Summary

Harry Potter and Tom Riddle are enemies, born adversaries, prophesied leaders of opposite factions.

2001 to 1932, forty-seven days to change the fate of the Dark Lord.

This is a 'Harry travels back in time to raise Tom' story. An unfortunate tale of one man's failed attempt to mold young Tom into a decent, law-abiding citizen. Instead, as Fate will have it, young Tom grows up to become the same twisted psychopath, who is hell-bent on winning the love of his adoptive father. Harry's consent be damned.

Notes

This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿
Mistaken Coincidence

47 Days to Change (a translation)

NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by Ink Emerald/墨玉绿. Also posted on Fanfiction.net

I really like her story. It's a time travel fic done right. And her characterizations are fairly on point. Harry is tortured but sweet and Tom is deliciously evil. MUHAHAHA.

Here's the link to the original story:

Title: [HP]47天改造

Author:墨玉绿

Link: www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1888544

Miss author (墨玉绿) wants to put a disclaimer out -- that her story is purely fictional, so please disregard all discrepancies from JKR's series and all historical inaccuracies. Due to her youthful inexperience... the views (regarding World War I/II, France, Britain and Germany) presented here may be highly inaccurate. She just wants to warn you in advance. So... no one go over to flame her, okay?

WARNING: DUB-CON/NON-CON (in later chapters; see end of chapter note for details.)

BETA: Paperthins
December 31, 1926

It was late December. Naturally, the streets of London were blanketed with snow. The city, still shadowed by the horrors of World War I, presented itself like a weak, old man desperately clinging onto the last visage of its former imperial glory. Its citizens hurried about, pulling their coats against the winds, unwilling to dwell in empty streets. Newspapers fluttered in the cold air; the date on them read December 31, 1926.

Today was the last day of the year 1926.
On a street corner, a thin dark-haired young man clutched a device around his neck, a pained expression on his dazed face. The delicately crafted trinket resembled a small hourglass, embedded with silver rings that were engraved with unreadable letters. If any wizard happened to pass-by at this exact moment, he was sure they would have recognized the object.

_A Time-Turner._

Although compared to the standard Ministry-issued Time-Turners, this particular device seemed much smaller, more intricate, and wrapped in a mysterious sort of silver glow.

The young man stood in silence, watching as litters tumbled through the streets, until it came to a stop at the foot of a corroded limestone statue of the Virgin Mary.

_This must be a mistake!_

Icy winds swept through the young man's messy black hair, and its curly strands stuck on his round glasses, obscuring his eyes. The young man tightened his fists as he stared at the empty, unfamiliar streets. He felt lost.

Who could he turn to... in this era that was not his own?

"Your mission is to find his weakness," Hermione's words ringed in his head.

The brilliant Muggle-born witch gazed at him, with the sort of reverence reserved for something precious. Something like their last hope, the last bit of light before complete darkness.

Soon after Dumbledore's death, the Order of Phoenix had fallen. In three short years, the Dark had come into power. Voldemort returned triumphantly. The Light had lost.

Every battle was a struggle of desperation. Their forces grew weaker by day; allies and friends disappeared one-by-one. Until one night, perhaps due to pity of the Heavens, Harry managed to read Voldemort's mind once in his sleep, and found a crack in the Dark Lord's memories– the man has a fatal weakness.

"Find his weakness."

That was Harry's mission. It seemed simple enough, but also impossible. Weakness? What weakness? Was it a person? A thing? A spell? _A weakness_ seemed too vague of a clue to go on.

After digging through every detail of Harry's vision, they finally found an entry point. 1946, Voldemort's twentieth birthday.

Thus was the plan. The Time-turner was supposed to take him back to 1946.

But... it made a mistake.

Harry Potter frowned, and carefully considered his circumstances.

Harry wasn't aware that from the moment he appeared in this deserted Muggle street, he had– inevitably, unintentionally– set off a chain of fated events. Fate had set rules. Things could change, but the end result would be no different. All Harry could do was to fight against its fateful currents, struggling in vain, hoping for a better outcome.

"Sir...sir," a weak voice called out.

Harry brushed his bangs from his glasses and looked to the source of the voice.
It came from a stumbling pregnant woman, her face as pale like the snow she had fallen into. She was weak, thin as a skeleton, with a fat tummy protruding from her bones. She could not support its weight as she fell over, clutching at a street lamp, begging for aid with despairing eyes.

"Madam!" Harry ran toward her. "What is the matter?"

Her situation looked bad. The snow beneath her feet became quickly coloured by blood, alarmingly dark amongst the white snow.

Harry stood by helplessly. He didn't dare to move her. He didn't know what to do.

"My child... my child," she whimpered. Her lips were dry and she could barely manage the strength to speak. "Take… Take me to an orphanage—"

"What?" Harry could barely hear what she was murmuring, but there was no time to think. He wrapped her in his cloak and carried her to a nearby inn.

The Innkeeper bristled upon seeing them, shocked by the amount of blood. Quickly, he summoned his wife. His wife instructed Harry to lay the woman down on the table, and hurried to prepare some bandages, scissors, and hot water.

"Stay awake. Think about the baby. You must stay awake for the baby," urged the Innkeeper's wife. She continued to rub the woman's belly. Her pained cries grew quieter still, as if all her strength was needed just to stay alive. She trembled terribly.

After five long, agonizing hours, a baby's wail filled the room. Instantly, the cry seemed to have injected life back into the dim, damp room.

Harry smiled at the baby. He couldn't explain the joy he felt, for this child whom he did not know. Birth was such a remarkable thing! A cathartic thing to experience, especially for a man who had seen so many war and death. The baby cried softly, and in that moment, they all shared a mother's joy and love.

Harry had always liked children. They were such innocent and happy creatures, meant to be treasured and celebrated. Meant to be loved.

"My... child," whispered the woman. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

The Innkeeper's wife handed the small bundle to her. She looked at woman's pale face with worry.

The baby, like all babies, was a funny-looking little thing, thin and pink with wrinkled skin and covered in goo. But to his mother, he was the most beautiful thing in the world. She kissed his forehead with reverence.

"Sorry... That I cannot take care of you—" she touched her frost-bitten fingers to his closed eyelids.

That sentence seemed to take everything out of her. Her breathing became laboured, short. Death's bony fingers tightened its hold around her throat.

She gave him one last smile. Her dry lips bled with effort.

"You shall be called Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Once he heard the whispered name, Harry's mind turned blank.
What day is it? Harry's eyes searched madly through the room for anything with a date on it. Anything.

December 31, 1926.

There it was— printed on the last page of a calendar on the wall. That cursed date.

Harry stared numbly at the baby in his arms, testing the familiar yet obscene name on his tongue.

Tom Riddle... wasn't he suppose to be born in an orphanage?

Harry felt like he was struck by lighting. The baby felt heavy in his arms.

If it wasn't for his interference, Tom Riddle would have been born in an orphanage.

Harry Potter liked children, all children, all except this one... This one, he thought, should have been a still-born. The future Dark Lord, who terrorized the Wizarding world for so long, was currently sleeping in his arms. Harry could snap his little neck so easily, with a twist of his hands. Or Harry could simply let go, let the baby's soft flesh hit the pavement, and then... perhaps... he'll find out if Voldemort's bones break just like everyone else's.

If he kills Voldemort now, everything will be fixed. Everyone will be safe. No more broken families, no more wailing mothers, no more orphans... No more needs to search for any weakness. If he simply let go... everything will end.

Tortured by all the dark thoughts in his head, Harry closed his eyes.

He let go.

So frail and weightless was a baby's body. Its softness was no match for the hard pavement... Harry was ready, prepared to accept the sin of murdering an innocent child, if it meant sparing the thousands of death that will follow.

"SIR! THE BABY—"

A pair of strong hands managed to snatch the bundle just as it slipped from Harry's hands.

It was the Innkeeper's wife. She grabbed the baby tightly, gazing tenderly with worry.

"Here, here. I've got you—" she cooed, holding the baby like it was the most precious thing in the world.

Numbly, Harry handed the bundle to her. He watched the small, pink creature in her arms. His mind torn apart by conflict.

Tom, as if instantly sensing the changing of hands, startled awake and wiggled restlessly. Once Harry stepped away from them, the baby started to cry, loud wails that seemed uncontainable in such a small body.

"It's alright, honey pie. Don't cry—" The woman rocked the baby gently, humming lullabies in her sweet tone.

But little Tom was stubborn. He wailed louder. The Innkeeper's wife looked confused. She tried to rock him faster, but it didn't work. The little baby raised his chubby fists from the blanket, as if resisting her touch.
The baby wailed with all his might. His monkey-like little face turned purple with effort. He coughed; he choked; he wailed some more. His pitiful little mouth flapped in vain, as if he was protesting something that none of them could understand.

Harry looked upon the baby's purple cheeks. He could not see Voldemort in him. This was but a child, new to the world, untainted by ambitions and greed, pure as a new-born fawn. This was but a child, who, like all children, deserves to be loved.

Years ago, when Harry was thrashing in pain on the floor of the Ministry of Magic, he remembered Voldemort's blood-red eyes. Harry remembered every word that he said to the monster.

"You'll never understand love, Tom Riddle. You'll never see friendship. For that I pity you."

Harry remembered something flashing across that pale, skeletal face, briefly, for just a second, before all emotions became consumed by the Dark Lord's wrath. Something like an old wound exposed to the world, a moment of weakness and wistfulness. There was something buried deep in that black, empty heart of his— after all.

Would Tom Riddle have become Voldemort under different upbringing?

In the end, he was just another discarded orphan.

Unwanted, like Harry was.

Harry felt a lump rising in his throat. He raised his arms toward the woman.

"Here. Let me hold him."

The woman regarded him with uncertainty. But she was at her wit's end against the wailing creature, so she gave him up.

Something about Harry must be comforting to the baby. Instantly, the crying stopped. Little Tom gabbled Harry's sleeves, yawned contently, then closed his eyes.

"Oh my! He... he stopped," the woman looked at them with amazement. "Poor thing... Barely a day old and already motherless—"

Harry looked at the little bundle in his arms. Pink skin and spongy fingers. Tiny fists grasped tightly onto his sleeves, like it was something precious, a security blanket that brought great comfort. Harry felt a warmth blooming in his heart.

How could he feel so much for such a tiny thing? How could he ever think about harming this precious boy? Once was a terrible mistake.

Never again.

If he could change Tom's birth place, then why couldn't he change more? If there was an alternative to murdering an innocent baby, however difficult the path, Harry was determined to follow it through.

Harry kissed the baby's cheek. The child's warm skin tickled against his lips, a tenderness that seared into his memory forever.

"Ma'am," Harry nodded to woman hovering about. He could tell she was quite taking with Tom. "Can... can you take him in?"
The innkeeper's wife froze, blinking nervously. "Me...me?"

"Can you?" Harry hugged the baby tighter, equally nervous.

"Our... our family is rather poor. We... we won't meet the standard for adaption," she murmured shyly. Her head hung low in shame.

"But are you willing?" Harry pressed.

"OF COURSE!" She squealed. Her brown eyes shone with absolute delight. Her face could barely contain her excitement.

_A child!_ That was all she ever wanted! You see, she had trouble conceiving and her family was too poor to gain adaption approvals. Yet... she never gave up her dream of being a mother.

Of course, she was willing to take him in... Such a precious, little boy.

Her little boy.

Harry watched as tears of happiness poured down her face. He tightened his hold around Tom.

— A woman like her will make a wonderful mother. She will take good care of you.

Harry handed Tom to the woman. Tom, the ever-so-clever little boy, seemed to sense his eminent departure and began screaming in protest.

Harry patted the baby's soft cheeks, then bowed toward mother and son.

"I must be on my way, ma'am."

Tom must have heard him. He screamed so loud that his voice cracked.

Harry fastened his cloak and disappeared into the streets. Snow blurred his shape, then he was gone.

The baby's pathetic wail seemed to follow his every step, dissipating into the empty, snow-covered street.

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TN:

This is a very important **WARNING!** Read it please.

There will be **NON-CON/DUB-CON** element later in the fic (in about chapter 80). Reader discretion is advised.

Also, I will put specific warnings in front of each chapter.
December 31, 2000

Objects moved rapidly around him, twisting in their vagueness as bright lights sped by. Numerous faces passed through Harry's vision, too fast for him to recognize any of them. He heard a tick, then metals banging against each other. The ringing was so loud that he couldn't concentrate on anything.

Finally, it stopped. The silver Time-Turner ceased spinning on its axis. Well... if you can call the device a "Time-Turner".

Harry stumbled. He steadied himself against the wall. His laboured breath pulled painfully at his chest.

He was back. He stood in an empty laboratory, bare white walls except for a workbench and some chairs. The starting point.

"Two minutes and forty-eight seconds, almost three," a stern female voice intoned.

A girl in white lab coat stood near-by. Her eyes fixed on a timer in her hand. Her quill moved furiously as her face turned grim.

"Hermione," Harry exhaled. He hated the way his voice shook weakly. "There was an error."

Hermione's lips trembled. The smart, young woman frowned at him. She set Harry down on the chair.

"What went wrong?"

"I ended up in 1926."

"1926!" Hermione exclaimed. She leaped up and fussed over Harry, checking him for injuries with a careful tenacity that's usually reserved for her lab specimen. "You got caught in a time vortex! Are...are you alright?"

Her fussiness reminded Harry strongly of Mrs. Weasley. After she finally determined that he was (largely) unharmed, she pressed him back into the chair.

"I'm fine. It's just... I went to 1926. December 31, 1926." Harry sat up straight, stressing the date with great care.

Hermione frowned again. She did not notice the significance of the date. Instead, she focused on her own puzzles.

"How were they twenty years off target?"

Harry took a deep breath and tried again.

"Listen. I... I was there... at Voldemort's birth."

That got Hermione's attention. She gasped, staring at Harry blankly.
Voldemort's birthday.

"You—" Hermione regarded Harry uncertainly, unsure of how to formulate her question.

"Yeah... And I wanted to kill him. There and then," Harry understood her implication at once. He nodded and then shook his head. "But— I — I couldn't."

Hermione looked down at her notebook, deep in thought. After a while, she seemed to have reached a conclusion. She nodded at him.

"And—" Harry hesitated, then licked his dry lips. "I changed his birthplace!"

Hermione looked upon Harry's excited green orbs. She raised an eyebrow. She doesn't think this particular detail is worthy of much notice.

Harry took a deep breath.

"Mione, if... if I can change Voldemort's birthplace, then... then maybe I can do more. Maybe I can change his childhood, and... maybe that will change his future. Maybe... maybe... now, seventy years later, the future is changed. He is no longer Voldemort. Just Tom Riddle," Harry shouted excitedly.

His green eyes burned with a brilliant optimism that made him seem younger, like the bashful boy he should be at this age, not the hardened soldier he had become.

Hermione sighed. She sat down across from Harry.

"Harry. I understand your intentions... But, you can't—"

Harry wanted to argue, but Hermione stopped him.

"No one has EVER gone back seventy years! ... Time-Turners are only capable of turning back 24 hours— 24 hours AT THE MOST— and there are good reasons for that... Muggles have this interesting theory about time-travel. For example, what if someone went back to the past and murdered his grandfather, what would happen? Paradox. Harry. It'll create a time paradox."

"Harry... This is also what will happen if you are to go into the past and murder Voldemort. You'll create a paradox. Anything that changes the past... will alter the future as well. The smallest change can lead to a chain of infinite events. Maybe if you killed Voldemort back then...then maybe your mother will marry Snape, instead of James, and you — Harry Potter — will never be born."

Harry opened his mouth, clearly unsatisfied with her explanation. Hermione saw that and continued as seriously as she can muster,

"Wizards and witches have their own theory as well—"

"Fate. They believe in fate. Fate, who governs time, who governs history. Fate and prophecies and predeterminism, whatever it is called. It stops meddlers from changing history. It prevents paradox, Harry. For example, when a time-traveler is about to kill his own grandfather, a rock will magically appear by his feet and trip him. You tried to kill Voldemort and you failed...because of fate. You can not change history... because fate has already set it in stones. It is fate's game, with its rules, and no mortals can— ever— exist outside of its rules."

"But... I changed Voldemort's birthplace!" Harry protested weakly.
"You were only able to do so because fate considers it an inconsequential change —" Hermione disputed quickly. Upon seeing Harry's crestfallen face, Hermione's voice turned gentle. "Fate does not care about Voldemort's birthplace, just as it does not care whether you like to drink tea or coffee."

Harry kneaded his eye-brows. He stared blankly at the floor, his mind troubled.

Thus, according to Hermione, that little baby, who was just tagging on his sleeves, would still grow up to become Voldemort. That adorable child would still become the terror that slaughters so many good people.

Despair hit him like a brick wall.

A warm hand touched his shoulder. Its familiar presence was reassuring. He looked into his best friend's smiling face.

"Harry, while in theory, it is impossible to change history... but, in reality, no one has even tried to test such a theory. In the case of time-travel, there are too many unknowns and zero absolutes. I think ... I think you should just do whatever you feel is right. Even if it leads to some unforeseen consequences, in the end, fate will fix it all. Fate can restore history."

Hermione patted his shoulder in encouragement.

Harry pushed the round, antique glasses up his nose, and smiled back.

"Ok, Harry. One more thing—" Hermione went all serious again. "How long did you spend in the past?"

"About six hours."

"From my perspective, you and the Time-Skipper were gone for two minutes and forty-eight seconds," Hermione tabbed her chin thoughtfully.

Harry looked down at the device around his neck. _Oh...so this thing is called a Time-Skipper?_

"I'm not aware that time flows faster in the past," she scribbled something in her notebook, crossed out a couple of theories and scribbled some more.

Harry frowned, then remembered something. He asked, "Say... 'Mione, can I just skip to 1946 next time?"

"Sadly no," Hermione shook her head. "A Time-Skipper is set on only one time-line. Since this Time-Skipper has locked onto 1926, we'll have to go with its flow. We'll have to start in 1926 and wait it out, hour-by-hour, until the time-line syncs up to 1946. Luckily for us, time flow faster in the past."

Hermione laid down her quill. Her face grew solemn still.

"Harry, you got to do another time-jump tomorrow."

"Why?"

"I need information on the synchronicity of the two time-lines."

All these technicalities were giving Harry a headache. He was never as smart as Hermione when it comes to experiments and theories.
January 1, 2001

"Are you ready?" Hermione stared at the timer in her hand, afraid that she's going to miss the moment if she blinks.

"THREE. TWO. ONE. JUMP!"

As Hermione gave her cue, Harry spun the Time-Skipper.

It was the same nauseating, gliding experience. The landscape twisted around him. The pangs of metallic ringing made Harry wish desperately for some ear-muffs.

Harry steadied himself against the ground. He squeezed his eyes shut as blind spots clouded his vision. He took a deep breath before surveying his surroundings.

He landed at the same Muggle street corner as last time. The rows of grey houses remained the same, although the dirty snow, that covered them, was long gone. In fact, the warm breeze made him sweat. Harry removed his black scarf and cloak at once.

In the empty street, winds were no long chilling— A bit damper than last time, maybe, comforting air currents that carried the scent of spring.

*Time do flow differently in the past.*

Harry paused, then found his way to the fateful inn.

Harry tried to peek into its darkened, dirty windows. But he could not see a thing. After a bit, he gave up. Harry smoothed his hair nervously (why is he nervous?) and stepped inside.

"Welcome, how can I help you?"

Surprisingly, the greeting came from the normally solemn Innkeeper, who was laughing jovially with someone. The man was positively beaming. This wasn't the same stressed, disheveled man, that Harry met last time.

"Er... I don't know if you remember me?... I was here a...a while ago?" Harry asked, "How is Tom?"

Harry lifted his head to smile at him. Through the open door, the sun kissed his pretty face, highlighting its delicate features.

Before the man had a chance to reply, a woman stepped forward. She, too, was positively radiate with happiness.

"Who is it? Eddie? —"

Harry recognized her voice. It was the Innkeeper's wife.

He rushed forward. "Ma'am, I am—"

Harry stopped in his track. He stared, stunned, at the slow-moving woman. She laid one hand on her belly. Its bloated form clearly announced to everyone that she is with child.

The world faded the moment he saw her. Blood drained from Harry's face. The cheerful greeting
died in his throat.

She recognized him too, judging by the effort she spent avoiding his eyes. She shuffled to her husband's side.

The woman murmured, "I'm so sorry about Tom, sir. It's just... our finances... We can't afford to raise two children..."

She apologized profusely. With her husband's hands wrapped tightly around her, the woman only had eyes for the life that grew within her belly. She smiled apologetically; her cheeks flushed with blessing.

Harry didn't blame them. Tom was not their responsibility.

Harry's chest contracted. *It hurts.* It took him a while to realize that he was hurting for Tom.

Harry asked quietly, the words bitter in his mouth, "*So where is Tom? *"

The woman's shoulder slumped.

"At...at the Orphanage."

Harry stood frozen by the door, her soft voice exploding in his mind.

*The Orphanage.*

Somewhere in the back of his head, Harry knew that has to be her answer. But it still landed like a blow to his head.

"*You cannot change history. Because fate has already set it in stones.*"

Hermione's words swarmed his mind, mocking him with its blunt truthfulness.

*It's Fate. Fate's games. Fate's rules.*

And Harry was powerless to stop any of it.

*Fate. Bloody. Fate.*

Harry bit his lip, so hard that it bled salty iron-taste into his mouth. Harry turned on his heels and ran out the door.

He charged toward the Orphanage.
May 31, 1927

Harry didn't know how he made his way to the Orphanage.

The stern, grey building looked exactly like the one in the Pensieve.

He passed through a set of iron gates into a bare courtyard that fronted a rather grim, square building surrounded by high railings. Due to age and negligence, white paints were peeling from its walls, revealing the greying matter beneath, in uneven chunks all over, like cavities that sprung from within this dying place.

The gates were high and oppressive, like prison bars.

Harry stood by the door, a strong stench of detergent drifted toward him. Something turned in his stomach, he felt sick.

He remembered the Pensieve.

Mrs. Cole, half a bottle of gin in hand, stared at Dumbledore with surprise.

"TOM?! All these years Tom's been with us, he never got no visitors—"

Harry remembered Tom.

The eleven-years-old, thin, pale boy, stubborn and proud, eyes dark with ambition far beyond his age. His childish voice ringing with anger.

"'Professors?' Is that like 'doctor? — I'M NOT MAD!"

What kind of childhood did the Dark Lord lead?...

Harry couldn't think right now, even the theory of it made his insides tie into knots. Harry knocked, his knuckles tight and pale.

"Are you... here to adopt someone?" Mr. Cole hiccupped loudly, swirling a glass of gin in her hand.

Harry frowned at her untidy manners. He stood by the door of her office and refused her offer for a drink.

"No. I'm just here to visit a boy. Tom. Tom Riddle."

Mrs. Cole leaned back on the chair. Her eyes slide out of focus. She poured herself another drink.

"Tom Riddle?... Who?"

"Tom is at the nur—" interrupted a scruffy, young girl who stood behind Mrs. Cole.

Mrs. Cole waved her hand at the girl impatiently, before turning her attention back to the gin. "Well, then, take him there."
"I'm sorry for the delay, sir," the girl wiped her hands on her apron, as they headed down a long corridor. "There are a lot of children with us... you understand... and Mrs. Cole—"

Then, she thought better of it and changed the subject.

"—Tom is a funny baby. He doesn't like people, ye' know. He cries when anyone tries to pick him up. Even when feeding, he likes to do it by himself. Holding the bottle in his arms. A good little one. He doesn't cry much either. Easy to take care of, really—"

"Is that so," Harry nodded politely. He knew that Tom's always guarded... the boy treasured his personal space. And Harry can sympathize with that.

As they walked, suddenly, the objective of Harry's original mission jumped into his head.

"Sorry—" Harry interrupted her excited babbles. "What's today's date?"

The girl gave him a strange look. "May 31."

"And... the year?" Harry asked, and smiled apologetically as the girl grew more wary.

"...1927," she answered, but carefully slowed her steps to put some distance between herself and the stranger-who-does-not-know-time.

Harry shrugged. May 31, 1927. Five months had passed since he last been here. And in 2000, only a day had gone by.

One day in the present. Five months in the past.

She brought him to a door with painted sunflowers.

"Here we are," announced the girl. "Tom's in the first bed to the right. I'll be next door. If you need anything, call me."

Harry nodded his thanks, and went inside.

The room was spacious, clean, with large windows that allowed plenty of sunshine. Some faded flowers were painted on the walls, lest to inject some life into this greying place. Six crumbling cribs lined the walls. They were barely standing, held up by broken plywood tied around their bottoms. The babies napped peacefully. They looked thin; the flush of pink (sign of health on normal babies) were missing from their cheeks.

Orphans were not attractive to funding, especially in post-war times when there are so many of them. The Orphanage couldn't afford proper baby formulas. Most times, the babies were given a mixture of rice porridge and mashed carrots.

Harry saw little Tom right away. He wasn't asleep.

Tom looked at the stranger curiously. He nipped his fist, slobbering all over the place. Tom had begun teething and he did not like it.

Five months were enough to alter a child's appearance drastically. Now the baby's skin smoothed out and soft, black hair framed his face, Tom was almost unrecognizable from the little monkey that clung to Harry so short while ago.

The boy's black, round eyes were clear and shiny, a pure sort of ebony like the night sky. No trace of the scarlet that had, yet, to taint them.
The baby stared into Harry's emerald eyes.

He remembered them.

Just as Harry remembered the strong, inky eyes of the pale boy in the Pensieve.

The boy was handsome and rather thin for his age. His hair parted neatly and, dressed in grey slacks, he looked just like all the other boys at the Orphanage. He looked calm, but an insidious power boiled beneath the facade. Momentarily, his black, depthless eyes betrayed his power; anger ripped through him, torrent, like an unseen storm brewing in the dead of midnight.

"You are a doctor, aren't you? From the asylum—"

"No... I am a teacher. And I'm here to tell you about Hogwarts," replied Dumbledore.

He was eleven then. An age of playing, shouting, jumping, laughing; an age of wonder and adventure and belief in a bright future.

Instead, he was solemn, angry. He said, "I DON'T believe you."

Harry watched in silence. As the boy coldly refused the one thing in the world that will make him happy. He seemed to retreat into himself, prickly to the world, curling up like a hedgehog in self-preservation mood.

"It's... it's magic? What I can do?"

"What is it that you can do?"

"All sorts... I can make things move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want them to do, without training them. I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to."

A flush of excitement rose up into the boy's hollow cheeks. Harry watched, unsure what to make of the child.

"You are a wizard, as am I," said Dumbledore.

"PROVE IT!" The boy demanded.

The shabby wardrobe burst into flames. The boy jumped to his feet, the orange fire reflected in his ebony eyes, giving them a curious glow.

Harry saw his face transfigured: there was a wild happiness upon it. The grin lit up his finely-carved features. At last, the boy found people who are just like him.

"Thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts," Dumbledore said calmly, pointing at the objects scattered on Tom's bed. "At Hogwarts, we teach you not only to use magic, but to control it."

The boy stood still, looking up at Dumbledore, challenging, unabashedly refusing to apologize.

Dumbledore stood up, grabbed his scarf. Then, the boy rushed out.

"I can speak to snakes too. I found out when we've been to the country on trips—they find me, they whisper to me. Is... is that normal for wizard?"
A flurry of uncertainty flushed across those dark eyes. His arrogance fell away and for a moment, he looked every bit the stubborn eleven-year-old that he was. He looked at Dumbledore expectantly.

Hopeful... for what?

Tom Riddle was a prideful child. Prideful to a fault... and thus, he didn't care about what other people thought of him. But there was one question that bugged his childish mind. One question that shadowed his whole life. One question that his pride won't allow him to voice—

"Am I normal?"

"Sir?... SIR?" the scruffy girl called out, snapping Harry from his memories. She carried a basket of bottles in her arms.

Tom was still staring at him with large, round eyes. He didn't seem to mind the presence of the stranger, who loomed over him. He saw the bottles and waves his chubby arms excitedly.

"Alright, alright. Lunch," she handed the baby a half-filled bottle.

Tom must've inherited Salazar Slytherin's overbearing and possessive tendencies. As soon as those small arms wrapped around the bottle, he refused to let go, guarding it with the zealouslyness of a jealous lover. Tom sucked on the teat, biting it with a tenacity that's very indicative of his combative nature.

It took the girl a while to wrestle the bottle away from Tom. Saliva covered the thing and the teat was chewed up beyond repair.

The baby babbled angrily. He screeched in rage when the girl refilled the bottle and replaced the teat, then handed it to another baby.

"Miss... Tom, he—"Harry asked with concern. The baby looked very distressed at the sight of sharing his bottle.

She shrugged. "Nuthin' I can do. Tom is a jealous one. Possessive. But we are short on supply, so—"

Harry looked down at Tom as the boy nipped on his fist again. He rolled over in his crib, creamy skin and round body, very adorable indeed. Then he remembered the uncertainty flashed in those ebony eyes.

The boy asked, "Am I normal?"

Suddenly, Harry was overcome with a desire to hold him.

Tenderly, he picked up the baby, one hand supporting his soft head. His small body was supple, warm and doughy, and smelled like sweet cream.

"SIR! He doesn't like to be touched—" the girl yelped.

But, to her surprise, Tom did not cry. Instead he yapped, made some puppy-like noises.

The baby looked uncomfortable in Harry's arm, so Harry quickly set him down again. But as soon as he let go, Tom started to wail, with that impossibly loud cry which tags at the heart-string of everyone within earshot.

Harry panicked. What does a baby want?
"Hmm..." the girl regarded them curiously. "I think... you were holding him wrong. Try something else... Lay his head on your shoulder."

So Harry did as she instructed. And it worked.

Little Tom lay meekly in Harry's arms, small head lopped against the crook of his neck. The baby's skin was so smooth and warm... and frail. The crying dissipated. Tom buried his head in Harry's shirt, trying to get closer to the source of the familiar scent, a scent that had imprinted on his newly-formed mind.

Harry thought it was unlikely that Tom remembers him.

But there they were... Tom tagged playfully on Harry's hair and Harry held him like it was the most natural thing in the world. The baby made some content 'Goo Goo Gaa Gaa' noise and tickled Harry's nose.

In his arms, Tom's weight was feathery, light and unnoticeable. But it felt real. Real, much more than a fragment of the past.

They stood there for a while. Harry treasured the warmth of Tom's skin, and rubbed the baby's back contently.

Yet it was time for him to go.

*Time waits for no one.*

He patted Tom's chubby cheeks, like he did five months ago, and handed the baby to his care-taker.

"Okay, sweetie, say good-bye to Mr. Potter, now," the girl rocked the child carefully.

Tom's doe-like eyes followed Harry, desperately clung to the young man's every move. The smart little boy blinked, then anxiety filled his dark eyes and tears wetted his long eyelashes. He yapped and squirmed, trying to grab onto Harry's shirt.

"Miss, please... Please take care of him—" Harry whispered. Perhaps his words meant nothing, but this was all he can do.

"Sir—" She tried hard to hold onto the squirming baby. "I think he really likes you. Have you considered adoption?"

Harry saw himself reflected in Tom's clear, ebony eyes.

"One day... One day I'll come back for him."

He was determined to keep his words. *Fate or not.*

The wheel of fate will not veer off course, thank you very much. Its complex system churns about, spinning out threads of time and narratives of life — time and life; past, present and future; and everything in between.
January 1, 2001

As the Time-Skipper whirled, Harry's world tilted. He felt the same familiar flying sensation, metallic bangs thundering in his ears.

Finally, he landed in an empty laboratory.

Harry's whole body trembled. His legs buckled; he leaned into a wall, gasping for breath. Every jump seemed to sap all energy out of him, but this time, the problem was especially severe.

"HARRY!" Hermione ran toward him. "Are you alright?"

She took his pulse and noticed its irregular, erratic beats.

"No more jumping for now," she looked at him worriedly. "It's too taxing on your body."

Between short breaths, Harry managed to squeeze out, "I'm... I'm fine."

But then he wheezed and slid to the floor.

Hermione pursed her lips, but decided to drop the subject.

"So how did it go?" she asked.

Harry frowned, "It was...er... It was May 31, 1927."

*Five months.* Hermione wrote that down, then pulled out some charts. She drew some lines on them, murmured to herself, before addressing Harry.

"I got it!... We need to wait for 47 days, then do the jump and you'll end up in 1946."

Harry hesitated for a bit, then he turned toward her, emerald eyes grim and serious.

"I want to go back," he said simply.

Hermione looked at him with concern. "...why?"

Harry thought about the baby, short, supple arms wrapping around his neck.

"Because...because I want to change him, Hermione. Even...even just for a little bit."

Hermione looked into her friend's green eyes, troubled by what she saw. She knew there was no stopping him. But she also knew she couldn't let him risk his health for a hopeless cause.

"Fate will *not* allow you to change history, Harry. And your body *can't* take so many time-jumps. CAN'T. WON'T. SHOULDN'T—"

Harry grimaced as Hermione shouted into his ears.

"But Time-Turners—" he protested feebly.
"Time-Skippers are not Time-Turners," Hermione interrupted him sternly. "Time-Turners have less adverse side-effects, while Time-Skippers are dangerous."

She leaned forward and squeezed his shoulder reassuringly.

"Harry, I'm sorry. But you know I'm right. Tell me... Your attempt at changing fate— did it succeed?"

Harry looked down. Long, thick eyelashes casted shadows that blocked out Hermione's face. But he knew that she knew that he did not succeed.

He couldn't kill Tom or gave him a better childhood.

"Fate does not lose. It plans for everything. It accounts for everything. The past is set in stones," she explained, feeling guilty for crushing his hopes, but she won't let him injure himself so aimlessly.

"Then... Perhaps I'm un-plannable. Un-controllable," Harry snapped defiantly. "Even if I can't— didn't— stop him from becoming Voldemort, my very presence in the past is a change in itself."

Hermione stopped, shaking her head. Now, she was getting really worried.

"NO. Harry, you don't understand. It'll make no difference. Fate will— or did— erase your presence there. See!... Voldemort doesn't remember you. If he did, he wouldn't have murdered your parents. He wouldn't have been so keen on murdering you!"

Harry fell silent.

Hermione gasped. She grabbed Harry's hands and apologized.

"I'm sorry. I— I didn't mean to bring your parents into this."

Harry shrugged. That was the least of his concern.

"Harry... You are our last hope, so please take care of yourself. You reckless—" Then she looked down at his pale fingers and shouted, "—MERLIN! HARRY. YOU ARE FREEZING!"

She wrapped her cloak tightly around him, then scrutinized him again.

"Where is your coat?"

Harry grinned sheepishly. Right... he had a matching black cloak and scarf. They were new, even, Christmas presents from the Lupins. Harry casted a heating charm on himself, and instantly felt the heat rising to his chest.

"I must've left them at the Orphanage."

Aww, man, they were new.

Ron got injured.

As soon as they stepped outside, Harry and Hermione were greeted by a panicking Ginny. She didn't look so good herself. There were tears in her robe and burns on her face. Her scraped knees were still bleeding, dripping a trail of red behind her.

"The infirmary—" she nodded at Hermione, who turned pale upon hearing the news.
The mousy-haired girl turned and ran upstairs. She didn't even bother to take off her lab coat.

Harry wanted to follow, but Ginny pulled him back.

The slender, nineteen years old girl had changed a lot during the war. She matured into a brave warrior, with fierce red hair and sharp blue eyes.

"We caught an interesting one this time," she grinned cheekily at him. Splashes of dried blood covered her face, although it did not look disturbing; instead, it acted as a badge of honour that accentuated her youthful vivacity.

Harry never noticed how pretty she was... He felt his cheeks flush.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the interrogation room.

"It's raining,

it's pouring,

the Ministry is falling.

I'm laughing,

I'm crying,

the Phoenix is dying."

A high-pitched, crazy voice drifted toward them from behind the metal doors of the interrogation room. Harry could also hear Percy's exasperated sigh as the man shouted things at the prisoner.

Ginny gave him an apologetic look.

"Sorry, but...he insists on only speaking to Harry Potter."

Harry smiled to let her know it was no trouble, and stepped inside.

The nature of interrogation required the room to be rather claustrophobic. Metallic desk and chairs in a dimly lit steel cage, it was designed to evoke fear in its visitors, which, in these days, were mostly Death Eaters.

"Harry, you don't look too good," Percy greeted.

"It's cold in here," Harry shrugged. His skin was icy cold. "Probably...I should've brought a cloak."

In the center of the room, a bloodied Death Eater was hand-cuffed to the metal desk. The Dark Mark showing through his tattered robe; it looked even more ghastly beneath the room's dim, green lights.

The man chuckled, a nasty, wheezing sound.

"HAHAHA. Our saviour needin' to take care of himself... After all, his pathetic life still belongs to my Lord."

Percy rolled his eyes. He pulled up a chair for Harry.

The Death Eater glared at Percy, his eyes bulging from their sockets. He... looked deranged, in the worst ways.
"I SAID—I would ONLY speak to Mr. Potter. ALONE."

Percy frowned. He turned toward Harry, hesitant.

"It's alright. I got this," Harry pulled out his wand and sat down across from the prisoner.

The look on Percy's face displayed his disproval, but the red-haired man had no other options. He had tried everything.

"Listen, Harry. I'll be right outside this door. Shout if he tries anything funny. Anything at all," Percy said, before slamming the metal door behind him.

Harry massaged his temple. He was rather exhausted from time-travel, and this was not what he wanted to be doing right now.

"Alright," Harry grumbled. "What does Voldemort want?"

The Death Eater gazed upon his Death Mark lovingly, a smirk twisting his thin lips.

"Do not speak his Lordship's name in vain, Light's Saviour... Enjoy your last moments, stupid boy, for his Lordship wants you to know that he will make you pay for those memories...of the horcrux—"

Harry followed his reverent gaze to the Dark Mark. The tattooed snake seemed to be mocking him.

Harry thought about baby Tom... tiny hands tagging at his sleeves, giggling.

"Fate will—or did—erase your presence there. See!... Voldemort doesn't remember you."

Hermione's words lingered in his mind.

Harry forced a cold smile onto his face, and pushed his insecurities aside.

"Oh?... And here I thought Voldemort didn't care for those memories, which are of his childhood, no?... He doesn't exactly strike me as the sentimental type. What exactly am I paying for here?"

"His Lordship," the Death Eater whispered. "His Lordship is getting stronger. His Lordship is getting rid of all of his weaknesses."

Harry's heart sunk. So he knows! Voldemort had found out that Harry knew about the weakness...

"HAHAHAHA, next time... when you meet my Lord, he'll be more powerful, more immortal, more... perfect," the Death Eaters laughed, crazy eyes transfixed on Harry's face.

The thrill laugh mocked him. Harry's heart thumped in his chest, so rapidly that it might burst, right there and then.

He jumped up and ran to the door. For a moment, blackness clouded his vision, and Harry slumped against the door, huffing for air. When he finally calmed down, he threw open the metal door and gulped in the cool, fresh air with relief.

"Are you okay?" Percy and Ginny rushed toward him.

Harry nodded, "Yeah. I'm fine."

"Your face is so pale," Ginny looked worried. "You'll need to rest."
Harry nodded again. "Yes, of course. You too... Ginny, you need to get those wounds treated, right away."

Ginny smiled with understanding. She gave a little wave, then turned and left them.

As soon as Ginny was out of earshot, Percy asked quickly.

"So what did he say?"

Harry hesitated. He considered the Death Eater's revelation and the nature of his mission; then, he looked to Percy with a grimace.

"You'll need to continue interrogation. He said something about Voldemort becoming perfect. Voldemort is planning something big... We need to find out what it is...and we need to warn Hermione."

"I see," Percy looked thoughtful. "Listen, go take a break. Ginny's right. Your face is as white as snow."

Harry laughed dismissively. *It can't be that bad.*

"Fred, George—"

Harry ran to catch up with the Weasley twins. Both had nasty cuts on their faces, which just served as a good excuse for them to make jokes about how ugly is each other's face.

"Yo, Harry," they gave him a big hug, evidently high in spirit.

Harry grinned brightly.

"Listen. Can I trouble you for a favour?"

"Sure," said one of the twins, wrapping one arm around his brother. "Anything you want."

"As long as you foot the bill, of course," said the other, grinning.

Harry licked his cracked lips. He checked to make sure they were alone in the corridor, then hesitated.

"Oooh, so secretive," said Fred.

"We're good law-bidding folks," said George. He winked at Harry. "So no funny business, okay?"

Harry stared at them fondly. He spoke quickly.

"I need you to get me some fake identifications—Muggle and wizarding—a birth certificate for 1906. And I need lots of British pounds. *Lots*—enough to buy a house."

*Now* they looked interested.

Fred patted Harry's shoulder. "Does Hermione know about this?"

Harry shook his head honestly.

George stepped closer, he lowered his voice, "Does this have to do with your time-travel mission?"
Again, Harry shook his head honestly.

Fred and George turned toward each other, identical, mischievous grin on their freckled faces.

They said in unison, "I like the way you think, Harry. We'll get it done for you."

Harry watched as the twins walked down the corridor, arm-in-arm, singing, laughing. He let out a breath of relief.
January 2-6, 2001

Harry hauled his exhausted body back to his room. The small, windowless, dormitory-style room always served to Harry as a reminder of his position in the world — now, he and his friends were fugitives. Even their headquarters must be hidden, tucked away on the border between wizarding and muggle world. Both the Ministry and Hogwarts had fallen into the hands of Dark Lord’s forces. Mainstream power and public opinion tilted against them. Harry Potter, the saviour of the wizarding world, the boy-who-lived, became no more than a criminal, who watched, hopelessly, as his friends died around him.

He dropped onto his bunker. The aftershock of the time-jump was torturous. He tried to dull the pain by keeping busy, but it didn't really work. He curled in the bunker, biting his lips to keep pained groans from escaping.

He couldn't allow Hermione to find out about his conditions. Or she might end the experiment.

"Next time... when you meet my Lord, he'll be more powerful, more immortal, more...perfect."

The deranged Death Eater's damned words followed him, mocking him during every waking moment.

Harry laid there, silently, in complete darkness, hard mattress pressing against his back. He couldn't fall asleep.

Two faces kept appearing in his head— one of blood-red eyes on a white skeletal face; one of radiant ebony eyes and chiselled features.

As always, he remembered everything regarding him.

His fourth year— the Triwizard cup, the sensation of being pulled through space, face pressing into mud at the cemetery, Cedric's dead eyes, Tom Riddle's tombstone, Voldemort's return.

Surrounded by his Death Eaters, Voldemort hissed triumphantly, pointing his wand in Harry's face. He laughed in his high-pitched voice.

"Look at me," he said. "Let me see all hope extinguishing in your eyes. Look at me as you die—"

Pure hatred on the pale face twisted into something else. Insane. Unrecognizable. Inhumane.

Harry was afraid.

He couldn't understand him—darkness and pure hatred, so much hatred.

Voldemort despised the light, because he had learned to survive in darkness. He lived in the shadows; shadow of being the product of a loveless marriage, shadow of being abandoned at birth, shadow of being labelled a 'freak' throughout childhood. Even at Hogwarts, with his family, the Slytherins, he had to be careful. He had to hide away the 'orphan' and 'half-blood' aspects of himself.
Voldemort despised the light, because no ray of hope had ever blessed him. He despised justice too, because it did not exist.

Harry was afraid, but he still wanted to try to change things.

But the more he thought about it, the more impossible his goals seemed. The snake-like face surfaced in his memories, cruelly sneering at him, hissing, "I'll be the one to kill you, Harry Potter."

He was the same. The Dark Lord. Nothing would ever change.

Harry buried his head into the pillow, his chest throbbing with pain and disappointment...and despair.

Hermione was right— Fate is unalterable. Voldemort would never be a good man.

Pain spread to the rest of his body, but Harry paid it no mind, because, ever since his return from the past, doubts had been creeping into his heart, growing into dark, empty despair. He felt helpless, worthless.

Were all his efforts in vain?

After the pain subsided, Harry decided to take a shower, then, mercifully, he managed to fall asleep.

When Harry awoke, he felt much better. The sun was blazing in the middle of the sky. Harry cleaned himself up a bit, and then wobbled downstairs.

"HARRY!" Ginny yelled, pointing toward the laboratory. "Hermione wants to see you."

She had washed the blood off her face, leaving nothing but a thin, long scar that traced her jaw-line to her ear. She smiled brightly and waved at him, wearing her victory badge with pride.

Her eyes were warm and her smile infectious. Harry couldn't help but smile back at her.

"Listen. Harry. We are in trouble," Hermione said bluntly as he entered.

She was writing something furiously over her work-station. Her hair fuzzy and sticking out all over the place, indicating she didn't get a good night's sleep.

"What is it?" Harry approached her and nabbed a file from her desk — one of the many training assessment of Dumbledore's Army.

Hermione looked at him grimly.

"Percy spent all night interrogating the Death Eater. And, well, you know how good he is at that—"

She shrugged.

"What—" Harry edged on.

Hermione pursed her lips, a pained expression on her face.

"Very bad news. Not only did Voldemort find out that we know about the weakness, he's also looking for it, seeking to destroy it before us. What's more— he's trying to reabsorb the horcruxes."

"Reabsorb...?" Harry didn't even know he could do that.

Hermione ticked in frustration.
"That Death Eater said... He said that Voldemort has already gotten his nose back—" she glared at him. "— This is serious, Harry. Don't laugh!"

Harry obeyed, of course. Then, suddenly, he realized the significance of her words.

"'Mione! Maybe he's looking to get back those specific memories. His memories of 1946."

"Yes, yes. That's why I wanted to see you... According to my calculations, Voldemort's memories of his twentieth year — which is 1946— are stored in the Slytherin's Locket."

Harry's hand went straight to his inner-breast pocket. He pulled out the golden locket by its chain and dropped it on Hermione's desk.

She inspected it carefully, and then said to Harry.

"Since the Gryffindor's sword is still missing, and Hogwarts is being occupied, as of right now, we have no means to destroy the horcrux. All we can do is keeping it safe. We can't let Voldemort get his hands on it—"

"Of course," Harry nodded.

"And one more thing," Hermione laid down her pen. "Harry... You must be prepared. After he becomes whole, Voldemort might be more powerful and even sensible... and that means... our goals might—"

Harry held up a hand to interrupt her. He knew what she was going to say, and he couldn't let her voice doubts in her own plans.

He smiled reassuringly. Emerald eyes glimmered brilliantly beneath round glasses, brave and tough like the most precious gem stones.

"We don't have much a choice at this point. Don't worry too much, 'Mione. I have faith in our plans," he waved at her and turned to leave. "I'm going to see Ron."

The infirmary was large, but evidently not large enough, judging by the rows of beds crammed within. The sick beds were cramped so close together that Harry could barely squeeze through. Some patients placed a wooden plank between two beds and created a make-shift table, which everyone was currently crowding around, playing poker with their bandaged arms or casted limbs.

They seemed lively, shouting at each other happily and passing Sickles under the sheets, careful to not be caught by the nurses.

Finally, Harry caught sight of a turf of red-hair.

"RON!"

"Hey, Harry," Ron's left arm was wrapped up in a white cast hanging from his neck, but that didn't deter him from waving at Harry enthusiastically. Harry rushed forward, half-afraid that Ron was going to re-injury himself.

"How are you?" Harry asked as he sat down on Ron's bed.

Ron nodded toward his bandaged arm, then toward his legs, which were also immobilized in thick, white casts.
"Same old, same old." He laughed heartily.

_Same old Ron._ Harry smiled.

"So, I heard you went to visit a twenty years old Voldemort!" Ron asked enthusiastically. "Is it true?"

Harry's smile turned sour. "Not exactly... I did see a new-born Voldemort, though."

"HAHAHA... So you ended up at the inn, huh? Is it as scary as they say, the birth place of the devil —"

Harry raised an eyebrow... _What?_

"What inn?" He murmured.

"Huh? I thought you knew—" Ron gave him a puzzled look. _The Inn. You know, where Voldemort was born. The muggle inn where the devil was born._

_The inn,_ Harry repeated. Then, some fleeting hope ballooned in his chest. He grabbed Ron's arm excitedly, knuckles white. "Wasn't Voldemort... born in an Orphanage?"

"Owww!" Ron yapped as Harry unintentionally squeezed his injured arm.

"Sorry," Harry quickly let go. He looked at Ron expectantly. _Well?_

"Well what?" Ron grumbled. He scratched his nose with his one good hand, and looked into Harry's hopeful eyes with confusion. _What Orphanage— you told me yourself that he was born in an Inn. Dumbledore showed you—_

Harry was dumbfounded. Quickly, he turned to Ron's neighbour, "Ernie, where was Voldemort born?"

"You-know-who?" Ernie Macmillan asked, looking just as confused as Ron. "At an inn in London, why?"

Harry leaped to his feet. Hope trickled down his spine like electricity, providing him with a newly renewed vigour.

"I need to go see Hermione!" Harry shouted excitedly and ran out the door.

Ernie stared after the boy-who-lived, mouth agape, then he turned to Ron, who simply shrugged.

Harry's heart filled with happiness. _Finally, some good news._

Of course, the change in Voldemort's birth place led to a rippling effect. Everyone's knowledge of the event also changed.

Even though Hermione had explained that _Fate_ only allowed these changes to occur because _Fate_ considered them to be insignificant, unimportant in the grand scheme of things... Even if that was true. Seeing solid evidence that his actions did, in fact, make a difference, however small, it still made Harry very happy. A spark filled his head with infinite possibilities.

_Hope._ Harry dared to hope again.
If Fate didn't care about the details, then Harry could change them all. If he could alter the small things, then, hopefully, the rippling effects of the sum of his efforts would birth something new. A new destiny that none — not even Fate — could foresee.

Harry couldn't wait to share his theory with Hermione. He needed to do time-jump again.

"HERMIONE," Harry burst into her office, huffing for breath. Excitedly, he dumped his new theory on her.

She frowned. She didn't seem to share Harry's enthusiasm.

"Oh? So Voldemort wasn't born in an inn?"

Harry's bright smile lit up his handsome face. He had never felt better.

"Yes and no... For our sake, he was born in an inn."

In one possible future, one of those answers was absurd. In another, the same answer was universally accepted. It all depended on Harry's choices in the past.

"Hermione, when are we doing the next jump?"

"46 days later—" She turned back to her documents, examining them with the uttermost care.

"No, I must go—"

"No," Hermione answered firmly. "Your physicals came back...It's not good. You must rest for a minimum of five days before the next jump... Or your body is going haywire... Like right now—" Her tone softened, sympathetic, "— you are hurting right now, aren't you, Harry?"

Harry forced a smile, "I've gotten used to it."

His brunette friend sighed deeply. She was too smart to not see through his lies.

"Harry, I'm not trying to oppose your attempt at changing fate. However, my consent only extends to situations that are safe for you. And right now, time jumping is not safe for you... Promise me you'll take care of yourself?"

She glared at him with resolute brown eyes, ready to jump into lecturing mode if he dares to argue.

"I promise, 'Mione. " Harry smiled reassuringly.

Five days passed quickly, but Hermione didn't mention time jump again.

Five days in the present... that meant twenty-five months in the past. Harry did a quick count, Tom just turned three.

These were busy times for Dumbledore's army. Everyone worked from dawn till dusk, scurrying around the headquarters like little ants. Harry split his time between the training area, where he taught the new recruits, the war room, where he planned strategies with the founding members, and the library, where he drew up new wards to protect their home.

Only when he was lying in bed, alone in the darkness, too exhausted to fall asleep, did Harry think about Tom. What is three years old Tom like? Would he be like Voldemort at all? Even at that age...
Of course, he never had an answer.

On the sixth day, Ron turned up in the training area, high as a kite on pain-reducing potion, one leg still in its cast.

Harry handed him a large bundle of files, then sighed in relief.

"Merlin's wand!" Ron exclaimed. "How on earth did you manage to finish so much work?"

Ron tried to pat Harry's shoulder in compliment, but his movements were so awkward that he somehow managed to step on both Harry's feet.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry grimaced.

He was so tired, but at least he had finished his assignments early, so now he was free to do what he wants.

Ron thought about it. "I think she's in the lab... having a meeting with Luna and Cho."

*Of course, where else?*

"Thanks," Harry waved goodbye to Ron and ran toward the laboratory.

"I want to — confiscate — Time-Skipper," fragments of Hermione's voice managed to slip out from behind close doors, although it was barely audible.

"But Harry's mission —" that was Cho.

Harry did not wait to find out what Cho thought about his mission. He lifted the Time-Skipper around his neck, gritted his teeth and spun it.

And once again, the world tilted around him.
His name was Tom Riddle, the orphan Tom Riddle.

What is a normal four-year-old like? Should he be wrapped in mom and dad's arms, begging for a new toy? Or should he be running free, laughing with his friends, pranking everyone in sight.

To Tom, being four was difficult. Ever since his young caretaker passed away, Tom found it increasingly difficult to survive in the Orphanage.

You see, being four was like being stuck in the middle. Two and three-years-olds were fed regularly; seven and eight-years-olds were strong and tall enough to take what they want. And Tom, being four, made the perfect victim.

The fat maid came around with a basket of dried bread, one for each child. One and absolutely no more. With her beady eyes, she glared at them like hawks as the children reached into the basket to grab their dinner. If anyone tries to take more than one, she would beat him down with her thick fists and confiscates his only ration for the night. But, often, Tom was so hungry that he didn't care. He would try to sneak an extra piece when she wasn't looking. He was fast and nimble, but that didn't mean he never got caught...when he did, ten lashes on his back.

But it was worth it. The beating was preferable to being hungry all the time, to feel so unfulfilled, as pain gnawed and twisted his stomach, like a parasite killing him from inside. The beating was worth it for the few times that he managed to sneak pieces of bread to his room, where he hid under his bed, wolfing down every last crumb, almost choking on its dry, wooden texture.

He got real good at stealing— Then, they noticed him.

They referred to a group of eight-year-old boys, gangly and weedy, with stupid faces that Tom didn't recognize. However, Tom did recognize they were a lot bigger than him.

"Hand over what you stole! NOW! Or we are telling Mrs. Sophia—"

Mrs. Sophia was the fat maid's name.

"I ate it—" Tom replied stubbornly. His trembling hands betrayed his fear, but he stood his ground, hiding the two pieces of bread behind his back.

A boy, the one who was always holding a rabbit, pointed at Tom. "HE HAS IT! IN HIS HANDS!... I SEE 'EM!"

That was all it took. They swarmed him, hands pulling and punching, and pushing Tom to the ground.

*It hurts. It hurts so bad.*
The harder they hit him, the tighter Tom clutched the breads in his hands. Even with their eight-year-old strength, none of them managed to pry anything away from Tom.

Maybe his natural-born viciousness graced Tom with some unlikely strength. Somehow he managed to break away from them. He ran; they were right behind him. As he ran, Tom tore the breads apart with his bare hands. He grinded them into little chunks, then threw them onto the ground. Tom stepped down hard on the precious food, as if trying to destroy something he hates with all his heart.

By the time those boys caught him, the breads were lost. They were inedible, mashed into the mud with Tom's footprints on top of brown, flattened form.

"HIT HIM!" Someone screamed.

Fists and boots landed furiously on his back. Tom knelt on the ground, arching his back, trying desperately to protect his stomach and internal organs from their blows. Bruises and cuts ran away his face and arms, in gruesome purple patches, but, through the pain, Tom was smiling.

*They are mine... And if I can't have them, no one can.*

He laughed silently. A strange, crooked, satisfied little smile twisted his handsome face.

Afterward, of course, they told on him and, as punishment, Tom was locked in the basement for three days.

Tom slumped against a cold, damp corner, rubbing his hands in an effort to stay warm.

"Tom? Tom? Are you in detention again?"

Tom ignored the woman, who peered at him from behind metal bars, as she rubbed her hands together nervously.

*What does she hope to gain from these visits?*

"Tom, I— I brought you some candies. I left them in your room... Er... Hope you like them."

*Candies?! —What does a hungry orphan want with candies? Such small and frivolous plaything—it will only bring trouble. It made the others jealous; it made him a target. Anyways, since she left it in his room unattended, he bet someone already took it.*

*But she never really thinks, does she? Never notices anything important. She just wants to appease him... but not for his own sake, exactly. She just wants to appease her own guilty conscious.*

Tom stared at her from behind cold, metal bars. The wavering candle-lights casted soft glow on his face, yet his eyes remained cold, steely.

She took a step back. For moment, his eyes morphed into the hungry eyes of wolves, appraising her weaknesses, readying to strike.

"I'll... I'll come back another time—"

Tom watched, emotionless, as she practically bolted out the room.
He saw right through her.

She was afraid of him, afraid of his un-childlike eyes, afraid of his un-wavering expression. But she insisted on visiting him anyways, because she felt bad for what she had done.

And, really, what she had done wasn't so bad. All she did was abandoning him in the Orphanage, because something better came along; because "they couldn't afford to raise two babies, so sorry, sweetie".

She always babbled on endlessly to him, and always about the mysterious Mr. Potter.

"He's a wonderful gentleman. And he really cares about you, Tom—"

Even his previous caretaker, before her untimely death, liked to mention Mr. Potter.

"Mr. Potter said he will come back for you, Tom. I know it. He asked me to look after you."

Tom punched the wall in frustration.

*He hates this Mr. Potter. HATES HIM!*

If this man really wants to adopt Tom, then where is he? If this man really cares about Tom, then where was he when Tom was beaten or starved or screaming against the unfairness of it all? *Humph* — "he will come back for you"—What lies! Tom could certainly recognize a lie when he hears one.

His hatred bubbled to the surface, colouring his childish face. If anyone could see him right now, they would be astonished by such seething anger on a four-year-old's tender face. Such a terrible evil it wrought.

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The Orphanage did not require strict attendance. They were too short-staffed to provide proper schooling. The children only had to attend English lessons twice a week (curtsy of the Church), then they were free to wander about the streets of London aimlessly. Mrs. Cole cared little about what happens to them. If one orphan dies— well—that was one less mouth to feed.

Tom usually stayed out until four in the afternoon. He didn't dare to stray too far.

Tom headed straight for his room.

The small bedroom was turned upside down. The mattress thrown to the floor; wardrobe tipped over; clothes scattered everywhere. Everyone at the orphanage were issued four standardized uniforms per year, *no replacements*, and Tom's clothes, right now, were cut into rags with muddy footprint stamped all over them.

Tom chuckled darkly. Calmly and methodically, he began plotting slow and painful deaths for all the boys who had done this to him.

However, as soon as he laid eyes on a scrunched-up, black cloak, tossed carelessly into a corner, Tom's rage exploded.

He roared and swore bloody vengeance upon his enemies. *No matter who they are, he will find them*. His ebony eyes filled with pure rage, burning dark and depthless like the abyss of hell, which swallowed, whole, the bones of all his challengers.
Tom picked up the black cloak gently. It was old, but in good conditions because he always took care of it. It must have been expensive once; thick, flowing fabric which extended past Tom's feet, with a traditional yet stylish cut that tightened around the waist. Tom thought it must have looked really handsome on its original owner.

Whenever he felt sad, Tom would wrap himself, tightly, in the cloak, breathing its scent and treasuring its warmth.

*Maybe... Someone really did care for him?... Even for a short while... Someone like Mr. Potter.*

Tom put the black cloak around his shoulder, and stroked the expensive fabric lovingly. Its soft warmth was almost enough to calm him down.

"TOM! Check out my new scarf," a boy said, as he entered the room unannounced,

Tom leaped off his bed, staring at the intruder with alert eyes of a territorial beast.

It was the boy who always carries a pet bunny. Triumphantly, the boy stroked the bunny's fur, sticking his neck out.

Tom's pupils contracted. His fists tightened. His eyes zoomed in on the scarf around the boy's neck —

It was *Tom's*. That blackish grey scarf, faded with age and matched, exactly, to the cloak left behind by Mr. Potter.

Tom's eyes turned vicious at once. He pounced forward like a powerful cheetah, snaring his teeth at the boy, murder plain on his face. The boy jumped back in fright, surprised by the sudden change in the four-year-old, who was, after all, much smaller than himself.

"*GIVE. IT. BACK,*" Tom menaced slowly. His eyes hooded in an eerie shadow.

The boy tried to stay composed. He told himself that no four-year-old can harm him, but, looking into Tom's savage eyes, suddenly he didn't feel so sure.

Tom glared at the boy and his disgusting rabbit; it was rubbing fur on *his* scarf. *Unforgivable*, he thought darkly.

"I... found it. So it's mine," the boy stuttered, trying to look brave.

Before he had a chance to finish, a small body knocked him to the ground. The frightened rabbit leaped away. Before he could react, or even let out a frightened yell, small hands wrapped around his windpipe, crushing him with impossible strength.

The boy gagged. He couldn't breathe.

Tom's childish face hovered above him, eyes dark and deadly like vultures. Tom's tender features twisted with glee, transforming him from a child into something terrifying. At the moment, he was no longer Tom Riddle the orphan, but a magnificent angel of Death. His hands squeezed harder.

Tom discovered, right there and then, that he was capable of murder.

"MY GOD! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

Someone pulled Tom off the boy. Tom rubbed his numb fingers, and gave a cold look to the old nurse who so rudely interrupted him. He said nothing to her.
Wheezing, the boy crawled away from Tom and found his pet rabbit. Shaking uncontrollably, he looked at Tom, then at the rabbit in his arms.

"It's... It's my fault... I stole Tom's scarf."

The old nurse looked at them with confusion. She looked at Tom, then at the trembling boy.

"If you say so, Billy. And — Tom, three days of solitary confinement for you."

Without protest, Billy gave up the scarf. As they got up to leave, Tom flashed a toothy grin at Billy, which contained a message that only they understood. In a gruesome way, they shared in something unique tonight, but only Tom could see all the changes that it will bring.

After that night, everyone at the Orphanage knew to stay away from Tom Riddle's bedroom, especially from the cloak and scarf.

In many ways, nothing changed.

They still didn't have enough to eat. The children still fought each other for food.

The first time Tom beat up someone for their food, he got nothing special, a piece of stale bread and a thumb-sized cheese. Yet, as he clutched his hard-earned victory in his hands, despite the throbbing pain of his ribcage, Tom Riddle felt happy.

He felt powerful.

_There is no good and evil. There is only power, and those too weak to seek it._

Tom Riddle wanted power. And he wanted lots of it.
Once again, winter had descended upon London. Homeless men shuddered in dread, cursing the heavens; while stray cats and dogs hid away safely in some abandoned buildings, waiting patiently for snow to stop falling.

Snow covered all the roads with a silvery flurry. Winter came early this year, the temperature dropping like a rock. All vegetables doubled in price, even brussel sprouts.

Things took a turn for the worse at Wool's Orphanage. They even lost their weekly 'meat dish' privileges. If possible, their daily breads smelled even worse, wrinkled and mouldy, but the children didn't protest—

Anything tasted better than starving.

Behind the Orphanage's high-rise gates, fights and unfairness were occurring daily. The children formed little gangs, semi-organized and territorial, they behaved as cruel as adults — beatings, blackmail, burglary— nothing was beneath them. The matrons at the Orphanage had long since given up maintaining order. As long as they took the fights outside, no one cared.

In the snow covered courtyard, a bag of candies was enough to ignite a new conflict.

"You there. That woman brought you candy again, didn't she?"

A sturdily-built boy stood in Tom's way, looming over him while cutting off his path. He snickered cruelly, then signalled to a group of waiting boys and girls. They moved forward, giggling in their high-pitched childish voices, as they surrounded Tom.

"Oh, Tom," A boy said in a fake, squeaky voice, trying to imitate Tom's visitor. "Are you in detention again?"

Tom stood still. Cold eyes, black and silent as midnight, stared past their faces, as if they were no more than clowns in a bad show.

The boy with the rabbit popped up next to the bulky one. No way was he going to pass up a chance to humiliate Tom. He stroked the balding rabbit in his arms, then, in his annoyingly high-pitch voice, he mocked.

"Tom, so sorry, sweetie. But we are too poor to take care of you."

They sniggered loudly, as if that was the funniest thing in the world.

So what?! What if he was the only one to get candy... In the end, he was still abandoned at the Orphanage, no better than any of them.

"HAND OVER THE CANDIES! THEN MAYBE WE'LL LET YOU THROUGH."
They stood in front of him, chins high, eyes mocking, proud like prickly peacocks. No trace of childhood innocence remained on their faces. Society and its cold, harsh reality twisted their sense of morality into a mockery that had long since vanished into winds. All that remained was a savage need for survival, a cold and terrifying practicality that told them—one ought to care only about himself.

Tom sneered.

He never touched the bag of candy... and he never will. Yes, that woman always brought candies for him, regardless of his disdain for their sickly, sticky sweetness. The candies, cheap and of every colour imaginable, filled a whole plastic bag, which Tom tossed in a corner of his room, where they remained to this day.

Ever since he almost murdered Billy— that moron— and his disgusting rabbit for trespassing, no one dared to step into Tom's room.

Tom didn't care for candies; however, that didn't mean he was willing to share. They were given to him, and thus, they belonged to him.

What is his...remains his forever. He would like to see them try to take anything from him.

"HAND 'EM OVER— OR YOU WILL GET A TASTE OF OUR FISTS."

As the children waited, suddenly, a smirk bloomed on the four-year-old's thin, pale face. Eyes as black as a raven's wings, hair tainted by dead nights, at this moment, the boy, who standing-up could barely reach the tabletop, became something more than human. He became something more mystical, unimaginable, potent like the ruler of Hell.

"AHHHHH!" Someone screamed in pain.

Everyone turned and stared in horror as one of them, a red-haired boy, keeled over in pain, clutching at his face. Blood poured from a terrible gash on his forehead. Endless crimson liquid pooled by his feet, colouring the snow pink. A blood-stained brick laid close-by.

Who could've done this?

They stared at each other in confusion. The brick seemed to have appeared out of thin air.

They were still children, unprepared to deal with unforeseen events, and instantly, the sight of blood panicked the crowd.

"WHO HAS DONE THIS?... SHOW YOURSELVES!" They screamed, eyes wide with fear.

Billy, who was so enthused a moment ago, cowered behind his friends, clutching the rabbit close. Too frightened now his victims dared to fight back. Cranking their necks, the children searched the empty yard, screaming for the culprit to show.

In the excitement, they seemed to forget all about Tom, who remained in the middle of the crowd, watching them scream with mild interest.

Tom watched as the bleeding boy grew faint. He looked down as blood dripped onto the snow, then he smiled, a most sweet, innocent, boyish smile. Tom was the only one unaffected by all the commotion. He stood in leisure, as if he expected all this to happen, a most peculiar smile etched across his face.
"HE DID IT!" The bulky boy screamed suddenly, pointing at Tom. "HE DID IT! I KNOW THAT HE DID IT!"

Tom's smile only grew.

"But... but—" a girl trembled. "We were all watching him. He... he didn't even move."

*That's right.* Tom didn't even move. He couldn't have thrown anything, because they were all watching him.

"FREAK!" Billy yelled, watching Tom's face in terror. He backed away slowly, then turned and ran. With tension already high, that was the last straw. All the boys and girls ran away —screaming — from the four-year-old. Something in his small, delicate body frightened them— something mysterious, primal and *powerful*.

"GET AWAY FROM ME! FREAK!"

Suddenly, Tom was the only one left in the empty courtyard, left behind with nothing but a swarm of muddy, messy footprints surrounding him.

*Freak?*

*So what?* Call him a freak if you must, for as long as his name strikes fear into your heart, for as long as he has enough power to take what he wants. Freak, or monster, or whatever... was a name that came with certain distinctions, which carried a power that they could only dream of.

Tom smiled. He inspected his bony fingers, so small and frail, yet... *so powerful*.

He waved his hand. The blood-stained brick levitated and floated toward him. Tom wiped the crimson stain with his fingers tips, then held his hand to the light. The dark scarlet coated his pale skin beautifully.

"Sssss... Tom, I thought you hate that bunny boy, why didn't you hit him?" A soft, reptilian hiss drifted to his ears, unintelligible to human-ears but perfectly clear to Tom.

"Ah, that one deserves much more than... a rock to the head."

The young child giggled at his own joke. Darkness clouded his eyes. His soft hissing, as soft as lullabies, caressed the ears of the viper wrapped around his ankle. The creature shuddered, whether due to the cold or her young master's sinister cheeriness... well, no one knows.

*Human hatchlings are scary,* the viper thought as it flicked its tail.

Fate looked down on them, satisfied with the progress. From the beginning of time to the end of the universe, it has always pushed history along a predetermined track — the boy's magic had awoken, his mind had opened and his destiny had begun.

No matter how hard you try to change it— *no matter how many times you turn back the clock*— all your efforts will only end in futility.

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When Tom returned to his room, he received notice to get dressed — right away— then to head down to the lobby. *A guest was coming.*

At the orphanage, this could only mean one thing— a potential adoptive family was coming. *Better*
clean up nice and look cute.

For such special occasions, the orphanage provided them with one set of nice clothes, a fine suit with paper-thin fabrics. Of course, it was designed for appearances sake, with no practical function in mind and too thin for winter. Tom wrapped the aged, black scarf around his neck, three-turns to make sure it was secure.

"I heard he is young!"

The children, all dressed in identical uniforms, gossiped excitedly amongst themselves as they headed to the lobby. Tom followed, their faces blurring together, none important enough for him to notice.

Three girls walked in front of him, chirpy and giggling, hopeful with the dreams of a better life.

"Well, I heard he's got a big house. And unmarried too—"

*Unmarried. That's big!* That meant no competition from birth children or hard-to-please mistress, which lowered the likelihood of being sent back to the orphanage.

Tom stayed quiet. He blended into the crowd and entered the lobby with them.

Tom lowered his head, bored out of his mind. He had no interest in being adopted. Now he had figured out how to gain power over the children, he was fine with sticking around this shithole — at least, *here*, there were little adult supervision and no familial responsibilities. At least, here, he was allowed to roam freely, taking what he wants by force.

Tom's eyes flickered. He pulled up the scarf to cover his face.

"*Tom,*" the rope-sized viper slithered in his pocket. "*They'll be a fool to not choossssse you... If you just smile a little, they'll see you're the prettiest little one here—*"

"*Don't be sssssilly. I don't want to get adopted.*"

The little snake hissed in confusion. Her un-evolved brain couldn't comprehend why Tom is acting so stubborn. *Why must the boy wear such a gloomy expression on his pretty face? And why must he insist on not caring, when, in fact, she knows he is yearning for a family?*

After five minutes, when they were all seated, Mrs. Cole, very drunk judging by the state of her walk, brought in their guest.

"Ma'am. I'm only look for—"

"Yey, yey," Mrs. Cole interrupted the young man rudely, eyelids half-open. She slurred. "Good kids... the lot of 'em... Good kittens... They... they...waitin' for you."

The doors threw open. Mrs. Cole waddled in shakily, looking rather like a giant walrus with a bottle of gin.

A frowning young man followed closely behind.

Tom, who hid behind other taller children, gave a dismissive glance toward their guest.

The young man was very slender, with porcelain skin as pale as moonlight, as if he was recovering from some terrible illness. He appeared fragile, even more so than the thin kids who stood before
him, yet his disposition was strong and alert. The most amazing things were his eyes—bright green—so bright that Tom couldn't find the right words to describe them. Tom thought that they looked even prettier than his favourite glass marbles, jade-green when glimmering in the sunlight.

His black hair was a bit long and messy, curling at the tip, which hid his forehead. Tom thought he saw a peculiar shaped scar beneath the bangs, but he was too far away to be certain.

From the moment the stranger stepped into the lobby, Tom felt something stirring inside him. His own soul resonated, burning like never before, drawn—inexorably—toward the stranger from deep within his very being.

"What's wrong, Tom?" The little snake slithered up his sleeves, after noticing her young master's distress. His heart beat so fast—too fast—he must calm down before he gets a heart-attack. She bit his wrist. The pain was enough to snap Tom out of his trance.

"I'm fine," Tom exhaled slowly.

A dull pain expanded in his chest as his heartbeat slowed to normal. For a moment, the pain made Tom think he was suffocating. But the moment passed as quickly as it begun. His heart returned to pumping blood, dutifully, through his veins, as if it had never tightened at the sight of that mysterious young man.

Before Tom had a moment to gather his thoughts, Mrs. Cole spoke again, "Everyone, this is Mr. Potter."

Mr. Potter.

That familiar name caused Tom's heart to skip another beat. The normally stoic boy startled up; his ebony eyes fixed on Mr. Potter's face, whose likeness, now, was burned onto his retina forever.
One Day, One Day

NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

November 19, 1932

As Harry entered the Orphanage's lobby, a sudden case of lightheadedness overcame him, almost knocking him off his feet. He stumbled forward; his legs felt like wet noodles. Harry grimaced as sharp pain and dizziness attacked his brain; even his vision blurred, blotchy with black spots flashing in front of his eyeballs. It took all his strength to not fall over in front of the children.

*Guess Hermione is right, his condition is worse than he thought.* Harry forced a smile onto his face.

If it wasn't for his body's *condition*, Harry should've been here two-years ago. *That* one time — when he attempted to time-jump prematurely — caused him to pass out in front of the laboratory. *That* unfortunate incident delayed him for three whole days, then... afterwards Hermion's wrath delayed him for two more. But, eventually, Harry made his way back to Tom.

Overall, he spent eleven days in 2000, which, according to Harry's calculations, meant Tom is about to turn five.

After a while, the terrible feeling had passed. Harry shuddered. The episode was the worst he ever felt; it almost felt like his soul is being ripped from his body. Suddenly, he became aware that the Slytherin's locket — which Harry always kept close by his side — was burning in his pocket. Without planning to, he pulled it out and it sprung open.

*NO! Not in front of the Muggles!*

Harry's pupils contracted in shock. The locket opened, yet... nothing was happening. No Tom Riddle's whispering temptations, no alluring mind-controlling charms, even... no trance of any magic left in the thing. The jewellery was *normal* again, save for the bit of angry heat that still clung to its golden surfaces.

And that meant — the Horcrux was destroyed!

*But how? How could it be destroyed when nothing has damaged it? How could it be gone when it never left Harry's side?*

"Everyone, this is Mr. Potter."

Mrs. Cole's words pulled him back to reality. Harry stuffed the locket back into his inner-breast pocket. *He'll have to save the investigations for later.*

Harry lifted his head to smile at the children lining up in front of him. He didn't mean to make a fuss. He was just there for Tom, and, before he could get a word in, Mrs. Cole enthusiastically summoned all the children. They stood stiffly in front of him, in a neat line, sorted by age, as if Harry was a visiting general inspecting his troops.

"Ma'am, I'm just here for —" Harry raised his voice to protest, but Mrs. Cole wasn't listening.

"I know... I know. Hard to choose... They're all good kids. Goodies —" The drunken Head-Matron slurred, waving her hands and spilling some gin on the floor. "Say 'hello' to Mr. Potter, everyone."
"HELLO! MR. POTTER!" The children shouted, their unified voice clear and booming inside the large lobby.

Harry scanned their faces.

The oldests were but ten and the youngest were no more than babies. Dressed in identical silk suits, they stared at him with frightened eyes of newborn fawns. Their faces were pale and thin, hollow cheeks clearly demonstrated malnutrition, but most of them smiled shyly at him, large eyes shiny with tears and wistfulness.

Harry's heart melted at the sight of them. He had a difficult childhood once, living under the mercy of unkind caregivers. He was one of them once, and so, their helpless, silent pleas resonated with him deeply.

Of course, what Harry didn't know was that these kids were acting. They had been through this process before, many times over, and they were used to be picked like cattle. Therefore, they learned how to fake presentation—how to look sad and helpless; how to cry at the appropriate moments to gain sympathy. Innocence was a privilege of childhood, but it was a privilege for the rich kids, the ones with parents, and not for them, who must survive on their own.

But Harry didn't know that. The world was always simpler in the minds of golden Gryffindors, they—foolishly—liked to assume the best of people.

The thought of disappointing most of these kids troubled Harry greatly. He looked away.

"I just want to adopt—" Harry's words choked in his throat.

"DADDY! DADDY! PLEASE DON'T GO!"

Suddenly, in the front row, a boy started to cry. He wailed on top of his lungs, a heartbreaking thrill voice that echoed in the lobby.

The boy trembled uncontrollably, as if it took all his strength to remain standing. "I WANNA GO HOME! PLEASE, I'LL BE GOOD. DADDY. I WON'T ASK FOR A RABBIT NO MORE—"

"BILLY! BE QUIET!" Mrs. Cole snapped at the boy angrily. His piercing wail was giving her a migraine.

The boy looked frightened. He hid his face in his sleeves, but couldn't quite stop himself from sobbing. His muffled cries sounded even more depressing as Mrs. Cole glared at him.

"Mrs. Cole... Is he alright?" Harry asked.

The drunken woman waved her arm dismissively.

"Yeah, yeah... the boy misses his daddy. Happens now and then... Maybe...maybe, Mr. Potter, you remind him of his father—the man dropped him off one day, right here, with nuthin' but a newly-purchased pet bunny... Said he'll come back for him later. Ye'know—"She hiccupped "—they never come back."

Harry felt the revelation weighting on him like stone. No more than a boy, yet he had to watch his father abandon him... he had to watch families after families pass him by, because of his age. How can such a small body handle so much suffering?

A thought formed in Harry's head—Perhaps Tom would like the company of a friend, a brother... A
Muggle to grow up with Tom would be good for his developments, for changing his prejudices.

Harry pursed his lips. After some careful deliberation, Harry knelt in front of the sobbing boy, and asked gently.

"Dear child, would you like to come home with me?"

The little viper had never seen Tom lose control like this.

Even when the others called him names, hit him, spitted on him, Tom only sneered coldly, keeping all his emotions locked within, and plotted his revenge from the shadows. Now, a sudden, harrowing madness descended on this too-mature boy, twisting his childish features into something fiendish... Something, which Tom has managed to keep hidden all these years, exploded.

His small fingers twisted around the black scarf, pressing it into his palm, as if trying to absorb its wool into his bloodstream. Purple veins popped with the effort.

The viper snuck a look at the boy's face.

Tom was staring at the young man in front of him. Hatred masked his ebony eyes like dark clouds blotting out the sun. Tom grew paler, as his only hope — his one good childhood memory— shattered around him.

His expression— for there was no mistaking it — was pure, unadulterated loathing and anger.

Directed at whom though, it wasn't clear.

The viper flicked her tongue, confused.

Tom was good at keeping his emotions hidden; at most, he wore a cold sneer that warned off all challengers. He was a snake, controlling the world from the shadows, always prepared to strike mercilessly. Tom was a snake; he did not lose control.

So why is he losing his mind over some man adopting Billy?

Tom stared at the young man's smiling face, green-eyes warmer than sunlight. Tom stared as he knelt in front of Billy, comforting the moron with arms that should've been wrapped around Tom.

He gritted his teeth, pulling at the scarf, wishing he could tear it to pieces.

"Mr. Potter said he will come back for you, Tom. I know it. He asked me to look after you."

The young caretaker always told Tom.

Now her words were no more than the cruellest of mockeries, like sharp knives stabbing at his heart, over and over again.

The black scarf, that he loved so much, felt choking around his neck. Its existence was a mockery too, a mockery of his unattainable goals, a mockery of his naive hopes... a mockery of all his waiting.

He used to fall asleep every night with the cloak carefully wrapped around him. He used to fly into a deadly rage to protect the scarf. He used to be— so naive— so stupid for all the things he had done to preserve his last connection to this Mr. Potter.
No more.

Tom wasn't the skinny boy who got beaten up in the courtyard. No more. Now, he controlled a power that they could only dream of — he was better than all of them. And so... he didn't need them.

He didn't need the charity of this-so-called Mr. Potter!

However— regarding Billy Stubbs—

One day! One day soon!

"Billy?! Bill..ly is a good boy," Mrs. Cole waved her bottle. "Let's get it settled, then—"

"WAIT—" Harry stood up, still holding Billy's hand. "I'm looking for a boy. Tom Riddle."

Tom, who hid behind everyone, adjusted the scarf, and stepped forward through the parted crowds.

The little snake wrapped her body tightly around his arm. She felt his muscles relaxing, veins and tendons no longer straining against her scales. He looked calmer too, but, she could tell that his mood is only growing darker, bone-chilling with unseen wrath.

"I'm here," Tom said calmly. Jet-black hair and starry-night eyes, his face was as calm as the deep sea, so impenetrable that Harry couldn't detect a moment of happiness or surprise... or anything at all.

Harry recognized the scarf around Tom's neck. He smiled, remembering his adventure just eleven days ago.

"So... you've kept my scarf?"

"It's my scarf now—" a greedy smirk appeared on the child's face.

Harry took a step back. That smirk looked familiar, exactly like Tom Riddle's face from the diary, the same handsome smile as Harry lay dying.

He had almost forgotten... That this little boy, in front of him, will become Voldemort!... His sworn enemy.

The cute little baby, whom he cradled in his arms once, was gone. Before Harry realized, the boy's features grew more and more alike Voldemort's, as inevitable as time progressing forward.

Harry took a deep breath, green-eyes assessing Tom Riddle's face, familiar yet so different.

He asked, tone stiff and unnatural.

"Do... do you want to come with me?"

The boy's lips twisted into a robotic smile, as if he knew it was expected of him, and replied politely.

"Yes, Mr. Potter. Thank you for your kindness."

That unfamiliar "Mr. Potter" gave Harry pause. He looked at the old yet well-preserved scarf around the boy's thin neck, and, suddenly, his heart tightened.

"TOM— you knew this Mr. Potter, don't 'ye? He gave you that scarf?"
Billy stroked the rabbit fur slowly, watching as Tom gathered his few belongings into a suitcase. If Billy could see the devious glints in Tom's eyes, the boy would shut up so fast that he might bite off his own tongue... But, alas, the boy saw nothing, so he continued to boast.

"I thought fast—smart—and got Mr. Potter to notice me."

He stuck his nose up, very proud of his little tricks. He glanced over Tom's stiff body and looked down on the smaller boy with disdain, as if Tom was something stuck on the bottom of his shoes.

"Tom, you are the extra."

Tom clutched his fists. An extra, is he?

When the young man faced Billy, he was so gentle, so intoxicatingly lovely, he said,

"Dear child, would you like to come home with me?"

But, when faced with Tom, the young man's expression turned stiff, green-eyes looking to the floor, as if the same words were more difficult to say.

"Do... do you want to come with me?"

Everyone could see the difference. Everyone could see who Mr. Potter preferred.

Yes, Tom was the extra. The unwanted one, yet again.

"Riddle, save yourself some trouble and don't pack a thing. You'll be back soon enough—"

Billy snickered, tickling his rabbit. A cruel glee bloomed on his face, and he almost looked sweet, innocent, like the good little boy he was.

"Are you two ready? We should go—" Harry's warm voice, as soothing as the spring's rain, came from the doorway.

Billy cheered, and ran to his side. He pointed to a backpack by his feet. The brunette boy smiled eagerly, eyes turning into crescent moons.

"Yes, I'm ready. Harry."

"Good boy," Harry smiled and rewarded him with a pat on the head.

Tom pinched himself to calm his anger. He allowed himself a moment, until the darkness receded from his eyes. He grabbed his suitcase and turned toward Harry.

"I'm ready too... Mr. Potter."

Harry probably should've patted Tom on the head too, or to reach out for his hands. But the more Harry looked upon Tom's childish face, the more he remembered the diary Riddle's cruel sneers. And he couldn't find the right words. Instead, he grabbed Billy's hand and led them out of the room.

"Aye? Tom? You've forgot your cloak—"

Billy pointed to the black cloak left behind on Tom's bed, tagging on Harry's hand triumphantly, the rabbit by his side as always. His smugness was clearly designed to provoke Tom.
Tom followed them docilely. He paused upon hearing Billy's challenge, fingernails cutting into his fisted palms.

"I don't want it anymore...It's torn."

Billy, dude, you deserves an Oscar...
Confusion and Hope

NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

parseltongue

December 20, 1932

Harry sat in front of the fire-place, cross-legged, and stroked the fire with an iron poker.

They lived in a large house in the suburb of London. His name — Harry Potter — painted neatly on the mailbox. Although the Weasley twins were well-known jokesters, their abilities were equally unquestionable. In eleven short days, they managed to get Harry everything he needed— from a birth certificate to a bank account large enough to buy a house.

The two children were in bed. The empty silence made the large house seem rather lonely.

Harry inspected the Slytherin's Lockets. Its smooth, golden curvatures reflected orange glow of the fire, and redirected lights into Harry's green eyes. He was deep in thoughts. The Horcrux couldn't have vanished without a cause... Harry was sure Tom's presence had something to do with it.

Harry sighed. Magical theory was not his speciality... better leave it for Hermione. He tucked the Locket away and rubbed his temple.

He waited until the fire extinguished, until coals went dead as their burning redness receded. Then, Harry dragged himself to bed.

Even the softest feather bed was not enough to comfort his exhausted body. Harry stared at the ceiling in the darkness; his versions blurred.

He felt so tired, like he was lost in a maze, a gigantic, endless maze more dangerous than the one in the Triwizard Tournament. He ran; he screamed; he searched for an exit, but there were none. He was all alone in the dark— a trapped lab rat in a maze— as Fate watched him from above, omniscient as it built more and more walls around him.

So Harry had managed to adopt Tom successfully. Yet, Fate hadn't made its move.

Harry turned over in bed. He couldn't get these terrible thoughts out of his head.

Hermione had said, Fate allowed certain changes to happen, because it believed those changes were minor in the grand scheme of history. If Fate didn't care that Harry adopted Tom... then... did that mean that no matter what Harry did, Tom would always end up as Voldemort?


Harry covered his eyes. He laughed bitterly. Then, lying alone in the darkness, for the briefest moment, Harry regretted his decision. The thought spread through his mind like a virus, latching onto his weakness, poisoning his resolve.

Harry sprung up in bed, shaking with cold sweat. He mustn't think these thoughts. One moment of weakness and he would lose the war. He would lose everything. There was no going back.
Harry was scared—scared of the unknown, of the future. He wanted to go home.

Suddenly, Harry realized what he needed to do—right now, he needed to go see the boy.

Tom lied on his bed, eyes-shut, but he wasn't asleep.

His new room wasn't very big, just enough for two twin-sized beds, but it was warm and his duvet was soft. Tom should be sleeping. After the long, exciting day he had, Tom needed to rest and preserve his energy.

But he couldn't sleep. Anger only made his mind clearer, sharper.

Billy Stubbs was scrawled on the bed next to Tom's, snoring loudly. Tom sneered. The boy needed to thank Mr. Potter for putting them in separate beds, or Tom would have strangled him in his sleep... *Come to think of it, Tom still might.*

The little snake was still wrapped around Tom's wrist. Unlike most reptiles, its magical body required no hibernation. Tom contemplated on ordering his pet to use its deadly poison on the boy and his disgusting rabbit. Tomorrow, the headlines would lament how a foolish boy had accidentally disturbed the nest of a hibernating viper, and, sadly, he passed away shortly after being bitten.

In the darkness, the child's face twisted with a savage satisfaction.

Suddenly, door hinges squeaked, the sound very clear in the night. Tom withdrew his thoughts, one hand on his wrist, prepared to wake his pet at a moment's notice. He listened carefully, readying to attack.

Fire continued to crackle in the furnace. There were sounds of muffled footsteps. Tom opened his eyes to a slit and watched as, from shadows reflected on the window pane, an intruder approaching them on tip-toes. It was Mr. Potter, who stopped in front of Billy's bed.

The reflection betrayed Mr. Potter's movements clearly. Gently, he pulled up the half-fallen duvet and tucked it under Billy's chin, wrapping the boy tightly, as if he thought a mere new furnace was not enough for his precious charge. *A rustling of fabrics,* almost inaudible as fire crackled.

Tom lied on his side, his back toward Mr. Potter, but his eyes were glued on the young man's reflection. On the window pane, the blurry shapes somehow looked perfectly clear to Tom. He could see the smile that lingered on those red lips. A smile that wasn't meant for Tom... Tom bit his lips.

He didn't care for Mr. Potter's smile! It was so fake, the smile of a disgustingly hypocritical man. Tom didn't care... so why does he feel like choking at sight of those lips?

Tom glared at the glass pane, dark eyes unwavering, perhaps hoping he could shatter it with his mind.

The face on the window pane turned away from Billy. Tom watched as the shape moved toward his bed. Then, he hurriedly closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. His fists tightened, as if readying for battle.

Tom always took care of himself. He tucked himself in, and he never kicked his duvet off the bed. If you were dumb enough to sleep like Billy, within the cold walls of the orphanage, then you deserved to die of hypothermia. Tom's duvet remained wrapped tightly around him, fitting perfectly. So there was no reason for Mr. Potter to tuck in his sheets...
Besides, judging by the man's attitude toward Tom, he wouldn't lift a finger even if Tom was lying—
dying—in the snow.

The boy squeezed his eyes shut, feigning asleep. His mind mocked him with terrible and wonderful
thoughts. Tom's fingernails bit into his flesh, almost drawing blood, yet no clue on the boy's face
betrayed his inner turmoil. Again and again, Tom stabbed his own heart with cruel words that
borderline on masochism... He wanted to keep a clear head, no false hopes, yet he couldn't kill the
yearning blossoming within his heart.

No matter how hard Tom tried to act mature and rational, he was still a four years old boy. Although
Tom never knew love, he still hoped for it... even just for a little bit.

So, eyes-closed, Tom waited.

He waited. One second passed, then two, then three— even if Tom thought such hopes were
childish and beneath him — *He waited.*

*Nothing.*

*See, he doesn't like you,* a sharp voice penetrated his mind. No one was coming, nothing but fire
crackling and wind howling outside. Tom's pretence fell away. Such a stupid tactic, pretending to be
asleep waiting for Mr. Potter, it was a mockery to Tom's intelligence. *So stupid of him.*

*He had left already, while you were waited like an idiot.*

Tom exhaled deeply, ignoring the strange sadness spreading in his chest. He opened his eyes.

"Sorry, did I wake you?"

Harry's green orbs locked with Tom's surprised ones. The black-haired young man sat on the floor
by Tom's bed, in silence, eyes fixed on the child's sleeping face. Their eyes met. The sight of those
crystal-clear emerald eyes struck Tom to the core. His normally fast-paced brain froze and, slowly
and unintentionally, the tension uncoiled.

"I'm leaving now... Go back to sleep." The man soothed in his quiet voice, a little embarrassed at
being caught. He got up to leave.

Tom looked up at him in a daze. He didn't know what to say.

The boy's large eyes followed Harry, a flash of vulnerability in those deep, ebony orbs, brief like
extinguishing flames.

Harry hesitated. He pursed his lips and laid a hand carefully on the boy's forehead.

"Go to sleep."

Tom wrapped himself tightly in the duvet. His forehead tickled; the man's warm touch lingered on
his skin.

That one simple gesture was almost enough to tear down the walls of hatred that the boy built around
himself.

Tom was never soft, tender, or caring. He wouldn't hesitate to rob a staving man of his last piece of
bread. But... when the dark-haired young man had sat next to his bed, breathing quietly, watching
Tom with clear, caring green-eyes that were unmarked by scorn or rejection— those eyes made Tom
feel like the most important person in the world. Tom thought he could look into those eyes forever. Suddenly, unexplainable emotions washed over Tom. His chest hurt and something lumped in his throat. These unfamiliar bursts scared him.

He closed his eyes. Mr. Potter's images filled his head.

Tom cocooned himself into the duvet. He felt weird.

But... he didn't dislike those feelings.

Next day, the sky was clear. Warm sunlight dispersed all of winter's gloominess, and brought life back to London.

Tom woke as soon as he felt warm sunshine on his face. He tended to be sensitive to lights.

Billy was still asleep. His pet rabbit was awake, though, red-eyes turning toward Tom, pink lips trembling.

Tom glared at the dumb animal.

"Can I eat him, Tom?" The little snake climbed up Tom's arm, drooling at the sight of the fat creature.

Tom's eyes zoomed toward a brand-new set of clothes on his bed. Billy had a similar set on his bed too. Tom's thin lips twitched, his smile not entirely genuine.

"Of course... You can eat the human too, for that matter... But... wait until it and its idiotic owner are sent back to the Orphanage."

The viper seemed surprised. It hissed in Tom's ears. "Then, are you staying here? And are you planning to chase him out?"

Tom buttoned up his shirt. The fresh, black cashmere sweater fitted snugly on his body. With his new, expensive clothes, he looked very handsome. Soft hair tucked neatly behind his ears, lustrous as the best black pearls. The four-years-old sat on his bed and glared at Billy's face, pink flesh poking out from under the duvet.

He chuckled darkly.

"Here—this — all is rightfully mine, so why should I leave? All is rightfully mine... And he will not enjoy any of it!"

Cheerfully, Tom bounced over to Billy's bed. His hands wrapped around the Muggle boy's exposed throat, then tightened.

The pain startled the boy awake.

He coughed. "TOM!... Ugh—Ugh— What are you doing?!"

Tom watched as Billy clawed at the hands around his throat; he grinned brightly.

On the future of this fic:
1) Note that this story progress very slowly... The author published 60ish chapters already and those two are still not together. Tom/Harry's relationship gets pretty dark and twisted. You have been *warned*.

2) Tom is a psychopath (or high-functioning sociopath, whichever you prefer...) and Harry is a bit of bleeding-heart. That's not going to change.

3) However, the author DID promise a happy ending. So Tom/Harry will end up together. Let's hold her to that.

Thanks for reading
December 1932

After that night, nothing seemed to have changed. Harry's expression remained stiff when facing Tom, yet he was so gentle to Billy.

Obviously, Billy was pleased by the preferential treatments. He spent all his time glued to Harry's side, spitting seemingly innocuous words that were designed to upset Tom. Tom grew silent in face of the other boy's challenges, eyes morose with darkness. Harry saw it, the unfriendliness, but he didn't know how to repair their relationship.

"HARRY! Look at the rabbit that I drew!" Billy thrust a piece of paper in Harry's hands.

Harry put down the documents from Dumbledore's Army. He smiled with his usual warmth and spread the picture on the table.

It was, indeed, a rabbit. Although one could only tell from the two elongated ears poking out of a mess of squiggly lines, the rest was... imaginative. The silly, abstract rabbit lightened Harry's mood. Perhaps he worried too much.

He rubbed the boy's head, and praised. "It looks great, Billy!"

The boy's eyes flashed. Then, he said to Harry, in the sweetest voice he could muster.

"Tom's drawing looks good too!"

"Oh?" Harry was actually curious. What does Voldemort's childhood doodle look like?

Tom, who sat silently near-by, raised his head as his name was mentioned. Harry smiled at him encouragingly. Tom paused; before he could react, Billy snatched away his drawing without permission and presented the paper to Harry eagerly.

Tom pursed his lips and clutched the crayons in his hand. His eyes searched Harry's face, which almost seemed like he was nervous.

Harry stared at the drawing. It was coloured all in black, filled with messy lines that resembled dark clouds rolling in the storm. In the middle of the paper, outlined with white markers, was a neatly reproduced symbol that was — unfortunately — much less abstract than Billy's bunny. Harry had no problem recognizing that symbol — it was a large, white skull.

To Harry, it looked awfully familiar. Yes, he had seen it... On many dark, dreadful nights, green projection of the giant skull dominated the starless sky. A smoke-formed snake was slithering out of its open mouth, its fluorescent body residing above deaths that had inevitable occurred by its master's hands. People, who saw it, ran from it screaming, "You-Know-Who!"

"I don't feel well... I'm going to bed," Harry stood up suddenly. "You have fun, boys... Good night."
Then, he practically bolted from the room, almost tripping over the carpet.

"See, he doesn't like you," Billy said triumphantly. Sticking his tongue out proudly, Billy sauntered pass Tom, bumping into his shoulder. The boy whispered into Tom's ears. "Say... if Harry knew what a freak you are, what do you think he'll do?"

Tom looked up abruptly, but the cowardly fool was already meters away, smiling at him with false friendliness.

"See, Riddle, I've told you that... you don't have to pack anything. You'll be sent back soon enough." The door slammed shut with a loud bang, and, suddenly, Tom was the only one left in the enormous study.

Tom stayed glued to his seat, still as a statue.

"Tom—" the little snake crawled out of his sleeves. Her cold-blooded body rubbed against Tom's cool cheeks, comforting him in the only way she can.

"He does like me—" Tom hissed, patting the viper with his thumb.

She didn't have an answer for him. Snakes were solitary creatures. They did not possess a social brain and thus, her tiny mind couldn't understand the complexity of human interactions.

She couldn't understand, for example, why Tom, who was clearly fond of this Potter human, never even smiles at the man? Even if smiling was easy for human, as she had seen Billy pretends to smile all the time.

She couldn't understand, even more so, why did that Mr. Potter, who was equally fond of Tom, never hugs the boy like he hugs Billy? Even if, after Tom fell asleep, the man would take the trouble to sit by the Tom's bedside, watching over him for a long time, guarding the boy when he could not know.

Life would be better without that Billy human, she decided. If only stupid Billy was gone, then little Tom wouldn't be so sad anymore. Also, if only stupid Billy is gone, the, finally, she would be free to feast on that annoying rabbit.

If only —

Harry couldn't untangle his own emotions.

Every times he thought about the boy, he remembered the day that Tom was born, the tiny, soft bundle sleeping in his arms. Harry swore to himself that he would always look after this child, ensuring him a happy, healthy childhood. But as the boy grew older, his ebony eyes became coloured by Voldemort's scarf anger; his face took on Voldemort's cruel, emotionless mask; and even his thoughts, so mature for his age, tended toward Voldemort's vast ambitions — so merciless and cold — all things that Harry found hard to accept.

He thought about that drawing.

He had to admit that Tom's a genius. Even yet to turn five, Tom's undisciplined hands were able to reproduce such detailed and realistic drawings. Harry chuckled despite himself.

After the initial shock wore off, though, Harry realized how careless his actions were... He remembered how Tom's face had turned ghastly pale as Harry ran from the room— ran to get away
from Tom— and suddenly, he realized, unintentionally, he had been treating Tom unfairly, especially in comparison to Billy. This was— perhaps— because Billy tended to act more like a child, immature and attention-seeking. While Tom was... Tom was more independent, capable; he liked to solve his own problems instead of running to Harry for help.

The crying baby gets the milk first, as the idiom goes.

Harry sat up in bed, guilt suddenly jolted through him. Now that Harry thought about it, all of their interactions seemed to consist of Billy talking excitedly to Harry while Tom, sitting aside, watched them in silence, as if he was a bystander in this new family. Guilt weighted on Harry's mind like stone. Carelessness was no excuse for negligence... and Harry had failed Tom, as the extremely smart boy was sure to notice.

Tom's proud and boyish eyes flashed in Harry's mind, piercing his consciousness like the stares of a wounded wolf cub. Harry pursed his lips. His chest hurt, as bitter regret rose to his throat.

Am I actually helping Tom?... Or am I just pushing the boy down the same path, towards becoming Voldemort? Harry shook with cold sweat, as the sudden realization popped into his head.

Harry pushed open his bedroom door and happened to see Tom striding toward him. The boy walked with a military precision, every step calculated to be the same uniform length, as if he was a robot pretending to be a boy.

"Mr. Potter," the boy greeted politely. He deliberately moved around Harry, and walked faster down the hall.

The unfamiliar title struck Harry like a tone of bricks. The child didn't even feel comfortable enough to address him by name.

"TOM! —" Harry yelled after him, but, as the boy turned to face him, Harry didn't know what to say. He licked his lips nervously. Then, seemingly remembering something urgent, Harry turned and ran downstairs. "TOM! — Wait for me. I'll be back soon."

The front door slammed behind him.

The child stood still, watching through the window as the young man ran across the street, his coat still unbuttoned in the rush. He lowered his eyes, a shadow passed through them, grim and unreadable.

"'Tom... I'm sleepy. Let's go back to our room—'" The snake poked her head from Tom's shirt collar.

The boy hesitated, then, he set her on the floor gently. "You go on back... without me—"

Harry didn't know it would take him so long to find what he was looking for... He walked to the end of the street, and, finally, found a convenience store that sold the thing he wanted.

By the time Harry returned home, it was way past dinner time.

"Tom?"

The house was dark. All the lights were off and Harry couldn't see a thing. He called the boy's name, gently, as he walked into the dark living room.
No one answered.

Harry waited in silence until his eyes got used to the dimly-lit interior. Immediately, he noticed a small body slumping on the sofa.

The boy had fallen asleep on the sofa! Harry watched the boy's peaceful sleeping face and smiled tenderly. He wanted to laugh at his own stupidity... Yes, Harry was being stupid — *Tom isn't Voldemort* — and, even if that would be in their future, the boy wasn't Voldemort right now... At least, right now, he was a child who would fall asleep waiting for Harry to come home.

Harry smiled. He placed the newly purchased parcel next to the boy. His eyes inspected the boy's fine features lovingly, then, he pulled a blanket over the child's small body. Quietly, Harry went into the kitchen to prepare dinner, his steps springy with energy, as if a huge weight just lifted off his shoulders.

"*Tom, what is that in your handssss?*" The snake slipped under the duvet, staring curiously at the box in Tom's hands.

The four-years-old grinned, clutching the box tightly. A wonderful, childish elation appeared on his face, a pure sort of happiness that she had never seen on his face. Dressed in his adorable, puppy-print pyjamas, the boy sat on his bed and opened the box in his hands. He showed her the content of the precious box — a new set of twelve multi-coloured crayons laid in a row, under the furnace's glow, their waxy surfaces shimmered with all colours of the rainbow.

"*What are those?*"

"*Crayons. For me... Sssssso I can draw more skulls.*"
December 1932

Billy Stubbs thought that something had changed while he wasn't looking.

For example, Tom didn't avoid them anymore. For example, Harry no longer looked at the floor while speaking to Tom. For example, Harry brought Tom a new box of crayons, which Tom treasured greatly, hiding it at a safe place away from Billy.

Billy was very unsatisfied with the new developments. He begged Harry until the man brought him crayons too, but... it wasn't the same.

See, he really liked Harry; but then any orphan would... even the freaky Tom Riddle. This was because Harry was the best adoptive parent that any child could hope for. The man was young, gentle, patient, and considerate. He never raised his voice against them, even when the children played rowdy games inside the new house.

And so, it was important for Billy to keep Harry's affection all to himself—a sentiment, which he firmly believed, was also shared by Riddle. And that, he thought, was simply unacceptable. Holding his pet rabbit as always, Billy stood on the top of the stairs, inspecting the house that ought to belong to him. He stroked the rabbit's fur, preoccupied by his own thoughts.

There was no need to worry. He could handle a four years old Tom Riddle, because Tom Riddle was a freak—an unmistakable monster who will never be accepted. If Billy wanted, he could expose Tom anytime and send the boy packing back to the orphanage. One child was enough for Harry—Billy could easily make it happen, if only he could trick Tom into revealing his unnatural abilities.

"Harry! Harry, I want to listen to a story." Billy leaned back on his bed, one hand holding the rabbit, the other tagging on Harry's shirt persistently.

Harry acquiesced. He turned to ask Tom, who was lying on the opposite bed. "How about you, Tom?"

From the corner of his eyes, Tom noticed the jealous hatred flashing across Billy's face. It pleased him, so although Tom had no interest in fairytales, he nodded at Harry.

"Ok... How about The Selfish Giant by Oscar Wilde?"

"Harry— " Billy interrupted. "Do giants really exist?"

Tom's mocking, black eyes fixed on Billy's face, taking in the boy's curious, expectant expression; only an idiot would believe that fairytales creatures are real.

"Of course they do," Tom's disdain was cut short by Harry's words. "They live in another world."

For Harry, Billy's question brought up memories of the past. Speaking of giants, the first thing that
popped into his mind was the image of Hagrid the half-giant, with his bushy beard trembling as he laughed throatily.

Tom was transfixed by the warm smile that appeared on Harry's lips. Its gentle curves caught within his ebony eyes, captivatively beautiful as Tom stared unmoving, as if that smile somehow managed to turn him into stone.

"Harry, I don't want to listen to The Selfish Giant. Instead, tell me more about giants." Billy begged. He even turned to Tom for help. "Tom wants to know more about giants too. Don't you, Tom?"

Billy's question snapped Tom from his mesmerised staring. The boy blinked, ebony eyes flashing with wants.

"Yes," he replied absentmindedly.

Harry smiled. "Alright. Once upon a time, there was a boy, whose mother was a giant and his father a human. So he grew up smaller than all the giant children, but bigger than all the human children. His palms are as big as fans, like this big—"

"Wow!" Billy yelled, eyes wide. "Cool!"

Billy's wide-eyed expression reminded Harry of his first trip on the Hogwarts Express, of the same surprised look on Ron's face when Harry showed him his scar. The memory made Harry smile again and he couldn't help but reach out to rub the boy's hair.

"Actually, it isn't so cool." Harry continued bitterly. "The giants took one look at him and said he wasn't one of them. The humans said the same. Being rejected twice… isn't so cool, after all."

"Then what happened?"

"Then luckily, the boy got accepted into a school. The old Headmaster treated him well, helped him, and forgave him even when he made mistakes. Even after the boy was expelled, the kind Headmaster took him in, and charged him with protecting the school."

And so the half-giant half boy continued to protect the school, even to this day, even when the school was almost overrun with Death Eaters. He protected the school even when his life was in danger.

Tom noticed the wistful and melancholy expression on Harry's face and suddenly, he knew he disliked that giant fellow, even if they had never met before and he was not real.

"If he was bigger than all the humans, why didn't he just conquer them? If he ruled over them, they would have to accept him—" Tom stated his question like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

This was the first in a long time that Tom had taken an interest in their discussions; it was also the first time he had addressed a question directly to Harry.

Harry didn't know whether to be flattered by the attention or concerned. Or perhaps I should commend the young Dark-Lord-to-be for thinking about the big picture, Harry thought drily.

"Tom, acceptance cannot originate from fear, but from respect." Harry said solemnly as he looked into the boy's curious eyes, as bright as stars in the night sky.

Tom's dark eyes clashed with green ones. He lifted his chin proudly, nonverbally expressing his disagreement—because to the four years old child, respect was utterly useless. In fact, all positive emotions were useless, including love, empathy, responsibility. They were, to Tom, no more than
false ornaments of society, all of which would so easily shatter in face of true adversity and danger.

On the other hand, negative emotions were the only effective ones. They were more threatening and therefore persuasive. Fear, dread, and anger were all great motivators—they would help Tom obtain and consolidate power, which was how he survived at the orphanage.

"I want to go to sleep!" Billy exclaimed, deliberately breaking their moment. He tugged at Harry's hand, forcing the man to turn his eyes away from Tom. Behind Harry's back, Tom gave Billy a warning glare, and his fingers ran across the scales of his viper that had silently appeared around his wrists. The older boy stiffed; he seemed to have gotten the massage.

Harry stood up and helped them adjust the flames that burned brightly in the furnace.

"Yes, you two should go to sleep."

Suddenly, Billy reached out his arms and whined loudly. "Harry, my goodnight kiss."

Harry lowered his head and pressed his lips against the boy's forehead. "Alright... goodnight."

He turned and saw Tom sitting on his bed. The boy's posture stiffened proudly. Harry hesitated; he couldn't quite imagine himself kissing Voldemort goodnight. His fleeting hesitation did not escape notice by either boys.

Billy chose this unfortunate moment to shout at them.

"Harry, you forgot Tom's goodnight kiss!"

Harry smiled wryly, and thought he could escape the situation by joking about it; yet as he looked at Tom, his heart tightened as soon as he caught sight of the dark haired boy.

At first glance, the boy's face looked calm, a careful mask of serenity, as if he hadn't heard them at all. However upon looking more closely, Harry could see Tom's thin shoulders slumping with disappointment. But, of course, Tom would never complain. The child would never ask, let alone beg to anyone for anything, no matter how much he wanted it.

Harry berated himself. Before he fully realized, his body acted before his brain. He bent forward, until he was at the eye-level with the child, and brushed strands of black hair from the pale face. Harry gave Tom a quick peck on the forehead, lips tender and warm against cool skin.

"Goodnight, Tom. Sweet dreams," Harry said, then left.

Tom remained seated on his bed for a long time, his own hands pressed against his forehead, seemingly frozen into place.

Carefully, the snake poked her head from his sleeves, while trying to avoid Billy's inquisitive glaze and hissed in Tom's ears. "Tom, are you alright? You are acting weird—"

Tom's mask had been dangerously close to cracking, before his face immediately became blank again. He ran his long slender fingers through his hair and let his bangs fall back in place. Then, he lay down in bed and went to sleep. He never answered her question directly, although he did award the snake with a strange, unreadable look before dozing off. Whatever that meant, she thought.

Everything seemed to be going well. As they grew more familiar with each others' routines, they almost seemed like a real family.
Frustrated, Billy discovered that he couldn't trick Tom into revealing his abilities. Originally he had thought it would be easy to provoke Tom, but now he discovered that the four-years-old had impeccable self-control; nothing, no amount of insult or abuse, could make the child lose grip of his anger. Tom's boyish, handsome face wore the prefect mask, impenetrable like the disguise of the devil. His eyes regarded Billy with cold mockery, as if the older boy was merely a clown at the circus, unworthy of any attention except to be laughed at. It made Billy angry.

"Freak," Billy whispered to his rabbit, as he continued to stroke its fur.

Tom never thought much of Billy.

Oh, he knew what the boy was up to, alright. That idiot wanted to coerce him into show his true powers. If Harry saw it, the young man would join Billy together in accusation; pointing at Tom and screaming, "Freak! Freak!" Tom clutched his fists, a mad grin twisting his sharp face into madness. He wasn't afraid of the things that people said about him, even if... Tom didn't care even if Harry would join them, he decided. All he desired was to become the most powerful of them all— then Tom would sit atop his throne, staring down as they lay trembling by his feet, bowing to the-one-who-is-a-freak.

He smirked. Not yet; right now, he must be patient for he needed more power. He had to stay here, in the best environment possible until he grows more powerful, enough to survive on his own. In case Harry ever found out that he was a freak; in case the young man ever betrays Tom, he must grow powerful enough to muster the strength to kill him. Betrayal would result in death; this was all logical in his young mind.

The boy's eyes flashed. His murderous, grim expression scared even the little snake, which quickly slithered into his pocket.

"Tom, are you ready to go?"

On the second floor, the boy stood staring down at the smiling young man, through the space between carved handrails of the stairs. Tom licked his lips, eyes latched on Harry's face. For the first time in his young life, Tom thanked Fortune— yes, it indeed was a good thing that Harry didn't know the truth.

Tom then looked at Billy who stood beside Harry, holding the dumb rabbit, and his eyes turned darker still. He walked down the stairs, with slow and deliberate steps.

Yes, it was a good thing that Harry doesn't know the truth, and Tom was determined to keep it that way!

"Harry, can people make things fly?" Billy asked loudly, glaring at Tom out of the corner of his eyes. He grabbed his rabbit with one hand, and tugged onto Harry's hand with the other.

Harry nodded, surprised. *Shouldn't this question be from Tom?*

"Why, yes, of course."

Billy frowned in puzzlement at the unexpected answer.

"First hold a small bird in your hands, then... just let go. It'll fly away, see?" Harry chuckled at his own joke, emerald eyes warm and bright.

Through the lens of his round glasses, Harry's eyes glinted with a mischievous joy. The laughter
coloured his normally pale cheeks with a lovely rosy shade and made the man look younger, livelier. Tom wrapped his fingers around Harry's other hand; eyes unable to look away from the man's face.

Billy opened his mouth, but they had arrived at their destination. Tom stood behind Harry, and glared at the other boy, cold eyes sending chills down Billy's spine. Billy clutched his pet tighter and inched closer to Harry.

Suddenly Tom smiled at the newcomer, a wonderfully sweet smile that looked adorable on the his young face.

"Tom, Billy. Meet Headmaster Marco," Harry gently nudged them forward. "You'll be attending his school soon, right after Christmas."

However an incident happened right before Christmas, and changed everything.

"Hey, Tooom," Billy cooed mockingly. "Would you be more upset to return to the orphanage before or after Christmas?" He stroked lovingly at the rabbit in his arms. The poor creature's leg was bandaged as it trembled under its master's touch, as if the rabbit understood the boy's devious plans.

Tom sat still on his bed. His face grew increasingly darker with suppressed anger; a dangerous storm brewing in his black eyes.

Outside their bedroom window a carriage stopped, as the horses screeched to a halt. The front gates immediately clicked open.

Billy grinned. "Harry's carriage is back. Too bad you can't spend Christmas with us Tom, because... because you tried to kill my poor, defenceless bunny."

He squeezed the rabbit's injured leg. It squealed, and desperately tried to leap away from him.

"Tom, are you familiar with concept of frame up?" The boy sounded casual, pleasant, as if he was merely discussing the weather.

Tom clutched his duvet, his knuckles white, lips tight with anger. He did not reply.

Then, suddenly, everything in the room started to shake, like in an earthquake. Scattered around their beds, loose papers and books shook and rose into the air.

"FREAK!" Billy screamed in delight. He stood up, arms around the rabbit, in midst of the swarm of levitating furniture, a panicked expression on his face. He looked around wildly, as objects zoomed by, almost smashing into him. Billy's face held a look of terror, yet his eyes hid a satisfied glint.

This ought to be enough to get rid of Tom!

Harry heard Billy's scream all the way from the living room. He gave a worried shout; the children could hear footsteps rushing on the staircase.

As furniture floated in the air, Billy looked up at them. A devious smirk grew on his lips.

"Tom, it looks like... you've lost."

Reviews are extremely appreciated so we can know how to make the fic more enjoyable for you, the readers :)
Poor Harry, all the psychos seem rather fond of him... Good-luck!

_from the beta: hope you guys liked this chapter! dun dun dun dun… what's going to happen to Tom now?_
December 1932

Everything was a blur. Tom’s vision focused on Billy’s yapping mouth in front of him. The boy was complaining loudly, or perhaps crying, but Tom couldn’t hear what was being said. All he could focus on was Billy’s eyes, staring at him in malicious triumph. By Tom’s side, the rabbit laid, bleeding, on his bed, its injured legs stretched pathetically—dust, fur, and flesh clinging onto exposed bone, sickening and raw—a bloody mess. The stench of blood drew out the little snake. She poked her head from under Tom’s sleeves, but retracted quickly after seeing that they had company.

The young child wasn’t afraid of blood. In fact, he had an almost unhealthy fascination with the dark liquid. He liked its red colour, thick and dark and despairing; he liked how it dried quickly after spilling and how it felt sticky on his fingertips. He had studied blood before, so he noticed how a rabbit’s blood wasn’t as thick as human’s. It wasn’t as red; it wasn’t as radiant, like burning flames that dazzle the eyes.

He definitely wasn’t afraid of blood, but when those emerald eyes turned towards him—wide with shock and distrust—his own blood turned into ice!

But Tom did nothing wrong.

He did nothing, except standing there beside the bleeding rabbit. Suddenly, Billy had screamed and cried his lungs out, rushing forward like a mad man, hitting Tom with angry fists. In the end, the older boy had a valuable three years of life experience over Tom, so he knew when to act quickly. His cruelty and tricks were finally winning out.

Everything had proceeded according to Billy’s plans.

Harry arrived just in time to witness the bloody aftermath—the injured rabbit, the broken furniture, the scattered toys and... Tom standing in the middle of it all.

Billy was delighted to see the man’s pupils constrict in shock. The boy couldn’t have known this, but his plans accidently hit right on target. In Harry’s mind, the bloody mess conjured up memories of the battlefield, the deaths, the war, and stirred up his hatred and fear of Voldemort.

It was almost too good.

Even Tom responded as Billy had planned! The boy only stood besides the rabbit, frozen into place, his jaw muscles taunt, his eyes expressionless, with no pleas of innocence whatsoever. Perhaps the shock had overtaken his brain or perhaps his pride wouldn’t let him explain. However, Tom’s eyes was still pissing Billy off; those same, superior, piercing eyes, looking past him as if he was unworthy of any attention.

The little boy stood still, black eyes focused on Harry’s approaching steps, young face stubborn and
sombre, just like the boy in the pensieve.

"Tom... I don't want to give up on you, so don't force me—"

Harry met Tom's cold stares. He closed his eyes, pained as he shakily uttered the threat. He picked up the rabbit and the stench of blood filled his nostrils. The man's quiet words landed like a hammer on Tom's ears, deliberately striking the most vulnerable parts of him, again and again, until his legs shook under the pressure.

Harry carried the rabbit out of the room quickly. He didn't look back.

Billy and Tom were left alone in the room, with only silence.

Tom squeezed his numb fingers. Only when Harry went out of his sight completely, did he remember to breathe. The air rushed painfully into his lungs, and it hurt so much. However, Tom paid no attention to the throbbing pain. Right now, all he could focus on was the terrible, burning anger that all but consumed him.

He was angry. So angry. Angry at Harry—who didn't believe in him, who didn't even wait before condemning him for the crime. Angry at those green eyes, which turned accusing against him, cruel like needles puncturing his heart. And he was angry at himself... for caring.

Don't be stupid, he thought. He doesn't like me! He never did!

Everything became clear at once: the man's stiffness when they first met, the man's avoiding eyes when they spoke. Everything confirmed what Tom already knew—that Harry Potter was a lie! The good memories of the past two weeks, the gift and the affections were only pretence, a cruel and fragile illusion put on to teach Tom a lesson. Fake! They were all faked.

Know this, Harry. You are not the one to give up on me. I am the one who willingly chooses to leave!

Tom's chest heaved painfully as he reached his decision. He exhaled; to his own surprise, a sob escaped from his lips.

"Good thing rabbits can't talk, eh?... Or this magic trick is going down fast," Billy said suddenly, breaking the silence with a smirk and a shrug. "So... lucky me, they can't!"

Tom stood still, refusing to acknowledge him.

Billy was disappointed by the child's lack of reaction. The whole scenario was more... boring than what he had hoped for. He left the room quickly.

In the messy bedroom, silence clung to the walls. Books and toys were scattered on the floor, which seemed very normal for a bedroom of two young boys, all normal save for a brilliant red stain covering one of the beds.

When it was safe, the little snake slithered out and climbed up Tom's arm.

"But, Tom... You didn't do it. Why didn't you explain?"

"Hmm... Explain what?" Tom stared at the bloodstain. Then he laughed, his laughter turning into soft hisses as he whispered to her, in a sweet tone which barely concealed the murderous rage beneath.
"Explaining won't make Harry believe me. Explaining won't make Billy hurt. Explaining won't turn back time... So why should I explain?"

Even to her reptilian ears, his childish laughter sounded mad and terrifying. She wrapped herself around his shoulder. *"Harry is kind, if Tom would just explain to him—"

Tom's eyes narrowed. No trace of emotion was left in those black eyes, nothing but the cold emptiness, protected by a darkness that devoured all hope.

*No more hope*, he thought. *No more disappointments.*

Suddenly, a vicious smirk blossomed on his thin face. Since his childish hope had been dashed, there was no reason to stay here. Since there was nothing holding him back, then, as his parting gift, he shall give them a memory that would terrorize them forever!

When Billy returned to the bedroom to taunt him, Tom unleashed his full wrath on the foolish boy. His familiar yet mysterious power flooded the room in full ravenous force. The caged beast was finally set free.

*Would you be more upset to return to the orphanage before or after Christmas?*

Even if Tom warned himself to not care, even if he knew the taunts were a part of Billy's plan, those words still ignited his rage like no other. *He* was the one who decides to leave! He made the decision, for himself, by himself, and yet... why did his heart hurt so much? It ached like all cells were dying from within. Tom bit his lips. Undoubtedly, no matter how much Tom wanted to deny it, Billy's words hurt him. The realization only fuelled his anger, further and further, until it burst forth like black flames of Hell.

"FREAK!" Billy screamed, a taunting smirk on his lips. "Tom, you've lost!"

The dark-haired boy laughed. *He lost? Who cares about winning or losing!* Cruelty and tricks were nothing in front of absolute power, real power, power that only he could possess. Power was the only tool to obtain victory in the real world, and it was the only tool Tom would need!

So what if Harry didn't like him? So what if he wasn't welcome here? Tom didn't need them. *Any of them.* All Tom need, right now, was revenge.

Suddenly, all the furniture in the bedroom began to levitate. Rapidly, they converged in the middle, smashing together until only a mess of sharp edges and broken glass remained. The swirling mess moved about like a swarm of murderous wasps, cutting and tearing at exposed skin. As the shadowy swarm circled him, Tom could feel his energy draining. He huffed with the effort.

However, any moment of weakness could be dangerous. A wooden frame flew at him; its jagged edges left a bloody gash on his face. The pain was sharp, but Tom ignored it. Instead, he gritted his teeth and focused on his seething anger.

Slowly but surely, Tom directed his rage towards Billy, who was cowering in a corner. The objects began attacking the crying boy, a hungry swarm puncturing and scratching at him. Billy cried out in pain, as shards grinded against him, drawing blood from numerous tiny wounds on his body. Finally, the foolish boy had his wish— Tom had revealed his power to the world, so terrifyingly dangerous yet... so glorious.

A satisfied grin twisted Tom's lips. Compared to a quick cut to one's throat, he preferred the slower
method... This was more sportive, satisfying, like a cat playing with its prey. He watched as desperation descended upon his enemy. The slow, numbing pain from thousands of tiny wounds tore apart the boy's nerves. He felt like ants was crawling inside of him, and it was slowly driving him towards the brink of madness.

"FREAK! FREAK!" Billy could only scream that one word, over and over again, so loud that he almost brought the roof down.

He was terrified! *This wasn't a part of his plan!* He never thought that a small child could have this kind of power, a power strong enough to kill him... *Easily!*

Through the sounds of shattering glass, they heard Harry's approaching footsteps. Next second, the door threw open—

A gush of wind scattered Tom's neatly parted hair. With clear dark eyes, cruel red smile, standing amongst the carnage, the child almost looked like the famed Devil of fairytales.

*So now Harry knows it too — my true nature,* Tom thought darkly. *Time for everyone, Harry and me, to confront the truth.*

"STOP! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

Harry ducked on instinct as a piece of a lamp flew overhead. He surveyed the devastated room in shock.

Tom glared at him through tornado of floating objects, eyes searching the man's face. He already knew what he would find— the man's face full of fear and disgust, just like anyone else, as he pointing toward Tom accusingly, screaming 'FREAK'. Tom sneered. The action reopened the wound on his face, blood dripping down his neck, but Tom didn't care.

Pain only made his mind clear, calm.

He turned towards Billy, who shrunk further into the corner, arms and legs bleeding profusely. The sight of redness coating his enemy's skin made Tom smile. The boy twitched under Tom's cold appraisal. Desperately, he tried to flatten himself against the wall, shielding himself in vain.

"TOM!" Harry yelled again, his normally kind voice turned sharp.

*Oh well, at least he didn't say 'Freak'*— Tom's smile didn't waver as his muscles tensed. He channelled even more of his power toward the swirling objects. They moved frantically.

"Tom, stop! Calm your mind!"

To his surprise, the dark-haired young man didn't rush toward Billy. Instead, he approached Tom in slow, confident strides. For a moment, Tom panicked; he threw all the shreds toward Harry, sending them rapidly like bullets.

*Those eyes!*

The thought of those green eyes panicked him. Tom's chest pounded painfully. He couldn't bear to look up and find rejection in those eyes, so he would not look— instead, he would use his power to tear them from their sockets.

Tom tried to breathe. The thoughts of those eyes were suffocating, crushing his chest with numbing fear. Tom's eyes turned dark and brutal as he accepted what was to come.
The young man continued towards him, every step firm and calm. Tom's heart raced faster and faster, as if those steps landed not on the ground, but on his heart. Oddly, none of the flying objects managed to hit Harry. They bounced off the young man, like he was protected by an invisible shield. Tom stared stupidly; somehow he detected an impossible power coming from Harry. The realization shook him to the core—*No, it can't be*—

Next second, something suppressed his power. All around them, the floating objects fell to the floor, clanking and crackling like hail.

"Don't be afraid, Tom," the man said softly. He gave Tom a weak smile, trying to comfort the stubborn little boy, even though Tom was the one person who had nothing to be afraid of.

Tom froze as Harry knelt beside him. His mind became completely entranced by those starling green eyes.

Tom saw many emotions swirling in those emerald orbs—surprise, understanding, concern and resignation; but strangely enough, the one thing he didn't see was...*fear.*

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**Thanks for reviewing! *Hands out doughnuts and nutella***

*from the beta: Hmm, who's going back to the Orphanage NOW?! Muahahaha*
Tears and Hugs

NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

BETA: the great and wonderful Parseltongue.

December 23, 1932

Wizards were born with the gift of magic, but it lied dormant, asleep in their bloodstreams, until the right moment when a child needed his power the most. In that moment, his magic would come to him, in full, unpredictable force, awoke once it truly belonged to him. Wizards called this — accidental magic. Of course, sometimes accidental magic could be dangerous; sometimes it could even lead to magical explosions.

But Tom didn't know any of this. To him, it was only revenge.

After his power dissipated, it left behind quite the messy carnage in the room. Furniture and broken shreds scattered everywhere. Nothing was left in tact. Without whirling sounds of flying objects, the room seemed eerily quiet, silent like the dead...well, except for Billy's muffled sobs. Harry stood in the middle of the room, his face pale, unsure how to react to the mess. His chest tightened as he surveyed the damage, all the destruction that Tom had caused.

Harry stopped Tom with his magic. But the damage had already been done.

Before he could think of what to say, Tom took a step toward him.

Throughout the last twenty years of his life, Harry had never felt so conflicted toward another person, but Tom... Tom was always special. One second, he felt disheartened by Tom's natural, cruel tendencies; but the next, he felt a great tenderness toward the small boy standing proudly in front of him, all alone, black eyes distrusting the world.

Tom might've looked calm, but Harry could discern, beneath that hard-kept pretence, the child was upset. Even if, one day in the future, Tom would become the Dark Lord... at least right now, in front of Harry, he was still a scared little boy in need of guidance.

Before Harry could console the boy, he heard an angry screech coming behind them.

"HARRY! STAY AWAY FROM HIM! HE IS... HE IS A FREAK!"

Finally, Billy snapped from the paralyzing shock. Perhaps... after barely escaping death, Billy finally realized that he was provoking a power which he knew nothing of. That kind of power was unnatural! No human beings should be able to command such a force — such unnatural power — so terrible, formidable, and evil. He screamed at Harry, his voice cracking with hysteria.

Billy pointed accusingly at Tom, fingers trembling uncontrollably, whether due to pain or fear he did
not know. For once, the boy's pitiful state was genuine and not a pretence put on for Harry' sake.

Momentarily, the Muggle boy's reaction surprised Harry, but then...he supposed that it shouldn't have. Children could be ignorant and insensitive, especially in face of things they didn't understand. Suddenly, Harry realized his mistake. He realized his mistake from the expression on Tom' face, as the child's lips trembled at that word — *freak*. In that moment, Harry's heart hurt for Tom; it hurt for all the damage his careless mistake had caused.

If Billy wasn't so paralyzed with fear, the cunning boy would've surely noticed the regret flashing across Harry's face. But he wasn't paying attention, and so Billy made his first mistake — his one honest reaction would prove fatal to his plans.

"FREAK! FREAK! FREAK! FREAK! — DIE! FREAK! DIE!"

The common insult hurled toward them, over and over again, like stone thrown at criminals, weighted down by centuries of fears and witch hunts. Tom's expression became blank as Billy screamed louder and louder. Ebony eyes shadowed with dead resignation. Faltering, Harry wanted to cover his ears, to spare the child from the hatred and abuse.

See, Harry wanted to let Tom know that he understood him. *He was the same.* He understood what it felt like... being called a freak, being rejected, bullied, and feared... all because they were *different*. Harry wanted to tell him, wrapping his arms around the four-year-old, that he was *not a freak*.

*But... how to begin?*

"BILLY! SHUT UP!"

Harry's stern voice stunned Billy. The boy looked up and saw Harry's pale face glaring at him. Billy blinked in confusion; the young man had never used such cold and stern expression with him.

Harry watched as fear and hatred twisted Billy's face, as the normally well-behaved boy turned into Dudley and his friends. Then, he knew where it went wrong. This was a mistaken from the beginning.

Billy was still a muggle. No matter how much Harry wished for mutual friendship, muggles and wizards were still from different worlds. *How can two children, who'll never be truly equal, grow up together as brothers?*

Harry pursed his lips. He approached Billy, his tone softening as he inspected the boy's injuries.

"Billy, come with me. We need to get you treated—"

Now, all alone in the ravaged bedroom, Tom could barely remain standing. The accidental magic had drained all his energy. His knees felt like rubber; his hands trembled. His new power was devastating, unforgivable, and it had reduced the newly furnished room to rubble. Through the broken windows, the duskig sun lit the room aflame with an intense orange glow —unbothered by the battle that had raged — which made his victory feel rather empty.

But... he had won. He scared Billy to (almost) death; he caused Harry to turn pale with dread. He had his revenge. But then... *why did it feel so empty?* Sorrow drenched him like freezing rain and disappointment nailed his feet to the floor.

Outside, a carriage approached the house. Tom could hear the driver calling out, "did someone called for a cab for number 15 London Street?"
The boy sneered coldly. Even though no one was watching, he tried hard to keep the disappointment and panic from showing on his face. Of course, he knew what was coming — it was time for him to return to the orphanage.

After all, this was his own plan, wasn't it? He had unleashed his power willingly; he had conquered and terrified them. So now, surely, they were eager to get rid of him, eager to chase away the dangerous beast that he was... So he was going back to the orphanage, to where he didn't have to pretend to care, where he could fight and explore and destroy to his heart's content.

Unexpectedly, the boy felt something wet dripping down his face. He was crying, and that made him angry. Tom wanted to remain strong even if no one was watching, but tears just kept on falling. Trembling, he couldn't even muster the strength to raise his hands to wipe them away.

As the child's body quivered, the little snake detected his distraught. But she had no arms to comfort him, so she only wrapped herself tighter around his wrist.

Suddenly, the door was opened. Harry had returned. He was alone, carrying a first-aid kit in his hands. Tom took a deep breath. Quickly, he wiped his tears and gritted his teeth. As he glared at the approaching figure, his eyes remained red-rimmed, but also sharp and distrustful like a wolf cub snarling at intruders.

"I've — I've brought you medicine." Harry smiled at the child, with what he hoped was a reassuring expression. He waved the first-aid kit.

A dreadful, deep gash ran across the boy's face, mangled with dried blood and pink flesh. But Tom didn't pay it much attention. Instead, he stood stiffly, ebony eyes as indiscernible as deep seas.

The child asked, "Why aren't you afraid of me?"

His tone was light and nonchalant, but only himself knew the effort it took to say those simple words.

Harry tried to smile again, but his heart twisted as Tom's clear eyes stared up at him, flickering between distrust and hope. Suddenly, he wanted to hug the child.

Harry laid the medical kit on an upturned dresser. He approached Tom, ignoring the angry glares, and knelt besides the boy. He inched forward, carefully, until their faces were close to one another, their eyes met.

"Why would I be afraid of you?" Harry sighed deeply, emerald eyes warm and gentle as always.

The boy's face twisted into a wide sardonic smile. His wound began bleeding again.

"Because I am a freak," The boy replied simply, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Yes, Tom always knew that he is a freak, different from all the other children. Better than them all — but he never had any reason to doubt his freakish nature. Suddenly, Tom's chest tightened. He couldn't breathe as those green eyes looked back at him, just as kind and beautiful as he remembered.

"No," Harry said firmly.

No? — Tom looked up at Harry. The young man looked lost, as if he was struggling to keep his true feelings hidden. Hidden from Tom. The child blinked. Anger, disappointment, and sadness overwhelmed his mind. The emotions stunned his eyes, threatening to turn into tears again.
"I know that you are planning to send me away," Tom interrupted rudely.

His voice was high-pitched and angry, sharp as a knife, as he stated the truth. The anger spilled from his dark eyes, and finally the child shed his mask. Standing straight proudly, with teeth clenching and fists trembling, Tom yelled at Harry in a fit of childish rage. For once, he acted his age.

"Don't pretend to care about me. Don't lie to me... Just tell me to go. And I will—I KNOW THAT YOU HATE ME!"

Harry felt like someone had punched him in the guts. This was the first time that Harry saw Tom, who was normally so quiet and so mature, throwing a temper tantrum like all the other children. Harry's eyes widened in shock. He was at a lost for words.

"I know that you hate me... but then... why did you bother to adopt me?"

Tears wet the boy's face as he struggled to maintain his composure. Tom stood tall and proud, face fierce, not willing to let anyone get close to him.

Harry didn't expect to see Tom cry. He paused, eyes fixed on the child before him.

Compare to other children, Tom even cried in a prideful way — he kept still, tears dropping from red-rimed eyes, but his face looked angry, vicious, and certainly not as pitifully as most wailing children. Tom rubbed his eyes with an unnecessary force, ripping open the wound. Blood and tears clung to his cheeks. Still, Tom stifled his sobbing forcefully, making a sad choking noise that sounded like strange cries of wolf cubs.

Tom wiped his eyes angrily.

_Crying is weak! Crying is useless! He doesn't need childish tears to gain sympathy. He doesn't need—_

Suddenly, from somewhere close to his ears, Tom heard a deep sigh, then he was pulled into a warm embrace.

He was enveloped in soft fabrics and a familiar scent — a scent that was warm and nostalgic, like flames on a cold winter night. Comforting arms wrapped around his back, pressing into tense muscles reassuringly. Tom felt a warm breath tickling his neck, hot moist air on his skin, almost seeping new life into him. For a moment, the sudden, firm warmth made Tom felt saved, like a drowning man being pulled from icy waters.

A hand stroked his back awkwardly. Its owner clearly didn't have much experience dealing with crying children.

"Don't cry. Everything will be fine—"

Harry, who hugged Tom tightly, was doing his best to calm the child. He could see Tom was on the verge of breaking point, but he didn't know what to say... So he acted on instinct. He wrapped his arms around the boy, and, rather stupidly, he repeated the only words that he could think of:

"Don't cry."

People with kids would know better than this. They knew that you couldn't indulge a crying child, because — the more you try to comfort him, the harder he sobs.

But the sight of those tears panicked Harry. So he closed his arms around the child, trying to protect
him from the world.

Tom didn't move. He let the warm hug surround him, soothing and alluring, and somehow it made his tears flow even faster. Through the softness of sweater, Tom felt the young man's heartbeat aligning with his own, and, as Harry's arms tightened around him, Tom felt safe for the first time in his young life. He grabbed Harry's shirt and buried himself into soft cotton, breathing in the other's scent. Then the child wept like never before.

That vicious rage, which seemed to have followed Tom all his life, vanished completely.

So this is— Harry Potter, Tom thought, as he laid his forehead on the young man's shoulder. He felt so warm, as Harry continued to repeat his silly, comforting words, silly yet melodic to Tom's ears.

"You are not a freak," Harry finally said.

Tom pulled on Harry's shirt. Blood and tears stained the young man's expensive clothing, but Harry didn't mind. He ruffled the boy's hair until Tom finally lifted his head to look at him. Tom's large, ebony eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks flushed. With tears still clinging on his eyelashes, Tom stared at Harry, enthralled, an odd little expression on his face, odd with an intense affection that bordered on obsession.

Harry thought he looked very cute. When the boy grows up, he's going to be a lady killer, that one, Harry thought fondly.

"Watch this,' Harry smiled at Tom. He waved his hand. "Reparo!"

Suddenly, all crossed the room, everything—scattered toys, broken furniture, shattered frames—all mended magically. They rose into the air and arranged, neatly, back into their original positions. Even the window pane stitched itself back together, not a crack to be seen on its smooth, gleaming surface.

In less than a minute, the bedroom looked like new, as if nothing happened at all.

The scene shocked Tom. Everything that he had hoped for, the fleeting impossible dream that he was denied for so long, was suddenly coming true. Fervent happiness overcame him like a tsunami, coming forth so fast that Tom could only stare blankly.

Harry held Tom's dazed gaze, green eyes earnest and understanding, and said. "Tom, you and I, we are not freaks."

Harry felt a deep sadness as he recognized the unbridled ecstasy in Tom's face. Perhaps, all Tom needed was to hear the truth—that he belongs somewhere. And perhaps, Harry should've told him so from the beginning.

However, once again, Harry misread the child's emotions. Yes, Tom was euphoric, but he was elated for a different reason—he was elated to find a special connection between them. If both Tom and Harry were special, this meant that they were also equal. This meant Harry was no ordinary, weak human. This meant Harry too was destined for greatness. Most importantly, this meant Harry was fated to stand by his side!

This was why Tom felt such happiness swelling in his chest—because now he knew that Harry belonged with him, to him, and only to him.

"Is it just the two of us?" The child asked.
"No. There are a lot more, just like us, who are wizards."

Tom pursed his lips. He lowered his gaze to hide his disappointment.

Well, that's too bad. Although the tears barely dried on his face, the child managed to crack a mysterious smile. At least, now he knew an important fact—*that the person who will be spending Christmas at the Orphanage...It won't be him.*
December 24, 1932

Billy left the very next day, carrying a bandaged rabbit and numerous new scars. Just like that, the boy disappeared from Tom's life forever. So it was clear that...which one of them ended up the victor. Tom stood by Harry's side, watching as Billy wailed loudly and Harry stuffed his backpack full of new clothes and treats. Kneeling down, Harry bottomed up Billy's coat, apologizing profusely.

Billy wailed with all his might. His tears soaked the rabbit's fur, as he mumbled to himself, "But...But Tom is the freak"

"I'm... I'm very sorry, Billy." Harry patted the boy's head gently, comforting him for the last time.

Tom stood close-by, watching them in silence. The look of regretful sadness on Harry's face sure damped his triumphant.

Or perhaps, in the end, no one had won, Tom thought darkly. In the battle of hearts and minds, Tom wasn't as experienced as Billy. If that worthless boy even manages to occupy a small corner of Harry's heart, then Tom knew that he, too, had lost the battle.

Tom sat on his bed, tickling the little snake absent-mindedly; his eyes shadowed, as dark as midnight. He should be happy. After all, Billy was gone. But... that expression on Harry's face as he watched Billy's carriage rode away... that expression lingered in Tom's mind and made him burn with anger. Something stirred within him; from an ugly corner of his soul, a terrible darkness sprouted like poison ivies and blossomed into blood-red anger.

It took Tom a moment to realize that feeling was jealousy. A burning sensation rooted in a deep, unreasonable possessive nature, which he inherited from Salazar Slytherin himself.

Know this, Tom wasn't some stupid kid. In fact, if you were to test him, you would label him a genius. Therefore, it wasn't hard for him to deduce the truth — that Harry favoured Billy, after all. Of course, that was true, because why else didn't Harry even question Billy's accusations? Tom knew that he only got to stay because he was a wizard, same as Harry, and if he wasn't, he would have been the one send back to the Orphanage.

The thoughts only made the child's eyes turn darker.

Tom watched the fire burn in the furnace. His room seemed suspiciously spacious with only one bed. Tom glared at the newly emptied space and contemplated his future.

At least, he learned a vulnerable lesson from the experience. Everything Billy had done — the crying, the cute smiles, the obedient quiet acts, the pretence of being weak and vulnerable, even the well-calculated childish fits — everything was done with a purpose. Tom had to hand it to Billy. At least, that moron was a good actor, a master at manipulating emotions. Billy acted just as expected
from "a poor, abused orphan", which was enough to gain Harry's sympathy and love.

Tom re-examined Billy's treacherous and cunning plan, and how it almost worked. He was smart enough to recognize that... although power is the most important tool in life, it must be supplemented with strategies and plots and manipulations. Tom's fingers ran along the snake's cold body; he grinned. Now he understood what he needs to become. If stupid Billy Stubbs can do it, then he can do it a thousand times better. Then, after he masters the art of deception, with a perfect combination of power and wit, the entire world would tremble by Tom's feet.

There was nothing inherently wrong with Tom's cool, calculating intelligent...but once he started to learn, started to master playing hearts like instruments... well, there would be no stopping him. Right now, if Harry could read the child's mind, would its dark ambitions scare him? Would its angry thoughts chase him away?... **Probably...But, sadly for Harry, he cannot read minds.**

Although he had yet to turn five, the child has learnt the value of manipulating and controlling people's heart. It won't be long before he grows into a masterful politician, refined and courteous on the surface, but also cunning and ruthless as he conquers the world from the shadows, using whatever means necessary.

Once again, as history sped down its predetermined track, Tom Riddle grew from a child into something more. Fate hid beneath the veil of the night, satisfied as her chess pieces moved along, all according to the plan.

"**Tom... Why aren't you happy?**" The little snake asked, twisting its tail.

"**Wrong. I'm actually very happy,**" Tom answered. The rough Parseltongue sounded strangely alluring as he hissed excitedly. Suddenly, he leaped off the bed and set the little snake down on the duvet. His ebony eyes shone with an odd, almost cheery glow. "**You stay here for the night. Do not follow me.**"

Tom brought his pillow along as he walked down the dark corridor. An excited anticipation bloomed in his chest. Finally, he thought of a way to get close to Harry, although it required him to act like a naive, scared child. As the possibilities tantalized his mind, Tom didn't even realize how easily he had forgiven Harry; even if, just moments ago, he had warned himself against trusting anyone.

"Harry?" Tom called nervously, as he knocked on Harry's bedroom door.

He knew the door wasn't locked, but he wanted to be polite. He heard some rustling noises, and he could almost imagine how Harry just rolls out of bed, half-asleep, and shuffles to the door.

The door opened.

Harry wasn't expecting Tom at this hour. The young man squinted, his hair and robe in a tussled mess, which made him look dazed and very young, unlike his usual considerate self. He stared at the small boy, whose head barely reached the door knob, standing in front of him and he didn't know what to say.

The dark-lord-to-be was dressed in paw-print pyjamas that Harry bought for him. The child clutched tight his pillow, a fluffy thing that was almost as big as himself. He tilted his head and looked at Harry expectantly. The child's face wasn't pleading exactly, but, in the moment, Harry thought Tom's large eyes resembled a puppy very much, unknowingly wagging its tail for a treat.

"Tom?" Harry hesitated, raising one eye-brow.
Tom paused. *Now what?*

After all, he couldn't pretend to be Billy, who would start to wail like a baby in the situation... Suddenly, Tom remembered yesterday, how pathetic he must've looked when he cried in Harry's arms, then he bit his lips. As soon as he met those bright, emerald eyes, all the lies, that he had prepared, vanished from his head.

The child mumbled nervously. "It is... It is just me left in the room."

It took Harry a second to understand what the boy's asking. Tom's eyes remained downcast and his endearing embarrassment made Harry simile.

"OK, then... Would you like to stay with me for the night?" Harry grinned.

"Ye...yes," Tom answered immediately.

Harry let the child into the room. Tom hugged his pillow tight, its bottom dragging on the floor. Although the child tried to keep his face neutral, his eager, glowing eyes betrayed an uncontainable excitement.

The dim lamp cast a soft, yellow glow in the room, which made its interior feel warm and welcoming. Duvet and sheets were tossed casually on a large bed, as if someone has just startled awake. A pen and notebook were also left on top, as Harry was just working on a new strategy for Dumbledore's army before Tom knocked on his door.

Tom made his way to the large bed. Then, the normally confident boy halted, looking lost as he stood by Harry's bedside. As he waited for Harry's permission, he fidgeted nervously, black eyes excited although his face remained stiff.

Harry walked over. He petted the boy's head reassuringly. Tom looked very much like a scared child at that moment, just a boy who didn't want to be alone at night. Now, things were becoming clear to Harry; it was impossible to see Voldemort reflected in this nervous child.

Gently, he lifted Tom onto the bed. The boy's muscles tensed for a moment, but Harry smiled encouragingly, and pulled open the duvet. Tom slipped under the sheets quickly, his movements as silent as possible, like a snake slithering to its den.

This particular winter was colder than usual. So, Harry prepared by adding several heating charms on his bed. The comforting warmness quickly surrounded Tom and defrosted his cold toes. It felt so good that Tom almost moaned like a satisfied cat. Blood pumped through his veins. His round cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"Heating charms," Harry pointed out to the curious child. He helped Tom set up his pillow. Then, since he couldn't get any work done under the circumstance, Harry put away his notebook and dimmed the lights.

"Go to sleep, Tom. Tomorrow will be Christmas and — " As Harry tucked Tom in, his legs brushed against the child's feet. The boy's skin was freezing, like the skin of a dead person.

Suddenly, it occurred to Harry that Tom walked over on his bare feet. Soft skins barely produced any noise against the cold, hardwood floor as he entered the room.

"Tom, come here. You are as cold as ice," Harry inched closer to the boy. He scooped up the boy's feet, then push up his pajamas and pressed the small feet against his bare stomach, so his body heat could sooth Tom's freezing skins.
Hopefully, Tom wasn't too surprised by the presumed intimacy. Harry once saw Aunt Petunia warm Dudley's feet like this, and he remembered it. Because that was what parents do for their children, right?... They took care of them.

Although Petunia was never good to Harry, she loved her son very much. And that small act of maternal devotion always stuck with Harry, because no one ever done it for him.

It was an act that carried all of someone's love and concern. Tom stiffened. His feet tickled against the warmth. The young man's stomach was flat and his skin soft likes silk. In an instant, the comforting heat spread from Tom's feet to his head, as if he was submerged in warm water. He could feel Harry's stomach heave as the young man breathed softly beside him.

Suddenly, although he didn't know why, Tom's eyes welled up.

He buried himself in the duvet. Its soft and fluffy surface rubbed against his face, and a familiar scent filled his nostrils, the scent of soap and sunlight, and oddly nostalgic like the faded smell of the old cloak and scarf. Tom felt like he was back in his nursery, although this bed was a million times better than all the damp, moldy, broken things at the Orphanage.

Gradually, his feet felt better. Tom hesitated, then pulled his feet from under Harry's pyjamas. Harry turned to look at him. The child's face was downcast, and his head pressed against Harry's chest. Harry rubbed Tom's head, deliberating messing up his hair, then wrapped one arm around his thin shoulders.

Earnestly, he made a promise to Tom,

"Tom, I want you to be honest with me, like today... You can ask me for whatever you want, because... you don't have to endure anymore. I hope you can be straight-forward with me, because I'm not a smart man. I'll need your help to become a good parent."

For a long while, Tom stared at the buttons on Harry's pajamas, and then he nodded slowly.

Harry grinned. He retracted his arms and closed his eyes. As he was about to fall asleep, suddenly, Tom asked quietly.

"Are you going to send me back? Like Billy?"

"Never. I'll send you to school, though, if you don't mind." Harry ran his fingers through the child's smooth hair, as he reassured the boy.

Tom poked his head from under the duvet. Even in the darkness, his eyes glinted bright, as black and shiny as the starry night. Face serious, he stared into Harry's calm green eyes, then asked carefully,

"You will not abandon me?"

"Never. I'll never abandon you," Harry repeated. Suddenly the gravity of the child's question struck him. He paused, green eyes contemplating, expression solemn; then an unexpected sadness washed over him. Harry smiled, but the words tasted bitter in his mouth.

"I'll stay with you, Tom, for as long as you need me."

I will... but, very soon, you'll be one who wants to get rid of me. To kill me yourself.

"Go to bed." Harry ordered. He shut his eyes, brows-furrowed, and turned away. Something in their conversation clearly bothered him.
Tom watched the young man's expression closely, as the man feigned asleep. For a moment, the boy just sat there quietly, watching Harry with a fiery intensity, his face ponderous and unreadable. Then, the child lied down next to the young man, and shut his eyes.

After Harry fell asleep, Tom opened his eyes again. Under the moonlight, famed by thick eyelashes, his large eyes seemed cold and hard like the purest, darkest obsidian. The child stared at the sleeping face next to him. He watched as Harry's breathing slowed and evened out. Then, he pushed away the pillow, which he dragged all the way from his own room. Quietly, he inched closer to the warm body and rested his head against Harry's shoulder. As the heat of the man's skin seeped into his own, Tom closed his eyes, then sleep claimed him easily.

As the night spread and grew, all along the streets, dim lamps lit up one by one. Today was December 24th. 'Twas the night before Christmas, to all the children of the world and to their loving families — "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

Here is a wonderful fan art done by Popuyund. Check it out and applaud her artistry.

nyakata166.tumblr.com/image/85502086159
December 30, 1932

It didn't take long for the brilliant child to master the art of manipulation. Once he experienced the benefit of lying, he quickly adopted a disguise—one of an ordinary boy, one without any violent or vicious inclinations, one without dark ambitions seared into his very bones. If Harry ended up liking his new self, then Tom supposed that he could pretend to be an idiot for a while.

Like Harry himself had admitted, he wasn't a very smart man, especially when it came to social cues. For instance, he wasn't alarmed by the sudden change in Tom's personality. He was just happy for the boy's progress, because Tom was finally starting to open up to him... even if, at times, it seemed to be not completely genuine. After all, the child was the only reason that he had chosen to stay behind in the unfamiliar time. Now, without Billy, Harry could focus all his attention on Tom, give the child all he had to offer, and pray that it would be enough to change Tom's future.

Flames danced in the fireplace. The heat filled the whole room with warmth and light. Even as the winter storms raged outdoors, Harry did not feel a shred of coldness sneaking into the room.

"Orchidaceae fioriress."

Harry was sitting on the bed, legs crossed, his duvet warmed by heating charms. He waved his wand. In one smooth movement, a single beige orchid bloomed from its tip. Its petals bobbed slightly, wonderfully perfumed and beautifully illuminated.

Tom sat across from Harry, looking at the flower with just the right amount of fascination. Even if he secretly thought this particular spell was rather useless, Tom kept his mouth shut and nodded at Harry with polite interest.

The young man's green eyes shone with a childish delight. He beamed mischievously, then he eagerly shoved the wand into Tom's hands. He waved his hands.

"Tom, now you give it a try."

Tom couldn't describe the feeling. As the wooden stick touched his fingers, something new and electric passed through his skin and crawled deep into his bones. His soul trembled with power. The wand felt warm where Harry's body heat lingered on its hilt. Tom clenched the wand. A sudden, frenzied longing crept into his dark pupils, a pure blackness like the deepest depth of the sea.

Magic was even more wonderful than he imagined!

Judging by its peeling paint, the wand in his hands had seen its fair share of battles. The wooden rod was dense with magic and hardened, through endless war, against all tragedies and vicissitudes of life.

*Its power— he wants it!* At once, the thought popped into Tom's brain. But the boy was careful to
prevent Harry from seeing the hungry glint in his eyes. After all, there were many things he wanted, more than just a wand.

"Tom, say it with me. *Orchidaceae fioriress.*" Eagerly, Harry demonstrated the waving motion with his hands, and explained the basics of spell-casting to Tom. "Elbow a little higher. Yes— that's perfect."

Smiling, Harry could suddenly understand the joy of teaching. With bursting pride, he watched as, under his guidance, a young child partook in his first step in becoming a wizard.

Tom bit his lips, arms suspended stiffly in midair. *Are all spells casted with such stupid waving movements?...* He couldn't help but complain in his head. But still, he did as he was told. He waved the wand.

*"Orchidaceae fioriress."*

As he spoke, colourful sparks flew from the tip of wand. But then... nothing happened. Nothing at all, and definitely no orchids.

Instantly, the normally proud child's face fell. The unexpected failure of his first attempt at magic made his already irritated temper flare.

"Don't worry, Tom. Try again."

As the young man's encouraging words reached his ears, Tom suddenly felt a heat trembling through the wand. The strange magic passed through his body like the electric shock of a nerve signal, and somehow it calmed his mind. He paused.

Many questions popped into his head. Was that — was that Harry's doing? The strange magic felt like a friendly nudge from the wand itself, although it couldn't be sentient... *Could it?* Perhaps it was able to sense its master's intent—

Tom looked at Harry curiously. His heart skipped when Harry met his eyes with a bright, encouraging grin.

The encouraging expression was something Tom never seen before. Kindness and love were extravagances that he had never hoped to find. Even the young nanny, who had taken care of him as a baby, never looked at him like that; she mostly sighed as she told him to stay out of trouble. This was the first time that anyone had looked at him with expectations, with hopeful, supportive and trusting eyes. Harry's green eyes looked so bright, as he smiled at Tom.

Tom's arms seemed to move on their own. Before he realized what was happening, he cast the spell.

*"Orchidaceae fioriress."*

Finally, a delicate, flowering bud emerged from the wand tip. As they looked down at it, it bloomed silently, fully exhibiting its pompous beauty. Normally, Tom would find flowers rather useless, but this little cream-coloured orchid had managed to grab his attention. He stared at its petals, unable to tear his eyes away.

"Wonderful!" Harry praised, loudly.

Tom took a deep breath. He could still feel magic lingering where his fingers held the wand. It felt good, much better than what he was doing before—recklessly forcing magic out of his body. The wand was able to maximize his powers, and the new experience of might and control almost
overwhelmed him.

As Tom watched the blooming orchid, he rolled the wand between his fingertips. He smiled greedily. *He wants it."

"Tom!" Harry called suddenly, eyes widening with surprise as he stares at Tom, sitting across from him. Then, Harry smiled again. His emerald eyes glistened with cheery emotions, more viridescent than anything Tom had ever seen.

Before Tom had a chance to adjust his smile, a warm hand patted his cheeks.

Harry's hair sat like a messy nest on top of his head, bangs just long enough to hide the scar on his forehead. Beneath round glasses were eyes filled with mischievous joy. He said, grinning, "Tom, your smile looks very handsome."

This was the first time Harry had seen genuine joy on the child's face.

Harry couldn't explain why the sight of that small smile made him so happy. Maybe... maybe because he couldn't imagine such genuine happiness on Voldemort's face. Surely Tom was... was different.

Plus, it didn't hurt that Tom looked very cute when he smiled; no longer gloomy or mocking, he looked just like all the other children, smiling brightly with confidence and boundless energy. Combined with his natural good-looks and immaculate style, Tom Riddle no longer seemed an orphan who needed Harry's help; instead, the boy projected the image of a poised and practised young aristocrat.

Harry was happy for Tom, for the boy seemed to grow more comfortable and confident each day. His grin grew wider, white teeth flashing.

Tom stared at Harry's face. He couldn't understand why the young man liked his smile so much. His eyes darkened for a moment, but his smile remained wide.

*Harry does spend a lot of effort to try to make me happy,* Tom realized. Harry was happy when Tom was happy, which seemed very odd in Tom's opinion. Very odd... and stupid.

Yet... the smile on Harry's red lips was mesmerizing. Tom stared, dark eyes unblinking, thin lips curled upwards. The young man's pure, unabashed happiness was contagious; and it was almost enough to tear down Tom's long-held defences.

Because... he looked so happy, so happy because of Tom. *And only because of Tom.* The realization made Tom feel powerful, just like a moment ago, when his magic was flowing through the wand...

It was intoxicating.

Tom made sure he committed that smile to memory. He swore to himself—that he will make sure that Harry stayed with him, forever! *Forever...* not even death could take Harry away from him. If Harry dares to die before him, then Tom will make his body into a doll, so they can stay together forever.

Before the boy had even begun to truly discover love, his childish possessiveness had already twisted his mind into something unrecognizable. And thus, perhaps, fate was really always unavoidable.

Everything in their lives proceeded smoothly for the next few months, and soon Tom was ready to
start primary school. But Harry decided to hold him back for a bit, so that Tom can first learn to control his magic. Tom spent all his days with Harry, learning magic and playing whatever games he wanted.

Their lessons took place in Harry's Study. Although there weren't a lot of books in the room, it still felt crammed with piles upon piles of paper stacked on Harry's desk.

Sometimes, Tom would sneak a quick peek at the papers. Although he couldn't understand all the complex charts and diagrams, he remembered the two words that showed up the most — *Dumbledore's army*.

*Who's Dumbledore?* The boy frowned, before setting the paper down exactly where he found it. He carefully made sure everything was back in their proper place, before exiting the Study, his face shadowed and expressionless.

Tom returned to his bedroom. A lime-coloured snake coiled lazily on his pillow. Tom let the snake crawl up his arm.

"*So how did it go?*" Tom raised one eyebrow at her, a cruel but delightful smile curling on his thin lips. *"Did you enjoy the treat of ... Billy's rabbit?"*

The little snake flicked her tongue, looking rather satisfied.

"*Tom, why didn't you let me eat the silly thing?... I had already swallowed it, but then Tom made me spit it out... A half-digested rabbit is not as yummy,!*" she whined with loud hisses, then coiled unhappily around his arm.

Tom remained silent, but kept his smiling eyes on the snake's cold, scaly skin. He sat down on his bed, pleased. Then, he started to grin wildly, imagining the look on Billy's face as the idiot saw his present — one familiar and half-digested rabbit.

"*And then...and then... Tom!*" The snake rolled around his lap, eager like a pandering dog. "*I told my companions to hang the rabbit from the ceiling, so Billy will definitely see it!— First thing as he enters—*"

"*Good job,*" Tom hissed, dark eyes narrowing with pleasure.

"—Tom, time for dinner!*" Before Tom could finish his sentence, Harry poked his head into the room. He stared at Tom with impossibly bright green eyes.

Moving as fast as she could, the snake hid into Tom's sleeves.

"*Come downstairs right away—OH NO— the stove—*"

Harry turned and ran out before Tom had a chance to catch a glimpse of his expression. Tom watched in silence, from the edge of the half-open door, as Harry disappeared from his view. Suddenly, Tom had the weirdest feeling that Harry might be... running away from him?

When it was finally safe, the little snake poked her head from his sleeve.

"*Are you sure Harry's can't understand us?*"

Tom's good mood vanished suddenly. His eyes darkened. He pursed his lips and tried to recall his
conversation with the snake. He tried to remember if it was possible for Harry to overhear them... and suddenly, the thought of it panicked him.

The snake thought long and hard, then shook her tiny head. "Not all wizards can understand snakes."

She wrapped herself around Tom's wrist unhappily, and refused to explain more. Does Tom think that parseltongue grows in trees? Does Tom think that this noble language is so common that anyone off the streets might be able to understand them?

This was the noble language of the great Slytherin house. The ancestral language of his heirs.

OMG, I'm so sorry. Forgot yesterday was Wednesday! Wednesday is such a bad day. It's in the middle of the week, so I'm always busy.

Can I change my weekly update schedule to Fridays? Thanks!
In a flash, three years had passed. Tom had matured both physically and mentally. Provided with nutritious food and stable environment, he had experienced his first growth spurt. The boy's thin body had grown tall and strong, and his previously delicate features had become more chiselled and refined, with a hint of masculinity visible in his sharp eyebrows and angled jaw-line. He was seven years old, and already a master at hiding his true nature. He behaved like a perfect young gentleman, always courteous and proper.

Evidently, the past few years had been good to him.

Along with Tom, even the little snake had grown a lot. She shed her skin many times, until Tom realized she would soon be too big to hide in his sleeves and forbade her to grow any larger. Even though, Tom, from the very beginning, was sure that Harry couldn't understand Parseltongue, his suspicious nature made him cautious about letting his caretaker see the snake.

Harry was the only one who hadn't changed. These past three years had left no mark on the young man, almost as if time, for Harry, was frozen in place. As the years had gone by, his green eyes remained bright, pure, and full of hope. Even his hair looked the same—same length, same messy black curls.

Three years was enough for Tom to familiarize himself with everything about the young man—how the scar on his forehead was shaped like a lightning bolt, how he always wore a silver hour-glass around his neck. Harry had no friends in London; he barely socialized at all. He preferred to sit all day in his Study, alone and in complete silence, as he etched out plans for Dumbledore's Army in his notebooks.

Many times, Tom pondered the enigma that was Harry Potter, the mysterious man who seemed to have fallen from the sky and landed in front him. Tom couldn't find anything about Harry's past. No one knew where Harry was from, or where Harry was going, and that made Tom worry... and that made Tom want to capture him.

The boy's eyes darkened as he knocked on the door of the Study.

"Tom?" Harry's gentle face emerged from behind a large table, which was stacked full of charts and calculations. Black hair dishevelled like always, he smiled at Tom, before turning his attention back to his work.

Tom smiled back, eager and confident, but only he knew the insecurities that grew within his heart. Harry had been frantic the past few days. He locked himself within the Study. He barely slept or ate as he worked endlessly, like a man on a mission, as if he was rushing against time to meet some
deadlines that Tom didn't know about.

Harry's strange behaviours worried Tom.

"Harry. Next month, our school is organizing a field trip— parents are encouraged to attend."

Tom expertly put on an eager expression, feigning childish giddiness for the trip. He handed Harry the permission slip. As he leaned over the desk, he caught a glimpse of Harry's writing. *Of course, Dumbledore's Army, again.*

Harry desperately wanted Tom to understand muggle life in order to prevent the boy from developing prejudices later. So he sent Tom to a muggle primary school. Right now, the seven-year-old was attending second grade.

"Ah, Tom, do you want to go?" Harry laid down his pen. Exhausted, he rubbed his temple and read the permission slip carefully.

Tom seemed distracted. He tugged at his cufflinks and gazed at the slip through lowered eyelids. A shadow hooded his face, hiding dark eyes that were full of disdain.

"Of course!... I want to go!"

When Tom raised his head to look at Harry, his expression brightened instantly. His ebony eyes glimmered with anticipation, like precious diamonds in the night sky.

*Now that's a perfect performance,* Tom thought darkly. He knew exactly what was necessary to tug at Harry's heartstrings, to get Harry to agree to accompany Tom on the trip... No matter how busy the man was.

Harry pursed his lips and nodded. Swiftly, he signed his name on the permission slip, then he handed the paper back to Tom.

Suddenly, Harry shifted as if remembering something. He smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid I cannot attend the trip with you, Tom—"

He paused, before continuing casually.

"I'm afraid I must leave home for a while."

Harry announced the news with all the nonchalance of mentioning something as mundane as a shopping trip, but, to Tom's ears, the words landed like a knife straight through his heart.

Tom went rigid. His pupils contracted suddenly, pure blackness collapsing onto itself. He stood there, back against the fire, in a shadow, his expression unreadable. He clutched the paper in his hands, nails cutting into his palms. Still smiling, the boy appeared grateful for the upcoming trip, yet, as he shoved the paper behind his back, he almost tore it apart violently. An angry coldness unintentionally bled into his voice.

"Harry... where are you going?"

Harry leaned back in his chair. On instinct, his hands wandered toward the sliver hourglass. He felt its hard outline, reassuringly, beneath soft fabric of his shirt. He smiled a little, green eyes warm and full of nostalgia.

"Somewhere far, far away—" he replied.
Yes, somewhere far, far away. This era was not his own...and it was so lonely here... Harry had to admit that he couldn't wait to return to his own time. Even ravaged by war, he still had friends, teachers, comrades there— it was home. If he returned home, he could find the strength to carry on — find it in the rubbles of the battle fields; find it in the people he swore to protect.

Tom's eyes fixed onto Harry's smiling face. The man's soft expression seemed to mock him.

"I've hired a nanny to take care of you. So be good while I'm away, alright?" Harry pinched the boy's nose affectionately. Bright emerald eyes betrayed his excitement. He was going home.

A NANNY?! So it was all planned out!...

*How dare you be so happy to leave me?* Tom stared forward, eyes blank as bitterness raged in his mind, so strong and vicious that it almost broke through his mask. Tom felt like he was being betrayed. And the feeling made his insides twist with burning anger.

Tom stared. See, Tom's entire world only consisted of Harry and himself. Therefore, Harry's world must become the same. Eventually, Tom would make sure that Harry learns... that all he needs in life is Tom Riddle.

No matter how much Tom pretended to be a nice, normal child, his twisted, obsessed nature only grew stronger in secret. And sooner or later, secrets, like all suppressed things, were bound to explode.

"Are you going to abandon me, Harry?" The boy asked, quietly.

He looked very calm, even as rage burnt up his insides. Tom, who was now a head taller than the desk, peered at Harry with intense focus from behind a pile of papers.

The whispered question gave Harry pause.

He met the child's eyes, but he couldn't read the emotions in those composed, ebony orbs. Harry frowned. He licked his dry lips, feeling nervous and disappointed. *Even after three years together, Tom still doesn't trust him... The boy is still so guarded and untrusting, so smart and overly sensitive to his surroundings.*

"I'll be back soon, in five months at the most... I promise," Harry lowered his head so their faces were closer to one another. Green eyes locked onto intense black ones. Harry continued, not loudly by assuredly. "In fact, this is more than just my promise to you. This is an oath."

In the end, Harry left as he said he would.

Tom did not try to stop him. The only thing the boy did to acknowledge Harry's departure was asking that one question, the one he asked that same night he found out — "Are you going to abandon me?"

The permission slip with Harry's signature was submitted, dutifully, with a small comment added on the bottom — "parents not participating".

Tom twisted a key to open the front door. It was dusk. Vanishing sunlight supplied the house with minimal lighting, making the large house seem very empty and gloomy, like the haunted mansions in novels.

Tom walked in, threw his bag to the floor and walked across the living room. Suddenly, he halted. A
familiar smell of freshly cooked food drifted from the kitchen...the child perked up as he breathed in the warm, delicious scent. Then, he heard a noise from upstairs. Tom's hands trembled as he ran up the stairs.

The corridor was dimly lit, almost swallowed up by darkness of the coming night. Tom walked fast, blood pumping through his veins, nervous and eager in anticipation.

Because of the darkness, Tom saw, at once, a distinct slit of light coming from Harry's room.

*Oh, how exciting it is to see that light!* For the first time in his life, Tom somewhat enjoyed something that brought light.

Tom wanted to act nonchalant, but he couldn't slow his steps. Trembling, he pushed open the door to Harry's room, shouting eagerly, "HARRY!"

Next second, a dazzling light flooded Tom's vision.

"I — I — I'm just trying to clean the room," a strange woman answered. She stood nervously, bending over the bed, hands frozen in mid-air as she tagged on the duvet.

Tom's heart plummeted, his blood turned to ice. The excitement in his eyes died instantly.

The child stood by the door, tall and lean with a likeable handsome face, yet a terrifying coldness seemed to be radiating from his silent form, so silently angry that it froze the woman in front of him.

"To...Tom," the nanny said, trembling. She tried to force a smile onto her lips, because, after all, he was her charge.

Suddenly, the boy smiled at her. His pretty features looked perfectly proper and polite in the lamp's light. The nanny blinked. 

*That thing before... was... was that a hallucination?*

"Nice to meet you, madam," the boy greeted politely, smiling. Perfect postures, perfect manners, and no sign of anything obscure. "From now on, please allow me to clean this room myself."

The nanny gave him a bewildered look. "But... but it's my job."

"I said — I will do it," the boy's voice turned icy. Suddenly, the smile was gone.

They looked at each other for a second. The nanny shook her head, trying to shake off her feeling of wrongness. *Perhaps the boy is just ... shy. He's so polite!*

The hapless woman grinned, all friendly and gullible, then shook her head at him. She continued to fold the sheets. "Thank you, Tom. That's sweet of you...But that won't be necessary. It's my job to help you to clean and —"

"*Get. Out.*" Tom growled, but his voice sounded as calm as ever. He glared at her hands, which remained on Harry's duvet. His eyes turned aggressive like a territorial leopard, silently warning all against touching what belonged to him.

The nanny looked puzzled. Something in the boy's tone made her obey him. She left the room quickly.

*What a strange child,* she thought. And for some reason, she shivered.
Eventually, the nanny became familiar with Tom's routines. Ever since that day, the boy always smiled politely at her and insisted on cleaning the master bedroom himself.

Normally, if some other child had said this, she would put it down as some childish whim and wage that they'll abandon the task within a week... but not Tom.

Although the boy was polite and friendly, with a delightful smile, something in his depthless, black eyes simmered dangerously. The nanny patted her poor, pounding heart.

Dark coloured irises were not uncommon... But eyes like that — with pure blackness like starless nights — were something that she had never seen before. A colour so pure, so dark, so endlessly grim.

*What a strange child.*

Tom couldn't tolerate someone else's hands touching Harry's bed, so he decided to clean the room himself.

Tom stood in the middle of the bedroom. Using wandless magic, he moved brooms and mops around the room easily. If Harry could see him now, the man would be so shocked by the child's proficiency with advanced magic. Ever since the incident with accidental magic, Tom took great care to hide his true ability from Harry.

Days had passed in Harry's absence, and Tom's suspicion only grew.

"*Somewhere far, far away,*" Harry had said.

Yet... *If it was such a long trip, why did Harry leave behind all his clothing? Why did he leave behind his wallet?*

The child stood in front of the open closet, examining every neatly-folded shirt with great care, his face volatile with shifting emotions.

The snake crawled from his sleeves. She was big now, almost as long as his arm, with shiny scales and rings of colourful patterns forming on her skin. Black and yellows spots appeared on dark-green scales, poisonous and ominously bright.

She glared blearily as he took a shirt from the closet. *"Tom... What are you doing?"*

Tom pressed his face into one of Harry's shirt, inhaling the familiar scent.

The shirt smelled like evergreen wood and lemony soap, but no trace of Harry was left.

Tom frowned, bit his lips. Irritated, he shoved the shirt back into the closet, and pointedly ignored her question.

Harry had been gone for half a month. *Half a month.* Long enough for his scent to disappear from this empty house.
The Slytherin's Locket

NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

BETA: the brilliant and wonderful Osmodion

parseltongue

January 13, 2001

Harry decided it was best to leave while Tom was still in school, when the boy was distracted.

It was necessary for him to go back to his time. Before he came here, he had made a promise with Hermione to return to the future once every seven days. He needed to check in with her so she could examine the physical long-term effects of time-traveling, for his own safety. Once every seven days. So...seven days in 2001 equalled two years and ten months in the past.

No matter how many times he time-skipped, Harry felt that it was a sensation that he would never get used to.

The endless din of banging metal, the kaleidoscopic, ever-shifting images in his head, the disorienting feeling of weightlessness—experienced all together—time-travel felt bloody awful. Harry felt like his body has been taken apart and hastily reassembled. The price for defying time was physical pain, pain so sharp and visceral that Harry wished he was unconscious.

But he persisted. Finally, the time-skipper stopped spinning.

His ears were still ringing; his eyes blinded by dark spots. His temple throbbed. The nausea bubbled up, and Harry kneeled over, retching on the floor.

"HARRY!"

Dressed in a white lab coat, Hermione ran toward him. She helped him up and examined his face carefully. She stared at his pained expression, frustrated by her helplessness as she did the only thing she could—gently pat his back.

Shakily, Harry gathered his strength. He turned and gave her his best dazzling smile. Even on his unhealthily pale face, his sincerity warmed her heart.

Harry's smile was as bright as ever. "Hermione, long time no see."

"You are getting worse, aren't you?" Hermione asked bluntly, eyebrows furrowing.

Yes, he was definitely getting worse. The nausea turned into full-blown migraine, excruciating pain grinding in his mind.

Outwardly, Harry continued to smile nonchalantly. He leaned against the wall and casted a heating charm on himself. Hermione sighed deeply, but she didn't argue with him. She watched him in silent disapproval, and couldn't help but reach out to button up his jacket. *He must be freezing, wearing so little in the dead of winter.*

"Come on, you need rest," Hermione said sternly. She helped him up and steadied him with an arm
around his shoulder.

Harry shook his head quickly. His feet refused to budge. "No. We should start working... I need to go back within 24 hours."

Hermione frowned again. She glared at him with razor sharp scrutiny, and, for some reason, her stern expression reminded him of Tom.

"Hermione, you said, return once every seven days, then I can —" Harry's voice trailed off. Hermione's scrutiny made him feel guilty, but his resolute will remained strong. He must return, because he made a promise to a child. Five months... and the boy is waiting for him.

Still, Hermione glared at him, with stern eyes that reminded him of Professor McGonagall. Harry met her gaze with his own steely resolute.

"Okay, fine," she finally sighed and her bossy demeanour fell away. "Harry, you need to be aware of the fact that... everything you do has a consequence. If you choose to live twenty years of your life in the past, then your life — later— will be shortened by twenty years or maybe a lot more. And that's not all— "

Hermione set him down a sofa. Her intelligent eyes were troubled as she examined his conditions, once again feeling helpless against Harry's stubbornness.

She sat down across from him. "All this time you spent in the past is putting constant stress on your body. It's dangerous! Even if Fate couldn't erase your presence there, it could still make you pay a steep price for your defiance."

Harry lay back in the couch. He said nothing, because... she was right.

"Look, Harry. Give up please... We already know that your plan has failed! Because Voldemort is still Voldemort, right here— right now — he was never changed by your kindness! "Hermione squeezed the words out through gritted teeth, her voice almost pitying.

She felt guilty as Harry turned pale... but it had to be said.

Her statement rammed through Harry's heart like a sword.

Oh yes... How he hoped to see a different 2001 waiting for him when he returned. But reality was cruel, and fate unalterable. Once again, the truthfulness of her words scattered the illusion of his hopes.

Tom hadn't changed at all.

The higher the expectations, the harder the fall... Despair always follows hope.

"Harry, is it worth it?" Hermione asked, quietly.

Unexpected tears welled in his eyes. Harry opened his mouth, then closed it. Finally, he admitted shakily,

"I... I don't know."

It was true, Harry didn't know... Is it worth it to throw away twenty years of his life, suffering constant pain and unknown danger, in exchange for a chance to change the Dark Lord who cannot be changed? The future was unknown, the end was unknown. No one had ever changed the past, no
one had even tried... Was it worth risking everything?

Harry's head rested on the sofa. He squinted toward the light.

"I don't know if it's worth it... But I feel that I need to do this—" Harry replied, calmly.

Yes... Harry owned it to Tom to at least try... to try to give him a childhood, to try to give to him guidance, to try to change him.

Hermione watched her friend with concerned eyes. Three years in the past had not altered his appearance. He was still young, deathly pale, and so thin that his collarbones were almost visible. But compared to their last meeting, he looked much happier. His smile was almost as bright as it once was, in his youth; and for a moment, it almost made her heart flutter like a school girl's. (Of course, Hermione only thought of Harry as a brother, but even she had to admit that he is a very good-looking young man.)

"Fine," she nodded with resignation. "Harry, don't interfere too much... then maybe Fate won't be so harsh to you. Take care of yourself, okay?"

They smiled at each other, as old friends finally reaching an understanding. Hermione was determined to aide Harry— regardless of what he's planning. She swore that, for as long she lived, she wouldn't let any harm come to him.

With Hermione's agreement, Harry's shoulders slumped in relief. He took a bundle of miniaturized documents out of his pocket, then cancelled his shrinking charm.

"Hermione, I've completed our recruiting plans."

Hermione accepted the thick bundle, looking rather impressed.

Then, Harry reproduced the Slytherin's locket from his inner beast pocket. He held it toward Hermione, who regarded the dangling object with suspicion.

"Open it," Harry urged her.

Hermione looked at him sharply. She hesitated, then flipped it open.

Nothing happened.

Hermione gasped. The horcrux... it was destroyed?

"Yep, the horcrux is gone. I didn't do anything, no Gryffindor's sword, no basilisk's fang, nothing. It was just gone, "Harry explained calmly. "Hmm... It happened when I first saw Tom — I mean, Voldemort—"

Hermione pondered the information carefully. She had some theories about horcruxes, but... She narrowed her eyes as she remembered something.

"My guess... is that no two of the same soul can exist at the same time," she replied slowly, voice uncertain. "Since this horcrux overlaps with a piece of Voldemort's soul, and since there can't be two VolDEMorts... when they came together, Fate must've destroyed the extra one. Fate must keep history on its track... and thus, I think it's the most likely culprit."

"Hey, if that's true, do you think Fate will destroy my wand?" Harry asked, suddenly remembering the two brother wands that remained in Ollivander's shop.
"I hate Fate," Harry mumbled, sinking further into the sofa.

"Yes, but at least it helped us destroy the horcux," Hermione pointed out.

Suddenly, Harry's expression turned grim. "One more thing, Hermione — I can't... I can't understand parseltongue anymore."

Harry pursed his lips, remembering the days he spent outside Tom's room, listening to the boy hissing unknown, obscene words. It was the first time he heard snake-speak but couldn't understand, and the low-thrumming hisses made the hairs on his neck bristle. He didn't know the content of Tom's words, but that sound... it was rather alarming.

Hermione's brows furrowed deeply.

No one knew why Harry was a parselmouth... When Harry was in second year, Dumbledore had hinted, vaguely, at the possibility that a part of Voldemort's powers had transferred to him that night.

But it was a vague hint, with no explanation as to how or what or why.

The news of Harry's vanished ability unnerved Hermione greatly. She hated not knowing. People may fear tangible threats or mistakes, but the unknown, creeping out of unseen darkness, was always the thing that terrifies them the most.

"Hermione, don't be afraid," Harry soothed. Sensing her distress, he wrapped a gentle arm around his friend.

Hermione stared at the trusting smile on the dark-haired young man. The familiar sight reassured her, calmed her and gave her confidence in the future. She felt a warmth spreading in her chest.

Her lips twitched, "Shouldn't you be the one who's afraid?"

Harry grinned. He didn't like making Hermione worried about him, but, in a way, it was a refreshing change. Her concern was touching. *It's nice to know someone cares.*

Finally, she cracked a smile. Her eyes softened. *He is their last hope... if he gives up, then their hope of winning the war gives up with him.*

*Best of luck, my friend, you'll need it,* she thought.

"Harry, see you in seven days." Hermione stood near-by, waving good-bye with a smile on her face.

"Actually, I plan to stay a little bit longer this time," Harry informed her. "Give Ron and Ginny my love."

Next second, Harry was squeezed through the awful feeling of time-travel again.

But this time, Harry felt happy.

*Happy...* because he knew that he had friends here, on this side of the timeline, who care about and support him. And because he knew that he had someone there too. On the other side, there was a little boy waiting for him to return home.
Two things:

1) I want to point out the new BETA—Osmodion—and to thank her and to show my appreciation for her help. Thank you! And good luck on your exams.

2) Might I urge you guys to go and leave a comment for the original author, Emerald Ink. Say 'hi' or 'I appreciate your work' or 'wingardium leviosa' or whatever :D

To leave a comment on the Chinese site:
- Go to:
  
  http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1888544&chapterid=2
  
  - Scroll to the bottom, fill in the user name, fill in the text box, and press submit. No sign-up necessary. It may take half an hour for the comment to show up.
Baits and the Cave

October 26, 1935.

Autumn seemed to arrive suddenly that year. The morning of the first October was crisp and golden as an apple.*

What a perfect description for a perfect October day — warm sun kissing happy faces and cool wind caressing messy hairs. It was perfect day for a field trip.

The primary school took the children to a beach. It was a rather desolate stretch of ocean, furious waves beating against jagged rocks on white sand, nothing like the fun, golden beach that they had hoped for. Cold winds swirled around them, warning all that winter is coming fast.

As violent waves invaded the empty beach, teachers and parents looked upon their destination with disdain. They set up a picnic area somewhere far from the waters, and watched the children play from afar. The children, though, didn't mind the isolation. The rural, empty space was new to them, so they were eager to explore.

Tom stood on the beach, coolly observing other children's games, as they chased after each other, laughing, yelling.

*How boring! How obnoxious they all are!*

Tom watched from afar, with cold, dark eyes that couldn't conceal his inner turmoil.

Harry should've come with him on this field trip... but Harry wasn't around anymore. It had been about a month since the man had left—almost one whole month... gone— and Tom had already begun to question whether or not Harry would come back at all.

The man promised him... *Five months.*

Tom hated feeling like this. *So helpless.* He hated himself— his weak, useless self who clung to Harry so desperately, who relied on Harry for his very own survival. Once again, he understood his own powerlessness. He was powerless to stop Harry from leaving. He was powerless to do anything more than waiting, day after day, wallowing in his own miserable uncertainty.

Tom never desired power more so than he did in that moment. With all his heart, he wished for enough power to stop Harry from leaving him again, ever. *Never again.*

Harry would always belong to him... because Tom would never let the man go.

Even if, some day in the future, when Tom no longer wants Harry, even then... he would rather destroy Harry with his own hands than to ever let him go.

Tom needed more power... because he wanted — needed — to have Harry in his grasp. He needed to control Harry. He needed to turn Harry into a person who relied on him— who relied on *Tom* and on him alone — someone who clung onto Tom with the same desperate *need* that burned within
Tom's mind.

Tom needed more power. Lots and lots more... power and influence and knowledge. He needed to grow.

"Tom!" A pretty girl, in a floral-print dress, ran toward him. She screeched to a halt, when she caught sight of the twisted smile on his red lips.

No matter where he was, Tom always attracted attention. He inherited all of Riddle Senior's good looks. The seven-year-old was beautiful and noble, always dressed and carried himself appropriately. He had the rarest, most wonderful eyes — pure black orbs that captivated everyone — and he had a head full of rich, well-coiffed, jet-black hair to match. Tom's charisma was special even among the crème de la crème of Slytherin society, so never mind in this small, muggle school.

The young boy already knew how to use his good looks to his advantage. A handsome face matched with a refined and courteous personality, combined with a mysterious and tragic past, instantly, Tom became the most popular boy in school. Even the teachers, with their motherly ways, could not resist his charms.

The girl bounced toward him, shouting his name. She wanted to show Tom her pretty new dress. Plus the most handsome boy in school shouldn't be all alone... She nodded to herself, yes, she'll help him!

Instantly, Tom's expression shifted. His red lips curled politely; his black eyes softened; and all traces of dark and vitriolic thoughts vanished into a blinding smile.

"Yes? What is it?"

She peered at him, puzzled by the flash of cruel smile that lingered in her memory. Then, she smiled back, trusting and eager, as she tagged on his sleeves. "Come with me, Tom. Let's go play!"

Tom hid his annoyance, as he discreetly removed his sleeves from her grasp. He petted the snake concealed under his coat, to placate his pet, so it would stop squirming after the girl's unwelcome intrusion.

"No thanks. I'll pass," replied Tom. He gave a disgusted dismissal toward the children skipping stones on the shores, but quickly adjusted his expression into a shy smile.

She saw the hesitance on his face, which just furthered her resolute to help him. She beamed at him, "That's alright, Tom. You are my friend now! ... I'll introduce you to everyone."

Tom nodded obediently, looking ever the sweet, handsome boy. But, in his mind, Tom sneered — idiot. He didn't want to play with children. The only amusement they could provide him was by acting like fools — fools who believed his model student act, who loved him for it, even as he manipulated them from unseen shadows.

"ALLIE! Why are you talking to him!"

The downside to being popular was jealousy from other stupid little boys.

"He's just an orphan — dirty, poor, but lucky enough to be adopted by a rich dad," the leader of a gang of boys rounded toward them. The older boy shouted loudly on purpose, eyes challenging Tom.

Tom didn't react. It was true; he was just a lucky orphan.
The girl glanced at Tom nervously. She turned and hissed at the approaching boys, "Stop it!"

The tall boy shouted, "Why? It's all true! Isn't it?"

"Yes, it's all true... Harry is a very good adoptive... father." Tom narrowed his eyes. The word 'father' rolled off his tongue slowly, as if he was unhappy with the common label.

Eagerly, the boys were edged on by Tom's apparent passivity. All at once, they spilled everything they've heard from their parents.

"Hey, I heard that your father doesn't want you anymore."

"Yeah, yeah. I heard that he's disappeared for one month! Bet you he's never coming back!"

Tom's smile remained unwavering, but his fingers moved toward where the snake hid beneath soft fabric. Its cold body coiling around his arm, poisonous fans extended, readying to strike.

Tom hesitated. He looked toward the teachers and parents standing far behind them. Too bad... they could still see them. Then, Tom's eyes flickered toward a distant cave; its cavernous opening dark and welcoming like a hungry mouth.

Tom released his hold on the snake. He rewarded those yapping boys with an unreadable smile, ebony pupils constricted with the intense focus of a viper stalking its preys.

Calmly, he answered them, "You are wrong, by the way. He didn't disappear for a month, just for twenty-six days."

At lunch time, the teachers gathered up the children around a picnic blanket.

The kindly nanny had packed Tom a luxurious lunch, full of delicious treats.

Tom waved a cheery-jam scone in front of the children.

He offered his lunch to them, smiling earnestly as they all focused hungrily on the box in his hands. "Goodness! I can't finish all these by myself. Who wants to share?"

"Me!" "No, me!" The children shouted, pushing each other out of the way to reach the scones, glistening with thick, sweet cheery-jam.

"But—" Tom suddenly tugged the box away, looking down at the scones with a troubled expression. "Too bad that I... that I didn't bring enough for everybody—"

Tom's eyes rolled over their eager faces. How boring! No challenge in playing these fools, he thought.

"Say, later, I want to go explore that cave over there. I'll share my lunch with anyone who will come with me."

The children looked at the dark cave that Tom indicated. They couldn't see into its pitch-black depth, but something strange and ominous seemed to be lurking just beyond. They recoiled, suddenly frightened.

"Cowards," Tom sneered at a gang of boys.
Such a simple provocation technique—a direct challenge, simple but very effective, especially on those impetuous idiots.

"I'll come with you! And so will he," No surprise that the tall boy took the bait right away. The idiot even dragged his friend into it. "And after... you promise to give us all your food?"

"Of course," Tom nodded, grinning like a satisfied cat.

*All my food? Well, sure, and I'll personally make sure you have no teeth left to enjoy them with.*

"Ri... Riddle... Let's go back," said the boy, voice cracking with fear, as he followed Tom further and further into the cave's dark interior. Everything was pitch-black. All they could see was a vague outline of Tom leading them into the unknown. Salty wet air filled their nostrils.

"But we just got here," replied Tom sweetly.

He walked fast, his eyes growing brighter in the darkness. There was something special up ahead at the center of this cave. Tom felt a distinct power hidden there. Amongst the jagged limestone, there was a dark and deadly force calling out to Tom, like an irresistible Siren song. A sinister force saturated the cavern's air. Its strangeness resonated with Tom's dark magic, as it reached out to him, almost like an eager servant.

All Tom wanted was to teach those boys a lesson, but now... it seemed that he had found something even better. *Well, now he'll have to repay them with a bigger gift, won't he?... To thank them for leading him here.*

Tom grinned darkly, anger twisting his handsome face into jagged edges, sharper and more dangerous than ragged rocks all around them.

*All those, who defy him, must be punished!*

Tom's mask was perfect, so the boys didn't realize how much their words angered him.

*Harry... doesn't want him anymore.* As soon as the thought popped into his head, Tom's blood boiled. Dark magic and rage whirled within him, ready to explode. His mind burned with anger and there was only one thing that could calm him— revenge. *He'll make them hurt. He'll make sure they shut up. He'll make sure they never speak Harry's name in front of him again.*

By happenstance, the two boys had attacked Tom with the one topic that was untouchable. So, as they walked behind Tom, unassuming and unsuspecting in their callousness, they had doomed themselves.

Finally, they reached the end of the tunnel. But there was no light there, only a large body of black water in front of them, its surface calm and sinister like a horizontal mirror.

"Riddle! I'm... I'm going back," stuttered the tall boy, legs trembling.

Tom spared them a lazy glance. There was no need to pretend anymore. Tom grinned into the darkness, and, suddenly, an unseen force tossed the boys into the air. They fell, head-first, into the cold, dark waters.

"AAAAHHH!!" They screamed as salty liquid drenched them, chilling to the bones. "DAMN YOU, RIDDLE!"
Finally, the boys realized Tom was leading them away to exact revenge on them. They cursed at him, screaming as they struggled to stay afloat.

Tom licked his lips. *No, this is not enough to exonerate their rudeness... More, more—*

Suddenly, the two boys froze in fear. From the depth of the waters, something cold and soft tangled up their legs. It felt leathery, soft, almost like skin. They turned stiffly, and saw, emerging from the water, many colourless faces staring up at them — faces with eroded, empty holes of eye-sockets turning toward them.

"How... extraordinary," Tom could barely contain his excitement as he emerged from the cave, alone. His eyes shone beautifully like precious obsidian.

It almost felt like the very moment he had discovered Harry was the same as him. The ecstasy he had felt finding out how magic connected Harry to him. And now, he experienced a different kind of joy. Magic could be different from what Harry had showed him. Harry was light. He would never show Tom the true extent of cruel destruction that magic could bring. But now Tom had seen it with his own eyes. *Dark magic and its wonderful, unforgiving powers.* And it shook him to the very core.

"HELP!" screamed the boys. They tried to run, but their legs turned to jelly. The living corpses climbed on top of them. The stench of long-dead things filled the air, and disgusting body fluid dripped onto their clothing. Fear pumped through their veins, crawling up their throat, until nothing else remained.

Finally, they couldn't take it anymore. They fainted, falling to the ground in a thud, nested among the dead creatures as if they belonged with them.

Tom watched their terror with cold eyes. He smiled with satisfaction, then retracted his magic.

*They can't die here... It'll lead to trouble.* Tom still wanted to keep the cave a secret, for now.

The teachers found the three missing boys on the other side of the beach.

Two of the children were wounded and drenched in some foul-smelling liquid from head-to-toe. One of the boys, the tall one, had a terrible gash on his arm, and he was feverish, drifting in and out of consciousness. When they asked them what had happened, none of the children could explain. The two boys mumbled some nonsense, in broken sentences, body rocking back and forth in terror.

They said something about dead people crawling out of the sea... Must been a heck of a hallucination, hmm?

*Quote from J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.*
December 31, 1935.

London of 1935 has officially entered the coldest stretch of winter. Snow fell and fell; it fell on Christmas Eve; it fell on Christmas Day; finally, it fell on the last day of 1935, New Year's Eve, Tom's birthday.

"Where are you going, Tom?" The nanny asked timidly, looking at Tom from the kitchen. Tom was the politest and most disciplined child she had ever met. He never gave her trouble, but sometimes—few times when he became careless — his countenance changed, revealing a dark nature that terrified her.

"Today... today is your birthday. Mr. Potter told me to —"

Tom stopped by the door. Chilling wind blasted his exposed face; white flakes fell on his neck, melting and mending their coldness into his skin. But Tom stood stiffly, as if he felt no coolness at all.

After a brief pause, Tom gave her a reassuring smile.

"I'm going... to a friend's house."

Friends? He didn't have friends. He didn't want friends.

"But—"

"I'm going to a party at a friend's house." Tom's firm tone allowed no questioning.

The nanny said no more.

It was early, rose-pink dawn before the sun has completely lit-up the sky. Chilling air slipped though the collar of Tom's coat; soft snow squeaked beneath his boots. Tom breathed out puffs of white mists, warm and cloudy which blurred his vision.

Tom pulled his coat tighter around himself. His smile vanished the moment the nanny turned away. His face was utterly expressionless, as cold as the winter air around him.

*His birthday?* The boy didn't think it was an occasion worth celebrating. It was just the date that he was born, the date that his worthless mother died. She didn't even spend one day with him, perhaps she didn't want to... *Why is such a date worth celebrating?*

Of course, Harry didn't agree with him. At the last day of each year, he insisted on celebrating Tom's birthday, always ordering a custom-made birthday cake. Tom disliked all sweet things — cream or chocolate or whatever— but, when Harry looked at him with excited eyes, Tom always ate at least two pieces of cake.
Harry liked birthdays. He liked all holidays. He liked to run around the house, putting up colourful decorations everywhere, smiling as he worked, his cheeks rosy with happiness.

On every birthday, Harry always kissed Tom's forehead gently, whispering, "Thank the Lord for bring you into this world."

Although it was just a common birthday blessing, the words always made Tom feel so special—as if Tom's very existence in this world was enough to make Harry happy.

Even though Tom knew that was not true.

No one was happy simply because Tom exists. Harry wasn't happy just because he was born and Harry wouldn't be upset if he wasn't. Tom was sure that Harry only remained with him out of kindness or a misplaced sense of duty or —God forbid — out of pity. Whenever Tom is old enough to live on his own, Harry would leave him, instantly, without hesitation, like he did this time.

The boy's face became twisted. Darkness seemed to bleed from his intelligent eyes. He walked fast, suppressing his inner urge for murder.

He needed to do something to take his mind off this birthday nonsense.

Harry wasn't here, so everything—like birthdays—became meaningless to Tom.

Soon, he arrived at the abandoned beach. Mornings always arrived late during winter time. As Tom entered the cave, the sun was just peeking out behind clouds. Bright lights penetrated the cold air, even the dark cave was blessed with some golden rays, scattering around the edge of darkness.

Tom smirked as he awoke his pet. A green-black snake slithered out of his pocket and draped its thick body lazily around his shoulder.

"Come on. We are here."

"Go in, go in," the snake wiggled excitedly. She liked the smell of the cave, the smell of dark, rotten things, the smell of resentment and regret.

Technically, the viper was younger than Tom, only four years since hatching. But her magical ancestry integrated certain knowledge into her DNA, so, at least for now, she knew more about Dark Magic than Tom. She knew about those creatures in the dark—the inferi.

"These are the naturally-formed ones. They are— They are—" The viper struggled to explain necromancy to Tom. She was a magical snake, a natural-born hunter but not a good communicator.

Tom was relaxed inside the cave, like it was his own backyard. He listened to her broken explanations patiently, quickly, he was able to extrapolate from her words and fill in the blanks himself.

"They are rare?" Tom raised an eyebrow.

"Ah! Er... yes?" All this talking was giving the snake a headache. She flicked her tongue in annoyance, wanting to end the lesson as soon as possible. "Inferi are normally created by magic, with necromancy... But, occasionally, under the right circumstances, some unclaimed dead can naturally turn into inferi—"

Created? Tom was intrigued by the concept. He licked his lips eagerly.
"Although the naturally-formed ones are weak, like the ones in here... Unimpressive and few in numbers," the snake lamented to Tom.

Tom smirked as the wheels turned in his head. His dark eyes burned with anticipation, but his tone remained cool, even-keeled, "How impressive can they get?"

The snake struggled to remember. Her primordial memory was not as detailed as textbooks, so she only knew the basics.

"Er... Impressive ones would have killed those boys back then... and turned them into inferi."

Tom nodded, deep in thought.

_Something that is man-made, powerful, and able to self-generate. They sound interesting, like Frankenstein's monster, maybe they'll make good pets_, thought Tom.

They approached the water at end of the cave. The water's gleaming surface was deadly calm, although its main body was connected to the ocean, no creatures of the sea would ever approach such a evil place. The pool's surface was flat like black marble, but Tom could feel the insidious, dark magic simmering underneath, ready to lure unsuspecting divers to their watery graves.

Tom stood on the rocky bank. Precious quartz crystals were all around them, but Tom paid the gem stones no attention.

"Look, Tom. There's an island up ahead," the snake was the first to see the small island in the middle of the lake, strange columns of rocks rising from unknown depth, an abrupt blimp on the lake's calm surface.

An island is a completely isolated place. Shut-out from the world.

Tom narrowed his long and sharp eyes. Suddenly, a thought popped into his head.

It looks like a good place to keep one's prize — to keep one's prisoner.

Theoretically, one could build a tower on the island, with heavy locks to keep out the world. Just like the witch in the fairytale _Rapunzel_ (which Harry used to read to him before bedtime), Tom could also hide his prize away in a high-rising tower, unseen by the world, somewhere solitary to confine and to imprison whoever he wants...So, in time, through complete isolation, the tower's inhabitant would give himself wholly to Tom— becoming Tom's possession— his to control, his to claim.

Of course, this was all theoretical...Tom didn't have enough power for such a plan, yet...

"So, how to create inferi?" Tom asked. His voice softened to a whisper, gentle and alluring, and dangerous. "How do I create many, many more powerful inferi?"

For a second, the snake froze, then she answered honestly."I don't know for sure... But if the inferi drag some living humans into their territory, then the water should be able to turn them... probably."

Living humans, Tom repeated in his head.

Tom kicked a rock into the lake, watching as ripples broke the water's shimmering surface. He turned around.
"Alright. London has too many useless, stupid humans, anyways."

Ever since the economic crisis of 1929, business on the black market has been booming.

Unlike the infamous stock trades, the black market had no restrictions, no rules. The only things that ruled were money and power. Thus was why people came to the black market. They never needed to explain themselves — no need to care about where the merchandise came from or where it was going.


Of course, there were exceptions. No rules meant that the strong is free to prey on the weak. There was big money to be made from discovering sources of rare commodities, then, once found, experienced merchants could takeover those places and keep the profits all to themselves.

"What a beautiful rock! Son, can you tell me where you found it?" The thick merchant asked Tom eagerly. He smiled at Tom, revealing a row of yellow teeth, as he tried to appear trustworthy, but nothing could hide the greedy glint in his beady eyes.

Internally, Tom sneered. But, when he looked up at the man, his expression turned innocent, wide-eyed with ignorance. "I found them in a cave, good sir. There are lots more rocks there —"

"Good, good, son. Can you take me there? I'll give you money. Lots."

The child grinned happily. He waved the pound sterlings that the merchant had given him. "Lots?!! Even more than this?"

The merchant stroked the crystals in his hand. He cleaned its surface, so lights could pass through and scatter inside the gem, filling the rock with beautiful, pure rainbow spectrum. He could see golden metallic glints on its surface.

It was a Titanium Quartz!

*And it will make him rich!* If he could find the source, he could become one of the richest men in London. He would never have to slave over a little stall in the black market again!

"Of course, child, lots and lots of money for you," he answered instantly. "Just show me the cave."

The child nodded enthusiastically and tugged on the merchant's hands. "Let's go then. *Now.*"

Quickly, the merchant gathered five of his friends. Discreetly, they loaded their equipment onto a truck and took off eagerly.

Of course, everything was done in uttermost secrecy. The merchant did not want other greedy bastards to know that he has found a treasure trove, his very own cornucopia. This was God's gift to him.

Tom sat next to the driver, very still and reserved as he was careful not to dirty the car's leather seats. After all, in 1935, automobiles were rare and admired things, not something peasants were accustomed to.

"Hahaha," the merchant laughed jovially. Now more than ever, he was sure that the child was no more than a dumb, lucky boy from a poor family. As his head filled with dreams of riches and crystals, his laughter lasted through the car ride, blissfully unaware of Tom's true intentions.
Tom acted his part—a trusting, ignorant peasant boy—and he acted well. His mask never wavered.

Tom enjoyed the people who worked at the black market, because they were men of desires, with insatiable appetite and no morals. Tom knew, when people want things, they were easy to manipulate.

*Oh, he can't wait to see their terrified faces as they turn into inferi, as they become slightly worthless than what they are now.*

The boy was a viper. Protected by the darkness, he moved in stealth, raising his fangs against poor, unsuspecting preys.

"There—I got them from inside that lake, over there—" The boy pointed toward a large body of black water, corralling the merchants as they greedily inspected the mines within the cave.

All six merchants rushed forward at once, unwilling to let anyone else beat him to the prize. They dipped their metallic detectors into the water, cold, salty liquid drowning their legs.

Their movements disrupted the calmness of the lake. Ripples called out to the creatures in its depth, stirring up dark powers, and, as the men waded deeper, driven by greed, they've doomed themselves forever.

The water's surface quivered as the men screamed. They screamed and screamed until it was over, until their lungs and mouths were filled with frigid fluid. Six lives had disappeared into the cold, dark sea. In time, through the nurturing magic of the dark water, they would rise again as inferi.

*No... This was not enough! It was only the beginning.*

The boy stood on the uneven bank, staring at the small island in front of him. Unseen shadows cloaked his lean figure. They caressed him lovingly and cocooned him into their magic, almost as if the darkness itself was alive and *he* was their child.

Tom smirked. On his handsome face, thin red lips twisted into a terrifying sight.

This year, he wouldn't receive any birthday presents from Harry. So he would just have to make due with his own.

*Six inferi. Six muggles... Just some pathetic muggles, but, at least, they made some suitable experimental subjects, right?*

Tom thought darkly, *oh joy, happy birthday to me.*

"*Tom, what about their truck?*" the snake asked. Tom's experiments always bored her.

Tom narrowed his eyes. *Easy. Push it into the ocean. The sea will swallow everything.*"
NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

parseltongue

Januaray 19, 1936.

Christmas had passed in children's laughter. Now, no matter how much they didn't want to, the children had to pick up their backpacks, store away their toys, and head back to school hand-in-hand. Every year starts with fresh hopes. Even the chilling January wind was not enough to damper the bright smiles on their chubby, innocent faces.

The world went on as it should. Tom was still pretending be a good little boy, every teacher's favourite student and every parent's ideal son. The nanny was still looking after him, taking care of the house, although with increasing weariness as her charge's mood grew worse. Harry was still... not home.

January 19th... That meant Harry had been away for three months and nineteen days, just one month and eleven days until his return. He promised... five months.

The slender, handsome boy slung his bag over his shoulder casually as he walked out of the classroom, his steps nimble and his face expressionless.

"Wait, Tom! I'll walk home with you!" Ellie yelled after him. All the happy and energetic little girls like her— with red cheeks and bright eyes— they were blessed like princesses, beloved by everyone. Well, everyone except for Tom.

The taller boy only walked faster, not even slowing down to adjust his bag's drooping straps. Through the windows of the hallway, golden sunlight highlighted his pretty features, as he pushed through the crowd wordlessly. His back was slightly hunched with casual indifference, black eyes looking towards the floor, although everyone's attention was still drawn toward him. There was something in his countenance that spoke of being unsocial and aloof and arrogant, yet it also made him stand out from the crowd, with suspicion and with prominence.

There was a sort of danger lingering in those strikingly handsome features, unlike his normally gentle and polite personality.

"Wait for me, Tom!"

She yelled again, but Tom had already disappeared down the stairs. She leaped up and stuffed all her belongings into her bag, then she ran after him, huffing, not even bothering to zip up her bag. Her pigtails flew behind her as she ran, catching the attention of all the boys in the school. But she only had eyes for one.

"TOM!"

Although Tom appeared to be walking idly, it still took all her effort to catch him. Panting, Ellie grabbed onto the tail of Tom's coat. She was the only daughter of the richest family in the small town, so naturally she grew up a little insensitive and demanding as everyone has always spoiled her
rotten.

"Tom, can I go to visit your home?" She asked excitedly, with a whiny tone that demanded instant gratification.

Although her puppy-like cuteness would have worked on most people, it only served to irritate Tom further. His temper flared; his eyes darkened.

"Let go," he warned simply.

"Tom, I want to have more of that cheery jam you bought last time," Ellie continued to talk, as she seemed rather clueless to Tom's gloomy mood. She must've really bought his gentle and kind acts.

The boy ticked impatiently, slapping her hands away.

"Go away," he warned again. This time with a ringing power behind his words, icy tone biting like winter's winds, chilling to the bone.

Tom narrowed his eyes, and, for the first time, he revealed his true nature to her—a sinister darkness beneath the handsome mask, with simmering powers that she couldn't begin to understand. The girl recoiled in shock. For the first time, the wolf cub snarled with his sharp fangs, because he no longer had reasons to blend in with the sheep flock. After all, he had only put on his acts for Harry's sake—to win the man's affection and sympathy—and since Harry wasn't here, Tom was free to act as he pleased.

Tom sneered as the girl's face turned pale. Inexplicably, it always gave him pleasure to see fears festering in those sheep's eyes, as they learned to respect his power. Perhaps parts of Tom were just like the other children, capricious and immature in his own odd ways. This was his childish way of lashing out, to blow off his inner anxiety and anger, to express his resentment of being abandoned by the one person whom he cared about.

"To...tom," The girl stuttered.

Tom turned and walked away without another word.

Ellie hesitated, but she was never one to give up easily. She bit her lips and chased after him, although this time she was careful to keep her distance, trailing behind him closely. His baleful eyes remained fresh in her memories.

She was puzzled—when did Tom get so scary?

As they turned a corner, Tom's home came into view. Tom approached the snow-covered house with slow, robotic steps, his face hooded and emotionless, as if his own home held no more significance than any of the other houses on the street.

Ellie glanced at the large, brick-laid house admiringly. Of course, she had an inkling that a boy like Tom must've come from a good family, but the house's elegant architecture—symmetrical frames rising from a sea of white snow, with red-clayed roof and cobble stone garden—was still a sight to behold. If Harry was here, even he would have to admit that the Weasley twins have good taste, despite their joker natures.

Tom pushed open the iron gates and marched inside without sparing a glance to the girl following behind. She lingered by the door, before her curiosity got the better of her and she followed him into the garden.
Right now, Tom couldn't care less about her. As he entered the house, instantly, his attention focused on a pair of white sneakers, casually lying on a mat in the foyer.

He recognized them! Harry never liked to wear rigid loafers; instead, he favoured comfortable, cheap sneakers. Tom's eyes stared in shock, inky pupils constricting as if they are fixed on some forlorn treasures instead of an ordinary pair of shoes. The sneakers looked the same as he had last seen them, white rubber with green grass stains smeared on their soles. Tom could almost imagine how their owner had hurried through the garden, smiling as he unlocked the door to their home.

Suddenly, his breath hitched. His heart raced. A trembling excitement shot up his spine, tickling like an electric shock. Tom could not hear Ellie calling his name softly beside him; all he could focus on was the ravage pounding of his own heart as adrenaline pumped through him. He stayed very still for a moment, even though cold sweat was condensing on his forehead. His throat felt dry as his mind whizzed out of control.

Is he... is he back?

Chest heaving, Tom tried to calm himself. But... it wasn't working. Suddenly, he took off, running through the living room and up the stairs, not even bothering to remove his muddy, winter boots.

Ellie stared after him in bewilderment. His tense expression, his trembling fists, and his unsteady rushing steps all suggested one thing to her — that Tom was very nervous. Ellie had never seen Tom like this. In her recollections, Tom was always so mature and controlled, always smiling politely, the kindest boy she knew. Yet, she shuddered as she recalled the image of those dark eyes, flashing so ferocious and cold, and so un-childlike, but... surely that was a mistake. She means everyone loses their temper once in a while, right?

Still, Ellie lingered by the open door, unsure whether or not she is welcome to go inside.

Once again, Tom was standing outside of Harry's bedroom door. The door was closed, as it had been for the past three months while Harry was away.

The boy stared at the closed door, and suddenly he was afraid. That fearless, arrogant, and tenacious young boy — who had committed heinous crimes without hesitation— that Tom Riddle was afraid. He was afraid to open a simple door. He remembered when three months ago, he was standing in this exact spot, the door swinging open only to reveal a room full of empty disappointment.

He stood in complete silence, dark shadows swirling in deep-set eyes, watching the door for a long time. Finally, he took a deep breath, trembling fingers turning the door knob.

It opened easily, only a short squeak of protest from the rusting hinges.

The room was silent and empty, exactly as Tom had left it. All the furniture remained in their place; the vase on the nightstand hadn't moved; even the thin film of dust was still clinging onto the windowsill. There was only... silence. Although the sun was shining on his face generously, Tom felt an all-consuming coldness surrounding him, trapping him like dark tendrils of inescapable nightmares.

Tom's boots squeaked against the hardwood floor. They left a muddy trail behind him, brown damp footprints leading out the door, a clear indication of the boy's prior excitement, but now, they were an indication of his foolish, dashed hopes.

Ebony eyes narrowed as his mood turned morose, as the last bit of hopeful lights snuffed out of his eyes, until a pure darkness swallowed him whole. The boy pursed his lips, trying to suppress the
overwhelming disappointment in his chest, rumbling like ruthless waves.

Suddenly, Tom hated himself. He hated his emotions. He hated how much he was affected by the thought of that one person. He turned away. The trail of muddy footprints seemed to be mocking him. They said he was an idiot, a silly little puppy chasing after an unattainable goal named "Harry Potter". As his heartbeat slowed, his handsome features became twisted by the darkness.

"Tom? There's a girl downstairs — is she a friend of yours?"

Tom's head jerked toward the warm voice. A slender figure approached him. A familiar face was smiling brightly as his reflection became trapped in Tom's clear black eyes, captured in all of his perfect likeness, as indelible as images stored in the camera.

The boy's hands clutched the door's wooden frame. He froze, staring like a dumbfounded wax statue.

"So?... Don't you recognize me?"

Tom's throat felt dry.

The young man stood by the stairs, thin face unhealthily pale, green eyes bright as stars.

He walked to Tom and put his hand on top of Tom's head. "Oh my! You have grown so tall in just three months —"

Tom did grow fast. After being supplied with sufficient nutrients, he had grown like sprouts after spring's rain. He grew taller and stronger, and now, as they stood face-to-face, Tom was able to reach Harry's chest.

Harry inspected the attentive little boy and ruffled his hair affectionately. He chuckled, his face beaming with pride.

Tom stared at the buttons on Harry's coat, seeming at a loss for words. As Harry's hand stroked his hair, Tom noticed the young man's skin felt very cold, like ice brushing against his forehead, but its touch also felt comforting. *Real.* For a moment, Tom thought something had took over his body, because his normally intelligent mind turned to mush and an explainable emotion was bursting forth from his chest. It compelled him to move forward, on pure instinct, and launch himself into Harry's arms. His small arms wrapped tightly around the young man's waist, tightening with unforgivable pressure.

Snow still clung onto the outside of Harry's coat. A cold wetness seeped into Tom's new shirt, but the child refused to let go.

Harry smiled, green eyes softening as he looked at the child. This was not the first time they embraced, but it was the first time Tom initiated the action. The boy was always withdrawn, keeping all his emotions locked within. Normally, it was hard to tell whether Tom was happy or upset, so this outburst of affection was especially rare and touching. Harry guessed correctly that Tom was worried. He had been away for three or four months, and no matter how mature the boy acted — still, he must've been afraid of being alone.

Harry leaned forward and hugged Tom back. He whispered into the child's ear.

"Come. Be brave. Your friend is still waiting for you," Harry let go. Still smiling, he helped Tom straighten his shirt and tucked a strand of stray hair behind Tom's ear.
Tom released him reluctantly, irritated by the sudden loss of the man's body heat.

*Be brave?* Tom hoped that Harry didn't think of him as a clingy, scared little kid.

Ellie poked her head through the front door, peering at the dark-haired young man curiously.

*This is... Tom's adoptive father? But he is so young!* 

He looked more like an older brother than a father. The little girl quite liked his warm smile, so she grew more eager to learn about Tom's family.

"Ellie, come inside," suddenly Tom appeared besides her, smiling politely as he held open the door. *Ah, this is the Tom she recognized from school, the refined and perfect student.*

His smile blinded her, so she forgot all about that vicious expression on his face just a moment ago. She leaped up and took off her boots, then followed him into the living room.

"Please, have a seat while I go pour a cup of tea for you," he beckoned with impeccable manners. Beautiful black eyes, curling red lips, it seemed Tom was in a good mood. She was at an age when romance and boys held great allure, so her face burned as those bright black eyes turned toward her. Her mind filled with dreams of the future — Prince Charming, Mr. Right, knights in shiny armours... The more Ellie thought about it, the more her face turned into a tomato.

Harry noticed her red cheeks. He grinned, he couldn't help but tease her, "Now, Ellie, isn't my Tom such a handsome boy?"

With a shy voice barely louder than buzzing of mosquitoes, she whispered, "yes."

Harry laughed. A boisterous and sweet sound that made Ellie turned even redder. Harry felt his chest filling with pride. He liked to hear other people praising his child, his amazing, brilliant little boy. At last, Tom seemed to be changing. He was willing to hug Harry; he was willing to bring friends home; he was even, unwillingly, attracting the attention of pretty little girls.

Harry felt like a proud father. Tom's changing attitudes brought him great joy, so much that Harry thinks he'll be laughing even in his dreams.

*Such happiness is often addictive.*

Tom was always a good actor. Tom would only show his best aspects to Harry, to only show the aspects filled with good manners, artificial smiles and bright lights. And the lights, while only illusionary, would be enough to hide the darkness away.

Harry was laying in bed, wrapped in soft duvet, his body quivering in pain. No matter how tired he was, he couldn't fall asleep. The pain came in waves, assaulting him until he curled up like a pathetic animal. He sighed, turning over and closing his eyes. Although his face was frail and pale, despite the pain, a satisfied smile lingered on his lips.

He remembered Hermione's question. And now, he knew the answer.

*The pain, his life, everything...Yes, it is worth it.*

Across from the hall, Tom was also laying in bed. He also couldn't fall asleep.

*I think... we ought to slow down our Inferi experiment.*
Eventually, Ellie became a regular house guest at Number 15, London Street, where, hanging over the iron gates, there was a large wood-carved sign announcing their owner's name for all to see: Harry Potter.

Now, why was she coming over all the time? Why! — the answer was simple — because Tom invited her; because the boy had found her useful, a short-cut to achieve his goal.

With his usual perceptiveness, easily, the boy had figured out that Harry likes Ellie. Every time, when he brought the girl home, Harry would smile warmly at her and offer them cookies. Tom observed with cold indifference, as the young man bought cakes and sweets for his friend. Every time, when he watched them, an irritated beast would roar in his chest, hissing at the intruder, but Tom would always suppress his urges, while adjusting his mask to a polite smile before facing them.

He could tolerate her. *For Harry's sake.*

"Tom, where have you been today?" Harry frowned, as Tom hurriedly came in through the front door, removing his scarf as he walked.

The boy looked up at Harry with clear black eyes, so sincere that Harry felt bad for questioning him. Discretely, Tom ran his fingers along the snake wrapped around his arm, whose cold body was concealed under his coat.

He smiled sweetly. "Ellie invited me over to her house."


"I'm starving. Thanks, Harry," The handsome little boy nodded eagerly. Casually, he tossed the scarf, which was stained with some mysterious, foul-smelling liquid, into a basket filled with a large pile of laundry. Unnoticed by all, limestone dust fell from his sleeves, fine grey powders drifting onto hardwood floor, dust that had traveled all the way from some far, damp, dark cave.

Even though he was only seven years old, Tom knew how to take advantage of all the usable things around him— even people.

The little girl was busy dreaming— dreaming of princes and princesses, dreaming of the boy, of his perfect smile and gallant chivalry. She was too busy dreaming to notice that, to him, she was no more than a usable tool and a convenient excuse.

"Tom, I'm going to marry you when I grow up," she proclaimed loudly, face shiny with hope and innocence.

Under the orange glow of the setting sun, a boy and a girl were walking along a winding path, side-by-side, step-by-step, as they promised eternal devotion to one another. *First love, sweet like*
tangerines, perfect like all the happily-ever-afters in fairytales.

"You are not all grown up."

"I will be! In no time— very soon — very quickly —"

The dark-haired boy smiled in response, but his beautiful black eyes were mirthless, ominous.

Tom was very mature for his age. Compared to the other children, he had an unusually profound understanding of 'marriage' — and he knew that he hates it. At the orphanage, Franny the fat nanny had described Tom's mother with utter disgust: "Oh, she was alone and pregnant, without a husband. Wandering like a tramp on the streets. Probably one of those tavern wrenches— you know — the ones thrown away by their husbands."

Tom never pitied his mother. Quite the opposite, he despised her. He despised her for being weak, for being a woman who only lived for love and marriage, and who died with shame and absolutely nothing. She was stupid, weak!

He doesn't need bonds or limitations or marriage. Power is all he needs!

All Marches and Aprils of spring were cool like morning dew, with the thermometer's silver mercury hovering about 10°C. In the damp cave, the air was chilling, cutting to the bone. In the darkness, there was only silence; one could even hear drips of every water condensation.

"Thissss... is not enough," the boy hissed, a quiet sound like snakes slithering in tall grass, barely audible but bloodcurdling in implications.

The snake reared her head and inspected the numerous, white skeletal faces submerged in the lake. She murmured.

"Looks plenty to me."

"Not in term of quality... Not enough... I need more powerful inferi."

The snake nodded in understanding. She replied confidently, "This place is suitable for raising Inferi... Let them stay for ten or twenty yearsss, they'll become powerful."

"Not good enough. The wait is too long."

Climbing onto precious quartz crystals, Tom inspected the isolated little island in the distance. His pupils flashed, a rich full darkness like moonless midnights. No one knew what the boy was planning, not even the snake always by his side.

Of course, the viper wasn't worrying about the future. She just wanted to find a solution for Tom's demands.

"Ooooh! Tom! Inferi made from wizards are much more powerful— "

The boy listened. Immediately, the first thing that he thought about is Harry. Up to this point in his life, Tom had only met one wizard — Harry Potter.

His dark eyes narrowed. Without hesitation, he removed Harry from the list of options.

Something stirred up the inferi from their rests. They poked their heads through the lake's calm
surface, gaunt faces like mummies, ragged bodies slick with foul-smelling fluid, pale muscles half-eroded and distorted, frozen in their moment of death, in that horrified and twisted expression right before they were dragged under and transformed. Two black, gaping holes replaced where the eyes supposed to be.

The boy shoved his hands into his pocket, as he inspected his pets casually.

*He doesn't want to make Harry into an inferius... He doesn't want to see the man's beautiful green eyes and captivating smile transform into those disgusting creatures. Not even one bit.*

"Where... where can I find more wizards?"

"I... I don't know," the snake replied weakly. Her primordial memories all came from her family's ancestral lives in the unexplored, dark, magical forest. She never cared much about the wizarding and muggle worlds, so she never knew how to move between the two. Actually, she didn't even remember how she ended up in London.

Er... not by the tube, that's for sure.

"I think you should ask Harry. He'll know."

*Harry? The boy pursed his lips.*

Harry was a very kind man. He had infinitely patience for the boy.

"Of course, I'll take you," the young man smiled, green eyes unfocused and drowsy, black hair dishevelled, since he has just woken up. Wind-swept bangs flung aside to reveal an odd, lightning-shaped scar. Tom was very curious about the scar. But his instincts told him to not inquire after it.

Harry was more than happy to grant Tom's request. He remembered the first time he visited Diagon Alley — how happy he was— to enter that wonderful, mysterious, magical Wizarding world. He remembered curiosity and excitement ballooning in his chest as he walked down the magical street; how awe has coloured the memories of his first year with honey-golden sweetness. *Ah, he might be getting nostalgic.*

"The first time I saw Diagon Alley, it was amazing—" Harry recalled. His thick cotton coat was a tad loose on his slender frame, although it looked oddly charming.

Tom raised an eyebrow. This was the first time Harry mentioned his childhood.

"Harry, did you grow up in a wizarding family?" Tom asked, watching Harry's reaction closely.

The young man paused, before, quickly, he broke out a cheerful grin. "Nope, I grew up with Muggles. Muggles are non-magical people, by the way—"

"So... your parents aren't magical?"

"... Well, no. They are magical. Very powerful wizard and witch."

"Then... why did you grow up with Muggles?" Tom asked quietly.

The child looked up at Harry, dark eyes searching his smiling face, almost accusing as if the boy managed to see right through his false cheerfulness.
Harry stared at the child's calm face, suddenly he felt nervous. He licked his lips.

"Hey, look! The traffic cleared. Let's go—"

Tom's eyes flashed, but he didn't ask again.

As they walked together, Harry smiled wryly. *Why did he grow up with Muggles? Because his parents are gone. Why were they gone? Because you murdered them.* Only moments like this... it reminded Harry of the fate of the little boy who walked in front of him — in the future, he is Voldemort, Harry's mortal enemy.

"Harry, are we there yet?" The seven-year-old asked eagerly. Whenever he turned to face Harry, Tom was careful to appear suitably excited and fervent, black eyes gleaming with childish wonders.

"Not yet," Harry replied, ruffling the boy's hair playfully. He smiled again, this time the smile was genuine.

*In the future, he is Voldemort, the enemy... But now is not the future.* Right now, he was still a little boy, with a propensity for childhood silliness and softness. There was still hope for the future.

Somewhere on Charing Cross Road in London, there was a broken-down, old pub. So ordinary that Tom wouldn't have paid it any attention if Harry hadn't pointed it out to him.

Tom followed Harry closely, as the young man deftly navigated between crammed tables of oddly-dressed wizards and empty bottles, walking straight pass the dusty bar counter toward an empty courtyard in the back.

"Muggle clothing?... Nah, ain't no Muggles able to see this place," an old wizard with terrible teeth murmured. He slammed an empty mug on the counter and hollered at an ancient-looking bartender. "TOM! — bring on another pint."

Behind Harry, the boy stiffed slightly. Through the corner of his eyes, he gave the hunched-over bartender a scornful glance.

"Tab again?" The bartender grumbled. Impatiently, he filled the mug and slid it across the counter. Foaming amber liquid swirled wildly, but, oddly, none spilled.

Tom is such an ordinary name. Practically three out of every ten British men are named Tom... Tom sneered, as he observed the weak, old bartender who shared his name.

Tom... Him too, hmm?

Clearly, Harry also heard his name being called. He patted Tom's thin shoulders reassuringly, and gave him a brilliant smile. "No matter if your name is Tom or Sam or whatever. Just remember, you are only yourself."

*No matter if your name is Tom or Voldemort, you are always yourself to me.*

"Thanks," came the boy's sullen reply, as he sulked behind Harry.

Harry thought his reaction was quite cute. He couldn't help but ruffle Tom's hair again, messing up the child's perfectly-coiffed hair on purpose. "Cheer up! We are here — entering Diagon Alley."

Tom knew not to overplay his hand. Love and sympathy also required patience, and it was best not to test Harry's patience... just yet. He looked around the small walled courtyard and frowned. It didn't
look like much, no more than four meters wide, chipped brick walls, with nothing but a trash can and a few weeds.

Harry walked up to a red-brick wall. He tapped the wall three times with his wand.

"Three up... two across," he told Tom.

Harry stepped back. Suddenly, the bricks came alive, they wiggled and moved backward, and an archway appeared before Tom, revealing a whole new world to the child.

Lively, noisy, crowded, real and magical — this was their world.

"Welcome to Diagon Alley," Harry announced, smiling at Tom's amazement. The boy's face was just as bright as Harry's when Hagrid first introduced him to the wizarding world. He felt proud, happy. This was home.

Unexpectedly, Tom was stunned into silence by the sights in front of him. He stared blankly. His eyes focused on the young man's smiling face, who, standing among the foggy backdrop of old Victorian houses, seemed to be glowing with an enigmatic, soft, rosy beauty.

Like imprinting of baby chicks, like how Harry became attached to Hagrid, the first-magical folk he met— Tom, too, was experiencing an inexplicable emotional transformation. Something was growing deep inside his heart, something powerful that'll come to shake his worldview entirely. His very soul trembled in anticipation.
NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

BETA: the brilliant and awesome AzulticSerpens

parseltongue

January 14, 2001

"Are you ready, my loyal followers?"

Blood-red pupils gleamed in the darkness. In a magnificent, high ceilinged hall, the Death Eaters stood in a circle around a raised throne. Their master's appearance was no longer a chalk-white, skull-like face, but one with chiselled features and pale skin as smooth as marbles.

Beneath the throne, the followers of the Dark Arts bowed before him. With reverence and fervent adoration, they answered, "Yes, my Lord!"

"Very well," the dark king chuckled as he surveyed the numerous black-robed bodies before him. He stood and strode out of the meeting hall, a python, its width rivaling that of a human thigh, slithering at his side.

Soon, the whole world would belong to him.

He strode out of the grandiose meeting hall leisurely, only accompanied by the sound of Nagini slithering on marble floor. For a moment, an illusion of peace settled over him.

Peace? He sneered. In the Dark Lord's eyes, there was only fear and destruction and silence of the dead, nothing that resembled peace. The night is the darkest just before the dawn, and such was the Dark Lord's favourite hours. Such was the hours festering with disappointment, fear and an impenetrable darkness, and he, the master vampire stalking the night, only grew more content and powerful as he feasted on their terrors.

It would not be long at all before the wizarding world, too, became enveloped in that darkness. Time would freeze at the right moment, forever in darkness without any hope of dawning sun. His lips curled viciously. No matter how handsome his face was now... The darkness within him only twisted it into a terrible sight.

Yes, it would not be long before the supposed saviour, the Chosen One, lost everything. The boy-who-lived?—HA! Soon, there would come a day when he, too, would fall under a streak of brilliant green light. One day when the boy's legend would come to an end by his own hands.

His red-eyes narrowed with contentment. The thoughts of death and blood woke the hunger in his veins. Pale, bony fingers stroked the yew-wood wand, contemplating.

He could feel his powers returning to him; he could feel his mind reverting back, sharp and clear; he could feel the horcruxes merging into him. Once again, he was becoming perfect.

No one knew more about the forbidden art of horcrux-making than himself... not even that dead, old, meddling coot.
Horcrux — it was a symbol of eternal life, of the immortal soul; however, it had one fatal flaw. It scattered his power, reduced his mind.

*Bet that old coot never saw this coming*, he sneered. *The Dark Lord willingly giving up his state of immortality to merge his soul back together—on a whim more or less—just because he could.*

The Dark Lord smirked. *Because I can do even better.*

Suddenly, he was filled with power and vitality again, with bloodlust and an iron-clad resolve to exorcise that so-called weakness. *Immediately.*

As he thought about his weakness, his face turned dark, murderous.

Dreams often revealed the subconscious, exposing one's weaknesses and fears. But... buried deep in the Dark Lord's dreams, there was only a fuzzy white screen and some buzzing noises, like vague mists blocking him from seeing real and important details. And... there was also fear in his dreams, an suppressed and sublime terror rising from somewhere within him, like the tide surging in, fast and furious, until it made him feel like he was drowning. It came inexplicably, without warning, but accompanied by an agony felt like his heart was being ripped out of his chest.

Ever since he made his first Horcrux, he'd stopped experiencing such emotional instability. Beside immortality, the Horcuxes had another benefit — they got rid of his emotions, especially those associated with the memories of his childhood. He'd peeled away all of his past memories and feelings — his once happy, sad, painful or warm experiences — and then he stuffed all that those useless emotions into Horcruxes. In doing so, he became superior to men. He was able to observe his memories with a calm, objective attitude, as if he was a stranger in his own — no, *in Tom Riddle's* — life.

It was supposed to make him calm, ruthless, and cerebral. And, thus, it became rather suspicious when powerful emotions resurfaced in his mind again, even if it was just... in dreams. He became keenly aware of something missing — something important, and something else had erased his memory of this so-called weakness.

He had a weakness.

The Dark Lord could not allow such a weakness to exist, especially one that he couldn't even remember.

*He needed to find it!* That weakness... and he needed to find the reason behind that inexplicable fear in his dreams. And so, he began to merge the Horcuxes back into himself.

Eventually, even the night's deepest darkness fades. A glimmer of golden dawn was appearing on the horizons. The Dark Lord found the faint lights rather irritating. He turned sharply, black robe flapping in the air like a giant bat's wing.

"Nagini, return to the bedroom," he ordered. He needed to rest at a place of complete darkness. He was the Dark Lord. He was allergic to all things light and soft and sweet.

Because he hated the light, with all his might, and he hated the Chosen One and everything the boy stood for.

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Even though the morning sun was smiling outside the window, the Dark Lord's bedroom remained dusky, just how he preferred it.
Although his Lordship didn’t care if the furniture in his room were the best available in Europe, his loyal followers insisted, and so he came to lay in the finest silk, surrounded by the most beautiful trinkets. Not that he cared about the luxuries of life...No, he was the Dark Lord, he only cared about power and war.

As he startled awake from a dream, Voldemort sat up in bed, eye-brows furrowing.

This was a side-effect of merging the Horcuxes. Irritated, he threw a few *reducto’s* at everything in the room, destroying all the best available in Europe. All except for the bed he was lying in, of course.

The side-effect of merging the Horcuxes included re-experiencing his past mood swings. Once again, in the privacy of his dreams, he became haunted by all the useless emotions — hope, lust, obsession, and... a deep, longing sadness.

After reabsorbing the soul-piece in Ravenclaw's Diadem, gradually, he started to recall all the memories after his twenty-fifth birthday, and felt all the tangled emotions that followed. That year, he had applied for the Defence Against the Dark Arts post at Hogwarts and, again, he was unceremoniously rejected for his 'inexperience'. He remembered how his budding confidence had turned into disappointment and full-blown rage, then he turned to the Dark Arts and chose the path that took him here.

Once, he had loved Hogwarts. Any wizard who grew up within her ancient walls would come to love the castle. So even he, with his arrogant and paranoid nature, had wanted to contribute something to his alma mater. But... Hogwarts had slammed her door in his face.

The handsome lord calmed his mind. He smirked, a provocative, almost tantalizing sight.

At last, Hogwarts had fallen under his control. Now, she was no more than a tool to him... a tool to use against the Chosen one. Yes, his motto was true all along —there is no good or evil, only power.

He stood up and dressed in a tailored black robe. The Dark Lord had returned with a vengeance. He looked quite different. No longer snake-like and inhuman, now he had his old body back — a tall, lean figure, with broad shoulders, jet-black hair, and long powerful limbs. *Only seventy years old, quite young really.* For the typical wizards' lifespan of 300 years, he was right in the middle of the prime of his life.

"My Lord," a hooded figure approached the throne and bowed deeply. When he looked up, his crazed, fervent eyes looked awfully familiar. This was the same Death Eater captured by Ron Weasley not so long ago.

"So, you are back," the Dark Lord nodded lazily. His handsome face twisted by a cruel smile. "How did it go?"

The Death Eater let out a depraved laugh. "Lately, our dearest hero has been quite occupied. He only shows his face once a week. Last I saw of him, he looked as thin as a stick. Weak... *Emaciated*... Maybe some brute has been fucking our little hero in secret, fucking him bloody—"

A round of lecherous laughter broke out amongst the Death Eaters. Everyone knew that the Chosen One was rather fond of that bulky, idiotic friend of his, Ronald... something — those two had been the butt of jokes in their circle for ages.

All jokes aside, the Death Eater had completed his mission spectacularly. Eagerly, he submitted the map of Dumbledore's Army headquarters to his Lordship. *Knowing is half the battle*— this gave
them the perfect opportunity to attack.

Victory was upon them.

"Hmmm," The Dark Lord drummed his fingers noncommittally.

"My Lord, this is our chance to get rid of Harry Potter— once and for all!" The Death Eaters clamoured eagerly.

Leaning back on his throne, the Dark Lord's thin lips moved as a cruel, inhuman hiss filled the room.

"**Harry Potter... Ah, his death shall not be granted so easily.**"

The Death Eaters listened to the hissing sound with ecstasy. Even though they couldn't understand a word, they understood its significance — parseltongue, the birthright of the Slytherin line.

Rows upon rows of Death Eaters knelt down in front of the throne, hooded faces bent low with utter reverence, like worshippers in front of the altar.

The future is forever mutable... Not even Fate can control what has yet to happen.

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Time flows like a chain of infinite events, the future linking the past, all connected through the tendrils of choices — on one side of the link were the Dark Lord and his followers; on the other side, passing through a Time-jump, was a quiet darkening day.

"Why don't we stay at the Leaky Cauldron for a night?" Harry suggested. Although it wasn't much of a long trip back home, judging by Tom's expression, the boy didn't want to leave so soon.

"Yes," the boy nodded eagerly.

Harry smiled. Talking Tom by the hand, they walked toward the old pub.

Tom followed obediently. His face docile, yet his irises became tainted by a darkness that was full of simmering, repressed rage.

Through the whole day, Harry never let go of his hand. **Not even once.**

At first, it was a protective gesture — Harry was afraid the child would get lost in the endless crowd, so the man tugged him close and watched over him. But, somewhere along the way, Harry's intentions changed. The man clutched Tom's hand, restricting just like cuffs around a prisoner's limbs, as green eyes watched Tom with a thinly-veiled wariness — with suspicion — as if Tom required some unexplained surveillance... As if Tom had done some wrong.

Tom could feel Harry's mood changing as they stepped into the wizarding world. Harry became more guarded... **No** — Harry was always guarded around him, but the man's distrust seemed especially obvious at the moment.

The young man's palm was soft and warm with sweat, and the heat burned against Tom's hand.

Normally, Tom would have no trouble putting on his mask, pretending to be a good little boy grateful for Harry's affection. Normally, Tom would have acted out of self-interest, towards goals derived from cold, objective logic. But now... he didn't feel like pretending.

No matter how much he pretended, Harry never truly trusted him. The young man was always the same — all smiles and warm affections on the outside, but, inside, he was always wary of Tom.
The child looked up at the young man beside him and gave a mocking smile. Anger spread from the numb pain in his chest; bitterness tasting like blood in his mouth.

*Harry, too, was a good actor, wasn't he? He was also wearing a mask— pretending to be a good, loving father, while plotting away behind his back.*

*If so, two can play at that game.*

Tom wiped away the vicious expression on his face and smiled sweetly.

"Two rooms, please," Harry nodded toward Tom the Bartender.

"Ten Sickles."

Harry paused. He only had eight Sickles and few Knuts left in his pocket.

He grinned sheepishly. "Er... do you accept muggle money?"

Old Tom gave him a stern look. "No."

A little taken back by the old man's firmness, Harry rubbed his nose and opened his mouth. Before he could speak, Tom cut in. "Just get one room, Harry."

It seemed the boy was anxious to make sure they stayed the night in the wizarding world.

Harry nodded. He took out five Sickles and held them toward the bartender.

"That's not enough—"

"Ah?"

"Six Sickles per room," the old man said, his stern expression unwavering.

*Oh, so ten Sickles was actually the discounted price?* Harry smiled to himself as he fished out another coin.

Wizarding inns were much nicer than the muggle ones. Each room was fitted with its own space-expanding spells and heating charms, as well as other useful house-keeping tricks. After such a long day, even adults would be exhausted, so it was no surprise that the seven-year-old was fast asleep already.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed, gently stroking the boy's hair. It was only when Tom was asleep peacefully that Harry could let down all his guard and treat the boy like how he should— like Tom was his own son. Playfully, he pinched the boy's soft cheeks and grinned as the boy frowned in annoyance.

To be honest, he was scared to bring Tom into the wizarding world. He had so much to worry about. He was worried that Tom would find the Dark Magic section in Flourish and Blotts; he was worried that Tom would find his way to Knockturn Alley; he was worried that— actually, Harry knew worrying won't fix anything. *What's the worst that could happen? That the future remained unchanged?* Well, in that case, the worst had already happened.

Perhaps all Harry could hope for was to slow down time's progression. To prolong their present relationship for just a bit longer.
Perhaps Harry was being impulsive... Maybe he shouldn't have taken Tom here. He just wanted... Tom to be happy. He wanted to show the boy a place where he belonged, just like how Hagrid showed him all those years ago. He never wanted Tom to ask him again — "so we are not freaks?"

The Voldemort of the future was only getting more threatening, ruthless, and powerful... So Harry had to worry. He smiled bitterly as he tucked the boy's hair behind his ears.

Someday in the future, if he had to fight against Tom— could he see the boy, whom he raised and loved, as his mortal enemy?

Tom feigned sleep. He heard Harry's soft sighs as the man's hand weaved through his hair, as an addictive warmness seeped into his scalp.

Tom feigned sleep, eyes closed peacefully, the very picture of innocence.

墨玉绿's AN:

Comedy Sketch:

Death Eater: "Lately, our dearest hero has been quite occupied. Last I saw of him, he looked as thin as a stick. Weak... Emaciated... Maybe some brute has been fucking our little hero in secret, fucking him bloody—"

Tom: "Are you calling me a brute?... Well, I guess I'm well-endowed enough—"

(Snow_owl01: Haha, I can't believe that this is the one AN I chose to translate.)

Big round of applause for the new BETA — AzulticSerpens

Check out her work on AO3. The Avengers fandom.

LINK: http://archiveofourown.org/users/AzulticSerpens/works

Also there is an One-Shot set in 47 Days to Change universe:

It's a one-shot of VERY graphic and mature content, posted separately on AO3. It is written by the original author (Emerald Ink), but it's NOT a part of the main plot. I repeat: the one-shot is NOT relevant to the plot.

Also it's super depressing. You have been warned.

WARNING: Sexual explicit content, Angst, Non-Con, Rape, MPreg. Proceed with caution.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION! NC-17 MATERIAL!

Link: 47 Days to Change (a translation) - One-shot
September 1, 1938

"Do you have everything with you?"

Hurriedly, Harry walked ahead of the tall, prepubescent boy. The man was pushing a cart, stacked with many large and small trunks—and even an owl.

The boy nodded slowly, thin lips pursed tight. He didn't look too happy.

"Hey, cheer up! I remember how excited I was to go to Hogwarts," Harry joked, puzzled by Tom's somber mood.

Young Tom Riddle halted suddenly.

Harry stopped too. He turned around to look at the boy inquisitively.

"... Can't you come with me?" Tom peered at him, hesitant.

The boy's pure black eyes reminded Harry of the tranquil night sky, where, against the backdrop of a profound ever-expanding darkness, countless stars still glittered brightly like rays of hope.

Harry stood by the reluctant boy, green eyes inspecting his roundish handsome face. Finally, Harry grinned.

Yes, he couldn't stop Tom from entering the Wizarding world, and he couldn't deny him the chance to attend Hogwarts. He also couldn't predict Tom's growth and inevitable changes. So he worried about how the boy would mature under the guidance and snares of the magical school. He worried about the future. But, at least right now, Tom would still wait for him inside the train station and ask him this childish question — can't you come with me?

Harry's grin grew wide. It coloured his green eyes with warm affection.

"Silly Tom, who brings their fathers to school with them?"

Tom frowned and turned away without another word. Disappointment slumped his thin shoulders, his eyes darkening with unreadable emotions.

_Harry doesn't look like a father at all. _Tom considered carefully as he looked around at the chattering faces. If Harry put on a Hogwarts uniform, he could easily pass as a sixth or seventh-year student. This aroused Tom's suspicions, because Harry's appearance hadn't changed one bit in the six years they had lived together.

_It is probably because of magic_, Tom pondered, but he didn't pursue the question any further.
Before them, the red steam engine train was blowing white smoke toward the sky, hot steam hissing as the engine rumbled. Harry glanced at his watch; it was three minutes to ten.

"Hurry! Go on. Remember to change into your uniform in the compartment before arrival—" Harry gave Tom's shoulder a reassuring squeeze and pushed the boy forward. He hesitated, before adding a rumbling list of advice. "Be nice... to your classmates. Make some friends. Don't be rude. Tom, study hard and enjoy your time at Hogwarts."

Tom didn't respond, instead, he remained in place, his eyes transfixed on Harry's face, watching him intently as the young man fussed about.

"Come on! Come on! It's time, Tom, you have to get on the train."

Still, Tom didn't move. The boy looked lost in thoughts. After a moment of silence, he looked up, determined black eyes meeting Harry's green ones.

"Harry...What will you do while I'm at Hogwarts?"

"Me?... I'll be at home, waiting for you to return, of course."

Beautiful ebony eyes continued to scrutinize Harry with a piercing acumen. Suddenly, the boy smiled brightly, a wondrous and handsome smile, just like how Harry had often smiled at him, with warmth and sincerity that burned like the sun. But only the child knew his smile was not like Harry's at all. Beneath that friendly smile, he was all sharp teeth and dark desires, a predator ready to kill to protect his home territory.

He promised. He had said, *I'll be waiting for you to return home.*

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Soon enough, the Hogwarts Express was speeding down the countryside of Scotland. The train cars no longer jolted once the train reached its optimum speed. The train glided along smoothly, puffing white smoke underneath blue sky. Outside the windows were endless green rolling hills, a breathtaking and refreshing wild expanse that had yet to be tainted by civilization.

Tom sat by a window, watching the landscape rolling by. His fingers lingered on his wrist, rubbing the cool exposed skin. Too bad he had to leave behind the little snake to guard the inferi. He was already missing her and the reassuring presence of her cold body crawling up his arm.

"You there, first-year—" One of the other occupants in the train compartment snapped his fingers.

Tom turned to look at the older boy. Instantly, his eyes narrowed at the boy's pompous resplendence — sparkling blonde hair, sparkling gold-gilded wand, sparkling silver buttons, sparkling leather loafers.

"Is that any way to greet your fellow *senior* schoolmates?" The older boy leaned toward Tom, an annoyingly jaunty expression on his face as he ran a hand across the boy's cheek.

Honestly, Abraxas Malfoy's attire wasn't as ridiculous as Tom had described it. To most people, Malfoy the younger was sophisticated and noble. The young pure-blood had impeccable taste and a devilishly handsome face (*if he do say so himself*), with his smooth shoulder-length blonde hair, tailored white silk shirt, and military-grade black boots.

Tom stared at the unwelcome invader blankly. He did not even flinch as the annoying finger prodded at his cheek.
"How boring," Malfoy shrugged at the child's disappointing stillness. He retreated back into his seat.

Tom smirked cruelly. Since Harry wasn't here, he had no need to pretend any more— one more second, and dear Abraxas might have found himself missing a finger... or two.

Not even bothering to look up from her book, a girl sitting next to the boy commented offhandedly, "Malfoy, you are such a prick."

Malfoy slumped against the leather seats, and replied in a casual drawl. "Yeah, yeah, just bored."

Out of the corner of his eyes, Malfoy observed the seemingly harmless first-year with interest. His carefully-honed, high-society sensibilities warned him that this first-year was going to be someone special.

Of course, a Malfoy never jumped to conclusion without staunch evidence. Before the train had left the station, Abraxas saw the boy through the window, standing obediently by his guardian's side. His head hung low, meekly listening to the young man's every word, almost too respectful and duteous for a child of his age. But, as soon as the young man had disappeared from view, the child's demeanour changed completely. From his small body, a dark aura and turbulent magic came alive, almost frightening in their powers.

Like he was a caged beast being set free—

Malfoy shrugged and closed his eyes.

For sure, this is one is a Slytherin. Ambitious and dangerous, through and through.

"At Hogwarts, there are four houses— Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin," Harry had explained to him once.

Tom remembered everything Harry had ever told him about Hogwarts, including the slight hesitation that came with mentioning Slytherin.

Slytherin? Just as the word popped into his mind, the ugly hat on his head started to quiver. A small voice whispered in his ears.

"So... so you want to go to Slytherin?"

Tom inspected the Great Hall, concealing his surprise carefully. None of the teachers and students seemed to be able to hear it.

"Psst, I'm inside your head," the ugly hat replied before a question even formed in his mind. It paused, before resuming talking again. "Hey, little prat, you can't tell me to bugger off— I'm the great sorting hat—"

Tom decided to ignore the voice as it droned on and on, prodding annoyingly at his mind.

"So you want to go to Slytherin? I don't know if that's the best choice for a half-blood like you. Maybe... WAIT! HOLD ON! —" Suddenly, the dry croaking voice started shouting. Tom's ears rang painfully. It paused again, and Tom thought he had felt a tremble of shock passing through the old hat. "Oh Merlin, are you—?! Of course, then you must go to Slytherin—"

Before Tom could even respond, the hat announced loudly.

"SLYTERIN!"
Harry never told Tom about the prejudiced nature of Slytherin society, because he wanted to give the boy a chance to form his own opinions. However, when the sorting concluded, Tom was observant enough to notice that Slytherins did not welcome him, deducing from the muted applause and his housemates' judgemental glares.

By all appearances, the boy should've fit in nicely with the snobby, well-dressed crowd: he had impeccable manners, rich jet-black hair and sharp aristocratic features; he had the right countenance, proud and intelligent with a straight backbone and neatly pressed robes; and, most importantly, ever since he had left Harry's side, he had unleashed a dangerous charisma that spoke of his willingness to do anything to achieve his goals. Yes, he was a Slytherin in every conceivable way — in every way, except the most important one.

All Slytherin children remained quiet in their seats, not like their neighbours, the Gryffindors, who were already in an uproar greeting their newest members.

Tom sat down on an empty seat by the end of the long table. No one greeted him.

"Riddle? Not a pure-blood name, is it?" Someone asked from across the table. But from the boy's unfriendly eyes, it was obvious that the question wasn't addressed to Tom.

"Nope, never heard of it in any wizarding families," another answered.

"So... Is it a mudblood?" A girl snickered.

Tom couldn't understand the extent of their insults... Not that he cared for the opinions of children. No, right now, he was thinking about the Sorting Hat.

It had said, "Are you—?!" and "You must go to Slytherin—"

Why must he go to Slytherin?

It seemed the Sorting Hat knew some secrets about Tom, something that Tom himself didn't know... Something like his parentage, perhaps? Beyond the utter commonness of his name— there must be something special about Tom... whether it is his bloodline or his powers...

Who was he?

As expected, the Slytherin Common Room was furnished lavishly. Exquisite marble fireplace, intricately carved high ceilings, enormous glittering chandeliers— everywhere was glided by wealth and legacies from Slytherin's distinguished alumni. Their noble house deserved only the very best, with assets and furniture that would be envy of kings.

"Very good... I hope all of you will last and thrive in Slytherin," a fifth-year Prefect said. His arms folded across his chest causally, as he inspected the nervous first-years. "Now for our noble house motto—"

"We rise from mud and blood. We aim for power. We grow from ambition. We are strong and steady. We are restraint and grace. We do not rue. We are Slytherins— such are our house words. Do remember it! Of course, the most important part you should know already — We aim for power; we grow from ambition."

The Prefect paused, rewarding them with a sinister smile. "Honestly, compared to the house motto, I prefer something simpler — No matter the means, no matter the sacrifices, winning is all that matters. Winning is our honour."
Tom stood amongst the first-years, a newly-minted Slytherin crest on the breast of his black robe. He listened carefully, eagerly. He licked his lips, a sweetness like the copper taste of blood spreading in his mouth, enough to arouse the dark magic growing within.

*No matter the means, no matter the sacrifices, winning is all that matters.*

*Winning is our honour.*

Slytherin — a place where illusions of glamorous riches and bright futures hid all the dark secrets of its rotting core, all its rotting, cunning, paranoid, selfish, ruthless, ambitious and *glorious* core. It was a place made for men like Tom.

Under the green lights, the child's beautiful obsidian eyes gleamed bright, hiding the fervent madness within.

The Sorting Hat was right. *He was a Slytherin.*

In time, he would come to love this place.

"My Lord?" The Death Eaters trembled before their master.

On the tall throne, the Dark King seemed to have fallen into a trance.

*Was...was he napping... during the meeting?*

Suddenly, Voldemort snapped his attention back to his followers, all of whom cowered under his scarlet scrutiny. He gestured toward a man who was giving a report. "Continue—"

The red-eyed, black-haired Dark Lord leaned casually in his throne, the words of his childhood flashed in his mind.

*No matter the means, no matter the sacrifices, winning is all that matters. Winning is our honour.*

Never mind why he was reminiscing about his school days at a time like this... Such memories only awoke the bloodlust within his veins.

Voldemort cut off the speech of his subordinate quite suddenly.

"Get ready for battle! Let us go pay our *saviour* a little visit— and have some fun, shall we?" He stood up, a formidable figure towering over them. To all those present, the Dark Lord's quiet yet vicious tone sent a shiver down their spines, as it surely was harbinger of the bloody slaughter to follow.

Death Eaters roared excitedly.

Contrary to popular belief, Slytherins were not cowards. They did not shy away from battles, cowering in some war room, only looking to save their own necks. No— more than anyone else, they understood the chaos and necessity of war. Power was their calling, and thus, war was in their blood.

Even if victory demands for eight-hundred lives of their own men to kill all one-thousand enemies, then so be it— *Winning is all that matters; sacrifices are necessary.*

*A Slytherin never gives up, because he cannot lose.*
If Gryffindor's flaws were their impetuosity and thoughtlessness, then ironically, Slytherins' flaw was their mad, all-consuming determination.

Harry sat in front of his desk, wondering whether he should compose a letter to Tom. But as ink dripped down his quill and dried on parchment paper, he still couldn't think of anything to say.

_Oh, never mind_— After all, he should be back in time for the Christmas holiday, then he could talk to Tom in person. Harry smiled and laid down the quill.

He fished out the silver chain from under his collar and clutched the miniature hourglass. It felt warm, heated by his own body. Carefully, he spun it, and, once again, time began speeding forward.

It was time for him to go home.

Fate sat behind its chess board, planning its moves. History was a series of teetering events. If merely one piece fell out of line, then empires would crumble.
Waiting For Me

NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

BETA: the brilliant and awesome AzulticSerpens

parseltongue

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**December, 1938**

December of 1938 was cold and fickle. Once again, snow was falling in anticipation of a white Christmas. Another winter, another year coming to pass. It seemed that God was rather fond of this frigid weather, as snow and sleet had been hanging over Britain for months, merciless with gloomy dark clouds.

Hogwart's grey courtyard and stone walls were blanketed with snow. A vast whiteness as far as the eye could see; undisturbed fresh ground where the snow redirected the sunlight into a blinding brightness that flashed at passersby. And, at midnight, silver moonlight reflected from white cloaked forest, granting the castle a mysterious glow.

At that moment, the castle was silent. Nearly everyone was in deep sleep — even the ghosts, who drifted quietly around the ceilings, pretended to partake in the rituals of their passed living days. Only Peeves the Poltergeist was up to his old antics, howling about the empty hallways, unnoticed by people and ghosts alike.

In the Slytherin Common Room, a fire was still dancing in the marble fireplace. The flame wasn't very bright, but under its heat, glowing embers crackled viciously.

Next to the warm fire, Tom sat with a piece of blank parchment in front of him, feathered quill hovering above its surface, tentative as his mind pondered the mystery of his previous letters. None of which had ever received a reply. His face was frozen in place, seemingly calm and expressionless; but his fists were tight with furious, long-repressed resentment. Once again, after months of strained suppression, that familiar simmering darkness was bubbling up to the surface.

Hogwarts was an isolated, private school. There were almost no means to reach the outside world, other than those stupid, slow owls.

Tom glowered at the poor trembling owl hiding in the candelabra. He crushed the quill in his hand. It snapped easily. Black ink spurted out and coated his pale fingers.

The boy took a deep breath. Then, he waved his wand and fixed everything with a simple reparo. He gulped in the cool air, frenzied as a drowning man, until his vicious expression fell away to a cold emptiness.

He felt calmer now, although he was never truly calm. As his cool, calculating mind returned, he started to write, quill scratching against parchment paper with unnecessary force.

The words came pouring out of him, because he had composed the same letter so many times... and his hopes were dashed so many times, as, one after another, the owls had all returned from London with nothing. As words appeared in neat rows of elaborate cursive, the quill's nib attacked the paper
in his vicious anger, black ink soaking through thick parchment. His handsome face became twisted with the same rage that came pouring out of his hand, but, very quickly, he cleared his mind once again.

He was getting better at pretending.

Still, the thought of that man was almost enough to make him lose his temper. From September first to mid December, thoughts of that man had never really left his mind. Yet, Harry never wrote to him. Not even once.

Tom fidgeted. But he could do no more than wait, wait until the owls came back with more empty disappointment. Right now, all he wanted to do was to wring the man's neck for ignoring his letters, but ... he couldn't. So Tom had learned to suppress his rage. Right now, he was not powerful enough to demand for more.

So he wrote, with stiff and polite words. Pleading. Addressing that man with all the concerns of a devoted son.

"Dearest Harry:

This is the twelfth letter I've sent to you in the past three months. If and when you read this, do kindly send along a reply. Please let me know if you are well or busy.

I have been sorted into Slytherin, as I have mentioned to you for the twelfth time. The Slytherin house is located in the dungeon— did you know that? In the winter, the dungeon can get awfully cold. Is it also cold at home? Hopefully, you do remember to take advantage of heating charms. Do remember to take care of yourself.

I wish that they would teach us the heating charm already. I bet that would really come in handy right now—"

He paused, then sneered at the childishness of his blatant lie. With a twist of his wand, he threw a perfectly cast heating charm on his chair.

What would Harry's reaction be when he sees the letter? Maybe the man would send along warm clothing or a hand-drawn diagram with an elaborate explanation on the heating charm.

That is... if Harry sees the letter at all. As Tom recalled his previously unanswered letters—all eleven of them — his expression darkened once more.

He remembered the train station, how Harry had smiled at him with warm green eyes, promising, "I'll be waiting for you to return home."

As his writing filled the long parchment, Tom sat still in the empty common room, pouring over every phrase with great care. His young face was sullen, his eyes incensed, and his chest trembled with something that was part hatred and part dread. He almost couldn't breathe as he finished the letter. Finally, he let all his long-suppressed emotions bubble to the surface, all dark desires and lies and fears, crawling along his nerves toward the quill's nib. And so, with trembling hands, he poured his resentment and insecurities into one last sentence.

He gave Harry Potter one last warning—

"Lastly, Harry, remember what you have promised me— you said that you are waiting for me to return home. I hope to see you soon."
Sincerely yours,

Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Diligently, Tom put the letter into an envelope and wrote out his home address in green ink. He tied the letter to the leg of the frightened owl. Then he went out to the hallways, up the long-winding stairs, and opened a window. Outside, a snow storm was brewing. Tom took one look at the cruel white storm, then at the shivering little owl in his arm. He nodded, then swiftly tossed the poor creature out the window.

It was almost to Christmas holiday. Soon, the school would be empty, students returning home to be with their families.

You said you were waiting for me to return home.

Tom bit his lips, then smiled to himself. Although his face was young and beautiful, there was nothing cheery about his smile — it was all sharp teeth and cruel dark eyes, so sinister and frightening that the little owl took one look at him and zoomed away like a rocket toward London.

Life at Hogwarts seemed to revolve around homework and timetables.

Every morning, breakfast was at the same time, at the same place.

The Slytherins' breakfast tended to be a bit more sumptuous than most. Legend has it... that many years ago, some pure-bloods grew unsatisfied with Hogwart's traditional menu, so they sent some of their own house-elves to Hogwarts, as a separate force that catered exclusively to Slytherins.

Tom didn't know if that was true... not that he cared. Sensual pleasure of the taste was brief, fleeting, so it never interested him.

He was in the middle of finishing a pudding, when someone patted him on the shoulder.

"Hello, Tom!"

Tom's eyebrows furrowed in annoyance, but when he turned around, his face was bright and friendly.

"Good morning, Professor Slughorn," the handsome boy greeted politely, white teeth gleaming beneath a wide smile.

It was obvious that Slughorn favoured him. Clearly the man had thought this little boy was someone with a bright future that he could collect.

"Say, Tom, why are you all by yourself?" Slughorn asked with false concern, pretending to inspect the empty seats around Tom with confusion.

Of course, as Slughorn had expected, he saw Tom lower his head in shame.

"Professor, you know I'm a half-blood and so... I'm not exactly popular...here."

After nearly three months at Hogwarts, the boy had grown more than familiar with the rules and games of Slytherin society.

Professor Slughorn waved his hands dismissively, his walrus-like moustaches shaking with his movements, fat belly juggling up and down. He exclaimed with animated friendliness, "AH! But—
even half-bloods can be great!"

What a scheming, vain old fool! As if Tom couldn't deduce the implications behind his false charity...

As Tom watched Slughorn's retreating form, he sneered. Out of all the Professors, the head of Slytherin was among the most cunning, but also the most obvious.

He was cunning because he knew the value of maximizing investments— extending a hand to someone at the low point of his life, and thus, winning his gratitude and loyalty with minimum effort.

Also, he was obvious because, compared to the other professors, everyone knew what Slughorn was after. The more his inner desires became exposed, the easier it was for someone to use his own greed against him. Yet, Slughorn was set on his old-school methods, scheming in the most obvious ways. Rather stupid for a Slytherin, really—

Professor Slughorn strode leisurely toward the high-table, quite contented with the crop of new students. He thought to himself, how wonderfully sweet are children, for they are so gullible.

What he didn't know was that one of those "children" was laughing at him behind his back.

Idiot, Tom sneered, as he dabbed a napkin at the corner of his mouth. Then, he got up and slinked away quietly.

The first class of the morning was Transfiguration.

Although by now he could recite his timetable backwards, Tom still diligently checked his books and schedule. His eyes lingered on the name beside Transfiguration — Professor Albus Dumbledore, and he tsked with disdain.

He had never liked the auburn-haired professor. Oh, the man was intelligent, no doubt, a competent teacher... but Tom couldn't figure him out, which meant he was also dangerous.

Tom had known the man even before he had started school, when Dumbledore visited his London home with Tom's Hogwarts letter in hand. The tall wizard had been dressed in an absurdly bright plaid jacket, auburn-beard braided in front of his chest.

He'd greeted them with a friendly smile, blue-eyes twinkling, "My name is Professor Albus Dumbledore. May I speak to Mr. Tom Riddle?"

Dumbledore — instantly, that name had rung a bell in Tom's head. He recalled how that name had appeared in every document in Harry's study. He recalled how Harry used to shut himself inside his study, secluded and secretive as he worked on endless plans of Dumbledore's army.

At first, he thought those two must've known each other. He had even noticed Harry turning misty-eyed when he shook the old man's hand, yet... it seemed that Dumbledore didn't recognize Harry at all.

"My boy, are you alright?" Dumbledore had asked with concern. The young man's eyes had been unexpectedly red-rimmed, but nonetheless Dumbledore had felt a genuine fondness from the dark-haired stranger as they shook hands.

"I'm fine, sir... It's just... It's just you reminded me of my mentor," Harry replied fondly.

Indeed, their formality implied that they did not know each other.
After just one minute of brief interaction, Tom could tell that Professor Dumbledore quite liked Harry and Harry, too, admired the older wizard very much. It was almost as if they had an instant connection, something like a newly-formed friendship that excluded Tom. Tom gritted his teeth. He'd always hated when new people came into their lives and took away Harry's attention, because a boy like Tom should never be ignored... And since he couldn't take his anger out on Harry, he had grown to hate Professor Dumbledore and his stupid Gryffindors.

"Good morning, Tom. I see you are the earliest one to arrive, yet again," Professor Dumbledore's wise blue eyes twinkled behind half-moon glasses, as he greeted Tom warmly.

Tom, who was now taller than the podium in front, nodded politely. "Not quite, sir. I think you are always earlier than me." Tom hesitated, then, with a serious expression on his face, he proposed a question to the professor.

"Professor, have you ever formed... an army?"

"An army?" Dumbledore repeated, puzzled. He knew that the boy in front of him was exceptionally intelligent and not all he seemed, but even he couldn't make sense of such a random question.

"Yes, an army— something like Dumbledore's army," Tom said with a grim tone. His dark eyes searched the man's slightly wrinkled face, carefully looking for any sign of recognition.

The auburn-haired man laughed jovially, pulling on his ugly robe, a bright purple one with an odd, swirling moon-and-stars pattern.

He winked at Tom. "No, my boy. But if I ever form my own army, I shall call it — the Bumble Bee Brigade."

For a moment, Tom's smile faltered, which Dumbledore caught and his eyes twinkled even more. Rather annoyed, Tom sat down in his seat. It seemed that... Dumbledore was telling the truth.

In the Great Hall, the children bustled and dined nosily. Above, owls of every colour and size imaginable screeched and dived toward them.

"Hey, look! Your mum sent you sweets again! Great! I love sweets— Best mates share, right?"

"Ugh! — NOT this dress again. I've told her I WON'T wear it. And now I have to send it back — so annoying —"

"Woohoo! My brother sent me his old Wizard's Chess set."

"Er... Is that a Remembrall?"

"Blimey Charley! This AGAIN? "

Tom's head was buried in a thick book, completely isolated from the noises and festivities all around him. Owls fluttered about, but none were looking for him.

He had sent his twelfth letter and still... no reply.

Still nothing.

All around him, the children's flaunting, complaining, surprised yells only made his own desolation feel more alone, more pathetic. Those irritating noises filled his eardrums, tearing at his nerves, stoking his well-concealed resentment into rage. Tom lowered his head, silky black hair flopped
forward and hid the fiendish darkness in his eyes — oh, how he wished to silence all of them with his powers!

The boy took a deep breath and told himself, over and over again, to stay calm.

Christmas holiday was coming in less than a week. Then, Tom would return home, where he would find his answers... Had Harry been lying to him at the train station?

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

But... he promised.

Are you still waiting for me?

---

TN:

Woohoo! Finally used 'blimey' and 'mate' in the translation. Always means to do it, always forgets. Also, wow, Tom sure is a friendly person... =_= 
December 20-27, 1938

Finally, it was the tail end of December. Once again, Hogwarts was ready to release all her students for the holidays.

"Hey there, I sent your presents via owl!"

"Thanks, mate. I left you a surprise too."

Tom walked along the lengthy hallway, words of joy and gratitude drifting around him. The boy's eyes were incensed, his jaw taut, and it took all his strength to not lash out at them, to snarl at their happiness and stupid affections, to destroy that annoying festival atmosphere, all because their happiness only emphasized his loneliness. Although Tom had never been afraid of being alone, this was different; in the past, solitude was always his choice, yet now, it was because that person had abandoned him.

Has he abandoned me?

Tom could not stop thinking about the possibility. If so, said a vile and angry voice inside his head, I will destroy him. He can't leave me! No! NEVER...Not even if I have to lock him up, trap him inside the cave and turn him into an inferius.

He remembered three years ago, how he had felt when he was left behind in the empty house, doing nothing but waiting, day after day, with no letters and no end in sight. He had felt those white-picketed fences closing in around him, locking him within like an injured beast trapped in the bottom of a well—trapped inside the mockery of what was once his home. Even though the nanny came by everyday, she was nothing to him. The house was nothing to him, nothing but a shell of dark and empty spaces, filled with unrecognizable lies and dreadful dreams... So he stayed out everyday, loitering in the cave or at the black-market, just to avoid returning to his — Harry's — home.


He never wanted to experience such emotions again.

No. He would not permit Harry to abandon him. Even if, one day in the future, Tom no longer cared about Harry, he still wouldn't allow Harry to leave him —Harry Potter had to stay with Tom Riddle, forever, willingly or not.

Swiftly, he returned to the Slytherin dormitory.

The Hogwarts Express was pulling into the station, its crisp whistles reaching far and wide. Departure was to be at 11 AM and arrival to be at London at 7PM... In eight hours, he would finally find out, once and for all, whether Harry's promise was true...or lies. Then, depending on the situation, Tom could decide on his Christmas present for Harry — would it be mulled mead from the
Three Broomsticks or floral mead laced with cyanide?

Tom smiled ever so sweetly. His lips were as red as sweet cherry, yet his heart was as black as deadly venom.

When he arrived at his dorm room, the other bed had already been cleared out.

Due to the generosity of their pure-blood forebearers, the Slytherin children enjoyed the privilege of separate dorm rooms — two students per room, with two large green-and-silver four-poster beds.

Tom knew that his roommate, Parkinson, did not like him. The boy avoided him, never uttering an extra word to him in three months of rooming together, which was just fine with Tom. See, Tom could easily identify the flaws within Slytherin's internal hierarchy, because, pure-blood or not, people everywhere were the same — the same greedy, vain, selfish bastards. Slytherin's hierarchy served no higher function than as a gimmick for rich children to show off, as an excuse for the strong to bully the weak, yet it came with a great cost — it divided them amongst themselves. It weakened their resolve, their unity, and greatly diminished the power and potential of their noble house.

Obviously, cunning did not equal wisdom. Tom sneered.

Tom didn't have much to pack. After all, he was only leaving for two weeks, so he planned on only bringing one small hand-held suitcase.

Tom was surprised to see three parcels lying on his suitcase. They were wrapped neatly with silk ribbons and shiny paper.

Christmas presents!

Maybe Harry had sent him something, after all.

Tom's eyes lit up. Of course, they must've come from Harry... Given his current circumstances, who else would give him presents?

The thought calmed him a little. He reached out with trembling hands and picked up the packages. As his fingers tugged on soft ribbons, Tom felt the poisonous rage, which was coursing through him just a moment ago, slowly receding in his bloodstream.

The first parcel came from Slughorn, a thick book titled A Collection of Rare and Practical Potions. It was a heavy and substantial book, with illustrations and few annotations by Slughorn himself. Tom flipped through it quickly and noticed it even included a lengthy section on how to brew poison. The boy smirked cruelly.

How stupid was the vain old man to give him something so dangerous? Well, then... Tom supposed that he definitely ought to make good use of the professor's generosity.

The second parcel was much smaller, but wrapped quite ostentatiously in luxurious golden threads and dark burgundy paper. Tom raised an eyebrow and tore off the wrapping carelessly. On the velvet inlay of the small box, there was a bejeweled silver brooch and a note with the sender's name in fancy cursive — Abraxas Malfoy.

Tom rolled the expensive brooch between his fingers. The inlaid sapphire gem gleamed beautifully, as Tom's red lips curled up with unreadable intentions.

He picked up the third — and last — parcel. This had to be the one from Harry.
Suddenly, he was so nervous he couldn't breathe.

His heart pounded madly as he carefully unwrapped the present. Compared to the other two, the ribbon on this one was crooked, evidently its sender had been in a hurry.

_To Tom Riddle; From Ovidius Parkinson_ — said the attached card.

Tom's heart plummeted until the world turned dark and blurry in front of his eyes. His chest hurt, his hands trembled, and he thought he was suffocating from the assaulting amalgam of disappointment and anxiety.

He felt like he was drowning, like inferi had dragged him under cold water and held him there, in eternal darkness, until his brain lost its ability to think and he couldn't even lift a finger to defend himself.

It wasn't from _Harry_.

The handwriting on the card was neat, meticulous, so there was no chance of him misreading the name. Tom blinked. Of course, he would never misread _Harry's name_! He almost wanted to laugh out loud, to mock himself and his silly, childish hopes.

Tom couldn't even remember how many times had it been, when even the mere thought of _Harry_ were enough to scramble his emotions — he had hoped again and again, and he was disappointed again and again.

Disillusionment could tempt even angels to fall, so what could it do to the devil?

The devil was calm and stoic as he picked up his suitcase and marched out of the room; it was as if his previous outbreak of anxiety had never happened. He had left all of those frivolous presents on the nightstand, and had only taken the potions book with him.

The devil had already fallen, and so he couldn't fall any further. He had been cast out of his home, with nowhere to go. And so, he chose to armour himself with all the negativity and sins of the world, forging his rage into the perfect mask.

Women wear their dolled-up masks to greet their lovers; the devil, too, wears his carefully cultivated mask to welcome his one and only love— eternal damnation.

It was winter, so the night came early. Snow fell at dusk, soft white flakes leaving cold streaks on their faces.

At seven exactly, the red steam-engine train entered King's Cross station, greeted by the eager faces of parents waiting by.

As he stepped off the train, Tom held his suitcase close to his chest. The eleven-year-old couldn't help but search through the numerous faces in the crowd. When, as expected, he didn't find the face he was looking for, his expression didn't change and his eyes only flashed briefly, carefully concealing the violent rage growing within.

Number 15 London Street was not far from King's Station. But the night was dark and cold, and the snow didn't make for ideal walking conditions. All alone, the boy walked with steady steps, trudging slowly through snow and empty streets. After twenty minutes of exposure to the silent, freezing night, his fingers and toes had turned into ice.
He could see the house up ahead—it was grim and pitch-black in the night, not a single light was shining through its windows. Tom halted and looked up at his home, at the lonely, lifeless square building. Suddenly, he burst out laughing.

"HAHAHA—"

The child's sharp laughter cut through the tranquility of the winter night with a dreadful, odd dissonance. Although his voice were childish and soft like the chiming of bells, underneath, it also carried a layer of warning, spine-chilling and horrible in its mad desperation.

There was a pile of letters lying on the mat by the front door. Tom recognized the ones he had sent—all twelve of them—from September 3rd to December. Every letter was delivered safely; every letter remained unopened.

"I'll be waiting for you to return home." Harry's voice rang in his ears, the whispers of nightmares. Tom replayed that moment over and over again in his head, until that same face, that same voice and that same warm smile filled his mind. Harry's words were like knives prodding at his wounds, mocking with him with the truth—Harry had lied to him!

"I'll be waiting for you"—was no more than a false promise to get rid of Tom!

Even if one day he would become the Dark Lord, right now he was no more than an eleven year old boy with no allies and no ability to find the man who had abandoned him. Even if he wanted to destroy this entire street to satisfy the blood-lust raging in his chest, he had no power to do so. In the end, even with all his viciousness, cruelty, and ironclad resolution, he was still a little boy. There were still some childish longing left in him.

So he hesitated. He decided to give the man a little more time.

He would wait a bit longer—for one more day... no, for one more week. He would give Harry one more week to come back to him.

With quiet and nimble movements, he pried open the window to his own bedroom. Unnoticed by all, he slipped inside and returned home, to the house where the other half of "home" was missing.

The first day of Christmas break, December 21:

The handsome young boy sat alone in his bedroom, avidly reading his new book, *A Collection of Rare and Practical Potions*.

He told himself, over and over again—do not fret; there were still six days left.

The second day of Christmas break, December 22:

Without anyone doing chores and manning the fireplace, the house was very chilly. Tom bundled himself up and dug up some soon-to-be-expired cheese and crackers from the pantry. He stuffed them down without tasting anything.

The young Dark Lord watched a snow storm sweeping through the streets, onyx eyes dark and unreadable.

*Tick, tock. Harry, you only have five days left.*

The third day of Christmas break, December 23:
He was half-way through *A Collection of Rare and Practical Potions*. His notebook was half-filled. If any potion master managed to peek inside the boy's notes, he would gasp in horror — unconsciousness-inducing potions, petrification potions, mind-control potions, and dissociative potions with addictive properties similar to that of heroin.

Tom smirked as he poured over his notes, red lips full of malice — *Harry, which one shall you taste first?*

The fourth day of Christmas break, *December 24:*

It was Christmas Eve. Tom turned on all the lights in the house, which gave the large empty place a false festive glow. There was nothing on the kitchen table, no turkey, no pumpkin pie, no presents. The boy chewed on flavourless crackers, trembling hands crushing the thick book in his lap.

*Harry... Harry would be back by tomorrow, wouldn't he? The young Dark Lord told himself, yes, yes, he must come back, because tomorrow is Christmas.*

The fifth day of Christmas break, *December 25:*

With a thud, the boy closed the thick book that he had finished reading. Then, he took out his wand and ran through every spell he had learned in the past three months. Heating charms were scattered throughout the empty house, bringing a warmth that no one was present to enjoy.

*Harry... come back to me, please?*

Tom suppressed the silly wish as soon as it popped into his mind. Hmm, he would not beg!

The sixth day of Christmas break, *December 26:*

Tom stood in the dark damp cave, impassively watching some muggle scream as inferi advanced towards him. The snake, who had missed him greatly, was coiled snugly around the boy's neck, but unexpectedly Tom did not return her affections.

"Tom... Are you upssset?"

The boy smirked and let her crawl down his arm. "*No, I'm happy.*"

Yes, he was happy because he was not truly alone. At least he had his loyal pet as company. Not that he needed company, mind you... Tom didn't need friends or partners, no one was good enough to stand by his side as an equal — not even Harry.

The seventh day of Christmas break, *December 27:*

The child... No, the handsome youth smiled brightly as he packed up his suitcase and left number 15 London Street. He was dressed impeccably in the finest suits, tall and proud and full of plans and ambitions.

*Harry Potter?* The young Dark Lord looked up at the lifeless building behind him, dark eyes roving over the name on the card by the door. His smile was frozen into place, mirthless and sharp, with all traces of childhood hopes and naivety left behind.

Fate was very happy with the result of its hard work. It watched silently, everywhere at once, as the young Dark Lord abandoned his boyhood identity inside that empty house. He was growing up, becoming a youth, then the great man he was meant to be. Fate read all the lives of the densely packed names on her palm, all the comedies and tragedies, all the causes and effects. Even if the
beginning had been shifted, the ending was still well on its way.
January 16, 2001

It was true that some Slytherins had a tendency toward extreme egotism. At times, the young Dark Lord's paranoid and selfish nature led him to make hasty judgements — he had, wrongly, accused Harry of abandoning him. So, while he was seething in the safety of the past, he couldn't have known the dangerous situation Harry found himself in.

In Tom's future and Harry's present, once again, Harry Potter was engaged in a dangerous battle. He was facing imminent death, fighting against the formidable and sweeping dark force by the name of Tom Riddle — no, by the name of Lord Voldemort.

Just as Harry had arrived in the future, gasping and stumbling, the news of Voldemort's attack reached his ears.

Voldemort was coming— with an army and the shadow of death behind him.

In all their previous battles against Death Eaters, Voldemort was rarely seen at the front line. Instead, he commanded his troops from the shadows, pulling every string like a puppet master, watching Harry's and his friends’ desperate struggles with all the amusement of a cat grinning at trapped mice. Although it was pathetic to even be thankful for this small mercy, Harry would have to admit that he was glad that Voldemort never hit them with his full force, and so... Dumbledore's army managed to escape through the cracks.

But now, the Dark Lord had lost all his patience.

He was coming to end it — once and for all.

"HARRY! You stay here!" Hermione didn't even have time to greet him, before running out of the lab, white lab coat flapping behind her.

All around him, Dumbledore's army were bustling with pale and alarmed faces.

Voldemort's forces were approaching from a plain a few miles east of their headquarters. The attack took them by surprise. All the resistance's young soldiers merely had time to grab their wands, potions, brooms, and portkeys, before rushing into battle bravely. This would be their toughest test yet. They were so young. They were not ready.

*The Dark Lord himself is here!* — The news spread like virus, reverberating through the battlefield to the cheers of Death Eaters and the grimace of light wizards.

Voldemort inspected the vast plain before him, endless black-robed bodies stood in battle formations behind him. He narrowed his scarlet eyes at the nervous young faces of his enemies.

It was obvious which side would emerge victorious in this battle.
The flat stretch of plain offered no cover for hiding. This would be a battle of straightforward combat, a war of attrition. Simple. The side with the most manpower would win.

The air was thick with tension, but the Dark Lord towered above it all with power and confidence. Behind him, his army snarled in their eagerness and bloodlust. He waved his hand and they advanced at once, a formidable dense mass of dark robes and raised wands.

The Dark Lord's handsome face was lit-up by a cruel smile.

*Dear saviour of the wizarding world...Harry Potter...Tell me, how can you save them now?*

"No matter the means, no matter the sacrifice, winning is all that matters. Winning is our honour," the Dark Lord declared. Cold winds carried his voice far and wide. The Death Eaters roared in approval; their master's words had stoked their desire for glory, blood, and death into a murderous frenzy.

They charged forward, running across the plain, swarming Dumbledore's army like hungry ants.

They were winning easily. As the battle raged on in pained screams and bright explosions and deathly swirls of spells, all that remained of the their enemies were the light's best fighters. Making clever use of brooms, Dumbledore's army fought in an orderly formation, a perfect harmony of defensive and offensive strategies, each protecting his comrades with his own life. Those young witches and wizards fought with everything they had.

And so the resistance was able to hold off their attacks. *For now.*

Still, the numbers were on their side. Death Eaters outnumbered their foes ten to one.

On the fringes of the battlefield, the Dark Lord stood with his Inner Circle, watching the struggle with cold eyes.

"My Lord, let us enter the battle too," Bellatrix Lestrange could barely contain her bloodlust, a mad glint in her dark eyes.

The Dark Lord, who now had the chiselled features of someone in their late twenties, narrowed his scarlet eyes as he patted Nagini. Casual and relaxed, he seemed as though he was watching a funny play at the theatre, instead of the bloodshed in front of him.

"Not yet. We'll wait. But I do believe it is time for my Death Eaters to downsize...a bit."

He had no need for weaklings as Death Eaters. War was an opportunity— death shall weed out all incompetence from his squadrons.

They were hopelessly outnumbered. The odds were against them. Yet the dire situation spared them not one second to breathe, nor one moment to say a prayer.

"Harry, take a break. I'll take the lead," Hermione, who had been manning the command booth, had no choice but to enter the battle herself. She rushed past Harry, who had just dismounted from his broom.

Harry grabbed her arm, green eyes troubled. He hesitated, then nodded and gave her a weak smile. "Hermione, be careful."

She gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze, before apparating away.
Harry gulped in the chilly air, trying to suppress the twisting pain in his chest. He felt like his insides were being crushed. His whole body trembled with agony until he collapsed onto the command table. If it weren't for the support of its cold hard surface, Harry was sure that he would be rolling on the floor right now.

Time-jumping had taken a heavier toll on his body than he had thought previously.

The messy-haired saviour pounded angry fists against the table, knuckles white with pain and helplessness. More than anyone else, Harry knew that he was in a wretched spot. With his condition so weakened and crippled, he would be useless on the battlefield, but... they still need him. Harry struggled to stand up.

Bitterness bled into bright emerald eyes, as he remembered the not-so-distant past. The leader of the Death Eaters—who was so eager to slaughter them all— was also the little boy who, just a day ago, had asked him hopefully, "Can't you come with me?"

But now... it seemed that all his efforts were in vain. Nothing had changed. If anything, it was only getting worse.

"How can YOU be hiding at a time like this?!!" A sharp voice pulled Harry back from the cliff's edge of despair and pain.

With a pale and confused face, Harry looked up at the intruder, before snapping back into alert battle mode.

The intruder was young and impetuous, blood splattering his battle-robe, cuts covering his face and arms. His angry eyes flared with an admirable, but naive, self-righteous sense of justice. His Gryffindor sensibilities taught him that only cowards stay behind as friends battled with their lives. He glared at Harry accusingly, cursing out loud.

"How can you hide like a coward when Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley are fighting out there— YOU are supposed to be our leader!"

It was hard to hold a grudge against youthful bravery and honest passions.

Harry nodded as he stood up. "Grab your brooms. Gather some men. We'll head out immediately."

As he moved, another jolt of pain shot through him. Harry grew paler, but, no matter what happened to his body, he would persist and fight on.

He was a reckless Gryffindor, after all.

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The Dark Lord twirled his new wand between long, pale fingers. He had obtained his prize from Dumbledore's tomb. The Dark Lord held no qualms about stealing from the dead. In fact, he planned on conquering them all — Death or Prophecy or whatever was foolish enough to stand in his way.

Finally, he had enough of playing along as the audience. It was time for him to put on his own grand act — starting with boy.

He pointed his wand to his throat; the spell propelled his voice outward to everyone on the battlefield, his low, rumbling laugh clear and booming like thunder.

"Hello, members of Dumbledore's army. Halt. Let us all take a break from battle—"
Everyone halted, frozen in terror or bewilderment. Everyone heard the clear, cold voice, even Harry, who was barely clinging onto consciousness.

"First, let us acknowledge this plain fact— you are losing," the Dark Lord's voice sounded surprisingly pleasant, amused, as he chuckled at something. "But I'm feeling rather generous today... and so I am willing to offer you a deal— a deal that is only beneficial to you and your friends."

Under the influence of Dark Lord's silencing spell, the whole battlefield remained unnervingly still and quiet, saving for whizzing of few extinguishing spells. His voice was the only source of activity across the battle-torn plain, tempting all with an offer to escape the bloodshed.

"However, as with any deal, you must pay an equivalent price. Give me Harry Potter and you will be rewarded. Give me Harry Potter and I shall withdraw along with my Death Eaters. Give me Harry Potter and none shall be harmed."

Beside him, the Inner Circle frowned at their Lord's decision, but only Bellatrix was crazy enough to question him.

"No, my Lord. It is the perfect opportunity to end them—"

"Do not fret, Bella," The Dark Lord replied nonchalantly, a twisted smile on his pale lips that told his cruel intentions. "Isn't this a fun game? Let us await their choice— will they choose life or follow their dear saviour to death? Will the Gryffindors prove loyal? Will the Chosen One choose to give up his own life for his so-called friends, all of whom shall forsake him soon?"

"Ah— and I shall enjoy playing along as the big, bad villain. What a wonderful show, isn't it? Good verses evil, a tale as old as time... Ooh, I'm getting rather restless with anticipation." Scarlet eyes glinted with a mocking delight. The Dark Lord's soft hisses lingered threateningly in the frigid winter air, sending chills down the spines of his followers.

Harry swallowed thickly as his broom zoomed forward. He shook, whether due to the cold or pain he did not know.

"HARRY —" The impetuous young Gryffindor called after him. "Harry, you can't— You can't go to him. This must be one of you-know-who's tricks."

*Ah, to be so young and naive.*

Harry flashed a grin at the young man, before speeding away suddenly, losing him with few sharp turns.

He had fought against Voldemort for nine long years. He knew his enemy better than anyone else, and so he saw through the man's goal right away.

This was more just a trick — this was a trap. And it was a trap that Harry couldn't refuse.

Harry knew that he would have to accept Voldemort's deal. If he chose not to go, Dumbledore's army would not turn him in willingly and Voldemort would show them no mercy. And so, the three elements combined to form the perfect clause for a deal that was beneficial for the Dark Lord, while trapping Harry like chains, tight around his neck. Now, Harry faced the impossible choice.

There was no way for him to win, so he had to go. *Willingly. Bravely. Unexpectedly.*

He needed to confront Voldemort face-to-face, to strike when the Dark Lord was least expecting it. He needed to find an opportunity to do the impossible.
He needed to win!

While Tom was waiting all alone at number 15 London Street, growing increasingly resentful toward Harry, in the present, Harry was currently confronting an older version of him. With a deathly pale complexion, Harry stood in front of the Dark Lord, staring at the handsome face that was so painfully familiar.

Seventy years ago, a boy had once cared for and obsessed over the green-eyed man in front of him. Though presently, faced with the same young man, the Dark Lord only felt fiery rage and murderous malice toward his nemesis. He had no recollection of the man who had raised him, for Fate had taken all his memories of the time-traveller many years ago.

"Harry Potter," the Dark Lord hissed, savouring the familiar name on his tongue. "Welcome, welcome."

Harry Potter shuddered at sight of the restored man in front of him— although not with fear. He raised his wand, his lungs struggling with every painful gasp of breath, Voldemort's face indistinguishable from the boy seventy years ago.

"Sectumsempra!" Harry made the first move. He didn't have the strength for a long duel.

Immediately, Voldemort answered. A streak of red light flew toward him. Harry dived left as the spell gazed his arm, his movement jerky and sluggish due to the pain clinging to every part of his body. Damn Fate and those troublesome time-jumps!

Before he could even recover his breath, a red light hit Harry squarely in the chest.

"Crucio!"

Of course, it was the Dark Lord's favourite — the torture curse.

"Well, well. I shall try not to hold your lack of manners against you. Throwing a dark curse as a greeting? Destroying my precious diary? Tsk, tsk —"

The Dark Lord moved toward the young savour, who was twitching on the ground in agony and muffled screams. For the briefest moment, the boy's pale, anguished face stirred up unknown emotions inside him. The Dark Lord paused, before breaking the spell and dragging the boy to his feet roughly by his hair.

"Give me Slytherin's Locket."

For some unknown reason, as his mind grew sharper, the Dark Lord grew more and more fixated on the so-called weakness. It felt like — He felt like he had forgotten something very important. He had to reabsorb that specific Horcrux, because he needed to remember, to recover all those memories and emotions stored within.

Unexpectedly, the young saviour obeyed.

With great difficulty, Harry struggled out of the man's vice-like grip and pulled out a silver chain from his inner pocket. Something golden gleamed on the other end— Slytherin's Locket!

"TOM, keep your words! Withdraw your troops now!" Harry clutched the silver chain, shouting before he had time to think. The familiar name came tumbling out of his mouth easily, and Harry immediately realized his mistake. His chest squeezed painfully; it seemed that name had been
branded on his heart forever.

For some reason, the Dark Lord was startled at the mention of his old name. He stared at the pale young saviour, who looked so weakened that he might keel over any moment, and suddenly, his heart raced wildly, almost as if some living thing was struggling to break out from his chest.

He pursed his lips, perplexed with yearning. Is...is this Horcrux calling out to him?

His soul screamed at him to grab the locket. He needed to find out about the weakness. Suddenly, greed and arrogance propelled him to move forward. Driven by a subconscious hunger curved deep in his bones, the Dark Lord eagerly reached out to snatch the locket from Harry's hands.

Of course, no one expected the saviour to even have energy to remain standing, much less to ambush the Dark Lord in his own camp. And no one expected that he was bold enough to use a destroyed Horcrux and himself as bait.

As soon as the Dark Lord's fingers touched the silver chain, Harry attacked.

"Avada— Sectumsempra!" Harry shouted, knuckles white as he aimed his wand.

Almost on instinct he changed the spell, he just couldn't... he couldn't use the killing curse. Selfish emotions split his heart; the image of the boy from seventy years ago filled his mind.

The dark spell hit the Dark Lord's stomach; at this close range, the damage was maximized. The man was cut from lower belly to left shoulder, a dark gaping gash spanning his entire torso with blood spurting out like leaks from a water hose. The Dark Lord stumbled backward, even he couldn't ignore such a life-threatening injury.

Only Snape knew the counter-curse to Sectumsempra, and, unfortunately, he wasn't present that night.

A faint victorious smile appeared on the young man's pale face. Before the Death Eaters could react, Harry gathered all that was left of his magic and apparated away on the spot.

"MY LORD!" It took Bellatrix's blood-curdling scream to snap the Death Eaters into action.

Lucius rushed toward his Lord and tried a couple of healing charms, but to no avail. The blood kept on flowing. Lucius panicked, even the Dark Lord could die from such tremendous blood loss.

The Dark Lord seemed to have reached the same conclusion. He only had time to clasp the Locket tightly in his hands, before ordering them. "Return to base— NOW! And get Severus."

The Dark Lord wasn't too concerned with the saviour's insignificant victory. It was only a temporary delay. He knew that he would not die so easily.

Right now, despite the pain of his body, all of the Dark Lord's thoughts were focused on the locket in his hands.

This horcrux, which contained the weakness that he had somehow forgotten, was finally his again. Finally, he could recover the truth— His instincts told him that this weakness was very, very important to him.

Couple of things -
First, special thanks to **AzulticSerpens** for her expedient work. She helps to make double updates possible :) 

Second, good to know people do read end-of-chapter notes. I only use it to make logistic announcement or whatever. (Note: sometimes there are double updates. If you see an update not on Thursday/ Friday, then assume there's double update that week.) 

Third, thanks to all the reviewers and constructive criticisms and complains about Harry's genius plan (LOL and there were lots). Yeeek! Angst and fatalism are just aspects of the story, nothing that I can do about it... Er, how about I leave a joke for you guys at the end of the angst-y chapters? 

Fourth, here's 墨玉绿/Emerald Ink's Author's Note: 

"I like to clear up a few things about Harry's decision: 

*First, why didn't he write to Tom? As mentioned few chapters ago, he wanted to write but he didn't know what to say. Also he believed that he would be back in three months, which is when Tom is at Hogwarts. It's never meant to be cruel.* 

*Also, for plot reasons, Fate is able to interfere. Such events are not coincidental but intentional.*"
Growing Up

NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

BETA: the brilliant and awesome AzulticSerpens

parseltongue

1939

As his body tipped into adolescence, the boy began to grow at an impressive rate. His height shot up like a spring's young willow after abundant rain. He stood tall, lean and proud, with a confidence that was uncharacteristic of boys his age. Combined with his superb intelligence and eloquence, his new physical transformation had caught the eyes of a lot of young girls, especially the Ravenclaws.

"Tom, can you explain to me the theory of magic flow?" A girl with a white-and-blue scarf asked him, a sheaf of parchment in hand, looking eager and studious as always.

Tom nodded politely. With patient and gentle manner, he helped her label all the main points on the diagram. His smile remained pleasant and charming, as he had perfected his model student act a long time ago.

"Thank you!" The girl squeaked, her cheeks flushed pink.

Yet, Tom's expression turned dark as soon as her back was turned. Immediately, his sharp, narrow eyes relaxed into their natural state — long lashes framed black orbs that reflected his predatory nature, full with swirling menace and cold arrogance of a solitary wolf. It was hard to imagine that just a moment ago they had projected nothing but warm friendliness.

He walked down an empty corridor until he saw his roommate, Ovidius Parkinson, waiting by a door. The boy was one of the three people who had sent Christmas presents to Tom.

"Hey, Tom!" The scrawny boy waved at him, long black hair obscuring half of his face. This boy was wholly unremarkable, weak, except for his eyes —which were so bright that they made him seem out of place in Slytherin— they almost reminded Tom of... Harry.

But as soon as the name popped into his mind, Tom immediately suppressed his thoughts, discarding that name along with all accompanying confusion and bitterness.

Tom nodded in greeting. "Let's go."

The scrawny boy led the way as they walked out to the courtyard. He walked stiffly with a pace that was, perhaps intentionally, just fast enough to put a bit of distance between Tom and himself. His eyes bright and alert like a wary fox.

As they stepped out into hot summer air and green lawns, Tom's cold eyes assessed the boy in front of him.

Ovidius Parkinson was rather useless for a Slytherin, an obedient and unremarkable boy. The Parkinsons were a small and unimportant pure-blood house, which traditionally served as a vassal house to the powerful Malfoys. Tom knew that Ovidius was a jittery boy who only acted friendly toward him on Abraxas' orders. In other words, the boy was spying on him for Abraxas Malfoy.
"Now that we are done with exams, summer vacation will start soon. Do you have any plans for the summer, Tom?" Ovidius asked carefully. He tried to act friendly and nonchalant, but Tom noticed his nervous fidgeting right away.

"No. I'm going... home."

Although Tom's tone remained pleasant, a vicious smile bloomed on his red lips. He chewed on the word 'home' slowly, as if it were in a foreign tongue. To him, home was a forbidden word; instead of evoking feelings of joy and protection, 'home' only made his blood boil with malicious anger.

Of course, Ovidius' back was turned toward Tom, so he completely missed the murderous expression flashing across his roommate's face.

"If you are free during the summer, please come to visit my home at any time." The Slytherin boy gave his invitation enthusiastically.

"Thank you, Ovidius. That's very kind of you." Tom dipped his head courteously. For the moment, his perfect manners and beautiful smiles were more than enough to mask his true nature— as vicious and selfish as the devil himself.

There was still no news of Harry. It was almost as if the young man had vanished from the world.

The young Dark Lord sat on his bed, twirling his wand between long fingers, watching sparks flying out of the wand's tip with a bored expression.

It had been ten months since he last saw Harry.

Ten months — from September 1, 1938 to June 28, 1939 — exactly three hundreds days had passed since he had last seen Harry. Yes... Harry had vanished for ten whole months.

Ten months were long enough for Tom to accept the circumstance as fact. It was long enough for him to learn to swallow his sorrow and rage. It was long enough for him to drill the new reality into his head. He repeated to himself, over and over again, that Harry Potter meant nothing to Tom Riddle.

Tom had returned from Hogwarts sometime during the beautiful month of June. Hogwarts in June was bustling with activities and noises, children turning their happy faces toward hot summer sun, eagerly anticipating the summer holiday when they would return home.

But Tom's own home was not bustling or happy — it was empty, dead, devoid of all life and activity. Home was not a word that brought joy to Tom. Home was nothing more than an empty house, without Harry waiting for him, without even the nanny's daily visits.

Yet, Tom insisted on returning...home.

Thin film of dust covering all the furniture, lights glowing through dirty windows, mould growing on dried cheeses on the kitchen counter, withered orchids spilling out of cracked pots— those were all that waited for Tom at home. The London house was silent and eerie, an empty manor only suitable for dead things, like vampires from novels.

The first night after he returned, Tom spent the whole night wandering through the empty house. He sneered at the unkempt rooms, but he was calm, as if he couldn't feel the disappointment crushing his chest.
The door to Harry's room remained open as it did ten months ago. In some aspects, Harry had a rather open personality, naive and careless and welcoming. The young man was pure of heart, his mind unpretentious and simple. It almost seemed like he had been too eager to believe Tom's lies and disguises, simply because Tom had asked him to.

Harry's room was simply furnished, one large bed, one plain lamp and one nightstand with some ink bottles and quills. Harry's life was very simple. It was hard to imagine that, seven years ago, this unassuming twenty-year-old had the capability to purchase a house and raise a child on his own.

Tom narrowed his eyes, onyx eyes as dark and unreadable as the night outside. Once his suspicions had been aroused, it would be hard for him trust again.

Now that he thought about it... All those years ago, Harry's appearance had been rather sudden and suspicious; now, his disappearance was equally sudden and suspicious. With his emotional attachment cut out, Tom was able to assess all the uncertainties surrounding Harry's life with cold objectivity — maybe, from the very beginning, that man had an ulterior motive for adopting Tom?

Tom paused. He stared at the pot of withered cymbidium orchids on the window sill, suddenly he pushed it out. With a loud crack, the ceramic pot fell to the pavement below and splintered into pieces, spilling a pile of black soil and dried roots. Then Tom smiled cheerfully, revealing two rows of gleaming white teeth.

All alone, Tom did what chores he could to maintain the large house. Currently, he was weeding the garden under the blazing summer sun.

Honesty, Tom didn’t know why he insisted on staying here. Even if Parkinson's invitation was not exactly genuine, it would be still interesting to visit a pureblood household. However, even though Tom refused to admit it out loud, he knew that somewhere deep in his subconscious, he was still clinging onto the hope that one hot summer day, the green-eyed young man would step through these gates again, unannounced, smiling at Tom with his unique warmth.

Hope... so utterly pathetic.

The youth rewarded himself with a mocking smile. His muscles tense as he worked, the scissors in his hands chomping away at flowering bushes, delicate pink buds falling under his brutal and reckless hands.

Tom picked up a flower bud, then ripped away its delicate pink petals. His eyes narrowed — he needed to get rid of his emotions, all these useless, uncontrollable emotions.

Fate liked games with cruel twists and turns. Before Tom's heart could turn completely dark with resentment, Fate brought Harry back to him.

It was towards the end of summer when Tom saw Harry again. Although September was approaching fast, the glorious sun was still blazing down on London like it was mid-summer. Harry was bundled tightly in a winter coat, because it was January on the other side of the timeline. To Tom, twelve unforgivably long months had passed; and yet to Harry, it had been less than three days.

Just like last time when he returned from God-knows-where, Harry appeared very weak and exhausted. After months upon months of simmering anger, the young Dark Lord thought he had prepared for this moment. He thought that he no longer cared, yet the moment those emerald eyes
turned toward him, once again, he found that his heart began beating impossibly fast.

Yet, as soon as those emerald eyes met his own, Tom noticed that Harry's body stiffened visibly with alarm and wariness.

"Tom!... I'm so sorry, but I must rest... for a bit. May...may I pass?"

Harry stood in the foyer, nervously avoiding Tom's fervent gaze. He had hoped that he was mature enough to separate young Tom Riddle from Lord Voldemort... but right now, he just couldn't bear to look into those familiar, intelligent dark eyes, lest to keep his mind from reeling— Tom and Voldemort... were one and the same.

See, he won't even spare one minute to speak to you! A voice in Tom's head jeered at him.

Tom smiled politely and shuffled aside, surrendering the staircase which he was blocking.

"Of course, Harry."

Harry collapsed onto his bed. He didn't even notice the sheets hadn't been changed in a long time. He couldn't think, exhaustion clawing at his mind.

Right after he'd wounded Voldemort and before the Dark Lord had discovered that his horcrux had actually been destroyed, Dumbledore's Army managed to move their camp successfully. One big advantage of being wizards was that they could transport things that would take muggles weeks to move. So, hastily, they escaped with what they could and abandoned their headquarters all together. Although Voldemort's attack was a big blow to their cause, the important thing was that they survived. In those two tense days, they carefully ducked around Death Eaters until they've found a new safe haven in some desolate woods, where they settled and made camp.

With great power comes great responsibility. And Harry was so tired from all the grave responsibilities pilling on his shoulders.

The next thing he knew, sleep had claimed him. He didn't even have time to worry about the assaulting waves of pain that had never left his body.

Slowly, Tom walked up the stairs, fingers gliding along its polished rails. The hardwood felt cool beneath his skin.

He pushed open the door to Harry's room. It squeaked loudly, although not loud enough to wake the sleeping man.

Tom watched the young man's pale, peaceful face. Suddenly, Tom wanted to shake him awake and scream at him until all the questions of the past twelve months were answered... but Tom didn't. Instead, a mirthless smile appeared on his lips as he compressed all the dark turmoil into himself. He blinked, black pupils turning as depth-less as black holes, which concealed the brief feeling of hurt.

Tom left the room quietly.

Humph...

The young Dark Lord lowered his eyes. He felt extremely agitated and indignant. He hated how the mere sight of the young man was enough to affect his emotions, so easily, so carelessly — Why couldn't he escape Harry's influence?

Tom tilted his head, fingers tapping the cover of A Collection of Rare and Practical Potions.
He was deep in thought. If only he could create some objects to store away his emotions... he wanted to get rid of Harry's power over him, because he needed to grow up. He needed to act more independent and logical in order to grow his powers.

His eyes darkened as he made up his mind. He locked the potions book into a drawer.

*This was not enough!* He needed other textbooks — something more powerful and dark!

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Miss author (墨玉绿/Emerald Ink) would like to give you a warning:

*"This story exists in a no moral, dark, grim, ironic universe. Tom's character traits are high IQ, anti-social, egoistic, proud, cruel, and other common villain traits. He is a total sociopath, not a tsundere. He doesn't understand love and he doesn't know how to show affection. I have no plans to make him a good guy or redeem his actions. That's the main character. Be aware. Run away while you can."*

**Snow Owl:** Hahaha... That happy ending does seem impossible when you put it like that. Hopefully these two don't go the way of Doctor Hannibal and Will Graham, hmm?

**Emerald Ink:** RUN AWAY— while you can.

**Snow Owl:** Hahaha... Psst, gals and guys, sometimes miss author comes to read your reviews. So feel free to leave constructive criticism, but be nice.
August 27, 1939

Perhaps it was because Slytherins tended to be exceptionally talented at reading people; perhaps it was because Gryffindors were bad at hiding their emotions. Either way, Tom had become keenly aware that something had changed after Harry returned home. Once again, Harry was tense and wary around him.

"I'm full. I'm going to... I'm going to stay in my room today. Tom, leave the dishes. I'll wash them later."

Harry excused himself as soon as he finished eating. He stood up suddenly; it almost seemed like he was running away from the kitchen table.

"No need. I can wash them," the handsome young boy replied politely.

He gave his guardian a bright smile, looking as calm and poised as ever, although his hands trembled ever so slightly as he stabbed at his lunch with unnecessary force, the pork loin turning into mush under his fork.

Of course, someone as brilliant and sharp as Tom was bound to notice that their relationship turning sour with detachment and distrust.

But if Tom didn't even know the reason behind such changes, what could he do?

Tom sneered, plucking the fork from the pile of uneaten meat mush.

Harry closed the curtains tightly, before collapsing onto bed again.

He couldn't pretend that everything was all right. Every moment of every day, the boy's maturing features reminded him of the Dark Lord, who was only growing more powerful and perfect on the other side of the timeline. Everything that he had seen in the future told him that nothing had changed — that nothing could be changed.

Harry felt like he was living in a nightmarish loop. He didn't know what to do — he couldn't be ruthless enough to leave the boy and go back home, yet he wasn't noble enough to act like nothing was wrong. His conscience and emotions pulled him in opposite directions, guilt and fear and worry trapping him in an unsolvable dilemma. His mind reeled; the pain from time-travelling still tormenting his body.

Harry felt like he was drowning, grasping at straws as he shakily reminded himself — I can't give up! There is... there is still hope.

It was only 1939. There was still hope for the future.

Tom didn't know the future, but Harry, who did, was equally powerless to stop time's inevitable
progress. Fate plucked the crisscrossing stings of its instrument, which connected the destinies of all the lives across time and space. It nodded — it is time!

It wasn't until the first V1 bombs fell out of the sky like hideous birds and exploded all over London that Harry realized what was most important to him.

Even though he had attended Hogwarts since the age of eleven and wasn't familiar with muggle history, when he heard those ear-splitting sirens and low-rumbling booms, he realized what was happening instantly. As an Englishman, even he would never forget the scars and destruction left by the two muggle wars.

The Second World War, The Blitz.

During World War II, in preparation for Operation Sea Lion, Hitler had commanded the Nazi Air Force to air-bomb London for seventy-six straight days and nights, reducing the crown jewel of the proud imperial Britannia—the empire on which the sun never set—to a field of burning rubble and death.

Before the realization had sunk in, Harry felt the ground shake beneath his feet, followed by more deafening booms in the distance. Bombs exploded all around them; an endless assault of fire and falling debris pelting the pavement like heavy rain, beating and swallowing up the ancient city.

Even their quiet suburban house started to shake violently, plaster dust raining from the ceiling. Overhead lights flickered and went dark, swinging madly on thin wires.

Screams and panic filled London. Desperate wails mixed in with ominous droning of oncoming airplanes, cutting through the darkening London sky, ruthlessly shattering all of the peace and prosperity streaming through its streets just a moment ago.

KABOOM!

The sound seemed to land next to their ears, loud enough to cause momentary deafness. The floor rumbled upon impact and the house rattled like a doll house.

Harry stumbled forward before bracing himself against a wall. This was the first time he had truly experienced the terrible power of muggle war machinery.

Compared to wizard duels, muggle weapons of mass destruction were more cold and terrifying. These unseen metallic weapons took lives so easily, without any regard to collateral damage, without even confronting their victims like wizards do for their duels. Even facing the Avada Kedavra was better than this, to be crushed like bugs under these apathetic machines and chemicals, under the uncaring and calculating orders of distant enemies—under war, life itself became insignificant, and people everywhere were reduced to tiny cogs in the machine, trapped and powerless and disposable.

Harry paled but stayed calm.

Harry was confident that he would not die here — at least not right now. No matter what disaster or trouble he ran into, Harry couldn't die in the past, because his body and soul didn't belong here. You see, based on the fact that his body never aged in the past, Hermione had theorized that Fate couldn't let people die outside of their own timelines. Time had its own set rules — the future and the past were bound by complex laws that even Fate couldn't break. And so, Harry was safe as long as he remained in the past, protected by time and Fate itself.

Thus was another reason why Hermione agreed for Harry to return, despite the drain on his body. At
least, here, in the past, he was relatively safe under Fate's protection and outside of Voldemort's reach.

She had said, "Harry, Fate has one flaw— while you remain in the past, it can't erase your existence, no matter how much it may want to. While it may despise your attempts to change history, at the very least, Fate cannot kill you. Therefore, your very presence there... can become your biggest weapon."

But the boy... he belonged to this timeline, and so... he could die here.

Once the ugly thought popped into his head, disgust and self-loathing flooded his mind. Yet, the thought lingered...From the ugliest and most selfish corner of his human nature, it grew and grew until it became uncontrollable, undeniable, and unforgivable.

"HARRY!" Tom hurried to his side. The boy's knotted eyebrows were the only signs of his panic. Tom took a deep breath, temple throbbing with an unsettling intuition. He reached out for Harry's hand.

"Harry, we need to get to the wizarding world, now!"

Before Tom could take another step, Harry jerked back suddenly and avoided his outstretched hand. Tom's hand froze in midair. Hot August air turned chilly and suffocating around them.

Harry looked at the boy and suddenly he couldn't breathe. Outside, the warring world faded away and the only thing Harry noticed were those familiar dark eyes peering up at him. Harry's own heart drummed wildly in his chest, squeezing so painfully that Harry thought that it might explode.

Still, that vile thought lingered in his mind, like a burning fuse refusing to be extinguished, like a poisonous snake swaying to the tempting music of the snake-charmer's flute. It guided him toward some dark and disgusting corner of his mind, tempting him with thoughts too horrible to even think about.

Harry blinked, gasping for air.

Yes, Harry came from the future and couldn't die in the past. But Tom... Tom belonged in the past and had no extra protection.

As long as... as Tom Riddle stayed in this house, then he might...die.

What if this child...Tom Riddle had died in the London Blitz of 1939?

What if Voldemort have never existed? In a future without Voldemort, his parents might still be alive and Sirius might be there with them, waiting for him. Dumbledore might be there too, and this time, he wouldn't be expecting Harry to save the world. If Tom Riddle had died in the past, then Harry Potter of the future would never become the Boy-Who-Lived. He would just be Harry, a boy like everyone else. He could become a professional seeker; he could save his friends and family from their premature deaths; he could fall asleep without be haunted by nightmares; he could be... free.

This could be his one opportunity to fix everything.

Even full-grown wizards would have difficulties surviving the constant bombardment of artillery shells, never mind a helpless first-year.

Harry didn't even have to do anything. Really. All he needed to do was to abandon the boy here and... just let fate decide the rest.
Harry's lips trembled uncontrollably, bile rising to his throat. He couldn't speak; he couldn't think.

A distant voice was ringing in his head, as irresistibly sweet as sirens' song, luring him deeper and deeper into foul and unforgivable territories.

"Yes, yes. Kill him."

**KABOOM!**

A shell landed right across the street. It exploded in a ball of shocking light and heat, sending broken blocks of cement and steel outward in sparks of fireworks.

Debris rammed through the walls and windows.

"*Protego!*" Harry cast the shielding charm on instinct, and just in time too, as a palm-sized rock flew toward him and bounced off the invisible shield.

Tom, who remained quiet and obedient by his side, ducked away. The boy was not familiar with shield charms like 'protego', so he couldn't even do anything to protect himself.

The house quivered terribly. And like toy blocks that had been knocked over, it began to collapse in and onto itself, piece by piece.

Harry clutched his wand. Its hard handle dug into his palm, and somehow it felt very heavy. His heart squeezed painfully.

Harry turned away. He had to restrain himself from checking on Tom, to make sure that child was safe. *He was the Dark Lord; he was a child.*

"*Protego!*" Tom whipped out his own wand, trying out the new spell he had just heard Harry use. But... nothing happened. Tom frowned, as he awkwardly dodged several items falling from the shelves.

Tom clamped down hard on his lips until he tasted iron. The taste of blood seemed to calm him. He refocused and raised his wand again.

*As expected from the future Dark Lord,* thought Harry. He watched the boy's action in silence; the yew wand's tip glimmered briefly as an invisible dome was expelled outward, protecting its master from falling debris. Harry stood very still; his arms felt impossibly heavy. He gave a bitter smile, before raising his own wand, its trembling tip pointing toward the young boy.

*Finite Incantatem. Stupefy. Expelliarmus.*

A million options flashed in his head. Harry opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He felt like he was choking on the dusty air, the acrid scent of chemicals and burning things filling his nostrils.

Tom pointed his wand overhead. Gasping for breath, he could barely keep the shielding charm in place. He stood facing Harry, upright, composed, not avoiding the other's wand and not panicking; he just stood there, looking up at Harry with clear black eyes.

Harry found it difficult to meet the boy's gaze, although there was no trace of accusation or anger in those deep dark eyes. Tom was only staring at him intently like he always did, with an unreadable, polite, little smile.

"Harry—" Tom's eyes fixed onto Harry. He called out to the young man with their usual familiarity,
smiling sweetly as if he couldn't see the wand pointing directly in his face. "Harry— are you going to abandon me?"

Amid the ruins of their old house, the little boy, who would grow up to be his mortal enemy, was struggling to maintain a fragile shielding charm cloaking his thin body. His small hands quivered as he held up his wand, but his eyes remained clear and calm as he peered up at Harry, asking: *Are you going to abandon me?*

Once again, Harry found it hard to breathe. Like a fish stranded on dry sand, his mouth flapped wordlessly, opening and closing repeatedly, but he just couldn't answer that simple question.

He told himself — *You must think of the big picture, Harry Potter. Think about Hermione, think about Ron, think about Ginny, think about all the faithful members of Dumbledore's army... they are all counting on you. Think about the Dark Lord you met that day... Voldemort is real!*

Even if he had the potential of a Dark Lord, right now Tom Riddle was still a small first-year, who couldn't possibly maintain a complex shielding charm for long. Finally, the light from the tip of the yew wand flickered and vanished.

At the same time, an overhead beam snapped in two with a loud crackle. In clouds of dust, large cement blocks and wooden planks fell around them, blocking off access to all the windows and doors, trapping them within this dark, teetering house.

*Now there really is no escape* — Harry gave an ironic smile and lowered his wand. There was no need to cast spells, anymore.

He was trapped. *Both of them* were trapped by tragic circumstances.

Tom clutched his wand with both hands. Settling dust in the air hid the turmoil rippling in his eyes; his young face hardened with steely resolve as he searched for redemption or regret in those familiar green eyes, but he only found an overwhelming sorrow reflecting back at him. Tom's face darkened still as he raised his wand towards the young man, *the spell*, which he had spent all of last year studying, was on the tip of his tongue.

The young man only said, *"I'm sorry."*

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**TN:**

Miss Author said she is aware of the historic inaccuracy presented in the fic (i.e. Wrong dates of the blitz and operation sea lion ... etc) But hey, for plot reasons, ignore these discrepancies.
August 27, 1939

It was as though the world was ending.

Even though the ground trembled violently beneath his feet and deafening explosions reverberated in his eardrums, the handsome young boy paid no attention to his surroundings. His entire world condensed into that one quiet phrase — "I'm sorry." The two simple words were enough to plunge his gut into icy waters.

It felt like his world was ending.

As the house crumbled all around him, Tom remained unnaturally still. His jet-black hair tousled a mess, his normally neat clothing wrinkled and torn, sweat and dust dirtied his roundish elegant face. Yet, as the young boy stared up at Harry intently, he appeared utterly calm, impassive, without a single word of plea or accusation. His dark eyes were as unreadable as unexplored deep seas, his posture as proud as a solitary wolf.

Harry's hands trembled. He met the boy's gaze and suddenly felt like he was back in the Pensieve, watching Dumbledore's memories, observing the eleven year old orphan as he spoke, his voice ringing with anger and distrust:

"—I don't believe you."

It was as if an invisible hand was tightening around his throat. Harry gasped for breath. Dimly, he wondered if the foul smell of the air was poisoning his brain, because he couldn't think at all.

It had been so hard for this child to learn to smile and to even hug him once in a while. It had been so hard for this child to learn to love, learn to hope, and learn to believe in someone else. It had been so hard for this child to open up, to trust tentatively, then to remain desperately clinging to a home — to their home. This child was his child.

Blankly, Harry stared at the boy in front of him, at Tom Riddle.

No matter how Tom's future turned out, he was still Harry's child. Children were always the apples of their parents' eyes, no matter how mischievous they'd acted or what mistakes they've made. Suddenly, Harry was cast into a sinner repenting at the altar of church, on his knees, fingers locked in prayer; a wary traveller praying for forgiveness and guidance, begging God for the right path, asking if redemption was still possible, whether hope still endured...

Yet, no such guidance came, only more and more bombs fell. The poor, battered house couldn't remain standing much longer.

"TOM!" Harry shouted. A chandelier was knocked loose and came crashing down to where Tom stood.

There was only a split second to react, but a split second was all Tom needed. Immediately, Tom
made his decision to test Harry one last time, to give him one last... chance. Tom narrowed his eyes and steeled his body, but he didn't dive out of the way. With a loud boom, the chandelier crumpled to his left and, miraculously, only grazed his arm. Tom remained utterly still as if frozen in fear, even as pain shot through him, only keeping his eyes glued on Harry's face. A dislocated steel hook left a nasty bleeding gash on his left arm.

"Tom!" Almost on instinct, Harry ran to the boy, all colour draining from his face.

Harry never wanted to see Tom's face like this — so utterly ashen like a dead man, with emotionless eyes of an creature abandoned by the world, so proud and composed and calm as if he hadn't noticed Harry's cowardly betrayal at all.

The boy squeezed his bleeding arm. Fingers tightened around his wand. Soft bangs hid the sorrow and madness ensnared within the darkness of his eyes. In the dim lights, Tom stood still, waiting for the man's approaching steps.

This man wanted to kill him, yet couldn't help but worry about his injuries— Harry, what a maddening paradox you are! And it shall prove to be your downfall!

Tom's mouth curled into a sinister smile, exposing two rows of gleaming white teeth. His eyes were sharp like that of a trapped beast, stalking the man's every step; a pitiful beast cocooned in darkness, licking his wounds where no one could see.

Beneath that deceptive calmness, the boy's eyes hid a flash of desperation and anguish. The young Slytherin heir was smart enough to see through Harry's intentions. After all, he had obsessed over everything about the man— he knew him better than he knew himself!

He knew it!— He should've known that Tom Riddle's existence was a burden to Harry Potter. He should've known that no one was happy that he existed.

But... if Harry didn't care about him, why did he adopt him? Why did he give him a home? Why did he smile at him? Why did he try so hard to worm his way into Tom's heart, only to abandon him? Why did he give him a taste of love and hope, before ripping it away so cruelly?

It was a thousand times crueler to give a beggar a taste of extravagance and luxury, before striking him out into his old penury.

Should Tom be grateful for such a lesson?

If you are going to abandon me, dearest Harry, then I must pay you back for everything you have done—

Suddenly, Tom backed away, dark eyes capturing Harry's gaze. Dark pupils dilated as he looked into familiar green eyes, challenging the man like a snarling wolf cub. Slowly, he raised his wand.

Harry gazed back at the child, into those dark vicious eyes which held so much sorrow and grief. He couldn't breathe as he stared into the boy's blood-shot eyes. The redness in them looked oddly familiar.

"Damn it!" Harry cursed, punching the wall in frustration. He bit his lips until they bled. The boy's red eyes scorched into his mind. With shaking hands, he rushed forward and scooped up the boy into his arms. He felt Tom's body stiffen with shock, but the boy didn't resist. Tom's fingers dug into Harry's shoulder, before the boy relaxed slightly and leaned into Harry's chest. His injured arm hooked around Harry's neck very tightly.
"Tom, grab onto me! We'll make a run for it." Harry roared, although his voice seemed oddly small in the backdrop of booming explosions and sirens. He licked his cracked lips. Smoke was stinging his eyes.

He knew what this act meant — but he made his choice. This meant he was denouncing his friends and family. This meant he was personally pushing them into the path of the Dark Lord, into a future and a past filled with war and death... all for the sake of his own selfish love.

"Is it worth it?" Hermione had asked him, once.

Was it worth it to sacrifice twenty or more years of his own life to try to save a Dark Lord who cannot be saved? Was it worth it to risk the lives of his friends and family to redeem a man who became a mass murder?

Even now, Harry would give her the exact same answer: "I don't know if it's worth it... But I need to do this."

"I'm sorry."

Once again, that quiet, simple phrase exploded in Tom's ears, causing his mind to go blank. Although the tip of his wand had already been pressed furtively into Harry's waist, Tom couldn't bring himself to complete the action.

"Tom, I'm... I'm so sorry."

As if his prayer had been answered, suddenly Harry's mind became clear and determined; his eyes brimmed with tears as he apologized profusely, laying gentle kisses on top of the boy's head.

Tom felt Harry's arms tightening around him. He looked up at the young man's pale face, at the taut jaw and red-rimmed eyes.

Suddenly, the young boy smiled. In the dusty, darkening room, his smile was as bright as morning sun peeking from grey nimbus, so very warm and full of life.

Harry thought the boy's smile was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

What Harry didn't know was beneath that beautiful smile, Tom also made his choice. Slowly, the boy removed the wand pointing at Harry's midsection; its tip still glowing with a dim green light.

Maybe he was no expert on defensive charms, but he had spent a lot time studying... the killing curse.

Harry was still rather naive. He hadn't learnt to never trust a Dark Lord. Even a very young one.

Yes, Tom had grown a lot since his time at the muggle orphanage. He had learned to smile and to embrace, and he had learned to lie and to pretend. He had learned about love and hope, and he had learned about jealousy and despair. He had learned to trust and to care, but... above all, he had learned that in order to keep his obsession by his side, he would need a lot more power.

He needed to learn to kill and to take!

Too bad you are planning to abandon me, because I am planning to never let you go... Even if I have to drag you to Hell with me, I will never let you go— Tom smiled contentedly, burying his head into Harry's shirt.
With one arm wrapped firmly around Tom, Harry's hand clutched the holly wand, attempting to apparate on the spot. Yet he couldn't... his body and magic were too weak, as he was still reeling from the aftermath of time-traveling. Right now, Harry wasn't as skilled as Dumbledore all those years ago; it would be extremely dangerous for him to attempt side-along apparition under his weakened state... Never mind dragging along an injured boy.

Harry pursed his lips.

Yet, he couldn't wait. Five seconds of hesitation could prove fatal.

Finally, their luck ran out. The next round of the blitz began without warning, bombs erupted in bright flashes of heat, rising from furnaces of Hell.

Before Harry could react, the ceiling caved in on top of them.

"Diffindo!"

The curse blasted the falling plaster into pieces, temporarily clearing a pathway.

"Tom, we need to get out of the house first," Harry made sure Tom was wrapped tightly in his arms. "Don't be afraid."

"Okay," Tom murmured. His face pressed into the crook of Harry's neck, fingers digging into the other's shoulder.

Since the overhead beam had already broke, the walls were slowly crumbling under their own weight. The hardwood floor trembled with every explosion; debris fell from what remained of the ceiling. Still, Harry couldn't gather enough magic for apparition. It was too dangerous to wait. They needed to get out. Now.

A tangled mess of cement and steel blocked the door. If they were muggles, certainly they would've been trapped here, then buried alive once the house collapsed.

But they had magic.

Another blasting curse was enough to clear a path. Harry could see the front door was buckling under the crushing weight of teetering walls. Harry aimed his wand. He had one shot. Once he blast the door open, no doubt the house would flatten completely.

As more debris hit his back, Harry heard crackling noises of snapping wood. They only had one minute left. Maximum!

"Hold on tight!" Harry instructed the boy in his arms. He cast armour charms on Tom and himself. His hands were cold and clammy, green eyes burning so wonderfully bright.

There was no reason to be afraid. Fate and time would protect him, and in turn, he would protect Tom with his life. His body would act as the best shield.

"Diffindo!"

As soon as the door was blasted off its hinges, a corner of the house began to collapse into a cloud of dust.

Although the Protego was an extremely useful spell, magic had its limitations. As Harry ran out of the house, shielding Tom with his own body, his face and arms were cut and bruised by falling
debris. Blood dripped down his arms, leading a thin trail onto the street.

But, before they could even catch their breath, a V4 bomb fell straight onto the ruin of number 15 London Street. There was no time to run. On instinct, Harry pressed the boy into his chest and spun around, intentionally steering the boy away from the brunt of the blast.

KABOOM!

The sound was so loud that it seemed to rip through their eardrums. Even with their magical protections, they were still flesh and bone, prone to internal bleeding, burns, and grave agony. The heat wave from the explosion threw Harry into the air. He landed awkwardly, painfully, but he did remember to hold onto Tom, cushioning the boy's fall with his back. The holly wand spun through the air, fell into a pile of burning rubble and disappeared.

Harry felt like every bone in his body had broke. His ears rang, his chest heaved painfully. Maybe there was even a rib fracture or two.

He stumbled up. Still, he mustered up a smile. At least, he couldn't die.

"Harry, I can walk—" Tom's eyes darkened as he released his arms, which remained wrapped around Harry's neck.

"NO! Hold onto me!" Harry yelled, breath short and gasping. "I won't die. Trust me, Tom. I can't die!"

The anxiety in Harry's voice was very genuine, and it made Tom's heart beat very fast. Suddenly, warm blood was rushing into his head, making his cheeks burn as he clutched onto Harry.

Immediately, they heard a buzzing noise overhead. A bomber jet flew at a ridiculously low attitude. A door opened from its tail and left behind a streak of yellow gas in the air. It dispersed rapidly, a pungent sulphurous smell hitting their noses at once.

Hurriedly, Harry covered the boy's mouth and nose with his hand. Through the yellow mist, he scanned the ruined landscape for his lost wand.

The mist stung their mouth and eyes. Harry's wand... was nowhere to be seen. Harry, who was ever so good-natured, began swearing loudly as his throat tightened, purple veins popping from his temple.

Nothing was more useless than a wizard without his wand!

They had to leave! The poison gas was beginning to affect him. Quickly, Harry decided to give up the wand. He turned and ran toward the nearest bomb shelter.

His shoulder wasn't much wider than Tom's body, yet somehow he managed protect the boy. Tom was largely unharmed as he curled in Harry's arms, listening to the other's thumping heartbeat.

Harry's trainers ripped open as he weaved through burned lawns and cracked pavements. His toes and heels were exposed to rough gravel, but he didn't slow down.

Bombers still droned overhead, preparing to commence their next round of attacks, poison gas and bombs loaded and ready to go.

Without his wand, without any protection, Harry ran across London that had been turned into a war zone, with Tom wrapped tightly and safely in his arms.
Since previously he had chosen to give up on him, now... he was choosing to do everything to protect him. His own injuries and blisters were not important — for he deserved those punishments.

At least he couldn't die.

TN:

AHHH! So much angst... Now I also need something to get the angst out my system. So I wrote a little crack piece to account for all reviewers' complains.

(Whispers) Hopefully Miss Author doesn't see this... If she does, may she please please ignore me... Please. Also, you are a genius! Keep updating! ... And maybe update a little bit faster? No pressure!

Sometimes in not-so-distant future:

Tom: Ugh! By Salazar, Harry, You have more mood swings than a pendulum in a hurricane.

Harry: But... Pendulums don't have mood swings.

Tom: You are missing the point... Anyways, the readers agree with me, right?

Harry: What readers?

Tom: The ones who say you're responsible for my abandonment issue.

Harry (splutters): Well...er...well. You killed my parents!

Tom: Technically, I didn't... yet.

Harry: Oh, yes, you did.

Tom: Oh, no, I didn't.

Harry: Yes

Tom: No

Harry: YES

Tom: NO

Harry: NO

Tom: Ye... wait a minute! I see what you are doing. Are you seriously—

Harry (interrupts): No, I'm not Sirius. Sirius is my Godfather. A real cool dude. I should introduce you to him one day, but... your crazy follower had killed him... (Sobs uncontrollably)

Tom: ...

Harry (still sobbing): I'll admit I have issues. But, Tom... you should know that you are my only family and... I love you.

Tom: ...
Harry: Hem-hem. I said— I LOVE YOU.

Tom (whispers): Alright, alright... I love you too... ish... sort of...

Harry (grins): What's that? I can't hear you.

Tom grabs Harry's tie and pulls him in for a rough kiss.

Harry (eyes widen): !

Tom (smirks): Hey! The cue card over there says 'to kiss and make up'.

Harry: What cue card? I don't see any cue card.

Tom (rolls his eyes): Just shut up and kiss me.

(They kiss again. Roses bloom in the background. Light beams down from the ceiling. Audience applaud.)

(Snow_owl holds up a cue card that says: 'And they lived happily ever after. THE END')

See, no conflict makes for a short and boring tale ;)

For Whom the Bell Tolls

NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

BETA: the brilliant and awesome AzulticSerpens

August 27, 1939

The world was grey with dust and smoke that clogged the air. Bombs had filled London with flames and explosions and bursts of lights, turning the city into bleak chaos of black soot and red glows. It was dusk. But Hitler's celebration was just beginning. London was their stage, a fancy exhibition to show off all the power and might of the Nazi's new technologies and weaponries.

This was a real war, a muggle's war. Even wizards appeared insignificant before the terrible flashes and swarm of airplanes, humming in the sky, casting shadow of death upon them all. Dodging falling shells, people ran for their lives, hiding, praying; severed arms and legs poked out from under the rubble, pale and macabre yet ignored. Rocks fell; people screamed; bullets sliced through soft flesh. Along the burning streets, even ancient oaks bent to the enemy, their branches trembling, as if they could sense flames crawling toward their roots.

Harry couldn't even remember how many times he had fallen. His mind was pained and muddled; he couldn't even tell north from south. Yet, his body moved on its own, like a programmed robot determined to fulfill its mission. He ran, protecting the precious little boy in his arms.

Fate sneered at them. Indeed, it could not erase Harry's presence there. Yet, history demanded for it to punish the time-traveller who dared to go against the tide of time. Fate nodded.

So he couldn't die — but he could suffer.

"Harry," a soft head kneaded against Harry's neck, whispering into his ears, which still rang from the constant bombardments. It sounded like the soft whine of a wolf pup. "You... you aren't going to abandon me, are you?"

Although his tone was quiet and respectful, only Tom knew how much Harry's answer meant to him. In that moment, as he waited, Tom hated this dreadful feeling of apprehension and neediness. Slytherins were men of actions. They attacked instead waited, always landing the first blow.

Therefore, he slid on his mask, pretending to fall into vulnerability, to plead, even, for Harry's sympathy and protection. Again, he had asked: Are you going to abandon me?

Yet, beneath that mask of a helpless child, beneath that soft pleading tone, his eyes turned dark and ominous, as cold as ice as he compressed all emotions into himself. Passively, Tom pressed his head against Harry's neck, listening to every beat of the man's erratic pulse.

As he waited, his teeth clenched so hard that his gums hurt.

Harry's ears were still ringing from the boom of explosions, so the boy's words had only sounded vague and muffled.

— What... was Tom saying?
With great difficulty, Harry blinked; sweat and dust had almost glued his eyelids shut.

If he hadn’t been protected by rules of time-travel, Harry was sure that he would’ve died by now.

But, even if his mind and senses were drowning in a sea of exhaustion and pain, he still noticed the spike in the boy's emotions, vaguely, through the slightest tremor in the child's voice.

Was he afraid?

Harry felt his tired muscles turning as stiff as rocks. He didn't even have the strength to speak. He was only able to crank his neck a little, so his chin rested on top of the boy's head reassuringly, letting his actions speak for him.

— Don't be afraid. I'm with you.

Tom tightened his arms around Harry's neck. He didn't want to let go of the faint warmth seeping through the young man's skin.

The little boy pressed closer, almost burying his head into the man's neck, breathing heavily as he greedily inhaled the familiar scent. Warm and overwhelmingly addictive, his scent was so distinct even mixed with the smell of gun powder and smoke.

— Harry. So this is your confession... You are promising that you won't abandon me.

Tom's lips pressed into Harry's neck, a wolf pup hiding his growing fangs and obsessed predatory grin. When Slytherins wanted commitment and affection, they only knew how to demand for it, how to take it through force and persistence and selfish lies... as if love could be forcefully obtained, as if commitment could grow from one-sided obsession, it was almost... pathetic.

Harry might have been running for only twenty minutes, but it felt like an eternity. Time seemed to have stopped, yet his pain seemed infinite.

Harry was careful to conceal Tom within his embrace. Everywhere, the blitzing of bombs buried London under sulphurous chemicals and searing heat. Harry had so many close calls. If it weren't for the protection of time's rules, he would have been burned to a crisp, many times over.

Harry wrapped his arms tightly around Tom. An eleven-year-old didn't weigh much, but under the pelting rain of shells and bullets, it was undoubtedly a heavy burden, the slim difference between survival and death.

Finally, Fate had enough of its cruel and silly cat-and-mouse game. It trembled in anticipation, grinning excitedly.

Suddenly, high in the sky, the bombers dived toward them. A hatchet beneath their metal wings opened up to reveal round barrels of machine guns. After the initial blitz had levelled all of the taller structures, it was time for phase two — to eliminate all moving targets, using more precise and rapid rounds to erase all lives below.

Harry paused as a dense rain of bullets fell around him. Oddly, it reminded him of the times in his childhood spent watching Dudley play computer games, as neon spaceships were shot down by lines and dots. It almost looked and sounded like this, filling his ears with sounds of 'ratatatata', and filling his vision with streaking bullets and holes appearing in the ground.

His arms were numb. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, until even the pain of his broken ribs faded away. Harry felt like he was dissociating from his own body, even his skin had lost all
sensation. Only when, again, a piece of cold metal bit into his flesh, did his mind started to think again. Although Harry knew that he couldn't die in the past, he still felt scared as the strong smell of blood—his own blood—filled his nostrils.

It felt like he was actually dying.

Suddenly, Harry came to a terrible conclusion. What if Hermione was wrong?

—Your very presence there... can become your biggest weapon.

But... what if Hermione's theory was wrong from the beginning, what if Fate didn't care about what happened to Harry...

Harry opened his mouth, but he could only cough out more blood. Moments ago, a single bullet had torn through him, burrowing straight into his lung.

Harry's legs wobbled. More bullets pierced his body, until finally he collapsed, kneeling onto the road of hard gravel and broken glass.

"HARRY!"

Harry gasped in pain, his larynx and lungs filling with blood. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against the ground, arching his back upward, forming a temporary tent using his own body and clothing—a tent just big enough to hide an eleven year old boy.

Stiffly, Tom could feel the weight of Harry's body pressing him down, protecting him. Roaring and clunking of bullets banged against his eardrums, black smoke clouded his vision, and the smell of blood filled his nostrils. Harry was very still. Suddenly, an overwhelming realization came over the boy. Shaking terribly, he reached out, fingers splayed against the young man's chest.

This was the first time that the boy didn't rejoice at the red sight of blood; this was the first time that he feared for the inevitability of death; this was the first time he felt ecstasy and relief as a heart beat beneath his fingers.

"Harry! Harry!" The young Dark Lord yelled urgently, as he struggled out of Harry's arms.

"Don't... don't move," Harry grasped, his voice terrible and weak as blood gurgled in his throat. "Don't let go of me... I won't die, Tom... You stay hidden... under my arms."

Harry shifted all his weight onto his forehead and limbs, bare skin pressing into hard gravel. Many images flashed in his mind, rapid, distorted, until the battlefield in front spun into grey and red until it vanished. There was a lustrous and dazzling light, many colours, then, suddenly, he was home again. He saw Ron, then Hermione, then the Weasley twins...

His mind was slipping. He was...dying.

In his trance, a hand was pulling at him, small but strong like the claw of a baby beast. A soft head was rubbing against his cheeks, and a small voice came from so far way: you've promised that you won't abandon me.

—...Tom Riddle?

Harry's lips quivered, almost stretching into a reassuring smile. Green eyes dimmed and squeezed shut.
Something painful was expanding in Tom's chest, making his eyes and nose sting. He had thought that he was so familiar with Harry Potter, but he never understood him. Tom never figured out Harry's goals and desires, his intentions for adopting Tom... He was Tom's enigma. It was true that he had wanted to kill Tom, yet, the next moment, he was sacrificing himself to save Tom. Suddenly, the young Slytherin felt very angry, like he had been cheated.

But now was not the time to vent his anger. Right in front of his eyes, the man was growing weaker by the second; there was only the slightest heaving of his chest and the faintest pulse of his heart that indicated some hope. It seemed like Harry's soul was slowly leaching from his body, the vibrant and warm lustre nearly gone out of his eyes, leaving behind nothing but an empty shell.

"HARRY! Don't close your eyes!" Tom screamed at the unmoving man, angrily, desperately. Rage twisted his face, hiding the true fear which arose from his very soul. "Harry! Look at me!"

The boy, who was ever so mature and brilliant for his age, panicked; he couldn't do anything but scream and watch.

Muggles! It was all their fault! Harry...this—everything—was all their fault. If only they were all dead —

In his desperation, the Slytherin heir turned his full-blown hatred towards the muggles. His hunger for power reached a new peak; his desire for violence grew and grew. If only he had more power, then he and Harry wouldn't be trapped in this mess. If only he had enough power, enough magic, then he could exact revenge on all those disgusting muggles, crushing them like worthless ants they were.

I won't die, Tom... You stay hidden... under my arms, the man had said. His arms were as stiff as a statue, and yet he never let go of the boy.

Tom's eyes were red and angry, bloodshot, something hot and wet seemed to be dripping down his cheeks.

Once again, he wrapped his arms around the young man's neck, drying his tears on the other's bare skin. Tom only clutched tighter, desperately pressing into the man's feeble pulse, as if he were a wolf pup trying to burrow into its mother's warm fur. He murmured, his voice hoarse and incensed, childishly demanding, threatening.

"You've promised me! You are not going to abandon me!"

He waited. Harry didn't answer.

He waited until he couldn't even hear Harry's breathing. Harry's whole body went limp, collapsing on top of Tom. Numbly, Tom could do no more than holding Harry up with his small arms, unable to stop the man's warmth from slipping through his fingertips.

Tom's mask shattered completely. His eyes turned scarlet. Suddenly, he sank his teeth into soft skin. A man's neck was his most vulnerable spot. Harry's skin was soft and delicate, and it tasted just like him, pure and sweet, like his warm and gentle smile.

"Harry, Harry, Harry, Harry, Harry..."

He repeated the name over and over again, madly, obsessively, his childish voice lost in the thuds of bullets and roars of shells. No one answered. He clutched his teeth, swallowing that name into his stomach.
He gnawed on the man's neck, until Harry's pale skin turned as raw and red as his bloodshot eyes.

Yes, he was a child. A distraught, lost little boy who was overwhelmed by the circumstances until only his vicious instincts remained — he became a real wolf cub... and animals couldn't cry, they couldn't hope, they could only whimper, pleading and pathetic... and defeated.

Tom didn't even notice that no more bullets managed to hit them. An invisible shield seemed to appear around them, sealing them off from the outside world, from the deadly rain of bullets and falling debris.

Maybe Fate had finally remembered its job... or maybe it had lost interest after its intended target had... perished.

Time was a series of interlocking rings, perfect circles, syncing and reconnecting past to future.

In January of 2001, somewhere in the Ministry of Magic's head office, the Death Eaters had already seized power.

Abruptly, the handsome Dark Lord rose from his throne. His irises were glowing red, brighter than ever before, brighter than even blood that poured from a freshly slit throat.

Slowly, he pressed a hand to his chest, as his heart recovered its steady beat. He felt rather agitated.

That sensation just a moment ago— when he felt like his own heart had arrested and his insides were being hollowed out... What was that feeling?
NOTE: This is a translation of a Chinese HP Fanfiction by 墨玉绿

BETA: the brilliant and awesome AzulticSerpens

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**September 27, 1939**

As Europe spiralled down further and further into chaos, none of the muggles' sorrows and war reached the wizarding world. While they all lived within the British Isles, right now—the muggles' and wizards' lives couldn't be any more different. The muggle world was filled with fires and ruins and the scars of what was left of their once prosperous, industrial cities; while the wizarding world went on uninterrupted, ignorant and safe behind their wards.

Right on schedule, Hogwarts welcomed back all her students on September 1st. Once again, her halls were bustling with laughter and excited faces.

"Riddle, may I borrow your notes?"

The handsome young boy flashed a perfect smile, before offering his notebook to a passing classmate.

"Aren't you in a good mood today?" inquired Abraxas Malfoy, raising an elegant eyebrow and regarding his young companion with great interest as they walked down the hall together.

Tom adjusted his bag and straightened his back. His strides were fast and confident, almost military-esque in their precision. The standard Hogwarts black robe looked crisp and fitted on his slender frame, as proper as the perfect Slytherin. His smile was both blinding and calculating.

"Fine day," Tom replied casually, dark eyes narrowing like a satisfied cat.

"Oh? I take it to mean your Harry has returned?" Abraxas asked, teasingly but with a fair degree of curiosity, as he rubbed the large ruby set in the family ring on his middle finger.

Tom was approaching the entrance to the Slytherin common room. Suddenly, he halted, then he turned to look at the blonde third-year. His smile was gone. The boy's face turned utterly blank, unreadable and composed. "He is not mine. Harry is his own man."

"Tsk-tsk," Abraxas smirked, at once noticing the insincerity in the boy's statement. The tall blonde leaned lazily against the doorway, blocking Tom's path. "I do believe... that a proper Slytherin won't allow himself to make the same mistake twice, as to be so careless with the leash of his... pet."

The boy's pure obsidian eyes flashed, before immediately settling back into an emotionless darkness. "He is not my pet."

Abraxas didn't seem to notice a chill creeping into Tom's voice. He looked rather bored, examining his diamond cufflinks. He commented casually, all friendly smiles and business, despite the cruelty of his words.

"If it were me— if my pet dares to disobey, then it shall be punished, demoted, become no more than a disposable toy."
Abraxas continued to play with his cufflinks, blocking Tom's way, as if he were expecting something from the boy.

"I... understand."

The boy's quiet answer seemed to placate the older boy. He smirked again and stepped aside.

Ovidius Parkinson heard the door to the Slytherin common room slide open. He looked up.

A young boy strode in, with aristocratic features and a proud posture. Ah, it was his roommate — Tom Riddle.

"Over here!" Ovidius waved him over, shoving his bag away to make room.

The handsome boy nodded in greeting. Although Tom was not smiling, his bright eyes glinted with something beautiful and mesmerizing— it seemed like something good had happened.

Ovidius was puzzled. Actually, now that he thought about it, his roommate had always been rather... odd. For example, Tom told Ovidius that someone, who he really cared for, was injured very badly... If Tom really cared about that person, why did he seem so happy when he spoke of his injuries? Yet, if Tom didn't care, then why had he acted so gloomy and scary all throughout last semester?

While Ovidius pondered away, Tom sat down next to him.

Was Tom happy?

Yes, at least right now, he was very, very happy... or rather, he was very satisfied with the outcome of the summer's events.

Yes, Harry was injured very badly. And yes, Harry had almost died. There was something very odd about the young man's wounds... Even with the help of magic and potions, Harry healed very slowly. But... now that Harry is out of critical danger, Tom noted cruelly, those strange wounds can be rather beneficial for my purposes.

For one, it kept Harry bedridden. So he couldn't even attempt to run away... to leave again without even saying good-bye.

Tom licked his lips, remembering the young man's pale and bandaged body, sunken into soft mattress, so weak and helpless. Oh, yes, Harry could only lie still in bed, obedient and grateful as Tom brought him food and drinks. He had to rely on Tom, leaning against the boy's shoulder as he was fed soup and porridge. He had to rely on Tom for everything. He couldn't take care of himself. He couldn't even leave his room. In those early days, Harry was barely conscious, only waking up for few hours per day. Most times, the man was heavily sedated and in deep sleep, looking ever so peaceful as Tom sat by his bedside, flipping through some school books, waiting patiently for Harry to wake again.

Sometimes, Harry didn't even look alive. He looked like the bright-furred antelope specimen they had hanging over the fireplace, alert and vivid despite its utter stillness.

As he observed the young man's peaceful sleeping face, an alluring thought rang in Tom's head. It told him an old tale— about a princess named Snow White. How her beauty and grace were forever preserved in a glass coffin, where she lay waiting, dreaming of wonderful things on top of a bed of red roses.
Oh, fairytales were ever so enchanting.

Suddenly, a beautiful smile lit up Tom's young face; confident sparkling eyes attracted the attention of many blushing young girls. Even Ovidius was momentarily stunned by the boy's bright smile.

A beautiful smile was enough to conceal the twisted ruthlessness growing within his bones; the appearance of a harmless child was enough to camouflage his ever-expanding dark ambitions. Tom unfurled a sheaf of parchment. Chuckling to himself, he picked up a quill.

As Tom worked on his letter diligently, Ovidius shot his roommate an alarmed look. He scooted away. Like the acute hearing of wild hares, prey often had excellent survival instincts, and Ovidius' instincts told him that although Tom Riddle's smile might have looked beautiful, it was also very, very dangerous.

Luckily, Tom paid Ovidius no attention.

He wrote furiously.

"Dearest Harry:

How are you?

I hope you are feeling better. Do your injuries still hurt? I hope they have healed by now.

Professor Dumbledore wants to send his regards. He is worried about you.

Harry, I've searched through the entire collections of Hogwarts library. Oddly, I've found nothing that explained your condition. As far as we know, you aren't cursed, but physical wounds shouldn't persist for so long on a wizard's body.

Why don't healing potions work on you? Odd. Very odd.

I will keep searching for a solution. And I'll send notice as soon as I find anything.

Also, I've been having terrible nightmares for the past month. Every night, I've dreamt of you, your skin turning cold and pale as marble coffin, your bleeding body on top of me, your eyes fading. One second, you are murmuring, "I won't die", but the next... I see a black tombstone.

Harry, do remember what you have promised— you... you won't leave me, right?

Life at Hogwarts remains the same. Quite unexciting, really. We attend class, eat, sleep, although sometimes I attempt to amuse myself by admiring all the statues tucked at every corner.

You will write back soon, won't you? Not like last time... I hope.

Harry, are you still staying at Miss Joan's house? I must confess that I don't like her very much. Even if she did save us that day... even if she is a fellow Slytherin alumni... even if she is a rather knowledgeable and accomplished Auror. It is just that... I don't feel entirely comfortable around her. She is not like you.

Hmm... I hope I'm not being too demanding, but I would really like to return to our home during the holidays. To our own house. Just like old times.

One more thing, my friend, Abraxas Malfoy, has offered to sell us a house at a discounted price. What do you think, Harry? I don't think it would be proper to continue intruding on Miss Joan's life. You should move out as soon as possible. I can help—"
Tom paused, red lips curled up into a mysterious smile. Carefully, he double checked the letter. He had to make sure that everything was in order, to make sure his tone was just right, to make sure Harry Potter only saw the right side of Tom Riddle — the side that was normal and childish and had nothing to hide.

Harry couldn’t find out — that the boy, who was pouring out words of caring and concern, was also grinning at his pain. How his childish eyes were turning dark with paranoia, cruelty, and twisted ambitions.

Tom flipped through his notebook, filled with loose pages ripped from potion books. He pondered, before carefully picking out a recipe for a simple pain numbing potion.

“P.S. I’ve attached a recipe for an useful potion that should help you. Dissolve carnotite powder in ephedra juice, which can be extracted by crushing its roots, and apply directly to wound.

I hope it helps.”

Tom nodded. He knew many more powerful and effective healing potions. But... this one was just perfect, because it was very effective for treating pain, but it wouldn't heal him. Because the young Slytherin heir didn't really want his Harry to get better... not yet, anyways.

He was not prepared yet.

Tom was still smiling when he released the little owl, watching until it disappeared into the night sky with his letter.

Harry leaned against the headboard, a parchment spread out in front of him.

He stroked its smooth waxy surface. The neat careful cursive, the round red wax seal, the expensive parchment had shown off its writer's polite and thoughtful attitudes. Harry couldn't help but recall all the letters that he had used to sent to Ron and Hermione. How the paper was always crumpled up and blotted with ink; how his handwriting was slanted and ugly; and how Hermione used to circle, with red ink, all the grammar mistakes of his letters, before sending it back along with her reply. At least, he could take consolation in the fact that Ron's writing wasn't much better.

Harry grinned.

Beneath his thumbs, Harry felt the indentations made by sharp nib pressing down on paper. He could almost see Tom leaning over the desk, pouring over his words, head low, lips pursed, eyes bright and focused behind soft black hair. And... maybe... beside the boy, a group of young Slytherin girls mulling about, trying to catch his attention.

A good Slytherin was also naturally good at disguises — he had to hide away his ambitions, his cruel and combative nature that would never be accepted by society.

"I must confess that I don't like her very much. Even if she did save us that day... even if she is a fellow Slytherin alumni... even if she is a rather knowledgeable and accomplished Auror. It is just that... I don't feel entirely comfortable around her. She is not like you."

The boy's words were carefully chosen. He was always very polite, even referring to the Auror as Miss Joan. But still, Harry could decipher some childish jealousy from between the lines.

Harry grinned as he read Tom's letter again, his expression softening even as more pain shot through his body.
After the events of that day, the boy seemed to be opening up to him. See, now he was writing to Harry to share some honest opinions and wishes, even if his reasoning was rather... childish.

"Mr. Potter, it is time to take your meds," the door was pushed open after a polite knock.

Harry turned toward the blurry shape that entered. He was pretty much blind without his glasses, but he recognized the woman's voice immediately.

He smiled. "Morning, Joan."

Joan nodded in greeting and laid down a tray of steaming potions on the night stand.

"Sorry to trouble you again, and... for this entire month," Harry gave her a sleepy grin. He wasn't comfortable letting a stranger take care of him, let alone a young woman like Joan. British gentlemanly traditions dictated that he should never inconvenience a lady... But, as it were, his house was destroyed and he had nowhere to go. Smiling, Harry gave her another apologetic look.

Joan didn't reply. Actually, she didn't mind the young man, so she wasn't bothered.

"Get some rest," Joan shrugged. Her eyes swept over the letter on the duvet, before stepping out of the room.

Joan was not like the other Slytherins. Her house was modest and neat, without any expensive rugs, velvety sheets or glistening decors. She wasn't keen on make-up or jewels, with only a pair of thick-rimed glasses adorning her face. Her dress was always dignified and formal, plain fabric like the clothing of nuns secluded in a monastery.

If she hadn't told them, for sure they would've guessed that she was a strict Ravenclaw.

Joan pushed up her glasses. She frowned as she looked at the closed door, recalling the day she met Harry and the boy.

Because she was a Slytherin, she understood them very well. And because she understood Slytherins, she worried for the young man.

The day that she saved Harry started with her receiving an order from the Auror office to investigate Tom Riddle's violation of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery for performing a 'Protego' in muggle London. Slytherins always received some favours in the Ministry. They weren't expelled automatically through a letter; instead, an Auror would be sent to investigate the allegations personally.

When she arrived, she had been shocked by the scene in front of her— all the ruin and destruction, and bullets falling like rain. She scanned the smoke-filled streets, until her eyes met the desperate gaze of another Slytherin. Oh, there was no doubt the child was a Slytherin. The eyes of a Gryffindor wouldn't be warning of destruction; the eyes of a Ravenclaw wouldn't be red with madness; the eyes of a Hufflepuff wouldn't be glowing so angry and extreme.

Because she was a Slytherin, she understood that the child's slender body was simmering with dark powers and uncontrollable emotions, readying to explode.

Like a dragon whose treasure had been stolen, he was dangerous and growing powerful with anger. But... anger, like all emotions, was transient. It would pass. In the end, evil dragons were always tamed by brave knights.
But Tom had surprised her, for the boy settled down very quickly. He didn't scream out of rage; he
didn't swear bloody revenge; all he ever did was sat by Harry's bedside, waiting for the man to wake
up. Quietly and patiently, his expression was always devoted and gentle, appropriate, not a hair out
of place, no resentment, no anger, as if he was just... grateful to be alive. He just sat there, resting his
head against Harry's shoulder, affectionate and childishly clingy.

Joan frowned. She wanted to warn the young man, but didn't know what to say.

She shook her head. She was over-thinking it. She grabbed her books and cloak, then left the house.

It would be fine... Dragons, no matter how greedy and evil, were always tamed by knights in the
end.

____________________________________________

TN:

Sorry for delaying the update! I've been busy. I'll be busy all the way through September. So a
warning ahead- some weeks might not have/ have slower updates. Things should go back to normal
by the end of September.

I apologize in advance.
October 31, 1939

After two months had passed, Harry's wounds had finally scabbed over. The young man's healing process had been excruciatingly slow, so much that even Joan was frowning over him with worry.

"Joan, I have purchased a house at Godric's Hollow. Please come to visit soon... Again, I cannot thank you enough for everything you've done."

Harry smiled brightly at the young Auror, his splendid green eyes shining with excitement. Although his torso and face were still bandaged—which, oddly, made him looked very young—Harry was rather eager to be free of the sickbed. It was time for him to leave and to start the next phase of his life.

He needed to go home. Soon, someone would be expecting him.

Joan frowned again. She couldn't help but ask, "What's the rush?" — even though she already knew his answer.

"Sorry... It's just... Tom says he wants to come home for Christmas." The young man shrugged as he ran a hand through the messy tangle of black hair, although his smile was bright and joyful with indulgence.

Home — Harry repeated the word in his mind, over and over again until indescribable warmth spread through his veins. That word just made him feel happy, so happy and grateful for this second chance at life, a chance to unite with Tom.

Hermione, Ron, Ginny, George, Fred... everyone knew how much home meant to Harry. They all saw the longing on his face as he stepped into number 12 Grimmauld Place, and the mad desperation in his eyes as he had watched Sirius fall through the veil.

The cruellest thing in the world... was to catch a glimmer of hope before being cast back into darkness.

If he was a Slytherin, in those moments of loneliness and disappointment, perhaps he would have welcomed the darkness, falling through, wielding his power for nothing but vengeance and bloodshed, railing against the world.

But he was a Gryffindor— a brave and naive Gryffindor, who still believed in justice, in hope. Perhaps a Gryffindor's best trait was his ability to hope. They would go to the end of the earth in search of hope and warmth, even if, in the end, that warmth would burn them like the moths drawn to flame. Even if... their journey were plagued by moments of weakness and doubt, they wouldn't stop.

Gryffindors wouldn't give up.
For so long, Harry had longed for a home.

Although he didn't know how long this—his and Tom's—home would last, at the very least, he would do everything in his power to make it worthwhile. He still had hope.

Home was a form of a bond. At least, Harry could hope that this bond would be enough to change Tom, to slow the progress of history... Who knew? Not even Fate could take away his hopes and dreams.

Joan picked up the half-emptied potion bottles from the nightstand. She dumped the leftover liquid down the sink at Harry's insistence.

Perhaps it was childish, but... after two months of the steady intake of foul, bitter potions, he really couldn't take it anymore.

"Your injuries... Harry, are you sure you don't want to go for a check-up at St. Mungo's?" Joan pushed up her glasses. Her stern scrutiny reminded Harry strongly of Professor McGonagall.

Harry gave a dry smile and shook his head.

In this world of the past, only he knew the secrets and flaws of his body.

Five months, here, in the past was equivalent to only one day in the future, in his rightful timeline. If his body's aging process was slowed down in the past, then it was only natural for his wounds to heal just as slowly. Surely, it was supposed to happen like this... Harry didn't think healers at St. Mungo's or anywhere else could help him.

Suddenly, Harry's face turned serious. "Joan, could you do me a favour?"

In front of outsiders and other houses, Slytherins liked to pretend that they were in a class of their own. Classy and superior, obviously. But as soon as the door to the common room closed shut, they, too, fell under decadence and immodesty, acting on wild whims and the lustful impulse of teenagers. Flaunting was in their nature. These rich pure-bloods loved their decadent and outlandish parties, when they could wear the most luxurious robes, consume the most sumptuous food and drinks. Money could buy them an appearance of class and sophistication, and everything else they wanted, even if it was no more than senseless self-indulgence and pleasure. A rite of passage, just some harmless fun, they claimed, although, deep inside, they knew it was just an excuse to act out some hidden desires and to get adrenaline pumping through their veins.

Therefore, the Slytherin Halloween party had become legendary for its decadent and unforgettable ... nature.

"Tom, are you bringing a date to the party?" Ovidius approached Tom's bed, a brand-new dress robe stretched in his arms.

"No," Tom replied simply, bored. He didn't even bother to look up from his books. He never had much interest in social niceties, even though he was exceptionally good at them. See, he didn't even own a proper dress robe.

Recently, second-year students were introduced into the proper Slytherin social circle. This was the first time they were invited to their house's parties, so no wonder Ovidius was so excited.

Tom's dark eyes were glued onto a book. He turned a page and, for a moment, his quill hovered over a familiar topic — the "protego". Suddenly, he looked up. "Do I have to go?"
"Hey! Trust me—you'll want to go to this one." Ovidius shouted excitedly. He wiggled his eyebrows at Tom, then cracked a suggestive smile. "Don't tell me that you don't know what is going on tomorrow?"

"What? The Halloween Ball?" Tom circled something on the book.

"Oh Merlin! You don't know?!" Ovidius gasped.

Of course Tom didn't know. The purpose behind Slytherin's annual Halloween Ball was a house secret, a tradition passed down through many pure-blood families. Harry didn't know about it, and so, Tom couldn't have found out.

Tom looked at Ovidius inquisitively.

"Well, it's..." Ovidius paused. Tom's calm, depthless black eyes were making him feel rather exposed, embarrassed even, and suddenly, he forgot his words. He scratched his head sheepishly.

"Ah! Never mind! You'll see soon, tomorrow night—"

Ovidius' secrecy managed to spark Tom's interest briefly, but soon, his curiosity was forgotten and the boy became engrossed in his books again.

He had lots of books to read. He had lots of things to learn. He needed more knowledge. He must get stronger, train his mind, his magic, using every second of every day to grow and expand his power. He needed to grow up.

His curiosity had been completely forgotten until Abraxas Malfoy showed up.

"Here... A small present for you. For tomorrow's coming-of-age ceremony," Abraxas, still dressed rather ostentatiously, placed a gift-wrapped square box on Tom's bed and beckoned the boy to open it.

Tom didn't move. He raised an elegant eyebrow. "Coming-of-age ceremony?"

"Oh yes," Abraxas lazily brushed some platinum blonde hair from his shoulder. A teasing glint flashed in his cool blue eyes. "Now... you must test your will against the seductions and follies of the adult world. I trust you can manage, can't you?"

"Don't play games with me," the slender, tall adolescent snapped. The way his young face hardened with irritation made him seem considerably older.

Abraxas shrugged and said no more, although Tom did not like the knowing smirk on the Malfoy heir's smug face.

There were two ways in which someone was coming-of-age.

First, legally speaking, coming-of-age meant that an individual was old enough to take full responsibility for himself and ready to contribute to society. In the muggle world, one legally became an adult at age of eighteen; in the wizarding world, one earned that distinction at the age of seventeen. Second, biologically speaking, coming-of-age meant that an adolescent's body was rapidly maturing into that of an adult, with all its full-ranging functions and needs.

A sickeningly sweet fragrance lingered in the vast open longue. Its interior was transformed to a luxurious ball room, with champagne glasses, cushions, loud music and exposed bodies everywhere.
The light was dimmed with magic, permeating the room with a seductive glow that was just bright enough to illuminate youthful smooth skin, yet dim enough to shroud them in vague mystery. Even second-year girls changed out of their traditional school uniforms, favouring something tighter to show off their rapidly developing curves.

All the higher year students were present, loud and giggling and dancing with each other. Impossibly expensive robes and dresses twirled and swayed with the music. Under the dim lights and haze of alcohol, the voices and faces blurred together into a mass of youthful passion and uninhibited desires.

Instantly, Tom caught on to what was happening.

*Coming-of-age ceremony? How interesting.*

They were driven by human instincts. No matter muggles or wizards, teenagers would act like teenagers. Maturing boys and girls were naturally very curious about the opposite sex. And, for some, that interest included the same sex.

"What? Don't tell me you never had such urges before?... Not even a wet dream?" Abraxas peeked over Tom's shoulder and gave him a mischievous wink. He patted the boy's shoulder firmly, before abandoning him in favour of a witch in an teal-coloured dress.

*Wet... dream...* Tom narrowed his eyes as he sat down on an empty sofa, trying to recall his first hormonal experience.

Slytherins were always rather true to themselves, tuned into their own desires and ambitions; and so, sex wasn't such a taboo topic for them.

It happened last year... roughly. Tom didn't even remember anything about that experience. He didn't remember any dream. He wasn't even aware that he was dreaming of something, *or anyone*, until the next morning he woke up to find his pants soiled.

It didn't bother him. He just shrugged and changed his sheets. It was a very common biological reaction, after all.

Tom summoned a glass of alcoholic drink for himself. He sipped it slowly, calmly observing the party around him.

Obviously, the second-years were too young to participate in anything other than dancing and conversations. Even if some of their bodies might be capable, they were much too young for sex.

This party was certainly lively and extravagant and wildly noisy, but it wasn't enough to impress Tom.

Unless... there were more secrets to this *show*?

A smirk danced on the boy's lips briefly, as he drained his glass.

As the dance went on, the music had changed from classic jazz to thundering rock. The boys and girls, who had began the night with some self-control, were sufficiently drunk enough to throw all caution to the wind. Some danced on as they removed their cumbersome robes. Some sixth and seventh years had wandered off to some dimly lit corner, climbing onto soft cushions together, lips and hands exploring each other's bodies eagerly.

It felt like the air was turning hot and heavy. A smell of musk, mingled with muffled moans and
gasps, was spreading throughout the ballroom.

Tom stood up. He walked around the dance floor, to where some prefects were gathering up the other second-years. He strode through the crowd with a casual indifference. His young face was beautiful and arrogant under the dim lights, and his brand-new dress robe fitted his slender frame perfectly. Aesthetically, he was the perfect Slytherin, a young prince amongst unsophisticated juveniles.

He caught a lot of eyes, but no one approached him.

Second-years Slytherins were not suitable targets. They were too raw. Other arrangements had already been made to entertain the newest members of their society.

Tom watched the naked Veela kneeling by his feet, taking in her long blond hair and pale skin that was glowing under dim lights. Compare to his classmates, Tom seemed very nonchalant, his narrow black eyes cool and emotionless.

So this was the so-called secret of the party? They were provided with a chance to try their very first sexual experience in a semi-public place — nothing too difficult, just...oral sex.

The handsome boy licked his lips and smirked again. Suddenly, his eyes flared bright with a devious confidence, which at first glance, made his smile seem more alluring than even the Veela girl in front of him.

All men found a Veela's pheromones impossible to resist — it wasn't love, just primal instinct... but just as effective, nevertheless.

Immediately, Tom felt a strange warmth rushing to his lower belly. It made the blood in his veins burn hot, and suddenly, he felt a lust for blood rising to his throat.

"Come here," the boy beckoned the waiting Veela with one finger, his voice commanding and cold. But... sometimes, things tend lose their seductive allure once they lost the shroud of mystery and forbiddenness.

Tom sunk into the sofa as he observed the Veela's head bobbing between his legs, her hot tongue wrapping around his hardening prick eagerly. His eyes narrowed, and suddenly he felt rather empty.

Even the suggestive wet noises of lips sucking on skin seemed monotonous after a while. Once the burning curiosity died down, he felt nothing in his mind, not even a primal need for release.

Still, the slick, hot tongue was enough to excite his organs, yet it did not feel good, just waves upon waves of prickling heat and confusion. It was just rather...empty.

"Leave," the boy's command was cold and dismissive. He had finally tired of the act and pushed her away rather unceremoniously. Perhaps it spoke of his willpower or his cruelty even to himself... that he didn't even allow himself to achieve release, his prick still slick and throbbing.

Disgusting, Tom pursed his lips and quickly cleaned himself up. He gave a mocking glare to the groaning bodies all around him, before heading for the door.

This so-called forbidden fruit... it wasn't so sweet after all.

The Slytherin dormitory was utterly silent. No one had returned yet. They were all too busy
drowning in a good time of booze and lust. After all, Slytherins were meant to indulge and enjoy life.

Hands clutching in his pockets, Tom walked slowly from the ballroom back to his dorm, enjoying the cold night's wind caressing his cheeks. He felt calmer, his hormones and hot blood having since cooled down.

As he walked out of artificial dim light and into serene moonlight, the silence of the empty halls had done wonders for Tom's mood. His mind was clear again. Suddenly, an unexpected image jumped into his head.

*Harry.*

The boy stiffened.

Why would he be thinking about Harry at a time like this?

As soon as he entered his room, his eyes were immediately drawn toward a letter on his desk, with few brown feathers scattered about it.

Obviously, Tom did not expect mail at this hour.

He ripped opened the envelope and a photograph fell out.

It showed a square brick building, which looked rather similar to their previous house at number 15 London Street, lit aflame by the setting sun. A man was standing in front of the house, a head full of messy black hair, grinning widely, with plasters covering his face.

It was Harry. He pointed toward the house, then smiled and waved at Tom.

The boy's eyes focused on the young man's face, and for a moment, they seemed to glow with unreadable emotion. He couldn't help but reach out to touch the man in the photograph, but the little figure managed to evade his fingers.

"*Dear Tom,*

*Happy to report that I've found us a house. Obviously, the building behind me is our new home. Joan was kind enough to help me take this photo. I love it.*

*Also, happy Halloween to you.*

*Love,*

*Harry*"

TN:

So I just want to clarify — this fic does contain some sexually explicit contents. Few chapters here and there. (So far... maybe about 6ish?) So I'll give warnings for those chapters in the beginning of each chapter. I should probably go back to the first chapter to add the warnings there too... I should do it, when I'm not lazy.

Thanks.
For all the families in Europe, Christmas was the most important holiday of the year. Even though most nations were no longer under theocratic control, Christmas still held a special place in their hearts. It had become a traditional festival rather a religious holiday. Even the wizards, who were once persecuted by Christians during the Middle Ages, were eager to celebrate this special day alongside the muggles.

Ah, yes... religious or not, there were presents and feasts to be had.

"Are you seriously refusing the invitation of a Malfoy?" Abraxas asked in disbelief. He leaned toward Tom from across the train compartment, looking rather offended by the second-year's nonchalant reaction. "No Slytherin would turn down a chance to spend Christmas with my family."

"Thank you," the boy repeated. His apologetic yet firm tone indicated his refusal quite clearly.

Puzzled, Abraxas turned to look out the window, as rolling hills and green fields flew past.

Normally, he was very confident in his ability to judge people. He could see Tom was a capable and ambitious boy. He could see the potential in the boy's eyes, from that fathomless, dark depth into which people did not dare to look directly. The boy reeked of ambition and greed — the favourite perfume of Slytherins.

He was confident that, given time, this boy would become an influential figure in the wizarding world. Exceptional intellect, ruthless ambition, powerful magic... yet combined with an insignificant background and lack of familial backing— such a boy was the perfect target for Malfoy family to recruit.

Therefore, it had never occurred to Abraxas that Tom might refuse the golden olive branch extended by the Malfoy family. Yet...

Suddenly, Abraxas seemed to realize something. He frowned, before quickly plastering a friendly smile on his face.

"Then... are you planning to spend Christmas with your Harry?" Abraxas smirked; his tone was friendly and teasing, just enough to conceal the true intention behind the probing question.

Tom looked down, concealing the darkness flashing in his eyes.

"Yes."

Abraxas' smirk grew wide. He adjusted his arms, leaning back against the soft leather cushion. He was rather pleased with the boy's answer.

As long as the boy cared for something — he would always have a weakness.
Ha, now once he successfully recruited Tom, he would know exactly how to control the young viper.

Naturally, Tom had sensed the shift in Abraxas' mood, but he paid the blond no attention. After all, in the eyes of the young Dark-Lord-in-training, who had been perfecting his mask since he was four, the Malfoy's schemes and games were as obvious as child's play.

No. Tom's mind was occupied by something else.

From the moment he stepped onto the train, his mind was whirling wildly, exploding with painful thoughts and memories. He felt a dreadful tension building in his stomach, spasming in his throat, slowly but surely suffocating him.

Today was December 20th... and he couldn't help but recall the scenes from last year's holiday.

December 20th, 1938... Last year, same as today, he boarded the red, puffing Hogwarts Express. Same as today, he sat quietly in a train compartment, feigning an appearance of nonchalance as he stared out the window. His heart thumped in his chest; his throat tightened with dread. Although, in the back of his mind, he had been very aware that the man wasn't waiting for him at 'home', yet... he'd been foolish enough to hope. The flames of hope burned ruefully in the boy's chest, until he had finally reached the dark square building, where only an empty silence greeted him. At once, hopelessness had drenched him like freezing rain and, at last, snuffed out all the silly, childish sentimentalities of his past.

Once again, the scene in front of him appeared so similar. The same train compartment, the same soft leather seats — everything was as it once were... as if history was set on repeating itself; as if, once again, that same, unbearable disappointment was waiting to tear him apart.

Tom's face twisted. He clutched the letter in his hand, crumpling up the carefully preserved parchment. Its waxy sheen gleamed ominously in the sunlight.

The writing on the parchment was neat and easy to read— "...I've found us a house. Obviously, the building behind me is our new home."

Home?

Using his hands, Tom shielded his face from Abraxas' inquisitive gaze. His red lips cracked into a mocking smile, revealing his adorable canine teeth.

It was almost seven o'clock. Darkness has descended upon London amidst a flurry of white snow. Outside the window, memories from 1938 seemed to blur into the present scene of 1939. The hour, the location, even the weather, were exactly the same.

The red steam-engine train emitted a sharp whistle. The locomotive puffed out thick, cloudy columns as it screeched to a stop inside King's Cross station.

Then, beneath their feet, the compartments shook violently and inertia jerked them forward. The next second, the doors slid open and cheering children streamed out of the train at once. Laughing, hollering, the children ran into their parent's arms, free at last from the prison of homework and classes.

It was like the scene abruptly transformed from a silent black-and-white film into a lively, clamorous movie — as if their loving reunions had injected a burst of colour into the world.
Tom watched the commotion coldly. His fist tightened; cold sweat soaked the letter in his hand.

He looked at the letter, which he had read so many times that he had memorized it, and hesitated. Then, he tucked it into the pages of a book.

He didn't throw it away.

Harry had arrived at Platform 9 3/4 early.

Even though he knew the train's arrival time was seven o'clock, he still worried that it might come early or he might run late. So he showed up ahead of time and waited in the snow, alongside many other eager parents. It seemed that they all had the same idea.

Harry couldn't wait to show Tom their new home. He almost wanted to laugh at his own childish giddiness. After all, it was just a regular house, not some treasure.

The flurry grew thicker. Harry had to retreat into a sheltered waiting area, as more and more snow melted on his coat. All around him, wizards and witches wisely casted heating charms and drying charms on their cloaks. But Harry had lost his own wand in the airstrike from months ago. Not a piece of the holly wand remained. Not even the summoning charm could locate its fragments. So he had to make due, stomping his feet and rubbing his hands together like a muggle.

Maybe, it was time to pay Ollivander a visit. The holly and phoenix feather wand should still be in a box somewhere in the old man's shop.

Just as Harry was growing restless and rather bored, he heard a clear, piercing whistle. The train was pulling into the station.

Then, at once, the crowd pushed forward, parents rushing toward the train, just as [the] children, who had already changed out of their Hogwarts uniforms, ran out its doors. Instantly, the platform was filled with happy faces and festive greetings.

Harry, too, was trying to push through the crowd.

"Excuse me. Coming through!"

"Sorry, ma'am."

"Pardon me."

Harry scanned the crowd and he found Tom instantly.

Even though Voldemort's nose-less, pale face was rather horrifying, Harry had to admit that Tom Riddle was very handsome in his youth. The boy was tall, slender, with an indescribable charm and charisma. And, he was the center of attention everywhere he went.

After four months of separation, Harry could tell Tom had grown quite a lot at Hogwarts. He might even reach Harry's shoulder now. The boy was dressed in muggle attire, his hands hidden in his pockets, relaxed and casually confident as he watched the crowd; his trunk floating by his side, the impressive spell work drawing envious stares from his classmates.

Harry wiggled his frozen fingers and toes, before rushing toward the boy. He grinned widely.

"TOM!"
As he approached the boy, Harry found that not only had Tom grown taller but he had also lost some baby fat. A protruding Adam's apple was quite visible on his long neck. His face no longer held the roundness of a child; his features becoming more chiseled and sharp, with the assertive and powerful lines of a young man. He was transforming, growing up beautifully, as if being perfected under the chisel of a master sculptor.

The boy stood very still, back straightened, lips pursed, silently studying Harry's smiling face. Harry almost found his unwavering attention to be... rather flattering, for the lack of a better word.

"Hello, silly. Don't just stand there. You'll catch a cold." Harry patted the boy on the head, while silently lamenting to himself that time sure flies.

Tom didn't reply. He couldn't look away from the young man's bright green eyes. He couldn't explain the strange yet intense emotions bursting from his chest when he heard that familiar voice shouting his name. If he'd been a Gryffindor, he would've been running forward instantly, hugging the young man tightly and never letting go. But... Slytherins valued control. So, instead, he internalized his ecstasy and relief, dissolving its fierce intensity into a mask of polite and innocent smile.

He knew what Harry expected from him... and he was even willing to pretend for the sake of the young man, for the sake of their new home, for the sake of this momentary happiness.

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Godric's Hollow was home to a mixed muggle-magical community.

Harry didn't spend a lot of time strolling through the village, even though he had lived there for a while. He spent most of his days locked up in his room, working on strategies for Dumbledore's Army.

He couldn't explain why he chose to live here.

In the village square, there was a black obelisk carved with names — yet they were names that Harry didn't recognize. And, whenever someone got close to the memorial, it didn't transform into a statue of a father, mother and baby.

"Harry?" Tom followed Harry's gaze to the plain marble pillar. The boy observed the obelisk carefully, but he couldn't find anything special about it.

The question snapped Harry from his memories. Flustered, he squeezed Tom's hands, then he quickly pulled the boy away from the obelisk and toward their house.

Suddenly, Harry regretted buying a house at Godric's Hollow. Everything in this village reminded him of his parents, of their murder, and of their murderer— their death was his and Tom's beginning. Harry walked quickly, determined to avoid looking at the grim marble slab. He bit his lips.

He couldn't afford to cry.

"Harry? What's wrong?" Tom asked as he looked up at Harry. The young man's eyes were still bright and beautiful as emeralds, yet Tom detected a shift in his mood instantly.

"Come, we are almost home."

Harry wrapped Tom's hands in his palms, trying to keep the boy's fingers from freezing. Yet, in the face of the winter's cruel wind, such a feeble gesture was barely noticeable, its warmth easily robbed by the cold, arid air.
The walking distance from the village square to their home was short, yet long enough for Harry to calm down.

Every road must lead to somewhere. Every choice must have some consequence.

Since he had decided to stay with him, to love him and to watch him grow up, then this was his choice. No regrets.

"Welcome to your new home." Harry smiled as he pulled open the front door to reveal their new house.

Its walls were newly painted, as white as the snow outside. For a moment, as the young man's gentle and graceful smile filled his vision, Tom thought the entire world had melted away into the snow. Harry hurried him inside, then earnestly asked for his opinion, as if he were a child eager to be praised.

The man's enthusiasm was contagious, so much so that it made Tom's lips curl up. At once, the boy felt very warm.

"Ah, you are back already?" Someone walked out of the living room. Very naturally, she took Harry's coat from his hands and hung it up. Then, with a wave of her wand, she floated Tom's luggage inside and lined it neatly against the wall, then gave them a stern greeting.

It was Joan.

As soon as Tom saw the young woman, his smile vanished. He frowned, before immediately shifting his expression back into a polite smile. "Miss Joan, what are you doing here?"

Harry evened out some wrinkles on his beige sweater and rolled up the sleeves. He turned and answered, "Oh! I invited Joan over to celebrate Christmas with us. She's helped me a lot — with moving and everything."

"I see, but... doesn't Miss Joan want to spend Christmas with her own family?" The boy asked politely, before gasping and covering his mouth in an over-dramatic manner. "Ah! I apologize. I think... I might've forgotten that Miss Joan was kicked out of her household. Sorry, let me take this inside—"

Tom pushed past Harry and Joan, then dragged his luggage into the living room.

Harry stood in the foyer in awkward silence. Was... was Tom lashing out?... It wasn't like him.

"Sorry, Joan. He—"

"No need. He was telling the truth." Joan shrugged. She wasn't offended at all. She nodded toward Harry, "Don't worry about it. I'm going back to my room. Later, I'll bring your potions to you."

Tom sat down on the sofa, cool dark eyes roaming over the room. The house's interiors were almost identical to that of number 15 London Street, yet it felt like a strange place to him.

The boy ran a hand through his soft, black hair. Suddenly, he felt very irritated. The good mood, in which he just been savoring three minutes ago, vanished completely.

He didn't like Joan. He didn't like her being here, intruding in his home. But he wasn't stupid enough
to confront her about it. Yet, that scene he just witnessed, when she helped Harry put away his coat, so naturally as if she was the mistress of the house... it was all very irritating.

Husband and wife, a new household, what a fitting and wonderful combination?.. Just heart-warming, no?

Tom grinned to himself, the little wolf cub showing off his sharp fangs.
December 25, 1939

"To deprive a target of his free will, certain Dark wizards created the thrall potion. This very potent and evil elixir was banned by the Ministry of Magic. A person who ingests this potion will be deprived of their senses, unable to process new information about the outside world. This includes the lost of all taste and sensory perceptions, as well as the removal of emotions like love, happiness, sadness... etc."

Tom dipped his quill in red ink, then underlined the word— thrall potion; his dark eyes icy and focused, his handsome face twisted with a savage curiosity.

The boy took a deep breath and tried to shut out the annoying image in his head — a kind young man and an intelligent young woman sitting together on a sofa, engaged in lively discussion.

What a picture perfect pair they made!... And, once again, Tom was the extra.

Ha... What irony!

Tom felt very irritated, but he tried to suppress his emotions, only allowing a mocking smile to surface.

A man, a woman, and perhaps a baby in their future— what a perfect little family! This was what a real family should have looked like, whole, happy, with a home that excluded Tom Riddle.

Oh, Tom knew how this story would end exactly. A freaky, little orphan would have no place in this wonderful home; his existence would become a blemish to this perfect family. So, eventually, they would gladly send him away, back to the orphanage where he belonged.

Tom bit down hard on his lips. Instantly, he remembered the woman who used to visit him at the orphanage with cheap, colourful candies.

He also remembered the oath he made as a child. He swore to himself that, one day, he would become a very powerful man... so powerful and strong that no one would dare to ignore or disrespect him. Never again.

Back on the Hogwarts Express, Abraxas had asked him: "are you planning to spend Christmas with your Harry?" and the blonde had been visibly relieved by his answer. Although the Malfoy heir thought himself very cunning, Tom saw through his scheme right away— he was so relieved to find Tom's weakness.

As long as Tom cared about someone, he would always have a weakness. As long as he had a weakness, he would never gain enough power to pose a threat to the Malfoy family. Yet... all of Slytherin's House was marked by their ambition, by their insatiable desire for success, by their endless pursuit of power... They would never settle for less.

Tom, too, was endlessly ambitious. He wanted to become the most powerful man in the world, one
without any flaws, one strong enough to stand alone, one influential enough to conquer the wizarding world if necessary.

Therefore, logically, he couldn't afford to have a weakness.

It seemed like he was at an impasse, with only one logical outcome— he must eliminate this weakness. He had to get rid of his emotions and this useless feeling of attachment... Then— and only then— would he grow up to be perfect and pure and powerful enough to make sure that man could never abandon him.

Never again.

"Tom, are you ready?"

Harry called from the foyer downstairs. They were leaving to visit Diagon Alley. Their purpose? — To buy a new wand for Harry.

Tom's eyes turned dark. He opened his drawer and took out a skinny rectangular box. The box was fitted with locks and anti-summoning charms. He murmured a spell and it slid open, revealing a broken wand lying on top of red velvet inlays. The fractured wooden stick was barely held together by tendril of a gleaming wand core— a single, beautiful, fire-red feather. Beside the wand, there were three bloodied bullets and a small piece of dark-scarlet cloth.

Obviously, the wand was his wand— the one made from holly and phoenix feather. The bullets were dug out and removed from his flesh. And the dark-coloured cloth was stained with his blood.

Claim it is madness, if you must... Tom would even agree that this perverse collection did make him seem rather like a stalker. Guilty. Sick... Dangerous.

His long, thin fingers stroked the holly wand lovingly, before suddenly pressing down hard and snapping the wooden stick completely.

"I'm coming!" He shouted back cheerfully.

Tom smiled brightly as he locked the box back into his drawer, no trace of dark paranoia lingering on his face.

"Ah! Isn't this only the second time we're going to Diagon Alley together, Tom?"

Harry was smiling at him from the foyer, a wool scarf around his neck, and Joan standing by his side. Today, the young woman had changed out of her usually sombre robes and wore her hair loosely around her shoulders, which made her normally strict facade fade away into a more womanly softness. She was smiling too... at something Harry had said.

Standing together, the two of them made a good-looking pair... awfully harmonious and sweet.

Tom stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at them. His smile never wavered, although his eyes dimmed.

He belonged to the darkness. Harmonious and sweet things were not suitable to his tastes. They were too bright, happy... a thorn in his eyes.

Harry hadn't felt so relaxed in a long time.
Family and friends, out on a shopping trip together, *enjoying life.*

This mundane little trip gave him more pleasure than he had felt all year. *Hmmm... Perhaps he should venture out more often.*

Right now, Harry was feeling rather content, enjoying the company of a good-humoured, cunning little boy and a cool, considerate friend. He was also enjoying the sights of a peaceful Diagon Alley, of shops and roads devastated by war in the future.

But Joan wasn't quite as content. She knew something that Harry did not — namely the little boy who he described as "good-humoured", glaring at her with dark eyes full of icy warning.

Joan slowed her steps, falling behind father and son as she observed them walking together, side-by-side. She frowned deeply. The boy didn't hesitate to bare his fangs at her, yet he did everything he could to keep the one person closest to him in the dark. He was a masterful actor for someone so young, a ferocious wolf cub hiding his claws and fangs, pretending to be a naive, helpless lamb for that man's sake. It was... rather alarming. Joan was troubled by the boy's behaviour, but she couldn't pinpoint why exactly.

In most Slytherin households, even young children tended to be cunning enough to hide their true intentions from their parents. But none were as skilled and thorough as Tom, good enough to wear a new and different personality so flawlessly.

This boy seemed rather... sinister.

"Oh! Look who it is—" Ollivander appeared from behind a tall stack of teetering wand boxes, inevitably knocking some over in his hurry. "Ah, never mind 'em. I'll clean 'em up later."

"Mr. Riddle," Ollivander, who hadn't yet gone all ashen-haired and wrinkled, winked at them. "Thirteen-and-a-half inches, yew with phoenix feather core. Yes? Perfect combination. Very powerful. I trust it's performing well?"

"Yes, very well." Tom nodded politely.

Ollivander turned toward Joan. "Miss Joan— Eleven inches, sycamore and cobra heart sting. Sturdy and very flexible. Didn't I say so myself?"


Harry stifled a laugh. *Ah yes,* even seventy-years later, the old man remembered things just as clearly.

"I wish to buy a wand," Harry informed the wand-maker. "My old one was lost during the muggle war. Unfortunately, not even the *accio* charm could summon it — or whatever remained of it."

Beside him, Tom's polite smile didn't waver, not even one bit. Casually, the boy twirled the yew wand between his fingers, as if he hadn't noticed the pang of regret in Harry's voice.

Harry was immediately put through a series of complex measurements, followed by wand after wand being thrust into his hands.

Reluctantly, Harry tried every single one of these wands; his magic reacting differently to each one, shooting spells wildly until the whole shop was almost in shambles. With the help of her sycamore wand, Joan was kind enough to mend and clean up what she could— while being very patient and encouraging throughout the process. Oh, she was such a *great friend* that it annoyed Tom to no end.
If only... it wasn't illegal for underage wizards to use magic outside of school...

Tom continued to smile, but his gaze turned even more frigid when facing Miss Joan.

There was a loud bang when another streak of light struck a towering pile of boxes. Everything toppled over at once, wands and wooden boxes cluttering toward the floor like an avalanche.

"Sorry!" Harry exclaimed, scratching his head sheepishly. He was really tempted to tell Ollivander outright just which one he wanted.

Yet the more wands Harry tried, the more excited Ollivander seemed. The elder wand-maker turned his attention to Tom, who had remained stubbornly by Harry's side despite almost being hit by stray spells, and suddenly his eyes lit up. He dove back, head-first, into piles of wand boxes, digging through and pulling out dusty cases excitedly.

"Ah-ha! This should be it!" Ollivander murmured to himself as he pulled out another wand, his eyes flickered and focused on the yew wand in Tom's hands.

As soon as he saw the wand, Tom's pupils constricted until they were tiny specks, as dark and fathomless as the cloudless, starless night sky.

Although Harry didn't often use his wand in front of Tom, regardless, the boy instantly recognized the wand in Ollivander's hands — it was the same holly wand locked safely inside his drawer. His eyes narrowed. Yes, he was sure this wand was an exact replica of Harry's old wand.

Now, Tom was no expert on wand lore, so he didn't know how two wands could be exactly the same, because he had read that should be nearly impossible. At least, he had never seen two of the same wands at Hogwarts. Although at first glance, some wands may appear similar to one another, there had to be some inevitable differences in their appearances, some variations in carvings, handle patterns, lengths, or even in wood textures.

Although Tom couldn't claim to have eidetic memory, he was always very confident in his own eyes and judgement. He knew that these two wands were exactly the same.

But... that would be impossible.

"Oooh...oh!" Ollivander clapped his hands excitedly, then handed the wand over to Harry. He observed Harry and Tom intently, grinning. "I presume you two are very close?"

"Yes," Harry smiled back.

Ollivander seemed satisfied. His lips stretched wide, revealing crooked, yellow teeth. "I thought so. There... Holly, with a phoenix feather core. How extraordinary... Mr. Potter, it just so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in this wand, gave another feather — just one other. Curious... very curious. So it seems your wand and Mr. Riddle's wand are brothers — brother wands — the only pair known in the world."

Tom snapped to attention at Ollivander's words.

Brother wands— the only pair known in the world?

The boy's fingers immediately jumped to his own wand, caressing its smooth handle tenderly, repeating the old man's words in his head — the only pair in the world.

As his fingers tightened around the wand possessively, an uncontainable pride rose from his heart. It
filled him with an unexplainable joy and satisfaction, and suddenly his bad mood vanished.

The dark-haired boy lifted his head to meet Joan's calm gaze. He gave her a smug look, challenging her silently, despite the polite, little smile still fixed on his face.

Joan's lips twitched. *Ah*, so he still acted like a child, a bit immature in his possessiveness, but still... so easily satisfied.

"Harry, what do you think of Joan?"

"Hm?"

Surprised, Harry looked up from behind the newspaper. He glanced over the neat living room, and found Tom, who was carefully rearranging flowers behind the coffee table.

"Such as... could she be your wife... or something?" Tom smiled brightly at him. He plucked some pink and green flowering buds from the vast, before suddenly crushing them in his palms, squeezing out pink sap that dripped down his wrists.

Harry chuckled. "Joan?! That would be very unlikely, I'm afraid."

See, Harry didn't belong to this era, so he had never even thought about marriage or romance. At least not here, while he was stuck in the past.

"Why not? I think... Miss Joan would make a wonderful wife." Tom spoke very slowly, carefully considering every word as he observed the young man's reaction intently. The boy wiped sticky sap from his fingers, then tossed the tissues and crushed petals into the trash can.

"Actually... there is already someone else." Harry smiled warmly as he remembered Ginny's fierce red hair and energetic blue eyes.

Tom's hands shook. A rose slipped out of his fingers; its thorns pierced his thumb, enough to draw blood.

"Then, are you planning to get married? Harry, you already... turned thirty-three, right?" Tom asked, tilting his head slightly. His voice was upbeat and curious, yet his eyes told a different story. Through thick eyelashes, his pupils were surrounded by a chilling darkness, almost uncontainable in its ferocity, tinting his eyes a dark, ghastly purple.

Harry didn't notice. He shook his head, "No... Not really. She— er— she is not here... in this world."

Yes, the pretty red-haired girl belonged in 2001. *Not here with him.*

Tom suddenly went quiet. Then, after a few minutes, he spoke up in a calming, comforting tone.

"...Ah, sorry, my condolences, Harry... I didn't know."

Harry hesitated, but decided not to correct him. He only thanked the boy's concern with a slight smile.

Tom straightened the flowers in the vast. Although he had torn apart few buds, the rest of the roses bloomed cheerfully on their stems, soft petals, vibrant colours, *beautiful.*

Leaves and roses formed a thick fan that hid Tom's face, so he discarded his mask freely. A pleasing smile danced on his red lips, although it wasn't the nice-kind-of smile, but a smile full of malice, cruelty, obsession and twisted, dark desire.
What a pity that she was not in this world.

The dark-haired boy chuckled quietly to himself, although, outwardly, his expression conveyed just the right amount of kindness and sympathy.

墨玉绿's AN:

More Comedy Sketches:

Scene 1)

Ollivander: "Your wand and Mr. Riddle's wand are brothers — brother wands— the only pair known in the world."

Tom smirks: "Brother wands?... I prefer the term— lovers... wands."

Harry: "... I'm the Chosen one, saviour of the wizarding world, enemy of the Dark Lord."

Scene 2)

The dark-haired boy lifts his head to meet Joan's calm gaze. He gives her a smug look, challenging her silently.

Tom murmurs under his breath: "Where's your brother wand? Hmm, harlot? And stay away from what is mine."

Harry: "... I'm the Chosen one, saviour of the wizarding world, enemy of the Dark Lord."
1941

Two years had passed in a blink of an eye. Fate sped up the dial of time. It grinned silently as, everywhere, destinies were being fulfilled according to its plans, without the knowledge of the busy folks of the wizarding world. They were blissfully ignorant, only after a long day of work, occasionally lamenting to themselves that ‘time sure flies!’

But for the muggles, the last two years had been hell. War raged on and on; their lives and cities had been blown apart.

August sun glared down on London with a stifling heat. Under its obscenely cheerful light, this ancient city only seemed more desolate, tragic, riddled with bomb craters and crumbled houses — this was purgatory on earth.

At the East End of London, a tall and handsome youth strode down a dirty road. Jet-black hair, pale skin, and expensive waistcoat, he seemed thoroughly out of place in the slums.

The fourteen-year-old had long since grown out of his childish features. His neck was long and elegant, his dark eyes narrow and sharp, his face as exquisite as the most perfect marble statue. He carried an air that made all the famous muggle celebrities seem shallow and inferior in comparison.

From time to time, orphans in rags would approach him, begging for scraps or kindness. For amidst the poverty and devastation of war, the boy’s elegance and cleanliness stuck out like a sore thumb.

The youth just walked on, utterly indifferent to their plights.

In one street corner, there was a little girl coughing out blood, one of her legs twisted in an awkward angle. Next to her, a little boy was digging through a trash can; he pulled out a piece of leather and chewed on it desperately, even though it was too tough to swallow. A woman was wailing inside the ruins of a destroyed house, cuddling a dead baby in her arms, her voice hoarse and ear-splitting.

Yet Tom just went on his way, as if he was oblivious to all their suffering.

Who was to blame for his apathy?... Nature, nurture, or the muggles from Tom's own past who had ignored his cries for help?

Tom sneered as he passed through the dirty streets. The scenery in front of him seemed awfully familiar, like the scene from two years ago when Harry lay dying in his arms. He would never forget the faces of the muggles who ran past them— their empty, fearful, apathetic eyes sweeping pass the fallen boy and man, blind to Tom's desperate pleas. He would never forget the feeling of hot blood seeping through his fingers as he begged the bystanders for help, yet none of them had even slowed or spared them another glance.

Tom halted as he surveyed the ruined muggle street around him. Suddenly, he smiled, savouring the
sweet taste of vengeance on his lips.

Help muggles?... Hmph...

Hidden on the outskirts of London, there was a desolate beach near a dark, jagged cave, where no amount of sunlight could reach into its grim, chilling, cavernous depths.

Tom narrowed his eyes and stepped into the cave. He, however, quite enjoyed its dark, damp air.

A large body of black water was found at the end of the tunnel. As Tom knelt next to the deathly calm waters, something icy-cold slithered up his arm.

"Tom! How could you leave me for sssssso long!" It whined loudly.

The serpent, which had been ordered by Tom to stay behind and guard the cave, had grown quite large in his absence. Its scaled body, once only the size of a grown-man's thumb, was now as thick as a child's arm.

The snake was very excited to see her master again after a whole year. She wrapped herself around his neck snugly, hissing into his ears, "Tom! Tom! I found myself a name— Nagini! Do you like it?"

Tom patted her triangular head. "Calm down, Nagini."

The large snake quite liked the sound of its new name coming from the boy's lips. She swished her tail around like a satisfied house cat, then settled down.

Tom turned his attention toward the deceptively still water, "How was that mission I gave you?"

Nagini flicked her tail and pushed a pebble into the dark waters. It splashed loudly, and the resulting ripples disrupted the calm, mirror-like surface, revealing the danger lurking just beneath, as endless, ghastly white limbs could be glimpsed through the dark waves. The whole reservoir was filling up with Tom's undead army.

Tom stood on the banks, observing these greyish white creatures of the sea with mild fascination. His dark eyes glinted with a terrifying glee.

Although no light could penetrate the inside of the cave, the boy could see just fine. He basked in the presence of his Inferi army, dark eyes savouring their pale, decayed bodies like displays of priceless artwork.

Finally, he seemed satisfied and rewarded his pet with a smile. Even in the dim lights, he recognized the half-eroded uniforms still clinging onto their undead bodies— metal badges in the shape of a spread-winged eagle, black-and-white ranking strips, and narrow-flank crosses; these were the proud emblems of the German Air Force.

"Tom! Can Nagini keep these?" With her tail, Nagini swept out a glinting pile of golden and silver pieces from underneath a quartz crystal; no doubt they once belonged to her victims. It seemed that, in her boredom, the serpent had racked up an extensive collection of medals and insignias.

Tom examined a few of the badges. Some were even from ranks as high as colonel or captain.

A beautiful smile curled on the boy's lips as he stroked her head in approval, nodding, "Impressive... Very, very nice."
Yes, his pet had done her task well. And... now he had a nice collection of athletic, strong German muggle soldiers under his command.

Very nice indeed.

"Ah! One more thing, Nagini—" Tom hissed softly, the inhuman sound dispersing through the dark cave like whispers of the wind. "Do you know anything of ...the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Nay...Never heard of it," Nagini tilted her head and thought hard, then shook her head again.

Tom nodded. His eyes narrowed, dark and brooding.

By the time Tom returned to Godric's Hollow, it was night time and Harry had already returned from a long day of work at the Ministry.

"Tom, it's late. Where have you been?" The young man questioned sternly.

Tom stripped his shoes and looked up. Fringes of soft, black hair settled into his eyes in a casual but perfect style. "Ah, Abraxas invited me over... Sorry, Harry, I must've lost track of the time."

"Oh," Harry's eyes grew wide at the familiar name, but he quickly recovered. He grabbed an old newspaper and pretended to read it, hiding his worried expression behind its grey pages.

How many lies were in the boy's words? Harry needed to know. He wanted to trust him, but... he was also afraid to find out the truth. What if all the answers only pointed toward one irreversible path? What if, in the end, no matter what he did, time was still irreversible?

Time sure flew... And he was not prepared to face the future that followed.

Maybe Harry was over-thinking it again... but he thought he had sensed the tide of time turning against him as Fate plotted away in the shadows. Before Harry had formulated a plan, Tom had already grown up so fast—the boy was entering his fourth year—and Harry knew how this specific year was a turning point in Voldemort's life.

Fourteen was an interesting age for European males. It was a time when their hormones had transformed them from scrawny bean sprouts to strapping, confident young men. Their faces were maturing, and becoming well-defined, straddling a perfect balance between feminine beauty and masculine power. Fuzzy stubble grew on their chins, their voices deepened, their grins brimmed with charm and youthful energy.

And, out of all of his fellow year-mates, Tom was always the best. The boy had inherited his father's handsome features and tall stature, as well as his mother's noble bloodline and powerful magic. And, more impressively, the boy never let his privilege go to his head, as he had always acted courteous and polite to everyone.

Of course, Harry was armed with the knowledge of the future, so he knew the boy's kind actions were a sham. He had paid close attention to this boy, and to his future, enough to recognize the power and ambition concealed within those beautiful black eyes.

History was set in stone. And so...in his fourth year, Tom Riddle would begin researching horcruxes. In his fifth year, he would murder his only living relatives and create his first—but not his last—horcrux. In his sixth year, he would open the chamber of secrets, unleash the basilisk and murder an innocent classmate, then frame everything on Hagrid.
Looking ahead, his and Tom's future seemed rather hopeless... All tangled up in tragic, horrible darkness. The very inevitability of fate. Suddenly, Harry felt helpless in front of all the potential problems of the future, weighted down by responsibilities and the lives he must save.

He was overwhelmed. He needed some... help.

Harry did not want to act rashly. He did not want to disrupt the tentative bond that he shared with Tom. He couldn't bring himself to confront the boy— so he looked the other way. All he had accomplished was to lock himself in his study as he worked on plans for Dumbledore's Army, trying his best to be a good father who constantly worried about his child. Harry did everything he could to maintain a normal home. And at times, in those moments when Tom smiled up at him with bright eyes, Harry felt that everything was worth it.

Voldemort had always been a great actor. He could seduce people's hearts and minds so easily... especially when he wanted something from them. Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, his charming smile fooled everyone around him— Professor Slughorn, who unwittingly told him about the Horcruxes; Helena Ravenclaw, who unwillingly gave him the diadem; and even Harry, who knew his true nature, could not refuse the boy's smiles.

"Tom, I'm going away for three months... after you have left for Hogwarts, of course." Harry set the newspaper down. His pinched his nose, feeling rather exhausted.

He couldn't continue on his own. He needed some advice.

He needed to talk to Hermione.

Tom's head jerked up. He met Harry's tired eyes. Suddenly, the boy's pupils constricted into thin lines like the hungry eyes of a snake, predatory and focused, folding the young man's image into their fathomless darkness.

From 1932 to 1941, nine years had passed, and yet Harry looked exactly the same as when Tom had first met him. The young man's skin was pale and smooth, as if time could leave no mark on his anatomy; his hair was lush, jet-black, and as messy as a bird's nest, as if it couldn't grow or grey in any way. Time seemed frozen on his body.

Tom smoothed out his expression carefully. He nodded and answered sweetly, "I see... Harry, have a safe trip."

Harry pursed his lips. He held the boy's respectful gaze for a moment, then lowered his eyes.

Tom stayed as calm as he could until he retreated into the safety of his own room, away from Harry's eyes. Then his expression changed abruptly, baring his teeth like a snarling wolf cub.

"Nagini," Tom pulled up the leg of his pants to reveal the miniaturized snake wrapped around his ankle. "I need you to do something for me—"

He paused. "I need you to... look after Harry for me."

Yes, look after Harry... He needed her to monitor what Harry was doing, where Harry was going and why... Why did the man insist on leaving Tom behind? In all honesty, he just needed her to spy on Harry.

Tom's expression turned bitter and chilling.
There was too much he didn't know about Harry.

In the past nine years, the man's appearance never changed, at all. Even though wizards tended to live longer than muggles, they were not immortal. Although fine wrinkles had crawled onto Joan's face, Harry still looked exactly the same. If he was a muggle scientist, Tom might've theorized that this man experienced abnormally slow cell division. All in all, Harry was a mystery — from his wounds that healed so slowly; to his wand which had a carbon-copy; to this trip that he took every three years to God-knows-where; to his odd attitude toward Tom, sometimes affectionate and other times... wary.

*Harry Potter... what a very suspicious man.*

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**September first. Platform 9 and 3/4.**

"Tom..." Harry turned toward the boy who was now as tall as himself. He opened his mouth, but wasn't sure what to say.

What could he say?... He wanted to tell the boy to never seek out the Chamber of Secrets, to never read up on Horcruxes, to never indulge in Dark Arts, to never —ever — change his name from Tom Marvolo Riddle to... Lord Voldemort.

But he couldn't.

If he'd been a Christian, he would have prayed to God to keep his son on the righteous path. He would've press a kiss on the boy's forehead, whispering, "God bless you, my child."

But he was a wizard.

"Take care of yourself," that was all he said as Tom stepped onto the train. Harry's face pale and grim as he watched the red steam-engine train rumble away into the distance.

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Tom sat by himself in a compartment near the tail of the train. He peered out the window until he couldn't see Harry's rapidly shrinking form anymore.

Maybe... it was beneficial for his plans for Harry to be away on his trip. Tom contemplated as he rested his chin on his arms.

At least, now he had nothing to care for... *nothing to fear.* He could devote all his time to search for the Chamber of Secrets... and to dig up information on the Horcrux.

After all, in the past two years, he had grown so much. He had learned so much, including patience. Tom's eyes swirled darkly, and then he smiled.

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Fate clasped its hands in satisfaction. It observed the two men heading down opposite directions—one sitting contently on the Hogwarts Express, while the other walked home with heavy and troubled steps.

Perhaps the young saviour would still come up an air-tight plan; and perhaps he only had the best intentions in mind... yet the events, which he had worried about the most, were already set in motion.

His fate could be summed up in two words—*too late.*
September, 1941

Some of a Slytherin's favourite things were attending parties and various social functions. And, for a Slytherin entering his fourth year, such events practically became a responsibility. In pure-blood society, fourth-years were given an invitation to choose a future for himself — to choose the right kind of future — with the right kinds of friends and the right kind of pureblood family to serve.

Therefore, it was no wonder that Slytherins always threw the best parties, always so grandiose and exquisite, with the most expensive drinks and lively music and all the right kind of people.

In the dungeons, there were always pits and rooms set aside for these special events. Hidden behind thick velvety curtains and crystal stained glass windows, under the soft glow of glittering chandeliers, a vibrant and expensive evening ball was under way.

Across the ball room, Slytherin boys and girls were clustering in small groups. It was easy to figure out everyone's alliance by their association. See, everyone followed at least one of the three most powerful families — the Blacks, the Malfoys or the Princes.

Tom swirled his wine glass, observing their interactions and clashes with mild interest.

See, Tom was a special case in Slytherin. He chose not to choose sides. He kept his alliance deliberately unclear, despite the best effort of all three families to pursue him. Although Abraxas had been trying to recruit him since his first day at Hogwarts, Tom never gave a clear indication either way, which frustrated the Malfoy heir to no end.

Tom looked up as an older boy approached him, wine glass in hand.

"Tom Riddle," the handsome boy introduced himself to the newcomer with a firm handshake. He raised his glass toward the other dark-haired boy, as wine swished around in the glass, red and richly dark like blood.

"Cygnus Black," the other boy answered and drained his own glass. "Ah, so I've heard...Your name precedes you, Tom."

Indeed, his name did precede him. Everyone knew the name of Tom Riddle, who was the most promising Slytherin of his year.

He was Hogwarts' best student. Handsome, mysterious, brilliant, courteous, refined, and — everyone agreed on this — he was truly, irresistibly, irrefutably flawless from head to toe.

Yet... as perfect as he was, he was only one individual, without a notable family name behind him; and thus, a free talent like Tom Riddle became highly sought after. A most prized associate, whose abilities would make him a great asset to any well-known pureblood family.
Abraxas Malfoy rested on a sofa, watching the boy converse and dance around the crowds of young nobility with great ease. Suddenly, he felt the pressure seeping through the boy's polite smiles. He could recall, just four years ago, how that unknown boy with his gloomy face and his muggle name began schooling as the mutt of Slytherin; how he was bullied and rejected by his peers the moment he had yanked off the sorting hat. Yet... in four short years — no... in even less time — he had grown into a leader of Slytherin, someone to be admired, someone that even the children of the three families chased after.

Once, Abraxas had truly wanted to recruit the boy into the Malfoy family's services. But now, after observing how easily the boy managed to command a room, Abraxas felt just a wee bit threatened.

Abraxas rubbed his temple, blue eyes narrowed and focused.

_In end... who would become the servant, and whom the master?_

He sighed. At least, he was right all along. From the day that he saw the boy through the window of the Hogwarts Express, he knew there was something special about Tom Riddle.

_Young Mr. Tom Riddle...I must keep my eye on you._

Very politely, Tom bid adieu to his new _friend_, Cygnus Black. He loosed his tie as he walked away from the group of young heirs and heiresses.

Oh, he knew exactly what was on their minds. Schemes, power moves, clever little tricks... were nothing more than child's play to him.

Tom adjusted his robes. A beautiful and courteous smile remained on his face, dark eyes narrowing into crescents, which were enough to hide the greed and arrogance expanding within. _Let them have their games—_ in the end, everything would belong to him! He was Slytherin's heir. One day, when the time was ripe, he would claim his birthright and his place on top as their king.

It was only a matter of time. First, he would start by reclaiming the chamber, which Salazar Slytherin had left for him.

"Tom...Tom, would you like to dance?" A nervous young girl interrupted his thoughts.

Tom turned toward her; instantly all the dark emotions disappeared from his eyes. "Ah, of course, Mademoiselle. May I have the honour of this dance?"

The tall youth took a step back and bowed toward her, his right hand crossing his chest and his left hand extending forward in an invitation. His smile was dazzling, his etiquette impeccable, and his form perfect.

No doubt Harry would be very surprised to see the confidence and fluidity in the boy's movements. No one had even taught him how to dance.

The band played smooth and slow jazz music as couples swayed around the dance floor in elegant unity.

Under the bright lights of the ball room, the youth carried himself like the star of the show, twirling his stunned partner about with both the proficiency of an athlete and the gentleness of a lover. His black, tailored dress robe fitted him well, showing off his tall and lean figure. Handsome, elegant, and hopelessly charming, when Tom Riddle wanted to impress someone, he never failed. When his
pure, affectionate, dark eyes focused on you, he could always make you feel like the world faded away until only you and he remained, intimate, true, and all alone together in spite of the noisy ball room.

He was the rare sort of man that no woman could refuse.

"It was my pleasure to dance with such a beauty," he would say, eyes twinkling mischievously. False compliments came flowing from his lips like sweet honey.

By the time Tom sat down next to Abraxas, he had already danced with three different girls.

"Well, well...Someone sure is popular," Abraxas teased.

Tom shrugged. He loosened his tie and tossed it aside. Then, he drained a cold drink in one gulp and leaned back against the soft sofa.

"Wait 'till you get a true taste of the pleasures of a girl's body— soft breasts, slim waist, delicate thighs—" Abraxas looked up at the ceiling, grinning stupidly as if reliving some of his more...pleasurable experiences.

Tom rolled his eyes. Oh, he had heard plenty about the Malfoy heir and his colourful habits.

After seeing Tom had no interest in the topic, Abraxas turned away and pursed his lips in boredom.

Suddenly, he sat up and waved at a nervous boy cowering in a corner.

"Over here, Ovi!" He called over the reluctant boy.

Ovidius Parkinson never liked parties. He tended to avoid them if he could and, normally, no one ever missed him, because he was utterly unimportant inside Slytherin, nothing more than an insignificant member of a vassal house of the Malfoys.

Tom watched Ovidius' approaching steps. He froze, dark eyes seized by the boy's form.

Ovidius wasn't a particularly attractive boy. At most, his features could be described as soft and delicate, yet, from afar, there was something uniquely familiar about him. He had a scrawny figure and a head full of messy dark hair, jet-black and untamed like a bird's nest.

"Hello, Tom," Ovidius greeted Tom weakly. The boy's face was unhealthily pale.

"Come here," Abraxas leaned back. He spread his arms on the back of the sofa and nodded at Ovidius, giving him a frisky but demanding look.

All colours drained from Ovidius' face. Although he was only one year younger than the Malfoy heir, he was also rather scared of him.

"But... but... Tom is still... here," the boy protested feebly.

Tom was puzzled, but he had no intention of offering them privacy either.

Abraxas gave the boy a warning look, which made Ovidius' lips tremble terribly. The boy looked determinedly away from Tom and then climbed on Abraxas' lap.

"Good boy," Abraxas tagged the boy's head back roughly and sucked on his lips. Then, while still holding Ovidius tightly against his chest, the blonde turned and explained to Tom. "His father gave him to me over the summer... as a gift of good-will, you see."
Tom peered at them curiously. His eyes narrowed. Something about the scene in front of him made the blood run hot and hungry inside his veins. Suddenly, a rather pleased realization jumped into his head — so two men could... do these kinds of things?

The new idea was making Tom's heart pound fast. His throat felt dry. He licked his lips.

"I thought... you like soft and slender girls?" Tom shot Abraxas a look, his voice flat and nonchalant.

"Yes, but... soft and slender boys are fun too," Abraxas shrugged. He pulled Ovidius closer, and ran his fingers slowly through the boy's messy black curls, in a teasing and suggestive manner.

And, for some reason, that particular action annoyed Tom greatly. For a moment, the boy just sat there, staring at Abraxas' fingers weaving in and out of the familiar, nest-like hair.

Abraxas tugged on Ovidius' hair until the boy's head tilted back, exposing pale, vulnerable throat. Although he wasn't exactly beautiful, youthfulness was a gift that could conceal all blemishes. Sweat dripped down the boy's throat, gliding on pale skin, over protruding Adam's apple and down the hollows of his clavicular line. His breathing was short and heavy due to fear and embarrassment, but it also made the lines of his throat quiver uncontrollably. Tom stared. The sight was oddly... alluring.

"I think..." Tom interrupted suddenly. His eyes flashed, dark and vicious like a hungry wolf, trapping the boy in Abraxas' arms. "Do you mind... giving him to me?"

His request seemed to surprise Abraxas. The blonde turned around and raised an eyebrow as he silently appraised Tom. Then, Abraxas smirked.

"Oh?... And here I thought you were uninterested in sex all together... but obviously I was mistaken... Been barking up the wrong tree, perhaps?"

Of course, Abraxas, who had every intention of recruiting the boy, wouldn't refuse such a simple request. The blonde grinned openly; then he pushed Ovidius off his lap and toward Tom.

Ovidius followed Tom back to the dormitory, although he had only left his room fifteen minutes ago.

"Tom... Thank you for helping me," Ovidius stood by Tom's bed, apologizing profusely. "I'm really, really sorry that I spied on you for Malfoy... Really, I am—"

Tom turned around. He had already removed his dress-robe and was in the middle of unbuttoning his shirt. He loosened a collar, which revealed the pale and strong chest underneath.

The boy gave a mocking glance to his roommate. "Are you a Gryffindor, hmm?...By now, you ought to know why I helped you."

Although they were both only fourteen, Tom, who had already grown to 1.7 meters tall, hovered a head above Ovidius.

Suddenly, without any warning, Tom leaned forward and crushed their lips together. The boy's movement was clumsy, with no tenderness to speak of, as he bit down hard on the other's lips... It felt less like a kiss and more like the angry bite of an animal.

He wasn't trying to be gentle or loving as he forced his tongue past the other boy's teeth, as he tried to attack the other's mouth like Malfoy had done. It was a deep kiss... rude and raw and biting, but without any pleasure or thrill.
Before Ovidius could react, Tom hastily pushed him away.

Tom frowned. He wiped his mouth dry with his thumb. He did not like the slippery feeling of the other boy's saliva against his lips.

It felt... off. Like something was missing.

Tom considered the pale, tearful boy in front of him. He gave an unsatisfied tsk, then turned away.

This one was not good enough. Not strong enough. Not obstinate enough. Not warm enough.

*Boring... How disappointing...*

Now utterly disinterested, the beautiful youth turned around and left the room.

His mind was filling up with strange pleasure and pulsing heat.

He sunk into dreamy drowsiness, then slowly he began to see— a body, naked and perfect and breathtakingly beautiful, stretched beneath him.

Ivory skin, glowing with mysterious allure that made his stomach burn hot; the curve of a back; a shoulder... The youth couldn't help but to reach out to stroke the soft, firm skin. As he pressed down eagerly, a low and muffled moan escaped from the body beneath. It was a sound unlike any other. *Tempting. Husky. Subdued.* Not like the purposefully seductive noises of Abraxas' girlfriends. It was low and rumbling, like a surprised gasp of pain, like a suppressed moan of a creature who had suffered long and hard.

The voice made his blood boil with *want.*

His prick was hard, throbbing, and wrapped in something soft and moist and unbelievably hot. More out of instinct than any sort of coherent thought, he began thrusting forward. Rocking his body back and forth. Gently at first. Then, pounding like a madman.

"*Tom...*" the voice moaned. The voice was hoarse and husky. And definitely not one made by a pubescent boy.

Before Tom could say anything, he felt his body moving on its own. He felt his lips pressing down on the nape of a neck, his teeth biting on soft skin, sucking and gnawing away like a vampire feasting on its prey. Then, he heard his own voice calling out desperately—

"*Harry, Harry, Harry...*"

Tom startled awake. The images in front of him dissipated into white clouds, then into the ceiling of his dormitory.

It was all a dream.

Tom sat up. He reached down to his boxers and found it soiled.

The youth inspected the milky substance sticking onto his palm. Suddenly, he felt his heart pounding painfully as his eyes turned dark and dangerous.

*What was the meaning of this?*
November, 1941

Autumn was most people's favourite season. It was a season when the temperature hovered around cool and comfy, when the humidity felt just right, and when yellow and orange foliage brightened their moods, so that even the most tedious classes passed faster.

"Well, well, does anyone care to try this question?" Professor Slughorn, who was flabby enough to give a good-sized walrus a run for its money, stood on a podium as he pointed to the question on the blackboard. The man held up a small vial of opaque liquid with a distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen. The man cast a hopeful glance toward Tom, who was seated near a corner.

However, much to Slughorn's disappointment, his favourite pupil didn't raise his hand. Tom's head was hidden behind his book, seemingly like he had dozed off.

"Tom, you try." Slughorn pointed, thick moustache trembling.

Tom looked up. His eyes were clear and bored as he scanned the tube in Slughorn's hand. "That's Amortentia, sir, which is... I believe, a part of our sixth-year curriculum."

At the mention of Amortentia, some Gryffindor boys began smirking suggestively. They winked and whistled at some girls who sat behind them.

"Yes, quite right... Of course you are not expected to study love potions until sixth-year, but—" Slughorn waved to quiet them down. Then, he called Tom up to front of the class. "Come up, come up."

Tom frowned, but quickly hid his annoyance behind a polite smile. Under the curious gaze of the fourth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors, he stood up calmly and walked to Slughorn's side.

"Very good, very good. Now, Tom, smell this and describe its scent to everyone." Slughorn instructed genially, thrusting the potion under Tom's nose. Then, the potions professor winked at Tom playfully.

Tom didn't even have to inhale to notice the dangerous nature of the Amortentia. At once, a most seductive scent rose from the potion and filled his nostrils. The boy's deep eyes darkened as the alluring scent pulled at him like a deadly Sirens' song. He narrowed his eyes and immediately tried to suppress his sudden urge to grab the tube and breathe it in slowly and deeply.

"I smell fresh parchment, sir," Tom's face was calm and sincere, as if he'd only ever tell the truth.

"Ah, so you love to read, as expected... Anything else?" After Tom shook his head, Slughorn shrugged toward the disappointed class. "And here I thought that Tom might've discovered a perfume of a lovely young lady. But— Alas, it wasn't meant to be. Back you go, Tom."
Slughorn raised the small glass tube above his head, so everyone could see the odd, spiraling steam rising from the potion. His walrus-like moustache quivered as he spoke.

"This is the most powerful love potion in the world. Its purpose is in its name and needs no explanation, I'm sure. It's supposed to smell different to everyone — according to what attracts you. For example, if you love to swim, you might smell the sea. Or… say… if a girl likes young Tom over there—" he winked at a blushing girl in the first row, "— she might smell the shampoo in Tom hair."

"Amortentia doesn't really create love, of course. It is impossible to manufacture or imitate love. No, this will simply cause a powerful infatuation or obsession. Its effect, thankfully, is temporary. See the vial in my hand?— This much will only last twelve hours."

Slughorn stroked his handle-bar moustache. He beamed at them, looking rather like a scheming fox (albeit one with a large, perfectly round face).

"And this— ladies and gentlemen — is what I shall be offering as a prize in this lesson. One small vial of Amortentia for whoever can brew the best Swelling Solution before the class is over. So one of you, if you happen to win, can use it to create a perfect date… Or, conversely, it can help you obtain that perfect date you've always wanted."

As soon as Slughorn said that, all the girls' eyes lit up.

Slughorn laughed boisterously. "Pay attention, strapping young lads. Your time starts now—"

The Swelling Solution was the most difficult potion found in the fourth-year textbook, which was why Slughorn decided to encourage them with a reward. Although it was meticulous work, Tom's attention wasn't focused on the potions ingredients in front of him.

He was still thinking about that dangerous, seductive scent.

Of course, he hadn't smelled fresh parchment at all. No. Tom didn't love to read. Tom only enjoyed using the power that he had learned from books. Power, not knowledge, was his pursuit.

Tom had smelled the scent of power rising from the potion — the smell of expensive old leather that symbolized power and privilege; the smell of sulphurous gunpowder that spoke of strength and destruction.

But… the scent, that tempted him the most, was something else entirely. Something unexpected, yet just as distinct mingled with the other two. It smelled familiar… a crude mixture of coppery blood, sulphurous explosives, and salty sweat and tears. He had tasted this scent once— during the Blitz of London, when he had gnawed on that man's neck, clung onto that man's body, desperately trying to seal that man's scent into his own veins.

Harry's scent. Dying, desperate, dangerous, yet so warm and enthralling.

Merely the memory of that scent was enough to lure Tom's mind into dark, sinful territories.

Tom stirred the potion bubbling in his cauldron, lost in thought.

He pursed his lips; pure obsidian eyes seemingly mesmerized by the swirling, opaque liquid in front of him.

He… was in love with Harry?

It seemed like the only logical explanation.
As he reached his conclusion, the young Dark Lord curled his lips with disdain, dark eyes angry and mocking.

*Love?* — He had no use for such a pathetic sentiment. Love— praised by poets and artists as eternal and beautiful— was, in reality, the most fragile and untrustworthy thing in the world. It would only weaken him, dragging him down like some commoner.

He would never forget how, at the Orphanage, the fat nanny had spoke about his mother, along with gossips gathered in village — *oh, heavens, everybody knows* — that his mother was a pathetic, whimpering woman abandoned by her own husband.

*Love, family...* such would only end in betrayal.

Selfishness was the reality of human nature. *Love* and other frivolous sentiments would never stand a chance against true power, status, and wealth. How many families were torn apart over a simple piece of paper with some number on it? How many husbands and wives turned on each other in a blink of an eye, their vows sold for the right price? How many passionate young couples, who had promised to love until the end of the earth, ended up falling out because [of] the temptations and stress of real life?

*Love?*

No... All that Tom Riddle needed — *desired* — was absolute power! Only power, magic, authority and prestige were true, and they would serve his purposes well... As for *love?* — HA!

Tom gave a sardonic smile, tucking all of his rotten core inside the facade of a most courteous and respectful young man.

"Alright. Time's up," Slughorn clapped his hands, as a few girls sighed with disappointment.

Slughorn walked around the class, inspecting everyone's cauldrons. He stopped beside Tom, pulling out a stirring rod to check the viscosity of his potion. The professor nodded to himself, but he didn't seem very satisfied.

"Well, Tom. Although your work is the best out of anyone here, it is still not up to your usual standard."

Even though the silly old man had some obvious flaws, there no doubt he was one of the most skilled potion masters in the world.

Tom nodded politely and didn't let his annoyance show. "You're quite right, sir. I got distracted while... working. Added a bit too much wormwood, I'm afraid."

Slughorn was placated once Tom admitted his mistake. He took the small glass vial from its rack and handed it to Tom. Then, the man's smile turned amicable, "Here you are — not that you need it, young man. What girl could turn down your invitation?"

Tom pocketed the Amortentia, his eyes sweeping over the hopeful girls in the first rows. The youth smiled brightly, his face handsome and radiant like the summer sun. "Thank you, sir. Actually, it would be my honour to spend time with any... such lovely ladies."

The soft fringes of his hair fell in front of his eyes in a perfect and casual style. His pure black eyes glinted with a devious confidence.

*Ah, yes... Emotions like love were useless... except as tools of manipulation.*
Tom shut the door to his dorm room. He glanced at the bed of his roommate. Again, it was empty.

Ever since the day of the welcoming party, Ovidius avoided him like the plague. Except for the mandatory curfew at night, the scrawny boy never lingered in the dorm room.

Not that Tom cared. Actually, he preferred it like this, with Ovidius smartly staying out of his way.

The young Dark Lord loosened and threw off his silver and green tie. He caught sight of the tip of a tail poking out of his pillow. He sighed.

"Come out right now, Nagini."

"No," Nagini whined, curling into a ball even though the pillow case was way too small to hide her body. "Tom is mean. I've crawled all the way from London to see you and you don't even greet me?... I won't tell you what I saw, then. Meanie—"

Tom striped off his shirt, revealing the young and muscular body underneath. Although he looked rather slender from afar, the youth had grown into a powerful young man, with compact abs and muscles that were more practical than visually prominent. His body was streamlined and beautiful like that of a powerful cheetah, elegant lines that hid an unexpected explosive power.

Tom was in a good mood. He had just figured out his little hormonal problem, so there was no point in avoiding it. The thought of power and authority cheered him up greatly, and now Tom was ready to tackle this issue of... his distraction — this distraction that he had obsessed over ever since he was a little boy.

"What did you see?" Tom asked curiously. He dragged Nagini out of the pillow case, his eyes dark and mysterious like the deepest reaches of space.

"Hh... I'm not saying! I ain't telling you how Harry vanished!" Nagini huffed. She was still mad at Tom for ignoring her earlier. As her serpentine body grew longer and wider, she had also gotten smarter and developed a personality; but, unfortunately for Tom, her personality ended up rather childish and capricious.

Harry had vanished?! — Tom tensed at the news.

"Vanished." Tom repeated the word sharply. His eyes dimmed suddenly. Although the black colour of his pupils remained pure and glistering like night sky, something in them had shifted suddenly — the darkness had changed in an indescribable way, expanding outward, brooding and angry and hopeless like black holes that sucked away all light.

Harry was his!... And his belongings couldn't have just... vanished!

Nagini was a magical creature. Although she was no expert in spell-casting, she knew what Apparition and Floo powder were — so when she said vanished, she meant something completely out of the ordinary.

Nagini flicked her tail, quite content now Tom's attention was focused entirely on her. "Yes! Yes! He spun that hourglass thing of his, then— poof— he vanished."

"Hourglass?! As in that pendant he wears around his neck?" Tom asked. The overhead lights cast a soft glow on his face, yet it only made his fathomless expression seem more gloomy and bleak. His hisses were quiet and his tone didn't change, yet the question sent a chill down Nagini's spine.
"Yes, yes. He was sssssitting in his study, then he ssssspun the thing, then he was gone."

Tom had seen it many times— the silver hourglass that Harry wore around his neck.

From the first day they met, Harry had always worn the pendant. Tom had examined it once, when Harry was asleep. It was small, intricate, made of silver and engravings of runes that he couldn't read. Tom had thought it was some sort of protection gear, a charmed object like Abraxas' family ring, which held anti-detection charms.

Suddenly, Abraxas' words popped into his mind— "if my pet dares to disobey, then it shall be punished, demoted, become no more than a disposable toy."

The dark-haired boy turned and walked toward the bathroom.

No matter pet or toy... that which belonged to Tom Riddle, were his forever! And Tom wasn't fond of losing his belongings— not even ones that tried to leave; and definitely not the one that had just vanished.

By the time Tom finished his shower, it was eight o'clock in the evening.

The youth flung a towel over his shoulder and let water drip down his hair. Droplets rolled down his naked chest, leaving wet marks on pale, smooth skin.

"Nagini," Tom dabbed his face dry. "How did you get into the castle?"

The serpent's body now ran a meter long. There was no way she could've slithered along a corridor without attracting attention.

Playfully, Nagini rolled over on Tom's bed. "I crawled along shrubs in the Forbidden Forest. Then I climbed up through Hogwarts' pipes."

Tom paused. That was... interesting.

"Yay! Pipes!" Nagini tried to describe the amazing maze-like structure to Tom, but her vocabulary was very limited. "Lots and lots of pipes, here, inside the walls of Hogwarts. Lots and lots and lots! Thick and wide and long pipes everywhere!"

Tom tossed the towel aside, then buttoned up his shirt. His eyes flashed.

He made sure his robe was impeccable and neat before stepping out of the room.

Pipes... Maybe he had been over-thinking it.

"Tom, are you waiting for someone?" A voice interrupted Tom's careful examination of an empty hallway.

Tom cursed under his breath, but, by the time he turned around, he was all smiles. "Good evening, Professor Dumbledore."

The wise old man wore a robe of colourful celestial patterns, long auburn beard almost to the ground. Compared to the kindly Headmaster seventy years later, this Dumbledore was vigorous, sharp, yet equally persistent.
Dumbledore winked at him. "It's almost curfew, Tom."

Due to his friendship with Harry, the transfiguration professor had paid close attention to the boy. And, in doing so, he had formed some opinions about Tom Riddle. But, also due to Harry's influence, this Dumbledore wasn't as suspicious of Tom as he should've been. This time, he wasn't given such a clear glimpse of Tom's true nature.

"I know, sir... I'm just going to meet a friend before heading back," Tom replied politely; his smile flawless.

Dumbledore's piercing blue eyes watched him from behind half-moon glasses. Although the professor's expression wasn't accusatory, nevertheless, Tom felt like he was being interrogated.

"Ah, Tom, my child. I hope you don't mind me saying this... Your friend has an odd sense of humour, for choosing to meet—" The old man scanned the hall around them. Wrinkles folded around his eyes as he smiled benevolently, although his gaze remained unwavering. "—in front of the Girls' Lavatory?"

Tom looked surprised. "Oh! My bad. I am supposed to meet him in front of the History of Magic classroom. But... I must've taken a wrong turn somewhere. It's those blasted stairs, sir. They are always moving!"

Albus Dumbledore stood by the window of the first-floor hallway, watching the boy's retreating steps. He was lost in his thoughts.

For over half-a-century, he had accumulated wisdom and learned to read people. Although young Tom was a hard one to crack, Dumbledore was still able to see through — although somewhat vaguely —the boy's disguise. The boy’s eyes glinted bright with greed and ambition, which, in itself, was not a cause for concern. After all, ambition was the root of all Slytherins. But... what did worry him was the depth of that ambition, clever eyes with an insatiable fire, just like the eyes of an old friend.

He had the same eyes as Gellert— with the same eagerness; the same fake smiles; and the same undeniable charisma that could burn so dangerously.

Dumbledore rubbed his long and crooked nose. Suddenly, the jovial man seemed dejected.

But... that boy wasn't Gellert. There was still someone very important to him... someone that could ground him, calm him, love him. The old man recalled the man with the kind green eyes — vivid and beautiful like the most precious emeralds.

TN:

This is another very important WARNING! Read it please.

So... unfortunately, bad things happen in the future (of this fic) and there will be NON-CON/DUB-CON element later (in about chapter 80). I won't give spoilers, only to say this particular chapter gives strong hints on what's to come.

Again, please heed the warning. Thanks.

P.s. I'm really busy right now. So I can't promise regular updates anymore. I'll try, but... er...
September 1, 1942

September first was the most important day in Hogwarts' calendar. This was a very special day when the solemn and magnificent castle opened up its gates to welcome back the future of the wizarding world.

One year had passed in a breeze and soon, it was September first again. This year's back-to-school day was especially meaningful to Tom, because he was returning as a cultured fifth-year Slytherin and a newly minted Prefect.

This was his first taste of institutional power. Although his authority would be severely limited inside the school, its taste was still rather sweet and satisfying... at least, for now.

Tom sat down at the end of the Slytherin table. His head kept low and his expression pleasant, his long, dark eyelashes casting a shadow that just managed to hide the conceited cruelty in his eyes. His slender, long fingers stroked the brand new Prefect badge pinned to his chest.

"Hello, Tom. Congratulations on making a Prefect," someone sat down next to him. Tom instantly recognized the newcomer by his familiar drawl.

Tom looked up and rewarded the newcomer with a smirk. "Long time no see, Abraxas."

"What do you mean... long time no see? If memory serves—" The platinum blonde teenager winked at Tom playfully. "— I seem to recall running into you in Knockturn Alley yesterday."

Tom, who was ever so composed and proper with not even a strand of hair out of place, replied calmly. "Oh? I think you must be mistaken... I've only visited Diagon Alley yesterday."

Abraxas smirked knowingly. "Ah, yes. I must be mistaken then."

Deep obsidian eyes met Abraxas' inquisitive glance. Tom's eyes glinted in a magnetic brightness that revealed the youth was in a rare good mood.

The two Slytherins shook hands in greeting, two young politicians-in-training who understood each other perfectly.

Every year Hogwarts accepted less than two hundred new students. Soon, after the annual ritual of the sorting hat's off-tune song, the nervous young boys and girls settled down at their respective house tables.

"Welcome to Slytherin," Tom greeted the first-years with a welcoming smile, slipping into his duty as a Prefect instantly. Although if anyone was paying attention, they might've noticed the chilling apathy reflected in the handsome youth's dark eyes.

"Attention!" The plump, kindly headmaster stood up from his seat, as all eyes in the Great Hall
turned toward him. "Before we commence with the feast, I have some very exciting news to announce. Listen carefully, students of Hogwarts—"

He paused, then nodded in satisfaction when the students all sat up straighter and listened with rapt attention.

"I trust that you have heard of a little event called the Triwizard Tournament. Oh, and the Goblet of Fire, of course," announced the headmaster with a wide grin. He even paused for dramatic effect as whispers spread throughout the Great Hall at once.

Tom didn't react, but Abraxas did.

"Merlin's ancient socks! The Goblet of Fire!" The blonde's eyes grew wide.

Many Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs yapped with surprise, even Ravenclaws couldn't help but talk excitedly amongst themselves.

The Headmaster raised a hand to silence them.

"Hogwarts is very honoured to host this year's Triwizard Tournament. The Goblet of Fire will soon choose one student from each participating school, which includes Hogwarts, to act as Champion for their respective schools. Because the tasks of the competition are extremely fierce and dangerous, the Ministry of Magic have rules set in place to prevent students who are under the age of seventeen from participating—" this was greeted with a particularly loud round of boos—" Now, please give a warm welcome to our friends from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons!"

The arrival of the Beauxbatons' girls drew the attention of all of Hogwarts' boys.

"Merlin, look at 'em— how they sway when they walk!" Goyle, a giant boy who sat across from Tom, gave a low whistle as he leered at some girls' backside. He barked with a digesting, vulgar laugh.

_The standard of Slytherins has really dropped off_, Tom sneered as he took in the lewd, stupid look on the boy's face.

"I have to agree. French girls _sont belles_," Abraxas leaned in to whisper to Tom, before a look of realization came onto his face and his expression changed to a teasing smirk. "Oh right, I forget they are not... your cup of tea."

Tom's smile reminded fixed in place. He ignored Abraxas and instead, the young Prefect turned to explain the upcoming tournament to some first-years in a most patient and kind manner.

Yet Abraxas persisted. He patted Tom's back to regain his attention. "Hey, look. I think _those_ are more suited to your taste."

Right this moment, the boys from Durmstrang, with their thick fur-lined cloaks, matched into the Great Hall in two neat lines.

Instantly, Tom's eyes were drawn toward a tall boy at the very back of the line. Tom's eyes narrowed, dark pupils as fathomless as the midnight sky as he fixed onto his prey.

Abraxas followed Tom's eyes to the boy. He raised an eyebrow, "Ugh, don't tell me that's your aesthetics?"

The boy in question wasn't very good looking at all. He had beady eyes of a vulture, with a thin
hook nose like a bird beak. The boy sulked behind everyone, his face gloomy and unpleasant like that of a vulture hovering above dead things.

Again, Tom didn't answer; his mind was occupied. Tom recognized that expression on new boy's face— as that boy entered the Great Hall, when he was once again placed at the end of the line, Tom saw his face twisting with anger and resentment. Yet... Tom saw something else in the boy's eyes... the green glow of a greedy hyena. It almost reminded Tom of his old self... his foolish self before the perfect disguises and the polite mask.

Tom's bony fingers rubbed the stem of the wine glass, as his eyes grew darker. His lips curled up. Something told him — that boy from Durmstrang would make a useful ally.

"— And finally, let us welcome our Triwizard judges." The Headmaster reached over to hug the headmasters of the two foreign schools. He beamed at his students, before adding, "We must also give our sincerest thanks to the Ministry of Magic, for ensuring the safety and functionality of this tournament. I'm happy to announce Aurors from the Ministry would be joining us shortly."

Tom was still observing that vulture-like boy, coldly calculating how to take advantage of the foreigner. Personally, he wasn't interested in some silly tournament. Although he had to admit that the fame and glory that came with the title of Triwizard Champion was alluring, but still... a title wasn't very practical... not like real power and authority. Besides, he wasn't yet seventeen, so it would be too much hassle to enter the tournament. Right now, Tom didn't want to draw attention to himself, because he was so close to finding the Chamber of Secrets.

He could care less about Triwizard judges or Aurors or whoever... as long as they were smart enough to stay out of his way, of course.

Tom's red lips curled into a beautiful smile, which mesmerized the blushing first-years sitting close by.

"Oh! Oh! I haven't announced the judges officially, have I?" The plump Headmaster continued to rumble on as he was prone to do, regardless of the fact that everyone had already tuned him out. The old man waved his wand to summon a roll of parchment. He put on his reading glasses. "Yes. Er... Here they are... The panel of judges for the Triwizard Tournament will consist mainly of the three headmasters of all participating schools, as well as Aurors from the Ministry. Please welcome — Alphonse Tullson, Joan Vail, and... Harry Potter. A round of applause, everyone."

The students respond with a scattering of unenthused applause. Evidently, rather than the panel of judges, the children were more interested in getting the welcoming feast started.

Tom snapped to attention. Instantly, he found a familiar face from the group entering the Great Hall. Tom's dark eyes fixed onto the young man's face, tracing the man's features carefully, from the dishevelled black hair that curled at the tip, to the wire-framed round glasses perched on the youthful face, to the uniquely lightening-shaped scar hidden beneath those overly long bangs — it was most definitely Harry!

*His Harry.*

Suddenly, Tom recalled the words Harry uttered to him as he had boarded the train.

The young man had told him with a smile, "Rest assured, Tom. I'll see you soon."

*So that's what he meant!* — Tom looked down, concealing the turmoil burning in his eyes. This was
a habit of his, because Tom never liked to show his emotions. So he always kept on a mask of perfect tranquility, shielding his eyes from inquisitive gaze in those rare moments when he lost control of his emotions, to hide away his anger, ecstasy, panic, and bloodlust.

Harry pursed his lips. He couldn't predict how Tom would react to seeing him at Hogwarts.

The boy might be... angry.

Harry gave a wry smile. These were the formative years when Tom opened the Chamber of Secrets and made his first Horcrux, and so, of course, the boy wouldn't welcome any outside interferences.

But Harry had to interfere... before it was too late.

"Harry, it is not your mission to change him," Hermione had told him.

Yes, he understood her words. He had felt Fate's invisible hands tightening around his neck, whispering that he was powerless—weak—against the tide of history. He was never able to change him... to stop him. Everything Harry had done for Tom Riddle was one-sided, born out of Harry's own naivety and affection... Maybe Tom never saw him as family... Maybe it was all wishful thinking on his part... He had foolishly believed that he had saved the boy from edge of the abyss, without realizing that he was the one who was sinking into its endless, dark depth.

So now, it was time for him to reassess his goal: what was his mission? His mission was to find Voldemort's only weakness. And that was it! His role in the past should be that of a bystander. He should've never gotten involved, but he just couldn't... leave him.

So when he was offered a chance to come to Hogwarts, to be closer to Tom, Harry took it without hesitation.

_The Triwizard Tournament._ Harry was rather familiar with the event, and not only because he had competed in one, but also because... he had lost a dear friend as a result. A young man with a bright future had lost his life; the wizarding world had lost its state of peace for fourteen long years.

Sometimes, in his dream, he still relived that fateful night in the graveyard—the sinister and glowing dark mark, the black robed Death Eaters surrounding him, and Cedric's ghost emerging from a wand tip, asking him quietly, "please take my body back to them."

Harry tried to stop these fatalistic thoughts from overwhelming his mind. His eyes stung, but he couldn't afford to cry. After all, he was the Chosen One, with the responsibility of many people's lives tied to his choices. Few years ago, on August 27 1939, he had made his choice to protect and to save Tom Riddle's life... and in doing so, he inadvertently had forced his friends of the future into a difficult situation.

Harry turned to look at the handsome boy sitting by Slytherin table, with his head hung low and his new Prefect badge displayed proudly on his chest. Suddenly, Harry felt lighter and his smile turned less bitter—still... that boy was his son, whom he had raised and loved for many years.

And so... no matter how difficult was the future, no matter how painful, he must bare it alone. He was the Chosen One, and this was his fate and his responsibility. To be labelled a 'saviour' meant he must bare sacrifices, make hard choices... Wasn't that always the truth?

Even if the future was unalterable, etched in stones, _indestructible_, he must challenge it head-on, plunge onward until he was bloodied and exhausted and spent his last breath—this was Gryffindor's spirit, a knight's honour and bravery.
Harry retracted his gaze from Tom, as the boy never even looked up once. He followed Joan to the high table.

"Harry, my boy, how wonderful it is to see you." The wise old professor winked at Harry, blue eyes twinkling with his customary warmness. The future Headmaster smiled kindly, his voice as gentle as Harry had remembered.

Harry suppressed the emotions welling to his eyes. "Wonderful to see you too, Professor Dumbledore."

"WHAT? So that was your Harry?" In the Slytherin Common Room, Abraxas jumped out of his armchair in a rather undignified way that was unsuitable for a Malfoy. His mouth hung open as he shot Tom a disbelieving look. "Merlin! He doesn't look a day over twenty!"

Tom looked calm, his eyes were beautiful like the nebulas of deep space, pitch-black and unreadable yet with splashes of lights that seemingly encompassed the secret of the whole universe. The youth's lips curved into a sarcastic smile. "True. From when I was four to fourteen, his appearance never changed."

"Wait! What did you say his last name was?" Abraxas suddenly realized something.

"Harry Potter, why?"

Abraxas' eyebrow knotted. He tried to recall the Auror's face which he only had glimpsed briefly during dinner. He remembered the man was rather attractive, but not much else... Abraxas' frown deepened. Didn't the Auror have thick black hair like a bird's nest, and a scrawny frame beneath his robe?... Didn't he look rather like a Potter?

"What is his relation to the Potter family?" Abraxas asked. The gears spun rapidly in the blonde's mind— the Potter family tended to have only one son per generation, and they don't have cousins or branch families in Europe. So the only Potter of this generation should be Charlus. Who was this Harry Potter?

Tom raised an eyebrow. "Potter Family?"

"Yes, I suppose you haven't met them. The younger generation of Potters had graduated right before you entered Hogwarts... So I suppose it's only natural that you haven't heard of him." Abraxas then explained the current situation of the Potter family to Tom. Then, he added thoughtfully, "I wasn't paying attention before, but now... is quite obvious. Harry and Charlus... both have very similar appearances."

The young Dark Lord's pupils constricted. He pondered Abraxas' words over and over again in his head.

— Very similar? What could that mean?
September 2, 1942

It had been a long time since Harry had felt so safe sleeping.

The feeling of Hogwarts’ magic around him was a reassuring presence. The bed was narrow but warm, washed clean by the house elves. Sunlight was streaming through the window, and a breeze was fluttering the curtains. But thoughts of 2001 made the scene feel ethereal and dreamy, unreal and untouchable.

The Hogwarts of 2001 was already under Voldemort’s control. Harry and his friends were like wolves forced to flee from their home, unwilling to stray too far, never able to get too close. The dark forces were too strong. The good places of the world were being overrun and even Hogwarts, the place which had offered them refuge for so long, had gone dark. They had lost Hogwarts and it was as if the wolves had lost water. How long could they persist without it? How long could the wolves support themselves without water?

Harry didn’t know.

All he could do was move forward. Even in the deepest darkness, without a light to illuminate the way, he would continue to move forward.

Hermione had said, “Without you, this war cannot be won.”

Yes, without him there was no hope for victory in the war. For the wizarding world, he’s more than just their savior, he is a symbol. He is their torch in their darkest hour, lighting the way forward. Harry Potter, a name once just associated with the gimmick of surviving the killing curse, is now a symbol of strength. Just saying the name gave people hope.

He can’t retreat, there is no going back, he can only go forward and lead the wolves to the next source of water.

The morning sun lit up half the sky with its warm glow.

The Great Lake was beautiful. Its calm waters and the feel of the soft wind were something Harry had greatly missed. He leaned on the railing overlooking the lake which was sparkling in the sun. He loved this place. It brought back fond memories of his third year, sharing the view with Professor
Back then Lupin had remarked that Harry’s fear of the Dementors meant that what he feared most of all was fear itself.

But what was he afraid of now? He was afraid of the death of his friends. He was afraid to give up, afraid to fail everyone. He was afraid that nothing would change, that Tom couldn’t be changed. People like Tom, whether they were muggles or wizards, often grew more and more terrible as they grew up, Harry knew.

“That’s the Great Lake. I hear mermaids live in there.” The short haired woman said as she came to stand beside him.

Of course Harry knew about the lake and the mermaids, having been well acquainted with both during his fourth year. Harry opened his mouth but thought better of saying anything. He couldn’t give any indication of familiarity. Here he had not attended Hogwarts and would need to feign ignorance about the place he thought of as his home.

Joan tilted her head, watching the young man at her side. The breeze blew through his hair making it appear wilder than ever. The sight of it made her smile but she refrained from teasing him about it. Something in Harry’s expression seemed wistful and sad to her.

“Harry,” Joan said after a few moments of silence, “Are you coming with me to meet with Professor Dumbledore?”

Harry looked up, took a deep breath, and straightened. When he turned to Joan he gave her a brilliant smile.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Joan turned and left, Harry following behind as if he didn’t know the way to the Transfiguration Professor’s office. There would be no avoiding this; hiding would be suspicious, better to wear a smile to meet the next challenge in his life. He was the torch, after all, the guide to illuminate the road leading to water.

“Good morning, Professor Dumbledore.” Harry said as he knocked on the man’s office door.

The wise old man was sitting behind his desk and nodded to them, greeting them with a warm smile as he gestured for them to come inside. The man had reddish brown hair and his beard was much shorter than he wore it in the future. Harry was suddenly struck by just how healthy the man looked.

The room they were in wasn’t the headmaster’s office, of course. It was just a normal office decorated with a desk, a few shelves, and Fawkes’s perch.

Dumbledore held up a box, “Candied fruit?”

“They were flown in from France this morning. My students know these are my absolute favorites and often send me some.” A voice announced with pride.
Harry turned to look at the speaker.

“Good morning, Professor Slughorn.”

Horace rose from his chair and plucked a piece of the candied fruit from the box and popped it into his mouth, eying Harry curiously.

“This is Joan and I’m Harry.” Harry said.

“You might be interested to know this, Horace. Harry here is a family member of your favorite student, Tom Riddle.” Dumbledore seemed disinclined to mention that Harry had adopted Tom. Harry smiled at the man. Blood mattered very little to him, but to a Slytherin lineage mattered quite a bit. Harry didn’t want Tom’s blood to overshadow what a bright person he was.

Seventy years in the future, Dumbledore had spoken to the media. Tired and old, he had tried to reveal the relationship between Tom Riddle and Voldemort.

He said, “I am part of the reason that Voldemort is Voldemort.”

That sentence set off an uproar in the wizarding world. The public opinion blamed the subsequent twenty years of darkness to the man. They called his good-natured intentions hypocritical. Despite the way people were pointing their fingers at him, Harry never lost faith in Dumbledore.

“Oh! You’re his brother, right?” Horace looked at the young man’s face keenly before he suddenly asked, “But I could have sworn your last name was Potter!”

“Tom kept his mother’s last name.” Harry said when he couldn’t think of a better answer. He tried to appear calm, to speak like this was a clear fact.

A thought came to Slughorn. Riddle was a surname with no background but with a proud family like the Potter’s in the mix, perhaps this was situation requiring discretion. With that in mind, Horace kept the chatter to less embarrassing topics and they all spoke at length. When it was obvious that Horace was winding down the conversation and was ready to leave, Harry swallowed hard and stopped him.

Harry hesitated a moment before he said, “Professor Slughorn, Tom… how has he been doing lately?”

Horace seemed surprised for a moment. “Tom has always been ahead of the class. He’s been advancing quite well in all of his courses.”

_Has he advanced to Horcruxes yet?_ Harry thought, suppressing a wry smile.

“Er, he was looking through some…” Harry wrestled with his words, eyes inadvertently coming to rest on Professor Dumbledore before he swept them away. He took a deep breath and tried to calm his heartbeat. “I came across him looking at some very dangerous books and I’m a bit concerned about him.”

Horace smile and waved his hand. “You can set aside your fears; Tom has proven himself to be completely trustworthy. In fact, he has shown himself to be such an exemplary student that we allow him access to the forbidden section of the library. I’m sure that whatever he was looking at, he was doing it to further his knowledge of magic, not for any terrible cause.”

_Yes, I know you trust him. You gave him the knowledge on how to split his soul._

“Yes, well, I’d still appreciate it if you’d talk to him about it.” Harry couldn’t help but glance at
Dumbledore. The old man’s face had a slightly frozen look to it. Harry’s heart grew tight but he smiled politely at Slughorn.

“I understand. I will look into the situation.” Horace said, giving Harry a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

“You…” Joan started as they stepped out of Dumbledore’s office. Harry shot her a look and she decided to hold back her question. She couldn’t understand Harry. He seemed so contradictory to her now. When she looked at him, she saw a man blinded by Tom’s disguise, seeing only his grace and politeness. What an unexpected turn of events for Harry to have seemingly caught on to the child’s game.

Harry let his thoughts wander as he lay in bed. He had told Slughorn his suspicions in front of Dumbledore. His goal had been achieved. Dumbledore had been alerted to Tom Riddle’s dabbling.

In his fifth year, Tom would learn how to make a Horcrux, split his soul, and make the diary. In his sixth year, Tom would open the Chamber of Secrets, kill a girl, and frame another student. Dumbledore still didn’t know that Tom was the heir of Slytherin. He hadn’t met Tom when he was young and seen his potential cruelty. He had never seen Tom for what he truly was. Maybe Tom would open the Chamber any way; maybe he would kill a girl and frame Hagrid. But now the seed had been planted and Dumbledore’s suspicions would inevitably turn to Tom. Tom would be forced to stop once again, if nothing else.

Still, it seemed unkind to manipulate people into viewing Tom with suspicion. He hadn’t committed the crimes yet. He was still an innocent child.

It’s important, Harry told himself. Dumbledore had to be watchful because Harry couldn’t stay at Hogwarts to keep an eye on Tom, couldn’t stop him when he was so far away. He needed someone else, in a better position, to make sure that Tom was on his best behavior. Really, there was no better choice than Dumbledore.

Harry buried his head in the pillow, and though it was only noon, he felt tired. What was the purpose of this era to him now? He had wanted Tom to realize what it meant to be loved, but love hadn’t paid off. Now he had to remain alert to what the child was doing and make sure he was in an environment that would keep a watchful eye on him.

Harry rested in the bedroom, not wanting to leave and take the next step. He was suddenly feeling nervous about running into Tom. Tom would greet him with a smile on his handsome face and Harry’s instinct would be to turn and run.
A Few Millimeters from the Truth

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: This is my gift to you guys! I will probably never ever update this quickly again. A chapter every other day would probably kill me. (^_^;)

September 9, 1942

Hogwarts was completely immersed in the excitement of the Triwizard Tournament. The exceptionally beautiful sunny weather seemed to magnify the enthusiasm. Swept up with the feeling, the boys chattered before class.

“I want to go duel after class!” said one energetic young boy whose warlike nature had been kindled by the Triwizard Tournament. The dueling club had gained much more popularity among the school after the announcement had been made. Bright and peaceful Hogwarts, filled with bright young boys and girls, was infused with the hype and fun atmosphere of the Triwizard Tournament.

It seemed like everyone’s mood was as bright as the sky outside.

But there is always a person who does not want to pursue the light. Even direct sunlight cannot wash away the darkness inside. It only served to increase the twisted form, accelerating the speed of their deteriorating soul.

Tom hated the light. This was true especially when he was in such a dark mood, the extreme contrast with the light set him on the verge of losing control.

Everything around him was beautifully clear but his eyes seemed too gloomy, gleaming with dark thoughts. He was not happy, but everyone else was. He couldn’t help but want to see all the cheerful people destroyed. Change their jubilance to fear.

Then there were the others in the school.

Dumbledore and… Harry Potter.

Tom chuckled loudly with gentle easy laughter. Sitting beside him Cygnus Black narrowed his eyes as he watched Tom from the corner of his eye.

He looked happy if you didn’t look into his eyes. While Tom’s black eyes could not truly become darker, a cold like ice radiated from them.

Harry Potter.

Tom laughed again. He had thought he knew Harry but perhaps the only real thing about the man was his name.

If he didn’t truly know Harry but had lived with him for nearly a decade maybe he was still the one who knew him best out of everyone else in the world.

Tom rubbed the palm of his hand over his eyes, briefly blocking the coldness from spilling from the
windows of his soul. He was coming up with ridiculous conclusions, baseless ones.

He had thought he understood Harry but he kept finding more and more inconsistencies, and now he was beginning to suspect that even the name Harry Potter was not true.

Potter was not an unusual name in the wizarding world, not even unusual in the muggle world. But the Potter family doesn’t have a family member called Harry. Was it just a coincidence?

The young dark lord did not believe it was.

Harry Potter was not a member of the Potter family and had told Joan that he had never gone to Hogwarts. How unusual then that Tom remembered when he was eleven years old Harry had been telling him with a sparkling smile about Hogwarts with a familiar natural attitude that could not be from Hogwarts, A History.

Harry Potter.

Tom wanted to get to the heart of the man behind that name, to truly see the man and all his secrets.

Professor Binns floated into the classroom, indicating that the class was about to begin. Out of pure habit, most of the class began getting into their favorite sleeping positions.

“On the last exam, some students seemed confused between goblins and elves,” Professor Binns said in his monotonous voice, with eyes that didn’t even see the students he was addressing. “Elves and goblins are very different. Elves look much the same and it takes two or three decades to see a change in them. Goblins age faster than witches, and often have wrinkly ugly faces.”

“Professor Binns,” a figure suddenly interrupted the ghost. After decades of no classroom interaction Binns blinked in surprise and quickly turned to address the student.

Ah, he knew this student. While his job was first and foremost to teach History of Magic, he took pride in knowing who was passing through the halls of Hogwarts. Tom was a smart young man.

“Sorry, I’m just curious.” The student paused, dazzling obsidian eyes reflecting the beautiful sunlight. “Are wizards able to delay their own aging, where they can go a decade with no visible change?”

Professor Binns looked bemused. “For over a thousand years witches and wizards have been attempting to keep or regain their youth. Rowena Ravenclaw herself could delay the appearance of aging with the use of beauty potions but could not truly stop it.”

Professor Binns smiled. “You can go ask Professor Slughorn more about the subject; he has a far better understanding when it comes to such things. Ah, now we are all going to talk about…”

Tom lowered his eyes, no longer listening. Every time he tried to figure Harry out, to get a better understanding, he just felt like the man was increasingly unreal, a mirage materializing in and out of Tom’s life.

Class ended and it was like a spell had lifted. The students, so attuned to History of Magic, woke up, stretching as Binns floated out.

Cygnus approached Tom. “Want to go to the dueling club, Tom?”

Tom tidied up his notes, smiling at Cygnus, “I’m afraid not, I have another class.”
“What class?”

“Ancient Runes.”

Tom shouldered his bag and left the room.

Boys had their arms draped over each other’s shoulders, girls walked hand in hand, and Tom slipped passed them. The students filled the entire hallway with laughter as they all started heading out to the school grounds to enjoy the weather. Tom had more important things than play on his mind as he went to his next class.

The boy walked proudly through it all, detached from everything around him.

“Hello, Tom.” The professor standing at the podium smiled at him as he walked into the sparsely populated classroom. “I thought you were going to skip, so many people have, much to my surprise.”

The professor’s eyes shined, “The runes you gave me last time were really wonderful!”

“What do they say?” Tom’s eyes lit up, red lips turning up at the corners.

Instead of beginning class, the professor quickly opened a book and pulled out a piece of paper. There wasn’t much written on the paper, only two or three lines, twisted like ancient hieroglyphics: runes.

If Harry were here, he would be in for a surprise. These runes were the very same ones he wore around his neck.

The professor pointed to one of the runes. “This is a rune most commonly used in time turners.”

The teenager frowned. “I’ve heard of them but I’ve never seen one before.”

“Now this section,” the professor waved to the other runes, “I don’t understand. I have looked through all of my books but can find no record of similar runes. These runes, as far as I know, are far more advanced than anything I teach. I’d even say they’re some of the most advanced kind the era. It seems almost out of place, like Merlin using a wand rather than a staff. Unfortunately, I can’t help you with these runes. You might be able to contact someone in the Ministry about it. Perhaps they can let you see the runes used for time travel. Ah, it appears I’m late to start class.” The professor waved Tom to sit.

Time travel?

Tom sat down in the corner of the classroom calmly and started carefully listing all the details about Harry that were odd.

Two identical wands, the way Harry didn’t age, his similarities to Charlus Potter, his apparent lack of connection to the Potter family, his unusually slow healing, Dumbledore’s Army, the strange silver hourglass… time travel.

Understanding was finally coming to him. He still didn’t have definite proof but all these things pointed to one simple truth.

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Harry had no idea that Tom had discovered the truth but he did know the boy was close by.

Joan was beginning to become wary of him.

“You’ve really never been to Hogwarts?” The woman frowned, her usually indifferent and calm eyes, sparking with suspicion.

“No.” Harry replied absently, shrinking into a shadow, waiting for Tom to walk by.

Joan held her tongue, not trusting herself to speak.

Harry was lying to her.

If he had really never been to Hogwarts, how did he always manage to find a hiding place every time they saw Tom?

She watched Harry hide, knowing that Tom Riddle must be near. Did Harry know of Tom’s strong desire to control and possess him? She was on the outside looking in on the two, watching the situation as a bystander.

An aggressive Tom Riddle stood on the other side, pressing harder and harder, with suffocating pressure, and unilateral fury. Harry had been on alert, putting distance between them on their battlefield.

“You’ve been hiding from him for a week.” Joan noted, wanting to ease the tension between the two. “Do you want to continue hiding?”

Harry said nothing.

He didn’t know. He just wanted to give Tom time to calm down and cool off.

He couldn’t help but worry that Tom had already started on a path toward making Horcruxes. He wasn’t sure how he is going to deter Tom. At this point, he can only hope that things will be different.

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“Tom, Professor Slughorn is having one of his parties tomorrow. Are you going?” Abraxas Malfoy said as stepped into the Slytherin common room.

Tom closed his book and looked up at Malfoy. “Who’s going?”

Sweeping his platinum hair out of his face, Malfoy shrugged. “People he believes have some future potential.”

Tom narrowed his eyes. Abraxas watched his expression, quipping, “You’re squinting your eyes. I know you’re planning something.”

The teenager’s eyes immediately swept to Malfoy with a dark look.
“I’ll go with you.” Tom said. He needed something and Slughorn might be able to provide him with answers.

Tom suddenly thought of something. He turned to Malfoy, “I don’t suppose you can get Felix Felicis?”

“I could, why?”

Tom opened his book again, eyes as dark as the coldest abyss. “My intuition says that without it, my plan would be difficult to achieve.”

Time marched on, everything in its orderly manner, history cannot be tampered with and the future cannot be predicted.
Father

September 10, 1942

Harry was startled awake by a loud noise and he fumbled with his glasses. The smiling face of his fellow judge, Alphonse, came into focus.

“Sorry for waking you up.” Alphonse laughed as he scratched his hair.

Harry smiled. Alphonse exuded a cheerfulness that was infectious.

“Are you doing anything today?” Alphonse asked. “If you’ve got nothing planned, would you like to come have a duel?”

“Sure.” Harry agreed readily.

There weren’t many people attending at the moment, probably because most of the students were in their classes. Harry wasn’t very familiar with the room they were in but he had been in it during his second year when he’d had that duel with Malfoy. At the time, that duel had seemed so important to him but now he could almost laugh at the childishness of it.

“Good job!” Alphonse suddenly cheered. Harry’s attention snapped to the stage.

The duel was between two older students who were tussling on the stage, wands thrown to the side. One of the students had his elbow pressed to the others neck, ending the duel in triumph.

Harry was surprised. “They were dueling wandlessly?”

“Yes,” Alphonse said with excitement, “close combat is very important for young wizards to learn.”

“Well, it’s our turn now!” Alphonse was practically bouncing he was so giddy now that the previous two had finished their duel. Grabbing hold of Harry’s hand he pulled him to the stage.

Tom was standing beside Cygnus Black near the dueling stage. He watched as the two men fell into a fighting stance on the meter high platform.

This was the first time that Tom had seen Harry truly fighting. It was so unlike when they had been escaping the bombing of London, fleeing from danger. Here Harry was embracing the battle. The combat was beautiful, even dazzling.

Tom had never seen anything like Harry, with his vigorous attacks. Every gesture of his wand was just right, not a movement wasted. His bright green eyes were focused and fiery. All the eyes in the dueling room were on him. The kind of self-confidence and strength he exuded drew the spotlight to him with no conscious effort on his part.

But as the young man watched the duel he unconsciously narrowed his eyes. It was becoming a habit to watch Harry. It was addictive to try to find additional weaknesses in the man. He focused on the other person, pulling his eyes away from Harry. The teenager recalled that this was Alphonse
Tullson. Like Harry, he was a Triwizard Tournament judge from the Ministry of Magic.

Tom thought that he looked rather unsightly.

“They’re really amazing!” Cygnus Black sighed, looking at the variety of colors being flung on the dueling platform, eyes full of admiration, totally unaware of the way Tom’s thoughts were turning.

Harry finally saw the opening he had been waiting for and quickly shot off an Expelliarmus. Alphonse tried to counter too late. In a last ditch effort before the spell hit, he tried to turn away from it but in an instant his wand hand was hit. The man’s wand flew over the dueling platform as everyone watched. Harry had won the duel.

“He won!” Cygnus couldn’t help but look at Harry with eager eyes. Part of it was simply the curiosity he felt at seeing Harry’s face up close. Like Abraxas Malfoy before him, he asked Tom, “Merlin, is he really your father? He looks so young.”

Harry didn’t expect that Tom would be in the room. Because he wasn’t looking he didn’t see him standing nearby. He just stepped off of the dueling platform, a bit out of breath. An arm came down heavily on his shoulders.

“You did great, lad!” Alphonse couldn’t care less about Harry’s sweaty neck or damp hair, reaching up with his hand to mess up the youth’s already messy hair. He rubbed hard and relinquished Harry only when he had thoroughly messed it all up.

Alphonse and Ron were very similar, both in the way that they smiled and in their body language. There was a kind of easygoing nature that they shared. Because of these similarities, despite that a sweaty Alphonse was touching him; Harry didn’t feel the slightest bit of disgust.

Harry gave a large grin in response to Alphonse’s.

For the first time, Tom found Harry’s smile ugly.

With the exception of the Triwizard Tournament announcement, Tom had not seen Harry around Hogwarts. The castle wasn’t that large and yet he had remained hidden from Tom for a suspiciously long time. Even Ovidius’s attempts at trying to hide from Tom had failed rather quickly, with Tom crossing paths with him several times. Still, he hadn’t come across Harry. How? The more Harry used his clever tricks to get away the more he gave himself away.

In the September weather just moving around made people hot and sweaty. After the duel, the two men were sweating to the tips of their hair. Despite this they were very close together. Harry avoided Tom but not the uncomfortably sweaty and warm man he’d been dueling?

Tom stared at Harry, narrowing his eyes. His glare rested on the arm around Harry’s neck. He thought of resting his head on Harry’s shoulder, biting, licking at the man’s most vulnerable areas. Not one inch of that smooth delicate skin would be untouched by Tom.

And that Alphonse Tullson dared rest his arm there, his skin touching Harry’s, standing so close that he could no doubt feel Harry’s body heat! Tom took a deep breath. The idea of anyone touching his property left him feeling extremely possessive.

Alphonse smiled, hugged Harry, and Harry smiled back.

Tom hated the contact between them.

Much like the way he feels that no one should be able to enjoy themselves when he’s in a foul mood;
when Harry shuns him no one else should bask in Harry’s company. When there were such barriers between them, when they were on such thin ice, how could he possibly tolerate another person coming between them?

He couldn’t stand it, so he fixed a handsome smile on his face and walked into Harry’s line of sight. Cygnus didn’t have time to ask what Tom was doing and could only hurry to catch up to him.

“Harry.” Tom greeted. The man looked at Tom and saw something off in his otherwise happy looking face. Tom’s eyes shone with a kind of malicious light.

Harry had been in the middle of laughing but the sight of the young man caused the laugh to catch in his throat.

“Tom,” Harry said. It wasn’t as if he wasn’t pleased to see the child but it still felt too early to face him. He couldn’t help the feeling of guilt and helplessness that rose at the sight of Tom. He could feel the sense of joy he’d been feeling fracture.

He knew he’d have to face this predicament at some point. The child’s temper had not cooled down as he’d been hoping. Harry had no particular talent with words and could not change the awkward atmosphere with a glib manner. He could only try to break the tension.

“I thought you were in class.” asked Harry, awkwardly.

“I’m sorry; I’m not bothering you, am I?” Tom was still smiling, but the words were thorny.

“No.” Harry quickly shook his head.

“Really?” Tom looked at Alphonse who was still standing beside Harry. “Good morning, Mr. Tullson.”

Alphonse was taken aback by the way the boy addressed him so seriously and it took him a few seconds to react.

“Good morning, and who are you?” Alphonse scratched his head sheepishly as he asked.

“I’m Tom Riddle and Harry is my…” Tom paused, his eyes flickering, “father.”

He could feel his tongue press lightly against his teeth when saying the word. With the exception of “mother” it’s undoubtedly one of the most common things to call someone. But his father was not common at all. Even in height, Harry was only half a head taller than his child.

Father? No one understood more than Harry about Tom Riddle’s feelings of indifference to family. Tom thought his mother a coward, he was disgusted by his muggle father, and as he grew older he distanced himself from his name. The one thing he inherited from his father, he would replace.

Harry had never thought to truly replace Tom’s father; his aim was off from the outset because of his ulterior motives. He had taken on everything but that most outstanding responsibility of Tom. That the child saw him as such was not much of a surprise, all things considered, but it was flattering regardless. Harry smiled, touched.

Alphonse, however, was very surprised.

“It looks like you’re in your twenties, how are you a father?” Alphonse’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates.
“I turned thirty-six years old this year.” Harry said, still smiling and looking at Tom with softening eyes.

Tom smiled back. “Father, why don’t we have a duel ourselves, just for fun?”

Father was a word with teeth; the bite of it gave Tom a strange kind of satisfaction. They know they’re not father and son, not even in name, but the word “father” implied a kinship of blood. That kind of relationship is both strong and vulnerable in the most obscure ways. The powerful the connection between family members tended to be more difficult to break.

That feature alone was enough to be fascinating, the deep connections of flesh and blood. The thought of having Harry that entwined with him gave Tom a possessive sort of satisfaction.

Unfortunately, they’re not related. Truly a pity.

There were, however, methods described in his books that could achieve a similar kind of effect. The young dark lord could afford to wait a while.

The teenager carefully concealed his thoughts and faced Harry expectantly. He took the initiative and stepped onto the dueling platform.

The majority of Harry’s dueling skills came from what he had learned fighting Voldemort. And now in the form of a face to face duel, he’d use those skills against Tom.

The past and the future were now in some form of strange loop; Harry using the skills he learned fighting Voldemort would teach Voldemort those skills.

There was no doubt about the results of the duel. Harry had been at the front of a war for three years. Tom didn’t have much chance of winning. Tom was, however, practically born for combat, or more accurately, for violence and death.

The teenager’s terrible attacks had raw talent behind them. Tom could accurately predict the other wand’s range and power and cast spells at the opportune moment. There was also a great deal of accuracy in his attacks which were both arrogant and bold, though his movements were guided by caution. Harry felt this duel could be trickier than his duel with Alphonse.

Tom danced too fast. Using his body in conjunction with his magic he fought tenaciously. He looked increasingly delighted as Harry had to concentrate more and more on the fight. It was as if he was appreciating the view of his most treasured flower blooming before his eyes.

And how true that was; just in front of him Harry was blossoming!

Every time Harry cast Expelliarmus Tom dodged or deflected it. In a daring move Harry darted forward, swift as a panther, in order to use a different kind of attack to disarm Tom.

Harry used his close proximity to knock Tom to the ground where he held him with his arm pressed against the youth’s slender white neck, panting, ending the battle.

“You’re very powerful, father.” Tom said with feeling. He could feel the power in the man’s body, the movement of his breathing, his violently beating heart. Harry grinned down at him and with some shortness of breath Tom smiled back.

They were so close that they could feel each other breathing in a rare moment of harmony.

But hidden beneath it there was suspicion, anger, and a desire for control on one side while on the
other side, guilt, helplessness, and despair were things only temporarily forgotten.

Harry couldn’t imagine that the child who called him father would be ready to calmly stroll to Slughorn’s office and open the book of their lives to a page that he had never wanted revealed.
What's a Horcrux?

Chapter Summary

This would have been posted sooner but I decided to give One Punch Man a chance this week and it consumed me. γ(∪)γ

September 10, 1942

Naturally, Slughorn's evening party was in his office.

Slughorn's office was not small, at least compared Dumbledore's office, because he had to entertain a great many students. He had a large dining table which could seat up to fifteen people with soft cushioned chairs.

The office door stood open but everyone invariably stood outside. No one wanted to make a bad impression in front of Professor Slughorn by going in without invitation.

Tom stood with the others near the office doorway, his face masked by the shadows, quietly taking in the other people who were invited to Slughorn’s little club.

There were students from every house but Slytherins accounted for more than half of the attendees.

"You’re up to something." Malfoy suddenly appeared beside him, uttering the words. He threw a vial of golden liquid, "It took a lot of effort to get this." The older boy sighed.

Tom looked down, uncorked the little bottle, and drank the contents. In doing so he hid the way his eyes were filled with contempt. A lot of effort? Considering the things hidden away in the Malfoy family property, let alone how wealthy they were, obtaining a vial would hardly be difficult. Moreover, thousands of years ago the Malfoys became vassals for Slytherin after the line fell. How much of what was rightfully Tom’s had been devoured by them in their greed? Anything they owned was his and one day he would get it all back.

Tom suddenly became aware of a problem with his plan and narrowed his eyes. His dark look was a terrible sight to behold. There were no other descendants of Slytherin, right?

As he was considering the matter, Felix Felicis began to set into action, and Tom’s thoughts were interrupted.

Felix Felicis brought a feeling of boldness, a self-confidence that Tom hated because he disliked any emotions beyond his control. But he could not resist the potion’s efficacy.

Felix Felicis started working almost immediately, just as that fat walrus Slughorn came smiling from the corridor around the corner.

"Sorry, I was just picking up the cake I ordered. My apologies for my tardiness."
"Have you heard the latest report about that new potion? The creator has decided to get a patent; he has a total monopoly of it!"

"I heard that the Ministry’s negotiations with the German side haven’t been very successful so far."

"They have a similar rule in Germany so why does the United Kingdom want to make a fuss?"

A wide variety of information passed over the table. The students acted like a network, the room an intelligence base as they gossiped about world events candidly.

Tom put his hand on the table, the dark wood contrasted perfectly against his skeletal hand, his fingers pale but powerful. While Felix Felicis was playing a role, it did not affect Tom’s estimated value of everyone around him.

One of the best ways to obtain information truly was through the school’s students. The Ravenclaw sitting opposite of him had a father working at the Potions Institute. The most proud sixth year Slytherin was the son of the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The girl wearing a headband had a brother who was currently studying in Germany. The information they could obtain covered much of the UK and Europe!

He didn’t even need to spend the time and effort to build an elaborate intelligence network of his own. As long as someone pretended to be even slightly attentive to them, those foolish young girls and boys would say everything they could, as they looked for the admiration and approval of their peers.

On the surface, Tom maintained an expression of absent-minded pondering but his sinister and cold eyes fell on those around him as he listened to their conversations. The viper, masquerading as an agent of light but truly a minion of darkness, in pursuit of expansion, greedily drained every drop of moisture from the hay.

"Tom, what are you thinking about?" Slughorn picked up a dish of fruit and held it out to him, "You should try the pineapple; it’s delicious."

Tom nodded in thanks and asked, “Professor, is it true that Professor Merrythought is considering retirement?”

Slughorn dropped the piece of fruit he had been about to eat. “How did you know about that?”

Tom smiled. The way that Felix Felicis superimposed on his own antagonistic emotions left him far more pleasant as a person. He knew about Merrythought’s retirement because he never shied away from a restricted area and had seen some of the half-written resignation letters in the man’s office. “I guessed, really. I have to admit, he hasn’t been my favorite teacher.”

"Oh, well perhaps by next semester you’ll have professors that you like."

"That would be nice." Pale knuckles tapped on the ebony table. The potion was making Tom very relaxed and confident, guiding him along a path he didn’t yet understand.

Tom watched the hourglass from the corner of his eye. The sand was falling faster now. He could hear the crisp sound of the sand hitting the glass. The party officially ended close to the start of
Students were slowly leaving but Tom had no plans to do so yet and lingered behind.

"Not leaving, yet, Tom?" Slughorn poured himself a glass of red wine, "If you’re caught out after curfew, don’t say I didn’t warn you."

Tom held his hands behind his back, his gaze downcast, presenting himself as a modest student. "I just have a few questions I’d like to ask you, Professor."

Slughorn paused a moment, just as he was bringing the glass to his mouth. Questions?

The conversation he’d had with Harry sprung to mind.

Slughorn’s green eyes narrowed, shrewdly.

"What do you wish to know about?" Slughorn slowly took a sip of his wine.

The teenager’s handsome face deliberately softened to look even more courteous and studious. “It’s about beauty potions.”

While he desperately wanted to know more about Harry’s secrets, Tom wanted more to know about Horcruxes. Everything else could wait. But Felix Felicis was driving him and he spit out one thing instead of the other as the potion pushed him along an ideal situation.

"Why would you need to know more about those?" Slughorn blinked in surprise. Was this what Harry wanted him to discourage Tom from?

With keen insight, the extraordinary boy immediately caught Slughorn's expression.

"I suspect that Harry has been using a beauty potion." Tom said.

Oh, no wonder the man wanted him to discourage Tom’s interest. Slughorn glanced at Tom. Most people tended to be secretive when it came to their attempts at preserving their looks. Doubtless, Harry was too embarrassed to ask Tom, a curious young man by nature, to stop investigating.

"I'm sorry, Tom, but I think Harry would prefer I not speak with you about it. In fact, I think he'd prefer you to stop looking into the matter altogether."

Harry? The teenager was particularly sensitive to that name. From the age of five, when he’d only known him as Mr. Potter, he’d drawn the curved arc of each letter of that name over and over, thousands of times, deep in his heart. Tom raised his eyes, suppressing the clamor that was occurring inside of him. The smiling young man let his question hang silently in the air.

"We spoke just the other day. I’m going to respect his wishes and won’t explain beyond what can be found in the textbook. I’ll be honest; when he said you were looking into something questionable I did not expect this." Slughorn laughed heartily, amused by the whole affair.

The sentence resounded like a clap of thunder in Tom, the confidence he felt from the potion dissipating. It felt like his body was falling up and every corner of his mind was rapidly thinking.

Harry knew he was looking into something and had asked Slughorn specifically not to tell him. Tom doubted it would be about beauty potions. Slughorn had seemed relieved when Tom asked. Harry’s timing was also more than a little suspicious.

An impossible terrible thought came to mind – did Harry know he was trying to make a Horcrux?
Tom’s jaw clenched.

No, he couldn’t possibly know that. The teenager’s eyes watched the hourglass, followed the sand trickling away. His dark eyes began to cloud as his repressed inner darkness started to emerge.

Harry might have been able to figure out that Tom Riddle was a selfish sinister person, could even know about the Slytherin blood in his veins, but he couldn’t possibly know about the existence of Horcruxes!

He didn’t find the idea of making Horcruxes terrible but Harry would see them as evil and truly see Tom’s nature. What would his reaction be if he knew what Tom was doing? Would Tom be abandoned, would Harry be disappointed or disgusted by him?

But Harry hadn’t shown those emotions. Perhaps he still didn’t know and if he did know about Tom’s plans then perhaps Tom could move forward without Harry knowing.

The young man fiercely bit the inside of his cheek. He could still do this.

In the fairy tale “Bluebeard”, the man approaches his wife step by step with a ferocious axe just because she knows his despicable secret. He didn’t hate his wife. No, he cared too much for her and was afraid she’d hate him and leave him. So when his carefully hidden secret was exposed, he reacted to it with extreme desperation.

Thousands of thoughts turned into millions in the blink of an eye as Tom considered the implications of what he’d learned.

"Tom, do you have any other questions?"

"Yes," Tom immediately set aside all superfluous emotions, though an unnoticeable eye tic remained, "there was something else I was curious about."

"Ah, is that so?" The old man beckoned him to go on.

Tom paused, feeling that previously repressed sense of self-confidence rising up, and furrowed his brow. "Yesterday, I saw a word in the library and I didn’t really understand it. I believe it was called a Horcrux."

The professor didn’t know that the student had used a potion that tamed the ugly greed in his eyes. Because he could not see it, he didn’t think of any dark purpose behind the enquiry. So without a reason not to tell Tom, Slughorn did.

"Thank you, Professor, for explaining it to me." Tom perfectly imitated an honest and grateful student. "I knew only you would be so knowledgeable about such an obscure subject."

Fate moved behind the scenes, guiding events to their inevitable conclusion. Destiny cannot be changed; history, already written, cannot be erased.

This was the truth behind the game Harry was playing; the beginning had already determined the outcome. The ignorant time traveler just didn’t want to see that.
A Real Illusion

Chapter Summary

I'm sick. :(

September 12, 1942

As the relationship between Tom and Harry grew more complex the rest of the school was captivated by the tournament. The day the Champions were to be announced had arrived and all eyes were on the Goblet of Fire. Everyone was sitting in the Great Hall for the ceremony, watching the blue flames with bated breath. After two weeks, the students were more than ready to know who among them would be called a Champion.

Harry and Alphonse were sitting at the end of the Ravenclaw table along with some of the foreign guests. Joan, as their leader, was sitting with the professors and the headmaster.

Harry watched the Goblet of Fire attentively, knowing what would happen next. Of course, it brought to mind the tournament of the future where it was his name resounding through the Great hall.

"Do you think I qualified for the Triwizard Tournament, Mr. Potter?" A Beauxbatons girl asked with sparkling eyes and a shy smile. The Ravenclaw and Beauxbatons students nearby turned to hear his answer.

Something about the girl was familiar to Harry but he couldn’t for the life of him figure out where he’d seen her before. The only Beauxbatons student he really knew was Fleur. Maybe this girl was her grandmother? Harry smiled at the thought, but found it a bit unlikely.

"I’m afraid only the Goblet of Fire knows." Harry said, politely.

The Beauxbatons girl smiled as he turned his attention back to the Goblet of Fire. His eyes burned with a power and confidence that she found charming.

Harry might not remember her but she certainly remembered him.

One day, by chance, she caught sight of a Patronus, something she had never been able to cast herself. In fact, she’d never even had the opportunity to see a corporeal Patronus before and was surprised by the calm and peace the creature exuded. Out of curiosity, she followed the silvery stag, watched its leisurely stroll, and enjoyed the feeling of the soothing power that flowed from it. She’d always wanted to cast such a powerful spell; one that few could cast. Who in the castle could have so much power, she had wondered.

Then, she saw Harry.

Romance blossomed in her heart at the sight of someone so powerful, despite never having had a conversation with him. Perhaps if she could prove herself strong enough or produce her own Patronus he would see the witch she was and be equally as enamored with her as she was with him!
The naïve girl let her romantic imagination run wild, confident in her abilities. Unfortunately for her, Harry had more important things on his mind.

Tom quietly watched Harry over the Goblet of Fire. The teenager’s dark eyes glared daggers at the oblivious man.

The Goblet of Fire spit out the first parchment – “The Durmstrang Champion is Dieter Charlov.”

Tom’s gaze swept along the Hufflepuff table where the Durmstrang students had chosen to sit. Of course, the face that interested him the most was not Dieter’s childishly ecstatic one but that of another student whose face was twisted with resentment, anger, and sinister jealousy.

Those terrible emotions were the gateway to the Dark Arts.

To Tom, there was nothing more fascinating than watching others fall so far that they could no longer escape from their own darkness. After all, he’d fallen quite far himself.

What was the name of that boy with the crooked nose? Karkaroff?

The cheers of the students died down as the Goblet of Fire spit out the second slip. Adjusting his glasses Armando Dippit declared: "The Beauxbatons Champion is Mylene Lance."

Harry leaned forward and spoke to the girl being congratulated as her classmates sighed with envy. There was an extraordinary calm amongst the students, though, so it seemed like the girl had been expected to be chosen.

Tom looked the girl up and down. What a bland thing, Tom thought with disdain.

With two of the school Champions announced, the Hogwarts students were on the edge of their seats as those who entered their names hoped to get called and their friends and housemates supported them. The Goblet of Fire shot the last piece of paper and the Gryffindors went wild. The last Champion left the room to join the others as the whole room watched.

Harry didn’t know the Champion and his name hadn’t left an impression on him. Harry watched the seventh year Minerva McGonagall try to hide her excitement behind her usual reserved facade though her lips kept twitching into a smile. He could also see Hagrid, already big enough to be noticeable in a crowd, dance with excitement.

With the all the Champions announced, and with their subsequent exit, the evening excitement started to subside.

Harry asked Alphonse if he wanted to head back to their room but Alphonse firmly shook his head. The man was starving and wanted to enjoy the feast and the excited atmosphere. Harry shrugged but got up with the intention of leaving the noisy room anyway.

Once the hunter saw his prey move, he smirked and set out with a trap in mind.

There had been a wide variety of others who had gotten in the way of his prey lately, much to the displeasure of the jealous hunter. Time had been wasted but now one of the biggest problems had been left behind.
He knew part of the reason Harry was often in a group was to escape Tom when all Tom wanted was to talk to him alone.

"Harry." Tom greeted Harry softly.

Harry froze for a few seconds when the tall handsome boy suddenly appeared from around the corner.

“I wanted to wish you a good night, Harry. I hope you didn’t take offense to me calling you my father.” Tom said, laying the foundation of the trap.

At Tom’s last word, Harry relaxed; letting some of his discomfort go.

"I thought you were just ..." Harry trailed off, biting his lip. After the day’s excitement had worn off, he had come to the realization that Tom had purposely called him that in front of his fellow Slytherins. It had only been a way to conceal his heritage and the thought had hurt.

"Father?" His child called to him again, with a question in his voice, and with a flash Harry felt that warmness again. Hearing himself called that was very rewarding and maybe it wasn’t just a way Tom was using him.

Harry was surprised by how dearly he wanted that to be true.

He wanted to reach out and ruffle Tom’s hair but decided it would be too awkward with Tom just half a head shorter than him. He didn’t know how else he could express his affection to Tom.

"I’m very happy you call me that." Harry said to try to get the message across.

Tom deliberately softened his face and smiled gently to further soften Harry’s defenses.

It seemed strange to Harry that Voldemort hadn’t changed even though he’d watched over the child who would become him. All he could see was the good in him and not a speck of the man he could become had appeared. Harry was even beginning to question the accuracy of history.

“By the way, Harry, I was moved to a new room only I have access to.” Tom said.

Harry was completely baffled, thrown off by the non sequitur. Why had Tom brought that up?

“I was given a Prefects bedroom where we could talk in private.” The young man stubbornly went on when Harry still hesitated, Tom continued, “I feel like we haven’t spent much time together lately.”

"I guess I can go see your new room," Harry smiled.

The teenager nodded and turned to lead the way in silence.

Harry followed behind Tom as they walked to the Prefect’s bedroom. They didn’t speak but there was a peaceful air between them, almost like his Patronus was walking with them.

Tom Riddle had grown from a child into a teenager. Harry stared at the back of his head. He’d had close to a decade with the child and could compare the Tom Riddle he had known in the future to the one in front of him. He tried to measure the differences between them.

Unfortunately, because he thought the child familiar to him he couldn’t look without bias, and that
created an illusion.

The hunter’s cage was slowly closing around him but Harry was blind to it.

Tom was happy as he walked along, though Harry didn’t know that it was a mask to hide Tom’s true mood. A decade spent raising Tom had degraded Harry’s vigilance.

The Prefect’s bedroom was larger than the normal dorm, despite being meant for just one person. Harry looked around curiously but Tom was impatient.

“Harry, have you been avoiding me?” The young man sat on the bed, face as still as marble, and his voice distant.

Harry’s heart twinged. He knew his actions weren’t fair to Tom.

He wanted to say that it wasn’t true, that he had no reason to do so but he couldn’t deny it.

The teenager didn’t speak when Harry kept his silence. Instead, he lowered his eyes. Sitting there with his downcast face, he looked absolutely dejected.

To Harry, Voldemort was arrogant, the Pensieve Tom Riddle was cunning and hypocritical, and the Tom Riddle trapped in the orphanage was bitter and hostile. The Tom Riddle before him was none of those things, just a lonely child.

Harry went to stand beside him. With the teenager sitting on the bed, Harry was finally tall enough to comfortably lay his hand on Tom’s head.

“I’m sorry, Tom. As long as you are a good person, I won’t do that again.” Harry said, running his fingers through Tom’s hair.

Tom’s bowed head hid his cold eyes. Harry wanted him to be good? Harry definitely had some idea of what Tom was doing.

“Of course, I’ll be good.” He put on a warm smile as he enjoyed the gentle touch on his head.

A lie but Harry didn’t have to know that. And if Harry ever found out, he’d find a way to force him to stay. Never again would Harry be out of his reach.
The night of September 12, 1942

Under the young man’s terrible subtle control, the pages began to turn.

Harry didn’t even realize that Tom was deliberately deceiving him by putting on a show. His humble attitude and sweet smiles were meant to lure Harry out of his cowardly hiding and ease his suspicions.

Of course, it was only natural that Harry would take for granted what he saw on the surface and assume that it was the truth.

The calm sea hides the predatory creatures lingering on the seabed. Someone who knows better knows to fear the water regardless, but many rush to the water without fear.

As they changed the topic to something more neutral, like classes, and started conversing in earnest, Harry looked for signs of the teenager’s blooming depression but found nothing in his eyes now. It was shocking how strong Tom was, even when he was faced with the possible rejection of someone he considered a father.

Tom turned out to be very knowledgeable, though that wasn’t actually a surprise. The things he knew even as just a fifth year student, however, astonished Harry.

He was reminded fondly of Hermione and considered what would have happened if she had applied her brilliant mind to the Dark Arts. If she and Tom were as alike in their studious natures as he thought, then he was afraid that, with the exception of Dumbledore, no one could truly match Tom’s power. Bellatrix and Malfoy paled in comparison to him. To truly master the Dark Arts, you had to understand them as few did.

They ended up talking at length. This was mostly due to the fact that Tom, when he wanted to, could act in an incredibly friendly and engaging manner. With his quick mind he could easily guess another person’s interests and could extend the topic as long as he wanted by saying just the right thing to stir up someone’s curiosity.

“Harry, I’ve been trying to master the Patronus Charm.” Tom pursed his lips for a moment and affected a subtle look of embarrassment, just enough for Harry to see it in his face. “So far, I haven’t been successful.”

Tom couldn’t guess at the true purpose behind all the things that Harry did. Presumably, Harry didn’t want something from him. He certainly wouldn’t be avoiding Tom so much if he did. As far as Tom could tell, Harry wanted to see a Tom Riddle that was perfectly good.

The Patronus Charm was often recognized as the ultimate representation of the good that resided in
someone, whether it was because of the spell’s ridiculous requirement or the way it looked, Tom didn’t know.

Even as a teenager, Tom’s ancestry shined in his spirit and character. For Tom, power was used only for aggressive attacks fueled by dark emotions not defense, and having to use happy memories was a hindrance. For those reasons, the Patronus Charm seemed like a foolish thing to waste time on as far as he was concerned. He had never tried to cast it before, though he had read about it in preparation for tonight.

In order to deceive Harry, he didn’t mind looking a little incompetent in his spellwork. In fact, if Harry saw such a weakness, he might let his guard down even further.

“You tried to cast a Patronus?” Harry asked.

Tom was unable to tell what Harry was thinking but he seemed surprised going by the miniscule widening of his eyes.

After receiving an affirmative nod, Harry felt his heart gradually warm as, little by little joy rose inside of him. The Patronus Charm was something he knew well; the charm needed both a strong will and powerfully happy memories to be cast correctly. Tom hadn’t been able to successfully cast it but was willing to try. Was Tom one of those people who wanted the prestige of being able to cast a notoriously difficult charm or did he simply wish for some form of protection? Either way, Harry was relieved to find him interested in such a good-natured spell.

Tom sighed, suddenly. “I went to Professor Slughorn for help, and I don’t know why, but he refused to talk to me about it.”

The moment Tom saw Harry’s expression freeze, his own eyes flashed.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I could teach you how to cast it. I’ve always been rather fond of the spell, myself.” Harry said, hurrying to get away from the subject of Slughorn.

Tom stood up from the bed and pulled out his wand at Harry’s invitation. “Then perhaps the spell will be easier to learn with a teacher of quality.”

Tom’s polite manner and smiling face made Harry feel, absurdly, like he was being invited to a dance. Harry met Tom’s black eyes but saw only his own reflection staring back. It was a strange situation with Harry feeling both affectionate but confused. If he was one of the young girls at the school, he might’ve been utterly charmed by Tom’s manner.

As it was, Harry also rose from his seat and pulled out his wand, feeling slightly baffled.

The Prefect’s bedroom wasn’t very large but there was enough room for two people to practice spellwork.

“You have to remember your happiest memory, a rather hard thing to recall, I know.” Harry felt rather like Professor Lupin as he explained how the spell worked.

Tom held his wand up, his attention dutifully focused as Harry directed him on the correct positioning.

Harry had Tom straighten his wrist and then said, “Raise your arm a little, you’ll be more likely to succeed if it’s higher.”

Tom cared little for what position his arm had to be in for him to cast it, but let Harry guide him
“Like this?” Tom humbly asked.

“Too high,” said Harry, taking hold of Tom’s arm. “It needs to be more natural.”

It was September and it had become the habit of the students to roll their sleeves to their elbows in an attempt to cool off and Tom was no exception.

Harry’s fingers met his bare skin.

Compared to the heat of the month, the fingers on Tom’s arm were delightfully cool. It was as though currents of energy flowed from the contact. Tom felt as though he could feel his soul spasm from the shock of it.

Even with Tom’s extreme dislike of not being in control, he couldn’t complain about the contact. The feeling of skin on skin brought a pleasure to him that nearly drove him to distraction.

The feeling that spread through him bred a deep satisfaction inside of him. It was beyond sexual, a direct stimulation of pleasure that was incomparable to anything else Tom had felt.

A true Slytherin, Tom restrained himself from making any outward response with the exception of his darkening eyes.

Harry was completely immersed in his teaching, oblivious to Tom’s thoughts. Thanks to the time he’d spent teaching the spell in his fifth year, Harry went through the motions without thinking much about it. His mind was on his friends: the way he adjusted their arms, praised them, and the way spells were flung bright and fast across the room. It had been hard work, but it was something Harry had enjoyed doing.

And just like then, when things were desperate, Harry had held onto hope. And he would do so now.

Even if the situation ends up getting worse, even if he is on the verge of dying, Harry will hold onto hope because it is all that he has to keep away the despair.

The result of Harry’s lesson was predictable. No matter how hard Harry tried to teach Tom all the techniques that would make it easier, Tom could not cast a Patronus. If this corrupt seed couldn’t sprout leaves, could he ever blossom?

“Don’t worry about it, the charm is notoriously difficult to master. I’m sure with more practice you’ll get the hang of it.” Harry patted Tom’s shoulder in sympathy. It couldn’t feel good for the child, usually so perfect in his spellwork, to have failed.

Although, Tom could no longer really be called a child considering that Tom’s height made it impossible to rub his head like Harry used to. He supposed it was like that for all parents; no matter how much they’ve grown, their child is still a child to them.

Tom was unable to distance himself from his feelings for Harry, that rough possessive desire he felt for the man. Harry, too, couldn’t distance himself from his feelings. He was Tom’s enemy, friend, guardian, and father.

Harry couldn’t sort out his complicated emotions, it was like they formed a Gordian knot and every time he tried to sort it out he just made a bigger mess of it.
“Harry, we’ve been at this for quite a long time. It must be rather late by now. Perhaps you should stay here for the night?”

Tired as he was, Harry nodded without hesitation. It would be a long walk back to his room from here.

“You’re not afraid of me hogging the bed?” Harry joked.

Tom smiled at him, “Of course not. I think I can survive one night with you.”

“Do you want to try squeezing into some of my clothes?” Tom called as he removed a night shirt and pants from his closet and moved to stand in front of the bathroom door.

All he could hear from the other side was the continuous sound of water hitting frosted glass. He also couldn’t see any movement in the light spilling out beneath the door.

Perhaps the sound of the water was too loud for Harry to hear Tom over. He certainly couldn’t hear Harry reply.

Tom asked again, waiting for an answer. When he heard none, he unconsciously pressed his hand to the door handle. With some surprise, he realized Harry hadn’t locked it.

He opened the door slowly and stepped into the foggy room. The air was humid and water droplets were already forming and sliding down the walls of the shower. Tom could barely see Harry behind the fogged glass. What he could see was the whiteness of Harry’s skin, what he knew was Harry’s back and slender thighs.

“Tom?” Harry asked as he heard the door click shut. Without his glasses he could only see the vague outline of Tom beyond the foggy glass. The water dripping into his eyes didn’t help matters.

“I brought you clothes. The door was open and you didn’t respond, so I thought I’d leave them here for you.” Tom said. Harry blushed a bit with embarrassment. Despite spending time with Ron, who was pretty careless about privacy, he really didn’t like that he’d left the door wide open. He must have been very tired.

Harry quickly reached for his glasses. Even with them he couldn’t really see as they, too, had fogged up spectacularly. He hastily wiped them with his fingers. Tom took advantage of Harry’s poor sight to brazenly stare at what he could see of the man without giving away the burning in his eyes.

But Tom knew better than to stay a moment longer, though he wished to. “Sorry if I disturbed you. I’ll leave these here for you.”

When Harry had finished getting dressed in clothes that were just a little too small for him, he stepped out in time to see Tom pour two glasses of wine.

“I hope you don’t mind that I chose the wine.” Tom raised an eyebrow and smiled, taking a sip. He
looked Harry up and down, taking in every detail he could from head to toe. The intense look in his eyes was hidden by the tilt of his head, making it only look like a trick of the light.

Harry rubbed his hair with his towel and laughed, “Where did you even get that?”

Tom just chuckled without replying and removed a small bottle from the shelf. He turned to Harry and asked him, with a concerned expression, “Harry, it looks like you haven’t been sleeping well lately. Would you like to try something that might help?”

Harry shrugged and watched Tom deftly add three drops of some kind of potion to one of the glasses. “I suppose it can’t hurt to try.”

Tom smiled happily, swirled the wine, and handed it to Harry. “You can go ahead and drink that while I take my shower.”

When Tom left the bathroom, he saw Harry already in bed, fast asleep. The glass of wine was on the table, empty.

With his heart pounding, the young dark lord was finally able to be himself in front of his prey. His great appetite had been slowly consuming his thoughts and now he was able to boldly walk over to survey what his trap had wrought.

The young man stood over the man in his bed, his shadow stretching out and covering the sleeping man.

Tom leaned in close, his dark eyes taking in Harry’s relaxed face. Even now, he could see no change from the man he’d first met as a child. This was a face untouched by time; one Tom had become very familiar with. There was a great pleasure in knowing that he was now in control of the situation. An unpleasant smile stretched across his face.

His most beloved possession was lying under him, peacefully sleeping.

Unable to resist a moment longer, he crawled on top of the man and buried his head in Harry’s neck, sucking at the fragile skin. Then he teased the man’s chest with his tongue. Inexperienced as he was, he was relying on his body’s instinct to guide him as rubbed against Harry and groaned.

Tom had been suppressing his desire for so long that he unleashed it now with aggression. He focused on the way it felt to caress Harry’s skin, stared at the man’s gentle face, as he happily took advantage of his prey.

Asleep beneath him was the man he called father. Despite the fact that they were not truly flesh and blood, the taboo nature of it only served to excite Tom more.

Thrusting against Harry’s stomach he reached his peak. Satisfied, he sat back and enjoyed the forbidden act he had just committed and the mess he’d made of Harry. After he had memorized the sight, he cast a few spells to conceal what he’d done. There would be no evidence for Harry to find.

Having let some of his frustration out he felt, temporarily at least, sated.

In the future, the Dark Lord suddenly frowned, feeling puzzled.
February 7, 2001

In contrast to the bright warm days Harry was enjoying in 1942, the present had taken a turn for the oppressive. The cold winter and lingering London fog made for miserable weather. While the Muggles brushed it off as just a dreary time of year the witches and wizards found it a manifestation of the horror and desolation they were going through.

The situation in 1942 may have held the veneer of peace, but the future had crawled out of its cocoon with cruelty on its wings.

"Ha ha ha!" Insane laughter filled the makeshift base, pounded people’s eardrums, and grated on everyone’s nerves. “You don’t have a hope; his reign will be great and terrible! You will be crushed beneath his fist! Death to all the blood traitors!”

For almost two months the Death Eater had been the prisoner of Dumbledore’s Army. The man was magically bound to a distorted iron chair so tightly that it nearly blocked blood circulation. His hair had long since grown greasy and lank and his clothes were beyond filthy. The first day of his capture he had been arrogant and proud but after two months of imprisonment, his sanity was declining. Still, he was defiant and screamed with a fervor that was nearly religious at anyone who came within earshot.

“Joy to his downfall! The Boy Who Lived is dead! The Dark Lord victorious!” he cheered and babbled to a corner of the room as if he were having a conversation with it.

“Put a sock in it, you loon!” Ron stormed in to the crude laboratory on Hermione’s heels. He glared at the man and balled his hands into fists as the Death Eater cackled madly. “Why won’t you let me hit him? Maybe then he’d finally shut it!”

Hermione fell into the chair at her research table. There she set aside the papers for Harry’s offensive magic training program, a draft for a potent healing spell, and Harry’s potion regimen.

“Just let it go, Ron.” Hermione buried herself in calculations. With her quill, she began furiously writing complicated formulas that made Ron dizzy to look at them.

Something was wrong and she needed to find out what. Hermione pursed her lips, sharp eyes dancing across the writing.

Neither muggles nor wizards could lift the veil on the flow of time. There was no way to fully comprehend the trajectories, calculate the complex theorems, and the formulas created were so interspersed with paradoxes large and small that it hindered any attempt to remove that blindness. The past could not be changed, the present could not be stopped, and the future could not be predicted.
A person trying to forcefully change anything could experience dizziness, difficulty breathing, and extraordinary pain.

“Hermione, what are you doing?” When Hermione ignored him, Ron continued in a low voice, “Does it have something to do with Harry’s plan?”

Thinking about Harry’s task was depressing to Ron and he couldn’t help but frown. After a moment spent in unhappy silence, he spoke up again.

“Hermione, have you heard the rumors… about Harry?”

Hermione’s hand paused, the scratching of the quill ceased. She looked up.

Rumors about Harry? Of course she’d heard! Hermione laughed loudly, the action sharp and deriding, a sound that was more appropriate coming from a Slytherin than a Gryffindor.

Ron winced but soldiered on. “Harry’s been gone for so long trying to get that bloody plan to work… and the last time he got back, he left as soon as he could, of course people are getting worried. It doesn’t help that that damned Death Eater has been shouting every bloody minute about Harry’s death. I don’t even know where he got the idea but he certainly seems to believe it.”

“And what do you want me to do?” Hermione asked, sharply, the pressure of working long hours driving her to the brink of her patience. “Should we just let them believe it? That he’s dead or a coward? They’re the cowards! They want to hide behind him and watch in safety if he lives or dies! And if he’s killed they’ll fall to their knees and beg for forgiveness.” She took a deep breath in an effort to calm down, “If we let them know what he’s really doing, the plan could be compromised.”

Ron clenched his hand into a fist and punched the table with a loud bang. Hermione’s attitude had begun to irritate him and the rumors being whispered about the camp were like flies buzzing about his head. He wanted to do something, anything about it. He was so frustrated!

“He’s found a safe place to hide!”

“Yeah, here we are on the battlefield, while he cowers behind us!”

“Hears us to die! I don’t want to die!”

“What if he’s dead? What do we do?”

Hermione had been weathering the storm of confusion and anger and her once tender face was beginning to bear the marks of her stress. She couldn’t explain to them what was happening. Harry’s mission had to be kept secret outside of a select few. She tried to comfort them as best she could, to let them know that Harry had a plan that they were not privy to.

Even knowing the plan didn’t stop the questions and accusations. Ginny kept asking why he wouldn’t come back. To Ginny’s frowning face, Hermione decided to be truthful rather than tactful, “There’s nothing that we can do about it now. We need to focus on doing something worthwhile until he gets back. Nothing is helped by you worrying about him.”

Recently, Percy had approached her, solemnly saying, “The situation here is very tense. Harry didn’t have to stay the entire time in the past. Are you sure this isn’t him escaping?”

Luna, Neville, Angelina, George, Fred… they had all stood silent waiting for her response.

It was true, compared to training for battle or holding the line against the Death Eaters in the flames
and smoke of war, being in the magical community that existed seventy years in the past, while not perfectly safe, could be seen as a peaceful place to hide. The fire of the Muggle World War II would affect the Wizarding World little and the Dark Lord taking over Germany would be kept out of the United Kingdom thanks to Dumbledore’s protection. Staying there, the only danger Harry would have to face was a young Tom Riddle.

It seemed too easy to them.

They didn’t understand how great that commitment is, how dangerous the task, how every move has to be calculated carefully against the future, and how strong Harry has to be to face the past alone.

They aren’t Harry, they don’t have to make the difficult jumps in time, and with the exception of Ginny, they have never faced a teenage Tom Riddle. How could they stand there and make damning comments when they understood so little?

When she lashed back at them they assured her, “We believe in Harry, but we don’t think this plan is the right choice.”

Hermione had nothing to say to that. She didn’t know if Harry’s plan was the right thing to do anymore.

All these questions and rumors and misery culminated one day into Seamus calling for action against Voldemort and for Harry to face him head on.

“Why the fuck not, right? It’s getting too dangerous for us to stay here. Harry’s going to be found and killed if we don’t make the first move. And if Harry dies, we die. We need to make a plan of attack. Harry’s a great fighter, the best of us, I believe in him. He can take Voldemort on if we can just distract the Death Eaters long enough for them not to interfere with the fight and attack Harry.” The young man stood tall, his fiery red hair like a lion’s mane, speaking with the passion of a knight.

"I believe in him, too! If he goes to fight, I’ll support him.” Someone from the gathered crowd, said.

The proclamation lit a spark in the camp and soon the sentiment spread. Seamus’ call to arms brought hope and the despair that hung over the camp for so long seemed to wither.

Harry was not the most powerful wizard to have ever existed but he was surrounded by friends who believed in him and supported him. That’s what made him strong.

“My Lord,” said the cloaked figure entering the room. They bowed to the man on the throne. “The rumors are spreading rapidly but it seems Harry Potter is still refusing to appear to anyone.”

With the black cloth covering their hair and clothes and the hood casting shadows over their features, the defector took great pains to hide their face. Yes, hidden amongst Dumbledore’s Army, Harry’s most loyal friends, a traitor existed.

Voldemort stopped playing with the locket in his hand. Standing by his side, Pettigrew cast a nervous look to the handsome face of the Dark Lord.

While the Dark Lord had been reabsorbing his Horcruxes, he had been using different tactics against Dumbledore’s Army, repeatedly using deception and terror to wear down his opponents without
damaging his own forces.

“Continue to spread word of the Boy-Who-Lived’s death.” Voldemort said with a cruel smirk on his lips.

The man who never forgot his fear of death laughed at the memory of the boy’s gesture of compassion.

*You’ll never understand love and never see friendship. I can only pity you.*

Ha.

What about you, Harry Potter? What are you without others standing beside you, shielding you from danger? They are beginning to waver and will one day betray you. And when you are standing alone who will be the pathetic one, then?

He openly chuckled at the thought, incredibly pleased.

“My Lord, when can we go attack the Muggleborns and blood traitors?” Bella Lestrange’s eyes shone as she gazed up at him. Each time she had suggested taking action, she had been dismissed but surely this time her Lord would also want to wreak his vengeance. Never had he gone so long without venting his wrath.

The Dark Lord smiled down at her. Purebloods were nothing but a joke. They thought highly of themselves but they were nothing but his easily manipulated minions.

“My dear Bella,” he said, his voice as gentle as a whisper between lovers, “we have no need for that now. Rest assured; I have a plan.”

His Death Eaters whispered eagerly amongst themselves. Their Lord had been becoming more powerful and more perfect every day. No longer did insanity hamper him. Where blind violence had once been his mark, now he used tactics and reason, and had become a far more dangerous foe for it.

“History is always marching toward the inevitable.” Professor Binns had said. “In the moments between one ruler and another, there are those who resist. Those rebellions are often short-lived but they can be devastating.”

And if the next ruler was brutal and dark, would the people fight harder to repel him? That was something that Voldemort had contemplated carefully.

Wizards weren’t complicated creatures, he knew. They only cared that they could sleep soundly with their wands on the bedside table, keep their clothes and homes and traditions, and that their child could still be sent away to learn magic. As long as they felt their lives were unaffected, they didn’t care who reigned supreme, be it Fudge or Dumbledore or Voldemort.

Those selfish, blind, stupid, and ignorant people were so easy to control.

Voldemort began idly toying with the locket’s chain again, his smile cruel and elegant.

Harry, my boy, watch carefully as hope crumbles around you. When your comrades betray you, when witches and wizards will watch you die for the sake of peace, when the whole world is against you, who will protect you?
A month passed in the blink of an eye. The Triwizard Tournament was looming on the horizon; the preparations were nearly complete.

“The Triwizard Tournament was founded about seven hundred years ago. Three magical schools, known today as Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and Hogwarts each selected a student to participate in tasks that would test their talents, strengths, courage, cunning, and adaptability. Due to the high mortality rate, the event was indefinitely suspended. Several attempts have been made to revive the Triwizard Tournament but they have all ended in disaster.” Almost all of the students were wide awake, an incredibly rare occurrence for History of Magic. Professor Binns droned on in his leisurely way, but that didn’t deter the interested youths.

The audience consisted of Slytherins, Hufflepuffs, and Durmstrang students. The Hufflepuffs listened attentively because they yearned for the Triwizard Tournament to start and to cheer on the Hogwarts’ Champion. The Durmstrang students listened carefully because they loved the idea of the challenging and dangerous tasks. Bitter, however, were the Slytherins. They weren’t interested in the challenges or the prize being offered. They listened because they desired the glory that winning would hold.

To further the Slytherins’ dissatisfaction, their Champion was a Gryffindor. They had always considered their House better than the others. Their blind arrogance left them intolerant of the Champion and his supporters. With no easy way to vent their anger, the mood was worsening, and the atmosphere was becoming tense.

“Rest in peace to the most flamboyant Gryffindor Hogwarts has ever seen. How did Leodegan ever get picked?” The mockery could be heard in every corner of the castle from the Slytherins.

“Do you really think that you could be better?” The other students would ask. The Slytherins would lash back with harsh words and the situation would continue to escalate until curses were being thrown.

Here was a telling moment for the Slytherin House. All that talk about grace, elegance, and strategy and all they amounted to was dressing fashionably and acting petty.

The handsome boy smirked to himself as he listened to his housemates make snide comments during Binns’ lecture.

What did it really mean to be Slytherin? They could be just as impulsive as Gryffindors, calm where
Ravenclaws were cool, but they were heartlessly cruel, cowardly, and untrustworthy. They demanded glory and status but shed all responsibility at the first opportunity and proceeded to be insolent and reckless. They were unscrupulous and their friendship could be bought and sold. And all these terrible things came together to form the noble House of Slytherin.

Slytherins rarely collaborated as a whole, preferring to be separated into groups based on their families’ social hierarchy. So the Slytherin House was always a mess with people moving in and out of groups as their families moved.

It pleased Tom to see the chaos.

He knew the best way to take over the Slytherin House. After all, its greatest weakness was exposed for all to see; the House ready to collapse at just the right push.

The teenager turned his attention away from his jeering housemates and to the lonely Durmstrang student in the corner of the room.

Igor Karkaroff glared at Dieter Charlov’s back, anger and jealousy filling his chest. Why did Charlov become the Champion? What qualities or talents did he possess that Igor did not? How could he be more worthy?

The Professor winded down his speech and gestured to the students that class time was up.

The Durmstrang students quickly and neatly packed up their items and followed Charlov out of the classroom. Karkaroff was excluded from that group. No one waited for him, no one called for him to hurry, and no one was willing to let him join.

No matter what country you lived in or which school you attended, the freak was always excluded from the rest of the group. It was a fact that had haunted Karkaroff for years of his life. If he had been chosen, he’d finally be acknowledged and admired.

Karkaroff took great pains to hide himself in the dark corner of Hogwarts, away from the sight of the Hogwarts students who had surely noticed his exclusion. He couldn’t bear to hear their whispers or see their curious looks.

“Damn you, Charlov.” The teenager growled as he hurried to gather his belongings.

“What is it? Just don’t like him or… no, could it be that you want to take his place? You would be a better fit.” Tom said kindly. He held out a slim white hand, lips stretched over perfect white teeth. The words rang out like a siren’s call to Karkaroff.

Karkaroff’s exceptionally sharp eyes peered up at Tom, angry and curious.

Tom smiled gently; his flawless looks and intelligent persona were powerful tools for convincing people to do what he wanted without using any magic. “I understand. He doesn’t deserve the glory and attention that he’s getting. I can see it, same as you. And you know what? I know how to use the rules to your advantage. I know exactly how stop him from stealing what’s yours.”

The young man’s voice had changed to something nearly tender, almost sweet, and charm practically dripped from his mouth. Though the words were gentle, Karkaroff could feel every point the boy
made with a pang in chest. They whispered to the anger and the jealousy in his blood. His heart started to beat faster.

“Who are you?”

The boy had bewitched him and Karkaroff was about to be dragged deeper into the abyss he was teetering on the edge of. Without a thought, Karkaroff placed his hand in the boy’s strong grip.

“My name is Tom Riddle, a pleasure to meet you.” Tom’s eyes flicked to their linked hands and his smile widened.

Karkaroff sullenly slunk to his temporary room at Hogwarts.

He heard laughter from the other boys but none of them even turned to look at Karkaroff, despite hearing him enter.

Tom Riddle’s words lingered in his ears as he headed to his bed.

“I’ll give you a day to consider this: I’ll give you what you want if you’re willing to give me your powers. I don’t need your loyalty, just your help when I call for it. I also want your assurance that you will not betray me.”

The thought of taking down Charlov had long since decided the matter for him.

He was tired of being ignored, despised the taste it left in his mouth. He no longer wanted to be excluded from the others. He didn’t want to be alone. Give Tom Riddle his powers in exchange for what he wanted? Of course he’d agree. After all, how could that boy ever know if Karkaroff did betray him? And what could he possibly do if he found out?

A sinister smile slid onto his face. No Unbreakable Vow, no contract, and he’d soon be away in Germany. How did a fifth-year Hogwarts student expect to keep him under his thumb? What a naïve child.

Karkaroff watched Charlov joke and laugh with his friends. He smiled, just as cheerful as the other boys, but for less amiable reasons.

Tom didn’t know the thoughts running through Karkaroff’s head but would balk at them if he knew. A good hunter never worries about his prey escaping.

Tom wore a warm smile as he kept a brisk pace down the hallway, greeting others pleasantly. He was stopped by Abraxas’ voice. Curious, he followed the sound around the corner.

“I didn’t do a thing to her.” Abraxas said, casually, hands in his pockets. He stood facing two serious looking girls.

Tom made his way further into the corridor, and turned his smile up a few notches, warm to
“Hello, Head Girl McGonagall. Has something happened?”

Her annoyance with Malfoy’s cavalier attitude eased at the sight of Tom. “Riddle, I want you, as Prefect, to get some control over the Slytherin students. These fights with the other students need to stop. I don’t want to see this happen again.” With her hair pulled back sharply from her handsome face, her serious expression gave her an impression of great authority.

“I’ll do whatever I can to remedy the problem. Good day, Head Girl.” Tom nodded to McGonagall as she and the other girl walked by him.

When she gone from sight, Malfoy flicked his hair over his shoulder and said, “So bad-tempered. She’ll probably end up marrying much later in life.”

“I’m going to the library. What about you?” Tom asked, ignoring Malfoy’s words.

“Same, I suppose.” Malfoy shrugged and followed Tom. He had nothing better to do now that his fun was over.

Abraxas ended up finding little of interest in the library. In his opinion, his family had a library with far more interesting books. In less than half an hour, he was squirming in his chair from the boredom. He wanted to talk to Tom but as soon as he opened his mouth the keen-eyed-and-eared librarian would look over at him. He ended up just swallowing his words.

Abraxas rested his chin on his hand, lazily looking around the library.

Was that Harry Potter? Abraxas squinted at the man and then swept his eyes to the other side of the table where Tom was sitting, focused on his book.

Standing beside Harry was a very tall person. Abraxas racked his memory for someone that large and came to the conclusion that it was probably that half-giant Gryffindor, Rubeus Hagrid. Ugh, the kind of creatures that House took in was revolting.

The half-giant seemed embarrassed and scratched the back of his messy hair. He then smiled at Harry, eyes crinkling.

The black-haired man laughed and raised his hand to pat one giant shoulder before handing over a book. He always seemed to be smiling. Anyone he came across was gifted with a genuine smile.

Abraxas briefly turned his attention to Tom before turning back. As far as he knew, Tom and Harry’s relationship had gone through both some bad and good times. He distinctly remembered that they had appeared to be in some kind of row not too long ago and Tom had been unpleasantly cross all throughout it.

The thought brought up an old memory. In his first year, Tom had similarly been angry most of the year. And why? Harry Potter.

A second year at the time, he had asked the sullen child about his problems. Like many Slytherins, he took pleasure in the distress of others. He’d been teasing the child when he’d said, “You care about him so much and he just left you? What are you doing to do about it?”

And how did that little first year answer?

“I’ll kill him.”

The sentence had seeped with murderous intent. The incident had left him spooked for several days.
But as that terrifying child grew bigger and bigger, he grew increasingly mild. Abraxas would nearly call him harmless compared to what he used to be. No one would ever believe it if Abraxas told them the story today.

“What are you looking at?” Tom asked, and before Abraxas could respond, he turned to see the two men standing between the shelves.

Abraxas thought Tom would move forward or wave to get the man’s attention but Tom surprised him.

“Come on.” Tom closed his book and walked straight out of the library.

“Don’t you need to check that out?” Abraxas stared down at the book.

Tom swept his hand over the book and the words on the cover began to change. It now read *Curses and Counter-Curses*. He trusted the glamour told in front of Abraxas, the librarian, and even Slughorn. He didn’t dare have it out in front of Dumbledore, who might be powerful enough to see through it. He also needed to keep it from Harry’s sight in order to eliminate all possibility of exposure.

As for Harry talking to the half-giant?

Since he had already tasted every inch of Harry’s skin, the man sparing an ugly half-giant a smile mattered little to him. He held an experience no one else could claim. Not Alphonse, not Joan, no one. They had not personally stripped off Harry’s clothes, licked the shell of Harry’s ear, or brushed their lips on his crotch.

Back in the Slytherin common room, Tom sat down. There he eagerly opened his book to a page titled “Horcrux”.
The First Task

November 24, 1942

The late autumn climate suffused the grounds on the day of the First Task.

The students, teachers, and even the ghosts gathered in the newly built amphitheater-like structure that had been assembled on the school grounds. The spectators held signs, and excited chatter and chants sprang up from the crowd as they waited. When the Champions were introduced there was a surge of sound as the students began waving, cheering, applauding, and screaming. Even wizards craved the promised action because the joy of watching a challenging fight was steeped in ancient traditions and rooted in their very bones.

Harry sat in the elevated judges’ booth overlooking the rocky arena the Champions would be traversing. He’d never gotten to experience the tournament from this perspective. He felt the cool wind push down the back of his neck and pulled his coat closer to his slim, but strong, body.

Harry’s determined dueling had started shaping his body over the last three months. He fought with anyone he could; sixth or seventh-year students, Alphonse, Joan, Professor Flitwick, and even Dumbledore had been willing to join him on occasion. He won, he lost, and there were days where he couldn’t continue because his legs became too cramped, but he didn’t dare slow down and stagnate. Better to fight through the pain.

He felt like he was caught between two large gears trying to grind him down. On one, his present, and the other, his future, and here he stood trying to endure them pressing down on him. He was desperately trying to maintain a balance as he tried to stop both without breaking either of them.

The problem was that his time was running out. Tom was already fifteen years old. By his calculations, he only had five years left to fix everything. That was only two weeks’ time in the future.

“Harry, it’s about to begin!” Alphonse said excitedly, nudging Harry’s shoulder and pulling his attention back to the Tournament.

At the back of the arena, the tournament staff levitated in a huge cage, draped with a cloth and secured with chains so that its reveal would not be spoiled by the curious or any cheating Champions. The staff quickly retreated, with one waving his wand, as he fled. The chain that had been holding it the cage closed fell with a rattling sound and the cloth began its own slow descent.

The noon sun, burst through the clouds to shine brightly down on the creature in the cage. The beast inside reacted to the light by twisting agitatedly as everyone looked on in shock.

To the crowd’s horror, the cage, bereft of chains, slowly opened and with a hiss and the basilisk was released.

Even the Slytherin students sucked in a breath of fear at the sight of their symbol, in monstrous form, crawling out into the open.

Wider than even the largest person in the crowd was tall; the winding body occupied more than half of the rocky field. With its spell-resistant scales, deadly fangs, and belly reflecting the sun, the great creature sent fear throughout the seated onlookers.
Even Harry had to swallow past a cold lump in his throat when meeting the magic-protected eyes of the beast. The sight of the snake provoked one of his darkest memories. There it was before him: the Chamber of Secrets, Slytherin’s legacy, and young Tom Riddle. His breath stuttered to a stop as his lungs locked up. Harry forced himself to slowly inhale and exhale in an effort to suppress his out of control emotions. At least this one couldn’t kill him with its eyes, he consoled himself.

The basilisk’s gaze swept across the amphitheater, powerful tail flicking with displeasure. It barely avoided hitting the champions perched up on the rocks on the side of the arena. There they waited for the signal to go through.

The basilisk opened its mouth, offering the nervous crowd the terrifying sight of its scarlet palate, tongue, and throat causing the spectators to shudder in fear. Gooey green discharge dripped from its fangs and dissolved the ground slowly like it was lava.

A few drops of the liquid splashed close to the audience and people screamed and yelled as they watched the corrosion up close.

The task was fairly straightforward – get from one side of the arena to the next. But with an enraged basilisk both occupying half of the space and in the process of liquefying the rest, it would not be easy, especially as the champions were not allowed to use brooms to get by. So how would they do it?

The first to go was the Hogwarts champion. Like all Gryffindors, he was brave to a fault, so he headed straight toward the basilisk.

Tom had no interest in how the boy progressed, just fixed his gaze on the irate basilisk’s body, dark eyes taking in the way the sunlight refracted off the scales of the beast, his mind as calm as the surface of a lake.

“Merlin… I don’t think I want to own a snake anymore.” One Slytherin girl sitting in the front mumbled to no one in particular as she trembled in her seat.

What would it be like to raise a basilisk? A flash of thought went through Tom’s mind, disturbing the calm as it pulled at hidden depths.

He frowned.

He considered the snake and was inadvertently reminded of Nagini, his thoughts turning from her to a memory.

"Lots and lots of pipes, here, inside the walls of Hogwarts. Lots and lots and lots! Thick and wide and long pipes everywhere!"

Nagini had laid out before him a flaw in Hogwarts’ security after she had climbed in. That was all he had believed of the matter.

His thoughts raced as he pondered the implications of the large pipes. The basilisk and Nagini, pipes easily traversed, and Hogwarts with Slytherin’s Chamber of Secrets hidden somewhere inside its walls.

Tom narrowed his dark eyes, the color gradually mixing with a red hue, before fading back to black.

Fate would prevent any attempt at change; the course of history would be maintained. Harry didn’t have to stumble or fail at a particular time or occasion. All that was needed was the inspiration that turns one young man’s mind onto the right track.
Just one thought to ruin all of Harry’s previous efforts. This was how Fate moved everything into its correct place: subtly, easily.

The Hogwarts Champion narrowly passed through the arena. His hair had half dissolved and his clothes were corroded up to his ankles, skin showing through and pink with burns. The audience found his appearance disturbing but he had suffered no true harm. He acknowledged that he might have a partiality toward Hogwarts and Gryffindor, because Harry didn’t hesitate to give the student the full ten points. To be fair, Harry doubted he could have gotten through the arena himself half as well without the use of a broom.

Alphonse ended up giving him eight points, Joan and the Hogwarts headmaster gave him nine, Durmstrang’s headmaster gave him eight points with great reluctance, and Beauxbaton’s headmistress, a mean-looking middle-aged woman, gave him a truly insulting number – four points.

That quickly set the Hogwarts students off. Everyone from the Gryffindors to the Slytherins began to yell foul language, abuse, and ridicule at the woman.

“I suppose if you’re using her breasts as a scale, that score isn’t so small.” Harry heard a Slytherin girl say with a deliberately raised voice near his spot at the judges’ booth. He turned to see her give the woman a look of pure disdain as people around her snickered.

Harry cleared his throat a few times to get her attention, sending an admonishing look to the Slytherin when she looked at him. She faced him stoically, undaunted.

Harry couldn’t help but let a smile cross his face, even though he knew he shouldn’t.

Although selfish and cunning, they were also just children and even they couldn’t hide that behind their carefully crafted personalities. Even if their anger was for an offense given to a Gryffindor, a person they normally held in contempt, that provocation was an insult given by an outside force, and they banded together with shaking fists to fight back at that common enemy. Maybe they fell into that rage because they still had that youthful passion, but there seemed to be a common defensiveness for Hogwarts among the students.

Their cries and resentment didn’t matter, however, because the score had been set and there would be no changing it.

The second onto the field was the Durmstrang Champion, Dieter Charlov. He seemed particularly fortunate because, unlike the first Champion’s thrilling and dangerous adventure, the basilisk didn’t bother him. He crept along the edge, narrowly escaping the dangerous swish of the basilisk’s tail, but faced no other real difficulty. In the audience there was a general sense of confusion that twisted into suspicion as they watched. Had he done something to the basilisk beforehand?

It didn’t take Charlov ten minutes to complete the challenge.

A flurry of disappointed noises came from the onlookers along with a growing contempt as the scores were given. Although he’d had little challenge, especially compared to the previous performance, he had completed the task in a better time and with less energy and his score reflected that.

Karkaroff was sitting with the other Durmstrang students, listening to the growing discontent in the audience. From his position, he could see Riddle absorbing the moment with a wicked sort of enjoyment. He saw it in the boy’s otherwise flawless facade because he knew that Riddle was more than what he shallowly showed.
They were alike, the same monster dressed in human skin.

In that moment, Tom’s gaze swept to his section, with a subtle smirk lifting one corner of his mouth.

Third to go was Mylene Lance. Although her headmaster clearly had great expectations of the Champions, it did not mean that she could meet them.

There was no use blaming it on the snake. It was in its design: the beautiful strong tail, the dripping sharp teeth, and the ferocious temper.

To everyone’s surprise the snake abruptly snapped out of the almost listlessness it had just been in. As it took in the sight of the girl, malice gleamed in the creature’s eyes and a rage burned through it with an intensity to rival the sun.

It should have been expected, two humans had already passed by it, encroaching on its territory, marking it with their scent. It would tolerate no more and faced the challenger that dared approach.

The basilisk raised its head, rearing back and showing its underbelly. A strange roar issued from its throat to the bewilderment of all the spectators. A noxious fume issued from the great snake’s mouth and started filling the air. The audience members quickly covered their noses and mouths but the dizziness and fatigue caught hold of them as it seeped through the cracks between their fingers and the fibers of their clothes.

Compared with Dieter, Mylene’s luck was beyond abysmal.

After spewing more gas, the snake arranged itself defensively in the rocks, lying in wait for the girl.

A green film covered much of the arena now and the air was misty as the fumes stubbornly refused to disperse. With its long tail ready to swipe, jaws ready to bite, and corrosive liquid everywhere, Mylene had no way to progress.

“Look, she’s levitating the rocks!”

The clever girl had summoned rocks that she could safely stand on and was floating them in the air and using them as stepping stones. But how long could she last while avoiding the long tail and holding her breath?

The basilisk locked its gaze on her, opened its mouth, liquid dripping, and reared back.

Everyone watched, transfixed. Nobody paid attention to the other members in the audience, too caught up in the alarming sight. Unbeknownst to them, a dark haired boy bared his white teeth in a lovely smile.

This was a warning, a punishment for attempting to get close to what was his.

Professor Binns had once said, “Because of the high mortality rate, the Triwizard Tournament was indefinitely suspended.”

Therefore, losing someone to one of the challenges wasn’t very surprising and, better yet, not at all suspicious.

There was a hush as the injured Champion was swiftly carried off of the field and away to the Hospital Wing. Worried and disappointed, the students were slow to leave. The basilisk was put back into the cage by its handlers, where it lay eerily silent.
Under the cover of the night, a small figure approached and hissed, dark and dangerous, the words, “Good boy.”
Karkaroff was just beginning to understand the demon he was working with.

The First Task had ended less than two days ago and already the eyes that had once gazed at Charlov with envy and admiration now held contempt. Of course, it was only a matter of luck that he’d managed to do so well, but a rumor had that he had taken Felix Felicis had spread rapidly and disgust followed in its wake.

“He cheated!” The Hogwarts students protested. “He should be kicked out of the Triwizard Tournament!”

As the rumors about Dieter Charlov spread through the school, the students got angrier and angrier as Charlov, the unwitting fool, lashed back and protested his innocence.

Even the Slytherin students, who looked upon both sly tactics and Durmstrang with favor, treated its Champion with disdain.

“How carefree he acted after his victory. I imagine he’s going to be eliminated soon.” Cygnus Black sneered as he and Tom walked by a group of Durmstrang students, "If the judges really do detect Felix Felicis, I’m afraid they’ll be lucky if their school is still allowed to compete at all.”

Tom reacted little to the conversation, mouth refusing to even twitch, but some amusement leaked into his words, “Truly, he turned out to be quite unlucky.”

What else could he be after falling from so high, having his glorious victory pulled out from under his feet? He’d been able to feel the glory in his success and now he would be cast aside, despised among even his fellow students. How could he be anything but incredibly unlucky?

When the investigation is over, how far will Charlov fall in his despair?

Karkaroff kept his face turned toward Krumlov, another Durmstrang student standing beside him, as he watched Tom Riddle from the corner of his eye. When he caught a flash of red in the boy’s eyes, a chill swept through him and he a shiver traveled down his spine.

He wasn’t sure how but that Slytherin boy, not even sixteen years old, seemed to be so calculating, so clever, that none could match the easy manner in which he turned a situation to his benefit. He hadn’t even needed to pull out his wand to succeed.

Ever since Charlov had become the Champion, Karkaroff had scheming up ways to beat him, but Riddle wasn’t interested in just taking him down; he intended to destroy him!
Was it a matter of it being easier or more efficient for the boy to destroy a man? Or was simply winning not enough to satisfy him?

The boy caught his stare, smiled at him, then calmly looked away and moved on.

He’d gone from vowing that his own prey would not escape to finding his own head covered with an inescapable net. As he felt his role change, fear burst bright in Karkaroff’s chest.

The gloomy boy gritted his teeth, and tried to restrain the cold rising through him.

He was just a child, not even a proper wizard, Karkaroff assured himself.

The First Task of the Triwizard Tournament had been met with wholehearted enthusiasm but the mood had taken a turn.

The Tournament was a joke! Durmstrang had cheated and the Beauxbatons’ Champion had to be sent directly to the Hospital Wing! The only saving grace was that, considering what Durmstrang had done, Hogwarts would likely be the de facto winner.

As angry, disappointed, or depressed as the students were, Harry took no notice as he hurried along to the Hospital Wing.

"Harry?" A voice called out to him.

As he was carrying a basket of fruit and enough colorful little boxes piled on top to almost rest right under his nose, Harry had to strain his neck to see who was asking for him. The precarious pile wobbled dangerously in his arms.

A hand reached out to catch a box that was slowly sliding off the top of the pile.

Relieved, Harry turned his attention to his helper.

“Good morning, Tom.” Harry freed a hand from under his stack of gifts to quickly push his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. He gave Tom a brilliant smile.

Internally, Harry sighed at the sight of Tom. He had to admit that he was a little jealous of the young boy.

The fifteen-year-old had already grown quite tall, was slim but didn’t appear weak, had a confident posture, and was gifted with a fine face, as handsome as you’d find on a Roman statue. He was practically perfect and even standing in the hall with dusty stone walls behind him, he looked like he belonged in a painting. Slytherin’s heir truly had a striking appearance.

Tom cocked an eyebrow and Harry set aside those bitter thoughts, bringing his good mood back to the fore.

“Where are you going? I can help you carry those.” Tom didn’t notice Harry’s distraction and held out his hand to help.

“Oh, these are from the Beauxbatons students. They asked me to bring them to Mylene Lance. Do you know her?”
Oh, of course he knew her. He’d watched gleefully as she’d been taken to the Hospital Wing. Tom smiled, a kind and easygoing look that served to hide his sudden dark thoughts and the flash of red in his eyes. “Of course, she’s the Beauxbatons Champion.”

“The Mediwitch won’t let her group of friends in, so they came and asked me to deliver their gifts.” At the thought of the vibrant and sharp girl, Harry began to smile. Somehow, here in 1942, he could find people so similar to those he knew in 2001. Alphonse reminded him of Ron, Joan of Hermione, and Mylene, with her cheerful and resolute character, was so similar to Ginny that it pulled at his heart. It wasn’t fair to them, but Harry saw these near-strangers as shadows of other people and felt in his heart their familiarity.

Tom loathed the sight of Harry smiling for someone else. How could he so easily treat a stranger to that genuine gentle look?

Even worse than Harry being too generous with others, Tom compared that smile to those he had received from the man. The smiles given to him still held sincerity but they were mild in comparison, mixed with reluctance, weariness, and something cold. That increasingly dark part of himself crept into his eyes, a harsh edge that he could not quite hide.

Tom considered Harry’s smile for a moment longer and then dropped his focus on the gifts. He asked Harry, with a somewhat distracted tone, “Harry, do you know her well?”

“So they’d met a few times?”

“Harry, you came to see me again!” A girl in a white gown greeted them with a smile just as they entered the Hospital Wing.

Again? Behind Harry, Tom seized on the word, turning the implications over in his mind as his dark eyes watched on.

“Harry, I’m so glad you came back. I wanted to ask you something. Would you be my date to the Christmas party?” The enthusiastic girl from Beauxbatons was bold, asking with Tom still standing there. He watched as she slyly put on a lost look and told Harry, “I don’t know many people here and don’t have anyone else to ask.”

Lying in bed, face pale and with a terrible scar that was slowly subsiding, her young beautiful features were still visible.

Harry didn’t react so Tom took the opportunity to speak first, “It appears that Miss Lance is recovering well.”

Tom’s handsome face, angular and soft with a smile, could deceive even the wise Athena, and he turned his charm on the girl in the bed.

His warning lesson was already being healed and in such a short amount of time. How could she have already gotten over the pain of her wounds? Her recovery was occurring too fast, Tom thought. Now Mylene was unsure of how to proceed. Tom was stunning and regarding her with a captivating
stare. She blushed a little looking upon him, but she still liked Harry.

“Ah, yes the Mediwitch has been wonderful and the potions have been working fast.” She politely replied.

As the two talked, Harry shifted awkwardly. He had forgotten the distress of the Yule Ball and the clumsy way he had interacted with the girls there. He hadn’t expected one to take the initiative to invite him this time around and was caught completely off guard.

Any notion to ask him should have been repelled due to his age alone. He was over thirty years old and ought to be considered an old man to the girls attending the Yule Ball. He shook his head, and was going to outright turn her down, but stopped as he considered how badly rejection could sting, especially if there was another person around to see it.

This young girl’s emotions were in his hands and he needed to make sure this confident, wonderful girl wouldn’t be hurt or embarrassed for asking.

So, he deliberated on his options and said, “I can’t dance.”

"I can teach you!” Mylene said eagerly.

Harry couldn’t help but think of how anxious he had become at not having found a partner and sympathized with her. “That’s okay, you need to relax and recover and I would probably embarrass the both of us.”

“What makes you think that?”

Tom watched Mylene laugh, the monster called jealousy boiling behind his eyes.

Well, if Harry didn’t want to make a fool of himself and Mylene wanted to teach him – the bite of jealousy hit Tom’s heart, spreading its toxin.

“Perhaps I could teach Harry to dance.” The Slytherin boy wore the most charming smile he could muster, voice deep and elegant, “Miss Lance could rest while you learn. After all, it could be quite strenuous teaching you everything in so short a time.”

Harry agreed, if a bit slowly, but the monster in Tom wasn’t satisfied with what he’d taken and was still tempted to reach for the girl’s neck.

“Get a good night’s rest. The Mediwitch told me that you should be able to get out the day after tomorrow.” Harry smiled and waved goodbye to Mylene as he left.

Tom also gave her a smile and politely said his own goodbye. “I’m looking forward to seeing you in the next Task… get well soon.”
Desire

December 25, 1942

"On Christmas night, in celebration of the Triwizard Tournament, there will be a formal dance – the Yule Ball."

“I will be teaching you all to dance for the occasion. Mr. Weasley, if you would come forward and be my partner for this demonstration.”

“Put your hand on my waist, yes, my waist!”

Ron’s face screwed up like he’d swallowed a fly. The image was still clear in Harry’s mind. Laughing, he recalled the stern, unimpressed look Professor McGonagall had given Ron.

How would Ron have reacted to seeing Harry being taught to dance?

Harry, flooded with good memories, felt his eyes mist as he smiled. Following his mirth, his muscles were more relaxed and that awful sense of suffocation that had been pressing on his chest was greatly relieved. But Harry stood on a dark road, where happiness faded quickly. Each instance was like a star dotting a dark monotonous sky and, even if the only helped a tiny bit, they were enough to support a strong-willed man who had to walk a hard, thorny path.

“What are you thinking about, Harry?” Tom asked as he handed Harry the glass of juice he’d left to retrieve. “I’ll give you a moment to rest and then we’ll continue practicing.”

After essentially agreeing to go to the dance with Mylene, Harry found that he was reluctant to make a fool of himself in front of a large crowd, and was, therefore, resigned to learn dancing from Tom. Tom was a very good teacher, perfectly executing every step, looking as though it was the most natural thing, even when he wasn’t taking the lead. He also had an overwhelming aura of confidence; he explained every move, never made superfluous corrections, and even when the dance got faster, Harry could still follow along. And Harry was only slightly accustomed to the steps.

Being so close, hand resting on Tom’s waist, Harry was again struck by the realization that the little boy he considered as his child had grown up. He was now several centimeters taller than Harry, and Harry could feel the strong muscles of a young man under his hand. He could even hear the deeper voice that he’d always associated with the diary. Tom had grown up and no longer needed Harry to guide him and, instead, was now teaching Harry.

Everything had changed so fast. Harry’s heart dropped as he struggled to come to terms with it.

“It would have been nice, if I were actually your father.” Harry twisted his lips in a painful smile, his gentle eyes sad behind his glasses.

Tom had been leading Harry into a twirl but upon hearing those words his hand tightened on Harry’s shoulder, and he brought them to a halt.

“What is it?” Harry asked with surprise. Maybe Tom was getting tired.

Tom’s hand slipped from his shoulder to his waist, and before Harry could react he closed the distance between them, burying his head against the side of his neck.
“Haven’t you been my father?”

Harry considered it for a moment, repeating the words several times in his head. He smiled, “Of course.”

Tom had learned early how to use his words and actions as a honeypot, patiently pouring honey into a cage, the taste sweet enough to distract his prey as he binds them.

The hour of the Yule Ball soon arrived.

The Great Hall had been transformed to look like a beautiful ice palace. It was like something from a fairy tale and even the magically-raised students were enchanted.

The Champions and their partners were ready, waiting for their grand entrance. Laughter broke out as the roof seemed to open on a snowy night, white fluff drifting down but never quite hitting the floor.

Abraxas Malfoy rested comfortably on a couch, his eyes on the silent Slytherin Prefect. His arm was resting around Ovidius in a way that seemed perfectly friendly, but in reality was nearly unbearable.

Tom just had to glance at the boy and, though there wasn’t much anger directed at him, Ovidius shook with fear. The devil had a heart of hard stone, and, in comparison, the horrible boy beside him was made of a soft rock.

“Aren’t you going to dance?” Malfoy asked with a faint smile.

Tom had once again refused the invitation of a girl. His expression, so perfectly crafted in front of Harry, was now cold and ruthless, watching the room with a predator’s eyes, making Malfoy wary.

“Hey, today is Christmas. The whole point is to be happy and enjoy yourself.” Malfoy reminded Tom, quietly. Tom’s face eased somewhat.

Just in time for the Champions to make their grand entrance into the Yule Ball.

Mylene and Harry were the first to come forward. Even though Harry considered himself an old man, he was still gifted with that youthful look Tom had always known him to have. He didn’t have the sort of handsome face Tom had, but he was fine enough to garner looks, and his temperament and power only added to his attractiveness.

Mylene had healed well and now her face was only marred by her red cheeks; a mark of merriness.

Suddenly, Abraxas understood the reason behind Tom’s gloomy mood. He couldn’t help but joke, “Well, it seems it didn’t occur to you that he might find you a stepmother.”

Tom glanced at Malfoy and the boy timidly sitting beside him.

“Oh, well it’s not like I wish her ill.” A joke but both Ovidius and Malfoy caught the dark undercurrent in the words.

Ovidius didn’t know nearly as much about the situation as Malfoy, but the more the two of them talked the more disturbed he felt.
“Tom, you obviously care about him greatly. You don’t want it to happen, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Harry’s on your mind, just looking at your face I can see that very clearly. He is your father in name only,” Abraxas could not help but remind Tom.

“So what?” Wearing close-fitting dress robes, the handsome boy unconsciously narrowed his eyes as if to hide his thoughts. Jumping from his lovely lips were the macabre words, “I want to speak with him; he needs to learn he shouldn’t even be allowed out of bed.”

“I thought you loved him?”

“Don’t make me laugh. How could I? It’s just a fleshly desire.”

Ovidius heard every word, and he stared wide eyed and gripped with fear at Tom, as though eyeing a terrifying monster. How could Tom entertain such dirty, awful thoughts of his father?

“We can talk about something else: London is in chaos!” Abraxas reminded him a bit sternly. Tom needed to learn to control his weaknesses, something Abraxas took pains to help with. Tom’s little Electra complex was no serious problem but a man with another man was still taboo. They were lucky not to be living in their father’s time or worse, the Middle Ages.

Ovidius followed Tom’s stare to the dance floor and a smiling Harry. Obviously there were a dozen protection spells in the room, but the look in Tom’s eyes chilled him from the inside out, hairs rising in horror. The man, watched by the hideous, terrible monster, seemed slated to be torn to bloody pieces by the creature’s desire.

Maybe he could warn the man of the monster’s purpose.

Ovidius felt submerged in fear and uncertainty when Tom turned his attention away from Harry. Sharp eyes stared straight into Ovidius’s as he told Abraxas, “Mind his mouth.” Ovidius trembled.

He was a Slytherin, not a Gryffindor, and his good thoughts became strangled under pressure and intimidation. But the seed had been planted, and would one day break past the rock suppressing it, driven by Ovidius’s good convictions.

The ball around them was exceptionally lively, but they sat coolly on the sofa, a bit stiff.

“Tom, I don’t wish to bring it up again, but don’t you think you’re overreacting?” Abraxas said, unable to resist speaking about it.

Tom wet his lips as he thought. Harry would fall for the sight of a glimmer of light, set in the smiling face of the girl dancing with him who, reflected in Tom’s eyes, was basked in deep red.

“Soon it will not be an issue.”

“A Horcrux is dark, very dark magic. It is an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul.”

“By doing so, you are protected should you be attacked and your body destroyed. In addition, it lessens the burden of emotions on the main soul, eliminating fear, low self-esteem, and other superfluous emotions.”

“And professor, how does one make a Horcrux?”
“I think you already know the answer to that.”

“Murder.”

The preliminary work had already been completed; the only thing missing was the fresh kill. The beaming thief that stole his prey would be the ideal sacrifice.

And then, he will have finally rid himself of the emotional ties Harry constrained him with. The devil would be free to move without hesitation.

Tom returned to his bedroom excited and laughing, his dark and urgent ambition seeping through his skin. He removed a beautifully decorated box from a spell-locked cupboard. Inside were numerous items; a fractured wand, a bullet that had pierced Harry’s body, a piece of cloth stained with blood, but Tom pulled out a simple book from his box of treasures. He stroked the black cover, took out a quill, and wrote on the bottom corner: Tom Riddle’s diary.

This diary would be the final record of Harry Potter and his hesitant child. It would seal the fate of the man and silence the crying angry child in him. Here, he would seal the weakness that had plagued him for the last ten years.

While Harry indulged in a night of fun, Fate silently guided history on the right path. The time traveler, as insignificant as a mayfly, could not grasp the futility of it all.

The Horcrux was beginning to take shape, and the savior was a step closer to the precipice.

Maybe when he had been a student, he could enjoy the wisdom of his old Headmaster, someone who could look back and see the problems so clearly but here, in the past, he couldn’t even see the present. He would have to decide, with no help, whether to put his faith in the child’s tolerance and trust.

Fate giggled and mocked the time traveler’s weakness.

And as for the violation of the ethical bounds of their relationship, Fate didn’t care about such details. What would it matter if the dark lord loved or not so long as he became the monster he was supposed to be?
The young dark lord's plan to take a life while in Hogwarts was a great risk, of that there was no doubt.

Dumbledore's presence would have been enough of a problem, but with Harry around too, Tom's plan had to be watertight.

A good Slytherin must be able to calculate carefully, unlike the other houses whose members could be mischievously cunning. The truly cunning students knew the greatest schemes were done with careful calculation. And the best scheme wears the appearance of coincidence.

The entire Hogwarts Slytherin house consisted of puppets all tied together, and if you pull the thread, say the right thing, the chess board would change as they danced along.

"You're a joke, Charlov, you should just resign now." Karkaroff sneered, a malicious and hideous expression that made his crooked nose more prominent. "You've already shamed yourself on the First Task. What could you possibly expect to do now?"

Charlov grit his teeth in fury and rose from the bed, his wand pointing at Karkaroff.

"If you say another word, I will make sure you're far more humiliated than I."

The other Durmstrang boys eagerly watched on, eyeing Karkaroff as he mocked the other boy derisively.

They thought he would back off but to their surprise Karkaroff laughed off the threat.

"Do you think everyone is shamed as easily as you? I assure you, it's a feeling reserved for disgraced lugs."

Those words incensed Charlov, who said in a wild grim tone, "There's a spell to make you do anything I say, no matter how humiliating or ridiculous: Imperio!"

The Imperius Curse was one of the notorious Unforgivable Curses, but what did that matter? The average German wizard wouldn't care, not while the need to punish the weak filled the Wizarding World in Germany. Only strength mattered, the stronger the person the better they were.

As Karkaroff was forced to commit one embarrassing thing after another, the Durmstrang boys laughed, enjoying the schadenfreude.

A Slytherin finds the best opportunity. Hidden behind the curtain, the villain declined to show
himself as he watched the farce unfold with a smile.

Mylene Lance died.

Very suddenly, without any sign of a struggle, she fell in the bathroom. The sink was still running when she was found.

Harry stood pale among the whispering crowd, smothered in the middle of it all. Two days ago, that same girl had taken his arm, happily chatting him up. He could still feel her phantom touch as if she had left residue on his skin.

And now, the same girl was lying on the cold wet floor with skin like marble, gray and bleak, dead. The richness of life would never shine through her skin again.

It wasn't the first time Harry had faced another's death, not the first time he felt the gap between life and death. Two faces he had seen go to cold silence, their lives and deaths again and again flashing in his mind. There he could see Cedric and Sirius bearing that same cold stiffness.

First Cedric, then Sirius, and now Mylene. Another ghost to weigh on his conscience. Her face would forever be ingrained in his mind; the expression left on her as if something terrible, like the devil himself, had come to take her soul and swallow it down. Harry grabbed at his hair, pulling painfully on his scalp, wanting to wake up.

Joan had immediately reacted to the scene and swiftly sent the Ministry a signal. Aurors quickly arrived at Hogwarts to launch an official investigation into the death.

"I died from the Killing Curse."

No matter what method of test was used, the same result appeared.

The professors watched on, expressions frozen as the truth became clear. A killer was in the school.

But who in the school could use such a cruel curse against the girl? Was it a student or someone on the staff?

Headmaster Armando Dippet was bewildered by the turn of events but after a quiet discussion with Dumbledore seemed to agree to a plan. Dumbledore turned to the professors and immediately commanded, "Gather all the students to the Great Hall."

The order was calm and decisive: an edict to protect the other students and also find the murderer.

"Headmaster Dippet, I think the Aurors should have the right to investigate further." Joan said seriously and without even pausing ordered, "You ask the portraits and ghosts nearby, Alphonse. Harry shall come with me to the Great Hall. I think it's necessary to check the children's wands."

Harry's face remained pale, even as he hurried along with Joan, a few drops of cold sweat forming. His skin appeared paler than Mylene's.
All the students were gathered in the hall. They didn't know what had happened, didn't know what had transpired in the past few hours. Those who noticed the girl was gone thought she was merely out of sight.

Harry feared he'd suffocate, so clearly were the boundaries of life and death before him.

He worked behind Joan, appeasing the fearful children, organizing them into lines, and testing their wands. The detection method they used was a very simple but very effective reverse spell. Once a spell was cast it could not be revoked. There were no ways to eliminate the irreversible consequences caused by a spell in a wand.

The children dutifully handed over their wands to the Aurors, believing in their authority, as they worried over the need for the inspection.

"Hand your wand to me."

After several castings, nothing unusual appeared. Did he really want to find anything unusual? Harry didn't want to see any green light coming from a child's wand. Children were the measure of an era. So what was a country when the children had muddy souls? What did it say of the time?

Harry handed the wand back to the restless first-year standing in front of him. He rubbed the child's hair, as he used to rub Tom's.

"Everything will be all right." Words he said to every child but in truth he didn't know who the murderer was or that they wouldn't cause further harm. Really, he was just spouting nonsense.

In 2001, he was helpless and pained in the face of death, and it seemed even in 1942 he couldn't change that. He could only continue to be weak, ignorant, and powerless.

"Harry, what happened?" Someone came up to him, not to hand over their wand, but to tug on his clothes, concerned, "You look ill."

Harry looked up into the shiny black eyes of Tom and a terrible thought struck him through the heart. There was no time to stop and think on it; already the idea left Harry reeling as though he crashed through an icehouse.

And who was to blame for the deaths of both Cedric and Sirius? Wasn't it this seemingly harmless child? Had he caused the death of Mylene, too?

"Give me your wand." Harry felt the words come out like they were scraping on gravel, the sound causing a prickling feeling down his back. He didn't answer Tom's question and Tom, stiff and obedient, handed Harry his wand. Their hands briefly touched, the warmth lingering behind.

Harry couldn't bring himself to cast the spell. He couldn't control what would happen if he did. He may have been from 2001 but for all the memories he had of Riddle from the Pensieve as both a lonely child and perfect student, it seemed he knew nothing about him.

Harry didn't want to doubt Tom but the thought wouldn't leave him. He had spent so much time with the child that he wanted to believe in him but the future, and all that he knew, put him on edge.

"Prior Incantato." The first spell out was harmless, and the second, and the third. He kept going but the curse never appeared. Harry let it go on and on until he felt confident enough to end it with relief.
There was no connection between Tom and Mylene's murder.

Harry repeated that over and over, trying to convince himself of the conclusion, fighting his old instincts that screamed danger.

Finally, Harry dared to meet Tom's eyes. "Tom... be careful."

The boy gave him a bright smile and nodded, lovingly.

"Please give me your wand." Harry waved the next child forward, giving him a warm smile. With the previous worry nearly removed from his mind he was better able to face the situation calmly.

The child who stopped before him was very thin, shy like Neville used to be, but had a Slytherin badge on his robe.

"Mr. Potter, I-" The boy's eyes flashed, and he licked his chapped lips, hesitant and afraid of something. The boy seemed to think of something, rather abruptly shivering. Harry could even see goosebumps spread from the neck down.

"Don't worry, there's nothing to be afraid of." Harry said comfortingly, knowing how frightening this abrupt investigation must be.

The boy looked up at Harry, brown eyes searching his desperately, trying to convey something with just a look. Words spilled out low and fast, nervous, "I'm Ovidius Parkinson, Riddle's former roommate." The boy abruptly swallowed.

He and Tom were in the same year? Harry studied the slight child, frowning.

Seeing Harry's skeptical look, Ovidius couldn't help but grab the man's robes, eager to make him understand. Looking up at him, Ovidius could see why the evil boy would obsess over his gentle and handsome father.

Ovidius had always been dependent on others, cowardly, and evasive of responsibility. But now, in his weak attempt to reach out to another, he felt as though he had been given a torch.

"Mr. Potter, Riddle he –" The words were too dirty for him to say. He struggled to get the words out when he felt as though two icicles had mercilessly nailed his body. It was as if a snake had bitten him in the neck and sent a chilly poison down to his tailbone, sending his internal organs into frozen spasms.

Tom Riddle stood watching in the distance, smiling at him. Ovidius took a step back.

Monster!

Ovidius choked on a repressed scream, a look of terror on his face.

An image of Billy flashed to Tom's mind. It was vaguely the same face that boy had made so long ago: the same fear, the same panic, the same understanding that Tom had every intention to kill him.

Tom walked up with his hands in his pockets, still smiling at the faint boy. He looked to Harry and said, "Harry, this is Ovidius. Abraixas and I have been looking everywhere for him. If you're done with him, do you mind if he joins us?"

Harry watched the show in front of him but couldn't quite see it right, blinded as he was by Tom's brightness. He couldn't understand how the events developed before him and could only look on
puzzled and disturbed. The two left him with his heart pounding and his intuition sounding the alarm.
Happy Birthday, Tom!

December 31, 1942

Tom Riddle was very, very happy. With "happy" being too shallow of a word, perhaps delighted would better describe his cruel and cold happiness.

Everything was in his hands and he couldn’t be more satisfied.

Dumbledore had once said that Tom Riddle was the best student at Hogwarts. This was praise the descendant of Slytherin deserved. He had the coldest, hardest heart, was capable of being cruelly decisive, had a charming eloquence and appearance, and he used wisdom before taking any action. Every lesson he had learned, he used to further his goals.

That Beauxbaton girl died in Hogwarts, but that raised the question of who murdered her. In a few days, even with the Ministry team’s incompetence, someone would be caught. The Slytherin calmly contemplated how best to introduce the next part of his scheme with the most impactful timing.

Tom shook his napkin out, dabbing at the chocolate sauce staining his mouth. Staring across the long table sat a lost man and the young brunette, bearing a cold smile, dropped the stained napkin then turned out into the main hall at Hogwarts.

Oh, he truly loved this feeling. He felt free, the restricting feeling of being trapped inside his body fading, weakening. Now he’s capable of acting as he pleases, even in the presence of Harry. No longer was he a slave to his emotions. He had even noticed his mood swings had lessened considerably.

Those weak, passive, useless emotions were locked beneath the black cover of the journal, at the cost of a useless girl’s life.

The Slytherin descendent smiled, he felt so powerful that he could never be shaken again.

A voice asked, then why did he stop Ovidius from warning Harry?

He doesn’t deny that some of the emotions that remained more or less affected him. But as for that feeling that drove his emotions out of control, it was gone. He was beyond being controlled by his emotions, and what little was left him with little care. Even the slightest cold, despite being treated, will linger, a weak virus can’t be eradicated immediately and his emotions had festered for more than a decade.

But he wouldn’t worry, those residual emotions would again and again be divided and broken.

Despite time being reversed, the king being crowned was the opening ceremony that the hero had admission to see. Tom Riddle’s soul would gradually become damaged, the Dark Lord Voldemort rising.

History could not be tampered with.
Hogwarts was enveloped in a downturn of the air. Snow fell outside the window, covering the roof, white and dazzling, as if nature was paying the highest tribute to the dead girl.

The students were in a low mood due to the Triwizard Tournament, and more importantly to Mylene Lance.

Once again, the Triwizard Tournament fails, a Champion lost, and worse a well-liked student. Even the oft-gloating Slytherins could not ignore the sad divide between life and death.

Tom was carrying his books as he headed toward the Potions classroom, the previous lively atmosphere of the Triwizard Tournament had repressed and depressed him. He and the dementors were probably the same in that way; the colder and darker the more he could enjoy and both he and they tried to remove that kind of happiness.

Tom suddenly recalled Harry’s sad pale face and vengeful pleasure spread with every beat of his heart. Such a pretty look on him, and now in his good mood he can appreciate his father’s expressions: ugly, painful, desperate. Each one made him tremble with excitement.

Was Harry’s face only capable of being described negatively? Of course not. It was a defect of character or unconsciously done that the young man focused excessively on the dripped ink on paper, while ignoring the white spaces outside. He deeply remembered those expressions, but deliberately or unintentionally forgot the other expressions he’d seen: softness, happiness, comfort, concern, and encouragement.

The sun shines impartially, and so the earth blooms flowers, and so the gutter breeds bacteria. Tom just laughed and walked toward the Potions classroom.

Now that Mylene Lance had died, Hogwarts could go back to being a school.

“Tom!” Someone shouted, and he glanced back to see a forty-year-old bespectacled man waving at him. The man shook a manuscript in his hand, excitedly. The professor had always been enthusiastic about magic Runes.

“I solved the problem!” The Runes professor shouted, causing some students passing him to raise their eyebrows as they curiously watched him go by.

Though he was a bit far, Tom could vaguely see the strokes on the paper. Tom could guess that it was probably part of the series of Runes taken from Harry’s hourglass. Had the mystery been solved?

Tom wasn’t too interested. The great urge he had felt to dig out the truth had weakened considerably along with his desire for Harry. Who was Harry Potter and what mystery did Harry’s hourglass hide? He didn’t care.

Perhaps in the past few years, Harry Potter had been a stranger but what did that matter?

So, the Slytherin approached the professor, greeted him politely, and let an apologetic expression spread on his face, “Sorry, Professor, I’m afraid I’m going to be late. I’d be happy to discuss this later, unless it can’t wait?”

Though a socially unaware man, he understood and quickly shook his head, “No, it’s all right, you can go on and head to class.”
The man felt put off, the child had been very eager before so how had he become so disinterested? Perhaps, he had imagined it?

But these Runes were really wonderful, an expanded time range for a Time Turner. It had taken him some time to calculate the new range the Runes would grant. At a rough estimate, it should be between 50 and 100 years. It was a powerful increase and would surely set off a stir in the world of magic!

The professor hurried back to his personal lab. For researchers, studying such a discovery alone was as great as sharing it.

The teenager would never know that he missed such a great opportunity. But he didn’t care about it. He didn’t need to care about it.

Harry could not perceive that shackles ready to bind him had disappeared.

He just looked out the window, watching the beautiful snow fall, waiting for the last day of the year to arrive.

That day was the only bright spot he could see in the coming cloudy days, Tom’s birthday, December 31st.

He still remembers holding the crumpled little baby in his arms and how little Tom didn’t look cute. Tom was mighty proud and Harry smiled thinking of how he had once looked so ugly.

But in an instant, that baby had grown taller than him and was now sixteen years old.

Anyone familiar with Harry Potter knew that he loved celebrations but the ones he held dearest were birthdays. He was keen to celebrate anyone’s birthday whenever he could.

Perhaps it was because he had gone a decade without receiving a gift until the night he received a very delicious cake and an invitation to Hogwarts. So, he loved birthdays, and often wished he could celebrate his weekly instead of yearly. Hermione had scoffed at that idea.

The best part of birthdays was being surrounded by friends, and so he had insisted that Tom got to enjoy every birthday, even if he had to jump time and space. At the least he prepared a gift for him, if he couldn’t be there but the only time he had missed the child’s birthday was in 1938. At the time he had been in 2001, facing the Dark Lord.

Harry rubbed his cold cheeks, reddening them. He seemed to have been caught between some good and bad energy. Maybe he was getting a cold.

Harry and Joan had rarely had a chance to say hello these days due to the investigation keeping their hands full.
“You want to go to Hogsmeade on the 31st? Okay, Alphonse and I will hold the line.” Joan smiled, she knew that it was for Tom’s birthday. “You’re not looking very good, maybe you should ask Tom to make a potion for you.”

Harry just smiled and shook his head.

“Tom? He’s only in his fifth year, isn’t he?” Alphonse looked at Joan, bewildered.

Fifth year? Tom had definitely surpassed seventh year knowledge and magic at this point.

Joan noticed Harry looking a bit weary and felt her heart jump with worry. These days, she no longer saw Tom and Harry together.

How very strange.

What really surprised Joan was what happened on the 31st.

Early in the morning, Harry’s mood had been very good, and it softened his cold pale face to something gentle and beautiful.

He opened the door to Joan’s room, holding a book in his right hand and wrapping paper and ribbon in his left. He looked embarrassed.

“I’ve always had the store assistant do the wrapping but the bookstore owner told me he doesn’t do it.” Harry pulled out his wand and attempted to make the wrapping paper activate and it wrapped the book haphazardly.

Joan gently unwrapped it and asked, “A classic Runes anthology?”

“He’s been interested in Runes recently.” Harry explained.

Joan shrugged, even learned Ravenclaw students found Runes boring and difficult. She tapped the wrapping power and it quickly wrapped the book, pretty and neat. Joan took in Harry’s smile and her own mouth twitched. His smile was infectious.

She thought Harry’s happiness today would far outshine Tom’s, despite it being Tom’s birthday and not Harry’s.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Tom said, wearing a stunning dress robe, cuffs extravagantly decorated. Harry felt inexplicably embarrassed in his casual clothes. Tom smiled, dark eyes hiding the falseness in his expression, “Abraxas has organized a birthday party for me at his home.”

Everything about Tom, from his handsome face to his clothes said he was born for these occasions. He had a slender and powerful body, wisdom beyond his years, and he would use this party to gather those he felt powerful or useful.

With the luxurious birthday party he was due to attend waiting for him, the thought of his father going to Hogsmeade for a meager present seemed amusing. Harry handed him his present, smiling sincerely, “Well, happy birthday, Tom.”
Tom didn’t care to tear most of the outer packing off, just enough to see the title of the book which provoked a hint of a sneer, “Classic Runes?”

He laughed, dropped the book, and headed off to a party worth of Voldemort.

Joan knew the next day that idiot went to Diagon Alley to search every books store.

“I want to find a book that he’ll enjoy. Making him happy makes me happy.” Harry told her.

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