The Historical Importance of Runic War Warding in the British Isles

by samvelg

Summary
After losing Sirius at the Department of Mysteries Harry is left abandoned, lost and alone with her uncaring relatives for the summer. She somehow finds herself sharing dreams with Lord Voldemort who quickly discovers that she is his horcrux, changing the terms of the game between them forever.

Because not only is she a part of himself that he is now determined to reclaim, but thanks to the terms outlined in a centuries old will she is also the key to him claiming his birthright and conquering Magical Britain once and for all. And nothing is as seductive to the abandoned as someone who truly wants them.

Notes

Ok, so this is mostly canon-compliant up until the beginning of HBP, the only big things really being different that Harry is a girl, and Barty Crouch Jr. got away at the end of GoF. Otherwise it's pretty much all the same, she still awkwardly dated Cho during fifth year while running the DA, Sirius still died at the Department of Mysteries, the Dursleys are still awful and Dumbledore is still a manipulative fuckwit.

The biggest change is that she took Ancient Runes as a subject as well as Divination and Care of Magical Creatures, since she's closer with Hermione in this and takes her studies more seriously. Turns out she really loves the subject and is something of a Runes prodigy, especially when combined with her aptitude for DADA and her self-taught skills in thread magic. It's not touched on too much initially but will be very important later, along with the fact she's a Parselmouth.

This will get increasingly dark as she becomes disillusioned with the manipulations of the Light and is drawn towards the charismatic Dark Lord who is determined to win her to his side. Any especially graphic or violent scenes will be tagged and listed in the end notes, so always check those if you're concerned about the content.
It had been a week since school had finished for the year, and being back on Privet Drive still felt like it wasn't quite solid or tangible. Harry just wished to hell she could sleep.

Every day spent cleaning the house and working in the yard felt like it was happening to someone else, like she was watching her body go through the motions from about three feet back and couldn't find it in herself to care much about anything. Whenever she was back here it was always hard to work out if it felt like her life in the magical world was the real one, or if this was real and her time at Hogwarts was all some kind of fantastical dream thought up by a lonely orphan.

It had been ten days since Sirius had died.

It felt significant somehow that by now it had been ten days, that the aching hole in her chest was no longer measured out in single digits. Ten days of cloying, never-ending sympathy and news headlines and whispers in the corridor, followed by sitting on a train full of even more whispers and unwanted sympathy and then finally, the blessed anonymity of white collar suburban Britain.

She never expected that there would come a day that the Dursley's patented mix of passive-aggression and actual aggression at the fact she continued to draw breath would actually be a relief. That being treated like nothing remotely special and worked every second of the day so she had no time to get lost in her own head would be preferable to the alternative.

She really was barely sleeping, so even though her skin was starting to get the sun-kissed golden-brown tan she got from any kind of sun stronger than what could brave the Scottish highlands, the bags under her eyes meant she still just looked ill. Her by now waist length unruly black hair, which she'd been growing out on Parvati's advice ever since third year in order to try and 'weigh down the curls', had become greasy and matted in the lazy plait she hadn't bothered washing or even brushing out since she arrived back from Hogwarts.

In short, she looked a mess.

Her lack of concern for her appearance was clearly bothering Aunt Petunia too, like that delightfully pinched sort of look she got on her face when Mrs. Number Six's daughter came home on the weekends from university for Sunday dinner with blue hair and ripped jeans. Like it offended her and her tasteful nailpolish (refreshed during her standing weekly salon appointment every Tuesday) and tacky pearls (inherited from Vernon's spinster aunt in her will) and her outdated middle class pretensions leftover from the 50s (which she hadn't even lived through, go figure). It was clear that she really wanted to do something about it, but didn't at the same time because then that would mean she was remotely invested in Harry at all, which she refused to be on principle.

So Harry did all her chores without complaint, feeling hollow and empty but still gaining some perverse enjoyment from wearing shorts that showed off her increasingly unshaven legs. It was like the Cold War of feminine hygiene, and she couldn't wait until Petunia went nuclear. It couldn't be more than a couple days away by Harry's estimate before she would accost her with a safety razor and snipe that she wasn't raised to act like some kind of wild animal or feminist, heaven forbid, and it was sure to be hilarious.

Or at least it would be if she made it that far without snapping herself. She was no stranger to
nightmares and insomnia, a shitty upbringing and being repeatedly targeted for mayhem and death by madmen since you were eleven would do that to a girl, but this was a new low even by her admittedly appalling standards. Between staring blankly at the wall until the wee hours every night and then being woken up at 6am every morning to cook breakfast, she was running dangerously close to empty and she knew it.

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When she finally fell properly asleep around 2am that night, apparently just exhausted enough to fall unconscious, she was surprised to find herself in a library. It wasn't a library she recognised but it still somehow felt very familiar despite it's opulence. It was a massive, stately room with complicated wall sconces and high ceilings and neatly stacked shelves all the way up, with those funny little ladders on wheels they always had in the movies. She seemed to be standing in an open area near one end, facing a large, cozy looking fireplace with a single leather armchair and a coffee table placed neatly in front of it on a pretty green rug.

She was just about to explore some more when she heard a sudden voice coming from behind her.

"Potter?"

She knew that voice.

Her veins turned to ice, and she spun around to see none other than Lord Voldemort himself sitting behind an antique mahogany desk in the corner opposite the fireplace, wearing a well tailored black suit with a black open-front robe over top and apparently going through a pile of what appeared to be paperwork of all things. It took her a split second to recognise him, he seemed to be looking more like an older, maybe late 30s version of the handsome Tom Riddle from the diary in her second year than the snake faced monstrosity she'd faced a week and a half ago. His eyes were still the same burning red though, and he seemed to be caught in what must be a rare state of shock.

"Voldemort?" She blurted out, apparently just as caught off guard as he was.

"What on earth are you doing here Potter?" He demanded.

"Well then." She said awkwardly, giving her arm a sharp pinch. "This isn't the first dream with you in it, but it's certainly the weirdest so far."

He raised an eyebrow. "You think you are dreaming about me? Does that happen often?"

"Sometimes." She replied to this odd dream-Voldemort, coming over and jumping up to sit on the edge of his big desk just to annoy him. "Normally just the nightmares, you've given me rather a lot of fuel for them over the years you know. Though they're not as bad as the other ones, when I am you."

He stared at her incredulously.

"You dream that you are me?" He asked slowly.

"Yeah, that or I'm Nagini, and they're always awful. They make my scar bleed too, which is never fun to wake up to let me tell you."

His eyes narrowed. "Your scar bleeds? Does it do that a lot?"
"Not too often." She shrugged, wondering why she was talking more now than she had all week but figuring it couldn't hurt any since it was just her subconscious. "It hurts sometimes though, especially when you're around or touching me. The actual you that is, not this weird human version of you I'm dreaming up. I wonder why I am though, it's all a bit strange really but then again I've been so sleep deprived lately pretty much anything was possible. It could have been Snape and McGonagall doing a tango or something, so really this is probably me getting off easy."

"Potter." He said, actually sounding amused. "You are not dreaming me."

She shook her head dismissively, kicking her bare feet lazily. "Nah, because that would mean you're actually here and not trying to kill me, and that would never happen."

He sighed the sigh of the long-suffering, pinching the bridge of his nose as if he had a headache. "You can't actually kill someone in a dream, it would be pointless for me to even try."

She frowned at him. "But, that would mean you're really in my dream."

"Technically you are in mine." He said conversationally, sitting forward to lean on his folded hands while studying her closely like she was a particularly disgusting type of insect. "I frequently meditate so that I can lucid dream. My lucid dreams take place here, in this library I constructed in my mind palace so I may access any relevant information I need. I have no idea how you ended up in here though."

She froze, slowly starting to wonder if perhaps he was telling the truth, and that she really was sitting brazenly on Voldemort's big, important desk with messy hair that hadn't been brushed in a week and wearing her pink floral nightie from Oxfam that was two sizes too big and falling off one shoulder.

"Oh." She said weakly. "Um, oops?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Indeed."

They were both silent for an increasingly awkward minute.

"Er, are you going to try and hurt me now?" She eventually asked, still sitting on the desk as if any sudden movement on her part would make him strike like one of Aunt Marge's bulldogs.

"Hmm, I don't think so." He said absently, head cocked to the side. "That is, unless you want me to?"

"Of course not!" She squealed, folding her arms primly across her chest and blushing furiously. "Why on earth would I want that?"

"Considering your apparent deathwish ever since we renewed our acquaintance in your first year at Hogwarts?" He smirked. "If your habit of running headfirst into every dangerous situation you can find is anything to go by, such predilections would not be entirely out of the realm of possibility."

She gaped. Was Voldemort teasing her? "Even if I did have any 'predilections', which I most certainly do not thank you very much, why on earth would I want you to have anything to do with them?"

He smiled briefly, flashing sharp looking white teeth. "Why me indeed Miss Potter? You are the one who barged into my dream unannounced after all, thinking of me were you?"

"It's a bit hard not thinking about the psycho who's out to kill you." She huffed, still very red in the face and refusing to meet his eyes.
"Now there is no need to be rude." He scolded. "Though I am curious to know about the other times you have dreamt of me. I know you have visions from time to time, but I was unaware that during them you saw through my eyes."

"Why would I tell you anything?" She snarled. "I can't trust you as far as I can throw you!"

"Well correct me if I am wrong, but I assume you don't actually enjoy these dreams? If so, it would be in both our best interests if they stopped happening altogether. Surely you can trust that I want my sleeping mind to be separate from yours as much as you do?"

She bit her lip. He had a point there. "Well, what exactly did you want to know?"

"You were receiving training in Occlumency with Severus over the last year, correct? How did that go?"

She didn't like having to admit it, wondering briefly if she was giving out sensitive information, but in the end she begrudgingly nodded. "Yes. I was rubbish at it though, he was an awful teacher."

Voldemort smirked. "He is an incredibly powerful practitioner of the Mind Arts it's true, but he is not one to suffer fools is he?"

"No. He hates me because of my father too, which didn't help matters. The lessons ended when I saw some of his memories in his Pensieve, and he kicked me out."

The Dark Lord raised his eyebrows. "Severus is an incredibly private person, what on earth did you expect would come of a such an act?"

"I didn't expect that he'd catch me!" She replied hotly, not sure if she was more annoyed at him or herself. "I was looking for proof that he was spying for you!"

"Typical Gryffindor." He sneered. "Always rushing in without thinking things through properly."

"Typical Slytherin." She shot back. "Lying and keeping secrets and blaming everyone else for his problems."

They both glared at each other, clearly at an impasse, and he eventually clenched his jaw in irritation before pressing on.

"What happens in the dreams exactly? And how long have you been having them?"

She bit her lip, still not wanting to tell him anything potentially important but really, really wanting a solution to the shared dreams no matter where it came from. "Off and on since the summer before the start of my fourth year, and it happens more when you're feeling especially murderous or Crucio-happy. I'm seeing through your eyes, or sometimes Nagini's. And I'm not me, I'm thinking and feeling whatever you are. One of the worst was when you sent Nagini into the Department of Mysteries after the prophecy and she attacked Mr Weasley. I can still remember how hot his blood tasted, the feel of him in my mouth as I bit him. I woke up screaming, my scar feeling like it was on fire, and it took two showers to get all the blood out of my hair."

Voldemort was starting to look more and more disturbed. Harry started to feel even more apprehensive, not knowing what would make Voldemort look worried but knowing she wasn't going to like it whatever it was.

"Do you get flashes of emotions sometimes, even when you are awake?" He asked quietly.

"Emotions that there is no explanation for, or cause that you can detect?"
She nodded emphatically. "Yes! All last year especially, I've been getting so angry. I've got a bit of a temper if provoked yes but I'm not actually a particularly angry person, but out of nowhere I'd suddenly be so furious that I wanted to slap someone. Madam Pomfrey said it was just hormones, but it sure as hell didn't feel like it. I live in a dormitory with three other teenage girls, and they might get weepy or mean sometimes, but never so bad that they nearly hurt someone over nothing."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "No, I expect they don't."

"Do you know what it is then?" She asked, arms still crossed defensively over her chest.

He ran a hand through his dark, wavy hair, clearly lost in thought. "I have a few ideas, none of which are particularly reassuring."

She sighed dramatically. "Well, pick the worst possible option then. Knowing my luck that's probably what it is."

He stood up, slowly walking around the desk towards her. "Tell me Miss Potter, have you ever heard of something called a horcrux?"

She blinked, feeling more and more nervous the closer he came but refusing to let it show. "I haven't, no. What's a horcrux?"

"A horcrux." He said, standing directly in front of her now and staring down at her intently with the sinister air of one who has just experienced revelation. "A horcrux is an object in which is hidden a piece of someone's soul. A soul can be split through murder and Dark magic, but by the laws of magic it is still considered to be one complete thing. Therefore, as long as the soul piece in a horcrux is intact, the rest of the soul cannot pass into the afterlife, making the owner of the soul immortal."

Her jaw dropped, and she felt cold dread trickling down her spine into her stomach. "That's why you didn't die." She breathed. "You had a horcrux."

"Horcruxes." He said with a smile that was all teeth. "Plural. My body was destroyed as well you know, but as my soul remained anchored to this world I couldn't die."

He kept staring at her, unblinking, and all of a sudden the cold dread hardened into ice. "No." She whispered, hands clenching the edge of the desk until her knuckles were white as what he was saying began to sink in.

"Yes." He said softly, running a fingertip ever so lightly along her frantically tingling scar.

"You're lying!" She said, shaking and absolutely refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

He shook his head, still stroking her scar with terrible gentleness. "It appears that you, Miss Harriet Lily Potter, are a horcrux. My horcrux. It was all quite unintentional I assure you. I knew from your visions and from when I attempted to possess you that something was not as it seemed, but never in a million years would I have imagined this."

She smacked his hand away, hating the strange warmth that radiated from his touch. "Can people even be horcruxes?"

He hummed, resuming petting her like she was his blasted pet snake and she just couldn't bring herself to move even an inch. "Apparently so, though I have never heard of such a case. You truly are unique."
"Why are you telling me this?" She cried desperately, wanting it to be a trick. "Surely you know I'll just go straight to Dumbledore?"

He grinned like a cat, lazy and mean. "Haven't you worked it out yet? Dumbledore wants to kill me, but I cannot be killed with any kind of permanence until all of my horcruxes are destroyed. That means, I cannot die. Until you do. Telling him would just paint an irresistible target on your back for your allies to stab you in. And you know some of them would too, if it was for the greater good. Not to mention that I can tell you feel far too ashamed to tell any of your friends, because you are scared they will start to look at you like you are a monster just like me." He leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "So no, I don't think you will be telling anyone Miss Potter. I don't think you will tell anyone at all."

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She sat up in her tiny bed with a cry, breathing like she'd just ran a marathon and her scar still burning from his touch.

A horcrux. She was a fucking horcrux.

Resisting the urge to laugh hysterically, she curled up under the thin blanket and tried to muffle her tears in her pillow so she wouldn't wake her relatives. Because it turned out they'd been right all along, she was indeed a freak. A freak who had part of Voldemort's soul inside her, the man who was responsible for the death of her parents and Cedric and Sirius and so many other people. Who had to be stopped at any cost, and whether she liked it or not apparently part of that cost was going to be her life.

Harry curled up tighter and cried and cried and cried.

She didn't get any more sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Harry experiences disassociation, depression, and disordered sleeping.
Ten points to Gryffindor

Chapter Summary

Another day, another dream, another argument, followed closely by a very surprising discovery and declaration. Harry has never enjoyed being the target of a Dark Lord, but at least when he just wanted to kill her she knew exactly where she stood. As the nature of their relationship evolves she wonders if she isn't perhaps missing how everything used to be so much simpler.

Chapter Notes

So I was going to stagger the chapters I've already written to weekly updates but I got too excited and here you go, chapter two. Your comments are literally give me life, thank you <3

Also, the theories of warding discussed are partly inspired by Seperis and her Supernatural magnum opus Down To Agincourt. You really don't know the true meaning of slow burn and elaborate but internally consistent metaphysical logic puzzles until you've read it.

The first thing she did the next time she ended up in the library after falling asleep was curse a blue streak.

"Not that I am not impressed by your vocabulary." Came the dry voice from behind one of the freestanding shelves of books. "But I don't suppose you have any idea how you come to be here again?"

"I just fell asleep, nothing out of the ordinary." She huffed as be emerged and headed back to his desk with a stack of books. "I was even doing my Occlumency exercises beforehand, it's been a few days and I thought since I'd been doing them every night that it was working." She didn't mention that the first two nights she'd also refused to let herself sleep at all, just in case she'd end up back here with him, but had been unable to stop herself from nodding off tonight.

He waved his hand dismissively. "No, this is just the first time since then that I have lucid dreamed."

She slumped, feeling pissy that her suffering had all been for naught and he was apparently the one in charge of this horror show. "And here I thought I'd actually managed to fix it."

"Do you think it would really be that simple, stupid girl?" He sneered, doing a remarkable impersonation of her irritable Potions Professor. "That is why I am here, researching. Our previous encounter was the first time I had lucid dreamed since our altercation at the Ministry, so I had to see if it happened again. If it happens a third time in a row then it is no coincidence and we can progress in our experiments to ascertain the cause."
"I thought the cause was me being your horcrux."

"That is the why, not the how." He corrected as she wandered around aimlessly. "Nagini is also my horcrux, yet she doesn't show up in these dreams making a nuisance of herself."

"Maybe she's broken." Harry replied flippantly, poking at a row of seven small grey stones lined up on a nearby shelf.

Despite his carefully impassive face his hands tightened on his book, parchment crinkling to reveal his irritation. "Do be quiet, I am working."

"How can you be working, you're asleep!"

"That is no excuse for idleness now is it?" He replied airily without looking up. "Twelve odd years as a disembodied spirit has left me rather behind schedule."

"You're welcome." She said cheerfully, sending him a wink and a shit-eating grin when he glared at her in retaliation.

"I am also, as you can surely understand, very motivated to find a solution for our little situation. Now, I am still not sure why you are here but if you are going to stay then either be useful or be silent."

She snorted in derision. "Why on earth would I want to be useful to the man who's trying to kill me?"

"Ah, silent it is then."

"I'm really going to enjoy vanquishing you." Harry grumbled under her breath, flinging herself ungracefully into the lone plush leather chair by the fire and very put out that once again she appeared to be wearing the daggy nightie she'd fallen asleep in. She was glad she'd at least caved and taken a long shower while the Dursley's were out at the cinema yesterday, washing her hair and exfoliating and generally making herself presentable. Turns out the prospect of potentially facing Voldemort while looking like she'd been sleeping in a hedge was infinitely more motivating than Aunt Petunia's waspish annoyance.

"That's nice dear." The bastard replied, back to not even looking at her while speaking.

They were both quiet for a while, Voldemort reading and Harry looking around curiously, but after a while even the alertness she usually had around Voldemort started to wane as he just sat there, ignoring her.

"So, what are you reading?"

"Potter."

"Come on Voldemort, I'm bored."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "A thirteenth century treatise on soul magic from Greece. As I said before, I am trying to work out what to do about our little predicament, so it really is in your best interest to not be a distraction. Just read one of the books and stop bothering me."

She perked up. "Do you have any good ones on ancient runes?"

He actually looked up at that and raised an eyebrow. "Runes?"
"I like runes." She said, feeling oddly defensive and not really knowing why.

He just kept looking at her as if she was a puzzle, before waving a hand. From one of the shelves nearest to him a book flew out of it's place and into her hands. The cracked leather cover read *The Historical Importance of Runic War Warding in the British Isles* by Fomalhauta Black.

Hesitating for a moment in case it tried to take a bite out of her like some of the books in the Black library at Grimmauld Place, she took one last look at Voldemort who was apparently back to ignoring her and started reading.

*Warding, the act of enacting boundaries on physical space, or more accurately manipulating the boundaries already present in physical space, ties in a lot with war, especially historically. The relative peace of the last few centuries in Magical Europe thanks to the oversight of the International Confederation of Wizards has led to an overall decline in the understanding and practice of war warding.*

*War wards are the pinnacle of the warding arts, a transdisciplinary practice that involves arithmancy, law, defensive charms, and ancient runes. One of the best examples in the United Kingdom of still functioning war wards is actually Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry located in Scotland. Thanks to the various wars declared and fought in the area during the construction and early years of the school, its legacy of war warding has it regarded as the safest place in the British Isles even a thousand odd years later. The other is Gringotts Bank in London, which owes its impressive wards to a long and bloody tradition of goblin wars and rebellions.*

*Due to the fact that basic warding principles are identical in every single magical culture worldwide, it is theorised that wards were the very first magic used by our ancestors in the distant past, followed closely by healing.*

"This is fantastic." She said out loud. "Are all of these books real?"

He raised an eyebrow at her condescendingly. "Of course they are, why would I memorise fake books?"

"You mean you read all of these? And memorised them?"

"Yes, I believe that is generally what one does with books."

Harry shook her head, impressed despite herself. "I don't remember them this well that's for sure. 'Mione maybe, she can recite pretty much every book she's ever read like she swallowed the damned things."

"That would be Miss Hermione Granger I assume, your pet Mudblood."

"She is nothing of the sort!" Harry shrieked, bristling like a cat.

"So you say."

"She's my best friend! And it doesn't matter who her parents are, she's the smartest witch in our entire year and probably all the others too!"

The corner of his mouth twitched in what might have been a smile on anyone else who was not a
total arsehole. "A diamond in the rough then, how quaint."

"You are an awful person, did you know that?"

"I am a Dark Lord." He deadpanned. "This cannot actually be that shocking to you."

She made a face. "Well you look, you know, like you did before you went all monstrous and scaly." She said, waving a hand in his general direction. "It's easier to remember you're a soulless bastard when you look like you got stuck halfway transfiguring into some kind of bloody zombie snake."

"A soulless bastard?" His lips quirked again. "That is probably more accurate than a lot of the things I have been called over the years."

"Well the bastard bit certainly fits Tom Marvolo Riddle."

He froze, red eyes narrowing. "Pray tell, where exactly did you hear that name?" He asked with a voice that sounded like ice. "And for that matter, how do you know what I used to look like?"

Harry paused before answering. "My second year." She said warily. "Your diary possessed Ginny Weasley, my friend's little sister, and opened the Chamber of Secrets. I went down there to rescue her, and your younger self told me everything."

He was so still it was like he wasn't even breathing. "And what happened next?"

"I killed the giant, insane basilisk with the sword of Godric Gryffindor that's what happened, and then I used one of the basilisk's fangs to kill your diary too." She grinned maliciously. "Your younger self died in a torrent of ink, screaming for mercy from a twelve year old."

"How in Merlin's name did a baby Weasley get a hold of my fucking diary?" He demanded, clearly enraged beyond belief if he was resorting to the non-magical kind of cursing.

She had a feeling this could only go badly for Malfoy Senior, so she didn't feel remotely bad telling him. "Lucius Malfoy was annoyed at the Muggle Protection Act that her father was trying to get through the Wizengamot that year, and for all the raids on private homes for Dark Arts objects he was helping conduct. So to discredit him he slipped it into her book bag while we were all in Flourish and Blotts getting our school things, knowing she'd get caught with it eventually and that it would reflect badly on him. None of us knew she'd been writing in it all year until after a bunch of Muggle-borns were Petrified and it tried to kill her."

"Lucius was under strict orders to guard that diary with his very life." The Dark Lord snarled. "Once he is no longer in Azkaban he is going to regret the day he thought that petty revenge was more important than his responsibilities to his Lord!"

"It was a horcrux." She said shrewdly, feeling oddly certain. "The diary was a horcrux too."

"And you killed it." He said furiously. "I had no choice!" She replied hotly. "The basilisk wouldn't listen to me and it had bit me when I shoved the sword up through it's brain, I was bleeding out and dying from the venom and the horcrux was still killing Ginny. So I did the only thing I could think of to save her before I died too!"

"The basilisk bit you?" He exclaimed suddenly, clearly alarmed. "How are you not dead?"

"Fawkes came down and blinded it for me, that's how I ended up with the sword. And after the basilisk and the diary were dead, he cried on my wounds and saved my life. Dumbledore said it was
because I'd shown him unwavering loyalty that his familiar was able to find me."

"Merlin save me from the self-righteous posturing of Gryffindors!" He yelled. "You insolent child, you killed a thousand year old basilisk that belonged to a Founder of Hogwarts and destroyed something absolutely precious and irreplaceable to me. Does it make you feel proud?"

"It wasn't my fault!" She yelled right back at him. "If the basilisk had just listened to me and stopped attacking people and your diary had stopped trying to kill Ginny they'd both have been fine!"

He stared at her like she was an idiot. "Why on earth would you think the basilisk would listen to you?"

She blinked at him in confusion. "Er, because I'm a Parselmouth?"

"You're a what?" He demanded loudly. Harry suspected that if he were any other man that his jaw would have dropped open, he honestly looked that shocked.

She bit her lip. "A Parselmouth. The whole school found out in my second year and thought that meant I was the Heir of Slytherin once the attacks started. You've got a bunch of followers with children who go to Hogwarts, didn't any of them tell you?"

"No, they did not." He snarled, finally standing up and pacing furiously between the desk and the fireplace and back again.

"Why does it matter?" She asked, slumping back in the armchair and not liking that he was making such a big deal of it.

"Of course it matters!" He exclaimed. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

She shrugged. "I don't like to think about it much, it's not exactly something that's particularly useful and it's caused me more trouble than it's ever helped me any. It doesn't run in the Potter family so Dumbledore said it was because you'd created some kind of connection the night you tried to kill me as a baby, and that was why I had the ability."

"Meddling, deceitful old coot!" He snarled, still pacing like he'd wear through the parquetry floor. "A connection? He has to have known or at least suspected what you were, that you held a piece of my soul. That would not have given you the ability on it's own though. Awakened a dormant potential perhaps, but Parselmouths aren't just Parselmouths because of magic, we have to inherit the physiological characteristics necessary in order to be such."

Well that certainly answered some very awkward questions about some things that had been happening to her for the last year or so. "What do you mean?"

"As Parselmouths have a special organ under our tongue which snakes also share, that's how we can speak like them. We also have extra bones and chambers in our ears which help us hear and understand them, and there is a host of other things that appear as we reach adulthood. We are like necromancers, we are not made or learned we are born. Do you have any idea at all how special you are?"

"I'm not special. Certainly not because of something that just makes other people scared of me and hurts them, like some kind of freak." She said quietly. "I just want to be normal."

He stopped dead, his blazing red eyes narrowed. "Who exactly told you that you were a freak?"

"Everyone!" She yelled as she surged back to her feet, rapidly losing her temper herself. "I heard it
every day of my life after bloody Dumbledore sent me to live with my disgusting muggle aunt and uncle who hate magic and work me like a bloody Malfoy house elf. Hell I didn't even know I even had a name that wasn't freak or girl until I went to primary school! And then, when I'm eleven I get told I'm a witch and I think finally, finally there's a reason why I am the way I am. That it all makes sense, that I have somewhere I belong. Only to find out that because of you I'm just a different kind of freak after all even in the magical world! I have never known a moment's peace or belonging for as long as I can remember, and it's all your fault!"

Voldemort was silent as she screamed at him, his eyes locked unblinkingly on her and a strange kind of manic tension making him shake as he clenched his fists at his side.

The silence dragged between them until he spoke so softly she nearly couldn't hear him. "I'm going to kill them."

"What?" She snapped, suddenly acutely aware of the barely contained rage emanating in powerful waves from the furious Dark Lord she'd just been yelling at. "Who?"

"Dumbledore. Your relatives. Every single one of the animals that told you that you were anything less than the miracle that you are." He hissed through his bared teeth. "Not only are you a female Parselmouth, a rarity even among the rare, you are the bearer of my soul. You are mine, and no one has the right to touch or demean what is mine!"

"I don't belong to you!" She protested, very pointedly ignoring the guilty curl of warmth she felt at someone being so protective of her, regardless of who it was. Merlin, she must be pathetically starved for attention if she was drinking it up from Voldemort of all people.

"Oh yes you do my dear." He breathed, moving and standing far too close for comfort. "I have been a part of you since the Samhain night I came for you, a piece of me grafted onto the very core of your being. There hasn't been a single second since then that you were truly alone, you've grown and become who you are shaped entirely by me. There has never been anything in this whole sorry world which belongs to me more than you do."

"Stop it." She whispered, unable to move away from the all-encompassing warmth he seemed to be drowning her in with his nearness and his words.

"No. You are mine, Harriet Potter. And one way or another, you will be with me always."

She finally got the energy to back away, completely unprepared to the furiously possessive Dark Lord slowly stalking her like she was a deer. "This is mad. You want to kill me, remember? You spent all of last year trying to get a copy of the actual sodding prophecy that's all about us killing each other!"

He chuckled to himself. "Well I can't kill you now can I? I would be destroying part of myself if I even tried, and I am many things but I am not suicidal. Not to mention that you share my gift of Parseltongue as well. No Miss Potter, you are far too valuable to just kill. You are safe from any further attempts on your life from me and mine, you have my word. I will even make a vow on my magic to that effect the next time we see each other in person."

She didn't know why someone telling her they had no intention of killing her was making her feel far more nervous than the alternative.

"What are you going to tell all your flunkies then?" She asked, trying desperately to ignore the way Voldemort was looking at her not unlike how she'd once seen Dudley looking at a particularly extravagant chocolate cake in a shop window. "I somehow doubt you're going to go around telling
them how you've got a chunk of your soul lodged irrevocably in the Girl-Who-Lived."

"They will be told it is a key requirement of my future plans that you are bought to me alive and unharmed, or their lives and the lives of their entire extended families will be forfeit." He cocked his head. "I don't suppose you could make all of that moot and just tell me where you are so I can retrieve you myself?"

"Like hell I will!" She retorted, retreating again to the armchair and her book so he'd hopefully take the hint and stop staring at her.

He eventually did after what sounded suspiciously like a solid minute of breathing exercises to reign in his temper, after which he went back behind his desk and continued with whatever he'd been reading. For lack of anything better to do, she decided to follow suit.

Wards are the best means of protection for anything, from something the size of a country all the way down to a jewellery box. The principles are always the same, the only difference being the amount of energy which must be expended in order to create and then maintain the ward in question.

Wards can also be used to guard things which are by definition more ephemeral, as in the case of the Fidelius Charm which protects a secret. It is most often used to hide properties but an especially determined and creative witch or wizard can use it to protect nearly anything, even an idea, providing of course that their ownership of said idea can be proven beyond reasonable doubt. This circumvents the otherwise necessary component of needing a physical space in order to erect a ward because the secret is stored within a Secret Keeper, thereby giving physical tangibility to the secret. Another example of a ward guarding the intangible is Occlumency.

Occlumency, the defensive form of the Mind Arts, only works for those who can define the entirety and boundaries of their own mind, and unflinchingly differentiate between 'I am' and 'I am not'. Without this sense of self awareness, it is impossible for an Occlumens to ward their own mind because it is impossible to ward something which you do not own or have the informed consent of the owner to ward.

Putting aside the fact that if Snape had just told her all this at the beginning of their lessons she probably wouldn't have driven him half mad by not understanding what the hell he was trying to teach her, it actually raised a very important question. "Why can't I keep you out with Occlumency, or you keep me out as for that matter? I'm assuming your Occlumency barriers are formidable."

He looked up at her. "Do you have any understanding of the principles behind warding?"

"My two best classes are Defense Against the Dark Arts and the Study of Ancient Runes, what do you think?"

She could almost hear him counting to three in his head. "Then what pray tell is Erasmus Winterly's First Law of Personal Warding?"

"That in order to ward any part of oneself, the caster's sense of self as an individual being must be whole and inviolate." She promptly recited, then blanched in horror. "Oh Merlin, that means that as far as magic is concerned there is no definitive line between you as an individual and me as an individual."
Indeed. Occlumency is just a variation on warding, albeit one that focuses on warding your inner self as opposed to your physical self, which means all the standard limitations are in effect. Normally meditation and self-exploration give an Occlumen the necessary insight to ward their minds, and as such it is a discipline which the weak-minded or delusional are physically incapable of learning. But in your case it is impossible for you to ward your inner self, from anyone I expect but especially from me, because as you said there is no clear line in the sand which separates us from each other." His carefully bland expression flickered with annoyance. "It would also explain why I have had issues with my own Occlumency barriers since regaining a physical form."

Something in the way he admitted that made her grin. "You thought you were going crazy didn't you? Come on you can admit it, I promise I won't tell anyone."

"Be quiet."

"Ten points to Gryffindor." She said smugly into her book, giggling at the way his jaw clenched.

"Potter!"

"Seriously though." She mused, ignoring how close he was to losing his temper again. "It's no wonder I was so pants at Occlumency, what with having a piece of you stuck in my head. There was no chance in hell I could ward it properly when I couldn't work out where I stopped and you started." She scowled, not liking the conclusions she was drawing. "You said Dumbledore had to know something about our connection, so why was he making me go through all that pointless training with Snape then?"

"I expect he was testing a hypothesis or several." Was the reply. "He was probably curious to see into your mind, and having Severus peek inside your head and report back to him what he found meant he didn't have to risk me seeing something in his, or taint the benevolent grandfatherly image you have of him. He never does anything for just one reason the old goat, and this all feels far too much like one of his wheels within wheels schemes."

Harry wanted to protest and defend Dumbledore, but he really was unfortunately spot-on in his assessment.

She really didn't like the fact that she'd had more honest conversations with Voldemort in two nights of dreaming than she'd had with the Headmaster all of last year, she didn't like it at all. And if the Dark Lord was to be believed then Dumbledore had known all along that she was at least potentially a horcrux and had never told her, not once. Just like he'd never told her about the prophecy, which in turn led directly to her losing Sirius forever.

Fury started to seep through cracks in the apathy she'd been stuck in since school let out.

Neither of them spoke again for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

I know it might seem like Voldemort is acting out of character in that he's immediately so possessive of Harry, but even in canon it's clear that he sees the world entirely in terms of things that are Him and Not Him. Harry being a horcrux immediately puts her in the category of things that are an extension of Him just like Nagini is, plus what he can read between the lines about her shitty upbringing is triggering a lot of unresolved
feelings about his own childhood.

All together, you get a very upset Dark Lord who is annoyed that his horcrux is so prone to backchat, but is still determined to reclaim what he sees as his and punish all those who have, by his logic, disrespected him by disrespecting her.
Cigarette Duet

Chapter Summary

While Harry is blissfully unaware of the atrocities being promised in her name, Severus Snape has a very bad night and needs to remind himself that you can't just shake people until their secrets fall out.

Chapter Notes

Here, have an outsider POV chapter showing Snape having to deal with the aftermath of Harry and Voldemort's conversations. I love writing Snape because he is the snarkiest asshole in the entire series, so throwing him into ridiculous situations just so I can hear his sarcastic inner monologue brings joy to my dumpster fire of a heart. As a bonus, enjoy the side by side comparison of the two masters he serves, and Voldemort having a merry giggle scaring people and getting juicy gossip on his horcrux.

Also, you can pry Narcissa and Snape being bitchy wine friends eternally despairing of Lucius 'Too Fucking Extra' Malfoy out of my cold, dead hands.

It wasn't often that the Dark Lord called for a general meeting, preferring usually to meet with his Inner Circle who would then dole out his commands to the idiots who made up the rank and file. The only regular exception were meeting the Death Eaters relevant to a specific task or objective one on one so he could give said task his full attention.

So that evening about two weeks into the summer break when the Dark Mark burned in the bone deep ache of a general call, as opposed to the razor sharp needling of a private or limited one, Severus Snape knew that something significant was happening. After making his excuses to the Headmaster he donned his black Death Eater robes, which always felt as deep and treacherous to him as the ocean at night, and pocketed his mask before heading out.

He smoked a cigarette on his way out past the wardline of Hogwarts, thankful beyond words that it was summer and the brats weren't here so he could do so without being on the receiving end of yet another lecture by Minerva, before pressing his wand to the Mark and Apparating directly to the gates of the Dark Lord's current base of operations in Malfoy Manor.

The gates swung open to admit him, automatically keyed to allow the passage of those bearing the Dark Mark. He stubbed out the remains of the cigarette on a passing marble statue, purely to spite the imaginary Lucius in his mind who would have had kneazles if he'd caught him littering the immaculately manicured grounds of his family's pretentious Manor with his uncouth muggle cigarettes because don't you know real wizards smoke pipes Severus?

The joke was really on him though. Severus knew he smoked the exact same brand that Narcissa did.

The walk up the long winding drive gave him time to put on his mask and organise his thoughts,
rearranging them like furniture to his liking so that all evidence of his betrayal, such as it was, was relegated to the attic where it would remain until he was safely back behind the walls of Hogwarts.

Entering the well appointed ballroom doing double duty this summer as a meeting hall for the Dark Lord and his followers, he didn't waste time on idle pleasantries with people he found almost universally unpleasant and took his allocated space in the front row and slightly to the left of centre. More than a decade had passed, but not much had really changed since the last war at all.

A subtle look at Narcissa as she took her place to his right where her currently incarcerated husband would normally have stood, showed that she didn't have any idea what it was about either. His best friend for his entire adult life thanks to their mutual interest in salacious gossip and keeping Lucius out of trouble, she was always one to have her finely manicured fingers burrowed deep in the pulse of whatever was happening. Especially with the Dark Lord currently residing in her home, her having no idea meant it was something very big or very sudden. Possibly both.

Walking briskly to the front of the room while everyone knelt before him, the Dark Lord didn't even sit down on his throne or wait for them all to finish standing up again before he began speaking.

"It has been brought to my attention that Miss Harriet Potter is a Parselmouth."

Oh sweet buggering fuck.

Immediately whispers started up behind him in the crowd of masked Death Eaters, all the other remaining members of the Inner Circle arrayed silently around him knowing far better than to allow their thoughts to show so transparently.

"I admit to being taken somewhat by surprise, especially as it was apparently made relatively public knowledge in her second year at Hogwarts. So I wonder, how is it I only came to hear about it some three odd years after the fact? The first two granted I had yet to return, but that does not excuse the year that has passed since then."

Everyone was silent.

"Selwyn." He snapped. "You had two children attending Hogwarts that year, have you raised them so poorly as to not know to pass along strategically relevant information, or did you just not think it was important enough to tell me that the second British Parselmouth in living memory had been identified?"

"My Lord." Selwyn protested weekly. "My children mentioned it in one of their letters at the time yes, but I thought for sure they were exaggerating or misunderstanding somehow. How could a halfblood Gryffindor bitch like that possibly have received the noble gift of Salazar Slytherin?"

The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed into furious slits. "Selwyn, come forward. Now."

The man audibly gulped, before shuffling to the open space before the raised dais at the front of the room. Severus resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Their Lord didn't take kindly to cowardice, the idiot was doing himself no favours at all.

When the unfortunate man prostrated himself at his feet, the Dark Lord lazily pointed his wand at him. "Crucio."

Severus watched the man screaming on the floor with detachment, hurriedly reviewing all the admittedly limited information he had about Potter and her morbidly ironic magical gift. He hadn't forgotten of course but as she never flaunted it around the school, no doubt showing some rare restraint after she'd been reduced to a pariah by the student body over it in her second year, he hadn't
thought to prepare contingencies for when the Dark Lord discovered it. He was deeply regretting that oversight right now.

"There are some things of a ritual nature-" Voldemort was saying over Selwyn's screams, "-of incredibly grave importance to me. Things that I had put on the backburner because I can only accomplish them with the use of another Parselmouth. Miss Potter fulfilling that requirement will therefore be a huge boon to us, and as such you are all to refrain from damaging or killing her before she can do so. When the time comes I will need her alive and intact, and that will not be accomplished if my Death Eaters have decided to get ahead of themselves and take out a schoolgirl without first thinking through the ramifications of their actions."

Severus wanted to be relieved that for some reason the Dark Lord wanted the girl left unharmed for now, but he knew that whatever the exact reason could be was unlikely to bode well for her in the long run.

"Is this ritual you need her for really so powerful my Lord?" Avery Snr asked calmly as Selwyn continued to scream. All of the surviving original Death Eaters who had actually attended Hogwarts with the boy who would eventually become Lord Voldemort were like that, respectful to the point of reverence but perpetually unruffled by absolutely everything he or the world at large could throw at them.

Severus considered himself a hard man to ruffle, but even he had to admit that if he had shared a dorm room for seven years with a budding Dark Lord during the horrors of puberty and lived to tell absolutely no tales about it whatsoever, he would probably be made of sterner stuff as well.

"Oh yes." Said Dark Lord assured them with a grotesque smile that stretched the skin of his pallid, snake-like face. "It could very well make the difference and win us the war, though it will take some time for me to prepare for it. In the meantime, we will continue as planned and work on infiltrating the Ministry."

By now Selwyn was unconscious, and the Dark Lord had stopped Cruciating him in favour of just walking over him as if he was a particularly lumpy rug as he leisurely paced across the front of the room. There was the sound of shifting robes in the rank and file. Even some of the Inner Circle, in particular Bellatrix, were looking confused and not a little put out by this newest decree. The Dark Lord didn't miss their discontentment.

"I can see that some of you feel inconvenienced by this new information. Let me paint you a picture then, so that there may be absolutely no chance at all for any…misunderstandings." He said congenially, still strolling across the front of the room and Selwyn's back as his giant snake appeared from somewhere, apparently determined to drape herself over the back of his throne to better observe them all with her far too intelligent eyes. "I don't care if it is by accident or sheer coincidence, if as a result of your actions she receives so much as a bruise or a scrape, I will be carving payment for it out of your hide. If she is wounded seriously, I will kill you. If you attempt to touch her sexually, I will personally feed you your own cock, and then kill you."

He ignored how his followers were starting to look increasingly sick, barring of course Bellatrix who seeing as she wasn't in possession of a cock of her own appeared to just be frantically suppressing a case of the giggles. Returning to his throne, he looked down at them all from the centre of the raised dais just as calmly as if he was discussing the weather and not force feeding them their own severed genitals.

"If by some chance she actually dies, I will hunt down every single blood relation to the third degree of the person or persons responsible, and kill them as slowly and painfully as I know how. Next, I will dig up every single one of their forebears currently interred on British soil and turn the rotting
corpses of the last thousand odd years worth of men, women and children into Inferi. With those Inferi I will proceed to lay waste to every Manor house, townhouse, beachhouse, farmhouse, warehouse, flat, shop front, hunting cabin, field, shack and garden shed their family has to their name. I will then burn the Inferi, and anything else still miraculously left standing at that point, to ashes and salt the very earth on which they once stood. And then kill them."

The room was as silent as a tomb. Severus was absolutely certain no one else was so much as breathing. He certainly wasn't.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes and continued. "I am not exaggerating. What I am, however, is powerful, resourceful, and immortal. Which means I have the ability, the means and the time to actually do everything I just said. Don't give me the reason."

He paused for dramatic effect, even though by that point it was really just overkill of an insulting order of magnitude. "To be very clear, in case any of you were thinking of being creative in your interpretation of my orders, I don't just expect her to be safe from all of you directly. If by chance you see her being harmed and do nothing to prevent it, you will be held just as responsible as the perpetrator themselves. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

Emphatic, pants-wetting agreement seemed to be the overwhelming response.

"I shall inform my son that when he returns to Hogwarts that he should be vigilant and intercede if he finds her in any danger." Said Nott. The other parents with school aged children chimed in their agreement, and Severus nodded his own head.


Narcissa shot him the briefest of questioning looks as she walked calmly past him, and he gave her the shallowest nod of his head to let her know that he'd call on her soon to sate her curiosity.

Severus just took a step forward and knelt in front of the throne, not raising his head or looking up even as the ballroom emptied of people and someone levitated Selwyn out behind them. He felt his skin tingle as his Lord silently cast a host of privacy wards before he sat down and began to speak.

"Look at me my Severus, and remove your mask."

He schooled his expression and did as he was instructed, keeping his face carefully blank as the Dark Lord absently stroked Nagini, who had decided that her master's lap was a much better place to lay on now that he'd sat down.

"I already know the answer, but just to confirm the Chamber of Secrets was opened in Miss Potter's second year, correct?"

Well then, he definitely had a good source of information. Outside of Potter and her friends, only a very small handful knew for certain the rumour that the Chamber had been opened was indeed fact.

"Yes my Lord."

"What were the circumstances?"

"From what little I was told by Dumbledore, a cursed item of indeterminate origins found it's way into the hands of a Miss Ginevra Weasley, the youngest child of Arthur Weasley, Ministry employee and member of the Order of the Phoenix. By all accounts she was possessed by some kind of
phantom from the cursed object and opened the Chamber of Secrets, Petrifying a cat, several Mudbloods, and one of the school ghosts before being stopped. She was taken into the Chamber to die by the phantom near the end of the year, and Potter and another Weasley child went down there with their useless DADA Professor at wandpoint in order to rescue her. I am unsure of the specifics, but it resulted in the Professor accidentally Obliviating himself with a backfiring wand, the death of the basilisk that dwelled within the Chamber at the hands of Potter, the destruction of the cursed item also at the hands of Potter, and the rescue of the possessed girl."

"Do you have any idea as to the nature of the cursed object?"

"No my Lord." 

"Do you know what happened to the cursed object after it's alleged destruction?"

"No my Lord." 

The Dark Lord paused in his interrogation, looking thoughtful. "Tell me, was our dear Lucius at all put out by what transpired?"

Lucius you great sodding idiot, what did you do? "Yes my Lord." Severus admitted, not wanting to get his best friend's stupid husband in any more trouble than he already was but unable to cover for him this time. "He never told me anything directly, but I suspected at the time that he had a hand in the cursed object ending up in Miss Weasley's possession in the first place."

"That is most unfortunate for Lucius." The terrifying man sighed, clearly very displeased. "That object was one I had asked him to safeguard for me prior to my very untimely discorporation. It has admittedly been some time, and do correct me if I am wrong my dear Severus, but I was under the impression that 'safeguard with your life' does not in fact translate to 'give to a prepubescent bloodtraitor' now does it?"

Oh Lucius was fucked. Their Lord only got this charmingly sarcastic when he was beyond pissed with someone. The last person had ended up in pieces spread across three square kilometres of London in the final year of the last war, with his head in pride of place on a spike in the middle of Diagon Alley. "No my Lord, it doesn't."

"You are my eyes and ears in Hogwarts my Severus, so how is it I never heard of any of this until now?"

Oh bloody hell. "Forgive me my Lord." He apologised, bowing even lower and keeping his eyes fixed on the hem of the man's robe. "It was some years in the past, it had honestly slipped my mind in deference to my unwavering focus on our glorious future and my ongoing responsibilities to you as your spy."

"Yes, you are not one to like dwelling overmuch on the past, are you my Severus? I have always appreciated that you were much like me in that regard, what with your ability to rise above the circumstances you were born to and look ever forwards." The Dark Lord mused. "However, this does not excuse you entirely. Crucio."

Severus grit his teeth against the screams that tried to push their way out of his mouth, knowing that to give in would just shame himself and make his Lord more annoyed. Finally after a minute that lasted roughly an eternity it stopped, and he bit the inside of his lip so he wasn't panting in an undignified manner.

"Tell me, have you ever heard her speak Parseltongue yourself?"
"Yes my Lord. There was briefly a Dueling Club in her second year, at the first meeting she was pulled up to duel with Draco Malfoy in front of everyone. He cast *Serpensortia*, on my advice, and when the snake was enraged she talked to it when it attempted to attack a nearby student. That's the first anyone had ever heard of it."

"Show me."

It wasn't a request, so he reinforced his Occlumency barriers and bought the pertinent memory to the front of his mind. He met his Lord's chilling red eyes, feeling the silent, wandless Legilimency that only the Dark Lord and Dumbledore were capable of casting as the memory replayed like a film reel. Once it was done he lowered his eyes again, subtly checking that his protections hadn't been breached.

The Dark Lord seemed very pleased by what he had seen. "Fascinating. Were there any other circumstances?"

"No my Lord. To the best of my knowledge, apart from when she opened the Chamber of Secrets later that year to rescue Miss Weasley she has never publicly used it."

The Dark Lord hummed noncommittally, still absently stroking Nagini's head. "Have you been asked at any point in the last year or two to brew antivenin for a student?"

He stopped to think. There were always odd accidents at a school for young magic users, but a snake bite was still enough of a rarity for the request to stand out.

"Just once I believe my Lord, roughly midway through the last school year. A sixth year, Miss Cho Chang of Ravenclaw, needed it. The venom wasn't one I recognised, which is why the standard antivenin in the Hospital Wing's stores wasn't sufficient. I remember it clearly because I was annoyed they wouldn't tell me what kind of snake had bitten her, though they did provide me with a sample of the venom so I could make what was required."

"No I don't imagine they would have told you." The Dark Lord's grin was wolfish, and Severus was sure he knew something that he didn't. His eyes narrowed as he connected the admittedly strange tangents of their conversation.

"My Lord, does that mean it was in fact Potter who set a snake on the girl which then bit her?"

"Oh my dear Severus." He purred, sounding positively delighted. "I would wager a rather large amount of gold that the girl wasn't bitten at all."

That didn't make any sense at all. Until it did, and he felt himself flushing in embarrassment. "My Lord you can't possibly be suggesting that..." Severus couldn't for the life of him think of a way to continue that sentence without being indelicate or sounding like a complete pervert.

"It is something that often happens to Parselmouths who are entering adulthood." The Dark Lord said with an indulgent wave of his hand, apparently feeling no such conflict. "Periods of heightened emotion often draw out the animal within at that age, it is simply that as Parselmouths that phrase is a little more literal for us than for most. I would imagine they were sharing some insipidly heartfelt moment of teenage intimacy, and the unfortunate Miss Chang got rather a lot more of a mouthful than she had bargained for."

Severus was both speechless and monumentally uncomfortable, two things he emphatically didn't like being at the best of times let alone while in the presence of the Dark Lord.

"Tell me Severus, does Miss Potter have a constant pack of suitors trailing around after her like
alleycats or is she generally solitary?"

He had no idea what specific sin on his part had lead him to this truly singular hell of discussing James Potter's insufferable teenage daughter's love life with Lord Voldemort, but he was sorry. So very, incredibly sorry.

"Not that I have noticed my Lord." He finally answered, after a few tense seconds of hopelessly wishing to be literally anywhere but here, having this conversation. "There are always unkind rumours and gossip as follows anyone who is well known in the public eye, especially when the person in question is a young woman. But she has never to my knowledge had a serious partner of any kind, and only a small number of close friends."

"Excellent. My plans will be much easier if she doesn't have too many fleeting human attachments."

Well that sounded just non-specific and ominous enough to be a veritable laundry list of potentially awful things.

"My Lord, if I may be so bold, what is the nature of the ritual you wish to use her for? I spend more time around her than any of your other followers, is there any way I could be of assistance to you?"

His crimson eyes narrowed. "Nothing that is your concern right now Severus. If and when that changes you will be informed. Now, you are to tell Dumbledore about my desire for her to be left alone when he asks and why, and the next time I call on you I expect to be fully informed as to his reaction."

Recognising the dismissal for what it was, he made his farewells and swept out of the ballroom as fast as could still be considered polite.

Returning to Hogwarts as if in a daze, all he could think was that he desperately needed a cigarette and to drink his firewhiskey in the bath until he fell unconscious, ideally drowning and never having to deal with any of this nonsense ever again. Sadly his duty, as always, came first so he made his way on autopilot up to the Headmaster's office. He'd informed the older man when he received the summons, and knew he wouldn't have gone to bed until Severus had returned and given a report.

"How did the evening go my dear boy?" Was the predictable question as they settled down in the Headmaster's cluttered office with a tea tray between them.

Severus didn't even have the energy to be annoyed at the overly casual form of address, he just took a teacup.

"It was a full meeting, which is unusual. The main topic seemed to be that he was told by an unknown party that Potter is a Parselmouth, and was most displeased that no one had seen fit to inform him sooner."

Albus was looking incredibly concerned, far more than Severus thought reasonable for that particular part of the news he had to share. It wasn't like it wasn't well known, even if it had been a few years since it was relevant.

"That is unfortunate, most unfortunate indeed." He said disapprovingly. "Do you have any idea who told him?"

"No idea, it didn't come up." Severus replied, taking a fortifying sip of his tea. "He even questioned Death Eaters with school aged children about why they'd never told him themselves."

"It would have been better if Tom had remained ignorant of that fact, but I suppose it cannot be
helped now." Severus thought, as always, that referring to such a dangerous man by his unwanted first name was an incredibly petty way to be disrespectful. "What happened next?"

"What happened next is he proceeded to threaten everyone present that if any of us so much as looked at her funny they'd be in for a world of hurt. He was both incredibly graphic and imaginative in his descriptions of what would befall anyone who tried to hurt her, and I have no doubt whatsoever as to the seriousness of his threats."

If Albus had looked concerned before now he was borderline panicked. Which Severus filed away to think about in greater detail later when he had more energy to devote to it, because hearing the Potter brat was apparently safe from Death Eaters for now should not be such a cause for worry.

"Why? Did he tell you why Severus?" The old Headmaster all but demanded, the infuriating twinkle no longer present in his eyes and revealing the cold calculation that he knew was a far more honest reflection of what really went on behind those ridiculous half moon glasses.

Severus just felt confused, like he was once again missing something very important. He didn't like it any more than he had earlier tonight. "Apparently there is a ritual he wishes to perform which can only be accomplished with the use of a second Parselmouth. He said that it would take some time to prepare for however, and that she was to be left alone in the meantime. Apparently it could turn the tides of the war, leading me to believe it is likely some form of very powerful, very old magic."

The Headmaster visibly relaxed. "Oh thank Merlin, for a moment there I had feared the worst."

He narrowed his eyes. This was not the expected reaction upon hearing about a potentially war-ending ritual. "What would be the worst Albus?"

"Never you mind my dear boy." The old wizard replied, the twinkle back in his eyes. "All will be revealed in due time."

He resisted the urge to scream in frustration. "Have you ever heard of a ritual like that?" He asked instead, even though what he really wanted to do was shake Albus Dumbledore until all of his precious secrets fell out of his beard.

"I have not, however I am admittedly not nearly as knowledgeable of Parselmagic as Tom is. It is an incredibly obscure branch of magic indeed. Not helped along by the fact the practitioners tended to record everything in Parselscript if they deigned to at all, which is impossible to read if you are not a Parselmouth yourself."

He looked positively pissy about it too, and Severus knew that he must have tried on at least one occasion to translate something in the language and failed miserably. And Albus Dumbledore didn't fail often, the man spoke fluent Mermish, for fuck's sake.

"What do we do next then Albus? I take it that Grimmauld Place is still closed to the Order?"

"It is indeed. It appears some kind of failsafe took place once Sirius passed away, and I have thus far been unable to reopen it."

Severus snorted. "He was an annoying bastard but he was the Lord Black. You know how paranoid those old families are about their secrets, and the Blacks were always more so than anyone. I'd wager you need Potter to reopen the house for us, the mutt made her his Heiress after all."

"Now now Severus, I have got a few more tricks up my sleeve to try before then. Besides, she is safe and sound with her loving family and I wouldn't wish to bother her with any of this Lordship nonsense unless I had absolutely no choice."
So he didn't in fact end up shaking Albus for his beard secrets, he begged off by claiming a dire need for potions and rest after enduring the Cruciatuus for maybe a tad longer than he actually had, and said good night.

All the way back to his rooms he reflected that while both Dumbledore and Voldemort hated the very idea of each other, they could be infuriatingly similar at times. Not that he'd ever tell either of them that, he valued both his continued ability to breathe and be free of passive-aggressive disapproval, and some days wasn't even sure which one was more important.

But seriously, Lordship nonsense? Not that she tended to act like it but she was the Heir of two Noble Houses, one of which was richer than sin and could trace itself back past Merlin to when Rome was a sodding Republic. While the Potters weren't quite that illustrious (literally no one was, the Blacks were just obscene in that respect) they weren't exactly slouches either. He thought back on what had seemed like countless breaches of etiquette and deliberate disregard for manners ever since she first came to Hogwarts, and wondered if by some chance she had just honestly not known.

Severus sighed internally, thinking longingly of his bathtub, and wondered if it wasn't too much to ask for a master to serve who wasn't a devious, circumspect arsehole.
Voldemort was pleased.

He'd called Severus back the following evening after the general meeting to see Dumbledore's reaction to this latest move of the chessboard and he had not been disappointed. It was painfully obvious the old man knew without a doubt that the girl was his horcrux. Which meant that unless he had found some scrap of information which even Voldemort hadn't he knew full well the only possible way he could defeat him was if Potter died first.

She was not going to be happy about that, not happy at all.

Voldemort was glad he'd blamed his new Hands-Off-Potter policy on needing her for a secret ritual, there was no way to predict at this early stage of the game what Dumbledore might have done if he suspected he knew the truth much earlier than he had clearly scheduled.

Plans for checking up on all of his accessible horcruxes and maybe even moving them were already underway. Where they were now was perfectly fine if no one had any idea they existed, but with someone like Dumbledore already on his trail it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that they'd be found. He really had been far too sentimental when it came to hiding them, but in his defense, he'd been very young and very drunk on his own power and genius at the time.

He itched have all his treasures safe in his own hands, minus of course the regrettably late diary which Lucius had been stupid enough to let out of his sight. He still needed to work out a suitable punishment for that. It didn't help that he still didn't know exactly where Harry Potter, his most unruly horcrux, was hidden away every summer. Dumbledore apparently didn't ever assign Severus the dubious honour of guard duty, apparently not fully trusting his spy's ability to keep the information safe from the Dark Lord if he got very determined to dig it out of his head.
Now Voldemort wasn't an idiot. He knew it was very likely that Severus was spying on him in truth, but as he was also equally sure that the man was doing the exact same thing to Dumbledore as well, he just made sure nothing especially vital made it's way to his ears and allowed it. To be honest he was a little curious about how it was all going to turn out, the man couldn't keep up his knife-edge balancing act forever so there must be some very interesting contingencies in place indeed.

The man was a Slytherin after all, a proper one too, scrappy and absolutely determined to be More Than What He Came From. Not at all like Lucius or most of the other pampered brats of his generation, who seemed to think that ambition was a trophy they had already won by virtue of their birth and not a way of life. So Voldemort did him the courtesy of letting him keep his secrets hidden in the attic of his mind, and pretended he didn’t see the way the shadows looked like regrets and a little girl with red hair.

Abraxas (one of the first Purebloods to swear fealty once the blood had dried in the Slytherin common room, and the halfblood with the chip on his shoulder and venom in his teeth inevitably come out victorious) would surely turn in his grave if he knew just how incredibly bad his only son had ended up being at the grand game. At least he'd married someone like Narcissa to help compensate for his own shortcomings, the Blacks did tend to breed them crazy but brilliant.

For as much as he enjoyed how his Bella could create chaos and destruction wherever she went, even he had to admit that Narcissa with her ruthless poise was the superior of that particular set of Blacks. Much more like her aunt Fomalhauta had been, almost too smart and too sharp around the edges for her own good, unlike that screeching harridan Walburga that Bella had regrettably ended up taking after. He had a feeling it was thanks to their mother, sweet useless Druella Black née Rosier, being such a wallflower and completely unprepared for the hellscape she had married into that it had left the girls to find other, much more quintessentially Black women to be their role models. He couldn't even remember the name of the third one, the one who had run off with a Mudblood Hufflepuff of all things, but he had truly disliked Cygnus so the news of his eldest daughter disgracing him like that had made him laugh until he nearly cried.

The special kind of madness enjoyed by Black women was something to keep in mind actually, considering that his little horcrux was a Black by blood and not just by the adoption of her late godfather. Sure she might have inherited her father's dusky skin and wild black hair, as well as her mother's startling emerald eyes and goblin steel backbone. But if you knew to look the angles of her face resembled no one more than Dorea Black, back when they were all still in school together before she'd graduated and gone off to marry bloody Charlus Potter.

Voldemort was very curious indeed to see if she would grow into that madness and come out a polished diamond like Narcissa had, or if it would swallow her whole like it had Bella.

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That night instead of going straight to sleep he breathed carefully, meditating and activating the passive magic which meant when he fell asleep he would lucid dream. As he opened his eyes in the library, absently changing his clothes to something more respectable than his sleep trousers since he was likely to have company at some point, he settled in to read.

The library was undoubtedly one of his best pieces of work, a careful record of both his memories (relegated to the shadows of the far wall, on shelves with locked doors) and the knowledge he'd hoarded over the course of his life. Books were one of the things he treasured above all but he knew
firsthand just how easily physical objects could be taken away and had long since backed the important ones up in his mind palace, so even if something happened to them all he’d still have the precious information itself on hand.

Fast forward to being disembodied and the majority of his estate being destroyed or seized by the Ministry, and thanks to his foresight he still had access to everything, even if he could only access it in his dreams.

"You were throwing around Crucios last night like they were party favours, weren't you? You absolute sodding jackass." Were the first words to sullenly greet him that evening upon his horcrux entering the once peaceful sanctuary of his library. "My useless muggle relatives don't exactly have a stock of curse-scar friendly painkilling potions on hand, I had a headache all bloody day thanks to you."

He raised an eyebrow at her, taking in the slumped posture and blank, pinched expression, and wondered where the grinning hellion who had taunted him the previous dream had gone. "Well, you are certainly in an excellent mood this evening."

"Not today Voldemort." She sighed, sinking into what she had apparently decided was her armchair and curling up into a ball.

He continued reading and tried to ignore her since she was being refreshingly quiet for once, but it turned out the only thing louder than her nagging and fidgeting was her doing absolutely nothing at all.

"What has upset you Miss Potter?"

"It's stupid. It doesn't matter."

He resisted the urge to sigh. "Clearly it does if you are moping around my dreamscape like someone kicked your kneazle."

"Ha ha." She said flatly, pulling an unimpressed face. "It's just, I really did have an awful headache all day. My uncle was a menace and had me painting the shed out in the awful heat, and I haven't heard from any of my friends since we said goodbye at Kings Cross Station. I just lost Sirius, my last chance for a family who could have taken me away from my awful relatives, and it's like they don't even care."

Voldemort wasn't sure what to say. He had always hated when people from school had hassled him during the summer holidays because at best it had felt like condescension and at worst like pity. By comparison, those poor idiots who tried to intrude for nefarious purposes were just entertaining, it was always gratifying to make them hurt for nosing in where they weren't wanted. But his own tendency towards violent misanthropy aside, he knew he needed to find common ground with his horcrux for his plans to progress, needed to encourage a relationship between them not based solely on mutually assured destruction.

So he wrestled down the impulse to sneer at her for wasting her time worrying about the motivations of sheep when she was part of his soul and clearly above such concerns, and instead tried to be diplomatic. "That doesn't sound like something real friends would do."

Hmm, maybe a bit too overt on the manipulation, he thought with a twitch. Still, Gryffindors were not known for their subtlety so perhaps it'd go over her head, especially since she seemed distracted.

"They mean well, but they tend to listen to authority figures far too much." Suspicion confirmed, too
distracted to notice. "The same thing happened last summer too. Dumbledore made them promise to not send me any letters 'for my own safety'." He could practically hear the quotation marks around that phrase. "Like somehow owl post wasn't safe. If that was the case you could have just sent me a letter yourself and followed the owl on a broom. Isn't that the whole point of the sodding blood wards, to protect me in the event I'm actually found?"

Voldemort felt like three kinds of idiot for not thinking of that himself, but he certainly wasn't going to admit it to a moping teenage girl wearing an oversized muggle t-shirt with cartoon cats on it as a nightgown.

"Maybe he doesn't want any sensitive information to be leaked." He said to encourage her to keep talking, then wondered why in Merlin's name he was apparently playing devil's advocate on Dumbledore's behalf.

She sighed. "They don't exactly have to send me advance notice of important Order missions. Just asking me how I'm doing and if I've started on my summer homework would mean the world to me at this point."

"I would ask why you aren't staying with them in the first place, but I am assuming he gave you a lot of nonsense at the end of the year about how it was definitely in your best interest to go back somewhere with people who hate you." Because that had gone so well for him last time. Merlin, the old man really hadn't learned anything in fifty years, had he?

"I ask every year and it's always no. It's like he wants me isolated on purpose." She sniffled, hugging her arms tighter around her knees. "I just feel so alone."

Voldemort was in no way equipped to deal with this.

He knew he was in no way equipped to deal with this.

Yes he could turn on the charm or fake sympathy with people when needed, had done so all his life when he wasn't just scaring the pants off them, but this was different. She was his horcrux, an extension of himself, and that meant she deserved more from him than some empty platitudes.

"The powerful are always alone." He eventually said quietly, telling her what he'd told himself so many times over the years until it had finally stopped hurting. "It is what makes us strong."

"I don't feel strong." She whispered. "I feel abandoned. Like they're happy to make me out to be some kind of righteous Saviour when it suits them and then exile me to bloody Surrey for the summer when they don't want to deal with me anymore. It's as if I'm just a weapon to them. A weapon who is apparently crying in front of her mortal enemy."

She actually was crying by now too he noted with growing alarm.

Desperately he tried to think about what made him feel better on the rare occasions he was upset and couldn't just kill the problem. Mostly that was actually her, come to think of it. He dug deep into himself, into his vast stores of expertly curated knowledge gathered over a lifetime of concerted effort and dedicated study of the intricacies of human behaviour, and the only thing which immediately came to mind was torturing his recalcitrant minions.

"Would it cheer you up at all to know that the reason for my judicious application of the Cruciatus yesterday evening was because I was completely terrifying all of my Death Eaters on your behalf?"

She looked up at him with wet eyes over the tops of her knees. "...Really?"
Ten points to Slytherin.

"Indeed." Silly him. Of course, torture was always the answer. "In fact, I am almost certain Pettigrew pissed himself in sheer terror in the back row of the hall."

She snorted at that. "He would, spineless coward. What did you tell them anyway?"

"That if you got so much as a scratch they would regret it. And that if you were badly hurt or killed then they and their entire bloodline would not live long past regretting it. They were incredibly enthusiastic as to their new positions as your protectors after that, so maybe expect some very clingy Slytherins during the next school year."

That drew an actual laugh from her. "Oh I bet they hated that. I'm surprised they even agreed, surely that can't be worse than any of your usual threats?"

He felt incredibly gratified that he'd indeed been correct regarding the mood-enhancing effect of torture, even if said torture had only happened vicariously. Maybe he had more in common with his horcrux than he'd initially thought.

"I am their Lord." He shrugged. "I also may have heavily implied that if they defied me I would dig up every member of their families all the way back to the days of Merlin himself, turn them into Inferi, and then use them to burn all their holdings to the ground and salt the remains."

She had the strangest wide-eyed expression on her face, which if she was anyone else and he was anyone else he would have sworn was one of slightly awed, slightly scared, very exasperated fondness.

"I don't think anyone's threatened so many people on my behalf quite so violently before." She said, a funny little crooked smile on her face as if she couldn't help but be pleased by his words.

Voldemort, in turn, was incredibly pleased with that smile, very pleased indeed. He had admittedly, strictly in passing of course, doubted in his ability to be able to relate to her in a meaningful way. It might not come naturally to him (he hadn't even liked interacting with teenagers when he had been one) but clearly he shouldn't have worried at all, he was doing an excellent job.

Feeling emboldened and like they were making some good progress, he put down his book and folded his hands on top of his desk, physically telegraphing to her that she had his full attention.

"Harry." He said. "How is your summer going?"

Her crooked smile trembled, but she rubbed her eyes on the hem of her t-shirt before slowly, haltingly, starting to tell him about what she had been up to.

Apparently, she was sick of her Potions essay but for once she didn't have to wait until the train back to Hogwarts to get her summer homework done and wanted it out of the way. Her aunt was furious that she was there being a nuisance and taking up space, but was secretly a bit pleased regardless because it meant her rosebushes were looking better than they had all year. She barely slept more than a few hours most nights, but at least she had a bedroom window she could open so it wasn't quite so hot and stuffy as the summers when she was little.

He listened quietly and attentively, occasionally asking questions but mostly just listening to her talk. It wasn't even forced or insincere on his part, knowledge was power after all and he genuinely wanted to know absolutely everything about her. He had no idea how a part of him, cold and angry and vicious as he was, could possibly become something as bright and caring as her. It was a mystery. A mystery which if he had his way he would have forever to try and solve.
Voldemort felt like throttling someone however as the picture of her life slowly became clearer, the holes which she left while talking around the edges of things giving a much clearer picture than she had probably intended.

Far from the information he had received that she was a rude brat from being spoiled by some overindulgent distant cousins of the Potters, it seemed that she had actually had an upbringing almost disturbingly like his own. Except it had been her own blood who had hated her magic and mistreated her, not pathetic muggles at an orphanage.

He wondered if at some point she'd had a priest called in to try and exorcise the demons from her too, and if it had given her nightmares. If she knew what it was like to be so hungry you legitimately considered what it would taste like to eat the next person who called you a monster, just to show them. If she had felt the same vindication he had when he found out he wasn't going mad, that he was magic.

Merlin he really needed to kill her relatives.

Maybe he could keep them in his dungeons until she could be encouraged to do it herself, it would probably be very therapeutic for her all things considered. It had certainly done wonders for him. Not to mention that the prospect of taking the Chosen One, Dumbledore's darling child soldier and figurehead of the Light, and turning her to the Dark was possibly the most exciting way to thumb his nose at the man once and for all that he could think of.

At least he now had her location narrowed down from likely somewhere in the UK, probably, to Surrey. He could work with Surrey. Maybe he could write her a letter just to see where it went, see if it even got through the wards before he could show up himself to split the earth open with his own two hands if that's what it took to get to her.

Though the more he thought about it, he began to wonder if it wouldn't be better to take the patient route. He didn't like it, but there was something about dying and still hanging around for years as a wraith which teaches one patience. If he went out as he wanted to right now and reclaimed her in blood and glory he'd always have to worry if she'd leave again one day. But if she came to him of her own volition, willingly, she'd be much more likely to stay for good.

Lost in his own thoughts, he missed when she stopped talking and just looked at him.

"Why are you doing this?" She asked suddenly. "Sitting there, listening to me ramble about my shitty life. Dark Lords don't do things just to be nice."

He considered his response very carefully before answering her. "I know exactly what I am little horcrux. I am not kind or considerate or anything else of the sort, and I dislike nearly everyone purely on principle. But you are not just anyone. Whether either of us likes it or not, you are a part of my soul. That means you are important to me."

"I really don't even know what to think of all this if I'm honest.\" She confessed. "Like I know intellectually that it happened, but I have no idea how it did or even how to feel about the fact I've apparently had part of you inside me nearly my entire life. How can you even tell?"

He rubbed the tips of his fingers together, remembering the feeling of a diary and a ring and a cup and a locket and a diadem and a snake, remembered the feel of her as he touched her dirt-smeared face in a graveyard when his current body had been only minutes old and reeling. "The key thing to remember is that people don't have a soul, we are a soul. Which means you don't contain a soul, whether it is your own or mine, you are that soul. You recognise all your own limbs without needing to look at them do you not? Much as you would always know your wand, be able to pick it out of a
thousand just because you knew how it felt and because it was yours?"

She nodded, biting her lower lip.

"It is like that. I didn't know to look at the time, I wasn't paying the proper attention, but looking back on my memories it is an indisputable fact that being close to you was exactly like being around my other horcruxes."

She seemed to consider that. "How does it feel then?"

He was silent for a moment, thinking. "Do you know that sensation when you are in the moment, excited about something, and you can feel your heart beating fast in your chest and everything is warm and vivid and right." She nodded again. "That is what having a soul feels like."

"Don't you feel like that normally?" She asked, brows furrowing. "At least sometimes I mean."

He shrugged. "Not anymore, not really. Not unless one or more of you are close by."

She looked like he'd just gutted her. "That's terrible."

"That is the price I paid for my immortality. And I would pay it again in a heartbeat, because nothing is more important than being alive."

"Not even feeling alive?"

He honestly didn't know how to answer that, so he didn't even try.

Instead he reached out and unravelled the magic which held the dream together, coming to awareness lying on his back in the silent, extravagant softness of his bed in the guest wing of Malfoy Manor.

Nagini was draped over him like always, absorbing the warmth of his body heat just as he absorbed the warmth of the fractured piece of his soul hidden inside her. It was uncomplicated their relationship, simple and with no strange questions, just two cold-blooded creatures enjoying the symbiosis of their mutual existence.

He stared at the ceiling, stroking the smooth scales under his fingers, and wondered again just what the hell he was supposed to say to something like that to someone like her.

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Miles away, but probably not nearly as far as either of them would have expected, Harry was also lying in bed staring at the ceiling.

She stroked the scar on her forehead, dimly wondering why it felt like snakeskin today, and thought about how hollow she sometimes felt. If it was somehow possible to feel the jagged edges where she'd apparently been torn out of him like Adam's rib, if that was why she'd never quite fit in anywhere she went. If it was possible to feel sorry for someone who you hated, if you could even hate a creature like him at all. It felt about as pointless as hating a lightning storm or a forest fire, as if he was more of a natural disaster than a man.

She remembered though a boy with black hair parted neatly to the side and an immaculate but out of
date uniform standing in the cold-wet-stone mausoleum of the Chamber with her. She was twelve and he was nearly sixteen, and he'd looked so mature at the time and was smiling so wickedly, but in reality he'd only been about as old as she was now.

Sixteen just like her, black hair just like her, an orphan just like her, phoenix feather in his wand just like her, mouth full of Parseltongue just like her, already a murderer (just like her). He'd seemed a monster then, something out of one of the old, dark fairytales where the hero didn't necessarily win. But at the same time, he couldn't have been born like that, with sharp teeth and holes where his soul used to be, before he ripped them out and hid them far away from even himself.

Maybe he was right, and in another life she could have been him or he could have been her.

Maybe they were already.

She didn't know if it was a comforting or a terrifying thought.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of you have said you've been enjoying my depiction of Voldemort, so I hope this peek behind the curtain does a good job of fleshing him out a bit more. A lot of this chapter is driven by the fact that I see him as typically a very coldly intelligent, analytical, and manipulative person when it comes to his interactions with others. I've tried really hard to make that come across, as well as show him trying to find a way to awkwardly meet her in the middle, and his confusion at how Harry is consistently the one thing that can in any way break through all that and unsettle him.

Seriously thank you for all your feedback and comments, that shit is like author!crack. Your excitement makes this so much more fun to do and gives me so much more energy for writing and yay <3
**Snitches get stitches**

Chapter Summary

You can't make a stitch in time, but nearly everything else is up for grabs. Harry sews her intent into the world with bleeding fingers and a smile, and Voldemort learns there's more to her than he ever thought to look for.

Chapter Notes

This chapter finally introduces the thread magic and runemaster! Harry tags some of y'all have been curious about and is dedicated to the fic *Unbecoming* by Turnpike, the very first Fem!Harry story I ever read. I actually practice thread magic myself irl both with runes and without so a lot of this is based on that, but *Unbecoming* was the first one I read which put that concept into the world of Harry Potter and did it masterfully, so check that out if you like this shit as much as I do. And seriously, if you have any good fic recs for thread magic or runes then hit me up in the comments :D

Also inspired a little by the Pureblood Wizarding Culture series by Ellory, because I just see Harry as being someone who would hold onto any kind of family connection she could find with both hands and never let go.

We also get their first hug so look forward to that, yay! I'm actually a 5'3'' shorty and my husband is a 6'5'' giant monster of a human and his hugs are amaaaaazing, so that's pretty much their height difference in this, just because I can. Seriously go hug a giant, do recommend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry sat quietly by the window in Dudley's second bedroom, her hands working steadily on her embroidery as the light of the full moon came in through the window and bathed her in its glow. The silver of her needle and thread seemed radiant, and if anyone was awake to watch her they would have seen the threads themselves seem to absorb the moonlight as she worked, meticulously tracing out bindrunes for safety and protection from harm.

She might be unable to use a wand during the summer holidays, but gently imbuing thread with delicately layered curls of her magic? That wasn't something which could be picked up by the Trace.

Never had she been so thankful for something she owl-ordered as she was of her beautiful black and green dragonhide satchel. She'd bought it from the same maker as her precious multi-compartment library trunk, the one she'd splurged on in the weeks she'd been staying at the Leaky Cauldron before third year and realised she couldn't fit all her new textbooks in the standard one she'd gotten on her very first trip to Diagon Alley with Hagrid. Not only did the satchel have a host of fire-proof, water-proof, theft-proof, featherlight, and space expansion charms on all the different sections, it shrank and unshrank with a password instead of with her wand. Which meant she'd been able to shrink it and hide it in her bra before getting off the train, so when the Dursley's had celebrated her return with the
traditional locking of her trunk and all her school things in the cupboard under the stairs they didn't get a hold of it.

It held all of her most treasured items including her wand, her invisibility cloak, the photo album of her parents, the Marauders Map, a handful of her favourite jewelry from her vault, her money pouch with her Gringotts key she'd finally swiped back from Mrs Weasley, half a dozen reference books she couldn't do without, and a respectable stash of preserved food to tide her over when the Dursleys were feeling particularly stingy.

It also held her sewing kit.

Most probably wouldn't consider a sewing kit to be something worth hoarding along with things like family heirlooms, rare magical artifacts and food, but to Harry it was as important to her as her wand.

Not only was there a dozen odd spools of precious metals in thread form she'd negotiated from the goblins and probably cost about as much as the new dirtbike Dudley wanted, she had embroidery needles made of everything from carved deer bone to silver and bronze, as well as crochet hooks and knitting needles in half a dozen different woods, each with different properties they could impart to her workings. Everything had been painstakingly researched, cross-referenced and tested, sourced from craftspeople or second-hand shops (and one particularly tense expedition down Knockturn Alley) because while thread magic was almost as obscure as it got in modern Magical Britain, it was absolutely one of her favourite kinds of magic.

She'd done embroidery and crochet and all manner of handicrafts ever since she was a child so that Aunt Petunia could show off 'her work' to the other members of her ladies club, and had always enjoyed seeing the tangible results of her efforts even if the praise lavished on them wasn't directed at her. And so, upon starting Ancient Runes in third year and hearing an offhand remark by Professor Babbling about how some Runemasters specialised in thread magic in order to create enchanted battle robes for champion duelers and hit wizards, she'd thrown herself into researching the topic with a scholarly passion which had surpassed anything she'd previously shown before.

By the end of third year she'd been embroidering runes into the lining of her clothes to help keep herself warm in a draughty old castle without needing to rely on the fickleness or magical drain of constant Warming Charms.

By the end of fourth year she'd knitted scarves for all her friends which would repel the rain and never get wet, and learned to tool leather so she could make her dragonhide boots walk silently on any surface.

By the end of fifth year her O.W.Ls term project (two of her old, plain, black winter school robes that were a little too short, cut down and reassembled into a set of traditional battle robes and carefully embroidered with gold and silver runes to protect her from everything from fire and stunners to minor hexes and curses) had astounded the Ancient Runes examiners just as much as her corporeal Patronus had impressed the ones for Defense Against the Dark Arts.

The hours passed as the moon slowly made it's way across the sky.

She wouldn't be sleeping tonight but it was ok, this was something which was both important and an enjoyable way to chase away the tedium and blandness of her exile to Privet Drive. Her skin was red raw from hours of the metallic thread cutting into the calloused pads of her fingers, but that was okay too. She knew she was creating something out of her own two hands, carving her will into the skin of the world a stitch at a time.

It was absolutely one of her favourite kinds of magic.
"You didn't show up last night." The following night in the library saw Voldemort staring at her out of the corner of his eye while sorting through a massive pile of scrolls on his desk, trying and failing to look unbothered while she plonked straight down onto her armchair. "I was concerned something had happened to our connection."

"I didn't go to sleep last night." She told him, amused by how put out he clearly was despite all efforts to sound unaffected. "It was the full moon so I was getting some embroidery done."

He stared blankly at her, as if trying to cover up his bafflement. "You didn't sleep because you were doing needlework?" He said in disbelief. "Was there a pressing midnight haberdashery emergency of some kind which you had to attend to?"

She glared at him, feeling pissed that yet another man was being dismissive of her chosen craft. "I was doing thread magic you misogynistic bastard. It's wandless so it's the only kind of magic I can practice during the summer, especially since my relatives lock up my trunk and my spell books as soon as I get back in the house. Doing it under the light of the full moon adds a power boost to the magic."

He put his scrolls down and leaned back against his desk, looking down at her like she was the most intriguing puzzle he'd ever seen. It was starting to be a familiar expression when he looked at her.

"You are a threadwitch." It wasn't a question.

"I told you I liked runes." She huffed, gratified he seemed to be taking her seriously for once instead of acting like she was an unruly pet. "I've been practicing it since I first started taking Ancient Runes in third year."

"How fascinating." He said, and Merlin if he didn't sound as if he actually meant it. "I have never met one before. Of course I read about them but the information was always somewhat thin on the ground. By all accounts only a small handful of Runemasters in a generation ever have the aptitude and the necessary fine control for it, usually only after many years of study. You must be very skilled indeed if you are managing while still a Hogwarts student."

Harry might be insecure about the pressure and expectations the magical world had always put on her for being the Girl-Who-Lived, but in this at least she knew she'd earned every bit of her increasingly formidable reputation. She also appreciated he'd said skilled, not talented like most did, acknowledging that it was something she'd worked hard for not just been born with. "Yes. I am."

Voldemort was still looking at her intently, as if weighing probabilities and potential conversation vectors in his mind. Eventually he spoke again. "What were you working on?"

She beamed, always happy to talk about her projects regardless of who was asking. "It's an extra credit summer research project for Ancient Runes. The tailors who work on things like Auror uniforms are more concerned with producing a large quantity of standardized garments with simple, mass-produced runework like fire-proofing and do it all magically to save time. But magic, strong magic anyway, always has a price and I think taking the easy option makes for a fundamentally weaker result. So I have a dress I embroidered to make the wearer fireproof which I completed while I was still at Hogwarts using the spell method, and now I'm working on an identical dress done
entirely by hand with all the little tricks you can only manage if you do it manually. Once they're finished and I'm back at Hogwarts I'll be able to test and see which is superior. I mean obviously it'll be the one done by hand, but a direct comparison will show exactly how superior it is."

"How will you test it?" He asked curiously.

She grinned, knowing he was going to hate her answer. "By setting myself on fire of course."

"You are going to set yourself on fire?" He demanded, clearly alarmed. "Twice?"

"Technically four times." She corrected with a smirk. "I'll be testing regular fire and magical fire to see if there's a difference."

"Four times?" He looked like the time McGonagall caught Fred and George stuck halfway up the chimney in the common room, utterly unimpressed and annoyed he wasn't more surprised.

"Of course. The embroidery doesn't make the dress fireproof on its own, it makes the wearer fireproof. Very important distinction there, or I'd just end up a charred skeleton wearing a sundress. Following proper test protocol I should keep all the other variables identical, which is why it's two copies of the same dress, the same kind of thread, the same needles, the same runes, embroidered during the same phases of the moon, and of course tested on the same wearer. I wouldn't be able to expect anyone else to wear my work if I'm not prepared to do the same now would I?"

The Dark Lord seemed speechless. Harry felt very proud, she didn't think too many other people were able to reduce him to such a state.

"Where did you even get the idea for something like that?" He finally asked.

Harry shrugged, not looking at him. "I got the idea from the First Task during the Triwizard Tournament when I had to face down an angry dragon with substandard protective gear. It was incredibly motivating."

She didn't mention that her rapid progression towards an absurdly early mastery in defensive runework was fueled almost entirely by her memories of being tied down to a tombstone in a graveyard by the monster out of her nightmares, weak and defenceless and not even able to move. That she spent late nights stitching metal into wool and cotton and leather until her fingers bled so she'd never feel that weak ever again.

His eyes narrowed, giving her the disquieting impression that he was peeling her skin back and seeing down into the truth of her anyway. "Do you wear your own work a lot?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. All my school uniforms and casual robes have some rune embroidery by now, though most of it is subtle."

His head cocked to the side. "What about now, away from Hogwarts?"

Translation: Do your magic hating relatives let you parade around like that? Because I somehow doubt it.

"You know I can't." She said, annoyed at how perceptive he was. "The jokes on them though, it isn't just my runes I can wandlessly imbue with my magic. For Christmas last year I knitted fireproof mittens for my friend's brother who's a dragontamer, and I know they worked because all the people he works with wanted to buy a pair off of me. The money from that's going to pay for all my school supplies this year and then some. It's tricky sure, but it's just a matter of being creative and knowing
your materials." She'd been very proud of that too, of being able to send all the Weasley's some kind of little knitted present to thank them for five years of kindness and jumpers which warmed her heart as much as her bones.

His eyes ran over her, the feeling far more solid and weighted than it had any right to be. "You must have something on now then, because I find it hard to believe that you would let your guard down around those muggles even in your sleep. I slept with my wand under my pillow during the summer even when I couldn't use it, and I don't imagine you are any different."

Harry scowled, tugging her baggy nightie down over her thighs in response to his blatant staring. She knew this wasn't her real body, just a recreation of it by her subconscious in this shared dream, but it still made her feel much more vulnerable than she liked to be while around him. Stupid summer heat and not being able to wear something more covering to bed.

"Not that it's your business but yes, I am."

His eyes flickered down over her again before looking back up at her, a sleek black eyebrow arched in unspoken question.

When she didn't reply the question ended up being spoken anyway. "Are you going to tell me, or am I going to have to inspect you more thoroughly?"

"You have no right to do anything of the sort!" She yelped, cheeks pink.

"Of course I do." He replied smoothly, completely unaffected by her ire. "You are my horcrux, which means you are a part of me. This is only a dream, and even if it wasn't it is no different than if I were touching myself or Nagini."

"I'm not you or your pet Voldemort!"

"And I am not all that patient. It is a simple question Harry, and no matter what you say your safety and protection are absolutely my business."

She was glaring, arms folded across her chest, but his gaze was unwavering and she knew this wasn't a fight she'd win. Of all the very important things to disagree and fight him about, this wasn't a hill she had the intention of dying on. So she grabbed one of the long braids running down her back and waved it at him.

"It's my hair, happy now? I figured veela hair in wands conducts magic and they're a magical creature just like we are if you want to get really technical. So I always have my hair up in braids which are imbued with my magic. It's simple stuff, just an increased awareness of threats, mild notice-me-knots, increased healing factor, things like that. At school I have extra jewellery and hairpins and the like to supplement the spellknots, but I don't want my relatives to take them away or know I have money for things like that, so I don't wear any around them."

"How interesting. I admit I have never been able to understand women with long hair." He confessed, running his hand through his own neatly styled hair. "Though I suppose if it has a purpose I can accept it on those grounds, but does it need to be so long? Surely it just gets in the way."

She rolled her eyes. "Well isn't it handy then that it's absolutely none of your business what any women, myself included, does with her hair? Besides, I inherited what Sirius called the Curse of the Devil's Snare Potter Hair. It's really dark, really thick, it grows in a million different directions, and it refuses to be tamed by anything short of fire. When I was younger my aunt would hack it short to try
and make it neat and it never worked, if it didn't grow back overnight I would just end up looking like a scruffy porcupine."

"That still doesn't answer my question."

She bit her lip, looking down at where her hands were still toying with the braid she'd waved at him. "It's very personal. You have to promise not to laugh."

He looked like he was holding back a smile. "I promise."

"Well, I'd been growing it out since third year anyway since one of the girls in my dorm with hair just as thick as mine suggested it might tame it some if it was heavier. She's Indian you see, and apparently my dad's paternal grandmother or something was from India and that's where the mad Potter hair came from. So I figured why not give it a go, and started to braid it every day purely for convenience. And then while we were staying at the Black townhouse the summer before last year I found this really old book in the family library. It was all about the Pureblood etiquette expected of young ladies of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, and it had a bunch of spells and charms including information on spells for braided hair."

"Is that so?" He said, clearly curious about her apparent interest in Pureblood traditions. "How did you find the subject matter?"

"I actually liked the book a lot. It's old, as in bustles hadn't even been invented yet kind of old, so of course a lot of it was even more horrifically sexist than the magical world is now. But I kept it anyway because some of the grooming spells were handy, and some of it was actually kind of sweet and romantic. One part in particular I liked talked about how a young lady should grow her hair long to show the strength of her convictions, but at the same time how no one outside her immediate family should see her hair loose and unbound apart from her Lord Husband and eventually their children."

She stopped, flushing slightly. "Don't get me wrong, I'm a modern witch and I expect equality and independence and all those nice things. But I guess I liked the idea of having something private and special to give my intended if I ever actually had the chance to fall in love, however unlikely it might be. I've kept my hair braided in public ever since."

Harry felt embarrassed. She always did whenever she had to explain that yes, Harry Potter, the girl who ranted with Hermione about the ass-backwards state of equality in the magical world and played quidditch until she was bruised and covered in mud was also willingly observing some traditional Pureblood customs which even a lot of the Slytherin girls didn't. If Voldemort's rapt face was anything to go by he was just as surprised as everyone else when they found out but was clearly very pleased by it indeed.

"What other customs do you observe?" He asked, his voice sounding suspiciously rough. Because he was starting to really get to know her and she didn't do anything by halves, so it stood to reason if she was so particular about this there were certainly other things as well.

"Well I don't really know anything about the traditions of the Noble House of Potter, I can't access the main family vaults until I'm of age and all the family grimoires were stored there during the last war for safekeeping. But since my grandmother was a Black and Sirius blood adopted me as his daughter last summer I'm also the Heiress for the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. I have access to the Black townhouse and their library, when I can beg and plead with Dumbledore to get there that is, so those are the ones I'm observing. Selectively of course, some are ridiculous and completely outdated or impractical, but I try to do what I can."
Voldemort's arms were folded firmly across his chest, shoulders tense as if for some reason he was holding himself still by force of will alone. "Why do you think it appealed to you so much?"

She thought about it before answering. "Family has always been important to me because it's something I never really had. Meeting Sirius and learning I was from such old, important families was a huge deal to me, not because I care less about blood purity but because it made me feel like part of something grand. So I guess my observing some of the family traditions made me feel like I really belong to them."

Her smile was bittersweet as she remembered her Dogfather in all his glory, grinning and slipping her books into her bedroom and secrets under the kitchen table. "Sirius might have run away from the expectations of his crazy parents but he never really stopped being a Black, so between our letters and the few times we could see each other in person he taught me as much as he could. Because however much he didn't like how Dark it often was, he would have done absolutely anything for me, to keep me safe. He knew the family magic was powerful and could give me an edge, maybe even protect me one day. So if I do things like keep my hair braided and my feet covered in public it isn't because I feel obligated or pressured or like I should be subservient, because fuck that sideways. It's partly to uphold the honour of my family name sure but really it's for Sirius, to honour him. For giving me as much of a home as he knew how."

"It says a lot of the strength of his brief presence in your life that you still work so hard to honour him." Was the very diplomatic but honest response.

"That's partly why I trashed Dumbledore's office at the end of last year." She said, furious just remembering it. "My Lord Father died in battle, defending me, so of course I wanted to observe the family rites of mourning. But he refused to allow me to go to our ancestral home and enter seclusion for a lunar month as would be proper and befitting of his memory. Hermione doesn't get it at all, she's even more of a feminist than I am and only sees the oppression and not the power some of the Olde Ways can have, but she still helped me charm all of my clothes black before I left Hogwarts so that's something. I guess I am still cut off from the magical world so it's kind of like seclusion, but it isn't the same not being there with the family magic."

Voldemort was still standing, leaning against his desk with his arms folded as he stared at her with his piercing red eyes. "I am aware it is in extremely poor taste for me to have an opinion on the matter due to my own responsibility for the events which ultimately led to the loss of your Lord Father, but it is utterly reprehensible that Dumbledore is denying you your heritage. He is the Headmaster of your school, not your family or guardian, and he has no right to do these things. Is he still using your property as the headquarters for his vigilante group?"

She snorted, feeling bitter and not a little bit smug. "Unlikely. Sirius told me that if anything happened to him to get myself there because on the death of the Lord the Black townhouse goes into lockdown mode, expelling all non-family members to allow time for mourning and counter-attacks if they are required, and will only reopen fully after an order is given by the Heir. I expect I'll be asked to do so at some point and give permission for them to recast the Fidelius and keep using it."

His lip quirked. "You could always say no."

"What?"

"Tell Dumbledore no, Merlin knows he needs to hear it once in a while."

Her brow furrowed. "But if I don't then-"

"Then what Harry? I kill you? The Order was protecting you from me beforehand yes, but I am not
your enemy anymore. You are probably safer than anyone else in Magical Britain right now, you don't need any more protecting from me."

"I could leave the Dursley's." She whispered, thunderstruck. "I could go right now and barricade myself in the Black townhouse by myself with the books and the family magic for the rest of the summer. Why didn't I realise this sooner?"

He scowled, so full of the anxious, angry energy which had been slowly building that he started pacing. "Because ever since you entered the magical world Dumbledore has been conditioning you to accept the scraps of attention and validation he gives you, knowing you are so desperate for it after growing up being told you were worthless that you will do anything to get it. Because his ridiculous twinkly eyes and holier-than-thou grandfatherly attitude hides the fact that he maneuvers people like chess pieces and systematically ignores the abuse of magical children in his care. Your relatives are subhuman animals for how they have treated you since you were left on their doorstep, but tell me this Harry. Who left you there in the first place?"

Clearly this rant had been building for a while, and as much as she wanted to deny it all she couldn't.

"Him." She whispered, the betrayal she'd been trying so hard not to think about since the Ministry sliding coldly down her spine. "It was him."

"Just like he left me in the filthy muggle orphanage I had grown up in, despite begging to stay in the school over summer every year. I had teachers willing to supervise me in return for being an assistant every single time, but he still said no and sent me back. Not only to the constant ridicule and the abuse, but to the muggle world in the middle of World War Two. Living in London at the height of the Blitz, forbidden from doing magic while bombs were constantly dropping down on us from above and death was haunting our every waking moment. Is it any wonder I turned to the Dark Arts and sought immortality? I begged every single year and he still left me there to die!"

His voice had risen to a roar as he'd paced and the usually composed man was gone, with hectic spots of colour in his cheeks and fever-bright eyes as he confessed to a wound he'd clearly been carrying around for a very long time. Harry didn't know what it meant that she related so much to someone like Voldemort or why Dumbledore seemed to keep remaking the exact same mistake, but she did the only thing she could think of.

She strode over to where he was still furiously pacing and hugged him.

He immediately froze as if she'd Petrified him, clearly not having suspected she'd be bold or stupid or kind enough to try and comfort him like this. She wondered if anyone ever had before, and how different their world might have been if they had.

"It's ok. It's only me." She said softly, face buried in his chest. "And it was wrong what he did. You have done some truly terrible things in your life make no mistake, but back then you were still just a child and you didn't deserve what happened to you. It wasn't your fault."

He didn't cry, frankly she'd have been shocked if he had, but he did slowly relax his tensed muscles although sporadic, minute shivers still wracked him occasionally. When she showed no signs of letting go he slowly reached up to put his hands on her thin shoulders, before even more slowly wrapping his arms around her.

It was the strangest, most silent hug she'd ever experienced.

The solemn, desperate kind you did as a last resort just before the tidal wave crashed into you to satisfy the animal need to not die alone. But it felt so warm and so good that she didn't want to ever
let go. Absurdly enough she felt safer in his arms than she'd possibly ever felt in her life, if for no other reason than the fact there was no chance anything could possibly come after her which was going to be more of a monster than he was.

Half dazed she realised her head was perfectly level with his sternum, that she could nuzzle into the solid, living bone and muscle of him and feel like the big bad wolf was curled protectively around her, like she was at the eye of the storm. Part of her brain still thought he should be cold like a snake, like a Chamber, like a graveyard at night, but he was as warm as she was. Maybe warmer, as the usual burning pain in her scar turned instead into a wave of syrupy heat which flooded her all the way down to her bare toes.

He must have felt something similar too, because it got warmer and he just held her tighter. Their fronts pressed flush together, and feeling his rapid heartbeat on her cheek all she could do was wonder what this would be like if they were in their actual bodies. Their shared dreams were more clear and vivid than regular dreams it was true but they still lacked the full physical weight and immediacy of the real world.

Just when she wondered if this fragile, wordless comfort was going to last forever or at least until they both burned so hot from it the library caught fire around them, she woke up with a huge shuddering gasp. That beautiful, utterly inappropriate warmth was still there, like her whole body had been submerged in a hot bath and all her nerves were tingling from it.

She flopped back down on the bed from where she'd sat up as the dream broke, cheeks flushed bright red, and wondered what in Merlin's name she was supposed to do about this latest development.

Chapter End Notes

If any of you don't think that Sirius would have taught her everything he could to try and prepare her, no matter how questionable it might have been, I don't know what to tell you. He was protective enough of Harry in canon, how do you think he would have acted if Harry was actually James' precious baby girl? He's fiercely, viciously protective of what's his, the kind to meet any prospective boyfriends on the porch with a shotgun and a shovel in case they think they can get fresh with his fawn. The man was a Marauder and a Black, that means the result is what matters no matter how many rules you have to break to get it done.
Shift gear, automatic, damned if I do

Chapter Summary

Harry plots her great escape from Privet Drive, seriously there are disguises involved and everything, and Dumbledore gets outdone by a door. Snape is over the whole bloody lot of them, and Voldemort likes gossip and teasing his horcrux far more than is probably advisable.

Chapter Notes

So I've had the demon flu and barely got this chapter out, I'm behind on replying to comments but y'all are dolls for leaving so many and I'll get to them when I can. Figured you'd probably prefer a new chapter instead of just my excited squealing, lol. Also, pretty sure I'm still delirious because while writing the chapter summary I couldn't stop reading it as 'Dumbledore was out-dumbled by a door' and I think that's either a sign of too many cold and flu tablets, or not nearly enough. Jury's still out.

After spending the rest of the night and the morning thinking it over, she came to the conclusion that sneaking out of Privet Drive was turning out to be harder than she had initially thought.

Avoiding her relatives was one thing, but dodging whatever Order members were there on guard duty was another matter altogether, especially if it was Moody who could see through her invisibility cloak or Remus who could smell her. There was no way to tell who was out there either, not when whoever was there wore an invisibility cloak of their own.

Well, by process of elimination it wouldn't be Remus today, it was the full moon the night before last and he was always out for at least two to three days afterwards. Tonks usually did evenings like the other Aurors, Harry could always tell because when she was out watering the front lawn she'd hear her tripping over next door's bins or whispering to a passing cat. So in the next 24 hours would really be ideal, as that way she'd either be avoiding Remus altogether, or in the very least the Aurors during the day.

By the time she'd made a big lunch for everyone else and retreated to her room with a peanut butter sandwich and a bottle of water she had come up with two plans. Either leave on her broom over the back fence tonight while under her invisibility cloak, or pretend to be running an errand into the nearby shopping centre for Aunt Petunia, lose them in the brightly lit fluorescent shopfronts, then put on her invisibility cloak to make her getaway.

Both plans would need her to liberate her trunk from the cupboard under the stairs tonight once everyone was asleep. Luckily the twins had taught her how to pick locks, and even given her a set of magic lockpicks of their own design on the train home as an early birthday present. She'd given them huge hugs, knowing she'd probably need it with how much her relatives liked to lock her, her things, and her owl up every chance they got. The trunk itself could be shrunk with a tap of her wand too, no spells necessary, so it could just go into her pocket once it was free. Hedwig she could just send
on ahead to find her own way there, she was clever like that. And once she was away, regardless of
how it happened, she would make her way to the train station and head into London, then see if she
had enough pound notes left over to get a cab to Grimmauld Place or worst scenario a bus.

The decision was made for her when she realised that tomorrow was Tuesday, meaning that Aunt
Petunia would be going to her nail appointment and would inevitably drag Harry along to do the
shopping for her while she was there. Perfect, that meant she'd have extra money on hand to pay for
the cab after all. Later that night she liberated her trunk as planned, saying a final goodbye to the
dusty cupboard she'd grown up in, and told Hedwig to head to Grimmauld Place after she was done
hunting for the night so she wasn't leaving during the day and making anyone suspicious.

Her luck held out, and after lunch the next day there was a crumpled wad of muggle money in her
back pocket of her cargo shorts, and her shrunken satchel and trunk were once again stuffed into her
bra. She wasn't particularly curvy, not as much as girls her age tended to be anyway, and having one
of them in each of her bra cups made her go up at least a size. But thankfully one of Dudley's
threadbare old button up shirts, knotted at her waist, hid a multitude of sins including the wand
holster fastened around her left forearm.

After Aunt Petunia flounced off towards the salon and turned the corner after leaving the sneered
instructions to bring back a receipt or else, she slipped a note she'd written last night telling her
goofy me and go fuck yourself under the windscreen wiper and headed into the shopping centre. It
was only a small neighbourhood one but there were multiple exits which was all she needed.
Slipping into a ladies toilet near Woolworths she went into a cubicle and dug her shrunken bag and
trunk out of her bra. Whispering the password to make the bag full sized again, she put the trunk
inside one of the pockets and got a change of clothes out of another.

Dressed again in a pair of baggy, charmed black jeans with patched knees and a huge black hoodie,
she stood in front of the mirrors to pin her braids up into a crown on her head then pulled the hoodie
up to hide her hair as best she could. Taking off her glasses and putting them in the bag as well, she
put in her contact lenses. She didn't wear them much because they were such a pain to put in, usually
just for quidditch games and special occasions, but the lack of her glasses could only help disguise
her now.

Nodding in satisfaction at her reflection, she double-checked her wand was still safe in her holster,
swung her satchel over her shoulder and left the bathroom to walk to the train station. Hopefully, the
change of clothes and the lack of her unfortunately iconic glasses would hold up to any casual
observers. On her way out she bought a pair of cheap, oversized sunglasses which she put straight on
and a muggle fashion magazine that she carried in her hand.

It was three blocks to the station and she spent it hunched over, grateful for the overcast day and
hiding behind a group of loud teenagers walking in the same direction and hoping it would be
enough to distract attention from her. Nothing to see here folks, just more delinquents being out and
rowdy in the suburbs on their summer break.

Luckily it was quiet enough in the middle of the workday that the train station wasn't too busy.
Checking the timetable she learned that she had another sixteen minutes until the train arrived, which
wasn't too bad all things considered. She spent it hunched in the most isolated corner of the train
platform she could find, sitting under the stairs on the ground and against the wall while pretending
to read her magazine. It wasn't pleasant, clearly it hadn't been cleaned recently, but it meant no one
could see her from the entrance, the sky, or the street just to be safe. With the people who'd be
looking for her being magic, there was no such thing as being too careful.

The minutes dragged by and then finally she was on the train, slumped down so she was almost
lying flat in the double seat so no one outside could see her. She exhaled all the tension she'd been carrying since she left Number 4.

She was here on the train, she'd done it.

One hour and fourteen minutes until she'd be in London, and from there straight into a cab and on her way to Grimmauld Place. Wizards, even the pro muggle ones, were worse than clueless about using their various forms of transport so as long as she kept her head down the worst of it was over and she had almost a clear shot to Number 12. Home, although she didn't quite know what having one felt like just yet.

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The train pulled in to Kings Cross Station with a bland, prerecorded announcement as she put away the summery halter top she was crocheting out of some black puffskein wool, not having wanted to be reading books with moving pictures around muggles. The fateful day part way through fourth year that she'd discovered a pokey little yarn shop in Hogsmeade which clearly catered to all the Molly Weasley's of the world and learned they could custom order pretty much any possible colour or yarn type or weight she could think of, she'd cried actual happy tears. She'd then proceeded to become their best customer, since as it turns out that using yarn made of hair or fur from magical creatures held magic better.

Coming out of the station exit, she started to feel cautiously hopeful. Stopping at a convenience store on the way to get some snacks just in case the cupboards were empty took all of two minutes, and within three she was in a cab and en route to Grimmauld Place.

Since there was no way a muggle could park on the street outside an Unplottable townhouse she got him to stop in the closest available spot. After paying the driver she flat out ran the three doors down until she got to Number 12, knowing the likelihood of Order members being on watch was high. She already had one of her needles in her hand and was stabbing her thumb just as she reached the front step. Glancing behind her she saw Tonks staring at her from across the road in shock as she smeared her blood on the door handle.

"I am the Heiress of this House and I demand entrance!" She told it firmly, just like Sirius had told her to do. The door swung open, and she had just enough time to see the pink haired Auror running across the road, hand outstretched, before she slammed it closed and locked it behind her. She slumped down against the door, panting, as she heard her banging on it from outside.

"Harry! That was you wasn't it Harry? Open the door luv, you know you're not supposed to be here, it isn't safe. Harry!"

But while the house might be visible to magical folk since the Fidelius had been broken, the lockdown hadn't yet ended because Harry still hadn't told it to. The whole bloody Order, the Minister for Magic, Voldemort, possibly even Merlin himself could all ring her doorbell and call out all they liked, no one was getting inside without her permission.

Harry laughed hysterically, the adrenaline and the musty air inside the house making her feel giddy.

She'd done it and made it here without being caught. She'd thwarted the Order and not run afoul of any Death Eaters, not that she'd actually expected to if she was honest with herself. For some reason
she wasn't sure why exactly she felt so comfortable taking Voldemort's words at face value, but somehow she knew he wasn't lying to her about not being after her anymore, at least not in the way he had been before.

And now she had Grimmauld Place all to herself for the rest of the summer. A nearly whole summer break with nothing to do and no one to be accountable to but herself. She could read whatever she liked, even the runic blood magic books she'd hidden in the attic with a lot of other Dark books and objects when Mrs Weasley had been trying to purge the place of 'bad influences'. She could work on her summer homework, and whatever else she felt like. Maybe she could try and wrestle the tiny, overgrown courtyard garden out back into submission. Maybe she could sunbathe and eat chocolate ice cream and owl-order more things for the ward stone earrings she'd been planning on making.

She sighed happily, splayed out on the grimy floor of her entranceway which she owned because it was her bloody house. Perfection itself.

First things first though. "Kreacher!"

He appeared with a pop, grimy pillowcase and bad attitude and all. "What's the filthy halfblood doing here, shaming the house of Kreacher's poor Mistress when it's being closed for seclusion. No manners, no respect at all for its betters, oh yes indeed."

"Oh shut it." She snapped, knowing full well the role the nasty old elf had played in Sirius' death and not willing to take his backchat for even a second. "I am the Heiress of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black by blood and magic, and you are forbidden from telling anyone in any way that I'm here or helping them to get in or take me out without my express permission. Nod if you understand."

The old elf looked mutinous but nodded stiffly.

"Good. Now, clean out the rooms for the lady of the house because I'm moving in. And get some bloody groceries in, I want to cook curry for dinner."

He disappeared with a pop and she sighed, rubbing her hands over her face. The knocking had finally stopped but she knew that Tonks was most likely off calling for reinforcements and they would be here soon. Definitely time for a cup of tea before then, and she could take it in the sitting room with the windows at the front of the house so she had front row seats for the imminent showdown.

It ended up being about twenty odd minutes before Dumbledore and Snape appeared at the Apparition point in the tiny park across the street and approached her door. She'd had enough time to make a pot of tea and hunt down some biscuits and had dragged an armchair over to the window in preparation, knowing that all the windows in the house were charmed to look out but not in.

Dumbledore swept up the front step in long sweeping robes the colour of a candy store nightmare and knocked on the door. "Miss Potter? I know you are in there my girl, would you please open the door so we may talk to you?"

She took another drink of tea, feet up on the windowsill, and contemplated how long it was going to take for him to get the message and leave already.

"Come now Harry, I know you're more mature than this. We both know that it was wrong of you to run away from your family, they must be worried sick about you."

She snorted. The only things her relatives were going to think was good ridance.
"Either the brat of a girl is upstairs and out of earshot Albus, or she's listening and ignoring you on purpose." Snape said flatly. "Regardless of which it is, if she hasn't replied by now I don't think you're going to get very far talking at her front door."

Dumbledore shot him a very stern look indeed but Snape just raised an entirely unimpressed eyebrow, causing Harry to nearly snort tea out of her nose.

"Harry I really must insist you do as you're told." The old wizard called out, voice getting louder and more frustrated. "You must understand this is all far more important than some misplaced teenage rebellion. I'm very disappointed in you."

Misplaced teenage rebellion, what the actual fuck? Sirius had died and it was largely his fault, and then he'd gone and refused to let her mourn for him properly. Why should she care if he was disappointed like that mattered shit to her anymore, that ship had well and truly sailed.

She considered for the next few attempts at getting her to respond if either yelling back at him to piss off or sending a note under the door would annoy him more, or if he'd just be more determined to talk with her. Maybe ignoring him would be better overall, after all not many people would dare to ignore the great Albus Dumbledore, and he was the dictionary definition of taking a mile when given an inch.

As predicted, after another ten minutes it became clear the silent treatment was working a treat. Harry cackled and ate another biscuit, really looking forward to telling Voldemort about this the next time they dreamed together. She couldn't think of anyone else who'd be more amused by Dumbledore's increasingly unsuccessful attempts to not look livid at being both ignored and rendered utterly powerless by something as simple as a closed door.

When Dumbledore moved on from persuasion to pulling out his wand and trying to brute force his way past the wards Snape just leaned against the fence and pulled what looked like a pack of muggle cigarettes of all things out of a robe pocket and lit one with the tip of his wand. As the Headmaster's face got stormier and the wards shuddered but held fast he continued to ignore the whole proceedings and just smoked like a chimney, as if washing his hands of the whole mess altogether.

Three of Snape's cigarettes, two cups of tea, and one round of actually hearing Dumbledore swear for the first time ever later, they finally left. Harry laughed until she cried and wished she had a Pensieve just so she could watch that all over again, every day, forever.

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When she appeared at the library that night she was in such a good she skipped right on over and sat on Voldemort's big desk again.

He raised an eyebrow but didn't tell her off, just giving her a knowing look. "So my little horcrux, Severus tells me you had a very eventful day indeed. Would you like to share?"

She beamed at him, in far too good a mood from thwarting Dumbledore to be bothered that Snape had run off and told Voldemort her business.

"I most certainly did!" She declared proudly. "After our last dream it took me a day of planning to work out logistics, but last night I picked the lock on the cupboard where my trunk and my school things were kept while everyone was sleeping. Then today my aunt took me with her when she went
to get her nails done, and I stole the money she gave me for groceries and left her a note telling her to piss off forever. I got changed inside the shopping centre so I wouldn't be as easily recognised, then walked to a station where I got the train to London, and then a cab to the Black townhouse. The Order must have been watching it or it was just really bad timing because I only just made it through the door before I was shutting it in Tonks' face. Her mum Andromeda was a Black, so if she'd been quicker she might have gotten in too. The wards keep out non-family members completely, and I'm the only one who can physically open the door when it's on lockdown, but I'm not sure if I could have stopped her if she hadn't been too far away.

Voldemort leaned back in his chair, clearly loving the gossip as much as she was. "Severus said he had been in a meeting with Dumbledore when the irritating pink Auror Floo'd them in a panic, saying you had shown up out of nowhere running like a Dementor was on your heels and letting yourself into what they are still calling Order Headquarters. They rushed right on over and Dumbledore proceeded to have a long, guilt trip inducing but ultimately pointless conversation with your front door before having to give up and head back to Hogwarts in a foul mood."

Harry just cackled again. "Well he wasn't wrong. Between Tonks leaving and the two of them showing up I put the tea on and set up at the front windows so I could laugh and eat biscuits while watching the esteemed Headmaster slowly lose his cool."

Voldemort actually laughed out loud at that, not his usual sardonic chuckle but a proper shoulder-shaking laugh. It made a small, utterly incongruous dimple appear on one side of his face which left her without any air in her lungs at all, as if she'd just been punched.

"I imagine he had a lot to say about how terribly disappointed he was?" He said once he'd collected himself, apparently unaware of her momentary, dimple-induced crisis.

"Circe's tits did he ever." She said, rolling her eyes and getting back on track. "It was pretty funny though, especially when he gave up and tried to break the wards, getting progressively more annoyed when he couldn't while Snape just smoked and looked bored, like he was deeply regretting ever being involved with any of us at all. I didn't even know he smoked, did you?"

"I did indeed. You will come to learn that I am at least passingly familiar with the vices of all of my followers. Knowledge is power after all."

"Do you know of any vices that I have then?" She asked curiously, poking at some of the odds and ends on his desk.

He smirked viciously. "Why Harry, are you telling me that you are one of my followers now?"

"No!" She snapped, annoyed at herself for walking straight into that one. "But I am your horcrux, so that makes me your...something, I guess."

He looked thoughtful. "I could make jokes about your thrill-seeking behaviour, but I think that currently your main vice is actually me if I am perfectly honest."

"How the hell do you figure that?" She demanded, absolutely appalled.

"A vice is, by definition, an immoral or wicked behaviour. Being the shining paragon of virtue that you are, consorting with me is probably the most wicked and immoral thing you have ever done, isn't it? Especially as you are not going to be stopping any time soon."

She folded her arms defensively across her chest. "I am nothing of the sort. And how can you possibly know that anyway?"
He shrugged. "I know because I won't let you stop, not ever. And because the part of you which is me won't let you either. We are the exact same kind of creature Harry, we are one thing in two bodies and whether it is on a conscious or subconscious level we want to be one again."

Harry just stared at him, jaw hanging open as she tried to find an adequate response to something like that. A veritable army of arguments to the contrary marched through her mind but all that came out was: "Are you hitting on me?"

He grinned, and it was all teeth. "In this particular instance no. Would it really bother you if I was?"

"But I'm fifteen!" She felt that was probably a very important thing to point out.

He just shrugged, because of course he did. "And I am sixty-nine, what does it matter?"

"It's illegal!"

He stared at her incredulously, one perfect eyebrow raised in amusement. "I am a Dark Lord. Why on earth would your arbitrary human morality matter to me in the slightest? You aren't actually a child, either physically or mentally. If we were a century or two in the past it wouldn't be an issue at all, and besides, you can not deny that I look exceptionally good for my age. All that aside you are mine, if I wanted you I would have you. That is all there is to it."

"No, it most certainly is not!" She cried, suddenly remembering she was still sitting on his desk and jumping down to beat a hasty retreat to the relative safety of her armchair. "Don't I get a say in anything?"

"Of course you do Harry, I may be a monster but I am not that particular kind of monster. And besides." He purred, suddenly sounding incredibly wicked and immoral himself. "It is far more satisfying when the forbidden is freely given, especially when the giver knows that they really, really shouldn't be giving it."

She didn't know if she should be laughing in his face at his presumption or fucking terrified at how calmly and matter-of-factly he'd said all of this.

Apparently she had taken too long to respond because he rolled his eyes at her. "Do calm down Harry, I just told you I had no intention whatsoever of molesting you."

"The fact it's being discussed at all is pretty bloody scary you ridiculous prat!" She screeched, really not having any idea what to do about the strange tangent their conversation had taken.

Voldemort apparently had a similar opinion because he waved his hand and a book flew at her head. Catching it without even thinking, thank you Seeker reflexes, she saw it was the same warding book she'd been reading during their previous dream.

"If you are going to be that high-pitched and scandalised you might as well just read quietly." He said with a last smirk in her direction, before going back to whatever he'd been reading before she'd shown up.

They were quiet for a good long while before something occurred to her, and like a complete twat she opened her mouth to ask before she'd even thought to stop herself. "What's your vice then?"

He looked up at her, clearly amused by the question. "I am a Dark Lord. By definition, my very existence is wicked and immoral."

She rolled her eyes. "I know that. But there has to be something though, something not related to
your grandiose quests for immortality and world domination and kicking puppies that you find irresistible."

He actually thought about it, looking contemplative. "If I had to choose something it would probably be that I am unable to resist coveting things which are especially rare, beautiful or unique. I have hidden caches all over Europe full of rare books and magical artifacts and art which I have collected, some through legal means and some not. The Ministry confiscated a lot of my collection after my initial defeat at your hands, but not all of it thankfully." His lips quirked at some unsaid joke. "I suppose you could say I am something of a magpie in that regard."

"Just can't say no to anything shiny huh?" She said, smiling a little despite herself. "That doesn't sound too wicked to me."

He smirked. "It is when I then use the very shiniest to put pieces of my soul into, which the vast majority of the population would consider to be desecration of the highest order. That way any would-be heroes would have to destroy priceless historical artifacts if they want a chance in hell at destroying my soul as well."

"How many bloody horcruxes have you made then?" She huffed, feeling annoyed and not knowing exactly why. "No wonder you're mental if you've been ripping your soul into pieces like it's a sheet of bloody postage stamps."

"Why?" He asked, amused. "Do you think it makes you less special by comparison?"

She glared at him. "No."

"There were seven including you. Minus the diary of course, which takes the total down to six." He paused, looking straight at her with a knowing, secretive little smile. "And for what it is worth, as far as I am aware you are the first human horcrux in recorded history, as well as being a female Parselmouth of which only about one in three of us are. I would be hard-pressed to find anything anywhere which is shinier than you Harry."

To her complete and utter mortification, she felt herself blush at his words. Not a delicate pink flush on her cheeks but a raging red heat that flooded her whole face and probably went all the way down her neck as well, because apparently the world hated her and everything she represented.

He winked at her, bloody winked at her the bastard, and before she could even splutter out a reply that would have probably made no sense whatsoever, she managed to wake up.
House of Gold

Chapter Summary

Harry plays house, pisses off Dumbledore some more, expands her family by one, and starts to really settle into Grimmauld Place.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first owl from the Headmaster arrived the next morning with the *Daily Prophet*, and Harry was hard pressed to decide which one had annoyed her more.

The *Prophet* had clearly been leaked something about the prophecy and was loudly declaring how she was going to save the magical world, using one of the awful old pictures of her from the end of the Triwizard Tournament where she was clearly in shock and just looked dazed and filthy, and she had a suspicion that the letter from Dumbledore wasn't going to be much better. After casting the wandless detection charms Sirius had relentlessly drilled her in last summer to check for poison, compulsions, traps or Portkeys, she opened it to read.

*Dear Harry,*

*After the events at the Ministry I am sure you are feeling very confused and upset, and that this is probably why you felt the need to run away from Privet Drive. I know the Dursley's are not the kindest nor easiest of people but they are still your family who have looked after you all these years, and they deserve a bit more than you stealing from them and running off with no warning. I am very disappointed in your behaviour.*

*I know you are feeling the loss of your godfather very keenly but locking yourself into Order Headquarters is not going to accomplish anything or make you feel better. The blood wards on Privet Drive are the only thing which can keep you truly safe from Tom and his followers, and it is vital to the ongoing functioning of the Order that we have a secure base of operations to work from, and while I know you did not mean for the disruption to our mission that you have caused with your actions it is still a problem.*

*Since it is far too dangerous for you to be on your own when Voldemort is doing everything he can to find and kill you I will be back this evening before dinner to take you back to your family, and I expect you to be packed and ready to apologise to them.*

*You know I am only thinking of you and your best interest my girl.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore*

*Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

*It took her an hour of swearing, pacing and ranting at a very patient Hedwig to be able to sit down*
Dear Headmaster,

You may come for me this evening as you indicated if you like, but be warned that you will be no more successful at gaining entrance than you were yesterday when you tried. I am in seclusion to honour the memory of Sirius like I should have been since school let out, and nothing you can say or do will change my mind.

Also be aware I will never, ever be going back to Privet Drive ever again. If the lockdown wards on this place can keep even you out they can surely keep out Voldemort, so I will be perfectly safe. In the name of that safety, I will not be lifting the lockdown until such a time as there are no longer any crazy wizards out to take me and use me for their nefarious purposes. I'm sure Sirius wasn't the only Order member with a property that could be placed under Fidelius, and that now that Grimmauld Place has been reclaimed for use as a family residence I'm sure you will have no trouble at all finding a suitable replacement.

As for not being left alone, after all my years at the Dursley's being treated like their house elf I am perfectly capable of looking after both myself and a household, especially with the assistance of an actual house elf. You can be reassured also that I am taking the appropriate precautions for my safety and won't leave the house until it's time to take the Express back to Hogwarts, which you're welcome to arrange an escort for if you like, and will owl-order for all my school supplies and anything else I might need in the meantime.

Thank you for your concern Headmaster, and I will see you at school on September 1st.

Yours sincerely,

Harriet Lily Black-Potter
Heiress to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black
Heiress to the Noble House of Potter

She grinned maliciously, annoyed she couldn't call him out on his lies about Voldemort still being after her but very pleased indeed with all the subtle digs she'd managed to squeeze in, before rolling up the letter and taking it to Hedwig.

"Here you go girl." She said, giving it to her to hold instead of tying it to her leg. "You make sure you take this to Dumbledore and drop it and leave right away, don't give him a chance to cast any spells on you okay? If you can leave it on his desk or something when he isn't around even better."

Hedwig nipped her finger affectionately as she carried her over to the window, and took off on a great sweep of wings.

She watched her go, feeling very pleased indeed, and decided that she should probably get started on making this place properly livable. After all the excitement yesterday she'd mainly just rested, made spicy curry for dinner just like she wanted since she wasn't cooking for the Dursley's and their appallingly bland palates anymore, and ended up sleeping in the room on the second floor she usually shared with Hermione.

But today was a whole new day, and she wanted to get the lady of the house rooms ready so she could move in properly. Kreacher had been begrudgingly working on them, but since they had been
crazy old Walburga's before she died they were a right mess and he was clearly dragging his heels. Harry was just bemoaning the fact that her only house elf was worse than useless when something occurred to her. He wasn't exactly her only house-elf, was he?

"Dobby!"

The funny little elf appeared with a pop, wearing a red, oversized kids shirt with coloured shapes all over it, three pairs of brightly coloured socks, and his favourite knitted tea cozy on his head, and promptly threw himself at her and hugged her knees.

"It is the great and kind Missy Harry Potter!" He cried, ears quivering with happiness. "What cans Dobby be doing for the Missy Harry Potter?"

"Hi Dobby, I've missed you too." She said with a smile, patting him on his little head. "I've got something important to ask you if that's alright."

"Yes yes, Dobby would bes doing anythings for the Missy Harry Potter." He declared proudly. "Anythings!"

She gently extricated herself and sat down cross-legged on the floor so they were at the same height. "Well Dobby, I've run away from my relatives who were mean and nasty to me like the Malfoys were to you. I've come here to Grimmauld Place because Sirius left it to me when he died so I could be safe here, and take my place properly as a lady and the Heiress to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. There is a Black house-elf here but he doesn't like me very much, so I was wondering if you'd like it if I hired you to be my very own personal house elf? I'd pay you a Galleon a week and you'd have every Sunday off, and all the socks you want."

Dobby, who had been vibrating in place while she'd been talking, suddenly burst into tears. She had just enough time to worry she'd upset him with her offer when he threw himself at her again.

"Dobby is being honoured beyond all other elvesies! It would be making Dobby so happy to be Missy Harry Potter's elf, but I won'ts be takings more than one Galleon and one Sunday off a month!"

"One Galleon and one Sunday off a fortnight." She countered. "And you don't sleep in the kitchen cupboard, you can have one of the bedrooms on the second floor so you have space for all your clothes."

He thought about it very hard, before beaming up at her like she'd hung the moon. "It's is a deal Missy Harry Potter of the Blackses. I am your elf for always!"

"Thank you Dobby, it means so much to have you here with me." She said, hugging him right back. "Now, something else very, very important is that Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix want me to go back to stay with my mean relatives even though I don't want to. This house is on lockdown for my safety and I'm the only person who can get in, so you have to be really careful that no one else gets in without my permission. They might try to trick me with Portkeys or compulsions to try and get me to leave, and I'm going to need your help to make sure I'm safe. Can you do that Dobby?"

Dobby nodded again. "I cans bes doing that! It would be best if the Missy Harry Potter made an elf-bond with Dobby, that way no one else could never ever get him to hurt his Missy Harry Potter or tell her secrets."

"Are you sure Dobby?" She asked, frowning. "I know how important it is for you to be a free elf, I
don't want you to feel that you have to give that up.

"Dobby only offers because he knows his Missy Harry Potter would never be a bad master like the Malfoys, and will still pay him and lets him do free elf things and wear clothes. This way Dobby is still free and his Missy Harry Potter is safe."

"Of course I will Dobby, and if I ever ask you to do something and you don't like it or don't want to you have to promise you'll tell me. I'll never make you do something you don't want to do, and you'll never have to punish yourself for it. Does that sound good?"

"Yes yes it does! Very good."

She smiled. "Alright Dobby, how do we do this?"

Dobby took off one of his socks, a really cute black one with little golden lightning bolts on it, and closed her hands around it. "Dobby bes swearing himself to the great Missy Harry Potter of the Potters and the Blackses. Dobby will bes her family's elf for the rest of Dobby's life. So mote it be."

Light flashed, and she felt a warm tickle as the elf magic locked into her core before fading away. She felt kind of guilty, she really hadn't intended for Dobby to swear himself to her like this but he looked so happy that all she could do was smile back at him. "Thank you Dobby of the families Black and Potter. I won't ever abuse the trust you've shown me."

He just giggled. "Of course you won'ts, and that's why I swore to yous. Now, who is the other Black elf beings?"

Right then. Better get the introduction over with, she thought with a grimace. "Kreacher!"

He appeared with a pop, muttering under his breath. "And what is the filthy halfblood wantings with poor Kreacher?"

Immediately Dobby's little chest puffed up in fury. "How dare yous be calling the Black Lady Harry Potter such nasty names! Yous is being a bad elf to our family!"

Kreacher glared right back. "Awful bloodtraitor son of poor Mistress made dirty halfblood his family, not Kreacher. Mistress and her blood bes turning in their graves to bes seeing the state of their legacy."

"They bes turning in their graves to be seeing the state of their house!" Dobby shot right back, hands on his hips as he told off the other elf. "All the mess and the dust, how shameful that their elf bes letting their house be so untidy. Yous is the dirty one, nots the Black Lady Harry Potter!"

Kreacher looked like he was about to explode or start spitting at Dobby, so she quickly laid down the new ground rules. "Kreacher this is my friend Dobby, he's going to be living with us and helping out since it seems to be too big of a job for you to look after by yourself. He's going to have his own room on the second floor, and you are forbidden from doing anything at all to hurt him in any way, am I clear? Nod if you understand."

He nodded, so red-faced and angry he looked like a tea kettle about to spill over, and disappeared with a pop.

"He's very old and very obsessed with Sirius' evil mother Walburga." She explained to the still clearly furious Dobby. "Until Sirius came back here a year or so ago he'd been completely alone for years with only Walburga's screaming portait in the hall for company. If he does anything bad or is mean to you let me know, okay Dobby?"
"Yes Black Lady Harry Potter!" He nodded, ears flapping. "Now what can I be doing first to get the house in order?"

"Well as you can see it's a work in progress and will take all of us a while to get finished. But if you could start on the lady of the house's suite of rooms so I have somewhere to sleep tonight that would be great. Anything Dark or cursed put in the attic for me to go through later, all the books put in the library, and any clothes that are still wearable put in an empty trunk for me to look through. There's a lot of curses and hexes all over the place so be careful, and if there's anything you can't disable then let me know right away. And open any curtains and windows you can without compromising the wards so we can start airing this musty old place out. I'll be in the kitchen."

Dobby bowed until his nose nearly touched the floor. "It be beings my pleasure Black Lady Harry Potter!" And he popped away to get started.

She sighed at this new title she knew there'd be no chance at getting him to drop, and headed into the kitchen to start doing some tidying up herself.

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After a long but productive morning getting the kitchen in order to her satisfaction she made sandwiches for lunch and sat in the now sunny drawing room to eat them, amazed at how much of a difference just opening the damn windows could make to a room. Hedwig returned looking smug, causing Harry to think she'd possibly evaded Dumbledore's efforts to catch or cast a spell on her, and proceeded to take a well-deserved nap. Kreacher was nowhere to be found, clearly sulking.

Not long after Dobby popped in to let her know that her new rooms were ready, and she moved her trunk up to the third floor to start unpacking. Having her own suite of rooms was something positively luxurious to a girl who'd grown up in a cupboard, and then had a pokey spare bedroom or shared with other girls for the last five years.

The sitting room was the first when you opened the door from the hall and was clearly still decorated by the dour, morbid Walburga even though it was now clean and shining. Her favourite part was the wall of bookshelves she'd gotten Dobby's help to move in which was where all her books went. She'd never seen them all at once since they always went straight into the library compartment of her trunk even while at Hogwarts, so she'd honestly not realised just how many of them there was until they'd nearly filled all the bookcases. Hermione would be so proud. The couch and armchair in front of the fireplace looked like a wonderful place to read or work on her embroidery in the evenings, as did the loveseat under the bay windows which were open and allowing a lovely breeze to circulate. There was a door which connected it with the sitting room of neighbouring suite for the lord of the house, but she just closed and locked that one since there was no way in hell it was getting used any time soon.

The next room was the bedroom, with a giant, intricately carved ebony four-poster with black velvet hangings which made even her bed in Gryffindor Tower look plain in comparison. There must be space expansion charms on the room because there was no way in hell a bed that big fit in a house as narrow as Grimmauld Place with that much room to spare. The matching vanity was also nothing short of lavish, with three sections of angled mirrors for her to look at herself with and lots of tiny little drawers to fill with Merlin knows what. Blood red lipstick and cursed hatpins and the souls of the innocent most likely knowing the Blacks, she thought to herself fondly.
There were another two smaller rooms coming off the bedroom, an ensuite bathroom with a deep, claw-footed bathtub she couldn't wait to use, and the other was a large walk-in wardrobe. All of the clothes had been either thrown out or put in a giant trunk in the bedroom for her to look through after she unpacked her own, and as much as she doubted she'd have much in common with Walburga Black either in terms of size or personal style there had to at the very least be some nice fabric or trims to save and reuse to make something wearable by someone born in this half of the century.

It took her until dinner but eventually she'd completely unpacked her school trunk for the first time ever, and it felt amazing to see her rooms full of all her things. There was a lot of shopping and renovation in the future to get the place done according to her own taste, but as far as work-in-progress went she was over the moon. Maybe she should move a writing desk into the sitting room so she'd have somewhere to do her homework. Though then she ran the risk of just never leaving her suite at all, which seemed like a waste for such a big house. Maybe she could reclaim one of the rooms downstairs to use as a study.

She thought about it as she reheated leftover curry for dinner. The fourth floor was the smallest, just Sirius' and Regulus' bedrooms (which she wasn't touching), and the stairs to the attic. The third floor had the two large master suites, the family sitting room and through it the dusty little sun-room at the back which looked down at the courtyard garden. The second was all guest bedrooms on one side and the expansive Black library on the other, which must also have some space expansion charms on it to be as big as it was. The ground floor was the drawing room, formal dining room, an office, the kitchen at the very back, and the courtyard just beyond. She hadn't been in the basement apart from on the initial tour of the house, but it held the cellar, the laundry, the potions lab, the ritual room, and a locked door at the very end which Sirius had flatly refused to go near and told her to avoid as well. Even her usually insatiable curiosity had been dampened by how pale and haunted he'd looked while saying that, and she had decided to follow his advice.

Maybe she could turn the family sitting room into a workshop. Her family was pretty much just her, the two house elves and Hedwig right now, and as far as friends went she didn't exactly expect any visitors any time soon with the house on lockdown. And there were always projects that needed more space that she'd put off because there was never the opportunity to do them. Clearing out the excess furniture but leaving a couch for laying around and reading on would be easy, and she could re-purpose one of the dining tables as a cutting table and put the writing desk in there for her homework. It'd be nice to have shelves and drawers for all her materials and equipment which mainly just lived in one of the compartments of her trunk until now. She nearly drooled when she realised she now had the space to put the loom and spinning wheel she'd always wanted but had never been able to justify. Hell this was an old house, maybe there'd be some in the attic.

She should clean out the sun-room too she decided, it would be a perfect place to eat breakfast or sit out reading in the warmer months. Maybe she could have some pots of herbs and flowers out there too which she could use for potions and cooking and just making her floor of the house smell lovely. Because it was sounding like, with the exception of the second master suite which she'd make sure was cleaned out of anything useful or dangerous but otherwise would ignore, she was colonising it in true British fashion.

The Headmaster's second letter arrived after dinner while she was rapturously eating the treacle tart that Dobby had baked for her, and the little elf didn't even let her touch it. Apparently, she'd pissed the old wizard off enough that he'd send her a letter positively dripping with compulsion charms. Harry didn't even bother reading it, just wrote back a cheerful note informing him that someone must have gotten into his mail and how he really should be more careful about security, and sent both it and the letter back with the disinterested school barn owl who had delivered it.

After reminding Dobby sternly to not work himself all night because they had all summer to get the
house sorted out, she retreated with a pot of tea to her sitting room and one of the books she'd found in the Black library about rune tattoo magic. After a few hours, she took a long, luxurious bath and got changed into one of the lovely silk nightdresses she'd found in the trunk, then tucked herself into the soft, freshly elf-laundered sheets of her giant, squishy bed.

Even with the *Prophet* being written by a bunch of useless gossip-mongers and Dumbledore being a pain in her arse, today had been just about perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter chapter than usual but an important one I think to set the scene for the next section of the story. A bit of gratuitous description-ing which I generally try to avoid since we all have pretty solid images of what everything looks like in this universe, but I think it's important to have a solid idea of where you are in the world to represent where you are emotionally. Harry is starting to reclaim her heritage and that's why she takes fixing up Grimmauld Place so seriously, it's a symbol of her breathing life back into the Black family which will be a huge thing going forward.

Next chapter will probably another Voldemort POV so get hyped.
Say, it'll make you insane

Chapter Summary

Voldemort is excellent at giving advice.
Voldemort has yet to Cruciate his horcrux and feels that this fact should be acknowledged for the achievement that it is.

Chapter Notes

Holy shit you guys, we've passed 12k hits and 1k kudos. I wish I could reach through my computer monitor and hug each and every one of you until you squeaked like a bunny, but in lieu of bunny snugs have another sassy Voldemort POV chapter, as promised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Voldemort flipped through yet another useless, misinformed book on soul magic and wished that he could resurrect the idiots who had outlawed it just so he could kill them again himself.

The trip back to Little Hangleton to retrieve his ring had gone to plan, there was evidence that someone magical had been in the vicinity recently but they mustn't have been able to get past all of his security measures at the time and decided to come back and try again later. He felt chilled thinking what might have happened to it had he not learned what Harry Potter was, and therefore realised that meant Dumbledore knew of his horcruxes and could be hunting them down. The destruction of the diary, while an irreplaceable loss, had not been nearly as large a piece of his soul as the ring and could therefore be written off as a cautionary lesson of the dangers of hubris.

The cup was still in Bella's vault at Gringotts or the goblins would have been up in arms over the break-in, the Inferi cave containing the locket was as close to impregnable as a wizard could conceivably make anything, the diadem was at Hogwarts in the Come and Go Room and in no danger of being found amongst the piles of junk, and Nagini was safe at his side. The only one unaccounted for was Harry Potter, who shared his dreams but was technically in the wind (inasmuch as the wind was a nigh impregnable townhouse located somewhere in inner London) but at this point in time, she was arguably the safest of them all.

He'd sat there multiple times over the last few weeks, assessing all the various options and possibilities, and had concluded that he really couldn't have made a better accidental horcrux if he'd actually set out to do just that. His Trojan horse shaped like a Saviour, a cuckoo in the Phoenix nest, a priceless treasure hidden in plain sight where no one would ever think to look for her. The irony truly was fantastic.

As if his thoughts had summoned her, his horcrux suddenly shimmered into view in front of the fireplace in his library and Voldemort had to bite the inside of his lip to hold himself still.

She seemed happier and more content than usual and it made her radiant, her casual plait of thick black hair falling over one shoulder with some curling loose around her face, golden skin glowing in
the firelight, and wearing an old-fashioned but lovely black nightgown made of delicate silk and lace. He'd gotten so used to her cranky, sleep-deprived and wearing ugly muggle clothing, that even though intellectually he knew she was a decently attractive witch it somehow hadn't occurred to him that with a good night's sleep and wearing something appropriate for her station she would pass over the line of good looking and straight into beautiful.

"Hi Voldemort, how goes the murder and mayhem this evening?" She asked flippantly, before sauntering over so she could slump inelegantly into the armchair as if she was trying to become one with it. Just as rude and irreverent as always, he thought with a carefully concealed smile, and felt the strangest pang of what might actually be honest to Merlin fondness.

"Splendidly my dear, thank you for asking." He replied, the very picture of gentlemanly politeness as he slowly flipped through his useless book so he'd have something to do with his hands which didn't involve touching her. "I assume life at the Black townhouse is treating you well?"

"It really is. Dumbledore sent a letter the day after our last dream being all passive-aggressive and disappointed and pretending you're still after me, so I wrote him back and kindly said thanks but no thanks and I'd see him on September 1st." She sighed fondly in remembrance. "He keeps sending me daily letters, so far four were covered in compulsion charms and one was even a Portkey, as if it would even work in my house. I just keep returning them to him unopened with a note warning him his mail is being hijacked by people trying to compel me, along with some helpful suggestions for additional security measures he could implement. I'm expecting another attempt at breaking down my door by the end of the week."

Voldemort smirked, feeling very gratified indeed at this further evidence of a rift between Dumbledore and his horcrux. The old man really must be going senile if he hadn't worked out that with someone like Harry Potter the harder you tried to reign her in the harder she was going to fight back purely on principle. He knew himself, knew that he was the kind to cut his own nose off to spite his face (a joke which no one who had seen his Lord Voldemort face had ever gotten, more's the pity), and he felt confident in guessing that she was exactly the same.

"I've been getting the house tidied up and doing what renovating I can with what's on hand and it's going great. So right now instead of a filthy, doxy-infested, creepy gothic shit heap I'm now living in a sparklingly clean, magical parasite free, creepy gothic shit heap. I'm pretty sure no one changed the décor since long before Walburga Black moved in, and while normally I'd just ask her she honestly still scares me even though she's just a portrait."

Voldemort chuckled. "I actually went to school with her. She was a few years ahead of me and she was a screeching, hateful banshee even then. It sounds as though age and death did not mellow her in the slightest."

"That's right, it's easy to forget you're as old as dirt with the face you wear in here."

He raised a very unimpressed eyebrow, aware that if it was literally anyone else childishly insulting him they'd already be screaming, but knew she'd respond about as well to someone trying to assert authority over her as he would have when he was sixteen. "I don't just wear this face in here, this is my actual face."

She frowned. "But at the graveyard and in the Ministry you always have that whole gross, bald, snakeface thing going on."

So charming, his horcrux. "That form is a corporeal blood glamour, a kind of partial self-transfiguration achieved via the Dark Arts. My first body looked like that when it was destroyed, so that is exactly the state the ritual restored me to, right down to a papercut I had at the time I was
discorporated. Now that I have my magic resettled and fully under my control again I am able to switch between my two forms at will, though during battle or in front of my followers I always wear that form. This one is my actual preference, but no one else knowing it makes it easier for me to move around incognito when required."

"I guess people would freak out if Lord Voldemort was talking a wander down Diagon Alley for some ice cream at Fortescue's." She agreed, as if he'd ever done anything of the sort in his entire life. "Where as almost no one would recognise a middle aged Tom Riddle and even fewer would know who else he was."

"Exactly, and it has strategic value as well since it is easier to rule through shock and awe when your very presence intimidates. When I was younger it became clear that my natural appearance was too conventionally attractive to inspire much fear, so I decided on an alternative and made it appear as though I had slowly corrupted myself with Dark magic. Most of my followers are former Slytherins, not exactly a group known for their unwavering loyalty, and if they smell weakness they tend to strike. Preemptively terrifying the pants off them by looking more monster than man meant I could rule without having to spend nearly as much time beating them into submission, which frankly made for a much more efficient working environment for all concerned."

"You are very much an outlier in that regard my dear. Besides, love is not something I find any value in. It is fickle and changeable and hard to define, and can be lost or gained in an instant. Fear on the other hand is a known quantity, something steady and predictable that you can rely on."

Harry just shook her head. "I can't believe your actual solution to ridiculous pissing contests was just an especially creepy method of alpha male posturing. Why rule through fear though, wouldn't it be easier if people loved you instead? I wouldn't follow someone I was scared of, while for the people I love I'd do just about anything."

"Why, are you volunteering?" He asked, smiling wickedly. "I must admit, I enjoyed our last one immensely."

She immediately blushed a bright, brilliant red. "So you're telling me the solution to your reign of terror is actually rainbows and hugs and kittens after all?" She sneered in a futile attempt to overcompensate for the telling nature of her physical response to his flirting. "I'll have to alert Dumbledore that he's right and your weakness really is the power of love."

"You see why I'm so annoyed at him." She said, kicking at the rug under her feet. "Whenever I actually try to understand why my life is a mess I get told I'm a child who can't know just yet, and when I ask for help I get told empty platitudes like that festering pile of uselessness."
Oh Dumbledore, he thought with satisfaction, by trying to keep her ignorant you're just doing half
the work of turning her to my side for me. "I really don't know if he is lying to keep you off track, or
if he is just honestly that mad."

"On my bad days I don't half wonder if it isn't in fact both." She admitted with a sigh. "Change the
subject please, I'm very aware that my life is a joke and it's just depressing."

Well then, that was an easy enough request. "Apart from your summer homework and your noble
efforts at home renovation, do you have much planned for the rest of your break?"

She relaxed back into the armchair, crossing one leg over the other and flashing a long line of thigh
that was far more entrancing than it had any right to be. "Not really, working on some projects, going
through the Black library and learning more about my family mainly. What I really want to do is go
to Gringotts and claim my Heir rings, but with the house arrest and all that's looking to be
impossible."

He looked up from pretending to skim his book in surprise. "You mean you don't have them
already?"

"When would I have gotten them?" She snorted. "Apart from the battle at the Ministry, the only
place I've been other than Hogwarts in years is here at the Black townhouse, Hogsmeade, Privet
Drive, the Burrow and Kings Cross Station. I only got my vault key back over Christmas, and I
haven't even been to Diagon Alley since the summer before third year because Dumbledore said it
wasn't safe and wouldn't let me. Mrs Weasley just kept doing all my back to school shopping for me."

Voldemort pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling the beginnings of a headache. "I don't know why I
am surprised by any of this. I really don't."

"You see my dilemma then. I'm too easily recognised whenever I'm in a magical area and it's more
likely than not someone would see me and tell Dumbledore where I was. And that's not counting the
Order members who are without a doubt camped on my doorstep under an invisibility cloak
watching the house now I'm here."

"Useless busybodies. "Well first things first, I am assuming you can't use magic to glamour yourself
since it is summer?"

She shook her head. "Sirius told me that while the Fidelius was up the Trace wouldn't work since it
confused the tracking magic too much, but now it's fallen it might. It's a magical house, so the usual
wards on muggleborn houses aren't up so I can get away with a bit of wandless magic, but that's all
just to be on the safe side. Even if that wasn't an issue, bloody Mad-Eye Moody's mad bloody eye
can see through glamours, and he's always a regular on the guard rotation. Who as I may have
already mentioned are invisible."

It amazed him how that paranoid old battle axe was still alive and kicking after a year imprisoned in
his own trunk. "Let me think on that and get back to you. The Order members on guard duty mean
you can't just walk out the front door regardless, and I am assuming from what you said earlier that
Portkeys definitely won't work?"

She nodded in agreement. "The Black lockdown wards are some of the strongest you can get,
apparently warding is something of a family specialty and they don't allow Portkeys at all. The Floo
is blocked, and obviously even if I could Apparate that's blocked too. You couldn't even climb in
through a window from the street if they were wide open, the only way out or in is through a door,
with my blood, and my verbal invocation as the Heir to the family."
The Blacks certainly knew what they were doing, even he with his extensive experience in curse and ward breaking would have trouble bypassing security that tight without having to brute force his way through and hope for the best, and even then he'd be more likely than not to just end up tripping the secondary, tertiary or even quaternary layers of defences which were no doubt in place. If he'd learnt anything from Fomalhauta it was that if a Black decided you weren't getting into something you weren't getting in. "Is it just the front door?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, little horcrux." He sighed. "Is there a back door or a side entrance they might not know about which you could use instead?"

"Well it's a townhouse so there's neighbours on each side, but there is a small enclosed courtyard out the back with a greenhouse roof which might have a gate into the alleyway behind it. It's all rather overgrown, so I'm really not too sure."

"That might be something to look into. What about house elves, surely an old house like that has at least one. They probably can't get back in unless you specifically call for them while inside the wards yourself, but they might be able to get you out."

The witch looked thoughtful at that. "That's a possibility. Kreacher is a senile old bastard who hates me, but the day after I arrived I hired Dobby, and he'd do absolutely anything for me."

"You hired a house elf?" He asked, peering at her in confusion. "How in Merlin's name does that work?"

She grinned. "You'll like this one actually. He used to belong to the Malfoys, but the summer before my second year he secretly came to warn me that I was going to be in terrible danger if I went back to Hogwarts, and the whole year he did everything he could to sabotage me or get me injured so I would go home. He was honestly trying to save my life but I swear he got closer to actually killing me than you ever did. Anyway, fast forward to the end of the year and rescuing Ginny from the Chamber of Secrets. Lucius Malfoy came to Hogwarts to try and fire Dumbledore and was sent packing, and who did he have with him but Dobby. It was clear then that he was the one who gave Ginny the diary and he was being awful to the poor little guy, so once they left the Headmaster's office I took off my sock and put the diary inside it, then chased after them and threw it at him."

She started laughing, unable to stop. "Of course this sock is especially nasty since I'd worn it in the Chamber while battling a basilisk, it's soaking wet with blood and slime and ink all through it, really truly awful. So he takes the sock off the diary, chucking it away like the posh git he is and goes to leave. Only Dobby had caught the sock when he threw it, which meant his master had given him clothes, which meant he was free."

Oh this was fantastic. "You must be joking. You tricked Lucius into freeing his own house elf?" Voldemort knew immediately he was going to make Lucius show him that particular memory once he was out of Azkaban as part of his punishment.

"Would I lie about getting one up on a Malfoy?" She smirked. "Of course poor old Lucy was furious, and he whipped out his wand to no doubt do something that would be very bad indeed to do to a twelve year old girl in a school he's a governor for, but Dobby stood right in front of me and yelled that he wasn't going to be hurting his Miss Harry Potter! Lucy goes to curse me anyway because he's an idiot, and Dobby snapped his fingers and the great blonde twat gets thrown back like twenty feet into a wall. He had to slink off before his former house-elf flat out murdered him in the middle of the hallway, and after that Dobby was employed by Hogwarts. The other elves were pretty scandalised that he got pay and days off, but even though he's odd even for a house elf he's a
sweetheart and always had a soft spot for me. So when I got here and needed an elf who would actually do something other than sneer at me for my parentage I called for him and asked if I could hire him on instead, and he said yes."

"It never ceases to amaze me the ridiculous things you get up to." He said, not sure if he was feeling more amused or perplexed.

Harry just snorted inelegantly. "I'll have you know there is not a single adventure or ridiculous situation that I've been involved in that you weren't directly or indirectly responsible for, thank you very much."

Voldemort raised an eyebrow. "Surely some of them at least are entirely of your own doing."

"Nope. Hermione and I even made a chart one time to check, and there has not been one single ridiculous thing I've done that wasn't at most three degrees of separation from something you did yourself."

"That's not entirely fair." He argued. "I'd wager there aren't many wizards or witches in this entire country which can't find some way to blame me for their own problems, especially ones your age. It would be like blaming the sun for someone choking on their dinner because carrots can only exist because of photosynthesis."

"I really don't think you can equate carrots with wholesale murder." She retorted. "The blame is squarely on you, that's what you get for being a genocidal terrorist and a wannabe fascist dictator."

He smiled as blandly as a politician. "You will find I am actually only a pending fascist dictator by default because everyone else is too stupid to be in charge of themselves. If the world was less insane it would not need me, or at least would not allow the perfect conditions required for creating someone like me in the first place."

Harry just stared at him as if he had just announced his solemn intention to take up painting penguins green as a hobby. "You're bloody mental is what you are. Anyway, back on the subject of house-elves?"

"Yes, well it sounds like your Dobby will probably be able to get you out of the townhouse and straight to the steps of Gringotts, though you will both need to return together and enter through a door. If there is no back door you might be able to get him to make you reappear on the front doorstep and just get in quickly like you did the first time."

"That's sounding like the best plan I've got so far." She admitted. "What about the glamour though? I don't think I can cast any wandlessly just yet and house-elf magic does a lot but I don't think it does that."

"I will think on it and let you know if I come up with anything." He replied, making a mental note to consider the issue when not thoroughly distracted by his horcrux who was lounging back horizontally across the armchair with her bare neck one long, slender line in the flickering firelight. "In the meantime, look through your family library for any ideas. Worst-case scenario, there may be some clothes and such in storage which you can use to disguise yourself much as you did while you were heading there in the first place. Wizards and witches are usually so busy looking for magical forms of disguise that they miss the mundane entirely."

"Not a bad idea as a backup plan." Her eyes narrowed. "Thank you, I appreciate the help brainstorming."
He smiled pleasantly. "It is my pleasure Harry."

"I'm not going to lie, I'm still trying to work out what the catch is whenever you do nice things." She said, clearly suspicious. "Am I going to start craving human flesh or randomly bleeding from my ears or something?"

"Not to the best of my knowledge, though I am curious if you have any compelling evidence to the contrary. And for what it is worth, nothing I have been doing is actually altruistic."

Harry still looked suspicious, and probably rightly so. "But you've been listening to me and giving me advice which can't be of any benefit to you whatsoever."

"Anyone who does something purely for your benefit is either stupid, lying, or only doing it to manipulate you into doing something even bigger for them at a later date." It really was important that she knew that, Merlin knows how she'd gotten to her age without learning it as he had.

"Merlin you're cynical." She huffed, swinging back around to sit on the armchair properly again. "Well, which are you then?"

Ah, an excellent time to segue into something he'd been intending to discuss with her at greater length now that she'd had more time to get used to it. "None of the above. You are an independent, but not separate, part of the greater whole that is us. We are the same person Harry, anything positive which comes out of our interactions is purely selfish because whatever benefits either of us consequently benefits both of me."

"You really aren't bothered at all by the implied lack of individuality inherent to our situation, are you?" She said in complete disbelief. "Not even a little."

He just shrugged. "We made our first horcrux when we were sixteen years old my dear, the first time around. I've had rather a lot more time to get used to the idea of our plurality than you have, seeing as you do not as yet seem to have conscious access to our shared memories. Though I must say, you are a whole new type of creature compared to all the others."

"Why?" She grumbled, looking annoyed. "Are they the things you put all the strong, silent type bits of your personality into?"

"Technically that would actually be our personality, and not as such no. With the exception of Nagini, as limited as she is by not having an original soul of her own and still only possessing the brain of a snake, the diary was the only other horcrux which attained any degree of sentience of its own as far as I am aware. And that was largely only because I spent a great deal of time talking to it once it was completed in order to ensure it had the necessary autonomy to fulfil its secondary purpose. But that I suppose is the difference between a horcrux residing in an object, fixed and unchangeable, and a horcrux with a body of its own. You have your own organic brain chemistry and neural pathways and life experiences which you can utilise to your benefit whereas the others do not, which is how you can still change and grow independent of me. And as clever and wonderful as magic is, I do not think it has yet found a way to create something as singularly, imperfectly perfect as a sentient human being, not truly."

"That's...surprisingly thoughtful of you. Dare I say it even poignant."

Voldemort settled regally back into his chair. "I am not a Dark Lord because I am ruthless and capable of powerful magic. That certainly contributes to it, yes, but the thing which truly separates Dark Lords from other kinds of murderous psychopaths and indeed the type of people who follow Dark Lords is the fact we have both the ability to dream big and reshape the world around us
according to that dream by any means necessary. That is something only achievable through vision, strength of will and a certain talent for creative problem-solving."

"And here I was thinking it was your creepy, high-pitched laughter and penchant for slaughtering innocents." She snapped, body language defensive and clearly discomfited by what he was saying.

"If the world were fair and just, I would be able to Cruciate you where you stood until your nervous system melted into its component molecules and save myself the bother of your rudeness." He replied, calmly turning the page of his book for dramatic effect. "Alas, knowing that you are my horcrux and my own predilection for using sarcasm as a defence mechanism, I have no one to blame for your sass but ourself."

She perked up. "Does that mean I've got free reign to be a raging bitch to you without fear of any consequences? Because I'm not going to lie, that's sounding really good from where I'm sitting."

Give her an inch, he thought to himself with a smile. "Well given that the lack of permission has yet to have done anything to curtail your efforts to that end in the past, maybe this way you will get it out of your system and eventually learn to conduct yourself more respectfully. I am both patient and cautiously optimistic. Though of course that permission is predicated on the acknowledgement on your part that we are both me, regardless of the fact that we currently inhabit separate bodies."

She scowled. "Oh, that's sneaky. You knew full well the temptation to freely call you a prat would be all but irresistible."

"Curses, you've seen through my evil plan." He deadpanned. "Whatever will I do now?"

She sank back down into the armchair, arms folded like a pouting child. "Oh shut up Voldemort."

He restrained the urge to grin as he returned his attention to his useless book, knowing he'd won that round. "As you wish my little horcrux."

Chapter End Notes

So this was a lot of fun to write because these two are so damn bitchy, and because I especially enjoyed playing around with Voldemort's use of words to describe the overlap between the two of them as people. Harry of course is still rejecting their connection as much as possible, but as Voldemort says to her, he's had a lot longer to get used to the idea that he isn't a singular being and his use of language reflects this. Case in point, he refers to himself as a Dark Lord but not Harry because she doesn't currently identify that way herself, but still refers to things like the diary as their horcrux, because that is something mutual to their experience. Her not having the memory of creating it doesn't change the fact that it's a part of her soul too.

The reason I actually started writing this fic was because I really wanted to explore the relationship between a sentient horcrux with it's own life of experiences and it's 'master soul', for a lack of a better term. There's a lot of fan theories for the mechanics of how this happened and the horcrux ritual etc, but for the purpose of this story the fact is that a relatively sizeable piece of Voldemort's soul (the size of the soul pieces in various objects is discussed eventually and is Mildly Plot Relevant) broke off when Voldemort tried to use Harry's death to make his final horcux. It then ended up merging with the fragments of her post-AK-to-the-head, blank slate of a baby soul and kind of
overwhelmed it. She didn't consciously get the memories because of Reasons, but it isn't a separate thing trapped in her curse scar like a pearl in an oyster, and the fact remains that she is as much him as she is her, only with 14.5 years of their life that they've each experienced individually since the event in question happened. Kind of like how an annex is a subsidiary part of something, but is still subject to and party of the whole.

Any questions or theories or thoughts about the nature of horcruxes and souls and identity and their relationship are eagerly encouraged, as mentioned I've got a reasonably solid theory outline I'm working from, but I'm always 110% open to well-argued points that can change my mind or give a better context for their interactions.
The dog days are over

Chapter Summary

Harry returns to the library only to find that Voldemort has potentially found answers to some of their questions. It quickly becomes apparent however, that she isn't going to like any of them.

Forced to confront some deeply unpleasant truths by the unrelenting man she shares a soul with, she eventually comes to some conclusions of her own and slowly, tentatively, gives herself permission to start mourning the loss of Sirius and her assumptions of the person she once thought she was.

Chapter Notes

Alright, SUPER FEELS WARNING for the end of the chapter, I literally made myself cry while writing it. If you're sensitive like me, check the end note for a content warning.

This chapter is pretty heavy in general and was actually going to have a bit more build up before we got to it in a few chapters time, but after a discussion in the last chapter's comment section with some readers who were feeling that I didn't address Harry's fragile mental state and motivations clearly enough I decided to move it up. If you are curious to read my stupidly long rant about the dangers of chronic sleep deprivation and how Harry's been avoidant and disassociating pretty much 24/7 since she trashed Dumbledore's office, go check it out.

Also, I've been on a supermassive writing binge the last few days, but sadly most of what I've written is waaaaay down the track chronology wise. So while I'll probably still be maintaining a one or two chapter a week posting rate for the foreseeable future until we catch up, be reassured that even if there are bigger gaps in posting here and then that there's got to be nearing 100k of shenanigans just sitting in my notes waiting to see the light of day.

As always your comments and kudos give me life, and you stunning human beings are all the real MVPs <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After three pleasantly Voldemort-free days and nights of pottering around her increasingly immaculate townhouse, Harry had no sooner appeared in the library after failing to keep herself awake for a second night in a row when she received a stern talking-to from a hyperfocused Dark Lord surrounded by a massive array of open books who looked about as frazzled as Hermione did around exam time.

"Before you start lecturing me on the moral imperative of friendship or whatever saccharine bullshit it is today, please be aware that I have finally found a possible explanation for our situation and will
not take kindly to any interruptions until I have finished exploring it."

Well then, that would explain the miniature literary apocalypse taking place on and around his desk. "Er, yeah okay." She looked around. "Can I have that warding book I was reading then?"

He waved his hand sharply and the book in question sailed towards her at velocity until it smacked into her chest.

"Ow! Now that was just rude."

"Quiet."

"Fine." She glared at him as she slumped down into her armchair and started to read.

Anything being warded must either be warded in its entirety, or in some way ritually subdivided prior to warding. For example, you may easily ward a 1m square box but not a random 1m square patch of ground in your back garden. To successfully ward that patch of ground, you would first have to mark out the boundaries of the space with symbols or runes, and then ward along the new boundaries you have created.

A notable example of an exception to this rule is, in fact, prosthetic devices that are worn to replace a missing part of the human body. As discussed in the previous chapter on personal warding (which is the subcategory of wards which apply to the caster's body) Erasmus Winterley's First Law of Personal Warding states that when casting any kind of personal ward the caster's sense of self must be whole and inviolate. If, for example, the caster has a new prosthetic leg and does not feel as though it is a true part of their body, a personal ward may not extend to cover the prosthetic leg in question. Conversely, if the caster has had the prosthetic leg for a long period of time and treats it as just another part of their body that ward may protect the prosthetic leg just as much as the flesh and blood leg. Some wizards and witches report that their wands or eyeglasses often end up being accidentally protected by personal wards, purely because they use them every day and don't think of them as being something that is actually separate to their sense of self.

In any case, it is clear that our intentions and beliefs shape our perception of boundaries and therefore our application of wards, which is by definition the manipulation of the boundaries present in physical space.

Harry decided that she really needed to see if she could find an actual copy of this book in the real world, especially since it was apparently written by another Black woman. She hadn't found a copy in the family library but it was only published in 1947 so surely it couldn't be that hard to find. Maybe she could write a letter to Flourish and Blott's tomorrow and see if they could order it in for her, because she'd never found anyone who explained warding half as well as Fomalhauta Black did.

After nearly an hour of silence only punctuated by the thump of books being rearranged and the swish of turning pages, Voldemort apparently decided he was done with his research binge and turned his attention to Harry.

"Right." He said, slamming a book closed and making her jump at the sudden noise. "It is high time that we had a serious discussion."

She raised an eyebrow. "Well, that's not at all terrifying."
Voldemort actually got up and walked around his desk towards Harry, dodging loose piles of books as he went. With a distracted wave of his hand there was suddenly a matching armchair next to the fire directly across from hers, and with another wave the coffee table had an honest to Merlin tea tray on it.

"Um, we're in a dream." She pointed out as he sat down, feeling uncomfortable by the abrupt departure from their admittedly weird, borderline domestic routine. "We don't actually need to eat or drink anything."

"We are British." He replied blandly. "That means when things are difficult we drink tea."

She looked at the tea set suspiciously, as if expecting an Acromantula to jump out of the sugar bowl or something equally inauspicious. "You think this conversation is going to be difficult?"

He wordlessly placed a cup and saucer in front of her. However apprehensive she was she really couldn't fault his logic, so she put her book down and leaned forward in her chair as he poured her a cup.

"How do you take it?"

Utterly nonplussed by the sight of Lord Voldemort being mother, it took her a few seconds to remember to reply. "Oh. Um, no milk, two sugars." Deeply ingrained manners reluctantly kicked in. "Please."

He huffed a small laugh as he added two cubes of sugar to her tea, then stirred it and passed it over to her.

"What's so funny?" She asked, frowning at him as she took the cup and saucer which appeared to have tiny decorative snakes of all things printed on it.

He just smirked as he prepared his own cup with no milk and two sugars as well. "I was merely being amused that we have even something this mundane in common."

"Plenty of people drink their tea like this." She grumbled, taking a cautious sip and being surprised when instead of anything nefarious it just tasted like earl grey. "It doesn't mean anything."

"And that attitude is precisely why we need to talk. This will be a deeply unpleasant conversation and you will not remotely enjoy it, but it needs to be said so we can resolve this matter and get to work on your Occlumency barriers. We are fortunate that it is the summer holidays and you have another month and a half before you will be facing Dumbledore again, but considering how much you have struggled with the subject in the past time really is of the essence."

Harry did not like the sound of this, she did not like the sound of this at all. The bad feeling she had when he sat down across from her was just getting worse the more he talked.

Voldemort drank some of his own tea, looking intently at her as if cataloguing all of her weakness. "First of all, have you had any instances of dreaming through my eyes since you first found your way into my library?"

Harry shook her head. "No, but that might just be a coincidence. If I'm awake when I get a lot of bleed-through I just get headaches, it's only if I'm asleep that I get the visions."

"And you have barely been sleeping all summer." It was a statement, not a question.

She froze. "Yeah."
He was still looking at her with that calculating expression like he was adding some things together and not liking the result. "You are aware of course that prolonged sleep deprivation is actually used as a form of torture?"

"Oh." She blinked, confused by both the surrealism of drinking tea with the Dark Lord and the strange tangent they were going down. "Is it really?"

"Yes." He said simply. "It did seem as though you had improved somewhat once you relocated to the Black townhouse, but it is clear now that it was only a temporary improvement."

She looked back down at her snake patterned teacup, not wanting to see any more of his judgement. "Not that it's any of your business, but yeah. I'm used to it though, I've never really slept well."

He was quiet for nearly a solid minute. "You need to take better care of yourself Harry."

She looked up from her perusal of the china pattern to stare at him incredulously. "I can't believe you of all people are telling me to take care of myself! Out of the ten attempts on my life so far, you've been responsible for nine of them. Nine!"

He frowned a little. "I think you are exaggerating those numbers somewhat."

She slammed the cup and saucer back down on the coffee table so she had her hands free to count out her list. "Godric's Hollow. Jinxing my broom. Philosopher's Stone. Basilisk. Werewolf chasing me into Dementors. Quidditch World Cup. Triwizard Tournament. Little Hangleton Cemetery. More Dementors. Department of Mysteries."

He was quiet as he clearly ran through his own memories of the events in question. "I didn't have anything to do with the werewolf, the Quidditch World Cup, or the Dementors."

"The werewolf/Dementor combo only happened because of the clusterfuck that was your traitor Pettigrew getting away and running to your side, and granted the Cup was just your pet bigots looking for soft targets and not specifically out to get me, though if they had it wouldn't have been pretty. But the next lot of Dementors were only set on me because a Ministry official didn't like that I was telling everyone you were back. And that is, of course, counting the Triwizard Tournament as just one thing and not the three separate, life-threatening catastrophes they actually were."

He drank more of his tea before replying. "There may be some merit to your math."

"Thank you." She sniffed haughtily, rescuing the teacup because it was warm and gave her something to do with her hands that wasn't just fidgeting. "You forget, I'm best friends with Hermione Granger. Other teenage girls spend their free time gossiping about boys and reading Witch Weekly, we do tactical analysis breakdowns of current events and review duelling statistics."

His lip quirked as if he wanted to smile but refused to give her the satisfaction. "Well, the fact remains that I am not trying to kill you anymore."

Harry just snorted in derision. "So the fact you're not currently trying to kill me means that I should just start doing everything you say?"

"I think if what I am saying is exactly what any competent Healer would say if they could see your symptoms it probably isn't bad advice." He snapped, clearly getting annoyed with her stubbornness.

Well sucks to be him, she thought crossly. She would outlast the stars themselves just to make a point when arguing with Ron about quidditch, there was no way she was going to let bloody Voldemort lecture her about her bedtime.
"Did you know that when you are mentally digging your heels in you get this little crease between your eyebrows?" He asked snidely.

"Shut up."

"Eloquent as always little horcrux." The infuriating excuse for a man replied.

Harry just scowled even harder and wished there were some goddamn biscuits. "You're an arsehole."

"As stimulating as this is, we should really get back on topic."

"Fine." She sighed. "Have at it."

He set down his teacup and folded his hands neatly in his lap. "So to quickly summarise possibly the most laughable case of dramatic irony in recorded history, we are destined adversaries who also happen to share a soul. Due to this, ever since I regained a rudimentary physical form there has been emotional bleed-through. Sometimes in your dreams you would see through my eyes, or Nagini's while I was possessing her, and it caused you a great deal of physical pain. Ever since my resurrection into a proper human body, this pain has become more intense, and we have both experienced an increased amount of the aforementioned emotional bleed-through. How am I doing so far?"

Harry was trying really hard to work out what he was building up to, and didn't like that she was still probably going to be blindsided by whatever it was. She also didn't like that she honestly hadn't realised just how comfortable she'd gotten being in the library with him until now when they weren't just casually discussing things from across the room and instead he was sitting across from her, the weight of his attention feeling like a physical thing pressing down on her from all sides. "Yes."

"Thank you. And this all changed at the Ministry when I tried to possess you, an incredibly painful experience for all concerned. Ever since then you share my lucid dreams if you are also asleep at the time, though it is unknown if you still get the visions due to your erratic and occasionally non-existent sleeping habits. Things that used to cause you pain, me Cruciating my Death Eaters for example, is hurting you less and less as time goes on."

"Right on all counts." She sneered. "Do you want a gold star?"

He ignored her belligerent attempts to distract him and continued. "I believe the main difference pre and post possession is, in fact, the decreased pain from our interactions. After examining a new line of enquiry, I think it might actually be our biggest clue to what is really happening. If it had suddenly stopped right away it could still be up in the air, but the fact that it is gradually decreasing as our contact increases shows a direct correlation."

"While I've been enjoying not having nearly as many skull splitting headaches, now I'm kind of worried about what the cost was." She admitted, suddenly feeling so goddamn tired. "Because good things just don't happen to me without something even worse being there to balance it out."

"With all of these factors in mind, the obvious conclusion is quite simple really." He declared, obviously feeling very confident in his diagnosis. "I believe we are realigning."

Harry just squinted at him. "Right, you've lost me."

He sighed, irritation briefly apparent before his face smoothed over again and he went back into lecturer mode. "Between the traumatic circumstances surrounding your creation as a horcrux and my discorporation, plus the years we were separated with me as a wraith and you growing up all over
again without your original memories, we fell out of alignment. On top of that we were so convinced that each other was the enemy that we were subconsciously pushing each other away and denying our connection. But since our soul is still the same regardless of our personal feelings of the matter it made our interactions painful and uncomfortable, especially for you since you were fighting it so much harder. Like when you try to force a lid onto the wrong jar, the grooves don't quite fit together and the edges scrape each other raw."

That seemed logical and kind of plausible, as much as she preferred to not think about their apparently communal soul more than absolutely necessary. "Well then, that doesn't sound so bad. How the hell do we fix it?"

"Believe it or not we already are." He replied. "This is actually a more extreme version of something which has been documented as happening to Mind Arts practitioners who are victims of extreme trauma. They reject large sections of their memories or even parts of their own personality, and attempt to repress or even kill them off. Acknowledgement and integration is the treatment that Mind Healers encourage for these cases because by accepting all the parts of themselves, both the good and the bad, they can realign them and be whole again."

She was started to get a very bad feeling about this indeed. "I don't know if there's a single Mind Healer in all the world who would be able to honestly convince me it would be therapeutically beneficial for me to accept that part of me used to be Lord Voldemort." She said flatly, abandoning her teacup on the coffee table in order to cross her legs up underneath herself on the armchair.

"The possession attempt already jump-started the process, and dreamsharing once or twice a week is helping a lot. But you will keep hurting and be unable to heal properly until you accept the reality of your existence, however personally distasteful you may find it. Once you do, and likely only once you do, Occlumency barriers will be possible."

She shook her head, arms folded defensively across her chest. "There's nothing to accept. Maybe some little part of me used to be in you, but I can't remember it and it doesn't matter now. My name is Harriet Lily Black-Potter and I am my own person. I'm not just sodding Voldemort, the second edition."

"You are not Lord Voldemort right now yes, but you are not just Harriet Potter either." He said bluntly, leaning forward on his knees and looking her straight in the eye. "Harriet Potter died in that nursery, and you are part of the person who killed her."

Harry had to dig her fingernails into the palms of her hands to stop herself from just slapping him across the face. "You're wrong."

"I can't help but wonder if you have even sat down and thought about this." He hissed, frustration clearly peaking and making him mean. "I mean really thought about it, or if you just decided it was all too fucking hard and avoided the topic like a whining child."

"There's nothing to avoid!" She shouted, suddenly so furious she could have set something on fire just to see it burn to ashes.

"Really?" He demanded, his demonic red eyes seeming to glow from within. "Because the truth of the matter is Harry, you are essentially possessing your own body."

There was white noise buzzing in her ears, and even though it was just a dream she swore she felt all the blood drain out of her face and settle into a hard lump in her stomach. "Stop it."

"Lying to yourself is unbecoming Harry." He said coldly, as unyielding and unsympathetic as
something carved from stone. "And self-delusion is beneath us. The only difference between the
diary horcrux possessing Ginevra Weasley's body and you possessing Harriet Potter's body, is that
Ginevra had an extra ten years of memories and personality for her soul to fight back with that little
Harriet didn't, and you were ultimately successful whereas the diary was not."

She was dimly aware that she was shaking, and she couldn't have guessed from what emotion even
if she'd had a colour coded index. "Don't. Please."

He continued as if she hadn't even spoken, words gaining speed as if they were a rollercoaster
gearing up to the last big drop. "Whether you can remember it or not Harry, you were born in 1927
and lived every single thing I did up until Samhain of 1981. And ever since I attempted to possess
you in the Atrium at the Ministry that mostly dormant connection was renewed, because for those
moments that we were joined again we recognised ourself and instinctively began to realign."

Voldemort ran his hand through his hair, the only outward indication he was having any kind of
emotional reaction to what was happening. "Neither of us was prepared for the visceral immediacy
of our broken soul coming into contact with itself like that, for it automatically trying to merge our
disparate memories and experiences back into the previous whole. Especially with you fighting so
hard to deny me, it's no wonder it hurt us both so much."

"No." She pressed her hands tightly over her mouth, because if he kept talking like this she was
going to be sick.

"Yes." He said, relentless and uncaring how his words were making her feel. "You know it is true,
that is why you are fighting so hard. You need to accept it, Harry."

"But don't you get it?" She exploded, shocked to feel furious tears start to fall down her face. "If I do
then that means I'm just some-some fucking thing. Just like the diary was, a bloody parasite that
crawls inside little girls and eats them alive!"

"You are not a thing." There was nothing at all in the entire world more truly, singularly awful than a
Dark Lord looking at you with what might actually be sympathy. "You are still a person Harry. A
soul is a soul no matter where it comes from and that means you are human, albeit an extremely
unorthodox one."

"Why did you do this to me?" She whispered, curling up into a tight ball on the armchair and hiding
her face behind her knees.

"We did this to ourself little horcrux." He said softly, leaning forward so he could place a gentle hand
on the crown of her bowed, shaking head. "We raised our wand to kill little Harriet Potter, and it was
our final act together before we were torn apart by her murder and the spell backlash of Lily Potter's
sacrifice. I ended up banished when our first body was destroyed, and you ended up in the baby after
you absorbed the remaining fragments of her soul. I imagine that is actually the only reason you can
even get inside Hogwarts now, apparently they put up some rather strict anti-possession warding
after I managed to possess someone in the castle two years running. There is likely just enough of her
patchworked into the rest of you to convince the wards that she belongs to you now, bones and all."

All Harry could do was stare down at the floor through her fingers as he stroked her hair, absolutely
convinced that the only reason she wasn't being violently ill was that this was a dream and it
apparently wouldn't let her.

"I hate you." She whispered into the growing silence.

"You actually don't." He replied, sounding tired. "You can't. That's why you are so angry."
"I don't want to be like this." She whimpered, more traitorous tears escaping her eyes. "I don't ever want to be you."

"You learned how to once, you could probably learn it again." He sighed, taking his hand off her head and slumping back into his armchair. "Though for what it's worth, this time you have the benefit of having grown up as Harry Potter first, and the advantage of a body which is physically capable of feeling the full spectrum of human emotions."

She peeked up at him through her hands, confused by that weirdly weighted statement. "Do you mean you didn't?"

He shook his head, staring into the fire. "We didn't, no. Our mother was a very plain, very lonely witch who used a powerful love potion called Amortentia to force the handsome muggle fathered us to love her, apparently uncaring that this was just an especially insidious form of rape. More often than not children conceived under the influence of Amortentia can't feel love and often struggle with emotions in general, especially the positive ones. As exceptional as we have always been, that was always the one way we were just another statistic."

Harry was openly crying now, trying to imagine an entire life without love or joy or the contented happiness which came from being with friends who liked you back, a life of not being able to love Hermione or Sirius, and consequently felt like he'd just hollowed her out with his bare hands. "Oh Merlin, that's just too sad." She wept. "How could you live like that?"

Voldemort smiled at her. It was a strangely soft, bitter little smile that looked so disturbingly human next to his inhumanly red eyes that it was almost more terrifying than when he'd just been cruel. "We became Lord Voldemort." Was the simple reply. "Because we decided that if we couldn't find a place in the world where we belonged, we would just remake the world in our image. And when logical arguments and political reform were unsuccessful, we turned to blood and fire instead."

She could see it, could imagine it so perfectly that it made her wonder if all his memories really weren't lurking there somewhere in her subconscious after all, and shuddered.

"Don't mistake me for some tragic, misunderstood hero." He warned her sharply, clearly uncomfortable with the way she was looking at him with pity and naked desolation on her face. "We are very smart and very resourceful, and we had plenty of potential options open to us. It just so happened that at the time, after endlessly weighing up all of the possible risks and benefits of taking the legal approach of getting a job at the Ministry and working our way up into a position of power, versus the much more straightforward method of a violent and bloody revolution, one of the most decisive arguments was that it was honestly just so much more enjoyable to be the villain. We had spent years acting as the poster boy of Hogwarts, so being able to finally just let go and kill or torture all the idiots who stood in our way was incredibly liberating. I don't regret any of the decisions we made in the past because we made them very carefully and logically, after careful consideration of all the relevant information and resources we had available to us at the time." He paused, and his eyes seemed to pierce right through her. "But that isn't to say that I am entirely incapable of adjusting my plans, now that I have new avenues and opportunities open to me which we didn't have then."

Harry knew instinctively that he meant her, knew that there really was something he hadn't had the first time around and that it might not be the prophecy at all like Sirius had said, it might honestly just be her. Something about her being his horcrux and a Parselmouth had changed the game completely, as if everyone else was still playing checkers and he'd just found a queen to put onto the board.

She also knew she wasn't ready to ask him what it was just yet.

"Even if I have to accept that you are what I used to be, it doesn't have any impact on who I am
now." She said quietly, the foot or two of space separating them feeling like an ocean. "The person I am today is who I choose to be, and even if I got all our shared memories back tomorrow I know I would still choose to be Harry Potter. However messed up my life is, I would always choose this."

"Are you really so sure?" He asked curiously. "You spent fifty-four years first as Tom Riddle and then Voldemort, and only sixteen as Harry Potter. How can you be sure that she wouldn't be overwhelmed by the weight of all of those experiences?"

"I know because as Harry Potter I can be happy." She said bluntly, wiping away her tears and meeting his eyes steadily for the first time since this awful conversation had started. "Because when you told me that you couldn't feel love you looked sad."

He looked astonished, like he had absolutely no idea what to say. She tilted her head, giving him a look that she didn't realise was identical to the considering one he'd given her earlier. "I'll make you a deal Voldemort. I will admit that in another life I used to be you, if you can admit that in this one part of you desperately wishes that you could be me."

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Dawn found Harry on her knees and dry-heaving into the toilet in her ostentatious black bathroom, having long since thrown up everything else in her stomach. Once she was reasonably sure nothing else was coming up she wiped her mouth with toilet paper and flushed the evidence of her latest emotional crisis away. Staggering to her feet, she started running the bath as hot as it would go, pouring in the silly multi-coloured bubble bath Luna had given her for Christmas because she really needed something to make her smile right now. As it filled up she finally did the thing she'd been avoiding ever since she'd run in here to be forcibly sick immediately upon waking up and looked at herself in the mirror.

Her face (Harriet Potter's face) was ugly red and blotchy from crying, the tears dried in thick salty tracks on her cheeks, and her green eyes (Harriet Potter's mother's eyes) were swollen and bloodshot. Her messy black hair (Harriet Potter's father's hair) was falling out of the simple plait she'd put in before bed, and when she pulled off the rumpled nightdress she could see all the planes and angles and soft curves which Harriet Potter hadn't lived long enough to grow into. She shoved her fringe off her forehead (Harriet Potter's forehead) as the steam started to collect on the mirror, and with a finger slowly traced the slightly inflamed lightning bolt scar.

The scar that had killed Harriet Potter.

The point of entry for whatever the hell it was which could possibly make up the soul of a man who was able to cast the Killing Curse at a defenceless baby and mean it. She was so used to hiding the scar, just because the attention she always got for something she couldn't even remember always made her feel uncomfortable. And now not only was it from something she couldn't remember, but it also wasn't even true. Because as it turned out, Harriet Potter hadn't really survived that Killing Curse after all.

It was almost funny, in the way which made you want to cry more than laugh, because in a way it turned out that scar on her head she'd always hated was really the only thing she had that was without a doubt truly hers.

Harry huddled in the bath for what might have been ten minutes or ten hours, almost drowning in the
comforting scent of blackberries and vanilla, with her skin flushing bright red in the hot water which was automatically charmed to never go cold. She popped the ridiculous animal shaped bubbles which exploded into more little sweet-smelling rainbow suds and thought about the look on Voldemort's face when she'd told him that their situation was a two-way street, and that if he expected her to confess her own shameful flaws that he would have to do the same.

Was it arrogant for her to declare that she would only ever be herself no matter what memories she did or didn't have, or even whose soul was whose? She honestly had no idea, far too wrung out and empty to be able to ponder deep philosophical questions on the nature of the soul and identity as it pertained to the violent mitosis of the sociopathic murderer she'd apparently been once upon a time. Not to mention her ongoing occupation of their victim's body like it was a vacant house which she'd moved into when the previous owner died. The thematic similarity to her present living situation was nothing short of bitterly ironic.

He'd been right about one thing though, she had been avoiding thinking about it. She'd been avoiding a lot of things if she was really being honest with herself. Just like the end of every school year since she was eleven everything had been moving so quickly as it built up to the annual crescendo of horrors, and this one had been the worst yet. After her absolute meltdown in Dumbledore's office, she'd been shunted right back to the empty, sterile repetitiveness of Privet Drive which was enough of a shock to the system normally, let alone when she'd just lost the last piece of family she had left in the whole damn world.

For the first time in a month she actually allowed herself to think about Sirius properly, not just in passing because anything more hurt too much, but about his smile and his haunted eyes and how soft his usually boisterous voice went when he called her his fawn. The way that he'd initially been so scared that she wouldn't want anything to do with him after he'd had to make a run for it when Pettigrew escaped, and how overjoyed he was every time she replied to his letters or snuck away to visit him on Hogsmeade weekends. She thought about how he'd cried when he blood adopted her and said it was the proudest moment in his entire life, how he bitterly hated his family legacy but faced it anyway just so he could protect her better and make her feel like she belonged to something important.

She was sniffling again by the time she psyched herself up to wonder what he'd have thought about her being Voldemort's horcrux and if he'd hate her for it. She was outright sobbing when it finally occurred to her that while he would have been mad as hell at first he of all people would have understood exactly what it was like to come from the Dark, and want so badly to be more than the circumstances which had made you.

The person who despite everything that had happened still couldn't really think of herself as anything other than Harry, who might once have sort of been a baby girl called Harriet Potter and an empty boy called Tom Riddle and a fully grown monster called Lord Voldemort, stared at a menagerie of rainbow bubble animals as they slowly wound their way up towards the black tiled ceiling of her bathroom deep inside Number 12 Grimmauld Place. The dark background hum of the Black family magic cradled her as it had ever since she'd first come here, and while she now had some new context for just why it had probably felt so immediately familiar, she decided that maybe a person's identity was kind of like a ward.

That just maybe, your perceptions and beliefs shaped you more than the lines in the dirt ever could, and if that was indeed the case how comforting it was to think that ultimately your own definition of yourself as an individual being was the only thing which really mattered in the end.

Chapter End Notes
Alrighty, so Voldemort is a really pushy bastard in this because he knows how much Harry is avoiding pretty much everything and that the only way that he will actually get through to her is if he shocks her so badly that she can't ignore it. Not to excuse it because she's seriously unwell and even if she wasn't it's still a dick move, but it isn't because he's actively trying to be malicious, he's just an asshole who believes in getting the hard shit over and done with so you can get on with it already. Like he says himself to Harry, he's not tragic or misunderstood, he just believes in getting the job done and doesn't care if the most direct way to accomplish it makes him the villain.

Ps. Despite my best efforts to proofread like a motherfucker I don't have a beta and still miss things sometimes. I recently noticed a few things that had slipped through so I did a quick re-edit of all the previous chapters to fix a few typos and grammar errors, or rearrange a sentence to flow a little better. Nothing of any actual importance was changed, so if you're a chronic re-reader like me and notice a couple things seem a bit different you're not getting the Black madness, it was just me compensating for the things I miss by always posting in the wee hours of the morning because I don't sleep much better than Harry is right now.
Chapter Summary

In which Severus receives an invitation for tea, and Narcissa is arguably one of the most dangerous people in Magical Britain.

Chapter Notes

Because you were all so good for slogging through the speeding feels!train of the last chapter and because it seemed high time for a look at how everyone else is getting on outside of the confines of the library and Grimmauld Place, I decided to listen when Narcissa was most insistent that Snape come for tea. I love writing these two so damn much, and while I am not remotely encouraging of either smoking or daydrinking, it just suits these delightfully bitchy darlings to a T.

Bonus: Narcissa is so terrifying that she calls Snape the stupidest british pet name I could find online and he lets her. Granted it's only when it's just the two of them alone, but I still love the idea of Big Scary Dungeon Man being called something fluffy and ridiculous, it just made me cackle like Bellatrix.

It was an unseasonably mild day for a Thursday happening so closely to midsummer when Severus received an owl from Narcissa during breakfast asking if he could possibly be a dear and bring her a potion for her allergies that had been acting up again, and if he was going to be dropping by anyway why didn't he just arrive at four o'clock and join her for tea?

Now Severus and Narcissa had been friends for a good many years, so he knew that seeing as she didn't actually have any allergies the request was of course code for everyone else being out of the Manor for the time being so they would actually be able to talk freely. Because they had been best friends through both the aftermath of war and her starting a family alike, he also knew that the politely worded invitation was actually a code as well, only this one meant in so many words that he had better get his pale, lanky arse over there at precisely four as she had requested or she'd do him an injury.

With the other two facts in mind, he was also well aware that having tea that late in the afternoon was a thinly veiled pretense to sit just long enough in her well-appointed parlour to drink exactly one cup, and then declare it was far too nice a day to be indoors and spend the rest of the afternoon outside on her sunny patio drinking Lucius' nice wine and smoking.

He replied in the affirmative and sent the note back with Narcissa's silvery grey eagle owl, a snooty bird called Hestia who flatly refused to be fed by anyone but Narcissa herself. Which he was fine with, because there were few things Severus detested more than overly enthusiastic post owls trying to steal his breakfast before he'd even had a chance to finish his coffee, and nearly all of them were his bloody students.
At about half three he was on his way out of the castle to the wardline since all Floo connections except the Headmaster's were turned off over the summer, apparently for routine maintenance but most likely just so the old busybody knew who was coming and going since they had to go through either him or the gates, when he turned the corner into the Entrance Hall and nearly ran straight into said busybody himself.

"Off somewhere Severus?" The Headmaster asked cheerfully, as if Severus was obliged to check in with him when he left school grounds like he was one of his students.

And because he actually did, because the twinkly fucker owned him body and soul, he answered. "Just taking some potions to Narcissa, she's been feeling a bit unwell lately what with Lucius in Azkaban. I may even stay for a cup of tea to see if she's heard anything new about what the Dark Lord has been up to lately."

Albus nodded cheerfully, clearly pleased that his pet spy was behaving as he should. "Very good Severus, very good. It really isn't healthy to stay cooped up in those dungeons all the time you know my boy."

Resisting the urge to point out he was only there because the old coot wouldn't let him fucking resign already like he'd been begging for years, he just bid him a curt good day and stalked out of the blissfully empty castle.

He stopped in at Spinner's End on the way to make sure that no one had broken in and been eviscerated by his highly illegal security system, then transfigured his robes into muggle clothing just long enough to go down the street and buy two cartons of cigarettes. Narcissa being a Lady of a Noble House could of course not be seen doing anything as uncultured as popping into Tescos to pick up some Parliament Super Slims, so as the one who had introduced her to the bad habit in the first place Severus just slummed it on her behalf when his own supply was running low and got some for her as well. Especially considering that the Dark Lord was her current houseguest, he had a feeling she was probably going through her last delivery quicker than usual.

Stepping through the Floo in Spinner's End directly into her receiving room instead of Apparating to the gates since this was personal business and nothing Dark Lord related, he kissed her cheek and passed her the paper bag containing the excuse potions and their contraband which she received with what might even have been a relieved smile on her tastefully made up face.

"Right on time Severus, and thank you as always for such a thoughtful hostess gift."

"What can I say Narcissa." He drawled. "I'm an exceptionally thoughtful kind of man."

Her lips twitched in amusement and she turned to lead him through the stately house. "Come through to the parlour then dear, I already had the house elves set out tea for us."

"Will our Lord be making an appearance today?" He asked casually as they sat down, as if her note hadn't already heavily implied that the coast was clear.

"Sadly his Lordship will be gone until tomorrow lunchtime." She replied, playing along to their mutual charade because you never knew which memories would be plundered later. "Evidently there was some kind of errand on the Continent which he entrusted to no one else."

He raised a questioning eyebrow. "Is there anything we should be concerned about?"

She hummed thoughtfully, mixing the perfect amount of barely a half spoon of sugar and the smallest splash of milk into his tea with the ease of long practice. "Not to my knowledge. I believe he is
intending to retrieve something from a vault in one of his safehouses in Bulgaria, and will be calling in on some of our allies while he is in the area to keep them on their toes."

"There's nothing quite like the personal touch is there?" He observed mildly while taking the cup and saucer as she passed it to him as if discussing the weather and not the imminent Cruciating said allies were likely to be receiving any minute now.

"There certainly is not." She agreed just as mildly, fixing her own cup now with the usual amount of so much sugar he felt certain of his assumption that the only reason she still had any teeth left was thanks to magic.

"How is your sister doing?" He asked, half to be polite and half genuinely curious since he, of course, wasn't going to be so crass as to ask after Lucius as he usually would at this stage in the proceedings. "After she was thwarted by school children and the only one apart from the Dark Lord himself to escape the farce at the Ministry, I thought for certain he was going to turn her into a chandelier as a warning to others."

Narcissa's perfectly rose pink lips pursed ever so slightly at the corners, the only outward display of her displeasure. "Bella has since been residing at the Avery's with the others still recovering from Azkaban, and is under strict orders to focus on her healing and regaining her full strength as a duelist if she wishes to continue to be of use to anyone."

"That's probably for the best, all things considered." He noted dryly, well aware of the madwoman's penchant for causing mischief wherever she went. "I would have thought you would be relieved that she isn't challenging the portraits in the East Wing to duels anymore, or threatening to mount the house elves heads in the hallway as your late Aunt Walburga was so want to do."

"I confess, a part of me is glad of it." The blonde witch replied with uncharacteristic bluntness. "At first I was so pleased to hear our Lord in his mercy would be freeing her and all of our absent brethren from Azkaban. But during the course of her convalescence here at the Manor, it became very clear that whatever part of her sanity not already claimed by the Black family madness had instead been taken by the Dementors. While I may be no Mind Healer I am a practical woman, and I hold no illusions that it is a lack she will ultimately be able to overcome. Frankly, I think a part of her will now always be there on that godsforsaken rock."

Severus had actually been in Azkaban himself for exactly three days between his voluntarily surrender on Dumbledore's orders in the days immediately following the end of the last war, and when the older wizard had been able to use his influence as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot to get him a closed trial. As per their agreement, Dumbledore had even personally testified that he'd been a spy for the Order of the Phoenix for the entirety of the war and not just the last six months of it, and no sooner was he a free man than by the terms of that same agreement he had given up his freedom all over again and sworn an Unbreakable Vow to protect Harry fucking Potter.

All of this meant that even more than most Severus understood exactly what she was saying, because despite his relatively brief period of incarceration he didn't think he had ever gotten back the piece of himself that he'd left there either.

"Well, I'm sure she's having a grand time at the Avery's in the very least." He said, then smirked evilly. "I understand they have a small racetrack on the grounds for training the racing crups they breed, maybe she can run around in circles after the fake muggle with all the other barely tame animals."

"Oh shush you." His hostess scolded, but he could tell she was amused. "It's uncharitable to speak ill of the ill, and you know she's never been quite right since she was a girl. At least this way she's kept
out of trouble until our Lord is in a better mood, or is ready to unleash her on the unsuspecting public once again."

"Speaking of the unsuspecting public, have there been many meetings for planning the next round of raids? Because of my delicate position, I tend to only be called at the last minute for them if I am at all, and if there's going to be anything to interrupt my brewing time I'd much prefer to know in advance." The lack of regular meetings he'd been called for lately had made him concerned for what might be coming, as it had the rest of the Order.

She shook her head. "There has been a lot less comings and goings through the Manor of late. The Dark Lord has never been what one would call excessively social, but now he spends most of his time in our library researching Merlin only knows what or holed up in his private study. I think that whatever it is that he is planning to use Miss Potter for, it's taking up an awful lot of his concentration."

He took a polite sip of his tea. "I cannot for the life of me decide if I welcome the chance for a reprieve while I don't have any students to disrupt it, or if it just makes me more concerned about what will happen when he's done with his books and once again on the warpath."

"He seemed to have his course very much set and planned once he returned." Narcissa observed, selecting herself a biscuit from the tea tray. "Although we weren't exactly told much in advance, he's certainly one to play things close to the chest. Whatever it is that he is intending to use the girl for it wasn't something he expected, and consequently it's disrupted things immensely."

The Potions Master snorted, almost impressed despite himself with how she somehow constantly managed to be the human personification of a spanner in the works. "How like Potter. The blasted girl isn't just content to disrupt one side of the war, no, she has to go and disrupt both of them at once by virtue of her very existence."

"Disrupt both?" Narcissa enquired, saying more with an eyebrow than many did with an entire sentence. "I take it there are presently some phoenix feathers getting all nice and ruffled then?"

Severus sipped his tea to give himself a second to decide what to tell her but decided that ultimately the Dark Lord already knew the basics so it couldn't hurt. "She apparently threw something of a tantrum about three weeks into the summer holidays and ran away from her muggle relative's home. According to her aunt, the brat went with her to the village when she went to get her nails done, so she gave her some money to get groceries with so she wasn't just hanging about making a nuisance of herself. Only when the aunt got back to the car there was no Potter and no groceries, just a note under the windshield telling her in no certain terms goodbye forever, and furthermore advising her to go fuck herself. Despite ostensibly being under 24/7 guard, she somehow managed to make it all the way into bloody London without anyone even noticing and barricaded herself alone inside Order Headquarters, and since she technically owns the building the wards won't let anyone else in."

"Good gracious." She exclaimed as though only mildly interested, though Severus knew that she was currently reviewing all of the available information and now that there was no more Fidelius to conceal it she had probably already realised exactly where Potter was. Narcissa was a Black by birth herself, after all, she would have grown up making regular visits to Number 12 Grimmauld Place and would know that following the death of her cousin that the wards would keep Merlin himself out. Those same wards ensured the girl was safer than Gringotts though, and Narcissa wasn't stupid enough to share information with the Dark Lord that he couldn't currently use.

"The guard stationed at the house apparently hadn't even realised that she'd left until we got there minutes after Auror Tonks Floo'd to let us know she'd seen Potter emerge from a cab and go running like a bat out of hell down the street to let herself in as if she knew someone might be on the lookout
for her. It was clearly planned too, a quick search of the house before we headed to Headquarters ourselves showed that sometime the night before she'd picked the locks on the cupboard her muggle relatives apparently kept her school things in over the summers to prevent her from getting into any mischief, and all of her possessions were gone.

He didn't say what he'd thought when he saw that she hadn't been with a trusted family friend or distant magical relative as he'd thought for years, but with fucking Petunia and her pig of a husband. That her tiny room was cramped and full of half-broken furniture and things that were obviously not hers, with a door that had seven locks on the outside and an incongruously sinister cat flap even though no one in the family owned a cat. That when he'd checked the cupboard under the stairs for her things there'd been a tiny, thin mattress, some broken army men gathering dust, a few loose pieces of schoolwork dated from when she was ten, and an old piece of paper stuck to the inside of the door that said 'Harry's room' in a very young child's writing.

Holding in the urge to *Crucio* the entire fucking family, followed by Albus and then finally himself, had taken every scrap of his not inconsiderable command of Occlumency, to the point that when they had reached Grimmauld Place and he'd had to listen to the old man try to guilt trip her front door into going back to that awful fucking place he'd had to lean against the fence and smoke three cigarettes in a row just to cover up how badly his hands were shaking. If Albus had actually managed to break through the wards and send her back he didn't even care that he couldn't stand the girl, he would have just shown up in the middle of the night and taken her away himself, damn his employer and damn the war and damn everything else.

"I'm not sure I can condone a magical child's school things being locked up for an entire summer by muggles, even if the magical child in question is Miss Potter. How else are they going to prepare themselves for the next academic year if they can't even complete their summer homework?" Narcissa was saying as he was lost in far too depressing thoughts, shaking her head in disapproval. "I understand that by all accounts she is apparently something of a problem child with no concept of manners or refinement, but I suppose that if she's been raised by such beastly muggles then it really is no wonder."

Severus drained his teacup in lieu of replying, because with the benefit of hindsight yes it really was no fucking wonder at all now was it, and if he didn't get to smoke something to settle his nerves within the next minute he was going to start duelling the portraits just like Bellatrix. Narcissa watched him abruptly finish his tea with a raised eyebrow, but because she was his most favourite person left in the entire world she just smiled that little Mona Lisa smile and received the message to change both their subject and their venue.

"It really is much too lovely of a day to spend indoors isn't it ducky?" She declared. "What do you say to taking this outside so that we can get some fresh air?"

"My dearest Cissa, I thought you'd never ask."

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"Tell me something Cissa because I've never been able to work it out for myself." He asked not much later once he'd had a chance to smoke his way back to some approximation of equilibrium. "However did you manage to escape the fabled Black family madness? I feel like most of my life of late has been spent either dealing with or trying my best to avoid all of you mental Blacks for the sake of my blood pressure."
They were relaxing in the gentle shade of Narcissa's private patio, the one which looked out over her picturesque rose garden. Between them was a crystal ashtray which was probably worth more than he made in a month and a bottle of chilled white wine whose label was exclusively in French, and it was all just so fucking pleasant that Severus honestly felt like if he'd perhaps had more days like this in his life then maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't have ended up being the thoroughly miserable, misanthropic cunt that he was.

Narcissa was taking a drag from her cigarette and reclining ever so slightly back into her deck chair, her thin lilac summer robe unbuttoned to reveal the long, white dress under it, and she was absolutely the most relaxed he'd ever seen her save for the day she'd given birth to her son. And even then that had only been for the half hour after Draco had been born, followed by the three minutes it had taken her to compose herself between the Healer leaving him and Lucius fussing over her and the baby and her in-laws arriving to inspect the new Malfoy heir. To this day it was his strongly held opinion that her speed and skill with grooming charms really were a frightful thing to behold.

"It is all a matter of history really." She said, drinking her wine with one hand while she flicked her cigarette into the ashtray with the other. "Before we made Britain our dominion we hailed from Rome you know, long before it was an empire. To all Romans but especially to the patricians as the Blacks certainly were the most important things in life were the state, the family, and the gods, and not always in that order. Every Black struck by the madness has simply been a Black who focused on one of those three things to the exclusion of all others."

She took another long drag, before leaning back and exhaling it in a cloud above her head. "Take my poor dear Bella for example. She was barely more than a girl when she first met our Lord, and like all the holy women before her, she saw in him the sacred fire of the gods themselves and dedicated herself accordingly. In the case of my recently departed cousin, his madness was for his family, though it was his family of choice instead of blood that he swore himself to mind, body and soul. And he just kept giving up more pieces of himself in their name until the day came that he had finally lost himself in mind and in body and in soul. As for my estranged sister Andromeda, she is far subtler about it but her madness is actually for the state. She had an idea of Magical Britain as she thought it should be, and it led her to forsake her own blood and be a living example of that idea, because surely if a Black woman could marry a mudblood then anyone could, right?"

That actually made far more sense than it didn't if he was honest with himself. Things that the mutt or Bellatrix or even bloody Tonks had done which seemed so illogical or irrational at the time suddenly had a weird kind of logic to it, even if he was still very much of the opinion that they were all idiots of the highest order.

"So you see ducky." She continued, sounding ever so slightly wicked. "The real secret is that none of us Blacks are actually exempt from the madness at all, not a one of us ever since the days of ancient Rome itself."

"Oh?" He asked, curious to see where this was going. "And what pray tell is your madness my dearest Cissa?"

"Isn't it obvious?" She asked smugly as she extinguished her cigarette in the ashtray, meeting his eyes with the kind of fever-bright gleam in her own which she usually concealed very carefully behind bored society smiles. "We may be different in how we express it, but I am in the end the exact same kind of mad as my cousin because I have made my madness for my family. There is nothing, absolutely nothing on this earth that I would not do to protect them, no amount of pain or indignity or hardship I would not endure or inflict if it meant their protection and safekeeping. I would burn it all without a second thought, and not even Merlin himself could stop me or make me feel bad for doing so."
When she looked at him like that he could actually see it, that the raging fire so blatantly obvious in Bellatrix hadn't passed her over at all but instead had been banked and honed, turning it into a stiletto point of white-hot intensity which would set the world ablaze if she let it. It was awe-inspiring if he was honest with himself, the depth of the love she felt for her family putting to shame everything he had ever felt in his entire life except maybe guilt, and it reminded him just why she was his best friend in the first place. They were both unexpectedly passionate people that because of good breeding or circumstance couldn't freely show it, and so despite their many differences, they understood each other very well indeed.

Severus raised his wine glass to toast her and wondered to himself what Potter's madness was going to turn out to be. "To the glorious inevitability of the Black family madness then, may the world survive it."

She clinked it lightly with her own, sipping the cool tartness of it while folding her fire back down to wherever it lived when she wasn't using it to make a point. By the time she lowered her glass she was once more the mild-mannered, politely disinterested wife and mother so many fools mistook her for.

Settling back into his own deck chair Severus lazily held out his wand without looking and let her light herself another cigarette on the tip of it, before lighting a new one of his own.

"Enough about my madness though, what about yours?" She said conversationally. "I have no idea how you manage to hold up dashing yourself bloody on the rocks between two such impossible men without simply expiring for your troubles. I'm sure I would have worn myself down to nothing within the month if I were in such a position."

He snorted inelegantly. "I don't half wonder sometimes if I actually do so on a daily basis, and am then promptly reborn at the dawn of every new day to do it all over again like some kind of bitterly sarcastic Prometheus. Only the sin I'm being punished for isn't anything so noble as stealing fire for mankind."

"Well that won't do at all!" She exclaimed. "You really must take better care of yourself, or you'll just work and worry yourself into an early grave."

He thought about Lily not getting to see her baby girl grow up into the righteous hellraiser that she was. Her baby girl who thanks to Severus' sins had lost her parents and saved their whole world in the process, and had more likely than not grown up in a fucking cupboard for her troubles. "I don't think that the early grave I am most concerned about is my own."

"It has been many years." His best friend said quietly, the only one since Lily to ever truly know him. "You weren't to know where his eye would fall, and like a hurricane there was no way to stop him once it did. You cannot pay that debt forever my friend."

"It's not her early grave I'm worried about." He confessed, and to his credit for once he wasn't even lying. "This war took so many of us the first time around that I sit there sometimes and try to imagine what a victory could possibly look like, for either side, which isn't just a wasteland. I am not saying the war is not worth fighting, we wouldn't all be doing so if there wasn't a good reason for it, but we all have so very much to lose. Maybe even more than we did last time."

"I cannot deny that." She agreed softly, staring into the depths of her wine glass. "All we can do is follow our Lord and pray that with his strength it is over quickly."

He huffed a laugh. "And on that fateful day, if by some chance I actually survive it, I will take up paddling myself across the Black Lake like a raft every Sunday because clearly I will be unsinkable."
"I think it's good to plan for the future." She said sagely, as if imparting all the wisdom of the universe. "It gives you a reason to live for it."

Well she had a point there actually, as loathe as he was to admit it. Severus tried to imagine that nebulous, hypothetical future free of this seemingly endless bloody war, and all he could think was that all he really wanted was the one thing he'd never had in his entire adult life, freedom.

"I think I shall find you a wife." Narcissa declared out of the blue, apparently thinking this to be a splendid idea. "There's nothing more motivating than someone to live for after all."

"Cissa, not this again." He groaned. She routinely got it in her head to make him settle down, by force if necessary, to the point where he was reasonably certain that if she found a mountain troll actually willing to wed him she'd march him straight to the altar herself at wandpoint. "Every couple of years like clockwork you announce your intention to find me a wife, as if you could just pick one up from Twilfitt and Tatting the next time you visited Diagon Alley. And every single time, you have to admit your defeat when there is no one who you can find to foist me off onto. Do you truly find my company that lacking?"

She smacked him lightly on the shoulder, thankfully with the hand not currently holding a lit cigarette. "Of course not you brute of a man. But you're not getting any younger you know, most wizards are well settled down by their mid-twenties and here you are dragging your feet and well on your way to forty. Forty! It's most uncalled for."

There was truly nothing on this earth more tenacious than a matchmaking, Pureblooded harridan on the warpath. Even a sodding Devil's Snare didn't cling quite so tightly to anything as they did to their absolute and total conviction that everyone ought to be married off as soon as humanly possible, all so they could promptly begin spawning the kind of useless dunderheads he dealt with on a daily basis during the school months.

"Who on earth would wish to be bound in unholy matrimony to a Death Eater turned spy turned Death Eater, who now the war has begun again has the projected life expectancy of a puffskein? The Light won't like the Death Eater part while the Dark won't like all the spying, and the Neutrals would just think my getting involved at all was an exercise in poor judgement." He shook his head, because his next thought was just too awful for words alone. "Not to mention that I've taught Potions to almost every single student in Magical Britain since 1982, so anyone thirty and under is infinitely more likely to curse me in a darkened alleyway than marry me, and that's if I even wanted to have anything to do with any of the little cretins when they finally grew up in the first place."

"And as I tell you every time you try to crush my dreams with your miserliness you are a loyal and passionate man who would be a dedicated husband to whomsoever he chose to commit to, and that anyone would be lucky to have you." She paused, a thoughtful look on her face. "There's a thought actually, do you think I would be more successful in sparking your enthusiasm for wedded bliss if I were to be finding you a husband instead?"

Severus stared at her incredulously, wondering what exactly it was about him today of all days that made her wonder if perhaps all he really needed to be happy was just unlimited access to a cock that wasn't his own, before admitting with a sigh, "You know what, I have absolutely no idea. Between the war and the teaching and now the war again, it's not ever been anything I had the time or inclination to think much about. Though I don't see you as being any more successful at finding a wizard willing to marry me than you would a witch, it's not what's under their robes that's the prohibitive factor at work here, it's me."

"Well it doesn't hurt to ask the question now does it ducky?" She huffed, refusing to be dissuaded from her latest theory that maybe he just honestly needed a right good buggering. "And for that
matter how do you know if you don't give it a try, hmm? You're not from a Noble House so you have the freedom to date around a bit before settling down, it doesn't have to be a formal courtship or anything restrictive like that. When was the last time you even went on a date?"

"Merlin balls Cissa, you mean apart from all the agonising introduction dinners you've forced me to sit through over the years?" He sneered defensively, aware it was defensively and unable to help himself. "Exactly never. Admit it, you just want to plan another wedding and Draco's still too young for it."

If she was a less composed woman she would have been pouting. "I also have a truly depressing lack of darling nieces and nephews, and no babies whatsoever on either my or Lucius' sides of the family to lavish my attention on either. Severus dear, I am not even remotely exaggerating when I say that it is nothing short of torture."

He resisted the urge to expound at length on all the reasons why he would gladly prefer torture to being paraded around like a prize stallion that nobody wanted to buy, and just finished his wine instead. "Narcissa you crazy fucking harpy, you would marry the Dark Lord himself off if you thought he'd actually let you and you could get some bloody godbabies out of it."

"I will have you know that it is the pleasure and joy of a Pureblood woman to scheme and matchmake her way into creating a whole new generation for her to spoil." She sniffed, apparently most put out by his lack of sympathy to her plight. "It's tradition, and you know how seriously I take our traditions Severus."

"Don't I ever." He muttered as he reached for the bottle sitting between them, well past the point of needing another glass of wine to deal with all this insanity.

She was pursing her lips at him again and waited until he was drinking and unable to interrupt before continuing the frontal assault on what remained of his dignity. "So just to clarify then because you weren't particularly clear, was that a no on the subject of potential husbands, or should I consider you equal opportunity inclined for spouse-hunting purposes?"

He ran his free hand over his face and wondered if anyone might be in the market for one best friend, slightly used, and he wasn't even sure which one of them he was talking about. "You may consider me so over this conversation that I'm actually in fucking orbit. Ta ta luv it's been a grand old time, I'll be sure to send you a postcard from the moon."

She didn't snort, because ladies of Noble Houses did not snort, but he could tell that she had really, really wanted to.

Just as she was about to bust out the highly anticipated next round of her biannual attack (attempting to guilt him into procreating because after complications when giving birth to Draco she couldn't have any more children of her own) when said complication himself flew over on his broom and landed on the patio. He was sweaty and red-faced from exertion, with a practice snitch in one hand that told Severus that he must have been out at the quidditch pitch behind the house before unwittingly coming to his rescue.

"Draco, what I have I told you about landing your broomstick on my patio!" She cried, hastily stubbing out her cigarette as if her smoking wasn't the worst kept secret in Malfoy Manor from absolutely everyone except Lucius, the peacocks included.

"Not to do it." He rolled his eyes, because he was a teenage boy and of course he did. "Uncle Severus, I had no idea you were coming today!"
"Hello Draco." His godson was a brat but he was still a brat he'd watched grow up, and it warmed Severus' cold, dead heart to see him looking so happy and carefree despite all that was happening. "It was spur of the moment, your mother needed something dropped off and we got to talking."

The impossible boy smirked. "And then it was just too nice a day to spend inside?"

Severus felt his lip quirk, because why Narcissa felt like they had to keep up the pretence was often beyond him as well. "Quite so. I see you've been enjoying it also, is practice going well?"

Draco nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, I've been getting out of the house a lot this summer to practice so we can take the Quidditch Cup back from Gryffindor next year for sure."

He rather doubted it had anything to do with the Quidditch Cup as much as it did their houseguest but he wasn't about to say anything to that effect, Draco looked well but there were still subtle shadows under his eyes that spoke of troubled sleep. With his father in Azkaban and a Dark Lord staying down the hall Severus couldn't exactly blame him.

"Come sit with us Dragon." Said Narcissa, patting the seat on the other side of her. "There is actually something I wished to speak with you about."

"Of course Mother." Draco replied, leaning his broom against the railing and taking the seat as Narcissa poured him a cold glass of water from the previously untouched carafe.

"This morning before our Lord left, he shared with me the happy news that Lucius' case is being pushed forward on his order and will be up for review at the end of August. If it goes as well as it looks like it will, they will be dropping the charges completely and he will be released from Azkaban."

The boy perked up so much he even forgot he was supposed to pretend to not have any expressions. "Father's coming home?"

Narcissa smiled so warmly it was as if she'd forgotten too, an accomplishment that generally only her son could ever claim credit for. "Yes my Dragon he is, probably a week or so after you return to Hogwarts in September. We are to be very grateful indeed of our Lord's mercy in ensuring this, as most of the others who were arrested will probably remain incarcerated for some time."

"That's excellent news, thank you Mother." Draco replied, reigning himself in a little again but sitting even taller than before, clearly relieved beyond the telling of it that his father would be home soon.

She nodded firmly. "Until your father return you are still to be on your best behaviour as befitting the future Lord Malfoy, and even when he does whenever you are home for the holidays I will expect you to continue taking your new lessons in politics and deportment with me. I have been far too indulgent of you, and that ends now because the world and the war will not wait for you to grow up as I had once hoped it would."

Seeing the stubborn look on his godson's face, Severus took the opportunity to interject. "You mother is right Draco. Everything is different now that the Dark Lord has returned, and you must be more prepared for what is to come."

"To that end." She continued smoothly. "As your father is still indisposed I have asked Severus to be here with us today so that we can discuss one particularly pressing issue, which is Miss Potter."

Of course this wasn't just about Narcissa needing to blow off some steam, she'd also press-ganged him into helping instil some discipline in her unruly spawn. Devilishly clever schemer that she was, she'd probably had this all planned out to within the half hour.
"Bloody Potter." He sneered, looking so much like Lucius had at that age it was uncanny. "What's she done now then the stupid scarhead?"

There was the slightest frown creasing her forehead at his rudeness, no matter who it was directed at. "That is precisely what we need to discuss Dragon. At the beginning of the summer the Dark Lord discovered that she is a Parselmouth, and as there is some ritual that is apparently vital to the war that he needs another Parselmouth for, he declared that in order to ensure she can be used for it when the time comes that she is now to be considered untouchable. I will not repeat his threats, but suffice it to say that anyone who causes her to receive so much as a scratch, or even stands by and allows her to be injured, will forfeit their life and maybe even the lives of their entire family in the most painful and awful ways imaginable."

Draco's face twisted up in anger as he decided that he was most put out indeed by being denied his favourite punching bag. "You can't be serious Mother! She's the worst sort of mudblood loving Gryffindor trash, she needs to be put in her place!"

Narcissa narrowed her eyes dangerously and her previously warm tone became wintery. "Draco Lucius Malfoy you will listen to me or I shall become exceptionally cross. Normally I could not care less about some halfblood girl with an appalling attitude, but the Dark Lord wants her for something very important and what he wants he will get. Our family is in enough of a delicate position without it becoming known that you've gone and defied him all for the sake of a childish schoolboy grudge!"

She paused and took a deep breath to settle herself. Draco was just staring in shock at his usually perfectly poised mother losing her composure, apparently lost for words.

"I nearly lost my Lucius over this mess and may still do so in the future, but I will not lose you Draco. You are my son, my precious only child, and still I would sooner have smothered you in your cradle with my own hands than see you live long enough to experience what would become of you at the hands of the Dark Lord if he decides that he has put up with enough failure and disobedience from our family and that he will take his repayment for it out of you, because it will not be quick and it will not be kind. And know this my son, that if that day came it would be happening over my own broken corpse because as long as I still drew breath I would not let a single hand be laid on you without cutting it off myself."

Draco was looking pale and kind of sick, as could only be expected really after being told something that truly horrific by your own mother, but also like he was seeing her for the very first time in his entire life. And in a way he probably was, this was not a side which anyone got to see from Narcissa unless they were lucky enough to be sheltered under her protective wing, or unlucky enough to be on the receiving end of her wrath if you threatened someone who was.

She raised her chin regally, as cold and determined as any soldier going to war. "This means that once you return to Hogwarts you will be behaving yourself Draco. Because if I hear from your godfather or from anyone else that you have been risking your life and the lives of your family so carelessly I will immediately pull you out to be homeschooled, no discussion and no second chances. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

"But Father-"

"Your father lost the right to make those decisions when he failed to remember that Slytherin's are first and foremost subtle and cautious, and his failure put our family in danger." She said firmly, her cutting tone brooking absolutely no argument. "That I have not already long corrected that same failing in you is entirely my own fault because I wished so badly to give you the carefree childhood I did not have."

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"But Father-"
mistake. You may be angry or resent me for it if you wish, I will not blame you for it for all that it will break my heart, but know that I am doing this to save your life." Her face a glacier, and her spine was made of goblin steel. "You are my whole world Dragon. If you think there is any price I won't pay to protect you, even if it is your freedom or your love for me, then you are sorely mistaken indeed."

Draco was silent, face twisted in angry confusion from her words because thanks to his father's arrogance and his mother's self-admitted indulgence he'd been raised to believe that the world he lived in was one that he was sitting right on top of. However rightfully intimidated he was of the Dark Lord, it seemed that the introduction of a predator even higher on the food chain was still something he was having trouble getting his head around.

"May I be excused Mother?" He said stiffly, staring fixedly at the tabletop between them.

She sighed, looking older than he'd ever seen her. "Yes you may. Don't forget that dinner is at eight o'clock tonight with the Parkinsons, so be sure to meet me at the Floo at a quarter to." No sooner had she spoke when he was up and storming back into the house without a backwards glance, even leaving his broom behind in his pressing need to go somewhere private and undoubtedly throw a tantrum.

Severus turned back to Narcissa, who was staring off into the middle distance and seeing absolutely none of it. "He'll understand eventually that you're doing this all for him."

She sighed heavily, finally looking away from her unseeing contemplation of the horizon, and used her wand to light another cigarette with hands that shook ever so slightly. "As long as he lives long enough to continue hating me it will be worth it."

He picked up the second wine bottle that had silently appeared at some point when he wasn't looking. "Another glass Cissa?"

"Thank you ducky."

They sat there quietly for long moments, both lost in dark thought as they stared out towards the garden bathed in golden late afternoon sun, and it suddenly seemed a tragedy that a woman so caring and so full of love should be so goddamned sad.

"No redheads."

She looked over at him, clearly confused. "I beg your pardon?"

He shrugged, already regretting his decision to be so disgustingly soft-hearted but well and truly committed to it now. "When you are once more embarking on your pointless quest to inflict a spouse on me, I would greatly appreciate it if you could avoid any redheads."

She laughed at that, and it was a little watery but still sounded like the beautiful tinkling of silver bells. "Of course Severus my duck, no redheads it is. Anything else?"

He actually thought about the question seriously for once, instead of just being sarcastic or changing the subject like he usually did. "No green eyes, no former students, no one squeamish or prone to insipid flights of fancy, must be able to hold up their end of a conversation, and I don't care if they're older than me as long as there is no way in hell they could even remotely be mistaken for school age. Mid-twenties and up only for the sake of my sanity, I beg of you."

"Well you certainly aren't making this simple, but I suppose I've always been the type of witch to
enjoy a challenge." Her eyes flicked over to him and there was the slightest hint of a teasing smirk on her face. "And while screening prospective spouses can I look for this serious, non-redheaded, non-student personage on both sides of the dormitory?"

He drained his third glass of wine in the last hour and a half because who knows, stranger things had happened than him potentially marrying another bloke. "Sod it all, why the fuck not."

Chapter End Notes

FYI: I hate the lack of anything except heterosexuality in the canon HP series, so for worldbuilding purposes consider that in this one there's no actual taboo against other sexual orientations, it's just that the Noble Houses usually try to avoid it because they have such an illogical boner for blood purity that they are distrustful of surrogacy or other magical means of same sex couple having children.

Furthermore, I personally headcanon Snape as being likely very much on the grey-ace spectrum and probably incredibly demisexual, it's just that as he says himself in this chapter he's never really been able to think much about it in much detail, especially after the last person he loved died in such tragic circumstances and partly because of his own actions. I haven't actually decided if Narcissa will be successful in marrying him off, but it's fun to think about her good-naturedly teasing him about it because fuckdammit she wants godbabies already!
You're lovely baby, this war is crazy

Chapter Summary

After a welcome intermission from the library, Harry forgets that asking Voldemort questions usually ends up with far more in the way of answers than she was prepared for. Because the Dark Lord has an armchair and a plan, and neither are quite what she expected.

Chapter Notes

I'm in a near constant state of shock that this fic is being so well-received, so well done to you all for making me roam my apartment staring into the middle distance on a daily basis with all your kudos and comments and bookmarks, oh my.

Also, I spent the entirety of yesterday devising my own system for the legislative and judicial branches of the government of Magical Britain, and that's not hyperbole it was literally all I did from when I got out of bed until I went back again. So because I spent a full day doing nothing but researching surnames older than the Norman Conquest, outlining parliamentary procedure, and making detailed charts of voting blocks throughout different arcs of the story, I'm adding some freaking politics tags to this bitch. Sorry not sorry to all the people just here for the smoochies, you're really going to have to commit to slogging through the trenches of extended political discourse as the plot picks up steam before we get there. But we will get there, pinkie swear, and it'll be nice and filthy when we do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over a week went by without dreaming of the library, which made Harry feel weirdly thankful for the uncharacteristic display of tact from the belligerent Dark Lord after the emotional rollercoaster of their last conversation. Though maybe he was just sulking as much as she was and in no mood to deal with her, who knew.

She spent most of it working on her summer homework since there wasn't really anything left to clean, and she was feeling very proud indeed that apart from her Ancient Runes project it was all finished before her birthday. The courtyard garden had also been well and truly cleared out on a particularly mild day with Dobby's enthusiastic help, and not only was there now space for her to plant a garden of her very own, there had indeed been a small door in the far corner which let out into the narrow alleyway behind the house just as Voldemort had predicted.

Harry had Dobby keep watch for her, but after frequent check-ins over a period of several days and nights, it became clear there was no one watching it. House elves couldn't see through invisibility cloaks, but turns out they could usually sense if there was something being hidden from them, which is how she'd confirmed that there was indeed Order members watching the front door of her little fortress after all, most of them apparently avoiding the London foot traffic by literally camping on her doorstep.
She'd been here for nearly a month now and the members of her weird little family had settled into a routine, inasmuch as a family could be one fifteen year old fugitive witch, one mean-crazy house elf, one nice-crazy house elf, one loud portrait with both anger issues and a Permanent Sticking Charm, and one regal snowy owl who clearly thought (and rightly so) that they were all completely bonkers. But it was still a damn sight better than the Dursley's, so she felt it was a marked improvement. She still got in fights with Walburga's portrait if she was too noisy when she went past on the stairs, but even the mental portrait's heart wasn't in it quite so much when Harry just did her best to ignore her and she saw her old house getting progressively nicer.

After one particular day when she'd gotten Kreacher's help to bring all the Dark Arts and other assorted 'evil' books back downstairs following their protective exile in the attic so that she could re-shelve them into the Black library, Kreacher had taken a very long look at her after dinner while she was brushing out her increasingly long hair in the moonlight, and then disappeared with a pop. Only to reappear soon after with a heavy, antique looking silver hair brush with stiff, oddly purplish bristles that smelled rather strongly of blood, and had handed it to her while mumbling that if the nasty halfblood was going pretend to be a proper Black lady she couldn't do it with filthy muggle hairbrushes.

Knowing how much the Blacks liked to curse everything she wasn't sure if she should even use it until she saw the initials W.P.B engraved on the handle. She had a sneaking suspicion it had once belonged to Walburga, but after her wandless detection charms didn't come up with anything malicious and even Dobby couldn't find anything wrong with it when he checked, she figured it was probably safe. Using the hairbrush made her scalp tingle like static electricity, but after only a few days her hair was already looking smoother and healthier than ever so she figured while undoubtedly magical and likely more than a bit questionable, it probably wasn't doing anything too nefarious.

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The attic was just as dark and musty and creepy as it had been last summer, but today Harry was on a mission.

With the exception of the unworn looking silk nightgowns which she had immediately claimed, none of Walburga's clothes had interested her apart from a gorgeous black velvet cloak embroidered with an accurate star map of the Northern Hemisphere, though a lot of them were folded up on the cutting table of her work room in order to be cut down so they could be repurposed. She was by no means a dressmaker, but after years of doing all the mending and hemming for the Dursleys, not to mention altering most of her own clothes so they'd actually fit her, she knew enough to make do. Especially since most witches clothing that wasn't just muggle-made were dresses and robes, which weren't too hard as long as you didn't try to get too fancy with it.

But she both wanted and needed new clothes, some decent ones, because if Voldemort couldn't come up with a suggestion for hiding her appearance without glamours then dressing up in a disguise really was going to be her best option for getting to the bank without being spotted. So that was why she had ended up here, sorting through an attic that was far more expansive than it had any right to be considering the outside dimensions of the townhouse. Harry was just glad that Dobby had run out of other places to clean, so at least it wasn't as dusty as it had been the last time she'd been up here.

She'd been methodically checking all the armoires and chests of drawers as she worked her way back from the door, and about a third of the way in she found a trunk that didn't look quite as dingy or old as a lot of the others. After checking for traps, because she knew better than to touch anything
a Black had owned without checking first, the trunk was apparently just an innocent trunk so she popped the latch. The trunk opened easily, and Harry felt her face nearly split in half she was grinning so much.

"Jackpot."

It was packed full of clothes that must have once belonged to Sirius' many female cousins and been left behind when they visited their aunt and uncle. And even the lost or overlooked clothing of three Pureblood girls over a span of a decade or so was a very respectable amount, especially when Harry was small even for her age and could probably fit things belonging to a girl several years her junior. An hour and a full inventory later Harry was beside herself in excitement.

Dresses, skirts, blouses, petticoats, slips, robes, stockings, a very nice evening dress, two pairs of shoes, more silk nightgowns, one especially lovely pair of long, lilac silk pjama pants with a matching camisole, even three sets of some honest to god stays in black, white and lilac. In short, once she'd mended some things, resized others, and maybe altered them a little to be a bit more modern, she'd have the basis for a full wardrobe of a young lady of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.

She'd just called up Dobby and asked him to give everything a wash before putting it on a rail in her work room so she could start on the alterations tomorrow, when she felt something that made the skin on the back of her neck tingle.

Looking around, she wandered a little deeper into the attic, following the odd feeling, until she came across the trunk with the big rusty latches on it that she'd told Dobby to put any cursed or Dark items he found into. Knowing that she should probably ignore it, but also aware that after weeks of sorting through things covered in the Black curse staples that she was confident in her ability to deal with or at least safely identify whatever was in there, she pulled the sleeves of her jumper up to cover her hands and carefully opened up the trunk.

Inside was a wild mess of old books with stained leather covers, a dingy globe with a broken stand, a generous helping of weird odds and end that wouldn't have looked out of place on Dumbledore's desk, a whole jumbled set of what must be cursed silverware, a battered set of tarot cards that made her skin crawl just by looking at them, and a necklace. Her eyes were immediately drawn to it, it was bright gold despite how old it looked, with a long chain and what looked like the letter S made of shiny emeralds on the front of the large, oval locket.

Taking her wand out of her pocket, she used it to carefully pick up the locket by the chain and take it out of the trunk before closing the lid. It was definitely what had given her the feeling, and as she put her wand away she wondered why it seemed weirdly familiar until she recalled a vague memory of it being one of the things that Mrs Weasley had tried to throw out last summer, that she'd saved by quickly throwing it into the attic along with some other odds and ends and books that had looked interesting. Waving her hand she cast her usual detection charms and didn't come up with anything, and even trying to open it didn't do her any good. But there was something about the locket that was still niggling at her, so she bought it back downstairs with her and left it in her sitting room to take a look at in the morning. It wasn't until later while she was relaxing in a nice warm bath that she realised why it had called to her.

It had felt like Voldemort.

The weird, entirely inappropriate liquid heat from the time when they had hugged, and the general warm background hum whenever they dreamed together, the locket felt exactly the same. Now Harry wasn't born yesterday, she knew that she probably felt like that around him because of the whole horcrux thing, and hadn't he said that she was one of seven, minus the diary? Maybe the
locket was another, he'd even told her that he liked to turn the shiniest things he collected into horcruxes, so it wasn't out of the realm of possibilities for him to use something that ostentatious. Though how it had ended up in Number 12 Grimmauld Place was another thing all together.

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The following night after a busy day spent doing clothing alterations, she re-entered the library. The first thing she noticed was that while the tea tray and the huge mess of books was gone, the second armchair was still opposite hers by the fire, and the Dark Lord himself was sitting behind his desk calmly reading a book as if nothing had happened or was different at all. The second armchair sat there though, proof that she hadn't imagined everything that had been said the last time they'd been here together.

Going to sit down, she saw that the ward book was already resting on the arm of her chair, as if waiting for her. She couldn't work out for the life of her if it was a peace offering or a way to avoid talking to her, or even something else entirely. But she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth, so she got herself comfortable and, with a last look at Voldemort who she somehow knew could sense her presence just as she could sense his, Harry settled in to read.

She'd finally gotten through the preliminary chapters which gave a kind of crash course in warding theory from what she had a feeling was a very non-traditional perspective, and was just now moving into a new chapter comparing the different properties Elder Furthark and Ogham runes had when warding. It was actually really interesting, they'd yet to cover wards in Ancient Runes (although apparently they would this coming year in order to start familiarising themselves early with the topic for their N.E.W.Ts) but they had been covered briefly in Defense Against the Dark Arts in fourth year by fake-Moody as part of the section on "Constant vigilance in the home!". The DA had also read about them in more detail in some of the older student's textbooks from previous years, that they'd shared around between them when it had been mentioned that there were often a few questions on them during the theory portion of their O.W.Ls.

While she had a feeling that this book would probably help her and any other study partners she might have during the course of the year, all of Harry's efforts so far to find a copy of the book in the family library or even the attic were fruitless. Even sending Hedwig to Flourish and Blott's with a letter inquiring if she could order it had turned up nothing, because apparently they hadn't even heard of it. She just hoped the letter she'd just sent that afternoon to the bookshop in Hogsmeade would turn up something, because if she was going to have to venture down into the various secondhand shops in Knockturn Alley again she was going to be very cross indeed.

"Oh that reminds me." She said absently, breaking the silence that had reigned supreme ever since she had appeared in the library when thoughts of secondhand shops reminded her to ask him about the locket. "I don't suppose one of your other horcruxes is a necklace is it? I found an old locket in the attic yesterday with a big green S on the front, and it feels so much like you that it's kind of disconcerting."

Voldemort actually dropped his book. "Could you please repeat that?"

She looked up properly. "A locket. Gold with a thick chain, very old, won't open, big S made of emeralds. Ring any bells?"

"That locket is supposed to be hidden in a secret underwater tidal cave off the south-east coast of
England, with every anti-Portkey and anti-Apparition jinx and ward known to wizardkind, at the bottom of a very large bowl of rather nasty poison which you can't remove with any magic whatsoever, only by drinking it all which in turn makes you desperately thirsty. And all of this is happening on a tiny island surrounded by a lake full of hundreds of Inferi, that will then kill you if you so much as touch the surface of the water. So what in Merlin's name is it doing in your fucking townhouse?"

Dear Merlin was that the most ridiculously complicated way to hide something she had ever heard of in her entire life! Was there just something about Dark Lords that made them predisposed to act like they were cackling Disney villains, or was there a special guidebook called 'How to be a pretentious drama queen while attempting to take over the world in ten easy steps' that they received in a welcome pack along with a stupid name, bigoted minions, and a big, black cloak.

"I have no idea!" She protested. "I was up there looking for clothes, and I felt something odd. After a bit of poking around there it was in a trunk."

Because really, it certainly wasn't her fault he apparently couldn't keep track of all of his bloody soul bits. Seriously, of the three out of seven she knew of personally, he was at three for three the ones that were destroyed or otherwise misplaced. If he didn't want them scattered to the four winds he probably should have thought of that before carving himself up like a Sunday roast in the first place.

"This is not happening." While she'd been busy judging his poor life choices he'd actually buried his face in his hands. "How on earth did it get into your bloody attic?"

Harry shrugged. "Mrs Weasley tried to throw it out last summer while she was purging the place, and I caught Mundungus Fletcher trying to steal it along with a bunch of books and family heirlooms. So I hid them all because I was annoyed at how cavalier they were being about lumping everything they didn't understand into the category of Dark and not even trying to work out what they actually did, and who gave them the right to chuck out things that belong to my family anyway?" She huffed, still pissy as hell at their presumption. "The dodgy bastard probably would have pawned your gaudy soul recepticle off for drinking money if I hadn't saved it, you could be a little more grateful you know."

His face was still in his hands as he took some deep, calming breaths. "That locket was our mothers."

"Oh. Oh wow." Well then, that she had definitely not expected. At all. "I'm really glad I saved it then."

"Time for a lesson in family history little horcrux." He said with a long exhale, abandoning his dropped book entirely and coming over to once again sit in the second armchair across from her, because apparently they weren't going to talk about the fact that it was still there and this was just something they did now.

He crossed one leg over the other and folded his hands on his knee, the very picture of a well-dressed wizarding gentleman even while she was still somehow stuck in a bloody nightie. "Our mother's name was Merope and her family, the Gaunts, were a Noble and Most Ancient House and the last living descendants of Salazar Slytherin. The family prestige and fortune was squandered generations ago, and our mother, her brother, and their father were all disfigured, inbred idiots barely a step up from squibs that lived in a decrepit old shack out in the woods near a muggle village in Yorkshire. I am being very literal about the inbreeding too, I have no official confirmation but am fairly certain that our grandfather and grandmother were brother and sister."

He looked disgusted, lip curling as if he was still remembering finding out that on the prized magical side of his lineage he'd come from such a genetic cul-de-sac. "The locket, which Salazar Slytherin
had given as a gift to his wife, and a ring were the only two things they had left of their former glory.
After Merope had ran away to London with our filthy muggle father Tom Riddle Snr and he had left her penniless and homeless while she was pregnant, she reluctantly sold the priceless locket at Borgin and Burkes in order to survive, and the bastard only gave her ten sodding Galleons for it. To a broke, pregnant girl not much older than you, living on the streets in the middle of a London winter. Quite unsurprising, not long after that she died giving birth to us on the doorstep of a poor muggle orphanage, which is where we then grew up."

It was such a horrendously sad story that Harry didn't know what she could possibly say. But luckily it seemed she wasn't expected to say anything at all, and he just kept talking in the same calm, slightly bored tone as if he were discussing tax benefits instead of the tragic life and death of Merope Gaunt.

"After we graduated Hogwarts we actually worked at Borgin and Burkes for about a year as a purchasing agent because it gave us access to his high profile Pureblood clientele, the opportunity to hunt down useful Dark artifacts and, the treasure we were most interested in, rare and valuable objects to turn into our horcruxes. One of the regular customers, the fattest, most nauseatingly handsy old witch you could ever possibly meet, liked to show off her hoarded collection of expensive antique trinkets whenever we visited on behalf of our employer and tell us hilarious stories about them while she pawed at us."

Merlin that was a gross and depressing mental image to have. It seemed incredibly surreal to think of someone sexually harassing Lord fucking Voldemort, though Harry felt fairly certain in her assumption that the nasty witch in question was probably long dead by now.

"One of these hilarious stories was about Slytherin's locket." Voldemort continued. "And how Burke had swindled a poor, stupid, pregnant street girl out of it for a pittance and wasn't that just funny. We had known about both our mother and the locket from looking through our uncle's memories when we took the ring for ourselves, but not what had ultimately happened to it. It was rightfully ours as well of course so we killed the old cow, arranged for it to look as though her house elf had murdered her, and then stole the locket back, along with another heirloom of the Founders she'd owned as repayment for the insult, and eventually made them both into our horcruxes."

Called it. Harry sighed, because she hated always having to be the one sole voice of reason that this crazy fucker probably had in the world. "She sounds like a real piece of work, and it was awful that she was so dismissive and cruel about what happened to Merope, but that didn't mean you had to kill her. You're smart and sneaky as hell, you probably could have taken the locket and whatever else the second thing was without killing her or framing her poor house elf for it."

He just sneered. "She had taken a treasure that didn't belong to her, and then laughed at our mother's poverty and desperate situation. Not only that, but she was honestly the worst kind of wretched human being imaginable. Truly I was doing the world a kindness by disposing of her."

"But you don't even like your mother!" She blurted without even really meaning to, because what the hell.

"So? As pathetic and flawed as she was, not to mention stupid enough to fall for a muggle who didn't even want her in the first place, she is still the reason we have magic and the legacy of Salazar Slytherin." He shrugged, apparently rather apathetic about the entire business. "I will forgive her everything else she ever did because at least she still gave us that."

That was weirdly kind of touching actually, in the macabre, serial-killer sort of way that seemed to be his raison d'être.
"Regulus fucking Black." He suddenly hissed through his teeth, startling her out of her contemplation of the weirdly incongruous fact that the Dark Lord was apparently vaguely fond of his sad, dead mother.

"What does Sirius' dead brother have to do with anything?" She asked, completely confused about the abrupt shift in topic.

"When I took the locket to the cave I took his house elf with me and used it to drink the potion so I could place the locket there, and left the miserable creature there to die in order to protect the secret. But if Regulus called for it before it died, it may have been able to teleport out. Standard wards don't always work on house elves, because they are descended from the Fair Folk their magic is too similar to the magic of the land so there's a small possibility that it could have managed to slip through the cracks." He slammed a hand down on the arm of his chair. "I can't believe I missed it! I should have known better than to overlook something like that."

Harry shook her head in disbelief, wondering what the odds were that he was talking about Kreacher. "What should I do about the locket then? Because I'm not going to set foot into any murder caves for you."

Voldemort looked at her as though she was the dictionary definition of an imbecile. "Of course not, I wouldn't let you go anywhere near that cave even if you actually volunteered for it. No, for now you should just keep it safe there with you behind the Black wards. Don't let it leave that townhouse for any reason whatsoever unless it is to bring it directly to me."

"Not going to lie, I'm still pretty hesitant to even contemplate handing over anything which is that powerful or important to you, let alone deliver it personally." She said bluntly. "You not wanting me dead doesn't mean that I'm miraculously on your side of the war you know."

"No, but the fact that you're so protective of your family's Dark books and artifacts, and rapidly becoming as resentful of Dumbledore as I am, means you might be closer to it than you might think."

He smirked. "Besides, this isn't a war. Not yet at least."

Well then, that was the stupidest thing he'd said since describing his cave of murderous wonders. "What do you call it then?"

The smirk grew. "Warming up."

She really needed to stop speaking so soon, clearly he was just really that committed to doubling down on stupid this evening. "People are dying."

He shrugged, utterly unconcerned. "People are always dying little horcrux. Isn't better that if they're going to do it anyway, that they die for a higher purpose?"

She scowled, getting seriously annoyed with his blatant disregard for human life. "You're not a god you know, you don't get to decide that."

Voldemort just raised an eyebrow. "All the rest of my qualities and powers notwithstanding, I am powerful enough to cheat death. This automatically makes me more qualified to be a god than nearly every other human being who has ever lived, so if not me then who my dear?"

Harry just rolled her eyes at his unending proclivity for dramatics. "Your delusions of grandeur aren't exactly making me reconsider my opinion on not wanting anything to do with your side Voldemort. You can contemplate the inanity of your glorious apotheosis on your own time, I'm not buying it."

"How about this then." He said with a knowing, secretive grin. "I truly, and with complete and total
sincerity, want to save the world."

Harry couldn't help it, she burst out laughing. "Pull the other one!" She cried, almost certain there were going to be tears in her eyes if he kept this up. "You won't be happy until the world is a pile of corpses with you sitting right on top of it like some kind of gross meat throne, and we both know it."

He seemed completely unfazed by her meat throne accusations, an enigmatic little smile tugging at his lips. "You might be surprised. Tell me, what do you know, actually know about my motivations and goals? That isn't based on propaganda and conjecture I mean."

"I know that you're a blood supremacist, that you hate muggles and muggleborns and want them all dead or enslaved. You kill and torture people without feeling a shred of remorse or guilt, and you want to make Dark Magic and all manner of nasty things legal again even though it might hurt people." She sneered at him mockingly. "You are also so afraid of dying that it made you rip your own immortal soul into pieces, and during the last war when you gambled on half of a prophecy, you lost to a toddler. How am I doing so far?"

The arsehole didn't even have the grace to be offended by her verbal barbs. "You have a lot to say about the things I have done Harry, but not much about why I did them."

She snorted, unimpressed by his trying to wiggle his way into explaining away his laundry list of personal atrocities. "The why is that you're a hateful, sadistic bastard who is taking his resentful superiority complex and unresolved daddy issues out on literally everybody else. That's not exactly a mystery."

He finally looked furious when she mentioned his daddy issues, but it was quickly stamped down in favour of resuming his determined quest to make some kind of point to her.

"While you are not actually wrong." He gritted out through his teeth. "That is still not the entirety of the truth. Consider this Harry, most of the magical world knows me as a deranged, murderous lunatic who would *Crucio* anyone who so much as breathed funny while in his presence, let alone put up with even a second of the disrespect and insults I receive from you every single time we fucking interact. But isn't the fact that we have been dreamsharing for over a month in relative civility without me even once trying to hurt you show that maybe there is more to my character and motivations than might be readily apparent to all of the simple little sheep that we are surrounded by? Death might not be possible in a dream, but pain certainly is."

Harry just rolled her eyes again, leaning back into her chair dismissively because she wasn't remotely scared by his implied threats. She'd experienced excruciating pain before and would undoubtedly do so again the next time fate or her own big mouth got her into trouble, and of all the things she'd endured the pain hadn't broken her nearly as much as dashed hopes and grief had. "The only reason you're even halfway civil to me Voldemort, is because I'm your horcrux and you're a possessive arsehole. Not to mention you obviously want me on your side, I'm not actually stupid you know."

"I do not believe I have ever once pretended to not have an agenda regarding your true place little horcrux." He replied mildly. "You are a part of me, however insolently that part might behave, so is it really so strange to imagine that I want to have you safely by my side where you belong? Even if you weren't the Girl-Who-Lived and all that entails politically, reclaiming you would still be one of my highest priorities."

She narrowed her eyes, hating how he always referred to her like that, as if she was a puppy that had escaped from the backyard and proceeded to inconvenience him by making him have to leave work early to go pick her up from the pound.
"You know, I did a lot of thinking after the last time we were here." She admitted, needing to find a way to explain to him that he couldn't just act like this and expect it to go well for him. "And as much as I hated to admit it you were right on some counts, I have been avoiding a lot of what's been happening and one of those things is whatever the hell this craziness is between us. I might be on my way to eventually accepting that in the past I was part of you, but that fact still doesn't invalidate the person I am now. The person I am might not be exactly who I thought I was, but that doesn't make it any less real or take away the new life I've built. You can't just act like I'm one of your other non-sentient horcruxes and therefore subject to your dominion Voldemort, because whatever it was that made me like this also gave me my own free will, and you need to learn to accept that. It's kind of like how parents contribute their genetic material to their children, but their children are still independent from them. You contributing part of your soul to my existence doesn't mean that you own it."

"In the name of all that is sacred and profane, please tell me that you are not actually likening our relationship to that of a parent and child." He looked positively disgusted by the very concept. "Ew! Fuck no I'm not saying that you disgusting pervert, that's just obscene!" She shook herself violently to dispel that exceptionally trauma-inducing thought. "I'm just saying that this isn't as straightforward as you clearly want it to be. Be honest, are you really trying to tell me that you don't treat me differently from your other horcruxes? Because I have the locket right here, which you happily left in a bloody treasure cave for the last seventeen odd years like some kind of demented Ali Baba without a second thought, and beyond being pissed that it's not still in there you don't seem too concerned. Whereas in my case, you're going out of your way to interact with me and constantly trying to convince me of your supposed righteousness so that I'll join you. But even if you got me tomorrow, I somehow doubt you'd be leaving me in any caves anytime soon. Your words might say one thing but your actions are proving that you already acknowledge that I'm something different altogether."

She could tell that he wasn't able to find a fault in her logic because he was looking increasingly murderous.

"Are you honestly trying to tell me that I have no right whatsoever to be invested in you and want you with me where you belong? Because I refuse to accept that I am apparently not allowed to want part of my own soul!"

She rubbed her hands over her face, because he was so stubborn it made her want to just swing a Bludger at him to see if it stood a chance at getting him to move instead. "I'm trying to tell you that neither of us are anything that the other actually wanted or expected Voldemort. But if by some truly freakish twist of fate you are actually being sincere and legitimately want to save the world, then dear Merlin do you need to fire your public relations department! Because I'm pretty sure that even most of your followers just think you're a violent loony, I'm just putting it out there."

"I do not owe any of them anything." He hissed. "I am Lord Voldemort, the Heir of Slytherin and the future king of their world, and I should not have to justify my actions to sheep!"

"But you do have to justify them to me!" She cried. "Because as weirdly okay as these chats are when you're not acting as if I'm a set of keys you lost down the back of the couch, or rubbing my face in the fact that I apparently got my body secondhand, you can't actually expect it to ever be anything more than a temporary cessation of hostilities before our fated, fatal confrontation if you're not prepared to give me a really damn good reason why I should actually listen to anything you have to say."

His red eyes narrowed dangerously. "Are you calling me a liar? Why is my word not enough? I have
done a lot of unconscionable things it is true, but I have never once been dishonest about any of them."

"You've got to give me something to work with here Voldemort." She pleaded. "Something, anything more than just your word or some empty promises, or we might as well agree to just sit here quietly every night until one of us eventually kills the other."

"You would still try to kill me, even knowing what we are to one another and that it is tantamount to suicide?" He honestly looked just as appalled as Oliver Wood must have done when it had been announced that because of the Tri-Wizard Tournament there wouldn't be any quidditch that year.

"I would." She said simply, because her hating it didn't magically make it not true. "If it was the only thing that would stop the war and save everyone and I had absolutely no other choice, because as much of a bastard as Dumbledore is for not being honest with me I do actually know that all of this is bigger than just one girl, even if she is the bloody Girl-Who-Lived. I'm not asking for your top secret plans for world domination or your full manifesto here, just give me one thing that proves you're actually a human being, one thing, or we're done." Harry slumped down, feeling strangely bereft.

"We're done."

The silence dragged between them like the shambling dead, and even though she ostensibly hated him and stood by what she'd just said, every second that ticked by still felt like one she should be mourning, and she couldn't even understand why exactly she felt that way.

"Fomalhauta."

Her head snapped up at that quiet admission, and she stared incredulously at him. "What?"

"You asked for my one thing." Voldemort said stiffly, not looking at her. "It was her"

"Fomalhauta?" She was momentarily confused, before she remembered where she had heard that name before. "You're talking about Fomalhauta Black aren't you, the author of the ward book?" Then some inner voice reminded her of the book's year of publication and the age of the man sitting across from her, and suddenly it all came together. "You knew her, didn't you?"

"We did indeed." Said the uncharacteristically pensive Dark Lord. "She was a Slytherin, three years ahead of us. Being from a minor branch of the Black family meant she was intimidating enough to be mostly left alone by the other Houses but wasn't influential enough to be popular with the other Slytherins, and her abrasive personality was enough to drive away the few who might have looked past all that." He huffed a bitter laugh. "She was also the first and only human friend I ever had."

Harry couldn't stop staring, completely dumbstruck by this confession from the same man who even before when he'd been talking about his own dead mother hadn't sounded half this vulnerable, but he just kept talking without looking away from the fire.

"As backwards as our society is now towards witches, it was worse in the 30s. Even at that age she had cut all her hair off and wore the boys uniform in order to protest the lack of equality, and had made it very clear to her incredibly unimpressed parents that she had no intention whatsoever of being married off like some shiny bauble. Not only that, much like your Miss Granger she was leagues smarter than virtually everyone else she had ever met and flatly refused to apologise for it. She was, in a single word, unyielding."

"You admired her." It was obvious really, the wistful way he looked while he was speaking as if seeing something precious that was lost far away and long ago.
"Very much so." He agreed easily, as if this wasn't a declaration roughly on the same order of magnitude as the American Declaration of Independence in 1776. "She was simultaneously the very best shining example and cautionary tale a genius level, supposedly mudblood magical prodigy in Slytherin could possibly ask for."

Holy shit. "Did she ever become a Death Eater?"

He actually snorted at that. "Oh Merlin no. She had already graduated by the time we gained control of Slytherin House, and even if she had not she was never going to be the type to willingly subjugate herself to any man, no matter the reason. No, as soon as she graduated she stole a trunk full of books and her own dowry worth of gold from the family vault and promptly ran off to the Continent, not even caring that there was a war happening at the time, all so her parents couldn't force her to get married to some insipid second cousin who wasn't even a fraction as smart or interesting as she was. We kept in touch though, and when next we saw her it was in Bologna, in 1947. The war had finally ended, it was our first time out of Britain and we were heading to Albania in order to find another lost relic of the Founders. Fomalhauta, after years of tireless research, had just published her first book, *The Historical Importance of Runic War Warding in the British Isles*."

He smiled fondly. "I can still remember it so clearly. We were having dinner together in this cramped little trattoria to celebrate, we asked her if she'd join us when we eventually returned to Britain but of course she just laughed and poured us another glass of wine, and we didn't press the issue. We ended up talking all through the night, us about our horcruxes and our quest for immortality and our lofty plans to conquer Magical Britain, and her about her family and the things she'd discovered about magic while researching for her book. We didn't sleep at all in the end, and the next morning we boarded our train to Brindisi with a drunkenly signed copy of her book, one of the worst hangovers in our entire life to date, a promise that we'd meet up with her in Naples once we had finished with our business in Albania, and a growing sense of dread about the state of the magical world."

A shadow passed over his face then, and it was like storm clouds obscuring a spring afternoon. "Not even two months later she was dead, killed by savage muggles while in Rome when she was caught in the crossfire between pro-fascist dissidents and a group of partisans who had been on a spree of post-war revenge killings."

"That's awful." As much as she thought of him as a heartless bastard, it was clear that he had genuinely cared for his one friend as much as he knew how. "I'm so sorry. It sounds like she was an incredible person."

He met Harry's eyes for the first time since he'd said her name. "She really was. It saddens me greatly that you do not remember her." His red gaze returned to contemplating the fire. "I truly believe to this day that the loss of her was one of the greatest blows to the magical community in a very long time. She had just as many plans to change the world as I did, though her weapon of choice had always been knowledge rather than a wand."

That was a very curious thing to consider. "What did she want to do?"

He tilted his head, considering her question thoughtfully. "You haven't finished the book yet, have you?"

Harry shook her head. "Not yet. I've been trying to find an actual copy in the real world, but no one has it. Most haven't even heard of it."

"Send an international owl to the Stichwort-Verlag publishing company in Frankfurt, there was only ever the one small printing run of it made but they should be able to find you a copy." He informed her, before scowling fiercely. "It is a fucking tragedy that she never lived long enough to receive the
recognition she deserved for her ideas. She was even working on a follow up book when she died, one that I am positive would have been ground-breaking and maybe even have helped to save us all. But I never found out what happened to her notes or her journals or her manuscripts, and believe me when I say that it was not for a lack of trying."

He sighed, looking as tired and melancholy as she had ever seen him. "Once you finish it you will be able to draw your own conclusions, and maybe you will understand why I made the choices I have. I know that most would not be able to comprehend the true scope of my purpose, but you were right when you said that out of all of the people on this earth, you are the only one to whom I owe an explanation."

Harry sat there, acutely aware of the immensity of what he was saying, the strange kind of respect he was showing her. She also knew that if there was going to be any chance at all for her to work out what the hell was actually going on, she had to acknowledge the potentially treacherous olive branch for what it was.

"Okay." She said, exhaling heavily and nodding a little to herself. "Okay, that's a start."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the meta-plot, mwahahahaa! If y'all were wondering about the OFC tag there you go, Fomalhauta Black might be dead but she's the all-state, all-feminist lesbian OG of this alternate universe.

Seriously though, this chapter had me researching the weirdest things like the densest concentration of publishing companies in post-war Europe (Frankfurt because the previous centre in Leipzig was still controlled by the Soviets) and the train routes between London and Albania in 1947, because I'm that insanely persnickety about details that I can't just make some shit up and save myself the hour of googling and wikipedia trawling. Amiright my fellow authors?
As Harry's birthday approached, Dumbledore must have gotten sick of all his letters going unread and seen an opportunity to get to Harry through alternative means. So she wasn't exactly surprised when poor Errol managed to find his way inside one day around lunchtime, only to skid across the kitchen table, knocking over books and jam jars as he went, right up to where she was sitting and landed face first in the butter dish.

After cleaning up the mess and the buttery owl she relieved the silly old feather duster of his burden, which turned out to be letters from Ron, Hermione, and Molly Weasley. Detection charms all turned up clear, so she poured herself another cup of tea and sat down to read through her correspondence.

The first one she read was from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Dumbledore came by the Burrow this morning and told the Weasley's that you're at Order Headquarters by yourself and won't let anyone in, are you alright? I know we weren't supposed to send any letters to you and I thought you'd prefer it anyway since you couldn't do your seclusion properly like you wanted, but I still can't believe you ran away at the start of July and didn't tell me!

Dumbledore sounded very worried, apparently You-Know-Who has been acting strangely and they're worried this is just the calm before the storm and he's going to be hitting us hard as soon as we let our guard down. Promise me you're not going to run out and do anything reckless, okay Harry?
It's been an okay summer so far all things considered, my parents really have no idea what's going on and that's probably for the best. I mean, what can dentists even do about the war that's coming? I don't tell them half of what we get up to every year and they still worry themselves sick, I'm certain if I told them the whole of it they'd try and pull me out and send me to Beauxbatons or Salem Witch's Institute. They don't seem to understand just how small our world is, how being a country or a world away doesn't matter when people can Apparate or Portkey in the blink of an eye.

I miss you Harry, promise me you're taking care of yourself and that you're being careful, alright? We need you now more than ever, and I need my best friend.

Love,
Hermione

The one from Ron was pretty much the same, just briefer, and also let her know that his mum was on the warpath at Dumbledore for waiting nearly a month before telling her Harry was at Headquarters by herself. The one from Molly was predictably overbearing, insisting Harry was far too young to be by herself in 'that nasty old place' as she called it, and how since it was her birthday in a couple of days anyway she simply must come to the Burrow immediately so they could look after her properly and throw her a birthday party.

She made sure to spend an hour doing her quidditch exercises in the garden before replying to any of the letters, but especially that last one. Because while she knew she meant well the older witch's fussing and tendency to treat people like they were small children was incredibly frustrating to someone as autonomous as Harry. Not to mention the idea of having a party when her father hadn't even been dead for two months felt obscene.

In the end she wrote back to everyone, telling them she appreciated their concern but as she'd yet to starve or burn the place down she'd be staying for the rest of the summer in order to quietly mourn Sirius' passing according to the traditions of the Black family. She also pointed out that if even Dumbledore couldn't get in she was perfectly safe from all and sundry, and there was absolutely nothing they could say or do to change her mind. To Hermione she also reassured her she wasn't going to run out and challenge any Death Eaters to wands at dawn, because while she might still be annoyed at her for always doing everything Dumbledore said without questioning it she was still her best friend and she was clearly scared.

According to the short letter she received back that evening from Hermione, Molly had apparently nearly sent her a Howler before being talked out of it by her husband, who had rightly pointed out that sending a Howler to a grieving teenage girl probably wouldn't do much to convince her to trust them. Hermione expressed her own concern about whether she was making the right choice staying there alone, but as the only one who had taken the time to listen to Harry talk about her observances and family traditions even if she didn't agree with all of them, she said she wouldn't bother her unless she sent a letter first, and if Harry needed to talk about Things she had been reading lots of books on grief counselling in preparation and was there for her.

She might still be a bit cross, but Harry knew full well she really was lucky to have a best friend like Hermione.
Harry stayed up until midnight on the 30th to wish herself happy birthday as was her tradition, though this time she wasn’t locked in her cupboard or Dudley’s second bedroom, and she also had a giant chocolate cake which Dobby had made just for her. Her friends, knowing her well enough by now to know her habits, had all timed the sending of her presents so they’d arrive not long after midnight and she had fun opening them all while stuffing her face with cake.

Ron had sent her a big box of her favourite Sugar Quills, while the twins had given her a selection of their newest products from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, including a bunch of suspicious pink bottles which were apparently from the Wonderwitch line. Luna had painted her a beautiful picture of a stag, a doe, a wolf and a Grim in a moonlit clearing, and Neville had sent her a sizeable collection of different pieces of rare and magical woods from his family's greenhouses and gardens with notes of what they all were and their properties, which would be amazing for her runework projects. Parvati and Lavender had gone in together to get her a hard-to-get copy of the Witch Weekly special edition from last year that had sold out in a day, both because Harry had been on the cover in her Yule Ball outfit, and because the editor had apparently decided the real reason she was lying about You-Know-Who was because she was up the duff and hormonal. It made her giggle a lot, because it was so very them to make a joke out of how ridiculous it was by giving her a framed copy of the bloody thing. Remus had sent her a very kind letter and a pretty dual photo frame that looked like a carved wooden forest, with one side showing a moving photograph of Sirius carrying baby Harriet triumphantly around on his shoulders before tripping over his own feet, and a more recent one of the two of them hugging and making silly faces last Christmas on the other, which made her laugh as much as it made her cry. Hermione, always practical, had given her a book about the history of the thread magic practiced by Norse witches, as well as half a dozen balls of gorgeous yarn to play with.

All in all, she was touched by the thoughtfulness of her friends, and resolved to send them all some nice thank you notes in the morning. Remus especially, she hadn’t really talked to him properly since the aftermath of Sirius’ death when he’d stopped her from unthinkingly committing suicide via Veil of Death. Even if she was hesitant to open up to someone who was so madly loyal to Dumbledore, if anyone was feeling as lost without Sirius as she was it would be him.

A final present, this one wrapped immaculately in matte black paper with an emerald green and silver ribbon, arrived later that morning during her highly nutritious breakfast of cake in the sun room, and was delivered by the most vicious looking black eagle owl she’d ever seen in her life. There was no card attached and the menacing owl didn’t stay to wait for a reply, but it was completely obvious at a glance who must have sent it.

"Not at all subtle you prat." She said under her breath as she fought a losing battle against a smile, strangely pleased the bloody Dark Lord had done something as mundane as send her something for her birthday.

Inside was a black velvet box which contained a folded piece of parchment and a beautiful bracelet. The bracelet was a heavy, antique looking silver chain made of thick round links each engraved with dozens of tiny markings, and hanging off it at regular intervals were three bone charms yellowed with age and carved with runes, with what looked suspiciously like recently dried blood painted into the deep grooves. The folded parchment was a short note, written in silvery speckled black ink which looked like the night sky in a smoother, more polished version of the handwriting from the diary horcrux.

Happy second 16th birthday my dear.
Put this on and you will be shielded by a glamour not even magical means can see though.
I trust the freedom to go on some more absurd adventures will please you.
How very like him to slip in a reference to their ridiculous soul nonsense by making a private joke out of it. Despite herself Harry was indeed pleased, as he would have had to know she would be, and while she hoped her face wasn't nearly as warm as it was feeling she knew the odds were against her. 

Because all jokes aside, he hadn't just given her something pretty and interesting and useful (and Merlin was she looking forward to investigating those runes and seeing how they worked), he'd given her this specifically because he knew how important her freedom was to her and how much she wanted it. Now she knew the previously unknown door at the back of the courtyard wasn't watched by the Order, with this she could leave the house as often as she wanted without anyone being the wiser. And even more importantly, now her seclusion was over she would be able to get to Gringotts unmolested by the Order.

She quickly finished the rest of her cake and went into her walk-in wardrobe where the full length mirror was to put on the bracelet. Immediately her reflection rippled like the surface of a pond, her skin feeling like it was trying to quietly crawl off without her noticing, and as it cleared she was looking at a stranger.

While the same length and level of wildness, her mad black curls were now a lovely soft brown colour that looked kind of like tea. Her usually golden skin was milk pale and slightly freckled, something which tickled her because she'd always secretly thought the Weasley's freckles were adorable and wanted some of her very own. Her face was softer and rounder, with none of the angles she was used to but still pretty in a plain sort of way, and best of all her scar wasn't there at all. With it being a curse scar caused by Dark magic there was generally nothing magical at all which could hide it completely, making her wonder just how the hell the bracelet even managed it. Overall she was nice looking but utterly unremarkable, and would blend in with the predominately Caucasian crowds of Magical Britain very nicely indeed.

Her glamoured eyes made her cry though.

Because of course they were Black eyes, deep set and expressive, and the exact shape and stormy, silvery grey which Sirius' own had been. She knew it was on purpose too, and not to be cruel like she might have assumed even a few weeks ago but because it was the closest thing to an apology someone like him was capable of making. A stupidly overcomplicated, quietly grand gesture, so she'd at least have something which reminded her of her father when she looked in the mirror. She spent all her life being compared to Lily and James Potter, and while she did love them in an abstract sort of way, Sirius was the true father of her heart and the one who had truly given her a family to belong to. Having something of his like this was painful, but exhilarating.

Which really summed up her weird fucking relationship with Voldemort didn't it, she thought to herself wryly as she wiped her wet face on her sleeve, painful and exhilarating.

She knew a lot of it was because right now she was isolated and angry, and he was smart enough to take advantage of it. But at the same time he was strangely upfront about the fact and she could tell he wasn't treating her insincerely while he was doing it. He made no effort to downplay or make excuses for who he was or what his goals were, it simply wasn't in his nature, but he had apparently just decided that since technically speaking she was a (much) more independent part of himself, she got the dubious honour of his undivided attention.

She fingered the bracelet gently, which now she was wearing it had heated up to a little warmer than skin temperature as the magic did whatever it did to conceal her true appearance so completely, and wondered where on earth he'd found something this clearly old and powerful. The thought that
maybe it was from one of his caches of treasures made her feel kind of flustered, and almost as pleased as the prospect of being able to get out of her damn house.

Deciding there would be plenty of time to contemplate the clusterfuck that was navigating her mutual rapport with the Dark Lord, she turned instead to getting herself dressed to head to Diagon Alley.

Now Harry had always liked old things. Perhaps it was thanks to growing up with Aunt Petunia refusing to buy her new clothes, but also refusing to let her wear too many of Dudley's old things because it would be unladylike. Always supremely committed to making sure Harry knew she was an unwanted burden, Aunt Petunia had therefore gotten around this logical conundrum by buying everything her niece wore from op shops and vintage stores, the older and less fashionable the better. It had backfired though, because Harry was both adaptable and maybe subconsciously remembering the anachronistic world she really belonged in, and had ended up secretly loving all the beautiful old things which seemed to have so much more personality.

So the decision to dress like a Pureblood lady in what might well have been a teenage Bellatrix's clothes wasn't actually all that much of a stretch for her, all things considered. From one perspective, she was well within her rights to claim whatever things some previous, indeterminate daughters of the House of the Black had left in her damn house a good couple of decades ago, and from another it was just a more intense expression of her pre-existing vintage obsession.

She eyed the stays warily. Maybe this was simply taking retro to it's logical conclusion.

Deciding fuck it, because if you can't dress up in an awesome disguise when going on a secret birthday adventure when can you, Harry wiggled into a pair of black silk stockings and carefully laced herself into the lilac stays which had proven the best fit (alterations to rigidly tailored foundation garments having proven not possible at her skill level), and were petite enough they likely hadn't belonged to the buxom Bellatrix. Over it went a simple black linen dress suited for the warm weather which ended just below the knee, with a sash she'd made from some of the salvaged fabric from one of Walburga's ridiculously frou-frou dresses to nip it in at the waist and show off how slender the stays made her look.

Harry sat primly at her vanity and meticulously braided notice-me-knots into her temporarily brown hair before pinning it up, taking inordinate amounts of pleasure at being able to brush her bangs off her forehead for once. Almost no one in the magical world had even seen her forehead since she had compulsively hidden her scar from age eleven onwards, so between the glamour, her hair style, and the contacts which made a reappearance, there was likely no chance anyone would think she was even Harry Potter's distant relative. As much as she didn't like that the glamour changed her skin colour, she'd spent enough years being teased for it in Little Whinging that she refused to be ashamed of it on principle, even she had to admit it was a fiendishly clever way of ensuring her anonymity.

By the time she'd found a nice black witches hat (something she generally never wore outside her uniform), a pair of black heeled ankle boots, and a lightweight black summer robe, even she didn't recognise herself. The stays ensured her good posture, which she had been trying to work on but breaking the bad habits of a lifetime wasn't easy, and the full mourning black meant she looked both lovely and vaguely threatening. In other words she looked like a Black lady, which was exactly what she'd wanted.

Her father's eyes stared back at her from the mirror, and she pushed down the powerful whirlwind of emotions and turned her spine to goblin steel just like he'd taught her.

She was ready.
After the excitement of getting ready, checking on her Order babysitter and slipping out the back gate with Dobby was a breeze. They'd held hands and he teleported them right outside Gringotts into the small, covered side alley which ran between the bank and the neighbouring storefront. She looked down at her little elf, knowing if she kept him with her they risked detection, and decided that he needed something to keep him busy since he wouldn't be able to go back home through the wards without her.

"Now, while I'm in the bank I need you to go around and collect up one of all the owl order catalogues you can find. I know Flourish and Blott's has a display near the front full of them for businesses without shopfronts of their own. Can you do that for me and then meet me back here in about half an hour?" She usually got a new stack of owl order catalogues before she went back to Hogwarts in September anyway, and maybe she'd luck out and he'd find catalogues for a homewares business or two.

"Yes Great Secret Lady, I cans be doing that!" He declared proudly before disappearing with a pop. Harry had to smile at how seriously he'd taken her request for no names, and hoped he would stay out of trouble while she was gone.

Looking up at the crooked marble façade of Gringotts she took a fortifying breath, made sure her satchel was comfortably snug over her shoulder, and walked in through the doors with her head held high. Striding calmly, but not hurrying, she went straight up to the first available teller goblin she could see.

"I would like to speak to my account managers."

Something she'd only learned after being in the magical world for far too many years was since goblins were descended from the Fair Folk, saying please or thank you to them was to be avoided at all costs so as not to either offend them or imply you were in their debt in questionable ways they weren't legally allowed to follow through on anymore. It was no wonder they were so grouchy all the time, that combined with the British imperative to be polite to anything which stood still long enough must be maddening for them. The verbal wiggling to be courteous while avoiding such platitudes was therefore best accomplished by being as blunt and to the point as possible, so they didn't have to put up with you for very long.

The teller goblin squinted down at her, like he could tell she was wearing a glamour but not what it was hiding and was most annoyed by it. "We couldn't care less for the legal standing or politics of wizards when they are outside of our bank." He said with a sneer. "But we do expect them to not be so rude as to hide their identity from us while they are here."

Harry inclined her head minutely in agreement. "I am aware of the suspicious nature of my presence, but it would be difficult for me to conduct my business here today if I were to be recognised. If you have a private room I would be happy to remove my glamour and prove my identity."

He glared at her. "What accounts are you here to discuss?"

She passed him the folded slip of paper she'd written her full name and titles on in preparation. He read it, looked up at her in alarm then suspicion, and finally nodded. "Very well. Follow me."

He led her down a winding hallway deeper into the bank, and she was lost within three turns. Hopefully she'd have an escort back to the main section of the bank when she was done, or she'd be
here a while. Opening a door to a well appointed meeting room with lots of nasty looking axes in glass display cases, he gestured for her to be seated at the table. She did so, removing the bracelet at the same time and causing her true appearance to ripple back into place.

"I will fetch the Potter and Black account managers. Wait here." And with that he was gone, almost as quickly as he'd arrived.

Not even five minutes had passed before the door was reopening and two goblins carrying stacks of leather folders entered the room, the second one closing the door behind him and running a long finger down the door so a lock clicked and she felt the minute vibration of a privacy ward snap into place.

In true goblin fashion they wasted no time with pleasantries and got right down to business. "Before we can continue, you will need to prove your identity with a blood test." Said the first goblin, taking a seat across from her and placing a small silver knife and a piece of parchment with a thick border of tiny runes around the edge between them on the table.

"Of course." Said Harry, having expected something like that to come up. "What do I need to do?"

The first goblin looked unimpressed that she didn't know what to do. "Cut the index finger of your wand hand with the dagger in front of you, and let three drops of blood fall onto the parchment."

She did as instructed, hoping against hope that her original name didn't show up as well as her current one and cause a scene she had no idea how to talk her way out of. Once the blood was on the parchment it swirled like ink in a bowl of water until words appeared.

Name: Harriet Lily Black-Potter  
Date of birth: 31st July 1980  
Parents: Lily Juniper Potter née Evans (mother) (deceased)  
James Charlus Potter (father) (deceased)  
Sirius Orion Black III (father via blood adoption) (deceased)  
Siblings: None  
Blood Status: Halfblood witch  
Titles: Heiress of the Noble House of Potter  
Heiress of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black  
The Girl-Who-Lived (by conquest)  
Tri-Wizard Champion 1995 (by conquest)  

"Very good Miss Black-Potter." Said the goblin who'd given her the dagger as he took it back and cleaned it before disappearing it back into the same random pocket it came from, completely unaware of her crashing relief that apparently they were very literal when they said this was a blood test and not anything more spiritually comprehensive. "I am Urlor, and I am the Account Manager for the Noble House of Potter."

"And I am Larnok, Account Manager for the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black." Said the second goblin, still sorting through the larger stack of folders he'd bought with him. "I take it you received my owl regarding the estate of your late father?"

She frowned, confused and not liking it. "I don't think I've ever received any mail from Gringotts at
all Larnok. I came in today to get an overview of my accounts and my Heir rings."

The goblins both looked furious.

"As the last of your House, you have been sent annual bank statements on the Potter accounts since you turned eleven." Said Larnok. "We have sent numerous letters since you turned fourteen and were eligible to claim your Potter Heir ring, as well as your Black Heir ring once you were so named by the late Lord Black last summer. In addition, a bank statement on the Black accounts along with another invitation to claim that Heir ring was sent once we were notified the late Lord Black had passed away. Are you stating for our records that you haven't received any of our correspondence?"

Harry wondered what she had to do to get a hit put out on a certain meddling Headmaster. Surely Voldemort would oblige if she asked him nicely, right? "Yes that's correct. I've suspected for a while that I have a mail redirection of some kind on me since I never received a single owl until I got my Hogwarts letter, and other students told me they'd written me letters when they were children. I never expected that would extend to redirecting official mail from Gringotts however."

"Do you have any idea who would have placed a redirection on you?" asked Urlor, not caring in the least about her fanmail but clearly livid about the fact that five years of confidential information regarding the accounts of the Noble House he managed were apparently unaccounted for.

"The only person I can think of would be Headmaster Dumbledore." Harry said, because seriously who else could it have possibly been. "He's the one who placed me with muggle relatives after my parent's death, and one of only I believe four people who knew where I was before I began attending Hogwarts, and all three of the others are in his employ. I wasn't even aware I was an Heiress until last summer when my Lord Father blood adopted me. He was most upset no one had informed me before then what my responsibilities were, and when he confronted the Headmaster about it was told it was for my own good so I could enjoy my childhood, and that he was forbidden from telling me anything. He pretended to agree, but taught me in secret until he was killed in battle while defending my life and honour."

The goblins both nodded curtly at that admission. "A noble end for a son of Black." Said Larnok briskly. "May his enemies forever fear his name."

She bowed her head. "As his Heiress by blood and by choice, I give my word his gold will grow."

The goblin looked vaguely approving for the first time. "I see he at least taught you well in what time he had. It is long past due for the honour of the House of Black to be restored."

Harry nodded, because that was something she also felt very strongly about. "I couldn't agree with you more."

"Back to your requests." Said Urlor, who not being the Black account manager didn't seem to care much either way for the honour or lack thereof of her family. "We can provide summaries for your accounts and assets today, although as the Heir you can't manage your assets or access any of the main vaults until you are of age, and as far as properties go you may only access the listed ancestral home of each family. I'm unsure why the Potter cottage in Godric's Hollow is listed as the ancestral home instead of Potter Manor, but regardless it was confiscated by the Ministry to be a memorial and as such is unusable as a residence. As it was in use by the late Lord Black prior to his death, I assume you are using the Black ancestral home at Number 12 Grimmauld Place in London as your current residence, is this correct?"

"Yes I am." She said, wondering why the hell her parent's house was a bloody memorial and why she'd never heard of it before.
"Very good. The late Lord and Lady Potter left you a trust vault which you have used since you were eleven, and the late Lord Black has left a trust vault as well which we will give you the key for. Do you have any questions so far?"

"No that sounds fine, I didn't know about the Potter cottage or that I had a second trust vault, but it's good to know." Just the Potter trust vault was more than enough for her to live on comfortably for the rest of her school years, and that was even taking into account her admittedly expensive habit of buying gold and silver thread for her embroidery.

"As you have already taken a blood test we can also give you your Heir rings today." Said Urlor, and the goblins each pulled a small black ring box out of their pockets and placed them in front of her on the table.

"Now primacy matters when it comes to claiming titles." Warned Larnok. "So if you wish to be known as Heiress Black you should put the Black Heir ring on your right index finger first, then once it has accepted you put the Potter Heir ring on your right middle finger. If you wish instead to be Heiress Potter, then you should do the opposite. Obviously you will be the Heiress of both and all formal correspondence will reflect that, but so people do not wander around with titles longer than their wand arm only the primary is used in conversation."

Harry bit her lip, feeling torn, but in the end reached for the box with the Black crest first. She loved her biological parents of course, they had given up everything for her just so she could live and she would honour them forever for it. But Harry couldn't deny that between being Sirius' daughter and her observances of the Black family customs, she identified much more as a Black than as a Potter. Even more than that, sometimes it felt like Harry Potter belonged to Magical Britain, while Harry Black only belonged to herself. Anything which made people look at her as a person and not just another bloody memorial like the Potter Cottage could only be a good thing.

The ring was a thick band of platinum with the family motto 'Toujours pur' engraved around the band and the family crest pride of place in the centre, a shield with three tiny ravens on the lower half and a hand clutching a wand victoriously in the upper half, with a H made of a single carved black diamond set on the top in place of the skull. She really didn't want to even guess at how much it would have cost to make something this insanely detailed and clearly expensive.

As she put it on the correct finger it heated up and shrank down to fit her finger, and she wondered if the last person to wear it had been Sirius. She knew his grandfather Arcturus had made him the Heir not his father because the cantankerous old man had flatly refused to entertain the possibility of giving up the Lordship in his lifetime, and the fact Sirius hadn't been legally disowned and therefore still able to claim the Lordship pointed to it probably still having been him. She hoped that was the case, the idea of it coming to her straight from him was comforting.

By comparison, the Potter ring was a bright cheerful gold with the motto 'Novissima inimica destruetur mors' engraved around the band and the family crest pride of place in the centre, a shield with a rearing stag on a red inlaid shield and a gold H on the top. She put it on her right middle finger and felt it heat and shrink as well, smiling softly at how much smaller her finger was than her dad's had been.

"Gringotts acknowledges you Harriet Lily Black-Potter, Heiress of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black and Heiress of the Noble House of Potter." Said Larnok curtly. "May your will be iron and your heart be gold."

"My acknowledgements to Gringotts, Account Manager Larnok." Harry replied, because that was the closest she could get to saying thank you and she felt the moment called for it. "May your gold overflow and your enemies walk ever in your shadow."
The goblin nodded in response to her words. "Now as Heir rings they have some protections, the main one being that the only one who can remove them is you. In the past they've been stolen by the enemies of a House or even jealous relatives by cutting the appropriate finger or hand off the wearer, so they now have enchantments so if that eventuality occurs they will be immediately transported to the Heir trust vault no matter where you are in the world. If you die while wearing them, they will also return automatically to the Heir trust vault. In addition they are goblin made and almost indestructible, so don't worry if they'll get chipped or wear out from everyday usage, they're designed to be worn so just wear them."

"Furthermore." Piped up Urlor. "A drop of your blood on either shield while reciting the relevant family motto can render them invisible or visible again if you have the need. It is hoped however that in claiming them you are ready and prepared for the responsibility of representing your Houses and will only do so if it's unavoidable. At any time after you turn seventeen you may come and claim the Lordship to become Lady Potter."

Larnok gave him a dirty look for interrupting him. "In the case of the Black Lordship however you will first need to perform some ritual blood magic and receive certain familial ritual tattoos in order to be eligible. Do you have any questions about this requirement?"

Right after he'd adopted her, Sirius had showed her all of his own ritual tattoos that he'd been forcibly given right after he was made the Heir at fourteen and explained the history and purpose behind them, how they empowered and protected the Head of the House of Black. It was one of the reasons she was spending so much time this summer reading up on ritual tattoos, granted the circumstances surrounding how he'd gotten his had been traumatic at best, but to a girl who was obsessed with runes they seemed fascinating.

"Not at the moment, I know which book in the family library contains the information needed, and we have a ritual room in the basement for private use." Granted she had no idea how she'd go about actually getting them considering a lot would have to go on her back, but that was very much a problem for another day.

"Very good Heiress Black. Now lastly, there is also the matter of the various gifts bequeathed to you by members of the public following your initial defeat of the Dark Lord Voldemort."

Well that was completely unexpected. "What? You mean complete strangers left me things in their wills or something?"

Urlor nodded. "That is correct. Most of it is monetary in nature and was added to the main Potter Vault for use once you reach your majority, as were some collections of books and artifacts, and the deeds to three properties including an upstairs flat located on Absent Alley which runs off Diagon Alley, a cottage and the surrounding land in rural Scotland not far from Hogsmeade, and a chateau near Nice in the south of France. The final item of note is the entire estate of the Once Noble House of Pyrites, including their name and hereditary seat in the Wizengamot."

What the actual fuck.

"Excuse me." She asked, not sure she could have possibly heard him right. "How could someone leave me their entire House?"

Urlor huffed at having to repeat himself. "Apparently the Once Noble House of Pyrites was decimated in the war due to most of them joining up with You-Know-Who against the express wishes of their Lord who wanted to remain neutral. The late Lord's wife was killed by Death Eater's during a raid on Hogsmeade, and as a result he disinherited the few of them who still survived. Following your initial defeat of You-Know-Who he left the entirety of his estate to you, the
vanquisher of the Dark Lord, in restitution for what his family had done to Magical Britain. Consequently, when he passed away a few years later it came to you."

It was taking all of her willpower to not let her jaw drop open. "People can do that?"

"It's exceedingly rare but yes, it comes under the category of a formal inter-House surrender, which is why they are currently known as a Once Noble House instead of a Noble one, and why all of their assets are frozen. This means when you reach your majority you may petition the Wizengamot for one of three options. First, to have the House abolished, it's name erased and it's seat and estate absorbed into the Noble House of Potter. Second, you can take the title of Lady Pyrites by conquest, and it's seat and estate will be yours but remain under that name, which you may then pass onto a family member or heir. Or third, to return the seat and lands to a surviving member of the House minus a fee, on the condition that as a House they will evermore be the sworn vassals of the House of Potter. I believe the only surviving members of the Once Noble House of Pyrites are an inmate recently freed from Azkaban by You-Know-Who, a cousin who fled to the Continent in disgrace after the war, and an illegitimate halfblood grandson of the late Lord currently attending Hogwarts two years below you."

Harry's head swam. All this talk of politics was far above her paygrade, but she understood enough to know this was a really big deal. Well then, firsts things first, what would Hermione do? Ask questions, get all the information she possibly could, and then camp out in a library until she understood what the hell was going on. Right then, she could do that.

"I confess this is most unexpected." Understatement of the bloody year. "Do you have a copy of all the bequests to add to the account statements I can take with me today? I admit my understanding of the Wizengamot and inter-House politics is limited, but I will be looking into it and educating myself so when the time comes I can make an informed decision as to the fate of the Once Noble House of Pyrites. Can I know the name of the student attending Hogwarts?"

Urlor bared his teeth in what she belatedly realised was the goblin equivalent of a smile. "Heiress Black their House surrendered to yours in totality. In accordance with the old laws you could ask for their head in bloodprice if you so wished and be assured of receiving your request, though admittedly some would frown upon it."

Dear Merlin that was messed up. "Well then." She said, polite smile frozen into what was probably more of a grimace. "That's good to know, but I have no intention of collecting any heads today. The name will be more than enough."

Urlor bared his teeth in what she belatedly realised was the goblin equivalent of a smile. "Heiress Black their House surrendered to yours in totality. In accordance with the old laws you could ask for their head in bloodprice if you so wished and be assured of receiving your request, though admittedly some would frown upon it."

"The child is Rowan Fletcher, and as of September 1st will be a fourth year Hufflepuff. I understand his muggle mother was a victim during an attack on a muggle village by Death Eaters, and was assaulted by one of the sons of the late Lord Pyrites. Unfortunately it was unknown she'd fallen pregnant and when Aurors arrived to rescue the muggles she was healed and Obliviated, taking with it all memory of the assault but also the knowledge that the sire of her child was magic. Mister Fletcher was raised entirely as a muggle until his Hogwarts letter arrived, and to the best of our knowledge thinks he is a muggleborn. We only know because of the routine blood test performed when opening a vault with us got flagged and forwarded to the Pyrites account manager, who then investigated during the course of preparing this dossier on their estate for your perusal. As the deceased father was disinherited and he is therefore presently ineligible to inherit, the title didn't show up during the blood test, and it is not Gringotts place to share such information without the approval of the victor, that being the Head of House Potter."

"Which I can't give because I'm not seventeen, alright then." She shook her head, because that was
some heavy shit and also a problem for another day. "I acknowledge the diligence of the Pyrites account manager and will give the matter my full attention. Is there anything else?"

"Not today Heiress Black, we will look into the matter of the mail redirection placed on you and continue to maintain the business interests of your estates according to the wishes of the late Lords Black and Potter." She definitely liked Larnok more, he was informative and didn't seem nearly as blood-thirsty as the Potter account manager. "We will also begin to prepare overviews so that next year when you reach your majority you may take over management of your estates with ease."

"Excellent." She took the big stack of folders they passed to her and put them all into her wonderfully charmed dragonhide satchel. "Is it possible to get an escort out to the main floor of the bank? I don't want to get lost and end up somewhere I shouldn't."

"I will escort you Heiress Black." Said Urlor after Larnok shot him a glare, looking put out but like he was grudgingly relieved she wasn't trying to get up to any mischief.

They all stood and Harry put her bracelet back on, the funny tingle of the ripples as her appearance changed making her feel restless. "Right, let's be off then."

Chapter End Notes

CW - very brief mention of suicide; reference to sexual assault (not relating to any named characters)

Family mottoes - Toujours pur = always pure; Novissima inimica destruetur mors = the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.
I made up the Potter crest, and the Black crest is on the HP Wiki and so fucking badass I can't even handle it.

Bonus points if you spotted the Mighty Boosh reference, and all my love to 'A Marauder's Plan' by CatsAreCool for introducing me to the idea of primacy and being 873k words of some of my fav political discourse in the fandom.
More than just a leitmotif

Chapter Summary

Voldemort would like his horcrux to put some fucking clothes on.

Chapter Notes

Voldemort POV again since the last one was chapter 8, and we get to see him in struggletown. Some negativity results, nothing drastic, but check the CW in the endnotes if you'd prefer to be cautious.

This chapter wrestled with me more than most have so far, Voldemort is far too stubborn for his own damn good, but I'm still really happy with it now it's done. And after a brainwave last night that wouldn't let me sleep a wink, the next one is going to really shake it up a bit.

As always, you wonderful humans are the tops <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was earlier than usual when she appeared in the library that night.

He realised immediately that she must have fallen asleep before getting changed for once. Because she was wearing what looked like a black crochet halter top and some kind of tight, black velvet miniskirt, and he momentarily forgot how to breathe at the very sight of her. Witches really did tend to dress more modestly than other women even in summer, and even in all the awful muggle clothing she'd always had more covered. Her bare legs seemed so long now she wasn't wearing long nightgowns or robes to cover all that smooth, golden-brown skin, though she appeared to have some odd bruises and scrapes on her knees and the front of her calves. Even the ridiculous mess of her dark hair was pulled off her face in thick braids which hung down her back, though some loose curls framed her face so she looked like a doll.

Voldemort was caught entirely off guard by her appearance, thankfully realising he was staring just as she turned to look at him, and managed to school his expression into blandness.

Words dammit, they'd be useful right about now.

"Did you have a good birthday little horcrux?" There we go. "I assume by your shiny new rings that your gift worked as was intended and you made it out into the big, wide world unmolested by any Phoenixes."

His horcrux beamed, her smile so bright it was like looking at the sun. "It really did, thank you so much. The eyes were a nice touch, they made me cry but they were appreciated."

That was a relief, he'd actually had to mull that one over for nearly a whole day after he'd returned from his trip to his Sandanski safehouse to get the bloody thing, before throwing caution to the winds
and just going with his first impulse. He was glad he had too, she seemed happier than she typically did and he was going to chose to believe he was at least partly responsible for it.

"I am glad you liked them. I admit I deliberated, but I know how disgustingly sentimental you are so it seemed appropriate."

She giggled to herself. "That's me."

It really was strangely pleasing to see her looking so happy. "So did the visit to Gringotts go as planned then?"

She trotted over and hopped up to sit sideways on the edge his desk again, holding out her right hand for him to see her Heir rings. "Sure did. Did you ever see anything prettier?"

He took her hand in his own, having to curb his reaction to the warmth which spread between them at the skin contact, bringing it close to his face so he could inspect the rings thoroughly. "They are indeed very lovely, the Black ring especially."

"It really is." She said happily, sighing dreamily as she pulled her hand back to stare at them herself some more. "I feel so much better having them. I mean, I knew I was the heiress already but this really seals the deal, you know?"

He did indeed. "I remember when we first got the Slytherin Heir ring, it was a very affirming moment." Though maybe he wouldn't mention exactly how that momentous occasion had been celebrated, odds were she would be unlikely to agree with him regarding the entertainment value of arson at this point in time.

Harry looked curious. "Do you have the Slytherin Heir ring on you now?"

"I certainly do." Voldemort held up his right hand so she could see the ring on his index finger. It was a thick, antique silver band engraved with the family motto 'Callidus que gloria', with the proudly rearing basilisk crest of his House, and a H on top made of tiny, brilliantly cut emeralds.

"That's really nice." She said, tracing the curve of the basilisk as he allowed her to hold his hand close to study it. "I was worried they would get in the way being as big and detailed as they are, but they must be charmed to not catch on anything."

"The wonders of magic." He drawled, entranced by the newly exposed scarring on the inside of her left forearm which had to be from his basilisk biting her and Pettigrew stealing her blood.

She pouted at him as she relinquished his hand. "Easy for you to laugh mister, you're not the one with approximately an acre of hair which likes to grab hold of everything and make friends with it. Ever since it grew past my shoulders I have literally lost quills in it, that's why I started braiding it in the first place before I began observing family traditions."

"I cannot even begin to imagine how annoying that is." He agreed, because dear Merlin did that sound arduous.

"How does the bracelet even work by the way?" She asked, clearly itching to understand the admittedly glorious runework. "The goblins couldn't see through it at all and they were pissed as hell until I asked for a private meeting room."

He smiled crookedly at her, because her impetuous demand for knowledge was so like them despite the obvious change in face that it was like looking at their younger self. "It is actually a kind of blood glamour, much as I use for my other form. This one is tied to the bracelet though, not one the caster
need maintain themselves. I found it some years ago while travelling, and it seemed a good solution to your little problem."

Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully, though her cheeks were slightly pink for some reason. "Before when we discussed them you said blood glamours were a Dark Art, didn't you?"

Voldemort raised an eyebrow. "Is that a problem?"

She thought about it briefly, before shrugging. "I guess not. As long as you didn't have to sacrifice a goat or a virgin or something for it."

How very interesting. "No, no goats or virgins. Just a minor sacrifice of my own blood."

Harry nodded as if she'd been expecting something like that. "I thought the blood in the grooves looked fresh, it's definitely yours then? Only I've been reading up on runic blood magic in the Black library and I thought that for most blood magic with a personal effect like a glamour you had to use your own blood."

"But of course." He grinned wickedly, still inordinately pleased with himself for having thought up this particularly clever solution. "Normally no one else could have enchanted it for you but I used your blood in my resurrection, remember? So now our blood is the same for most magical purposes."

"How did you get your Heir ring back then?" She asked, head tilted to the side in confusion. "The goblins said Heir rings are returned to the Heir vault when they die. I know you didn't technically die but your body did, and if it had still been there in the house the Aurors would have confiscated it."

He grimaced, because that had been one incredibly long and frustrating meeting at the bank. "I did a blood test as I assume you must have done, and your name actually came up. They called in the bank manager to sort it out, and in the end I had to see one of their shamans for some kind of metaphysical identification ritual. It was both involved and unpleasant."

"That's what you get for being rude and stealing other people's blood without permission you know." She said primly, but he could see the flicker of humour in her eyes. She really must be in a good mood today, references to that particular event were generally more likely to upset her than not.

"It had to be unwilling." He pointed out, because it niggled at him like a loose tooth to not be accurate about such things when it came to ritual magic. "Blood of the enemy unwilling taken, remember? I couldn't exactly have said please and thank you."

Harry just shook her head, braids swaying. "I'm in a good mood so I'm going to overlook your complete lack of boundaries or basic human decency today. Want to hear the rest of the news?"

How magnanimous. "There's more?"

"Oh Merlin yes." She said with a sigh, leaning back on her hands and crossing one leg over the other. "For one I got copies of my account summaries and Circe's tits! I mean, I knew I had money but not this bloody much of it. I've gone from living in someone's cupboard to the point where I could probably support myself comfortably for the next thousand years and still not spend all of it."

He really, really needed to kill her relatives.

"The Blacks are richer than God, everyone knows that." He said, because at least that way he wasn't sharing any of his desire to abduct and torture certain people who would most certainly have it coming. "Not to mention the Potters have always been a merchant family, and had a very tidy fortune built primarily on potions sales and the associated royalties ever since the 12th century when
Linfred of Stinchcombe invented Skele-Gro and Pepper-Up among other things. Even more recently your own great-uncle Fleamont Potter invented Sleekeazy's Hair Potion, and by all accounts quadrupled the family estate when he sold the business.

"Really?" She asked, gobsmacked. "I had no idea about any of that, no wonder Sleekeasy's is the only thing which works on my stupid hair! Though it does make me feel extra bad I'm so useless at Potions."

"I am sure you are not actually that bad. Have you gotten your O.W.L results yet?"

"Not yet, should be any day now though since our book lists usually arrive at the start of August and it should come with them." She sighed dramatically. "It's a good thing I don't want to be an Auror like Ron, because I bet you anything I don't score high enough to get into N.E.W.T Potions."

"I won't take that bet, I refuse to believe my horcrux is a moron."

Harry snorted. "You clearly haven't been talking to Snape then."

"On the contrary my dear, I talk to him about you quite often." He smirked. "Truly I never knew there were so many synonyms for gross incompetence before."

"Yeah that's him." She said with a laugh, before looking thoughtful. "It's funny. I mean, I know he's a spy and all but it's still so damn weird to think of my Potions Professor discussing me with Lord Voldemort. What's even weirder is that both you and Dumbledore know he's a spy, and somehow you're both still confident he's on your side. What's not to say one of you is wrong?"

"Personally, I think we are both wrong actually." He said, always amused at pondering his spy's agenda. "Severus is an astonishingly intelligent man, far more so than most, and I see him as very much playing for his own side in all of this."

She looked confused. "How does that even work?"

Voldemort shrugged. "He likely gives each of us just enough information to curtail an excess of casualties on both sides, and continues to play the middle."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Frankly, it's actually very entertaining." He confessed. "Also, there will come a day when he has to commit to one side or the other or die trying, and I am deeply curious to see which it will be." He suddenly grinned. "Maybe he will even try to play us off against each other, and when one has killed or mortally wounded the other he'll swoop in and attempt to take us both out. That really would be the sensible thing to do, and he is likely the only one who would stand even the slightest chance of succeeding at something like that as he has both the power and the access to us both he would need to accomplish it."

She was staring at him as if he was mad. "You're discussing your spy trying to betray and kill off both you and Dumbledore, and it's making you grin like a loon. Your spy, I feel the need to mention again, who is a bloody school teacher."

"You think Severus is at Hogwarts because he cares about shaping the minds of tomorrow?" The thought was hilarious. "The only way he'd actually find that enjoyable was if every single member of the student body were mute, perfectly behaved, and already knew exactly what they were doing before they even showed up in his classroom."

"Why is he even teaching at Hogwarts then if he hates it?" She asked, clearly exasperated at having
had to put up with him for the last five years if neither of them even wanted him to be there.

He raised an eyebrow at her, wondering if she honestly hadn't figured it out yet. "He is there because despite his prodigious talent for Potions, Dumbledore was one of the only people in Magical Britain who would hire a spy of indeterminate loyalty, and he likes to have his pawns on a very short leash. The Dark thought he'd betrayed them to stay out of Azkaban, which is true, and the Light still thinks he is lying about not really being a Death Eater the whole time, which coincidentally is also true. There is probably no one who is more precariously balanced between the two camps than the two of you, and as a result he is in the curious position of having the keys to all of the doors but being unable to walk through any of them."

"He really doesn't have any other options or choices does he?" She asked quietly. "It's the war or nothing."

"That is correct." He said, because by now it really was a forgone conclusion. "Severus sold himself to two different masters when he wasn't much older than you are, and neither of us are the type to give refunds on such a transaction. No, my dear spy is in this for the long haul, just as we are. Odds are good he will win the war for whoever ends up ultimately having his loyalty, though it is even more likely that regardless of whether he does or not he still won't survive it."

"That's kind of sad actually."

Well that was a curious reaction. "I thought you hated him?"

"I do." She agreed. "He's a bully and a self-righteous arsehole, but I can still feel sympathy for someone without having to like them."

"You are doing that thing where you have a functioning sense of empathy again aren't you?" He noted, nose screwing up in distaste. "Nasty business if you ask me, gets in the way of rational thinking."

"Thank you Sherlock Holmes." She said, rolling her eyes. "But back to what I was saying before you put me in the weird freaking position of feeling sorry for Snape of all people, it turns out a bunch of people left me stuff in their will for defeating you."

That actually made him laugh. "Is that so? That is actually quite amusing all things considered."

"The irony didn't escape me either, but that's not all." She said dryly. "Apparently the last Lord Pyrites didn't want his family involved in the war but they joined you anyway, so he disinherit them and left me absolutely everything. Not only that he formally surrendered to the Noble House of Potter, so once I'm seventeen I have to decide what happens to his House."

"Oh goodness, my Death Eater Symeon Pyrites already knew he was disinherit but he will be furious when he hears about this." He observed, eyes gleaming. "I don't think there's been a formal surrender between Houses in two hundred years, when the Once Noble House of Crouch surrendered to the House of Blythe after an especially nasty feud, giving them their Noble title in the process."

"Yeah the goblins said it was uncommon."

Voldemort snorted. "If by 'uncommon' you mean 'has now only happened three times in our entire history' then yes, I suppose they are correct."

It was incredible how wide those big green eyes could get when she was surprised by something. "Oh wow. I wondered why I had no idea Houses could even do that before today."
"Noble Houses can at least, Ancient Houses are inviolate." And thank Merlin and Morgana for that kindness. "The Pyrites were very influential prior to the last war, and allied strongly with both the Neutrals and the Traditionalist movement. Do you know what you will do? The simple thing would be to simply do as the first Lord Blythe did and abolish their name, taking their seat and their estate for the House of Potter so you'd get an extra vote on the Wizengamot."

She shrugged, fiddling with her Heir rings. "I'm really not sure. It would be the easy thing to do yeah, but not necessarily the right thing. The late Lord Pyrites was clearly honourable if he surrendered to make restitution and it would make me feel bad if his name was lost, especially since he gave it to me not knowing the full details of my situation or your so-called 'defeat'. Apparently there's a muggle-raised, halfblood Hufflepuff at Hogwarts who is his illegitimate grandson, so I'll either claim the title by conquest and eventually pass it down to someone, or see if he was interested in getting his inheritance and becoming a vassal to the House of Potter."

"I could see a vassal House being useful, not only do you get annual tithes but you get primacy which means they're essentially your subordinates, you even get the final say in their marriages. I believe the Houses of Crabbe and Goyle are vassals of the Noble House of Malfoy, if that is any evidence as to the usefulness of having minions. The House might be down to the one member right now, but give it a couple of generations of proper management and they'd be back to a position of strength. Not to mention, if the members ever did all die the House would revert back to your direct control anyway, so it's not like you would lose out."

"I don't think I like the idea of having flunkies like that." She said, making a face. "I get enough people deferring to me and it's weird as hell."

"Really?" His lip quirked as he suppressed the urge to grin. "I find it quite gratifying."

"Well that's pretty damn obvious." She scoffed. "If I hadn't been all, you know, tied to a gravestone and terrified at the time of your resurrection, I probably would have burst out laughing when you began grandstanding for your Death Eaters. Who I might add were barely paying attention because they were too busy trying so damn hard not to piss themselves."

"I was not grandstanding." This was revenge for the unwilling blood comment earlier, he just knew it.

The brat actually laughed at him. "You were monologuing like the villain in a movie who spills all his secrets to the intrepid hero just before they escape. That was me by the way, in case it wasn't already clear. You on the other hand were the noseless creep in swooping black robes quite literally cackling at your evil minions in a graveyard."

Goddammit. Can't a man have one good fucking day without being harassed for it later by his mouthy, adolescent horcrux?

"I confess I was somewhat...overwhelmed when I was first resurrected." It damn if it wasn't loathsome admitting it to another person. "And that it made me slightly irrational until I could once again find a suitable equilibrium with my physical senses and reactions."

She snorted inelegantly. "You mean you were mad as a hatter and completely incapable of reigning in your raving homicidal impulses? For a good while too if the reports we got were anything to go by."

"I would like to see you return to corporeal form after more than a decade as a wraith and do a better job of re-acclimating to suddenly having dopamine and endorphins again." He snapped, not enjoying the reminder of the months he'd spent in a near-constant state of mania.
She just grinned. "I'll pass thanks." Then she paused, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. "Say, Voldemort?"

"His kingdom for a muzzle. "What is it Harry?"

Her face looked reflective, pensive, but he could see the wicked humour in her eyes. "If anything happened to kill me temporarily and I ended up as some kind of gross demon baby like you did before you could make me a nice new body again, would you still like me?"

"Harry." He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"It's a serious question."

"Why on earth would you think I like you?" He hated he couldn't even pretend he wouldn't make a body for her like she had rightly assumed he would, it was infuriating.

"Because while you hate nearly everybody, I'm your horcrux and therefore kind of part of you, and you're narcissistic enough that you couldn't hate yourself even if you tried." She smirked at him. "Plus you gave me an incredibly old, incredibly powerful, and incredibly pretty piece of jewelry for my birthday. It even has bones of indeterminate origin stained with your own blood on it and everything, I hear that's quite the overture coming from you Dark magic types."

Well she had him there, the absolute menace. And she didn't even know he'd gone all the way to bloody Bulgaria to get it for her.

"I am sure I don't know what you mean." Dear Merlin, even he had to admit that sounded pitifully defensive.

"Ha ha, Lord Voldemort likes Harry Potter." She sang while kicking her legs, cackling in glee and sounding ever so slightly like Bellatrix that it was jarring. "Ten points to Gryffindor."

He glared at her disdainfully, the glare which usually reduced adversaries and hardened criminals alike to quivering wrecks. "I don't like anyone. You are my horcrux and as such we are stuck with each other, what with the whole immortal soul business, so I am simply making the best of it."

She was still grinning, completely unbothered by his glare or even having a furious Dark Lord at her back, and was staring out at the rest of the library without a care in the world. "See I would have said that too, but I was thinking about it a lot today after I got home from the bank. And everything that's happened over the last month and a half? Literally the only explanation which makes even a lick of sense is if you actually found my company vaguely enjoyable and liked having me around."

"Is that why you are still sitting on my desk?" He asked waspishly, quite carefully not thinking about anything at all to do with licking. "Usually by this point you have gotten up in arms about something or other and retreated to your armchair."

"There's another point in my favour actually. The armchair, you know, the one which only exists in your mindpalace? It's mine. So much so that when you had to come sit down with me for serious talk time you didn't push me off, or even conjure up a big dumb throne for yourself. You just made yourself a second one just like it so we could talk, arguably as equals."

Lesser witches and wizards had surely burst into flames from how hard he was glaring at her, but she just looked increasingly smug. "I was being polite. I may be a Dark Lord but I am not an ill-mannered barbarian."

"And while you've been busy being polite, I've been exercising that other quintessentially British
impulse to plant a flag somewhere ridiculous and claim part of your territory for myself. And you let me." She grinned back over her shoulder at him, braids swinging across her bare shoulders. "If it wasn't very clear by the way, the flag was my arse."

The arse in question which was still sitting on his fucking desk.

Her pert, Quidditch toned arse, which was perched on top of a memory of a fucking first edition copy of 'Magick Moste Evile' by Godelot without a fucking care in the world, and still he had to forcibly restrain himself from finding out firsthand if the velvet was as soft as it looked. And while he had an itemised list of everything he had to get through first before he could even start to think of something like that, the thought was proving to be annoyingly persistent.

"Are you purposefully trying to provoke me today, or is it just a happy coincidence?" Because if she kept this up he was either going to Crucio her or spank her, and either way he refused to be held responsible for his actions.

"It's a gift." Was the mock-solemn reply, because of course it was.

He sneered at her. "A gift? What is the returns policy then I wonder for one Saviour of the Magical World, sans limbs?"

"Noblesse oblige Voldemort." She replied breezily, feet kicking lazily through the air again and still not having the decency to at least pretend to be intimidated. "For the privilege of being this fucking delightful, it is my responsibility to share it with the world."

The absolute cheek of her. "Your contribution to society is so noted."

Apparently sick of craning her neck to watch his humiliation, she wiggled around to face him and sit cross-legged on his desk. It made him notice the bruises again, and he couldn't stop himself from enquiring about them. "What happened there, did you have to wrestle with the goblins before they would give you the blood test?"

She rolled her eyes. "Not that I'm not always up for some wrestling, but I was wearing stays at the time. Dressing like a Pureblood lady means your outfit really isn't conducive to physical exertion."

Voldemort almost dreaded to ask. "Stays?"

She winked at him. "Corset looking thing, only a bit less fancy and hour-glassy. Because the magical world isn't just old-fashioned, it's literally still wearing fashion from three centuries ago."

Fantastic. That was just bloody fantastic.

"I cannot believe you would go from dressing respectably to looking like this all in the space of a day." His arms were folded across his chest as he leaned back in his chair to create a little more distance, perilously close to losing his cool but refusing to let it show.

Harry scowled at him as she leaned her hands behind herself on his desk again. "It was hot as hell today you prat, the house's built-in Cooling Charms only work up to a point and I can't do them wandlessly yet. By the time I got home I needed out of all those damn layers, and then I was out working in the garden. That's how I ended up with all the bruises by the way, not that it's your business."

"You didn't think it might be a good idea to heal them, or did you just like the colour?" Having said that he then couldn't help but note that the bruises really were a good look on her. Merlin, he was losing his mind.
"If you must know I was going to take a bath and soak in some Murtlap Essence before bed." She huffed. "But then I fell asleep reading in my sitting room."

"And here I thought maybe you dressed like a muggle harlot just to annoy me." He sneered venomously, reaching his absolute limit for both frustration thanks to her overall lack of undress this evening and also being flustered by her presence and her bruises and her mentioning of her undergarments or lack thereof, and no longer caring in the least if he was being a bastard.

Her right foot immediately lashed out to kick him in the shoulder, and Voldemort was so shocked that someone was actually *kicking him* (how long had it been, surely no one since they'd be in their fifth year at Hogwarts had been quite so fucking stupid) that he caught her ankle as she came in to do it a second time and just stared incredulously at her. Then stared some more as the fact belatedly registered that him holding her leg up in the air like he was had inadvertently given him a clear view right up her indecently short skirt.

Harry seemed to realise it about the same time as he did and then they were both frozen, him still in shock and her in growing horror, as neither of them moved and her face got as red as her red cotton knickers with little yellow lions on them.

Before either of them could say anything or even work out how the hell they could possibly extricate themselves from their current predicament, she shimmered and vanished. Apparently she'd gotten so mortified that she'd actually woken herself up. Which was probably for the best all things considered, because he had no fucking idea what he was supposed to have done next after all of that.

It didn't matter in the least that she was part of his soul and should therefore not be such a bloody mystery, there truly was nothing more fragile, ephemeral, and impossible as a teenage girl.

Chapter End Notes

CW - Voldemort gets slut-shamey which is very rude and 110% not what I'm about personally, but it really is unavoidable when you consider he grew up in the prudey 30s and then entered the magical world, land of full body robes for all genders, and has absolutely no idea how to handle his attractive, half-naked horcrux.

'Callidus que gloria' - Cunning and ambition

Ps. I'm using stays here to refer to the general style of structured undergarment in use in the 16th-17th century, as opposed to the general style used in the 18th-19th century which are usually called corsets. I have legit studied and taught fashion history and even I'm aware it's an approximation, just go with it.
Days before you came

Chapter Summary

An the aftermath of their last encounter Harry makes a discovery which changes the balance of power between the two of them, and Voldemort sends her flowers.

Chapter Notes

So this chapter is suuuuper long but I just couldn't find a good place to cut it, so you just get more to read than usual. Such a disappointment huh? This one mixes it up a little and alternates POV throughout the fic but you'll get why and it makes sense I promise.

~"Text in italics like this is Parseltongue"~

Doing yoga at three in the morning might seem strange, but when the alternative was facing a Dark Lord who you'd recently flashed in truly spectacular fashion you got creative purely out of self defense.

Harry was trying to keep herself awake for the third night in a row and, delirium aside, not doing a great job of it. Far too late she had realised that her visits to the library usually happened on average every three to five nights, and if she wanted to avoid him more then it would have been much smarter to sleep the first night or two before starting to chug coffee after dinner and do time-consuming thread magic or obsessively exercise to keep herself up all night.

So far she'd made a skirt (not another miniskirt like the last one that's for damn sure), four pairs of enchanted socks (because a girl could never have enough magic socks), and a first, shaky attempt at a robe from scratch (mixed results on that one), and was probably on her way to being the fittest she'd ever been in her life if she kept this up.

It had also occurred to her in that special way nonsensically logical things only occur to you in the weird limbo between far too late and far too early, in those vivid moments of startling clarity, that a more permanent solution would be to simply start sleeping during the day when Voldemort was much more likely to be awake.

She finished doing the yoga routine that Parvati had taught their dorm in fourth year for the sixth time in a row and collapsed on the rug in a sweaty heap to get her breath back. Immediately she remembered yet again, in infuriating detail, just how scandalised Voldemort had looked while holding her ankle in the air and getting a view straight up main street to her Gryffindor knickers, and she buried her burning face in her hands.

That was the last time she agreed to go clothes shopping in Hogsmeade alone with Luna, who had seen the matching Ravenclaw ones and declared they had to both get a pair to make sure the Blibbering Humdingers couldn't see them. Harry suspected she just didn't want to get a pair by herself, but they were cute so she had indulged her and not thought much further about it. Especially
considering how disastrously her attempt to date Cho had gone, it wasn't like anyone was going to be in a position to see under her robes anytime soon after all.

No one that is, except the absolute worst person in the entire world to see them.

Honestly, even accidentally flashing Umbridge would have been better, she'd have just lectured Harry on being more ladylike and made her do lines with her awful quill. Surely being made to write 'I must not be a tramp' until it scarred you permanently couldn't be as bad as giving the Dark Lord an eyeful of your unmentionables. Even Snape would have been marginally better, if for no other reason than the fact he only saw her as a Potter-shaped annoyance no matter what she did meant he would just sneer and give her a detention as usual.

That's it, Harry decided, if she made it through tonight without sleeping, or failing that without ending up in the library, she was going to become nocturnal. Bats and foxes did it and they turned out fine, surely teenage witches being pursued by Dark Lords could too, right? Harry had no idea how she'd keep it up when school went back, but she was stubborn and she had a Hermione. If anyone could work out how to make sure she never slept at night until either forever or Voldemort was dead, it was her.

Without any warning or permission at all, her traitorous chest decided to pick that exact moment to feel wounded and raw, all but cracked open by the force of her visceral reaction to the thought of him being dead.

"Oh crap."

***

A Death Eater was writhing on the ground under his wand, his screams echoing beautifully off of the elegantly embossed wall paneling of the Malfoy's ballroom, and he couldn't even enjoy it properly.

Voldemort was concerned, and he absolutely hated it.

Four nights after the Velvet Skirt Incident he'd returned to the library figuring he'd given her long enough to stop blushing, only for her not to show. Remembering the last time it had happened he'd even checked the lunar calendar when he woke up, but it wasn't a full moon or even a new moon or any kind of magically significant moon at all. The following night she hadn't shown up either, or the night after that, or the one after that, and he was very quietly starting to panic.

A night or two could be explained away by insomnia or embarrassed avoidance, but it had been over a week now and most humans couldn't go that long with no sleep without dying or going mad. There was no way she could be dead without him knowing, so she was either mad, someone had taken her and interrupted their link, or she had worked out how to block their connection somehow and was purposefully avoiding him. He couldn't decide which possibility was scaring him more.

To combat the entirely unwelcome feelings of powerlessness he'd stepped up the amount of raids he sent his Death Eaters on, often tagging along with his real face hidden behind the obscurity of a white mask so he could cut lose and vent his frustration without having to worry about maintaining his image.

And while the adrenalin-soaked release of violence did help with the worst of it, it didn't do anything to help the actual situation itself. With her somehow evading his attempts to dreamshare and no
closer to finding her physically than he had been at the start of the summer, he was at an
uncharacteristic loss as to what to do next. He'd even asked some of his unoccupied followers to
keep an eye on Diagon Alley and even Hogsmeade for her blood glamoured form, not because he
actually expected her to be that stupid but because it was the closest he could get to actually doing
something constructive that didn't involve sending her a letter like some fawning teenager.

Time was running out too, soon she'd be back at Hogwarts and if she was still able to keep him out
there was almost no chance he'd be able to get through to her. And if he couldn't, all his plans were
dead in the water.

The Death Eater was unconscious by now and he reluctantly stopped his Crucio, turning to the
others kneeling in terror at his feet.

"All right, who wanted to give me bad news next?"

***

Thanks to her new lifestyle of being an urban fox and making Dobby promise to dump water on her
if she fell asleep between the hours of 10 p.m. and 10 a.m. (so far it had happened twice and both
times she'd given him a few Sickles and told him to buy a new pair of socks for himself), it had been
over two weeks since she'd been to the library. She'd finished so many clothing alterations and
projects that she'd been able to start using a second section of her stupidly big wardrobe, and had
definitely never been more flexible.

The only issue now was the bleed-through.

She'd felt restless from about the one week mark, but every day since then it had built and built until
now it felt like a constant thunderstorm raging in her bones. It didn't take a genius to work out
Voldemort was panicking. Of course most of the time he just felt murderous, nothing really odd
there, until she realised this level of murderous had been either less frequent or at least reduced since
they had begun to dream together. The Daily Prophet at the beginning of summer had been loudly
predicting an immediate escalation of raids and attacks now that the return of the Dark Lord had been
confirmed but had been proven wrong, and next they had began wondering if it was just the calm
before the storm.

Well the storm had arrived, sweeping across the country like an oil spill, and Harry didn't know how
to feel that it coincided exactly with her sudden avoidance of the Dark Lord.

Then there were the moments, usually in the few hours after dawn when she was fighting to stay
awake for just a little longer, when out of nowhere she'd feel such a dizzying rush of panic and fear
that she could have drowned in it, made her gasp for breath until she was lightheaded as if she was
on the verge of having a panic attack. It also didn't take a genius to put together that it was
Voldemort waking up after yet another night of not seeing her, and royally freaking out.

The thought of him in that big, quiet library waiting for her every night made more of that desolate
feeling in her chest happen, the feeling that she was resolutely ignoring. Whenever she was too
conflicted with just her own guilt for company, she outsourced it by re-reading all the copies of the
paper she'd started saving which mentioned the mayhem and destruction his Death Eaters were
inflicting on the public, and tried not to wonder why there had been no confirmed sightings of him in
public since his duel with Dumbledore in the Atrium.
The initial embarrassment from their last dream had long since faded, utterly inconsequential in light of the realisation and carnage which had followed. Sure Voldemort seeing her knickers was mortifying but it wasn't life-ending (with the insanity of the life she'd led Harry had a high tolerance for the many and varied ways she was clearly the punchline of some great cosmic joke), and she'd probably have gotten over it after sulking in the library reading Fomalhauta's book for an hour and yelling at him for a bit, because as much as she hated to admit it being around him was weirdly relaxing.

Fucking horcrux realignment bullshit.

No, the thing keeping her up every night without fail was her delirious, sleep-deprivation induced realisation that she honestly didn't want the evil arsehole to die.

To combat this blatant insanity she tried to remind herself that Voldemort wasn't just the intelligent, pleasantly sarcastic psychopath in her dreams, that he was the heartless monster who had nearly destroyed Magical Britain before she had unwittingly stopped him, the flashing green light which had haunted her dreams for as long as she could remember. Not only that he was also her prophesised adversary, made of malice and Dark magic for the express purpose of death and destruction.

But it wasn't quite true was it? He might be all of those things yes, but he was also much more complicated than that. And if what he'd been hinting at had even a fraction of truth to it then there was something bigger at work which she desperately needed to understand.

She'd gotten an owl back from the publisher in Germany saying they didn't have a copy of Fomalhauta's book but had given her a list of stores who might still have it in stock, which she'd then sent off another round of letters to mostly via international owl again in order to try and hunt the elusive book down. Right now though, the only copy she could access was in the library, which bought her back to square one on that front.

Her O.W.L results had even arrived and she'd done amazingly well considering how much of a mess exam time had been, but even that hadn't cheered her up because of course her first bloody thought had been to tell Voldemort she hadn't gotten an O in Potions, just like she'd predicted.

There was also the matter of her accidental discovery that touching or wearing the locket took the worst of the edge off of the crawling ache of withdrawal. Because that's what it was really, it felt disturbingly similar to temporarily giving up caffeine with Hermione because they'd discovered the jet fuel which was magical coffee and it had made them both so jittery they couldn't sit through their classes without causing their desks to shake like there was a very localised pair of desk earthquakes, and much like that short-lived attempt she had been unable to stop herself from wearing the bloody thing around. He'd told her it opened if you talked to it in Parseltongue, but remembering the diary and how easy it had been to talk to she didn't dare.

Harry knew she couldn't keep avoiding him forever, but she had no idea what to do next.

Voldemort stared at Number 4 Privet Drive from across the street.

There were three Privet Drives in Surrey he had discovered once she'd let it slip in conversation and
deduced that it had to be the address of her muggle relatives. And after checking each one personally while once again wearing the anonymous robe and mask of a Death Eater, just in case there was anyone on guard who could see through Disillusionment Charms, he'd finally found the only one with the tattered remains of once-powerful blood wards around one of the houses.

It was ugly, a bland two-story made of even blander brick, and identical to all the other houses on the street and the streets beyond it in that nightmarish way that suburban muggles seemed to favour despite all sensible arguments to the contrary. Honestly the thought of her growing up here was about as repugnant as their childhood in Wool's Orphanage, and at least that had been in London.

There was no car in the driveway despite the late hour, no lights on inside, so he figured that her muggle relatives were away for whatever reason. Probably being boring somewhere else just as awful as this place knowing muggles.

Crossing the road and over what had once been the main wardline, he ignored the driveway and instead walked over the grass on his way to the door, wand waving silently as he suppressed the few remaining alert wards so he wouldn't be interrupted quite so soon. He felt the faintest wisps of her magic in the well-tended front yard as he passed, remembering her comments about rosebushes and the gardening she did constantly whenever she was home for the summer. It showed too, any plants or animals tended long-term as they had been by a witch would passively absorb her magic, growing stronger and more vibrant than their mundane counterparts.

Inside was hell.

It was narrow, an odd combination of cluttered and sterile, and the small ball of witchfire he conjured in his free hand revealed a small mound of letters on the doormat under the mail slot, giving credence to the idea the occupants were currently absent. They were exceedingly fortunate if that was the case, he was not in the mood to be merciful to anyone, let alone to them.

When he lifted the bottom of his mask up to flick his tongue out and taste the air properly, he actually gagged on the overpowering scent of cleaning chemicals, sweat, over processed food, and plastic. His skin crawled at how artificial it felt, how dead it all was. None of the wood and metal and stone of magical architecture which felt so alive and welcoming, just so many types and configurations of cheap particleboard covered in various artificial veneers that he lost count. Even all the upholstery and curtains were synthetic creations, their fibres spun from giant mechanical spinnerets out of processed and refined petrochemicals to simulate real cotton and wool, and failing utterly.

Voldemort hunched over, supporting himself with thankfully gloved hands on the railing of the stairs, and thought about all the zooplankton and algae that had lived in the primordial lakes and seas which had covered the earth long before humans ever existed. How over eons in their graveyards deep underground they fossilised into petroleum, before their first exhumation to be the mortar of the walls and towers of Babylon, and then later as one of the muggle's many poisonous solutions for powering their doomed civilisation without the clean energy of magic. For fuck's sake, for years now he had personally practiced necromancy on a semi-regular basis, and he still didn't understand how the hell the muggles could live so comfortably surrounded by so much reeking fucking decay.

Then he thought of his horcrux, his soul, growing up here amidst the shiny plastic death and toxic suburban carcinogens, and he wanted nothing more than to burn the world to ashes for the blasphemy of it.

Never before had he been more grateful for the anonymity granted by his precaution of moving about in disguise unless he was making a statement to his followers or to the public, the idea of someone barging in right now and seeing Lord Voldemort not even three paces into this godsforsaken house and this bloody shaken was unacceptable.
Steeling himself, he tasted the noxious air again as he cast a detection spell to try and find any lingering traces of her magic. His spell registered something upstairs in what he assumed was her bedroom and the cupboard under the stairs, where she had said her school things were usually kept during the summer. Deciding to try the bedroom first and sneering at all the unmoving pictures of the ugly muggle family he passed, he followed the beacon of her magic until he found a door.

A door with seven locks.

On the outside.

He snarled, feeling his fangs throb and the burn of venom in his mouth, and Vanished the entire door and part of the wall it was built into with a sharp wave of his wand. The bedroom was tiny, full of broken and discarded things, which said far more about how her relatives treated his horcrux than about her own habits. She had told him in passing about how much housework she regularly did here, as well as the way she had spent almost the entirety of her first month in the Black townhouse cleaning and fixing it up from top to bottom. There was no way her room would be this trashed unless they had explicitly wanted it that way.

He went back downstairs so he didn't lose his barely restrained temper, but opening the cupboard door once he got there was the last straw. It wasn't big enough to keep even a medium sized dog humanely let alone a child, let alone a magical child, let alone someone as precious as her. Because she had been kept in here, locked in here, the brooms and mops and dust not concealing the tiny mattress shoved inside against the wall.

Her offhand comment early on in the summer about how she at least had a window to open to air now unlike when she was younger suddenly had a new and terrible context.

Kneeling down to look closer, barely able to fit his head and shoulders inside, he ran a shaking hand over the cot. The layer of dust moved by the action revealed what even in the low light he could tell were bloodstains that had never quite washed out. Lifting his mask again to taste the air for a third and final time he smelled the unmistakable sweet iron of old blood, her precious magical blood which could trace it's lineage back to the founding of Rome, mingled with the saltiness of an ocean's worth of tears, and seemingly endless years of misery and hopelessness.

As a rule he never regretted or apologised for anything, to anyone or for any reason, but the thought he'd been partially responsible for condemning her to grow up here was an unsettling one. Was it simply because she was his horcrux and he felt covetous of her and disliked her being kept poorly, or did it just make him think so much of their childhood long past that he was able to experience an incredibly rare show of empathy?

Back on his feet again he decided he'd seen more than enough, killing his ball of witchfire and pointed his wand at the cursed cupboard under the stairs, the prison which still smelt like her blood and despair years later it had sunk in so deeply, and created Fiendfire instead. A roaring basilisk made of flames erupted from his wand, his own burning rage perfectly expressed by the elemental fury of his magic as it ate away at everything it touched. He directed it to fill the ground floor of the house before starting to lick it's way up the stairs and through the ceiling to the next floor, blasting out a shockwave of raw power that smashed every window to allow more oxygen so it would burn hotter and faster, and as it did he felt a warm exhilaration which almost equaled that of her presence.

Once he was outside he picked one of her roses, holding the perfectly white flower up to his nose so the sweet perfume and witchmagic drowned out the acrid smell of burning plastic. Fire was devouring the disgusting building, the brick exterior turning into a chimney as it burnt up. He thought again of those long dead seas and wondered if there had been magic in the world even then, or if this was the first time the corpses of those microscopic creatures felt what it was like to finally be
purified by its splendour in their long overdue funeral pyre.

Before turning to leave he surveyed the burning house one last time, wondering what Harry was going to say when she found out what he'd done for her, before casting the Dark Mark into the sky to make sure there was no mistaking what had happened here tonight. The blazing red flames licked up past the roof into the night sky like they were reaching for the gods themselves for salvation, and instead only found the acid green, rictus grin of his symbol laughing down at them mercilessly.

For the first time in weeks, he smiled.

***

After a restless few hours of sleep and waking up late in the afternoon, Harry headed downstairs to make some tea when she ran into Dobby where he was polishing the already spotless bannister.

"Black Lady Harry Potter!" He said, beaming up at her. "A big black owl be coming here early this morning, had post for yous he did. A lot of other letters came afters too, Dobby checked for tricks but they was okay."

Oh shit. She only knew one person with a black owl, looks like Voldemort had finally gotten sick of the radio silence and written to her. She'd expected it eventually of course, especially with it only being about a week to go until September 1st, but she was still surprised that he'd been the one to give in first.

Sitting on the kitchen table at her usual seat was a black envelope and a huge white rose of all things, sitting on top of another small pile of letters. She smelt it as she picked it up so she could get to the envelope underneath, seeing that it wasn't just a single rose but a little bouquet also containing an oleander, a belladonna, a fraxinella, and a small sprig of yew, tied together neatly with a black ribbon. She hated that he was being charming while almost certainly saying something awful in Victorian flower language if she was remembering things correctly, and couldn't help but notice the rose looked and even smelt like one of the varieties Aunt Petunia had growing in her front yard, only a bit smoky.

Exactly like them actually, come to think of it.

Blood suddenly running cold, she put down the ominous flowers and opened up the envelope with shaking hands.

Inside was just a newspaper clipping from the front page of today's *Daily Prophet*, with the headline 'Muggles in Surrey attacked by You-Know-Who!' over a moving black and white photograph of a burning house with the leering malevolence of the Dark Mark above it. It took full seconds for her to process that the house, which really was more fire than building by the point the photograph had been taken, was the one she'd grown up in.

Harry barely made it to the downstairs bathroom before she was throwing up.

***
Voldemort paced his library impatiently. He knew she'd gotten his message, the bleed-through of panicked horror he'd felt this afternoon was the most emotion he'd felt from her in weeks. It had taken all his self-control to not sleep earlier than usual, knowing that if she did indeed show up tonight it wouldn't be early anyway.

Finally after what felt like hours she appeared, wearing lilac silk pajamas with full length pants instead of a nightgown and a furious glare that would have even made a nundu hesitate. He didn't even say anything and neither did she, just stalked right up to him as he strode over to meet her in the middle and, completely ignoring their height difference and all common sense, pulled her arm back and punched him square in the face.

Voldemort didn't even flinch, just ignored the surprising amount of pain in his jaw and grabbed the offending hand, yanked her forward until she was pressed flush against him. She was hissing and spitting like a cat but he had over a foot of height on her, not to mention Merlin only knew how much muscle mass, and just bodily picked her up despite her increasingly vocal protests. Carrying her over to the fireplace he all but collapsed into his chair, because not once in the last month had he been able to bring himself to sit in hers, and despite her thrashing and calling him every name under the sun he just bundled her up into a ball of enraged witch and buried his face in her hair.

"Don't you ever do that to me again." He growled, restraining her struggling limbs so she couldn't separate them again.

"To you?" She snarled right back, clearly very aware that between his firm hold and the opiate effect of their conjoined soul in proximity to itself there was no way she was extricating herself, but still giving it her best shot. "You're the one who decided passive-aggressive arson was the solution to all your problems you fucking bastard!"

"I know." It amazed him how small she actually was. With her force of personality being what it was it usually felt like she took up an entire room, but curled up like this all of her fit so easily on his lap. "Nobody died so you can't even hold that against me, though if they had the animals would have no one to blame but themselves."

"That's not for you to decide!"

"Of course it is. They hurt you, that was unforgivable."

"I don't forgive them either, but that doesn't mean you get to be the one to pass judgement for it. How dare you!"

~"I thought something terrible happened and I had lost you."~ He said in Parseltongue, face still hidden in her hair, because saying it out loud in a language other people could understand even in the privacy of their dreams was too much, left him feeling far too exposed. True he hadn't heard of anyone being able to see the memories of dreams either via Legilimency or Pensieve before, but with magic there was a first time for everything.

She huffed, a sharp, violent exhalation. But he could feel her muscles ease either from the warmth of their connection or because she was struggling to retain her anger in the face of his shameful confession. Likely a little of both.

"I know you treat interpersonal relationships as war zones and conversations as just another kind of armed conflict, but that isn't going to work with me. You marked me as your equal, remember?" She said eventually, poking his forehead much harder than was called for so he would sit up and look her in the eye. "That means as long as we're fighting each other we're a zero sum game. The only winning move is to be more evolved than that and change the terms of engagement."
He tried to imagine a life not spent fighting against anything and everything the world could throw at him, either for glorious purpose or purely out of spite, and failed utterly.

"I don't think I have ever been anything but a battlefront of one kind or another Harry." He confessed.

She snorted. "Yeah I could tell that from the increase in Death Eater activity and how you burnt my relative's house down, you drama queen."

Voldemort scowled at her. "It is just so...frustrating."

"What is?"

"How imprecise words can be. We used to be the same, there was harmony and unity of purpose in everything we did. And now I struggle to simply find words to reach you, and even then you are more likely to disagree with me than not."

"Me being your horcrux..." She paused, picking her words carefully. "That means a lot of things Voldemort, but it isn't a guarantee. When you chose to rip me out of you, you lost the right to decide what I do or say. It isn't just because I'm a contrary bitch either, it's because despite our mutual origin point I'm separate from you now. Is there even any way to, I don't know, re-assimilate a horcrux again?"

"Remorse." He said. "The only way to reabsorb a horcrux is if you feel complete, genuine remorse for the murder which created it."

"Well there you go then, the only way I'm going to be you again is if you manage to feel so much remorse for killing baby Harriet Potter that you reabsorb my horcrux." She raised an eyebrow. "So, any chance of that happening anytime soon?"

Even though he knew it was impossible for so many different reasons, Voldemort still took the time to consider it. Imagined being able to have her so deeply inside him again that she could never leave, about having the warmth of her presence with him always.

About never seeing her smile again. Never saving the world.

~"As much as it was an accident, and regardless of how much you infuriate and confuse me at times, I don't think I could ever regret making you."~ He sighed, retreating again to Parseltongue.

Because however much you vex me, he refused to say aloud, it has become very clear that I need you, and maybe not just for the reasons I thought I did.

"I despise this weakness." He said instead, because really it meant the exact same thing.

~"Needing other people isn't a weakness."~ She said softly, the very first time he'd heard her speak their shared language himself, and it made him shudder just a little. ~"Human beings come in all kinds, but we were never meant to be alone."~

"Then why did you leave?" Voldemort snapped before he could register how pathetic it sounded and stop himself. "And don't pretend it was simply embarrassment or an excess of girlish modesty, because I am not a fool."

Harry was quiet. "While I was freaking out in the days after the dream I kind of worked out a way to stay away, so I did. At first because I was embarrassed but mainly because I needed some space, some time to think. You know, you have this way of eating up all the air in a room, and everything
else too if you can manage it. We might be stuck with one another and you might not be entirely awful to be around some of the time, but I'm still not going to let you control or overwhelm me Voldemort."

He chose to focus on the important part of her words. "Tell me how you found a way to circumvent our connection." So I can work around it, went unsaid.

She just smiled. "No. First of all it's out of your control entirely anyway, and secondly I think it'll be good for you to not get your way about everything."

It was then he realised it had never actually occurred to him before now just how the power of their situation had been weighted so strongly in his favor, their dreams always happening without her input or consent. He was so used to being in control of all aspects of his life and in all of his dealings with other people it hadn't registered she might resent it. Because Harry was just like him, self-reliant to an extent most weren't, and having to put up with Dumbledore and the Order and most of Magical Britain trying to dictate her every action to boot. Frankly, he was now just surprised it had taken her so long to act out and reassert her independence.

"It was never my explicit intent to make you feel powerless." On the contrary, she had so much fucking power over him if it was anyone else he would have killed her long before now in self-preservation, which maybe was why he hadn't realised how it could look from her perspective.

"It doesn't matter it's not what you intend, it's still what you did." She pointed out dryly. "But we'll say you're being sincere, so let's compromise. You Slytherin's like that sort of thing, right? I'll agree to not pull a vanishing act for so long again, but in return you have to agree to accept when I do need my space without flipping out."

He could see the logic to her request but that didn't mean he had to like it. "And what am I supposed to do if something happens and I need to contact you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Write me a letter like any other sodding human being would. I know your owl can do it, you've sent me a lovely birthday present and a creepy fucking stalker present. Thanks for that by the way, it was suitably horrible."

Voldemort smirked. "You are very welcome little horcrux."

"I can't believe you sent me a threatening message in Victorian flower language." She said in disbelief, clearly still bewildered by that particularly inspired decision on his part. "What, were they all out of 'Sorry I saw your silly knickers, but aren't you taking this all a bit too far?' Hallmark cards or something?"

"What can I say my dear, I was feeling maudlin." He replied, utterly unrepentant because it really had been an excellent idea. "And regardless of what you say about my methods, clearly it worked."

The smile disappeared and she frowned at him. "I'm not always going to reward bad behaviour Voldemort. Creepy bouquets are one thing, if the overall situation were less of a disaster yes it would probably have been hilarious, so please feel free to express any future displeasure in sinister, sarcastic floral arrangements if that's how you get your jollies. But if any of that violent, destructive bullshit happens again I'm going to ignore both it and you for even longer."

He smiled smugly. "You showed up this time, I'm confident you would again."

She shook her head. "No, the only reason I did was because it occurred to me, once I finished throwing up and dealing with all the letters from concerned friends and Order members that is, that
we hadn't ever really discussed boundaries or what our connection means outside of this library. And what with you being the social equivalent of a conquistador that you are it was probably a bad idea."

"What is there to discuss?" He huffed, irritated.

"Voldemort." She said flatly. "Out there, regardless of what technical term you want to give it, a war is brewing and we are currently the figureheads of the two opposing sides of it. While in here I'm currently sitting on your lap in my sodding pajamas, because apparently I'm now the human teddy bear you refuse to let go of after an arson tantrum. Surely you can see how crazy this is?"

For fuck's sake it wasn't anything of the sort, how she possibly accuse him of being so undignified? This was purely to ease the discomfort of their prolonged separation and the most efficient method to encourage their realignment, not to mention a way to make sure she didn't run off again.

Still, the point itself was valid. "Perhaps some clarifications are in order."

"Thank you. Now I think the biggest one is that you don't want me dead anymore." She said, as if she still couldn't believe it herself. "And against all my better judgement and a great deal of effort, it turns out I don't want you to die either."

Well that was unexpected. She wasn't generally the type to scream for blood but she still had a very vindictive sense of justice when wronged, as shown by her recent Cruciating of Bellatrix, a category that logically he should fall into. This though, her explicitly admitting that she wanted him to live? This was something new. And in retrospect it made the last three weeks make a lot more sense.

He raised a mocking eyebrow, purely to annoy her. "I am assuming this was a recent realisation then?"

As predicted she glared daggers at him, though the effect was limited since she was still a little ball of black braids, lilac silk, and grumpiness on his lap. "Yes it was, you mind-reading berk."

His smirked a little at her cranky, half-hearted attempt at insults. "If I was using Legilimency on you my dear, rest assured you would know it."

She huffed a soft laugh, shaking her head but unable to entirely hide a smile. "Yeah I probably would. Can I just say, I hate how hard it is for me to stay mad at you. Of all the people in the world I have the right to be mad at you. Of all the people in the world I have the right to be mad at, surely you're topping the bloody list."

"Realignment." He said dryly. "Personally I find it easy to be mad at you, but then again I find it very easy to be mad at everyone. However, I do struggle with even the idea of punishing you as I would any other who angered me even a fraction as much as you do."

"Which is why you burned Number 4 to the ground." She sighed in resignation. "You couldn't punish me for it and you knew going after my friends would get you more than a punch in the face, so they were the next best thing. How'd you even find it?"

He shrugged. "You have mentioned both Surrey and Privet Drive over the course of our dreamsharing, I just searched every Privet Drive in Surrey until I found it."

Harry rubbed her face tiredly. "I want to be surprised you went to all that effort but I'm really not. You're kind of the king of going the extra yard in order to be a terrible person."

"If something is worth doing, it is worth doing properly." He declared. "I went there knowing I was going to do something to send you a message. But no one was there so I went inside to see for myself where my horcrux grew up, and by the end of that enlightening visit I was left with no option
but to burn it to the ground."

Immediately he felt her stiffen.

"You went inside?" She said quietly, not meeting his eyes and obviously more than aware of exactly what he would have found there.

"The muggle filth were fortunate they were not there when I arrived." He snarled, mind flashing back to seven locks and a dusty little cupboard which had made the back of his mouth taste like her anguish. "One day they will pay dearly for how they treated you Harry. Of that I promise you."

She was quiet, kind of hunched in on herself with her face hidden behind her raised knees, and with the memories of that cupboard still floating around in his head he now suddenly knew why she always sat like this when she was distressed. "Will you also promise not to tell anyone?"

He thought of their orphanage, the way the pity felt worse than the isolation and abuse ever could. How people looked at you when they knew you came from nothing, how you had to prove yourself so much more just to break even.

"Of course little horcrux." He said, readjusting his arms simply to be more comfortable and definitely, certainly not to hug her closer to him. "Not another soul."

Chapter End Notes

Harry: *shows up again*

Voldemort: I thought you weren't coming back ever ever again so I panicked

Harry: *watches the burning debris and sighs*

Also the flowers represented this (at least according to the guide I found):
White rose - innocence/I am worthy of you, also represents Harry
Oleander - beware
Belladonna - silence
Fraxinella - fire
Yew - sorrow, it's also Voldemort's wand wood and represents him

So all together it essentially says 'bitch, you're blowing me off and I'm a bad motherfucker so you really shouldn't, also I burnt down your shit'. Because why be a violent arsehole when you can be symbolic about it to really rub it in. I've always headcanoned Pureblood customs involving Victorian flower language and he'd know she'd understand his meaning without having to use his actual big boy words.

Another fun fact, all coal is the fossilised remains of the early Carboniferous forests, and all petroleum is the fossilised remains of algae and zooplankton just like I said in this, and they really did use it when they built Babylon. Also, excluding some very new bioplastics and recycled textiles, all plastics and even every piece of synthetic clothing etc you wear is made of petroleum, and I really see people being raised in the magical world or zealots like Voldemort finding it all pretty creepy.
The gravity between us will keep us safe

Chapter Summary

Summer is finally over. It’s the night before her return to Hogwarts and time for Harry to swallow some truths she would prefer not to. Because what’s a little drowning between two people who share a soul?

Chapter Notes

Hopefully this a little lighter than the last chapter, though don’t think that means you will miss out on contemplation of the nature of the soul and suggestive approaches to Occlumency training.

Next chapter it’s finally time to head back to Hogwarts, woo! It’s going to be interesting to see how everyone deals with Harry now she has her eyes a lot more open, and to see how the difference Voldemort knowing what she is has had on canon events.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After their weirdly intense reconciliation things returned to as normal as they could be when you were regularly dreamsharing with your arson-inclined arch-nemesis who apparently got aggressively cuddly when you didn't return his calls for a few weeks. Her sleeping schedule was still wrecked but that wasn't exactly anything new, so she just owl-ordered some sleeping potions to force her system into submission and tried her best to ride it out. Thankfully she hadn't been nocturnal for too long, and it wasn't too hard to get back to her usual levels of insomnia.

Clearly trying very hard to prove he had some measure of restraint (as if he hadn't pouted so much at being ignored he'd burned down her relative's house) Voldemort limited himself to only lucid dreaming every two to three days, which was honestly a lot better than she'd expected of the possessive man after three weeks of avoiding him so she didn't complain. Besides it was pretty funny to see him acting as aloof as usual, as if nothing at all was the matter, despite choosing to do all his reading sitting across from her by the fire instead of at his desk. It reminded her so much of Crookshanks when he was annoyed but still wanting attention, that when she’d first had the thought she’d had to pretend to have a coughing fit to avoid explaining to the Dark Lord she was laughing about how much he resembled a grumpy old cat with a squished face.

So now every time it happened she just raised an eyebrow and went back to reading Fomalhauta’s book, knowing he’d get defensive if she bought it up and having to begrudgingly admit to herself that the deliberate proximity was actually helping with the brief setback to their realignment.

She’d also enjoyed finally getting to rub his nose in the fact she’d been right about her Potions O.W.L. after all. Though even he was pleased to hear she’d passed all ten of her exams, getting an Acceptable for Divination, Astronomy, and History of Magic, an Exceeds Expectations for Transfiguration, Herbology, Potions, and Care of Magical Creatures, and an Outstanding for Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Ancient Runes. For Defense and Ancient Runes she’d
even gotten an O+, meaning she was the top of her year for those classes, which would help immensely with convincing Professor Babbling to agree to letting her start her mastery early like they'd been discussing last year.

Of course Voldemort had to be a bastard though and casually mention how he'd gotten straight Os for every single exam he'd ever sat while at Hogwarts, including an inhuman twelve sodding O.W.Ls and seven N.E.W.Ts, but she refused to let him rain on her parade. Seriously, after missing half of the Astronomy exam she was lucky to get an A at all, the fact she passed Divination was a miracle due solely to Lavender and Parvati taking pity and helping her revise, and likewise passing History of Magic was only thanks to her self-studying one of the side topics outside of class on a whim which by pure chance ended up being the short essay topic in the exam.

And so, after the strangest summer of her life, it was finally time to go back for her sixth year. Her trunk was packed, the house elves had been warned to be nice to each other and not leave unless they wanted to be locked out of the townhouse until she came back for Christmas, an escort from the Order would be on her front step at ten o'clock in the morning to walk her to King's Cross, and of course when she fell asleep that night she woke up in the library.

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Voldemort was sitting by the fire again, as always dressed in full black robes as if he was about to head to the Ministry. Harry on the other hand, correctly anticipating that he would pick tonight to seek her out, had decided to celebrate her pending return to Hogwarts by wearing red shorts and a huge red t-shirt with a moving golden lion on it she'd found in a catalogue and ordered purely so she could wear it to post-quidditch game parties in the common room. The opportunity to annoy Voldemort with it was just a cheeky bonus.

Sure enough, he raised an unimpressed eyebrow as she threw herself into her armchair with a broad grin.

"How...festive." He drawled, eyeing her distastefully over the top of his book because naturally in addition to her spirited sartorial choices she had also braided red ribbons into her hair for extra wow factor. "Did you seriously wear that ridiculous getup to bed just to annoy me?"

"What can I say, when I decide to do something I really commit to it." She replied cheerfully.

"I don't know about committing to something." He said dryly, still staring at her shirt as if it would come alive and try to eat him. "Being committed sounds more accurate."

"Now Voldemort, it's not nice to call someone crazy." She scolded, slouching back into the softness of the chair to enjoy the warmth of the fire and make him twitch at her bad posture. Summer had a lot going for it, but there was a special kind of enjoyment in being warm and cozy by a roaring fire.

Sure enough his jaw clenched before he smoothed his face out. "You are a Black my dear. Somehow I am sure I am not the first to comment on your sanity or lack thereof."

Harry shrugged, because she had to give him that one. "It's going to be so strange being back at Hogwarts after everything that's happened over the last few months." She said instead, feeling happy but also kind of melancholy at this latest proof that time marched on no matter who it left behind.

Voldemort looked less repulsed and more curious. "Are you looking forward to it then?"
"Of course I am." She said, trying to distract herself by shooting him a big grin. "Hogwarts might be a ridiculous, gossip-ridden, non-Euclidean nightmare, but she's still home. The first place I ever really called home, in both of my lives actually come to think of it. It'll be different now though, knowing what I do about Dumbledore's agenda. Not to mention all the mind games you just know he's going to start playing as soon as I step foot inside the castle."

"He really isn’t one to leave well enough alone is he?" He said, lip twitching. "By my best estimate he will want you to go see him in his excessively cluttered office as soon as the Welcoming Feast is over."

"That soon, seriously?" She asked, scrunching her face up. "Surely he'll wait a few days in the very least, right?"

He just smirked. "I bet you it happens exactly as I said."

"Oh yeah, what are we betting exactly?"

"How about a future favour?"

Harry just laughed. "Nice try, there's no way I'm giving a Dark Lord an open IOU. I wasn't born yesterday."

Voldemort shrugged. "What would you suggest would be an acceptable thing to wager then?"

"Hmmm." She said, pretending to think very hard. "What about a pony?"

He stared at her as if she was mad after all, so really he just stared at her much like he usually did. "Are you serious?"

Oh that was too good to pass up. "No, that was my father."

"Harry."

"Hey you're the one who keeps purposefully lucid dreaming, not me." She said, confident that even if Sirius wouldn't be too enthused by her consorting with a Dark Lord he would at least approve of her torturing him with her wonderfully shitty sense of humour. "That means you're the one steering this ship mister. Really you have no one to blame but yourself for my glorious puns."

Voldemort just shook his head and looked like he was in physical pain, it was fantastic. "I suppose I deserve this really, all things considered."

She grinned, utterly unrepentant. "It's no less than you deserve you know. Cosmic retribution via undignified humour is the least of your karmic worries."

He waved a hand dismissively. "I will take my chances with the universe thank you my dear. How about we wager sleepwear that doesn't look like something a toddler would pick out?"

"Excuse you!" She huffed. "It's rude to talk about a lady's attire like that, where are your manners?"

"Hiding from that appalling shirt." He said airily. "I don't consider it rude in this instance, more like a public service."

"You're the one who always looks like they're off to meet the Queen for tea and crumpets." She said, grumpy by how impressed she was by how quickly he returned fire during verbal duels as well as magical ones. "Do you fall asleep in your study every night, or are you just allergic to pyjamas?"
He looked far too amused for her comfort. "Of course not Harry. I usually change when I arrive here, especially after I started having company."

"Are you bloody kidding me?" Oh Merlin this was so monumentally unfair. "And you didn't ever think to maybe mention this a little sooner?"

The bastard shrugged, trying and failing to conceal his smugness. "You never asked."

Harry Potter, this is your life.

"You mean I've been parading around in my jimjams in front of Lord Voldemort for the last two months and I could have been wearing actual clothes this whole bloody time?" She knew her voice was getting increasingly shrill but wasn't inclined to stop it. "Or even a suit of armour, why the hell not? Getting medieval sure seems preferable to this!"

"This is a dream Harry." He said slowly and clearly, as if she was thick. And honestly, she couldn't even blame him this time. "If you felt the burning desire to spend some quality time as a giraffe you could do so, the ceiling is certainly high enough."

What the actual fuck. "I think I'll settle for trousers and a bra thanks, you absolute weirdo." Yes her breasts were on the small side, but it was the principal of the thing dammit.

His eyebrows were making a valiant effort to invade his hairline but he seemed to think better of commenting further on her lack of underwire. "Then simply will yourself wearing them little horcrux. Most magic as we use it in the real world doesn't function in here, but at the same time there is no actual need for it. Even a bloody muggle could lucid dream with enough practice, you can literally do anything in here with enough will and imagination."

Merlin that sounded pervy.

"If it's that simple to change things then why doesn't just thinking about something make it appear?" She asked, annoyed and folding her arms protectively across her chest. "And why do I always show up looking exactly how I went to sleep?"

"It is simple, but it does take concentration to get results. As for why you appear as you do, it is because that is the last image you had of yourself. For example, if someone charmed your hair a different color while you were asleep your appearance in here would not change, because your mind would be unaware of it. The brain remembers a lot more than we can consciously recall without training."

"Is that how you could memorise all these books?"

"Precisely." He said. "We always had an exceptional memory, but in our youth we experimented with various ways to improve upon it."

"I'm guessing there wasn't a class about it or I would have spent the last five years hearing Hermione complain about them not offering it anymore."

He smirked at her annoyance. "Of course not. In the end a combination of potions, a ritual, mental exercises, and Occlumency were needed to create the library. Every single thing I know is stored here, from books to ideas to memories. I do have to sort through it all from time to time so there is nothing in the wrong place, but I have a good system and it can keep itself going without direct supervision for long periods of time if need be."

"Why doesn't everyone do it then?" Because she was with the imaginary Hermione in her head on
this one, if this was actually a thing which magic could do it seemed monumentally unfair it wasn't the very first class you took when you got to Hogwarts. "Seems like it would be really useful to students and pretty much everyone else."

"It is not without risk, especially when you are young and your brain hasn't finished developing." He explained. "It took me many years of dedicated effort to both research possible solutions and then actually make them a reality. Not to mention the ritual and potions very much come under the category of Dark Arts and are therefore highly illegal."

"Of course they are." She said, not surprised in the least that even Voldemort's sodding brain would be enough for him to get sent to Azkaban.

"Funnily enough it was probably mastering Occlumency which took the longest." He said thoughtfully. "Crafting basic barriers to protect your mind are hard enough, let alone the work involved in completely restructuring it. And you cannot do any of the other steps until you have done so."

"That doesn't make me feel any better about my ability to learn Occlumency. I guess I'm just going to have to be careful not to look Dumbledore in the eye for the rest of my natural life or he'll..." Harry paused, frowning. "You know what, I really don't know what he'll do but I'm fairly certain I won't like it. Best case scenario I get locked up in Gryffindor Tower like some traitorous Rapunzel until he works up the courage to kill me for his Greater Good. Or more likely convinces someone else to do it for him."

Instead of looking murderous as she would have expected by discussing Dumbledore killing her, Voldemort just looked as pompous as Percy Weasley did while discussing his bloody cauldron bottoms. "On the contrary, thanks to the fact we now know the cause of our mutual issues with mental shielding and my recent overabundance of research time, the solution is simple."

She ignored the passive-aggressive dig at her panic holiday. "Really now. Care to share?"

He finally put his book down, giving her his full attention. "Occlumency barriers are variations on personal wards, correct? And for a personal ward the caster's sense of self must be whole and inviolate."

Wary of anything that made him look this pleased, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Yeah, so?"

"So, naturally there needs to be a mutual acceptance that we are only whole together, that we are one being in two bodies. Then whatever shields we have will be shared."

Harry scowled, because as much as she couldn't completely deny it anymore it was still a touchy subject. "I still don't like thinking about that Voldemort. I'm my own person, not just your bloody reflection."

He smiled at that, the one with a dimple just for her which made her chest ache. "No, you most certainly are not. But it doesn't change the fact you need to be protected, if Dumbledore finds out we both know what you are you will be in danger. Occlumency barriers will keep your mind safe from him and everyone else who might try to invade it."

Well he wasn't wrong, but she still didn't see how her surrendering to his insistence that she was an outpost of the great commonwealth of Lord Voldemort could help. "How would it even work? Especially with me in Hogwarts and you off running around like a madman all over the United Kingdom."
"The soul is one thing, remember? That is how a horcrux works, by making use of a loophole in a fundamental law of nature. It wouldn't matter if we were shattered into a million pieces, we are still a part of the whole which is us. Which means regardless of physical distance what is true for one is true for the other. This is simply taking further advantage of that same loophole, though I will readily admit it is experimental because there has quite literally never been a situation like ours. But a personal ward works on everything someone recognises as part of their individual selves and can give their consent to ward."

"So I need to accept us and give consent if you even want to ward yourself let alone me, don't I?" Harry asked, feeling very certain of her guess. "How do I know this will even protect me then, and isn't just a way for you to protect yourself?"

He smirked at her. "While I do commend your healthy sense of paranoia and encourage you to demonstrate more of it in the future, if wizards can ward their eyeglasses along with their physical body I am confident that with our mutual acknowledgement of our mutual personhood I will be able to ward us both with no issue. There is no better defense for you than this Harry, ever since I mastered the Mind Arts my barriers have never once been breached. And believe me, many have tried."

Out of nowhere Harry remembered a documentary about quantum entanglement she'd heard not long ago while cooking dinner, because for some reason Uncle Vernon seemed to think rubbing her face in science would somehow make magic less real, and quite liked to pretend he was smart enough to understand things like that himself. Granted she didn't do much better since aside from bits and pieces she'd only studied science up until the end of primary school, but she still remembered how it talked about how two particles, entangled on the subatomic level, would know and mirror each other even from the opposite sides of the observable universe.

Harry wondered if that's what a soul was like.

She'd even seen one once, when the Dementors were trying to eat the ball of light which was everything which made her father who he was that wasn't his Black blood, and his Black bones, and his Black eyes. Even though she'd been drowning in cold and Lily's dying screams at the time, she'd still had the clarity of mind to know it was wrong, so beyond wrong, that there was a creature which existed only to spread despair and eat the very thing which made sentient beings what they were. Of all the awful things she'd seen and learned and done, Dementors were still the greatest offence against nature she'd ever seen.

It made her think about the feeling of inevitability drawing her back into the Dark Lord like a tide no matter how far away he was or how far away she wished she could be, the lazy gravitational pull he had on her very bones. The aching emptiness she'd felt while avoiding him all those weeks which was only helped by wearing his locket, their locket. Her recent conviction she could close her eyes and point, and know it would be a straight line to exactly wherever he was in the world.

"Okay." She said, because even she wasn't stubborn enough to put her pride above her safety. Not quite. "Let's assume I can accept this as being true and not an exercise in futility. What happens next?"

He smiled darkly, as if somehow he knew what she'd been thinking. "Well as my barriers are both established and powerful I will take primary responsibility for shielding us both. Though you will be expected to learn them yourself and reinforce them from your end as well, just in case of the unlikely event of an emergency which incapacitates me. There is of course no way to prove it conclusively unless we tested it, but after some calculations it is my best estimate that as our soul is one if our barriers were different they would clash and neutralise each other, which really is the last thing we
Harry's nose scrunched up. "Am I even going to be able to do that? If they're as complicated as the library I don't know if I'll be able to. Not all of us have been chugging illegal mind potions."

"It is true that some Occlumens construct elaborate walls or fortresses as their shields." He agreed. "But I always felt the best method was to keep it simple."

Will wonders never cease, that was a first. "What are your barriers then?"

"Darkness." He replied, and really how could she have expected anything else from someone like him. "The absence of everything, an absolute void. An intruder cannot go looking for anything if they don't know forwards from backwards now can they? Not to mention most humans are scared of the dark on a primal level, all those genetic memories of predators in the night seared into their hindbrain in self-preservation mean they will always hesitate before looking harder. And that hesitation is usually enough for us to be able to locate and eject them."

She smiled ruefully at him, knowing somehow that what you used to hide yourself from the world said more about what it was you were actually hiding than it didn't. "We're not scared of the dark though, are we?"

He smiled back just as knowingly, a strange moment of quiet solidarity that bridged the usual chasm of understanding between them.

Resigned to going along with this she straightened so she was sitting up properly to meet whatever came next head on. "Do I have to do anything special then?"

Voldemort shook his head, motioning with a hand so suddenly their armchairs were closer and their knees were nearly touching, even though nothing had actually moved. Bloody dreams. "No, I will guide you through the darkness to the other side and from there it should be simple. This would be best done in person but for now take my hands and look into my eyes. You are already in my mind technically speaking, so hopefully this is enough of a symbolic gesture for it to still work."

Harry cocked her head to the side, a little confused. "How can you guide me into your mind if I'm already here?"

"If you need an analogy to make sense of it, you entered through a back door of sorts which bypasses my barriers, because a soul is always welcome to rejoin itself. However, as I am not going to let you march through the length and breadth of my inner being for this you will need to come through the front door. All magic, large and small, works primarily on intent and symbolism so by doing this as if we were physically sitting across from each other hopefully that is enough to achieve our goal." He gave her an amused look. "Holding hands is a representation of two joining together in harmony, and eyes of course are the window to the soul which is why you need eye contact for Legilimency to work."

He held his hands out, palms up, and there was the slightest moment of hesitation before she reached over and put her hands in his. Irrationally, she couldn't help but notice how stupidly big his hands were compared to hers, his long pale fingers curving around her own tanned ones so they almost disappeared entirely.

Looking up from their joined hands to meet his gaze she nearly jumped. Red eyes stared into her like he really was looking into her soul, such as it was, unblinking as a snake. She had just enough time to think about how she really must ask him how he ended up with them when she knew they used to be brown when he did something which twisted them kind of sideways and down not unlike a
Portkey, and by then the library had disappeared and they were the both of them tumbling down the rabbit hole.

It wasn't like any of the times Snape used Legilimency to force his way into her mind, or even the once she'd accidentally bounced it back and ended up in his. Instead of an intrusion it was more like they fell together through a kaleidoscope of noise and colour, before an endless midnight without stars washed over them like a crashing wave.

Even though Harry had expected it she was still surprised by how absolute the dark was, but while they didn't even have the approximation of bodies they used in their shared dreams Voldemort was still holding her somehow, guiding her through the black forever just like he'd promised. It was warm too, not the cold vacuum of empty space she'd half been expecting though maybe that was due to their connection more than anything else, and just like she'd said it wasn't scary. Total darkness for her always felt like she was back in her cupboard, the overwhelming black and the smell of old dust which meant she was safe, for now. Because even though she couldn't get out and that did present it's own unique set of problems, it also meant the Dursley's couldn't get in. Not without the warning of her hearing the lock click open to brace herself for what was to come.

It was a sad but true fact that the only times in her childhood Harry could actually remember feeling truly safe was when she had been locked in that fucking cupboard.

Voldemort must have known somehow or at least guessed, because she felt him curl tighter around her as they went even deeper, as possessive as ever no matter where they were or what they were doing. It was curious because she couldn't hear his thoughts and suspected he couldn't hear hers either, but there was something here beyond words which let her know he knew somehow and was determined to burn them all for how they had treated her, just as he'd already burned the house which had been her prison.

It probably shouldn't have been as reassuring as it was. Knowing there was a monster in the dark after all, and that he would hurt absolutely everyone in the world but her.

Because even though she hadn't realised when she was younger and had never suffered worse than minor scarring, broken bones, malnutrition, and neglect, she knew now it was still abuse and therefore unacceptable. That no child deserved what she'd been through, not for anything. After years of begging Dumbledore to not send her back, not unlike how long ago a young Tom Riddle had once begged the man as well, having someone on her side about it for the first time felt vindicating.

The time for musing was cut short when the void parted and all of a sudden they were through to the other side, standing in the centre of the roiling black ocean in front of huge stone doors which looked exactly like the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. It was hazy and not entirely solid, the colours muted to almost nothing much like being inside a Penseive memory, but she could still see the carvings of snakes which almost looked like they were moving. Voldemort had a form again of a sort, a chiaroscuro idea of a human being dominated by luminous red eyes brighter than anything else she could see. Harry knew she must look much the same to him, with glowing emerald-green eyes the only thing to break up the shadowy brushstrokes of someone's tentative first draft of a girl.

That's you in there isn't it? She asked, not quite with words but not quite without either. You're Slytherin's monster, hidden behind the Chamber doors which only the worthy can open.

Of course. He said, so sure and certain of the reality of his own deviant abnormality that she was envious of how comfortable he was with even the ugly parts of himself. I would not trust the sanctity of my being to one form of protection alone.
But you'll let me be here. It wasn't really a question or even something she had intended to say, but apparently intent was relative here.

Only you. He said, and she knew it was true the same way she knew lies were impossible here at the bottom of the well of a human consciousness. Only because once you were protected by those doors just as I am now.

He moved closer, for any given value of moved in this impossible place. The boundaries between them were vague, as if they were both half or more dissolving back into the ocean or each other, whichever came first.

What now? She asked, intrigued despite herself because she'd never not looked a challenge in the face a day in her life, and had no intention of starting now. Do we go inside?

So eager to become one with us again little horcrux? Amusement swirled between them like specks of dust caught in a sunbeam.

No. She said, because it was true.

But I am curious. Because it was also true.

She got the impression of nodding even though he didn't really do anything, the edges of him still bleeding out into the black. Of course you are. We all want to know where we came from, even if the answer is not the one we wanted or hoped for.

That sounded like the voice of experience talking. What did you do when you found out? Where you came from I mean.

Harry wasn't sure how he could have teeth when he didn't even have a mouth, but somehow he managed. I killed them all.

The hollow ache of loss flowed between them, unsaid but undeniable.

Why? Because the why was just as important as the fact, even if it wasn't a good one. Without why they were just animals.

Because they were all weak, muggles and magicals both, every one of them inferior to me in every way. He said, as bleak as the void which cradled them. And still they did not want me.

I'm sorry they hurt you. Because she knew what it felt like to be rejected by your own blood for things that weren't ever your fault, and apparently it really was something she wouldn't wish on her worst enemy. Even if she wasn't sure if that was even what he was anymore. You shouldn't have done that though. Killing your problems doesn't make them go away.

I know. Resignation and frustration. But it helped.

By removing the temptation to hope for more? She wasn't sure how she knew that, but she did.

By removing weakness, one piece at a time.

She sighed, because he wouldn't be him if he wasn't so determinedly embittered. What now Voldemort?

He put the impression of a hand on her shoulder, and dipped the other into the dark, pulling a thick tendril of it closer where it twined around them affectionately like a beloved pet.
Now you need to accept us, all we are and are not, and accept that once you made a home in me. Open up your eyes and ears and your nose Harry, your heart and your mind and everything you are, so that I may in turn make a home in you as well. He told her all this with solemn inevitability, holding the waiting dark in his red right hand. Open your mouth.

For a brief moment she felt like she was in wonderland again, with things labelled 'Eat me' and 'Drink me' which would change her in ways she couldn't predict. But she wasn't Alice, lost and clueless, she was a horcrux. And while she might not be able to agree that she was still him or his, she could accept that maybe (just maybe) they were still both parts of them.

Harry opened her mouth.

Voldemort held her throat with both hands, still somehow having enough fingers free to pry her jaw even wider with, and poured the shadows inside her.

It was like swallowing the void. Like being submerged in warm black bathwater which filled her eyes and her ears and her nose just like he said it would. The black drained into her like a flood, and Harry felt it drown her until there wasn't any part of her that was empty anymore. But it didn't make her feel dirty or unclean as she had thought it might, just so familiar it was less like the surrender she'd expected and more like coming home. As if she could relax and let go of all the tension she'd felt every day since she'd left him until this point, the feeling of being so exposed to the world and the people in it that she was more of a bleeding wound than a girl finally over.

The black inundated everything she was, pulling her down into the depths, and for the first time in her life Harry let go.

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She awoke in her bed, body as safely curled in her sheets as the rest of her was in his barriers. They lapped even now like gentle waves at the back of her mind, the space behind her eyes now an opaque black ocean which seemed deceptively still on the surface, and she was amazed at how much better she felt now they were there to protect her.

The realisation in the dream of how constantly on edge she'd felt before was still there, the now undeniably soul-deep certainty that the reason she'd always been so sensitive to other people's comments and judgement and criticism was because she had lacked the ability to insulate herself properly from the rest of the world. A corner of her mind, the one perpetually cold and detached from everything happening to her, pointed out that maybe all along the jittery agitation she'd always felt was just the vulnerability of her soul missing the protection she'd had when she was still part of him. Part of them.

It was paradoxical that the first time she truly felt completely at ease in her own skin was also due to the first piece of indisputable proof that it wasn't really her skin at all, at least not originally. A lot of things could be faked if you were clever and charismatic enough, as clever and charismatic as he certainly was, but Harry knew enough about Occlumency and warding to know there was no possible way for one person to shield another with an extension of their own Occlumency barriers, especially from what might well be the other side of the country or even the world as far as she knew.

Merlin he was going to be so smug when they saw each other next.

Now she was thinking about it Harry could even feel some trickling across their link, the echo of
self-satisfaction not her own in the back of her mind letting her know he was awake as well and apparently feeling very pleased with himself indeed. It wasn't entirely unwarranted, he'd just achieved something most considered impossible. Even she could allow that his attitude was justified in light of this accomplishment.

Peeking out of her bed curtains she saw the light of dawn making the windows glow softly, heralding the start of a new day and a new school year.

"Well then." She said to herself, hoping he was feeling her amusement at his egotism. "I'd best get up."

Chapter End Notes

CW - brief mentions of the Dursley's mostly canon-typical child abuse and Harry acting as if it wasn't a huge deal even as she accepts it wasn't ok, because a few years aren't nearly enough to change the kind of mental conditioning a child gets when they grow up thinking that they deserve the way they're treated by abusive caregivers.

Also, if anyone feels the suggestiveness of the whole 'swallowing the black' is a bit much then well done, it was absolutely meant to be exactly that. Harry consenting to letting the barrier into her 'body' was a symbolic gesture to allow the magic to do it's thing just like Voldemort explained. If you think it's unrealistic that they could share Occlumency barriers like that at all just stick with me, I promise there is an actual reason which is internally consistent to the lore of their universe which Voldemort worked out, and will come up and be explained further down the track.
You're too young to be this empty girl

Chapter Summary

It's the beginning of a new school year and Severus already has a headache.

Chapter Notes

Howdy folks, time for another Severus POV chapter! It was originally going to be a Harry one but she was less than enthused and after nearly a week of trying to beat her into submission I said fuck it and knocked this one out in a day. Just goes to show that perspective is a hell of a thing, huh? :p

I try really hard to avoid just copy pasting stuff from canon though there is a bit in the first DADA class which will be recognisable, and that's only because it's one of my fav Severus quotes in the book. Insert disclaimer about not owning Harry Potter etc here.

As always thanks for all the kudos and comments and for being as excited about this crazy rollercoaster ride as I am <3

The Welcoming Feast was as much of a cacophony of noise and youthful exuberance as always. It made Severus feel very glad he'd taken the usual precaution of a headache potion before arriving, though it was a small comfort that this year at least he had been victorious in getting the Defense Against the Dark Arts position he'd wanted for so long. A whole year of being allowed to hex the little bastards silly all in the name of education and not get in trouble with the Board of Governors for it, not to mention the lack of having to put up with morons trying their utmost to discover new and exciting ways to blow themselves up while wasting valuable potions ingredients.

Truly, if he was to be stuck here dealing with the miscreants at all, this year at least will be one for the record books.

It stung a little of course, knowing the only reason he even got the opportunity wasn't through his own merit but because the oh so esteemed Headmaster needed an excuse to have bloody Horace Slughorn in the castle for Merlin knows what convoluted reason he'd likely never bother explaining, and it was simply all too convenient to shunt him sideways into DADA to free up the position of Potions Master for the old walrus. But Severus still thought longingly of not having to endure children blowing up his classroom and decided he didn't even care why it was happening or even that it would only be for a year.

Because he knew full well there was no chance it would be for more than a year, Albus liked to pretend otherwise but all the regular staff knew the curse on the DADA position wasn't just a fanciful rumour, and they hadn't been able to keep a DADA Professor for longer than a year since he'd turned the Dark Lord himself down when he applied for it in the sixties. When Severus had learned that particular tidbit of information (from an especially sloshed Minerva during the end of year staff party following the fiasco with the Chamber of Secrets) he'd been reminded of how Hitler's application to art school had also been denied, and wondered if just maybe Albus had gotten off his
high horse and given it to the man if maybe, just maybe, things would have gone differently for all of
them. If nothing else he would have been in a better position to keep an eye on his rise to power and
they would have had a competent professor, and Severus knew firsthand just how good a teacher the
Dark Lord could be if he felt you were worth the effort.

Severus wasn't even sure if he cared all that much if he wound up dead or disgraced or even
Obliviated into nothingness and sharing a room with Lockheart in St. Mungos, one sodding year of
not figuratively dying inside while he watched the brats mangling what should have been an artform
of glorious precision and subtlety into an excuse for explosions and noxious fumes might actually be
worth the loss of life and limb.

It hadn't been an exaggeration when he told Narcissa that his life expectancy was on par with a
mayfly now the war was beginning in earnest. Really his position as a spy would be hard enough let
alone as a double or triple agent, let alone the precarious position between the two factions he had
found himself in. While he might not be required to attend every meeting or raid he was still the
Potions Master for the Dark Lord and the Order both, and between them he was kept very busy
brewing in his piss-poor excuse for downtime. Thank Merlin and Morgana for Stasis Charms that's
all he was going to say on the matter, he had enough Painkilling Potion, Blood Replenishers, Skele-
Gro, Polyjuice, and everything else a group of magical vigilantes needed stockpiled in a series of
warded storage rooms throughout the dungeons to see the castle through a bloody siege if need be.

It was just as well the raids had slowed down by the end of August so he could prepare for the last
minute change of his subject for the school year. The lesson plans of most of his predecessors were
laughable, but he had been able to use them as a guideline to cobble together something approaching
adequate, and he had sworn to himself to never admit how useful the ones Barty and the fucking
werewolf had left were.

The whole process was honestly something of a novelty despite being more rushed than he would
have liked. His Potions curriculum had barely changed beyond a quick review and update every year
since he first wrote it in 1981, a task which thanks to the utter stupidity of his contemporaries
generally took no more than a few hours at most. If Severus actually survived this bloody war he was
going to withdraw from society entirely, and settle down in the cottage in the middle of fucking
nowhere he'd purchased a few years ago through a muggle agency to be an untraceable safehouse
and warded to the hilt. He'd owl-order his groceries and never leave it or deal with other human
beings directly ever again, and would do nothing but research and submit articles to potions journals
and periodicals about how incredibly wrong they all were about absolutely fucking everything until
he slumped over mid-brew and died.

There was probably something to be said for the fact that the best case scenario for his life was to live
long enough to spend his remaining days proving people wrong and then die alone in rural Wales,
facedown in a cauldron. But he chose to think of it more that by being a teacher and a spy for his
entire adult life he had more than fulfilled his quota for both socialising and contributing to society,
and deserved the chance to enjoy some fucking peace and quiet.

Apparently the Sorting Ceremony had begun while he was lost in thought. He idly clapped
whenever a student was Sorted into Slytherin, and pretended it didn't bother him how few of them
there were compared to the other Houses. That aside from the children of Dark-aligned and Death
Eater families the few who were tried their very best to not be obvious about how distraught they
were about it. There was nothing wrong with Slytherin House, he thought with gritted teeth, being
ambitious and cunning wasn't a life sentence to being a murderous psychopath until everyone else
decided that vilifying eleven year olds with those particular attributes was clearly the sensible thing to
do. Prophecies weren't the only thing which could be self-fulfilling, if you told impressionable
children often enough they were destined for evil you lost the right to be surprised when that's how
they turned out.

He sighed as yet another baby Gryffindor took their seat to rousing applause. Merlin, this war was only just starting and he was already so tired of it he wanted to tell them all to fuck off forever.

It was only after the Sorting was over and the annual inane speech from Albus about the danger of the Dark Lord and the power of friendship or whatever the fuck it was this time had given way to the regularly scheduled gluttony that he realised Potter wasn't holding court at the Gryffindor table as per usual. The Order escort would have said if she hadn't gotten on the train at Kings Cross and he would have been drafted into searching for her if they had, so why wasn't she here?

His kneejerk reaction was of course to assume she was waiting in the wings to make a suitably fashionable late entrance, but no sooner had it occurred to him he then remembered Petunia's pinched face and the dingy fucking cupboard she'd kept her niece in like a broken vacuum cleaner, and felt sickened at himself.

Hearing that the Dark Lord had somehow found the house and burned it to the ground had filled him with such a profound satisfaction that he'd had flashbacks to being young and stupid and so desperate to be valued that he'd burned as brightly as that hellish fucking house had. Albus had been so panicked when they'd heard, but as far as he was concerned the only downside was that Petunia and her despicable family hadn't been inside when it had gone up in flames.

It really was the worst possible timing for him to visited by a conscious to be honest. This year more than ever it was crucial he play the part of Death Eater spy who hated the Girl-Who-Lived, even if he could admit in the safety of his own mind it was bullshit.

By the time the Welcoming Feast was more than half over he finally saw Potter slip into the Great Hall with the perpetually indefinable Miss Lovegood, and despite doing her best to avoid notice people saw her and the whispers began in earnest.

She didn't seem to be missing any limbs and wasn't covered in blood, her school robes rumpled but tidy enough and her ridiculous hair braided up in a pile on top of her head. Sitting down with her friends who immediately started grilling her, presumably about her whereabouts, she just smiled and answered them while quickly filling up a plate before the dinner dishes disappeared and were replaced by dessert, acting all the while as if she didn't even notice the gossip. The fact he could hear them himself all the way up at the Staff Table meant there was no chance she hadn't either, but it occurred to him that it wasn't as if she was unpracticed at tuning out the discontent mutterings of the student body.

Still wary about the possible reasons for her being late (her second year and a flying Ford Anglia came to mind) he decided to do his habitual low-level sweep of Legilimency, just to reassure himself there wasn't any kind of emergency he would inevitably be the one to deal with sooner or later. He grasped his wand where it was hidden in his sleeve, and whispered the incantation as the thankfully last remaining boy Weasley still attending Hogwarts gestured towards him, clearly telling her about who was the DADA Professor this year, and he catch her gaze as it flicked up towards the Staff Table for a split second.

Only his ironclad discipline as a wartime spy kept him from knocking his goblet of pumpkin juice all over himself because instead of the chaotic mess he was used to she was empty.

It was like taking a spear of ice to the brain. The space behind her thick-framed (James Potter's) glasses and the veneer of (Lily's) green eyes was dark and endless, because somehow the same blasted girl he'd tried and failed to beat even the most basic of Occlumency shields into for the better part of half a bloody year looked so hollow it was as if she wasn't even fucking alive.
It should not have been nearly as eerie as it was.

"Something the matter Severus?" Slughorn asked cheerfully as he helped himself to a third helping of roast potatoes, apparently tearing himself away from nattering on at Rolanda Hooch about some famous quidditch player he knew long enough to notice that he existed. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Nothing you should concern yourself with." He sneered, cursing the fact their seats were next to each other and he would be expected to make small talk with the unpleasant man for the rest of the bloody year. Especially during moments like this when there actually was something very, incredibly wrong and it was taking all his self-control to resist the urge to march over to the impossible vanishing Potter and make a scene.

It was far more disconcerting than Severus would have thought, the idea that while staying alone in that cursed hellpit all summer long something had hollowed the blasted girl out and left nothing behind but her empty shell. Sure it looked like she was laughing and prattling on with her moronic friends like nothing was wrong, but it didn't change that for once meeting her eyes hadn't been painful because it had reminded him of Lily and his own failure, but because it felt like he could get lost in them, and not in the insipidly romantic way most used the phrase. This was more like if he ventured too far inside he would be swallowed whole and would just tumble alone through the vacuum of empty space, forever.

No, something was wrong and Albus had to know. There was no way he could say anything out loud to him in the middle of the Great Hall even though he was sitting right next to him, so instead Severus caught his eye very deliberately and let the brief flash of memory float across the surface of his mind where he knew the busybody older wizard would see it.

His twinkling blue eyes widened, a momentary flash of panic that only Severus was close enough to see, before he smiled absent-mindedly as if nothing had happened.

"I'm glad to see our Harry showed up no worse for wear, it really is far too early in the academic year for search parties."

"I'm sure the girl was simply up to some kind of mischief." He replied, playing along for the benefit of anyone else within earshot.

"You know Severus, I had been intending to have a chat with the girl this evening, just to check in and see how she was faring after the events of last term." He said, as if it had only just occurred to him to have a chat and he hadn't spent the last two months silently fuming that she refused to even open his letters. "But it looks like she's probably not feeling the best so maybe I'll let her get settled in first. What do you think?"

So the old goat had been planning on hauling her up to his office right after the feast then, and what he'd shown him had changed his mind for some reason. Why was he not surprised.

"That's probably for the best Albus." He drawled. "If she can't even show up on time to the Welcoming Feast then perhaps it's best to wait. She might get lost on her way to your office and then we'd be down one arrogant Saviour."

Albus nodded thoughtfully, if he was giving any more consideration to his opinion than he usually did. "You have her in your class tomorrow do you not Severus? Maybe you could be so kind as to keep an eye on her for me, if she is still feeling under the weather after a good night's sleep it may be best we get on top of it right away so no one else falls ill."
So he wanted him to spy on her and make sure she wasn't possessed or something equally nefarious. What did he think she was going to do, annoy the other students to death?

"Fine." He said, sighing as if it was the greatest imposition ever asked of a man. "I'll keep an eye on Miss Potter for you, but if she's being disruptive to the class she won't escape detention even if she is unwell."

"Miss Potter you say Severus?" Of course bloody Slughorn was eavesdropping in on them while they were discussing the bloody Girl-Who-Lived, bloody trophy hunter. "I had lunch with her and a few other students today on the train and she seemed to be in good health. Such a polite young lady, a bit on the shy side I'm sure but if I didn't know better I would have sworn she had been raised as a Pureblood! Young folk these days just don't have manners like they used to you know. I'm so looking forward to having her in my class, if she's even half as good as her dear mother she'll be a delight to teach."

"She's going to be in your class?" Severus asked, resolutely not thinking about Lily and not sure if he was more bemused that Potter got the marks to get in or at the idea she might be a delight in any way, shape, or form. "What did she get on her Potions O.W.L then?"

"An Exceeds Expectations." Said Slughorn, stupid moustache twitching happily. "I know you only took the Outstanding students at N.E.W.T level Severus, but there really is so much potential out there if only you nurture it properly."

He snorted, because the only thing Slughorn had ever nurtured in his life was his own godsdammed ego. "Then please, do enjoy the many and varied ways the dunderheads will find to attempt killing themselves and each other with my compliments."

"Oh ho, you were always one to have no time for the stragglers weren't you Severus? You haven't changed a bit since you were a boy."

And if that wasn't one of the most depressing things he'd heard in ages he didn't know what was. Especially coming from this old bastard who he'd spent his own school years resenting for barely giving him the time of day despite his exceptional abilities, all so he could suck up to the children of the well-connected and wealthy which he hoarded like an especially fat squirrel preparing for winter. Sure Severus might not be what one would call an unbiased educator, but at least he didn't care less if a student was an Heir or a nobody when it came to their skill, and even had the half-hearted excuse he was like this at least in part because of keeping up his appearance as a spy. That Slughorn also hadn't changed a bit in twenty odd years was infuriating.

Across the hall Potter was inhaling her dinner like she was worried someone might take it from her, and it made him feel sick that he now knew it to be less of an insult and more of a hard-won survival mechanism. He couldn't remember her being like this at any of the other Welcoming Feasts, but then again he knew firsthand that stuffing your face after long periods of starvation was an open invitation to throwing it all back up again later. The fact she could do it now meant whatever else had happened, she'd still been better off alone this summer with nothing but a mad house elf and a rabid portrait for company. Grimmauld Place was a thrice-cursed pile of bricks and a law unto itself, but at least there she'd been fed and not overworked and then locked away like a dirty secret.

Severus gave up on the idea of eating anything else himself, and wondered who he hated more: the Dark Lord, Petunia Dursley, Albus Dumbledore, or himself.

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After that first experience with Potter's new barriers he kept testing her at different time of day, in different moods, when she was concentrating on something and should by rights not be able to keep them up. Any time he was able to catch her eye really. But no matter what he did nothing changed, she never slipped even once and every time he looked she still had that menacing black ocean behind her eyes which threatened to drown him if he tried to look any deeper.

Their first class together was as messy as he'd predicted since the sixth year Gryffindors and Slytherins were in together as always, and he cursed whatever it was that made Albus think it a splendid idea to put the two most antagonistic Houses together in all the classes where they had the highest chance of doing each other an injury. They trailed in and were still chatting away, even his Slytherins who should know better, emptying what must be half the contents of their school bags on their desk as he sneered at their presumption.

"I have not asked you to take out your books."

They all scrambled like they'd been caught necking in a broom closet by a Prefect, apparently having not seen him where he was half-hidden in the shadows, and he folded his arms into the voluminous sleeves of his teaching robes and glared them all into silence.

"The Dark Arts are many, varied, ever-changing and eternal." He said, wanting there to be no chance at all they wouldn't take this class seriously. "Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before. You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible. Your defenses must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the Arts you seek to undo."

He waved a hand at the appropriately gruesome pictures he'd found to display on the walls of the classroom, purely to impress upon them the importance of what he would be trying to cram into their thick heads. "These pictures give a fair representation of what happens to those who suffer the Cruciatius Curse, feel the Dementor's Kiss, or provoke the aggression of the Inferius."

Finally the brats were starting to pay attention. Now it was sixth year they would be working on nonverbal casting, something Severus was particularly skilled at and found to be a vital skill for everyone to learn, and not just people like him who through their own imbecilic life choices were often in the position where a moment of surprise was often the only difference between walking away from a duel alive and (relatively) intact, and being something the Aurors scraped off the floor.

"I believe you are all complete novices when it comes to non-verbal spells. Can anyone tell me the advantage of a non-verbal spell?"

True to form Granger's hand shot up like she'd been electrocuted, everyone else just giving him vacant looks. "Since none of the rest of you apparently thought to bring your brains to class, Miss Granger?"

"Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you’re about to perform, which gives you a split-second advantage."

Dear Merlin he could never decide if he despised her swotty attitude, or wanted to begrudgingly commend her for single-handedly bringing up the collective IQ of the class from pathetic to passable. Before he could decide if he would move on without commenting (as good a compliment as he could give her) or take points, he heard the telltale sound of the bane of his existence conversing in hushed tones with the Weasley sitting next her.
"Potter!" He snapped, whipping around to glare holes in her. "Do you have something you wish to share with the class?"

"No." She replied, not even having the grace to jump.

His eyes narrowed, he might be torn regarding his judgement of her character but her complete lack of respect was still infuriating. "That's no sir."

She just smiled brightly. "There's no need to call me 'sir', Professor."

Half the class tried and failed to muffle giggles and the others looked as if they expected him to unhinge his jaw and eat her.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for your cheek!" He snarled. Because for fucks sake if he couldn't get any peace then neither could she. "I don't care if you are the so-called Chosen One, you are not exempt from spending Saturday night in detention. Eight o'clock in my office, if you are late it will be Sunday as well."

The idiot girl scowled but mercifully didn't argue, five years of experience with his temper apparently more than enough for her to realise if she pushed him now she wouldn't enjoy the results.

He did his best to put her out of mind and get back on track. "You will now divide into pairs. One partner will attempt to jinx the other, and the other will attempt to repel the jinx. I want Shield Charms and Jelly-Legs Jinxs only, and they must both be non-verbal."

What followed was an hour of the usual level of chaos and by the time class ended she'd disobeyed him again, leading to him trying to jinx her to prove a point while forgetting she wasn't a regular student but a girl who had been actively pursued by madmen ever since she started school. She responding so quickly and with such an obscenely overpowered Shield Charm he'd ended up thrown backwards and getting intimately acquainted with one of the desks as a result.

So it wasn't remotely fair of him to yell at her for it and he knew it, knew he couldn't really fault her for reacting instinctively in defense of her safety since those same instincts were likely the only reason she was still alive. But he still did it, because he had an image to maintain and needed an excuse to stand close and stare into her eyes, all so while he did it he could push so lightly against the surface of that horrible emptiness that even Dumbledore would have struggled to feel it. Partly because he was frustrated and resentful of how unfair he found this whole mess, partly for Albus and his machinations, and partly for himself. Because it scared him that something had happened to her to make her like this, and he had to see what happened when he tried.

Well what happened is the emptiness rippled, almost sucking him in like a black hole trying to eat a comet which came a little too close to escape the gravitational pull. And for the briefest of moments (which somehow he knew even as it was happening that later when he was alone in his quarters and chain-smoking with shaking hands he would tell himself was a trick of the light) her eyes, usually that haunting shade of green, had looked red. As red as fresh blood, as red as the fire in the Dark Lord's eyes which would set the whole fucking world alight if they let him.

And then she smiled, as if she knew exactly what he was doing and what he was thinking, and thought it was hilarious.

Severus didn't try again.
"So how has the new school year been my dear Severus?" Asked the Dark Lord the following evening when he'd been summoned alone to drop of some potions and give his report, the deathly pale man lounging back in his throne and stroking Nagini as the giant snake wrapped herself in thick coils around his shoulders.

"As well as can be expected my Lord." He replied, in his usual place kneeling before the throne. "The students are as idiotic as always, though many are more subdued than usual due to the present circumstances."

"And what of Miss Black-Potter? Any misadventures yet?"

"No my Lord, though it's early days." He wondered if he should share his observations with him, but was aware that if her barriers were enough to close her mind even from him that his Master probably already knew, and it would be in everyone's best interest if he didn't risk his position by not sharing the information. "The only thing of note is that over the summer she apparently managed to master Occlumency by herself, despite my own failed attempts to teach her last year. Every attempt to enter her mind or even read her surface thoughts has had no effect, her mind is all but impenetrable."

"Is that so?" His thin, reptilian lips twitched as if he was aware of some great joke and had no intention of sharing. "Do you have any idea how she came to be so proficient in such a short span of time despite your initial failure?"

"No my Lord, and neither does Dumbledore. They are…" He paused again, trying to find a way to describe them which didn't make him sound pathetic. "Her barriers are disconcerting. I have never seen the like before, they aren't a wall or a fortress as is typical of most Occlumens, instead they are just…complete nothingness. A cold black ocean without beginning or end. I have not attempted a more invasive attempt to breach them, but even trying to skim the surface is an exercise in futility."

"Is that so?" The Dark Lord mused. "Show me."

Severus battened down the hatches and bought the memories of encountering Potter's barriers the first time at the Welcoming Feast and again during class to the front of his mind, feeling his Master carefully examining each one.

Once it was done he lowered his eyes respectfully once more, habitually checking the seams and edges of his consciousness even though he knew full well if the Dark Lord had actually seen anything untoward he would already be strung up by his toes and screaming.

"How very curious, that we would mirror each other in this as well."

That made him look up again. "My Lord?"

The monstrous excuse for a man smirked, as if once again he knew something Severus didn't. "Despite your superiority in power and skill over most of my other followers, you have always been sensible and known when to push and when not to, especially when it came to my own privacy. Not all wizards have your common sense, and not all Legilimens have your innate respect for boundaries."

"I would never presume to attempt to disturb the sanctity of your mind my Lord." That wasn't even a lie or arse-kissing either, he might be a spy but he was not a fucking moron. Furthermore he wasn't nearly brave enough to want to see what the inside of the Dark Lord's head looked like, it probably made Hieronymus Bosch's hellscapes look like a day at the zoo.
"Consider this your one and only invitation to attempt to penetrate my mind. Make it your very best effort as well my Severus, I will know if you do not and as a teacher yourself I think you will find it most educational."

He didn't want to do this. He really, truly didn't want to do this in case it was a trap, but there was no way to refuse a direct order. So he resigned himself to being on the business end of a rousing round of the Cruciatus once he was done, and he pulled out his wand and met his Lord's burning red gaze without flinching. "Legilimens."

No sooner had he pushed past the surface when he immediately had the exact same sensation of falling into a freezing black ocean as he'd had while skimming Potter's mind, the predatory dark behind those inhuman red eyes making him feel like he was drowning in forever. There was no chance of finding his equilibrium in the completeness of the black, and it could have been seconds or full minutes until he gathered his wits enough to wrench himself out with a shuddering gasp. He fell onto his back, momentarily so uncaring of his dignity and so grateful for the half-hearted light coming from the chandelier overhead that he couldn't even move. Panting, completely unsettled and disoriented, he had the strangest feeling he'd narrowly avoided drowning in the dark just as his instincts had been warning him every time he brushed against Potter's mind, as if he really would have lost himself entirely.

"Do you see it now my dear Severus?" He said, as if his Death Eater wasn't a shivering pile of black robes at his feet, and for once from nothing as straightforward as a curse but just the yawning horror of his mind. "How curious it is that the girl and I would have even this in common."

No fucking wonder Albus had been panicked upon learning about the nature of Potter's shiny new void barriers. He couldn't imagine anyone but the Headmaster being powerful and daring enough to not only try and force their way into the Dark Lord's mind, but actually survive the attempt. First the Parseltongue and their brother wands and now this, just how many ways was the line between the Dark Lord and Harry Potter going to blur?

"Forgive me my Lord, I was unprepared for the ingenious totality of your barriers." Understatement of the year.

He smirked down at him. "Come now my Severus, it can't be so hard to believe I would excel in this as I do in all things."

"Of course not my Lord, you are correct." He said, because what else could he say really. "It explains why the old fool was so nervous when he learned of this development and was unable to see past them himself."

"It is for the best that our Harry is so closed off even to Dumbledore. Dissention in the ranks of our enemies can only work to our favour after all."

Severus only barely restrained the shudder which went through him when the Dark Lord referred to Potter as 'our Harry' just as Albus had. He might not like the girl, but even before the new perspective of her he had been apprehensive about what was going to happen to her if she continued to be the battlefield which these two powerful, terrible men waged their war on. He was as much of a bastard when it came to his students in particular and juvenile humans in general as it was possible to get and not be locked up in Azkaban for trying to kill them all off, and even he knew children shouldn't be used like this.

"What are your orders my Lord?" Focus, he had to lock it all away and focus on the mission, or he'd be useless to everyone.
"Continue to keep watch and inform me of the Order's movements. I also wish to know everything which happens to Miss Black-Potter, anything at all out of the ordinary. We are not the only ones who will be watching her closely this year, and I don't care what their agenda is she is not to be harmed by anyone. If Dumbledore breaks his pattern and attempts to do more than subtly influence or manipulate her I wish to know about it immediately."

"Of course, I shall be vigilant."

There were few things more concerning than a smug Dark Lord when you didn't know exactly why he was in a good mood, because it meant there were things happening which you couldn't even begin to predict or control. "I expect nothing less from you my spy. You are my eyes and ears and hands in Hogwarts, and you will use those hands to ensure she is kept safe and the isolation from her peers is maintained."

Severus wondered how a heart long broken and lost to despair could still hurt so fucking much. "As you command my Lord, so shall it be."
It's only the first week back and Harry is already completely over how everyone is looking at her as if she'll eat them or save them from themselves, and Dumbledore is in for a rude awakening.

Urgh, so sorry for being so late to update this my loves. It was my birthday (holy shit I'm 30, wtf??) and then I got the bloody plague and am only just getting over it. All hail naps and hot tea. We're currently at the point I warned you about a while ago where I have an outline but no chapters pre-written so the next few might not be quite as regular, but they're in progress and we'll keep on trucking until shit gets real in the in-universe October.

Finally we get the confrontation between Harry and Dumbledore about her barriers, and she takes advantage of the opportunity to beat him over the head with it. Take that you twinkly fucker.

People were staring.

They were always staring for one reason or another, but this was a particularly extreme case of it. Certainly more than when she'd been chosen as a Tri-Wizard Champion, though not yet quite at the level of when she'd outed herself as a Parselmouth in her second year and they all thought she was a particularly inept pre-pubescent murderer.

Harry couldn't rightly decide if this was better or worse than them all thinking she was a crazy person, but that at least she'd had a lifetime of practice ignoring thanks to her charming relatives. This fearful, borderline panicked reverence was just so unsettling on so many more levels than she could properly verbalise. The warm dark of the void ocean in her head made it all much easier to deal with than she suspected she'd have managed otherwise, calmer, like there was something which insulated her from the immediacy of it so she didn't feel the full weight of their eyes dripping down the back of her neck.

A pack of first years walking past her in the hall were not remotely subtle as they glanced back at her, as if safety in numbers meant that she couldn't see the way they whispered amongst themselves. It reminded Harry of all the articles which had been in the *Daily Prophet* all summer long, and she only barely resisted the urge to grimace.

One of the few things which had kept her mood up in the almost week she'd been back was how it hadn't been too difficult to play Spot The Baby Death Eater. It had never been what one would call particularly difficult, but now it was even easier since they all either looked terrified if she happened to get too close (in case proximity would somehow lead to her spontaneously becoming hurt) or just flatly refused to meet her eyes or even acknowledge she existed. All except Draco Malfoy of course,
who true to form regularly glared daggers in her general direction. But apart from casting a Full Body-Bind on her on the train when he caught her spying on him, in a rare show of restraint hadn't made any attempts to get any closer. She resisted the urge to wink at him whenever he did it, but only barely.

Being this on edge so early into September didn't bode well for her school year, and Harry knew she didn't deal well with people or crowds at the best of times. After a summer spent mostly being ignored getting used to all the attention again was always jarring, though this year there was also the added factor of having spent most of it in Grimmauld Place without much in the way of human contact aside from Voldemort.

And wasn't it so strange, how much her mental image of him had changed since the last time she'd been in Hogwarts.

On her way to the Headmaster's office after dinner (on Wednesday evening thank you very much, she was very pleased Voldemort hadn't won their bet) Harry let her mind drift, pondering all the ways the Dark Lord was somehow less and more than she'd thought he would be all at the same time. Not counting Godric's Hollow, she'd faced him in person four times now, certainly more than most did and live to tell of it. Once as little more than a parasite possessing her Defense teacher, once as a ghost in the Chamber of Secrets, once a revenant in the cemetery in Little Hangleton, and once a conqueror in the Ministry Atrium. Each time he'd been something different, a new variation on the theme of horrific and monstrous, but what had once seemed like indisputable facts were suddenly not so black and white.

For example, yes he was cruel but he wasn't unfeeling as most seemed to think. On the contrary, if the bleed-through was anything to go by he was probably more emotional than she was, despite a marked proclivity for negative emotions. Harry knew she could be somewhat lacking in the expressing her feelings department, according to Hermione being punished growing up for crying and any kind of extreme emotion probably hadn't been great for her development, and she was self-aware enough to know that the way people often treated her more as an ideal than as a person had made it far too easy to feel detached from them as a whole.

It was also undeniable that while he was a sociopath he wasn't actually mad, not as most people would define a madman anyway. No, he was far too smart and too calculating to fit a definition as narrow as that. His logic might be as cold as a Dementor's arsehole and erred very much on the side of bigoted totalitarianism, but when he could actually be bothered to explain himself you could understand his reasoning, even if you didn't particularly agree with it.

And that was probably the weirdest thing of all, how he really would explain things to her if she asked. She knew from her visions and firsthand accounts that he never did that, ever, would more often than not punish anyone severely if they questioned him let alone full on argued with him like she did on a regular basis. Even with the whole horcrux thing and him being a possessive bastard, it was still not in keeping with what she'd understood of the man prior to this summer.

So try as she might it was hard to reconcile the raving lunatic with the disconcertingly pleasant man she'd gotten to know over the last couple of months, far too many contradictions and double standards persisted. The simplest explanation was that at least one of those men was a lie, an elaborate façade designed to achieve very specific results, and Harry couldn't for the life of her work out what was more worrying, if he was playing her for a fool or actually being genuine as it seemed. After all it was a lot easier to hate a creature with an inhuman face than a man who held you on his lap and worried when he missed you, and welcomed you into his own mind to make sure you were protected.
Harry flushed, remembering waking up with the sun that last morning in Grimmauld Place after having spent her sleeping hours talking with him and then mutually spelunking into the outskirts of his inner being. It had made sense at the time, in that weird way dreams always did, but in the cold light of day she was incredibly aware of the highly questionable nature of the way her relationship with the Dark Lord was progressing.

Fuck, there being a relationship at all was something of a growing cause for concern. So it was quite ironic that she could now take refuge from the guilty enjoyment she found in his company by sinking a little deeper into their void ocean where such things didn't matter quite so much anymore.

That was probably the weirdest side effect of all this metaphysical bullshit, her thoughts were still her own and the emotional bleed-through and the shared lucid dreams were much as they had been previously, so nothing big had actually changed. She'd known accepting their connection would mean things were different somehow, it couldn't not since magic was all about intent, but she had not expected that so far it had predominantly manifested in how much calmer she would feel because of those barriers. Harry had always felt tense around other people and it had only gotten worse after she'd rejoined the magical world, constantly hyper-aware of their eyes and their whispers and the weight of their expectations. And while it was still there in the background like a loose tooth she couldn't entirely stop playing with, it was like she could finally breathe enough to ignore it. Even if there was some cost which would make itself known later, she had to admit the added peace of mind was more than worth the price of admission.

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To a casual observer Dumbledore's office looked to all the world as if she hadn't lost her temper in it nearly three months ago, as if the violent outburst of her righteous anger and accidental magic hadn't nearly leveled the room to rubble.

She felt strangely cheated that to all appearances nothing had been damaged irrevocably, that she hadn't destroyed even a small part of his life as much as he'd destroyed hers. Oh well, it was still early days yet.

"Would you care for a sherbet lemon?" Asked Dumbledore, sitting behind his desk with twinkling eyes and a dish of yellow sweets that Harry was more than a little sure had to be laced with something nefarious.

Harry raised an eyebrow and wondered what he'd do if she told him to shove his sherbet lemons where the sun don't shine.

"No thank you Headmaster." She said instead with a very polite smile, because even though she couldn't afford to alienate him completely just yet, that didn't mean she had to make it easy for him. "Is there something the matter?"

The old wizard had the gall to wave away her question, as if he had any footing on which to stand and patronise her. "Not at all my dear girl. I am merely aware that we didn't part on the best of terms at the end of the last school year, and I wished to clear the air as they say. Now you know the prophecy you must understand how important you are to the war, and that while we may not always see eye to eye I only wish to ensure you are kept safe."

Sure, because nothing said safe like a door with seven locks and bars on the window.
"You're most kind." She said, hands folded neatly in her lap so she didn't curse the fucker, and smiling the blandest smile she could as if he was a complete stranger. "However I'm sure it's not quite as dire as all that, the first week back is always a shock to the senses but it's nothing I can't handle."

"I'm so sorry to hear about the fire, you must be worried sick about your family. They were apparently on holiday when the attack took place, and while I know you must feel guilty for their being targeted as your abrupt departure meant the blood wards which protected you all failed, but you really must not blame yourself too harshly."

Was he fucking serious? Her only regret was that she hadn't been the one to set the blaze herself. Having Voldemort do it for her by proxy was definitely the next best thing though, and if she was being perfectly honest with herself she was almost a little disappointed they hadn't been there. Of course she didn't let onto that fact, wishing her awful muggle relatives dead via arson probably fell far enough into the morally grey territory it wasn't quite gray anymore. While she probably wouldn't go out of her way to bump them off herself, probably, if they somehow found themselves on the wrong end of a Dark Lord then it couldn't have happened to more deserving people.

Never before had she been more appreciative of her barriers, because they meant she could think these things while looking Dumbledore dead in the eye and he had no way of knowing. She felt the faint press of ghostly fingers which let her know he was trying to pry his way into her mind, a scorching lick of rage not her own letting her know she wasn't the only one who felt it.

Dumbledore's eyes widened in alarm, though she couldn't tell if it was because of his inability to read her mind or if he felt the secondhand anger as well. "Can you tell me where you managed to master Occlumency to the point where Severus is unable to read your surface thoughts when conducting some routine tests for me?"

Ha! Routine testing her arse, and how shifty to blame it all on his spy instead of admitting he had just been caught red handed trying to sneak his way in himself. Harry had known Snape was trying to peek into her head with increasingly fruitless results and constipated expressions ever since the Welcoming Feast, but having it confirmed by Dumbledore however was an unexpected bonus.

"Nothing too drastic." She shrugged. "Since I was able to get my summer homework done earlier than usual I had a lot more free time as well as access to the Black Library. I knew it was important that my mind be protected so I tried really hard, and I guess it paid off."

He smiled just as blandly as she was. "Surely it isn't too much of an imposition to inquire as to exactly how you became so proficient after struggling with the basics last year?"

Great, it looked like he was being a lot more direct than usual. "It needed to be simple you see. The books gave examples like walls and towers and labyrinths, I'm stubborn yeah but I struggle to concentrate long enough to even do basic visualisations let alone something that complex. So even if I could do it in a timely manner and it looked impressive as all hell it still would have been all form and no substance, pretty much anyone who took the time to look closer could have huffed and puffed and blown my house down." Harry paused, grateful she'd read so much about the theory of the Mind Arts over the break, and tried to think of the best way to give an explanation which was both plausible and jarring enough he wouldn't ask again.

"The best advice I found was if you were struggling, instead of trying to force your mind to contort into shapes which don't come to you naturally, you should look at what your mind already knows and make use of the automatic associations you make. So in this scenario someone like Professor Sprout would be best with something like a forest or a hedge maze because she knows and understands plants, and would instinctively grow things with thorns or the like which would ward off
intruders. I've become really interested in wards lately and Occlumency barriers are the most deeply personal kind of warding there is. Once you have a good idea of a person's character you usually stand a good chance of guessing what they'd use to protect themselves with, even someone like you Headmaster."

"How terribly clever." He said cheerfully, as if both fascinated and utterly dismissive of the whole thing.

Harry just smirked, a barely there and gone flash of teeth. "Of course I might be completely off the mark sir, but I bet you a nice, warm pair of socks that yours is Hogwarts."

It wasn't often that Dumbledore looked gobsmacked, but now was one of those wonderful times. "How on earth did you guess that my dear girl?"

"I'm no Legilimens if that's what you're thinking." She said dryly, delighted by the alarmed twitch as he automatically flicked his gaze away from hers to instinctively avoid eye contact. Ten points to Gryffindor. "It's because the magical world seems to produce very unbalanced magical people, entire generations who understand the magic part but don't understand the people part at all. You studied at Hogwarts, you were a Professor at Hogwarts, and now you're the Headmaster of Hogwarts. This isn't just a castle to you it's your castle, arguably your kingdom. Most of your life was spent here and you probably know it as well as anyone alive, maybe even more, and would-be intruders would have to work very hard indeed to get inside in the first place as a castle is a very powerful defensive piece of symbolism. With a mind like yours you probably even have a secondary line of defense as well where everything you know is very neatly organised in specific rooms, with a logic that no one else could easily guess. And right up here in the Headmaster's office would be the heart of you, your darkest secrets and the most essential part of your being, because this is your seat of power. It's where you feel strongest and safest."

The faint air of apprehension wasn't going anywhere. But as he was after all a very intelligent man, as he started to see where she was going with this his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "And where is it then that you feel safest Miss Potter?"

It was appalling that her first thought was in the library, curled up in Voldemort's arms. Her next thought was deep inside their void ocean, cocooned in the warm shadows that were so like the silent dark of her cupboard only better, and suddenly she had an answer for him. The perfect answer.

"I've always felt safest in the dark Headmaster, for as long as I can remember." Her head tilted to the side as she looked at him dispassionately just like Voldemort did, just to freak him out. "Do you know why?"

As predicted vague alarm flashed across his face like lightning in the night sky, only visible because she knew what conclusions he'd be drawing and was watching for it. "I am afraid I don't."

"Because when it was dark I was safe from the Dursleys." She didn't say it like she was sad or angry or embarrassed, just as if it was a truth as undeniable as the turn of the earth. The sun rose in the east and set in the west, and all the while it happened Harry's relatives hated everything she was. "I slept in the cupboard under their stairs my entire life up until I got my first Hogwarts letter, though as it was addressed to said cupboard they got suspicious the house was being watched and moved me into Dudley's second bedroom afterwards, just in case."

"Second bedroom?" He said faintly, less a question and more an exhalation, the next turn of the wheel which played out their conversation as if it had been rehearsed and couldn't have gone any
"Of course, where else were all his old toys going to go?" She said, as if amused he'd even bothered asking. "Those things need space and a window and sunlight much more than unwanted little freak girls like me do. Most of the time I wasn't at school or doing the chores or the gardening or the cooking I was locked in there in the dark, either to keep my shameful abnormalities away from all the decent people or to punish me for things like burning the bacon or doing better than Dudley in school. Though at least when I was being punished by being locked in the cupboard for days with no food I wasn't getting the cane, that was very unpleasant."

"Unpleasant?" By now Dumbledore was barely concealing his panicking and they both knew it, she could almost see the cogs ticking as he frantically reviewed and revised all his previous assessments and assumptions to find a way to regain control of the conversation and then her.

"Oh yes." She readily agreed, because now she had him in the ropes there was no way in hell she was letting him up without a fight. "Uncle Vernon really liked using the cane on me, I think it reassured him that he was in control. As if magic couldn't possibly be as scary as he thought it was if he could still beat me without being turned into a frog or something. Not that I knew anything about magic until Hagrid gave me my letter and explained how my parents had actually died, before then I just thought I was being punished for existing at all. Though to be honest, I don't think there's much difference to a witch."

There really wasn't, no one who was magic and knew what it felt like would ever be able to explain just how vital a part of you it was to someone who hadn't experienced it.

"So that's why the dark makes me feel safe Headmaster." She said. "Why it's so easy for my mind to make those automatic associations which let me maintain permanent barriers to protect myself with. It reminds me of all the times I couldn't get out of that cupboard, but nobody else could get in either."

"Surely you're exaggerating a bit my dear girl." He said smoothly, because apparently blatant dismissal and gaslighting were the appropriate response to a student under his duty of care reporting abuse, let alone a student he'd personally delivered to her abusers.

"So I just dreamed up all the scarring then?" Harry said with a raised, mocking eyebrow. "And you didn't actually think I was this small naturally did you? My parents weren't giants yeah, but I haven't grown even a centimetre in over a year so I'm guessing this is probably about as tall as I'm going to get. As I understand it chronic malnutrition does that to a girl. Or had you just never noticed that I showed up every September two dress sizes smaller than when I left? Even now after a summer getting three meals a day instead of the one or two if I was lucky which was the previous standard, I'm only passing for petite instead of gaunt thanks to keeping in shape for quidditch."

The older wizard was silent for a lot longer than Harry expected.

"Why did you never tell anyone?" He asked at last.

"What part of me asking every year to go literally anywhere else, even to the point of being willing to live with an escaped convict I had only just met, was in any way unclear to you?" Harry said, shrugging as if she was over it.

(She was not over it, not in the least.)

"I assumed that was the plan leaving me there. You had Mrs Figg down the street the whole time didn't you, there's no way she missed the bruises or all the rest of it. I was angry when I realised but then it occurred to me you had to make sure the weapon is nice and tempered by the fires of
adversity and deprivation and all that." Harry made sure her eyes were cold and pitiless as a shark. "All the heroes in books do it before they're bundled off to save the world or die trying, that's the script isn't it?"

Despite thinking on it rather a lot she still wasn't sure if her shitty childhood had been his express intention, a pleasant side effect, or an acceptable sacrifice, but regardless it was very obvious he'd never expected her to actually call him out on it. Though the fact it was happening now and not any other time in the last five plus years might have something to do with that, she knew from experience how people didn't like it when you suddenly broke character, especially puppetmasters like Albus Dumbledore who prided themselves on having everyone else worked out in nice orderly boxes.

The old wizard seemed to realise he couldn't gloss over what she was saying like he used to, not and maintain any credibility whatsoever, and changed his angle accordingly. "I am so sorry my dear girl, I truly am."

"If you were sorry you'd have done something the first time Mrs Figg had to set my broken arm, or feed me enough biscuits that I didn't pass out from hunger while she was babysitting me." She said flatly. "I'm sure you've got lots of great reasons for why you thought it was acceptable, but considering I've spent nearly my entire life paying for those reasons in literal blood, sweat and tears, I really couldn't care less what they are."

"Harry... I really am sorry." Was the weak reply, a look of tearful horror which might even be real in those bright blue eyes, which weren't nearly as bright as they had been at the start of their conversation.

"That's nice." She said, because there was no fucking way was she going to magnanimously forgive him for everything he'd put her through. "May I be excused Professor? I've got an essay I need to get started on."

He stared at her for a long while, and she met his gaze unflinchingly and watched the light dim even further as he began to understand exactly what his past actions had possibly cost him. "Yes Miss Potter. I will speak to you soon about starting private lessons to help prepare you for the fight against Tom."

Well wasn't that interesting. "Of course Professor, I'll speak to you soon."

Dumbledore sat slumped ever so slightly in his chair, staring off into the distance, while Harry left the office with her head held high feeling like a queen.
Half the world away

Chapter Summary

In which taking seven classes this school year isn't enough to distract Harry from being very determined to beat Voldemort at his own game, and Voldemort really needs to think things through a little better.

Chapter Notes

Hello lovelies, my sincerest apologies for the radio silence over the last few months. Life got all kinds of mad, and I have some ongoing health issues which unfortunately flare up from time to time and interfere in a big way with my being able to get things done in a timely manner. I'm finally on the mend though, and super keen to get back to sharing this story with you all, because I love it and apparently so do you.

Coming back to see how many hits/kudos/bookmarks etc were on this fic was incredibly humbling, as were the comments worrying about where I'd gone. I promise here and now that even if there are slow periods from time to time, this story won't be in WIP hell forever and it will be finished. I've got a bit over 2.5 in-story years already mapped out, and a good quarter of it already written. We're only getting started and we'll get there together eventually, I promise.

Hope you enjoy the new chapter, and I'm aiming to have another one out for you within 1-2 weeks depending on how everything goes irl <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry stuffed the last piece of muffin into her mouth while running through the corridor towards Ancient Runes, wondering yet again if she was an idiot for agreeing to take seven classes.

She'd only signed up for six, figuring she didn't have the marks for Potions since she didn't get an O. But no, Snape had finally gotten his hooks into DADA and the weird new Potions Master only required an EE, and when McGonagall had cornered her and Ron in the hallway she hadn't been quick enough to think up a good excuse to drop it. So now she had at least another delightful year of Potions to slog through.

At least Slughorn wasn't a miserable old bastard who favoured Slytherins, though to be honest the way he favoured the well-connected wasn't much of an improvement. Winning the vial of Felix Felicis had been fun at least, purely to see Ron's realisation that the battered old book he hadn't wanted was actually a goldmine of advice, and Hermione's refusal to believe that a textbook could be anything less than perfect proven wrong in such dramatic fashion.

Flicking through the Half-Blood Prince's book later in the evening to see that the entire thing was annotated was the only reason she was feeling confident about being able to keep up with the added course load, without the extra help she'd be struggling and she knew it.
Thankfully, whatever else was happening in Harry's life Ancient Runes was always a refuge. A place where there might be more than one right answer, but at the same time that answer was something she would always be able to understand eventually. Professor Bathsheda Babbling was one of the youngest teachers on staff, a friendly but no-nonsense witch in her early thirties who had as much enthusiasm for runes as Charlie Weasley had for dragons, and a hijab which was always perfectly colour-coordinated with her teaching robes.

It went without saying that Harry had been crushing on her something awful since third year.

Making it just in time to collapse into her chair next to Hermione, she ignored the disapproving look from the bushy-haired witch and dug around in her bag for a quill.

"Welcome to your sixth year and the beginning of N.E.W.T-level Ancient Runes." Said Professor Babbling from the front of the class. "Before we begin today's lesson, which of you are also continuing with Arithmancy?"

Hermione and about half of the class raised their hands.

"Those of you who raised your hands may notice that there'll be a bit of cross-over with what Professor Vector and I discuss, especially in the Spellcrafting Theory module which we will begin in January. Can anyone tell me why that is?"

Predictably, Hermione's hand shot into the air and the professor nodded at her to speak.

"Because both arithmantic equations and most rune alphabets can be utilised to create original spells by a sufficiently skilled witch or wizard." She said matter-of-factly.

"Exactly Miss Granger, two points to Gryffindor."

"What about those who aren't taking Arithmancy, do you think they will be at a disadvantage compared to those of us who are?" Asked Padma Patil with a raised hand.

Professor Babbling shook her head. "Not at all, the subjects are separate for a reason. Consider this simply a warning that if you are taking both you will notice some similarities from time to time. But be aware that while we might achieve similar results, we won't necessarily be taking the same route to get there. So don't think you can get away with only studying for one and be able to keep up with the other."

After that the class passed quickly in a flurry of notetaking, and finally it was time to leave. Since she had a free period afterwards she told Hermione to go on ahead without her, and stayed back to speak with Professor Babbling. As the older witch began to get ready for her next class, she turned to Harry with a welcoming smile.

"How did your summer project go Miss Black-Potter?"

"Really well Professor, thank you. I got all the embroidery done and the progress journal, all that's left is to do the tests and write up my conclusion."

The professor looked very pleased. "Excellent, if you leave your work on my desk I'll look over it and let you know next week if you can proceed with the fire testing. If both the experiment and the report are completed to my satisfaction, you might even be able to submit your findings to an academic journal if you so choose."

Well that sounded equal parts amazing and terrifying. "Do you really think my work is on a level they would accept Professor?"
Professor Babbling pushed one of the edges of her scarf back over her shoulder and gave Harry a level look. "I think it's been years since Hogwarts had a student with both the aptitude for runes and the passion for learning them which you do Miss Black-Potter. I would be a failure as an educator if I didn't push you to see just how much you can accomplish when you're challenged. If you keep working hard you could be one of the best Runemasters Hogwarts has ever produced, and I don't say that lightly."

Harry stared at her, wide-eyed and at a complete loss for words.

Professor Babbling winked. "So don't let me down, okay Harry?"

Later on while walking back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry couldn't help but feel warm all over from the praise. The Snapes of the world liked to accuse her of basking in the admiration of her so-called fans, but the reality was that the occasions where she was acknowledged for achieving anything other than failing to die as a toddler were still depressingly few and far between.

Having someone she admired as much as Professor Babbling tell her she could be great, on her own merit and not for things out of her control, was a feeling that she treasured.

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Of all the things Harry expected to see upon entering the library that evening, it wasn't the admittedly hilarious sight of the Dark Lord with his arms crossed like a pouting child, scowling at a book shelf while floating some ten feet off the ground. Even his robes had apparently gotten the message that gravity was currently optional, and were fanning out as if caught in a gentle, non-existent breeze.

"Everything alright up there?" She called out, pulling her new silk dressing gown tighter around herself and fighting the urge to smile. "Did the ladders go on strike or something?"

"Hilarious." He replied, not even looking down at her.

"The possible affirmative action of the furniture aside, you still haven't answered my question you know."

He threw a book in the vague direction of a small mound near his desk where it landed with a loud thunk. "This is a library. Surely it is obvious I am looking for a book."

She raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "Isn't this inside your brain? Don't you just know where everything is?"

"The entire purpose of having a mind palace is to have a system for storing more information than can be easily or immediately recalled. It just so happens that occasionally things can get..." He paused, once again scowling furiously at his shelves. "Misfiled."

Harry was beginning to feel slightly annoyed at being ignored in favour of a bookcase, especially tonight of all nights. "Seriously though, why have the fancy wheeled ladders if instead of using them you're just going to float on up there like a murderous balloon at the first sign of misbehaving literature?"

Voldemort looked like the effort to not curse something was causing him physical pain. "I am flying, not floating. As I'm working between multiple stacks it was more expedient to do it this way."
"Well that's all well and good." She said, thoroughly enjoying the opportunity to take the piss at the Dark Lord's expense. "But it must be habit-forming if you don't ever do it the proper way. Imagine you were looking for something in a regular, non dream library, and went to fly on up and just kind of stood around like a prat looking expectant. I imagine you'd feel pretty damn silly."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "It should come as no shock to you that I can also fly in the real world using wandless magic, you infuriatingly impossible girl."

It occurred to Harry that however amazing flying was on a broom, it had to be exponentially better flying without one. Oh that was just not fair at all.

"Where in Merlin's name did you learn to do that and can I learn it too?" She demanded, the enjoyment of teasing Voldemort swept to the wayside in the face of the possibility of actually learning how to fly.

"In the Swiss Alps in 1962, from a very old hermit with approximately four remaining teeth who is by now without a doubt very dead." He replied, still distracted by digging around in the shelf and sending more books soaring towards his desk.

Well shit.

"Ah. So they're probably not taking on any more students then, right?"

Voldemort snorted. "Probably not. While it is difficult to learn and the high level of magical draw it demands means it is only possible for a witch or wizard with an above average amount of power, considering who you are you would probably be able to learn it in time." His lip twitched as he resorted a selection of books with red spines from one shelf to the one below it. "Maybe if you are very good I'll teach you one day."

Harry couldn't help it, she grinned. "How good are we talking exactly? Good as a normal person would define it, or good in the evil, punching puppies in the face kind of way which you no doubt mean it?"

He actually raised his eyes heavenwards. "At this point I'd settle for a solid evening without having to endure your childish attempts to irritate me."

Yeah, that grin wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. "Wow, I must be a real pain in your arse if you're not holding out for a better deal than that. I almost feel embarrassed on your behalf." Almost being the key word here.

"Believe me when I say there is no one more painfully aware of this than I." The older man sounded baffled as to how he ended up bartering temporary peace and quiet for advanced flying lessons with the Girl-Who-Lived.

"Maybe I'm growing on you." She said with a shrug, her growing irritation making her bold enough to allow her dressing gown to slip down and reveal her shoulder a little.

"Perhaps I am simply living in hope for that one, far off day when you actually surprise me by -" Whatever he was going to say was lost, as in a move she couldn't have planned better if she'd tried, he picked that exact moment to finally look down to where she was leaning smugly against the bookcase next to the ladder.

"You're actually wearing it." It wasn't a question.

Harry just smirked at the stunned expression on his face. "Of course I am. I won didn't I?"
The day after her confrontation with Dumbledore in his office (which she'd dutifully recounted to the maniacally grinning Voldemort that night in the library) a parcel had arrived with the evening owl post. It was lucky it had been packaged discreetly unlike his previous gifts, and that she'd already received a number of things via owl order in the last week. Between that and dessert appearing she was able to explain it away as simply being more supplies for her runes projects and stashed it in her bag without anyone being too curious.

Opening it later in the privacy of her bed with the curtains drawn, she was incredibly glad she'd resisted the urge to open it in full view of the Great Hall. Because apparently Dark Lords take bets seriously when their horcruxes are involved, and he'd accepted her winning said bet and sent her new pyjamas as promised. And Circe's tits, what a pair of pyjamas they were.

It was a matching set consisting of a babaydoll-style slip with little shorts and a dressing gown, presumably to make a half-hearted attempt at preserving modesty and avoid any more knicker flashing incidents. They were also all made of the most luxuriously soft emerald green Acromantula silk she'd ever felt in her life, with tiny buttons that looked like actual black pearls.

The scandalously short slip had thin straps which criss-crossed over a low-cut back, trimmed in intricate black lace and black silk ribbons. The shorts were just long enough for the hems, also edged in black lace, to peek out of the bottom of the slip. That they showed off her legs was something of an understatement. The dressing gown had long, flared sleeves decorated with even more lace, and when done up technically covered from her neck almost to her knees. But it didn't change the fact that the Dark Lord had essentially sent her lingerie.

Stupidly gorgeous, stupidly flattering, and stupidly expensive lingerie which she'd worn to bed just so he could see her in it.

Harry didn't have the energy left to wonder what even was her life anymore, she was having far too much fun watching Voldemort attempt to control his reaction to her appearance. Served him right though, if he was going to send his arch nemesis/horcrux sexy pjs in an attempt to embarrass her, he should have been fully prepared to deal with the consequences of his actions. Honestly, had he ever known her to back down from a challenge, literally ever?

Voldemort still wasn't saying anything, burning red eyes fixed unblinking on her.

"Does it suit me then?" She asked, all wide-eyed innocence and fluttering eyelashes, loosening the sash so she could pull the dressing gown open a little more. When he didn't reply she flicked her braids forward over her shoulder and did a little twirl to show off how much of her skin the low back of the slip revealed.

His gaze darkened, hands tightening on the book he was still holding, and Harry grinned wider.

Ten points to Gryffindor.

After what seemed like a brief internal deliberation Voldemort discarded the book he had been holding by tossing it onto the floor behind him without a backwards glance, and floating down towards her. Stopping half a foot off the ground he held out his hand to her with a little half bow.

"Would you like to fly with me Harry?"

"On the contrary, you have been positively evil." He declared. "I of course thoroughly approve of this development, and wish to reward such behaviour immediately in order to encourage more of it in the future."
Harry couldn't help but giggle at his antics, hands twisting a little in her sleeves and not entirely sure if she was comfortable with the direction this particular escalation of their game was heading.

Now it was his turn to grin. "Believe me little horcrux, I won't bite unless you ask me very nicely."

It occurred to Harry that being borderline propositioned by the Dark Lord was probably the most inappropriately appropriate time to be blushing like a schoolgirl. From Voldemort's wicked smirk she could tell it wasn't the delicate little flush which Hermione got either, more like the level of raging red Lavender became while reading one of her romance novels.

There was no way she was going to let him win this round though, especially not when she'd been the one who started it, so she ignored the warning bells going off in her head and put her hand in his.

He pulled her closer to him in a fluid movement, making her gasp at the sudden wave of soul-deep warmth which always accompanied any of their physical contact, one big hand closing around her while the other pressed against the small of her back. Immediately they started to rise, not how a broom did by pushing defiantly against gravity, but as if the air itself was suddenly just solid enough to stand on.

"Watch the hands mister." She said with an awkward huff, reminded in no small part of the Yule Ball despite the fact she hadn't actually danced with any boys there, let alone someone as undeniably a man as he was. Seriously, they were flying in the air and she was still only level with his broad chest, it was completely unfair. It didn't help the matter that she was also wearing decidedly less clothes now. "It's not like we're dancing."

"We could be." He said smugly. Suddenly a lively tune was playing, because of course it was, and he was once again sweeping her off her feet.

"Now the secret to flying is that it is just like dancing, every movement must flow seamlessly into the next. As with most forms of higher magic without your unwavering belief that you will succeed, you will fall, every single time."

"What, no pixiedust Peter Pan?" She replied tartly, trying to sound unaffected by the dual rush of flight and horcrux nonsense and not doing a great job. "Do I also need to chant that I do believe in fairies?"

Voldemort laughed out loud at that, and she immediately regretted her poorly timed sense of humor when she was hit by the full force of his crooked, dimpled smile from not even a foot away.

"No need for that dearest Wendy." He said with a wink. "Everyone knows there's no fairies left anymore."

"Really?" She asked, determined to ignore the stupid butterflies in her stomach. "What happened to them?"

"They left the British Isles and returned to the Summerlands, a very very long time ago." He looked down at her, a considering look in his eye. "But that is a story for another day little horcrux. I believe I promised to show you how to fly."

It came as no surprise that he was an excellent dancer, so graceful and undeniably in control that even as flustered and lacking in practice as she was there was nothing to do except breathlessly follow his lead. Together they danced, the air itself seeming to hold them in its embrace as they circled the ceiling and stepped lightly on the chandelier in passing, just because they could.

It was far too easy to be here like this in his arms, listening to the passion in his voice as he explained
the magical theory of flight using the action and reaction of movement to illustrate concepts she might have otherwise struggled with. Even though she could feel his eyes running over her he was the picture of gentlemanly courtesy, hands never straying anywhere untoward. A small part of her was appalled to realise she was as disappointed as she was relieved.

"You look lovely like this my dear." He said eventually, leaning down to speak into her ear as he dipped her back into a deep arch which gave her a spectacular view of what the library looked like from upside down. "Do you like it?"

The entirely too distracting warmth of their bodily contact meant Harry wasn't quite coherant enough to work out if he meant the expensive silk fripperies or the mid-air dancing, but either way the answer was the same. "Yes."

His hands tightened ever so slightly as he pulled her back upright, the easy display of strength sending the smallest shiver down her spine. "Excellent."

The music eventually slowed down into a waltz. Without missing a beat Voldemort pulled her closer until they were pressed gently together, moving in slow circles above the fireplace while the flickering flames were reflected in the red of his eyes. He was playing dirty and they both knew it, but considering she had started it in the first place by teasing him (she flatly refused to acknowledge it had likely been closer to flirting than simple teasing, that was a crisis for another day) she couldn't find it in herself to be mad about it.

Harry wondered, not for the first time, just what it was he needed from her if he was perfectly happy to drop whatever it was he had been doing just to dance with her. It made no logical sense. But despite the irony, from her vantage point flying weightlessly through the air with the Dark Lord and swaying slowly in time to an unearthly waltz as she gave in and rested her head against his chest, for once in her life wars and prophecies seemed half the world away.

At some point over the last few months something had changed between them on a fundamental level, and she was at a loss to explain exactly when it happened or how deep that change went. All she knew was she couldn't deny anymore that on some level this closeness, as unwise as it might ultimately prove to be, was something she had begun to need as well.

Chapter End Notes

Was anyone else picturing the scene in Howl's Moving Castle where Howl and Sophie fly over the town to escape the creepy black slime dudes while they were dancing on the air? Because I rewatched that movie recently and had to have these two idiots do their own version of it, it was just so cute.

I'm also still giggling at Voldemort being a sore loser and trying to one up her by giving her sexy jimjams to make her feel awkies, and Harry being all you know what TRY ME BITCH and wearing then just to be a teasing little shit. It's like the most high-stakes game of gay chicken in the history of magical britain, and it's giving me life.
Your virtues have so strangely taken up my thoughts

Chapter Summary

"Well may the fascinating wearer of it be called a killing creature. She actually carries in her skirts poison enough to slay the whole of the admirers she may meet with in half a dozen ball-rooms."

Chapter Notes

Guess who's back, back again <3

Fair warning I'm doing Nanowrimo atm so I'm a bit distracted, but I promised a new chapter in a couple of weeks so here ya go. Yay for procrastinating on one writing project by doing another, gg brain. We're getting out of the dry patch in the plot and just about to head into the fertile plains of in-fic October, so there's a whole lot of chapters which are already half or mostly written. Next chapter should be out in a week or two, and I'll get back to all your amazing comments in the next few days too because omfg ilu guys so much <3

So, that quote in the chapter summary is an actual legit quote from the British Medical Journal in the late 1800s about arsenic clothing, which is really freaking interesting if you're a morbid fashion and/or history nerd and part-time dumpster fire like me. I read this article and just knew I had to reference it in this fic so here ya go, enjoy: https://pictorial.jezebel.com/the-arsenic-dress-how-poisonous-green-pigments-terrori-1738374597

Also referenced in this chapter is a cool thing I found while reading about witchburnings, and some nihilism, because Volders is a well-read bastard who likes to show off and Harry is eternally curious about everything ever. If you're a worldbuilding ho like me then get hyped because we finally get a look into the political scene of Magical Britain. If you're not then never fear, it's followed up with some more flirting and Volders being a thirsty bitch.

I also recently gave up on having my fic writing being separate from my main tumblr blog or having a cool aesthetic theme, and just decided to say fuck it and do whatever the hell I felt like. If anyone I know irl actually finds this account and reads it then godspeed to you, enjoy my questionably tasteful metaphysical porn and rants about the sexuality of Harry Potter characters. If you're on tumblr come scream into the void with me http://samvelg-likes-things.tumblr.com/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Voldemort watched the farce that was Lucius Malfoy's hearing from the back row of the viewing gallery in the courtroom and despaired of how much work was ahead of him to fix the stagnated mess of bloated corruption that was the government of Magical Britain. Sure it worked in his favour
now as he geared up to take over, but with the next stage of his plan getting closer every day he knew it was only a matter of time before he would be the one in charge of this shitshow. And then the real work would begin.

The people around him shifted restlessly, their initial enjoyment of the drama of a respected Lord being exposed as a Death Eater giving way to boredom as it dragged on. It amused him how they thought this would be an open-shut case because even with all of the evidence prosecuting a member of the Wizengamot was always tricky.

Despite the fact that while they convened as the Council of Magical Law they were supposed to be impartial and only vote according to the facts of the case, it was impossible for personal and political bias to be left at the door. Especially for someone as polarising in his influence as Lucius Malfoy, who prior to his incarceration had been the leader of the almost entirely Dark-aligned Traditionalist party, and the mostly Light-aligned Progressive party were as rabidly determined to see him back in Azkaban as the Traditionalists were to see him freed.

The Moderates, who liked to think they were upholding neutrality but mostly just didn't like picking sides, were as non-committal as always but would inevitably tip the vote so Lucius won by a small margin. Partly because Voldemort had ensured they were bribed or otherwise persuaded to do just that, and partly because they were far too fond of the comfortable status-quo they'd fallen into after the last war. As with most of the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot regardless of party or affiliation, they also disliked the precedent of seeing one of their own number so disgraced.

Restrained by magical chains in the chair at the centre of the courtroom which was reserved for only the most dangerous of prisoners, he certainly looked the part. It was unclear how much of the exhausted humility was an affectation on the part of him and his law-witch to engender pity and how much was sincere, but either way, it seemed to be working. Always a stylish and well put together gentleman, in the dull grey prisoner's robe and with his hair hanging lankly around his unshaven face he appeared to have aged years. The months in Azkaban had clearly not been kind to him, and even his staunchest adversaries looked somewhat shaken at seeing one of their peers like this.

Some of his Death Eaters in the Inner Circle had been confused when he had initially informed them of his plan to get Lucius acquitted. A brave one had even gone so far as to ask why they weren't just breaking him and the others out of Azkaban. After he'd punished them for their impudence, for the benefit of the rest of the idiots who hadn't worked it out yet he told them they would indeed be breaking the rest of them out in due time, but that first Lucius had to freed according to the letter of the law. Other Death Eaters were useful because of their skills in various areas or their contacts, but the place where Lucius shone and was of most value was in the political arena. And a Lord of a Noble House couldn't serve on the Wizengamot if they were also serving a life sentence in Azkaban. The trial might be a farce, but it was a necessary farce in Lucius' case.

Enter one Harlow Montague, a deceptively willowy brunette who could probably out-scream a mandrake if it pissed her off enough. She was a perfect choice as she was one of Narcissa's closest friends and it made sense for her to be asked to represent her husband. In addition to being an incredibly talented law-witch, she was also one of his un-Marked Death Eaters, one with a perfect record who had never had any suspicions surrounding her loyalty before.

Most of his female followers were actually un-Marked, both because thanks to the inanities of fashion they often had to wear shorter sleeves at formal events and because it made them so easily overlooked by the posturing idiots in the DMLE. He was with Harry on this one, it honestly baffled him that society still thought witches were all delicate flowers when they had fucking wands too.

Towards the end of the last war when everyone was being watched and couldn't even renew
their *Daily Prophet* subscription without Dumbledore hearing about it, Narcissa's collection of frivolous (and therefore unthreatening) young society ladies was a godsend. Her little spiders would meet up every few days in tea rooms or go shopping together, and as no one in the DMLE or the Order took them seriously after the first few attempts they were free to quietly pass along messages and intel which honestly did more for the cause than the rest of his spies put together. This was only truer now since she’d had an extra decade and change to spin her web, and Harlow Montague had been there from the beginning.

Therefore, it was unsurprising that after arguing for over three hours with the prosecutor about the circumstantial evidence, scolding him and the courtroom at large like naughty schoolchildren, and citing Lucius' many years as a valued member of the Wizengamot, the law-witch had clearly had enough.

She slammed her hand down onto the small table in front of her, the sudden loud bang silencing the red-faced prosecutor and making half of the courtroom jump. "Enough is enough! Not only is your tone condescending, but it is also utterly inexcusable that an upstanding member of our society is being persecuted simply because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time!"

The prosecutor looked about ready to explode. "He bears the Dark Mark and was found in the company of other Death Eaters attempting to infiltrate the Ministry of Magic!"

"He works in the Ministry of Magic! If you're working late at your office and get forced at wandpoint by a burglar to follow them are you then automatically a burglar as well?" She snapped, before turning back to address the Council. "Yes, he bears the Dark Mark because he was taken advantage of and Imperiused during the last war, something which I will remind you *yet again* he was cleared of by this very court!"

"He's a bloody Death Eater!" Said the prosecutor, apparently also at his limit. "I call for him to be sentenced to death via the Dementor's Kiss!"

Harlow Montague was having none of it. "Well, then I call for a free vote between the Noble House Assembly and the Ancient House Assembly!"

Whispers immediately broke out like a forest fire. It was showtime.

In his position as both the acting-Chief Warlock presiding over the trial and someone who had been so comfortably in Lucius Malfoy's pocket he might as well have lived there, Cornelius Fudge had been very uncomfortable with the entire situation and looked relieved that all the shouting had finally stopped. "You are aware of course Madam Montague that only a Lord or Lady of the Wizengamot can call for a free vote?"

"Yes, acting-Chief Warlock." She replied curtly. "To that end, I respectfully entreat any Lords and Ladies who also wish to see that justice is done to support my motion and call for the free vote."

More whispers, some of the members of the Wizengamot looking a bit put on the spot, before Marcellus Avery stood. "I have known Lucius Malfoy for his entire life, and not only is he the son of one of my dearest friends he is a man I greatly respect for his devotion to his family and to the people of Magical Britain. As is my right as the Lord of the Noble House of Avery, I call for a free vote."

Fudge looked relieved that something was finally happening without him having to visibly take a side. "Very well then. Will anyone second this call?"

To everyone's shock, it wasn't another member of the Traditionalist party which stood next as they expected but Lorena MacDougal, one of the Moderates. "I also knew the previous Lord Malfoy, and
I would not be able to face old Abraxas on the other side of the Veil if I stood by while his only child is being treated so inhumanely. As is my right as the Lady of the Noble House of MacDougal, I second Lord Avery's call for a free vote."

All according to plan. If two suspected Death Eaters or actively Dark-aligned Houses called for the vote it would be easy to right it off as a play. But by keeping it focused on family ties and a respected Moderate seconding it, suddenly the lines in the sand weren't so clear.

Voldemort leaned forward in his seat as Cornelius Fudge as the acting-Chief Warlock, Madam Bones the Head of the DMLE and Madam Umbridge the Senior Undersecretary began to talk amongst themselves, deeply curious to see how this all played out.

The Wizengamot was a simplified bicameral parliament comprised of the Noble House Assembly as the lower house and the Ancient House Assembly as the upper house. During both its usual function as a legislative body and during the rarely convened Council of Magical Law everything was debated jointly by both Assemblies before first being voted on by the Noble Houses, and if successful it was then passed up to the Ancient Houses for the final say. However, in a free vote both Assemblies voted jointly, with the Ancient Houses getting two votes per seat in deference to their superiority as opposed to the one vote per seat the Noble Houses got.

It was also the only time in which votes were submitted anonymously.

This particular quirk of due process was a leftover from centuries ago when there was still a lot more of the Ancient Houses active and they had a lot more power and influence. It was originally meant to ensure that on gravely important issues the Noble Houses had the freedom to vote against the interests of one or more of the Ancient Houses without facing retaliation, and today it would be the reason why Lucius Malfoy walked away a free man. Like most well-intentioned checks and balances put into place and never updated to take into account the way things inevitably change over time, that guaranteed anonymity was now the best way for someone to literally get away with murder if they had enough sympathisers.

Resisting the urge to smile Voldemort's eyes flicked over the upper levels of seating, counting the members of the Ancient House Assembly again just to double-check who was present. Just like when he first sat down, there was only one member of the Neutral party and two of the Dark party present, and the only current member of the Light party was absent.

Thoroughly enjoying the muffled chaos happening around him, Voldemort made a note to commend Narcissa for suggesting this course of action. Calling for a free vote was rare and it was even rarer for it to be approved since it required at least two out of three votes between of the Chief Warlock, the Head of the DMLE and the Senior Undersecretary to pass. But they had purposefully pushed for this date knowing that despite no longer being a pariah, Dumbledore couldn't be reinstated until the vote at the special quarterly Wizengamot session, which was next week. With Fudge's history with Lucius and how much Madam Umbridge loved to suck up to the prestigious old families, they would without a doubt overrule Madam Bones.

Soon enough Madam Umbridge was looking quietly smug and Madam Bones was looking thunderous. But she was unable to say anything as Fudge rose to his feet to deliver their verdict.

"The free vote in the matter of Lucius Malfoy vs. Magical Britain is approved." He said pompously and waved the Chief Warlock's sceptre.

Ballot slips of softly glowing paper flew towards all of the Lords and Ladies in attendance. The Chief Warlock's sceptre was about a foot and a half long, an elegant pair of hawthorn branches which had grown in a tight spiral. Made by Merlin himself for the first leader of the united Ancient
Houses and passed down ever since, it was still as alive as the day he supposedly cut it off the tree
even down to the green leaves, thorns and a small cluster of red berries. Heavily enchanted with long
forgotten magic, it was the symbol of both the office of the Chief Warlock and the sovereignty of
Magical Britain. Because it was next to impossible to be tampered with, by using it to create the
ballots they were spelled to be unable to be read by other people and would be sorted and tallied
automatically without the interference of a third party, which ensured total anonymity.

Voldemort felt his palms almost itch with the need to hold it in his own hands and study just what
kind of magic had gone into making something so powerful. Patience, he had to remind himself,
there would be plenty of time for that once he conquered Magical Britain. The pieces were all lined
up on the board, it really was just a matter of time.

As the people in the seats around him whispered fiercely between themselves while the Lords and
Ladies voted, he got to his feet and quietly slipped out through a side door. There was no need to
stay and watch the verdict, he knew what it would be.

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"So I read in the paper this morning that Lucius Malfoy got set free, despite a mountain of evidence."

He looked up from his reading to see his horcrux had appeared and was lounging in the armchair
across from him in one of her long black nightgowns and the green silk robe. "Good evening Harry."
He said, because surely if he modelled good manners enough she'd eventually have to pick at least
some of them up. "And to be fair, it was very circumstantial evidence."

She stared at him as if he was crazy. "He's a Death Eater, who was with other Death Eaters, wearing
Death Eater robes, while doing Death Eater things."

Voldemort just smirked and turned the page of his book. "He was wearing a mask for all of the
actual confrontation, and as much as the Order of the Phoenix dearly wish otherwise similar hair
colour is not grounds for positive identification. It also helps that by the time the Aurors got there
he'd swapped out his robes and was feigning unconsciousness. As both he and all of the others
currently in custody unanimously testified, they ran into him while he was working late and took him
as a hostage so he couldn't alert anyone else. Such nasty business."

"You can't mean they actually bought that?" Harry said in disbelief. "They were ready to expel me
for defending myself against a Dementor, but Lucius bloody Malfoy gets caught red-handed in the
Department of Mysteries and he's off scot-free?"

"With a formal apology." Voldemort added smugly, because he couldn't help it. Harlow Montague
was definitely getting a reward.

"A formal apology? You have got to be kidding me!" She looked pissy enough to singlehandedly
hex the entire Wizengamot with boils, it was hilarious.

He belatedly remembered just how much he enjoyed it when she was all worked up and righteously
indignant, and then it was slightly less hilarious. Especially at moments like this when the fiery burn
of her anger was juxtaposed with her ever so slightly soft and dishevelled appearance, dressed for
bed with loosely braided hair and wearing nice, luxurious things. Some of which he'd bought for her.

For fuck's sake.
"I suppose I have you to thank for this gross miscarriage of justice then?" She huffed when he didn't say anything, arms now folded and glaring at him.

"Of course you do." He replied airily, as if his errant brain wasn't currently imagining how she'd look while wearing their horcruxes and furious at him, cheeks flushed passionately and ready to scratch his eyes out if he wasn't careful.

This was becoming a problem. It had been over a week and he still couldn't for the life of himself work out if the plan to provoke her with the lingerie had completely backfired, or worked out better than he could have possibly imagined. The memory of her leaning against a bookshelf with her arms crossed refused to leave his mind, the elegant green silk of the lingerie he'd given her falling off one tanned shoulder as she smirked up at him with a challenge in her eyes.

Time to change the subject.

"I see you are wearing the robe again." Shit, that wasn't an improvement.

"Of course I am, it's all soft and comfy." She sniffed, picking up Fomalhauta's book from the coffee table where he'd started to leave it for her every night so she didn't bother him asking for it.

"Good to hear I chose well then." He said with a charming smile, sending her a flirtatious wink which typically reduced other women to blushing messes. "It was that or something in blood red, but as I guessed the green looks wonderful with your eyes."

Far from being charmed she just snorted in derision. "You're just saying that because you've got an obsession with your ancestry and they match the Slytherin banners."

"Not just the Slytherin banners." He replied smugly. "Did you know little horcrux, that your eyes are the exact colour of one of the most beautiful and subversive poisons in recent history?"

She raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Oh yes. In the 19th century, a new type of green dye was developed which was made from copper and arsenic hydroxide. It was the most vibrant shade of emerald green anyone had ever seen, and quickly became the height of fashion for everything from home furnishings to apparel." He dropped the charming act and grinned at her, the nasty one with too many teeth. "It also had the rather nasty habit of making rather a lot of muggles incredibly dead."

Thanks to their apparently mutual black sense of humour, the disbelief had morphed into a mixture of suspicion and reluctant amusement. "How the hell did a dye kill people?"

"Very slowly and painfully. But they were so in love with the colour that even after they learned it was so dangerous, some continued to wear it anyway despite the risk." He paused, drinking in the way the firelight made her seem to glow, and wondered if perhaps he had a new understanding of all those long dead Victorians who desired that impossible shade of green so much it killed them. "They couldn't help themselves you see."

She squirmed a little in her armchair, attempting to hide her face behind her book. "Are you seriously trying to charm me by waxing poetic about how my eyes are the same colour as poison?"

He smirked at how pink her cheeks were getting. "Why, is it working?"

"In your dreams." She snapped.

He raised an eyebrow, gesturing lazily to their surroundings. "Apparently so."
It was clear as day that she was resisting the urge to smile as much as he was. "I bet you think you're being terribly clever, don't you?"

His lip quirked. "Constantly."

She actually giggled a little at that, before looking back up at him as if something had just occurred to her. "That actually reminds me of something I've been meaning to ask, where did you get yours from?"

"Where did I get my what from exactly?"

"Your eyes. They used to be brown once upon a time but they're red now. They're even red while you're wearing your real face, so I figured there must be a reason for it." She stopped and smirked at him. "Unless they're just part of your evil aesthetic that is. I wouldn't put it past you to be that melodramatic."

He wished, oh how he wished, that he had the ability to send something stronger than a half-hearted glare her way. "No, they are not part of my 'evil aesthetic' you brat."

"Is it a side effect of all the horcrux-making then?" She continued, completely unperturbed. "They do say that the eyes are the window to the soul after all, it wouldn't surprise me in the least if yours was all bloody."

"No, it is not because our soul is all bloody." He corrected. "Though on some level the window part isn't entirely inaccurate."

"So?" She prompted when he didn't elaborate, putting her book to the side and giving him her complete attention. "There must be a story there."

He sighed and put his down too, resigning himself to story time. "After leaving Britain we travelled throughout the world for years, learning everything we could about the new kinds of magic we found as we were exploring. As you are now, reduced to only the knowledge and context of how Magical Britain sees magic you can't possibly begin to imagine it. The basic mechanics of magic are universal, but the various interpretations and applications of it? There are as many as there are people who can wield it, all with the background of their culture and the land they inhabit to influence how it evolved."

Harry looked like she had a feeling she knew where this was going. "So, where were you and what completely insane thing did you rush in and try to do without actually knowing what you were doing?"

Curse her and her sporadic but always perfectly aimed flashes of insight. Voldemort didn't know if he should be unsettled or not, and briefly wondered how much was because of the memories which were surely buried somewhere in her subconscious and how much was her apparently getting to know him as much as he was getting to know her.

"We were researching in Istanbul when we came across the extant works of the legendary necromancer St. Cyprian of Antioch, and decided to perform a summoning."

Her jaw dropped. "You actually summoned demons? Were you bloody mental?"

Voldemort couldn't entirely blame her for being appalled. At that point, they were young and had yet to find any situation they couldn't either kill or talk their way out of and that overconfidence had made them arrogant. "No, we summoned a demon, singular. And it was only ever the once."
"Why just once?"

It didn't matter that this was a dream or that he was decades and a continent away from the experience in question. He could still feel the phantom lick of flames trying to dig far too many sharp fingers into his skin, and had to repress a shiver. "Once was enough."

There must have been something in his voice that gave something away, because her eyes widened in surprise before narrowing them as if trying to solve a puzzle. The expression was one he'd seen on his own face, and not wanting to let her sit there and analyse his moment of weakness he knew he needed to distract her. With a flash of inspiration and wave of his hand two big green mugs of hot chocolate appeared on the coffee table.

Picking them up he passed one over to her, which she took with a shocked look on her face. "What's this for?"

Ten points to Slytherin.

"Tea is for difficult discussions and polite conversation, hot chocolate is for indulgent reminiscing."

"Is that a rule?"

He shrugged as he took a sip, and was pleased when it tasted exactly how he remembered. "Blame Fomalhauta. According to her, it's either this or Firewhiskey, and I assumed you would prefer this."

"Fomalhauta Black made you hot chocolate?" She asked before tasting it, face lighting up in surprised pleasure when she discovered how delicious it was.

"Sometimes if either of us had a particularly bad day she would sneak us into the Hogwarts kitchens and make this, she wouldn't even let the house elves help her. This is a memory of how it tasted, apparently it was a family recipe."

Behind the rim of the mug Harry's face softened a little, and he felt smug at his guess that she would enjoy experiencing another little piece of her family.

Having determined that he wasn't trying to mess with her, Harry sat back with the mug and returned to the discussion. "Come on then, you haven't finished the story yet. You just got to the bit where you were a crazy person and summoned a demon."

Pleased that she seemed to be enjoying herself he relaxed his usually impeccable posture and settled back more comfortably into the armchair, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle. "Did you know little horcrux, that during the witch hunts young redheaded women were the most likely to be burned? Impressive really, considering the statistically small percentage of the population of Medieval Europe they comprised."

"Why was that?" She asked, taking another drink and looking like she was close to purring from how good it tasted.

He smirked, leaning casually to the side with an elbow on the right arm of the chair and his chin resting on one hand. "It was because their enemies thought it was obvious that they were witches, because their red hair was a sure sign they had somehow bartered for or outright stolen the fires of hell."

"Did you try to steal the fires of hell Voldemort?" She asked in disbelief, eyebrows almost to her hairline and still rising. "Because that seems..." Harry paused, clearly trying to think of an adjective which could adequately convey the sheer magnitude of just how insane that was. "Excessive. Even
"No, but I didn't need to you see." He said softly, glancing sideways to look into the endlessly burning flames in the fireplace. "I saw them."

Across from him Harry had pulled her knees up to her chest and was hugging them with one hand while holding the mug of hot chocolate balanced on top of them with the other. It was adorable, and even though that position usually meant she was scared or stressed she still seemed curious and like she was enjoying the story. "You really did?"

With the shadowy quiet of the library and the flickering firelight, he was suddenly reminded of staying up late to listen to the older children at the orphanage telling ghost stories to the younger ones. If they saw him they'd always chased him away for apparently being too frightening himself, so he'd gotten good at hiding and not drawing attention to himself so he could still listen. Later on when he had proven them right about just how scary he could be they didn't dare try, but by then he had decided he was above such things and ignored them all, so he'd never been in the position of being able to tell any himself. He felt strangely gratified by her obvious enjoyment of him telling her about their shared history.

Ruthlessly pushing down the brief moment of sentimentality, he continued on as if nothing had happened. "I really did. For the briefest fraction of a second, before the failsafe wards kicked in and broke the circle. And that glimpse was more than enough to know to not attempt it ever again. To this day I have no idea what exactly it was we saw or how we managed to survive it, though possibly the particular nature of our occlumency barrier was a factor. You have noticed as well haven't you, how they feel like a cold, endless black ocean?"

She nodded in agreement. "Yeah, though to me though don't feel cold at all. More like sinking into warm black bathwater."

How very curious. It must be a horcrux thing, he'd always found them comfortable himself but was aware that the few who actually experienced them found them more along the lines of sub-zero. "I imagine the horcruxes helped too. But once our brain was no longer trying to bleed its way out of our face and we had finally woken up after screaming ourself unconscious, our eyes were red. As they have been ever since."

Harry looked fascinated. "You really can't change them back?"

"No, and it was only in our later years that we learned a sufficiently powerful glamour to hide them with. Much like your curse scar they're corrosive to most kinds of magic, and actively resist obfuscation."

"Do they do anything?" She asked, morbidly curious. "Aside from intimidating the hell out of people that is."

An even longer pause, one that felt heavy with something undefinable as he pondered how best to explain the strangeness of something fundamentally unexplainable. "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee."

Her nose scrunched up. "What's that, some of your angsty teenage poetry?"

"It's Nietzsche." He gritted out through his teeth, because honestly. "A 19th century philosopher who was a proponent of nihilism amongst other things. The idea that there is no good or evil, no truth or God, no purpose or structure in all the world which we don't expressly create for ourselves. That
human will and self-determination is the most absolute power in all of creation."

"Are you seriously quoting a muggle philosopher?"

"As his grandmother was a squib technically speaking he was a squib as well. It is speculated he might have known about the existence of magic because if you are familiar with some of the concepts present in the higher levels of magical theory a lot of it rings very true."

She took another drink. "So what do your eyes have to do with Nietzsche?"

"I gazed into the abyss, Harry." He said frankly. "Hellfire, for lack of any better term for it. So now on the rare occasion anyone actually dares to look me in the eye, they can see the faintest reflection of that hellfire gazing back at them."

She was staring at him as if she half expected a demon to spontaneously burst its way out of his skull and eat her. "That's kind of amazing. And terrifying. Mostly terrifying."

"It's true that most living creatures find it highly disquieting, even if they don't know why they feel that way." Voldemort took another sip from his mug, and seeing she still looked a little disturbed couldn't resist grinning at her. "Don't look so worried, it is the metaphysical equivalent of scar tissue and almost entirely harmless. Truth be told, even though it was a complete accident I am actually quite pleased with how it all turned out. It was a very educational experience, not to mention it has the pleasant bonus of making it far less likely that people are able to use legilimency on me. Only Dark creatures and beings don't have the instinctive urge to recoil, though they will still often be wary or fascinated depending on the individual in question and their species."

As predicted she rolled her eyes at him, but then something seemed to occur to her and she frowned. "Does that make me some kind of Dark creature then? Because they've never scared me any more than any other part of you did."

"Not at all. It is simply that even though you don't consciously recall the event, the impact of the memory is still there so it isn't something you find jarring. It doesn't matter if you are in a new body or can't remember it, there is no way to undo an experience like that." He smiled crookedly at her. "The scars from some things stay with you forever."

She flushed a little for some reason, avoiding his gaze by taking a big drink of hot chocolate. "With all the horcruxes and the awful things you've done, is there even anything left of your soul which isn't scars?" She grimaced. "Of our soul."

Hearing her acknowledge it, however begrudgingly, sent a thrill through him. "While it is by no means pristine, I can assure you it is not nearly as bad as you are probably imagining."

Harry raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "You must be joking. Didn't making your first horcrux mean splitting your soul in half, and the next one half of that, and so on?"

"That would mean we were each wandering around with approximately 1/128th of a soul dear, do think things through a little better." Voldemort shook his head because really, if that were the case he doubted there would be anything of him which was capable of reason left at all. "No, not only is the soul not something you can define with numbers I also don't think it is possible to quantify something like murder into neat percentages, it's far too visceral for that."

"Oh, it just seemed from how you talked about it that making a horcrux would be this big dramatic thing."

Merlin, she didn't know the half of it. "Oh it certainly is, but not in quite the way you are probably
imagining it I think. Murder fractures the soul of course, brutally so, but as someone who has done rather a lot of it, I feel confident in saying that not all murders are inherently equal in how they affect you. If anything I think there is probably a rough scale, with the accidental murder of an inconsequential stranger on one end and the premeditated murder of a lover or someone significant to you on the other." He shrugged a shoulder casually, taking a sip of chocolate. "Not to mention that for someone like me it is a lot easier to kill than it is for your garden variety Hufflepuff."

"I suppose I should have thought of that." She said stiffly, scowling and starting to look properly mad for the first time all night. "A monster like you probably doesn't lose much sleep by killing, it makes sense that it doesn't mess up your soul as much."

Deciding to ignore the hostility he just continued on as if nothing was the matter. "It is a common misconception actually. I think most people assume the murder for a horcrux takes half of a soul purely because the people who actually attempt it lean inevitably towards megalomania. And since most limit themselves to just the one they make sure to make it the most significant death they can manage. My first was the diary, which I made with the accidental death of another student who I had no feelings for at all, either positive or negative. The second one was a ring, and I purposefully sought out and murdered my own father in order to do it. So even though it was my second, it was comparatively a much larger piece of my soul."

"So most of your horcruxes were made from less damaging murders then." She said, still frowning but apparently putting the anger to the side in favour of understanding more about how she came to exist. "That's how you were able to make so many without going completely barmy?"

Voldemort pinched the bridge of his nose and took a calming breath. "That is a simplistic and not remotely accurate summary which fails to take into account the many and varied ways the exacting nature of both soul magic and high ritual magic can affect both the success of the horcrux and the wellbeing of the creator if not done with the utmost care and precision." There were few things which irritated him more than people glossing over important details like that, but considering her sudden bad mood he did his best to restrain the worst of it. "But for all practical purposes that is more or less correct, yes."

Harry was still uncharacteristically quiet, staring into the by now empty mug as if trying to see the future. Just as he was about to change the subject she turned back to him with an uncertain, complicated expression on her face. "What about my murder then?"

Of course she would be thinking of that, he was surprised he hadn't thought of it himself. "I feel no shame in admitting that I lost count of all the people killed by my wand or on my order a very long time ago, and that apart from the satisfaction I feel in removing an obstacle I am hard-pressed to remember most of them by the time they are no longer in my way."

Seeing fiery anger flicker in her eyes, those deadly arsenic-green eyes, Voldemort just smiled warmly at her with far more affection than the current subject matter should probably allow. "But you were not only a tiny innocent child, a stretch for even my admittedly questionable ethics, you were also prophesied to be the one person in all of creation who could be my downfall." He reached over and brushed her hair off her forehead, feeling a heady rush of dark satisfaction when she didn't flinch away from his hand, didn't even blink, and stroked her scar with quiet reverence. "Darling, I would wager that killing you was the most significant murder of them all."
(Careful Volders, your sugar daddy is showing.)

Real talks tho, how the hell does he make that last line sound so intimate? I wrote it and I still have no idea how this shameless trashlord pulls off some of the shit he does. In other news, I realised in the course of writing this chapter that he’s apparently developing a serious kink for Harry being a fierce sassypants, and I have absolutely no idea where that came from but it still fits so idk?? Their entire relationship up to now has been adversarial, so it makes sense that without them being at each other's throats to kill each other they'd just be at each in other, moderately less destructive ways. This seems to mainly manifest in Harry being a brat and knocking him down a peg at every opportunity, and Volders enjoying poking her and getting her all riled up. Once they're a bit further along I think he's also going to enjoy finding creative ways to shut her up because damn if he doesn't love the chase and a challenge.
It's after midnight, do you know where your Saviour is?

Chapter Summary

In between friends who she wishes could understand a little better and a Headmaster she hopes never will, Harry tries to fly and dreams of impossible things. She's unsure if the end of the world is more or less likely than Voldemort looking at her the way he has been lately, but perhaps it's all just variations on the theme of devastation.

Chapter Notes

Hello my loves! So I have bad news, good news and mad news. The bad news is that between Nanowrimo, a solid week worth of migraines from hell and the fickleness of the creative process this chapter took ages to get out and I'm sorry, my bad. The good news is that it's because I finished the chapter and was really unhappy with the pacing and considering the metaplot kicks it's boots in over the next few chapters, I sat down with my editor hat on and proceeded to do a shit-tonne of rearranging and rewriting. As a result this chapter is about a million times better AND the next few chapters are over two thirds done so they should be coming thick and fast as Harry finds out how much bigger the stakes are than she previously thought.

The mad news is that while going through the plot timeline while doing this (and realised that taking into consideration that after three and a bit in-universe months there's just under 100k words and I have at least three and a bit years of solid story) I realised it was important that I sat down and divided it up into not just one insanely long book but three still ridiculous but acceptably long books. That's right, this glorious dumpster fire of a fic is now officially a SERIES, and if you're curious as to how it's been divvied up I decided after a lot of contemplation that it makes the most sense if I take a page out of the canon (geddit? lol) and accordingly the current book will be Harry's sixth year, the second her seventh (no horcrux hunting, our girl is completing her education) and the third book will be everything which happens after. And oh golly there is a lot of after, so if you're a longread ho/masochist like me look forward to that.

In other news we've officially passed 70k hits, because you guys are incredible and I still can't believe it sometimes that there are so many of you enjoying this. A big thank you as well to the people who love and support my work, I seriously ugly-cried <3

When I'm not writing fic or getting obsessed with xianxia light novels I'm writing original work I hope to eventually publish when it's ready, and this gives me hope that one day I will actually be able to make a living as an author.

tl;dr So yeah, you are all actual angels and if I could hug every one of you I would. But failing that I hope you'll be happy instead with a very special moment at the end of the chapter which I think we've all been waiting for (I know I have). Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Uneasy sleep had been something of a staple in Harry's life for a while now, even before she'd started metaphysically cohabitating with a Dark Lord during their nocturnal hours. So as far as weird dreams went the bar had long been set pretty damn high, but even that felt like something of an understatement considering that in addition to the usual rotation of nightmares and hanging out in Voldemort's library she sometimes dreamed of the end of the world.

If asked how she knew that's what it was all she would be able to give in explanation was that it was too quiet, too bloody quiet to be anything other than the absolute end of absolutely everything. It was still up in the air if it was amusing or terrifying that the end apparently tasted like her cupboard, like iron and dust and cold, empty spaces.

This particular dream wasn't the end of the world, though the thematic similarities were hard to deny. Instead of hanging weightless in the still void of forever it was all movement and the rush of crisp salty air, unable to see anything or feel anything but the heady sensation of flying over an endless black ocean in the darkest hours before dawn. She had never been to the sea, not that she could recall (not during this life anyway), but she somehow knew that's what she was flying over. With no small amount of urgency if she wasn't mistaken. It wasn't the usual running late for class or running away from danger kind of urgency, but the kind where if she wasn't careful it might somehow turn into both of them at once.

She felt, bizarrely, like a comet. Nothing but fire and inevitability finally caught in the gravity of something monstrous. Because there was somewhere she needed to be, somewhere so monumentally important, and she knew with a strange kind of satisfaction that as long as she kept flying she was on track to get there right on time. The slumbering clouds parted, pulling back like velvet curtains just long enough to reveal a field of stars shining like a hundred thousand crystal eyes which looked right back into her before the dream fractured and fell away in pieces as she woke up.

Staring up at the canopy of her bed as parts of the dream faded away into half-remembered fragments, she tried to convince herself she wasn't going crazy even while she couldn't help wondering why the hell her nights seemed determined to be even more eventful than her days.

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Breakfast on the weekends was usually a more relaxed affair thanks to the lack of classes, with the house elves still serving food until mid morning for any late-rising students who thanks to the lack of classes couldn't bring themselves to leave the warmth of their beds. Not being nearly that fortunate, Harry hadn't been able to get back to sleep after waking up from her weird flying-ocean-comet dream and had instead slipped out to read in the Gryffindor common room while she waited for Ron and Hermione to wake up. The regular greeting of the dawn was something she had been doing ever since first year, to the point where her friends weren't even surprised or concerned about it anymore, they just smiled and trooped down to the Great Hall together like usual while Harry and Hermione did their best to make sure a still mostly asleep Ron didn't run headlong into a suit of armour.

"What's that you're humming?" Hermione asked later once Harry was (mercifully) onto her second cup of tea and therefore feeling a lot better about the world. "It's really lovely."

"Hmm?" Harry replied, jolted out of her daydream about stars with eyes and not sure what she was talking about. "What humming?"
Hermione looked up from where she was liberating a jar of honey from a yawning second-year who was about to wear it if he didn't pay closer attention. "You were humming something under your breath. You've been doing it off and on a lot lately, I just assumed it was stuck in your head. It's really pretty whatever it is."

Harry was about to suggest Hermione visit the Hospital Wing when her brain, apparently appeased by the offering of caffeine, decided to helpfully provide her with the missing information. Oh crap, it was the waltz she and Voldemort had danced to in the library. That was so many twisted kinds of mortifying and concerning she didn't even have the energy to try and unravel it all right now, so she just shoved some bacon into her mouth and hoped for something to distract her best friend, or failing that the arrival of the post or some kind of timely, meat-based epiphany.

"I hadn't realised." She said when the mouthful was gone and she was out of reasonable excuses to not answer, feeling a little better that it wasn't strictly speaking a lie. "I must have heard it somewhere."

Though it reminded her of something which had unfortunately been on the back burner, the whole reason the waltzing had happened in the first place which was the promised flying lesson. Despite all their bickering Voldemort had came good on his word and given her a crash course in Wandless/Broomless/Everythingless Flying 101 while they were dancing on the ceiling, and she had been so busy with schoolwork and everything else lately she hadn't even tried to give it a go in real life yet.

Clearly this had to be corrected, immediately. But she couldn't do it where people could see her, less they ask questions about where she'd learned about it which she didn't particularly want to answer.

"I think I'm going to do some serious meditation today." She said nonchalantly while wrapping the leftover bacon in a napkin for Hedwig. "My Occlumency barriers are holding well but I haven't been spending much time on them since we got back and I don't want to risk any problems if I need them suddenly."

"That's very sensible Harry." Said Hermione with an approving nod. "With You-Know-Who on the move it's important that he can't see into your head anymore. Do you need any help?"

Ron snorted into the remains of his pancakes. "Sit around and communing with your inner eye or whatever all day? I'll pass thanks."

"It's okay, you guys don't need to sit around bored while I'm 'communing' it really will be pretty boring."

Hermione bit her lip, fiddling with the handle of her tea cup. "You sure you don't need some company Harry?"

"I'm sure, if anything it's kind of better if I don't have any distractions. You guys go have fun." She looked sideways at them, a teasing smile on her face. "Besides, I know for a fact that Ron hasn't started on his Potions homework yet."

As predicted, Hermione immediately took the bait. "Ronald Weasley, I can't believe you are being so cavalier! If you get behind now it's going to be no time at all until we're sitting our N.E.W.Ts and then where will you be?"

"You traitor." He groaned, staring morosely at the remains of his breakfast as the bushy haired witch dragged him off towards the library.
"Have fun!" Harry called out after them cheerfully, pleased they would be occupied and she could have some space to try out the non-broom kind of flying.

Once she'd finished her own breakfast and another cup of tea she wandered up to the Owlery to visit Hedwig and give her some of the bacon she'd saved from breakfast. The snowy owl swooped down as soon as she reached the top of the stairs, alighting gently on her shoulder with a happy little hoot.

"You only love me for my treats don't you?" She giggled as she passed the bacon strips to her familiar. Hedwig just gave her a bland look while she wolfed them down, as if thoroughly amused by her human's attempts at humour.

"I'm going to go for a walk and try something stupid, want to come with me?"

Hedwig gave her ear a friendly nibble which she decided was a yes, and together girl and bird headed down through the castle and out towards the lake together.

On the far side of the lake there was a little alcove hidden between a collection of large rocks and the edge of the Forbidden Forest which you couldn't see unless you were standing in somewhere in the middle of the lake. After finding it in second year it was one of Harry's favourite places to go to be alone and enjoy the fresh air and open sky. It was also where she was going to try to fly.

Normally it being a sunny Saturday would be more than enough cause for a good mood, but after a while her determination to fly was still being met by very mixed results. If by mixed results you meant repeated variations on 'briefly hovered, then fell flat on her face' for the better part of three hours. Voldemort's lesson had turned out to be useful, that being how she'd managed to hover at all, but unfortunately for her shins doing something in a dream did not actually give you the relevant muscle memory and context for how to do it in the real world where things like gravity weren't just for show.

For the umpteenth time Harry stepped off one of the lower rocks and for once managed to achieve a few solid seconds of standing triumphantly on empty air, before getting so excited at her success that it broke her concentration and she somehow managed to trip in mid-air. As if annoyed by her defiance of its supremacy once gravity reasserted itself it did so with a vengeance, and she hit the ground with all the grace of a rogue bludger.

From her perch on a nearby branch Hedwig looked embarrassed on her behalf and like she deeply regretted ever being involved with her idiot human at all.

All things considered though it was actually a strangely enjoyable way to spend the morning. No proper flying just yet, but then again she hadn't really expected to get it right away and the more she practiced the more she was getting the hang of it. Harry refused to feel discouraged and just rubbed her newest addition to her collection of bruises, making a note to give it another half an hour before heading back to the castle for lunch and to go see Madam Pomfrey for some bruise paste after she was done eating.

Yes, all things considered a very enjoyable start to the weekend indeed.

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Harry slammed the door to Dumbledore's office shut hard enough that it rattled in it's frame. Not in the mood to wait for the moving staircase to take her down she just took them two at a time, certain if
she couldn't get far away soon she was going to start breaking anything and everything she could get her hands on.

After a painful but pleasant morning she'd returned to the castle for lunch only to receive a note from the Headmaster delivered by a fourth year Hufflepuff which asked her to come and see him after dinner to discuss some new private lessons to help prepare her for the war to come. She hadn't wanted to go but there was no way to avoid it, so at eight o'clock she'd given the password to the gargoyle ("Acid Pops.") and headed up, expecting that even if he was a pain in the arse at least they'd be discussing duelling and useful things like that.

But no, apparently Dumbledore didn't think duelling was all that important when you were expected to vanquish a Dark Lord, and that a trip down memory lane was the way to go instead. So after rambling at length about his many and varied suspicions and collecting memories from random members of the public like some kind of brain-sucking tabloid reporter, he up and dumped her headfirst into his Penseive to see some firsthand.

The following memory of Bob Ogden's trip to visit the Gaunts had been awful, and not because of the reasons Dumbledore seemed to think like when Morfin attacked Ogden or the passing muggles, but because of Merope.

Upon resurfacing from the memory Harry had nearly been ready to demolish the old man's office again, because it was one thing to hear about poor Merope Gaunt and another thing entirely to see her, watch her be mistreated by her awful father and brother and not be able to do anything to help her. A few minutes of watching had been enough that she no longer wondered why Merope had resorted to using a love potion on Tom Riddle Snr. It didn't make it okay of course, assault was still assault, but it gave a lot more context for why she was so desperate, both for any kind of love she could get even if it was a lie and for any way to escape her abusive family. After all, if there was one thing in all the world which Harry could relate to it was something like that. She'd spent her entire life being treated by the Dursleys just like the Gaunts had treated Merope, and it made her so furious and sad to see it happening to another person she wanted to scream.

Digging her teeth into her bottom lip as she marched back towards Gryffindor Tower, she hissed at the sudden stab of pain. Reaching up to her mouth she realised her fangs still hadn't retracted and she'd cut her lip up pretty bad. Tiredly she wondered at the strange way in which the stories of her two lives seemed to rhyme, and how Dumbledore didn't seem to worry about the injustice and abuse in either of them nearly as much as he was worried about her misbehaving dental situation.

Drifting through the common room and up the stairs on autopilot, Harry drew on the calming warmth of her Occlumency barriers and did her best to let the tension drift away as she let herself into her dorm room. Lavender and Parvati were absent, though considering the muffled giggles and strong herbal smell coming from their shared bathroom they were probably making good on their recent decision to experiment with Lavender's hair colour. Hermione was sitting up against the headboard of her bed, her own hair wrapped for bed in an old silk scarf and wearing her favourite pastel blue pyjama pants and a grey t-shirt with the periodic table on it.

She'd clearly been waiting for Harry to get back from her meeting with Dumbledore, and seeing her sitting there all relaxed and cozy and so bloody noble made something in Harry relax properly for the first time since she got the note at lunch. Looking up from an old book as thick as a dictionary the witch smiled warmly at her. "How did it go?"

Harry flopped down next to her, face buried in a throw pillow which looked like a flatter, pinker version of Crookshanks, only glittery. "Exhausting with a side of traumatising. I think I'm starting to hate Penseives, literally every time they're involved I have a bad time."
"That bad huh?"

"Worse." She declared. "And not even the kind of worse which is useful or educational, the kind which just makes you feel scraped raw and dirty."

"That's no good at all." Hermione agreed, putting the book on her side table with a clunk and putting a hand on her shoulder. "Want me to brush out your hair for you?"

Harry almost refused, wanting to curl up and hide from the world and knowing that if she was immobilised by hair brushing Hermione would be able to ask her questions she wasn't sure she wanted to answer. But in the end it was too tempting an offer, as her wonderfully sneaky best friend must have known it would be. "Yeah, that'd be amazing. Thanks 'Mione."

Sitting up to go fetch her weird magical hairbrush (which as they learned when one of the other girls tried to borrow it would apparently start screaming if used by anyone not in possession of Black blood, but just made her own hair feel like silk) she had completely forgot that she'd recently done herself an injury until Hermione freaked out.

"Harry you're bleeding!"

"What?" She blinked, before remembering. "Oh yeah, that. I got mad and my fangs decided to make an appearance, it's fine."

"It certainly isn't fine." She scolded, reaching towards Harry's latest stupid injury without thinking. "Let me see it then."

Harry batted her hand away, thankful yet again for her quick reflexes. "Careful, I swallowed the venom but there might still be some left."

Hermione just sighed as she cast a quick Cleaning Charm before inspecting the cuts. "Honestly Harry, I know you can't technically poison yourself but you should still be more careful. Those things can cut deep."

A quick *Episkey* later and they were settled onto Hermione's bed, the curtains drawn so Harry could quite literally let her hair down without feeling weird about it. They used to do each other's hair all the time when they were younger, using the time spent brushing or braiding to talk and decompress when homework or the life of the Chosen One got to be too much. The first time Hermione had offered to do it after Harry had started her observances she'd realised what she'd said right away and apologised. But like Harry had told her then, the idea was that your hair stayed braided when in public or around anyone not part of your immediate family. And as far as Harry was concerned Hermione had been her family for a very long time.

"What made you so angry?" Hermione asked after a while, when Harry had been reduced to not much more than a vaguely girl-shaped puddle.

Harry was quiet for a moment, thinking of what to say. "Dumbledore showed me some memories of Voldemort's family, and they were so awful Hermione. His mother lived with her unhinged father and brother in a run down old shack and they abused her, made her cook and clean for them when they weren't just hurting her and telling her how useless she was. Merope she...she was so young and sad and scared, and I just..."

"You could relate." The other witch said softly, hands working methodically through her hair and so careful she never yanked too hard on a knot, not even once.

"Yeah. And then Dumbledore just went on about how they were poor and resentful and always..."
 assauling muggles, and didn't seem to care in the slightest about how they were assaulting their own flesh and blood. Like it didn't matter that there was this girl not much older than us in such a horrible situation she had to resort to dosing up someone with love potions to escape it."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it like that." She soothed, clearly thinking Harry just needed reassurance about the Headmaster's motivations instead of a convenient alibi for that fateful day when he eventually disappeared under mysterious circumstances. "Watching the memory was about gathering information on You-Know-Who right? He was probably just trying to stay on topic."

"Yeah." Harry sighed, wondering what it was going to take for the usually so rational witch to realise that the Headmaster wasn't nearly as benevolent as he seemed. "Yeah that must have been it."

Later on when Hermione had gone to bed Harry couldn't stop thinking about the memory, about the young woman who in a roundabout way was kind of her mother as much as she was Voldemort's. Someone else might not have seen it like that, but Harry was already used to having one dead mother she couldn't remember, so another wasn't much of a stretch. But as straightforward as her feelings might be about Merope Gaunt, Tom Riddle Snr on the other hand was a lot more disconcerting to Harry.

It didn't help that at first he looked almost like a carbon copy of his son, they both had the same arrogant, aristocratic features and dark, wavy hair. But the more she watched him the more it was like he was a cheap copy of the original, despite him technically being the older one. Sure the individual pieces were all present and correct but there was none of the predatory grace or calculating intensity which made Voldemort seem so much larger than life. It didn't matter that they could almost have been twins, the more she had looked at him the more she realised he looked nothing like his son at all.

She thought about Slytherin's locket as she brushed her teeth, the one she'd seen around Merope's neck. The fact that right now it was tucked away safely behind the impenetrable wards of Number 12 Grimmauld Place made some of the sick feeling in her stomach ease, comforted a little with the knowledge that the treasure she'd given up to buy her survival and the survival of her child was safe. Knowing how much of a drama queen Voldemort was the Peverell ring Marvolo Gaunt had been wearing in the memory was undoubtedly a horcrux too, he had even mentioned to her once that the second horcrux he'd made was a ring.

With the benefit of knowledge the Headmaster didn't know she possessed it was obvious that he had been talking about horcruxes, even if he didn't come right out and say it. It might once have hurt her feelings how he was playing his cards so close to his chest, but by now she'd more than accepted the fact the old wizard she'd once trusted implicitly and thought of like a grandfather had no such feelings towards her.

Well you are fraternising with the enemy, Harry begrudgingly admitted to herself as she changed into her lilac silk pyjamas. Though in her defense that had only started recently for reasons mostly beyond her control, while Dumbledore had apparently been hard at work planning her glorious martyrdom ever since she was in diapers.

The diary, the ring, the locket, Nagini, and Harry herself. That left only two which she didn't know the identity and location of. She didn't bother fighting the urge to gloat that Dumbledore no doubt thought he was being so bloody clever, carefully doling out incomplete scraps of information in drips and drabs, when it was starting to look like she knew even more than he did.

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It had only been a couple of days since their last shared dream. But as seemed to be the standard when she had a bad enough day that even Voldemort could feel it, when she finally fell asleep after a lot of tossing and turning she opened her eyes in the library.

"You were furious this evening little horcrux." He said, back behind the desk for once with his robe draped carelessly over the back of the chair while he went through some folders full of loose sheets of parchment. "Care to share?"

She snorted, slumping down into her armchair and for once too drained to be annoyed at how quickly the tension left her now she was back here. "What's wrong? I didn't distract you from some light, after-dinner terrorism did I?"

"Of course not, it's hell on the digestion."

Harry resisted the urge to smile. "Good to know."

"So what was it then, someone pull your pigtails?" He smirked without looking up, a there-and-gone-again flash of bared teeth. "If you ask nicely maybe I'll pull something of theirs off in return."

She sighed, genuinely trying to not be a little touched by his strange, sporadic forays into protectiveness and failing utterly, even though it did lean as he always did towards the gruesome. "Dumbledore made his next move."

"Is that so?" Said Voldemort, sitting up straighter behind his desk and studying her closely. "Whatever is the old man up to then?"

"He dragged me into his office after dinner, apparently we're starting private lessons on how to defeat you. I'm not sure how useful he actually expects it to be, so far we're just looking at things in his Pensieve."

"What on earth for?"

There was no way to say this nicely, so she didn't bother trying. "He showed me Merope."

Voldemort stilled.

"It was a memory from some Ministry official." She explained. "He went to investigate claims of your nasty uncle attacking muggles and it didn't go well. Her father and brother were so bloody awful to her, I wanted to rip them to pieces for it and Dumbledore didn't even care."

"I believe I saw some pieces of the event in question on the one occasion I used Legilimency on my uncle. They were both of them piss-poor excuses of humanity let alone wizards, and the greatest kindness they ever did the world was leaving it."

"Your dad was in the memory too." She said, because now she was unloading it properly she apparently couldn't stop. "And in between wanting to Crucio your uncle and grandfather and Dumbledore for good measure, I couldn't stop thinking about how much your dad almost looks like you, only he was all wrong somehow so he ended up looking nothing like you at all. Still a complete arsehole though, so you two still have that much in common at least."

The glare he sent her way was enough to strip paint. But if he was going to insist they were the same person then she was well within her right to pass judgement on both him and the man who was for all intents and purposes her deadbeat, absent father from another life. It occurred to her that she had
rather a lot of parents for someone who was an orphan three times over.

"So yeah." She continued. "Dumbledore thinks he's being sneaky, but it's clear he's hunting horcruxes and wants to get me primed to do the same even though he won't just come out and say it. No idea when he'll ask me back for another 'lesson' though, I kind of freaked him out a little."

Apparently deciding to ignore her comments on him and his father in the interest of not starting an argument, Voldemort raised a curious eyebrow at her observation. "How on earth did you manage that?"

She shifted uncomfortably in her armchair. "I had a little incident."

If he looked idly curious before now he looked very interested indeed. "Oh? Do tell."

Slumping down in her chair she wondered what the odds were she could get away with not telling him, because she knew this was something he'd really like to hear about and despite their increasingly amicable exchanges it still grated on her to just give him what he wanted without a fight.

"I was angry." She finally said when it was clear he wasn't going to drop it. "At how they all treated Merope, like she was just some kind of object for them to slap around, and I lost control of myself. It was just for a moment, but before I could hide them Dumbledore saw my...my fangs."

As predicted he looked positively delighted at the news. "I wish I could have seen his face. Tell me, is it true your venom has come in then? You are well past the age for it and I know there has been at least one instance of another young lady ending up in the Hospital Wing thanks to a mouthful of snake venom."

"How in Merlin's name do you know that?" She shrieked, staring at him in panicked horror.

"I simply asked Severus if he had been asked to prepare antivenin at any point in the last year or two." He replied airily, looking smug as hell at catching her off guard like that. "He was most informative, right up until he worked out why I was inquiring and then he just became rather distressed."

Dear Merlin and Morgana, Snape knew she'd been snogging with Cho Chang and nearly killed her. And he'd told the Dark Lord. She felt like melting through the floor until she could curl up in the centre of the earth and wait for the world to forget she had ever existed.

Said Dark Lord just rolled his eyes. "Please cease and desist with the hysterics, it's all perfectly natural. Parselmouths are not just able to speak with snakes, surely you have worked that out by now."

She hesitated, before nodding without meeting his eyes.

"We are not human, not completely. When we go through puberty it is not unlike a mild creature inheritance, we change."

"I know." She whispered, staring at the hands she'd clasped in her lap.

He smiled, flashing sharp white teeth. "Yes, you must by now."

"Yeah." She sighed, feeling drained. "And Merlin do I wish I didn't."

"How ungrateful." He huffed, looking annoyed that she wasn't overjoyed at being able to produce her very own neurotoxin on demand. "What we are is a blessing from Mother Magic, you should be
"More appreciative of our gift."

"Some gift!" She snapped. "Cho and I hadn't even started dating properly when she ended up in the Hospital Wing, and considering I was the one who put her there she quite reasonably decided she didn't want anything to do with me anymore!"

Voldemort just smirked darkly, a flash of satisfaction making her scar throb. "Good."

"How is that good?" She demanded.

"Because she wasn't worthy of you." He sneered. "You are a Parselmouth and have the blood of a host of Ancient and Noble Houses running through your veins. In addition, you are a piece of my soul. You are a goddess among witches."

She scoffed at the very idea, even as she wondered what it said about her that the only person who seemed to think she was a catch was a Dark Lord who thought of her much how England thought of the Falkland Islands. "I most certainly am not."

The bastard just shrugged carelessly. "Deny it to make the masses feel better about their pitiful existence all you like, on some level you can feel it too and you can't lie to me. You forget, we are the same."

"I am nothing like you." She hissed.

"Training yourself to slip under the radar was a useful survival trait while you were with those disgusting muggles, and it wasn't a bad idea while you were new to the magical world and still learning how to protect yourself." His eyes were fixed on hers, seeming to look right through her. "But do not mistake that protective mask for who and what you actually are."

She folded her arms across her chest. "What I am makes it so I have to carry antivenin around with me everywhere I go just in case I hurt someone, so you'll forgive me if I'm not too happy with it."

"Don't be so dramatic. Have you even needed to use the antivenin again since the unfortunate Miss Chang?"

"Only once, not long after," Seeing his rapidly darkening expression she quickly elaborated. "Not like that you idiot. It was during the last Christmas holidays and I was angry during dinner at the Black townhouse when it was still Order Headquarters. Ron was sitting next to me and not paying attention, and he accidentally drank out of my cup after I did. He was on the ground and having a fit within the minute, but with Moony's help I was able to help him in time." She smiled bitterly. "Bad timing really, considering that was when his dad was in St Mungo's because of Nagini. He didn't talk to me again for the rest of the holidays."

"It still baffles me how you're so concerned with the opinion of sheep."

"My friends are not sheep and I don't care what the rest think, it'd just be nice to be able to spend time with my friends and live my life without the potential for an accidental manslaughter charge hanging over my head. I mean, how the hell am I even supposed to experience the dubious honour of badly thought-out teenage hookups if I can't even kiss people?"

"I managed." Voldemort replied with a smirk.

Well then. That was such a loaded statement she knew her face had to be as red as the Gryffindor banners in the Great Hall.
"It...didn't happen to you?" She asked haltingly, incredibly embarrassed but unable to pretend she wasn't deeply, morbidly curious about teenage Voldemort's Parselmouth-induced puberty blues. "When you were my age I mean. Why didn't you have problems when you kissed people?"

His grin by now was positively sinful. "Simple. I didn't kiss them."

"But you just said-"

"Harry. I said I didn't kiss them. That doesn't mean I didn't do anything else to them."

Oh. Oh wow.

"You are such a bloody pervert." She announced in lieu of any other reply, because if she thought too much about that she might just go blind.

"Oh you have no idea." He purred, resting his chin casually on one hand as his eyes slid over her.

She buried her burning face in her hands to try and pretend there wasn't a disturbingly attractive Dark Lord currently checking her out. "Please stop talking."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"Are you feeling flustered Harry?"

Yes. "No."

"You don't sound very sure."

"I'm sure." She replied, trying to be brief since she felt dangerously close to interested and that usually led to a lot of awkward babbling. "Sure as anything. Behold the endless vistas of my bountiful sureness."

Shit.

Instead of laughing at her as she so rightly deserved Voldemort just hummed thoughtfully. "You become quite poetic when you are embarrassed, don't you little horcrux?"

"I'm not embarrassed."

"Harry." He said, a scraping sound and light footsteps telling her he had gotten up and was making his way towards her. "You're doing an admirable job of hiding it but I don't need to see your face to know it currently matches my eyes."

Definitely not looking to see if the smile in his voice was on his face too, nope, definitely not. "I thought I told you to stop talking."

His footsteps were getting closer but she was still hiding behind her hands, so she was somewhat unprepared when against all logic he suddenly dropped to his knees on the carpet right in front of her chair. She jumped back when she opened her eyes and saw how close he really was, startled by the sudden proximity of Lord Voldemort in just a long-sleeved black button up shirt and without his usual outer layer of thick black robes. That was apparently a bad idea though as it just ended up with her accidentally making enough space between her knees for him to move even closer, and she'd never been more thankful to be wearing the long lilac pants instead one of her short nighties.
"Can you show me?" He asked softly, hands resting on the arms of the chair. Harry couldn't decide if it was stranger that Voldemort was kneeling in front of her, or that she should have felt boxed in and trapped but didn't.

"What?" She said, shocked confusion and the warmth of horcrux realignment bullshit apparently conspiring to make her an idiot.

"Your fangs." He said patiently, as if he spent all his time dealing with hormonal Saviors with short-circuiting brains. "I want to see them."

Dear Merlin. "How the hell are you making that sound so bloody inappropriate?"

He grinned wickedly. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

Harry made a face. "See, now I know you're doing it on purpose."

"You can't blame me for having an academic interest." He shrugged, as shameless as ever. "I've never met another living Parselmouth, and there is only so long one can study themselves."

"Academic interest my ass." She scoffed, finally recovering some much needed equilibrium and deciding stubbornly that she refused to let him win whatever game he was playing by letting him make her too uncomfortable to keep the conversation going. "Fine, I will. But only if you go first."

"A fair request." He agreed easily, which made her deeply suspicious she'd just missed something and that was exactly what he'd wanted her to say. As he leaned further into her personal space she had to reluctantly concede she'd probably hit the nail right on the head with that one.

Barring one hug to calm him down from the dream equivalent of a murderous rampage and one round of post-abandonment panic cuddling they'd never been this close before, not while neither of them were having an emotional breakdown in the very least, and she found herself feeling oddly flustered by his nearness. He must have known it too because he was smirking at her again, the bastard. Then the smirk widened into an actual grin, his upper lip pulling back as his fangs descended from his gums and over the top of his neat white teeth.

They were as curved and needle sharp as her own, maybe a bit thicker and longer, and much like hers they rested snugly in the groove between his incisors and canines. He held still, patient as a saint, while her curiosity got the better of her as it always did and she leaned in closer to examine them. Without even stopping to think it through she reached out to let him win whatever game he was playing by letting him make her too uncomfortable to keep the conversation going. "Fine, I will. But only if you go first."

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"Your venom is darker than mine." She said quietly, letting her finger carefully collect a thick drop of it and watching in fascination as it slowly dripped down her finger like treacle.

Voldemort just huffed a laugh, retracting his fangs until the only sign they'd been there at all was a thin film of red over his teeth. Taking hold of her wrist, he pulled it close and licked the venom off her finger.

Her breath caught in her throat.

"That's because this body is older than yours little horcrux." He said conversationally, placing her hand back in her lap as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened. "I've had more time to build up my resistance to lesser poisons and venoms, which has in turn made mine more deadly. We can work on doing the same for you if you like, nothing weaker than basilisk venom should outright kill you but it still wouldn't be a pleasant experience."
"Yeah? Um, I mean, that is er..." Fantastic. Apparently somewhere between Voldemort kneeling between her legs and him licking her damn finger she'd not only lost her damn mind but any ability to speak in coherent sentences. "Yes, that would be fine."

They both sat there staring at each other in silence, before Voldemort's lip twitched as if fighting a smile. "It's your turn now darling."

Harry stared blankly at him, white noise in her ears, before he raised a playful eyebrow and it jolted her out of whatever dark corner she'd left her rational thinking. "What? Oh! Yes, of course."

Looking at him as he watched her intently, she focused on imagining the pressure in her upper jaw whenever her fangs made an appearance. As she felt them descend, much as he had she opened her mouth in a wide grin, pulling back her lips to reveal her fangs. His eyes darkened as he saw them, something low in her stomach tightening in response to the hunger in his gaze, and she could feel the acidic burn of her own venom pooling thickly in her mouth as if she had been chewing on a battery.

Just like she'd done he reached towards her, holding her chin delicately and stroking a fang with his thumb. Unlike her however he wasn't content with light touches, and pressed firmly on the razor sharp tip and scratched a deep cut into the skin. She gasped, rearing back as she tasted blood in the air but only succeeding in drinking more of the scent deep into her lungs where it coiled like something warm and alive. By now his irises were more black than red, shining like hot coals in the firelight, and the expression on his face was predatory.

"Beautiful." He breathed, holding up his hand to suck his own bleeding thumb into his mouth venom and all, his eyes fluttering shut in obvious pleasure.

Harry felt like she was trapped in amber, unable to look away or even swallow the venom which slowly dripped onto her lower lip and down her chin.

Somehow she knew what he was going to do before he even did it, and she didn't move an inch even though he was moving forward carefully as if she was a skittish deer. He was so much bigger than she was that even on his knees he was tall enough to tower over her as he leaned further into her personal space, running one hand lightly across her shoulder blade and coming to rest wrapped most of the way around her bare throat, gentle but firm. The other threaded easily through the black mess of her hair as if he'd done it a thousand times before, gripping the base of her braids with just enough tension to make her really feel it without actually hurting her and tilted her head up so he could see her face clearly. Their eyes met from barely inches away, the horcrux-warmth pulling them together thick enough to drown in, and still Harry didn't move.

Slowly, without breaking eye contact, he licked up the line of red starting on her chin and ending at the corner of her mouth. Harry couldn't quite bring herself to resist the temptation to flick the tip of her own tongue out to taste where his had been, or swallow the quiet whimper at the far too brief taste of both of them in her mouth. Feeling like she'd go mad if she couldn't get closer to him and the siren call of their soul Harry tried to move closer, but his restraining hands on her neck and in her hair held her immobile.

"Come on pet." He breathed across her lips. "What's the magic word?"

His light, teasing tone made a sudden, furiously burning rage sweep through her like a flood, and out of nowhere she slapped him across the face hard enough that his head jerked to the side. They both froze, a red mark already visible on his cheek and his usually perfect hair falling into his eyes. Then the hand on her throat tightened almost enough to bruise as one of hers tangleed in the front of his shirt, and before she knew which of them had moved first they were kissing.
It was like finding a moment of perfect stillness in the middle of a hurricane, the sensation of standing at the eye of the storm and feeling the distant howl of the wind and electrical discharge as the sky waged war on the earth. And then it was just like coming home.

Blood pounded in her ears as he licked into her mouth as if he owned it, cutting his tongue on her fangs and shivering in delight at the sting of her venom. She was breathless, pressed roughly into the back of the chair and it was perfect, like it was everything she'd never realised she wanted until there was finally six feet and change of egotistical Dark Lord kissing her like the world would end if he didn't.

Part of her, the part which always seemed to watch everything from a safe distance noted that this was A Very Bad Idea. Possibly the worst idea she'd ever had in a long life full of bad ideas.

But right now all that mattered was the heat which permeated every part of her being, how she felt grounded by his hand around her throat while the other let go of her hair only so it could slide down her back to press her even tighter against him. Harry's own arms had ended up around his neck at some point, and apparently her legs also had a mind of their own because they were looped around his waist so tightly the bones of his hips dug into her thighs. The fact it was a dream seemed vaguely impossible, he was so warm and so real that when he bit her lip viciously all she could do was moan and wonder how anything could possibly be better than this.

There was a shard of long forgotten memory trying to tell her something important, something so incredibly important, but it danced at the edge of her awareness and refused to stay still long enough to be caught. Because kissing the other half of her soul tasted like fire and inevitability, and there was something so familiar she knew it down to her bones, something so important she couldn't believe she had ever forgotten it, but like always it slipped away as soon as she tried to hold onto it. And then she forgot even that because right now they were so close she couldn't even tell which one of them was which, like if they just kept kissing they could get close enough that they wouldn't still be two people anymore. And then they'd always be together, forever.

That final thought was just jarring enough to drag her back to herself. It was just for a second but it was enough for her to shove him off of her, halfway to her feet as if there could possibly be a way for her to run away from the fact Harry Potter had just been enthusiastically making out with Lord Voldemort. She immediately regretted shoving him quite so hard, not because there was a chance in hell of her hurting him but because he'd fallen back enough for her to see him clearly in the firelight, and if she looked even half as blissfully wrecked as he did then she might just have to accept that for the rest of her bloody life if you put a boggart and the Mirror of Erised in front of her they were both going to show her the exact same infuriating, impossible person.

Voldemort was half lying on his back on the carpet and half propped up on his elbows. Breathing heavily, hair mussed beyond belief and his mouth so kiss swollen and smeared with blood it was as if he'd just been devouring her. She had no idea whose blood it was, surely there was far too much for it to just be theirs, but before she could start to wonder where it had all come from his tongue swept languidly over his lower lip as if trying to savour the taste of her. It was so all so fucking suggestive that it made her stomach lurch and her knees give out, and then all she could do was collapse back into the chair. His eyes though, despite her growing horror at the line she'd just crossed she couldn't look away from them.

For the first time Harry properly understood what others must see when they looked at him and just fucking trembled. It finally made sense too what he'd said when he talked about his eyes reflecting hellfire, because right now they were blazing like binary stars going supernova in his flushed, all too human face. They were bright and unholy and everything bad decisions were made of, nothing any human being could possibly contain without combusting and taking the whole damn world along
with them. The fact he could do so as easy as breathing was as incredible as it was terrifying.

And then he smiled beatifically up at her, a sweet, open expression she’d never seen on him before. It was somehow even worse for such an angelic face to be full of hellfire and covered in blood and venom. One elegant hand dragged sensually over a wet, panting mouth which as she watched was twisting into a wicked grin so wide it nearly split his face open, and his teeth were so goddamn white except for everywhere they were red.

"Oh Harry." He breathed, enraptured, and her head swam just as much from the ways his body seemed to blur around the edges as from the raw, possessive way he whispered her name. As if it was the answer to every question he’d ever asked.

The last thing she saw before she woke up screaming was how when he began to say something else, for one impossible fraction of a second she thought that she could see the broken, shining remains of galaxies and dead stars inside his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

SO IT TOOK OVER 100K WORDS BUT THEY FINALLY KISSED!!! WOO!!

Was it good for you too? ;D

For reals though, I pity Harry's dorm mates having to console a hysterical witch who just had some illicit Parselmouth smoochies with her supposed nemesis/soulmate and enjoyed it far more than she probably should. Seriously, it's like that Katy Perry song only the lyrics are all 'I kissed a Dark Lord and I liked it'. Coz she did, hot damn she really did.

Bonus points if you recognised the little reference to that neat tumblr textpost about how fucked you are if your boggart and the mirror of erised show you the same person, I read it a while ago and it's been in my head lately but I can't remember where I saw it so yeah, that's a thing that exists and is awesome.

Hope you dudes liked this chapter and are as excited as I am that this is going to be an actual series, the only reason I haven't updated the work to reflect that fact is I can't decide what to call it! Might just call it the Historical Importance 'Verse for now but if any of y'all have any better suggestions please hit me up in the comments, because apparently I can write entire novel length fics but still struggle with naming shit XP

I'm on tumblr, come say hi! http://samvelg-likes-things.tumblr.com/
Harry has a lot on her mind. Admittedly, it's not every day a girl is left dealing with the aftermath of one of the most messed up cases of ill-advised attraction since Shakespeare, but when your Romeo has a body count and political aspirations which bring despots to shame, things get complicated.

We are back in business! Thank you all so much for your patience, in case you haven't seen the responses on my other fics or on my tumblr, some mouthbreather with nothing better to do reported me for mentioning that I started a ko-fi account on one of my chapters which is why this work has been hidden since the 30th. After reading the TOS it was my understanding that linking to something you were selling wasn't allowed, but I thought that it being a donation site and that I didn't link directly it would be fine, but apparently not. Don't hate on the review team for it taking a while, they're hardworking volunteers and it being the holidays they probably had a lot happening.

I want to take this opportunity to tell you guys I will never, ever, delete this fic. It's one of the worst things as a member of a fandom when a fic you love gets pulled (RIP Hauntingly) and I won't ever do that to you guys. I get that mental health can do a number on us creatives, really I do, and that ultimately it's our right to do what we want with our own work, but I promise that I might do a run of re-editing now and then if my non-beta'd ass finds some shitty typos but I won't ever get rid of it. I have WIP original stories that I don't love as much as I love this clusterfuck, and I love how much you guys love it too.

So thanks for your patience, enjoy this new chapter I had been hoping to post for bloody New Years, I love you all <3

The letter arrived near the end of breakfast, right as Harry was rubbing the hand-shaped bruises on her neck she’d miraculously been able to glamour before her dormmates could notice them and considering all of the truly excellent arguments in favour of drowning herself in the lake.

She didn't need to read it know it was from him, because of course it was. Staring in dread at the ominously blank white envelope while a generic post owl tucked into her untouched breakfast, she opened it and unfolded the single piece of parchment inside with hands she told herself weren't shaking.

_In the interest of ensuring you do not harm yourself and your grades irreparably by trying to_
combine not sleeping with a full class load, please rest easy with the knowledge that I will be giving you your space for now just as we agreed previously.

Enclosed is my personal copy of Fomalhauta's book and my word that I won't attempt to contact you again until you've finished it, cover to cover. Take whatever time you feel you need, you only have a few chapters left and I will know when you get to the end.

*Alea iacta est Harry.*

*I'll be dreaming of you.*

Voldemort's sudden possession of a functioning sense of empathy was as unexpected as it was appreciated, but in the wake of last night's development Harry was far too desperately relieved to want to question it all that closely.

When she unwrapped the shrunken book attached to the post owl's other leg and resized it to normal she was strangely relieved to see it really was the exact one she typically read during their dreams, although unlike in the dreams it smelt faintly of incense and mothballs. Apparently it was something Voldemort read a lot if all the extra cracks in the spine and creases on the top corners of the pages were anything to go by, and she couldn't help but imagine him reading it by the fire in some other library.

Lost in contemplation she wistfully stroked the worn leather cover, before it sunk in just what the hell she was doing and jerked her hand away as if it had been burned.

***

*Something we find hard to understand in these modern times of long range artillery and world wars fought on multiple fronts far from home is just how personal war truly is.*

*First and foremost war is a clash of territories or ideologies or economies, but when you break it down into the component pieces you are left with one sovereign group fighting for dominance over another. In this way the context of the conflict is at least as real as the conflict itself, because as is the case with all magic great and small how you define something is everything.*

*As well as having strict requirements for their creation, war wards are complex and near impossible for all but the most learned and experienced of Wardmasters. This is not only due to the raw power required, but also because in their creation you must understand and define not only the entirety of the physical space they will occupy but also the entirety of their purpose as it relates to that physical space, the living beings inside of it, and the precise nature of the conflict which inspires their creation. If the Wardmaster fails to do so properly they are left with at best a failed attempt, and at worst enough magical backlash to do serious damage to not only themselves but whatever it was they were attempting to protect in the first place.*

*For argument's sake, let's say the hypothetical Red Kingdom has declared war on their neighbours the Blue Kingdom. The Blue Kingdom has a powerful but inexperienced Wardmaster who decides to protect their people by creating war wards which will inflict a deadly curse plague on anyone with the blood of the Red Kingdom who crosses their borders. At first this might seem like a good idea, until you consider that as neighbouring kingdoms they have probably been intermarrying for as long...*
as the kingdoms have existed. Now over half the Blue Kingdom has the curse plague, and thanks to a diplomatic marriage a few generations back this includes the royal family. Furthermore, it turns out that to circumvent the terms of the war wards the Red Kingdom just employed mercenaries from the previously neutral Yellow Kingdom to fight for them instead of sending in their own soldiers. These mercenaries are unaffected by the curse plague, as the war wards specifically defined the enemy not as whoever crossed their borders with the intent to attack them but as those with the blood of the Red Kingdom. With half their population including their leadership and the entire line of succession incapacitated, the Blue Kingdom is quickly conquered.

They used to say that war wards could make or break a kingdom, and it's easy to see how when you consider this example. Technically speaking the Blue Kingdom's war wards functioned perfectly as they fulfilled the design of their creator to the letter, but due to that Wardmaster overlooking the finer details of the situation during their creation they directly caused the destruction of that which they were supposed to protect. This is a hypothetical scenario often used to illustrate why wisdom and understanding are as important to Wardmasters as skill and raw power.

***

Harry passed her days in a daze.

While she went through the motions and drifted through her classes like a ghost, she found herself alternating between feeling sick to her stomach at her actions and almost breathless from how badly she wanted to do it again.

At her lowest Harry was so distracted she accidentally blew up a cauldron in Potions for the first time in years, to everyone’s amusement apart from Slughorn who was confused as to why his formerly star pupil was being a clueless idiot and Ron who had gotten it square in the face. It had even reached the point where she had started to wonder if she should avoid operating heavy machinery until she spontaneously developed the ability to forget the way it felt when he touched her. Because really, how the hell was a girl supposed to concentrate on doing her assignments when her arch-nemesis kissed like that? One thing she was sure of, and that was just how weird guilt and longing got the more they overlapped.

In her calmer, more analytical moments, Harry found herself soundly perplexed not so much by Voldemort making a pass at her, but by all the deliberate ways in which he’d used not quite surrender or submission but something not unlike it during their...encounter.

Alright fine, during her arguably rather kinky Parselmouth snogging session with the Dark Lord who prior to this summer had been trying to kill her. As mortified as admitting it even in the privacy of her own mind made her, if Harry was going to be mental enough to make out with You-Know-Who then she really had to be able to say it.

It wasn't just how he'd taken the initiative to give her space after the fact and was even now keeping his word, especially when she could tell from the restless itch not her own crawling underneath her skin that he didn't like it one bit. At least she hoped it was bleed-through from him, the idea of them both being similarly afflicted by their separation was just unsettling enough that it was probably true.

No, it was also how before he even made a move he'd knelt at her feet so he wouldn't be more physically imposing than absolutely necessary, in how patiently he'd sat back despite his clear interest and let her touch him first. Even when he finally did kiss her it was so slowly and
purposefully that there was no possible way for her to pretend she hadn't known exactly what he was doing.

She was also convinced that if at any point she had told him to stop that he would have. Perhaps it was a ridiculous thing to be sure of considering who he was, but he'd told her himself that he wasn't that kind of monster and he'd done nothing to make her not believe him.

Lying in bed as the sun rose after another restless night without much in the way of sleep as her thoughts chased each other in maddening circles around her skull, Harry was forced to admit something she'd been trying to avoid. It wasn't like he'd jumped her out of the blue after all. That if she was honest with herself this crazy thing between then, whatever it was and whatever circle of hell it had come from, had been steadily building for a while.

They had been circling each other like predators who could smell fresh blood for weeks now, maybe months, and every resolved argument and shared secret since then had only drawn them further into each other's orbit. And while it was true he was an incorrigible flirt who loved to push her buttons every chance he could Harry knew she gave as good as she got, and whenever something had made her feel not just flustered but properly uncomfortable he'd always taken a step back without even needing to be asked. Even if this was all just a powerplay designed to manipulate her feelings, he was smart enough to have known it was likely she would react to their newfound intimacy by royally freaking out after the fact if the last time things had gotten a bit too intense were anything to go by.

So if by some dread miracle his interest was legitimate (and Merlin help her if that was actually the case, because she had no idea how to even begin tackling that particular possibility) and all of this wasn't just a convoluted game meant to draw her in so he could kill her off as cruelly as humanly possible, then it made sense that he had been careful to give her no possible ammunition with which to dismiss him and his advances out of hand. She would know too, having tried desperately over the last week to find some way to do just that.

Circe's tits she wished she could borrow Hermione's brain to help her work through this like she usually would, but there was no chance in hell of that going well.

After all, how could Harry possibly explain to her so very well-intentioned best friend that if you overlooked her being underage (or maybe not, with the whole horcrux thing and Magical Britain's slightly nebulous take on the age of majority she was admittedly kind of confused on that count herself) and the small matter of them being on opposite sides of a bloody war, then his behaviour had been excessively forward and more than a little perverted but still entirely above board.

If anything Harry just wished she could say the same thing about her own, because whether she was in class or sitting at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall the image of Voldemort flat on his back refused to leave her mind. It was like her brain was a worn out VHS tape permanently stuck on how incredibly attractive he'd looked with bloodied lips and a dazed, blissful expression on his stupid handsome face, all of which Harry had put there her damn self.

Creepy part-time snakeface pretentions aside, whenever he was properly himself he always looked so neat and proper, like there was nothing in all the world which could possibly do anything to crease his robes let alone wreck his composure. Nothing that is apparently except for Harry Black-Potter, certified human disaster. As much as she wished otherwise the fact she clearly held no small amount of power over a man like him wasn't just baffling, it was all kinds of hot.

Merlin, she was losing her mind.

Soft, that was how he had looked. Vulnerable. It wasn't so much that he was on his back and so godsdammed ruffled (he was that truly infuriating type of person who could probably pass for regal
even stuck upside down in a bloody tree mid-thunderstorm) but in the way he'd smiled up at her while he was. Like she was something miraculous, something wanted. It had been a smile full of plenty of dark promises but without any kind of malice or mocking for once, just breathless pleasure and wry affection.

It was also beyond inappropriate.

Sitting in Transfiguration and hiding her burning face behind her textbook while she prayed to anything listening that McGonagall wouldn't notice, she decided that no Dark Lord had any business having a smile that looked like that.

Having helped babysit a few of the younger Gryffindors and some of the people in the DA last year through their relationship problems (apparently the school being overrun by a fascist pink toad was a prime opportunity for everyone to really live their best viva la resistance lives) Harry knew very well the trap which so many well-intentioned people fell into with bad boys. How the slightest pretense of vulnerability on their part made the person in question feel special, because apparently the idea they might be the only ones who could possibly understand them or save them from themselves or whatever other asinine nonsense it happened to be was like catnip to the type of personality which leant itself to sticking it to the man and educational freedom-fighting.

Calling Lord Voldemort a bad boy was perhaps the understatement of the bloody century, but it was a cliché for a reason and one she was determined to avoid falling into headfirst like she seemed to fall into most of the things which made her life more eventful than your average Greek myth. Unfortunately it wasn't so easy to stick to her guns when Harry knew full well just how important her being his horcrux was to him, which made her uncomfortably aware that odds were looking good it likely wasn't an act at all.

With that in mind, maybe the worst part wasn’t even why it was happening. Maybe it was that the why didn’t even really matter all that much anymore.

_Alea iacta est_, he’d said in his letter. The die is cast.

Well he wasn't wrong on that front. By now they had well and truly crossed the Rubicon, and Harry couldn't take back enthusiastically kissing Lord Voldemort any more than Julius Caesar could have taken back sending his army to march on the Senate. In one moment of venomous indiscretion they had passed the point of no return, and only time was going to tell if this particular coup d'état would lead to a bloody, failed revolution or the fall of the godsdamned Republic.

It didn’t matter that even now they were separated by both the length and breadth of the United Kingdom and the hazy world of dreams. The visceral intimacy of their relationship hung over her like a familiar shadow in the safe warm dark of their shared Occlumency barriers, as well as in the faint bruises on her neck which she was still hiding from her unsuspecting dormmates since she couldn't quite bring herself to heal them. Even though she emphatically hadn't been lusting after the cackling, snakefaced maniac who had emerged from the cauldron in the Little Hangleton cemetery it still felt weirdly like this new development had always been hanging there between them in potentia, and in a way it always had. Thanks to their conjoined soul it didn't matter if it was as prophesised adversaries, as murderer and victim, or even as villain and hero, the fact remained that in two lifetimes worth of isolation like it or not they had always been the closest thing to one another.

So in light of her growing disillusionment with Dumbledore and his bloody war, as long as it was all consensual did it even matter what the precise nature of that potential took? Because really, after fifty-odd years as the same freaking person what was one more way for the line between them to blur.
Nothing could possibly be more intimate than them having once been the exact same creature, with one heart beating in a shared chest and pumping their blood throughout interwoven highways of veins and nerve endings and meat. Of decades spent moving in tandem as they lived and laughed and conquered but still never quite managed to love, not even once.

It occurred to Harry that her feelings for Hermione and Sirius were maybe the first time that any part of them had ever been able to love anything except for maybe magic itself, and looking back at what for him was now nearly seventy years on this earth it made her want to cry. Even before they'd faced off over the Philosopher's Stone hating him had always been so damn easy right up until the second that it wasn't, so fucking easy that she had to wonder if maybe some quiet part of Voldemort had known all along that he was a lonely excuse for a monster and had hated himself for it.

In the aftermath of their collision it seemed that the broken pieces of herself really did remember being one with the shards of him, if that was in fact why she had never felt more whole or at peace as when she had been pressed up against him with his hand around her neck. In her bolder moments (usually after she woke up panting from far too realistic dreams to a pillow soaked in venom and panties which were just soaked in general) she wondered if that was why a traitorous part of her had begun to wonder if kissing him had felt like coming home, then what might him being inside of her feel like?

Or hell, maybe it was the part of her still trying to deny their connection which was actually the traitor. Literally sharing a soul with the object of both your recurring sex dreams and your recurring nightmares made it hard to try and work out how the hell to rationalise this shit, but either way Harry knew one thing for sure.

She was fucked.

***

Prior to the rise of anti-magical sentiment which culminated in the implementation of the International Statute of Secrecy, which in addition to everything else forbid witches and wizards from holding sovereignty over muggles, it was relatively common for the ruler of a country to also be the Wardmaster. If for whatever reason they weren't, either due to being unable to receive training or a lack of magical ability, it was common for them to seek out a potential spouse with the relevant skills instead. A lower level noble family could raise their station considerably if one of their children were able to prove their skills in warding, and as a result the knowledge was often hoarded as a family secret and thought of as the domain of landholding nobility. If a ruler was not a Wardmaster themselves and unable to find a suitably skilled spouse they would attempt to attract a talented Wardmaster to their court, and if successful, do everything they could to keep them there. It was regarded as one of the most prestigious positions attainable and highly coveted, because since a Wardmaster must always have the informed consent of the owner to create any kind of wards let alone something as complex as war wards, it was essential they understand said owner, their dominion and their motivations as intimately as possible.

A similarity can be found in how early glassblowers were regarded as not just artisans or craftsmen but as national assets, so highly prized to their kingdoms they were forbidden from travelling and often killed if they were discovered attempting to defect. As a glassblower was entrusted with no small amount of a nation's economic prosperity so too a Wardmaster was entrusted with the safety and protection of that nation, and they were therefore a regular target for assassination. While wards can be anchored externally in order to survive the death of their creator nothing can last
forever, not even magic. Without regular maintenance by someone who understands their complexities and knows exactly what they are doing, even things as mighty as war wards will always fail in the end.

***

As it passed through September and into the start of October Harry read Fomalhauta's book as slowly as she could, rationing out paragraphs whenever the ache of withdrawal got too much to handle on her own. She tried her best to not think longingly of how much easier this had been when she'd at least had the locket to keep her company, and all the while she dreamed about glassblowers and plagues and absolutely everything but Voldemort. Well that wasn't quite accurate, she still dreamt about him in increasingly mortifying ways, but she didn't dream with him. After the third time waking up sweaty and frustrated from the feel of phantom hands and teeth somehow the distinction didn't make her feel any better.

So she was relieved to have something sufficiently exciting to distract her from how cold and empty she felt without him, even if it was just for an afternoon.

Professor Babbling had taken a bit longer to review her extra credit work than expected when she had needed to send a letter to a colleague who was familiar with thread magic to check up on some of the finer details of Harry's runic array. But after finally hearing back from them she had given Harry permission to do the fire tests on her two rune embroidered dresses.

They were in an disused classroom emptied of anything remotely flammable and Hermione was standing behind and to the side of Babbling, visibly fretting but supportive. As she stood at the far end of the classroom and stared down the business end of her teacher's wand, Harry felt centred for the first time in forever. The sharpness of adrenaline really did a great job of smoothing over the raw edges of where her unruly soul was up to its recent nonsense of trying to convince her brain to chase Voldemort down and climb the man like a tree.

"Are you ready Miss Black-Potter?" Asked the professor, so calm it wouldn't have surprised Harry that she regularly set aside time on her weekends to set fire to her students. "I will cast *Incendio* for precisely ten seconds, and if the test is successful and you are willing and able to continue we shall repeat it another two times so we can be sure of the results."

"You bet I am." Harry said with a smile which was probably a little too wild for polite company, her restlessness for something which she couldn't quite explain even to herself making her bounce lightly on the balls of her bare feet in anticipation.

To avoid any possible magical interference or losing any of her possessions she wasn't wearing anything except the white cotton sun dress heavily embroidered with gold and silver runes. The comforting tangle of spiralling Elder Futhark would be enough to protect her, she knew it down to her bones, so she'd removed all of her usual jewelry and even her Heir rings and her wand were safely hidden away in Hermione's pocket. Her only sartorial concession to any potential mishaps was that she had put in her contacts instead of wearing her glasses and that her hair was bound up out of the way and covered completely by one of Professor Babbling's headscarves, the deep violet silk having its own separate fireproofing charms which would save her hair in case anything went wrong. The prospect of ending up in the Hospital Wing covered in burns didn't concern her too much, pain wasn't something she was all that bothered by when magical healing was so incredible and so fast, but if anything happened to her lovely long hair which she'd spent literal years growing out then
she'd be well pissed.

"Miss Granger, please make a note that this first test will be the hand embroidered dress." Babbling continued, clearly knowing just as well as Harry did that the other witch needed to be kept busy to stop her from working herself up into a right sorry state. "I don't foresee any issues but please be on standby and ready to cast Augamenti, though only on my express direction."

"Yes Professor!" Said Hermione, visibly unhappy but still doing her best not to let it interfere with her self-appointed role as assistant note-taker and emergency back up fire-extinguisher. Harry didn't blame her. Even though her best friend knew full well just how meticulous Harry was when it came to her thread magic and trusted her to not be an idiot (not about something not life-threatening anyway), she'd also spent the last five years in the unenviable position of being the often sole voice of reason attempting to keep Harry out of harms way. Standing aside and letting her be set on fire was understandably stressful for her.

Deep breaths.

Hagalaz, Nauthiz, Jera, Algiz, Elhaz, Berkana, Laguz, Sowilo.

Harry rubbed the scar on her forehead as she recited the names of the runes she'd used as the core of her fire-proofing array and thought hard about protection, about mastery of the elements earned though resourcefulness, hard work and more than a little recklessness.

While there were many rune alphabets to chose from the Elder Futhark was undoubtedly her favourite, the main reason being just how delightfully contradictory they were since each rune didn't just represent one whole concept but also its inverse as well. With each individual rune being both sides of its respective coin simultaneously, you had to be so damn careful that when you used them you didn't just end up with the exact opposite of the result you were trying to achieve in the first place. That inherent duality meant you needed no small amount of flexibility and a rather black sense of humour to fully appreciate and master them, and both of those things were something which Harry had in spades.

"Ready."


"Incendio!" Babbling called out as she brandished her wand, and a giant plume of blazing orange-red shot from her wand straight at Harry who opened her arms wide in welcome to make sure the first thing the flames would come into contact with was her runework.

Like she was staring into the sun Harry just laughed, ecstatic, as the fire broke over her like a cresting wave, and for a split second the entire world was reduced to nothing but the dizzy rush of being enveloped in burning red heat. Heat and a light so bright that she might have closed her eyes if it wasn't for the fact she had expected it and braced herself for the impact. She was instantly relieved at her foresight too, because this was beyond incredible and she didn't want to miss even a single second of it.

The embroidered runes she wore blazed like stars as flames licked all over her body like a lover, leaving trails of greedy warmth everywhere they touched. Unaware that she was still laughing Harry sunk her bare hands into the burning heart of it, marvelling at the way it clung to her fingertips and her eyelashes just this side of pain without even leaving a mark on her skin. In the unprecedented position of seeing a firestorm from the inside out, she could breathe it in and feel it burning all the way down into her lungs before she exhaled it back out through her mouth as if she'd just turned into something magical, something cosmic.
It felt decidedly like the universe was trying to tell her something, because she couldn't deny that the onslaught of raw elemental power warmed the deep parts of her just like he did, the heat and magic branching outwards through her core making her properly realise for the first time just how cold and empty she'd been in the long weeks without him. Inside the swirling vortex of flame she knew with a strange kind of clarity that she was finally ready to face him again. Nothing outward had changed, but it was if all her doubts and fears had been burned away. He was still him and she was still her and all of the baggage those facts entailed were still there, but she couldn't be scared anymore, not of anything or anyone who made her feel like this.

Then as soon as it had appeared it was gone, the fire extinguishing itself once the spell which had created it stopped. Harry was dimly aware she was giggling like a loon and breathing like she'd just run a lap of the quidditch pitch, that at some point during the last roughly eternal ten seconds she had collapsed to her knees from the overload of conflicting stimuli. Running her hand over her torso to confirm that she wasn't injured she was pleased to note there wasn't so much as spec of soot on her, though the metal runes were still buzzing with residual magic and almost too hot to touch.

She'd done it, she'd stood in the heart of the fire and she hadn't been burned. It might be some lazy bloody symbolism, but Voldemort was right and it turned out endorphins really were a hell of a thing.

"Harry! Harry are you okay?" Hermione called out as she wrung her hands. It probably wasn't the first time she'd said it either, she was clearly only holding herself back from running over to her stupid friend because of the test protocol Babbling had drilled into them before they started.

"Are you okay to continue Miss Black-Potter?" Asked the professor, a slight smile on her face making it clear she understood why Harry had been a little overwhelmed.

For her part Harry just looked up at them with what was without a doubt a decidedly manic grin. Standing up she pulled the scarf off and shook her head so her braids were tumbling down to hang freely around her shoulders and back. This time, she wanted to feel the fire everywhere.

"Again!"

***

After dinner that night Harry retreated to her bed with the entirely plausible excuse of needing an early night after spending half the day as a human torch. After throwing up a Muffliato which she'd learned from the Half-Blood Prince so no-one could listen in just in case she had a freak out, she sat down and powered through the final half a chapter of Fomalhauta's book.

It was fantastic, to the point where she decided then and there that if she was aiming to do further study of defensive runes for her thread magic anyway then she really should just double down and study wards too, but after all the build-up it was something of an anticlimax.

From what Voldemort had implied there was some kind of terrible secret hidden in the pages, but she'd finished it and it just seemed like it was a glorified textbook. A fantastic, incredibly insightful textbook which she was now even more determined to own a copy of since she couldn't in good conscience write notes in the margins of someone else's book even if the someone in question was a Dark Lord, but a textbook nonetheless.
Maybe she’d missed something? Her eyes flicked over the letter from Voldemort which she’d been indulgently (stupidly) using as a bookmark, tracing the neat lines of his handwriting with a fingertip and wondering what she’d missed. Then she paused, re-reading the words for the umpteenth time, and promptly felt like ten kinds of idiot because he’d told her to read it cover to cover, not just to the end of the last chapter. Dear Merlin she was a moron.

After the last chapter was a glossary, which Harry dutifully read through even though she doubted that whatever point Voldemort was trying to make was some kind of secret code. The neatly alphabetised lists with their corresponding page numbers were easy to skim over, and when they revealed nothing immediately strange or of world-ending importance she turned the page to reveal an afterword. She started to skim though that too, quickly feeling her stomach sink down past her knees and through the floor without sign of stopping as she realised in growing horror just what it was she reading, before going back to the beginning and starting over.

Like many unrepentant academics I began this book purely out of a desire to share the object of my obsession with the world. Perhaps a love of the warding arts was something ingrained in me at birth as a member of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, but I honestly believe that there is no form of magic more personal and vital to our way of life. For me wards aren’t just a shield, they’re a way for us to define the world which we inhabit so we can better understand our place in it. For what is a ward after all but the sum total of territory and magic which belongs, whole and entire, to its rightful owner? And if you made it through these pages then you know just as well as I what happens to the magic contained within a ward when the owner of that magic is lost, don’t you?

It too is lost, whole and entire.

As impossible as it seems all the information I have been able to uncover points to the remaining war wards in the British Isles being significantly weaker now than they were when they were created, a pattern which continues through into other types and categories of wards used nationwide. This is generally explained as being a result of too many years and too few Wardmasters to renew them properly, but I believe there is something far more sinister than this at work. That it is because magic itself in the British Isles has become fundamentally weaker.

All around the world there are reports of not just war wards failing but other complex magics as well, of ancient enchantments weakening or even outright fading into nothingness. These results are not always the same when measured by standardised tests, indeed they vary greatly depending on their location and circumstance, and this I believe is the main reason no one has yet been able to piece it all together before now. Certainly the only reason I even noticed was due to my own compulsive habit of recording obscure data points when I discovered a discrepancy in the functionality of a minor part of an old runic array during the course of researching for this book, which in my wide-eyed curiosity I decided to investigate further. My attempt to compare it to what I had assumed to be a diverse control group of unaffected arrays led to my initial suspicions, which in time led to certainty and no small amount of disbelief. I say disbelief, but perhaps complete and utter terror is more accurate.

And so as much as I wish I could say otherwise, it seems that it is magic itself which is slowly fading. Not just in the British Isles either, but all over our planet. And I have no idea how to fix it, or even how much time we have left before it is past the point of saving.

Despite the heavy weight of this knowledge I fear I have only scratched the surface. This book is set to be published very soon and as such there is no time to include any of my findings beyond begging my long-suffering editor to include this afterword. Any more will have to wait until I can research
the phenomenon further and write a follow-up. But despite that same editor trying to convince me otherwise, I can't in good conscience allow a book about the importance of warding to be published without including this warning about the greatest enemy we have faced as a people, so that no matter what comes next it is immortalised in print.

Until then, I implore you dear reader to look closely around you at the foundations we have built our world upon. Think on all we have accomplished and stand to accomplish in the future, and then ask yourself what you would do were that foundation to give way. Think on what you would do if you knew of the calamity which was to befall our world, and all you would do and give in order to prevent it. As for myself, that answer is anything and everything within my power and even some things which aren't. Because our magic is not just what we do, it is who we are.

Yours in magic now and I pray for always,

Fomalhauta Ananke Black

Oh no. Dear Merlin no.

Hands shaking and her pulse pounding in her ears, Harry turned the final page.

On the inside of the back cover was a moving black and white photograph of an androgynously handsome young woman in a dark set of men's tailored robes. She looked like she had passed through tired into bone weary about three stations back but still had no intention of stopping anytime soon, hands stuffed into her pockets as she stared out of the photo with a crooked half-smile which was equal parts rueful and defiant. The smile was so achingly familiar that Harry now knew with painful certainty exactly where a young Tom Riddle had learned it, once upon a time.

Fomalhauta Black was leaning against an overstuffed bookcase as if it was the only thing holding her up, her wavy black hair in a scruffy pageboy cut and restless shadows under her deep-set, endless Black eyes. Underneath a brief author's biography was a handwritten inscription in a looping, slightly unsteady scrawl of faded emerald green ink.

To my fellow glorious outcast of the snake pit.

May this mark your first step along that unending road to greatness, because if anyone's actually mad enough to be the king of the world then surely it's you luv.

As you follow in the wake of my averted stride, don't forget that everything is fair in love and in war, and that all roads lead to Rome.

Chapter End Notes

WELCOME TO THE META-PLOT MY DUDES.

Y'all liked the teaser for this chapter I posted on my tumblr so I think that's going to be a thing I do more often, so come check me out if you're into that sort of thing:
The answers were there when I stared into you

Chapter Summary

Confronting possibly the only thing scarier than a Dark Lord with a thing for you, Harry heads to the library to get answers. As seems to be the case when Voldemort gives them to her they're nothing which she particularly wants but everything that she needs.

Chapter Notes

Oh boy you glorious heathens, strap in. Harry wants answers, and while Volders might not have them all he has enough to send her reeling. There's a bunch of history and magical theory in this and hot damn my dudes, I have entire files in my notes all about my interpretation of magical theory so I'm really excited to get to share some more with you!

With how vital this chapter is to the metaplot there's a lot of info to get through and it was getting too damn long, so the dream will be in two parts with the next being out real soon. Fair warning, I'm moving house in a few weeks so they might be a lil bit slower until we get into February. We're heading into one of my favourite bits of this book though so there's plenty to look forward to, I know I am!

CW in end notes if you need them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At some point during her entirely justified freak out Harry felt the ever-present itch under her skin fade for the first time in weeks. Listening to something which wasn't quite a sound she turned her head to stare off into the middle distance, through her curtains, through the thick stone outer walls of the castle, and out across the darkened world. Somehow she knew that wherever Voldemort was right now he had stopped whatever it was he had been doing and was looking right back at her, that he understood perfectly every single messy, broken thing she was feeling.

No bloody wonder he'd said he would know when she finished the book. While it was true that they only shared vague impressions of their strongest emotions with each other during their waking hours, with how much it felt like the world was already ending she was no doubt broadcasting like crazy.

Trying to fall asleep naturally was a wasted effort so Harry didn't even bother trying, just dragging on the first long black nightie she could find and breaking into her emergency stash of the last non-Dreamless Sleep Potion she'd found which could still knock her out. Turns out it had been quite an inspired decision, because for the first time ever post-possession attempt she fell asleep before Voldemort did. Which meant they both arrived in the library at the exact same time.

Any other day she'd be fascinated and probably get a good giggle at getting to see a Dark Lord in his pjs, even if they were a matching set of sensible black silk with emerald green piping and buttons, but funnily enough tonight of all nights it was so not important.
Eyes meeting from across the library they immediately strode towards each other in a strange echo of their last reunion after they had spent time apart. Though this time around instead of punching him in the face Harry could only bury hers into his chest while they held on to each other for dear life, and hope it wasn't obvious that his arms were the only thing which made her feel like she wasn't in danger of flying apart at the seams.

"What are you thinking darling?" He asked softly into her hair, and it wasn't so much a question as it was an acknowledgement of all the many and varied ways their world was so much more fragile than she could ever have guessed before tonight.

Harry shook her head, because if this conversation was going to be even half as intense as she thought then she wasn't going to have it standing up. "Make us a couch."

"Excuse me?"

"Couch." She repeated into his sternum. "Now. And tea."

Voldemort waved a hand and a soft looking couch which faced into the fireplace appeared between their two armchairs, making a cozy semicircle of upholstery with the coffee table and the requested tea tray in the middle.

Reluctantly letting go of her stranglehold on him just long enough to let him tug her over to it, when they got there she pushed him down so he was lying on it with his legs stretched out so she could half crawl, half collapse right on top of him. Her arms snaked around his neck and their legs tangled together as if they'd done this a million times before, and as the warmth of their soul drowned them both in gold it was like she could finally breathe properly again.

Normally Harry might have shied away from the intimacy of it all but right now she was just too damn tired of fighting him, of fighting them, to care.

To her relief, he didn't point out they could have done this with significantly less questionable touching in one of the armchairs, or even tease her for being so affected by what she'd read that she needed comforting like a child after a nightmare. Instead, he just stroked her hair and let her shake with her face buried in his neck as if she could hide in the quiet safety of their beautiful dream forever.

After a while she had collected herself enough to function, though she didn't get up or move her face from where it was still hiding in the general vicinity of his collarbone. "Tell me it didn't say what I thought it said."

His arms tightened around her. "And what do you think it said Harry?"

She didn't want to say it, as if speaking the words out loud would somehow make it undeniably true. "That magic is dying." She finally whispered.

Voldemort sighed, and he sounded just as tired as Fomalhauta had looked in her picture. "Do you want me to lie to you?"

Yes. "No."

"Then I am afraid I can't tell you it isn't true." He said, pressing a kiss against her temple as if in apology. "No matter how much I wish I could."

Oh Merlin.
Sitting up a little so she could look at him while they were talking, she folded her arms on his chest and rested her chin on it. "How do you even know this isn't just some scary doomsday theory?"

If he was surprised by how casually intimate they were right now he didn't let on, just folded one arm comfortably behind his head so he could see her a little better and played with the curly bits of her hair doing their level best to escape from her braids. "Because I know Fomalhauta. She would never make something like this up, or tell people about it without knowing for sure."

"How is this even possible?" She demanded, resisting the urge to wave her hands around as if it could possibly help. "Magic is just, well, it's magic."

He looked at her with fond exasperation. "Do you even know what magic is Harry?"

It seemed like a trick question. The kind of pointless philosophical nonsense which professors and Dark Lords liked to roll out with maddening regularity just to feel superior. But in light of what they were discussing she got the distinct impression that this time at least it really, really wasn't.

"Um, well." She fidgeted while he kept looking at her like he was waiting for an answer she didn't have. "Apparently not. I always just thought it was just, well..."

"Magic?" He said dryly with a raised eyebrow.

Well when he put it like that then sure, it suddenly seemed beyond insane that at no point during her last five-plus years in the magical world she'd ever thought to question what exactly it was which made it all possible.

"Magic is far deeper waters than most witches and wizards will ever know." He said while he continued to play with her hair. "They paddle on the surface, perfectly content with their place in the world, all the while ignoring the entire ocean underneath them."

Harry made a face. "Well try and explain what that means to this ignorant paddler then."

"It isn't a simple question and there's no simple answer." He said, gently pushing on her shoulders so she'd sit up. As soon as she had moved enough for him to swing around and sit properly he pulled her back down onto his lap, which freed his hands up to pour them both a cup of tea while still maintaining as much physical contact as possible. Harry blushed, the proximity-induced warmth after so long without him still not quite enough for her to not be painfully aware of all the new implications of their physical closeness outside of horcrux realignment in the aftermath of their last dream together, to say nothing of some of the private ones she'd had since then.

If Voldemort felt any of that same awareness he didn't let on, just continued on as if nothing had changed. But even Harry could tell how there was a new kind of confidence in how he touched her, the possessive way one hand stayed curled around the curve of her hips. Once he was satisfied with his efforts at tea preparation, he gave their teacups to Harry to hold onto before shuffling them both back to lean against one of the arms of the couch. She'd be annoyed at being manhandled if she wasn't too busy being impressed that he'd managed to do all that without spilling anything or letting her off his lap even once, though he did let her wiggle around sideways so she could at least face him while they were talking.

"To answer your question." He said after they'd both gotten comfy and he'd retrieved his tea from her. "Magic is a phenomenon created by the manipulation of the energy oscillating between the physical world and a sentient magical being such as a witch or wizard. It is a self-fulfilling interdependent system, much as the muggle scientists theorise a perpetual motion engine would function. Magic is simultaneously energy, a solid, a liquid, a gas, and paradoxically it is also none of
them. It is the exception which proves all of the other rules of the world because it is what happens when a sentient being's will and determination are so strong they can override those limitations to achieve the impossible."

Well that made no sense at all. "But magic isn't impossible, we can all do it."

"Harry." He said, nice and slow as if she was an idiot. "I can wave my hand and create fire from nothing. An animagus can change themselves into an animal and back again while never losing the continuity of their human consciousness despite only physically having an animal brain, and it doesn't even violate the bloody laws of thermodynamics. Just because we do these things every day does not mean that they are not impossible."

Huh. "Is that why becoming an animagus is so difficult then, because you have to learn how to keep your human mind without losing it despite the physical limitations of the animal you've transformed into?"

He seemed pleased she'd managed to at least grasp this without needing any intellectual hand-holding. "Precisely. It is also why they say to never transform alone until you have mastered it. So many new animagi lose themselves to the intensity of their deeply ingrained new instincts and need help to become human again."

Harry took another drink of her incredibly excellent tea and made a note to look more into animagi, because the potential benefits of being able to turn into an animal aside that was just badass. "Okay, so all magic is variations on the theme of miracle. It's very interesting yes, but why is it important?"

"So impatient." He scolded, the arm slung lazily around her waist briefly squeezing tight as if telling her off. Her breath hitched, immediately and viscerally reminded of how tightly he'd held her while they kissed, and she momentarily lost track of what they were talking about. "Don't you think that if it was so easy to understand and explain there wouldn't be more people clued into it by now?"

Equal parts relieved he didn't seem to have noticed her brief lapse of composure and annoyed that he was being an arse, Harry took another drink of her tea so she wouldn't be tempted to just up-end it on his head for taking so bloody long to get to the point. "Fine. Continue."

"As we have already covered magic exists in nature and often in beings which are an extension of nature themselves, there are even creatures like phoenixes and dragons which were created entirely by magic. Humans, however, are neither of those things."

"Then how the hell did we end up with magic of our own?"

Voldemort smirked into his teacup. "No matter what some might say the first human magic users were not the result of interbreeding with magical creatures or divine intervention or even random chance."

"Really?" Harry had vague recollections of hearing a few of these theories before when some older students were being pretentious intellectuals and remembered thinking they sounded perfectly logical at the time, but Voldemort looked offended by the very idea.

"Of course not." He said dismissively. "To say so trivialises the profoundness of their accomplishment, that they were such shining examples of the immeasurable potential of humanity that they made the universe itself bow to them. It wasn't just power they achieved it was a kind of apotheosis, and in return for them opening the proverbial Pandora's box it changed them and their descendants forever."
"Is that seriously how we got magic?" She asked, unable to deny that was way more awesome than the early witches and wizards just lucking out or getting busy with centaurs like one particularly vehement Ravenclaw had insisted. "What about Muggleborns then?"

"Research done in the Colonies after the war against Grindelwald indicates that two Squib descended people have a good chance of having a magical child." He replied, taking another drink of his tea. "Consequently most Mugglebloods are simply descended from the disinherited Squibs of magical families who were cast out into the muggle world to fend for themselves."

Dear Merlin could magical folks be arseholes sometimes. "Most?"

He shrugged. "There is an incredibly small number for whom magic spontaneously appears, just as it did for our distant ancestors. It is a romantic notion of course, but in reality Wildwitches and Wildwizards are about as common as Parselmouths."

Despite the potentially world-changing things being discussed Harry couldn't help but think of Hermione. Not because she cared one bit whether or not her best friend was a Muggleborn or something as fancy sounding as a Wildwitch, but because if anyone she knew could possibly make the world bend through sheer force of will alone it would be her.

"Have you ever met one?"

"I have met two that I knew of for sure. Both were truly exceptional examples of what a magical human should be." He paused, deliberating something, before he continued. "I had my suspicions prior to Samhain in 1981 and many more in the years since that Lily Potter was one as well."

Oh, oh wow. Harry thought numbly of her mother, the brilliant smile she'd only seen in photos and the faint Dementor-induced memory of her refusing to stand by and let a Dark Lord have her daughter, her back as straight and strong as a pillar which could hold up the whole damn sky if she had to. It was a strange kind of ache, to mourn for someone she never really knew, but it was always there in the background waiting to pop up at the strangest of moments.

"Did Fomalhauta explain to you why magic was dying?" She asked, pressing on before her thoughts got morbid and resolutely ignoring how saying it still made her feel sick to her stomach.

"She called it the Fade." He sighed, the hand not holding his tea rubbing soothing circles on her hip which her idiotic, touch-starved self had to admit was actually helping rather a lot. "Magic needs that reciprocal relationship between land and being in order to exist. It is different everywhere you go in the world of course, but in the distant past the British Isles oscillated with the Fair Folk as the dominant, sentient magical people."

That reminded her of something he'd said weeks ago when they'd been dancing. "I thought you said there weren't any faeries left anymore?"

"That is because there aren't. After centuries of conflict the Fair Folk were driven back to the Summerlands forever during the War of Cold Iron. In the end, it was only won because all of the strongest magical clans who lived here at the time formed an alliance in order to defeat them."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "The Ancient Houses." She wasn't sure how she knew that's who he was talking about, but she was.

"Precisely. In the aftermath of the war Merlin - who as the Emrys was privy to secrets we will spend all our days trying to understand - he knew what this meant and how without the grounding effect of that reciprocal relationship magic would eventually wane. As the responsibility for the departure of
the Fair Folk fell to them, he challenged the conquerors to in turn take responsibility for the continuation of magic for the good of all."

"Because conquest means ownership." She said distractedly, turning over all of this new information in her head. "Once they took the land from the previous owners they were the only ones who could properly protect it, that's basic warding principles. No bloody wonder it was Fomalhauta who worked all of this out."

"While the presence of magical humans, in general, helps with the oscillation just as the presence of the rank and file fae once did it is enhanced by the blood members of the Ancient Houses and is anchored by their Lords and Ladies just as it once was by the fae Kings and Queens. They owned the land, its magic and its seasons, and that ownership passed to us with the formation of the blood covenant with Merlin. Incidentally, that is why we need representation of both the Light and the Dark just as the Fair Folk had their Summer and Winter Courts, the balance of those two aspects is what the land knows. If the decline of the Ancient Houses and the persecution of the Dark continues our carelessness and rejection of our heritage will doom us all."

"Dear Merlin that's fucked up." She breathed, the common epithet gaining a whole new significance.

"When I eventually got back to England after years of travelling extensively and researching the state and origins of magic in other nations, I spent months in the Ministry archives analysing the census records from ever since the Ministry was first founded. I might not have Fomalhauta's data on the decline of war wards but I wanted to see if that pattern continued in other areas."

"Did it?"

"Merlin did it ever." He snorted. "The data I compiled confirmed the gradual decline of the Ancient Houses corresponded to the overall decline in magical birthrates and the increase in the birth of squibs as well. No matter what I looked into her theory still held true, that without the full complement of Ancient Houses to anchor it as the Kings and Queens of the Fair Folk once did the land's magic is slowly fading. And since you can't have one without the other, without the magic present in the physical world ours eventually fades too."

"And there's no chance that it was a coincidence, and it could actually be something else entirely?" She demanded, feeling increasingly agitated. "Like inbreeding, or some kind of genetic disorder that targets magical humans spread by said inbreeding? Maybe deforestation, or even all the fucking processed sugar in our diets? Literally anything else."

He shook his head. "I thought of those too, and I even checked. Nothing else fits the pattern, and it corresponded to the Fade I saw overseas as well. Of course, it's impossible to be absolutely 100% sure about things of this nature, but I am as close to certain as it gets."

"Why are the Purebloods not just having more bloody children then?" Because really, how the hell was a group of people that obsessed with blood purity not trying to overwhelm everyone else through sheer force of numbers alone.

"My kingdom for comprehensive health classes at that bloody school." He grumbled. "They try Harry. Witches already have double the chance of miscarriage that muggle women do, purely because of the effect magic has on a developing fetus. And that is in a country where the magic is stable, so in Magical Britain the magical instability makes it closer to four times more likely. In addition, fertility rates are lower because we no longer practice the Olde Ways en masse."

"So because we don't jump over a bonfire on Beltane witches are having less babies?" She asked, not sure if it would have been weirder if he had just announced that he planned to give up on all this
Dark Lord nonsense and retire to Devon to raise alpacas. "That's insane. What if they're like my
dad's family and have a different religion and ethnicity?"

He rolled his eyes. "If we were in India and people were outlawing or shunning their native practices
as we are here then there would be problems there too. What the individual believes isn't the key
issue, it's what the land knows. If everyone in Britain became devout Hindus then over many
thousands of years that would eventually become the dominant paradigm, but it's like trying to get
someone who doesn't speak English to understand you just by speaking really slowly. Think of it
less as cultural imperialism and more like the metaphysical equivalent of taking your shoes off before
entering someone's home while you're overseas, even if it is not a big deal in your own county."

She shook her head in disbelief. "I can't believe you're trying to tell me that atheism means witches
are having fewer babies."

"It doesn't matter for muggles in the least, but we are magical Harry. Belief and our interactions with
the natural world are not only realities for us but key components of our existence. The British Isles
has had countless religions over the years, but while the specific deities changed at its simplest it all
boils down to variations on a mother goddess and a horned god and the wheel of the year. As
magical humans of the British Isles we have Mother Magic and the Witchfather, and when we
stopped thanking them for their blessings we stopped receiving them because it doesn't matter if you
believe they are literal beings or just concepts. They are symbolic of our relationship with the land
and our own magic which we have cast aside in an effort to appease Mudbloods and their delicate
Judeo-Christian sensibilities."

"Doesn't the whole magic thing kind of make it impossible to be any of the varieties of Christian?"
Harry asked, putting aside the rampant bigotry to deal with later because there wasn't going to be a
quick fix on that front. "The whole 'thou shall not suffer a witch to live' thing kind of springs to
mind."

"Surely you have experienced firsthand the incredible capacity of human beings to be ridiculous
fucking hypocrites." He replied, putting his empty teacup down on the coffee table. "Magical
humans, although undeniably superior to their muggle counterparts, are still human."

She sighed and drank more of her tea. "So what the hell does any of this have to do with being a
Dark Lord? Surely being a scientist or a politician or a researcher could mean you were able to get
the public on your side without all the murder and civil unrest?"

Voldemort just raised an eyebrow. "Like being a researcher worked out so well for Fomalhauta? She
was from an Ancient House still in it's prime, and when she presented the theory in her book the few
people who bothered to read it thought she was just another mad Black crying wolf. And the second
book she was working on which would have proven the theory and provided a possible solution was
never found after her death and never published. No, I had already seen there was no chance they
would actually listen, I knew I would have to make them listen instead."

"And I bet you dealt with that roadblock like a perfectly rational adult." She muttered under her
breath.

"I had of course already intended to conquer Magical Britain anyway from about age twelve
onwards." He continued as if she hadn't said anything at all, like that was a perfectly reasonable thing
for a twelve-year-old to decide. "And I am perfectly capable of admitting that originally it was far
more about spiteful revenge than anything else. I hated muggles for my childhood, I hated the
Purebloods for looking down on me when I first arrived at Hogwarts, and I hated everyone else for
standing by and letting it happen. Becoming Lord Voldemort and taking over the country would
serve the dual purpose of putting me in the position to fix everything they had gotten wrong, and
forcing all of the arrogant Purebloods to bow down to a Halfblood who ordinarily they wouldn't even spit on."

Harry couldn't help it, she laughed. "Now that I can believe."

"Of course." He purred, apparently not bothered in the least by her amusement. "Truth be told it was so gratifying I even made it a rule that all of my followers had to bow whenever I entered a room, just because I could. In short, I was happily on my way towards murder and mayhem like so many budding Dark Lords before me, right up until that night in Italy when Fomalhauta told me about the Fade. She was the reason I first learned about what the gradual loss of the Ancient Houses meant for the magic of the British Isles, and the possible repercussions if they weren't protected."

"No wonder you joined the Pureblood crusade." Harry breathed, letting him get away with hugging her closer since it seemed like he needed it as much as she did. "I mean you were still a great sodding idiot for doing it, but between your bitterness at the muggles for your shitty childhood and the risk that the British Isles could end up a magical wasteland if too many of the Ancient Houses died off I imagine you were feeling pretty desperate."

"We really were." He said, his first slip into plural pronouns in a while. "Especially after Fomalhauta died, she had been the only one with any real answers. The recent war with Grindelwald had cost us one Ancient House and reduced two others to a single heir, many others had only had one or two children per generation for going on at least a hundred years, and that was just in Magical Britain! The magical nations on the Continent itself where Grindelwald had been most active were in an even worse state, and while not all of them had it as bad as we do here the loss of so much magical blood was threatening to destabilise what they did still have. It felt so much like time was running out."

This was legitimately one of the most terrifying things Harry had ever heard in her entire life. "Are you seriously telling me that the whole bloody world is experiencing the Fade?"

Voldemort ran his hand through his hair. "A lot of Asia is doing alright, as is the more remote areas of Central and South America, and nearly everything north of the Arctic Circle. It is mainly Western Europe, North America, Oceania, and select parts of Africa, South-East Asia and the Middle East which are the worst affected, all of those places which held the worst of the witch hunts and purges of native magical creatures and cultures which decimated our population and nearly cost us everything before we implemented the International Statute of Secrecy. The muggle's toxic obsession with global industrialisation hasn't helped matters either, magic comes in no small part from nature and with so much of the natural world being destroyed the few non-human magical guardians are going the way of their human counterparts here in Magical Britain."

"Do you have any idea what the second book was going to be about then? Apart from finding a way to make the Ancient Houses get busy with the babymaking without actually violating their civil liberties that is." Because there just had to be a solution, the alternative was too fucking awful to even contemplate.

"I have plenty of ideas and theories, but while I suspect it has something to do with war wards since it was during her research into them that she discovered the phenomena in the first place, there is still so much we don't know." Voldemort paused, laughing bitterly. "Irony of ironies, while I was always perfectly adequate when it came to runes I have none of the innate, instinctual talent for them she had being a Wardmaster, a talent which you apparently share even though your primary focus is thread magic instead of warding. I have no idea how my own horcrux ended up with such an ability when I did not, though I suppose it could be put down as being something you both inherited from your shared Black blood or even further evidence to your argument that you are your own person."

Harry hadn't realised until that exact moment just how used she'd gotten to Voldemort always having
all the answers, and the fact he didn't in this case was almost as scary to her as the Fade was. "But you were one of the best students Hogwarts has ever had! How could you of all people have no idea what to do?"

"As gratifying as your vote of confidence is." He said wryly. "Getting an Outstanding on my Ancient Runes N.E.W.T when I was eighteen, unfortunately, means sweet fuck all when it comes to trying to reverse engineer a solution to a global magical catastrophe which took a prodigiously talented Wardmaster years to even begin to understand, let alone solve."

"Do you mean to say that I'm actually better than you at something other than being a half-decent human being?" She asked with a weak smile, still processing her unexpected reaction to Voldemort almost being as clueless as she was for once. "Because you're just as terrifying academically as you are as a megalomaniac, so that's kind of nice to hear."

Voldemort glared at her for interrupting, but the effect was somewhat undermined by how he was still holding onto her as if cuddles really could make everything better. "I mean little horcrux, that you have the potential to be better than me at something. You are still sixteen and have a lot more to learn before that fateful day, so don't let it go to your head."

She didn't even grace that with a response, just poked her tongue out at him.

"In any case." He said as he rolled his eyes. "I immediately decided that the logical course of action would, of course, be to overthrow the muggle-loving government who was abolishing our traditions and in some cases even making them illegal, because safeguarding the Purebloods would have the dual benefit of protecting both the Olde Ways and the Ancient Houses. The hope was for it to buy me enough time in which to find a more permanent solution to the real problem of magic dying a slow and painful death."

Even though Harry still firmly believed his chosen methods of problem-solving veered too far into the realm of atrocity, she couldn't deny she was begrudgingly starting to see there had in fact been a mad kind of logic to his actions. He was absolutely still a murderous bastard who needed to be reigned in before he made any more progress on that whole genocide business, but it was becoming increasingly clear that despite his many flaws he really wasn't the deranged villain he was generally made out to be.

"You really meant it. You actually want to save the world." Harry said faintly as she discarded her empty teacup, really not sure what she should be feeling right now. "Lord Voldemort wants to save the world."

"I did tell you." He said, more than a little smug despite the dire subject matter. "Months ago. It isn't my fault you chose to believe propaganda instead of believing me."

She shook her head in disbelief, finding it hard to so drastically adjust her worldview but unable to deny that he really had been telling the truth. "I mean, you're still a psychopath and you've gone about it in the absolute stupidest way you possibly could have. But in your own mad way, you have actually been trying to mercilessly conquer everything with an iron fist in order to save it."

He looked down his nose at her. "I have already explained my reasoning for the choices I have made in the past, and I refuse to apologise for any of it."

"Oh shut up you mad wanker, and just bloody listen to me for once." Harry snapped, shoving his arms away so she could get up and pace in front of the couch. The furniture sadly stopped her from getting a satisfying amount of speed going, but she was utterly fed up with his posturing. "Newsflash, you can't save the world by killing nearly everyone in it! It doesn't matter if magic
survives if there aren't more than a handful of witches and wizards left standing to enjoy it, and if all but the remaining Ancient Houses are apparently acceptable losses to you then those Houses will eventually have to either marry muggles or they will end up as inbred and stupid as the Gaunts did and lose their magic anyway."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "You are missing the point."

"What point?" She demanded, hands planted on her hips so she wouldn't be tempted to try the face punching solution after all. "That your preferred method of problem-solving is still murder?"

"No." He gritted out between his teeth. "That this is a war for the fate of magic itself, and that the means will always be justified when the ends are so vitally important."

She rubbed her face, unable to believe that a man as intelligent as Voldemort was really this appallingly thick. "I'm going to be completely honest, knowing what I do now about the Fade I'm not even sure that your winning isn't actually maybe, maybe a good thing. And I mean that is one hell of a maybe Voldemort. It's definitely something I'm going to have to sit down and think about, but only on the condition you stop treating 'saving magic' and 'not committing genocide' as if they're mutually exclusive!"

"Muggles are the reason for so much of this mess and the most immediate and direct threat to our way of life." He sneered. "They are killing the planet with their pollution and their overpopulation and their greed, and if we don't find a way to deal with them then we're unlikely to make it another century before they've either decided to kill off either us or each other and indiscriminately blow everything away! You might have forgotten what it was like to huddle in a cramped air raid shelter night after night, listening to the bombs dropping all around and wondering if the next one was going to be the one that finally killed us, but I never have. They have to be stopped!"

Harry had to take a deep, calming breath and remind herself that this was a man who had lived through the Blitz as a child. And that even though he was in the wrong as far as his decision-making went she couldn't in fairness brush off that the underlying reason for it was his entirely justified trauma and probably no small amount of unacknowledged PTSD.

"While that will definitely need to be dealt with at some point." She allowed. "I don't think we have to be worried about a global nuclear event anytime in the near future. So until we hear the air raid sirens why don't we concentrate on getting our own house in order first, okay? As long as the Statute is upheld and we don't pre-emptively strike out at them only to get a nuke in the face for our troubles, let's just leave them to their idiocy and focus on ourselves and the problem of the whole death of magic thing. Because I'm not too proud to admit that the Fade is the stuff fucking nightmares are made of, and if you don't get your head out your arse and help me do something about it right the hell now I won't be held accountable for my actions!"

"Are you trying to threaten me into doing what I am already trying to do anyway?" He asked, squinting at her in confusion. "Because that seems a tad redundant."

"No." She snapped. "I'm threatening that if you don't get over your obsession with killing your way to a solution that I won't help you."

He looked far too scandalised for a Dark Lord who she knew for a fact engaged in recreational use of the Unforgivables, though it's possible that could be blamed at least in part on the stylish jimjams. "You would refuse to help me because you are squeamish about my methods? Are you honestly that simple in the head or just naïve?"

"Maybe a little of both." She shrugged, refusing to rise to his baiting because she had a point to make
dammit and she refused to be distracted from it by his bad temper. "Because I don't care how you can justify it to yourself, I don't see how you can save everything if you don't try to save people first."

Voldemort just stared at her as if she was crazy but that was nothing new and this wasn't something she was going to back down from, not for anything.

"Why are you so fixated on this idea of being their Saviour?" He asked, clearly more than a little incredulous. "I know for a fact you don't actually care about all the idiots who keep putting you up on a pedestal and expect you to fix their problems, only so they can tear you right back down again the second they need a convenient scapegoat."

Harry snorted inelegantly, slumping back down to sit across from him on the far end of the couch. "It's not about being a bloody Saviour, it's really not even about them as individuals either. Most of them can go hang as far as I'm concerned, the useless idiots. But I care because as annoying as those people are they're still people." And that had to mean something, it just had to. "If we can't find value in human life, in a species which has done and achieved so much and has the potential to do even more, then what could we possibly find any value in at all?"

Voldemort still looked like he wanted to shake some sense into her, but bless him that he was at least trying to understand her point of view. "So you want to save them all because we're all of us human beings, and you perceive that as a group they have an inherent value the individual might not necessarily have. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes!" Merlin this whole argument was like pulling teeth from the world's most dangerous toddler. "The biggest cause of discord isn't actually all the ways we're different, it's ignorance. And ignorance is something which can be fixed. Granted the older and more set in their ways someone is the harder it can be, but it doesn't change the fact that it's still possible. As long as a person is alive there is an opportunity for them to change for the better."

His arms were folded defensively across his chest and he still looked like he was doubting her possession of common sense. "I don't know how to feel about the fact I am apparently capable of such ridiculous, wide-eyed idealism."

The fact he was resorting to questioning her intelligence was irritating, but as it was also proof that he was running out of more logical arguments she jumped on it. "We're actually one of the best possible examples of exactly what I'm saying if you really think about it Voldemort. Regardless of my lack of our past memories we are fundamentally the same person, only when we diverged in 1981 I gained a new life and perspective which you didn't. And even with our shared soul and an upbringing which wasn't any better than our original one, I'm still able to sit here today and tell you that people can be better."

"Surely you're joking."

"Scout's honour."

"Harry." How he fit so much condensed meaning into just her name was really quite the achievement.

"Don't you see?" She pressed on. "Once upon a time I was Tom Marvolo Riddle, and then I was Lord Voldemort, and now I'm Harry Black-Potter. As much as you like to point out that I'm you the fact is you can't deny that some part of you is me as well, the part of you which turned to revolution because you got so annoyed that you honestly wanted to save the world from itself. The only difference is I wouldn't take the easy path and just kill off everyone who disagreed with me because
then it would never end, not until we were alone in the smouldering pile of ash which was once a world."

"There'd be plenty left." He huffed petulantly.

She shook her head, because honestly, how did he expect to take over the world if he couldn't think big picture. "We're too smart for that Voldemort. And there is no better way to prove once and for all that we really are better than all of them than to do what no other Dark Lord or king or anyone else has ever done before us, and do this properly."

"I know you think you are making a very persuasive argument by appealing to my intellectual vanity." He said, and then grimaced. "And damn you if it isn't working."

"As you're so fond of saying we're apparently immortal Voldemort. Which means barring some kind of catastrophe if you get your way we're going to be around for a really, really long time." She paused to look at him, really look, and grinned at the faintest hint of indecision she could see in his hellfire red eyes. "So wouldn't it be better if we had a world which was actually worth living in while we did?"

Chapter End Notes

CW - brief discussion of miscarriage, religious intolerance.

Apologies for the lack of more make-out sessions, but this was an important conversation for them to have and I hope that them having it while cuddling a lot was a suitable consolation prize. Next chapter is a doozy as far as their relationship goes though, so look forward to that.

I post chapter teasers and dumb fandom screeching on my tumblr! http://samvelg-likes-things.tumblr.com/
Chapter Summary

Tea is for difficult conversations, and there aren't many conversations more difficult than the one Harry and Voldemort are having right now. Finding a middle ground between two such disparate viewpoints was never going to be easy, especially when the consequences of failure were literally world-ending.

The solution proposed is not one she saw coming, but considering who they are it probably couldn't have gone any other way.

Chapter Notes

Ultima ratio regum = the final argument of kings.

Prepare thyselves my darlings.

Having reached an impasse they took a break from debating the fate of the world so Voldemort could make them both another cup of tea.

While Harry wasn't entirely sure why he seemed insistent on always doing such things himself, it felt strangely pleasant to have someone want to take care of her in even this small way so she left him to it. All the revelations had left her feeling agitated anyway, and Harry took the opportunity to pace around some more since getting excess energy out through movement usually helped her to stop overthinking everything. Now if only she could get rid of the immediate, manic tension which flooded through her every time she thought too hard about the Fade.

"Will they ever come back?" She asked when she came and sat back down next to him on the couch again. "The fae I mean. It sounds like they protected magic for a much longer time than we have without any problems, is there any chance they could do it again?"

"No." Voldemort replied as he passed over her tea. "Some things when lost are lost forever, little horcrux, and you can't undo the repercussions of their absence. No matter how much you might wish you could."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Are we still talking about the fae?"

"We can be if that makes it easier." He said as he took a fortifying drink. "But you can't deny that this catastrophe won't be solved by our current leadership. Their approach clearly hasn't worked, so instead of holding onto fantasies of the past or what we think the present should look like we should look instead to a future built on our own terms."

"Why is it so important to you that I agree with you about this?" She asked. "You had to have already known that I would never sit back and condone genocide, no matter how good your reasons
might be. Maybe give door number two a try."

"I will admit that after learning what you are that the exact nature of my plans has been….evolving." He admitted, with an air of forced casualness which she didn't buy for even a second.

"Well, that doesn't sound ominous at all." Harry said sarcastically. "Evolving how?"

In response Voldemort just looked at her for a few moments, clearly considering his next words carefully. "Tell me little horcrux, what do you know of war?"

Raising a disbelieving eyebrow she pointed to her armchair where 'The Historical Importance of Runic War Warding in the British Isles' was sitting like an ominous, leatherbound portent of the end times. "Are you serious?"

"Indulge me."

Harry rolled her eyes. "It's when two or more parties decide to fight against each other over land, resources, or ideology."

"In a general sense yes." He agreed, apparently back in full professor mode. "But to be more specific, it is when two or more nations declare their mutual intent to battle each other for dominance. It is not a disagreement or a fight or even a series of fights, though it will often take that form. War is different from simply attacking, both in the intent and in who can declare it. Anyone can get annoyed at a neighbour and decide to kill them over something, but that doesn't make it an actual war."

Returning his teacup to the saucer he turned to give her his full attention. "Now, why is that definition relevant to our present situation?"

She thought about the question for a moment. "You declared war on Magical Britain the last time you came to power, that's why the Order and the Ministry were fighting you."

"Ah, but that isn't entirely true if you consider our previous definition now is it? Yes, we were a violent, politically motivated uprising, but remember that only a sovereign nation can declare war on another. Magical Britain qualifies as a nation despite how geographically spread out and hidden amongst the muggles we are, but despite all efforts to the contrary I was unable to find a way for my followers and I to be a recognised nation in our own right at the time and had to fall back onto Plan B. You know my ultimate goal now, so what does that tell you?"

She hummed in contemplation, tapping the rim of her teacup impatiently with a fingernail. "War wards. Since they're how she discovered the Fade they're potentially the key to stopping it, or at least a really good starting point. So it stands to reason you'll need something you can build war wards around, a nation of your own. Not to mention that if you did pull it off and could declare war properly, when you do win and take over Magical Britain it would be by Right of Conquest and not just terrorist actions. With that your claim would be stronger and the magic of the land would be much more likely to accept you wholeheartedly because you would be a conqueror, the old school kind, and not just an insurgent or usurper."

Voldemort seemed inordinately pleased she had said when, not if, he would win and inclined his head in confirmation. "As you have surmised, the only way I could create my own war wards is if I had my own sovereign territory to ward in the first place, and this lack of territory meant I have been unable to do so. For all practical purposes I was, and continue to be, the equivalent of a king in exile."

"Thank you D.H. Lawrence." Harry said dryly, tossing an unruly braid back over her shoulder when
he smirked at her. "Surely you had a base somewhere though?"

"I've always worked primarily between the various Manors and properties of my Death Eaters." He admitted with a shrug, stroking the same braid she'd just been trying to corral. "And while yes I could use them as I saw fit they never actually belonged to me. By the terms set with the blood covenant between Merlin and the Ancient Houses only one of their blood who is recognised by the family magic can properly own their land, whole and entire."

"Aren't all Purebloods pretty much cousins though?" She asked.

"Most are yes, but despite my pedigree I am still a Halfblood." He admitted with clear distaste. "And thanks to the magical half of my parentage and their truly incredible dedication to inbreeding, I am actually one of the only wizards in Britain descended from one of those Houses who is not closely related enough to the rest to be able to potentially inherit any of them. Even as their sworn Lord I could not take or be given outright what had been won by blood and conquest in the distant past. It's not only that the Ancient Houses have been here since before Merlin and the Noble Houses only started to arrive after the Norman invasion, that undisputed ownership of their land's magic is what it truly means to be an Ancient House of the British Isles."

"And ownership matters." Harry said distractedly, so lost in thought she could almost ignore how nice him playing with her hair felt. "You can't ward something you don't own, not with any kind of permanence or strength anyway. That's the most fundamental law of warding, you can only protect something if it's yours and your claim to it can't be superseded by anyone else's."

"Exactly. And as I was unable to claim the Slytherin Lordship and therefore had no access to any ancestral properties of my own, I didn't have the necessary territory to declare sovereignty over."

"Couldn't you have bought land somewhere and done it like that? Or even married one of your followers?" She snorted into her earl grey. "I'm sure that crazy bitch Bellatrix would have been up for it, snakeface and all."

"Don't you think I would have done that if it were so simple little horcrux?" He shook his head, lip curling in a sneer. "A private citizen cannot declare war, which is all I would be if I owned a standard commercial or residential property. Not to mention that divorce isn't legally recognised in Magical Britain, so if I married one of them I would have been permanently barred from eventually claiming the Slytherin Lordship when my circumstances changed."

Hold up a minute. "You mean you don't already have the Slytherin Lordship?"

Instead of gracing her with a response Voldemort just waved his right hand in front of her, displaying the Slytherin ring which sure enough featured a letter H made of jewels just like her own did.

"Oh." Now that Harry thought about it she remembered noticing the H when he had shown it to her after she had gotten her own, and she felt like an idiot for not realising at the time the significance of what that meant. "Well alright then, why couldn't you claim the Slytherin Lordship if you married one of your followers?"

Apparently satisfied that his point had been made Voldemort leisurely poured himself another cup of tea. "The last Lord Slytherin lived centuries ago, and by the end of his life had only produced two incredibly stupid, incredibly useless children. In fact, they annoyed him so much that just to spite them in his will he left a list of nearly impossible requirements which had to be met before the title of Lord Slytherin could be passed down. I believe his reasoning was that only someone truly worthy of Salazar Slytherin's legacy deserved to inherit it. There have been a few recognised Heirs over the centuries - the requirements are not nearly so strict - but only the Lord could properly inherit the
entirety of the estate, which includes the affiliated properties and the undisputed ownership of the magic entrusted to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin."

"What are the different requirements to be the Slytherin Heir and the Lord then?" She asked, her eyes narrowing. "And why exactly are you telling me this now?"

Far from being annoyed by her suspicion he actually looked rather pleased. "You are starting to ask much better questions darling, well done. To be the Heir of Slytherin one must be of Slytherin descent and a Parselmouth, not too hard in the grand scheme of things. Even my useless, inbred relatives could have managed that much if they'd bothered to check with Gringotts. But to claim the Lordship? Now that is much more difficult."

This was building up to something incredibly significant, she could just tell. "How much more difficult?"

Voldemort put down his teacup again so he could tick them off on his fingers. "To become Lord Slytherin I would have to be a Parselmouth of Slytherin descent and the legally recognised Heir Slytherin, have personally opened the Chamber of Secrets, graduated from Hogwarts with distinction and gone on to attain a minimum of five magical Masteries including Parselmagic, not have already claimed any other Heirships or Lordships either in Britain or overseas." Here he paused in his recitation with his magnetic eyes locked, unblinking, on hers. "And married according to the Olde Ways to another Parselmouth, one who is contractually bound and capable of bearing my children."

Harry dropped her teacup, not even hearing it smash into a million pieces when it hit the ground. Months of hints and suspicions finally came together with all the explosive force of the Hogwarts Express crashing full-speed into King's Cross Station. "But I'm a Parselmouth."

"That you are darling." The madman had clearly been waiting for this moment for a very long time, and his manic grin showed far too many teeth to be even the slightest bit comforting. "I have already fulfilled every other requirement, so once you reach your magical majority together we would be able to inherit the entirety of the Slytherin estate as well as your own and finally declare our sovereignty. From there on it's just a matter of time, my followers who belong to Ancient and Noble Houses themselves could swear allegiance to me as their liege Lord, their vassals and extended families would, in turn, owe me fealty through them and so on and so forth. I would be their king, and together we would be one nation under magic."

"And then you could declare war on Magical Britain." She whispered.

His eyes were like burning red flames in his handsome face, exultant at even the mere thought of his impending victory. "Not just Britain."

"You can't possibly think I'm actually going to marry you?" Said Harry, as she stumbled to her feet to try and put some distance between them. She narrowly dodged the broken china, utterly dumbstruck that in a megalomaniacal, roundabout way Lord Voldemort had just proposed to her. "Yes we've been getting along and I want to find a way to stop the Fade too, but you're still a monster! You killed my parents!"

The Dark Lord just shrugged lazily, apparently not seeing why a spot of homicide between in-laws should get in the way of his grand plans to marry his way to a crown. "An argument could be made that I killed ours as well. Though in my defence it was unintentional in our mother's case, seeing as she died in childbirth."

Harry had no idea what the hell she was supposed to say to that, to any of this. "You're insane."
"Come now, my dear." He purred, leaning back and giving her a knowing look. "I thought after how pleasantly our last dream together ended we were finally past all the name-calling."

"I really don't think we are if you think I'll actually marry you!" She replied shrilly, very firmly putting aside the tangled mess of feelings he was inspiring to deal with later.

Voldemort didn't even have the grace to look offended, just stood up and prowled forward until he had backed her up against the front of his big imposing desk. "Why ever not? You can't deny our attraction to one another and I can guarantee you won't find a match who can offer you nearly as much as I can in a spouse." Slowly, as if he had all the time in the world he placed his hands on either side of her on the desk and leaned in as if to kiss her. "We will live forever Harry, and you will not want for anything ever again. Not wealth, power, influence, companionship, or knowledge. You will even be my queen once we conquer Magical Britain, and together we shall go on to save the existence of magic itself."

He paused only a few inches away from her with his head tilted to one side. "Not to mention that if another person touches you with sexual or romantic intent ever again I will skin them."

And there we go. It was like he was physically incapable of having a moment without making it into a felony.

"You can't go around skinning people for flirting with me!" Harry protested, trapped between him and the desk and still reeling from the whole being proposed to by Voldemort thing.

He met her eyes dead on like a promise. "Watch me."

If she needed any further evidence that she had lost her mind, it was that she was left desperately wishing that her reaction to all of this was literally anything that wasn't 'disturbed but charmed, and how'. "You're a possessive asshole is what you are."

"This cannot be news to you surely." He drawled, still infuriatingly unbothered by her less than stellar reaction to his proposal. "You are mine Harry. I don't like other people touching my books, why on earth would I let them get away with touching part of my soul?"

"Is this what it's all been about then? Acting like you give a damn, listening to me, even kissing me?" She demanded, horrified to feel the beginning sting of tears in her eyes. "All this time you've just been stringing me along because I'm a Parselmouth with a politically convenient womb who you can knock up?"

"Not at all." He replied easily. "You are also my horcrux."

Harry stared dumbly at him, amazed at how he could say something that cold and honestly not realise how awful it was.

And then she was just so angry she could have vanquished the son of a bitch after all.

"Fuck you Tom Riddle." She spat, not sure if the acidic taste in her mouth was her venom or her words. "You can take your messed up soul and your stupid plans and shove them up your arse, I don't care!"

"Listen to me very carefully little horcrux." He snarled, grabbing her wrists when she tried to push him away and his good mood gone like it had never even been there. "We. Are. Immortal. When we were your age we took steps to make sure that we would live forever, and not long after we learned of the near impossible terms of our inheritance. And since I refused to give up on my rightful legacy as Slytherin's Heir I knew, even then, that I would be waiting a very long time for my future bride.
Even if I was the kind to easily form attachments to other people, there was no point even trying because there would be no chance of a future with anyone when I was already waiting for another.

"Why should that matter to me?" She sniffed. "It's hardly my business if you're too much of a homicidal maniac to get a date."

"It matters Harry because after half a century of waiting it turns out that it's you." His hands gentled, running up Harry's bare arms and across her shoulders to cradle her face, while his eyes burned into hers with the exact same passionate intensity which once upon a time had launched a thousand bigots. "It's you Harry. And not only are you the Parselmouth I have been waiting my entire adult life for you are also my horcrux, a piece of my soul which I thought I had lost and would never see again. I am being quite serious when I say that there is nothing on this earth which I treasure more than you."

"But that's just it, that's the whole problem." She said, lip trembling and doing her damnedest not to just melt into him. "You treasure me. As if I'm just another one of your shiny antique trinkets, something for you to either display to prove your superiority or hide away where no one could ever find me again. You don't actually care about me at all."

"How many more ways can I tell you that you matter?" He said a little desperately. "How can you understand what you are and still not understand what you are to me?"

"Considering you don’t even see muggles as human beings I can see how this might not have occurred to you, but I'm not actually a prize or new land to be conquered, I'm just a person." She shook her head, refusing to let herself cry in front of him. "I'm Harry. Just Harry."

"Did you perhaps expect saccharine declarations of everlasting love?" Voldemort asked incredulously. "From me. Now who is deluding themselves?"

Feeling wounded to her core and not remotely in the mood for a front-row seat to him being a callous jerk she shoved him away, stalking back over to the fireplace and staring down into the endlessly burning flames with her arms folded tightly across her chest. "Don't be an arse. Do I think you need to find better ways to achieve your goals? Yes of course I do, you're a fucking psychopath. But even with that in mind, I have never actually wanted you to be anyone but who you are. I'd never ask that of anybody."

Leaning back against his desk as if it was the only reliable thing left Voldemort pinched the bridge of his nose, visibly gritting his teeth. "Are you actually trying to bargain with me?"

"Since it's all you seem to understand then yes, yes I am." She snapped, poking him in the chest to make her point. "If you can prove that you care about and value me, as a person and not just another..."
bloody trophy or conquest, then you can have me. Fully and completely, so that we can stop the Fade and save the whole godsdamned world."

Following this announcement he just stared at her incredulously. "Harry Potter, are you seriously asking Lord Voldemort to court you?"

"Yes." She declared, because apparently she was. "Yes, I think I am."

Harry sat down abruptly on the carpet like a marionette whose strings had been cut, eyes wide, as it all sunk in. "Circe's tits. I just asked Lord Voldemort to court me."

He sat down across from her, much more elegantly but apparently just as shocked by her declaration as she was. "Don't be vulgar, it's unbecoming."

"Unbecoming of what exactly?" She moaned into her hands, cheeks flaming red. "I clearly belong in St Mungo's with bloody Lockheart. I don't think they're too bothered by bad language in the Janus Thickey ward as long as you're not licking the wallpaper or trying to curse the Healers."

"It would be a bit hard to court you if you were locked away in St Mungo's." He noted dryly.

She looked up through her fingers. "What do you mean?"

He ran his hands through his hair in an uncharacteristic show of uncertainty. "I mean, that I would be lying if I said I hadn't considered the necessity of a formal courtship, I am just very surprised that it was you who suggested it. Though I admit that even I did not anticipate that the exact nature of your conditions would be what they are."

"Well." Said Harry once that particular bomb had been dropped. "Clearly we're both a few spoons short of a cauldron if we're even considering this."

He barked out a harsh laugh. "Oh without a doubt my dear."

It was quiet for going on a solid minute, with Voldemort staring pensively into the crackling fire and Harry staring awkwardly at Voldemort.

"So, what happens now then?" She finally asked when it became clear he wasn't going to say anything himself and the weighted silence got to be too much for her.

"Now..." He said slowly. "Now we should probably meet in person."

Harry froze.

These shared dreams were so realistic it was all too easy to forget they were just that, dreams. It was strange to think how in all the months she'd spent getting to know him they'd never actually met face to face. That the last time they'd both been in the same place at the same time was during the attack on the Ministry in June, when he'd tried to possess her and set this whole chain of events in motion. The night that Sirius had died.

"Do we have to?" She whispered, a flood of guilt and shame overwhelming her. She might have come to resent and maybe even hate Dumbledore for his many sins, but Sirius had still died for her. And now she wasn't just contemplating betraying his memory and the memory of her other parents but marrying the man who had killed them. The fact that one world-changing kiss aside it would primarily be a political marriage with the express purpose of saving magic from extinction notwithstanding, it was still a betrayal and she knew it.
He must have sensed the sudden dip in her mood. "Come now darling, you can't still believe I want you dead do you?"

She shook her head, wondering if this is what they meant by the road to hell being paved with good intentions. "No, not that. Not really anyway. I'm just... feeling guilty, I suppose. I worry about what my parents, what Sirius, would have said about all of this."

Slowly, as if he wasn't entirely sure if he was allowed to right now, he put his arm around her shoulder and relaxed a little when she slumped into his embrace. "I cannot pretend to have any idea what you are feeling, but you cannot live for the dead." He said quietly. "As you so often like to remind me, your life is your own. You shouldn't let anyone else dictate your choices or the conditions of your happiness."

She looked up at him out of the corner of her eye. "Even you?"

"Is that not what you are doing by asking me to court you properly instead of just doing the clearly more efficient thing and agreeing to marry me like a sensible horcrux would have done?" He replied with that crooked smile which made her chest hurt. "I would say I can't believe I am giving myself this much trouble but we have never been one to hold back on account of anyone, even ourselves."

She rolled her eyes. "Love isn't about efficiency, you machine."

Voldemort's smile fell, and he looked down momentarily before looking back up at her with a serious expression. "While I do of course hold you in the highest regard and with no small amount of affection, you do remember our discussion about how I can't necessarily feel things as others do?"

He smiled bitterly. "That thanks to our mother's questionable decision to assault our father with Amortentia I am not physically capable of experiencing love or the full range of emotions enjoyed by others."

"I already know you're a bloody robot Voldemort. And I don't exactly expect sonnets from you, I mean, can you even imagine?" She shuddered a little at the very idea. "That really wouldn't suit either of us. But even if you can't love me I still need to know you care about me as more than a means to an end, that you can respect me and see me as my own person."

"Do you honestly think that will be enough for you?" He asked curiously.

She shrugged. "You forget I've lived a pretty loveless life myself and I've managed so far without it. I've got incredible friends and that's already more than I ever thought I'd have, so that's good enough for me. I just need you to show me that you're serious about making this commitment, that I mean more to you than just a convenient way to stick it to Dumbledore or win the war."

"Well, you cannot deny that you are certainly both of those things." He noted with a very pleased smirk, before becoming serious once again. "I won't promise I will be successful Harry, but I will promise to try."

Harry smiled warmly at him, giving in to her need to burrow further into his arms because if she was really considering marrying the evil bastard then a hug was really the least of her problems. "That's all I ask."

He cleared his throat, no doubt uncomfortable with all the talk of feelings and looking to change the subject. "Well then, what do you know of a traditional Pureblood courtship?"

"Apart from what I overhear when my dormmates are discussing the latest bodice ripper they've read? Almost nothing. Not exactly a lot of traditional Purebloods in Gryffindor. My only frame of
reference is the House of Black and we're are about as far from typical as it gets when it comes to
customs, and the only book I had was seriously outdated." She shuddered in remembrance. "I
literally got up to the words 'unsullied maidenhead' and just skipped the rest of the chapter purely on
principle. It's not something I educated myself on since I was fairly convinced I'd never live long
enough to actually experience it." That the reason for that belief was the one now proposing to her
really was the height of irony.

"You're the Heiress to both the Noble House of Potter and the Noble and Most Ancient House of
Black." He said, tugging on one of her braids as if to scold her and mercifully too preoccupied to
notice the way it made her eyelashes flutter. "How has no one ever told you about any of this
before?"

"Dumbledore remember?" She grumbled, still flushing a little and thoroughly annoyed by it. "He
wanted me stupid, pliable and with nothing else to live for so I would be a bloody martyr for the
Light when the time came."

"Ah, of course. How like the meddling old fool to think all of his problems could be solved with
censorship." He sneered, before visibly reigning in his irritation. "Well, I obviously have no practical
experience in the matter but I read up on it in my youth in order to understand why all the Purebloods
around me were acting so patently stupid."

"Bloody hell, I'm guessing it's as mental and overcomplicated as everything else in the magical world
is then?"

Voldemort laughed at the disgruntled expression on her face, then in one far too smooth motion, he
scooped her up into his arms as if she weighed no more than a stack of library books and stood up.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Surely it is obvious little horcrux."

"Voldemort!"

Ignoring her protests and undignified flailing he effortlessly carried her back over to the couch so
they could settle in comfortably again with her on his lap and continue on as if nothing had
happened.

"Pureblood courtships are a bit ridiculous, yes. But since we weren't betrothed as children like a lot
of them and we will be negotiating all the details on our own behalf, it is a bit more straightforward."

"Well that's something I guess." She said, still not entirely recovered from the indignity of being
carried around like a teddy bear. Again.

"At it's simplest a courtship lasts a year and a day, at the end of which the couple decides if they will
marry or break it off. If they do decide to marry it must happen on the following Sabbat. Normally
the Head of your House would be required to give their blessing for a courtship to begin, but really
that is just a courtesy. Which is good for us because as you are the Heir of two Houses with no
current Lords your magical guardian would have to give their blessing instead."

"Who's my magical guardian then?" She asked curiously.

"The same as every orphan who attends Hogwarts, the Head of your school House."

Harry tried to imagine a scenario where telling Professor McGonagall she was set on wedding her
supposed nemesis went any possible way but horrendously awful, and quickly gave it up as an
"exercise in futility. "Well, that's certainly never going to happen."

"Indeed. But like I said the blessing is a courtesy, not a requirement, and we would only be required by law to get permission when we actually got married. While it is not done very often these days witches of Ancient and Noble Houses can technically be married as young as fourteen when they become eligible to claim their Heirships, but once again they would need permission to do so before they reached their magical majority."

"And in a year and a day's time, I'll already be seventeen and able to do as I like." She surmised, starting to see where the plan was going and not sure if she should be relieved or freaking out that the age of majority in the magical world was seventeen, not eighteen.

"Exactly. You will be an adult and the de facto Head of your Houses even if you haven't yet claimed the titles officially, and therefore able to give yourself permission to do whatever you like."

She groaned again as something occurred to her. "Merlin's balls. I'd be Lady Black, Lady Potter and Lady Slytherin."

"Technically you'll also be Lady Pyrites, not to mention Lady Gaunt and Lady Peverell as well if we can indeed claim those Lordships. Which I will certainly attempt once the Slytherin Lordship is secured, both to revive those Houses to prominence and because of the additional seats we'd get on the Wizengamot if successful. Between our joint seats and those of my followers, not to mention those who would follow your vote simply for being the Girl-Who-Lived, we might even get the voting majority if we are very fortunate. Which would actually make everything which comes after a lot more straightforward."

Harry shook her head, not even knowing where to begin trying to imagine what Magical Britain would look like if Lord Voldemort actually gained the political majority. "Just so you know, this is absolutely ridiculous. What will happen to all those family names if we get married, do we just absorb them into one big mega House?"

He smirked, no doubt enjoying the opportunity to finally be able to do the supervillain monologue about his evil plans he'd clearly been holding in for months now, ever since those first few shared dreams. "While not always possible for obvious reasons, the accepted etiquette when two Heads of Noble Houses marry and there are no other potential heirs to continue the subsequent lines for them is that they do their level best to have an additional child to carry on each family name."

"You mean we'd need to have five children?" She yelped.

"Not all at once of course." Voldemort said, still grinning at her. "We are immortal remember, and while we might need to have the first sooner rather than later due to the terms set by my inheritance I would ideally prefer to wait until we had conquered Magical Britain. It wouldn't do to have any liabilities until we were in a position of strength."

Harry refused point blank to think about the suddenly much higher odds than she was altogether comfortable with that she might end up a teenage mother after all, just like Aunt Petunia had always said she would. Or how by agreeing to marry him, pending a successful courtship, she had also tentatively agreed to shagging the disturbingly attractive Dark Lord she time-shared a soul with.

Nope, definitely not thinking about any of that at all.

And then she was just unsure if she was more furious at Voldemort assuming she'd be happy being his brood mare or at him calling their hypothetical future children liabilities, and her eyes narrowed dangerously.
"Let's make one thing very clear Voldemort." She hissed icily, pushing herself away from him so she could glare him into submission. "If we are going to be courting with the eventual goal of marriage and children, you will never refer to said children as liabilities ever again. Is that perfectly clear?"

Voldemort blinked, clearly very startled by the suddenly livid witch sitting on him. "Yes, very clear. My apologies if it came across as insensitive, I was speaking strategically."

Too angry to be smug she was able to intimidate the big scary man she just scowled even deeper. "I don't care! Both of us know what it's like to grow up unwanted Voldemort. I couldn't care less if it means all of my Houses and even fucking magic itself ends forever, I will not make another child live through what we did. That is an absolute deal breaker for me, do you understand?"

"Oh." Something so fragile and complicated she couldn't even begin to decode all of it flashed like lightning across his face, and even though it was immediately replaced by the usual bland mask there was something undefinable lurking in his eyes which he couldn't quite wash away. "I understand."

"Good." She huffed, somewhat mollified by his capitulation.

He pulled her back into his arms, and she let him since it seemed like he needed it as much as she did right now. "Indeed."

Letting herself sink into his embrace and have a few guilt-free moments to enjoy the calming warmth of horcrux nonsense, Harry got a face full of expensive black silk and was suddenly incredibly, painfully aware that between her not knowing how to alter things in the dream yet and Voldemort being too distracted to notice they were both still wearing their bloody pyjamas. That they had been all along.

While she didn't have any hard data on the subject Harry felt reasonably confident that people didn't generally discuss their plans for literal world domination whilst in their pjs, and that chances were good this might just qualify as the single most fucked up slumber party of all time. Seriously, why did this kind of shit always happen to her?

"We're getting ahead of ourselves anyway." Harry said after a while, resisting the impulse to scream at the heavens about how freaking weird her life was and trying to get them back on topic. "First we need to see if we can be in each other's company without causing any casualties or mass property damage, because so far our track record is kind of against us. I'm back at school now too, and it's not like you can just show up on one of the Hogsmeade weekends and take me to Madam Puddifoots."

At the mere mention of that doily-ridden nightmare the fearsome Lord Voldemort shuddered, apparently proving Harry and Ron's long-standing theory that the ridiculous teashop must have been terrorising long-suffering dates for as long as there had been Hogsmeade to have Hogsmeade weekends at. Which made her realise she was now kind of unofficially engaged to a man nearly as old as her grandparents, even though he didn't look too much older than her parents would have been.

Her parents who he had in fact personally murdered. Before also kind of murdering her too.

Sweet fucking Merlin, that Killing Curse to the head as a child must have messed her up far more than anyone had previously thought if she was even considering this. Or maybe it was just the strange cocktail of sharing a soul and knowing that the potential ramifications of this whole conflict were suddenly a hell of a lot bigger than just her and her impossible circumstances.

"Not exactly no." Said murderous old man was saying, apparently unaware of Harry's sudden onset of internal screaming. "For now it would be inconvenient to try and explain how the purposefully
isolated Saviour of the Magical World somehow ended up with a mysterious suitor of unknown providence."

He paused for a moment, before continuing to think aloud. "Tell me, do you know any of the secret passageways out of the castle? If you can get past the castle's wardline without anyone knowing I can send you a Portkey."

She frowned. "I really don't like Portkeys."

"Why ever not?"

She raised an incredulous eyebrow. "Because this one time I used one I was kidnapped, watched a friend be murdered right in front of my eyes, and was then tied to a headstone and made to participate in the resurrection of this creepy fucker who proceeded to torture, mock and try to kill me. Not to mention that while this was happening I was fourteen years old and surrounded by a very large group of robed and masked adult men who were jeering at me. Does that ring any bells Lord Voldemort?"

He had the decency to look suitably chastened. "Ah. Of course." He cleared this throat. "Do you have any other suggestions then?"

"Unfortunately no." Harry reluctantly admitted. "The only Floo connections in the castle are the Hospital Wing, the Headmaster's Office and the offices of the Heads of Houses, and even if I could get to one I'm pretty sure they're all monitored anyway. I'm guessing you're too far away for me to sneak out and fly to on my broom."

"Unfortunately yes. It looks like our only options are that you either need a Portkey, or you need an escort who can Apparate you to me. I can work on teaching you how to Apparate yourself in the future, but it will take time and in-person instruction."

"Well unless you have someone you trust implicitly with both my safety and our secret, or want to take the risk to fetch me yourself, I think a Portkey is our best bet." Harry admitted with a resigned sigh.

He nodded in agreement. "I will make one and have it delivered myself within the next day or two."

"Where are you right now anyway?" She asked, suddenly curious as to where he'd been holing up all this time. Definitely somewhere expensive and pretentious if she knew him.

"Malfoy Manor." Yup, called it. "Narcissa is an excellent hostess, and I did so enjoy making Lucius sweat knowing I was in his house while he was not. It helps that their library is excellent, and the palatial wine cellar doesn't hurt matters either."

"You old lush." She said with a grin. "Though if it's all the same I'd prefer a more neutral setting for a first meeting, at least while we sort out the initial details for this descent into madness."

"A fair request." He agreed, looking thoughtful. "If you don't have any suggestions, there are a few possible options which I will look into on our behalf and let you choose from."

"Nah it's fine you pick. It's not like I've spent a lot of time exploring the seedy underbelly of Magical Britain, so you'd know better than me anyway."

"Any chance I could get that in writing?" He said innocently, as if he even knew how to pull that off.

It was so easy in moments like this to forget that he wasn't just a malevolent spirit sent from Planet
Arsehole to ruin her day. Like she could cut him open with nothing but the power of her death glare and he'd be nothing but sarcastic bastard all the way down.

"No." She replied just as innocently, and doing rather a better job of it too. "But you can go fuck yourself."

"Do you promise?" Voldemort asked, looking delighted. "It's just that now there are two of us that is suddenly very doable, if you will excuse the pun."

Oh wow. Harry couldn't even be mad at him, she'd walked right into that one. "And of course you're even more of a shameless bloody flirt now. Why am I not surprised in the slightest?"

He just hummed thoughtfully. "Why, pray tell, is it wrong for me to enjoy the very lovely new packaging that my soul has found its way into?"

Harry rolled her eyes. "Because it's obscene, that's why?"

Sharp white teeth flashed in a smug grin. "Well, I would be lying if I said it wasn't part of the appeal. Why does it matter though?"

"Because you don't actually want me." She said, trying to ignore how bitter it made her feel. "You're a textbook narcissist Voldemort, you just like seeing yourself reflected back at you."

"That bothers you, doesn't it?" He said shrewdly. "You feel hurt because you think that my interest is due only to your status as my horcrux."

"Of course not." She huffed, refusing to meet his eyes. "I don't care what you think about me."

"Come now pet, I thought we had agreed to be honest with ourself."

Harry gave him a warning look. "I'm still not your pet Voldemort."

"But you are mine are you not?" He purred, pulling her even further into the all-encompassing circle of his arms. "A shiny little part of me which was cast out into the big, bad world and has finally found its way back home."

"No." She whispered.

He nuzzled her cheek like a contented jungle cat. "You are so beautiful when you lie to me through your teeth like that."

Against her better judgement she sighed, melting against him and only just barely resisting the urge to bury her face in his chest again. "Yeah."

His reply wasn't so much a killer grin as it was a serial killer grin. Impossibly, it made him no less attractive to her.

"Seriously though." She said, more than a little aware of how close they were and how perfectly they fit like this, how they kept somehow managing to fit in every way. "What does it say about us that we're attracted to each other? I mean we're the same person, sort of, so it's kind of perverted isn't it? Like the most over-complicated kind of masturbation inhumanly possible."

"It means little horcrux, that there is no one who can possibly understand us the way that we can understand us." He replied, leaning in and stopping when he was only a hairsbreadth away to speak against her parted lips. "You know we are not like other people my Harry, we never were. We are
the two faces of the fledgling god of this world."

There was nothing left which needed to be said right now, so between one breath and the next their lips met as if they'd been starving for each other. It felt like they weren't so much two people as they were two tectonic plates pressing together to create mountains and continents out of nothing but passion and friction, the kind of collision which could reform the world. And just like the first time they kissed, it felt inevitable.

Chapter End Notes

BOOM, HEADSHOT.

Quite an appropriate way to celebrate 5000 kudos don't you think? Please feel free to scream at me in the comments about all this, I've got coffee and more feelings about this fic than I know what to do with.

I post teasers on my tumblr, that's a thing I do now.
http://samvelg-likes-things.tumblr.com/
Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of their latest dream and the far-reaching effects it will be having on their world, people are left feeling contemplative and very much like they're staring headfirst into the calm before the storm.

Chapter Notes

Omfg you guys, moving house sucks. I'm currently staying with some lovely friends and am writing this in their spare room, but my husband and I finally have an apartment and we'll get the keys on the 25th! So now I'm not running around to house inspections all day erryday I've finally had the time to sit down and crank out this chapter.

This has been a weird one because like 2/3 of it has been written for aaaages and only needed minimal editing, while the final 1/3 has been like pulling teeth. I'm still not perfectly happy with it but I could keep umming and ahhing for another week or I could just Get It Done so you guys have something to read so that's what I did.

It felt like a good time to do some alternating POV to really give y'all a look at what's happening and how the things which have up till now only been happening in dreams are starting to slowly but surely impact the real world as well.

The next few chapters are some of my favs of this whole book too, so I hope you're as excited as I am ;D

FYI I post chapter teasers and shit on my tumblr: http://samvelg-likes-things.tumblr.com

Having dinner with the Malfoys was always a fascinating juxtaposition of amusement and tedium, and tonight was no exception.

The novelty of once again possessing tastebuds had worn off months ago, but there was still something to be said for spending twelve years as a disembodied spirit to really impress upon you just how important it was to appreciate the simple pleasures in life. It was true that he had never been what one would call excessively relaxed about anything in his life except perhaps his attitude towards the legalities of various forms of magic, that 'spartan workaholic' would probably be a far more accurate descriptor of him than anything else.

Now however? While he still wasn't one to indulge frivolously in anything which wasn't the gloriously violent or the exceptionally rarified (his human horcrux notwithstanding), following his resurrection Voldemort had discovered a newfound appreciation for all things hedonistic.

Case in point: sitting at the head of the table in the nicest formal dining room in Malfoy Manor,
dressed in expensive, well-tailored robes and enjoying some wonderful examples of fine dining.

Conversation was never what one could conceivably call relaxed during these dinners and wearing the serpentine blood glamour while doing mundane things like eating was always ridiculous at best, so for those reasons he tended to have breakfast and lunch alone in his rooms more often than not. But propriety still dictated that when a guest of note was visiting dinner was to be a formal (and communal) affair, and as Narcissa was no sooner going to allow impropriety in her home than she was going to admit her smoking habit to her husband, every night the three of them sat there and alternated between tense silences and awkward small talk while politely taking refuge in some truly excellent wine.

Needless to say, Voldemort thought it was fucking hilarious.

Even though there was generally an unspoken agreement to not discuss shop talk during dinner, sometimes Lucius got a bee in his bonnet about something or other and couldn't stop himself from putting his foot in it. And tonight that something was one Harry Potter and his orders that she be left the hell alone.

"Surely you are mistaken about her usefulness my Lord." He all but whined, clearly still annoyed after having to once again relive his memories of the diary incident for his master's amusement. "What possible use could that brat of a girl be to your plans?"

"Are you questioning my judgement Lucius?" He asked softly, gaining no small amount of amusement from the way the other wizard shrank in on himself without even moving a single muscle. "Things being what they are do you truly think you are in any sort of position to be doing so?"

As predicted, his blondest of minions immediately backtracked, clearly remembering the last time he'd made a scene during dinner and been on the receiving end of a *Crucio*. "Of course not my Lord."

Narcissa, mostly silent up until now as she stoically worked her way through her filet mignon, looked about ready to *Crucio* him herself. "Please forgive my husband for speaking so thoughtlessly in your presence my Lord, he is sadly still recovering from his temporary absence and getting back up to speed on current affairs. I am sure he simply meant to convey that he only wishes to better understand your reasons and motivations so that he may better serve you."

It was good to know that a stint in Azkaban hadn't dulled Lucius' idiocy any, or his wife's almost preternatural ability to save him from himself. "It really is simple my dear Lucius. Not only is she vital to the success of the war, the girl is mine. And I will not tolerate anything which interferes with that."

Lucius still looked like he wanted desperately to keep arguing the point, but between his Lord's deceptively congenial smile and Narcissa sitting across from him with a blank, unblinking stare which could rival a basilisk, even he wasn't stupid enough to push the issue. "Of course my Lord, thank you for your illumination in this matter."

Later on in his study Voldemort found himself feeling strangely contemplative, because watching the Malfoys and the way they balanced and complemented each other got him thinking about marriage again. The last dream he'd shared with his horcrux had been so momentous that he was still reviewing and unpacking it days later.

Despite a few hiccups he knew that he'd come across as confident and mostly in control of the
situation, but if he was honest with himself it was one of the most harrowing things he'd ever done in his life. It didn't matter that he'd been working towards this plan for the last fifty odd years, and this exact situation for the last several months, part of him still couldn't believe he'd actually had the balls to go ahead with it and propose to Harry bloody Potter.

Even more than that, he couldn't believe that she hadn't said no.

Of course there was still plenty to ground to cover before it was a yes. That would be true even if they'd been a normal couple in a normal situation, and not the disaster waiting to happen which they actually were. Voldemort knew he was often guilty of hyperbole, but for once it wasn't just his flair for the dramatic talking when he said that as it stood the actual fate of the magical world was apparently resting on his ability to be charming and prove his ability to feel things he wasn't entirely sure he was capable of.

So yes, no pressure.

Well first things first, being charming was doable and he'd certainly had the practice at it. Not for the first time he thought about her explanation of why she'd been willingly observing such old Pureblood customs, how he'd been fascinated and more than a little turned on by her admission. Some of the more traditional of his early followers had done so in their youth and some of their children had as well, but he knew for a fact that almost none of the current generation did so. And if they did it was not nearly to the extent which she apparently was.

With that new information he'd known even then that he was going to have to completely rethink his approach towards their relationship if this was something which was important to her. In deference to her muggle upbringing he'd initially been planning on treading lightly in case she got offended by some of the more old-fashioned notions inherent in a proper courtship, but that conversation had been a game-changer.

Voldemort eyed the newly completed Portkey sitting on his desk in a jewelry box, admiring the workmanship as well as his own spellcasting which had gone into it. Sure he could have used any old thing but a part of him (the part which had gone all the way to Bulgaria for a bloody bracelet and even now kept thinking of all the treasures he owned which would look so incredibly fetching on her) still wanted her to be appreciative of the lengths he was going to in order to provide for her. It didn't matter that she was easily as wealthy as he was if not more so, the fact he could lavish his soon-to-be betrothed with fine jewelry and expensive things made something in him inordinately pleased. Maybe it was him showing his age, or even a leftover from growing up poor as dirt, but the idea of spoiling her rotten was an incredibly gratifying one.

Then he just wondered how long her hair was by now, what it would feel like to undo all those meticulous braids and watch it fall around her bare shoulders in thick waves.

While it was true he'd never considered hair to be especially erotic before, not even in his youth when all the outwardly modest and seemingly unattainable Pureblood girls had been all but begging him to drag them into the nearest broom closet. But now he felt certain he couldn't imagine anything more alluring than the possibility of his young, beautiful, incredibly gifted and utterly irreverent Parselmouth horcrux wearing nothing but her long, unbound black hair on their wedding night. Godsdammit was he turned on just thinking about it.

Sighing deeply and trying very hard to drag his thoughts away from the direction they were heading down, Voldemort made a note to research the customs of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black before their upcoming meeting and got to work double-checking the enchantments.
It was strange how everything could look just like it always had even when everything had changed so profoundly. Though Harry supposed the world was the same it had always been, and that the only thing which had actually changed at all was her perception of it.

She found herself feeling strangely contemplative, observing the other students and even the professors to see how they all used magic as easy as breathing for everything, great and small. From personal grooming to medical care there wasn't a single aspect of life in their world which didn't rely on it in one form or another, and the idea that even now it was running out like so much sand in an hourglass was beyond chilling.

After a couple of days worth of classes she was newly perplexed at just how little time was taken to explain what exactly it was which made magic possible. During the conversation with Voldemort she'd been horrified at her own ignorance about the true nature of magic, but now she realised that it wasn't just a personal failing on her part but a systematic one. None of her professors talked about the origins of magic, how it worked or even why it worked, only that it did and what they needed to do to achieve the desired results with it.

It reminded her disturbingly of the time one summer during primary school when an accident at the power station had caused a total power blackout for most of Surrey. There was a lot of people getting heatstroke because they had no airconditioning and her cousin had just thrown a tantrum because he couldn't watch his favourite tv program. Harry had thought he was just being petulant, but after a while she'd realised that he honestly had no idea how electricity actually worked beyond flicking a switch on when he wanted it.

That Magical Britain had anything at all in common with Dudley Dursley was deeply concerning.

Such were her thoughts when the post arrived near the end of breakfast on Wednesday and a magpie of all things swooped down and landed in front of her, dropping a small parcel next to her teacup before exploring what she had on her plate. Distracted from dark thoughts about the fate of magic because she was fondly remembering how Sirius used to use tropical birds to send her letters, she smiled down at the odd bird which made her feel so warm and comforted.

Hmm. Maybe a little too warm and comforted.

Suspicion growing, Harry eyed the magpie which continued to silently inspect their surroundings. Her suspicions were confirmed when the bird finally looked up at her and she could see his bright, hellfire red eyes.

"Something of a magpie, huh?" She said under her breath, recalling a long-ago conversation about vices and wondering what on earth was the proper reaction when there was a Dark Lord in an incongruous but strangely apt animagus form sitting on the Gryffindor table during breakfast and no one even noticed.

Somehow laughing until she got a stitch seemed neither appropriate or subtle.

Voldemort-the-magpie hopped up to perch on her wrist so she brought him up to eye level. "I bet you think you're being terribly clever don't you?" She scolded, ignoring the weird looks she was
getting and trying her best not to laugh. "You cheeky sod."

He did that funny chortling trill magpies do, and even without the warm rush of amusement not her own rippling through the black ocean in her mind she knew he was laughing with her.

"Harry, why are you talking to a bird?" Ron asked around a mouthful of toast.

"No reason." She said, giving up on all hope of this situation being anything other than insane and petting the Dark Lord on his little feathered head.

He accepted the pets regally, because of course he did, before hopping back down to the table and pecking at the parcel he'd delivered then looking back up at her expectantly. Clearly he wasn't leaving until she'd opened it.

"Oh fine then mister bossy." She sighed, unable to stop smiling at how imperious he was even as a bloody bird, and picked it up. It was a small box wrapped in matte black paper, not unlike her birthday present had been, and inside was a beautiful silver ouroboros earring with what looked like tiny rubies for eyes.

"It's beautiful, thank you." She said quietly, smiling down at the magpie, before taking out one of the plain hoops in her right ear and replacing it with the ouroboros. The magpie reached into the little box with his beak and pulled out a small piece of folded parchment which she took from him and read under the table.

*Friday, midnight.*

She nodded, then slid the paper into an inner pocket of her robe to burn later. "I'll be there."

The magpie looked at her one last time with his bright red eyes, nodded, then took off and flew out of the Great Hall in a whirl of shiny black and white feathers. Alrighty then, she had a date with a Dark Lord on Friday.

Buttering herself some toast, Harry was still laughing to herself at his audacity while planning how she was going to sneak out on Friday night without anyone noticing when she realised that Circe's tits, she literally had a date with a Dark Lord. On Friday.

One who had killed her once upon a time.

One who had been waiting for his future wife, for *her*, for over fifty years.

One who had seen her in nothing but her pyjamas for the last four months.

Harry buried her burning face in her hands, toast abandoned. Forget deciding how to sneak out, what the bloody hell was she going to wear?

***

"Tell me my boy, have you noticed anything odd about Miss Potter of late?"

Severus looked up from the shitty excuse for kindling which was his first years latest attempt at essays, and wondered how the hell such an incredibly old man in such incredibly lurid robes could move around a drafty old castle like a sodding ninja. "Apart from the stresses of being targeted by a
"Dark Lord and all the usual teenage delinquency you mean?"

"Come now Severus." He said, voice full of reproach. "This is very important."

Of course it was. Reviewing his recent interactions with the impossible girl in his mind he frowned. "Now you mention it, I suppose she has seemed stupider than usual in class lately. More distracted."

"Hmm, I feared as much." He sighed, stroking his long white beard and apparently lost in thought.

Well that was entirely reassuring. "What's this all about?"

Albus continued to stare off into the middle distance, as if the answers to all of his problems could be found somewhere in Severus' bookshelves between the 18th century funghi encyclopedias and back issues of Potions Monthly periodicals. "A few weeks ago I had her come to my office to discuss Tom and so I could share some information which will come in handy for her in the future. We took a trip into my Penseive to look at a memory of the wizarding side of his family, and rather than be bothered by how aggressively violent and anti-Muggle they were she instead became rather fixated on the plight of Tom's mother, the unfortunate young Merope Gaunt. Do you think her reaction and subsequent preoccupation is perhaps a sign that her mind is still under his influence?"

Giving up on getting his marking finished before dinner so long as the older wizard was hanging around and in a mood to be bothersome, he reluctantly put down his quill and gave his employer his full attention. "What exactly happened in the memory?"

As Albus explained the contents of that particular memory Severus found himself quietly praying to Mother Magic that this was a trick question. But no, apparently it wasn't and his boss was really just that sodding thick.

"Albus, what did you expect?" He asked, experiencing no small amount of disbelief that he of all people had to be the one to explain empathy to another human being, one who should really know better. "You showed Potter - a young woman with a hero complex who grew up being systematically abused and worked like a slave by her caretakers - a memory which contained the abuse of another young woman who clearly also grew up being systematically abused and worked like a slave by her caretakers. A young woman who Potter can't even save, as she's already long dead as an indirect result of that same abuse. What the hell did you think was going to happen?"

"Oh." The older wizard deflated like a particularly morose, bearded balloon. "I suppose I may have overlooked how it could seem from a certain point of view."

A certain point of view, really? "Honestly, if she'd seen that and not been affected then you'd have far more to worry about than a little emotional transference. As much as it physically pains me to say it, the fact she is capable of empathising with others is proof that while a royal pain in my arse she is still fundamentally a good person."

Of course Albus perked up considerably at that, eyes once again twinkling merrily, and Severus wished that he hadn't even fucking bothered.

"Why Severus, was that a positively glowing compliment coming from you, and for young Harry of all people?"

Dear Merlin, why did he have to go and open his damn mouth. "Please cease and desist with your attempts to annoy me, I still have work to do."

"I never knew you had it in you, my boy." He continued cheerfully. "But I should have known that even you would warm up to our intrepid heroine eventually."
Oh for fuck's sake. "Go away."

"Would you care for a sherbert lemon Severus?"

"Albus."

***

The Chamber of Secrets was something Harry and Ginny had never talked about after the fact, not even once.

They barely talked at all since then actually, which was strange considering how close Harry was with the Weasleys and how much the two of them had in common. Then again some things surpassed the more conventional forms of social compatibility, and the memory of Tom Riddle had always stood between them like no man's land, one which neither were yet willing to venture across for fear of attracting enemy fire.

The shared experience of both being that young and half or more in love with the same too perfect boy from a diary, only to be betrayed in the most profound way imaginable, had definitely affected both of them in ways no one had foreseen at the time. As well as a newfound distrust for talking magical objects their ability to trust even other people had definitely been compromised by diary-Riddle, especially when it came to romantic relationships of any kind. Exceptionally bisexual, Harry had mostly sworn off boys altogether until she'd ended up being propositioned by his older counterpart, while Ginny had apparently taken it upon herself to systematically date her way though the pool of available boys in both their years.

In either case, it was clear neither of them had been particularly successful at distancing themselves from his memory.

This precarious state of affairs was on Harry's mind because she had elected to stay up late on Thursday night to do some last-minute embroidery, and for once fate had conspired to have the two of them alone in a room together while they were both awake. Harry thought about it, and realised with a jolt it was probably one of only a handful of times it had happened since the Chamber of Secrets.

"Umm, Ginny." She said, immediately hating how loud her voice was in the quiet of the empty common room.

The other witch looked up from her homework, apparently confused they seemed to be breaking a long held, mutually unspoken agreement to politely ignore each other.

"What is it Harry?"

She paused, knowing this wasn't going to be something which went down well, but in light of what she was going to be doing tomorrow she was unable to hold it in any longer.

"Do you still..." She trailed off, unable to think of a tactful way to ask this and just going for broke. "Do you still think about him sometimes? Not what he is now exactly, but what he used to be?"

There was no need to clarify who she was talking about. Ginny's face had gone terrifyingly blank, her freckles swimming in milk pale skin, and there were far too many shadows in her eyes for a girl
her age.

Harry should know, she had them too.

"Yeah." The response was bitten off abruptly. As if there were a horde of other, much less polite, words pushing themselves against the backs of her teeth which she flatly refused to let out. "You?"

It was a fair question, all things considered.

"Yeah." Was also her quiet reply. "I tried not to for the longest time, but once something is that deep inside you it...rearranges things to fit, doesn't it? There's always that hole shaped like him which won't quite close over."

Ginny Weasley, the only other girl - only other human being - alive who knew exactly what it felt like to have that beautiful terror so deep inside you that you were occupied territory, slowly nodded her head. "It's lonely sometimes." She whispered into the quiet dark, voice full of guilty longing and self-recrimination.

Thinking of how awful even just the recent few weeks of separation had been Harry felt a stab of pity for her, trying to imagine what it would be like if the horcrux inside her was destroyed and she somehow miraculously survived the event. Now she understood what it was and had more or less stopped fighting its comforting warmth, however mixed her feelings on it were it was no longer a source of fear but instead a reminder that like it or not she was never going to be alone ever again. Ginny hadn't had anything like that, so for her to go from having him to having nothing must have been beyond jarring.

"Sometimes I wonder if things would have been different if he hadn't been so lonely either." Harry confessed. "Dumbledore has started showing me these memories he's collected of his life and where he came from and it's just so sad. I mean, I had a shitty childhood as well so I'm not saying that growing up like that is an excuse for becoming a genocidal idiot. But I can't help but feel there were so many points in time where if the world had been just a little kinder the worst of the bloodshed might have been avoided."

"He was so clever." Said Ginny, laughing wetly as Harry pretended not to notice how she wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her jumper. "He could have been anything or done anything he wanted, there's no doubt in my mind about that. But he let his coldness rule him and he didn't let anyone in, not really. And I do kind of get it you know. I mean, he liked to talk big, like there was nothing which could possibly hurt or upset him. But before he decided to beat them at their own game, him being what everyone thought was a Muggleborn in Slytherin he wouldn't have had it easy. All the Purebloods in his House must have given him such a hard time for not being like them, and the rest of the school would have distrusted him just because he was a Slytherin. Kids can be so bloody cruel."

"They really can." Harry agreed, thinking of her own time at Hogwarts and all the many ways the student body had really put in the hard yards to make her life hell. "If you had a chance to talk to him today, knowing everything about who he was then and who he is now, and have him actually listen to you and take whatever you said seriously, what would you say?"

Ginny was quiet for a long time, staring into the fireplace but clearly miles away. Unwilling to rush her Harry waited patiently until finally she replied, slowly and haltingly, as if she was forcing each word out to face that firing squad after all. "I would tell him...that if there was even one single person in the whole world who could get past all of his walls that he should probably let them, for his own sake if not everyone else's. And that if he needed someone to talk to until he found them that I would listen, and I wouldn't judge him for any of it. I mean, I wouldn't necessarily agree with him or like
what he'd say, but I'd still listen. Because it doesn't matter who you are everyone needs that sometimes, even Dark Lords. Maybe especially Dark Lords.

Sitting there by the fireplace and feeling not unlike she'd just been hit by the Knight Bus, it occurred to Harry that no one gave Ginny Weasley nearly enough credit. To have gone through what she did so young and not end up bitter or hateful or broken because of it, but kind?

Forget killing a bloody basilisk, that was the achievement which was really nothing short of miraculous.

So lost in her own thoughts Harry must have taken too long to answer because the other witch started to look flustered. "Merlin, you must think I'm a right moron." She said as she put a cap on her inkwell, shoving discarded bits of homework into her schoolbag by the handful. "I'm sorry, I know you're the absolute last person who wants to hear all about my stupid crush on sodding Minimort when I was a first year."

"No it's ok." Harry sighed, rejoining the land of the living and smiling ruefully. "You weren't the only one."

At her quiet admission Ginny stopped putting her things away and looked up, eyes wide. "Really?"

"Oh yeah." Harry knew she was blushing a little, that she wasn't just confessing to something as small as a crush many years in the past, but considering Ginny's own painful honesty she couldn't in fairness do anything but return it with some painful honesty of her own. "I know that everyone expects me to be all noble and defeat him in some kind of heroic showdown so they can go back to bitching about things in peace, but honestly?"

She looked down at her hands, at the way the firelight flickered over her skin and the faint callouses from quidditch, and the memory of how it had felt to have Professor Quirrell burning alive from her touch alone briefly surfaced before she could wrestle it back down into the depths of her subconscious where she preferred to keep it. "I don't want to kill anyone." Not again. "I don't want anyone to have to die, not even him. The only reason the coming war seems inevitable is because both sides are convinced they're in the right and that there's no other way. That's it. They've all given up on even trying to find a third option."

"I think you're right." Ginny said thoughtfully, eyebrows knotted as she considered Harry's latest functional heresy. "It's like everyone got a bloody script and are just playing their parts without even thinking it through."

"This isn't our war Ginny. It never was." The weight of the whole impossible mess she was in crashed over her all at once like a wave, and Harry was just so bloody tired of all of it. "We're just the ones who'll have to either live with it or die for it."

It was a strange moment of quiet solidarity, but it felt like one Harry had needed desperately for a while now, and maybe Ginny had too. She might not be able to tell anyone about all the ways her life was taking a sharp turn towards the completely insane, but she somehow knew that if anyone could ever understand it would probably be her.

"Er, it was really nice talking to you Harry." Said Ginny as she stood up, swinging her bag over her shoulder.

Harry smiled at her. "Yeah same here. Don't be a stranger okay?"

Just as she was about to head up the stairs, the other witch stopped and turned around. "Hey Harry?"
"Yeah Ginny?"

"Do you know what you'd say?" She asked, and her voice was quiet but Harry heard every single word. "If you could talk to him now I mean, and have him actually listen."

A slow smile spread across her face. "You know what Ginny? I think I do."

***

It was three minutes to midnight and Voldemort was pacing.

Never one to resist the opportunity to show off or make people off-guard, instead of some anonymous abandoned building in the middle of nowhere he'd booked a private room in one of the most exclusive private gentleman's clubs in Magical London. It was lavish but tasteful, all antique furniture and modern artwork and fresh flowers, and best of all they were guaranteed the best privacy money could buy.

Standing at the edge of the circular rug which was the Portkey's ultimate destination as he straightened his cuffs and smoothed the lines of his immaculately pressed robes, he was struck by the sudden fear that maybe she wouldn't show up after all. Then the clock struck twelve, and amidst the chimes his horcrux materialised in the centre of the room in a whirling vortex of magic. Knees bending to absorb the impact of her landing, her wand was already in her hand and immediately whipped up to point straight at him.

She was dressed head to toe in mourning black, her identity completely obscured by the deep hood of a black velvet cloak which had what looked like constellations embroidered all over it. It didn't matter though, even without the familiar wand clutched in her hand there was no chance in hell that he wouldn't have known her for who and what she was, not now he knew to look.

Voldemort had thought he'd been prepared for it, for seeing her again with his own eyes and for the physical immediacy of her presence. Hell, he'd even delivered the Portkey to her himself in his animagus form just to get a feel for it so he'd be better prepared. But as it turned out he shouldn't have bothered, because he had never been more wrong about anything in his whole damn life.

Dreams in the library were vivid and detailed of course, even when compared to other dreams, but they lacked the tangibility of the real world. Here with barely a metre separating them he could feel the welcoming hum of his horcrux in his bones, could taste her when he flicked the tip of his tongue out to smell her in the air. Her dream presence had always been soothing, but right now it was the difference between the soft, all-encompassing glow of a Warming Charm and standing next to a raging forest fire.

Then she pushed back the hood of her cloak and whatever he'd been about to say died before it even had a chance to exist, because just like he had with the room she had really gone all out for this as well.

Her black hair was intricately braided into a complicated crown which was liberally decorated with enchanted jewelry. There was even what appeared to be a witches ladder of all things hanging behind her left ear, the curls spellknoted with what looked like nine small white feathers from an owl and some kind of polished bone at the end. Her ears were pierced multiple times, small metal rings of various shapes and purposes in the lobes and crystal studs carved with runes marching up the
cartilage and the silver ourobous Portkey still in pride of place in her right ear.

Not even her clothes were spared the excessive ornamentation, the black open-front battle robes covered with intricate runic embroidery in silver and gold, as well as rune carved charms made of bone, crystal and polished wood arranged in what must be very specific patterns and intervals. The long black dress underneath - clearly covering some of her blasted stays from how incredibly it cinched in her already tiny waist and pushed up her breasts - was formfitting but still clearly cut for combat with high slits to allow freedom of movement. When she moved to remove her cloak one handed and toss it onto a nearby chair it revealed a brief flash of a lace-covered thigh and a pair of well worn but polished knee high black dragonhide boots also sporting their own carefully tooled metallic runework.

To purchase a full outfit as heavily enchanted as she was wearing from a Runemaster who worked with thread magic would cost a small fortune equivalent to the dowry for a daughter of a Noble House, too few had the necessary knowledge and skill to produce something even half as complex as what she'd done. Because he could tell just by looking at her and feeling the intensity of the ambient magic locked into the runes that it was entirely her own work. He recalled her hair being braided and some embroidery on her school robes at the Ministry but nothing of quite this magnitude, and foolishly he'd not paid much attention to it at the time. Even not knowing about her talent until afterwards he really should have, if she had produced something of this level as a sixth year she was nothing less than extraordinary.

Even better than her obvious skill however was the fact that despite all the extremely logical reasons as to why she shouldn't have she'd still come to him tonight just as he'd asked her too. But not as all the others did as a follower or as a supplicant, oh no.

His horcrux had come ready for war, wearing her mastery on her sleeves and her intentions knotted into her hair, demanding without words that she be taken seriously.

As an equal.

Wand still trained on him Harry held out her other hand, which Voldemort took in his own. He heard the unmistakable sound of a tiny hitch in her breath when their bare skin touched, and resisted the animal urge to growl possessively only by sheer stubbornness alone. Instead he bowed low with his wand arm folded neatly behind his back, pressing a lingering kiss to her knuckles just as she pressed the tip of her wand against his forehead, all without taking his eyes off hers for a second. "Welcome Heiress Black. I swear by Mother Magic and the Witchfather that you shall be sheltered by my House, on my blood and on my honour as the Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin."

She curtsied gracefully as if she'd done it all her life, her hand still clasped in his and her wand still pointing at his head. "Greetings Heir Slytherin. I place myself in your hands, on your blood and on your honour as the Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin."

The only thing more lovely than direct skin on skin contact with her was hearing those traditional words falling so prettily from her lips, so much so that he couldn't even be annoyed at her smirking wickedly all the while as if she knew exactly what effect her appearance and her ruthlessness was having on him and thought it to be the height of amusement.

Straightening to his full height he pulled on her hand to bring her closer, ignoring her sharp inhale as he brushed her fringe aside to look at the lightning bolt scar which had joined their destinies together so irrevocably. He traced it with a finger, just like he had the night in the graveyard when he'd first regained a body and in the shared dream when he'd first learned just what she was. Like something unseen clicking back into place, blazing heat flowed through them both like they were a conduit
which reached all the way down into the molten core of the earth.

"I still can't quite believe I'm really here." She said absently, clearly just as dazed by the powerful rush of their realignment as he was but trying to not be too obvious about it.

"Well if you really think about it darling, we're both doing the wrong thing for all the right reasons." He smirked at her, wondering how she'd react if he kissed her again right now. "Quite fitting isn't it?"

"Behave yourself Voldemort." She said primly, though she was finally lowering her wand. "Or the only fitting we'll be doing will be my boot fitting up your arse."

Voldemort felt a wicked grin take over his face, meeting her fierce green eyes with a purring sense of satisfaction. It occurred to him that even with the whole convoluted matter of Lordships and wills and horcruxes aside, he couldn't have chosen his future wife better if he'd tried.

Harry Black-Potter was going to make a truly formidable queen.

Chapter End Notes

Small note regarding Harry's contemplation about how her and Ginny's experience with diary-Riddle affected them when it comes to relationships:
This is not me saying that abuse makes people gay, or promiscuous, or anything else. As someone who is a survivor of abusive partners and situations, some of which occurred when I was a teen, this is more just acknowledging how formative something like that can be to your experiences. Just like Harry I was always bisexual, but for a while after my first experience with an abusive partner (who was male) it was just easier to avoid guys altogether for a while because it was too triggering being around them. And just like Ginny, after a while I got so sick of feeling defined by those experiences there was this almost unhealthy impulse to date guys just so I could prove to myself I could. Neither were entirely healthy but they were still part of the healing process, and I think it's important that there's more visibility about the ways people deal with and process experiences like this.
Silver and gold shall be stolen away

Chapter Summary

While Harry admittedly doesn't have any other first-hand experiences to compare it to, her first date with Voldemort (while decidedly strange) goes rather a lot better than either of them expected.

Chapter Notes

The much anticipated first date chapter, because ask and ye shall receive!

I finally move into my new house on Monday and Tuesday (plz pray for Mojo) so I wanted to make sure this was up for the weekend for y'all to enjoy. Also the next chapter is legit one of my most favourite ones IN THE ENTIRE BOOK, so if you're one of the many darlings who have been begging for more Narcissa and seeing other people's reaction to our doomsday duo then definitely look forward to it ;)♡

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He smelled kind of like a storm waiting to happen and it was maddening.

Harry's hand tightened around her wand as if just holding it could help her resist the urge to press herself bodily up against him, because all meteorologically themed romanticism aside it was beyond strange to be standing in front of him again after months of shared dreams. If just their hands touching had felt roughly on the same scale as cataclysmic (don't think about him kissing her hand, don't think about it, don't think about it) then she shuddered to think what any kind of more intimate contact between them would be like.

For his part he seemed to be examining her with just as much interest as she was him, and up close like this it was getting hard to ignore the heated feeling of what could only be their conjoined soul making her kind of want to crawl inside the man like he was a stylish winter jacket.

Finally Voldemort broke their weirdly comfortable staring contest and gestured towards a nearby table and chairs. "Well then, shall we take a seat and begin?"

Steeling herself for what she'd decided to ask before coming here, Harry shook her head. "Before we get started I need you to do something for me Voldemort."

"Is that so?" He said, turning back to where she was still standing in the middle of the room. "And what might that be little horcrux?"

She took a deep breath, ignoring the sick feeling in her stomach and bracing herself for impact. "I need you to put on your blood glamour. Just for a minute."

He raised an eyebrow, actually looking rather surprised. Clearly whatever he'd been expecting her to ask for it hadn't been this.
"Are you sure Harry?" He eventually asked, voice curious. "I would have thought you would prefer to interact with me while I looked properly like myself."

"I do, very much so." She agreed, because that was so emphatically her preference it might as well be carved on some stone tablets and carted down a mountain. "It's just that before I can even think about agreeing to any of this I need to make sure there's no way I'm lying to myself about what it is I'm really doing. And who it is I'm doing it with."

It said a lot for how seriously he was taking her request that he didn't take the admittedly rather easy opportunity to turn it into a sex joke.

"While I understand your reasoning, I hope you don't think it disrespectful if I ask one last time if you are certain."

"No it's fine." Harry said, because she wasn't all that sure this was a good idea either. "I'm not certain but do it anyway. I might be betraying just about every person who's ever meant anything to me just by being here, but I refuse to do it while pretending that I'm not."

Voldemort stared at her inscrutably for a little longer as if he was looking for something, before shrugging elegantly. "As you wish."

Before she could blink his wand was in his hand, giving her just enough time to swing hers back up to point at him again on pure reflex before he nonverbally cast the blood glamour. His skin rippled, much like Harry's had done when she put on the bracelet he'd given her for her birthday, but her eyes stayed fixed on him as his skin paled and his hair disappeared, his nose sinking back into his face while his skin tightened like a corpse. In the space of a few breaths Lord Voldemort in all his serpentine glory was staring down at her, wand still in hand and every inch of him once more the thing out of her nightmares.

Harry was frozen in place, wide-eyed and heart racing in her chest as she tried to convince all of her hard-won instincts that she wasn't actually in any danger. Voldemort stood there in silence, not moving at all and letting her work through the frantic adrenaline rush inspired by what a not inconsiderable part of her was still convinced even now was her enemy.

After a brief stalemate where neither of them moved or said anything, she was maybe a few seconds away from caving and begging him to remove it after all when she finally met his eyes and paused. Far from being the icing on the fear-cake as she had expected they were apparently the only thing which hadn't changed at all with his transformation, that same perversely comforting hellfire red she'd been staring into ever since June.

How many nights had she spent sitting across a library from him and then across a coffee table and then closer, learning how he looked when he was lost in thought and how his lip twitched when he tried to hide a smile? By now Harry had known him sad and amused and tired and furious and vulnerable, and always those red eyes had looked back at her and saw her in a way which no one else did. As terrifying as Voldemort's false face was she would know those eyes anywhere, and that meant she couldn't still be scared of him, not really.

"Are you alright?" He asked, and damn if even his voice was more slithery and creepy right now. While even a few minutes ago that might have been enough to make her bolt from the room in self-preservation, by now she had regained enough of her self control that she just exhaled shakily.

"Yeah." She said, and there was no one more surprised than Harry when she realised she was actually telling the truth. This entire situation was still insane and she had increasing doubts about how much of a good person she could be if she was here at all, but she was no longer feeling like she
was about to run away screaming. "I think I'm okay now, you can change back."

He did so, and however much she was slowly accepting this brave new world where Voldemort wasn't quite an adversary (or at least not only) she was still beyond relieved when he suddenly had hair and a nose again. Right up until he was back to being an incredibly tall, incredibly handsome man in some very nice black tailored robes which showed off just how incredibly in shape he was, and then she was just another kind of flustered all over again.

Well then, who knew her standards were low enough that apparently all you needed to qualify for being distraction-material was hair and a nose. Though in her (admittedly shaky) defence it certainly didn't hurt that he was probably the most attractive man she'd ever seen in her damn life. Because really, how the hell was that even fair?

As if they were continuing the charade that this was perfectly normal and definitely not a trainwreck happening in slow motion, Voldemort pulled out one of the chairs at the nearby table for her and even pushed it in for her when she sat down. Harry was just pleasantly surprised that she managed the whole thing without getting her dress or her robes or any of her copious amounts of jewelry caught on anything, because while fantastic for making an entrance they might be, easy to manoeuvre in they were not.

As Voldemort sat down across from her she found herself feeling rather relieved for his foresight, because having even the dubious barrier of the small round table between made this whole thing feel a little more business-like and a little less intimate. It didn't matter that they'd blown well past intimate in their dreams, they were in the real world now and that changed things. Considering how much the visceral immediacy of horcrux realignment bullshit was trying to do weird things to her impulse control, it was probably better for their ongoing ability to have a serious conversation that there was sufficient furniture in the way to ensure there was no chance of her ending up on his lap. Again.

"You look a little flushed Harry, is everything all right?"

"I'm fine." Smug git. "Where are we exactly?"

"One of the private rooms at The Golden Key, a private club on Absent Alley in Magical London. They have some of the best privacy warding in the country and I thought it prudent that there be no chance anyone knew either of us were here, let alone here together to discuss what we are."

"Well then." She said with a snort. "I definitely owe Hedwig a mouse."

"I'm sorry, you owe who a what?"

"Hedwig, she's my owl. I got her before I started Hogwarts and she's a great listener if a little judgey. I was thinking you'd have us meet either somewhere fancy as hell or somewhere creepy as hell, but I was leaning more towards creepy while Hedwig clearly thought fancy. So now I owe her a mouse."

He looked torn between bemused and pleased. "You told your familiar you were coming to meet me?"

"Well I wasn't exactly going to tell anyone who could speak English I was going on a date with a Dark Lord was I?" She said with a derisive snort. "I believe we've already discussed the likelihood I'd be locked up like a traitorous Rapunzel if anyone found out about any of this."

Too late she realised what she'd just said, and was about ready to kick herself when he looked like all his murderous Christmases had come at once.

"Do you think this a date?" Voldemort asked, clearly delighted.
"Well what the hell else should I call it?" She snapped, mortified by her slip but with nowhere to go but doubling down and sticking to her guns. "We're all dressed up and meeting at some overly fancy club to discuss our relationship, I'm really not sure why you're fighting me on this."

"No, I like it." He said, still grinning like crazy. "I am just trying to remember the last time I did anything like this at all."

"I'm guessing it was before you started to pretend you didn't have a nose." Harry sneered, very pointedly ignoring the burning flare of jealousy his comment had inspired. For fuck's sake, the last time he'd had a date they were probably still the same bloody person, so it was ridiculous that she'd feel jealous over something she herself had technically done.

It occurred to Harry that of all the relationship issues television had led her to expect to face as a teenager, nothing had prepared her for how to feel about any potential relationships her arch-nemesis/other half of her soul/reluctant crush had been in back in the day when they were still one person.

Wow, being a horcrux was weird.

While Harry was wrestling with this latest existential dilemma Voldemort tapped a small, gilded statue of a porcelain bird on the table with his wand, and a few seconds later a tray with a pretty blue floral tea set appeared between them.

"More tea, really?" She asked with a raised eyebrow at the strange reminder of the first time she and Voldemort had done this in the library. "What, was the kitchen all out of the blood of the innocent?"

"Do rest assured my dear, that if either of us were vampires you would know by now." He said dryly as he placed a cup and saucer in front of her. "I had briefly considered a nice merlot but considering your age I thought it best that we avoid alcohol. This blend of chai is probably the best I have found outside of India and they actually know how to prepare it properly here too, so I think you will enjoy it."

"Are you serious?" She said in disbelief, not sure if she was more confused at his thoughtfulness or touched by his nod to her heritage. "Not only are you a freaking Dark Lord, the whole reason we're even here is because you want to knock up your teenage horcrux. Is underage drinking really the line in the sand you're not willing to cross?"

"Not at all." If he felt ridiculous when she put it like that he didn't let on, just started pouring the milky, vaguely pinkish tea which admittedly smelled incredible into their teacups. "But as I can only assume that your alcohol tolerance is probably on par with that of a house elf, considering the importance of what we will be discussing tonight I didn't want to risk you making any decisions while not in your right mind."

Merlin she hated it when he sounded so reasonable, it made it so much harder to argue with him. "You're an arsehole."

Apparently unconcerned with her judgement, Voldemort just mixed a little honey into both of their teacups before passing one to her. "Perhaps, but as I am also right maybe we can move past my choice of refreshments and onto why we're here in the first place?"

One cautious sip of the chai tea later and she no longer cared why he'd chosen it because bloody hell it was too good, all strong and spicy and sweet and how the hell had she never had this before? "Oh Merlin this is amazing."
The bastard just smirked into his teacup. "Told you."

"Nobody likes a gloater."

"Ten points to Slytherin."

Harry couldn't help it, she laughed. This whole messy situation might be insane, but if they could still tease each other and be idiots in real life just like they did in the library then somehow she knew it was all going to be okay.

"So little horcrux, I believe the pleasantries are over so why don't you tell me what you're thinking?"

"I had a very interesting conversation with Ginny the other day." She said casually as she took another drink of her chai, taking the time now that she was actually here to make sure she thought this through properly instead of rushing in headfirst like a rampaging hippogriff as she normally would. Because this conversation was potentially the most important one she'd ever had in her entire life and she would only get one shot to do it right.

He looked up from where he'd been fastidiously straightening the tea tray, momentarily bewildered by the unexpected answer to his question. "Ginevra Weasley? The girl who found our diary?"

"Yes." She replied after another leisurely sip of chai, determined to take her time and not letting him rush her or dominate the flow of conversation. "She's likely one of the few people still alive who really knows what it's like to be on the receiving end of the charisma-Bombarda which is your undivided, not entirely murderous attention."

The Dark Lord's eyebrow raised slightly, clearly curious about where she was going with all this. "The two of you must be close then."

"Not at all." Harry laughed, taking the opportunity to glance down then look up through her lashes just like she'd seen Lavender and Parvati practicing in the dorm, which was apparently as successful as intended if his rapt expression was anything to go by. "I think it was actually our first real conversation which wasn't just about quidditch plays or passing each other things since the Chamber of Secrets. But I needed to get some perspective you see, and seeing as how she had talked with the diary horcrux for the better part of a year she was in the rather unique position of being able to give it."

He settled back into his chair and pressed his fingertips together thoughtfully in front of his face, intrigued enough by his generally straightforward horcrux being more circumspect than usual to be content to let her dance around the point she was trying to make. "And what pray tell did our dear Ginevra have to say?"

"She was in love with us you know?" Harry said simply, knowing he'd enjoy hearing her rare admission to their shared past out loud. "I probably was too just a little, even though I didn't have our diary for nearly as long as she did. Is that still technically narcissism do you think, falling for another version of yourself if neither of you actually recognises the other?"

His lip quirked and he looked smug as hell that even the horcrux of their sixteen year old self had affected her so much. "I'm not sure. It is possible you simply felt drawn to it because it was a fellow horcrux, and that was why our younger self had such a big impact on you in a relatively short amount of time."

"Maybe." She shrugged, really not all that phased either way what her unresolved feelings for diary-Riddle might have been. Not when the grown up version was sitting right in front of her, larger than
life and much more a cause for immediate concern. "I mean it's all academic really, but talking to her reminded me of the impact one person with a different point of view can have on someone else, and therefore on the bigger picture."

Harry paused again to drink more chai, deciding there really wasn't going to be any way she could conceivably manipulate him without him knowing exactly what she was doing, and that perhaps a combination of her usual recklessness and the cold logic he seemed to favour would be the best approach after all.

"I don't know if I can trust you to be true to your word, or even capable of what I've asked of you." She said easily, meeting his gaze without flinching. "But to be very frank, regardless of any personal misgivings I might have at this point in time, the opportunity to have influence on both you and the war to come is far too strategically valuable for me to pass up."

He nodded readily as if he had fully expected this particular thought to have occurred to her as well. "That is a logically sound argument. Do you really think you can fix me?" To his credit he didn't even sound angry or mocking, just politely curious.

"No, because you're not actually broken." She replied bluntly. "Far too cavalier about taking human lives and more than a little sadistic yes, but not broken. However I do think you need perspective, and just like Ginny was for me I find myself in the rather unique position of being able to provide it for you."

He was leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table, as if he could smell her impending acquiescence like a shark could smell blood in the water. "Are you saying yes to the courtship then little horcrux?"

"I am." Harry agreed, wondering if this is how Brutus had felt on the Ides of March. And then she purposefully tilted her head to the side just like he always did when he looked thoughtful, springing the trap she'd been baiting ever since she'd shown up looking like a warrior queen and acting just like him. "Because even the future of the magical world aside, I think you're just as curious as I am to see what happens if we really give this the old college try."

Far too triumphant to hold himself with his usual level of cool reserve Voldemort was grinning demonically, eyes burning so brightly they were almost glowing. "Let us talk terms then."

Ten points to Gryffindor.

"Basics first." She said, plowing ahead with all the ill-advised determination of Napoleon marching on Russia in the winter. "Courtship for a year and a day as is traditional, and if you actually manage to convince me you're serious about this unmitigated disaster and not just a callous, unfeeling arsehole we will get married on the next Sabbat."

Dear Merlin she was really doing it, she was negotiating for her own hand in marriage with Lord fucking Voldemort. She wondered if this would be in the history books one day, if future Hogwarts students would sit through History of Magic as Binns droned on about the landmark day the Girl-Who-Lived got all dressed up and heroically pimped herself out for the sake of Magical Britain.

Voldemort nodded in agreement. "It will have to be a traditional ceremony in order to satisfy the terms of my inheritance, I believe the Malfoys have standing stones on their grounds which will suffice. It would be on Samhain too, which really has a lovely kind of symmetry to it all things considered."

Because they were the Malfoys, and of course they did. Part of her wanted to balk at the idea of
marrying her birth parent's murderer on the anniversary of their deaths, hell, if you wanted to be very technical it was also the anniversary of hers. But she had already decided before she came here tonight that this was bigger than her and her delicate sensibilities, and if she was already going along with this insanity what was one more nail in the coffin.

"Agreed. And I will not be persuaded or coerced into agreeing." Harry said firmly, wanting to be very clear on this particular point before they went any further. "If you have to resort to any kind of underhanded manipulation or compulsion, magical or otherwise, it means you've lost. And you'll have to accept it and find another way to have your bloody war and stop the Fade. I'm willing to compromise for our mutual goals, but I'm not selling myself to you just for the sake of your ambitions."

This of course meant his usual brand of blatant manipulation was still on the table, but expecting him not to be devious arsehole was like expecting water not to be wet. At least this way he was less likely to try and pull a fast one on her.

"Very well." He conceded, clearly too thrilled with his impending victory to be overly bothered by the minutia which was exactly what she'd been aiming for. "In the meantime we shall consider ourselves at a détente as far as the war to come is concerned, and will take no direct action towards each other or encourage others to take such action on our behalf."

"It's not like I have my own private army of vigilantes, but alright. Obviously I can't control the Order or the Ministry, but I will make sure it's clear that I'm taking a step back and don't condone any violence." She paused and gave him a coy look, not because she expected it to work but because she knew him pretty well by now and odds were good he'd find it hilarious. The fact that seeing through a few blatant attempts like this would make him less likely to look for the more subtle ones was just a bonus, after all, he hadn't said anything about how she couldn't try and manipulate him now had he? "What can you do to curtail said violence on your end Heir Slytherin?"

He smirked, clearly approving of her tactics even if they were completely transparent. "I am not going to stop campaigning entirely just because you are batting your eyelashes at me my darling Heiress Black, but it was a very inspired effort."

"Can't blame a girl for trying." She said with a shrug, not even caring that he'd called her out on it when the fact he was looking at her like she was dessert meant it had clearly worked as intended.

"Certainly not." He hummed thoughtfully, and despite his words to the contrary his eyes still slid over her hungrily almost without his conscious decision to do so. "I can commit to avoiding civilian targets and focusing primarily on the political angle for now while we work out what will happen next. Is this an acceptable compromise?"

It was definitely an acceptable compromise. In fact it was actually so fan-fucking-tastic a compromise that she would have married the stupid prat right here and now if it meant he would keep his word. But despite half wanting to rush out and find an officiant right the hell now she knew to let on would just weaken her bargaining position, so instead she nodded as if she was mostly unimpressed by the concession but agreeing to it regardless. "That's acceptable I suppose, I'll take it."

While he was clearly trying to be on his best behaviour she could still tell how hard it was for him to hold in the urge to gloat. "Now, I think laying out some clear ground rules for our conduct is in order, just so there is absolutely no chance of any future misunderstandings or surprises which may negatively impact the success of our courtship at a later date."

"That's fair." She allowed, narrowing her eyes as she wondered how he was going to use this to mess with her, because whenever he sounded this reasonable it usually meant something especially
shocking was incoming. "What did you have in mind?"

His grin was wolfish. "The main one is that I am fairly certain you are currently a virgin, and I want you to stay that way until we are married."

"What the absolute fuck?"

Well, she'd been right. As usual with him her knowing something was coming hadn't stopped her from being completely and utterly blindsided by it, and she felt absolutely mortified.

"While it is not a hard requirement for a traditional ceremony, it is still the far more preferable option." He said, clearly enjoying having thrown her so off balance. "Furthermore, I am aware of the potential for power imbalance inherent in relationships such as ours, and I refuse to allow anything to jeopardise it. This way you won't have to worry about me taking advantage of our situation and I won't have to worry about someone else taking advantage of you. Everybody wins."

She folded her arms across her chest defensively. "You do know the whole concept of virginity is a pile of patriarchal, misogynistic bullshit designed purely to keep women subservient by teaching them to be ashamed of themselves and their sexuality, right?" She was fairly certain her face was the colour of a stop sign and hated how easily he'd managed to get to her with one bloody sentence after keeping her cool for the entire bloody conversation so far. "A hymen has no correlation whatsoever with a woman's intrinsic value as a person."

"Yes I am well aware." He informed her calmly with a shrug, as if they were discussing the weather and not her sodding maidenhood. "But it is still a symbolic act the kind of which has magical significance, the same way in which any symbolic act can have magical significance. I am assuming then from your excessive defensiveness that my guess was correct?"

"Merlin you are impossible!" She snapped. "Yes, alright? Bloody hell! Are you sure this isn't just you being a jealous bastard who doesn't want any of the other children to play with his toys?"

"Without a single doubt in my mind yes, that is absolutely why." He didn't even blink let alone look embarrassed by his admission, the shameless bastard. "I know myself very well little horcrux. If I found out someone else had touched you I would not be able to hold myself to the previously requested standards of minimal violence."

Harry knew she was pouting but she didn't even care. "You do know I'm mostly gay right? If I had sex with a girl the whole hymen thing is kind of a non-issue."

He sneered at her. "I don't care if it's a girl, a boy, or the Giant Squid, I'm not one of those idiots who thinks the only thing which counts when it comes to sexual intimacy is whether or not there is a cock involved. If on the day of our wedding you can look me in the eye and tell me you could still happily pet a unicorn, I will consider this requirement met and I won't have to spend our wedding night flaying anybody."

Harry was almost too busy trying to get over the fact the Dark Lord had just said the word cock to be impressed by his admittedly progressive ideas about sexuality for a middle-aged white British man, but she knew it would be something she would think about later. Same as any reference to their hypothetical wedding night, because holy shit if the idea of sex at all was a daunting prospect at the best of times then sex with a Dark Lord sounded positively terrifying.

"All agreed?" He asked briskly, apparently still not seeing what the big deal had been. "Good, next order of business. I want us to spend one day together a week, as well as your school holidays. My suggestion is Sunday, though it can be moved depending on any commitments or emergencies which
arise."

Still reeling a little from the abrupt subject change Harry drank more chai, wondering if he had a Time Turner stuffed conveniently in his pocket or if he just expected her to spontaneously develop the ability to be in two places at once. "How the hell am I supposed to get away once a week when I'm still at school?"

He just shrugged and drained his teacup. "Classes are Monday to Friday, and quidditch games when they happen are on a Saturday. Therefore, Sunday is the logical choice."

"But what about my homework, my responsibilities? I'm the Gryffindor quidditch captain this year, that's not nothing." She was in her sixth year at Hogwarts for Merlin's sake, and by the end of the courtship period she'd be in her seventh, which was N.E.W.Ts year. As in the year which chewed up students and spit them out again. But of course, this was the adult version of perpetual overachiever Head Boy Tom Riddle she was talking to here, he of the fabled straight Outstandings on every single exam he'd ever sat all while maintaining a secret society of violent baby fascists on the side. He could probably have easily managed a covert relationship with a fugitive Dark Lord outside of the castle and still had time to torture some muggleborn underclassmen in his downtime.

"You are a teenage girl going to boarding school in a very big castle full of hidden rooms. I am sure you can find a way to explain to your friends why you need some space once a week without them alerting the Ministry." Suspicion confirmed, he was a pod person. And apparently he had never had any friends or minions or whatever else he liked to call them even half as clingy or nosy as Ron and Hermione. "I will make you a pair of reusable Portkeys which will take you back and forth and you can come to me at Malfoy Manor after breakfast and return before dinner. I don't care if you bring your homework and do it in my study while I work on other things, or if you spend the whole day knitting in perfect silence. It is important for us to spend time getting to know each other in a casual setting which isn't the library. I don't know about you, but I am finding us being physically in the same room very different from dreamsharing."

Well he wasn't wrong on that count, sitting this close was almost making her bones vibrate. As much as she hated to admit it he was actually making a lot of sensible points.

"I get to spend quidditch and Hogsmeade weekends with my friends." She countered, because otherwise she was going to go mad trying to keep up with this double life. "And I say we aim for once a week, but if something comes up like a big group project I need to do with someone else or a quidditch practice gets moved, or even if I just can't get away because people aren't leaving me alone and it would be too suspicious to blow them off, then you have to accept it and not get cranky. I'm sure you can agree that my keeping up appearances is best for the both of us in the long run?"

"Fine." Voldemort didn't look happy, but he couldn't deny her reasoning. "As long as you are making a genuine effort to visit regularly, and inform me if you will be late or detained, that will be acceptable."

This actually raised a very good point come to think of it. "How would I inform you if I can't come? I did some tests last year and all of my outgoing owl post is monitored, even if I use a school owl. I'd say I could send a Patronus, but mine is kind of distinctive and I've got no way of knowing who you might be with when you received it."

"I will find a solution and get back to you." He replied, and she believed him because he had certainly proven himself to be the problem solver type over the course of their relationship. Dear Merlin, it really was a relationship too wasn't it? "And speaking of your Patronus, I want your word if anything bad happens to you, or if Dumbledore finds out what we are doing and you can't get yourself to safety that you will send me one immediately if you are able. Ideally in Parseltongue. I
don't care if I am asleep, in the middle of a meeting with my entire army, or elbow deep in someone's entrails, if you are in serious danger you will not be a stubborn Gryffindor about it and you will tell me. Is that clear?"

"It's not like I go out of my way to get into trouble." She grumbled, doing her best not to think too hard about the entrails comment.

"Harry."

"Fine, I promise." Something funny occurred to her and she smirked, knowing it would annoy him. "You know, for an evil megalomaniac you can be such a mother hen sometimes."

"There is no need to be rude." He sniffed, but despite his clear distaste the effect was kind of ruined when he chose that exact moment to take back her now empty teacup and pour them both some more chai. "Furthermore, if opportunity permits once you have sent me a Patronus you will ask Severus for help as well, either with another Patronus or in person if he is there. He will likely be in the position to assist you much quicker than I and time may be of the essence."

"What would I even tell him?" She asked. "He doesn't exactly like me."

Voldemort just smiled knowingly as he passed her back her teacup. "It doesn't matter if he likes you or not, he will still protect you with his life. Tell him you've had enough of your fleeting human attachments, he will understand."

"Okay fine." She said, rolling her eyes. "Weird coded messages all round, happy?"

"Ecstatic." He drawled. "Now, school holidays?"

She shrugged, because this wasn't something which mattered much to her so she didn't mind giving them up to keep him happy. "I usually spend them all at school, at first because it meant I was away from the Dursley's but lately because Dumbledore wouldn't let me leave for safety reasons anyway."

"You have an impenetrable townhouse." He said dryly. "Somehow I think you'll be safe there. That or you may come and stay with me at Malfoy Manor, there's plenty of room in the guest wing so you would still have your own space and your privacy. If he refuses to let you leave you can always use your Portkeys. I have the utmost faith in your resourcefulness."

"Won't it be kind of weird though?" She asked, honestly trying to imagine having holidays with a Dark Lord and coming up blank. "Spending Christmas and everything together I mean."

"Harry, for fifty-four years we were literally the same person." He pointed out, as if there was any chance at all of her forgetting that delightful fact anytime soon. "Besides there is also the small matter of how when we do end up married we will be spending the rest of our lives together. Considering we are also immortal, it can be assumed my dear that we will in fact be spending a very, very long time in one another's company. This would first and foremost be a political marriage, but I do hope we can at the very least reach the level of a mutually beneficial, respectful companionship."

"I guess that makes sense, if we end up being the kind of couple who just doesn't get along in close quarters it's probably better to know in advance so we can plan for it and keep the fallout to a minimum." Suddenly the separate bedroom suites in Grimmauld Place made a whole lot more sense than just the excuse for lavishness they had seemed previously. "That's why so many rich folks who have political marriages also have separate bedrooms for the spouses I suppose, so they don't just end up lobbing the silverware at each other during dinner."

Voldemort's lip twitched as if he was fighting the urge to smile again. "Indeed, let's keep the lobbing
Harry drank some chai to avoid having to agree out loud, because apparently some things just bred true.

He nodded as if he'd expected nothing less. "So by spending time together regularly to acclimate to each other's presence and spending your holidays together to see how we fare at cohabitating, we will be able to determine how best to ensure our marriage will ultimately be successful."

"Even if we nearly kill each other you're still going to want to marry me though." She pointed out frankly, because it needed to be said. "I'm still your horcrux, which you seem to think equates to me having a flag planted in my arse which claims me for your glorious eternal empire or whatever you want to call it. And even without that lovely fact there's still the matter of a rather large dearth of other Parselmouths for you to impregnate."

"How very charming you are my dear." He sighed. "So much so that your presence in my life might even be enough to make me begin to believe in karma."

She ducked her head modestly as if he'd just paid her a compliment of the highest order. "Oh thank you my Lord, I do so try my best."

Voldemort just shook his head, not even bothering to hide what might even be a fond smile on anyone not a psychopath. "And to answer your question, yes, there is absolutely nothing you could do to stop me wanting to marry you. I mean this very literally, I don't care if you set fire to a nunnery or steal the Crown Jewels, if your chronic backchat has yet to put me off then surely nothing will."

"Is it weird that's kind of comforting?" She said thoughtfully. "I mean, most girls my age are worried about driving off any would-be suitors if they accidentally forget to glamour their spots in the morning, and all the while I've got mister crazypants over here who legitimately wants to make me a queen and wouldn't even bat an eye if I went out and burned down a village."

Harry stopped and took a good look at just who exactly she was talking to. "If anything you'd probably find it endearing, wouldn't you? You sick fuck."

Voldemort didn't rise to the bait, just spread his hands and smiled disarmingly. "What can I say, I am a simple man who enjoys simple pleasures. It just so happens that burning down villages is one of them."

She couldn't help but laugh at that. "It's funny, because while I know your sense of humour is honestly that morbid at the same time odds are good that you're not joking at all." She paused again as something new occurred to her. "Though the fact I think it's funny too is probably cause for some concern."

The prat looked just as proud as Hagrid had when baby Norbert set his beard on fire. "Clearly some things are just that deeply ingrained."

She just smirked right back at him, not willing to let him get away with taking complete credit for her failure at being a decent human being without a fight. "I was actually going to blame the Black family madness like I always do whenever I say something people think is weird, but hey, I suppose that works as well."

"That's why being evil is so enjoyable." He said conversationally as he sipped his chai. "You never have to explain your actions because people have no expectations whatsoever as to your good
behaviour. It also has the happy benefit where if you ever so much as say thank you they will literally prostrate themselves in gratitude."

"I think you've been a bad influence on me, because with all the holier-than-thou posturing and righteous arse-kissing people have been sending my way this year that's sounding pretty bloody tempting."

"Without a doubt." He winked, actually bloody winked. "Isn't it fun?"

"Jury's still out." She said, amused despite herself. "But I'll get back to you."

"Much appreciated. Now, back on topic." He said as she drank more of the amazing chai, the regularly scheduled sarcasm break apparently over for the time being. "I will start writing the contract up in the morning, I know a courtship doesn't technically need one but considering the literally world-ending stakes resting on our ability to be civil to one another I think it would be prudent."

"No I second that idea, this should definitely be in writing." Harry readily agreed, because now she thought about it that was actually an excellent idea. "I'd say we should get a lawyer to look it over to see if we've missed anything but they'd either have no idea what was going on or run away screaming. And no you're not allowed to just kidnap one."

"Technically speaking Lucius trained as a law-wizard." Voldemort said nonchalantly. "He never practiced of course, far too busy being a politician and a meddler of the first order, but he is both familiar with the situation and sworn to keep my secrets. He was also released from Azkaban recently, and Narcissa is getting annoyed with how he keeps moping about the house feeling sorry for himself. Something like this will keep him busy for a little while and hopefully motivate him to find better ways to occupy his time."

Harry narrowed her eyes suspiciously at just how nonchalant he was being. "Hmmm, I wonder what the odds are the universe knew we would be needing the help of a shady law wizard to put together something like a courtship contract not long after Lucius Malfoy, shady law-wizard extraordinaire, was released early from Azkaban?"

"What are the odds for something like that?" He deadpanned. "It truly must be fate."

"You impossible man." She said, shaking her head at the manipulative wanker she unfortunately co-owned a soul with. "Do you really think it's okay to tell him what's going on with us?"

He shrugged, apparently blithely unconcerned about the opinion of his subordinate. "Not everything of course, but as I am a guest in their home for the foreseeable future it would be both rude and impossible to conceal it from them for long with you making regular visits."

"That's fair I suppose." She allowed. "Alright, let's get old Lucy involved. I do consequently have another condition to add though." It was such a big condition she couldn't believe it had actually taken her so long to think of it.

"Of course you do." He sighed, as if he had any right to act like the long-suffering one out of the two of them.

"If we're going to be talking to him about all this, you need to be looking like you, the real you." Harry said bluntly. "Because I'll be damned if I let the sodding Malfoys or anyone else think I'm marrying that godawful bloody snakeface. I absolutely refuse."

He actually rolled his eyes. "You don't ask much do you? There are reasons I don't let people see me like this Harry. Good reasons."
"You're living in their house. Surely it gets old having to be all corpsey, all the time. It doesn't have to be anyone else, just them." She looked down to where she cradled the delicate china in her hands, the soft candlelight glinted off of her Heir rings. "Besides, I'd prefer if any and all interpersonal time is spent with you looking properly human, I've got a lot of very bad memories of you looking like that while you tortured and tried to kill me. I'm not in denial about who you are and what you've done Voldemort, case in point my request when I first got here. But in the interest of moving forward I would prefer to err on the side of compartmentalisation if it's all the same to you."

There was no way in hell he could conceivably argue the point without coming across as a bastard for doing so, and he didn't even try. "You have raised valid arguments. I will reveal my true face when I inform him of my need for assistance with the contract."

She held in the urge to sigh in relief, because while it wasn't quite a deal breaker it was pretty damn close. "Thank you."

"On that note however, I think I shall ask Narcissa to be present as well." He decided. "She is the one with the real head for politics in their family so her opinion would be invaluable, and she is also much more likely to be knowledgeable of all the myriad things a young witch needs to consider when she is being pursued for marriage."

"Really?" That actually surprised Harry quite a lot. "I've only ever seen her a couple of times and she's always just been silent and dismissive, or snobby and dismissive. I would have thought it was the other way around."

He smirked, a knowing look in his eye. "Of course it seems that way, an intelligent lady like Narcissa knows it is far simpler to pull the strings when no one is looking directly at her. She may come across as a well-mannered, slightly bored society wife, but in reality the woman is a vicious bloody spider made out of diamonds and witchfire."

Holy shit that was an amazingly cool mental image. "That's terrifying. And also kind of awesome."

"It's only to be expected, she was born a Black after all." He suddenly grinned wickedly. "Imagine her disappointment when it became clear her precious only child sadly took after his father when it came to his complete lack of subtlety. Though to her credit she has used the threat of my presence in their home over the summer as a very strong wake up call to encourage him to pull his head out of his arse."

Harry couldn't stop herself from hysterically giggling at the fact the Dark Lord was gossiping with her about Draco Malfoy. "I'd wondered why he'd been a bit more subdued when school came back this year." She said as she got control of herself again. "I just thought it was your creativity when requesting they leave me alone to blame."

Voldemort looked absurdly pleased with himself that he could make her laugh. "One of these days he is going to owe you a great deal of thanks actually. I had originally intended to Mark him over the summer and give him an impossible mission to complete this school year as punishment for his father's incompetence, but discovering the truth of our connection meant I had to pretty much upend the entire chessboard and start over."

She was honestly quite shocked by that, because he was very much the kind of person who didn't so much as get out of bed without multiple, overthought contingency plans just in case the duvet got any funny ideas. "Wow. I didn't realise I'd actually changed that much."

"Surely you are joking?" He asked in complete disbelief. "The first time I came to power it was using my Plan B because I didn't have what I needed for Plan A, which really is the far more elegant
solution. I am happy to take the minor setback of a few months if it means I can do this the way it was always supposed to be done."

"I'm Plan A aren't I?" She sighed, starting to realise the magnitude of just what this had all been building up to right from those first two shared dreams, and mildly annoyed she couldn't even make herself feel mad at him for it. "Me and my magical Parselmouth uterus."

"Indeed you are." He said smugly, looking entirely far too pleased with himself. "Congratulations, Harriet Potter being born biologically female means you are singlehandedly responsible for saving the 28% of the population of Magical Britain I calculated would have been lost by the end of the successful completion of Plan B."

That was actually a really fucking awful thing to consider. If you applied that percentage to Hogwarts students it meant it would be the equivalent of losing an entire school House. "You worked out bloody percentages?"

If you went by expression alone you wouldn't have been surprised to learn that he doubted her possession of anything remotely approaching a brain cell. "Of course I did, and they really were bloody ones in the most literal sense of the word. Acceptable casualties had to be kept under 35% in order to not go below the projected threshold for population integrity, which plans C through F were unable to guarantee. There is no point in being the immortal ruler of a country which will ultimately collapse within a few generations due to a lack of genetic diversity."

"Well then." While she liked the confirmation that he had evidently been looking into genetics (which was going to make it so much easier to argue with him about the stupidity of blood purity further down the track) she had absolutely no idea how to feel about the fact the fate of Magical Britain might well be resting solely on something as arbitrary as what set of reproductive organs she'd ended up with. "Well then, I am very grateful for my magical Parselmouth uterus."

His lip quirked again, because clearly smiling was for losers. "Once we are king and queen I will announce a public holiday on it's behalf."

Harry just shook her head. "See you're doing that thing again where I can't tell if you're joking or not."

"You'll get there eventually my dear." He said airily as he poured them another cup of chai, as content as the cat which had got the cream. Literally all of the cream. An entire ocean's worth of cream. "After all, we shall have all of the time in the world."

Chapter End Notes

I post chapter teasers and cheerfully answer all your excited questions/rambles on my Tumblr, so come say hi!♡
http://samvelg-likes-things.tumblr.com
Before today Harry would have said the most embarrassing situation she had ever been in was hands-down the Yule Ball in her fourth year.

True to form she had left the whole 'needing to invite another human being to go with her' thing to the absolute last minute in a vain attempt at hoping the problem would go away if she ignored it hard enough, and by then nearly everyone she knew was already going with someone else. After the ostrich approach failed spectacularly she ended up taking her roommate Parvati, and thanks to nerves was so horrendously bad at dancing when the Champions and their dates did the opening waltz that she'd gotten embarrassed and ended up awkwardly avoiding the other girl for the rest of the Ball, drowning her sorrows in Butterbeer and hiding out near the ice sculpture with an aggressively pouting Ron.

The resulting mood in the fourth year Gryffindor girls dorm for the following month and a half could only be termed frigid if you were both exceptionally charitable and had previously spent your entire life somewhere far north of the Arctic Circle.

Sitting stiffly next to the Dark Lord Voldemort on an original Queen Anne loveseat while across the
tastefully matching coffee table the Lord and Lady Malfoy were in the process of discussing her virginity at length, Harry knew she now had a whole new benchmark by which to measure embarrassment. Thank Merlin for the mood-regulating properties of Occlumency barriers, that was all she was going to say on the matter.

As she sat there, kind of regretting her decision to wear her stays to their charming Sunday afternoon get-together at Malfoy Manor, Harry wished not for the first time that she had a friend who knew the sharp left turn into the morbidly ridiculous her life had taken lately, just so she could tell them all about this later. At least that way someone could be getting a well deserved laugh out of it.

Resetting her braids over her shoulder where they were trying to do battle with her buttons, Harry consoled herself that at least she looked incredible in the traditional black mourning robes which she'd owl-ordered over summer break and then painstakingly monogrammed herself with the Black family coat of arms and a Grimm to honour her late Lord Father. Because as much as he'd hate her being here at all she knew he'd get a laugh out of her subtlety rubbing the Malfoy's noses in just how much higher up on the social ladder she was than them. Even the usually placid Lady Malfoy had ever so slightly raised an eyebrow when she had arrived calmly in the Receiving Room via Side-Along Apparition on Lord Voldemort's arm, dressed to make a statement and even her hair passive-aggressively braided in ways which only another Black witch would understand.

"It is a very straightforward request my Lord." Said eternally poised Lady Malfoy remarked serenely, as if she regularly discussed the Girl-Who-Lived's virtue over tea and expensive French petit fours. "If she is indeed still a maiden for the ceremony then the original wording of the vows can be used, which really makes for a much more profound bonding experience."

Lucius Malfoy looked about as stiff and uncomfortable as Harry was, but he at least had the advantage of the bland Pureblood expression they must teach them all in the bloody cradle to help him keep up appearances. So even though he clearly had no idea what the bloody hell was going on he was soldiering on with the grim determination of a man who had recently been released from Azkaban, and knew he had to continue to prove his usefulness so he wouldn't be sent right back.

"I simply feel for the benefit of all concerned that there be a certain amount of flexibility when it comes to the definition of what constitutes intimate relations my Lord." He said carefully, avoiding looking at Harry as he had for the entirety of this exceedingly polite disaster. "It would be unfortunate if, for example, one of Heiress Black's schoolmates got a bit too enthusiastic while confessing some misplaced feelings and attempted to kiss her. A courtship contract might be more flexible than a marriage contract but it will still have an impact on the overall success of the bonding magic if it's terms are violated too harshly."

The Dark Lord for his part (wearing his real face as promised even though his followers kept looking at him out of the corner of their eyes in thinly veiled disbelief when he wasn't looking) was frowning a little as he went through the proposed alteration to the wording for the current subsection. "I suppose it will have to be sufficient." He said at last. "Though I still think in the eventuality of a third party attempting to dishonour my betrothed I should be informed so I may determine if I wish to pursue the insult at a later date."

"You most certainly will not!" Harry snapped, by now out of petit fours to distract herself with and rapidly losing her temper. "If for some reason I end up in the highly unlikely and indeed nigh unprecedented situation where I have people bodily throwing themselves at me, I will firmly tell them I am not interested and that will be the end of it. I couldn't care less if you feel insulted, you are not using me as an excuse to start flaying people!"

Following her outburst Lucius looked even paler than usual, while Narcissa appeared outwardly
unruffled but also seemed to have stopped breathing altogether. Harry just looked Voldemort straight
in his ridiculous red eyes, raised an extremely unimpressed eyebrow, and waited.

"Fine." He eventually growled once it was clear she wasn't going to lower her eyebrow until either
he agreed with her or the sun went supernova, whichever came first. "But if anyone attempts to take
you by force I reserve the right to skin them for it."

"Fine." She snorted, eyebrows no longer weaponised and feeling very satisfied by her victory indeed.
"Though if someone actually tries to assault me you can get in line for when I've finished dealing
with them."

He nodded decisively. "Agreed." He turned back to his shocked subordinate. "Lucius, make a note
that if anyone attempts to assault her she agreed to let me skin them. I want that in writing."

Lucius looked for all the world like he had woken up in an alternate dimension where Dobby the
house elf was the Minister for Magic, but he was at the end of the day a good little minion and
despite any personal reservations he might have had he still did as he was told. Next to him Narcissa
seemed to be breathing again, and was masterfully hiding a small smile behind the rim of her teacup.

Ten points to Gryffindor.

The next time Lucius looked up from the parchment it was with a face so blank it might as well have
not been there at all. "Just to be clear, are you also agreeing to abstain from intimate relations with
any third parties for the duration of the courtship my Lord?"

As much as she despised the man Harry had to give it to him, it couldn't be easy to ask your
homicidal boss about his sex life or the pending lack thereof.

"That is correct Lucius." Voldemort replied calmly, blithely unconcerned with the absurdity of this
entire conversation because he was far too busy pouring Harry yet another cup of tea. Really, what
was with him and making her tea? "I have no interest in pointless affairs now that I have found my
future queen."

Visibly not looking forward to whatever he had to ask next but unable to avoid it, Lucius cleared his
throat. "One last question and this section will be concluded." Oh thank Merlin. "Do you wish to
impose limitations or requirements on any intimate relations between the two of you for the duration
of the courtship?"

Harry stole Voldemort's last petit four and decided she was very interested after all in the cup of tea
her madman of a future husband/king had fixed to her exact liking and was passing on over.

Said madman seemed as unbothered by her grand theft pastry as he was with the entire conversation,
and relocated the only remaining one (which had previously been on Lucius' plate) onto her own
without comment. "As long as she is a virgin for the ceremony I don't really care. Any physical
contact beyond handholding will only be with her very enthusiastic consent."

Definitely blushing now, Harry thought to herself faintly. She savoured the petit four, shamelessly
using the excuse of it being impolite to talk with your mouth full to avoid having to say anything, and
idly wondered if her red cheeks could be seen from a low earth orbit. Merlin did he ever pick the
absolute weirdest times and ways to be a considerate human being.

Wisely not commenting on or even reacting to his sudden lack of sweets the blonde wizard turned to
look at her properly for the first time since this particular subject came up, and for once he wasn't
snearing even a little bit, to all appearances doing his utmost to remain professional. "Do you have
Harry shook her head, frantically suppressing the wildly inappropriate urge to giggle. "Nothing further Lord Malfoy." Seeing him relax a little and take a large, calming drink of his tea she smirked wickedly. "And I greatly appreciate the opportunity to move onto a topic which isn't my hymen."

The Lord of the Noble House of Malfoy choked on his darjeeling and had to be smacked repeatedly on the back by his Lady Wife, and Harry stopped holding in the giggles altogether. It really had been a losing battle there anyway.

"I suppose it has been over an hour." Voldemort said over all the commotion as he continued to calmly drink his own tea, not even pretending to be surprised. "You were about due for a tantrum."

"Hey!" She protested. "I just sat through you being a cave man about my so-called maidenhood. Deal with it."

"I know I said there wasn't anything you could do to make me not marry you, but you really shouldn't feel obliged to take my poor life choices out on my Death Eaters."

"Well I distinctly recall you saying that as long as I eventually joined with you in unholy matrimony I could do whatever the hell I wanted." Harry replied primly over Lucius' awkward spluttering. "Considering some of the examples used were burning down villages and stealing the Crown Jewels I don't think a harmless joke even begins to compare to the kinds of tantrums you could be putting up with from me if you still want access to my magical Parselmouth uterus."

Voldemort pinched the bridge of his nose. "You really need to stop referring to it as your magical Parselmouth uterus."

"Why not?" She huffed. "That's what it is. Literally magical too, because I'm a Parselmouth witch, and because despite what you'd like to believe at the end of the day it's still my uterus."

"Please stop." Voldemort was not the kind of man to beg anyone for anything, but this came close.

"You know what you're right, I really should name it something more stylish. Something timeless, something elegant." She said, pretending to be deep in thought. "What do you think about Tiffany?"

"Harry." He sighed, eyes raised heavenwards as if beseeching an uncaring god for a stray lightning bolt.

"Okay so not Tiffany." She conceded, on a roll now and having absolutely no intention of stopping, lightning bolts be damned. "What about Theophania? Yes I know I know, technically it's just the longer version of Tiffany historically speaking, but it sounds much more fancy and more importantly it still has the word fanny in it. Everybody wins!"

From the look on his face following this announcement Voldemort had just that exact second realised they had somehow gone from calmly discussing their courtship contract to having an actual domestic right in front of the flabbergasted Malfoys, and despite having been an active participant for the entire conversation he still looked like he was utterly mystified as to how it had actually happened. "I swear to Merlin girl, if you do not behave like the adult I know you are when you can actually be bothered to try then I will be the one who burns down a village!"

Not remotely intimidated Harry folded her arms across her chest in annoyance as she slouched back into the loveseat as much as her highly structural undergarments would allow, purely because she knew her bad posture would annoy him. "You know you can't just threaten to go out and burn down a village every time I annoy you. It's not exactly laying the foundations for a stable relationship and anything further to add to this section Heiress Black beyond the, er, the skinning clause?"
"one of these days I'm just going to call your bluff."

"And on that happy day I will go out and burn down a village." He hissed, apparently dangerously close to his last remaining nerve. "I have done it before and I will do so again if, Merlin as my bloody witness, you do not behave!"

"Fine, be like that." She grumbled, knowing she was pouting and well past the point of giving a shit. "See if I care."

Narcissa, who after saving her husband from the most ignoble death possible for a landed lord, had watched their entire exchange with the same kind of detached horror one gives to the passenger airplane about to land on their house. Taking advantage of the brief lull in the conversation she hastily interjected. "My Lord, why don't we have a short break so I can take Heiress Black out to get some fresh air? I remember struggling to sit through my own courtship negotiations when I was her age, so I'm sure if she can stretch her legs and get some sunshine she will feel much more agreeable when she returns."

The henpecked Dark Lord rubbed his face and looked like he was deeply regretting ever going to Godric's Hollow that fateful Halloween night. "Thank you Narcissa, that is probably for the best."

"Then with your permission my Lord, why don't we all reconvene in a half an hour? I'll call the house elves to fetch a bottle of the strawberry wine from the cellar for us, it's bottled here at the Manor after every harvest you know and it will be lovely with the shortcake they were baking this afternoon."

"Ooh, cake!" Said Harry, immediately perking up from her bad mood considerably.

"That is acceptable." He turned to Harry who had already stood up excitedly at the first mention of cake. "When you return Harry, I don't expect you to be happy with everything we discuss with the Malfoys but as we are still guests in their home I do expect you to be courteous. Is that a reasonable request?"

Already feeling calmer thanks to the dual prospects of cake and getting out of this damn room, and knowing she'd pushed him pretty far and in front of two of his closest followers no less, she nodded in agreement. "That's fair. I think Lady Malfoy is right anyway, I am feeling kind of restless. I'm sure a walk will do wonders."

The stern look melted into something infinitesimally softer and Lucius dropped the stack of papers he had been tidying up. "Very well. Off you go then."

She smiled crookedly at him, the other half of her soul and her very own matching disaster, and hurried off after Narcissa.

The witch waited for her at the doorway and elegantly held out her elbow so they could link arms, because apparently that was how proper noble witches walked around together. She called for a house elf as they left the parlour, and gave it the relevant instructions regarding the much anticipated cake without looking at it or even slowing down. Hermione would have hated it, but Harry couldn't help but be impressed by the efficiency. After the elf had bowed and disappeared with a quiet pop they were both silent as they walked down a long hallway, across a patio with some deckchairs and out into an immaculately manicured rose garden.

Only when they were well clear of the house did she finally address Harry. "You know Heiress Black, I honestly can't tell if you have a deathwish or are just truly that much of a lion."
Harry shrugged awkwardly with the shoulder not currently in use. "It's not really either of those to be honest. I wasn't lying when I said he told me he wasn't going to change his mind no matter what I did, and I'm not going to not speak my mind just because he's an evil bastard."

Narcissa hummed thoughtfully, eyes looking out over the garden as they walked underneath an archway covered in so many white roses it looked like it only stayed up thanks to magic. "Having power and actually using it are two very different matters though. You might be able to get away with things the rest of us cannot because of the unique situation you are in, but men like him are used to a certain level of respect from the people around them and won't put up with that kind of discourtesy forever."

To say Harry was unimpressed would be an understatement. "Are you really telling me to just sit there quietly? His Crankiness knew full well what he was signing up for with me and I can't be Imperiused, so barring a frontal lobotomy there's no way in hell that's ever going to change."

Narcissa looked down at her for the first time since they'd left the parlour. "No dear, I am telling you to pick your battles more wisely. With the precarious position you have found yourself in between the two sides of the coming war surely it would make sense to smile through some mild discomfort now? That way when the day inevitably comes where you are the only thing standing between your loved ones and certain death you haven't wasted your valuable influence on childish mind games."

Harry felt a hot rush of shame, because the other witch was absolutely right. She'd been childish for the sake of being childish just because she was embarrassed and annoyed, and if she was going to find a way to save everyone and everything then she needed to be better than that.

"It is clear to me there is more to the nature of your relationship with the Dark Lord than we have been told." Narcissa continued calmly, doing Harry the kindness of not forcing her to admit she'd been acting like a right prat. "And that's only natural, when you follow someone like him you know you will never know everything he is thinking or all of his reasons for the choices he makes. But you follow him anyway, because he is strong and you have faith he is making the choices which need to be made. I imagine your willingness to stand up to him is something of a novelty, and possibly even something he enjoys up to a point. But unless you honestly believe you would be uncaring as to the fate of the potential village burned if you pushed him too far you would be wise to do as the Hogwarts school motto suggests, and avoid tickling any sleeping dragons. Because sometimes they will call your bluff, and you have no way of knowing if their fire will be directed at you or at something you find precious when they do."

"You're right." Harry said quietly, because even though she didn't have to say it she still should. "I'll be honest Lady Malfoy, this is actually the first time we've been around other people since this whole ridiculous thing started and I'm just so used to how we are when we're alone together. I'm not going to be some bloody doormat, but I think I need to make a point to remember the difference between being in private and being around other people."

"That is a very sensible thing indeed to keep in mind." Narcissa agreed, still as calm and implacable as a glacier. "As far as courtship negotiations go I sat there on that exact couch you were when my own father was negotiating with Lucius' father for our contract, so I understand perfectly just how mortifying of an ordeal it can be for a young witch. They talked about me in even more blunt terms than Lucius and our Lord were about you, and I wasn't even allowed the courtesy of any direct input like you have been enjoying. That is not to say your frustration isn't justified, wizards can be beyond insufferable when it comes to the subject of their witches."

"Tell me about it." She grumbled.

"I can still clearly recall the vivid fantasies I was entertaining about upending the entire tea tray over
my future father-in-law's head if he kept discussing me as if I was one of his prize-winning Abraxan mares. But because I smiled nicely he never had any idea how close he came that day to eating his own china, and because I was well known for being a young lady who always smiled nicely I didn't end up with even half of the restrictions placed upon me as many of my friends did during their own courtships." Narcissa looked at her, really looked at her, and it felt like she was trying to impart more than just what her words were saying. "Sometimes it is wise to give the appearance of being passive, in order to be free to move into a position of greater strength later."

Harry frowned, but still considered the advice thoughtfully. It went against a lot of the things she believed in but at the same time it made a strange kind of sense. "Huh. I guess I've never thought about it from that angle before."

Narcissa shrugged far more elegantly than Harry had managed earlier. "It is a sad truth that as women we often have to exercise subtlety when it comes to getting our way. As witches we hold a distinct advantage over all the unfortunate muggle women because wands are an excellent equalising factor to have in a society. But at the same time the fact we are of noble birth means our conduct is highly scrutinised and we have expectations and responsibilities which other witches don't. This means we must always be vigilant of the potentially long reaching consequences of our actions, and understand that the only true triumph is one which has the power to endure longer than the initial rush of success."

"So you're saying a short term victory isn't really a victory at all, and that it's better in the long run to be proven smart than proven right?"

"Precisely. For all of his reputation for unpredictability and ruthless violence, from what I have observed today our Lord appears to be the exceedingly rare kind of powerful man who honestly doesn't expect his wife to be a beautiful doormat. While I still have absolutely no idea as to how or why you are with him in the first place, as long as you keep your sass to manageable levels and mostly behind closed doors I honestly think you might even stand a chance at being somewhat happy. Other young brides entering into political marriages with men almost four times their age as you will be are almost never so fortunate."

"I understand that Lady Malfoy, I really do. But I can't accept the idea of toeing the line just because he's the Dark Lord, I absolutely refuse to be stuck for the rest of my life in a relationship based on fear or intimidation. I don't actually need to marry him at all you know. In fact I'm probably giving up on whatever slim chance at a normal life I still had left after he gave me an AK to the head as an infant. Not to mention risking all of my friends and loved ones abandoning me over it, the ones he hasn't murdered anyway that is."

"You are likely correct." Narcissa said softly. "I won't downplay the gravity of your choice by pretending otherwise."

"Yeah. And do you know my sole condition, the one thing I asked for in return? It was that he prove it wasn't just about the potential political power and my magical Parselmouth uterus and all the ridiculously weird ways we've been tied together by fate and magic. I didn't even ask him to love me, I know it's not something he's really equipped for and I'm honestly fine with that. I just need to know he can see me and respect me as my own person, as Harry. If he does that, just that, I will be his. The war will be his. Magical Britain will be his." She looked up at the older witch, unable to stop her lower lip from quivering just a little. "That's not so much to ask for is it?"

Narcissa's face softened for the very first time all afternoon, and she smiled down at Harry as gently as only a mother could. "No child, it isn't."

"Thank you Lady Malfoy." Harry said, a little embarrassed at the vulnerability but feeling better
about things now she'd gotten it off her chest. "I think you were right, I really did need the fresh air. And I do appreciate you taking the time to talk to me."

"It is my pleasure Harriet dear." She turned them around to start walking back towards the house. "And why don't you call me Aunt Cissa, you are after all a fellow woman of the House of Black. Not to mention I suspect we will be seeing rather a lot of each other over the coming year. And if I may give you one more piece of advise?" Harry nodded, curious as to what else she would say. Diamonds and witchfire indeed. "If you are going to be making it a habit to tease my dear, silly Lucius then you really must do as I did and learn to be more covert about it."

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The shortcake was excellent with the wine just as Narcissa had promised, and despite the alcohol content sadly being minimal at best the quick break had definitely let cooler heads prevail. Harry didn't stop weighing in with her opinion, and if she thought Voldemort was being an unreasonable prat she told him so. But she didn't purposefully antagonise him if she was cross either, and they made it through discussing plans for her regular visits and spending the school holidays together without any further mishaps or threats of wholesale destruction. Narcissa had even managed to squeeze in some provisions for her to receive regular courting gifts as was apparently traditional (which she greatly appreciated, because after a childhood spent getting used socks for Christmas she really, really liked getting presents) and there was no way it would have ever occurred to her to bring it up herself.

Finally they were up to the last and probably most important part of the whole contract, the terms for the détente.

"I confess that I was most... surprised by the contents of this section my Lord." Said Lucius, who had rallied admirably after the earlier drama thanks to the judicious application of shortcake.

"I think it is very considerate and sensible actually." Narcissa replied breezily. "You would find similar terms appearing in the initial contract negotiations for any situation where two warring kingdoms or the like were attempting to marry their way towards conflict resolution. It really is improper to allow such battles to be fought in a private setting, domestic harmony is achieved by respectful compromise or not at all."

"I agree completely with Aunt Cissa." Said Harry just as calmly, newly inspired to act the part of the lady she was and highlighting it by making a point of sitting like one instead of a quidditch player. "The whole point of this insanity is to find a third solution to the war, and allowing time to work towards that solution can only benefit all of us in the long run."

Ever since she had returned from her walk chatting with the blonde witch like they were old friends Voldemort had looked ever so slightly wary, and still seemed vaguely suspicious about when the other shoe was going to drop. "That is correct. The discovery that Harry is a Parselmouth changed everything because it meant the final obstacle to my being able to claim the Slytherin Lordship has been overcome. The political power we will be able to wield, especially when you add in Harry's own Houses as well as her personal influence, gives us more options and allows us to take a route to victory which previously was otherwise closed. A détente for a year and a day is a minor cost for the benefits it will ultimately bring, and we can still use the time to our advantage as we rearrange the chessboard to our liking."

"Very good my Lord. So the first point of interest is that in return for Heiress Black stepping away from the conflict and taking no direct action against you personally or inciting others to do so on her
behalf, you and your forces will also cease all attacks against both her and civilian targets?"

"Yes indeed. I would however like to classify civilian targets as non-combatants, anyone who takes up their wand to actively attack and not just defend themselves or others will be dealt with accordingly. Law enforcement will automatically be classified as enemy combatants, as will the Order of the Phoenix."

"That's not entirely fair." She said with a slight frown. "I can't exactly disagree with the bit about law enforcement even though I really don't like it, but a lot of my friends are in the Order or affiliated with it in some way and a lot of them only joined because of me. I'm doing this to protect the people I care about, but if you're just going to kill them after all what even is the point of this?"

Thankfully Lucius was prepared and already had a possible solution. "What about an agreement to take no pre-emptive strikes against Order members, and if during the course of my Lord's agents conducting their own business the Order chooses to launch a counter-attack only non-lethal force will be employed?"

"It is impossible in a situation such as this to avoid violence entirely Harriet dear." Narcissa said, not unkindly. "Accidents may happen, but as the Order doesn't allow children on the front lines only those who have the ability and experience to fight will be doing so. And if our Lord agrees to use non-lethal force the risk of casualties is low."

"Would you agree to that then?" She asked her soon-to-be betrothed, knowing this would be the proof of his commitment to making this work just as showing up here today at all had been Harry's.

"Considering that the Order generally try to not kill anyone themselves I suppose it will have to do." He admitted begrudgingly, clearly aware this was a test. "I will not be held responsible for accidents however, and if I or any of my Death Eaters are in a duel where someone is legitimately trying to kill us then we should have the right to reciprocate."

Harry bit her lip, thinking, but eventually nodded. "Fine. It's not perfect, but it's probably the most balanced solution we're likely to find."

"It's agreed then." Narcissa said, obviously aware of the unspoken undercurrents of their exchange. "Can I just say, I believe this to be an excellent foundation to build your future working relationship upon. While the particulars of the alliance won't of course be formalised until we reconvene to negotiate the marriage contract, I think this shows a commendable willingness to compromise in order to achieve your mutual goals."

"Indeed." Said Lucius, apparently quite used to his wife being insightful to the point of being functionally psychic. "Now the second part is regarding the political aspect of the current conflict. There is presently a lot of propaganda being used to sway public opinion for and against all the various agendas, and as both of you are key public figures what you say and do - or even what you don't say and do - will likely have the potential to have far reaching consequences for all of Magical Britain."

Voldemort folded his arms and settled back to prepare for another argument, because this was one of the only areas where they'd been unable to reach a preliminary agreement during their original discussion two nights ago. "My opinion is it would be unsafe for Harry to publicly denounce Dumbledore and the Light at this stage of the game, especially as I suspect in the future her sway over the followers of that faction will be a valuable resource. However she still needs to make it clear to the citizens of Magical Britain that she disagrees with the way they are conducting themselves regarding the conflict."
Harry rolled her eyes. "And my opinion is if I'm going to go out of my way to actively encourage attention from the public, which is something I loathe beyond the telling of it I might add, then there needs to be some assurances your lackeys won't be taking advantage of the infighting in the Light-aligned politicians which will inevitably follow in order to push through any laws which will violate people's civil liberties."

She'd unconsciously started to mirror the Dark Lord sitting at her elbow as she talked, arms crossed as she leaned back and readied herself to righteously dig her heels in for all she was worth. Because despite what Narcissa had cautioned earlier this actually was one battle she wasn't willing to budge on for any reason. "I might be proud of my magical heritage and have voluntarily chosen to follow our traditions, but I want it to be very clear I am vehemently opposed to the myth of supremacy based on blood purity, as well as any attempt to treat people like my mother and my best friend as second class citizens. I don't care how you try to justify it, the minute I see any anti-Muggleborn legislation being passed through the Wizengamot I will march myself right up to Dumbledore's stupid gaudy office and ask him very nicely to stick the sword of Godric Gryffindor right through my fucking scar."

Even not knowing exactly why that example was so specific the Malfoys were still staring at her like she'd finally lost her marbles, while Voldemort was starting to do that thing where he loomed so ominously he suddenly seemed ten feet tall. Twice over she was hit with the cold fury which he was radiating like a pissed off thunderstorm, the static electricity and ozone sensation of his magic prickling at all her exposed skin while his turbulent emotions echoed through the previously calm waters of their void ocean and turned it into a tempest.

"It is not wise to threaten me." He said softly, and it was like all the light in the room was being swallowed up by his aura of supreme displeasure. "Especially not with that."

Never one to be cowed by his temper, not before the revelation that she was his horcrux and especially not now, Harry lifted her chin defiantly. "I don't care. You want me and you want to rule Magical Britain, right? Well I am prepared to give you exactly what you want, I will go along with all of it and let you use me and my Houses and my reputation and my magical Parselmouth uterus, hell I'll even help you burn the world and remake it from the ashes if that's what it takes. But it will be on the sole proviso that the new world we build is for everyone. We need new blood to prevent stagnation, don't try and pretend you don't agree with me because I know you've been looking into genetics too and you'd have realised if we don't we'll be extinct within a few centuries. I'm even all for proper segregation from the muggle world, only it's not because they're stupid animals or inferior to us but because they are far more advanced than we are and smart as hell, with weapons capable of leveling entire cities in one hit and poisoning the earth for thousands of years to come. Oh, and let's not forget how they outnumber us hundreds of thousands to one. If a war really breaks out between the muggle world and the magical one, then by the end there will be nothing left for anyone."

She looked around at the confused Purebloods and the silent, furiously vibrating figure of Lord Voldemort, and she drove the point home. "I know it's going to take a lot of work and sacrifice and compromise, but I wasn't being flippant when I said that the reason I'm here is to find a third solution to the war. You already fought it once before and both sides lost, and in the end you both lost to me. Fighting it again is just going to end up with even more magical blood spilled and lost forever, and our world even closer to exposure or extinction or both. So we will have this fucking détente, in which we will all put aside the prejudices which threaten to destroy everything we love and so help me we will get to work."

Flushed and slightly embarrassed by her passionate scolding of three people very much her senior, Harry upended her wineglass and drained it all in one go. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Narcissa had the most wide-eyed expression she'd ever seen on a human being who wasn't Luna
Lovegood, and that Lucius was looking kind of offended but also as if he'd never seen her before in his life. But she kept her spine as rigid and unmovable as goblin steel, eyes fixed unwaveringly on the Dark Lord as blood red met piercing emerald and she refused to back down.

Not for anything in the whole godsdamned world.

Finally, after a small and utterly silent eternity, Voldemort spoke. "Do you understand now my dear Lucius, why I will accept no other as my queen?"

Harry glared at him, cheeks even redder, but he just looked at her with such burning intensity she legitimately wondered if she should perhaps check to make sure there were no sharp implements within reach which he might conceivably start trying to eat her with, because Circe's tits if he didn't just look like he was *starving*.

"I believe so my Lord." The other wizard replied faintly, apparently giving up entirely on ever understanding what the hell was going on between the crazy teenaged Saviour who somehow wasn't dead yet and his maniacally grinning Lord.

Said Lord reached over and brushed her fringe to the side so it wasn't caught on her glasses, running his fingers across her scar and down the side of her face to hold her chin, and she could see the tip of his tongue flick out as if trying to taste her defiance in the air.

"I shall *magnanimously* agree to temporarily table any plans which would purposefully lead to the reduction or loss of the civil liberties of any citizen of Magical Britain." He purred. "And although my political activities and infiltration of the Ministry and other key organisations will proceed as planned, I will not target Mudbloods with the express intention of purging their taint from our world."

His gaze was still boring into her from only inches away but she refused to recoil or even flinch. "On one condition."

She narrowed her eyes, knowing full well this was going to be one hell of a condition in return for a concession like that. "And what might that be?"

"That in return you directly contribute to finding alternative solutions to their negative impact on our society." The bloody smirk was back with a vengeance. "You did say we had work to do my dear, so I am simply putting you to work. Live or die, I really couldn't care less either way about your precious Mudbloods but you clearly do. So if you want to save them then you will have to convince me how and why I should be bothered." He leaned down, so close that if either of them were to breathe in too heavily that their lips would touch. "You might have to speak up a bit too darling. I have a lot of advisors and lieutenants who are bloodpurists, and only the one of you."

She grit her teeth, knowing he was manipulating her into agreeing to actively participate in his campaign before they had even gotten married as had been the previous agreement, but also knowing she couldn't possibly say no. The guarantee he would hold off on purging the Muggleborns for now and would even involve her in his decision making was far too tempting an opportunity to pass up, and the bastard knew it.

"In a past life you were the fucking snake in the Garden of Eden weren't you?" She spat in disgust, jerking her head back before he actually bloody kissed her in front of the bloody Malfoys. "You smug git."

Voldemort just laughed as he sat back and out of her personal space, honest to Merlin actually laughed. "I suppose that makes you my Eve then, doesn't it darling?" His eyes raked over her,
apparently far too gone to care one bit about propriety. "I cannot wait until all of your good intentions pave your way straight down to hell."

"Well we both know I'll have company when I get there, won't I?" She sneered. "And at least I'll know I tried my best to help people, unlike some I could mention."

"Then I look forward to our mutual and eternal damnation." He said with a pleased sigh, her audacity and then her capitulation apparently making him once again in an excellent mood. "Though for now, I think agreeing to my suggestion to collaborate on policy creation will have to suffice. Lucius, did you note the changes to that subsection?"

As it turned out he had not.

In fact he had apparently been so busy staring in unmitigated horror as his precious Dark Lord violently eye-fucked the Girl-Who-Lived while she argued him into submission (of a sort) that he'd completely forgotten he had a rather important job to do.

Once again Narcissa came to the rescue, quietly repeating the agreed upon terms verbatim for her husband to frantically write down while Harry distracted Voldemort by loudly informing him that she was all out of wine.

The two witches eyes met for a brief second while their respective partners were otherwise occupied, and it was such a powerful moment of female solidarity that Harry almost wanted to cry. As hesitant as she was about joining up with Voldemort and his merry band of psychos she got the distinct impression that she and Narcissa at least were going to get along just fine.

"As far as propaganda goes, will a mutual agreement to be hands off when it comes to each other personally suffice?" Lucius eventually asked once he'd caught up. "The Light, the Dark, the Neutrals, the Ministry, international interests, and the general public will remain open season, but you will for all intents and purposes acknowledge your differences in opinion but otherwise ignore the subject of each other in public and in the press."

Voldemort waved a negligent hand. "I have already announced she is to be left alone for the foreseeable future so it is no hardship to continue that policy. As long as she does not allow Dumbledore to parade her around as a puppet for the media I don't see it as being an issue."

"That's fine." She agreed, exhausted from the emotional roller coaster and just wanting it to be over. "I really do hate the press and their ridiculous obsession with me, and Dumbledore already knows he's on thin ice and can't push anything like that without me pushing right back."

"I think we can safely conclude the section on politics then." Even the inscrutable Narcissa sounded relieved, and Harry didn't blame her. Didn't people always say that discussing religion and politics were the fastest way to start arguments?

"The third point regarding the détente is the matter of Peter Pettigrew. It says here within a month of the commencement of the courtship he is to be turned over into the custody of the DMLE while under the Imperius Curse to force him to confess to his betrayal of the Potters, framing the late Lord Sirius Black for the betrayal of the Potters and the death of twelve muggles so he'd be sent to Azkaban, living in hiding for twelve years as the Weasley's pet rat, as well as his murder of Cedric Diggory and his role in my Lord's resurrection. This will be explained as being arranged as punishment for failing in his duties to my Lord over an unrelated matter so as to not draw any attention to Heiress Black's involvement." Lucius looked up from the draft contract. "This is very specific. Isn't there anything Heiress Black will be giving in exchange for this request?"
She glared at Lucius with such sudden, burning fury that he actually recoiled slightly. "No." She said shortly. "There are casualties in war, everyone who fights in one understands they might die for their beliefs at the hands of an enemy. But he wasn't an enemy he was their friend. He consciously chose to betray my parents to certain death and then he chose yet again to frame my late Lord father for it, which means it's in large part his fault twice over that I grew up with abusive muggles instead of people who loved me."

Her eyes flicked over to Voldemort, who was watching her impassively without interrupting. "Pettigrew isn't a gift or an exchange, he is an apology. The first of many my future husband will be making if he ever wants us to make it to the altar."

"I am not one to stand in the way of vengeance Lucius." He said mildly. "She is perfectly entitled to her request which is why I did not add a counter to it. Let it stand as it is, and if a counter must be listed for contractual purposes then you may note it as simply being the pleasure I will receive from seeing one as noble and principled as she actively participating in sending a fellow human being to a fate worse than death."

Harry hated how that sounded, wanting very much to tell him exactly where he could shove his voyeuristic moral sadism. But she needed so badly to clear Sirius' name even if it was only in his memory, and knew if it honestly came down to it she'd give the damn rat over to the Dementors with her own two hands if that's what it took to finally bring him to justice.

Never was she more aware of her innate potential for darkness than when she was overcome by righteous anger, and knew with her other half being who he was he would never be able to resist poking her in it just to see what she did. But as long as he was focusing on her it meant he'd have less time to be causing mayhem elsewhere, so she'd just have to thicken up her skin and learn to deal with it.

"Very good my Lord." Lucius replied stiffly, still looking at Harry with barely concealed wariness. "Is there anything further to add?"

"Just a small matter regarding being prepared for a worst-case scenario." Said Narcissa. "While I have the utmost faith in the ability of you both to be discrete a year is still a long time to be conducting a covert relationship of any kind, let alone one which sees Harriet regularly leaving school grounds. I'm sure it won't be necessary but I think having a contingency plan in place in case of discovery, both to ensure her safety and to control the political fallout, would be a wise thing to agree on ahead of time."

"An excellent suggestion." Said Voldemort, always one to be enthusiastic about the topic of Harry's safety. "In addition to the pair of reusable Portkeys I will be providing which she will be keeping on her person at all times, my main request was in the case of an emergency she would immediately send me a Patronus message and if possible send one to Severus as well."

"You are able to cast a corporeal Patronus at your age?" Lucius asked in surprise, apparently forgetting for the moment that he hated her.

"Ever since my third year." She smirked. "It's one of the reasons I got an O+ on my DADA O.W.L."

"Goodness me, how admirable." Narcissa said, sounding fascinated. "That is such an advanced piece of magic, and certainly an excellent option for emergencies. As I understand it there is no possible way to falsify a Patronus, and they are capable of finding anyone who the caster knows personally no matter where they are."
"Yeah they're pretty handy like that, it's why the Order uses them as messengers. Mine's a great big hulking stag though, so compared to most people's it isn't very subtle. It's also well known so I won't be using it unless as an absolute last resort. Besides I'm kind of used to the fact my life's a disaster so I've gotten rather good at getting myself out of impossible situations."

"Indeed you have." Voldemort noted dryly. "You've certainly caused me no end of frustration over the years."

"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em right?" She said with a wink. "As far as I'm concerned I'm starting my own faction for the coming war and you're joining up with me, not the other way around."

"You truly aren't scared of me punishing you for your insolence at all, are you my dear?" He replied as if he was annoyed, but still looking down at her with that half smile which should frankly be illegal.

"Nope." She said smugly, knowing the smile meant he wasn't actually angry and that if the slowly emerging pattern of his positive reactions to her moxie meant anything he was probably delighted by it. "Anyway, what should we do in the unlikely event of the news of my apparent defection being leaked?"

"Well as by your own request I am not ever going to be around you while wearing my other face, even if it somehow gets out we could probably just tell a slightly edited version of the truth where you have simply been seeing a much older man and kept it quiet because you didn't think people would approve. It would be a far more believable explanation than Harry Potter being courted by Lord Voldemort, and is still scandalous enough to make the gossip-mongers so insensate with excitement they are unlikely to dig any deeper than they need to in order to find my cover identity." All of a sudden he sneered. "Not to mention it would also have the added benefit of making Dumbledore look like an absolute crackpot if he tried to push the issue publicly."

"The unlikely nature of your involvement with each other is something which will definitely work in your favour." Lucius agreed diplomatically, which was likely in the running for the understatement of the year. "I will draft some press releases to cover a handful of the most likely scenarios for you to approve my Lord, that way if by some remote chance anything does happen we can move quickly and control the story in the press."

"Thank you for that Lucius, I would like to see them by the end of the week."

"I'd also like to make it clear that even if something happens I don't want you to drop everything and come charging in like some kind of knight in evil armour." Said Harry, quite reasonably she thought. Predictably Voldemort frowned at that. "If my betrothed is being forcibly kept from me I think I am well within my rights to retrieve her by whatever means necessary."

"Not if those means are indiscriminate bloody murder you aren't." She replied, pushing her braids back over her shoulder. "Remember the discussion about avoiding civilian casualties from before? Attacking Hogwarts counts as causing civilian casualties."

Seeing the Dark Lord starting to get annoyed again Narcissa smoothly interceded. "If I may make an observation my Lord, I believe Harriet will feel more reassured if the terms for any rescue attempt simply preclude anything unfortunate happening to her friends or any innocent bystanders."

"But what if her friends were the ones to kidnap her in the first place?" He asked petulantly.

"It doesn't matter." Harry said softly. "They're my friends, even if they hurt me or decide they hate
me because of what I'm doing that isn't going to change my own feelings for them. It doesn't matter what they do to me, I love them and if you ever hurt them for any reason at all I will never forgive you for as long as we live. Do you understand?"

The man was still only a hairsbreadth away from bloody pouting but he couldn't refute her argument. "Fine. I don't understand your inability to be logical about this, but I suppose in the interest of our future marital harmony I shall have to begrudgingly accept it."

"That's good enough for me." She said cheerfully. "In the unlikely event you do hear that I've been spirited away just get Professor Snape to investigate and see if there's a chance that we can avoid the nuclear solution. It's more likely than not they'd be keeping it as quiet as possible so as not to cause a panic, and that I'd be able to get myself free in due time either by talking my way out or just escaping outright. If he can help me out himself or let you know I've got it all under control it'll save us all the danger of escalating what might just be a knee jerk reaction on their part with no solid evidence which could blow over in a couple of days."

Voldemort looked about as put out as she did whenever he made some persuasive points she didn't want to agree with. "Unfortunately you make a logical argument. Very well, in the case of your being detained I will attempt to wait for Severus to report the exact circumstances before mounting a rescue. Be warned however, if you are imprisoned for longer than three days or are being intentionally hurt in any way I will know. And I will come for you and destroy anything standing in my way." Seeing her warning look he smoothly amended his statement. "Though I will of course endeavor to not irreparably harm anyone still of school age."

"I really doubt the Order will try and torture me." She pointed out, then sighed when she saw he wasn't going to be swayed. "It will have to do then. Agreed."

"Thank you both. If that is all, I believe that was the final point we had to discuss my Lord. If no one else has anything further to add I can get it all written up right now and you could both sign it this afternoon with Narcissa and myself acting as witnesses."

Voldemort turned to Harry. "What do you think my dear, are you satisfied with the terms we have laid out?"

She took a minute to think about it carefully, but they had been very thorough and the sooner she signed the sooner her friends and indeed most of Magical Britain would be safe from her homocidal intended. For now at least. And the cost of a year and a day of her life would buy Harry the time she needed to work on making sure they'd be safe for good.

"I'll sign it."

An actual, honest-to-gods smile broke across his face like the sun, though for once she was placated slightly by the fact she wasn't the only one who was utterly mesmerised by it to the point of complete distraction. "Excellent. How long will it take for you to prepare Lucius?"

He shuffled through the pile of heavily annotated parchment while studiously avoiding eye contact, apparently as disturbed by Voldemort smiling as he was by Harry's entire existence. "An hour will be sufficient time if that is acceptable to you my Lord."

Voldemort nodded. "That will be fine. Thank you for your input Narcissa, it was most helpful."

"Yes, thank you Aunt Cissa."

She bowed her head gracefully at the two of them. "It was my pleasure my Lord, Harriet."
Standing up Voldemort held out a hand to her as graciously as a courtier and she took it without even thinking, the barely restrained hum of energy under their skin making her eyelashes flutter. "We shall meet you both back here in an hour then. Come along Harry."

Chapter End Notes

I HOPE YOU LIKED THIS MY DUDES ♡

Banter and tantrums and UST and Black women bonding and the return of the magical Parselmouth uterus, omfg I seriously loved writing this chapter.

Fun fact: I saw this tumblr post ages ago about anachronistic names in historical fiction, and Tiffany really is a Medieval name which is the shorter version of Theophania, just like Harry said. I seriously can't get over that it's too funny, and like a lot of random historical information it ended up in here.

As always I post chapter teasers and updates and answer all of your burning questions on my Tumblr so come scream at my ask box some more!
http://samvelg-likes-things.tumblr.com
He told me that I was Apollo 13

Chapter Summary

When is a monster not a monster?
Oh, when you love it.

- Caitlyn Siehl

Chapter Notes

Finally chapter 27 sees the light of day! Between writer's block and my Japan honeymoon and now being in New Zealand to visit family, I can't even remember the last time I had a decent internet connection let alone a full day just to myself to get my writing done. Definitely before we moved house, it's been that mad.

Thanks as always for your patience and your comments and your well wishes because I read them all and they make my day. I'll be trying to reply to the last chapter's comments over the next few days too depending on if I can find a decent source of wifi or not, because charming seaside county towns are incredible for the scenery and the fish and chips, less so for phone reception.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Strolling arm in arm with an exceptionally pleased Dark Lord, they made it down a portrait hallway full of snooty Malfoy ancestors and through an honest to gods atrium before Harry had come to her senses enough to question where they were going.

"What are we doing back here while Lucius is writing everything up?"

Voldemort didn't even look down, he just kept leading her deeper into the Manor. "We are going to duel."

"We're going to what now?"

"Duel." He said dryly. "Wands, lots of bright lights and explosions, I'm sure you have heard of it. After all that talking I am about ready to break something and I know you are as well. Therefore, we are going to duel."

"Ha ha." She said, feeling more than a little apprehensive. "I don't know Voldemort. All the other times we were in that position were exceptionally unpleasant, I'm not sure if it's a good idea."

He raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "Harry, we are an hour and two signatures away from officially being betrothed. We need to be comfortable with each other and trust we are not going to do each other an injury. Can you honestly say you think it likely I would go to all this trouble just so I could kill you in a freak duelling accident?"
"No." She reluctantly admitted. "While you're almost melodramatic and vain enough to go the honeypot route it's too inefficient and it makes you too vulnerable. If you were really going to off me you would have done it the first time we saw each other in person." There was a reason after all that she'd arrived at their date the magical equivalent of guns blazing, and it wasn't just for making a slaming first impression.

"Precisely." He nodded, not even bothering to pretend he wouldn't have done just that if their circumstances had been even a little different. "Not to mention if I want you to live long enough to actually become my wife it is in my best interest for you to become a more proficient dueler. While your raw potential is nothing to sneeze at your education thus far has been haphazard at best."

"And whose fault is that exactly?" She huffed. "I'll give you a hint, it rhymes with 'mouldy shorts'."

"Consequently." He continued, as if ignoring her rude comment would make it go away. "I will be teaching you myself."

Well now, that was interesting. "Really?"

"Of course." He replied, opening the door to what appeared to be a dueling room and leading her inside. "If you are coming here most Sundays we might as well take advantage of it and make it even harder for someone to kill you."

"I do like the idea of being more of a badass." She said thoughtfully, eyeing the spacious room with undisguised interest. It even had a proper dueling platform and a chandelier, what the hell.

"See? I knew you would agree." He said briskly. "Now come on, take those robes off and get ready for me."

Harry tripped on the long hem of the robe in question. "For fucks sake, you just had to make it sound dirty on purpose didn't you?"

"I did nothing of the sort." He protested, once again aiming for innocent and missing the mark entirely.

"Then why the hell am I undressing to duel? This isn't beach volleyball."

"If I am to provide you with proper instruction then I will need to be able to assess your form." His red eyes roamed down her again, the weight of his stare in the privacy of the otherwise empty room feeling a lot more intimate than she would have expected. "Unobstructed."

"You bloody pervert." She snapped, but she still unbuttoned the heavy black mourning robe and threw it over a nearby chair while staring back at him defiantly.

Underneath was a rather modest tea length black dress with three-quarter sleeves and subtle silver rune embroidery, and she raised an eyebrow at his frank but approving assessment considering she wasn't exactly showing much of anything in the way of skin. "My form huh?"

He just grinned and didn't dignify her with an answer. "Ground rules: no Unforgivables, and nothing which can permanently maim. Everything else is fair game, and try to use as much of your spell repertoire as possible. If I am going to tutor you I need to assess how much you've learned since the last time we crossed wands."

"As if I would use an Unforgivable, and where would I have learned anything which could maim anyway?"
"You cast the Cruciatius on Bellatrix at the Ministry." He pointed out. "And while it is true there was mixed results, there was still enough intent to cause damage for her to need an extended stint with my Healers."

Harry really didn't like to remember that particular piece of spellwork, but she couldn't deny that knowing she'd hurt Bellatrix badly enough to need copious medical assistance was very satisfying.

"You said I could have anything I wanted right?" She said quietly, looking down at her hands. "Well, I want Bellatrix's head."

Far from being annoyed she was demanding the death of one of his top lieutenants he just looked rather impressed. "While normally I would be applauding your vindictiveness and seeing to it personally, she is one of the very few people in the world I can't give you. I am sorry darling, I would if I could."

Harry scowled. "Why the hell not? She killed Sirius, she deserves to face justice for what she did."

"Do try and look at the big picture here. Yes she murdered your Lord Father and you are well within your rights to demand vengeance for it, but she is also one of only twenty-two people alive currently anchoring the magic of the British Isles." He gently brushed one of her small braids back behind her ear. "We can't afford to kill her Harry. Not yet."

"Fuck!" If she was going to the extent of marrying the enemy to protect the future of magic, then however much her blood was screaming for justice she couldn't do it. Not now.

"Shall we begin?" Voldemort asked, changing the subject and moving to one side of the dueling platform and bowing elegantly as he saluted her with his wand.

Harry gave him a warning look as she went to the other and curtsied. "If you tell me to bow to death again I'm dumping your melodramatic arse faster than you can say quidditch."

The bastard just grinned. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Faster than a striking cobra he attacked, chaining what looked like an Incarcerous with a non-verbal Diffindo which she was only able to dodge and deflect respectively thanks to reflexes honed by years of Harry Hunting, quidditch and general chaos.

"How are you so bloody fast?" She asked breathlessly, firing back an Expelliarmus which he lazily swatted away with his wand when it got too close.

He raised a far too perfect eyebrow. "You mean apart from the fifty odd years of experience which I have on you?"

Harry made a face. "Urgh don't say it like that, it just reminds me that I'm marrying an old man."

Hellfire red eyes narrowed dangerously. "Excuse me?"

"Ow!" She yelped, almost dropping her wand as he hit her square in the funny bone with a ludicrously overpowered Stinging Hex.

"So sorry my dear." The apology probably would have been a lot more sincere if he wasn't smirking while he gave it. "My eyes aren't what they used to be. You know, being as I am so very, very old."

"Very, very funny."
The prat had the gall to brush imaginary lint off the lapels of his robes while he side-stepped her next hex as if it wasn't even there. "In the immortal words of Fomalhauta Black: there is no substitute for good manners, except fast reflexes."

It was official, she was being courted by a drama queen. "You really took her advice to heart didn't you? You rude wanker."

As usual he just ignored her insults, sharp red gaze zeroing in on her wand. "Hold still in that position for me please little horcrux."

"Why, want me to pose nicely?" She sneered, but she still did as he asked.

Moving from his position across the room until he was standing next to her, he took her wand hand in his own and began to inspect it closely.

"Well it is no wonder you can't react fast enough." He said, dangerously close to taking far too many liberties with her person as he assessed her stance. "You are still holding your wand in the standard grip they teach you in bloody first year Charms. We had gotten ourselves out of that silly habit before we even took our O.W.Ls."

Harry resolutely ignored how nice his big, warm hands felt on her. "Well excuse me mister clever if I don't want it flying out of my hand mid-spell!"

Voldemort just rolled his eyes. "You would have to try exceptionally hard for that to happen Harry. Now, do you see how I am holding my wand firmly between my fingers, but not pressed tightly up against my palm?"

Apparently very committed to Murder Study Hour he demonstrated it so she could clearly see what he was taking about, the almost lazy way he held it in his fingers with the top of his hand facing up and the wand tip angled down. It was very different from hers which was clutched in a deathgrip with the top of her hand facing the outside of her body while the tip pointed up at a 45 degree angle.

"This way the grip isn't so tight that it stiffens your wrist." He explained, bringing up her free hand and running it over his hand and wrist while he went through the motions of casting a few spells. It seemed a very strange thing to do until she realised that like this she could feel the fluid movement of his muscles under his skin, and then she was just far too distracted by the discovery. "This gives you more fluidity and ease of movement when you are casting."

"Oh, I get it." Reclaiming her hand before he could make her touch anything else she changed her own grip to mirror his, noting immediately that it felt much better just like he'd said it would. "So it's kind of like how you can't manoeuvre too well on a broom if you're holding on for dear life to the handle?"

"A plebian example but an accurate one." He agreed, though it was clear what his opinion of brooms were. "And much like with flying it is a lot easier to injure yourself if your tendons are pulled too tight, especially over a longer period of time. If you find yourself in a duel with an opponent to whom you are evenly matched your physical endurance becomes just as important as your magical endurance, and a small advantage such as this can often become the deciding factor."

"Is it just me or are most magical folk generally a pretty lazy lot? Not all of course, but it seems like a lot of them would rather use magic to fetch something than walk across the room to get it."

"You are correct. The younger generation are of course usually more active, but between our ability to accomplish most things with the wave of our wand and a fast metabolism from all the energy we
burn to fuel our magic, it is more common than not for magical humans to be woefully unfit."

"Our metabolisms are faster?"

"Surely you have noticed the incredible amount of high calorie food your peers can put away with minimal to no weight gain."

Suddenly Ron and his bottomless pit of a stomach was a bit less insane. "Huh, I just thought that was puberty."

"That certainly contributes." He said. "Even if you wouldn't know it to look at some of them."

Now that was just uncalled for. "You rude arsehole. Avis!"

What must have been thirty birds flew out of her wand, each one different from the last and all apparently determined to ruin Voldemort's day.

"Does this courtship mean I can call you Tom now?" Harry asked once he'd Vanished them, though not before a particularly determined nightingale had actually succeeded in messing up his hair.

Already pissed at her bird's misconduct, Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "It most certainly does not."

"Well I flatly refuse to call the man I'm for all intents and purposes engaged to Lord bloody Voldemort, it's not happening. Tom." She fired a Tarantallegra at him, just to be cheeky, which he deflected with a vehemence which conveyed just how annoyed he was at her trying to make him do something that undignified.

"If you ever call me Tom again, I will simply be forced to call you such as well." He followed up the unsuccessful Dancing Jinx with a whiplash fast non-verbal curse which sent a jet of purple fire at her feet, causing her to be the one to dance back to avoid being singed. "My dearest Tom."

Harry actually tripped over herself again, both from avoiding the curse and from sheer bloody shock. "What the hell?"

The infuriating bastard looked equal parts pissy and pompous. Seriously, did he and Percy Weasley take night classes in facial expressions together? "Well technically speaking you spent just as much time being called Tom as I did. Especially when you consider your current age you have rather a lot more in common with that phase of our life than I do."

"You can't call me Tom!" She shrieked, panicking and more than a little horrified as she only just threw up a shield in time to avoid a nasty smog-coloured jinx she didn't recognise. "That's not my name anymore, that's not who I am!"

He effortlessly blasted apart her Shielding Charm and followed it up with another Incarcerous which she had to dive to dodge, though her left arm and shoulder still got wrapped up tightly in ropes before she could Vanish them. "And neither is it who I am. Names are important, they are the first thing in our entire life which are our own and they utterly define us. Do me the courtesy of respecting my current identity and I will return that same courtesy. That is fair, is it not?"

It was fair, however much she was loathe to admit it.

"Fine." She conceded. "What do I call you then? Voldemort is just ridiculous, I refuse to call my fiancé something that pretentious."

He sighed as if it was the greatest imposition ever made on a person. "Then you are welcome to
I suggest a reasonable alternative for me to approve, for your personal and private use only of course."

"I seriously get to give you a pet name?" She breathed, because he called her so many weird (and weirdly adorable) things that it really was only fair she could do the same. "How does cupcake sound?"

*Incendio.* "Are you purposefully trying to irritate me?"

*Protego.* "What about pumpkin pie?"

*Ventus.* "No."

*Colloshoo.* "Tiffany?"

"Harry."

"Fine, fine, spoil my fun why don't you."

*Alarte Ascendare.* With a sharp sweep of his wand she was airborne before she even knew what hit her. "Just like you spoil my fun when I want to burn down villages?"

"Oh Merlin I can't breathe." She wheezed from her new position flat on the floor, staring up at the Malfoy's posh ceiling. How could even a ceiling be posh? Oh right, with a chandelier. "Help me I'm dying."

"So dramatic." Having resolidified his position as reigning badass, Voldemort sauntered over and helped her up.

Between the syrupy horcrux warmth and his surprisingly gentle hand on her shoulder while he ran a quick Diagnostic Charm over her, no doubt healing the new bruises she was now sporting as he went, it reminded Harry a lot of the first time they'd ever hugged. It had been an impulse she hadn't even thought through before it was happening, some deeply ingrained instinct to comfort someone who was hurting, but even now she remembered feeling strangely safe because what monster could possibly be scarier than the one curled around her as if she was the only thing which mattered?

"Monster." She said experimentally, looking up at his suspicious face.

"What, are you trying to be insulting again?"

"No, I'm suggesting a pet name. Because you're definitely a monster Voldemort, there's no denying it." Harry smiled crookedly, unable to deny the ill-advised affection she was developing for this brutal hurricane masquerading as a man. "But at the same time this whole betrothal insanity means that you're kind of my monster now, aren't you?"

With awed delight she noticed that even though he hastily schooled his shocked expression back into the usual blank disdain for the world, his ears had gone ever so slightly pink.

Circe's tits he was blushing.

Harry Black-Potter had made Lord Voldemort blush.

This was the best thing that had ever happened. To any human being, in the entire history of everything. She was going to tease him about this forever, literally forever.

Resisting the urge to start cackling in a decidedly Bellatrix-like fashion and resolving to do so later when alone, she decided to instead pound the stake into the coffin. Straightening his green pinstriped
tie like she was the perky young wife in a 1950s sitcom, she beamed up at him with the sweetest, loveliest smile she could manage. "My monster. It fits, don't you think?"

If anything his face got blanker and his ears got pinker. "You impossible girl."

Ten points to Gryffindor.

No longer bothering to hide her amusement she smirked at him. "I think the fact that there's two of us clearly demonstrates that I'm improbable rather than impossible."

Returning his wand back into the holster in his sleeve, he turned and began to walk briskly back towards the door. "Well if that is the case, then I don't think there yet exists math capable of quantifying just how improbable you are."

"Very funny monster." She giggled, Summoning her robe with a swish of her wand as she skipped after him, catching up easily and looping an arm through his as they walked. The victorious feeling only grew when he continued to look torn between flustered and smug as anything, because this was never going to get old, _never_. "See? It has a certain charm to it."

"Well you're not wrong." He grumbled under his breath. "Fine then you absolute menace, monster it is."

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The hour still wasn't up yet, so they ended up in Voldemort's private study while he tinkered with something on his desk and Harry sat by the fireplace in an armchair. It actually felt so much like being back in the library that she was soon bored and pestering him with questions to break the monotony.

"So monster, when you talked to the Malfoys about this did you do the face reveal or the courtship reveal first?"

If he was still overly affected by the new pet name he was doing a much better job of hiding it now. "The first, as I believe you requested there be no chance they would think you were marrying 'my godsawful bloody snakeface'."

She giggled under her breath at how literally he'd taken her request. "How did that go?"

"Hilariously." He drawled. "When I dropped the blood glamour I thought we were going to need to get a house elf to fetch the smelling salts."

Harry snorted. "There's no way Aunt Cissa nearly fainted just from seeing your sodding face."

"Don't be silly." He said, lip twitching. "It was Lucius."

Why was she not remotely surprised? "Of course it was."

"The courtship contact was another thing entirely. I began by informing them of my need for their assistance in a somewhat personal matter which was to be at the highest level of secrecy, only known to the two of them, myself, and my soon to be betrothed." He looked up at her, smirking wickedly. "When I proceeded to inform them that the betrothed in question was to be you, it was met with
considerable shock and no small amount of confusion."

Oh wow, what she wouldn't give for a Penseive memory of that conversation. "I bet that went over well."

"I believe this was the point where Narcissa nearly became overcome. As I understand it wedding planning is the sort of thing that witches of your station particularly enjoy."

"Don't look at me." She said flatly. "I was never one of those girls who daydreamed about weddings."

"Maybe it's something you'll acquire with age then."

"I'm still just feeling pleasantly surprised at how much better my chances of acquiring anything with age are these days." Harry confessed, which made her look suspiciously at the Dark Lord. "Why do you look so young anyway? I mean, I know you spent like twelve years without a body and that when you were resurrected it just kind of picked up from where it left off. But you were still in your mid-fifties when we did our Chernobyl impression, and you really don't look it."

Voldemort shrugged, back to not looking up from whatever it was he was fiddling with. "Magical humans live a lot longer than muggles do, and can still be quite active even in their second century of life. This is due to the preservative affect magic has on our physical bodies, and the stronger the individual's magic the stronger that effect is."

Well that was interesting to know. "So you look barely forty even though you're either fifty-something or sixty-something depending on how you're counting it, just because your magic is stronger than average?"

"Precisely."

"Were you just born stronger?" She wondered out loud. "Because that seems wildly unfair to everyone who isn't an evil genius."

"Contrary to popular belief, unless they are born a Squib or suffer some kind of curse all wizards and witches have the exact same potential for magic when starting out. Our strength is a combination of our willpower, our determination, and our commitment to learning and bettering ourselves." He smiled crookedly. "Not to mention you have to truly love magic to be able to excel in it."

Seeing him look so soft and happy while talking about love made something in her chest hurt, made her realise for not the first time that whatever it was which was growing between them she was really getting in over her head.

"That is why, ironically enough, unlike in the past it is often the halfbloods who end up being the most powerful these days." Voldemort continued, for once blissfully unaware of his affect on her. "As much as I hate to admit it the strongest human magic users which Magical Britain has produced in the last century - as far as I'm aware anyway - are in chronological order Dumbledore, myself, Severus, and now you little horcrux. All of us are halfbloods who grew up partly in both worlds, and therefore understand in a way Purebloods cannot just how precious magic truly is."

"Snape's a halfblood?" That was definitely news to her, and not something she would have suspected. "And how the hell am I on that list, I'm just a sixth year."

"A sixth year with incredible potential my dear. Because you love magic, you love to learn, and you are more stubborn than a dragon. Given time and the proper opportunities, you could do or be absolutely anything."
Well that was incredibly flattering all things considered.

"Now then." He said, putting down his wand. "Come here for a moment darling, I have a gift for you."

Harry's ears perked up. "Oh?"

"We needed a way to be able to communicate while awake yes? This is my solution."

Trotting over to sit on his desk like she'd done so many times before in the library, she really shouldn't have been as surprised as she was to see two rings sitting next to each other on top of an old, heavily annotated spellbook.

The rings were both silver, and the centre of each band featured two intricately detailed hands clasping each other. While getting closer she noticed on the inside of the band something was engraved, and picking one up to get a better look she saw that it was that same quote from his letter after the first time they kissed.

Alea iacta est.

"They're beautiful." They really were too, all sleek shiny metal and so finely detailed she half expected the hands to move.

"It is called a fede ring." He said, voice matter-of-fact like whenever he was explaining some new interesting fact, but his eyes were blazing when he stared at her. "They have been worn ever since Roman times, maybe even earlier. The clasping hands represent two people coming together in friendship or alliance, or as in our case, betrothal."

Dear Merlin was the charming fucker too smooth for his own good. "How do they work then?"

"As well as a powerful Notice-Me-Not the rings are enchanted with a modified Protean Charm based on the one I used in the creation of my Dark Marks. The engraving on the inside of both bands can be changed by either of us making adjustments to our own ring. This will be mirrored on the other, which will warm up to alert the wearer that there is a new message."

When he reached out towards her she hesitated for a moment before placing her left hand in his. As if entranced, Voldemort's eyes were locked onto where he silently slid the smaller fede ring onto her ring finger, the silver gently heating up and adjusting to fit her perfectly while Harry felt what could only be a horde of butterflies violently rioting in her stomach.

Before she could overthink it, Harry picked up the matching ring sitting on the desk. Not meeting Voldemort's eyes in case she lost her nerve, she took his left hand and slipped his onto the ring finger as well.

Neither of them spoke, the moment was far too fragile for words. But despite the fact there was still a long way to go, she knew without needing to ask that they were both experiencing something neither of them had ever expected to feel, not even once in two lifetimes.

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Signing the courtship contract was surreal, both because she was signing a courtship contract with Lord Voldemort and the fact that after their signatures were done they would quite literally have to seal it with a kiss. Lucius looked like he'd rather be anywhere in the entire world than right here,
about to watch this (a sentiment which Harry wholeheartedly shared), but apparently it wasn't negotiable and neither of them would be getting their way today.

"Do they really have to watch?" She grumbled, flushing red and not entirely sure if it was from embarrassment or anticipation.

"The Malfoys are our witnesses Harry." Apparently recovered from their emotionally charged interlude, Voldemort was back to his usual state of sarcastically amused by the world. "This means that yes, they do actually have to witness the official commencement of the courtship contract."

Cheeky sod.

They stared at each other over the signing table, both resting a hand on the piece of parchment which would save their world if everything went according to plan.

It didn't matter that they'd kissed multiple times in their dreams, this would be the first time in the real world and this would be what made it all true. All the betrayal, the lies, the hope, the attraction, the tentative affection which despite the pervasive feeling of it all being something fated was still one of the few things Harry had ever chosen entirely for herself, this is where it became real.

"Well then?" She asked, wondering why the hell he was being sadistic enough to draw this out.

Seeing Voldemort still standing there silently - all looming presence and pristine robes but with a strange light in his eyes - Harry realised that even now, on the brink of having everything he'd ever wanted, he was still waiting for her to move.

For her to be the one to choose him, to choose them.

"You idiot." She sighed, wondering if all Dark Lords were this bloody needy, and used her free hand to grab his tie and yank him down so she could kiss him.

If kissing in the library had felt incendiary, this time around it was positively incandescent. It might have been horcrux bullshit or the bonding magic or even something else altogether, but all Harry knew was that they were finally together and that they were burning.

Light erupted out of them like a supernova, but she couldn't see it because she was far too busy drowning in the all-consuming heat and the visceral resonance of him. His hands were gripping her waist and hers were buried in his hair, and she couldn't breathe because that would mean stopping and she never wanted this to end, never.

The ozone and static of Voldemort's magic and the rain and ash which Harry realised was her own, they were entwined like they'd always been meant to be like that. She could taste the storm brewing under their skin when his tongue teased at her fangs which had made a reappearance at some point, the unmistakable mix of blood and venom making her dizzy with want.

Dangerously close to going to far, they broke away from each other before they lost themselves entirely. Both of them were panting, their fangs flashing and mouths bloodied, clutching onto each other as the lingering swarm of light motes kept spinning around them like new constellations.

"Was...was it supposed to do that?" She asked dizzily, the taste of their shared blood intoxicating and only still standing because of his arms around her.

"Only for the most powerful of bonds." He said, still breathless and looking about ready to devour her. "And only if we really meant it."
Averting her eyes from what she could see in his Harry accidentally got a good look at their witnesses. Narcissa seemed awed by the fireworks, while Lucius was as fascinated and disgusted as a small child faced with a bucket full of muddy earthworms.

As she looked back up at the flushed, exultant face of her betrothed, Harry felt the last of the bonding magic flare and sink into her bones like an Unbreakable Vow made of fire and blood and gold. For better or worse she knew she had made her choice and there was no going back, that now he had her he would never let her go ever again.

Voldemort had won, utterly, and Harry couldn't even make herself feel mad about it.

Just like she'd told him earlier he was a monster, but he was her monster now and apparently that made all of the difference in the world.

Chapter End Notes

So fede rings are totally a thing, you should look them up coz they're a really pretty and really cool piece of history!

The duel was a nightmare to write purely because I've not got a huge amount of experience with action scenes so I hope it made sense and was fun to read. Failing that, I hope all the fluffy disaster!relationship moments were sufficient to make up for the late chapter. Oh, and please tell me what you think of Voldemort's new pet name! It's another thing I've had planned for ages and I'm sooo glad we're finally up to this bit so Harry can start calling him that because I love it so damn much.

As always I post chapter teasers and answer all your questions and asks on my Tumblr so come say hi ♡

http://samvelg-likes-things.tumblr.com
These dizzy stargazers who dreamed of the black

Chapter Summary

No human is an island, no matter how much they wish they could be sometimes. No human is only one thing, even if it would easier on everyone if they were. No human is beyond saving, even if they try to turn away from their saviour.

Voldemort; a triptych.

Chapter Notes

Hello my glorious heathens! After some health issues (chronic arm/shoulder RSI does not lead to writing productivity, urgh) and some much needed work on the back end of the story to tweak some lore and assorted plot points to take into account how the story has been evolving I was finally able to sit down and wrestle Volders into submission to get this chapter done. I'm behind on replying to comments which I don't like doing to you guys because I read them all and they absolutely make my fucking day, but considering my physical limitations right now I figured you'd rather I use my limited typing time to finish the actual chapter.

Voldemort sat down in his armchair next to the fireplace and sighed, feeling content. After the in-person drama surrounding the beginning of their courtship, it was something of a relief to once again be back in the familiar territory of the library, sans all the real-life complications and the almost dizzying rush of her presence. His horcrux still hadn't shown up but that was par for the course, and with her appalling sleep habits it would likely be a while until she did. A good thing too considering the current mess he was dealing with, yet again. Voldemort scowled at the shelves of his misbehaving mindpalace, because today really was not his day.

After they had started dreaming together he'd added another shelf to the horcrux section of the library and moved all of the facts and memories pertaining to one Harry Black-Potter onto it. Once the migration was complete he'd thought nothing more of the matter, but apparently at some point between then and now his subconscious had decided to do some rearranging. She wasn't in the 'Horcrux' section, the 'Allies' section, the 'Enemies' section, the 'Profiles of Useful People' section, or even where he kept all the information pertaining to souls and soul magic.

No, Harry Black-Potter was now filed on a brand new shelf right next to it which was helpfully labelled 'Soulmates'.

Sometimes he hated neuroplasticity.

While it was true the library was designed to be an intuitive system which categorised things automatically according to his own associations, he wasn't sure if it was mortifying or terrifying that his subconscious had apparently taken it upon itself to move where she was stored in his mind palace in such passive-aggressively dramatic fashion. As if he needed any more evidence that the brat had
managed to crawl much too far under his skin for comfort.

Getting up off his wonderfully comfy chair he floated up to the offending shelf, as for the second time in recent months he got to work removing the books pertaining to her from their new shelf and threw them into a pile by his desk to put back where they bloody belonged. He was not going to be made a fool of by his own mind thank you very much, that was one indignity too far. Just about to throw the last book into the pile Voldemort realised that what he was holding was all the memories of their recent in-person encounters. The book they were contained in was bound in black leather covered in gold runes, mostly empty as if waiting for more to fill it up, and faintly warm to the touch. She had been warm like this too, an entirely unhelpful corner of his mind unhelpfully reminded him. While their recent activities in the library had of course been incredibly enjoyable, actually kissing Harry Black-Potter in person had been not unlike kissing the godsdammed sun. Whether it was the influence of the horcrux on his soul or bonding magic or just smug victory, it was undeniable that he found her radiant. He ran his hands over his face and remembered how her magic was like rain after a forest fire, all green things, ashes and potential. How when it mixed with his own he could faintly smell the salt and danger of a wild, endless, primordial ocean.

Maybe beyond the delightful perversity of being intimate with his own horcrux that was what had him so fascinated, how he was unable to shake the nagging feeling that he might drown in her at any moment.

One did not become as powerful a wizard as Voldemort had without learning along the way how important it was to listen to your gut feelings, the way intuition and intelligence combined in unspoken ways to make you aware of things most missed. And all his instincts were screaming that there was something about Harry beyond just her being a horcrux and his future queen, something which he didn't understand. Even more than that there was something which he didn't understand about himself when he was with her too.

He recalled one of the earliest dreams they shared, explaining to her how having a soul felt like adrenaline and excitement and rightness. So maybe it wasn't all that surprising how being around her was making him feel more than he had in what seemed like forever.

Floating back down from the high shelf and retreating to his desk, a flash of inspiration had him emptying one of the drawers so he could put all the incriminating evidence as well as that last bloody book into it. His desk was special, designed to be somewhere he could work on problems over the course of several dreams if need be so things put on it or in it stayed there. Out of sight, out of mind, and this way he wouldn't have to think about it again. Not to mention that the idea of Harry stumbling across any of this was absolutely unacceptable. No sooner had he done so when the familiar shudder in the air heralded her impending arrival, and he hurried to slam the drawer closed and pick up the nearest book before she finished materialising.

"Good evening Harry." Voldemort said pleasantly, aiming for nonchalant by turning a page he hadn't even read yet and pleased when she just smiled like nothing was the matter. 10 points to Slytherin.

"Hi monster." She chirped, skipping over to the fireplace and flopping down into her armchair with a contented sigh not unlike his own earlier. "You'll be pleased to know that no-one found out I was outside school property for the entire afternoon yesterday. Apparently the excuse of needing quiet time to meditate and work on maintaining my Occlumency barriers to keep you out of my brain is just scary and boring enough to be both believable and also nothing people feel the need to witness."

Voldemort couldn't help but smirk, pushing all thoughts of uppity magical filing systems from his mind. "How very devious little horcrux."
"Well considering I'm going to have to sneak out a lot to placate your demanding self I had to think of something which would be a good ongoing excuse, not just a one-off." Her face screwed up. "I really don't like lying to my friends, but as there's no way they're going to understand why I don't need to worry about you trying to get into my head anymore I might as well just make use of that assumption."

"You would have been great in Slytherin." He sighed, choosing to ignore her rudeness and how borderline wistful he sounded.

Harry didn't even look up from her contemplation of the eternally burning fireplace. "Yeah, that's what the Sorting Hat told me too."

He blinked in surprise at that admission, looking up from the book he was pretending to read. "I do beg your pardon?"

"You could."

The absolute cheek of her. "**Harry.**"

The infuriating girl shrugged lazily. "It told me that Slytherin would 'help me on my way to greatness'. With the benefit of hindsight it's obvious now it could probably tell that I was a Parselmouth, and maybe even that I was your horcrux. Thanks but no thanks. So I told it to put me literally anywhere else." Her eyes sparkled with mischief, clearly very aware how much this admission would annoy him. "And that's how I ended up in Gryffindor."

It wasn't often that he was rendered speechless but this came close. All along she could have been in the House of their noble ancestor, and she'd just said no? Despite the trouble it caused him in his first few years at Hogwarts being Sorted into Slytherin had always been a huge source of pride, even before he found out that he was descended from Salazar Slytherin himself. After all the ill-advised bullying by his peers that realisation was one of the most vindicating experiences of his entire life, and she'd just said no?

"But you are a Slytherin, by soul and technicality if not by literal blood, so how can you not care about the legacy you were born to?"

"It's not like I knew that at the time." Harry pointed out, which was reasonable but also very much not the point.

"It doesn't matter what you knew then, you know now and you still do not seem to care." Dear Merlin why did he need to explain this. "Lineage is important Harry, especially to those of us of Ancient and Noble Houses. We are who we are in no small part because of where we come from and our connection to the history of our blood and magic."

She looked thoughtful. "Well, in that case I'm definitely more of a Black than anything else."

Something occurring to him, and he hummed thoughtfully. "Tell me, what do you know of the Black family history? Not so much their recent exploits, but your ancestors from back beyond the days of Merlin."

Harry looked up, apparently surprised by the sudden shift in topic. "Well I know how we were from Rome originally, and that we first came to England roughly around the time Hadrian's Wall was being built. Sirius didn't know much more than that, the family records get patchier the further back you go. But he always said that Blacks protect what's theirs, no matter what."

Voldemort snorted, because if that wasn't an understatement of epic proportions then he didn't know
what else could possibly qualify. "He certainly wasn't exaggerating. The Blacks did not just arrive when Hadrian's Wall was being built, they came here in order to help build it."

"You're kidding." She breathed.

"Why on earth would I lie about this of all things?" He said dryly. "From what I understand the Blacks were one of the founding tribes of ancient Rome, an ancient magical lineage which produced the Wardmasters who helped to build and then protect the city from its very founding. All because when Romulus asked for men to come and settle in his new city, taking both freemen and runaway slaves alike as his citizens, the Blacks answered his call. Romulus was not a wizard himself but as all muggles did in those days he knew of and respected magic, and so when the Blacks offered to ward his city in return for its protection he accepted."

In the face of all this new information about her family, Harry was quite literally on the edge of her seat. "Why did they need protection?"

Giving up on getting anything productive done tonight he put the book down and joined her at the fireplace, sitting across from her on his armchair. "The Blacks at that time were a small clan of refugees from somewhere far to the east, and they had been desperately searching for a safe haven after fleeing their unknown homeland after some manner of cataclysmic tragedy."

"Really?" She asked, knees folding up under her nightgown as she got comfy. "What happened to make them run in the first place?"

"It is unclear why, they refused to share why with outsiders, though we know that following advice from a seer they had travelled far for a very long time despite the dangers, and after arriving at their destination many were very weak from the ordeal and soon to die. Once Romulus and the elders of the tribe conferred and came to an agreement the dying were all sacrificed right there on the top of Palatine Hill, their blood mixed in with the mortar and their bodies interred under the foundations of the fledgling city in order to consecrate and ward it. In his gratitude, Romulus swore the Sacramentum Tenebrae, an unequivocal oath of shelter regardless of their shadowy and mysterious past, which decreed that in return for the sacrifice of their blood and their undying loyalty the Blacks would find sanctuary within the walls of Rome until the end of time."

"Oh Merlin." She breathed, looking amazed. "I knew the family traced back to Rome but never quite that far or that they were so deeply involved with its founding. Not to mention while I am by no means an expert, I remember briefly studying Ancient Rome in primary school and I don't think I've ever heard of anything like this at all."

"Of course you would not." He sneered contemptuously. "That was all the idiots could teach you because knowledge of our kind and our contributions are always erased thanks to the muggle's fear and jealousy of our magic."

Harry rolled her eyes. "We're not arguing about this today though for the record you're still a ridiculous bigot. Come on monster, I want to hear more about the Blacks."

So charming, his horcrux. "From the founding of Rome until the establishment of the Roman Republic the Roman Kingdom was ruled by a series of seven kings elected from the patrician class by the Senate who then held the office for life. Upon his election and subsequent coronation each king was bestowed with something called imperium, the ultimate symbol of their right of absolute ownership over the kingdom, including the land and its military and its people. The Blacks - while being undeniably patrician by virtue of their status - were nonetheless barred by Romulus from being elected to kingship on the basis that as it was their magic which held the war wards and therefore the safety of all of Rome, they should remain impartial to the political maneuvering so as not to risk
being corrupted by it. They would retain the standard rights of citizens in all respects but no king would be able to interfere with their appointed role despite holding imperium because they weren't regarded just as citizens but as physically part of the city itself. It was an odd loophole to use to get around the ownership condition for warding to be sure, but it meant imperium could be maintained while also freeing the Blacks to protect all of Rome at their discretion and not only that of whatever leader was in power at the time."

"How the hell did that even work?"

He grinned, knowing she was going to love this. "Erasmus Winterly's First Law of Personal Warding little horcrux. They saw themselves as part of Rome and Rome as part of themselves, they paid for that right with blood and believed it completely, a belief which was never contested by others. Of course it worked."

As predicted she was practically vibrating in her seat she was so excited. "Circe's tits, this is incredible! Why the hell do we never learn about any of this kind of stuff in bloody History of Magic? It's way more interesting than Binn's never-ending spectral boner for goblin rebellions."

Voldemort resisted the urge to roll his own eyes because he'd had Binns as a teacher himself and that was very much a mental image he could have gone his entire, unending life without receiving. "Because while the goblin rebellions are actually incredibly important historically speaking - and I despair how despite sitting through at least five years of that class no one ever seems to fucking understand why - the fact of the matter is that the overall standard of education in our country is laughable and will be one of the first things I change once I have conquered it."

Harry looked like she was about to start giggling and only just managing to restrain the urge. "Did you know you go on the exact same cranky rants about education standards that Hermione does?"

"Consequently." He said, glaring at her for the interruption. "Even once Rome became a Republic and eventually an Empire the Blacks endured and even thrived when others did not, because although they held great power in the Senate they were still essentially separate from it. Much like the Vestal Virgins they were revered and untouchable, as it was regarded as their sacred duty to protect Mother Rome and to their credit they never betrayed it, not even one of them in over a thousand years. Wards are all about ownership of course, and since Romulus had declared them a part of the city itself and the foundations were literally built on top of the bones and blood sacrifice of all those ancient Blacks none could deny their right to protect themselves, even if part of themselves was a whole bloody empire. Not only that, every single Roman knew it was important to respect them, because as the city and their borders inevitably expanded the Senate had to petition for the Blacks to willingly give of their blood or even sacrifice one of their family in order to continue to consecrate it all."

The excited grin sank into shock. "That's barbaric."

He shrugged, because of all the people who could justifiably pass judgement on others murdering their way towards achieving their goals he really couldn't have cast any stones even if he had felt any desire to do so at all. "Perhaps it is to our modern eyes but the world was very different then my dear, a much wilder and more violent place. They were no different than soldiers going to war, yet another scenario where the occasional sacrifice of individuals can in turn protected thousands, even millions by the peak of the Empire. Do remember that as far as the Romans were concerned the Blacks were not simply human beings they were physical embodiments of Rome itself come to life, and as for the Blacks they knew from birth that when needed they would be called back to their Mother."

"I can't believe they would choose to make human sacrifices of their own family just to protect their country." The admission was quiet, the words of an orphan whose family had been sacrificed for just
that purpose, and while he did wish she could be a little more pragmatic at times even he wasn’t crass enough to make light of it all things considered.

"Well it can’t be denied that it was effective. The war wards they built and then maintained on behalf of their adopted homeland lasted for over a millennium, and at their peak stretched from Babylon to Britain. And despite what muggle history might tell you, the reason Rome held its conquered territory for so long is due as much to the Black’s protection as to its roads and its armies."

"But didn’t Rome fall in the end? Quite spectacularly I might add."

Voldemort sneered, the ever-present fury at the muggles which simmered deep in his bones flaring up once again. "It should come as little shock to you that eventually the day came when they were utterly betrayed, driven out after Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Empire in the 4th century. According to the few remaining accounts, their last acts were to hide their collegium and then curse both Rome and even their own blood to ensure no matter what happened the bastards who had broken the Sacramentum Tenebrae would never again have their protection. And not even a hundred years later Rome fell, sacked by barbarians. The Empire was divided into East and West and eventually collapsed entirely, and it is said even now that no Black can ever return to Rome without being punished for it, falling victim to the curse of their ancestors."

"Oh dear Merlin." He had been waiting for the exact moment when Harry realised what that meant and she didn't disappoint him, eyes immediately widening in horror. "You said Fomalhauta was in Rome when she died, but she had to know about the curse. Why the hell did she even go there if she had so many important things to do and knew odds were good she'd die for it?"

"I have wondered that many times over the years, when I am not busy being furious with her for being so stubborn and not just asking for my help." He growled, before taking a steadying breath and continuing. "Hope maybe, that all those years would be long enough for the curse to fade or maybe it was simply desperation. I think she was looking for something there, maybe old records or the hidden Black collegium. She must have thought that her solution potentially lay in the remains of the ancient war wards of Rome, and that if any of their knowledge had somehow survived the centuries it might hold the key to saving our magic and our way of life. And that more likely than not only a Black would be able to find it."

"How do you even know this?" She asked quietly. "It was her, wasn't it?"

Voldemort looked at the flames. "The last time I ever saw Fomalhauta it was dawn in Italy and we were smoking down by the Reno river. Usually she was as irritable and stubborn as a dragon being interrupted from a nap, but there were tears in her eyes as she told me about the tragedy of the sacred martyrs of Rome who had held an unbroken vigil behind the thrones of kings and consuls and emperors alike. How for centuries they had walked the streets of their beloved city just to listen to it hum with the resonate power of their protective magic, and how having to leave it behind forever must have felt like being exiled to the wildest, most gods forsaken edge of the world, the ultimate betrayal by those they had defended so fiercely for so long. I am not a person prone to fits of sentimentality, but I will readily admit that even I was shaken by her words."

Looking across at Harry who had tears in own eyes threatening to fall he felt the incredibly strong urge to comfort her, and without even stopping to think about it too hard he got up and knelt in front of her once again, hugging her tightly to his chest. It was understandable really, the sheer magnitude of what her ancestors had literally sacrificed only to be so horribly betrayed would be enough to upset anyone.

"The Blacks were always survivors though." He said, stroking her hair as she burrowed further into his arms. "They survived whatever catastrophe lost to time which drove them to Rome in the first
place, and they survived their escape from Rome as well. They scattered to avoid persecution, though most came to Britain and intermarried with the branch of the family who had built and warded Hadrian's Wall and then settled here to hold this most distant border of the Empire. As the Roman Empire collapsed in on itself they adapted to their new home and even joined with the other sixteen Ancient Houses of the British Isles when they went to war against the Fair Folk, because Blacks are nothing if they are not fanatically devoted to whatever it is they decide to protect. So that is how they came to be one of the Ancient Houses of Magical Britain, and survived all the way down to culminate in you, my darling Heiress Black."

Harry sniffled a little, not looking up from where she was hiding her face in his shoulder. "How did she even learn all of this when it's all been lost?"

"As is often the case in a lot of the truly ancient families most of the Black's history and knowledge was sadly lost in the various purges through the Middle Ages, though obviously not all as Fomalhauta uncovered enough of it to share her preliminary findings with me. I believe she found records from one of the branches of the family who fled back to the east, and even though that branch was ironically enough wiped out by the Black Plague parts of their archive survived."

"I've said it before and no doubt I'll say it again, why are you telling me this now?"

Voldemort was quiet for a moment, conjuring a handkerchief for her to give himself a moment to reflect on the best way to explain his motivations in a way she would understand. "Mostly because it is your history and you deserve to know it."

"And the rest?" She snorted, wiping her eyes on the handkerchief. "You never do things for just one reason monster."

"To give you context I suppose, of one of the many motivations for my resolve. The work that lies ahead of us is vast and dangerous, but if Fomalhauta could come close to understanding it then I'm equally certain that with enough time I will be able to do so as well." He looked down at his horcrux, the Heir of all those ancient Blacks and potentially one of the few witches in history with the potential to surpass their incredible achievements. "I will make sure she is the last Black to be a martyr for magic Harry. I promise you."

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The screams never got old, no matter how long or how often he heard them. Voldemort used a clean handkerchief to clean the blood off his fede ring, annoyed that it had been dirtied by the pathetic excuse for a wizard in front of him. "You know, for an Unspeakable you are actually rather talkative. It is just a pity that so far none of it has been of any value to me whatsoever."

The prisoner was slumped in the chair he was chained to, terrified into stillness by how Nagini was slowly circling around him in a decidedly contemplative fashion. "I r-really can't tell you anything else important. We take Unbreakable Vows when we join the-the Department."

Voldemort looked down his resounding lack of a nose at the moron and waved his wand. "Do you truly take me for someone who is not aware of something that basic? Crucio."
The Unspeakable didn't respond, far too busy screaming from the pain.

~"So loud."~ Nagini hissed, unimpressed by the incredibly low-tier prisoner they were currently interrogating.

~"He certainly is noisy.~"~ He agreed, ending the curse and putting his handkerchief away in the inner pocket of his robes. "Now then, once more from the top please Unspeakable Hinde."

"Stop, please! I really don't know anything important!"

"That's not what I heard." Voldemort said casually, inspecting the ring to make sure he hasn't missed any stray blood. "In fact, as I understand it you are the sole person who has been in charge of monitoring the warding of governmental and public buildings and areas on behalf of the Invisibility Task Force for the last decade or so, which is a sub-branch of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. That means your work isn't actually covered by your Unspeakable Vow."

"Why do you care?" He asked, looking utterly baffled. "I'm just a junior researcher who pissed off their supervisor during training and got stuck with the shit detail."

For fuck's sake, attitudes like this were why he became a bloody Dark Lord in the first place. "And I dislike some of the data you have been researching Unspeakable Hinde, or failing to research in this particular case, which has in turn made my own job that much harder. You see how this works?"

Of all the things the man had expected after being abducted off the street, being told off by a Dark Lord for his poor work ethic clearly hadn't been it. "But I didn't mean to..."

"Didn't mean to be so resentful of your superior that you neglected your duties to Magical Britain?" He sneered as the other wizard somehow managed to pale even further. "Well then, now I don't mean to relieve you of your right leg."

~"You're in a good mood today."~ Nagini noted over all the hysterical wailing. Flicking her tongue out to taste the now detached limb, she waited for him to Vanish the shoe and stained clothing articles for her before swallowing it in one go. As a very large and very magical snake she could eventually digest just about anything organic, bones and boots and all, and frequently did if he fed someone to her whole for his followers or enemies to witness. But when they were not trying to make a point she much preferred it like this, the utterly spoiled creature.

~"Why shouldn't I be?"~ He said with a lazy shrug, giving in to a flash of inspiration and turning the Unspeakable's hands inside-out in an arching spray of gore and bone fragments. ~"My future queen is a gorgeous Parselmouth who also happens to be the Chosen One I've stolen right out from underneath Dumbledore's nose, and together we are going to save the world. Everything is going according to plan."

Snakes couldn't exactly laugh, but after so many years together he could always tell when she was amused enough by him that she would if she still could. ~"All hail the king."~

Voldemort wiped blood off his face and couldn't help but grin at her. After all the uncertainty of earth-shaking personal drama it felt good to indulge in the comfortable simplicity of righteous violence.

~"Are you still hungry princess?"~ He asked. The Unspeakable had passed out from the pain by now but there were spells for that, and besides, he didn't need his legs to answer questions.

~"Of course. That wimpy Pettigrew never brings me anything good, just those skinny rabbits."~ She huffed. ~"It will be winter soon and I need to eat enough to be nice and fat before it gets here."~
"Well that won't do at all." Clearly he needed to have words with the rat bastard if he was neglecting his familiar. "Why don't I put Barty in charge of your meals instead then, he's much more attentive and after that stint in Azkaban he doesn't spook so easily."

Nagini watched as he sliced off the wizard's other leg for her, cauterising both the stumps with another wave of his wand so he didn't bleed out too soon. "Yes I like him, he's very polite."

"It's decided then." He said, Vanishing the offending articles again before levitating the limb across so it floated a couple of feet above her head. "Come on then princess, say aahhh."

"Fuck you. And I want a deer next week." She hissed as if annoyed, but still eagerly opened her jaws wide.

Voldemort just laughed, delighted. "That's my girl."

***

It was the dream again. The silent emptiness, the absolute end of absolutely everything.

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.*

Voldemort curled up into the closest approximation of a quivering ball a person can manage when they're both mostly incorporeal and well over six feet tall, as if there was any way he could possibly hide when he was the only thing left in the entire universe.

*And the earth was without form, and void.*

It was a stupid habit, one born long before he knew any better thanks to growing up in a crappy church-sponsored orphanage in the 30s, but unfortunately by the time he did so the ritual of repeating the opening verses of bloody Genesis over and over again was the only bloody thing which could keep him vaguely calm while he waited to wake up from the nightmare.

*And darkness was upon the face of the deep.*

Fuck it if King James didn't have a lot to answer for, pity he was dead already. Where was he even buried? Probably Westminster Abbey like all the other muggle royalty come to think of it, maybe he could sneak in and make the dead bastard a fucking Inferius.

"Monster?"

Something uncomfortably like horror invaded his attempt to distract himself from the usual existential dread. He slowly looked up and saw his horcrux, who had somehow managed to appear like an angel in the midst of his very own personal hell. Much like he was she was only half there, their forms indistinct and hazy like they had been when they had descended into the depths of his mind so he could give her his Occlumency barriers. Her eyes were still as vibrant as ever though, shining like poison lanterns which chased away the worst of the gloom.

"Harry?" He said in disbelief, doing his best to stop the tremble in his voice, but from her wide-eyed
expression he hadn't been as successful as he would have hoped.

Fuck it all. The weakness felt like acid, corrosive and intrusive, and he couldn't decide if he was more humiliated that she'd seen him like this or desperately relieved that he finally wasn't alone. It was with reluctance that he admitted (to himself if to nobody else) that the relief won out when she gently untangled his limbs and climbed onto his lap, clutching at her like she was the only thing he had left in all the world.

"I didn't expect to see you here." Harry said after a while. "Usually it's the library or..."

"Or what?" He asked, still shaking and desperate for something - anything - to distract himself with.

She nuzzled into the dense shadows which passed for his hair in this awful place. "Memories."

There was no need to ask which specific memories she was talking about. Until relatively recently they were all just varying degrees of horrific.

"So monster, why are we both here then do you think?"

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

"I think it is likely to be a combination of our realignment and the precursor to the bonding magic bought on by the formal beginning of our courtship." Focusing on the warmth of her in his arms and arcane magical theory was actually helping to push away the worst crawling feeling of emptiness trying to drown him in forever. "The side-effects will no doubt settle down as our magic adjusts to one another. Well, readjust." 

Truth be told even he wasn't too sure about the metaphysical logistics of ritually joining his soul and magic with that of another person who was in all technicality another him as far as souls were concerned. Or maybe he was another her, if you went by blood. Mother Magic, even he was confused sometimes by the Gordian Knot they had made of their identity.

For a while they stared out at the abyss together, both seeming to be lost in thought while Harry hummed softly and occasionally stroked his back. No one had ever done anything like this for him before, partly because people generally never cared enough about his emotional well-being to bother and partly because even if they had he would have sooner ripped their throats out with his teeth than let them. Never in a million years or a million lifetimes could he even contemplate doing that to her though, and it was so contradictory a feeling that he was left both hating her gentleness and feeling utterly, rapturously destroyed by it.

Fuck King James. Voldemort could never have expected that with Harry Potter of all people this awful kind of vulnerability could feel holy.

"You don't seem surprised by all this." She said eventually. "Well, the total lack of all this."

The green glow cast by her eyes was the only light left in all the world and it was perfect. "Why would I? I've been dreaming of this for longer than I can remember."

"You too huh?"

His eyes flicked to hers in surprise. "You have dreamt of this before?"

"For longer than I can remember." Harry repeated with a sigh. "Literally too, if you've been doing the same thing."
"This is always what I imagined death to be like." Voldemort said quietly, not sure why he was even telling her any of this but unable to deny that the void seemed less imposing when he could fill it with conversation, with her. "During the war when I was back in London for the summer, whenever the air raid sirens would go off we would all be herded like cattle into the bomb shelters. It was so hot, always hot, full of crying children and the smell of too many bodies crammed into far too small a space, but every single time I would be so cold I was shaking. It was like I could feel this place waiting for me just out of reach, like I was always one unlucky moment away from being stuck here forever."

"Did we ever come close back then?" She asked, voice impossibly gentle. "To that one unlucky moment?"

More times than he cared to remember. "Mercifully we missed the Blitz proper since it started a week after I returned to Hogwarts for my third year, but while that was the worst of it that was by no means the only time London was attacked. On one occasion that same summer I was purposefully locked out of the shelter by some of the older orphans, and the matrons were so busy they either didn't notice or didn't care that I was still outside."

"That's awful! I get that kids can be little shits but it was wartime, how could they do something that malicious?"

"Because they hated me, they all did. I pounded on the door but it was this huge metal thing which wasn't allowed to open again before the all clear was given, and who could have heard anything over the sirens and the explosions anyway. I ended up huddled in the doorway all night long, freezing cold in the middle of summer and clutching the wand I didn't dare use to protect myself with just in case they expelled me for it. Dumbledore was just waiting for an excuse and I wasn't yet influential enough that anyone would have tried very hard to help me, just another orphaned mudblood who no one cared about."

"I'm sorry that happened, no one should ever have to go through something like that." Anyone else he would have killed where they stood for their pity but strangely enough from her it was acceptable, maybe because even though she didn't remember it she had been there all along as a part of him. "I don't think I've ever been that scared of it beyond the eeriness of it, not really. It's too much like my cupboard you see, and as much as I hated it when I was in there I was safe."

"Darkness, dust and iron." He said, hands clenching into fists in the soft shadows of her as he remembered the blasted cupboard he'd reduced to ash because inside it he could still taste her sadness in the back of his throat even so many years later.

"I know what you mean about the void seeming like it was waiting though." She said conversationally as if he hadn't said anything at all. "But for me, it never felt like it was waiting to take something away from me. Kind of the opposite really."

"Oh? How so?" It was obvious that she was blatantly avoiding the topic, but he let it go without commenting on it for once. One of them having a crisis at a time was more than enough to deal with thank you very much.

Harry shrugged, playing with the shadows of his hair where they blended in with the floating clouds of hers. "I suppose I always felt like it was waiting to be given something, you know? If it's taking and taking from you until you're nothing then that just makes it an ending, and I don't think that's what this is. Well, not just that anyway."

What an absurd thing to say. "Well, what else could it possibly be?"
Harry just smiled knowingly, arsenic eyes shining in the emptiness as she waved him closer as if she was about to tell him a secret. Normally he would have at least tried to refuse to indulge her childishness, but this time it felt strangely as though the formless void itself was holding its breath in order to hear what she said next. All he could do was lean in as if she was the centre of a gravity well which he'd never had any chance of escaping.

Pressing close so her lips were touching his skin, she whispered a secret - maybe the most important secret of them all - into the shell of his ear. "It's not just an end monster. It's a beginning."

The idea sank jagged teeth into his mind, something cataclysmic stirring in the darkest parts of himself as awe swept through him like nothing he'd ever felt before. Because against all logic her words were newborn stars which tumbled out of her mouth like precious jewels to set the void aflame, and in the molten centre of the event horizon between and around them he felt the movement of deep sea creatures or maybe even the gods themselves parting in deference to her glory.

*And the Lord said, let there be light.*

Chapter End Notes

Woohoo, so what do y'all think? Hope you enjoyed Black family madness and murder!domesticity Voldemort and Nagini, coz I liiiiive for that shit I stg.

It's been a while since we had a pure Voldemort POV chapter and it was well overdue considering the upheaval of the last few chapters, but as always the inscrutable bastard fought me every step of the way. Literally every single Voldemort chapter takes longer than the Harry and even the occasional Snape POV ones because he is so allergic to vulnerability, but I think it's important for us to see firsthand how he's dealing with things and try to understand him just like Harry is trying to understand him.

As the whole 'Voldemort; a triptych' in the chapter summary implies I wanted to take three different snapshots of our favourite megalomaniac and explore his current mental/emotional state as it relates to his relationship with Harry as well as his actions and his perception of himself. He's incredibly intelligent and incredibly violent and incredibly broken all at once, and exploring that ambiguous line between sympathetic villain and anti-hero while not trying to explain away the shitty stuff he does is one of my favourite things about writing him.

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