost, and spend the rest of her centuries haunting a toilet."

"See. That just sounds stupid. Why do stupid things always come out your mouth."

"You're stupid."

Abraxas raised a brow, before swinging the bathroom door open and shouting into it's depths. "MYRTLE, I DON'T MIND THAT YOU THINK I LOOK HANDSOME FROM THE BACK! YOU'RE RIGHT! I DO!" Various passerby stared suspiciously at the two boys.

A loud sob came echoing back.

Malfoy smirked at Harry. "I've heard I have quite broad shoulders."

"Youch!" Malfoy yelped, after Harry kicked him in the shin.

"What the bloody fuck is wrong with you?" Harry scolded the blonde. "She said I looked ugly from the front, this is the least she deserves!"
"And she wasn't wrong," Harry chuckled. Malfoy reached down and pulled Harry's hair who responded by slapping the brute off of him. A playful fight ensued, until Harry'd gotten the taller boy into a chokehold.

"Scarhead!" Malfoy sneered, rubbing his neck, when they'd finished.

"Ratface!"

"Git!"

"Gobshite!"

"Lunatic!"

"Ignoramus!"

"What does that even mean?!"

"Let's see... imbecile., fool, idiot. Oh. Can't forget, MORON!" Harry wondered what the Weasleys would say if they saw him now.

The two were interrupted by Myrtle explosively blowing her nose followed by her emphatically screaming "WHYYYYY?!!" to an invisible presence. The shriek resonated through the halls, causing students to walk faster, clamping their hands over their ears. Harry and Abraxas mellowed out and looked at eachother. A part of Harry was reminded of when Hermione's polyjuice had backfired in second year. It was odd to look back on the memory so fondly.

"It's like she wants to be heard."

"We should go in."

"We can't. It's a girls lavatory." Malfoy fidgeted, shifting his robes around.

Harry narrowed his eyes, "Then the last one inside is a coward!" With that, he swung the door open. Harry found Myrtle in her favorite stall, and kicked the door ajar. Myrtle stared back at him with wide, tearful eyes. Her lower lip wobbled.

"Harry?" Myrtle blubbered.

Harry sighed at the state of her. Even the snakes on her head expressed her inner turmoil with their subdued, miserable hisses. The truth was, Harry wasn't certain he could convince Myrtle to avoid the bathroom without his swamp. He'd had to follow Myrtle into the washroom twice already this week, and the grand total for the month had reached the double digits. Professor Kaddlewack had caught him once, and instead of lecturing Harry on the treacherous implications of following women into bathrooms, he'd simply advised Harry not to get caught. Harry'd nearly lost his temper at that. And Harry didn't have the natural ability to soothe one's woes like Hagrid did. Harry was lost. The swamp was gone. Riddle was on the verge of opening the chamber. Myrtle's death was imminent at this rate. It terrified Harry. Especially when Harry realized that she was one of the few people keeping him sane in this period.

"Myrtle, what's sitting here and crying about it going to get you?"

"Your sympathy, apparently" whispered Malfoy from behind him.

Myrtle wept. "I- I dunno." She sputtered.
"Exactly. Myrtle... my situation wasn't exactly like yours, But I have experienced bullying before. For a large portion of my life, actually."

"You have?" Harry was glad she had the decency to not reply with sarcasm or something snide.

"Yes, and most of it was by adults- who held far more power over me than whoever is targeting you." "Horny" coughed Malfoy behind his fist. That was the shining beacon of light in Myrtle's situation. Those who wielded the power to ruin Myrtle, to determine her future... were not the same as those terrorizing her. She didn't have a pair of Dursley's towering over her. Nothing but herself was stopping Myrtle from empowering her future. But Myrtle couldn't see that silver lining.

"Did it ever stop?"

"Sometimes... no. But there is a way to significantly subdue a bully."

"How?"

"You have to start by not feeding them. Whoever stole your shoes, whoever did that to your hair- They like seeing you cry. They like when you're upset, they like when you react."

"That's it? I have to bear my pain in silence?" Myrtle wailed. "Moaning myrtle always complains! Moaning Myrtle should just shutup already, right?!" she abruptly howled. "Oh! I forgot! IT'S MOANING MEDUSA NOW, ISN'T IT?!! SILLY ME!" For a split second, Harry saw her as the transparent image of her ghost. Especially when she burst into a fresh set of tears.

"Myrtle, listen. Calm down." Harry kneeled beside her, and grabbed one of her quavering hands. He stifled a grimace at the sticky texture of her palm, and tried not to think about the bogeys she'd wiped onto it. "You're right. You should get to moan all about it. But- but" Harry desperately looked behind himself at Malfoy, who was blasely leaning against the open stall and examining his nails. Malfoy shrugged at Harry's scowl, mouthing "What d'you expect me to do?"

Harry turned back to Myrtle, who, surprisingly, had reverted her attention back to him.

"But. But you- you should do it only with me, Malfoy, and Hagrid. Right? We're your friends."

"Ally would be better word."

"Shutup, Malfoy," Harry snapped. Now was not the time for a discussion over how deep their relationship ran. If Harry wasn't Myrtle's friend before, then he was now. And he'd drag Malfoy by the ankles along with him. "Myrtle, we're your friends. And what judgement we pass onto you, will be with good intentions. Other people- if you cry in front of them- They may look for reasons to laugh, or to dislike you. They will empathize with your bullies. Because knowing they can ignore another's pain makes them uncomfortable, and it makes them feel guilty. And sometimes, being cowardly and doing nothing makes you an accomplice. It's understandable in some situations. But cruelty only thrives when we let it."

"So just- bear with it? That's really it?" Myrtle looked as if all hope had been thwarted.

"No. What you're also going to do is stand up for yourself."

"Easier said than done," Malfoy murmured.

"What a Gryffindor suggestion," Myrtle replied, voice flat. Her tears had stopped.

"Bullies don't like when you've gained the courage to face them, Myrtle. Well... Most don't" Harry
suspected Tom Riddle would take sadistic enjoyment in destroying his challengers.

"And what if that just makes everything worse?"

"It won't."

"Why is that?"

"Because we're going to scare the living shite out of them. If you can't make them respect you, then you're going to scare them more than they scare you." A part of Harry wished he'd had someone telling him this when he was ten. Wished it hadn't taken him *years* before he could properly use what the Dursley's feared most against them.

"We're?" Myrtle replied, guarded.

"Do you *really* think I'd let you face this alone?"

Myrtle looked up. For the first time a light shone in her eyes. For the first time she looked as if she wasn't ready to submit to her fate. Harry realized he should have thought of this a long time ago. Instead of purposely blocking Myrtle from her crutch, Harry should have worked with her. Harry should have gifted Myrtle with the confidence, and abilities to stand on her own- without the bloody bathroom.

"But I expect the same, y'know. No more letting anyone call me mad. Only you, and Malfoy and Hagrid can call me loony, now. Got it?"

"You *do* realize you're on the verge of expulsion, Potter?" echoed Abraxas' unwelcome reminder within the lavatory.

"Then you can help, Malfoy."

"Morgana's *knickers* what are you trying to get me into?" Malfoy dramatically leaned against the bathroom wall, crossing his arms. "My mum'd rather kill me than ever see me pulling the stunts you do, you know. And if she knew I was helping this lot of-"

He snapped his gob shut when Harry and Myrtle faced him with twin expressions, daring him to say 'mudblood' one more time.

"Be honest. Do you want to help Myrtle or not?" Harry didn't tell Malfoy that he didn't have to worry about running into trouble. As long as there wasn't an Umbridge ruling the school, what Harry had in mind would perfectly abide by Hogwarts rules. But Harry wanted to test Abraxas. He wanted the pureblood boy to prove that he really did have that small bit of goodness inside him, that Harry suspected he did. Deep down. Very, Very deep down.

"Honestly?"

"So you *don't* want to help Myrtle?" Harry raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"It's alright," said Myrtle, voice gravelly from her tears. "You don't have to." She looked as miserable as a kicked puppy. Even her snakes drooped.

"I- I..." Abraxas looked between Harry and Myrtle, clenching his fists. Finally, his shoulders slackened. "Alright! Fine! And I suppose you're going to rope Hagrid into this somehow too?!"

"Of course," replied Harry, fixing his glasses.
The two boys said nothing when a mona-lisa-esque smile blossomed on Myrtle's face. Too embarrassed, the both of them looked in opposite directions, clearing their throats.

"Night, Harry!" Myrtle and Abraxas waved their arms like a pair of fools. Myrtle wore a blinding beam and Harry couldn't help the matching grin spreading across his face. Harry strolled the rest of the way into the library, swiveling around once, to watch the two head out, pushing and pulling each other. Malfoy reached a palm up over his brow, feigning as if he were searching for Myrtle off into the distance, to which she elbowed him in the gut. They were off to bed. Harry exhaled at the thought. Lucky them.

There were only two lights visible in the library on these nights. One was the lumos belonging to Madame Quincy's wand as she wandered around the library, organizing the last few books for the day. The other was the oil lamp kept at a library table that'd somehow become The table. Every time Harry arrived, checking and returning books on menhirs and ancient runes, Harry could no longer pass by the table without shuddering. The side Tom Riddle usually sat on had the perfect view of the courtyard during the day. During the night, moonlight streamed in, framing Tom's pale face.

Harry set his bookbag down and took a seat. "Evening, Riddle."

Tom, who'd been entranced by his schoolwork, glanced up, and did a second take when he saw Harry. He released a diminutive laugh. When Riddle laughed, it was like the act physically pained him. Or it was purposefully mocking.

"Your hair, Potter."

Harry reached up, finger curling around a snake, which embraced him. Harry felt it's tongue flitter out onto his thumb.

"This? I surprised myself actually. My hair usually resists spells."

"You look absurd."

"It's an act of solidarity. It doesn't matter if I look absurd." Harry'd even indoctrinated Malfoy into it. He'd nearly cried, but after Harry told him he looked like a big, bad Slytherin he became rather keen on the idea. Due to his giant genes, Hagrid's hair had been stubborn. With Myrtle's help, Harry'd transformed it into one long, angry python, which snapped at anyone who got close. The effect was fearsome, especially on someone of Hagrid's stature. Prudence Parkinson ran in the other direction when she laid eyes on Hagrid. As was anticipated, Hagrid was positively in love with the thing. He'd named it Alfred and was intent on keeping his new hair. Harry had yet to tell him it'd only last a week.

"Adorable," Riddle drawled. There was an expression on his face, that told Harry he wasn't being quite so sarcastic. The notion made Harry squirm.

"So," Harry leaned back in his chair, "What's on the schedule for today?"

"Your potions paper came back." Riddle lifted the scroll he'd been studying.

"And?"
"Slughorn gave you an E."

"Not bad. I would have gotten an O, but I think Slughorn hates me now."

"You're talkative today." Harry was. Thus far he'd been suffering his "study dates" as Myrtle disturbingly called them, in silence. Harry'd had a million and one questions at the beginning of term, none of which Harry had felt like was the right time to ask. Why did Tom Riddle spare that muggle man? How were the Bulstrodes? What was the extent of their injuries? Just how bad was it, if even a month later, Augustus still hadn't returned to school. If Harry's swamp was gone, did that mean Riddle had discovered the Chamber of secrets? If he had, why hadn't he opened it yet? Why was it so bloody calm? Why wasn't Harry hearing voices in the walls and seeing spiders crawl out the windows? But today was different. Today Harry felt braver than he had before. Who would have thought Harry might actually take Amaltheia's advice?

"I have an idea," said Harry.

"My stomach fills with dread already."

"Oh shut up," Harry snapped, surprised at the chuckle his reply garnered. "I want to play a game"

"You have transfiguration formulas to brush up on."

"That can wait until another day."

"And your game can't?" Riddle sneered. "Tell me. What's this game called?"

"Let's call it..." Harry thought "Interrogation."

"That doesn't sound like a game at all. And what are the ground rules?" asked Riddle.

"Oh," replied Harry, surprised Riddle would care to ask. Then again, it was best to know the rules before you broke them.

"Each of us can ask a question. The other... The other may choose to pass on that question- but they will have no choice but to reply on the next one. Likewise, passing on a question, forfeits your right to ask one until the next turn." Harry wondered whether this would end in disaster. "There will be one question at a time. We will take turns. You may only ask the same question one time. Lastly..." Harry fixed his eyes on Riddle's forehead. "No legilimancy. No lying"

"You put too much trust in me, Potter. Let's begin."

"Promise. No legilimancy. No lying."

Tom huffed.

"Fine. I promise. Would you like to hook pinkies?"

"Then I'll begin." affirmed Harry, attempting to think of a question that Riddle would refuse to answer. "Let's start easy, shall we? Where's my swamp?"

Swift. Direct. And incriminating either way.

Harry didn't expect a straight answer, but it was what he got.

"Mulciber and Dolohov are holding it at the moment. What were you doing in Gloucester, before you came here?" Harry paused, stomach doing a swoop- There it was. So Riddle had flattened his
swamp. That meant he'd accessed the Chamber of Secrets. Harry was running out of time.

And Riddle was preparing his questions with lightning speed.

"This? Again?"

"Answer me."

"I was helping little muggle children out. Is that fair enough? What are they planning to do with it? The swamp, I mean."

"I've not asked. Something foolish, no doubt. Who are the Weasleys?"

"Family friends... you could call them," Harry said- stubbornly staring at the table lamp.

"I want a better answer than that. Their swamp defies at least three principles of wizarding illusion and I've taken a look at the records- How would your family- your mother i'm assuming, happen to know a Weasley. Blood traitors and dirt poor- they still descend from an esteemed name and."

"So?" Harry interrupted, "What about you? Somehow you've surrounded yourself with the young, rich, and powerful- and yet your lack of blood purity is circulating throughout the castle. Somewhere there's a pair of pureblood girls discussing you right now."

Riddle's fists balled on the table.

"Oh, but my... mother happening to know a pureblood or two shocks the socks off you. Are you forgetting that just like yourself I'm the product of two? A muggleborn and a pureblood. Now... let's move on. How are the Bulstrodes?"

Riddle folded his arms across his chest, the action bunching his fitted robes against his pectorals.

"Alive," he replied. So clearly unhappy was he with Harry's response.

"How vague and unsettling."

Riddle wouldn't let Harry siphon any more information out of him regarding their conditions. He jumped to the next question. Just like himself- Harry knew the boy had a plethora of them lined up. It was risky- Harry knew. He could only begin to imagine Amaltheia's disappointment. All this time she'd been encouraging him to improve his occlumency. Had even gifted Harry a pensieve that was now collecting dust in his trunk. And here Harry was laying all his cards out on the table in his effort to find answers.

"How do you know I'm a halfblood, Potter?" Harry wondered if he'd really caught a subtle tremor in Riddle's voice or if that was just a figment of his imagination.

"Lucky guess."

"Two months ago when we were dancing together, you were utterly confident of yourself. You stated it as if were fact." Harry cringed, recalling Riddle's hands pulling at his waist and being twirled. He felt as if he could still feel them now. "Tell me how that is a lucky guess."

"Perhaps I saw a like-minded individual in you Riddle. Sometimes a shared experience is visible on the face."

"Ahh" Riddle scoffed. "That would explain the mindless stalking your first two months here. Just pass on this question, Potter, if you're so incapable of answering it honestly."
"Fine. Pass." Instantly, Harry regretted it, fearing he'd walked himself into a corner. Suddenly Harry imagined Riddle to be much, much larger than he was. It felt like the fifth year was looming down over him like Grawp.

Riddle looked like the cat that got the cream.

"Tell me the truth. Do you work for Grindelwald?"

Nevermind. Harry was the luckiest wizard alive.

"Really? That's what you're going to ask?" he laughed, relief discreetly flooding him. "Sure, Riddle. I'm also his son and part time grandfather, but he's unaware. Because I also masquerade as Grindelwald's secret lover. We take long walks on the beach and enjoy pina coladas in his off time, when he's not torturing muggle prisoners."

"You're attempting to make me feel foolish."

"Is it working?"

"It is not a stupid assumption, Potter. You appear out of nowhere. You exhibit odd behavior. You know things you shouldn't and you're never where you should be. You know how to apparate and what little I've seen of your dueling abilities has been far superior to anyone else our age. You were spotted in Gloucester following the attack, and not even your own mother knew you were there."

"Yes. Well. Did you perhaps ever consider that I am an inter-dimensional time traveler and that my superior dueling abilities and knowledge are all due to my extensive experience fighting dark wizards? Hm? Not even once? Pitiful."

Yes. Amaltheia might be disappointed. But how much was there to really worry about when Tom Riddle simply rolled his eyes and pursed his lips? Yet again, Harry found himself bemused by Riddle's exasperation.

"Oh. But I'm the mad one, aren't I? The git implying I'm some spy for Grindelwald couldn't possibly be in the wrong state of mind."

"Enough of this, Potter. Let's move on."

"Are you embarrassed? I would be if I were you."

"Move on," the Slytherin demanded. The mild threat in his tone caused a shiver to roll down Harry's back.

"Right. I'll be short about it. Why did you save Haluk?" It remained mystifying for Harry whenever he remembered Tom Riddle deliberately sparing the man's life. Everything he'd previously thought about Tom was being turned on it's head.

"Haluk?" Tom's eyebrows rose.

"January first. The muggle man. In the forest."

"I told you already." Riddle fixed Harry with a glower. His upper lip curled. It was immediately apparent he detested the subject being touched upon. It only made Harry wish to delve further.

"See. I think it's more than what you told me. I think in any other situation, it's more likely you would've killed him. You'd have found another way to get your revenge on the Bulstrode's. In any
other situation, you wouldn't have risked it. I think that you just... couldn't do it, could you? It was
not like that was your only chance to return their pettiness. Apparently," Harry squinted at the
younger boy. "You've mastered obliviation. I know you. You must have punished your friends in
unimaginably cruel ways a thousand times over by now."

Tom seemed to shift the more Harry spoke. Without warning, Riddle's placid mask slipped, and
Harry realized he'd intrinsically pissed the boy off. He was looking at Tom unmasked. The boy's
hatred was unmistakable.

"And if I have, Harry?" Tom replied, delicately. Riddle leaned closer over the table, the lamp light
causing shadows to flicker under his eyes, his lips. There was a dark, sinister glitter in his eyes. At
once, Harry knew he'd intrinsically pissed the boy off. The boy's
hatred was unmistakable.

"H-have what?" Harry couldn't help but trip over his words.

"Don't you remember, Harry?"

"Er, remember what?"

"That day in the forest- after I 'saved' the muggle, as you've mistakenly labeled it. You asked me
why I hadn't obliviated you yet."

Yes, Harry frowned. He recalled it.

"Wouldn't it be amusing if I had? And you unknowingly asked such a question?"

"But you didn't."

"Oh. But you did. I did unimaginably cruel things to you, and you didn't even know it." Riddle's lips
twisted into a nasty sneer.

"No. You didn't. You're just evading the question."Harry grit his teeth. He willed his palms to stop
sweating. Riddle was attempting to gaslight him, to make Harry question his very own reality. Riddle
didn't want to give Harry a proper explanation and that was all the more reason to continue. "Why
did you save the muggle?"

"I did so much to you, and you don't even remember it. Just like Bulstrode."

"Scared to answer something so simple? Scared to admit you couldn't kill a man?"

"I tore you apart, Harry." Tom inhaled, looking as if the very thought titillated him. It probably did,
thought Harry. It left Harry rattled to remember just who he was speaking to and what he was
capable of. "I ripped holes into you as I mutilated you. I strangled and burned you. Oh, how you
cried out. It was music to my ears."

"You saw something in that muggle, or yourself. Something that changed you. And you couldn't do
it. You couldn't kill him." Harry was doing it. He was really saying it aloud. And he wondered
whether he actually believed it- or if in his urgency for a proper answer, he was purposely goading
Riddle. Whatever it was, it wasn't working.

Riddle's suggestions became more cruel. And more risque.

"I strung you up and flagellated you. It wasn't enough for you Potter. When you begged for death, I
thought a cruciatus was in order. You screamed and screamed. I've never heard a voice so loud. So
broken. I've heard it's like a pain never felt before." Tom bit his lip. He had the same expression on
his face he'd worn when he'd attempted to convince Harry to divulge his nightmares.

"It is," Harry admitted- to Tom's visible shock. "But you didn't use the cruciatus on me."

Riddle pressed his lips together in a flat line. All traces of his perverse pleasure had left.

"You wouldn't know if I had," Riddle insisted. Something about him looked so... *childish* now. As if Harry had kicked Riddle's painstakingly created sandcastle. Harry had to admit, this version of him was preferable to the boy he'd been with Mulciber.

"Yes I would. To begin, your description simply isn't realistic."

"How so."

"Riddle. If you'd really crucio-ed me, then you'd know that I'd have rather slowly died than to ever beg you for anything."

"Don't tempt me, Harry. You know I enjoy a challenge."

"You still couldn't kill that muggle, though, could you?"

"Isn't magic *wonderful*, Harry?" Tom continued again, using the same velvety tone he'd used when colorfully describing the multitude of ways he could torment Harry. "You're right. I never used the cruciatus on you. And I wouldn't obliterate you. even if I bent you over and violated you on this very table- I still wouldn't. I could erase every sign of ever being inside you."

Harry couldn't disguise the widening of his eyes. Riddle had finally shocked him into silence. As Tom's words sunk in, Harry grew warm. It was not only repulsive Riddle could even suggest such a thing- but that he'd dare to say it aloud.

"But I wouldn't," Riddle repeated. "Just like you said. You would know if I'd tortured and pillaged you. Consumed you. *Defiled* you. But not for any other reason... than simply wanting you to know."

Riddle leaned even closer, as if he were about to disclose a nasty secret.

"See, I *want* you to remember it when I was finished with you."

"You've gone too far, Riddle" Harry finally retorted. His voice was subdued. Harry felt if he were to speak louder, then the entire world would somehow know what Riddle had insinuated. And for a reason he couldn't pinpoint- the very thought of anyone knowing, filled Harry with hot shame.

"You've gone too far, Harry. You're endeavoring to see some inkling of good in me, aren't you? You want to justify how you can sit and speak with me every other night- when I'm so despicable. Well. You can stop now. So what if I saved a muggle? I save a life, and Harry Potter thinks he can make wild presumptions about me, my intentions, or my morality? Don't be so naive. Don't you *get it*, Potter? I'm not trying to act like a good, prefect boy in front of you anymore, am I? I haven't. Not for awhile now." The words flooded out of Tom, soft-spoken but razor edged. And it left Harry speechless. Shaken. "So why are you attempting to reduce me to one choice I made?"

"It was respectable. It was the right choi-"

"And it was so incongruent of me that you've clung to it. See how you tremble now? Is it anger... or fear? Perhaps both. I like it, Potter. I like you scared. I like you in pain. And I like how you see right through me."
Harry's thighs quivered. Rage teetered through him, accompanied by a large helping of horror. At once Harry grasped what Riddle had alluded to when he'd claimed to like Harry knowing in the Bulstrode forest a mere month ago. Riddle should have felt threatened or exposed by Harry's knowledge. Instead, he'd gone and found a safe haven in Harry. Because who would believe Harry Bonkers, Harry the mad? Harry was as liable as a speck of dust in 1943 and it was his own doing. Riddle felt like he could be anything he wished in Harry's presence now- and that included the one thing he'd never fully shown to any other wizard, save Dumbledore, before.

Himself.

Which was moderately terrifying.

"Yes. I am terrible, aren't I?" Riddle hummed. "And noone knows how deep it runs. But you."

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for alluding to underage sex and Tom being an all around asshole, who says some sick, indecent shit in this chapter.

Don't worry. Tom didn't do any of what he said he did. I'm sooo happy to update again, you guys. I lost my work for this chapter TWICE and by the time i finished this chapter was drastically different from it's first version. Thankyou for all your lovely feedback on chapter seven!
1974

BANG!

The scroll on Tom Riddle's writing desk jumped as fists rumbled against the door to his study.
"LET. ME. IN!" hollered James Potter.

Momentarily, Tom considered casting a silencio and letting the fourteen year old scream it out in the corridor. What would Harry say then? Harry, who was stuck at the bedsides of Euphemia and Fleamont Potter. Who was ignoring the dangerous and infectious nature of Dragon Pox, putting himself at risk despite Tom's objection. Harry, who when looking into the face of death once more, became more glacial towards Tom than he'd been in years.

Tom pierced his parchment with the point of his quill, feeling bitter resentment bubble over inside him. Ink pooled in the miniscule stab wound he'd left behind. When they were twenty one, Harry'd told him he couldn't do it anymore. Whatever it was at the time. And again several months following the birth of James. Again on his eleventh birthday. Again, Again, Again. Tom moved the world for Harry and how easily could Harry forget all about it, forever caught in some internal struggle or another. Perhaps one day, he'd learn to just let things... go.

Under the candlelight of Euphemia's Beltane festival, Harry once asked Tom whether he spited James. Despised him. He'd forcefully laughed- pretending the question was in jest. And it'd struck Tom then, that a part of him must still frighten Harry.

Tom didn't hate James. Didn't love him either.

Tom envied him.

"Tom! Tom!" James' banging slowed, growing weaker and dulling into resignation. Tom paused when he heard a broken plea. "Please?"

Rising, Tom strode forward, unlocking and swinging his door open. James didn't give Tom a chance to scold him. The messy haired boy barraged into the room, pacing erratically, and Tom found solace, leaning against a clear surface of his desk. He folded his arms and waited and watched. Tom did not mention the dried tears streaking his face. Whenever James furiously scowled at him, Tom raised his eyebrows, silently daring James to only speak.

Harry breaks the bad news, somehow Tom takes the brunt of the blame. Repeat.

Tom broke the silence. "Your parents have approximately three years left." Two, when taking into account that Dragon pox gradually rendered it's victims delirious. Tom was being cruel as it was.

"Shutup!"

"Treasure what time you have left with them." James couldn't. He was stuck here, at Hogwarts.

"No. You'd find a way to save them, if you really cared!" James spat. "Dark magic, Flamel's stone, whatever you could get your grimy hands on!"

"Are you demanding a favor, or just insulting me?" James was not intimidated by his threatening inflection. He jut his chin and clenched his fists, looking as if at any moment he might throw a punch.

Looking at the boy now, Tom was struck by how much like Harry, James actually was. Perhaps it was the warrantless blame he was being subjected to. Tom was suddenly back in 1943, attempting to seduce a boy that at every turn was looking for a reason to despise him.
Hagrid was scheduled to meet James in Hogsmeade the following day. He'd lost his dad to dragon pox. He'd know just what to say to a broken James Potter, Harry had said, before leaving for Hogsmeade, and subsequently St.Mungo's. But in the meantime, that left Tom as the only adult presence James could speak to.

"But you don't care about them!"

It was an awful responsibility.

"No," Tom concurred. "I don't. I care about Harry." Everyone else would and should come second. Tom couldn't understand why it was so difficult a concept for the Potters, including Harry, to grasp. And he'd long stopped attempting to make anybody believe otherwise.

"And you don't care about me!" James barked. Tom couldn't bring himself to pity the genuine expression of hurt on the student's face.

"Not for want of trying." Tom crossed his ankles, remembering a time when Harry had adored James so much, that it'd felt borderline mandatory for Tom to feel the same. Fortunately, James was not nearly as small, vulnerable and sweet-natured he was as a child. Harry didn't love James any less. (Tom wished he had.) It was only difficult to show it now. Teenage James was a shitshow.

And the current James was red-faced and teary eyed. James claimed to detest Tom so frequently, that being in Tom's study in his time of misery was a curious thing indeed.

"Why are you here, James? What do you want to hear so badly? What do you want me to do? Surely you don't wish for me to comfort you, soothe your ills." James knew Tom almost as well as Harry. Which meant he didn't know Tom nearly as well as he thought he did... While still understanding him better than most others.

James' fit of rage sputtered. "Of course not!"

"I-I" He began hesitantly. "Look. I..." James ran his hand through his hair. He wouldn't look Tom in the eye, his eyes glued to the wall behind him. He refused to blink. Tom could tell. The fresh tears brimming along the rim of his eyes would drip if he did. He tried so hard to be strong, unyielding in Tom's presence. It was all rather offset by the obvious trembling of his lower lip.

"Go on," Tom encouraged him, knowing then, that James was about to demand something peculiar.

"I want to use the eye glass."
On February 14th, Azrel Diggory would turn up petrified. Or so the plan goes.

In one fell swoop, without even trying, Mrs. Potter's jester's jinx had called Tom Riddle's legitimacy into question. So, Tom composed a list of names.

Alice Flint. Norman Bagshot. And Azrel Diggory.

They'd been the only pureblood students besides Augustus at the New Year's bash. Alice Flint was a seventh year Slytherin whom kept to herself, Norman Bagshot, a Hogwarts graduate. Then there was Azrel Diggory, the Hufflepuff prefect.

Tom laid in bed, tapping his abdomen with his fingers and staring at the ceiling of his four poster. Nagini had curled around his hair, spooning his head and quietly hissing in her sleep. The light of a lamp being turned on peeked through the sliver of Tom's bed curtains.

An impromptu meeting in the Slytherin common room had left Alice open to Tom's legilimancy. She was innocent, though her dormmates ought to lock their trunks. She'd been nicking their keepsakes. Norman Bagshot was unlikely. He worked as an intern at The Daily Prophet and was a mudblood-cohorting Gryffindor in his school days.

Rodolphus had conducted an investigation disguised as an odd study group in which he'd boiled down the names discussing Tom's lineage the most. It's left Tom with Macmillan and Parkinson.

Where Prudence Parkinson was a third year Slytherin girl, Dughall Macmillan was the same year AND house as Azrel Diggory.

Azrel Diggory was the first to open his mouth. There wasn't a person left in Hogwarts who hadn't heard about Tom.

So... naturally, Azrel Diggory would be the basilisk's first victim.

"Good morning, sunshine!"

The words snapped Tom away from his musings. Rodolphus Lestrange had drawn Tom's bed curtains ajar and was grinning maniacally, holding an oil lamp up.

Tom furrowed his eyebrows, squinting at the sudden light. Tom's bleary vision grew clearer- and Tom, angrier as the date dawned on him. It wasn't often that Tom slept in, but when he did, it was Valentine's day.

Tom blinked at Lestrange's boisterous beam. Today, Tom's personal hell began. But that didn't mean he couldn't take small revenges on his companions, who enjoyed Valentine's more than they did Christmas.

"Nagini, breakfast," said Tom, looking into Rodolphus' eyes. Nagini curled out from the bed she'd made in Tom's hair. She shot forward, snapping at Lestrange, who jumped back shrieking.

"Really, Tom?" Lestrange yelped from atop his own bed a minute later, while Nagini circled his trunk, hissing her soft laughter. "How very mature!"

A bed away, Mulciber was awake and had taken his favorite beater's bat out and was swinging it,
and making whooshing noises with his mouth. It'd cracked down the middle in third year, and the Slytherin team had let him keep it. He'd since then cloaked it's surface with nails and spikes. Mulciber especially anticipated Valentines day, for it was the best opportunity to practice his beater's skills.

"Why do you like to see me suffer?" Tom asked him, sliding his legs out of bed. Mulciber hadn't even dressed yet, just swinging around willy nilly with his bat and a pair of boxers concealing his dignity. Tom scowled at the happy sight of him.

"No harm meant, mate. It's good practice 's all!"

"At my expense."

"No!" Lestrange screeched, interrupting them. Nagini had slithered up Lestrange's bed bannister. Rodolphus attempted to hide behind his curtains, poking his head out in some surreal display. He looked like a fifteenth century noblewoman after getting caught undressed. "Tom! Call her off!"

"She's famished, Rodolphus."

"I don't care if she's bloody starving to death!"

"You won't have to either, once she's finished swallowing your brains."

Mulciber swung his bat, narrowly missing a bedside lamp. "A rather unsatisfying meal if you ask me."

"C'mon! mate, please!"

"Say it again."

"Please"

"Bat your eyelashes." Unhesitatingly, Lestrange followed Tom's command.

"Twirl." Rodolphus pivoted atop his bed, nearly tripping over his quilt.

"Bend over and slap your arse."

Lestrange paused and stared incredulously at Tom. If Tom had gone too far, he didn't particularly care. The both of them knew Nagini wouldn't hurt Rodolphus. Tom just wanted to see him sweat. At any moment, Rodolphus could suggest he was uncomfortable. But in his efforts to impress, he rarely did.

"Really?"

"And recite the sorting hat's song. Quickly," Tom's eyes flashed. "Before I cook up something worse." Nagini snapped her jaw threateningly.

Lestrange huffed and blushed. Then he opened his mouth, breaking into a tuneless song:

"Oh you may not think I'm pretty,  
But don't judge on what you see"
It sounded more like shouting than singing. Mulciber guffawed loudly from next to Tom. He'd since sat atop his duvet and had begun clapping his hands in an attempt to guide Rodolphus. Eventually, Tom joined him, leering. By then, the commotion was causing various years passing by their room to duck their heads in. Early-rising seventh years laughed before shaking their heads and leaving. Dolohov and Avery flung their bed curtains open, rubbing their eyes and complaining.

"What's all this ruckus? It sounds like my great aunt's camel."

The boys watched Lestrange's singing, cringing when his voice cracked and snickering, when Mulciber suggested he do an interpretive dance. At that, Lestrange mimed pulling a sword from a stone and jutting his chin out. A rather silly interpretation of Gryffindor house. Hufflepuff, he imitated The Fat Friar. Ravenclaw, he studied an imaginary book feverishly. The boys burst into fat tears of laughter when Rodolphus hopped onto his stomach and imitated a slithering snake, like a poor game of charades, all the while brokenly singing:

"Or perhaps in Slytherin,
You'll make your real friends,"

Lestrange's humiliation was complete when he finished his song, stood up, and slapped his flat posterior. Lestrange collapsed atop his bed, groaning and catching his breath.

"I hate you," he groaned.

"You adore me."

Lestrange wasn't one to hold a grudge.

"So true. I really do," Rodolphus panted, before rolling over, burying his face into his pillow and groaning, "WHY, WHY DID I DO THAT?!!"

"Nagini." Tom snapped his fingers, grinning when the snake hissed stubborn protests about how delicious Lestrange would've tasted. She slithered back to Tom, who pulled a magically preserved mouse out his trunk.

"What was that?" chortled Dolohov, while Tom fed his snake.

"That is what you get when you wake me up."

Besides Valentines, that Sunday was the morning of Augustus Bulstrodes anticipated return. Mulciber, particularly, was eager to see him.

"You look negligent when someone worse than you that used to try at their schoolwork up and leaves. Fortunately, Potter is still around or I reckon my quidditch time'd be threatened by Professor Ryan by now." Mulciber still had his bat slung over his shoulder, walking beside Tom. He reminded Tom of the cricket playing muggle boys that played near the field by Wool's.

"Speaking of," The five watched Abraxas Malfoy bolt past them, bookbag slung over his shoulders as he stomped up the staircase. His blonde, little snakes had been replaced with the worst bedhead Tom had ever seen on a pureblood. Malfoy didn't even look over his shoulder to sneer like he might've a year ago.
"Is Potter's hair contagious?" Mulciber regarded Malfoy's back thoughtfully.

Potter and his crew had been vanishing during their evenings, frequently during supper. Prefect's duty had Tom catching Malfoy out of bed twice thus far. Tom secretly awaited his mother's inevitable howler. A quick look into Malfoy's mind's eye a few days prior had given Tom an image of a door abruptly appearing and disappearing on the seventh floor. Tom couldn't make sense of it.

"Potter's up to something again," Tom said, watching Malfoy flounce off.

"When isn't he?" replied Dolohov.

"I have him this afternoon," Tom reminded them.

"I thought you had him Thursday?" lamented Avery. "He takes up all your time now!"

"I've told you, Pascal. The Medusa's curse he set on himself and all his friends earned him two weeks detention- which conveniently, he spends with me now."

"OWLS, prefect duties, you're busy enough as it is, aren't you mate?" Said Dolohov. Indeed. Between Harry, the chamber, prefect duties and the abundance of owl preparation professors were assigning in the new year, Tom's meetings and dueling sessions with his inner circle had dwindled.

"What you're forgetting, Antonin," chimed Lestrange. "Is that Tom enjoys his time being monopolized by Potter."

The boys didn't snigger or comment on his 'peculiar taste' this time. Thus Tom didn't refute it. He fiddled with the strap of his bag, striding ahead of them. He confessed to himself, that he was thinking of a lithe waist, broad shoulders, topped off by messy hair and crooked spectacles. There was comfort in knowing his followers were mindful of Tom's infatuation. It was as if Tom had already laid claim to Harry Potter.

The five entered the great hall and before they'd even reached the Slytherin table, Augustus Bulstrode rose, facing them. Augustus had lost heaps of weight. His skin was pallid from the weeks spent in St.Mungo's and concealing one eye, was a leather eyepatch. All that aside, he wore an elated smile on his face. Dolohov bulleted forward and barrelled into his embrace, causing Augustus to stumble back a few paces. Tom made mental note of Solis Bulstrode continuing to eat her breakfast at the Ravenclaw table, seemingly oblivious. But very much not.

"Dolohov missed borrowing his notes," said Avery, crossing his arms in an attempt to appear indifferent. "Go on," Tom told him, nodding towards their returned companion who was chatting with Dolohov. Avery blushed and greeted Bulstrode next. Mulciber and Lestrange soon followed. Tom was the last to greet him. They'd all turned to face him, and Tom had grown increasingly aware of their very public displays of affection and the stares of the student body.

"Thankyou, Tom," said Augustus. On all sides, he was surrounded by Mulciber, Dolohov, Avery, and Lestrange. The look of welcome made an odd sensation wash over Tom. Neither Mrs.Cole or Martha liked having Tom back during the summers at Wools. They tried not to make it obvious, but Tom could tell. It was discomforting to realize Bulstrode had actually missed him.

Bulstrode was so... unsuspecting. There was an expression of gratitude he hadn't had the chance to show Tom, behind hospital curtains and healers shouting at Tom and Mrs.Bulstrode to exit the room.
Tom couldn't decide if he liked it or not. Potter would say it was undeserved. But Augustus believed he owed Tom his life now, and if pureblood custom was anything to go by, Tom had a life long servant now. Potter would be infuriated.

"I wouldn't be alive, if it weren't for you," Augustus declared quietly. Tom wished that this was the talk of Hogwarts. However falsified his heroics were, it was preferable to the current gossip circulating the school.

"I only did what anyone else would do."

Tom made to shake his hand, but Bulstrode pulled him into a bone crushing hug, wrapping his arms around Tom and burrowing his chin into Tom's shoulder. Tom froze over, feeling revulsion roll down his spine at being touched so freely and casually. So nonconsentingly. "Thankyou," Bulstrode repeated. "Thankyou, Tom." It was rare in his group, that anyone hugged well... anyone. It took all his strength to not pull away. Especially when Tom began to feel the shudders racking Bulstrode's frame. Again, it was rare that anyone in his group cried. A flush enveloped Tom's face, seeing the upper years watch their interaction with warm smiles on their faces.

Harry Potter was the lone exception. He stared incredulously and his visage turned hateful at the sight of Augustus' eye patch. "You're welcome," Tom finally replied, rubbing circles along Bulstrode's back like he'd seen Martha with the younger orphans. He unrepentantly locked eyes with Harry as he did so. The reunion wasn't quite as he'd imagined.

"How is your father?" Tom inquired, relieved when Bulstrode pulled away.

"His leg is healed, bit of a limp still," Bulstrode wiped at his tearful, bloodshot eyes, reminding Tom of Billy Stubbs. It irritated Tom more than anything to make the comparison.

"That's good news," Tom lied through his teeth. Tom had sent the man a letter full of well wishes and suckarsery, along with Dolohov, Lestrange and Mulcibers signatures, in spite of himself. A connection like Bulstrode's wasn't one anyone in their right mind would want to lose. Even if he was an abominable wizard.

The conversation was cut short when a sweet, chocolate scent infiltrated the air. It was followed by the echoing, cherubic laughter that haunted Tom's waking nightmares. Tom turned stockstill, feeling as if someone had scooped him up and set him in a frying pan. The others smirked in his direction.

"And the first one arrives!" Mulciber cheered, preparing his bat. Whoops and jeers resounded throughout the hall.

The doors swung open with an explosive, ricocheting bang. Hundreds of winged, naked babies burst in, speeding around the room, dodging heads and happily squealing. Students whooped and laughed as valentine after valentine fluttered down. When a giggling cherub whizzed closer, Mulciber closed a single eye.

SPLAT! went the baby, bursting into fuschia and gold glitter, leaving behind a fluttering envelope. The note darted into Tom's hands only for Lestrange to snatch it away, ripping the valentine open and leaving shreds in his dust.

"Oh! Your first bloke of the day!" he exclaimed, while Mulciber hit cherub after cherub.
If Tom perked up, he didn't show it. "Wait- It's just Horseface Hephaestus." Lestrange's forehead creased. "Didn't know he fancied blokes. That explains the portrait he keeps of Dumbledore."

Dumbledore! Tom scowled. The fool upheld him on the same pedestal as Dumbledore?!

"Your eyes dark as a bats wings" Lestrange read off " Your vampiric air of mystery seduces me. Some nonsense about veela hair. More bats. He really likes bats. Upper body of a centaur... Sounds like Hephaestus lives a wild fantasy life, mate. I've seen Tom in the showers and sure- Tom's not bad. Rather skinny- he just looks-"

Lestrange paused midway, upon seeing the others observing him.

"Do. Go on." said Tom

"Anyway," Lestrange cleared his throat, "Anyone going to Slughorn's party tonight? You, Pascal?" Every boy present had received an invitation. Rodolphus knew this. While attendance was optional, it was unwise for the career-minded to choose otherwise. Rodolphus also knew this. The only one who wouldn't be going was Bulstrode.


The gang snickered and sat for breakfast.

As was custom since second year, cherub valentines were delivered all day. It was a tradition Dippett invented, and since then, insisted on keeping. One year, Tom had received such a heavy influx of valentines, anonymous and named alike- that it had become a running joke amongst Hogwarts students. Fourth year had been a special hell, when even the professors joined.

By mid-day, it became apparent that his fifth year would be no different.

Harry Potter might have found amusement in the towering stack of envelopes lying beside Tom's bookbag on another day. But evidently, he was determined to be offended after witnessing Bulstrode's condition. Periodically, cherubs would fly in, but Harry remained indignant. Even a valentine from Dumbledore- This one, brimming with poorly concealed, smug advice on the paths 'that which one should take' hadn't pacified him.

Harry only responded to the valentines by ignoring them or swatting them with a book titled, "Battle Magic and Common Dueling Formations." Defense was a curious, new obsession of Potter's, alongside his Menhir fixation. Tom'd let him study it, now his grades were rising and with O.W.L.S drawing closer, every subject mattered.

Tom spent most their session devising a mock exam, while Harry hid behind his DADA book. Ever so often Harry'd look up and open his mouth as if to say something self-righteous. He seemingly decided it wasn't worth it, when Tom stared into his eyes. He only wrinkled his brows and delved into the pages of his book or toyed with the stem of an orange he'd brought in, that he couldn't decide whether or not to eat.

And Tom would return to his parchment, catching sight of Potter's bitten nails, rough knuckles, and knobbly fingers. Upon the sight of them, Tom'd convince himself that his attraction was make believe. Tom hadn't the slightest clue how Harry Potter had entwined himself alongside his bedside
Tom was finishing up the Potions division of Harry's exam, when finally- finally the idiot said what he wanted to say.

"You took the eye out of Bulstrode."

Tom paused, his quill hovering over his parchment. Well, at least he'd stopped convincing himself there was a sliver of innocence inside Tom since the prior week. Tom would be tolerating zero delusions from him.

"No," he replied. He could hear the mirth in his own voice and savored the flare of nostrils it garnered. "Haluk, the muggle, did." It was Angus Bulstrode's decision to implement magic laced arrows anyway.

"You imperio-ed him!" Harry brayed. Tom stilled, seeing a nearby fourth year walk past, wondering what she'd heard. She only rolled her eyes at Harry.

"Be thankful I didn't kill him," Tom grouched after the girl had passed.

"That's not the point- it... him... his eye!" The Gryffindor threw his hands up in a gesture of disbelief. "Myrtle saw him walk into a pillar for crying out loud, he apologized to it."

"He'll have a replacement come summer."

"He'll be traumatized!"

Tom stared at the other boy long and hard. Was Harry for real? Augustus-by-the-way-I've-killed-men-Bulstrode... traumatized? Augustus had to sit through having Angus for a father for 15 1/2 years of his life. He was a hardened survivor as far as Tom was concerned. Augustus wasn't even in pieces. Perhaps a bit too grateful for Tom's tastes, but he wasn't some weakling, falling apart at the seams. Even if he had cried a bit too much.

"You don't know Augustus, Harry. I have almost five years on you in that area of expertise."
Augustus rewore his dirty socks and everyone knew it, but he still hid in the bathroom to fart. Solis Bulstrode would be impregnated any day now but he was still too shy to tell Dolohov what sex with women felt like, thus leaving Lestrange to make up extravagant lies about teeth and a burning sensation that he partially believed himself. And Mulciber to smirkingly and knowingly embellish upon them. Last but not least, having been raised in a home embellished with dismembered heads... the definition of humanity was very, very flexible to Bulstrode.

"It's not about knowing him. It's you committing the act itself. It's your complete lack of remorse-

"I'm really enjoying this dynamic we have going, Harry. I teach you the entire sixth year syllabus. Correct your spelling errors, and completely rewrite your essays. And you... you give me a good, hard lesson in ethics. Morality. Other things I haven't really requested or really want." Tom bit his lower lip. "Well. At least you're decent to look at. Yes, quite pleasing to the eye."

"And you don't care!" replied Harry, blatantly ignoring Tom's come on. Tom's only consolation was the lovely strawberry shade of his ears.

"You don't care whether Augustus deserved it."

Frankly, as pretty as Harry looked when in the thralls of another sanctimonious tirade, it got old. Quickly. And Tom was beginning to feel that it was just a little iniquitous. Harry didn't know that Tom had spent an evening puking on the perfect, expensive floor of the Bulstrode manor. He didn't know that the Bulstrode's had grossly endangered his life and spent nearly a week humiliating and devaluing him. He didn't seem to care either, why revenge might sometimes be necessary.

"What? A kid loses an eye and that's proper grounds to pity him and villainize me? Pfft," Tom returned to the mock exam, rolling his eyes. "Last week you were convincing yourself I have a heart, now I'm the dark lord Grindelwald himself." Flipping a page, with much finality, Tom added: "Nothing is ever as black and white as you give it credit for, Potter."

"Has it never occurred to you that sometimes people do awful fucking shit and that if everyone, but especially, sick fucks like yourself... took justice into their own hands, noone would be content ever and people could be doing a lot worse to you than they already have?" Harry suggested frostily.

"But that's not our reality. And that leaves me to take advantage of that."

Out his peripheral view, Tom suspected he might've seen a vein pop from Harry's head. He could hear the boy exhale, about to respond- some passionate argument on the tip of Harry's tongue, when pecking began at a nearby window. Unceasingly, a Barn owl balanced on the outside ledge of the castle and woodpeckered at the window, fluttering it's wings. The both of them stared until Tom remembered a Borgin and Burkes order set to arrive the very same day as Bulstrode.

His parcel!

"I've had it with these bloody valentines!" Harry exclaimed, swinging at the next cherub to fly in while Tom hurried to the window, unlatching it. Tom unsealed the window and the owl breezed in, until it rested on the back of Tom's chair. It stuck a leg out, the weight-reduced parcel attached.

With fervor, Tom rushed to untie it, while Harry gaped. His fingers slipped and slid in his earnestness. Tom had desperately wished to purchase 'Magick Moste Evile' since he'd seen it on display in Borgin and Burkes as a second year. No amount of muggle money he'd stolen or earned could match it's wizarding pricepoint. Until now.

It's value lied in its detailed explanations of inferi creation, basilisk hatching, regeneration potions, the
drink of despair- but most of all, for it's outlandish claims of instructions on cheating death.

Tom had to have it.

And now, unbelievably, it was in his hands.

Tom didn't care about Harry's scrutinizing stare. He only tore it's coverings off and flipped through it recklessly.

"What is that?" questioned Harry. Tom took a seat, continuing to flip through it, while the owl left out the same window from which it came from. He searched fruitlessly for the horcrux chapters.

"At this point in time?" Tom said, looking up. Harry wore a concerned frown, and was gazing at the book with a kind of intensity he usually reserved for the back of Tom's head. "This was my life's goal," Tom confessed.

"Really?" Harry said in a low voice. There was a lilt at the end of the word that told Tom something quite wasn't right, that perhaps... he shouldn't have said that. Tom ignored the gut sensation in favor of his book.

He turned to the index, trailing his finger along the table of contents.

"You're really comfortable with me now, aren't you? Too fucking comfortable," said Harry.

"Completely," Tom admitted indifferently, flipping to page 452. He'd discovered how convenient it felt to be his unaltered self. Tom wasn't going back now.

Tom could feel waves of rage emanating from Harry, but couldn't bring himself to care.

"Should I return to your mock exam? Dolohov's been wanting to give you an intense divination run through," Tom suggested, even as he flipped closer and closer to his destination.

He looked up to discover a distressed Potter- leaning back in his chair, muttering under his breath and running his hand through his hair. He acted as if at any moment, he might jump onto their shared table, pound his chest and howl.

Tom wasn't that far off. Potter shot up in his seat, coming to a decision.

"You're NOT researching horcruxes!" Harry snapped.

"Going to stop me, are you, Potter?" Tom grumbled, just a tad surprised he'd jumped so readily to the correct conclusion. Harry seemed to know everything sometimes.

Harry stared, seemingly mulling over his thoughts. Tom used the moment of weakness to apply his legilimancy, but he'd only managed to gather what was already obvious. Harry was outraged.

And then Harry turned towards the orange he'd left to his right. Harry nimbly picked it up, rolling it around in his palm and continuing to stare at Tom. Tom might admit one day that it was actually intimidating. Harry inhaled, exhaled, throwing the orange in the air. He treated it much like he would a snitch. Tossing it, catching it. Over and over again. Tom wouldn't tear his eyes away, even if something about the situation made him want to.

Evidently Harry'd come to a decision when he set his orange down again, looking straight lipped at Tom.
Unexpectedly, Harry grabbed the quill from Tom's own inkpot. Before Tom could question anything, Harry had begun etching the initials T.M.R. into his citrus.

"What are you doing, Potter?" Tom couldn't squash his curiosity, watching the boy puncture and carve the letters, viciously stabbing it and spreading it's scent through the air. By now, Tom's attention had been thoroughly diverted from his cherished tome.

"I'm teaching you a lesson..." Harry replied, a thoughtful expression across his face. "Just like you said, in ethics...morality. In the only way I know how. And the least violent one I can think of." Tom wondered then, whether if Harry hadn't been under threat of expulsion, he might be throwing that orange at Tom's face.

Harry raised the finished orange, turning the marked side towards Tom.

"Tom," he began "This is Tom Riddle, the orange. Say hullo, Tom." Tom did not greet the orange. He stared at the Gryffindor blankly.

"Every time I think your foolery no longer mystifies me-"

But Harry cut him off. He'd turned towards the orange.

"Say hi, Tom Riddle, the orange," he demanded of the fruit. Tom felt like he was in the kind of dream Dolohov might claim was prophetic.

He especially felt this way, when with a higher pitched voice, Potter responded to himself. "Hi, Tom Riddle the Orange."

"No," Harry again said in his usual pitch. "Say hullo to Tom!"

He turned the orange's marred face towards Tom. "Oh. Hullo Tom!" said the orange.

Harry looked at the citrus. "Would you like know something about Tom?"

"What?" Harry replied to himself in that same childish voice.

"He's been a bad boy."

Tom's soul exited his body. He watched the obnoxious display, feeling increasingly like a fly on the wall.

"An awful boy, frankly."

"Really? How?"

"He's studying legilimancy, torturing his friends. Literally took the eye out of Bulstrode. Oh. you should have heard what he told me the other day..."

"What was that?"

"He'd claimed to have tortured me! To have erased my memory!"

The orange gasped. "How provocative!"
"Right? You'd think I've never been threatened before in my life by the way he speaks to me. Always attempting to shock me... Until now, I'd tolerated it at best. Might have tossed a few books out windows, directly sabotaged his library searches... Er...Assaulted him. Necessary evils, you know how it is. But now... Now things are different. Now he's researching horcruxes," Harry continued to speak to the piece of fruit, appearing more than ever, like the madman he pretended to be. "So. I've about lost it."

"What's a horcrux?" inquired the orange.

"Don't you know? Horcruxes are dark magic for pathetic, vile cowards that want to live forever,"

"Blimey! He is a bad boy" exclaimed the orange. Harry even bobbed his wrist, causing the fruit to make a nodding motion. It was astonishing how Harry could put on such a ridiculous act and still find a way to make Tom feel like the fool in the equation.

"Potter..." Tom couldn't stomach it any longer. He felt a headache coming on at the base of his temples.

"But it's okay!" Potter told the orange. "Because I'm watching him- and do you know what I do to evil, little gits that make horcruxes?"

"Potter!"

Harry refused to acknowledge him.

"What?" squeaked the orange. The forced smile Harry'd worn throughout the interaction slid from his face. He looked as murderous as he had when throwing it in the air. Harry set the orange on the table, meeting Tom's eyes. He stood up, even taking the effort to tuck his chair back beneath the table.

Swiftly, Harry's hand shot out, grabbing "Magick Moste Evile" from beside Tom's inkpot. Tom was stationary. As usual, Harry was unnervingly fast.

Harry raised the book in the air.

Time seemed to stop. Tom held his breath. He slipped his hand into the pocket of his robes, desperately scavenging for his wand.

It was too late.

Harry SLAMMED it's binding down on the orange. In fact, he slammed the orange repeatedly. Again and again he smashed the book onto the citrus with such force it rocked their table and blew Tom's fringe back. The silence of the library was stifling compared to the echoing of Potter's lone, enraged hammering. BAM! BAM! BAM! His entire face turned red and he'd broken a sweat as he defiled Tom's book, gradually transforming the orange into a sad glob of pulp.

Tom could only sit and watch in shock.

With a heavy pant, Potter finished, and dropped the tome onto the table, standing and scowling at Tom. He didn't take his eyes off Tom. Open-mouthed, his chest rose and deflated as he caught his breath. Tom was struck still by the cherry red of his lips, and the flush slowly diminishing from his cheeks.

"That is what I do to them," said Potter.
It belatedly dawned on Tom then, that in a rare show of teenage hormones, his trousers had tented.

Heat pooling in his groin, Tom felt as if he could burst through them, imagined his zipper popping open and his button springing off and bouncing off Potter's forehead. No such thing occurred. He bore his humiliation in silence.

He should've been furious at the state of his book. Instead, he was dawdling over how best to hide his arousal- attempting to remember spells Mulciber regularly employed. Potter inhaled, appearing to calm down at once. He almost looked regretful. Until he bent down and retrieved Tom's book. Alongside his bag. Which he was haphazardly shoving the tome into.

"Potter, you are not taking my book." Tom said, stupefied, shifting in his seat to ease the throbbing of his crotch. It was a disgustingly helpless situation, having to determine whether it was worth standing up. "I won't let you do this, Riddle," Harry replied. "I'm keeping this." With that, he left the library, before Madame Quincy shortly arrived.

That might've been the point at which Tom would ordinarily go berserk. Harry had just stolen his most expensive possession in broad daylight right after defacing it. But clearly, his body had a mind of its own, and now there were more pressing matters.

Tom was so weak.

It took time for Tom's fury to build up. He spent his afternoon in a daze, flicking through his diary (in particularly the pages Harry had dogeared) and watching Lestrange and Avery sort through dress robes for the slug party before it hit him. Rodolphus had been thrilled to have received his first (and only) valentine. He wouldn't stop discussing it. Tom was in another universe entirely. Ever so often, Tom would recall a red face and a panting, open mouth and feel his face bloom red. From anger, embarrassment, or hormones, Tom couldn't discern between them.

Molgiber bringing an orange into their shared dormitory was when Tom abruptly lost his even temperament. There was this godawful moment where Tom laid eyes on it's textured peel, and genuinely wondered if his trousers might tighten again. Feeling as if he’d lost all sense of control, Tom bounded off his bed, tossed his journal aside, snatched the orange out of Julius' palm and hurled it into the nearest fireplace. Their dormitory fire roared and sizzled with the added kindle.

"NEVER!" Tom began ragefully, pointing at the fireplace while the others gawked at him, unaccustomed to this violent, rageful Tom. "NEVER," he repeated, "BRING AN ORANGE. IN. HERE..." His arm trembled with the suppressed fury. His eyes wide and mad. He'd curled his upper lip, snarling viciously at Julius. "AGAIN!!!!!!" he finished explosively. In a bout of emotion driven magic, Dolohov’s nearby bed collapsed in on itself, looking as if it were trying to hide and the dress robes in Avery's hands ripped themselves into shreds.

Avery dropped their remains, pouting.

Molgiber only blinked at Tom.
"Moody," he said.

Unfazed, Julius pulled another orange out his robes and swaggered past him, twirling his bat in the other hand while Lestrange keeled over from the weight of his own cackles.

"Last one," He waved the fruit. "I promise. Never again. I need sustenance, y'know. Spent half the day fighting these valentines off." Mulciber collapsed onto his duvet and took a large bite out his orange. With the peel on. "Couldn't even find the time to send one to Professor Merrythought," he garbled through a mouthful of orange.

A cherub abruptly flying in and belching out a pink, heart shaped valentine that smacked Tom right in the face only made it that much worse.

Tom resigned himself to furiously sitting in bed, drawing the curtains, lighting a lumos, vowing to make use of an unforgiveable or two, and as Lestrange occasionally referred to it: writing his feelings.

Tom consoled himself with the fact that, that very night, his plan would set into motion.

Bulstrode, "Recuperating" from his time spent in St.Mungoes would imperio Diggory. More from the imperius Tom had cast, than from his own volition. Diggory would enter the fourth floor lavatory. All the while Tom would have the perfect alibi- being caught up in Slughorn's Valentine's celebration

And from there, well... things would get interesting to say the least.

The goblets being passed around on a floating tray employed favrile glass. It gave them an iridescent shine that drew Tom's eyes more than the firewhiskey splooshing around in them. So much so that Tom considered discreetly slipping one inside his robes, after spilling it's contents into Slughorn's decorative, agapanthus pot. Tom couldn't find the chance.

Warbeck and Madame Bletchley blasted out the horn of Slughorn's gramophone. The swing music and crowding of guests disguised Harry Potter's arrival. But Tom saw. Even with Lestrange keeping him amused with small talk and gossip. Harry scurried through the orange curtains hung over Slughorn's archway, following Malfoy, who without fail, attended every slug party. He loved to remind anyone that would hear it, that he was a Malfoy. But Harry most definitely wasn't invited. Tom did not speak to him, though Tom knew if he ever wished to recover his book, measures would need to be taken. He clenched his glass, examining the orange curtains of the entry way and shuddering. Orange, orange everywhere.

Fortunately, Slughorn distracted Tom.

"Tom! M'boy!" Slughorn waddled up to him with a heavy set, elderly woman in tow. Slughorn's voice overpowered the surrounding noise, and guests turned their heads in Tom's direction. In particularly Potter, whom not so discreetly edged closer, dragging Malfoy along with him. With a
crease between his brows, he was staring avidly at the back of the elderly woman's ginger wig as if he recognized it. Or perhaps he was only admiring it. You never could tell with Potter.

"Good evening, Horace." Tom greeted his head of house. "Fantastic party, might I add."

"I cannot tell you how long I've waited to acquaint you with Ms. Smith," Slughorn gushed. "We met through a mutual friend of ours, Aggripina Crouch. Head of the department of magical finance. I'm sure you've heard of her. How long ago was it, you'd say, dear Hepzy?"

"Oh, it must be nine or some years now?" The witch fluttered her eyelashes, holding her hand out towards Tom. "Hepzibah Smith,"

"Tom Riddle," Tom replied, grabbing her hand and robotically kissing it's back. There was a revolting gleam in her eye that made Tom swallow. Tom wasn't one to trust anyone, but rarely did he come across anyone that stirred instant hatred either. Everyone had their uses at some point or another. Or so he told himself, staring down at the woman's orange, velveteen robes. Being desired was commonplace for Tom. Being desired by a leather-faced woman who undoubtedly looked as if she had enough money to buy him and as if she'd very much like to try...

Less so.

"Might I say... you look dazzling in those robes," Tom finished, smiling graciously at her. She looked like the glob of orange pulp Potter had left behind.

"Hepzibah is a descendant of Helga Hufflepuff." Such simple words immediately enlivened Tom's impression. Hepzibah beamed proudly, and turning to the nearest tray, she grabbed a goblet. Horace Slughorn used that moment to mouth the words, "Very, Very wealthy". If the raise of Slughorn's untrimmed eyebrows didn't send the message, the jewelry covering Hepzibah's swollen fingers did. "She's the largest collector of wizarding antiques in the whole of Western Europe. Impressive, isn't it?" Tom nodded along, giving the man the validation he so coveted. "And Tom has a certain affinity for relics of the past, himself."

"Horace tells me, you'll be competing in the E.T.T" said Hepzibah after taking a long sip of her mulberry wine.

Summer was a ways away, but everyone continued to remind Tom of it.

Slughorn wrapped an arm around Tom's shoulders. It made for an awkward gesture, now that Tom was nearly a head taller than him. Tom looked down, making note of the professor balancing on the toes of his feet. "He'll be the youngest competitor in a century, and the only non-pureblood, well... ever! Fantastic, isn't it? He'll go far, this boy!" Like a buffoon, Horace had taken to reminding Tom that virtually everyone knew his blood status now- in some awful attempt to assure Tom, that he didn't care whether someone was a mudblood.

Hepzibah giggled and clapped and Slughorn continued, "Though I admit, I was surprised when he asked me to sponsor him. Always struck me as a defense kinda lad! Always claims to love potions- but it's clear which he prefers!" Slughorn winked, "I don't mind, you know."

Admittedly, Tom did prefer defense. But DADA tournaments weren't lining up with exorbitant prizes like transfiguration was. The best anyone would get from entering a defense competition was a one way ticket through the Ministry's auror program. Tom could gag.

"It's rather dangerous now isn't it? In light of Bordeaux and all..." Hepzibah suggested heavily
"Yes," Slughorn replied gravely. "I've heard from my former student, Marie MacDougal, a very accomplished transfigurations sorceress mind you, that the organizers are unable to change the location. It's all very unfortunate, but I think we'll manage, won't we Tom?"

If it wasn't cancelled. And Tom suspected the coward was already attempting to find someone to attend on his behalf. But Tom didn't say that.

"Undoubtedly," Tom replied. From behind Hepzibah, Harry Potter and Abraxas Malfoy hovered, with their ears turned towards the conversation. His utter shamelessness still astounded Tom.

"Speaking of unfortunate, have you heard about Chet Wakefield," the witch gossiped. Tom scavenged his memories, recalling an up and coming crystal ball diviner Dolohov had become rather fond of. "He'll become level with the great three!" he'd spent most of fourth year exclaiming.

"A certain... friend of mine reads his book," Tom replied. "Big fan of diviners." His eyes again, caught onto Potter, who listened closely. He and Malfoy were at such an angle, that Tom was the only one to notice.

"What of Wakefield?" the straw-haired professor inquired. "Last I taught him, it was 1935. Wasn't the best student, nor from a superior background, so unfortunately he never qualified for any slug parties. I admit now, that if I'd known then what he'd be, perhaps he'd be on my wall now." Slughorn nodded towards the leftmost wall of the chamber, where if anyone looked, they'd discover a photograph of Tom, Slughorn had hung amongst others. It was a pre-celebration for the transfiguration tournament and a rather awful picture that Mulciber snickered at whenever he passed it.

Hepzibah's eyes bulged.

"You mean, you haven't heard? Well. I can't blame you, Riddle. But an influencer like yourself, Horace?"

Slughorn pinkened, mumbling something or other about the bustling, industrious life of a professor until Hepzibah waved a hand.

"No matter! The news won't be breaking till tomorrow morning,"

Salazar's balls, woman. Why couldn't she get to the point?

"You know what? I ought to invite him to a slug party. Decent fellow, He wouldn't hold a grudge," Horace muttered. "So, what've you heard, Hepzy?"

"Well," Hepzibah's groomed eyebrows twisted. "Well, you can't now."

"Why would that be?"

"Well. Because Miriam Sprout discovered him floating in The Severn river. Oh it was just terrible, she said-"The woman continued while Slughorn and Tom grew dead silent.

Not because the woman had broken the news of a tragic death.
Nor was that the reason Harry Potter, Abraxas Malfoy and nearby party dwellers held their breath.

No.

The few surrounding guests had only grown quiet because a beachball sized spider had suddenly appeared in their line of vision.

Gradually, an acromantula descended from the arched ceiling. It hung on it's silk until it was curled a mere foot above Hepzibah's head, flexing it's pincers. Venom collected at it's tips, looking as if at any moment it might drip onto the witch. Tom suppressed a shiver at the sight of it's black, hairy legs.

Tom's first thought was to look at Harry, who was watching the scene, looking more irate than he was terrified. Like this was just the cherry on top of an awful day. It was as if somebody had pissed in his pumpkin juice rather than there being a universally banned, flesh-eating, venomous monster in the room with them.

"N-now," Slughorn trembled, "Hepzibah, There is something I... I must do." The potions masters withdrew his wand. It was a brave act on his part, but Hepzibah only regarded him with shock as he raised it towards her. "Now. you must not look up-" said Horace.

Harry groaned and Tom silently agreed. It was the worst thing the professor could have possibly said.

Hepzibah fluttered her lashes.

"Well, why ever so?" She made to tilt her head up and Slughorn, Malfoy, and Harry bellowed in unison:

"NO!"

"Really now?" she blinked at them, unimpressed. It was only a moment's distraction. Again, she craned her neck.

"NO!"

And again, they foolishly shouted.

The acromantula had dropped another inch and by now, their shouting had garnered the attention of surrounding guests. At once, partygoers became aware of the half-grown, gargantuan spider hanging from the ceiling.

Screaming and dramatics ensued.

"Merlin's great, sweaty arse!" someone roared. Cassius Selwyn tripped and fell, tumbling along with the main editor of the Daily Prophet. Dolohov, whom was midway through a party trick with his wand, unintentionally set a Wizengamot member's robes ablaze upon the sight of the acromantula. Lestrange let out an ear-splitting, girlish shriek that put the one he'd released that same morning to utter shame. Soon, the Wizengamot member's lit robes transferred to a nearby b-list diviner. Guests were stop drop rolling while others poured their goblets of mulberry wine onto them, only thinking to
flourish their wands until a minute later. All the while others caused a jam at the archway in their frantic attempts to flee. Abraxas Malfoy shortly abandoned Potter and was at the forefront, kicking and elbowing folk side in his efforts to pave a way through. One wizard courageously withdrew his wand, brandishing it at the creature... until he fainted, falling into the arms of another wizard.

Slughorn's attention was diverted from Hepzibah and towards appeasing the crowd, leaving the acromantula to the two teenagers. Tom had half a mind he'd been looking for a reason to desert them.

"NOW, NOW!" Slughorn screamed at the other end of the room while Professor Kaddlewack ran past, crying, and smelling faintly of urine. "Let's all stay calm, everyone!" He raised his arms, but noone paid the least bit of attention to him, except for a fourth year, who burst into tears.

"What? What is it?" Hepzibah repeated, peering around, utterly clueless. Venom dripped onto her shoulder.

Potter had had enough of the chaos, and the useless patrons surrounding him. He withdrew his wand and shouted at the top of his lungs:
"ARANIA EXUMAI!"

A white light shot out of Potter's wand.

The spider zipwired up it's silk, narrowly dodging the spell.


Harry was too busy minding the spider.

"Aragog! Get down!" he hissed quietly.

What? Why... that wasn't a spell. Tom would say it was a name.

Hepzibah's shrieks rivaled a banshee. Tom cringed when the spider jumped on her face.

"HELP! HELP!" the witch cried.

"I'm trying!" snarled Potter. He shot a stunning spell which the spider minutely avoided by crawling to the back of Hepzibah's head. Instead, the stupefy hit Hepzibah, whose eyes rolled up in their sockets. She passed out. "ARAGOG!" Harry roared, momentarily silencing the crowd, save for some remaining whimpers. At that moment, Hepzibah fell backwards, right onto her back. Potter barely cast a cushioning charm in time and the acromantula, seemingly made of steel, crawled out from underneath her and onto her belly.

Tom watched, entertained, wishing he'd had something to drink, and doing absolutely nothing to help. So long as the spider's attention was on Hepzibah, clearly Potter was the man for the job.

"Arania Exumai!" Harry repeated, this time, meeting his mark. The acromantula fell off of Hepzibah. Stunned, it's eight legs trembled, and it scampered for the crowd blocking the entrance. Screams resumed as guests dove aside. Within seconds the jam at the archway to the party dispersed, leaving a wide, open space. The acromantula skittered to the entrance, looked back at Harry once, before
turning right and down the corridor.

Guests held their hands to their chests and over their mouths, breathing heavily or hyperventilating. The noise of the chamber descended to a lull. And then, guests began to look at Harry, narrowing their eyes and scrutinizing him. After surveying his surroundings, Harry simply fled the room, twisting down the same corridor the acromantula had. He gave no notice to the crowd of suspicious witnesses he left in his dust.

Mulciber, Lestrange, and Dolohov had all turned their gaze towards Tom. They communicated a single, unexpressed thought.

"Someone floo call the aurors," a nearby witch haughtily demanded while Slughorn instructed the guests to remain in the room. While the crowd searched for floo powder, Tom looked at the archway, and promptly sped out.

"YOU HAVE A BLOODY ACROMANTULA?!!" Tom thundered. It was irrational, but he couldn't help but feel betrayed. Perhaps by his own legilimancy, perhaps because Warren and Malfoy's minds hadn't yielded such a crucial fact, and perhaps because it was no use looking into a magic-immune Hagrid's brain. It felt hypocritical for Harry to scold Tom on the dark arts, while meanwhile rearing a deadly spider.

Up ahead, Potter's footsteps echoed. The spider was long out of sight, but Potter was wand ready as he trodded. Tom's shout fell on deaf ears.

"Answer me!" Tom sped up, pursuing the Gryffindor.

"Would you for once, mind your own fucking business!!" Potter exclaimed, striding faster and disregarding the irony of demanding someone mind their own business, when he'd spent the better half of the night eavesdropping on them.

"You first, then!!" Tom had caught up, a mere meter behind him now.

Grabbing Harry by the shoulder, the sixth year turned on his heel, scowling crossly at him.

"Not now, Tom!" he hissed.

"I'll help you," Tom suggested. Potter looked like he didn't know whether to laugh or to scold him.

The both of them stood beneath a hanging lantern, which cast an orange glow on Harry, a shine on his unapologetic hair, and a long shadow behind him. Tom was stuck on the glimmer of determination in his eyes.

"Go to Slughorn's," replied Harry.

"I won't."
"Go-" Harry halted midway, detecting something. Tom listened closely to the night air, eyes never leaving his face while Harry inspected the floor between them. Between them, a line of spiders was trailing out from the cracks of the wall, all the way to the opposite wall. Spider after spider skittered past.

Spiders was a fantastic sign, Tom thought. The basilisk terrified spiders.

"Spiders," said Harry. There was a critical sneer on his face. Along the crevice where ceiling met wall, hordes of them traveled. It was a nightmarish sight. Tom watched in fascination, before lifting his leg, stamping down, and killing a large group in one blow. Tom scraped the toe of his shoe on the stone, savoring the catharticism of the act while the survivors scurried faster and looped around the group of deceased.

"That's why... That's why Aragog..." Harry trailed off and stopped. "You've really done it now, haven't you?" He abruptly hissed.

"Did I murder your parents again? My apologies."

Tom's comeback fell flat. Potter took off down the corridor, his robes billowing behind him. Tom had no choice but to follow as Harry strode with as much purpose as he had searching for his acromantula.

Tom was not sure whether it was pure coincidence when following Harry up a flight of stairs, that the scene of the crime was only three corridors away.

Right, Right, Left. Harry took steep, deliberate turns that had Tom's curiosity teeming. How did he know?

They weren't far off from Azrel Diggory's body when Tom heard the basilisk hissing through the wall from his left. It was the same eat, kill, destroy rhetoric she always echoed. 1,000 years in a bewitched sleep could make one very hungry, and very mad. There was this second where Harry tripped and stumbled seemingly directly after the basilisks voice reverberated through the wall. Where he stopped, and twitched. And it made Tom wonder and suspect. But he didn't get the chance to mull it over until moments later.

Harry broke into a jog, and Tom unquestioningly followed, watching his back unblinkingly.

Harry rounded the corner, clamorous footsteps punctuating the basilisks hissing. Harry skidded to an abrupt stop, Tom following soon after. Harry stiffened upon the sight, standing rigid.

It was a wondrous picture. At the T-shaped intersection where corridor met corridor, not far from the lavatory Harry had so desperately protected, there Harry's swamp laid. It filled the depths of the hall across them, unobstructed. Quiet. Murky. The moonlight filtering in from the right made the sight of Azrel Diggory's floating, petrified body that much more haunting.

Tom had to admit, it was a sight to behold.

Along the left wall, in chicken's blood, shortly before the basilisk arrived to petrify him, an imperiused Azrel Diggory had painted the words:

"The Chamber of Secrets has been opened, enemies of the heir beware," Harry read off.
Besides the swamp, and Diggory’s blue, drifting body— he didn’t seem remotely surprised at the coagulated red of chicken blood decorating the walls or the threats the words implied.

Tom hadn't envisioned Harry would discover what use Tom had really put his swamp to this soon. But he wasn't disappointed by the horrified expression painting Harry’s visage. It'd been Tom’s own little twist to implement the very thing Harry used to prevent Tom and weave it to his own devices. Moreover, Tom couldn’t think of a better smack to the face for Rancorous Carpe than to reerect the same swamp the custodian claimed to demolish. That would teach him to take credit for another's work. What would become of the squib’s golden plaque now?

With most the student body in bed, Tom had intended the first viewing for Slughorn’s plastered, knackered guests. But he supposed he could make an exception for Harry Potter. Everyone was either asleep, or stuck in Slughorn's chamber, trembling and soiling themselves over the sight of an acromantula. Which- Tom was becoming astutely aware, meant that he had Harry Potter all to himself.

"At least you're consistent," muttered Harry. "And, Dolohov? Mulciber? You told me they had the swamp."

Tom shrugged and edged closer until the two stood shoulder to shoulder, beholding the dramatic sight.

"What are they going to think?" spat the bespectacled boy

"He's petrified, not dead, Harry. My companions are loyal. They'll think Azrel deserved his punishment. Know he deserved it."

"Why a pureblood like Azrel Diggory?" asked Harry, wrinkling his nose.

"He opened his mouth."

"Ah. I forgot. You care a lot for your reputation."

"And yourself... Not enough."

An unspoken moment passed, where they stared at each other, Tom concealing the catching of his breath and Potter— visibly trembling, the muscle in his jaw twinging as he clenched his teeth. Thus, Tom began:

"We both know by now that I'm attracted to you, Harry." Harry was an awful distraction, and one that Tom knew he needed to expel from his system. Harry blanched at the confession, taken aback. But before Tom could acknowledge it any further, Tom wanted to confirm something. Something that might change everything. Something that might explain the simultaneous flinches with the serpentine hissing concealed behind the castle wall. Something that would explain why, rather than how Harry Potter knew of the Chamber of Secrets. Though even then, Tom understood that if he received an answer, it might only leave him with more questions than he already possessed.

Tom remembered a great, grand hall inside of a broom closet.
“So, why did the sorting hat want you for Slytherin?”

“Oh. Plenty of reasons. Probably because I’m a parselmouth.”

The words parroted in Tom’s mind over and over and over.

If Tom was correct, then he’d been played for a fool.

"Between you and the Bulstrode's, I never asked you, just how is it, that you knew where the Chamber of Secrets was?"

Harry laughed nervously at Tom's statement, utterly oblivious to the swarm of questions circling the younger boys mind.

"I've no idea what you're on about."

But. If Tom was correct, then he'd be vindicated. His moods, the way he was riddled with hormones, his mind-numbing attaction- All of which he'd silently, and stubbornly acknowledged, would have reason, beyond his body just desperately and humiliatingly yearning for something.

"I think... That you're a parselmouth," said Tom, admiring Azrel's drifting form. It was a purposeful sentence, that if one took the time to pay attention to- they might notice something odd. Harry did not. Tom smirked at the echoing of Potter's laughter, much like the laughter he'd assumed when Tom had first approached him about the Chamber. It was a shrewd, derisive laugh. Potter was stupid. Ridiculously stupid.

"Grindelwald's servant, parselmouth..." Harry listed off, "What next? Mass murdering house elf?"

Tom nodded along, suppressing a smile and holding his hands behind his back.

"You perceive me as everything but what I actually am," said Harry, shaking his head.

"I suppose I can be wrong," Tom replied. "Once in a blue moon."

"So you admit it?" Harry's eyes lit up.

"I surrender," Tom conceded, and mockingly mimicked waving a tiny, white flag with one hand. It was a subtle movement, but it caught Harry's eyes, properly distracting him. "There's just one minuscule problem, Potter."

"And that would be...?"

"Well," began Tom. "If you're not a parselmouth, how are you understanding me right now?"


Tom turned to face the other boy. A smirk plastered to his face, he began, this time in English:

"Such is the nature of a natural born parseltongue. So easy it is to forget that what you hear is not
English at all."

Harry stared gobsmacked at him, an expression of horror glued to his features.

"Do you hear her, Harry? The basilisk?"

This. This was why Tom was obsessed.

Tom had been played for a fool. Harry Potter was without question a Parselmouth. Tom knew. Potter knew that he knew. And while the whole concept intrigued Tom, it noticeably terrified Potter.

It was then that Tom made the decision to ignore the deck of cards serving him a martyr, a celebrity and a hero. Tom preferred what he had now. Preferred an angry, mulish boy... who had more purpose than sense of what to do with it, more knowledge than he let on. Who knew Tom, and rightfully, might've feared him. But usually chose not to.

Harry Potter was Tom's and Tom's alone.

Tom shifted closer, noting how Harry only backed away with each step.

"Back off," said Harry, as Tom drew nearer, step by step. The atmosphere grew heavier, and the two forgot all about over-sized spiders and Azrel Diggory's floating, petrified body. Fantastic intuition, Harry sensed the change in Tom almost immediately.

"We're more alike than I ever gave you credit for." Tom's footsteps echoed rhythmically. Harry's scraped and skittered as he backed away and recoiled.

Whether it was Tom words, his burning gaze, or how close their bodies suddenly were, Tom didn't know. Tom didn't want to know either. He looked into Harry's bespectacled eyes and spared him that last shred of autonomy. He relished the way Potter kept him guessing.

"No."

"A half-blood... A parslemouth. What else are you hiding from me?" Tom was riveted.

It was like in the forest. But this time Potter wouldn't apparate, and Potter wouldn't escape. By now, Tom had him backed against the wall, the swamp laid only feet away.

"Relax," said Tom, trapping him between his arms. "I won't hurt you."

Harry didn't look comforted in the least. He'd clearly realized the vulnerable position he was in, but he'd chosen to ignore it. Tom shifted his lower half closer- and he could feel Harry's thighs softly quivering. He dared him to run, to kick, to punch, to fight. Harry did nothing.

Tom gave him one last moment to say "No," "Don't" "Stop." Tom couldn't imagine himself heeding to such demands. A sick part of him only wanted to hear them. But just like he said, Potter never begged, never pleaded.

Tom reached down, with one hand, grabbing Harry by the wrist. He splayed the older boy's hand
open, displaying his palm. He was reminded of one of Dolohov's lectures on beginner palm-reading, but all of that could be forgotten when he felt Potter's breath fanning against his cheek and traced the lines of his palms. Potter seemed to be frozen in thought, unable to respond. A feeling of unfamiliarity and dissonance fell over Tom, feeling Harry's hand then. Like the muggle begging for his life, Tom was suddenly struck by how alive Harry was. That if he traced his thumb along his wrist, he might feel his pulse thrum. Tom had felt it once before, feeling Nagini slither beneath his pillow on a cold, winter night and tracing the tips of his fingers along her smooth scales, and reveling in how something so small could be living and breathing.

"Do you recall when we first met?" Tom asked out the blue, continuing to hold his hand. He recalled it vividly. Especially now, when staring down at Harry's shaking form and feeling the sweat forming between his fingers.

"In the library, you pressed the point of your wand against the back of my neck. Everyone was speechless. I thought Avery might soil himself." At the time, Tom could only shift in his seat until he was nose to wand. "I remember looking into your eyes for the first time." Tom couldn't see much. The reflection from the window light had properly obscured Harry Potter's pupil's. But Harry had radiated a kind of anger Tom had never felt before. "You were shaking as you were now. You couldn't even hold your wand straight. You looked- I admit I thought at the time- As if you wished to kill me. But Dippett came rushing in," He'd apologized and mumbled something or other about a new student. "Said you were new."

Tom had let it go then, when in the weeks after, everyone became convinced that Harry Potter was mad.

"I brushed it off. Harry Potter's only daft. But... Looking at you now, it's different isn't it?"

Tom released his hand, bent over the older boy, and cupped his jaw. If he'd paid attention he might notice the clenching of Harry's eyes and the familiar manner in which Potter stubbornly sealed his lips. All Tom saw was cherry red and the same form of pure desperation coursing through his blood.

Tom smashed his mouth against Harry's.

A muffled "mffgh!" followed and a weak press of palms against his shoulders. Tom continued to forcefully kiss him, holding his face between his palms. It was a frigid February. The middle of the night.Tom hadn't applied warming charms inside his dress robes and rightfully should have been shivering. Instead, he was bursting hot, could feel the blush on his cheeks encompassing his whole body. With practiced ease, he coerced Harry's lips apart, and between the thumb and forefinger of a free hand, he anchored the Gryffindor's jaw open and snaked his tongue inside. Tom paid no mind to the groan of pain or the heavy, panicked air being released from Harry's nostrils.

Tom was lost in him. This was different from a muggle man, or the few upper years he'd messed with in fourth year. Noone was desperately grabbing for Tom, clinging to him like their lives depended on him, or ravenously grinding against him. There was only soft lips, the fluttering of eyelashes against his cheeks, and hands continuously pushing against his shoulders. And frankly, Harry's hands were not giving their all. Tom fantasized that he simply couldn't decide whether he wanted to push him away or pull him closer. Tom forgot all about Harry's stiff, unresponsive mouth. He enjoyed his pliancy and the ease with which he manhandled the shocked boy. It didn't stick around long.
When one of Tom's hands released his jaw and descended over his chest, he marvelled over the speed at which the Gryffindor's heart beat. He tilted his head in his attempt to deepen the kiss as his hand trailed lower. It was only a passing moment. Tom would feel differently tomorrow. But in that minute where their lips melded together, Tom wondered, horror dawning on him, whether he'd ever feel like he'd had enough of Harry Potter. He wanted more and more. He wanted to join their forms together and he wanted to never let go.

When Tom's hand traveled between the opening of Harry's robes and up beneath the fabric of his jumper, Harry abruptly bit his tongue.Hard.

Tom lunged back, holding his mouth, spitting out blood and cursing. Potter heaved, glowering at him with blood-dyed and bruised lips. Tom expected him to slug him, to knock him senseless. Instead, Potter's shoulders slouched. He looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. And wasn't that an insult to Tom's pride.

Harry shouldered past Tom, drawing his wand from his robes and casting an accio on Azrel Diggory's immobile body. Azrel drifted until Harry was pulling him out of the swamp, blatantly ignoring the way Tom stood there, dumb-struck and watching him. With blank eyes and a blank expression, Harry levitated Diggory and took off in the direction of the hospital wing. He couldn't even spare a look of disgust for Tom.

Tom was suddenly very, very cold.

1974

The peppy voice. The dry eyes. The way James had returned to playfully mussing his hair. Tom'd believe the boy had simply forgotten his parents were diagnosed with a terminal illness, had he not known any better. It was denial that had James insisting on using the eye glass. And it was Tom's cruelty leading him to it.

Tom stopped before the golden doors leading to the observatory. Their ornate surfaces were decorated with black, baroque details. James bumped facefirst into his back, before peering out behind his shoulders.

"We're here?"

"We're here." Tom confirmed.

Tom opened the doors, and the boy bounded into a great, round hall.
The late afternoon light streamed in from a skylight, and the telescope-like instrument in the middle of the room cast a long shadow along the shimmering, amber floors and over the mural clad walls. The doors closed behind Tom, shutting out the various sounds from the ministry. The echoing of their shoes was deafening. Tom recalled a long forgotten dream.

"This is it?" James' voice rang. He'd stopped between the brass scope and the lone, stone basin sitting on the floor beside it.

"That's it." Tom stepped closer.

"Rather modest, isn't it? This is what the ministry can't keep their hands off of?" It was modest. Compared to the likes of the various alloy and jewel encrusted instruments filling the timepiece room, it looked like a child's toy. Tom had fabricated it during a time of intense pressure, where its usage was his foremost concern. Not what it looked like.

"Knowing your future is destructive." Tom walked circles around James. "It's usage is relegated to wartime activities, national emergencies and pinpointing the likelihood of natural disasters now. Only a select few may use it." He gestured towards the orange badge hanging around James' neck. This was an experience ministry officials would kill for, and Tom was simply... handing it to James. Barty Crouch had been livid- but being the sole creator of the device, Tom still had a few privileges left up his sleeve.

"Why did you think of this? How?" The tone of amazement in James' voice was a first for Tom.

"It..." Tom remembered an ebony fortress sitting at the edge of a cliff. "Knowing my fate- It felt... necessary at the time. Crucial." Living day by day, not knowing what was to happen next had driven him half-mad.

James touched the scope and it automatically swiveled around until it pointed somewhere east of the Andromeda galaxy. James jumped back. "W-what?"

"It's touch activated, James." Did he think it could tell just any future? Tom breezed forward until he stood shoulder to shoulder with the teenager. Along the shaft of the eyeglass, there were runes inscribed, along with three dials and a number being gradually etched into it's base.

"What's that?"

"At this specific moment in time, you have 5,166,989,034 realms where your soul rests," Tom read aloud. He couldn't help but smirk when James' jaw dropped. The both of them watched as the number went up by one. "It fluctuates."

"Let's trickle that down, shall we?" Tom turned the left-most dial and the name James Fleamont Potter appeared besides the number, which transformed once more.

"That leaves you with 2,525,408 realms where you keep your name." It was a massive quantity compared to average. Tom surmised James possessed a much younger soul than most. They tended to cling to their first name. That might explain why he was jumping off the astronomy tower two weeks ago.
Tom turned the middle knob and a small needle abruptly popped out at the base. "Prick your finger, James." James hesitantly looked at him, raising his hand. "To trace realms with your bloodline," Tom assured him.

"It's blood magic!"

"It consists of multiple forms of magic."

"Blood magic is wrong." James held his hand to his chest, as if he thought Tom would hack it off. Now there was an idea...

"Blood magic is powerful." Tom rebutted. "Is now really the time for your moral crisis, James? What about dear mummy and daddy's prognosis? Don't tell me you're backing out now- How unlike a Gryffindor."

Shooting Tom a dirty look, James reached out and pricked his finger, flinching. The number morphed to just below a million.

"999,897" Tom read off.

Turning the last knob, a brass magnifying glass like object swung out at the base, replacing the needle. Tom yanked it, bending it to point directly at the basin sitting a few feet away from the eye glass.

"Now." said Tom, "This is most important. You must think of your most vivid memory. Your happiest, or your most terrible. It must be vivid. You must be able to recall the taste of what you ate that day, the smell in the air, the color of your robes, the weather, how the sky looked, Everything. And you must believe devoutly in the validity of this memory. Can you do that, James?"

Tentatively, James nodded.

"Good. Now, remember this one rule. You'll close your eyes, and you'll put your eye to the eyepiece. But you won't look into it."

"Why not?! It's called a seeing eye glass, isn't it?!"

"It sees for you. IT is the all seeing eye. You, are a speck of dust within it's midst. Your memories are malleable, biased and essentially untrustworthy. It is only making do with what you give it."

"Well... what would it look like... if I were to..." James couldn't muffle his curiosity.

"But you won't."

"What!?!" James snapped defensively, "It's a theoretical question!"

Tom raised a cynical eyebrow, eyes flickering to his wrists, and the teenager got the gist. He winced and got to work, exaggeratedly closing his right eye and bending close to Tom's eye glass.

"When can I stop?"

"Remember your memory, James"

"Right," the boy muttered beneath his breath. It was accompanied by a crude insult, but Tom chose to ignore it. Tom watched the magnifying glass vibrate until a translucent string of white light shone
out of it. Feeling the vibrating of the eye glass, James attempted to pull up, until Tom smacked his head down.

The white light shone into the basin, filling it up gradually and turning into an iridescent fluid, drifting and splashing around.

When the basin became half-full, Tom stepped closer, examining it's swirling contents, and noting the number two etching itself onto the basin's rim.

"You can look up now," said Tom. A quick purge of James' mind told Tom he'd followed his command. He had not looked into the eye piece. James stepped closer to the basin, coming to the realization of what it was.

"It's a pensieve!" James exclaimed. "A really old one," he furrowed his thick brows. "Ancient really. You positive, you trust it?"

Tom peered down at James. Ignoring James' obvious hesitance, Tom said:

"Your current present has two possible outcomes. Now, shall we begin?"

Chapter End Notes

Chapter warnings for a creepy, nonconsensual kiss. It's not meant to read as reciprocated and it's from Tom's pov so it may rub you wrong.

-smashes orange-
This was a bit more of a crack chapter. I hope you guys enjoyed it. Yes. it really took me 90k words to reach a one-sided, nonconsensual kiss scene. and i promise i will stop writing so much angsty!adult!tom. theres supposed to be a happy ending, but sad tom just keeps taking over. i will say this felt like a particularly difficult chapter to write, just because i had SO much i had to get in and so much happens. I did my best to make it not feel like an info dump, but im sorry if this chapter gave you guys like whiplash or something lol thankyou again for all your lovely responses on the previous chapter. They were wonderful and i loved them.
Vitellius Nott

Chapter Summary
Clad in her nightgown and silk cap, Madam Rosewood hadn't said a word when Harry delivered Azrel Diggory's petrified body to the Hospital Wing at one in the morning. After levitating Azrel onto the nearest bed, she'd raised her eyebrows, asked Harry where he'd found him, and checked Azrel's pulse. There might've been a brief expression of suspicion. A narrowing of the eyes, a tightening of the lips. Harry was grateful when she didn't ask any further. Harry'd seated himself on the bed across Azrel, hunched over and dazed. More staring at the wall behind Diggory than anything else.

Rosewood had observed the pallid appearance of Harry's skin, the sweat trickling down his temple and offered him a glass of water. Graciously, Harry had accepted it, watching Azrel's corpse-like figure while she left to the next room.

Sip after sip. A curling dread in his abdomen. Wondering who would be next...

Suddenly reminded of an impudent leer, Harry'd downed the glass in a second.

In retrospect, Harry vaguely recalled Tom making passes at him in the weeks leading up to it. The underlying eroticism in the way Tom had cornered him in Augustus Bulstrode's forest, his borderline harassment in their lesson two weeks ago. The way he looked at Harry sometimes left him feeling undressed. It spoke a million words. And now it couldn't be ignored or forgotten. Harry couldn't shake his head and call himself paranoid and silly. It was an actuality now. Tom's palms had clung to his face. He'd left Harry's lips bitten and swollen. Now Harry couldn't conveniently forget the sensation of his eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks or the scent of the Hogwarts soap still clinging to Tom's skin.

There was no way short of obliterating himself, Harry could forget now. Naturally, gargling was the next best thing.

Even then, Harry could feel Tom's hand creeping up his abdomen. A hazy sensation of guilt filled him while he swished water around in his mouth, and looked at Azrel. Azrel's eyes were still open in his petrified state. Harry was being absurd, but they seemed to look at him accusingly. Seemed to ask Harry why in that Hospital wing, next to a petrified prefect, Harry was still thinking of Tom Riddle.

Harry's trepidation came from an undeterminable place. Was it because it had been Tom that kissed him, that Harry still trembled there in that infirmary? Or was it because something deep-seated in
Harry wasn't as disgusted or scared as he'd like to be? Only confused, and angry and perhaps... a little curious?

But that was the problem. Harry should be scared. He should be scared witless. Tom had hated him. And perhaps he still hated Harry... but now he desired Harry as well. And that was an entirely different ego to deal with. And "No" wasn't such a simple answer to give Voldemort now that expectations were in place.

"Are you alright?" Madam Rosewood asked, unexpectedly returning. Harry'd leapt, nearly choking on his mouthful of water, before emptying the contents into a nearby lemongrass plant.

Mumbling a goodbye, Harry stormed out. Shamefaced, he jogged to Gryffindor Tower, mentally beating the embarrassment out of his head.

Harry Potter collapsed on his four poster bed nearing two in the morning, fully clothed and burying his face into his pillow. Curtains drawn closed, he rolled over restlessly throughout the night. His body refused to give way to peace, sanctity.

Instead of sleeping, Harry spent hours wondering what had become of his life.

Harry awoke the next morning to discover bruises covering his jawline. Tom had left clear imprints behind. Harry could see the exact point where Tom's thumbs and forefingers had forced his jaw open. Staring into the smudged mirror of the boys' lavatory, Harry turned his head from side to side, prodding the marks and wincing, and wondering- Whether Tom would take a sadistic pleasure in the sight of them. What his expression might look like...

Harry vowed to not look.

He considered a healing charm, and then, for a reason he refused to pinpoint- decided against it. Harry decided to keep the evidence. To lay it out in the clear. Tom might mentally masturbate to it. But It didn't mean anything. It meant that little to Harry. Tom kissed Harry, and Harry didn't even care enough to hide it. That was what he told himself, leaving for the Great Hall.

Harry later regretted that decision when Myrtle acted like he'd been mauled. The unfortunate liar he was, Harry claimed he'd been attacked by a horde of nifflers, to which Malfoy jeered over his breakfast.

There was a perk to Harry discovering Azrel's body first.

Tom's stunt was falling remarkably flat. Professors redirected students away from the corridor with the swamp and that was it. Noone cared about the blood on the walls, or the message, and scant students had actually seen it.

Despite circulating rumors of an acromantula, few took interest in that either.

Chet Wakefield's death hit the papers that very morning. Harry hadn't expected to see so many
students absolutely destroyed by the tidings. The loss of a beloved diviner had sent Hogwarts' pureblood population reeling and it was all they discussed. It even invaded the conversations of muggleborns, who wouldn't care otherwise.

Albeit a few Hufflepuffs expressed concern over the whereabouts of Azrel Diggory, that news didn't hit till later.

Antonin Dolohov was even planning a wake the following week and passing around invitations. Thus, noone discussed the mysterious identity of the 'Heir of Slytherin'. Nobody cared, and Harry liked to imagine Tom was irritated beyond words.

Dolohov was handing Malfoy (and surprisingly, Harry) an invitation Tuesday morning, when a pair of aurors entered the Great Hall.

"Chet Wakefield," Myrtle recited from the scroll, leaning over Malfoy's shoulder.

"It's next Wednesday," Dolohov reminded them.

"Never heard of him," said Myrtle, ignoring Dolohov's stink eye.

"Well you wouldn't, being a common blooded mu-" Malfoy paused, redressing himself. "A common blooded mongrel." Abraxas batted his eyelashes, expecting praise, and Myrtle and Hagrid pat him condescendingly atop the head. (Malfoy brusquely swatted them away.)

"Does not saying it even count if you're implying it?" Harry asked dryly, stirring his tea. Well. Improvement was improvement. That week he and Myrtle had spent their mealtimes throwing napkins at Malfoy whenever a slur had so much as left his mouth had clearly worked. Harry reckoned Abraxas could make a full recovery in a year or two.

"As a pureblood, I expect to see you there Malfoy," Dolohov declared, ignoring their chatter.

He'd tried to appear imposing, imitating a posture and tilt of the head that undoubtedly held Riddle's signature. The wrinkling of his chin and trembling of his lips gave away his inner turmoil, so the effect was lost.

That was the peculiar thing about a young Tom Riddle's inner circle. Harry'd gone in anticipating Bellatrix Lestrange. Instead, Harry was met with a rather sobering view of dark wizards. Everyone is a teenager once, monsters have mothers, and serial killers still have to do their groceries every month. By knowing Tom's entourage even the slightest, Harry couldn't disregard their humanity any more. He couldn't do it to Tom either.

"Funny that, you didn't expect to see me at your tenth birthday bash now, did you?" said Malfoy rerolling his invitation. "Or any of the ones thereafter..."

Dolohov rolled his eyes, marching off and muttering under his breath about stupid wankers holding even stupider grudges, while Harry sipped his tea, clinging onto that little tidbit of information.

"You were childhood friends?" asked Myrtle

Malfoy twitched, "We knew eachother," he replied.
The other three hadn't the opportunity to interrogate Abraxas any further. It was at that moment two aurors strode in, footsteps echoing. Everything BUT the auror uniform had changed since Harry arrived. He could recognize those robes anywhere. Other students, namely muggleborns, gazed in puzzlement. The odd couple captured the attention of the students, and the Great Hall fell into a hush.

It wasn't often that aurors came by. Even when Harry had been in the 1990's. Although... Harry reflected... In retrospect, it seemed Dumbledore liked to keep the happenings in his castle quiet. Dippet? Dippet was different.

The aurors strode to the professor's table, and the students watched as the faculty greeted them.

"What are they doing here?" Malfoy whispered, while Hagrid shrugged.

"What are they?" Myrtle was agog. Myrtle'd not seen an auror in her Hogwarts career. Harry pondered telling them. Everything. About Diggory. And Riddle. But such secrets he kept locked inside. He suspected the headmaster was about to break the news of Azrel anyway. The four of them observed the faculty and the aurors conversing gravely. One, was a handsome curly haired woman. The other had an ambivalent appearance. He'd the type of face Harry thought he'd seen somewhere before. It was a losing battle with his hair, Harry surmised. It'd been slicked back, and mostly looked elegant from the front. Though a few stubborn locks were left jagged on the back of the man's head.

The curious whispers dissolved when Dippet stood, walking alongside the aurors, so that the three of them stood in front of the faculty table, before the student body.

Dippet cleared his throat and addressed the room. Harry swiveled in his seat, to watch Tom Riddle, who belied nothing. No fear, no paranoia. Tom twirled his fork. Raising his eyebrows with a dead expression, he acknowledged Harry. Harry spun back in his seat, determined to ignore him.

"There are those of you," Dippet began, "Who may be wondering where a dear friend of yours has gone." He eyed the Hufflepuff table, which stiffened in their seats, glancing at each other.

"Azrel Diggory, prefect and headboy, was attacked the previous night. While his condition remains stable, he is petrified. He may remain so for the rest of the year. He may remain so, even until summer. Madam Rosewood has assembled a batch of mandrakes, and is working closely with Professor Slughorn and St. Mungo's healers to brew a draught, that should bring Azrel back to us.

As it remains, his parents will be arriving tomorrow, and those of his friends that should wish to speak with them can meet them in the Hospital Wing."

The Hufflepuffs gasped, though, Harry noted, noone in particular looked teary eyed or miserable. Only afraid.

"As I may add, Mrs. Euphemia Potter and Mr. Fleamont Potter are aurors here to operate an investigation." Heads all over the hall snapped in Harry's direction, and he ducked his head, catching sight of the pair curiously looking his way. Apparently Harry was meeting his grandparents in the worst scenario possible. "Morgana," Malfoy quietly exclaimed. "Harry, your half brother's here!"

"If you attended Professor Slughorn's Valentine's party," Dippet continued, "They will be conducting interviews with you. I ask of you to not be nervous, or scared and to be compliant with
all their questions. Your right to privacy will be honored."

"In the meantime, Professor Tabitha is holding practice O.W.L.S and N.E.W.T.S in the Arithmancy Classroom. I recommend that all fifth and seventh years attend."

Hagrid and Harry shared a look. There was not one mention of the spider haunting the castle. That was up to the aurors as well, Harry surmised. The two of them needed to catch Aragog and catch him soon, before the aurors did.

Dippet sat, and the aurors stepped down, trekking out the great hall. While muted gossip exploded, Harry was dead sure that Euphemia Potter had met his eyes. He flushed, wondering whether his relatives knew about his reputation here. But Harry continued to stare at his young grandmother, searching her features for their closest resemblance.

Though Harry was locked in a staring contest with Euphemia's dark eyes, her husband was stubbornly pretending he'd not seen the young school student. Myrtle's porridge abruptly exploded in her face.

Harry snapped out of his trance, looking at Myrtle, who'd slime dripping down her hair.

"I HATE HER!" Myrtle exclaimed, "TLL KILL HER!" she wielded her spoon violently, while Malfoy leaned as far away from her as possible. Hagrid and Harry handed her napkins. "I'm going to gouge her eyes out! And feed them to her!"

"Warren," warned Abraxas, "You're making Harry look normal."

Giggling ensued at the table over, and a few Ravenclaw girls twisted their wands, cooing and ohhh-ing at them.

"What've I told you about giving them reactions?" Harry reminded Myrtle. She responded with an ugly face, while Harry and the others cast an evanesco, cleaning the sludge from the table.

"I want to practice dueling you more, Harry," Myrtle pouted. "Malfoy's a coward, and Hagrid's impossible. Because when I get good enough, I'm going to challenge her. And I'm going to destroy her."

At least Myrtle was channeling her rage to a better place now. She didn't complain nearly as much as she used to. She'd found a purpose.

"Then we'll do the room of requirement tomorrow? And Thursday?" Harry suggested.

Aurors, Olive Hornby, petrified students. And Tom Riddle kissing him. The new year was gearing up to be very wild, thought Harry.

Throughout the week, the aurors conducted their investigation. At odd intervals, they summoned students from classrooms or the Great Hall. The Potters never came to eat. Rumor had it, they'd a room at Hogwarts, and ate in the kitchens. But Cassius Selwyn was also claiming they'd a room at
Paranoia ran through Harry's veins of when he'd be called for an interview. Harry ran scenario after scenario through his head. There was already a possibility of others accusing him. There'd been at least forty witnesses to see him run out the room that night. Not to mention the business with Aragog. Inevitably Harry would be a suspect.

But days accrued and the Potter's had yet to ask after Harry. They'd even interviewed Malfoy before him. Abraxas had refused to relay many details, instead claiming he'd told them Harry had a pet acromantula. It was a joke that hit too close to home. Only Harry and Hagrid knew the truth.

Harry skipped his lessons and detentions with Riddle in favor of Defense lessons in the Room of Requirement. It'd become something of his gang's headquarters, and they met less and less in the Hufflepuff common room. Harry didn't want to face Tom. He didn't know how to act, or what to do in the face of what had happened. Surprisingly, Harry's attendance went unreported. Harry'd expected Tom to cling to him any way he could, now he was 'interested' and all. Then again, Harry's school career was hanging by a thread. And perhaps, just perhaps, Tom wanted to keep him around. It was a harrowing thought, but also -Harry supposed... one he could use for his own devices.

After the Room of Requirement, Harry and Hagrid often waited for Myrtle and Abraxas to leave. Fetching his invisibility cloak and map, the both of them had spent the past few nights pursuing Aragog to no avail. Harry had hoped desperately that Aragog had escaped into the Forbidden Forest. But as was told by the Marauders Map, Aragog resided within the school. He jumped from abandoned classroom to abandoned classroom, frequently narrowly escaping Harry's advances.

Hagrid wore a cool facade during the day, but when the night came, it escaped him. Harry had to periodically shush him, to assure him Aragog was fine, often using the map as proof. Internally, Harry wished Hagrid had shown half as much worry towards him. It hadn't seemed to dawn on Hagrid yet that Aragog's escape, and their subsequent search was putting Harry's school career and home at Hogwarts at risk. But Hagrid was young. And Harry found that forgiveness came far too easily when his younger friends were concerned. Harry was a chump for them, as Malfoy had taken to teasing him over. Harry learned something new about himself every day these days.

They'd come close to catching Aragog twice now. Once in an abandoned classroom. Another time, two corridors outside of the Ravenclaw common room. Aragog was an elastic little fellow. Hagrid goaded him with food, often in the form of enlarged flies the size of Harry's hand. Aragog would crawl into Hagrid's arms for food and cuddles. And just as Hagrid embraced him, crying tears of joy, Aragog wriggled out, scampering away, with a mere "bye bye, Haggy"

It would be almost cute if Aragog didn't look so terrifying.

It was three days later, when his bruising was fading, that Harry finally told his friends what had transpired.

"I have to defeat Tom Riddle," said Harry, summoning a double sided blackboard and chalk. He also had to stop him from furthering his mission with the Chamber of Secrets- but Myrtle and Malfoy would only laugh, while Hagrid looked at him with his sad, sad eyes.

"For why?" said Malfoy. He was laying on his stomach, swinging his legs in the air and finishing his
History of Magic assignment.

Myrtle attempted to singlehandedly take on Hagrid in a duel. Professor Merrythought had marveled the other day to Harry, suggesting he might take lessons from Myrtle. Evidently her spellwork in the fourth year classes had increased *that* tremendously. Harry hadn't been sure whether to be proud or inform the professor that it was all thanks to *him*.

Instead, he'd sworn to attend defense more consistently. Harry was a tinge melancholic his defense prowess wasn't as well documented in this decade. Harry was beginning to *want* his brilliance to be recognized. To not just be that strange bloke students murmured about and avoided. Maybe that was yet another sign Harry'd been here too long. It didn't feel like he was on a mission anymore. At this rate, before long, Harry'd be settling with some Hogwarts sweetheart. Have some inane career. Have children perhaps. Ron and Hermione completely forgotten except in the lowermost dregs of his mind. Everyone he'd ever lost forgetting to matter. It felt wrong that the ordinary existence Harry'd always longed for almost felt inevitable, and all at the expense of leaving seventeen years of his life behind.

Regret, regret, regret. That was all Harry was lately, when he wasn't absorbed by Myrtle and Hagrid's school careers, by attempting to change Abraxas' supremacist disposition. When the feeling of Tom Riddle's lips wasn't invasively repeating in his mind.

"He..." Harry began. Abraxas peeked up from his schoolbook. Myrtle threw a stunner, red light flashing, while Hagrid withstood the effects that would knock anyone out. "He," Harry reiterated. Facing Malfoy's blue eyes and attempting to say it aloud seemed to take the utmost of courage, that which Harry had never actually had to try to muster before.

"He k-kissed me." Harry's face grew hot. Shame washing over him, he felt like a ten year old in a confessional booth. Why did this matter? It *shouldn't* matter. He didn't *care* about Tom Riddle. And Tom would be brimming with arrogance, smug satisfaction, if he knew Harry was confessing to his friends what he'd done. That Harry was so bothered by it, he couldn't help but speak about it, to seek out advice.

Nevertheless, Harry persisted.

"Tom Riddle kissed me." One of Myrtle's stunners bounced off Hagrid and redirected her way. By a whisker, she dodged it, falling flat on her rear. "WHAT?!" Hagrid boomed and lowered his wand, seeming to realize for the first time that week, that Harry had a life outside the room of requirement and outside of Aragog.

Malfoy's borderline invisible eyebrows jumped. "Oh? You too?"

"I'm not joking!"

"Did you like it?" said invisible eyebrows wiggled.

"NO!"

Hagrid shook his head.

"THAT GOOD FER NOTHIN' PIECE OF RUBBISH!" It was the worst Harry had ever heard Hagrid speak of Tom. And it filled him with a sense of grateful solidarity. Hagrid wasn't questioning Harry, or making a joke of it like Malfoy. Hagrid *believed* him, and his first response was outrage.
"What did yeh do?! Yer ought to have hexed him!"

"I... I didn't..." Harry admitted, downcast it hadn't occurred to him at the time.

Hagrid put his hands on his hips, lip curled. "Well, the next time we see him we ought to do it fer yeh!" He wielded his wand "Jus' say the word! He won' stand fer nothin' 'gainst a halfgiant like myself!" It was endearing coming from a thirteen year old.

"See," Malfoy scratched his chin. "I knew this would happen. It was all so obvious he fancied you. He'll be asking you to Hogsmeade next week, you wait."

Feeling sweat suddenly blooming on his forehead, Harry replied: "Well. Thankyou for the warning!" It'd have been nice if the omnipotent presence of Abraxas Malfoy might have told him Tom Riddle would be making moves on him.

"OH, like it's my fault you're stupid?"

"Oh, shutup! You didn't actually know anything. You're just pretending you knew because that's what you do! pretend to know shit when you don't know shit, you buffoon!" Harry imagine Hermione would be strangling Malfoy if she were here. He couldn't be the only one experiencing the incessant urge to grab and squeeze the air out of Abraxas' lungs.

"Do you hear him, Hagrid?" said Malfoy, while Harry heaved heavy breaths, roughly three seconds away from fist-fighting Abraxas and putting him into an early grave. Harry couldn't tell if Abraxas was just that used to folks hating him, or if he really was unbothered by Harry's outburst. "Nearly sounds like he's been possessed by Myrtle."

The three turned towards Myrtle, who was still splayed out on her bum, in a daze. Her wand laid a foot away and her hair was strewn about.

"Myrtle? You alright?"

Myrtle craned her neck around to look at them.

"Yes?"

"You alright?"

"Yes?"

"Are. You. Alright?"

"I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

"Oh Merlin. She's gone into shock," Abraxas snickered.

"Tom Riddle. He er... He..." Harry tried to re-explain. It'd pained him enough the first time. Frankly, he didn't think he could do it again.

"Full mouth to mouth action with Harry Potter."

"Shutup, Malfoy!"

"Did he stick his tongue in?"
"I said shutup!"

"Morgana's balls dropped, He did"

Abraxas rolled over onto his side and cackled while Harry and Hagrid glared at him. Myrtle blinked at them, before her eyebrows furrowed, and she said:

"Tom Riddle didn't kiss you. You're spinning codswallop as usual." It felt cruel to compare Myrtle to Umbridge, but her curled upper lip and the way she brushed him off sure reminded Harry of her.

"You're not turning on me now, are you?" Perhaps it was sheer loneliness, but Harry'd liked to believe the four of them were developing something of a bond. It was ludicrous, with Malfoy parroting his parents beliefs, the sheer age difference with Hagrid, the way Myrtle demanded compassion but so lacked in it. It wasn't a fully functioning friendship like with Hermione and Ron. Little trust. Too many differences. And all too much shallow banter to fill the gaps. But still, Harry remained optimistic.

"HE DIDN'T KISS YOU!!" Myrtle insisted, pupils shaking and lips quivering. "And you!" Myrtle turned on Abraxas. "WHY ARE YOU SO QUICK TO BELIEVE HIM?! YOU TOLD ME LAST WEEK HE HAD A GNOME WHERE HIS BRAIN SHOULD BE!"

"Wow," Harry muttered, wondering if he should be at least as bothered by them smacktalking him as he was Riddle kissing him.

"I'm a Slytherin." Abraxas shrugged.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"So..."

"So...?"

"So I was there last year when Riddle was meeting boys."

"W- what?!

"Obviously he kept it tight-lipped. You know, Muggle sensibilities and all that. I've heard they're quite prejudiced. So I imagine it hadn't reached much farther than our house. And I only know by luck really. I was having my owls and studying like mad. He used to empty his dormitory and make his mates sleep in the common room whenever he had a bloke over, so it wasn't too often..." Abraxas paused, "Interesting fact: Mulciber wears his pajamas backwards as a pregame ritual. Or perhaps that's just every night" Abraxas cupped his chin. "Perhaps I only assumed... A strange chap like him could give Harry a run for his money."

He glimpsed at Harry. "The two of you would get on alright now I consider it."

"Tom Riddle displaces an entire dormitory just to shag a bloke. Why does this surprise me less than knowing he's shagged anyone at all?" said Harry. He peered at Hagrid, wondering if he should tell the Hufflepuff to hold his hands over his ears. The third year was listening intently to the older students. Knowing that just like with Aragog, Hagrid would be stubborn, and put up a fuss, Harry said nothing, instead giving him a look that he liked to think said: Abstinence is key. Real adults don't
have sex. All babies are shipped from Romania. In response, Hagrid twisted his features obnoxiously, and Harry mourned the adult version that fed him rock cakes.

"Tom Riddle doesn't fancy men!" Myrtle squawked, causing the three boys to start.

Brazen homosexuality in the wizarding world often shocked muggleborns. Harry had an inkling this was a recent discovery on Myrtle's part. He'd been the same age she was, when he'd found out. Feeling a powerful wave of embarrassment, Harry recalled one evening as a fourth year, when Ron had politely informed him that men or women holding hands and kissing cheeks with the same sex wasn't just another odd wizarding quirk. Hermione as always, knowing everything, had snorted behind her book. Ron had laughed. And Harry had flushed and aptly said "Oh," and stared at the embers of the Gryffindor fireplace- feeling a bit like he had when Hagrid had first told him he was a wizard. In that... things began to make sense and Harry felt a little less scared and a little more hope.

Malfoy snorted: "Fancy them?" he shrugged. "Who knows. Bugger them? Well."

Myrtle paled, at last accepting the truth. "No," she whined, "But he can't!"

"Oh, but he can and he does. You've heard of Vitellius Nott, haven't you?"

"NOOO," Myrtle cried, flopping over onto the floor and shoving her face into the nook of her elbow. It was the kind of histrionics usually reserved for Malfoy.

"There there, I thought you'd moved on from Riddle" Malfoy comforted her, prodding her back with a foot. Or just kicking her. Harry could never be sure with the two of them. "I thought Lestrange was all the rage these days."

"Tom was still my first love," Myrtle hiccuped.

"How unfortunate," Harry monotoned, furtively wishing he could just pass Tom's affections on to Myrtle.

"It's not like you'd have had a cha-" Sensing what Abraxas was getting at, Harry feigned zipping his lips and punching his fist up an arse. Abraxas silently mimicked a monkey scratching it's armpit and then flipped Harry off.

Harry was just as flabbergasted as Myrtle. But at what, vastly differed. It was inconceivable for Harry to imagine Riddle as having been interested in anyone before him. Before the last week, Harry couldn't imagine him with anyone at all. Was it egotistical for Harry to feel disgruntled that Tom could feel attracted to anyone other than him?

To add to that... It was simply unfair wasn't it? Harry had wasted his fourth year narrowly avoiding death on multiple occasions. Voldemort had spent his fourth year experimenting. Like he'd actually been an ordinary teenager, getting to have ordinary teenage experiences. Like he wasn't the least bit demented.

Harry was still a virgin. And it wasn't for want of trying. It wasn't like Ron hadn't gotten up to things Harry wished he didn't know about with Lavender. It wasn't like Hermione hadn't imparted to him a few above the waist experiences she'd had with Viktor Krum, making Harry swear to not tell Ron. And each time, Harry could only listen. He'd no experiences to share or advice to give. Chaste kisses, ruined by tears. His kiss with Ginny had been something... at least. But responsibilities came
knocking at that door. Harry didn't get ordinary experiences.

Envy reared it's great, big, ugly head. Why did the man who'd ruined his life get that luxury? It wasn't right, and it wasn't fair.

"Who's Vitellius Nott?" Harry asked, pretending to not be bitter, while Myrtle dry sobbed into her arms, looking up to make sure the others sympathized with her, donning a displeased expression soon as she realized she was being ignored.

"The unspeakable," Hagrid grunted.

"Rude nickname! Don't call him that!" Malfoy tsked, causing Hagrid to blush and grumble an apology. It was rude. But at least Harry recognized the nickname. He'd heard it often in the Gryffindor dormitories, when dogmatic seventh years hissed about some bloke they hated. Harry pondered what Nott looked like. Did Riddle have a type? Harry had another of those dizzying moments where he wondered if he'd died and gone to hell. A hell where Tom Riddle not only wanted to bugger Harry, but one where Harry wasn't even special or unique in that respect. There was a 'chosen one' joke Ron might say somewhere in there.

"Y'know..." Malfoy began after some silence, wherein Harry considered whether he should ask what Vitellius was like and Myrtle's shortlived misery wore away. "You could do something with this, Harry."

"I'm not obliviating myself. I've thought about it, and it's too risky."

"No, that's- That's not what I mean," Abraxas released a hesitant laugh. Myrtle and Hagrid were listening closer now. "Look... supposing I do believe you and every mad-hatter thing you say, wouldn't Riddle being attracted to you and acting on it give you an advantage?"

"Oh yeah, real advantage I've been given here. Endless possibilities really. Looks like there are perks to Tom Riddle attempting to play tonsil quidditch with you."

Hagrid grimaced. "Tha's a real tasteful mental image yeh've put there Harry."

"Helen of Troy," said Myrtle, from seemingly nowhere. She'd seemed to cheer up with the snap of the finger, her dramatics long gone. She seemed to no longer care that her so-called first love had instead made the moves on the first friend she'd made at Hogwarts. Hagrid had proposed a few weeks ago, that Myrtle didn't seem to fancy the boys as she acted. That it was just her way of passing time, finding new interests and muses, and attaching fantasized personalities to them. Harry was beginning to wonder if that theory held ground.

"Helen of Troy," Malfoy nodded, "I mean, obviously not the war-fighting part, but you've more power than you know, Harry."

Harry blinked, questioning when the two of them had developed shared telepathy.

"Thousands of men died for her- and why? Because whether she wanted it or not, she had the love of a powerful man. That's the power of a beautiful woman," said Myrtle
"Okay?"

Myrtle and Malfoy simultaneously rolled their eyes.

"What I mean is, what happens if you capture Tom Riddle's heart?" Somehow, hearing those words from none other than Moaning Myrtle's lips, made Harry want to climb the Scottish mountains to the highest peak, avada kedavra himself, and let the vultures pick at his dead remains.

"Can't capture something that doesn't exist," Harry instead responded.

"But he wants you."

"Yeah. I know that."

"Stop being obtuse, Harry! It's so obvious!"

Harry gawked at her while Malfoy guffawed.

"Coming from a Slytherin, it's time I explained what Myrtle is saying. Tom Riddle wants your knob and any orifice of yours that will take him-"

Harry felt hot. He wasn't alone. Myrtle visibly pinkened and looked at Hagrid, before hissing: "Why are you so crude?! Behave yourself!"

Abraxas brushed her off, continuing: "By as good as telling you he wants you, Riddle's put the cards in your hands. If you play them right, you could virtually own him. And supposing he's the mad, mass murdering, hopeful dictator you've claimed he is. Which he isn't. I'm not an idiot. Don't look at me that way, Harry... But pretending he was- you could manipulate him, lead him astray and best case scenario- prevent all that. Couldn't you?"

Myrtle hummed in agreement and Harry stared at Malfoy's pointy features, deep in thought. He recollected sitting beneath the Potter willow tree with Amaltheia on New Year's eve. She'd said much along the same lines. Suddenly all the garble about Tom Riddle having carnal desires and hidden weaknesses made sense. Harry flushed. Just how much did the witch know?

"Obviously you can't change someone's natural proclivities. But you can influence their earthly decisions, can't you?" asserted Myrtle.

They were vastly overestimating any chivalry Tom had. He absolutely would not play by the rules of this metaphorical game, and was absolutely just as capable of imperio-ing Harry in his sleep, dragging Harry to the Chamber of Secrets, claiming he was dead. And there on keeping Harry as his secret prisoner for all of eternity. It was a very Tom Riddle thing to do.

Harry could entertain the game- however alien the notion of seducing Tom Riddle sounded. It was a possibility now. There was the complicated matter of wanting to. It seemed oh so effortless to them to just pretend to like someone for gain. They weren't in Harry's shoes.

But... there was something that lent the idea credence. Tom was researching the dark arts. Even with Harry's interference, he'd opened the Chamber of Secrets, was practicing legilimency and was taking massive leaps towards his future. If all that Harry'd done couldn't stop him, what did Harry have left? What could Harry use?
It was an option. Not a pleasant one. But at least Harry had a contingent backup plan.

Harry resolved to meet Vitellius Nott the next Monday. Curiosity getting the better of him, he'd snooped on the seventh year schedules, and used the last of his puking pastilles to get the day off. Madam Rosewood had written him a note, owled the faculty, and upon Harry's insistence that he preferred the coziness of his four-poster bed, she let him leave. Bad attendance or not, vomit was undeniable.

Thus Harry spent the remainder of his day, watching the map for Aragog, and later on, Vitellius, noting the advanced classes he took, and the few people he surrounded himself with. By the time Nott's last period came around, Harry left the dormitory, and waited by the door.

"VITELLIUS NOTT!" Harry shouted in the hallway while students filtered out. Harry had looked nowhere in particular, and just hoped face would turn around. Of course, being as loud as he was, a lot of them did. Fortunately, someone approached him, while the others giggled behind their hands.

Harry didn't know why he'd expected him to be better-looking. Or at least, bearing a resemblance at all to himself. He'd expected a face on par with Cedric Diggory's, or a bespectacled, messy haired boy. Something that told Harry anything about Tom's preferences. Instead, it'd left Harry even more mystified. Vitellius was pale faced, with a smattering of rosacea across his cheeks. He'd chestnut colored hair that was kept cropped. He wasn't particularly handsome though he did have rather delicate features.

Vitellius didn't say anything. He only stood there, with a satchel hanging on one shoulder, and his hand tucked into his trousers. He'd jut his chin, as if to say "Yes?"

"Erm..." Hary stumbled gracelessly, suddenly self-conscious. He wondered if this was sixth year levels of obsessive, and if Hermione would admonish him for it. But he'd been right last year, so Harry lingered.

"I'd like to speak to you about Tom Riddle, if that's... if that's okay?"

"Oh..." Harry fidgeted, "Umm..." He trailed off and Vitellius rolled his eyes, before fetching something from his satchel. A minute later, he was waving his wand, and words automatically
appeared in the air. Vitellius was faster than the horcrux Tom, Harry'd met in second year. A delayed second later, Harry grasped the complexity of Vitellius' nonverbal spell.

"I don't like everyone being able to see my chitchat," said Nott. Harry felt guilty. But he soothed himself with the fact the courtyard was by and large, empty. "It'd be better if you learn to sign."

"Sorry," Harry replied, Nott waving him off.

"What did you want to know about Tom?" inquired Vitellius. His eyes trailed along Harry's forehead, and he whisked his wand hastily, a playful smirk decorating his countenance. "You're Harry Potter, aren't you?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"You're Tom's new beau."

"I'm... What? WHAT?!" Harry spat, panicking. Had this information spread all over Hogwarts? Had Malfoy ran his mouth? Or had Tom decided telling the entire population would be a good way to peer pressure Harry? 

"Well. Not yet anyway."

"I-How did you know?"

"Been in your shoes, haven't I? Isn't that why you're approaching me? Tom wants to sleep with you." Vitellius slanted his words, to suggest various intonations. Upon reading them, Harry stupidly felt as if he'd been initiated into some secret society. On account of Tom, he probably shared more in common with this stranger than anyone he'd met in this decade.

"He's... said so. In more or less words."

Vitellius nodded, crossing his legs, stretching his back and relaxing. He seemed at home with himself, not noticing the ineptitude Harry felt. He wasn't as needy or dependant as Tom's other followers seemed. Was that an attribute Tom desired? To not want a faithful servant, but someone stubborn or prideful?

"You can really tell who feels purposeless, can't you," breezed Vitellius, snapping Harry away from his reflections. Vitellius turned to him, and Harry met his muddy eyes, deliberating whether that was an insult or not. He couldn't tell if Vitellius liked him. Harry wondered even, if Vitellius resented him. After all, Harry was Tom's new "beau", wasn't he? If this sort of thing reached the Hogwarts audience, it would put Harry at the mercy of a lot of people. And not so many fanatics would accept it as easily as Myrtle had.

"What was Tom like? In the err, purer sense? Did he treat you well?" Harry continued on, forging down the road he'd taken. There was no reason to back out now.

"We never dated."

"Of course," Harry faltered. "You only slept together. Y-You don't need to talk about that."

"He approached me one day. Completely out of the blue. We'd barely spoken before." "Were you
experienced... or?" How, or why was Riddle so sure Vitellius would have even said yes? It wasn't like there was a sign on his back saying he fancied blokes. Ron would probably loudly exclaim there were no tell tale stereotypical signs either. Harry couldn't imagine it. At least with him and Tom there was weeks of tension. But apparently Tom also approached men just because. In the 1940s.

In the wizarding world... but still. What kind of shameless bollocks of steel?

"I think... I used to be in a rush to sleep around. To sleep with someone. I didn't have any friends holding me back," Vitellius said. This was about the most intimate conversation Harry'd ever had with a stranger. Amazingly, Vitellius made it feel natural, like it was a late night and he and Hermione were sitting by a fireplace. "That's how it is, right? Some of us want to lose our virginity because we feel we have to. Or some of us think we'll be born anew, like it's this priceless rite of passage."

"And then, for some people." Vitellius' words took on a mischievous slant. "Some are at that age where a base instinct feels more like an absolute necessity. They act like they'd die if they go another day," Vitellius continued.

"Which do you suppose you are?"

Harry looked down at the raggedy knees of his trousers. He was reminded of Hermione proclaiming virginity was a social construct. For the second time that week, Harry became hyperaware of what felt like his own inexperience. It was moronic, he knew. Noone else cared but him, Harry reminded himself. He wasn't even particularly old. Loads of folks lost it in their twenties, or even thirties. Tom was the black sheep here. Tom was an early bloomer in far too many aspects. He inadvertently made people feel incompetent or uncomfortable sometimes.

"I think I'm the kind that never got the chance to think too hard about it," replied Harry, picking at the threads. Vitellius didn't ask him to elaborate. "I think Tom was the type to get it over with. Like it was a nuisance. He approached me at a House party. People'd been drinking. But not him. And not me either. Not much. And he said he thought I was good looking." Vitellius shook his wand and his head, from side to side. "I'm not goodlooking."

Harry didn't respond, thinking it would be impolite to agree. But even if Vitellius wasn't attractive, he wasn't ugly either. He reminded Harry of a character in a muggle film, before undergoing a makeover.

"Well there's a reason he was interested isn't there?"

"Tom said he liked my red face. My short hair. The shape of my nose." Vitellius waved his wand. "My air of mystery" Vitellius embellished the words with quotation marks, again, rolling his eyes. His upturned lips betrayed how much Tom's words must've affected him. How fondly he thought of Tom. "He liked... my bones? That sounds odd doesn't it? Collarbones, shoulderblades, wrists and ankles. He liked to trace the knuckles in my hands. Tom could point at any place on your body and name it. Then there were more ordinary things. The nape of my neck. the smell of me." Harry flushed, beginning to feel as if he were reading something he shouldn't be or flipping through rotten magazines. Vitellius saw the expression on Harry's face. He looked at Harry like he was an intruder watching a cult ritual. And Harry was the virginal sacrifice.

And then, Vitellius said:
"He liked that people can't hear my words."

This time, Vitellius shared a pointed look with Harry. Did Vitellius realize what kind of person Tom was? Or at least have an idea? Something darker seeped into Harry, as he registered the phrase, and considered it. Mulled it over in his head.

Tom liked Vitellius for the same reason he liked Harry.

Vitellius continued on. Except for that single moment, he didn't seem to see much wrong with Tom liking him for such reasons. He didn't seem to feel the same revulsion and disappointment Harry did. Rather, there was a look of exaltation upon his features. His interpretation belied Harry's. Where Harry saw a beast, Vitellius saw someone valuing his most acute differences.

"Tom is like that. Even if you mean nothing to him, he wants to be the only one. He demands to be the only one," Vitellius fanned his wand.

Tom wanted to be special, and in the process he'd made Vitellius feel important, prized. Harry didn't feel important. He felt used.

"So he seeks out the rare, the misunderstood, the unpolished, the old and antique. I was attracted to Tom because he was handsome. I liked him because he made grand gestures for stupid reasons. Like wanting to sleep with someone. I liked him because he was secretive. And because noone does acceptance better than Tom Riddle."

Tom can't have shown Vitellius too much, Harry determined, if Vitellius still sung his praises.

"Why did you two stop?"

Vitellius shrugged. "It didn't go on too long. A few months last spring. There was another. A man. But I only saw him in Hogsmeade once. I adored Tom, Potter. But Tom made it clear from the get go he was testing himself... I still think he preferred me though... I think he stopped when he decided he'd learned all he needed to know."

Tom Riddle using intercourse as a learning opportunity. Well if that wasn't him to the core... But Tom had never obliviated Vitellius. Or not everything. It was clear Vitellius had lasting memories of their times last year. Harry'd typecast Tom as not wanting anyone to recall his most intimate moments. But Harry'd typecast Tom as a lot of things he'd been wrong over.

It was all a matter of pride, Harry surmised. Tom craved to be remembered. Vitellius remembered Tom as a fantastic lover, because that's all Tom would let him remember him as. Or that was how Harry's nasty assumption came to be. Harry didn't actually know if he was right, but he liked to think he was.

"Thanks, Nott," Harry began, "I- You didn't have to tell me all this." He wondered if he'd made the other boy feel uneasy. After all, he'd been asking after his sex life, in the vaguest of manners. But Vitellius' true feelings remained cryptic.

"You're Harry Potter. I assumed at the rate you're going, you're going to be curious about me anyway."

Harry turned solemn. What did he mean at the rate Harry was going? What did he mean, looking at
Harry with those eyes full of meaning, that Harry was somehow supposed to decode? It seemed everyone was so sure that Tom Riddle up and deciding he was attracted to Harry made it a done deal, while not once considering Harry's feelings in the matter.

"I don't like him, Nott." Harry wanted to add there was not a chance he would ever like Tom... but wondered if that wasn't a tad melodramatic.

"Okay..."

"I'm serious when I say you shouldn't trust him. You shouldn't have ever trusted him," said Harry. By now there were a few other students seeping into the courtyard. It was a rare, clear day that mid February. Vitellius shifted, showing discomfort for the first time.

"I think I know what's best for me," Nott replied.

"He's a bad person."

"No less or more than you or me," said Vitellius. The words his wand drew took on a more sinister appearance, melting into the air when they disappeared.

"He's a bad person," Harry repeated, "Whether you know it or not, he's hurt you. He's hurt his friends, and they don't know it. He uses people, and he's capable of destroying lives."

Vitellius whipped his wand around. "You don't get to decide for me what my experiences have been, Harry Potter." Vitellius' eyes were icy. It was the first sign of real emotion he'd shown through that placid, ever-so-amused mask of his.

"I swear to you," Harry bit out, "I swear on my life, do not trust him."

With that, Harry stalked off, before people caught notice of Vitellius' wild wandwaving. At least Vitellius didn't call Harry mad. But Harry was still irrationally angry. He stomped past groups of people, all jumping aside for him and gaping after him and saying, "Well. That's Potter, isn't it?" Like it was expected, he'd be angry or emotional. But noone ever thought to expect Tom Riddle was genuinely dangerous. They never did. It was yet another unjust thing about this place.

It was by coincidence, that Harry, striding through the corridors and still fuming, bumped face first into Riddle and his entourage.

Like that, it set Harry off. Having to see Tom this close for the first time that week since he'd kissed him, sent Harry's blood boiling. Tom gazed down with cold, unflinching eyes and Harry trembled in his trainers.

"YOU!" He hollered. Tom faced him with an expression of confusion.

"Ohhhh boy," breathed Lestrange, "Here we go again."

"Who's next??" asked Harry.

Tom stared at Harry and Harry stared back, holding his breath. Following a momentary silence, Tom
said:

"You're delirious. I've heard you were sick today. Let me escort you to the hospital wing," He attempted to grab Harry by the elbow, but Harry smacked his arm away. Swift and terse, Tom got the point, standing with his arm in midair, and then pressing his lips together and letting his hand fall. Tom was growing angry with Harry. The obvious signs that none of Tom's friends could pinpoint were all there for Harry to witness. And Harry took satisfaction in it. He wanted to make Tom feel how he felt. How he'd felt all week. Vulnerable, confused...

Befouled.

"Who's next?!" Harry repeated.

"Would you at least try to make sense, Harry?"

"All I'm saying..." Harry smiled caustically. "Is that you can't just stop at the mad bloke, can you? I'll get old eventually and I'll lose your interest."

Tom shook his head, like Harry was a tragic case, in desperate need of help. He made to walk past Harry, but Harry took a step back, jutting his chin and puffing his chest out. Just rearing for a fight. Harry dared Tom to backhand him- To just give him a reason to attack him. Tom quirked an eyebrow. He was trying to tell Harry to save this for later. To save this for private.

"How about the sick, the old! How about werewolves, or squibs, or muggleborns?!" Harry rasped, clenching his fists. It was by luck, that no crowds had gathered yet, but Tom's eyes flitted from face to face around them. Students passing by, minding their own business. Even now he continued to value his reputation.

"You," Harry hissed. "You can't even attempt to relate to someone on the same level as you. You couldn't show yourself bare, unless they're disenfranchised enough that noone would want to believe them."

Tom's jaw clenched. He nodded towards his friends and they dispersed, walking off. Avery glanced at Harry curiously and Mulciber and Dolohov peeked back at him, with amusement. As if he was Tom's silly pet dog doing a trick. Tom strode off in the other direction, knowing Harry would follow, throwing insults at his back. So Harry did.

"You laugh in my face. You think i'm so great, because you can trust me. Because noone trusts me."

Harry spat at his back. Tom continued, nonreactionary.

"You're pathetic! you're pathetic, Tom!"

"You're a bloody coward!"

Tom cantered on, betraying no emotion and leading Harry away from Hogwarts and out towards the Great Lake. That was Riddle. He always had to be so calm and composed. In that moment, Harry despised him for it.

"What would you do if everyone knew I were sane? WHAT WOULD YOU DO?!!" Harry shouted
"Would I still be attracted to you? You mean?" He quietly asked. No. That wasn't what Harry meant. He quietly gaped up at the younger boy. Tom's aggressive behavior from the night they'd kissed was gone. He was replaced by a gentler boy that reminded Harry of 'Good Prefect Boy Tom'. The quandary was attempting to discern whether Tom had up and put on an act, and for what reason. "You've not been attending your detentions or your sessions," Tom said.

"You've not reported them."

"Dippet has enough on his plate as it is."

"I'm sure you care so much about Dippet."

"What do you want me to say? That it's better if I can keep you around? It's better if I can keep you around."

Harry chuffed, refusing Tom a reply. Why did he have to be so direct? Why couldn't he hide stupid school boy crushes like a normal boy? Much of Harry's anger from earlier had disapparated. But Tom was still vile.

"Now tell me," Tom demanded, "Why are you attempting to fight me in corridors again?"

Unspoken words:

'I thought we'd moved past that.'

'The last time I spoke to you, I was shoving my tongue in your mouth and grinding on your hip'

'So what if I like that you're mad? It took you until now to get angry about it?'

Harry didn't say he'd spoken to Vitellius. He didn't say he knew all about Tom's 'type' or his past. He twisted his lips, looking past the Slytherin's shoulder, reminding himself that practicing occlumency with students that didn't know legilimency could only help so much. Harry didn't say anything.

Tom stiffened at the lack of response, putting his hands in his pockets.

"For the record Harry, our peers thinking you're mad is only a fringe benefit. I've decided I want to have you for much more than that."

"Right. For being a Parseltongue? Or is it my 'air of mystery'?" Harry said, thinking of Vitellius. "Perhaps you like the red on my cheeks. The shape of my nose. My collarbones, my shoulderblades, my ankles and wrists. Perhaps the nape of my neck? Or how about the smell of me?" Harry couldn't help it. He blabbered. The words left him with such little thought. The joke of it all was that Riddle didn't realize the familiarity such words should hold. He wore a baffled expression.

The complete scoundrel couldn't even remember what he'd said to Vitellius. He didn't even know Vitellius held such words near and dear to his heart.
"Of course I like that you're a parselmouth. You and I, we could be great together."

"HA," Harry barked, almost wishing Tom had gone on about they way he looked or smelled, instead of showing his arse. Showing that his sheer ambition didn't leave Harry out of it. He couldn't just tell Harry he liked the shape of his nose. Whether Tom realized it or not, he was already envisioning a future with Harry.

"For as long as you live, Tom? You will never have me," Said Harry. "Never," He repeated.

Harry wasn't expecting the huff of laughter, the way Tom brought his fingers to his lips, smirking. He wasn't supposed to laugh.

"Alright," Tom nodded "I will never have you."

"That's right!" Harry pointed at him. "So don't get your hopes up!"

Tom's smile grew wider. So Harry took off, imagining his robes billowing in a Snape-like fashion behind him. He was several meters off when Tom Riddle called after him.

"Oh, Harry?! Do come by your next detention."

Harry looked over his shoulder. Tom stood beneath the tree. He hadn't moved an inch. A breeze was blowing his hair back, and that wide smile was still plastered to his face. Harry was far enough away now, that he could admit Tom was beautiful. It felt like looking at him in Dumbledore's pensieve, when Tom was just someone-else's memory, and Harry didn't have to worry about him hurting people. Harry glowered at him.

"You going to report me?"

"You know I won't."

"Good for me then!" Harry tucked his hands in the pockets of his robes, sauntering off, before Tom called again.

"I think you'll come!"

Harry ignored him.

On his way up to Gryffindor tower, Harry passed the corridor. The corridor. He stopped by the swamp and stared at the message on the wall.

There was one way to get back at Tom Riddle for his behavior. Perhaps completely humiliating the mysterious 'Heir of Slytherin' might have an effect.

Harry bit his lip, waving his wand, so that the congealed blood, yet to be washed away all collected
into one space, and then separated once more. "The chamber of secrets has been opened, enemies of the heir beware..." Harry said, sneering. "I think the fuck not."

Harry spelled out newer words. Better words. Something suitable for Tom and Tom only.

When he was done, Harry clapped his hands together, examining his handiwork, happily. Harry left gleefully.

While Myrtle and Malfoy and Hagrid were out and away, studying or hanging about, Harry was opening the portrait to the Gryffindor Common room and collapsing in his bed. For a day he'd spent doing almost nothing, Harry was exhausted. Perhaps he was tired from his anger. Or maybe Harry was weary, because all week, he'd kept it in, locked inside of him. Nevertheless, Harry fell asleep early that afternoon, with his Marauder's Map open atop his chest.

If he'd stared only a bit longer, he might've spotted Aragog again, his footsteps scampering around none other than the Slytherin Dormitory. Tom Riddle's name was surrounded by Lestrange, Mulciber, Dolohov, Bulstrode, and Avery. All encircled Aragog.

But Harry fell into a deep sleep before then, and he dreamed an intense dream.

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Despite the booming thunder, the overpouring of rain, the frigid cold, Harry kept the window open. It had the perfect view of what used to be a cornershop but was now ruins. It was periodically lit by bursts of white light, that sparked envy in Harry. If only it had been the walls Harry was enclosed in that had shattered. If only he could stand atop the crumpled ceiling of this place, with all it's inhabitants laying, screaming or dead beneath him. If only Harry could stomp on their struggling hands reaching for what life Harry wouldn't allow them.

If only Harry was at Hogwarts. At least he'd be gone soon. Harry reminded himself of that. Day by day Hogwarts grew closer. Fourth year would begin. Harry would be free. And all the muggles would be stuck here.

The creaking of his door alerted Harry to another's presence.

"Tom!" a boy called. He was a scrawny boy, on the cusp of puberty and had straw-colored hair. In the dark, he stood at Harry's doorway, bunching his fists in his pajamas while he fidgeted like a child that had to pee, or one that'd just been woken from a nightmare. Billy never did act his age.

"Billy," Harry greeted him, eyeing his shivering figure from head to toe. Like many of the inhabitants at Wool's, Billy was left shell-shocked from the blitz, that which Harry had narrowly missed. Slamming doors, the clattering of a plate on the tile floor, and most especially the crackling roar of thunder. All sent Billy into a flurry. Harry found that clapping into his face at random intervals could successfully shoo him off. Harry used to scare Billy. More than thunder, more than shrieks and screams, more than blood and orange blasts of light. Now, like a beaten dog, Billy sought out protection from the very boy he'd spent most his childhood avoiding.

Strangely, Harry couldn't say he minded. There was a faint whiff of power in the gesture, that
reminded him of Pascal Avery quivering in a school cupboard, or of Julius Mulciber running errands at the command of his older brothers. There was power, Harry had spent his first year realizing, in protecting the weak.

"Tom, m-may I come in?"

Harry pretended to heave a heavy sigh, rolling his eyes, he beckoned him forward, and sat up against the wall.

"Don't wet yourself, Billy." It was a response to the quick, fluttering footsteps. Billy wasted no time and soon the muggle quaked and curled beside him "Why bother sleeping in your own bed now?" Harry said when the boy huddled closer. With one foot, he probed the other boy away, raising his eyebrows at the audacity. A warning. "Soon those planes'll be back, and you and all those muggles will be huddling in the cellar again."

It smelled of urine down there now. It was an unpleasant additive to the mildew. Instead of the cupboard, Mrs. Cole had taken to sending Harry down there for punishments now. Another fight with Eric Whalley had Harry kept in the cellar the week prior.

"Say. Where do you plan to go when Wool's gets hit?"

Billy blinked at him, eyes going wide and glassy. The clap of thunder made him spring. Harry rolled over, latching his window closed.

"It won't," Billy trembled "You don't really think that, do you, Tom?"

Harry smirked. He spread the fingers of his free hand out and responded simply with "Boom!"

Billy flinched. He was so easy.

"Are you trembling, Billy? Scared Billy?"

"No!" Billy desperately refuted. "I'm not."

"Are you going to cry, Billy?" Excitement rose in Harry's stomach.

"No!"

"I see tears in your eyes, Billy." Harry snickered "Don't cry, Billy.

"It's the dust!" Billy insisted. Harry moved closer to the puny boy.

"When Wool's is gone you'll be homeless, won't you? Little Billy, out on the streets. Little Billy selling himself like meat. That is... of course, under the pretense you won't die. Let's be honest. You will."

All muggles did was die. Breed. Fight. Die. Repeat.

Billy would be no different. Perhaps if the war continued long enough, Harry would even get to see the unfortunate thing get drafted- like the older boys that had come of age. Clive Walker had reached a mere twenty-two when he'd joined the national service. At eighteen he'd found a blue
collar job, and he'd revisited Wool's every weekend until he'd been conscripted. He'd donated with his meager earnings when he'd still been around. And then he'd sent Mrs. Cole his miserable wartime letters— which she insisted on reading aloud at suppertime. And then he'd died. His body was never recovered, and Martha had made them all hold a candlelit vigil. She often morbidly reminded Harry that his penny loafers had been Clives hand me downs.

"And you won't?" A boom nearly muffled Billy's words, but Harry could still hear him. Dazed, Harry stared back as they repeated in his mind.

"Die? Don't say something so preposterous, Billy."

"Eventually. Everyone does. Don't they? Like Peanut," Harry scowled at the mention of the boy's rabbit. He was still hung up on that ugly, old thing. He should've skinned it. He shouldn't have ever let Billy discover the body. He shouldn't have buried it with him.

"Not me," That Billy had the audacity to even suggest Harry might die, left Harry shaken. He felt as if by speaking that possibility aloud, the boy had made it true. And that was making Harry's blood absolutely boil.

"And why not? What makes you so special?"

Where to start? Harry was smarter than the other boys, more agile. Harry was quick. Harry didn't get caught up in his emotions. Certain of all, Harry would never sacrifice himself for someone else. And last, but not least, Harry was magic. And Harry would absolutely not in a million years ever die. Why, a wizard dying? How outlandish!

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The fact remained that Euphemia and Fleamont Potter were going to pass either way.

James, so full of hope, had gone on to the next vision, Tom at his aside, as they scavenged through future memories.

So they'd died in the first memory. A slow passing, with a future vision of James by Euphemia's side, holding her hand, blinking back tears, while Harry wiped the sweat from Fleamont's forehead with a damp cloth. He served him one last glass of cool water, before Fleamont passed.

Tom's other self had stood at the doorway to their bedroom for what seemed like hours, a flickering in his eyes gave away the true turmoil behind his blank expression. Tom had known instantly what he'd felt. It was a sensation common with Harry's family.

It wasn't about him. This wasn't about him. But nothing could ever curb the feeling he was an outsider peering through the glass of a window. That this was Harry's family, and Tom was merely his sporadic husband. Not even a husband Harry could keep by his side consistently.
James' mirror image had clung to Euphemia's hand even after she'd perished. There was a refusal to let go. Harry had decided it was too soon to floo the mortician, and by the time James was ready to let go of her palm, rigor mortis had set in.

The James beside him, had watched it all, utterly horrified. And so James had insisted. The next one. The next one. They'll live on in the next vision, and that will be his reality. Tom had grabbed James by the hand then, leading him past Harry, seated at Fleamont's bedside, staring into nowhere, arms wrapped around himself. They'd walked right through the Tom Riddle standing at the doorway, immobile and still watching the scene.

From the Potter cottage, into a hallway at St. mungo's they passed. The walnut planking and portrait laden walls dissolved into white purity and James and Tom approached another James and Harry. Again, they mourned.

When it was over, Tom had pulled James with him out of the pensieve. James had collapsed onto his back, on the cold marble floor, next to the pensieve and the eye glass. He looked out the skylight of the observatory with wet, blank eyes. He'd laid so still, so silently, Tom wondered if his soul had departed.

"Did you know?" James asked after an hour passed. Tom had spent the time, admiring the handsome lines of a mural, his back turnt to the teenager. Privacy was a null concept for anyone who'd matured within Hogwarts' castle. But Tom could allow him that much, if only out of avoidance of the small comforts anyoneelse would partake in.

"Did you think Harry hadn't asked the same of me?"

"Harry... knows?"

"No. I hadn't let him,"

"But you let me."

"Some fates you can't escape James. Best to learn that now."

"I hate you!" Spat James. "I hate you! I hate you, you despicable man." He broke, and rolled over onto his side, clutching his head, stifling body wracking sobs and pathetic little sniffles. Tom had imagined it might feel better, to watch James' back expanding with the heavy breaths he heaved. Instead he felt the slightest of dread curling up in his stomach.

Tom no longer hid his shadow attributes. Those around him still admired him for his brilliance. It was interesting to read anecdotes all saying "handsome, but I can't stand him," on a near monthly basis. But there was always Harry's family, whom Tom attempted to behave around. But the truth was a difficult thing to hide once you started telling it. He couldn't pick and choose and those he
surrounded himself with had already met him through Harry.

Tom could already feel Euphemia's heavy backhand, the cuts her sharp nails might leave on his cheek, upon the discovery of James' state. She still had time before her illness truly set in.

"I hate you I hate you I hate you," James repeated over and over again. Tom hadn't changed as much as Harry thought. And he could acknowledge this was one of the worst mistakes he'd made in his adult life. He knelt beside the teenager, slowly cradling his head, and guiding it into his lap. Tom massaged James' temples, stroking his hair. Small, useless comforts.

"I'm sorry, James." Did he mean it? Sometimes Tom did feel as if he were different.

He continued to brush James' hair back. Tom tried to imagine James was Harry. Imagining him as such, might awaken the guilt Tom knew he should feel. Tom wasn't sure what he could possibly be sorry for.

If you acted like something for long enough, could you become it? Even starting where Tom had?

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for A LOT of mentions of underage sex, Tom being with omc's, ableism, and Tom's usual fucked up antics

Thankyou for all your lovely comments the last chapter. And for those of you still reading, thankyou for waiting. I know i took my time with this chapter. This was more of an introspective chapter. Not a lot of action! but i think you need things like this in between all the craziness. I might worry about how some people might take the OMC. But i think for the Tom I've constructed, he'd help Harry along to better understanding Tom on a deeper level. I wanted to write an experienced Tom, one far beyond his years like the rest of him. and I wanted Harry to get another perspective of himself through it. To feel as if he's missed something while being caught up in saving the world

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