‘Oh, there are many things I could do with you Harry.’ The undertone of his words rang through the air like a crack of a whip and Harry flinched. ‘And with the Horcrux embedded within you.’

‘Try it. See what happens.’ Potter seethed.

Then Voldemort charged forward in a blink.

After they both danced upon the bones of his father, Voldemort discovers Harry Potter is the seventh Horcrux he never intended to make.

This changes everything.

A ceasefire is agreed, Harry Potter is collateral - the target of Voldemort's newest, most potent obsession.

But, living with your enemy is a dangerous tightrope act and it is all too easy to fall into the traps set along the way.

And, Death has come knocking.
It began on a bone-chilling night under the waning moon.

If Harry could go back, he would have ran - and ran far.

He was nought but a child in a War between tyrants.

He was just a child looking for a place to hang his coat and sleep peacefully.

What he wouldn't give for one night of undisturbed, uninhibited slumber.

But as a child in a War of giants, he was always made to feel to so, so helpless, so useless.

That night when the moon was high, he met a small death in the rituals of his Wizarding forefathers.

With no warning, no aid, he had no option but to relent. To forgive those around him who felt as helpless as he did.

That was the first night red eyes gazed upon him with unhinged hunger.

A hunger which would be sated.

Voldemort sat in a high-back black leather chair with Nagini wrapped around his pale shoulders. In front of him was a low yew table, on it sat a small cup, a silver headpiece, a golden locket, and a ring with a large black jewel.
Red eyes fixed upon these four items were fevered intensity. The Dark Lord remained still and silent except the occasional shushing hiss when Nagini reared her head towards him inquisitively or squirmed in uncharacteristic discomfort.

'I do not think I have ever had all of them together like this, my friend.' Lord Voldemort uttered quietly.

'A difficult decision lays before you, Red-Eyes.' Nagini lamented. Her discomfort caused her tail to twitch sporadically. 'A decision which may not have to come to pass, there are other options.' She tried to convince in a conversational manner which belied both of their present states.

'I think not, Orange-one' Voldemort admitted with difficulty. His familiar shuddered with what her Lord was implying.

'It is unfair. You should simply take what it is you seek, not yield to those who think themselves better than you, your Greatness.' Nagini was really laying it on thick with the honorifics tonight, it revealed her nervousness to her companion.

'The old fool has the boy in a tight grip. In order to have him completely, I must bend slightly to the wind.' He hissed using the old snake proverb with discomfort. Yielding to his enemies’ whims left an acrid taste in his mouth, something he’d had to contend with since that fateful night fought upon the bones of his father.

'Alive?' Nagini was somewhat incensed. ‘Do you have to keep him alive, Red-Eyes? Surely it would be easier to take it from him instead bending the knee to you enemies’ whims.’ He forgave Nagini this one slight, the past few months had taken their toll on them both.

'Ah, little one. You see, that is where you’re wrong – they are bending to mine. He will be mine, I will have him. He is mine.' He motioned to the items in front of him. ‘Just like these are too.’

‘Am I included on that list?’ Nagini slithered around so that she was facing him head on.

‘Always, my sweet. Always.’

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Harry woke with his heart in his chest and his skin slick with sweat. He shot up with the overwhelming urge to empty his stomach on the floor. The nausea rolled through him and he felt flattened by it.

Gripping his sheets, he willed himself to breathe; to quell the thudding in his body and mind.

Calm. Calm down. It was just a dream. Count it out. Count.

He started at one and was past two hundred by the time his heart stopped roaring in his ears. It was somewhere past four hundred when it resumed its normal pace.

As he counted the dream replayed in his mind despite his attempts to let it fade from his him.

Have him? Who was Voldemort talking about?

Harry held his head in his hands whilst sifting through the vision. Recently, everyone in the Order
had stopped calling them dreams. Ever since that night he'd dreamt of being Nagini and how tasty a pale throat could be. Dreams implied that his nightly meetings with Voldemort were simply a product of Harry’s subconscious. These were nothing of the sort.

A noise to his left had Harry on edge instantly. Ron had moved in his sleep, obviously battling his own demons. The Gryffindor felt a ridiculous pang of jealousy.

What were those items all about? They didn’t look malevolent or arcane and yet Voldemort had stared at them so intensely.

He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was watching him. He had found that he hadn’t been able to take his eyes off of the objects. Harry wanted to say he was trying to burn them into his memory for Dumbledore, but instead all he had felt was a magnetic pull to each of them. A need to do…something.

The room was dark and unusually cool which didn’t help his tremors. In an attempt to shake it off he stood up and stretched.

Creak.

He turned and pulled his wand in one swift movement. He squinted at the source and his heart dropped when he could make out a human-like shape.

‘Show yourself.’ He growled.

‘Harry? Oh, Harry – so sorry! I thought you might be asleep. Didn’t want to wake the rest.’ It took a few seconds to identify the voice. Harry’s eyebrows scrunch in confusion.

‘Mrs Weasley?’ Harry asked in disbelief. She moved forward, the moonlight revealed her wool-clad figure.

‘Yes, Harry. Again, sorry.’ She smiled sheepishly up at him. With a start Harry realised he was now taller than the Weasley matriarch.

‘Oh, no. It’s okay.’ He whispered as he holstered his wand. ‘But, can I ask why you here-.’ He looked at Ron. ‘Do you want me to wake him up?’ He thumbed back at Ron’s snoring, a probably drooling, shape.

‘No, Harry. I’m here to fetch you. Glad you’re already up.’ She smiled. ‘Come one now, get dressed before any of the others might wake up.’

‘Okay.’ He said slowly. ‘Erm, I’ll get my things then.’ He replied in a daze, his mind already reeling.

‘Wrap up warm, my love. It’s a bit nippy outside.’ Harry nodded dumbly at Mrs Weasley’s soft stage-whisper. She turned to give Harry a semblance of privacy.

‘Might I ask where we are going?’ He pulled on his jeans over his pyjama bottoms and stripped his shirt for the jumper Mrs Weasley had knitted for his Christmas a week ago.

He was pulling on his boots before she answered. ‘We’re off to see Dumbledore. It’s serious business – he asked for you to be brought as quickly as possible.’ She said with a forlorn expression.

*Not good then.* He surmised. A little agitated that she’d dodged a direct answer he nodded curtly
under cover of darkness.

‘Can’t tell me about it then?’ He said with a forced smile. Mrs Weasley returned with a shake of her head. ‘Dumbledore will explain everything when you get there. It might be a wee bit of a shock. I’ll be right there with you though Harry.’ With a nod he stood up from the bed.

She took his jacket and scarf from his wardrobe and pulled them onto him. Turning she blew a kiss towards Ron’s bed and Harry followed her down the stairs to the common room. She paused for a second at the entrance to the common room and flattened his scarf for him.

‘Harry, I want you to be brave. But not for anyone but yourself. Do you understand?’ She totalled a stern gaze upon him. Beyond confused he simply nodded at her request. ‘I want you to be selfish for once and consider yourself before anyone else. And don’t forget Harry that you don’t have to go along with anything – we will all support whatever you decide to do.’

Bewildered Harry could only nod. Mrs Weasley hugged him and then led him out of the school.

The walk to the Hogwarts parameter seemed to last an absolute age. Everything glistened with frost and moonlight.

Harry was rubbing his hands together to warm them when Mrs Weasley halted them just past the school wards.

‘Right Harry, a little Apparition to get us on our way.’ Mrs Weasley held out her hand and after a slight awkward pause Harry took it. ‘Have you ever side-along Apparated?’ She asked cheerfully.

‘No, sorry.’ He said quietly.

‘No worries dear. You’ll feel a bit squished, but it will over before you know it. Best take a deep breath before we go. Ready?’ Harry breathed in and nodded, taking her arm his heart raced.

It felt like Mrs Weasley was slipping away from him with a horrible jerk. He grabbed her arm in a vice-like grip in the sudden blackness. He felt like his skin and organs were being stretched and crushed at the same time. He gasped on a silent scream as his arms and legs felt like they were being folded multiple times like freshly ironed clothes. His face felt like a deflated football being kicked with tremendous force. He almost lost his grip on her with the shock of it.

But when he blinked it was over and he was solid again.

Mrs Weasley quickly righted him when he nearly fell to the floor, brushing off imaginary dust off of his shoulders. She asked him if he was alright and winded, he gave her a shaky thumbs up.

‘First times always the worst.’ She replied.

They then walked up a small grassy incline. It was somewhat slippery, and Mrs Weasley held a supportive hand to Harry’s back.

When the broke the peak, Harry could see a white tent in the middle of a clearing. Black spindly trees surround it on all sides. Light flooded from the tent and it yellowed the grass surrounding it.

He was led to the tent with a brisk pace, as he got nearer, he spotted Snape at the entrance with folded arms and a grim expression.

‘Okay, Harry – you should hand over your wand.’ Snape held out his hand upon Mrs Weasley’s instruction.
‘My wand?’ He asked dumbly. She just nodded enthusiastically.

‘Perhaps today, Potter.’ Snape sneered. Harry took his wand from the holster and gave it to Snape’s waiting digits with unnecessary force.

_Fowl git. _He reprimanded internally.

Snape then extended an arm into the tent indicating they should enter.

What Harry saw inside gave him a start, sitting at a dark triangular table was both Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort. At the same time the both looked up at him. Dumbledore looked at him was abnormal stoicism, Voldemort with glee.

‘I, Molly Weasley née Prewett, announce to- be Lord Harry James Potter of the most ancient and noble House of Potter.’ Lucius snorted with derision until the Dark Lord stared him down for his interruption. ‘-as his interim guardian to grace this preceding peacefully and with clear conscious, so mote it be.’

‘So mote it be.’ Everyone replied, Lucius merely mumbled. Harry felt a sucking sensation in his chest as he passed through the entrance of the tent. He was suddenly very tired and anxious. Mrs Weasley quickly explained that the wards would temporarily dampen his magical core to stop his magic. Everyone else in the tent, her gaze lingered on Voldemort and Lucius as she explained further, would also be unable to perform magic whilst inside it. Harry’s eyes flicked to the back opening where Lupin stood holding two wands, his lips set in a bleak frown, his eyes staring unflinchingly at the Dark Lord.

‘Here you are Harry, there’s your seat.’ Mrs Weasley ushered him to the third side of the table into an ornate wooden chair decorated with purple jewelled leaves and golden ivy carved from black marble. Molly then sat behind him between Arthur Weasley and Lucius Malfoy.

The hairs on Harry’s neck rose when he fully took in the figure to his right. Lord Voldemort’s head had followed Harry’s entrance with a predatory precision; his red eyes unblinking followed every movement and every breath. His face was contorted into an awful grin.

Harry shivered without volition.

‘Harry, my boy. How good of you to join us with such short notice. I assume the journey was not too arduous?’ Harry’s head rounded on Dumbledore then, his eyebrow rose to his hairline. There was something about Dumbledore’s airy manner that put Harry’s teeth on edge.

Harry didn’t say anything in return, merely inclined his head slightly. The-Boy-Who-Lived was wholly focused on the _thing _to his right. He felt like he was on a knife edge, waiting for something terrible to happen. It was now the correct instinctual response when Voldemort or his followers were in close proximity.

Dumbledore obviously did not even have the gall to feel uncomfortable.

‘Well, you must be wondering why we are all gathered here today?’ The Headmaster’s voice lilted in an almost reverent quality. Harry surmised this was typical of those who had a flair for dramatics, the two beings he shared the table with were equally guilty of this practice. He could already feel a headache looming.

Dumbledore took Harry’s look of confusion and bewilderment that bordered on incredulity as a response. The Headmaster gestured around them. ‘What you see here is an Armistice Residing – a neutral ground on which two warring parties peacefully discuss terms and conditions which can
potentially led to a permanent ceasefire. But first, as is customary, we shall share a meal together. Hungry Harry? Suddenly, plates of rich and colourful food appeared on the table. Cakes, tarts, roasts, vegetables, fruits and food items Harry had never seen before filled the tent with a litany of scents.

‘Eat. We have a long night ahead of us.’ Harry had never been less inclined to eat in his life. He saw Lucius, Arthur and Molly approach the table. Arthur and Lucius bowed to the table and then started serving food to Dumbledore and Voldemort respectively. Harry felt Mrs Weasley set a placating hand on Harry’s neck and quietly asked him what he would like, but a cold fear had settled in his stomach and he could only shake his head. Molly filled is plate regardless and whispered that it was okay and reiterated that he should eat.

Harry’s dream returned to the fore front of his mind again unbidden and it only helped increase his nerves.

The young Gryffindor managed a few mouthfuls of potato and carrot before the food was Vanished. In its place several items appeared on the table; a cup, a tiara, a locket, a ring, Tom Riddle’s diary, and finally Nagini.

The items in the vision.

Harry stared. He looked at the objects with a strange intensity, only because they seemed to stare back at him. Then came a sudden urge to reach out and touch, like one would when told not to. A strange pulse settled under his skin as he fought with himself, and it was a bloody fight - the kind that was exacted with teeth and nails. He found it nigh on impossible to tear his eyes from them and with a small taste of the air around him, his senses were flooded with the notions of dark and wrong. But in the same breath, he found himself jarring at the sensation that made him want to sigh ‘finally’ in relief, of all things.

Then something flew in his peripheral.

Harry pushed back from the table in shock as the snaked head reared on him with a burning hiss. His hand pawed at his wand holster and his stomach dropped when he remembered it was in Snape’s possession. Harry hiss back a curse, instinctively facing the monstrous snake back.

‘Nagini, behave.’ Voldemort chastised like you would a naughty child.

At least the Weasleys and Lupin had the good sense to look concerned, Harry felt a little of his animosity towards them drain slightly.

Dumbledore totaled a withering glare on both the snake and her master before clearing his throat and resuming his jovial appearance.

‘What is this?’ Harry growled. The low danger in his voice surprised but strengthened him.

‘Would you care to explain, Tom?’ Voldemort recoiled angrily from Dumbledore with bared teeth before he seemed to control himself and inclined his head at the invitation. The twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes revealed the enjoyment he drew from causing Voldemort great discomfort.

Voldemort then rounded on Harry with a feral glint in his eyes and a toothy grin. ‘What you see before you Potter is the sum of my life’s ambition. These items are, despite their appearance, vessels which contain shades of myself - my soul – within them.’ Voldemort looked at the objects with the same fevered admiration Harry had witnessed in his dream. ‘These were formed using the very heights of my extensive magical capabilities and are thus, highly complex and powerful
artefacts.’

Egotistical psycho. Harry jibed internally.

‘They guarantee my immortality.’ Voldemort stated as if he were discussing the weather.

Harry slowly dissected that bombshell. So, Voldemort was immortal. Merlin’s pants, Lord Voldemort was immortal.

But suddenly his experiences within the Chamber of Secrets made a lot more sense. It was a shade of Voldemort’s soul Harry had encountered. His eyes feel sharply on the destroyed book, the item nearest to him.

‘They are called Horcruxes Harry.’ Dumbledore clarified. ‘Horcruxes are the product of extremely dark and volatile magic. Only a few have attempted their creation, the ritual is awful and necessitates murder – the most evil act- and typically, they fail. If they do succeed, they only do so once. Voldemort has succeeded not only once but six times since and once unintentionally. They are all connected to him, as he is connected to them – through soul-binds.’ Dumbledore looked strained when he looked at Harry then, like news of a familial death had just been announced.

It didn’t take an idiot to count the items.

‘But there are only six items here.’ Harry announced.

‘No, there are seven.’ Voldemort looked like he wanted to bounce in his seat when he said it.

‘And where is the seventh.’ Harry gritted out.

Dumbledore just looked at him, as did Voldemort.

Then Nagini turned from her Master to stare at him too, and a slow realisation rose up in him like bile.

The visions, the anger, his scar burning, the hate, the hate.

No-no.’ Harry paled.

‘Oh, but yes.’ Voldemort hissed, his eyes burning holes in Harry face.

Harry could only shake his head dumbly.

‘On the night you parents were murdered and the Killing Curse rebounded – a piece of Voldemort’s soul fractured and attached itself to the most alive thing in the room. You. You are the Horcrux Voldemort never intended to make Harry.’

‘And what gifts it has afforded you, my kin.’ Harry flinched at the gleeful hiss from his right. The young Gryffindor stared at his hands helplessly and swallowed painfully. A piece of Voldemort’s soul was inside him. A roll of nausea slicked up his throat. That vile creature was inside him. Harry felt violated and unclean. He wanted to turn himself inside out and rip it out of him.

‘Then remove it.’ Harry said through his teeth.

‘We cannot.’ Dumbledore said solemnly. 'Not without ending your life with it.'

'And destruction of my soul piece is not on the table, Potter.' Voldemort tutted.
A boiling rage rose up with the nausea.

Everyone in the room, bar those sitting at the table shuddered at the sudden tense crackle permeating the air. The room felt like led around them all. Harry’s rage blew through them all, everyone paled – Lupin even whined – the creature inside him seemed closer to the surface suddenly. The threat of some awful magic hung around them, much to the surprise of all attended. They all stared at the boy, some in concerned confusion – other’s with undisguised hunger. The wards visibly shuddered with the strain of containing the onslaught.

‘Says who?’ Harry intoned lowly. Voldemort rose a naked brow but did not answer - instead he clapped like a child would at a dancing monkey.

‘Dumbledore, the boy’s power exceeds what you have reported.’ Voldemort had the gall to sound happy about this. A few particularly eyebrow-raising curses escaped him then. Harry could only feel disgust, hate, and betrayal. Dumbledore had spoken to Voldemort about Harry? Harry could only growl at the thought.

Harry felt sick.

‘When we met each other last, when we danced upon my father’s rotting husk, when I finally touched you – I felt it then. I thought it was impossible, the sensation simply being a product of your blood flowing in my veins. You are too terribly mortal to be an adequate vessel – but then again, little one – you have always exceeded expectations. I suspect the vast reserve of power you rest upon is to blame – not that I am angry in the slightest.’ Voldemort was looking at Harry like he had the other objects on the table, greedily. The candlelight flickered and the tent swayed dangerously.

‘Enough power to knock you on your arse, you vile git.’ Harry hissed venomously in some twisted hybrid of Parseltongue and English. Lucius stood as if to strike Harry, but Voldemort simply snapped a hand at him, and he slumped back down angrily.

Voldemort never stopped grinning.

‘Harry, we will need you to calm down before we continue.’ Dumbledore actually sounded disappointed which made the acidic murderiosity in Harry’s stomach rise higher.

His mind reeled. He could hurt them; he could lash out at the two men in front of him and be done with it. The thought brought a vicious smile to Harry’s face. This was their war, not his.

A crushed throat, a flash of vile green, a sharp blade and a soft belly.

He snapped out of it as quickly as it came.

Then Arthur approached the table and laid a scroll on the table. With a touch to its seal it unravelled revealing three pieces of parchment joined in the centre.

A titled cursive script dominated the page. The letters so small and compact it was difficult to read with any amount of success.

‘These are the proposed treaty terms.’ Dumbledore announced. ‘Both parties – myself and Voldemort, as representatives of our respective causes – have drafted these and are willing to amend based on any requirements you may put forth Harry.’ The Headmaster’s voice was flat and emotionless. ‘We will carefully discuss any changes you might require; I implore you to read these with careful consideration Harry. If you agree to these terms, they are binding and cannot be annulled. If you agree to these terms, they bind you – and us three – for life.’
Harry wanted to spit in their faces and tell them where *exactly* they could shove their drafted terms.

The young Gryffindor read studiously in a manner Hermione would applaud.

But, little did he know that this was the beginning of his little death.

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*Offt, what a sexy champ Harry!*

*Thank you for reading so far!*

*All ze comments and kudo's for your hardworking house-elf here ;)***
After several long-winded paragraphs of legal-ese, Harry found the sections labelled ‘The Terms on which Armistice Rests.’ Beside it were three crests Harry had never seen before, including his own apparently. He marveled momentarily at the Potter’s blue and red crest before reading on.

Before he settled in, Voldemort totaled a sly grin toward Harry which made his stomach tie up in knots.

Nothing seemed real; it felt like the world had flipped on its axis.

*Peaceful negotiation with the homicidal maniac?*

Harry snorted to Voldemort’s clear displeasure and then read on.

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*In the name of respective parties attending this Armistice Settlement,*

*Representative of the Order of the Phoenix, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Order of Merlin (First Class), Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot*

*And*

*Representative of the Death Eater Bund, Dark Lord (previously, one Tom Marvolo)*
Riddle) Voldemort, Fester of the Arcane Occult, Lord of the most ancient and noble Houses of Gaunt, Heir of Slytherin, and Master of the Serpentine Council.

And

To-be-Lord (Marquess) Harry James Potter of the most noble and ancient House of Potter,

Do hereby propose the following terms for Armistice,

Upon Voluntary Renouncement of Personal Liberty of one Harry James Potter to one Dark Lord Voldemort, the Following Conditions will be met by both Parties of Armistice;

The required terms as proposed by the Order of Phoenix, as represented by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore are as follows;

Lord Voldemort may not seek to exact his will upon unwilling Wizarding or Muggle-kind institutions respectively, be it through violence, coercion, proxy, or magical means.

Lord Voldemort will immediately reintegrate all created Horcruxes soul-bound to him upon closing Armistice agreement, bar one Harry James Potter (horcrux host) and Nagini (horcrux) (by argument of sentience and risk of death) and will not seek to create another.

Lord Voldemort may not endanger, harm, injure, or kill one Harry James Potter knowingly or willingly and will voluntarily enter an Unbreakable Vow to actualise this term.

The required terms as proposed by Lord Voldemort are as follows;

Harry James Potter (horcrux host) is to remain in possession of one Lord Voldemort until death of either party, upon which he will be released from this agreed term.

Harry James Potter (horcrux host) is to reside with one Lord Voldemort until the death of either party, upon which he will be released for this agreed term.

Opposition parties connected with the Order of the Phoenix and Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore will not seek to harm, endanger, injure, or kill Lord Voldemort and those listed as his connected persons.

Punishment for crimes committed during war time with be overseen both representatives and the Minister of Magic where terms of justice will be agreed by all parties involved.

Both he (Lord Voldemort) and Harry Potter’s location at any instance is never to be revealed knowingly or willing by parties listed to persons not currently listed.

Revisions are permitted upon renewed Armistice Settlement, agreed by all treaty representatives.
Lord Voldemort’s records in their present state, as recorded by The Ministry of Magic and the Wizengamot, will be expunged completely (sanctioned by Minister Cornelius Fudge a priori).

Harry James Potter (horcrux host) will not be permitted to endanger, harm, injure, or kill Lord Voldemort knowingly or willing and will voluntarily enter in an Unbreakable Vow to actualise this term.

The (drafted prior to Armistice negotiation) terms as proposed currently on behalf of by one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore for Harry James Potter are as follows;

If requested, Harry James Potter is to be allowed visitation by parties (to be) listed for at least a period of six hours every four days upon Armistice settlement.

Harry James Potter is to receive rooms (one bedroom, private bathroom, private kitchen, and private leisure room) warded against entry to anyone except one Harry James Potter. This will be overseen by neutral, qualified persons listed. These spaces are not subject to interference from any person except one Harry James Potter. Entrance of listed person into the aforementioned rooms is subject to one Harry James Potters will – wards will fall under one Harry James Potters will and his will alone.

If requested, Harry James Potter is to be allowed to exit agreed proximity to Lord Voldemort for a minimum period of seven hours weekly without interference from listed parties.

Lord Voldemort is not permitted to harm, injure, maim, or kill listed parties and will voluntarily enter into an Unbreakable Vow to actualise this term.

Upon acceptance of the terms found with this Armistice Settlement, failure to abide by these terms will result in instant termination of the agreed Armistice and Representatives by either representative listed; Albus Percival Wulfric Brain Dumbledore or Lord (Tom Marvola Riddle) Voldemort will be subjected to the Traitors Curse and will be subject to exile from known Wizarding territories.

If Harry felt sick before, he was floored now.

But then he laughed. It was somewhat manic and grating; it made everyone except Dumbledore and Voldemort flinch.

Better to laugh than cry or doing something equally stupid.

The laugh had mutated into shuddering, broken gasps. No one knew if he was laughing anymore.

‘So- hah – let me get this – ah – straight. You want me to – ahah – become Riddle’s little fucking pet horcrux – oh – so that he stops acting like a murderous, vile, disgusting creature – oh lord- I’ve to play houses with him, until I die. I’ll be forced to remain at casa de psycho for the rest of my, or
his days like a good little puppy and what? We all live happily ever after? Are you all fucking insane?’

Harry had stopped laughing quite quickly after he began speaking and the humorous aspects of the Armistice evaporated. He was now seething and the dark, ugly feeling bloomed in his chest again. He must look like a feral beast, his teeth were bared, he was almost on his haunches as if to lean forward to rip into whatever piece of flesh presented itself to him first. He wanted to hurt them. Oh, how good it would feel to watch them writhe in pain, disfigured and begging for forgiveness.

How dare they suggest this?

How dare they fucking consider this?

‘Harry, I know we may be asking too much of you—.’

‘Don’t- don’t you fucking dare Albus.’ Harry interrupted, his breathing harsh and voice dangerously low. He stood up and rounded on Albus, faces merely inches apart. ‘You’re just going to roll over and accept this?’ Harry shoved the Dumbledore’s Armistice copy away from him. ‘You’re going to make me his little slave Albus? Fuck. You. Merlin, you’re as fucking callous and delusional as he is.’ Harry gestured to Voldemort who was watching Harry with careful consideration, surprise even. Albus had paled considerably, neither of them were expecting this reaction, which only fuelled Harry’s fury further. ‘I trusted you, but you are no different from them. You’re willing to go to any lengths to win this war, by any means necessary. Ha – even if that means carting off the boy you swore to protect. Fucking proud of yourself, Albus - feel good about this Albus?’

Nagini was hissing slowly, clearly enraptured with the boy’s loss of control. Her master shared the same intense concentration enraptured with Harry’s deliciously uncharacteristic responses.

Harry turned away from the table then to see the Weasley’s, Lupin, Snape, and Malfoy all pale with varying degrees of pity or surprise on their faces. Mrs Weasley watched everything through her fingers, Arthur could only stare at the floor in shame. At least Lupin seemed to agree with Harry if the daggers he gave both Albus and Voldemort were anything to go by. Lucius just looked shocked and somewhat smug at Harry’s choice of target for his ire.

‘You wouldn’t be his slave Harry. You will simply remain with him for extended periods of time. You still have your freedom, you can leave, you can see your friends –.’

‘You fucking miserable old cunt.’ He spat in Parseltongue, all of his previous respect and affection for the man blown away. Harry’s head lolled towards the table lazily, with a predator’s grace and Dumbledore visibly shuddered as if he understood him. Nagini wriggled with a laugh and Voldemort’s expression slacked slightly – even he had probably never seen Dumbledore spoken to like this. But Harry was incensed with hostile motivation. ‘On that monster’s say so only, Albus. I can’t leave that hell-hole for more than seven measly hours a week if he doesn’t deem it fit. My friends, the people listed can only come up, for a certain amount of time if he allows it – and only them! I can’t meet anyone new! Do you know what that fucking means? Tell me Albus, is it because you’ve lived life in solitude that you feel obliged, excited perhaps, to subject others to the same fate? You think that’s justified?’

‘No Harry!’ Albus rose enraged. ‘This is now the only option we have to put an end to it. If we back out of this, there is no way to win - as you put it. The horcruxes forbid it. I wouldn’t consider this if there were any other option, any other way. This-. ‘ He threw his had to the Armistice. ‘Is our only hope. It is the only way to save the lives of everyone we hold dear! And, to me you are one of those people Harry!’ Dumbledore then grabbed Harry and took him to the corner furthest from
Voldemort. ‘As soon as he found out you were a horcrux and revealed their existence to us, we were fighting a losing game. We can’t kill him otherwise.’ He whispered furiously.

The young Gryffindor paused, snapped out of Dumbledore’s painful grip, then sat back in his chair shaking. He didn’t trust himself to say anything else right now, his belly was full of acid.

Harry then felt a warm pair of arms wrap around him from behind. ‘Harry, my sweet boy – it’s okay to be angry. This is too much to ask of anyone, especially of you – you’ve already sacrificed so much because of this – this stupidity. But- but this is the only way.’ Molly stroked his cheek, she was shaking too.

Harry felt himself slump back into her, his head and heart thumping.

Except for Harry’s ragged breaths and Molly’s whispered assurances, the silence in the tent ticked on.

‘Amend your terms if they do not satisfy you. Or leave – either way I’ll find you, I will have you.’ Voldemort sneered dangerously.

‘You’ll never have me, Riddle.’ Harry spat.

‘Oh, I will boy. It’s just a matter of when and by what terms.’ He pointed to the Armistice.

The ground shook to the beat of the rush of fury building in Harry then. His eyes never left Voldemort’s as they stared each other down.

‘Please, Harry. I’m so sorry – please.’ He had never heard Molly Weasley sound so unsure or desperate – it broke something inside and he gave in.

He had never felt so weak.

He patted Molly’s arm and told her he was alright. He then straightened himself and lent on the table. If he was going to do this, he wasn’t just going to take it lying down.

‘I want at least twenty-four hours leave without interference every week for starters.’ Everyone in the room visibly relaxed, even Snape and Lucius. Harry thought with no small amount of smug pride that he had been able to scare the two of them too.

‘I can agree to that.’ Voldemort said silkily.

I sense some good old’ drama-muffins ahead!

Thank you for reading so far,

Comments and kudos a-plenty would be more than appreciated!
The negotiations, after Potter’s outburst, were executed quickly and with surprising precision.

Voldemort had not been able to tear his eyes away from the boy since he had lost control over his typically stoic demeanour.

And what a delectable removal from the norm that was.

The boy was all fire and fury with barely controlled murderous intent oozing from him in honeyed wave. Voldemort shivered. Who knew the Golden Saviour of the Wizarding World had such a vicious streak? Not that the boy could be blamed- the freedom he so carefully protected was about to be snatched away from no other than his sworn enemy.

The power which the boy had exuded in waves shocked everyone in the tent, even himself – and it was dark – filthy even.

Harry Potter was quickly becoming more interesting the more Voldemort was allowed to watch him without interruption.

Typically, they had only meet for fleeting, high-octane moments. The Dark Lord had never been allowed hours of uninterrupted proximity with the boy, it was something the Dark Lord found himself enjoying in crazed rapture.

The prospect of even more extended contact with that fiery, burning gaze sent a strange shiver down Voldemort’s spine.

The boy was not his typical fumbling self, instead Potter now oozed self-control and authority over his environment. He was not frightened of Voldemort, not even shaken by his presence during the
negotiation – and it fascinated him. The boys manner belied his age, what stood before him was a man with a tight grip on thick reins - it stunned Voldemort, and he was never so easily surprised.

How could a boy, so young, so naïve be so sure of himself in these increasingly impossible circumstances? Even Voldemort’s most loyal, currently here with him in the Armistice Residing, seemed to cower in the young boy’s presence after he had read the terms.

Snape described Potter as an idiot whose head had been too far inflated by hordes of worshipers kissing the ground he stood on. Worship the boy did not earn or deserve.

The Dark Lord was beginning to suspect Potter had earned quite a bit of the fanaticism he had attracted in droves. Voldemort almost felt moved.

Oh, and the way he spat venom at his beloved Headmaster had shook them all to their cores.

*You miserable old cunt.*

Nagini had been practically fleeing with joy and a newly founded respect for their fellow Parselmouth kin. The boy’s fury had gifted him a somewhat serpentine elegance; dangerous and exacting.

Voldemort shivered.

Yes, this version of Potter was a truly worthy adversary.

Since his rebirth in his father’s graveyard, Voldemort had begun to stalk the target of his newly founded obsession. He followed him through the streets of Hogsmeade, in the close confines of the Three Broomsticks and after his meeting with Dumbledore, in the corridors of Hogwarts.

Potter was for all intents and purposes a painfully awkward and shy boy, except when in the company of his friends and adopted family.

When he laughed, which Voldemort found to be a rare occurrence, he did so with his whole being. Potter would often sacrifice himself and his time if his friends ever had need of it. He was never interested in the benefits of fame that fateful night had gifted them.

‘The-Boy-Who-Lived, the Saviour of the Wizarding World, Vanquisher of the Dark Lord’ he brushed the titles off as if they never applied to him. He seemed to long for the quiet monotony that always eluded him. He was at his most languid and content when nothing was required of him, happy only in the company of his closely guarded friend-circle – and never exacted his will upon anyone except himself.

But the Armistice Settlement seemed to break something in the boy. Gone was the awkward self-consciousness and in its place stood a being full of wrath and dark passion.

Voldemort had not given much thought to the finer details of their co-habitation, but after witnessing the embodiment of Lyssa, the God of Wrath within Potter’s willowy frame, Voldemort found himself considering a range of new possibilities.

Terms be damned, my how he wanted the boy. The need to possess the young Gryffindor had set a fire in the Dark Lord’s belly.

He had never sought to be possessive over another being like this. He found himself agreeing to most of Potter’s terms. Not that any of his requirements too radical, Potter obviously knew where the line was in this Armistice and he knew how to manipulate it with careful compromise.
This boy did not embody the Gryffindor aesthetic of foolhardy martyrdom, this was self-preservation in impossible circumstances through and through.

Voldemort found himself glad that these proceedings had been necessitated if only because he had been witness to Potter’s lethal grace.

If it wasn’t common knowledge which house Potter had been sorted into, he would assume the boy was raised in the den of snakes.

And he speaks the native, noble tongue. What a welcome surprise it had been when he had heard it for the first time in person. Snape and Malfoy had reported it a few years ago, but what he had previously deemed unworthy of the boy now brought forth dark desires that he’d thought lost to him.

You will never have me, Riddle.

He spoke so fluently, so beautifully that even Nagini had quivered. Of course, he lacked knowledge of serpent etiquette, but that could be rectified. He wanted to hear more of it, of Potter’s tongue wrapping around each syllable and annunciation.

Potter’s tongue. Potter’s mouth. Potter’s eyes.

They burned him with their intensity with a shade of green he and his ancestors had always favoured, one that decorated their familial crest. The boy had glared at both of them with contempt. If Potter loathed Dumbledore to his core, he hated Voldemort with every fiber of his being. Voldemort relished the thought of their continued nearness and seeing that fiery gaze with fevered, unadulterated want.

When the boy’s power rose within the Residing, Voldemort and his counterparts shared a knowing look, awed by the intensity of it. He was clearly more powerful than Dumbledore had cared to realise. In fact, Voldemort surmised, he may even match both he and the idiot Headmaster’s magical reserves – but perhaps not skill, not yet anyway. The wards on the Residing were complex and powerful in of themselves, even he could not break their bonds – but Potter nearly did.

With some training, some discipline – Voldemort shuddered – the boy could be great. The boy would be a God among men.

When the terms had been fully negotiated and they had all signed in blood, Nagini quietly turned to her Dark master.

‘His blood contains a fire to light a thousand suns.’ She announced. The serpentine proverb described the boy perfectly.

Delicious. He thought.
I need a tall glass of cold lemonade after all that debauchery!

Thank you for reading so far!

Any constructive criticism would be golden, I love hearing your thoughts!

Comment and kudos, yah cretins!

Jokes, sigh, jokes.
More time, I just need more time.

A frigid daft blew through the tent, the walls flapping like birds ascending into the air. The roaring fire and yellowed candles cast a warm amber glow on them all. The flames caused all their faces to look shadowed and demonic.

And the Dark Lord’s eyes seemed to flicker like the flames.

Harry read the terms repeatedly, obsessively. If he was going to make a deal with the devil, he was going to secure as much time as possible out of his sticky grasp. Harry should have probably walked out the tent, God knows he wanted to. But the pressure and the shame of walking away, the potential blood on his hands kept him still. The blood would pour in rivers if he were to walk away now and it would be theirs, not his.

Twenty-four hours a week alone, unsupervised. Nine hours every three days with his friends supervised. Warded quarters. A guarantee of no violence.

He gut had told him asking for more would have encouraged Voldemort to fight back and increase his stranglehold on him. A grip he would be subjected to for the rest of his days.

Dumbledore had raised an eyebrow at the manner Harry had presented himself; he controlled the talks with an iron fist and did not budge to Dumbledore's tentatively offered suggestions. The Headmaster had pointed to several terms, all of them Voldemort's, and asked Harry to reconsider, to readjust, to realign his requirements to best suit the two tyrants beside him.

When Voldemort pushed back on the visitation hours, Dumbledore didn't fight him but instead asked Harry to stand down. Dumbledore was quickly told where he could shove his suggestion
and that seemed to endear the vile creature to his right who then quickly accepted the amendment.

Harry found that insulting Dumbledore's intelligence and usefulness gained him a lot more time.

Several times Harry caught the gaze of his fellow attendees. Mrs Weasley would nod encouragingly whilst her husband would grimace whenever the Dark Lord offered an opinion. Lupin stood with folded arms and nodded when Harry wouldn't back down to Dumbledore's requests, a sentiment which Snape seemed to support - much to Lucius' derision.

Voldemort didn’t even look down when he signed his name, he only looked at Harry and occasionally turned to give Dumbledore a smug, cat-who-got-the-cream grin. And Dumbledore had been nothing but a pathetic swindler wrapped in a thin veneer if faux dignity and grace. They would both get what they wanted, and Harry would suffer for it.

The Headmaster has all but rushed through the now-solidified terms. Harry’s gut roiled – the man would not even allow him the courtesy of time to consider his- now bleak- future.

What Harry realised then was that he was naught but a prized solution to Dumbledore, a prize he wanted signed-sealed-and delivered as soon as humanly possible. Maybe it was so he wouldn’t have to look Harry in the eye much longer. At least, Harry hoped it was at least some form of shame or guilt that had made the old man look weak and pale.

*Or maybe he just can’t wait to have me out of his hair.* Harry thought acidly.

He had been careful in his terms. He needed to secure as large a slice of freedom from the creature to his right.

Jesus, the thing practically had *scales*. Harry thought, disgusted. Voldemort was a nightmare gifted a corporeal form. Each time Harry looked at him, Voldemort’s requested terms became more and more real.

A life with this man and a few select people, and *only* them – forever.

Harry doubted he would be able to look at *any* of them without disgust after this was over.

They were ripping his life, his dreams and wishes from him. Whenever Harry thought that life couldn’t suck more hope from him, it chugged another pint of it.

If he could only weep without them watching. If only he could disappear to a place they could never find him.

The smoke and ash from the flames inside the tent submerged the space with a peaty smoke which clogged the senses. The haze set a dream-like scene - a very dangerous thought to have in current company. A icy tsundere would have suited the proceedings better. God knows Harry would have preferred it over this false sense of comfort.

‘Now, Tom – I think it’s time for you to hold up the first of our terms, don’t you think?’ Dumbledore looked disinterested as he calmly powdered the bloody signature in front of him. The edge to his voice said otherwise.

Harry had quickly discovered that any mention of Voldemort’s given name would result in barely controlled violent intent. It was one of a litany of notes Harry had already been collecting on the vile creature.

If Harry was going to have to spend the rest of his life in close proximity with *it*, he would arm
himself to the best of his ability. Harry had always been good at picking up the smallest of breadcrumbs to save himself.

Voldemort stood languidly and Harry felt the air in the tent change. Lucius rose too and moved to take his Dark Lord’s outer robes. Harry was left feeling disconcerted when the creature rolled up his shirt sleeves. Harry had never seen him to casually dressed and it was a peculiar sight; Lord Voldemort, serpent-featured, red-eyed and looking ready for some hard graft.

Lucius bowed after murmuring something quietly to his Lord, Voldemort nodded whilst motioning Nagini to exit the table.

‘Harry, if you will?’ Dumbledore motioned for him to follow the snake to the corner like some warped classroom dunce. It put his teeth on edge.

And then the tent felt suffocating.

Voldemort held his arms out over the objects on the table and they started to vibrate violently. His freakish hands clawed over them as he began to cast windlessly in a droning manner. The sound briefly reminded Harry of a monk’s prayer – soft, continuous and calling to a higher power. Harry felt drawn to it, his back as tight as a bow string.

Then he could feel it inside him, the piece of Voldemort’s soul trying to sing back. Nagini had risen to her full height too and stared never blinking.

The objects glowed with a blueish light and then the light flew from them with what Harry could only describe as a scream.

The light was furious and collected around the Dark Lord like burling wraiths caught in a tumultuous wind. Everyone in the tent covered their ears, turning away from the magic which pounded them assaulting and violated them down to their bones.

Harry felt the overwhelming urge to cry out, to stop it. Nagini whimpered with a broken hiss. He felt Mrs Weasley clutch him arm and move in front of him, as if to protect him from the waves breaking over them.

But then Harry realised she had been pushing him back for he had taken a step forward. He’d tried to get closer. Closer to Voldemort and the wailing shrieks of his magic.

Voldemort then pulled all of it into himself and his chest looked like it was burning hot-white.

Harry had never seen the Dark Lord break a sweat before, but it poured from him in droves now. His grey skin glistened and shook. Then Harry realised the creature was groaning.

He – the Dark Lord – the most terrible force, a being with untold power, an embodiment of seemingly pure energy was gasping.

The thought shook Harry. It told him the magic being wielded in front of him would most likely kill anyone weaker. That it would probably kill him if he’d attempted it.

Then the Dark Lord fell to the ground in a heap. Another jarring sight.

Lucius was quick to cover his Lord with a sheet of black silk. Under it, Voldemort seemed to heave and seize. His breaths the only sound now in the deafening silence.

And then he stopped moving completely all everyone held their breath.
'Master.' Nagini called to him when the stillness continued for a few beats too long.

Then he moved. Like a Dementor rising from the floor Voldemort stood and then the black silk fell away from him and fluttered to the ground.

*Oh God. Oh my God.*

Voldemort was gone and, in his place, stood Tom Riddle. Harry shook with the image, the same one which had tormented him the Summer after he’d been bitten by the Basilisk.

The same black curls, pale skinned demon from his twelve-year-old self’s nightmares.

It made Harry want to bolt, to run far – far away.

And then he opened his eyes, instantly capturing Harry’s horrified gaze and it froze the young Gryffindor to the spot. Harry felt the blood drain from him and the world felt tilted on its axis again.

*‘You are reborn, red-eyes. Though now your stare is the colour of precious metal and raging storm.’* Nagini looked please, well, as pleased as a snake could look. She moved to Voldemort’s feet, rose and with a slow dip of hear head bowed.

A slight upturn of Voldemort’s lips was his response, but not once did the Dark Lord break eye-contact with him. It was like they were the only two in the room. Harry felt something strange shift inside him then. Thoughts, forbidden – unbidden reared their ugly heads. The young Gryffindor had to force himself to swallow, the pressure in his throat threatened to choke him.

Lucius then grinned at his Lord and held his outer robes for him.

Robes that now didn’t fit over his arms or chest. Harry looked away and schooled his features into bored disinterest.

*‘And now Dumbledore, it’s time for you to uphold yours.’* His voice was different now too, wholly changed. The grating hiss had deepened into a low rumble which seemed to reverberate through every object inside the tent, Harry included.

Arthur brought forward a thick bundle of parchment’s inlayed with the Ministry’s seal. Both Arthur and Lucius bowed to each other, an action which caused both men to grimace, then the documents were pulled into Lucius’s grasp. Both he and Voldemort grinned slightly.

*Their get-out-of-jail-free cards, obviously.* Harry thought disgusted.

*‘Harry, a moment please?’* Dumbledore asked quietly pulling his attention from the formalities.

Dumbledore took Harry aside and leaned in close. *‘You have been very brave today Harry. I – we – not one of us will never be able to repay you for the sacrifice you have made today. For all of the lives you have saved, for all the pointless deaths you have allowed us to avoid.’*

*‘I did nothing for you. I did it for them.’* Harry’s fists clenched.

Sobered, Dumbledore nodded. *‘I know Harry. I know.’* Dumbledore put his hand on Harry’s shoulder and gripped it tightly, as if it would be any comfort for the young Gryffindor. *‘I do not need to tell you the danger you will be facing soon, my friend. The terms may seem watertight, and we have tried Harry – we have done our best. But, I have no doubt Voldemort will seek a way to confound the requirements we have demanded of it. That being so, I want you to be on your guard*
Harry. Vigilance- constant and unrelenting- is what we will be required from you, my boy.’ Harry slapped the Headmaster’s arm away from him seething.

‘I think you have required enough of me today Albus.’ He spat.

‘Yes. Definitely. But, the man behind us will seek to beguile you – to taunt you – to fool you at every turn. Don’t let him Harry. Be on your guard.’ The man had no fight, and it irked Harry. He wanted to shout, to rage – but Dumbledore wouldn’t even allow for that. His calm demeanour never allowed for that.

Harry looked over Dumbledore’s shoulder to see grey eyes looking back. A slick of terror ripped through his belly as the reality of it crashed down on him.

‘You will have a week to prepare yourself. After, that you will be in his care Harry.’ Dumbledore’s eyes then glistened. ‘I’m so sorry – I’m so, so sorry Harry.’

‘Save your crocodile tears and regrets for someone who gives a flying fuck.’ Harry moved away from Dumbledore and towards Mrs Weasley whose cheeks were scarred with tear-tracks. She took his hands but didn’t say anything, like she couldn’t bring herself to voice what had just happened.

‘That concludes tonight’s proceedings.’ Dumbledore then turned to Voldemort. ‘I trust you will prepare for the conditions of our terms within the week Tom?’

Voldemort sneered. ‘Yes, see to it you do too. As we all know, lives are on the line Albus.’ The air left between Voldemort’s teeth in a slight hiss.

Voldemort then strode toward Harry slowly until he was merely inches away. Mrs Weasley’s grip on his hand tightened. ‘See you on the full moon, little one.’ Harry bared his teeth and Voldemort’s face spilt into a feral smirk. The Dark Lord then took Harry’s chin in a bruising grip and the young Gryffindor tried to pull away but he was brought back to Voldemort’s face with a snap. ‘What fire runs in you veins. Be careful boy, for you may burn yourself on the flame.’

Harry spat on his face then. Everyone gasped and the room was asphyxiated with the tension between them. Voldemort’s face slackened, his eyes darkening until they were hollow and burning. Voldemort then wiped his face and inspected the clear fluid. He then took his thumb into his mouth and sucked on it, swallowing it down.

Harry’s mouth felt full of dry, hot sand. His face contorted with a thin-veil of disgust.

‘I’ll see you soon, little one.’ Voldemort echoed and then strode from the tent with Lucius in tow. Lucius looked like he was ready to strike Harry for the second time that evening.

The wards lifted and Harry’s hand twitched – nay - burned with lethal magic.

He wanted to burn them alive. He wanted to hear them scream.

Snape then returned Harry’s and Mrs Weasley’s wands to them and he looked at Harry with lethargic pity. ‘You’re lucky.’ He stated quietly. ‘If not for the piece of his soul which resides within you Potter, you’d be dead – and the deed wouldn’t have been swift or kind.’ Snape finished softly then nodded to the rest of the tent and followed his Dark Lord.

He heard the loud crack of Disapparation, and then Harry left too, not stopping to look back.
Like a pig in July my friends. Hawt.

Thank you for reading so far!

Comments and kudo’s you daft lot! They fuel this mania!

Your kind words and advise are appreciated and encouraged!
There are horrors beyond life’s edge that we do not suspect, and once in a while man’s evil prying calls them just within our range. - H.P Lovecraft.

The penny hadn't dropped, at least not completely.

Harry woke inside the Room of Requirement- his first destination after the Armistice.

He had been quickly followed by Dumbledore, Lupin and the Weasley's after he had left the tent. They seemed to understand his need to get away from them, or at least knew how to take a hint. Practically running from them, he'd caught Dumbledore's gaze - full of pity, his eyes troubled.

_Crocodile tears_, Harry amended.

Not a word had been shared between them when they apparated in Hogsmeade, and along the path to the Hogwarts grounds they had all fallen under a shroud of thick, tense silence.

Harry felt like tearing his head out when he realised it would probably be the last time he would take this path as a free man.

After this epiphany, it was hard to not think of everything in those terms.

His time was limited, he'd only been able to wrangle a week. It hadn't even been Voldemort who had disagreed with Harry about the length of time to prepare for their terms. Dumbledore had argued that any longer than a week may allow them to act without haste; that Voldemort may use the time for acts of an unsavory nature. The Dark Lord had neither confirmed or denied the accusation, and then a week became the duration of Harry's remaining freedom.
The young Gryffindor had all but ran from the men following him when they reached the steps of Hogwarts after an exceedingly awkward carriage ride.

Four thestrals heading the Hogwarts carriage all snapped to attention, their heads jerking towards Harry. They followed his gait as they neared him, their milky eyes watching him. Lupin commented that their behaviour was curious and pointedly stared at Harry, the recipient of their strange behaviour. Then, before they entered the carriage the creatures inclined their heads at the group, more specifically Harry. Arthur tensed, as did Lupin and Dumbledore.

If he hadn't just been betrayed by those closest to him, Harry may have asked them why they were so tense. But Harry didn't, he could not care less.

As they entered Hogwarts, Lupin made as if to speak to Harry, but he didn't get the chance - Harry all but bolted from them.

\textit{Sold. Slave. Pet. To be used, to be kept, so easily bought. Can't leave. Can't ever leave.} The thoughts swirled in tandem with his rushed breath and the broken beating of his heart as he climbed the stairs.

His eyes had started blurring and his chest became tight by the time he'd reached the fourth floor. By the seventh he was sobbing.

\textit{I need somewhere to hide, I need somewhere to sleep, I need to be alone.} He had begged the room internally. His choked weeping echoed around the corridor but had become muted inside the makeshift bedroom. Portraits on the wall behind him tried to ask what had happened, to tell them why he was so upset. He recoiled when the events of the Armistice pounding against the front of his mind.

\textit{Wiping his spit, then swallowing it down. Grey eyes turning his limbs to lead.}

The Room had delivered his rushed request and provided a small bedroom and bathroom. The bed was large and overstuffed with down feather, a few candles lit the path to it. He had sank into and willed for a quick descent into sleep. To break apart from the reality around him swiftly.

And then numbness, blessed silence.

When Harry woke the next morning his eyes opened with a snap. He knew exactly where he was. He instantly knew his reality again.

\textit{His last days of freedom. His last days of comfort.}

Dark thoughts had plagued Harry during a fitful sleep. Thoughts of ending it all; the peaceful clutch of eternal slumber. Of not being, of not thinking. Being and thinking were painful and it hollowed him out. He'd been betrayed, he had been sold like cattle, he was property now. He would always be property now.

And he felt strange, so strange. His magic roiled around him and within him unbidden and furiously. It felt different, there was a heat and slickness to it that hadn't been there before the Armistice. It was like a shell had cracked inside him and now his magic oozed out from the breakage.

It made him twitchy and nervous. Upon waking it snapped at him and made him shoot up straight. After that it had taken several minutes to handle the restlessness and the feeling that he was about to burst.
And then back to numb.

Harry cast a *tempest* and after a quick *scourgify* descended the steps to the Great Hall.

The thick savory sweet smell of breakfast greeted him. The Hall was bathed in the creamy yellow light of morning and a slight draft cooled his overheated body.

But the noise of the Great Hall grated on his frayed nerves and hollowed him out.

'Harry! Where were you? Woke up and you're already gone.' Ron, who had already stacked a mountain of foodstuffs on his plate spoke with a full mouth. As was instinctual now Harry dodged the spittle and wet crumbs as Ron spoke.

'Up early. You done the potions essay yet?' Benign, innocent topics were necessary right now. Anything mentioning Dark or Lord right now would probably send Harry into panicked hyperventilation.

'More like forced. Hermione's missed her vocation as an Azkaban guard.' Ron frowned as he chewed.

'Where is she?' Harry asked looking around as if she would suddenly appear.

'Speaking to McGonagall.' He inclined his head to the Head Table.

'Oh?' Harry deigned to not look up, he couldn't look at at least three of his professors yet.

'Moaning about her classes. The madwoman wants to take on another elective! I told her she should just drop divination but-.' Harry zoned out, thoughts screaming in his mind again.

'Harry, what's wrong?' Ron and Hermione now looked at him, so lost in thought he hadn't seen her return.

'Off your old world again mate? What's eating you?' Ron had stopped chewing, a sign that all of his attention was on Harry.

Harry made to answer and was blessedly saved by the onslaught of hooting and flapping wings as the post arrived. To Harry's surprise he saw the white, snowy down of Hedwig within the cloud of brown, beige, and black. The three Gryffindors received their post; Hedwig lingered on the bench beside Harry and pecked at his fingers as if to comfort him.

A thick heavy package now lay in front of him and with it a letter—his name written on the front in a heavily slanted cursive he was not familiar with. But, somehow Harry knew who had written it. Maybe it was instinct that made his fingers tremble slightly as he tore open the letter first.

*My dearest Harry,*

*I hope this letter finds you well,*

*You seemed to burn with a curiosity last night that your Headmaster clearly did not sate.*

*Ask and you shall receive, little one. It is an important lesson- and despite what*
Dumbledore may have told you, I am generous towards those in my care and in my possession.

Turn to page 356, it will have the answers you seek.

Yours forever.

Harry dropped the unsigned letter like it had burned him and the blood drained from his face.

And as one pillar topples, so do others.

Then the Great Hall erupted. People shouting - incensed and in indignation. Harry would turn to see what the ruckus was about, but the letter had every single modicum of his focus.

'Potter's been sold to the Dark Lord!' Someone shouted, shattering Harry's numbed state.

'Harry. Oh Merlin. Harry!' His head shoot up to Hermione who held a copy of The Prophet in a white knuckled grip. 'Tell me this isn't true! Tell me- Oh God. Is it true?'

Hermione snapped the paper in a rigid grip and showed him the front page headline: 'Harry Potter sold to He-Who-Should-Not-Be-Named in Armistice Agreement'. The room spun a little and he felt sick to his stomach. Everyone knew already. It was too quick. It was too much. The roar in the Great Hall climbed to a crescendo, as Harry whipped his head around he realised they were all looking at him.

'What is this?!

'What does it mean 'sold'?

'It must be a lie - why would he agreed to it?'

'It can't be true, no one would agree to that!'

'Going to be the Dark Lords little bitch Potter, what's it going to be 'Master and slave' or 'Lord and servant'?

At the last one Harry lost a grip on his faculties and lunged over the table and flew. He saw red. He saw blood pounding in the edges of his vision, but he was blind with rage. He lashed out and thumped, threw, and smashed into flesh. He growled and screamed. His fist was warm and wet and red. He smiled viciously, possessed to hurt, maim - to kill.

'Potter. POTTER! Stop this at once!' A voice bellowed, but he kept going. Several hands grabbed him away from the red, wet flesh. He was mindless with the need for violence. The students nearest to him as he was pulled back shuffled away from Harry quickly as he roared feral. He tried to pull away, to strike his target again- his teeth ached with the need.

Then Harry's view was obstructed. He was so far gone he almost didn't recognise the face now inches from his.

'Harry, you need to stop.' Ron's face was in front of his. 'I know - believe me I know -but you need to calm down. Please, Harry. Calm down.' Ron held his face and he slowly came back.
Harry inhaled on a ragged sob, his cheeks felt wet with tears. An agonised cry ripped through his chest and echoed in the Hall. Everything was deathly silent except his sorrowful howls. Ron threw his arms around him and held him tight. Harry was jostled as the other hands holding him protested and tightened.

'Get away from him.' Ron snarled viciously at the arms holding him. He was released and slumped into Ron's embrace. Hermione held onto his side shushing him and kissing his temple.

'Shh. Harry - it's okay. We're here. We won't let them touch you - Shh.' Harry looked over her shoulder to see Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle on the floor unconscious and wet with blood. He closed his eyes, wanting to banish the image, but it was etched into his eyelids. 'They can't do this. We won't let them.' This sobs renewed at the futility of her guarantees. He was sold. He was a slave. He would be used. He would never be free.

'Granger, Weasley - pick him up and come with me.' A cold, demanding tone sounded to his left. Harry felt Hermione nod and Ron pulled him up. They were both so pale. A flash of red caught his eyes and he saw the blood, still wet and bright, on his fist.

As they pulled him forward down the corridors, the whispers and questions grew in volume again. Harry couldn't concentrate on a single voice, instead it sounded like the roar of an beast which dwelled the deepest parts of the ocean.

As they made there way down into the depths of Hogwarts, Harry could hear his two best friends whisper between themselves furiously.

'It's clearly true Ron. I've never seen him like this.'

'Why would they agree to it? The Order wouldn't do this!'

'They have. I can't believe it either, but they have.'

'I'll fucking wring their necks if they even try to lay a finger on him. I'll happily do the time in Azkaban! Pawning him off like a fucking auction piece.'

'It's an Armistice Settlement Ron - I - don't ... it's not good.'

The clammy cold of the dungeons made Harry shiver. Some small part of Harry's mind twigged that they were in Snape's private quarters.

'Maybe he'll do me in for smacking the Slytherin Prince about. I hope he does.'

'Sit him there.' Snape pointed to a black leather sofa and they placed him down carefully. Snape turned to his cabinets filled with hundreds of vials, beakers, and jars. He picked out an ornate vial filled with a royal blue liquid. He clutched Harry's head and told him to drink as he fed it to him. It tasted floral and minty.

Calming Draught. His mind supplied. The sensation of a warm blanket seeped into his muscles and Harry slumped further into Ron's arms who hadn't let go of his once since the Great Hall.

The door to Snape's quarters opened, Lupin made a beeline and sat on his haunches in front of Harry. His face was strained; his skin seemed tight and wan.

'Mr Potter, has your mind ceased racing?' Snape asked from behind him. Harry could only nod. 'Good. I understand your violent reaction to Malfoy and his counterparts was due to your agreement with the Dark Lord and Malfoy's opinions of it.' Again Harry nodded feebly.
Lupin took Harry's hands and squeezed them tightly. 'Harry, if it's too much we can take you away from here. You needn't suffer. We'll find out who leaked to The Prophet. We can take you to Sirius now if you'd like. I'm sure Dumbledore will be more than happy to let Mr Weasley and Miss Granger stay with you.'

Harry didn't know what to do, his mind was a mess - his body shaking and weak. He suspected that if weren't for the Calming Draught Snape had given him he would have been sick by now.

'Potter, I seriously suggest you accept Professor Lupin's offer. You will need to rest in a comfortable environment. Hogwarts cannot offer you that at this present moment.' Snape's voice was uncharacteristically soft as he rounded on Harry, it shook him out of his daze.

'But - I - I won't be here again. He won't let me.' He didn't know what he wanted. It was more like the realisation had just dawned on him and he'd needed to voice it to them. Ron and Hermione both jerked in shock as he confirmed their fears. He looked at them for an answer.

Even his last moments in the safety of Hogwarts - his home - were now polluted by that foul beast.

Then a comforting warmth wrapped around his freezing shoulders. 'I think we should go see Sirius Harry. We'll come with you, no matter what Dumbledore or the Order say.' Ron pushed gently. 'We'll make it so that you can come back. He can't keep you forever.'

*I am kind to those in my care. Yours, forever.*

'We'll be there Harry.' Hermione echoed.

'Okay. Yeah. Let's go see Sirius.' He agreed numbly.

'Here.' Snape brandished the package from earlier at him. Harry recoiled from it, not wanting to touch it. 'I suggest you read it Potter. It would not be wise to remain ignorant of your current predicament.' He drawled.

Harry's head snapped to him. 'How do you-?' Snape didn't answer, he simply rolled up his sleeve and showed Harry the Dark Mark writhing and wriggling on his skin.

'The Dark Lord tells me a great number of things Potter. Particularly things which include sending packages containing unsavoury literature to underage students.' He pointed at the brown wrapping.

'Sir, I don't want - I can't -.' Snape ushered Hermione and Lupin out his way and then leaned towards Harry holding his head.

'You must.' Snape hissed. 'Knowledge is power Potter, arm yourself with it. You are about to enter a den of poisonous snakes, of which The Dark Lord is the master. It does not matter if what is written in that book makes you sweat, makes you heave, or if it depresses you - you will learn it. All of it.' Snape's grip on his head became unbearably tight. 'None of us would have asked this of you Potter. Merlin, I even expect most Death Eater's wouldn't put their own children forward like this. Dumbledore - the fool - has deemed himself above even basic morality or humane decency by asking this of you. To be in the company of The Dark Lord is to suffer. To be with the Lord is to know true fear. Especially if you remain in his company ignorant of exactly what he is capable of.' Snape pushed the book into his lap. 'Your first lesson Potter: The Dark Lord has given you a gift, he will expect you to use it as required.' Snape released his grip then passed the letter to him, it was torn in two. He didn't remember doing that.

Snape had laid out the truth in front of him and it tore him up. He wanted to tear the book to shred
and scream *How dare he assume I wanted anything from him! I never wanted anything to do with him!* But he bit his tongue and held his head in his hands.

Harry was silent as Lupin relayed that events of the Armistice to Ron and Hermione. He almost couldn't bare hearing it again.

'We will help you.' Hermione said with fervent conviction. 'Fuck Dumbledore. We're leaving now.' Sometimes Harry thought Hermione may be a Seer; she always knew what he needed to hear in moments like this. Harry was dismayed that there had been so many awful moments, and he hadn't even reached his majority yet. He smiled tightly at both her and Ron taking their offered hands as he stood up.

'I find myself on both the Dark Lord's and your listed persons Potter. You need help, owl me. If I can help - I will.' Then for the first time in five years Snape smiled at Harry without malice - a small smile - but one nonetheless. Harry inclined his head in the old Wizarding greeting; a sign of the upmost respect and gratitude he had learned from the Weasley Twins before a mock duel. Snape mirrored him before Snape's brows rose high and he motioned for them all to exit.

The trio, joined by Lupin, walked in silence to the Gryffindor Dormitories. Thank Circe, the corridors were blissfully empty.

Before they entered, Hermione turned to Harry. 'Do you have a copy of it? The Armistice Terms?'

'Yeah, in my trunk.'

'Good. We will go over them. Snape's right Harry - we need to prepare you. Until we can find a way to get you out.'

'I don't think there is Hermione, it said it was for life.' Hermione simply shook her head and smiled in a manner which made Harry question why she hadn't been sorted into Slytherin.

'If there's a loophole, I'll find it. Failing that, we will acquaint you with the means to protect yourself. By any means necessary.' A vicious glint shone in her eyes and both Ron and Harry shivered. 'Now, come in Harry. Tell us exactly what happened. We have work to do.'

'Even in a crisis.' Ron quipped as he rolled his eyes at Hermione's retreating figure.

Harry had told them everything he could. Ron had paled when he explained the issue of having Voldemort's soul lodged inside his own. Hermione nodded and stated it would explain his dreams, his mood swings, the Parseltongue and being able to sense when Voldemort was near.

Harry had laid the Armistice copy out in front of them. As they read Ron's face slowly grew into a worrying shade of red, his fist clenched and white-knuckled. Hermione's face was contorted into disgusted concentration as she poured over them terms. She muttered something along the lines of *of course Dumbledore would have the least to lose* though Harry may have misheard as Ron was loudly cursing Dumbledore and Voldemort calling them a few choice names the Mrs Weasley would have probably booted his arse for.

The package and the letter still in his lap felt heavy.

Hermione began scribbling notes and writing letters with a determination that exceeded her exam preparations. She motioned to the package. 'Start. We haven't got much time.' She said in a no-nonsense tone that had Harry complying instantly.
Your first lesson Potter: The Dark Lord has given you a gift, he will expect you to use it as required. Page three 356.

Harry ripped open the package as Ron sat down to join him. Inside, a black leather book in layed with decadent purple spirals read in a white gothic font: Secrets of the Darkest Art by Owle Bullock.

As Harry flipped through the book to find the correct page, his stomach roiled as his eyes caught snippets of disturbing text and diagrams. He felt like he could feel the icky dank of Dark magic on the book; his fingers itched to throw it away.

'Bloody awful stuff. No wonder it's banned.' Ron muttered dejectedly.

Harry set the book on the table in front of him when he reached the page, he and Ron nodded at each other before delving in.

**Immortal Musings: Artifacts of Ever-Life**

Of all the methods and tools used to achieve the lofty goal of immortality, the most reliable is the Horcrux.

Only for the most learned and establish Dark artist, the Horcrux allows Wizard-kind to achieve immortality by way of soul separation; the Darkest act.

The method, although seemingly simple requires the intent to commit the most supreme act of evil - murder of another.

The act and its intent splits the soul into shards, this allows for the removal of the soul piece and subsequent placement into another object.

Dark artists must chose the vessel of their soul carefully; items organic or animate in nature are unsuitable carriers as the vessel is stablised via the Awfil Sempternum Curse.

Once the vessel is prepared, and the murder committed, the soul is then ripped from the Dark artists person and then carried into the vessel.

If the current self is murdered by another the Dark artist would still remain, existing only between the land of living and of dead.

The Horcrux does not gift corporeal form, simply offers the staying power to remain hidden from Death’s grasp.

Though, Dark artists be warned. Sacrifice of the Soul loosens the mind and its perception of reality. Thus, the Dark artist may experience unsavoury change in his Self. Thus, only the strongest minds should venture this route to ever-life.

Harry snapped the book shut. Memories of the graveyard, Cedric, Wormtail's hand, of pain and blood and misery came unbidden. The young Gryffindor itched the scar on his wrist.

Blood of an enemy, unwillingly given.

'It explains a few things.' Ron offered quietly. 'He must have went into hiding after the Killing
curse rebounded cause he didn't a body.' Harry regarded Ron, now impressed. Harry hadn't connected those dots, he'd been to busy thinking about the awful image of Voldemort rising out of the cauldron. Ron mused, not noticing Harry's appraising glance. He then visibly shivered, creeped out by the book in front of him. 'The stone and the unicorn blood are now making a lot more sense too.'

'Yeah, explains the graveyard too. He was pretty deformed before it started.'

'Still - he looks like a no-nose whack-job. Didn't do a very good job did he?' Ron laughed.

'Well, no - not anymore.' Grey eyes, black hair, pale skin, too-tight clothes. 'He took most of the Horcruxes back into himself as part of the agreement. Now he looks more like the version from Tom Riddle's diary.' Harry licked his lipped unconsciously as an old guilt reared its ugly head before it was - quite rightly- stamped on.

'So human then?'

'I wouldn't go that far.' For the first time since the Armistice Harry genuinely smiled. Ron returned it, and then patted him on the back.

'Don't worry mate, we'll get this sorted.'

'I hope so. I really do.'

:::::::

Hey my lovely cretins!

Thank you for reading so far.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, more to come soon.

Snape's nasally-ass voice: Your comments and kudos though expected, are appreciated. The author clearly needs some constructive criticism. Now you dunderheads!
The last week of freedom had gone too quickly.

At the beginning of it, Hermione had evolved into a one-woman-lawyers-firm. She had spent several hours furiously scribbling letters, referencing Wizarding law books, and familiarised herself with the binding magic of the Armistice. Her first priority had been to get Harry out of Hogwarts and away from *Prophet* reporter owls who had been hounding him since that first morning.

Ron and he had taken great delight in burning the mound of letters that had gathered. All of them asked for an exclusive interview, asking for clarification on the matter. Harry had wondered if Dumbledore or Voldemort had received this many demands for their attention. Harry snorted, of course not.

The Gryffindor Common Room became a base of operations of sorts. Hermione had three self-typing typewriters on the go, two quill notes quills, and had transfigured the wall into a huge blackboard.

Ron commented that if Hermione ever entered into politics or journalism, that would be the Wizarding worlds day of reckoning.

Hermione had a single goal in mind: to locate a loophole in the Armistice. She’d said that in Muggle Law contracts could often be overridden by older, forgotten laws or policy – it was simply a matter of finding it.

By midnight on that first day, Harry was convinced Hermione had sent a letter to every member of the Wizengamot, Blood-Lawyer, and Magical Advisor in Wizarding Britain. A steady stream of owls flocked to the Common Room, picked up a letter and left in heavy rotation.
Hermione was terrifying when confronted with the words ‘No, it can’t be done’.

Ron couldn’t take his eyes off her, enraptured by the level of control Hermione had taken of the situation. In fact, the puppy-love eyes he kept giving her had sent Harry into fits of disturbed giggles. Much to Ron’s chagrin, Dean, Seamus and the Weasley twins started making jokes about cracking whips and dogs which go fetch when he’d started drooling over Hermione’s domineering tone.

The twins rounded behind Ron, by this point he was drooling. They winked at Harry before hounding him. ‘You seem to like a woman who’s in control Ron. Or is it just when she tells you off? Oh - you bad boy.’ Fred had whispered conspiratorially. Harry was equal parts shocked and struggling to hold in a laugh that threatened to burst forward.

‘Well, he does seem to go out of his way to rile her up.’ George confirmed evoking a manner similar to how a Doctor would diagnose a patient.

‘You mean all those arguments I’ve been in the middle of – he considers foreplay?’ Harry asked with mock-indignation.

‘Must be. You’ve seen how he is- puff’s his chest like a peacock plume in mating season each time she wins.’ Seamus snorted nodding to the red head.

‘If you lot don’t bloody shut you traps, I’ll hex them off.’ Ron was now a worrying shade of hot pink which clashed with his hair.

‘Would you say that was confirming or denying George?’ Fred asked.

‘I think it’s more in denial Fred.’ George answered.

‘Aw, look – he’s blushing!’ Dean laughed through tears. Ron glared at them.

‘He still hasn’t denied anything-.’ Harry let his statement drift off.

‘There isn’t anything to deny. I don’t know what you’re all talking about.’ Ron said, nay, squeaked.

‘Don’t worry Ron, we won’t tell Mistress Granger.’ The twins laughed in unison.

Ron started hexing his brothers in with embarrassed fury. They yelped, giggling like school girls as they ran through the Common Room.

‘What is going on here?’ Hermione growled darkly, rounding on the Weasley boys. The effect was instant, all of them snapped to attention looking somewhat bashful.

‘N-nothing.’ Ron spoke for his brothers. Harry sniggered.

‘It had better remain nothing, Ron. I’m trying to work if none of you have noticed. What have you got to say for yourselves?’

‘We were just talking to Ron about he admires your – ability to take control of a situation Granger.’ George’s tone was heavy with innuendo. Ron kicked him.

‘Well, maybe instead of sitting here and being useless sods – you can all move your arses to the library and get me these-.’ A huge roll of parchment filled with book references fluttered down to the ground. ‘-unless you have anything better to discuss?’ Hermione’s tone was all false-sweetness
and a promise of violence.

‘Yes, mam. No, mam.’ The twins snorted in unison, but in a flash, Hermione sent a barrage of Stinging Hexes at their feet, chasing them from the Common Room. All the boys yelped and ran from her promising they would retrieve the books. Harry held his belly, shaking with giggles as he heard mumblings of ‘tough-task master’ and ‘Mistress Whiplash’ from the Weasley boys as they exited.

Hermione threw herself on the couch next to Harry and huffed. ‘Really – you would think they would have a little more class during times like these.’ She mumbled.

‘I don’t think any of them could ever be accused of being classy ‘Mione.’ Harry snorted.

‘No. But one can hope.’

The was a pause and Harry knew they were both thinking of the same thing.

‘I haven’t found anything yet Harry. I’ll be honest- it doesn’t look promising.’

‘I guessed. I don’t think Dumbledore or Voldemort would enter into an agreement that wasn’t completely binding. Saw everyone’s faces when I signed-.’ His throat felt like it was closing up.

Hermione looked at him for a few beats. ‘The agreement isn’t watertight – not with regards to your protection.’

‘Yeah. I think I know what you mean. After signing, Voldemort he-.’ Harry then rubbed his forehead in frustration.

‘Was possessive?’ She answered for him.

‘You have no idea.’ He said through his fingers.

‘I can imagine.’ Hermione stood up with a snap. ‘Which means we should get about finding a way out of this. If there are none? Well, either way, we should start training you in some form.’

Harry nodded and then tapped the book he had received that morning.

‘No, Harry. I was thinking more along the lines of self-defence, the violent kind.’ She smiled.

‘Have you written to Sirius yet?’ She asked to lighten the conversation.

‘Yeah, he says we’re good to go at Grimmauld Place.’

‘Good. Go pack your things. We’ll leave once the boys return with those books. Dumbledore’s given us free reign to take whatever we need apparently – least he could do really.’

‘I’m just glad I don’t have to speak to him.’ Harry admitted.

‘He won’t if I have anything to do with it. From what I’ve heard so far, not many of the faculty or Order have spoken to him since.’ Harry couldn’t find it in himself to feel bad for the Headmaster. Harry was currently somewhere between murderous rage and callous contempt for the man. ‘Snape was right, not even Death Eaters would put their children forward like this.’

Harry considered his next words very carefully. He didn’t want to seem like he had lost it. ‘I found myself siding with Voldemort through most of the proceedings. It’s thrown me. When Malfoy spoke out in the hall, all I could think of was what Dumbledore did.’
‘A pretty understandable reaction I’d say. Though- I wanted to speak to you about what happened in the Great Hall. Harry, I’ve never seen anyone move like that. And you looked…different. One second you were across from us, next you’d scaled the table and you were on top of Malfoy. When Crabbe and Goyle tried to interfere you – you snarled and then threw them down like it was nothing.’

Harry’s tried to think back to it, but there were gaps. He couldn’t recall most of it.

‘I didn’t- I mean I did mean it. But I can’t remember all of it.’ Hermione nodded.

‘Rage can do that but, it wouldn’t be wise to lose yourself like that - especially where Voldemort’s concerned. No doubt he’d use it against you – Circe – he might even push you to it. The Armistice legally binds you too, the consequences for breaking the Terms can mean the abdication of some of the few rights you have or worse - death.’ Hermione shuddered.


‘I’ve contacted all of the Order and their now all on board for the next week. We’re going to get you ready for this. It seems Dumbledore was quite happy for you to go in blind – that not going to happen. Not on our watch.’ She murmured, clearly angry for him.

‘Thank you ‘Mione. I- you have no idea how much this means to me.’ He smiled into her hair. ‘It means everything.’ She nodded and then took a deep breath as she stood.

‘Right, come on. We have packing to do.’ She ordered.


Harry had never thought what it would be like to finally leave his home; Hogwarts. When the time to leave finally arrived, he realised he was in no way, shape, or form prepared for it. Internally he begged a higher power, any higher power really, to stop everything, to let him stay.

But the fates had decided otherwise.

Before he left, Harry had said many goodbyes to his school friends. The finality of it shook him. He realised very quickly that this was probably the last time he’d ever see some of them.

It seemed the whole school had broken curfew to see him off, even the Slytherins looked dour.

The farewells had started of easily enough, but the creeping realisation soon had soundless tears falling down his cheeks. Neville, Luna, Seamus, Dean, and Cho had lingered and enveloped him in hugs and pecks to his cheeks. Fervent murmurs of ‘thank-you’ and ‘I’ll miss you’ blurred together as his chest tightened. Teachers shook his hand – McGonagall swooped him into a fierce hold and told him how brave he was, how unfair it all was as he squeezed his eyes tight.

Luna placed a bracelet in his hand and asked him to wear it. ‘It will alert you if you find yourself in danger. Might give you a bit of a head start.’ She explained while hugging him.

What broke the dam was Hagrid as he lifted him and held him, sobbing. The half-giant didn’t say anything and seemed unwilling to let him go until Hermione patted his arm in a consolation.

Then Malfoy, as well as the whole of Slytherin house it seemed, marched to him. Harry braced himself for a scathing remark, a strike, or mocking. Malfoys face bore stitches and bruising from
his assault earlier that morning his face held in a grim frown. Except, nothing came. Instead, Malfoy held his hand out. Dumbfounded, for a moment Harry stared. Malfoy pushed his hand forward more then Harry took it and they shook hands.

‘I apologise for what I said earlier. For everything I’ve said.’ Malfoy said in a formal, rigid manner. ‘I realise now how wrong I’ve been and what you have done for all of us. Father was furious this morning but he laid it all out for me. What you're doing is brave Potter, beyond anything I would have done.’ Malfoy looked him straight in the eye then. ‘I’m sorry. Truly.’ Harry nodded and gave Malfoy a small smile in thanks. They rest of them looked at him and smiled – nodding in agreement with the blond.

Malfoys announcement changed something in the room. It changed from miserable acceptance to vehement pride. The blond Slytherin slowly backed away from Harry and started a slow clap. Malfoy started singing to the beat and it echoed around the room.

Through dark, dank and little faith,
The hero brought us to this place,

Once broken, bruised, and feeling low,
The hero brought us back home,

For all the souls we lost and mourn,
The hero gave us time to reflect,

For all the men who fell to the dark,
The hero drove us in a forward march,

Shining like a thousand stars,
The hero’s glory is spread afar,

Without his fight, his will, his liberty,
Without the hero, we’d never be free,

So, thank you hero, for our lives.

In our heart our hero never dies.

It was a song Harry did not recognise that sung of heroes, battle, and overcoming hardship. Everyone joined, singing until the room bellowed with it. The room – students and teachers alike - clapped and sung as one, the pace ever increasing until his ears rang with it. Harry stood in the middle of the singing students and faculty stunned and nearly swayed with the emotion.

‘They are thanking you. It’s an old Wizards song for returning heroes.’ Hermione explained in a whisper as she clapped along. Harry moved forward and hugged Malfoy as the last few lines were dung and the blond thumped him and the back and grinned. It floored Harry as it grew to a crescendo, but Hermione and Ron caught him as they shuffled out the room to hoots, hollers, and thunderous applause. Everyone smiled, laughed and cried for him – with him.

They all followed the trio as they moved out of the castle, waving goodbye to them all.
With one last look at the castle he called home Harry chest shook with the intensity of his emotion. He felt everything then.

Hogwarts was lit up, a warm glow in the cold night.

His last glimpse of Hogwarts as he was pulled away by Hermione’s apparition was the moonlit castle and everyone waving goodbye to him one final time.

Grimmauld Place then seemed ridiculously dark after the lights of Hogwarts.

Harry looked up to see Sirius sitting on the entrance steps before he lunged towards them with wide steps. He grabbed Harry and squeezed the air out of him. ‘You stupid boy.’ He said. ‘You stupid, marvellous boy.’ Harry crumpled into him and held him back just as fiercely.

Sirius pulled them all into the house. He had greeted Hermione and Ron with hugs and pecks on the cheek. They all seemed winded by the emotions around them. The Marauder then ushered them upstairs into a room with three beds and ordered them to sleep.

Before Harry pulled away Sirius caught his shoulders. ‘We all got Hermione’s letter. I think it’s long overdue – but we are going to teach you everything we know.’ He sighed. ‘When Dumbledore out this on our laps, none of us agreed. We told him to shove it – hell - even Snape disagreed. But the fool ploughed on anyway. Said there was no other option now that the Horcrux issue was out in the open. Dumbledore’s lost his fight, but we haven’t. You’re not alone in this Harry. You will never be alone with this. I swear, I’ll kill every-last-one of those stinking Death Munchers if they so much as look at you wrong.’

‘Okay.’ Harry said shakily. He couldn’t formulate a response more articulate than that, the day had finally caught up with him.

‘Remus and Snape will be here when you wake up. We’ll start then.’

With another peck, Sirius wish him goodnight.

Looking at the beds, all at opposing sides of the room Harry suddenly felt a little cold. Ron caught his gaze and nodded. With a swish of his wand he brought them all in the centre. Although Ron could often be dismissed as having the emotional depth of a teaspoon, when the going got tough he could always be counted on. He knew Harry. Knew what he needed.

They all clambered in and held each other. Cocooned from the outside, nothing but them and their soft breaths, Harry felt a great sense of peace.

He had his friends. They had each other. Always. Forever.

Sirius wasn’t joking when he’d said they would start when as soon as he woke.

Remus, Lupin, Sirius and Molly greeted him and pulled him into breakfast. Molly neigh-on force fed him all his favourites and slapped the biggest mug of milky tea Harry had ever seen in front of him.

Ron was in heaven. He moaned and lamented to his mother about her cooking skills. Harry
suspected it may have been due to the sheer quantity of food she piled on his plate.

Snape sat and watched Ron consume his food with such a level of disgust it contorted all of his features.

‘It’s one thing to watch you shovel it in from the safety of the Head Table, Weasley. It’s downright dangerous to witness it in close proximity.’ The Potions Master sneered. Ron just grinned, blissed out from the luxury of home comforts. Remus snorted from behind his teacup.

‘We’re all used to it. Though, unless you possess cat-like reflexes, I wouldn’t ask him to speak.’ Hermione said from behind a massive tome she was researching for Harry. Snape shuddered in contempt and turned to his copy of *The Prophet*; a clear barrier between him and Ron’s culinary ministrations.

Sirius sat with a thick tome in front of him, compulsively downing his coffee, with his legs constantly bouncing. His eyebrows were pinched together in concentration. Harry watched his Godfather highly amused, until Sirius’ face snapped up to look at them all.

‘Seems we can’t take it out of him Remus. Not safely at least.’ Sirius’ announced solemnly.

‘Ah, yes. I think we were all expecting that.’ Lupin nodded as he leaned forward on the thick oak table. He turned to Harry's questioning gaze. ‘We’re looking up horcruxes – specifically animate ones, like you.’

‘Oh.’ Harry felt like cold water had been poured over him. The warm safety of breakfast was now shed – straight to business it seemed. ‘Find anything interesting?’

‘Interesting is one way of describing it. Fuckin’ insane is another.’ Sirius snorted as he laid the black leather book down. ‘Typically when a soul is held in an inanimate object there’s a clear line of separation between them. I think I’ve found why animate vessels are ill advised; the references I’ve found say that vessels with a soul don’t just carry the foreign soul – they merge together to become a whole.’ Ron audibly gulped.

‘Does that mean Harry and snake-face share a soul?’ Ron looked queasy.

‘In a manner of speaking, yes.’ Sirius grimly confirmed. ‘I think when old’ Voldy’s soul got cut loose that night, Harry’s soul made space for it. Since then it’s grown with you and now the two are probably indistinct.’

*Well, there goes that last hope.*

‘I’d have to die to kill it.’ Harry stated when he realised what Sirius was implying. ‘But doesn’t that also mean Voldemort couldn’t take it out without things getting messy?’ Harry asked the room.

‘Not really no. It’s not just his soul piece anymore – it would be a hybrid of you both. I think this answer why he wants to keep you alive and close though. But, it also points to something else.’ Sirius looked at the Dark tome and seemed to mull over his next words in careful discomfort.

‘What?’ Harry said from behind his hand.

*What could be more difficult to say that what you’ve already said?*

Sirius closed the tome and huffed, then turned to face Harry head on. ‘The two souls are indistinct yeah?’ Harry nodded. ‘Souls hold many things; traits, characteristics, motivations, hopes, memories – so on and so forth. If the two soul pieces have melded together, means the you have
grown up with some of his personality too. So, a small part of you is in the truest sense him. If that night hadn’t happened, you could have been quite different from the man you are today – irrespective of what’s happened around you.’ Sirius smiled. ‘Doesn’t mean you’re suddenly going to become a loon or a homicidal maniac. Might mean you are motivated by similar things, might like the same food, or share a hobby? Nonetheless, you are you – these things are like you said ‘messy’ and there is no way to tell or track what comes from you or him.’

‘So really, it’s my soul. All of it. I’m both.’ Harry’s mind tried to wrap around the theory, and it started to make a little sense.

‘His soul won’t feel foreign to you is what I’m trying to say. You told me about your nightmares Harry – like how you felt you were doing those things. This might explain some of it.’

‘Sorry, but doesn’t the merging of two souls cause equivalence?’ Hermione piped up.

‘Well, look at that – Granger can apply theory instead of simply reciting it for house points.’ Snape drawled. Hermione sneered at the Potions Professor before motioning Sirius to answer.

‘Yeah. It’s already happened though, eh?’ Sirius smiled sadly.

‘Equivalence?’ Harry was beyond confused. Hermione raised her wand and summoned a small book titled ‘Between Two Souls’. She ran her fingers through the pages and exclaimed ‘ah-ha!’ when she found what she’d been looking for.

‘When two souls merge, be it through a bond, soul-mating, over-use of spirit-walking or dream voyeurism; this increases the likelihood of Equivalence. It’s manifestation, although not universal, does result in the same effect if present– magical traits, signatures, reserves, and skills will equalise between the bonded pair. This can be expressed as the soul-bearers both becoming equally powerful, sharing magical abilities unique to them, or shared wand allegiance.’ Hermione looked up from the book and Harry could see her thoughts tick over into epiphany. ‘You ever wondered where Parseltongue came from when you have no ancestors on record with the same gift?’

Harry’s minds tumbled through what he knew about his own magic. ‘The wand cores are the same.’ He offered.

‘Also being able to cast a Patronus powerful enough to ward off a hundred-plus Dementors at thirteen?’ Sirius mused, waggling his eyebrows at Remus who smiled softly. ‘Aw, shite. Does this mean we owe snake-face a favour?’ Sirius whined then slumped on the table.

‘I suspect the Dark Lord would be equally, if not more dismayed that he had anything to do with helping either of you.’ Snape drawled as he eyed Remus and Sirius. ‘Though this is riveting, may I suggest that we get on with what we’re all here for? I’d quite like to have this over and done with as soon as possible gentlemen - and we have a lot to go over.’ Snape stood and lifted a box that had been on the floor at the end of the long table. Remus stood to help and Vanished the dishes to the kitchen, much to Ron’s apparent disappointment as he exclaimed, he ‘hadn’t finished yet’.

Harry could hear Mrs Weasley and Kreacher arguing over whose job is was to do the dishes from the kitchen.

With a tap of his and Remus’ wand the wooden box opened to reveal the Pensieve from Dumbledore office.

‘Oh, so that kind of training.’ Harry said more to himself than anyone else.

‘Already know what this is Potter?’ Snape intoned as if heavily bored with everything around him.
‘Yeah, fell into one last year.’

_Barty Junior, Mad-Eye Moody, dragons, drowning, maze, cup, graveyard, blood, pain, death._

‘Uh-huh, probably more like snooping.’ Snape stated. Harry heard him, but his mind was still in the graveyard.

_When we danced upon my father’s bones._

_Blood of the enemy, unwillingly given._

_I will have you._

_I can touch you now._

‘Potter!’ Harry snapped to attention. Snape looked at him with something resembling – concern? No, that couldn’t be right. Snape was never concerned for anyone’s well-being, except his own maybe. Even though Harry was berating the Potions Professor internally, he was grateful for the distraction from the rabbit-hole his mind had threatened to fall into.

‘As I was saying, we will be looking in the Dark Lord’s past Potter, courtesy of those who were around him in his formative years.’ Snape and Remus poured several vials of luminescent blue liquid into the silvery bowl. ‘For context, Dumbledore collected these memories with the intention of discovering the location of the Dark Lord’s horcruxes in an effort to destroy them.’

A light bulb flashed in Harry’s mind. ‘And then to destroy me too?’ He said before he could think to bite his tongue. Snape’s eyes snapped to Harry’s and then slowly he nodded.

‘You would have had to die once the others had been rendered defunct.’ Snape wordlessly expanded the circumference of the Pensieve. ‘No doubt Dumbledore would have presented that little titbit in a manner that would have tickled your inner-martyr’s fancy.’

‘So, Armistice or not, I’d have to sacrifice myself.’ Harry mused, his anger on a backburner to be analysed later.

‘Yes, though I suppose this way is far less violent than what the other would have been. Perhaps we should seek solace in the fact the Dark Lord took a fancy to you as his kin, and not as his mortal enemy.’ Harry nodded slowly. The list of Dumbledore’s potential manipulations was steadily growing longer by the minute.

‘Right folks, up we get. Hermione, Ron – you will be joining Harry, Snape and I in this.’ Remus chirped, Hermione’s eyes lit up.

‘Fun? Are you mental? Fun is a good Seeker’s game or a few rounds in the Leaky. Traipsing around a homicidal maniac’s obviously gruesome past? That’s not what anyone in their right mind would call _fun._’ Ron huffed indignantly.

‘Quite Weasley. Now, on the count of three we will all submerge.’ Snape drawled.

‘It will feel quite strange at first, like falling. But not to worry, you will not feel pain or discomfort. However, sometimes a little emotional transference is to be expected.’ Remus offered softly.

‘Great.’ Ron’s face scrunched up.
‘I’ll be here if any of you get a little distressed.’ Mrs Weasley said from behind them.

‘Now, the aim of all this is to become familiar with the Dark Lord’s past. To know your enemy as it were.’ Snape totalled Harry a heavy look. ‘At this point any information is good information.’

‘Does he know about this?’ Harry asked quietly.

‘Yes, he even offered a few of his own upon Dumbledore’s request before the Armistice.’ Remus confirmed. Now Ron and Hermione were clearly distressed.

‘We will start with his formative years and finish with the first-hand sources.’ Snape stated curtly. ‘Or in other words, the most benign first, the most distressing latterly. There will be no stopping or breaks, so ready yourselves for sudden memory shifts.’ Snape smiled viciously and Harry gulped.

‘On the count of three. One, two, three.’ And they all plunged down in the abyss.

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The familiar sensation of free-falling didn’t catch Harry of guard, but the memories themselves did.

The first was an Auror named Bob Ogden’s memory of Voldemort’s uncle, Morfin Gaunt. Harry, in all honesty, failed to see the family resemblance. They shared the same black hair, but that is where the similarities ended. Morfin’s eyes, crossed and dark were a far cry from the grey Harry had seen in the Armistice tent. His Uncle’s skin was pockmarked and scabby, were Riddle’s skin was a smooth, almost inhuman porcelain.

However, the Uncle and his nephew seemed to share an aptitude for Muggle-hating and extensive bouts of mania.

And if Morfin was cruel and callous, his sister Merope was pathetic and weak-minded. If anyone had asked Harry to guess at the Dark Lord’s past, this pitiful tale would not have been even in the realm of potential answers. He had assumed the heirs of Slytherin would have more in common with the Malfoys or the Blacks. But it seemed years of inbreeding and madness had eroded what may have once been a noble and ancient house of Gaunt.

Merope’s story in equal measures repulsed and saddened Harry. She had wanted to be loved, but when rejected, forced her will onto Tom Riddle Senior. That obsessive one-mindedness must be a familial trait; Harry had seen the same behaviours in Voldemort time and time again.

The Gaunt’s all had a fatalistic characteristic; the ability to blame others and seek revenge for what was their faults and their faults alone.

All the way through, Harry was reminded of a documentary he’d watched with Dudley once about Ted Bundy and his unfortunate upbringing. The muggle psychologists had cited a lack of love, abandonment, and an inherent proclivity for violence could explain psychopathic or sociopathic behaviour.

Well, case in point. Harry snorted as he viewed the Slytherins descendants harrowing tale.

Merope’s seduction of Tom Riddle Senior was perhaps the most horrific part of the whole thing. Like Devil’s Snare she kept the muggle in her grasp. For all that time his will had been robbed and forced to mindlessly conceive a child.

And then the horrible moment when the truth came crashing down around Voldemort’s mother; Tom Riddle Senior was never in love with her, would never be in love with her, and was more than
happy to abandon her even if she was carrying his child.

The child she’d raped him for.

Caractacus Burke’s memory of Merope begging for money, pawning her last few possession didn’t stir much pity in Harry. He couldn’t shake the notion that she’d brought about her own suffering, not matter how heavily the tears fell in the memory. Harry's disgust towards Voldemort's wizarding family felt suffocating.

By that point seeing Dumbledore’s memory of Riddle in the orphanage was a reprieve, except when the wardrobe burned – then he felt angry at Dumbledore. The boy had only been eleven. His first experience of real magic was violent and disarming. Is it any wonder the boy would grow into a man obsessed with the same things? Endless violence and seeking to arm oneself in tandem with rendering other’s defenceless.

You fool. Harry thought bitterly. You don’t know what you’d help create.

The orphanage brought forward memories within Harry that he’s forgotten. The other children chasing him on Dudley’s say-so. The starvation, too little food and piles of dirty plates that needed washing. Clothes that were to big and a bedroom that was too small. A memory of Riddle’s hand being belted looked as painful as Petunia’s wooden spoon over his cold fingers.

The most heartbreaking moment in the collection of memories was when Tom Riddle Junior met his muggle family for the first time. Harry could see the hope in the young man eyes as he’d greeted then. Hoping beyond hope that they’d accept him, that they would bring him into the fold. The hope died quickly, Morfin’s violence and Merope’s rape had seen to that.

Harry had intimate experience with that kind of rejection. To be pushed away from those who were meant to love and care for you hurt. It was painful beyond words. Although for Harry it was all he had ever known, he had experienced it first-hand for the first eleven years of his life and then every Summer thereafter. The burning desire to scorn and to hate had brewed slowly in Harry over a span of years. Before the Weasley's, his best friends, and the safety of Hogwarts, Harry had nothing to compare his experiences with the Dursley’s to. Rejection had been his reality, his only reality in his formative years.

But, Riddle had all of that dumped on him mercilessly in just a few seconds. The deaths didn’t surprise Harry, even though they should have. He was less disgusted with Riddle’s weakness than the unfairness of the whole story. The boy hadn’t sought his family out to murder them, but his family had ensured their own deaths by playing with love or being loveless.

Then Riddle's obsession with arming himself took the form of seeking immortality rather quickly. Harry supposed it made sense at an abstract level of analysis.; immortality was the ultimate protection from harm. Though Riddle’s harm was psychological or emotional in nature, his need for physical safety had manifested from it.

Harry recoiled when pity for the young man flooded unbidden. The boy had then started his hunt for the ultimate trophies, as he had when he was a boy.

Again, obsessive one-mindedness.

The Peverell Ring, the Hufflepuff Cup, the Slytherin locket. The fevered gaze and touches had been present even then. He treated them like a parent would their children; fiercely protective and with unreserved adoration.
But the pity solidified when he saw Dumbledore turn him down for the Defence Against the Dark Arts position. He saw how it tore the younger version of Riddle apart, how he hated Dumbledore and he’d fought the temptation to beg for it.

He could have been saved! He could have been better – Albus you could have saved him! Harry felt like screaming. Voldemort had sought a way out of his misery, a route back into Hogwarts. Hogwarts had been Riddle’s home just as it’d been Harry’s.

The wound of Harry’s separation from the place he’d felt safe and wanted was still fresh. Riddle had by then experienced years without it. Harry felt Riddle’s desolation like it’d been his own.

Then, the scene shifted, and it was more vibrant and colourful than the previous memories. It felt fresher, newer and Harry made the educated guess that now they were viewing Voldemort’s memories.

And final the scenes chilled Harry to the bone.

Voldemort and a younger version of Snape stood in a bleak room, outside the clouds roiled, dark and stormy. Candlelight flickered over the two men. Snape was sweating and heaving, clearly terrified in his Dark Lord’s company.

‘What did it foretell?’ Voldemort’s voice creeped over Harry like frost.

‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.’ Snape voice trembled and his hands shook.

Voldemort had become still as carved stone. ‘And the source?’

‘Reliable my Lord. The seer who had foretold it was being interviewed by Dumbledore about it’s contents.’

‘Good. You have done well Snape. However, I remain confused as to why you stand before me trembling like a leaf?’ The question had promised violence.

‘It’s – it might by a boy I know. Lily’s son.’ Snape quivered, his eyes glassy and knuckles white.

‘The Potter boy? You think this is who the prophecy identifies?’

‘Maybe, my Lord. The Longbottom boy could also be the one the prophecy foretells.’ Snape started rubbing his hands together in uncharacteristic nervousness.

‘Well? That does not explain your questionable mood, Snape.’

‘I wish – would like to request a favour of you my Lord.’ Snape’s breaths were harsh and echoed around the room.

‘Yes. You wish for a reward for your efforts? You have done well, my servant – so ask and you will receive.’ Harry shivered at that.

Ask and you shall receive, little one … I am generous towards those in my care and in my possession.

‘Spare her.’ Snape gasped. ‘I want you to spare Lily’s life.’

Voldemort laughed then, the sound was grating as it bellowed through the room.
‘Ah, I see. You wish to have her for yourself Severus. Yes - ha – what a sneaky little snake you are.
To pillage another’s nest and take their bounty. Quite astute of you.’

‘My Lord, if it doesn’t please you-.’ Snape trembled.

‘Oh, come now. You asked for this one small thing and I shall deliver, for am I not a merciful
Lord?’

‘Yes. That and then some, my Lord.’ Snape visibly relaxed.

‘You care not for the boy then Severus?’

Snape hesitated, but then shook his head. ‘I just want Lily safe.’

‘Good, our goals are aligned Severus. You will receive your Lily once the deed is done, in fact, as
special thanks – I will personally oversee it.’ Snape paled and was white as death.

‘T-thank you, my Lord.’

The scene shifted again, and it was once that Harry was very familiar with. He’s dreamed of it for
years.

Harry’s father was dead, staring up with lifeless eyes as Voldemort walked over him. The Dark
Lord sneered, then smiled as he neared the nursery.

Harry felt something akin to vertigo viewing this from Voldemort’s perspective. It was like the
dreams he’d had were he was Voldemort; the old man hit with the Killing Curse, as Nagini
wrapped around her Master’s arms, as Voldemort when he looked upon his horcruxes with
something akin to lust.

‘Move.’ Voldemort sneered at the red headed witch. His mother, stood in front of him, looked back
fearfully but defiantly. Harry could feel Voldemort’s disgust and reluctant admiration.

Riddle’s mother had never defended him, no one had. The thought echoed around Harry's mind, but
he couldn't be sure it was his.

‘I won’t tell you again. Move aside and you will survive, don’t – then you both will die. It would
be a needless sacrifice on your part.’ Harry mouth curved at the irony of Voldemort's over-
confident statement.

‘No.’ Lily shook, grimly determined.

‘I said move aside.’ The Dark Lord was growing impatient.

‘Never.’ She locked eyes with him, and he could feel that no matter what he said the young mother
would never save herself. Better for her to die with them than live without them. The Dark Lord
had read his mother's mind. Harry felt floored for hearing them.

‘Fine. If that’s what you wish – Avada Kedavra!’ The room erupted into light, then a splintering
crack, like a stone of glass rebounded around the small room.

Then Harry fell back onto dusty stone tiles with a hard thump.

He heaved. His breaths gasping, like there was little air around him. He gulped it down greedily.

Then a dark figure shifted to his immediate left.
‘You.’ Harry hissed – his wand out in a flash and then mercilessly shoved under a pale, wrinkled neck. ‘You fucking did this.’ He growled. ‘You told him!’ He spat. ‘You’re the reason their dead!’ Harry’s head and throat felt like they were in a vice as the rage seized him.

‘Harry – no! Calm down!’ Hermione pulled at his shoulder but he pushed her off. Ron shouted at Harry for the hard shove.

‘Yes Potter! I am!’ Snape bellowed. ‘And I have paid for it ever since!’ He screamed.

‘You’re still alive. I don’t think you have.’ Harry crooned dangerously. ‘I suppose we could rectify that.’

‘Harry, no. Let him explain!’ Remus shouted, his wand levelled at Harry’s temple.

‘Harry–.’ Molly tried to soothe. But it made Harry snap a bit further.

Harry then threw Snape down to the ground, his wand train on him. Harry smacked Remus’ wand away from his face as he rounded on the pale, greasy man.

‘Go on then, explain.’ Harry snarled. Ron and Hermione held there wands out. Hermione’s was trained on Harry – Ron seemed more conflicted but had settled on Harry after Hermione pushed it up.

‘I loved her Potter. I always have. She was my best friend, my only friend when we were children. I loved her for that, for everything she was to me. We drifted apart, she fell in love with your father – and despite how much I loathed him Harry – I was happy for her. Happy for her happiness. Then that fucking prophecy. I wish I’d never heard it. I wish I’d never known.’ Harry couldn’t hide the confusion contorting his features. ‘Oh, yes. I knew her.’ Snape sat up further, his head in his hands. ‘Knew your Aunt too. How she scorned your mother for her magic – I was there when she called her a freak, the devil’s spawn. Your mother was no such thing. She was kind, beautiful, amazing inside and out. She even liked me! A wimpish, friendless excuse of a boy. And Circe, she smiled. She was always smiling.’ Snape grimaced as his eyes glazed over. ‘But then I broke it. I ruined it all.’ Snape’s chest shuddered and his breath sounded on the verge of tears. ‘Called her a Mudblood when all she did was try to defend me. I was my fault, never her. Oh, Merlin never hers.’


Sirius sighed. ‘We were ruthless as teens. We hated each other and the pranks always went too far.’ Sirius confirmed. Your father and Snape hated each other, and we goaded them to violence - sick yeah?’ It had been a while since Harry had seen his Godfather this distressed.

‘Why tell him then? Why not save her and her family?’ Harry couldn’t understand and he boiled with disgust.

‘I was the Dark Lord’s most loyal servant Potter. The position offered me what I’d always sought, an esteemed position of power; shackles guised as advantages. I knew he would find her, all of you. It was just a matter of time. But I needed to save her and stupidly I trusted him. I did not care about you or your father. Just her. I trusted in the Dark Lord and only him then. But little did I know that his insanity ruled him then, just as it does now – and that insanity compounded his impatience Potter. Lily didn’t move. She would never move. I was stupid to think any less of her.’ Snape’s tone had quietened to a low murmur, full or grief, regret and self-hatred. ‘That night broke me Harry. The one piece of goodness in my life was snuffed out due to impatience.’ Snape laughed humorlessly. ‘I defected, disgusted with what I’d trapped myself in - for what I'd helped build. I
sought Dumbledore out. The need for revenge burned Potter. I wanted to kill him, but I knew I couldn’t – not without help.’

‘So, you entered the Order.’ Harry confirmed more to himself than anyone else. ‘That’s why you became loyal to Dumbledore.’

Snape shook his head. ‘Not quite.’ He said softly. ‘I simply became a tool. Between the Dark Lord’s insanity and Dumbledore’s manipulations I stood and waited for a moment to strike. No Potter, my loyalty has never been to either or them. Just her. Her son.’

‘You hate me.’

‘I hated your father boy, and you look so much like him. I’ve never been accused of being a rational, level-headed man. But I swore I’d protect her son, the boy with her eyes. Not your father’s son, not Dumbledore’s golden boy, not The-Boy-Who-Lived. Her son, only for her.’

‘You knew all this?’ He asked the two Marauders across from him.

‘We suspected, recently it was confirmed.’ Remus paused. ‘I think it wouldn’t matter who wished the harm on you, Snape would do his best to protect you from it.’

‘You can trust him Harry.’ Sirius added. ‘Even if he’s a git.’

Harry exhaled. Pinched his brow. Then moved to Snape and put out his hand. Snape looked at it for a few beats, nodded then took it. Harry pulled him up. ‘I’ve not forgiven you for what happened. I might though.’ Harry muttered.

‘That already exceeds my expectations Potter.’ Snape smirked then walked back to the table. Everyone in the room let out a sigh of relief.

Questions, so many questions swam in Harry’s mind. Everyone moved back to the table in awkward silence until Harry broke it. ‘Why did he choose to show me that?’ Harry looked at Snape. ‘Why that memory?’

‘There are several reasons, I think.’ Snape rubbed his back form where he had landed earlier, groaning slightly. ‘In some twisted sense he’s trying to show you that he had tried to not kill her, if that makes any sense whatsoever. When you consider he gave his blessing when Dumbledore told him about our plan to show you these memories; I suspect he’s trying, in some warped sense, to gain your trust.’

‘It’s like he needs you to understand him on some level.’ Remus offered.

‘Tell me Potter, what did you think of those memories?’ Snape asked softly.

‘I-I…’ Harry found it difficult to offer an answer he was happy with. ‘We’re similar in some respects. I don’t agree with it, but it makes sense why he hates Muggles so much.’ Harry swallowed the bile that had risen. Snape’s eyes lit up and Harry knew he’d answer correctly.

‘And in what respects would you say the two of you are similar?’ Snape pushed. Harry couldn’t answer, the question was too close for comfort. He looked at his friends - nay - his family at the table. He didn't want to disappoint them, he didn't want to worry them. They had already said he would share characteristics with the Dark Lord. He didn't want them throwing him out when they realised exactly how many of them there were.

Hermione reached over the table and took his hand. She looked at it for a moment before taking a
deep breath. ‘Harry, you didn’t tell us much about your family life?’ Hermione trailed off at the end, clearly uncomfortable with the question. Trust Hermione to cut down to the bone of the issue.

Harry had never relayed his experiences with the Dursley’s in extensive detail, he never really wanted to. Sure, he’d griped and moaned in his letters to his two best friends over Summer. But he had never spoke of it in any specificity. All eyes were on him and Harry’s stomach fell down like a leaden weight. He didn't want them to be suspicious of him, he didn't want them to think he hated Muggles like Voldemort did. Harry then felt a hand grip his shoulder in a comforting manner. He turned to see Mrs Weasley smiling down at him, she nodded. ‘I think this is a good time to speak about it Harry.’ She murmured kindly.

Harry took a deep breath. ‘It wasn’t good.’ His felt a frog in his throat. ‘They hated magic. They never told me anything about it. Said my Mum and Dad died in a car crash. –’ Snape and Sirius hissed at that. ‘-There were instances of accidental magic, a lot of it actually. Whenever it happened, I was punished.’ Harry snorted. ‘Even outside of that I was punished. No dinners for a week, locked in a cupboard – my cupboard, hit with whatever came to hand, spat at, called a freak. Vernon he – he let Dudley do whatever he wanted. The playground at the muggle school was a nightmare. When Vernon was angry – or had a beer in him – it got pretty bad.’

‘Define bad.’ Remus coaxed.

Harry waited a moment for his breathing to calm down before marching on. ‘I’d get thrown, kicked in the stomach, slapped about. Petunia just watched and Dudley was usually sleeping. It stopped the night I first saw Padfoot. I threatened them with my wand then ran away. When I went back during Summer they stayed away from me, didn’t ask me to do anything.’

The room was silent. ‘Did Dumbledore do nothing about this?’ Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. ‘I don’t think he knew.’

‘He must have.’ Sirius’ fingers rapt dangerousely of the table. ‘He interviewed them every year after the Summer ended.’ Sirius’ looked every bit as dangerous as the snarling dog he’d first met the night he’d ran away.

‘I was there. He used Legilimency and asked how you were getting on.’ Snape confirmed. ‘I knew Petunia was unpleasant but didn’t suspect she would condone violence.’

‘I think she was as scared of Vernon as I used to be.’ Harry admitted. He remembered the looks Petunia would give him during Vernon’s intoxicated rages. She always pleaded with him to keep silent, to stop goading her husband, to stop giving him a reason to keep going.

‘Fucking scum.’ Ron snarled. ‘You should have told us Harry.’ He muttered dangerously. Ron was leaning forward in his chair like he was ready to pounce.

‘I’m sorry. I just wanted peace. I was happy at Hogwarts; I didn’t want to bring it with me.’ Harry could hear how stupid it sounded. If any other child was suffering what he had, Harry would want to know so he could stop it. He couldn’t even give himself that small kindness.

‘The old git knew and didn’t do anything about it? Why?’ Ron spat.

There were a few beats of silence as everyone struggled to answer. Snape cleared his throat. ‘The blood-wards surrounding the house. Stronger than any Fidelius Charm or the layers of wards protecting Hogwarts. They protected Harry. Hide from the even the Dark Lord – or so one would assume.’ Snape snorted then looked off distantly. ‘The charm necessitates several things; a blood
relation, proximity but also familial treatment and care. The latter, it seems, was completely absent. The wards would have been weak at best – completely absent at worst.’ Snape played with the edge of his teacup. ‘I think your location may have been the only thing between you and the Dark Lord at times. I doubt he would find himself frequenting muggle, suburban Surrey on a regular basis.’ That raised several eyebrows.

’He left him unprotected?’ Remus paled.

Harry felt Molly jerk slightly. ‘I remember Minerva saying something about a pair of awful muggles asked to care for a wizard babe. She said they were so unlike any of us it boggled the mind why Albus would place the child in their care.’ Molly seemed frozen, her grip on Harry shoulder tight. ‘It was years ago, I didn’t think-. Merlin Harry, if I’d known – we’d have taken you in. More than that Harry, your already family – you would have had a family. Circe.’ Harry grasped the hand on his shoulder.

’You didn’t know. It’s okay.’ Molly Weasley did not deserve to feel guilty for anything. ‘You did give me a family. The Dursley house was just a temporary residence.’ He smiled up at her, willing her to understand he felt no ill will. Fat tears rolled down Molly’s cheeks and she hugged him. ‘I’ll never see them again.’ Harry realised somewhat stunned.

’Nope. Never.’ Ron agreed.

The memories he’d just watched swirled around his mind.

’I’m like him, aren’t I. He kept being sent back too. The difference being Dumbledore just didn’t need him or like him.’ Harry took a deep breath. ‘I couldn’t imagine being hated by him.’

’Who cares what he thinks?’ Hermione who had been silent since the Pensieve broke Harry’s musings. ‘He left you Harry. He left you with those awful people. Everyone thought you were being looked after. You didn’t tell us in so many words, but I trusted Dumbledore. I trusted he wouldn’t put you in harms way, but he did. Repeatedly. And the Armistice agreement? How dare he?! How could he?!” Hermione was shouting and red-faced. Ron shook his head in disgust.

’You should have seen his face when Harry gave a piece of his mind during it. I can’t decide which was my favourite; when you compared him to the Dark Lord or when you told him to ‘fuck off’.’ Snape laughed heartily. ‘Everyone bites their tongues around him, I expected Sirius to be the first to break – not you though, least of all you.’ Seeing his Potions Professor crumple into a fit of giggles stunned Harry until he found himself laughing too.

’That was tame compared to what I said in Parseltongue.’ That renewed Snape’s fit of bellied laughter.

’Oh – yes – I nearly forgot -.’ He wiped a tear from his eye. ‘You called him a miserable old cunt!’ Snape screeched. His laughter was infectious; Sirius slapped the table hooting ‘old cunt?!’ and Remus’s hands dragged down his face his snorts quickly giving way to sniggers. ‘Even the Dark Lord’s jaw dropped at that one, he was so shocked, was rambling about it when we got back.’ Snape couldn’t breathe, neither could Harry. ‘Oh, I’ve never seen either of them so cowed. It was sheer brilliance. I can die a happy man for seeing it!’

’It was – ugh – so hard to not laugh when you were barrelling into them. Even Lucius’ had to hide behind his hand!’ Remus held his belly then slumped on the table in uncontrollable laughter.

’Oh, he was singing your praises back at the Manor.’ Snape chuckled.
'You’re a shameful bunch.' Molly punched Remus’ arm in mock-outrage. ‘Who taught him that one? I bet it was you, you’d make a sailor blush.’ She totalled at Sirius who held his hands up and batted his eyes innocently, then winked at Harry. ‘Right, you lot – up! I need to get this cleared. Off with you now!’ Molly mothered them trying and failing to hide a smile.

‘Quite right.’ Snape finally breathed. ‘We’ve a lot to do. Black, will you lead the way to the duelling quarters.’ He motioned for Sirius to exit first.

‘Ah, finally we get to the good part of the day!’ There was a dangerous glint in Sirius’ eye that raised a few eyebrows.

That afternoon and evening was spent in a massive room littered with scorch marks and dents in the walls.

‘This was my great-grandfather’s contribution to the Black home.’ Sirius’ introduced the hall. ‘He was very found of training in offensive Dark magic, much to my great-grandmothers dismay apparently. He’d broke several ornaments until she snapped and banished him to this room.’

Sirius’ waved his wand and the room came to life. Life-size dummies walked into what Sirius named ‘The Arena’ and stood in the Wizarding En garde; wands poised overhead – stance wide. Lupin explained that the room was equipped to parry any magic thrown at it. It was the perfect training grounds for what they had planned for Harry.

They said nothing was off limits anymore. Harry would be trained to the best of their knowledge in combative art; both Light and Dark.

‘You might need both, depending on the circumstance.’ Snape explained.

They spent hours in that room. Harry loved every second of it. He blocked, stunned, rolled, parried, hexed and cursed to his heart's content. The training dummies gave as good as they got, but not more so. It was like fighting a perfect reflection of yourself.

Duelling with the adults proved an entirely different experience. None of them went easy; Lupin favoured beguiling his opponent – in their confusion he’d strike and strike hard. Sirius was a completely different beast; his strengths laid in complex manoeuvres and sharp stuns to unprotected areas of the body. Snape was all brute force. He’d hit you with an eye-watering barrage until you either disarmed him or submitted.

Harry ducked and dived through curses and hexes which burned the walls around them. Whenever Harry got hit, which was less than he’d expected at first, he was told to dust himself off and start again.

After a particularly bad hit to the gonads, the men took pity on him and called for a break.

‘It’s impressive Harry.’ Snape commented whilst Harry gulped his water.

‘What is?’ Harry asked out of breath.

‘Your magical reserves. They are vast and extremely powerful, and yet you have them in a strong grip. It’s unusual.’

‘Thanks.’ Harry smiled.

‘Impressive Severus? You mean insane!’ Sirius piped up. ‘He nearly took my head off with that Expelliarmus!’ Sirius chuckled. ‘I’ve never fought anything like that.’
‘If I were a betting man, I might put money on you given Dumbledore or the Dark Lord a run for their money.’ Lupin chimed in.

‘Ha. Right.’ Harry answer sceptically.

‘Honestly!’ Lupin parried. ‘Even the Armistice tent was struggling to contain it when you went ballistic.’ Lupin shivered. ‘Snape and I thought we would have to intervene at some point.’

‘Really?’ Harry said worried. ‘Is that bad?’

‘No, Potter. Just highly irregular. An irregularity that will stand you in good stead if anything unsavoury were to befall you.’ Snape answered. ‘But you lack finesse, simply due to your age and inexperience. Something which we will be trying to rectify this week and in subsequent meetings afterwards.’

Harry gulped - he’d forgotten what this was all for momentarily. ‘Do you think I’ll need it?’ He asked tentatively, not really wanting an answer.

‘Perhaps not against the Dark Lord directly, but maybe the danger he attracts.’ Lupin offered rubbing a hand through his sweat-laden hair. ‘He can’t hurt you directly. But others around him might.’ Snape nodded in agreement.

‘Better get ready then.’ Harry huffed.

‘We will need to train you in other respects too.’ Sirius interrupted Harry’s return to The Arena. ‘Those being your mental fortitudes.’ He tapped his head.

‘Come again?’ Confused Harry looked to the three adults.

‘He means Occulmency and Legillimency Harry.’ Hermione answer from behind him, holding up Ron who had been stunned. ‘Mind-reading as muggles would call it.’ She panted under Ron’s deadweight until Sirius leapt to ease the burden.

‘Oh, yeah. You mentioned that earlier -.’ He pointed to Sirius but paused for a beat before he blurted. ‘Voldemort can mind-read?!’ Harry felt faint.

‘He is a master of the art.’ Snape stated. ‘And is rather vicious when he yields it. Like to play with his victims heads before he disposes them.’ The Potions Master muttered like he was talking about the weather.

‘It’s also something Snape is very good at Harry.’ Lupin interjected.

‘Had to be, playing both sides for so long. Albus is no stranger to it either.’ Snape confirmed.

‘You stopped two of the most powerful wizards in Britain from reading your mind?’ Harry asked, clearly impressed. Snape just nodded like it was nothing.

‘Like I said, it was a necessity. I’ll be teaching you, starting tomorrow. Its…difficult to begin with.’ Snape looked uncomfortable.

‘You will have to let Snape enter you mind Harry. He will see everything. But he will also swear not to tell another soul what he finds. The goal here is to build up your defences and to fight off an attack of this nature, it’s not to embarrass you – even though it might feel like it.’

Harry swallowed. Snape in his head? Harry groaned.
‘Trust me, I share the sentiment Potter.’ Snape laughed. ‘But it’s too important to dismiss due to fear of ridicule.’


‘Good. With that, I believe it’s my turn for a duel Harry.’ Lupin motioned to the arena.

Well, a little fun before imminent torture was one way to relieve stress.

:::::

Offt, wit a long, meaty chapter *cracks knuckles*

Thanks for reading so far!

Any comments or kudos would be much appreciated. I live off them.

Constructive criticism is more than welcomed too, voice off down below!
In the old Black library, Snape sat in the glow of the crackling fireplace place. The older man seemed pensive; his in chaos as he attempted to prepare and plan in defiance of the Dark Lord’s and Dumbledore’s aims for Potter.

And how Potter had surprised them all in the face of an impossible choice.

The boy had but a few options pushed upon him; either turn away from an agreement that could save the lives of everyone he loved and by extension, the entirety of the Wizarding world or accept it, and lose the very liberty and comfort he sought desperately.

Snape considered what Lily would have done if she were still here and he drew a blank. Wishing for the thousandth time she were still here would not help him, but he did so anyway.

The Potions Master sipped on a large glass of Pinot Noir that had been thrust upon him by Black. It was a good vintage, straight from the Black’s vast wine collection. But, despite its rich flavour and high alcohol content, it did not stave the creeping anxiety Snape felt towards Lily’s son.

‘Penny for your thoughts?’ Snape’s turned to the entrance of the library were the werewolf stood. Remus strode to the armchair next to him and slumped on it, holding his hands out to the roaring fire.

‘Ah, but there are many.’ Snape chuckled. Remus nodded sympathetically.

‘Same here. There’s still so much to do. How’s Harry getting on with his Occulmency training?’ The werewolf leaned back and closed his eyes. It had been a long few days and they were all running on fumes.

‘The boy is surpassing my expectations by a great margin.’ Snape stated, smiling slightly. ‘Took a
few tries for him to accept it in the beginning, but now he seems adept as clearing and closing his mind to me.’ Snape’s casual tone belied the awe he had felt at how quickly the boy had taken to the art of shielding and guarding his mental faculties. ‘He was quick to recognise the connection between him and the Dark Lord in his mind. He said he could see it. And his defences are quite beautiful for lack of a better term.’

‘Woah. That’s amazing!’ Remus beamed.

‘It is. Harry seems to have grasped in three days what would have taken others months to achieve.’ Snape summoned a glass and held it out to the werewolf who accepted it. ‘He pushed back though, made his way into my mind.’ Snape said as he poured Remus a glass.

‘Oh. How did that go?’ Remus shifted uncomfortably.

‘Horribly. He stamped though all the worse bits. Felt like a herd of hippogriffs stampeding. But better than what it could have been if he did not already have knowledge of my previous… mistakes’ Snape snorted humorlessly then took a large gulp from his glass.

‘He saw James then?’ It was more a statement than a question, but Snape knew Remus was too polite to assume that James had affected him so deeply.

‘Yes. The boy had many questions after that. I answered what I could, pointed to you and Sirius for the rest. Don’t be surprised if he’s a little prickly about it.’ His interactions with James had coloured so much of Snape’s life thereafter. It was difficult to remain unaffected by it, even harder to admit he’d been affected by it right done to the bone. His rivalry with the Gryffindor had set in motion some of the worst decisions Snape had ever made, decisions he was still trying to account for.

‘Suspect he’ll hold up against You-Know-Who’s mental assaults?’ Remus’s voice carried a worried edge.

‘Yes, surprisingly. He accepted it all so quickly, an acceptance on his part that I don’t deserve quite frankly. My treatment of the boy before the Armistice was - not kind.’ Snape cringed internally. He’d been so blinded by Potter’s resemblance to his father that he’d developed the notion that they were the same person. Potter was proving every expectation Snape had of him wrong.

‘The lad is as forgiving as he is foolhardy. He responds well to the truth and is less reckless with it.’ Remus offered.

‘Yes, truths he should have known of well before now. Dumbledore has failed to prepare him for these awful circumstances.’ Snape agreed.

‘Do you think he would have ever told him about the Horcruxes?’ Remus gripped his glass a little tighter.

‘Yes. But only when he needed the boy to sacrifice himself. The Dark Lord blew any notion of Horcrux hunting out of the water when he approached Dumbledore about Potter. The old fool completely lost any element of surprise he may have yielded against him. For all Dumbledore is revered as an amazing, all powerful Wizard, he failed to develop a – what’s the Muggle term? – ah, yes, a Plan B.’ It was difficult for Snape to decide which of the two tyrants was worse at the moment; both were callous towards that which did not compliment their own goals to the point of stupidity.

‘I suppose You-Know-Who is happy enough, but what about his Death Eaters? I heard there was a
meeting.’ Snape luxuriated in the realisation that members of the Order no longer considered him a Death Eater, that he had transcended such titles by revealing his true intentions. The truth was liberating after years of secrecy and guise.

‘I’d say there is a rift brewing that may be a cause for concern if it is not contained. Most were happy enough to scurry away with their clean slates and unbranded arms. But, some were not very happy at all about the new development. A few Unforgivables were used to quiet the herd.’ Snape allowed.

‘Well, most can hardly have been ecstatic that the Dark Lord has thrown it all away for his sworn enemy.’ Remus chuckled.

‘The upper circles fought back the most. Lestrange was knocked out after a solid ten minutes under Cruciatius. One might think she even enjoyed it, deranged as she is. Though, Malfoy surprised me; he took it rather well. He is still faithful to the Dark Lord, but he had a wife and child to consider and Narcissa has made is very clear how she felt about his allegiances – an expunged criminal record protects all of his future Ministry pursuits I suppose and that pesky Malfoy name.’

Remus laughed heartily at that. Snape allowed himself to consider the man next to him for a few moments. The werewolf, although infected with a disease that frightened the Potions Master, he was a kindly and gentile sort of man. In their school years, the werewolf had never joined in James’ and Sirius’ ministrations towards him. He had even broken a few of the worst fights off. Remus was neutral, well, as neutral as he could be given the circumstances. Snape had been suspicious of Remus when he had taken the Defence Against the Dark Arts post – and more than a little jealous. But, Remus had never been anything but kind and patient with Snape, even when the Potions Professor had stoked the students suspicions of Remus’ condition.

‘I never said sorry for what I did to you last year. I apologise. My actions were unsavoury.’ Snape said softly. If Remus was sitting right next to him, he might not have heard.

‘It’s alright, maybe even understandable.’ Remus chuckled.

‘It still stands that I am sorry. I was wrong.’ Snape never looked up from his glass.

‘We all thought that Sirius was a murderer, that he had betrayed the Potter’s. I suspect that in tandem with my new position at the school would have made anyone suspicious – you especially, given our pasts. Like I said, it’s understandable. You were right to put the students first, even if Albus was singing my praises.’ Remus looked like he had a bad taste in his mouth.

‘Typical Gryffindors. You and Potter share something in common; you forgive too easily. You would be cannon fodder had you entered the Death Eater’s ranks.’ Snape sneered.

‘Probably worse, You-Know-Who does not favour those with my predicament. Even Greyback is treated no better than a dog I hear.’

‘Well, I personally think he deserves it. Not because he is a lycanthrope – because he is an animal in the truest sense of the word. He brings shame to your kind.’ Snape sneered.

‘He’s made most of my kind Severus, myself included.’ Remus paused. ‘He won’t like the Terms at all.’ The werewolf paled.

‘Nope. Would probably rather drink powdered silver than give up a War he’d been drooling for. I don’t think we’ve heard the last from him.’ Snape agreed.

‘Means it’s not all done with yet then?’ Remus huffed.
‘Not by any stretch of the imagination, no.’ Snape confirmed.

The Dark Lord had never felt time move so slowly for him. It made him consider the applying himself to the delicate art of time-weaving, a field that had never piqued his interest previously. A Wizard, no matter their skill or prowess were limited in what they could achieve if they set to explore time and what it had to offer – not a lot Voldemort found.

Time does not move for any person, wading through it takes an immense amount of power and intricacy. The most anyone had been able to achieve was slipping back a few hours, attempting days had killed many who’d attempted it. No one could ever wade forward, the current of time in that direction was too strong – even for Lord Voldemort.

But waiting for Potter had saw the Dark Lord roll up his sleeves and attempt to move time a little faster. The would be his thirty-sixth attempt and he had yet to move even a second closer to his goal. All that he’d managed was a sizzle of lazy magic and a table which had cracked in half as a result. He huffed uncharacteristically and shut the tome which had laid it out for him pretty clearly; it was impossible to go forward – no matter how much you wanted to.

‘Master, the old wretch is here.’ Nagini stated disgusted, slivering up his body. She had shaken the Dark Lord out of his frustrated musings like an electric shock. Voldemort rolled his eyes to the heavens; he would need the strength to not give into the temptation which presented itself during each meeting he’d had with the Hogwarts Headmaster. He wanted nothing more than to curse the old fool into oblivion, tear him to pieces, and then give Nagini a well-deserved lunch. But, he couldn’t – not now, not ever. That knowledge frustrated him further.

The Dark Lord righted his appearance before Apparating to the foyer where Dumbledore stood. The old man seemed to take in his surroundings with polite, detached interest, except that cold edge to his gaze gave him away– one that Voldemort was very well acquainted with – told him that Dumbledore was scoping out every vulnerability his home had to offer. Not that the miserable bastard would find any, Slytherin Crest was a fortress.

‘Ah, Tom! How good to see you, I hope you have been well.’ The fatherly guise had never worked with Voldemort, even in his formative years. Why the old man kept it up around him always confounded the Dark Lord, until he realised that Dumbledore knew he hated it and continued it just to spite him.

‘I wish I could return the sentiment, but it would offend my principles.’ Voldemort parried softly, smirking. ‘To what do I owe the displeasure?’ Voldemort wanted to scream when the old bastard started moving into his home uninvited – the gall of it. Though he didn’t, the scream remained at the back of his throat.

‘Joan Udders, a rather excellent witch, will be joining us shortly. Here expertise lays in ward-casting. She will be the neutral party we have previously discussed.’ Dumbledore intoned with a sing-song quality that grated against the Dark Lords eardrums.

‘And why, might I ask, was I not alerted of her or her apparently expertise before today?’ Voldemort seethed.

‘I did try Tom, but my owl seemed to receive quite a bump on the head when it flew into your wards. Might I ask that you permit future correspondence from myself and other members of the Order henceforth? Otherwise, we might find ourselves poorly informed and having to turn up unannounced.’ Dumbledore levelled Voldemort a harsh gaze.
Voldemort suspected that no such owl had been sent, never mind even attempted the flight. Dumbledore was trying to get what he wanted out of Voldemort through passive aggressive means and it made Voldemort’s hand twitch.

‘I thought we had agreed to correspond through our mutual party.’ The scream threatened again alongside violent fantasies of Dumbledore’s head on a pike, tongue swollen and blue, ornamenting Slytherin Crest’s front gardens.

‘Snape is currently with indisposed with Harry’s preparations.’ Was all Dumbledore said. The boys name brought a lick of fire up his belly, it made him shiver.

‘Oh, I’d thought you’d be overseeing that yourself Albus. Or is the boy not too fond of you at present.’ If Voldemort had any knives to stab Dumbledore with, he’d plunge and twist them mercilessly.

And oh, how the old man faltered at that. ‘Harry has chosen to remain with his family and close friends this week. Snape is a gifted Legilimens – far better than you or I. He’ll see the boy right.’

‘Ah, so now you have the boy’s best interests at heart.’ Voldemort snorted.

The Headmaster didn’t get to reply as a small armadillo Patronus entered the foyer. ‘Udders, sirs. I’ve arrived and am presently waiting outside the wards. Permission to enter?’ The disembodied voice ask, calm but lilting and very American.

Voldemort wandlessly raised the wards to her. At least someone respected the necessity for invitation when entering one’s home.

With a rapt of knuckles to the front entrance, Voldemort swung the door open with a flick of his wrist.

‘Hello, pleasure to finally meet you both. Might I come in?’ Voldemort nodded and the plump young woman walked to them then held out her hand and Voldemort shook it, eyebrows raised. ‘The Magical Congress of the United States of America passes on its greetings to you both. They also wish for me to tell you how pleased they are with this new development and to remind you of how important to them that it continues peacefully.’ The woman then shook Dumbledore’s hand vigorously. ‘I am here as both a representative of MACUSA foreign relations and as a neutral party on behalf of one Harry Potter. Though I am not an official member of staff, I am contracted from time to time as per my skillset. I hope the aims and objectives of our appointment are as swift as they are painless.’ She smiled sweetly at them both.

‘I suspect you’ll be wanting to get down to it then.’ Voldemort turned to his charming and charismatic persona. A good, peaceful meeting with the MACUSA representative would stand him in good stead with the American authorities. No doubt any grievances this woman may have would be relayed in excruciating detail. Voldemort had to seem forthcoming and accepting of these circumstances, no matter how much they put his teeth on edge. ‘My peer has just informed me of your talents in the warding field.’ He motioned to Dumbledore as if he were an old friend. The action made the old Headmaster glare at him momentarily before masking his features into peaceful agreement.

‘Ah, I am not one to toot my own horn – but I’d like to say I take pride in my work and it shows in the finished product.’ All smiles and sweetness again, and it gave Lord Voldemort toothache. ‘If you could lead the way Mister Voldemort, I would be most pleased.’ Voldemort held in the snort that would have accompanied the woman’s presumptively applied title, but again he bit his tongue.
‘Yes, if you would follow me.’ Voldemort then led both of them to what would be Potter’s quarters come the end of the week. He’d taken great care to modify the rooms to what he thought would be Potter’s liking. It was a house in of itself and had room to fit at least ten people comfortably. Voldemort had selected only the finest furnishings and textiles to adorn the rooms. Voldemort had obsessively ran his fingers through fine silks and velvets thinking about how the would feel and look against Potter’s honeyed skin. He had found the exact green of his eyes to embellish the dark wooden bed currently placed in the centre of the room. The placement of it was no mistake. If Potter forgot to close his door at night, Voldemort would have a perfect view of his sleeping form. He would very much like to see how the young man writhed and tangled within the silken nest.

The thought sent blood rushing to his loins.

‘Here we are.’ Voldemort presented the room to them with unveiled pride.

*See what I can provide for him Dumbledore? See what luxury I can afford him, luxury you deigned him undeserving of.*

Snape, despite the revelation of his true loyalties, had proven to remain a reliable source of information of everything concerning Potter. The letters written to Voldemort by him had revealed many things about the young Gryffindor, and Voldemort had drank them in like a man starving. The young man had been abandoned to the clutches of magic hating Muggle-scum as a child. In his letters, Snape recounted several revelations that the entirety of the Wizarding world, if they heard about it, would cry in outrage. According to all accounts he’s received over the years, the boy had been looked after and cared for. Voldemort assumed it was within the protections of a Wizarding family honoured to care for the babe that had vanquished the Dark Lord.

What Snape had told him blew that notion to smithereens. Despite the blood relation they may have shared, Snape astutely claimed that the Muggle house Potter had grew up in had been no home.

Voldemort felt a little bloodsport might be in order as he took in the litany of the Muggles transgressions.

‘Oh, lovely.’ Udder’s complimented whilst Dumbledore looked upon the rooms with thinly veiled disgust. The woman then positioned herself in the middle of the room and swept the place for any tracking or spying spells that might have been inlaid within the walls or furnishings. ‘Sorry, necessary precaution.’ Voldemort smiled and motioned for her to continue. Udder’s then expanded a suitcase which had been shrunk and kicked it out. The suitcase had a runic circle ready prepared with black candles, burning charcoal and bird skulls.

‘Voodoo?’ Voldemort asked impressed.

‘Ah, yes. A speciality of mine courtesy of my ancestor’s coven – the Willow’s Bow.’ She lit the candles and set he wand aside to produce a vial of blood. ‘Over here y’all call it Dark magic, but we American’s make no such distinction. Magic is magic after all. What matters is intent.’ She chirped. Well, that would have ruffled Dumbledore’s delicate feathers.

‘And this process is safe? No repercussions?’ Dumbledore queried because of course he was suspicious of the medium.

‘No, voodoo is all about give and take – hence a little Potter’s blood.’ She shook the vial. Voldemort’s eyes zeroed in on the thin vial and he licked his lips. ‘Potter willingly gives his blood, the magic takes it and then manifests itself – with a little help from my ancestors.’ She offered.
'Necromancy? How impressive.' Voldemort complimented.

'Of a sort, yes. More like spirit-wielding. They freely offer their services as I will when I join them.' Udder’s explained and Voldemort was itching to pick her brains on the subject.

'The Rite of Servitude? Amazing. I would like to know more, if you have time in the future.' Voldemort found he couldn’t take his eyes off of the vial as it was being poured into the bevel of the runic circle.

'Oh, certainly. I give lectures regularly in New Orleans, French Quarter if you’re available. We’re always happy to teach folks about the practical applications of voodoo. It’s not all virgin sacrifices and goat dismemberment – that’s what we would class as Dark. Though goat gonads do give rituals a little spunk - pardon the pun.' She laughed. The woman then slit her palm and her blood joined Harry’s and Voldemort had the strange wish that it was his blood instead. ‘Right, show time. If I could ask you gentlemen to exit the rooms?’ Udder’s announced and they complied. Both Dumbledore and Voldemort watched, one in revulsion the other with enthusiasm.

The blonde then stood and wordlessly retrieved her wand. She looked around momentarily before her body slumped like a puppet on strings. Her head lolled forward, her eyes turning milky white as she invited the dead to her. The blonde then spoke in an incantation style unique to the American craft. Her voice was heavy and low as she spoke the strange dialect, the same as the Shaman's of old would have evoked - so unlike the British Latin variant. This was the tongue of her brethren in the wilds of the Amazon, the plains of Africa and in the heat of the Mediterranean. Her voice rumbled through the space and the spirits greeted her. They pulled the blood to them, clasping it like a fragile gift and then smeared it on every wall of the rooms. A spirit in the form of a young African boy met them at the door, stared unseeingly at them and then smeared the floor with Potter’s and Udder’s blood.

Voldemort wanted to bend down and press his fingers into it. To take a piece and lick it off. He would have had no one been around to witness it.

Udder’s then dipped her fingers into the small pool of blood at her feet, as if teasing the Dark Lord - she smeared it on her lips. Then the incantation, rough and bellowing took on a soft song-like quality. Her head flopped around her shoulders like a new-born babe. Voldemort could make out when she evoked Potter’s blood by his name. The magic latched to the syllables and burst from it like it were dancing in celebration for hearing it. The spirits of her ancestors broke into a grinding dance, stamping their feet and jumping in the air. Udder’s then screamed and the whole display halted, her ancestors returned to her and after kissing each of her cheeks slipped back inside her.

It was breathtaking.

‘Hah.’ The American exhaled, her eyes returning to their dark brown. ‘Oh, that was fun.’ She smiled. ‘Always nice to see Grams again.’ Udder’s dusted herself off. She then cast on the blood smearing the walls and it was swallowed into the paint. She Banished the rest and kicked her suitcase to collapse. ‘If both of you would be so kind as to try and enter. Warning though, it might buck like a mule.’ Both Voldemort and Dumbledore tried to touch the wards, but they burned them before they could even touch the surface.

‘That was beautiful.’ Voldemort said softly. Dumbledore looked at him like he’d grown a second head. ‘Put’s our British stiff upper lip to shame.’

‘Ah, British casting has its uses. I like its clinical rigidness sometimes- refreshes the palate. But thank you. I’m glad you enjoyed it. Here – my business card. That’s where the lectures are held.’ She handed Voldemort it with a girlish grin that belied her magical intensity. 'The rooms are
warded against anyone except Potter or those invited by him. Even I won’t be able to enter now that I’ve exited. Potter is also the only one who can request to have them taken down, he must contact either the MACUSA embassy or the Willow’s Bow Coven directly then. But he will need to pay those services.’

Voldemort had never seen Dark magic used so casually. Having always had an affinity for it, he mourned its lack of use on the British Isle. He scorned the Ministry and its ‘Light or nothing’ paradigm. He much preferred the American model where intent mattered more than the medium itself. Voldemort thought he might introduce Potter to the American model. The boy had been indoctrinated to believe that Dark was evil, like the vast majority of his peers. It was an assumption that he himself had not helped alleviate.

*One more day, one more night.* He thought wistfully when his thoughts returned to the young Gryffindor. It was such a small duration to the eternity he would be allowed to share with the young man. The young man with jewel eyes and a burning gaze.

‘Thank you.’ Voldemort replied. ‘I’ll be attending soon hopefully.’

‘I’ll hold you to that. And bring young Potter with you, he was a joy to meet yesterday.’ Voldemort curled with jealousy and wanted to lick her skin for any essence of him she might still have on him. He internally shuddered with the intensity of it. ‘Right, I’ll take my leave. MACUSA would also like to extend its hand in friendship to both of you. We value level-minded Wizards who can negotiate for peace over power.’ She nodded to them both.

Voldemort led them to the front entrance and waved Udder’s off. Dumbledore lingered, much to Voldemort’s frustration.

‘I think any international trips will have to be agreed upon in the future.’ The bastard stated.

‘Really? I didn’t read that in any of your or Potter’s terms.’ Voldemort sneered.

‘Then perhaps the courtesy of prior notice? I’m sure his friends and family will be deeply concerned if he were to suddenly disappear to halfway across the globe.’ It was said softly, but Albus kept an edge to it.

‘Then I suspect Potter will be more than willing to alert those closest to him his whereabouts.’ The old violence burned in Voldemort’s veins. If it wouldn’t keep Potter from him, Voldemort would gleefully smash the Headmaster’s face in - he might even find catharsis in the Muggle means of exacting it. Magical means were too good for the wretch.

‘And if you bar contact?’ Dumbledore pushed.

‘I have no intention of doing so. Potter will want to keep in touch with his friends. If it makes him happy, who am I to stop him?’ His words were benign at first glance, but Voldemort’s purr sounded like innuendo and dark promises.

‘Then you should know that there are a great number of things that would make Harry unhappy Tom.’ Dumbledore sneered, his mask falling from him completely.

‘As in?’ Voldemort batted innocently.

‘Like those perverse pastimes you salivate over.’ He snapped.

‘You assume it would make him unhappy Albus? That he might not find *pleasure* in the perverse?’
'No, I don’t. He doesn’t.’ Albus growled.

‘Then, your failure to stipulate that in the terms speaks volumes Albus.’ Voldemort droned. ‘I have never made my perversions, as you deign them, a secret. But, alas – takes one to know one eh, Albus? And one must ask why those terms were not included. Wanted a show big boy?’

Albus paled, the blood draining from his cheeks and neck. ‘You force him. I’ll kill you myself.’ Albus hissed.

‘You can try. And who said he’d be forced? Scared little golden boy isn’t all white picket fences and flowerbeds?’

‘I wouldn’t put you above it, Tom. Ever.’ The headmaster growled, baring his teeth.

‘Just because I don’t repress myself like some Albus, doesn’t mean I’d sink as low as debauching an unwilling participant. And trust me, Potter will be more than willing.’

Voldemort had seen how the young Gryffindor’s pupils had blown as he took in Voldemort’s new appearance. The rush of breath that came when he neared him was unmistakable. His eyes had followed the movement of Voldemort’s fingers from Potter’s cheek to his finger as he’s sucked it entranced.

Voldemort may not have deigned to utilise seduction in some decades, but that didn’t mean he’d Obliviated his experience yielding it.

‘See that you don’t. I’d hate to start another Wizarding War just because you couldn’t sate your curiosity Tom.’

‘See that you don't mistake screams of pleasure for screams of pain.’

Dumbledore held his stare for a moment then turned for the door. ‘Lift the wards for incoming correspondence for the persons listed in the Armistice. That includes myself.’ Dumbledore rumbled and then left, slamming the door.

Voldemort then kicked a side table, the vase on top of it smashed on the tiled floor cracking a few of its tiles.

‘I think you should keep the wards up where he is concerned.’ Nagini announced. ‘He is a vile menace.’

‘Oh, I can think of better ways to describe him than that Nagini, you’re losing your touch.’ Voldemort had slumped onto his haunches, his hands in his hair.

You miserable old cunt. Voldemort snorted.

He hated how that man could still rile him up like this. He hated everything about Albus Dumbledore. Voldemort sent a wind throughout the house; he felt sick that Albus had polluted it with his cursed breath.

‘Our kin will be with us soon, Master. After that, the old wretch will have to keep his distance unless called for. I suspect the little snake won’t be requiring his attentions any time soon, not after he betrayed him so.’ Nagini soothed wrapping around his torso and giving it a slight squeeze.

‘He will be with us soon.’ Voldemort echoed on an exhale. He let the thought invigorate him, steady him.
Calming himself had become easier since he’d merged with the Horcruxes. The insanity which had clouded his mind was painted over and now his mind was clearer than it had been in eons. Though his wants and desires were still very much intact, his crazed depression over not having them had eased considerably.

Another unforeseen benefit was the improvement in his appearance and rigor. The more debased desires that had left his previous self feeling cold and disinterested now burned him like a fever. Like an itch he needed to scratch until it bled.

*Green eyes, rough nails embedded in the delicate skin of his back, the flush of blood in innocent, inexperienced cheeks, begging him, needing him.*

Albus was right told call him perverted, but he was wrong to assume the young man wouldn’t want it too. Though, it was to be expected that what Potter wanted remained a mystery unto himself.

*And to be the one who helps him discover it? What a gift.*

‘Come, little one. We have much to do.’

As Voldemort ascended the stairs with Nagini in tow, his grin threatened to split his face in two.

:::::::

*All the perspectives! All the juice!*  

*Thank you for reading so far, hope it tickles your fancy.*

*Kudo's and constructive criticism as always sil vous plait!*  

*Or love. Just give me all the love. That works too.*
So, today was the day. The day that everything would grind to a horrific halt. The last day of happy, normal Harry.

He had woken in a tangle of limbs between his two best friends. Throughout the week they hadn’t discussed the reasons behind their sleeping arrangements, they didn’t need to. They all needed the proximity whilst it lasted. He hadn’t expected to, but he would miss it. Having never shared a bed with anyone, Harry didn’t know what to expect. The safety and comfort had allowed him a peace he could never achieve on his own.

Even Ron’s snores soothed his nerves.

The awkward teenage need to independence, scoffing in the face of tactile comfort and intimacy had been thrown out the window. Harry had relayed his fears before they had left Hogwarts; he would never experience sharing a bed with someone he loved, even in a purely platonic fashion. Hermione and Ron had soothed him as he’d sobbed on the third night of their stay at Grimmauld Place. Snape’s Occulmency lesson had unearthed the terrifying realisation. Even Snape seemed sympathetic towards the notion; he had briefly gripped Harry’s arm before telling him to carry one because he needed to.

The morning sunlight turned his vision bright red from behind closed eyes. Pushing thought of tonight from his mind, he basked in the warmth of it. He was curled up to Hermione and Ron held them both with his arm over the two of them. Harry didn’t even mind the drool.

His nightmares hadn’t crept up on him either, but Harry would not look a gift horse in the mouth. His waking hours were already nightmarish enough.

He could hear the other occupants of Grimmauld Place stir and descend to the kitchens. The smell
of breakfast foods already permeating the air of the four floors above where Molly was no doubt orchestrating a culinary masterpiece. Harry would force himself to eat it. He didn’t know when he would get the chance to again. He also didn’t want to get up either because this was it. The last time he’d share in the simple human contact.

Maybe he could visit in his free time away from him.

Some sick part of him wished that they would just get it all over with. The wait was as excruciating and it was terrifying. He just wanted to know what would happen, how it would be, to find where it was safe in that house of horrors.

The house with no love. No family. Not even a vague familial connection that he’d had with the Dursley’s. Harry scoffed, he never thought there would be a time when the Dursley’s attempts at hospitality would be preferable.

‘Wa’ time is it?’ Ron mumbled.

Harry cast a wandless Tempus. ‘Eight.’ This resulted in Hermione snapping awake and Ron grumbling about having ‘a few more minutes’ before Hermione shoved him awake again.

‘Come on. Up. We need to get ready.’ She pushed them both, her hair a crazy mound of tufts and loose curls. Ron groaned.

As Hermione stood to stretch and then pull Ron from the bed Harry sat with his legs folded under the covers. ‘I might just run away.’ Harry said more to himself than his friends, but it had made them freeze nonetheless. His statement had obviously reminded them of what today would entail.

‘Oh Harry.’ Hermione clambered to him then hugged him close on her lap. She ran her fingers through his hair. ‘It will be okay, we’ll be there.’

‘We’ll see you all the time after today too.’ Ron rubbed his back. ‘Until we find a way out of it that is.’ Hermione nodded in agreement.

Harry sat up and took a deep breath.

‘I want you both to know I love you.’ The words had been playing on Harry’s mind this whole week, they were so difficult to say but so necessary too. He needed them both to know. They were the first people he’d ever really loved, the first people he truly cared for. ‘You’re my family.’ Harry wouldn’t cry about it, no matter how hard the tears threatened.

‘We know mate. You’re our brother.’ Ron stated simply.

‘We love you too.’ Hermione smiled through tears. They three of them held each other for a few beats and then started getting ready for the day ahead.

His muscles and bones protested as he moved through the room sluggishly. Grimmauld Place had turned into an impromptu ‘Defence Against the Dark Lord’ training camp with Harry and his friends as the sole trainees. It was rough. The gruelling workouts Sirius, Remus, and Snape have devised bordered on evil. Harry and Ron now sported new muscle swells that they had thought was possible to gain in only six days. Hermione's body had also hardened slightly, much to Ron's drooling, knuckle-dragging pleasure. The duelling training was even more intense. Sirius and Remus never held back. Even Dark curses were utilised with lethal precision by the trainers under the justification of 'snake-face might use them, so we'll use them too'. Harry thought it was instead an underhanded tactic to keep them on their feet, other that or it was Sirius’ dark sense of humour.
Snape's Occulmency lessons had actually turned into a small reprieve for the young Gryffindor, much to his own surprise. The Potions Master was uncharacteristically kind in the time he'd spent with Harry. But, after hours and hours of the same tasks, even the solace had turned into a small torture.

So in both mind and body, Harry was absolutely bushed.

Harry had already packed the few things he owned. Snape had told him to keep a hold of his textbooks especially, they would be picking up his education from where he’d left off in his private quarters. Harry didn’t have many clothes, most of his possessions were sentimental or gifted by those he felt sentimental towards. He’d gifted his map to Ron and Hermione, they would put it to better use than he could. His cloak and the photo album Hagrid had gifted to him in first year were the last things he’d packed. When all collected together, it didn’t seem like very much at all.

Molly, true to form, had made a stellar breakfast and he’d shoved as much of it down as possible, savouring every bite. He even raised Ron’s eyebrows and Harry had to feel proud about that.

Harry was laughing with Ron about the Cannon’s abysmal performance at yesterday’s game when Dumbledore had joined them in the kitchen. Then everyone was on tenterhooks and thoroughly displeased with his presence.

Dumbledore took note of the room and then turned to Harry. The ever-present twinkle in his eyes was gone, his stare as hard as stone. Harry turned away from him in disgust.

‘Good day Harry, how have you been?’ Dumbledore intoned softly.

‘Better.’ Harry didn’t even look up from his plate as he played with his food, his appetite well and truly gone.

‘Ready then?’ The Headmaster pushed.

Harry snorted. ‘Kind of a pointless question, don’t you think?’ Harry then looked at him.

‘Seems polite to ask under the circumstances, my boy.’ Dumbledore then took a chair.

Harry then felt a less then gentle probe against his mind’s defences. It felt like cold fingers on his forehead. Harry bared his teeth and then hurled the inquisitive probe from him. Dumbledore’s eyes widened momentarily before turning his head away.

‘There are plenty of people I’m more than happy to discuss my welfare with. You are not one of them.’ Dumbledore sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment too long then turned to the room.

‘Everything ready then, Severus?’

The Potions Master had watched the exchange carefully and was somewhat pleased by it. ‘Yes. Ready when you are.’ He stated curtly.

‘Good.’ Everyone then gathered their things and exited to the Apparition Point nearest Grimmauld Place. Harry was flanked by the Marauder’s and his best friends, surrounding him like a protection from Dumbledore’s painful attempts at conversation.

They all paired off; Harry took Sirius’ arm. ‘Good job waving off the old bat.’ Sirius whispered with a grin before Harry felt the Apparition suck him in to it’s awful void before it spat them back out again.
In front of him stood a monstrosity.  

A massive building that Harry could only describe as a castle loomed before them. The structure was all clean lines of carked slate-grey stone that glinted slightly in the morning sun. Harry was surrounded by dark forest and neatly cuts lawns of greying grass. At the gate was adorned with twin states of women reaching to the sky, their faces look as if they were either in pain or rapture, thick robes hung off them leaving little to the imagination; one a perfect mirror image of the other. The castle itself was built around one ominous tower in it’s centre, so tall it looked like it scraped the sky. The front of the building was littered with tiny arched windows nestled in various floors. The roof was decorated with dark, glassy tiles which glittered. A wide path decorated with an arching pattern curved in front of them straight to the front entrance.

‘Slytherin Crest.’ Sirius sighed. ‘Homey isn’t it?’ He snorted. Harry just stood and stared at it silently. This is where he would spend the rest of his day then? God help him, it was as awful as it was darkly beautiful. ‘Onwards and upwards then.’ He said when everyone had arrived. Their confidence steps belied the anxiety curling in their bellies.

‘Circe, doesn’t do things by half, does he?’ Ron’s voice squeaked at the end.

‘It’s almost cliché; he’s really playing up to the old villain trope.’ Hermione agreed.

‘Intimidating house for an intimidating man I suppose.’ Remus offered.

‘It’s almost funny.’ Ron chuckled. ‘Can imagine him playing an organ in the tower when it gets stormy.’ Harry snorted at the image.

Harry could feel him before he saw him. His eyes zeroed in on the entrance before it opened, and the source of all Harry’s anxieties greeted them at the door with his arms held out wide.

‘Welcome everyone. Do come in.’ He purred, his grey eyes latched onto Harry’s. The young Gryffindor’s hands were trembling and try as he might, he couldn’t look away.

Hermione’s jaw dropped at Voldemort’s new appearance and the Dark Lord smiled at her attentions. Even Sirius gave him an appreciative glance. He was dressed in a cadet blue shirt with a few of the buttons undone. His trousers were all sharp lines in a Marengo grey, Harry could see the muscles of his thighs, lithe and sinewy, ripple from beneath them.

Voldemort turned away from them and stood ahead in the foyer where Nagini ascended his leg to then coil around his shoulders. Harry’s eyes followed the snakes movement as if bewitched.

Voldemort looked like the embodiment of Peitho. He oozed sensuality and held dominion over the space, his gait was predatory and exacting just as it had been in the Armistice tent. As Voldemort looked at Harry again, his eyes hooded and inviting, the Gryffindor swallowed loudly.

‘He’s here Master! He’s here!’ She hissed, vibrating with excitement. The snakes jubilant hisses echoed a dream he’d had that Summer before the Triwizard Tournament of old lonely men, raw and bloodied infantile limbs, and an awful green flash. Harry was beginning to regret eating so much. Voldemort stroked Nagini’s scales and kissed her head whilst staring Harry down. His eyes travelled down his body and Harry felt the overwhelming urge to hide himself away from the onslaught.

Everyone stood rigidly as they took in their surroundings, Harry might have joined them if he weren’t watching Voldemort’s every move as if waiting for him to strike.

‘Harry. It’s so good to finally have you here.’ The Dark Lord crooned softly. Harry didn’t reply, he
couldn’t. The way the man had said his name made blood rise to the young Gryffindor’s cheeks and throat.

‘Hello Tom.’ Dumbledore said loudly as he walked to Voldemort, thankfully blocking Harry from his eyeline.

‘Albus.’ He greeted in clear discontent. ‘This is quite an entourage. Worried something might happen?’ He sneered.

‘As pleasant as it would be to go back and forward with you Tom, we have more important matters to attend to.’ Dumbledore sounded frustrated if not slightly flustered. Despite his feelings toward the man, his tone caused anxiety to flood Harry’s chest; if Dumbledore was uncomfortable, then God help them all.

‘Ah, yes – but of course. Follow me and please do make yourselves comfortable. My home is your home.’ Voldemort asked, venom colouring his tone before he gave Harry a pointed look with the last bit.

‘Yes, thank you. Lead the way Tom.’ Harry really wished Dumbledore would stop calling him that, it seemed to provoke a response that was one slight away from a slip in sanity.

Voldemort then led them to a large room to the left. Walking through a thick stone alcove Harry entered what could only be described as sheer opulence. The walls were covered in an array of paintings all featuring questionable or dark subjects. One scene, painted dark yellows and reds, had three men stabbing into the other, each laughing maniacally each time they plunged the knives in. Another had a woman in an eggshell blue dress standing on the bodies of many dismembered figures; the hem of her skirts forever blooming with the blood on the floor. It wasn’t the violence that disturbed Harry, it was the way they all stared at him – and only him.

‘Come, have a seat. There will be refreshments shortly.’ Why did everything Voldemort say sound like a threat? The juxtaposition of Voldemort offering a wee sit-down as if among close friends was jarring. Harry turned to see Lucius Malfoy already reclined in one of the inky leather Chesterfield. Nagini slivered down her Master to curl up on a Brontë chaise longue nearest the fire, her yellow eyes flicking between the guests with varying levels of revulsion.

Everyone awkwardly sat as far from the Dark Lord as physically possible.

Malfoy inclined his head to Harry and then the guests. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to reveal unmarred skin to Harry’s surprise.

Of course, the Death Eaters have disbanded – now unbranded it seems. Harry was then left to wonder why Malfoy was still here. After what he’d seen at the graveyard, Harry would assume Malfoy would have hightailed as soon as the opportunity presented itself. He had disappointed his Dark Lord profoundly having lost one of his Horcruxes and never attempting to find him.

Voldemort flicked his wrist and several large ornate tea sets and cake pedestals of ebony and gold appeared. It all looked very tempting and delicate. Every cake was in small artisan slices, adorned with sugared flowers and ripe, glistening fruit - the smell was mouthwatering. Harry felt like this is what a mouse would think before the bracket of the trap clamped 'round their throat.

A small house-elf dressed in a clean white shift began to pour tea into amethyst cups and all but forced them on several Order members who eyed the liquid suspiciously.

‘Please help yourselves, Neepsy has been slaving away all morning. It may not soothe your
suspicions, but I promise nothings poisoned. Neepsey wouldn’t have it.’ With that both Lucius and Snape laughed, the other guests paled further. Hermione's lip curled at ‘slaving’.

Ron broke the tension when he asked the for a particularly colourful genoise slice and moaned when he bit into it. Neepsey blushed with pride and then started asking guests which they would like to have, not if they would like to have them.

‘So, Tom. Are you ready to settle the last of the terms?’ Dumbledore asked, cutting through the quiet conversations between the Order members.

‘Straight to it then? All work and no play Albus, you’ll drive yourself to an early grave.’ Voldemort looked gleeeful about the prospect, however.

‘Yes, well, I think we both want all of this settled as soon as possible. Harry, Snape – if you would?’ He motioned for them both to join him and Voldemort.

‘So, Harry – ever made an Unbreakable Vow before?’ Voldemort uttered, his voice was too close to him now.

‘No.’ Was all Harry could choke out.

‘It’s quite a boring display, but the magic itself is quite ingenious. Though this official variant we're using is quite interesting.’ He said as Snape and Albus discussed something quietly beside them. Voldemort’s body curved into Harry slightly. ‘It doesn’t just make those making the promise swear on the Terms themselves, instead it binds the souls and heartfelt goals of all those involved. A liar can never make this type of Vow, you have to want to fulfil the terms you are swearing to. You must be very choosy about the words you allow to evoke the vow, if you don’t – well – they could be the death of you. Literally.’ Harry’s eyes fluttered closed when he could feel Voldemort’s breath on his neck.

Albus cleared his throat. ‘Might we begin?’ The room seemed to dim slightly as thick black clouds vanished what little sunlight had entered the room.

Snape took out his wand with a flourish as Dumbledore and Voldemort extended their arms to each other, their sides of their palms touching. Snape jerked his head at Harry telling him to do the same. Harry hesitantly reach out, his hand trembling.

As his hand joined their Snape started wielding thin strings of magic that bound their hands together.

Then Harry felt Voldemort’s ring finger stroke his in a minute caress. The touch sent a wave through his chest and his stomach clenched as the finger scraped back up again.

Oh God.

‘Will you, Albus Dumbledore swear to never harm, endanger, injure or kill Lord Voldemort, willingly or by proxy?’ Snape chanted.

‘I will.’ Dumbledore stated soberly. A stream of fire travelled from Snape’s wand to their hands.

‘And will you, Lord Voldemort swear to never harm, endanger, injure or kill Harry Potter or Albus Dumbledore, willingly or by proxy?’

‘I will.’ Voldemort droned. Another bright flame curled around them.
‘And will you, Harry Potter swear to never harm, endanger, injure or kill Lord Voldemort, willingly or by proxy?’

Harry’s finger tingled where Voldemort had softly touched it.

Did he? The thought of Voldemort murdering everyone in the room encouraged a heartfelt response. ‘I will.’ Harry croaked.

The enflamed threads wove around their hands in a brilliant bluish light, Harry squinted his eyes wanting to turn away from its glare.

‘As the representative of all parties present, I announce the Vow is officially concluded. Be warned: failure to maintain the clauses stated will result in an immediate, painful death.’ With a swish of his wand, the fire rose from their hands to the ceiling above. ‘Thus, the Armistice is exalted. So mote it be.’ A chorus echoed in response - ‘so mote it be’, his friends and family looking somber as they intoned. The flame extinguished and Harry jerked his hand away from them, Voldemort sent him a lascivious grin. Snape bowed to them, which they all returned – Harry still flustered did so last after following direction.

Harry’s hand felt like it had really been on fire. He had to quell the urge to rub along the inside of his finger. Harry turned to see Dumbledore staring at the offending digit and then to Voldemort and the Gryffindor felt a furious blush colour his cheeks.

The adults in the room then congregated together of not-so quiet chit-chat and discussion of their pursuits to adhere to the terms. The Death Eaters had been completely disbanded. Malfoy, Snape and a few others had chosen to remain at the Dark Lord’s side as representatives, counsel, or acquaintances – if they could be called that. The Order had officially disbanded too, except in friendship. Lucius was asked about the well-being and view held by the ex-Death Eater members, he reported that not all were happy with the decision but would maintain a respectful distance. The conversation then rounded on Harry’s safety, and the concerns several had about it. Voldemort and Snape guaranteed his continued well-being.

‘Are you okay?’ Hermione shook Harry from his attempts to listen in.

‘Yeah. Kind of.’ He wasn’t. He was already obsessively fidgeting with his hands, the area where Voldemort hand touched them. Harry then took a teacup from Neepsey and thanked her and the house elf beamed at him. Though the fine china rattled together in his useless hands.

‘Master's be so excited to have you come stay Master Potter.’ The house-elf grinned at him.

‘Oh, just call me Harry please.’ His stomach felt like lead.

‘We’s be having a big dinner tonight Harry sir. I hopes you like roast chicken.’ She tried to offer him a cake, but he made his excuses as kindly as he possibly could, there was no way he could eat anything now his breakfast threatened to repeat on him. The house-elf then turned to Remus who kindly accepted another cup.

‘Write to us. As much as you can.’ Hermione’s voice warbled.

‘I will. I definitely will.’

‘You’ll see us all the time mate. We’ll come up. Dumbledore’s given us permission to leave Hogwarts grounds when we want to.’ Ron smiled sadly. Harry nodded. Everything was happening to quickly, he wished for a time turner to take him back to Grimmauld Place, away from this mess.
‘You have those grimoires I packed?’ Hermione asked in a hushed whisper.

‘Yeah, why?’ She took his hand and placed it on her lap.

‘They have…protection spells in them. Things to ward away unwanted advances.’ She then glanced at Voldemort. ‘I don’t like the way he looks at you Harry.’ Harry paled; he had hoped she hadn’t noticed.

‘Do you think he – you know –?’ Ron trailed off. Harry shook his head in self-denial.

‘Harry, he might. If he does anything, you need to tell us.’ Hermione studied him for a moment. ‘I mean anything.’ He knew what she was insinuating, and it made Harry cringe.

The room fell quiet and the trio fumbled as if they had been caught doing something bad.

The other guests then started to vacate the room and Harry’s heart leapt to his throat.

Don’t leave. It’s too soon. Don’t go. He begged internally.

Voldemort then rounded on Harry. ‘I expect it may be time for you to say your goodbyes Harry, I’ll give you a tour you new home afterward.’ Harry recoiled when Voldemort had said home.

Home equal family, friends, happiness and comfort. This would never be a home, only a prison. Harry briefly wondered if Azkaban had any available rooms, they would be preferable.

Harry rushed away from the Dark Lord, his friends in tow. Remus and Sirius grabbed him into a tight hug. Sirius pecked his cheek. ‘Remember the training Harry. Never let your guard down, keep the bodily protections maintained. And bloody hell, come visit when you get away from snake-face.’ He chuckled softly but Harry knew the man was impossibly sad.

‘We’ll be round fortnightly, if not sooner. We can start on Apparition and your licence soon, since your now emancipated. Snape’s agreed to get you up to scratch with potions when he can.’ Harry couldn’t speak. He didn’t want to say goodbye yet.

‘And do keep up with your coursework Harry. If McGonagall finds out you’re being lackadaisical with your homework submissions, she'll chew your ear off.’ Remus warned goodnaturedly.

Hermione and Ron hugged him fiercely and he wanted to fall into them. But he couldn’t leave them worried, so he put on a brave face when they whispered goodbye and good luck.

Dumbledore didn’t say anything, he simply waited by the door. Good, Harry didn’t want to deal with him at all. He’d ruin it all.

Harry’s heart broke when the last one of them left.

Steeling himself he turned to where Voldemort was standing. He was smiling at something Lucius had said and the conversation came to an abrupt halt when grey eyes locked with green. Lucius inclined his head to Voldemort then made for the door.

‘I do hope you enjoy yourself Mr Potter. I look forward to our next meeting.’ Lucius smirked before he exited.

When the door shut behind them with a sharp clack. Harry’s heart started thudding in a furious tattoo.

Nevermind a trap, he was now the mouse in the snake den.
He is here. Finally, he’s here. He’s so close. He’s here. Had been the mantra swirling in the Dark Lord’s mind since he had felt the boy enter the grounds.

Circe, he felt him.

The boy’s magic permeated his senses. It was still the electric, raw current that had licked him in the Armistice tent. He could almost smell it in the air. It tanged like bergamot and citron verbena and it made Voldemort want to salivate, to inhale where he knew the scent would be most concentrated; right at the apex of Potter’s thighs.

The boy jerked slightly, clearly unnerved by his nearness.

And then an epiphany lit the Dark Lord’s mind, this was the first time they had truly been alone together. Oh, the possibilities it afforded him, the options were endless.

The boy stood a little ways from the front door as if he wanted to join his friends and walk straight back out again. Potter stared and stared at the exit looking ready to bolt. His fist were clenched at his sides and shaking.

‘There’s no reason to be nervous Harry.’ Voldemort stated just to see the boy squirm.

Harry turned then and leveled the Dark Lord a scathing glare, his magic simmering around them. ‘No, I think there are plenty.’ The boy rolled out darkly. He could see Harry’s hand twitch for his wand.

The Dark Lord moved forward as Harry moved away, then they began circling like lions would over prey.

‘And tell me, what might those be?’ Voldemort crooned. ‘We both made a Vow, Harry. We cannot harm one another.’ The boy met him step for step always mirroring him, maintaining his well-guarded distance. The boy then glared at him and it sent a fissure of want through him.

‘Your reasons for my being here namely.’ Harry said softly, dangerously as they kept up their macabre dance. The boy maintained eye-contact throughout, obviously waiting and prepared for the Lord to strike him. Harry legs, supple and graceful matched him step for step like a mirrors reflection.

Well, hasn't someone has been practicing like a big boy.

‘You are my Horcrux. I’d say that is a simple enough reason for your being here.’ The tension in the room racked up a notch.

‘It’s no reason at all. You can’t do anything with it.’ Gone was the awkward boy who’d fumble around the Hogwarts corridors with his head hung low avoiding his peers awed gazes. Instead he moved like a cambion would, with inhuman elegance and agility. It amazed the Dark Lord that the boy could be both; the duality of it a complete mystery - a compelling one that drew you into its chasm.

‘Oh, there are many things I could do with you Harry.’ The undertone of his words rang through the air like a crack of a whip and Harry flinched. ‘And with the Horcrux embedded within you.’

‘Not without dying immediately after.’ Potter smirked. ‘You try to extract it, well, that would be harming me wouldn’t it?’ It had been a long time since Voldemort had fought a battle of wills on a
level playing field and he luxuriated in the circumstances, enraptured with the challenge.

‘Who said anything about extracting it, Harry?’ Voldemort hissed.

Parseltongue offered much what his native dialect couldn’t. Snakes were masters of the subtle art of conveying a multitude of wants, needs, and intentions in a single sentence in overture and undertone simultaneously. Snakes, despite their infamy and rumoured divisive, secretive natures, were in actuality particularly honest creatures; every need, every want, every desire was laid bare. Sugar coated words, white lies, and dark truths all communicated with finely woven honest intent and feeling. He knew Harry could hear it, what his words themselves did not elude to explicitly; his need for his skin on his, the want for his rushed breath and pleading moans and his intent - to exact whatever means at his disposal to acquire it.

Then the boy’s face contorted with rage, upon hearing it, his magic burning the air until the room felt suffocating.

‘Try it. See what happens.’ Potter seethed.

Oh, and the boy really was fluent. He honed the serpent’s tongue to tell the Dark Lord a great multitude of things. His rage was violent, his animosity frenzied. The boy would happily kill, maim or torture the Dark Lord, for he was an exception in that regard. The boy would rampage, he would rave through the halls of Slytherin Crest with Voldemort’s cold, dead body in hysterical glee if giving the opportunity. He would avenge his family. He would avenge his friends with vehement rapture. All of this from five simple words.

Dumbledore golden boy was far from the glorious saviour he’d been exalted as. The boy was a threat, a promise of malevolent desire. He took the Dark Lords breath away - just not in the way the young Gryffindor would have wished.

With a roll of his neck, a serpentine gesture Voldemort charged forward in a blink. He grabbed then pulled Potter back three rushed steps to the wall behind him, pinning his arms above him by the wrist.

‘Such an open invitation for one with so little experience.’ Voldemort rumbled against Potter’s neck, tapping down the urge to bite, to lick, to suck. The Dark Lords fingers were burning against the young man’s skin. Potter’s magic electrified the air around them, and his breath heated the air between their lips. ‘One might be inclined to think you haven’t the faintest idea what you are doing.’ Voldemort’s tongue snaked out to catch a glassy bead of sweat rolling down the honeyed neck. ‘Or the potential consequences of such a tempting offer.’

Potter thrashed against him and it did little but stoke the fire in the Dark Lords belly. Green eyes blazed and teeth snapped before a growl which made Voldemort shiver in delight.

‘Get. Away. From. Me!’ Potter warned, roaring like an animal. ‘You can’t fucking do this!’

How long had it been since he’d felt this enthralled? He hadn’t felt like this…ever. Not even with the most powerful enemies at his feet, begging or pleading for mercy. His mercy. The thought of Potter begging him for something only he could give made his stomach clench.

‘I think you’ll find I can. You see, there are several things that I can do to you whilst you are in my care, little snake. The Terms only stipulated that I could not harm, injure, torture or kill you. It says nothing about restraining you –.’

To make his point clear, Voldemort gripped both of Potter wrists in one hand, pushing into them
with a delicious pressure. He then trailed the other through the thick mass of brown hair before letting his fingers feather down Potter’s jaw, cheek and then his full bottom lip, dragging it down slightly and feeling the moisture inside his mouth before letting it go abruptly. ‘-It says nothing about touching you.’

The young man froze. His eyes owlish, he stared at the offending digit.

The Dark Lord licked his lips as he saw the new information seep into the boy’s mind, a slow blink, then the blood draining for pinkened cheeks.

‘No.’ Potter gasped in horror. ‘No.’

‘Yes, yes, little one. There was one very important thing that you were not made aware of before you signed that dotted line with your blood. The terms are mediated on intent Harry. Meaning, if I intend to harm, injure or kill you and then do so, I’ll die. However, any intent that does not include the four mentioned is permissible, actionable.’ Voldemort felt along Potter’s lip again, dragging his nail into it slightly. ‘Poor Harry, Dumbledore’s betrayal goes far deeper than you could have possibly imagined.’ Voldemort crooned as he drank in the sight before him. ‘Beguile you with his fatherly, holier-than-thou disposition, did he? Treated as his favourite, and tossed away like a pair worn shoes. Said he cared about you too? He’s thrown you to the wolves to save his own traitorous hide. The Boy-Who-Lived, cherub of the Wizarding world, played like a stringed puppet.’

Voldemort whispered against Potter’s ear, his lips grazing the pink flesh. ‘A puppet that is now all mine to play with.’

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Hot breath dancing along his ear and neck. A tight, bruising grip on his wrists. His chest and belly fluttering from vulnerability with the stretch of being restrained. A thigh pushing in between his. Warm, wet lips ghosting at his pulse.

Harry had never felt anything like this before.

He was horrified, terrified at the promise in Voldemort’s voice. Terrifying words spun like silk, spoken from a face that beguiled the onlooker. Voldemort’s eyes were hungry, like he hadn’t eaten for days. Like Harry was the most delicious thing on the menu.

The young Gryffindor couldn’t think, he couldn’t breathe. The was no air. Only warm flesh and a deep voice reverberating through him. In him.

But Harry finally snapped at the last thing it had said. Then a dreadful hatred had settled into his bones.

With a roar Harry threw himself into the being which fuelled his nightmares. The grip on his wrist gone he tackled the creature to the marbled ground and delighted at the sound of the impact of bone against stone. Harry grabbed his wand and flicked it before he had a conscious thought.

‘Incarcerous.’ He spat. Thick leather vines wrapped around Voldemort and fastened with a snap. The grip of the binds looked painful, an awful smile grew on the Gryffindor’s face.

Harry chuckled darkly. ‘Ah, Tom.’ He intoned, smug. ‘Let me see – so it’s all about intent then?’
Harry nodded to himself his mouth in a grim line when Voldemort writhed against the binds which a infuriated hiss. ‘That goes both ways though, doesn’t it?’ Harry moved and slowly crouched over the Dark Lords figure who was vibrating with rage, eyeing him lazily. ‘If I were to say, intend to defend myself or maybe even embarrass you, to take you down a few pegs from that mounting pedestal you’ve put yourself upon – would that be actionable Tom?’ Harry flicked the wand and the binds grew tighter. The vicious grin on his face grew. ‘Apparently so.’ Harry drew a finger down the bind that wrapped around Voldemort’s straining neck. ‘Being tied up by teenage boys must be humiliating, especially at your age.’ Voldemort made an inhuman noise then and it egged Harry on. ‘Or maybe if I intended to simply move you from one place to another?’ With another non-verbal swish Voldemort’s body flew from underneath him to the other side of the foyer, the sound of skin squeaking against polished floor was music to Harry’s ears. ‘Hmm, seems so.’ The Dark Lord’s eyes bore holes into Harry’s face promising violence for his transgressions.

‘I’ll fucking crush you, little boy.’ Voldemort hissed. ‘Let me go now and I might be lenient.’ Each word was strained with thinly veiled fury.

‘I don’t think so Riddle. I quite like you where you are. Like -what was it again? – oh, yes. A strung puppet.’

‘You little fucking-.’ Harry flicked his wand again and the Dark Lord flew to the other corner of the foyer.

‘Shut up.’ Harry growled as he slowly strode towards it, his mind spat. ‘You’re in no position to make threats or jibes Tom. Oh, merciful little Lord –.’ Harry chuckled. ‘- that ship has well and truly sailed. To put it simply, we both stained that parchment with our blood; if either of us acts on our true intentions, we’ll both die.’ Harry gripped the Dark Lords jaw and pulled him up slightly. ‘But everything else goes. Doesn’t it? And I must thank you Tom. Your actions have emancipated me, meaning I can do whatever the hell I want to you. No trace, no punishment, no Ministry watching my every move – not since I’ve been thrown away, as you so delicately put it.’ Harry sank lower, his face inches from Voldemort’s. ‘I suspect I could get away with murder Tom. And not a soul would protest in your favour.’ Voldemort’s breathing was ragged and Harry suspected that this creatures rage was now beyond the point of verbalisation.

‘If you think for one second that I’ll let you lay a finger on me like that again, well – I suppose what will come next might be deadly fun. And make no mistake Tom, if you do that again – I’ll kill you, painfully and I’ll enjoy it - well, right before I die anyway. Your precious little horcrux will die with me too. One stone, three birds and all that.’ Harry closed his eyes and rolled his head on his shoulders, relishing the heady feeling before fixing his gaze on roiling grey eyes. ‘And no. You won’t survive it cause your little snake will be next.’ Harry could hear an indignant hiss behind him. ‘We both die? A whole band of Auror’s have been instructed to tear her to shreds, and then the great, merciful Dark Lord will be well and truly dead. And trust me, you don’t want to tempt me into what is already such a titillating offer.’ Harry crooned. ‘Because the idea of you cold and rotting makes me happy, so happy in fact that I’d be willing to die just to know it happened.’ Harry could see his reflection on the marbled floor and he looked crazed; his grin was unhinged, his teeth bared and his eyes bright.

‘So, here’s how this is going to go Tommy boy. You piss me off? You touch me without my permission? You, in any way, shape, or form try to make this agreement any more difficult than it already is? I’ll slit your throat.’ A little spittle landed on Voldemort’s cheek and Harry pinched the Dark Lords bottom lip a pulled, wanting to humiliate him further. ‘Do I make myself clear?’ He asked dangerously, leaving no room for argument.

Voldemort jerked his face from Harry’s grip. ‘Crystal.’ He stated, seething.
‘Good.’ Harry hissed in the serpents tongue, with an overture of triumph and a undertone of potent rage.

Harry then wordlessly gagged the Dark Lord. ‘Neepsey!’ The house elf cracked into the room, her eyes widening when she saw here Master bound on the floor. ‘Hello there, would you mind showing me to my rooms, Neepsey?’ Harry smiled gently at her. ‘After that, could you then unbind little Tom here?’ He gestured to the man underneath him who was deadly still, except for eyes that followed his every movement, pin-prick pupils glaring and unblinking – like he was imaging all the way to remove Harry’s skin, sinew, adipose and muscle from his bones by the slowest method known to him. ‘In fact, leave him like that if you wish – he might need the time to cool down a bit I think.’ What Harry assumed were muffled death threat sounded from behind the gag.

Good, let him hate me. The feeling is mutual. Better that than him wanting anything else. Harry stood and shook his head in disgust.

The house elf paled and shook slightly. ‘N-Neepsy will show you to your rooms sir.’ Then Harry joined her on the ascent to the upper floors, of which there were many. The Dark Lord’s screams quieting as he climbed.

The irony of where his rooms were situated was not lost on him. His quarters were in the highest floor in the hulking tower. The stairs leading to them were opulent and decorated with jewels and ever lasting violets. He nodded to the portraits gracing the wall – these one were much more dignified than those of the lounging room downstairs. They whispered about what had just taken place downstairs and it made Harry feel giddy.

The grand staircase gave way to a tighter, spindling set of stairs wrapped in blackened iron. Harry deigned not to look down, the steps were made of latticed metal through which he could see all the floors he’d just traversed.

‘Your rooms sir.’ Neepsey squeaked, her eyes darting to the stairs, clearly terrified of the thing bound on the ground floor. ‘Neepsey cannot show you around. Only Harry Potter can enter and leaves the room, sir.’ She gestured to a bell just inside the door. ‘If Harry Potter be needing anything, Neepsey will answer to two rings of the bell. Master doesn’t like when Neepsey’s name is shouted. Master has spelled the rooms to clean themselves; sir need to only think about how he wants the room and it’ll change for him. Neepsey’l go see Master now.’ Harry thanked her and waved her off, smirking when he thought about how Voldemort was probably still struggling in his binds – the elf looked more than anxious to attend to her Master, she all but ran from him. Harry laughed; the all-powerful menace was thwarted by a few simple leathered straps.

Harry could feel the wards as he passed through them, it felt like a quick embrace of warmth as he strode through. However, what his eyes laid upon when he entered his rooms left him feeling cold.

A room large enough to fit the entirety of the Burrow inside it rolled out before him. The room was a litany of black, gold and rich green. The bed stood alone in the middle of the room, the foot of it staring at him. It was a fourposter monstrosity which donned thick sage-green velvet curtains. The sheets were a dark grey sparkling satin. Thick mahogany furnished populated silk-papered walls from which bejewelled gold candelabras hung. The floors were shining with buffed dark wood and decorated with Persian carpets. Harry moved into it, his mouth agape. He opened the first wardrobe, which was as high as the ceiling above, him and found masses of clothes hanging within it. Pulling out one, his lip curled when he saw a thin tunic of wine spider’s lace and blood-red cashmere. He threw the offending garment back in and slammed the doors shut.

The other rooms mirrored the hyper-opulence of the first. The bathroom was all carved from one block of brown-green marble, the fixtures made of flamed copper. Cream Egyptian cotton bath
robes and towels were displayed on teak wooden cupboards, beside which stood a massive porcelain sink and a gilded mirror. The bathtub and shower were cut into the floor itself from the marble; sculptures of lions and dragons fought along the edge of it, the showerhead a long rectangle was attached to the high ceiling.

The kitchenette was all granite tiles and surfaces. The reddened stone glimmered in the midday sun. Harry opened the fridge to find it jam packed with foodstuffs and prepared meals he couldn’t pronounce the names of with any confidence.

What surrounded Harry was more something more luxurious than anything he had seen before. Every surface was festooned with products, trinkets, and decorations. Every inch of the space was worth more than what the Weasley’s earned in a half a year. Harry’s eyes couldn’t focus on any one particular thing.

*What a gilded cage indeed.* He thought spitefully.

The fact that Voldemort had chosen every element in the space that was now his home made his skin crawl.

*BANG. SMASH. CRACK.*

Oh, so the Dark Lord was free of his binds now. Harry snorted as he heard the carnage below him, and then he felt guilty, worried for Neepsey’s welfare. Although muffled, he could hear Voldemort’s howls of rage and the young man grinned at that, highly pleased with himself.

Neepsey then appeared at the door shaking, with some sort of white powder all over her. ‘Neepsey be recommending Mister Potter does not leave his rooms. Master is not happy, not happy at all.’ She squeaked.

‘That’s quite alright Neepsey, I have no intention of seeking your master’s company. Might I suggest that you find a quiet place to rest whilst your Lord obliterates the ground floor?’ Harry asked, try and failing to conceal his mirth.

‘Yes Mister Potter. That be’s a good idea for Neepsey. A good idea indeed, sir.’ She gave him a strained, shaky smile then disappeared with a *snap*. Harry then fell on the floor laughing, half from hilarity, half from hysterics. He roared which each audible display of demolition below him.

His laughter tapered off after a while and he sank the ground staring blindly in front of him, the gravity of his circumstances dawning on him.

This was it; this was his life now. Now and forever. The quakes from his laughter soon turned into shudders of crushing sadness as his eyes filled with tears. A black, sticky feeling clung to his chest and he heard himself sobbing without really feeling it. He was numb, reeling from what had just happened.

He was stuck in a castle with his own personal homicidal psychopath. A psychopath that seemed to want something that he was not ready for in any capacity and would never be if Voldemort was the one seeking it.

*Sex.* The word played on a loop in his mind and he tested it on his lips silently as he stared into the abyss.

*Sex with Voldemort.* The thought came unbidden. Disgusted, Harry recoiled from it and then punched the floor beneath him, angry at himself. Angry at the terror on the ground floor. Angry at the floor.
‘Shut up!’ He screamed at the noise below him. ‘Shut the fuck up!’ He punched the floor until the skin split on his knuckles and the wood was somewhat dented. But it did not cease, and Harry crumpled to the floor and lay on it, looking at the ceiling and the carnage was louder than before.

I’ve got to find a way out this. There must be a way out of this, he wept at the roof.

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Good LORD wit a saucy steam boat. WHERE’S MA LEMONADE?!

Thank you for reading so far!

If you have any of that good ol’ kind critique, sound off below!

KUDOS *clap-clap-clap* KUDOS *clap-clap-clap*
The Wizarding sewer system was not something that was often frequented by Wizards, at least not by anyone who had any sense. Dark, damp and foul, any Wizard interested in their well-being would avoid them unless it was absolutely necessary.

Well, then again, Henry knew that he hadn’t ever had much sense.

Trips down to the forgotten maze of reeking waste were few and far between, unless you were someone as unfortunate as Henry was. Poor decisions and bad luck had all led him here; quite literally shit creek.

As he climbed into the dank tunnel, his footsteps echoed on the rungs of the rickety ladder. The ladder swayed and creaked slightly as he descended, the noise reverberated down the gloomy tunnel.

Frequently Henry would look up to see the small entrance above him slowly become a faint dot, now nought but a pinprick in the towering ceiling. The sewers were always ridiculously deep down in the earth. Inspectors who visited often complained above the descent and Henry would laugh because they hadn’t even tried to ascend it yet. He supposed that this is how an ant might feel climbing down a tall stalk of dry grass; long and arduous. So he understood the gripes and moans of his higher-ups, but his ability to climb up and down these ladders gave him a short-lived sense of superiority over his bosses. That notion fell flat on its face when he stopped clambering.

Case in point, with a habitual small jump he landed on the platform and splashed in a suspicious looking puddle. Henry softly cursed under his breath and futilely shook out his hardened boot, now caked in muck.

Henry’s wife had pleaded that he avoid the grime and the muck as much as possible tonight.
The Hilber’s were coming around to dinner she said, her eyes pleading; she didn’t want the house to smell like he often did; foul-smelling and rancid.

‘There goes that then.’ He sighed to himself.

Plucking his short and chubby wand from his work trousers, he cast a flimsy after a few failed *Lumos* and marched forward now annoyed.

Minnie would gripe about the embarrassing smell and tell him to leave for the Union Pub, where all the other stinking sewage workers were sent by their wives, if they had one that is – not many of them did, understandably.

The expert plumber often had the chance to contemplate the mistakes that led him into this profession. The money was great, and perhaps the only reason his wife could stand him, but it was soul destroying unblocking pumps and fixing dirty pipes all the time. Wizarding sewers often presented him with the awkward issue of try to dislodge discarded potions ingredients and thus, avoiding the odd explosion. He cringed when he thought back to his wife’s face after a poorly placed and ill-timed explosion covered him in waste and filth, the neighbours as far as five houses down had complained. She had whinged about that one for weeks after.

But Minnie could get those stains out like no one else, and in the beginning that had been enough to make him positively *randy* for her, if she would have him. But, now she tended to Banish anything he wore at the front door, much to his own embarrassment. That started after her co-workers in the mills had started holding their noses around her.

Mrs Pilly from across the way had seen his pale, flabby buttocks more than he cared to admit.

It was nights like these that he particularly disliked his occupation. It was seven o’clock and a hot Summer’s evening- not the best time to be in any sewer, never mind a magical one.

‘I might switch to the Muggle trade.’ He considered whimsically. ‘More money, better pension, less stress.’ He grunted as he pulled on a hatch to let him into Chamber Six which was only a short turn from the ladders. Hauling his gear over his shoulder he set to work. The clanking and clanging sounded like wails in the huge roof arching over the viaduct.

Apparently, the blockage was somewhere around here. Chamber Six housed the huge spelled pumps that powered most of the East coast; *from Newcastle to Ramsgate* he would announce proudly if anyone was interested enough to hear about it. However, nobody ever expressed interest in Henry’s line of work, he corrected sulkily.

This Chamber allowed the outside water supply to carry the waste to be a Banishing House where it was magically filtered and purified. At least those morons could keep a safe distance from the grime and sludge, protected by glass screens for the most part. Henry usually had to get down and dirty, which was an awful innuendo he had massively overused, much to his co-workers despair. It was also his go-to for anyone who cared to hear about his occupation, namely no-one outside of it.

People often underestimated the importance of Henry’s work he mused. Without his sweating and enduring the awful conditions, that lot up there wouldn’t have any water to drink or shit, piss, or throw out-of-date potions into, now would they?

Henry was only a bitter man when he was at work.

As he moved forward in the murky, gloomy chamber, Henry couldn’t see or hear the typical squealing shriek of a blocked pump yet.
Yes, Wizarding plumbing was an assault on all of the senses.

*Just a small one then.* He sighed with relief. Last week it had been a particularly nasty mix of Kneazle litter, Everlasting Glue and newt feed that some idiot had decided it was an intelligent move to flush down their toilet.

Arriving at the pump he read all the normal dials, and everything seemed to be running like clockwork. No red warning wards, no pressure faults, and no caterwauling screech.

*I swear if this is another false alarm, I’ll kill Kohl.* Henry muttered some insults concerning the uppity and overzealous nature of his twenty-four-year-old boss.

His last insult died in his throat when his eyes glanced at the last pressure dial for pump seventy-seven. The glass of the dial was tremoring, within it, the red hand pointed to a dangerously high number in pump seventy-seven’s auxiliary shaft. Henry paled, then rolled his eyes and huffed, now complaining about not being called out sooner. He bet it’s was a bloody rat in the filter. If it blew, he’d have Kohl’s neck for real. No matter how good his wife was, Henry doubted she’d be able to get that kind of stink off his uniform.

If he made it out at all, he thought sombrely.

He sharply climbed the ladder at wrapped around seventy-sevens dull grey cladding, huffing as he went. He went as quickly as he could without breathing in too deeply. As he rose up the ladders the air got thicker and so did the smell.

Finally, after scaling the rusted ladder Henry climbed on top of the tube and brought his tool bag out and after having to give his wand a few thumps, expanded it from its shrunken state. He spelled the massive grips and tugged the crank opening a severely rusted panel. Henry noted the black gunk was oozing out the sides of the panel below him too.

*Not good.* He asserted.

He readied himself to pull, inhaling a large breath and he began to inch the crank anti-clockwise. Henry grunted and the bloody thing wouldn’t budge. More slime oozed down the side and it smelled foul, way worse than the sewers under him. Henry didn’t know what it was – he didn’t want to know what it was.

After several more effortful heaves, Henry was frustrated and dripping of sweat. It seemed to get worse as more sludge oozed out of the pipe, which was now dangerously close to his plumber robes.

The fumes surrounding him made his eyes water and for the first time in twenty-three years, he gagged.

*What in Merlin’s saggy tits is that?*

Henry pulled until he saw stars and then in a grunt of rage his struck the grey cladding with his wrench and kicked the pipe beneath him.

*Ting- Bang.* Henry realised quite quickly that it hadn’t been his kick that had caused that noise.

Henry froze.

The plumber shook his head and rationalised it away as the regular creaks and groans of the Sewer System.
Henry gave up and put his gear back in the tan leather hold-all.  

Kohl’s going to have a field day with this. Twenty years and Henry had yet to fail a call; it had become a running joke in the department; ‘Never despair, Henry will make the repair!’. Henry shook his head at the promised party and free drink Kohl said he’d throw when he did make a mistake.

But then his eye caught a movement. The panel crank started to turn, by itself. Fight, flight or freeze; Henry’s instincts chose the latter as if his genes were predisposed to be always utterly useless. But then he flinched at the ear-splitting scratching noises from inside pump seventy-seven.

And then there was an ear-splitting scream from inside the tube too.

Henry rushed to the ladder, nearly slipping right off – black sludge was now dripping down the edges. His hand slick with it. Henry clambered down whilst trying to not wretch. His breathing be damned, he needed to get out now.

When Henry was halfway down, the panel had blown right off. To his horror, a torrent of the oily, stinking gunk was heading straight for him. He couldn’t even scream. It hit. The awful mass threw the plumber down onto the ground. Instantly his back blossomed in agony and he threw up violently. He had swallowed the wretched liquid and it assaulted his senses. Eyes watering, stomach retching, he cradled his back. Henry then heard a thud then a slow drag and clunk and the metal flooring next to him.

It was in his eyes, they watered and burned. He tried to wipe it away and roll around. But something moved which a sickening lurch in his spine. Then he couldn’t do much, except experience white hot pain. He couldn’t even scream for the garbled retching as his lungs and stomach convulsed.

Henry could vaguely feel himself being dragged, razor sharp talons piercing his chest, then the warm blood oozing from his chest. The rancid sludge entered the wound and it blistered like a brand in the torn flesh. His legs dangled like a rag dolls would; numb and limp. Both his arms were then in the creature’s grasp. He squeezed his eyes shut and gave in completely. His limbs filled with a cold and sluggish sensation; his sight blurred an angry red around the edges. He could only manage a small protest when he was shoved into the tube and shoved into the torrent of the pump.

Henry caught a glimpse of his captor, dead, empty eyes and rotten flesh. Finally getting a good view of his attacker, Henry’s heart filled with terror. A pair of empty eye sockets seemingly stared right back at him. He noted it felt strange but awful to be dragged up a set of ladders by a nightmarish creature. The same creatures his Aunt Hilda had told him about to keep him away from seedy, dark places as a child.

As he was dragged under the bubbling surface Henry realised that Minnie would never have to smell him again.

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Five days of silence. Five days of nought but his own thoughts. Five days on tenterhooks. Five days
since Harry had heard or seen Voldemort.

At first Harry had relished the notion of quiet. Within it he had felt calm, at peace even. It was as if he could pretend that the Dark Lord wasn’t in the same building as him, that Voldemort didn’t exist at all.

But the notion of peace was shattered by his own paranoia.

It had started when Harry quietly wondered what the psychopath was doing at that very moment. A few things then became very apparent to the young man. Voldemort hadn’t tried to speak to him. He wasn’t making any noise. Harry could hear no bells for Neepsey. No echoes in the halls. There was no shuffling of feet, no creaking floorboards. So, Harry had begun to pay attention to it more.

That was three days ago.

Now Harry was wringing his hands and pacing. Partly, his mind was running through everything the Dark Lord could be preparing, plotting, devising for Harry whilst the young man sat in the tower, well catered for, but trapped, nonetheless. On the other hand, Harry was listless. Muggles would call it ‘cabin fever’. Despite the space afforded to him by three very large rooms, the Gryffindor felt closed in and somewhat smothered. The furnishings, hand-picked by Voldemort Neepsey told him, seemed to stare at him. Living in quarters that were decorated in Voldemort’s image was suffocating. Harry had raw marks on his skin from where he’d scratched it with blunt nails.

Sleeping in a bed chosen by the Dark Lord creeped Harry out. Voldemort must have thought about Harry in this bed, the young man was sure of it. And, compared to the starchy cotton sheets in his Gryffindor dorm, the feel of satin was jarring and something he couldn’t get used to.

The sleepless nights had probably compounded the sense of imminent doom Harry couldn’t seem to shake.

What is he doing? Why can’t I hear him? Where is he right now? Is he watching me – listening to me? Is he hiding, waiting? Should I leave the room? Can I leave the room? Oh, god what will he do to me if I leave?

It was maddening.

Harry was very aware that the wards on his rooms were probably the only protection he had, except himself. He couldn’t stop jumping at every creak and groan of the walls around him at the castle heated and cooled. He kept looking over his shoulder, so sure something was right behind him. Harry had never felt uncomfortable when naked, he’d had no reason to be, before now anyway. He couldn’t close his eyes in the shower for longer than a few seconds, the sensation of something standing directly in front of him felt too real. Too constant.

Maybe the Dark Lord had found a way inside? He was probably playing with Harry, toying with him to watch him squirm before he did anything drastic. The young man’s heart hadn’t calmed to a regular pace in the three days since the paranoia had kicked in. Every thought brought a new wave of acidic anxious in his belly, fuelling the erratic tattoo of his pulse.

Harry needed to do something before he crumbled under the strain of it. He knew it wasn’t healthy sitting in one place obsessing over things he had no control over.

It had taken three days to remind himself that he was a Gryffindor through and through. Gryffindors don’t sit and wait for danger to come, they face it head on.
Well, it had really been Snape that had reminded him. On the forth night Harry had sent the Potions Master a rather long letter recounting the events of the first day, what Voldemort had told him, and what he thought Voldemort’s intentions were towards him.

Snape had firecalled him quickly after that.

’Soo, what you are trying to tell me Potter is that you bound the Dark Lord, pinned him to the ground, and proceeded to threaten him – and you are still alive? That is beyond insane Potter. Do you have any idea how much danger you might have put yourself in? You’re first instinct should have been to escape to the warded rooms afforded to you, not give him an excuse to seek revenge Potter.’ Snape’s speech started out as a drawl and ended with shouting, which through a few embers Harry’s way.

Harry had gone to speak for the sixth time, but Snape interrupted again. ‘Though, I suppose, that option would have been foolish if you didn’t have the wherewithal to exact the threat perfectly, which I loathe to say, you have Potter.’ Snape looked like there was a bad smell in the room.

‘Should I be expecting more headaches like this in the future? I do have a life outside of this Potter. I cannot be expected to spend my every waking hour fretting over what your stupidity had wrought upon you each day.’ Harry smiled, he knew that Snape was expressing concern, in his own strange way.

Snape sighed and looked heavenward. ‘You think his intentions towards you are deviant in nature?’

Harry nodded. ‘He- when he spoke in Parseltongue it was it was really obvious. He’d been staring. Said he could touch me if he wanted.’ Harry voice was monotone as he recounted it, he was scared that his voice would warble otherwise.

‘Circe.’ Snape pinched his brow and he stayed silent for a few moments. ‘This should have been covered by the terms. Why it hasn’t been? Well-.’ Snape bared his teeth, looking forward unseeingly. ‘He never expressed those kind of interests before. Even before the curse rebounded. Hasn’t apparently since he was a young man, if even then.’ Snape said more to himself than anyone else. ‘Best not tell Sirius. Knowing him he’d march to Slytherin Crest and try and off the Dark Lord like any good, unhinged Black would.’ Snape looked at him then. ‘The wards hold?’ Again, Harry nodded. ‘Good. You should continue your training then, especially the combative kind. There’s very little we can do at the moment Potter, although Miss Granger’s has all hands-on-deck to find a potential legal solution.’

‘What if he tries anything again?’ Harry’s voice was strained.

‘Then you will protect yourself of course.’

‘So, stay in here?’ Harry suddenly felt depressed at the prospect.

‘Merlin no. You were restless menace even when you had the entirety of Hogwarts to terrorise, I’d hate to think what a meagre three rooms would do to you.’ Harry’s stomach twisted in knots at the prospect of leaving the safety of the wards, though he knew Snape was right. He felt like he was beginning to go a little barmy. ‘Potter, it is a very real possibility that we may not be able to relieve you of these circumstances. The Armistice is legally binding, in all senses of the word – that plus the added complication of the Unbreakable Vow. I will be honest with you, the chances that you will ever leave the Dark Lord’s custody are slim at best, at worst non-existent. You may have to get used to the prospect of spending a very long time with him.’ Harry let out a harsh exhale at the truths Snape continued to lay down. ‘So, to that end, you will continue your training. There is a room in the basement that is not unlike the Arena in Grimmauld Place. I suggest you locate it then
‘I just don’t want to have to deal with him. I really don’t want to see him.’ Harry whined in a moment of weakness.

‘No one really does. He is not a pleasant person, even he’d readily admit to that. Actually, before his sanity was improved recently, he might have basked in the notion he was noxious to most people.’ Harry snorted at that. ‘Keep your wand on you – and maybe the cloak as well, just in case.’ Snape said softly. ‘I will alert everyone, except Black perhaps, about this new development. And Merlin Harry, leave your rooms soon. Your fidgeting is painful to watch.’

Sensing Snape had other matters to attend to. ‘Okay, will do. Thanks.’

Snape had become a close confidant of Harry’s over the week of Occulmency lessons. He trusted Snape’s judgement, that in itself made Harry chuckle a bit.

So now here Harry was, standing directly in front of the entrance to his rooms staring at the shimmer of the ward.

Just do it. You have your wand. You have your magic. He encouraged himself, well, attempted to at least.

His recited a few of his most trusted offensive spells as he crossed the threshold. When in the hallway his head snapped left and right looking any sign of Voldemort. When after a few moments there were none, he quickly made his way downstairs.

As he flew down the floors, there was neither hide nor hair of any of Slytherin Crest’s other inhabitants.

Basement. Basement. Basement. He said under his breath with each rushed step.

Harry paused at the foyer for as long as he dared. There was nought left except the walls and floors, and even they sported massive cracks and scorch marks. Harry’s joviality at the prospect of Voldemort throwing a tantrum didn’t seem so funny now.

The gouges dug out of the floor motivated him to continue downwards even quicker than before; the hairs on his neck rose.

He reached the final floor and passed several rooms situated within it. He glanced briefly at what seemed to be a very large wine cellar, then a sterile room with beds that looked to be an infirmary of sorts. Then an iced door which he assumed was a pantry or a massive fridge.

He finally spied the room Snape had mentioned through the window pane in the door, it had a raised platform and several different weapon types decorating the parameter. Harry took the handle to rush inside but glanced at the door across from it fleeingly and then pivoted to face it. The door was barred. Checking the hallway for any unwelcome guests he then stepped to look inside.

The room was made of dank mossy stone and had steel bar walls on the inside. Each compartment had shackles, the centre of the room held a chair with restraints and a St. Andrews cross.

A dungeon. Harry shivered.

When his eyes became used to the darkness, Harry could see thick splatters of red-brown marks within each cell, and concentrated below both the chair and the cross.
No, a torture chamber. Harry paled. This was where Voldemort held his victims during the War, maybe even before and after it. Harry recoiled from the door as if burned and flew into the Arena.

He shut the door behind him and slid down it, hyperventilating.

Harry told himself to ignore it because of course Voldemort had a dungeon and obviously had prisoners before. Because what was a Dark Lord without screeds of victims?

He shook himself then moved into the room. Harry spied the dummies, not unlike the one’s in the Black home. Though, unlike Grimmauld Place, this Arena had a litany of Muggle weapons. Swords, pikes, lances, knives, axes, claymores, maces and other weapons Harry didn’t have a name for shone in the low light of the room. Harry reached out to touch the edge of a curved blade, it was so sharp it sliced the pads of his fingers without him feeling it.

Harry set wards on the door to alert him to visitors and then pointed his wand at the dummies. ‘Eisque Inanimata’ He cast softly.

The dummy at the front swivelled slightly, it’s gears cranking, and then jutted to a standing position before walking to meet him.

Having had no human contact for the last five days, the movement left Harry feeling slightly perturbed.

He just hoped that these dummies were no different to Sirius’. Harry tested the dummy with a ‘Mollestult’ - a low-level offensive spell, not unlike Stupefy, that even a first year could defend with ease.

The dummies gears then whirled and it parried with a ‘Ferit Minata’. A soft strike hex, again suitable for young children to practise with. Harry deflected it wordlessly.

Okay, so far so good. Harry kept throwing spells of increasing intensity, the dummy always matched the spell strength and only diverged along spell effect. When Harry threw a Bombarda Maxima the dummy returned with an Ignis Verbera, the flames of the conjured whip only attempting to hit him once before it retracted. To Harry’s Submerci Ferma - a sink hole spell, the dummy sent roots ripping through the floor under his feet attempting to grab him - Vinea Vinctum.

Once Harry was happy that the dummy hadn’t been spelled to overpower him, Harry took off his robes and shirt. He then duelled with the faux-opponent as hard as he could. He used the Dark spells Sirius had taught him, he ducked and dove after the dummy mirrored his barrage of spells. Harry sent off four spells in quick succession, and the dummy fought back with their equivalents.

Sweat dripped down Harry’s head and chest. The dummy had got a few grazes in and after a particularly powerful Segmata Curse caught him, he was bleeding slightly on one side. Harry rolled and spun on the floor like a possessed dancer. He jumped a hex aimed at his shins and then deflected a cloud of black smoke – Harry wasn’t even sure what that particular spell was.

The burn from exertion exhilarated him. Bruised, bloody and sweating Harry expelled the anxiety he’d felt over the last few days. He was good at this. Maybe even excellent.

It gave him the confidence boost he’d needed. He shouldn’t be made to cower behind wards and stuck within only one place for the rest of his days. The Dark Lord did not hold dominion over him and would never do so.

If Voldemort had an issue with his independence, then he could go and royally fuck himself – as Sirius would put it.
Harry felt his wards tingle. He met the intruder with the end of his wand.

‘Sorry little one, I didn’t mean to disturb.’ Nagini hissed.

Harry kept his guard up. ‘What do you want?’ He asked as the snake slithered into the room then faced him.

‘Master wishes for me to inquire into your well-being, Green-eyes.’ Harry lowered his wand slightly but kept a tight grip of it.

‘Tell him it’s none of his business.’ He spat.

‘Ah, you are well then.’ She chuckled in a shuddering hiss.

Harry eyed the snake for a moment then turned back to the dummy in dismissal.

But apparently, the snake didn’t get the hint. ‘What are you doing?’ She slid to his left.

‘You can also tell your Master that is also none of his business.’ He threw another Bombarda at the dummy.

‘Ah, it is my question, not his.’ She explained nonchalantly. ‘Master doesn’t visit this room.’

Harry sighed. ‘I’m practicing.’ He made it clear he wanted this to be the end of the conversation.

‘What for?’ It actually hurt when Harry rolled his eyes, he’d done it that hard.

‘Fighting, defending.’ He hissed impatiently.

‘Against Master? You needn’t worry about that. He won’t hurt you.’ Nagini spoke coolly.

‘Well, forgive me. I don’t share in your confidence towards your Master’s intentions.’ He wanted this conversation to end. In fact, he didn’t want to converse with the Dark Lord’s pet at all.

‘Yes, I suppose he hasn’t given you much reason to yet.’ She agreed.

‘Correct.’ Harry then sent a Leg-Lock Curse at the dummy and it hit.

Nagini sounded her version of a snort. ‘Those lifeless things do not bear a challenge for you, Green-eyes.’

‘I am bleeding, however.’ He offered as he relaxed in the snake’s presence.

‘But not incapacitated. You are barely breaking a sweat.’ She laughed.

Harry looked at his own soaking torso and then stared at her archly. ‘Not breaking a sweat?’ He asked incredulously.

‘Nay. You could do better with an opponent you cannot so easily anticipate.’ She jibed.

‘And who do you suggest? Your Master is the only other one I can duel, and we won’t be engaging in an amicable activites any time soon.’ He snorted at the thought.

‘Not him. He is still in a sour mood. No - but I can duel with you.’ Nagini rounded on him, her head level with his.

‘Forgive me, but I am not interested in defending myself against sharp, venomous fangs.’ Harry
eyed them sceptically. She huffed.

Nagini gave him a measured look then nodded. ‘I can remedy that.’ She said conspiratorially.

She then slivered to the dummy and with a swipe of her tail sent it reeling back to the pile in the corner. Harry widened his stance, anticipating her to strike at him, but instead the snake curled into a tight coil and then her scales begun to tremble.

Then the snake grew. Oil-slick scales gave way to soft, matte, supple flesh. Her eyes shifted forward, and her skill largened then rounded. From her body, limbs sprouted and lengthened – curves bloomed and expanded until they settled into hips and breasts. Angular jowls filled out into cheeks and lips, her skulls bridge lengthened into a button nose. Then a thick mane of iridescent hair poured from her skull down to her back.

Now a young woman stood before him, her modesty protected by opalescent scales, her eyes a bright orange and her skin an inky black.

Harry stared at her, his jaw on the floor.

‘Will this do? My teeth may still be venomous, but they are blunt in this form. Too soft to break flesh anyway.’ She smiled.


Nagini laughed, a human laugh. ‘Master is exceptional, isn’t he?’ She twirled in pride.

‘How is this possible?’ He asked still dumbfounded.

‘Wizards can turn into animals, can they not?’ She raised her eyebrows.

‘Yes, animagi - but I’ve never heard of an animal, or reptile for that matter, being able to turn into a human?’ He approached her and without thinking touched her face. He almost expected his fingertips to come away with blackened ink, but all he felt was warm skin. Nagini then playfully snapped at his fingers in a serpentine gesture and then grinned at his quick withdrawal and slackened expression.

‘Animals without magic? No. But Master speaks the tongue of our kin and thus can evoke the magic within it.’ She explained as if she were talking about the weather.

‘Parseltongue Magic? I’ve not heard of that either.’

‘That would be unlikely. Master seems to be the only being who has understood it to the extent that he can manipulate it.’ She huffed. ‘Wizards think we are Dark, untrustworthy creatures. So, they rarely bother with us.’ She actually looked crestfallen at the prospect. She then teasingly pushed him away and then walked to the Arena platform. ‘So, will you fight me in this form Green-eyes?’ She echoed his previous complaints.

Harry straightened and considered the billion questions running through his mind. ‘How would you defend yourself; can you use magic?’ Seemed like the most relevant question. Harry might have felt more than a little out of his depth at that moment, but he’d be damned if he was entering a duel that only favoured him.

‘To an extent, yes. Master has taught me enough to defend myself successfully if needed, like if anyone discovered that I can achieve this form.’ She explained whilst toeing the ground beneath her.
‘His eyebrows scrunched together. ‘Why are you telling me this then? You know what would happen if your Master and I attempt to kill one another.’ Harry paled at the thought now. The idea of the Auror’s harming Nagini or as he’d put it, tear her apart, in this form seemed more like murder than simply putting down a pet.

‘We are kin, you and I. We are the same. Probably more so than Master and I.’ She gestured between them. ‘You hold a piece of him within you too. You feel him like I do. And I can feel you, you could learn to feel me too.’ She moved a little closer to him then. ‘In that spirit, I have revealed myself. Though, I hope you needn’t tell your brothers aligned with the Light about this form. Like you said, as a rule, animals don’t turn into humans. I suspect a serpent being an exception to the rule would not be positively received, not at all.’ She hissed softly.

With her words could feel her honestly, her hope, and the bond she perceived between them. Parseltongue allowed for many meanings to be interpreted, all of them honest feelings. The trust between them formed so quickly and Harry hadn’t settled into this kind of confidence in another being since he was a small child. She felt to him like a sister or a twin would. Harry didn’t know if it was the Horcrux or the words she had spoken, but he felt utterly relaxed around this creature. Suspicion, deceit, and doubt were the furthest thing from his mind as they spoke. She was so open to him in her speech, there was no hate or ill-will towards him.

It blew Harry away.

Harry couldn’t let the Auror’s or the Order know, she was right – they would clamber to destroy her at the earliest convenience, even in the face of the Armistice. ‘Okay.’ He said to himself, feeling like he’d lost a few bolts. ‘I agree – I will not tell them.’ Then Nagini’s arms flew out in excitement.

‘Shall we dance?’ She asked, a play on the English variant, in Parseltongue dance meant both ‘to join together’ and ‘to fight’. Nagini was bouncing on her toes in, brimming with energy.

Harry smiled, remembering how wonderful magic could be. ‘Yes, let’s see if I can grow to anticipate you, like the lifeless forms.’ He jibed playfully. The snake laughed and took stance at her chosen side of the Arena. ‘Your Master taught you the duel customs?’ He inquired politely. She nodded. ‘Good, let’s dance.’

They both bowed to each other giggling and then took the En garde stance. Harry’s wand was overhead, Nagini sank onto her haunches.

Then she lunged, Harry sent several hexes at her simultaneously. Booming flashes of light flew to her and she dodged them all in a fierce run. Her teeth were borne in a wide grin as she bounded from surface to surface with an almost feline grace. When Harry thought one of the more intense hexes would land, she hissed an serpentine incantation and deflected it with a wide swipe of her arm, like a lioness would against its opponent. Harry laughed gleefully at the display and she hooted in return. Harry had to rolled sideways to avoid her pounce from his right. He whooped and ran and laughed all whilst sending spells, curses and hexes at her. This felt like the first time he rode a broom, or Buckbeak, the first time he saw Diagon Alley, or Hogwarts.

Harry was exhilarated beyond measure and felt nothing but wonder.

She fought with savage freedom. Nagini was all wildness and youthful frenzy. For a fleeting moment Harry thought of feral children, of Pan and Artemis – the deities of the wild - at the sight of it. She kept him on his toes, she was faster than any human or Wizard he’d fought and he was quickly running out of breath, his limbs filling with acid and burning pain. Her magic was earthy and ran from her like a wind would through trees.
Each time Nagini nearly caught him or pushed him with her strange feeling magic she would shriek happily with a very human sounding ‘aha!’ or when a near-miss flew near her she chortled an ‘oooh-hoo-hoo!’ gently goading Harry.

Harry had never fought like this and had felt so joyous about it.

The room was buzzing with the energy of their joust and for a while everything looked brighter.

Then, Nagini swiped him with a leg which curled around him and then pulled him into a hold he couldn’t wriggle out of. They both fell to the floor with a muted thump on the soft surface of the Arena.

‘Do you yield little one?’ She giggled and tightened her hold when he squirmed uselessly.

‘Never!’ He laughed. He tried to wriggle more, but it was no use. She then started tickling him and Harry protested that duellists ’did not tickle one another’ with roaring laughter and breathless gasps.

‘Then do you yield, little one?’ She poked at his helpless state. He breathlessly said ‘yes! Goddamnit, yes!’ and she relaxed her hold. Harry then rolled to the side on is back gasping with a huge smile on his face.

Nagini sat grinning at his legless state. ‘See? Those lifeless forms are useless.’ She sang smugly.

‘Well, I doubt they could jump quite like you do.’ He panted, his chest expanding and contracting rapidly.

‘No one can.’ She said with a self-satisfied smirk.

Harry laughed sluggishly, all his energy was well and truly drained.

‘I would like to spar with you again, Green-eyes. You are enjoyable to defeat.’

‘I’ll hold you to that.’ His chest still heaving. ‘I’ll definitely beat you next time.’

‘You can hope.’ She barked gleefully. ‘Maybe next time we can raise the stakes?’ She gestured to the wicked sharp weapons adorning the walls. ‘I am even better when given the right tools.’

Harry’s eyebrows rose to his hairline.

Then Neepsey cracked into the room. ‘Hello Mister Potter, Miss Nagini – Master be wanting you’s both in the dining room. Dinner be ready.’ Harry cast a quick Tempus and his eyes widened; he had been duelling for hours.

Nagini stilled a little and then turned to Harry. ‘You will join us, won’t you?’ She asked sheepishly. ‘Master may be a sour snake, but he can be quite likeable if you give him the chance.’

Harry snorted. ‘I don’t know. I doubt I could ever find that man likeable.’ Nagini looked a little mournful about that.

‘Then join me. I wish to eat warm, tasty foods today. Mice are a bit bland after all.’ She beamed.

‘Eh-.’ He hesitated.

‘Neepsey will not be’s serving Mister Potter in his rooms today. Master forbade it.’ The house elf stared him down as if daring the young man to make her life any harder than if had already been in
recent days.

‘Fine.’ He groaned then stood and went to collect his clothes. Nagini sent a cool wind over him to clean the grime and sweat. He thanked her and then the three of them went upstairs.

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The Dark Lord was not used to being denied what he wanted.

He was even less used to being made a laughingstock out of.

He had never had to submit to a fucking teen.

After Voldemort had been released from his binds he had lunged after the route the boy had taken to his rooms. The little fucker needed to be taught a very important lesson, one that in his current state of mind, demanded payment in blood, weeping, and pain.

He hadn’t even made halfway up the first flight before his familiar wrapped herself around him. ‘Master, you mustn’t.’ She hissed furiously. ‘You are making a mistake!’

The Lord could only see in shades of red, his eyes darting to the floors above him to where he was. The insolent little cunt had dared to bind him, had dared to make a mockery of him. Lord Voldemort had razed whole villages to the ground for less. And the pathetic excuse for a Wizard thought he would get away with it?

The little fool.

‘Nagini, let me go.’ The snake did not often interfere with what he willed, so he deigned to be patient with her. It was a patience that was rapidly wearing thin.

‘You cannot! You both will die. Of all the actions to take, this is the most ill-informed.’ She spat.

‘HE HAS MOCKED ME NAGINI, HE TRIED TO MAKE A FOOL OUT ME! I REFUSED TO BE SHAMED LIKE THIS!’ He screamed, but the snake only coiled tighter.

‘Then take your frustrations out on anything but the boy. Because if you keep down this path, he will hate you forever and then it’s really on a matter of time before one of you kills you both!’ Her hiss a fierce torrent.

The Dark Lord could only howl with the frustration of it. He threw the snake off of him and then wrecked everything around him to dust, his magic howling from him.

He imagined the boy’s face on every surface; every bone was cracked, every inch of flesh flayed and torn to shreds. His screams, low and guttural bellowed through the halls, making Neepsey flinch before she vanished with a crack.

He continued like that mindlessly for most of the hour afterwards.

Days later, he now sat in his rooms with a thick tome. Though he tried, he failed to take any of it in. His mind was occupied with running through every moment of his and Harry’s first real tête-à-tête. He had termed as such because every interaction they’d had before paled in comparison by a brutal margin.

He bound me and I could not break free.

It had been an equally horrifying and infuriating experience. A mere boy restrained him and threw
him around like a soft toy. He had spoken down to the Dark Lord, like he was a clown and looked upon him like one would dirt on their shoe.

*He spoke to me like I was a farce, stunted simpleton.*

He had thanked Nagini a few days later once his mind had cleared. She was right to stop him, despite his deep all-consuming desire to slash the boy into little pieces. Even she had avoided him in the days following Potter's retreat to his rooms. Rooms that he had failed to leave for five days now.

His bones itched at the thought. If he didn’t catch himself, Voldemort would find himself rocking back and forth with an unblinking stare trained at his bedroom door. He could seek the boy out, put him in his place. He could do it without breaking the Terms. But his mind was so full of sweet violence that he could not trust his own will to exact anything but sheer murder.

When Potter bound him, he had simultaneously been reminded of his hate for the boy, for the prophetic doom he would wrought upon the Dark Lord and how small he’d been made to feel in that damnable orphanage.

How pretty his little green eyes would look when ripped out of their sockets.

He had to breathe slowly to tap down the need for that image. Snape had commented that the Dark Lord's state of mind had vastly improved since he'd merged with the majority of his Horcruxes. Before that, Voldemort hadn't noticed how shaky his grip on reality had been till then. He did not like that idea he'd been weakened in some form by the tools that were meant to strengthen him, to complete him. He ran a hand through his hair and pulled on it slightly, a comforting habit he'd taken on in the orphanage. Voldemort couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted anything akin to comfort.

Voldemort then felt a shift in the air around him; the tang of Potter’s magic had become more concentrated, filling the space around him.

*Ah, so the little snake has come out to play.*

The Dark Lord rushed to his bedroom door and heard muted footfalls flee pass it. Voldemort then quietly opened the door. The first glimpse of the boy in day was of his back, and the Dark Lord deemed it more than suitable to follow it.

Like a predator would stalk guileless prey, Voldemort stuck to the shadows as he made the same journey as the teen. If one were to look, they’d only see a spectre, within the haze, a pair of blood-red eyes.

He watched the boy as he stood in the foyer, his mouth agape. The boy paled before heading further into the castle.

*Where are you scurrying to, little mouse?* He thought cruelly.

In the basement, Potter hesitated at the dungeon door. Voldemort stood by as the boys face contorted in fearful disgust at the interior.

*Maybe we could make a home for you there, little mouse?*

His thought burled obsessively around the image of Potter splayed on the cross, thick welts from the barbed whip sticking into deep his skin before being torn away to land again, his screams piercing the air around them, making the Dark Lords ears ring.
The boy pivoted and then entered the Duelling Quarters.

There was no way out of that room except the one he’d just passed through, Voldemort’s face broke into a toothy grin.

Then he stalled at the route his thoughts had burled down once more. He had no control over himself and wasn't that the most ironic torture? The all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent Dark Lord had been thwarted by not only a teenage boy, but also his own mental faculties.

He then stood at a small viewing window to the far right of the door and watched Potter, itching to push those kinds of thoughts away. The Dark Lord watched the young boy with indifference and a little sliver of curiosity he wasn't ready to admit to yet.

So, the boy was practising.

Potter moved fluidly, dodging with grace and in an exacting manner. He was aware of everything around him. No curse or hex landed.

Before this, the most the Dark Lord had seen the boy use was a meagre *Stupefy*.

Then, the boy disrobed.

His skin was slick, glistening with a fine layer of sweat. His cheeks and neck were flushed, pink for the exertion. Not once did the boy make a sound except a small hoot when a spell landed.

Voldemort’s eyes widened when the boy had thrown some *very* Dark curses at the mannequin which it in turn mirrored with a Hassan Choking Hex. The boy’s eyes burned bright in delight with his inanimate sparring partner.

But the mannequin mirroring him would do only that; it would meet his level and not push him to achieve anything greater. Potter kept going, not ever stopping to break, not to even pause for a breath. He moved at the same punishing paces for *hours*.

At first he was merely entertained, but then the Dark Lord felt the energy leaving the boy in waves.

Gone was his rage for the boy. The fury floated away as if it had merely been thin smoke in his lungs.

Watching Potter push, twist, and force his body to defend itself was sublime. He was filled with life and the Dark Lord had been nothing but a deathly nightmare for some decades now. He still remained so, except now the thin veneer of his renewed visage disguised it a little better.

It reminded Voldemort of a description of the first Russian ballerinas; they had been exalted as beautiful, ghostly creatures, like sun rays in dewy morns. They brushed through the space uninhibited by earthly musings, they rose above it – their necks bared to heaven in delicate submission. On beloved wings, they held a breath above us all, and graced us with the air so that we could rejoice within it.

The boy certainly was not a novice. He yearned to join the young man, to be a sparring partner worthy of such an ethereal sight.

The Dark Lord stood and drank every hour of his dance in, he greedily swallowed what Potter offered.
An emotion he couldn’t name rolled through him with bruising ardour, and his world quietly shifted.

And then the futility of it all burned him. The Dark Lord would only be able to gaze upon such a sight from a distance. The boy would never embrace something as twisted and broken as he’d been. The boy hated him, for good reasons too.

‘Master.’ Nagini greeted. Voldemort inclined his head but didn’t take his eyes off the teen. ‘Do you wish for me to lead you away again?’ She offered. His familiar had proven to be a great source of restraint over these last few days. Each time he had lunged to throw himself at Potter’s ward, she had blocked his attempts. He was now thankful for her interruptions, even though it made him want to merge one more Horcrux at the time.

‘No, that won’t be necessary Nagini.’ He whispered. The snake then rose to the widow and hissed slowly at the sight the Dark Lord couldn’t tear his eyes away from.

‘Ah, the little one can fight well. But those things are awful for improving one’s skills. It merely hones them.’ She muttered then shook her head. ‘You should duel him instead.’ She advised softly.

‘No, I don’t quite trust myself yet with such a task – he wouldn’t either.’ The fact that he couldn’t sent a prickle of anguish in his belly.

‘He is cold towards you. You both dealt in grief to one another.’ She agreed.

He could see the ripple of soft muscle on Potter’s back roll with the slashing motion of a Diffindo.

‘What do I do Nagini?’ Voldemort breathed, his quietly spoken question fogging up the glass, his forehead resting against the pane.

‘Become that which he wishes to surround himself with.’ The snake followed that boy’s movements and rumbled, clearly impressed as her Master was.

The mannequin returned with a Severing Hex and it skimmed Potter’s side. Voldemort’s grip around the window-pane tightened again and he winced at the wound and the blood rolling down his side.

Circe, it had only been a few hours since he’d wanted the boy screaming in agony.

‘That’s a mountain to climb-.’ His whisper sounded tortured. ‘- its peak as high as the Nephilim nests, where the air ceases to blow and the stars spin soundlessly.’ His fisted clenched at the frame. Potter was like a bird in flight and the Dark Lord dwelled in the underbelly of the earth.

‘I am sure you can scale it.’ Nagini rounded on him then. ‘But that means you cannot stumble into old caverns.’ She warned him. ‘He will never follow you down there.’

‘Nay, he is above it all.’ He said on a shuddered breath.

Nagini then offered to speak to the boy on his behalf to which he agreed. Winded from his revelations, the Dark Lord turned to retire to more a more comfortable space.

He had to think. He had to think.
*Sings*  I have never ever ever ever, written this many chapters!

Cause we-eee have never ever ever ever, written a plot that's better.

Hem-hem, I'll be singing that in the shower I so desperately need later.

Thank you for reading so far!

I hope it's tickling yer pear eh? eh? ;)

I need sleep.

Kudos please if you haven't already exhausted that lovely gifting resource.

I WANT CRITICISM OF THE MOST CONSTRUCTIVE NATURE. I WANT YER THOUGHTS. NEED YER OPINIONS!

Lemonade then bed for me I think.
Nagini had all but dragged Harry to the dinner table, as he moved closer his heart thumped louder.

‘Don’t be nervous little one. You need to eat.’ The snake chided him gently.

That was easy enough for her to say, she didn’t have a Dark Lord salivating for her blood or flesh. Harry thought back to their confrontation and his stomach swooped.

Voldemort would not forgive such an immense slight on his character.

Harry wanted to make his excuses. He did have coursework to complete before Snape arrived tomorrow. Harry would very much like to have the tutoring session out of the way as soon as possible so he could spend time with the others who were also visiting.

But Nagini was stubborn and would not take no for an answer.

They climbed to the second floor and then strode down many winding hallways and passages until the entered a dining room.
Actually, calling it a dining room was an understatement.

It reminded Harry of the ballrooms in fairy-tale films or in historical documentaries of ancient Muggle residences. Mirrors and floor-to-ceiling portraits spanned the room, which Harry suspected a dragon would fit comfortably inside. The floors were a beautiful blushed shining wood, and Harry thought it may have once been used to stage massive parties, filled to the brim with dancing couples in formal dress.

In the centre stood a long marble and wood table, it was intricately carved with flowers that looked like the violets that wound around the staircase upstairs. Nymphs and fairies made of marble played along the underside and edges of the table, at the moment they seemed to be trying to capture wooden dandelion seeds that were floating above them.

It awed Harry.

But also, in the centre of the bright, pastel room sat a dark figure hunched over a tome.

‘This is my favourite room.’ Nagini announced as she pulled him to the table and sat him directly across from Voldemort who didn’t lift his eyes from the page, he was taking notes on. The snake then pointed to a painting behind Harry that portrayed a bird-like woman with coal black eyes and flaming red hair. ‘That’s my grandfather and his Mistress, Lady Wrackbet.’ Harry looked at Nagini confused then looked to the painting again, at the woman’s feet was a cottonmouth snake that undulated beneath her.

The snake in the picture nodded to them both and then left the frame, probably to go find a mouse in the painted fields on the fourth floor.

Harry then turned to Voldemort who hadn’t looked at him yet.

Five days of separation may have done the Dark Lord some good; he didn’t seem as keen to jump Harry as he had before.

Voldemort seemed so engrossed with the task in front of him that he hadn’t noticed their arrival. It gave Harry the rare opportunity to stare at him uninterrupted.

The Dark Lords features were set into an intense look of concentration; his eyes were narrowed and hooded by thick, dark eyelashes. His hair was messy, but in a good way, Harry thought. It fell on his forehead in waves which curled at the ends. He was scribbling furiously with the black feather quill, but his handwriting looked like a textbook example of Edwardian script. Harry watched his hands transfixed for a moment looking at the neat nails of his fingertips, following the cursive loop of his handwriting. And in a too-human gesture, Voldemort had his other fingers covering bitten lips, the tip of a finger trailing across his bottom lip.

The same finger which had trailed Harry’s five days ago.

This creature in front of him looked nothing like that man he’d fought before. This creature was calm, docile even. He could have been a regular student, perhaps at a Magical University, studying for an upcoming test. Harry then tried to guess what age the Dark Lord’s new body was. If he had to hazard a guess, he might say the man looked about twenty, maybe twenty-two. It was hard to tell those, Voldemort’s face had a timeless quality to it, like it had been carved and buffed from moonstone.

He didn’t even look up from his page when Neepsey levitated the eye-watering amount of small dishes to them. The incredible smell of it didn’t even seem to register on his face. He just kept
writing, obviously cocooned within the task before him.

The dishes in front of Harry were bright, colourful and meticulously decorated. The jewel-like colours of pomegranate seeds, flame raisins and pistachio nuts mixed in with turmeric yellow rice. Thick cuts of rare meat sat in a bed of roasted vegetables, glazed in a burgundy sauce that made Harry’s eyes bulge and his mouth water. Flatbreads and grilled pains were still steaming beside his, their scent wafting under Harry’s nose.

Harry’s stomach grumbled loudly and Nagini snorted. ‘Eat. There is plenty to try.’ She pushed several dishes at him at once. Nagini spooned massive amounts onto her plate, until it was almost over spilling the plate. She reached to grab the sloppy mess with her hands, but then Harry heard a tut-tut across from him.

‘What have I told you about eating with your hands Nagini?’ He chided her like one would a child. Nagini rolled her orange eyes and growled slightly. In a huff she grabbed the cutlery noisily and then went on to shovel the food into her mouth, barely stopping to even breathe it seemed. Well, he guess it made sense; Harry was reminded of the way a boa constrictor might consume a large deer - with a dislocated jaw and in one gulp.

Ron would be impressed. Harry snorted. At the noise Voldemort rose his head to look at Harry and the young boy gulped slightly.

‘Eat. You have been training for hours.’ He gestured to the food in front of them. Harry froze with the casualness of it all. His hunger won out over his shock though and he served himself from the silver tableware.

The silence after that made Harry feel immensely awkward. At the Burrow or in Grimmauld Place, mealtimes were accompanied with roaring laughter, music and the clicking of glasses being refilled. In here, the loudest noise was Nagini’s enthusiastic attempt to load as much food into her mouth in one go.

Harry then spied a beautiful baby grand piano in the corner. He thought of something but wondered if he’d be chastised for it. He knew the spell that would make it play. Then Harry was between suffering the maddening silence or drawing attention to himself by casting the spell on his lips, but really he wanted to play it the Muggle way.

At the Dursley’s this Summer Harry had found a few discarded CD’s that were all classical piano pieces. It was from when Petunia thought that Dudley might be inspired to pick up an instrument if exposed to the music of one. She had even went to the effort of buying her Dudders a keyboard and some music books. Her attempts had been in vain, and the CD’s were dumped in a living room drawer and the keyboard discarded in Harry’s closet.

Dudley’s music collection was his pride and joy, not that it was anything to be proud about. Dudley’s music tastes seem to be predisposed to enjoying repetitive thumping bass and high reedy synth melodies and singers which always seemed to ask the crowd if they were ready. Harry had to threaten Dudley with another tail if he didn’t keep the volume down past midnight.

Instead of trance, bass and booming build-ups, Harry had fallen in love with the piano.

Being left alone and having nothing to do, Harry had picked up the keyboard and the music books and started learning. What started as frustrated fumbling when his hands would always try and mirror one another, turned to a small haven during his lonely Summer.

He kept at it almost obsessively. His hands and fingers seeming to grasp the basics, to his unending
surprise, very quickly. Learning theory, knowing how quick, slow, hard or soft to play. Nodding his head to an imagined beat, whispering the notes under his breath. Simple melodies became muscle-memory and then he grew from strength to strength. He figured reading music was just like picking up a new language, except he felt that somewhere inside he already understood it.

Everything Harry couldn’t say out loud was sung from the keys of the piano and thus, his playing became a closely guarded secret. It was like writing a diary entry to him. At the Dursley’s he gravitated to pieces that sang in minor melancholy. If Vernon spat at him and called him a freak, it was the fast rage of Bartók. When his friends sent him letters and photo’s it was the happy-calm of Massenn. When he thought of faceless bodies with warm hand and a wet tongue against his, is was a Liszt transcription.

He mainly kept it to himself, he didn’t want his dorm-mate’s to have more fuel to poke at him with. He did have a small CD player which Arthur had gifted him for his birthday. Which turned into a very long conversation about digital music and how it functioned. The player worked with magic, thankfully, so the batteries didn’t blow up when he turned it on in school.

There was a song Harry would really like to hear, it was a little sad sounding, but it always calmed him. He often listened to it before bed.

Harry bit his lip and stared at the piano. His legs and arms started to fidget with the need to stand up and walk over to it.

‘Do you play?’ Harry’s head snapped to Voldemort when broke the silence. Harry was frozen again, his previous fidgeting grinding to an immediate stop. Harry didn’t know if he wanted to answer, fearing the Dark Lord would make fun of him if he said yes.

When Harry had thought he’d had the Dursley’s home to himself, he had played without using the headphones for once. The electronic buzz of the keyboard speakers was not as appealing as hearing it through the headphones he’d attached, but it was nice to have the music fill the air for once.

But then Vernon had slammed the door open and then guffawed at Harry calling him a snobby ponce for playing the Chopin piece.

Nervousness kept Harry silent for a few beats, but then he nodded. ‘Yeah.’ His mouth dry.

‘Do you want to play?’ Voldemort stared at him unblinkingly. Harry schooled his cautious expression into one of indifference. He looked back down at his food, feeling out of his depth. The last time anyone heard him play, he’d been laughed at. Now he sat in the company of a man who’d probably love nothing better than to see Harry humiliated and tearful – something that would definitely happen once he finished playing.

Voldemort pointed his wand to the instrument and the lid opened like a butterfly’s wing.

Nagini had stopped eating to give him a small smile, telling him to go to it with her eyes. ‘I have shown you my talents, little one. You should show me yours too.’ She encouraged with sauce all over her face.

Before he could tell himself what a bad idea this was, he stood up with shaky legs and then moved to the corner. He opened the lid over the keys, but his hands were sweaty, and the lid snapped shut again. He cringed when the sound boomed in the hallway. His cheeks inflamed he fumbled to open it more carefully this time. Then he saw the beautiful ivory keys and he let his fingers sweep over them slowly. He tentatively pressed down the C# and hummed in quiet pleasure as it rang.
He felt a little self-conscious about the piece, but then closed his eyes and simply started playing it, not letting his thoughts discourage him. It was one of the newer pieces from a music book Harry had bought on one of his many secret train journeys to London over the Summer. Surrey didn't have many music shops and he had already exhausted them of all of their piano related produce.

He inhaled then the room fell away as he fingered the keys.

The tune was simple and a little repetitive, but it is was also hauntingly bittersweet and sad. It filled his chest in equal parts serenity and anxiety, like waiting for a kiss or feeling yourself fall in a dream.

It obviously made Harry wax poetic too, he smiled at the thought.

The music filled the room, the echo of it built and Harry wondered if this was how church pianists always felt; like they were ascending higher and higher until the roof couldn’t even hold them down. The size of the hall gave the piece more power and each note felt sustained for eternity.

His mind melted away, thank Merlin. He had been trapped in it for too long. All the worries, the fretting, the anticipating slid off him. No training, no preparing, no being The-Boy-Who-Lived. In these moments he got his deepest wish – he was just Harry and then he was nothing but the sounds around him.

Harry was so lost to it, he didn’t hear the footsteps approaching nor did he falter when he felt Voldemort sit next to him. Harry was so calm that he couldn’t be spooked or stopped, he just simply didn’t want to. A small part of his mind told him he should stop, but he brushed it away. He didn’t want to interrupt this small happiness.

A second pair of hands joined him in the melody and rang a perfect harmony. Harry looked to his right and saw long pale fingers move in perfect sync with his own. They brushed the keys so softly that the harmony didn’t overpower the piece and only offered to lift the eerie feel of it.

The piece began to slow as if falling and breaking apart towards its end. Harry let himself bathe in it for a little longer, drawing out each note a little further.

When his hands stilled they stayed over the keys, slowly drawing down the cool smooth surface until his hand were in his lap.

Harry slowly turned his head and let himself look. Grey eyes stared back at him with pale lips parted slightly. Something had drifted inside him whilst playing. The idea of hating, of fighting, of defending was almost laughable now. Anything that broke the peace in his chest felt utterly unnecessary. Why did he have to live in fear when he could just have this? This simple pleasure of playing and having something to share. And he had shared it. He had shared it with his worst enemy.

‘You play beautifully Harry.’ He felt Voldemort’s breath brush his face as he said it. ‘I haven’t heard it before.’ Simple words, simple meaning. No confusing insinuations, no hiding, just an uncomplicated compliment and Harry’s smiled a little more because of it.

‘Thank you.’ Two words he never thought he would say to this man and mean them. This exchange was so pure and unembellished. It felt like breathing in clear air.

Thoughts of peace and friendship filled him. Why did he have to hate this man? Why couldn’t they share a space without one needing to reprimand the other? The thought of returning to it made Harry tired and weary. Nagini had gained his trust so quickly, why couldn’t he be like that with
Voldemort’s eyes roamed over Harry’s face like he wanted to find out what was underneath it all. Harry thought in that moment that if he’d asked any question Harry would have answered openly and honestly. He felt like he wanted to tell this man everything, he wanted him to know everything. He felt cool fingers brush lightly against his.

*I can touch you now. Cedric’s dead eyes staring up to the sky. The pain of the knife in his wrist. His parents telling him to run.*

Reality always did smack Harry in the face particularly hard. Harry recoiled from Voldemort whose face washed over in confusion when Harry shot out of his seat. Nauseating adrenaline sloshed in Harry’s gut and he made a break for the exit. Nagini shouted for his to stop, but he kept his eyes on the floor.

A hand grabbed his wrist and yanked him back, he pulled and shoved away like a small animal would if in a jaw with sharp teeth.

‘Get you fucking hands off me.’ Harry growled.

The Dark Lord didn’t, he only pulled harder. ‘Why the sudden change in tune Potter?’ Voldemort’s eyes searched his. ‘From where I was standing, you looked to be enjoying yourself.’

‘Is that a joke?’ Harry wrenched his arm, but the Dark Lord keep his grip. ‘Who in their right mind would enjoy themselves with you anywhere near them?’ Harry threw at him.

‘Don’t lie to me Harry, I’m kind enough to let an insult slide, but I can’t abide liars.’ He hissed.

Harry laughed humourlessly. ‘You’re so awfully conceited for someone so repulsive. You think I enjoy having you near me? I don’t.’

‘You did just now.’ Voldemort rumbled. ‘And it’s embarrassing to watch you deny it.’

Nagini shifted in her seat uncomfortably until she slowly raised onto her haunches.

‘You want the truth? Fine then. You make me sick. You make my skin crawl. Want to know why? Because you’re a sick fuck, a fucking murderer Tom. Do you get off on it? Hmm? Knowing that you murdered my parents just to get at an infant just to have him in your disgusting clutches later?’

Next think Harry knew his back had slammed against the floor beneath him. His wand clattered off the wall then rolled on the floor after Voldemort threw it from him.

‘Master! Stop! Stop-.’ Nagini lunged to them but Voldemort threw her back to her seat wordlessly.

‘I’m the sick fuck?’ He spat. Harry tried to breathe, but he was too winded. ‘Don’t think I can’t see it Harry. The way you gasp and bite back a moan when I touch you. I see it all of it little one; the pleasure pooling in your belly, the blood filling your cock, the way your hands shake when you realise your body won’t do what you are asking it to. The way your knees trembled with the weight of wanting to give into it.’ Voldemort’s pale hands clenched in Harry’s hair. ‘All that whilst knowing what I did to your parents, after your mother begged for her life to save you.

And I did fucking murder them Harry. I rejoiced in it; their screams, their begging, the way they desperately clung to protect you had me elated, and the tears they shed when they realised they couldn’t made me smile. I don’t deny my faults, but you? You cower from your own. You run from them like a rabbit from sudden noise.’
Harry clawed at Voldemort’s arms trying to push him off, he dug his nails in and felt the slick of blood under his fingertips. Harry was screaming at him to let him go and the Dark Lord just watched him with an awful grin. Nagini cried for them to stop hurting each other, but they both couldn’t hear her. Harry’s blood boiled in his veins until it burned inside him.

‘You scared Harry? Scared you might like it?’ The Dark Lord trailed a hand up Harry’s thigh, his eyes roaming over his body. ‘Oh yes, your terrified. Your so scared those little friends of yours would shun you if they knew what lurked beneath the surface. They don’t know do they?’ Voldemort berated in a sing-song voice as he pulled Harry towards him; his ear at his lips. ‘You haven’t told them that you wonder what it would be like to be taken, to be owned, filled up to the brim until your screaming into the pillow. What would your precious friends think if they knew that you wanted to feel hard lines and taught muscle under your hands and not the soft curves and plump tits of a willing cunt?’

Harry stilled at that, his eyes wide and alarmed. He stared at grey eyes in horror.

Voldemort kept going, he didn’t stop even though Harry begged him to in a rushed whisper. ‘How quickly do you entertain those scary thoughts before you push them away, utterly ashamed of yourself? Is it at the first instance or is it after you’ve sank so low into the pleasure of it you lose yourself? How many other boys have you stared at just that little too long? How many of them have made you want to beg for it?’

Harry shook. He felt sick. He felt-

Harry scrambled back and pulled himself into a run.

‘You keep hiding from yourself like that, you’re going to give yourself a fright.’ Voldemort called after him maliciously

As Harry climbed the stairs two at a time, scrambling as he flew up each floor, a rotten shame curdling in his stomach.

Panicked he slammed his bedroom door so hard the walls shook.

No way. No fucking way.

Terror clawed at Harry’s insides. His mind a fucking minefield of shunned thoughts, of hiding, of pushing it down.

Voldemort must have been bluffing. He was just bluffing. There’s no way he could know that. Jesus, Harry himself didn’t even know it! The thoughts rushed through him unbidden, the faceless hands and large arms. Harry grabbed a glass bowl and hurled it with a roar.

He hiccupped on every inhale and he strode in a confused circle tearing at hair, his nails digging in at the roots.

He couldn’t know. He didn’t know.

Harry threw his magic at the room and punched the wardrobe until he dug a hole in it. The frightened rage inside wouldn’t leave. He kicked over a table and burned through the wall hangings with a scream.

He knew. He knew. No.

He would tell everyone, he would tell everyone about it they would laugh, they would fucking
leave him. Harry’s panic reduced him to mindless rambling and sobs.

‘What do I tell them? I can’t – They will – Oh God no – The-.’ He convulsed.

The Muggle boy who laughed when Harry held his hand in the playground. Finch-Fletchley sneering asking him why he was staring. The way Cedric’s eyebrows raised when Harry asked to speak with him alone. Dudley slamming his face into the brick of the garden wall ‘you fucking ponce…pillow biter…arse licker’. ‘Get your hair cut boy, we don’t need the neighbours thinking you’re a poof when they already know you’re a freak.’ Vernon spat whilst stuffing his face with custard creams.

Harry bawled in a heap on the floor.

*What the hell was that at the piano? What the fuck was I doing?*

Harry deflated with chagrin when he hid in his rooms again. There was no way that was normal. That was such a weird reaction to everything that was around him right now. Peace and friendship with a bloody Dark Lord? A Dark Lord who had murdered his parents and his classmate in cold blood no less. What was he a fucking happy-clappy moron now? That thing killed his parents and fucking enjoyed it. He was disgusting. Harry was disgusting.

‘Harry.’ Nagini called from the door. ‘Hush, little one. Shh…’ She held her hand to ward and her eyes widened when it fell through the barrier. She padded to him and pulled him into a tight embrace. She hissed sweet nothings against his hair. ‘Your bleeding little one, you’ve hurt yourself – shhh. It’s okay -.’ Nagini’s hand slide down the scratches on his scalp and arms, her magic cooling the burn.

Harry’s gasped slowly to a small whimper as he clutched her arms. ‘I can’t- it’s – I don’t want that – I don’t want them to know that – I -.’ He wept uncontrollably, the repulsion feeding his fears.

‘They won’t. Not until you’re ready. It’s okay – shhh – I’m here. You should not feel shame. There is no shame in it. Keep breathing. That good Harry, well done.’ She cooed.

He groaned and held his head in his hands. Nagini pulled at them, then gave him his wand. It took several minutes, but Harry calmed down. His chest still shuddered, but at least now he could breathe.

‘I would not worry, little one. Your friends will not leave you for such a simple desire. I felt it from them when they entered our home, they love you. They will always love you. The air was full of it when they embraced you.’ She smiled.

Harry gave her a shaky smile back. ‘I’m being stupid, sorry.’ Nagini shook her head.

‘These are normal fears. Being scared in matters of love is a path we all take.’ She grinned. ‘Even I am frightened of it, I have been since I was gifted this form. Human emotions are…overwhelming at times.’ She then pinched his cheeks. ‘Come, let yourself soak in warm waters and then find peace in slumber.’ She pushed him to the bathroom. ‘Call for me if you have need of me.’ She waved before allowing him some privacy.

Harry did not look at his own body as he showered. He did not let him self think as he dried off or put on his pyjamas. He shut himself away as he lay on the too-big bed.

He cringed slightly and then forced himself into nothingness.

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Voldemort had looked up from the tome he was studying about the Haitian origins of Voodoo to see Potter staring longingly at the piano.

He had been pointedly ignoring the boy, not trusting himself around him in the slightest. Even instructing the young man to eat had taken every ounce of control he possessed. He wanted nothing more than to speak with him, to explain himself, to seek his forgiveness in hope that Potter in turn would give him his trust.

Potter was anxious, that mush was clear, but for once Voldemort didn’t seem to be the cause of it. The boy’s eyes flicked from his nearly finished plate to the instrument like one would toward a first love. He knew that look. He’d seen himself wear it often enough in his teens.

One of the few good things that orphanage forced the children into was piano lessons. In the forties, being able to play was a symbol accomplishment and competence. If others knew you could play, you were revered as intelligent and the matrons thought that the boys needed all the help they could get.

Lessons were haphazard and inconsistent, but the orphanage housed a small spinet piano in the playroom. When Voldemort, then Tom, showed some promise with the art he was often asked to play for visitors, mostly those who were looking to adopt.

Voldemort couldn’t care less about the prospective homes his talent may offer him, what took him instead was the music itself. It let him drift away from the there and then and let him imagine himself in lands far away from the dump he resided in.

He was at his happiest when he played. He was only happy when he played.

But all of that was ruined by the war. The spinet was sold for funds for the boys schooling, then the rations started, and the bombs started dropping. Tom then lived in fear and misery, always waiting for the bomb to land on top of him, going hungry when the food supply couldn’t reach them through the rubble-laden streets.

Being accepted into Hogwarts offered him a little relief from the terror of the orphanage, but it still paled in comparison to the happy moments he’d had in the playroom.

The Dark Lord’s stomach clenched when Potter started playing. The music was heart wrenching. The boys face had thawed into a relaxed, contented expression. His head dipped in time with the slow swells of each note.

Before Voldemort knew it, he was walking to him.

He hadn’t played in decades, but all that mattered was that he did so with Harry. The music had drawn him in, Potter had enthused him.

He mirrored the boy like he had always known this song. Voldemort’s body filled with warmth at the fact the boy hadn’t stopped or rejected him. It was a perfect moment.

In his past attempts to seek perfection, Voldemort had been left cold, enraged and greedy. In his mind perfection equated immortality. But with each death exacted and soul-split ensured, he had felt more desperate for the elusive sense of perfection he thought it would have gifted him.

*Perfect seven. The most powerful number in magic. Seven deaths, seven cracks, seven protections.*

All it had done was ensure he’d live forever in a broken body with his sanity torn to shreds.
Gods, the boy is beautiful.

He was smiling. Circe, Potter was smiling.

A giddy sensation took over and Voldemort’s fingers nearly faltered.

The perfect moment ended to soon, the Dark Lord held his breath as Potters sun kissed hands slowly, softly finished the piece. Voldemort felt like he was trying to hold onto a wave, just for the water to slowly slip through his fingers.

Their thighs were touching, and the warmth permeated his skin. He had been so numb in his former cold-blooded body that sensations like these now felt amplified, and right then he was happy for it.

Voldemort couldn’t take his eyes off Potter’s profile, his eyes were closed and his breaths warm and heavy. The Dark Lord burned the image into his mind, he wanted to remember this always. He would immortalise it in the Pensieve and relive it over and over again. He would bottle it and keep it in in the safest place he knew because this was the most precious gift.

Harry’s beryl green eyes locked with his. His pupils distended to encompass the ring of colour. He smiled at him lazily, happily. Voldemort would have given anything then to see inside Potter’s mind, to wrap himself within it. He couldn’t imagine any greater happiness than that.

His pupils retracted suddenly, and just as quickly the boy paled then shot off his seat, bounding out of the room. The change was so abrupt that the Dark Lord’s mind failed to keep up with it.

Voldemort looked at Nagini whose eye were as wide as his own. He wanted to call for him to come back, but the sound was stuck in his throat.


He grabbed at Harry as if his life depended on the proximity. And when the boy denied him, dreadful venom flowed from his lips. His newly sought control was shattered before it had even started.

Voldemort screamed with the frustration of it.

But had every reason to leave, didn’t he? Voldemort was nothing but something to be repulsed by. Self-hatred blackened his mind then and he slammed the piano shut. He had orphaned the boy, then stalked him, and took every effort to end the boy’s life. Without him, Potter would have never known of death or hatred or horror.

Oh course, why in Gods name would Harry want him in the manner Voldemort had spat at him. He had humiliated the boy, he’d projected those fears which he himself had at his age. The fear, the repulsion so intertwined inside the unending compulsion, wayward glances and young hope in the face of futility.

The fear of never knowing what it is to be loved.

The Dark Lord had hidden himself from those feelings, thinking himself above such a depraved weakness. His teenage desires did nothing but separate him from his peers even further. He heard the whispers and jokes of other boys who had the same desperate hopes, who were also so deeply terrified that they would be revealed and then they would be borne to the wolves. The wolves that would surely rip them apart piece-by-piece for such an unnatural need.
‘I’m a monster Nagini.’ He could only admit it in a whisper, each word cut so deep.

Nagini stared at him with orange eyes. ‘You needn’t have done that.’ She was furious with him and had every right to be. ‘He is too young to know himself. And who are you to tell him what he wants when he does not yet know it himself?’

Voldemort dug his palms into his eyes until he saw stars. They both lurched when they heard glass shattering and a broken yell.

They both ran up the stairs to Harry’s rooms. As the approached they both flinched at the scent of soured magic; it was black cloud of cloying terror and it choked them. He could hear the boy’s gasps and sobs. His whimpers and broken ramblings of the things he was most frightened of: discovery.

Nagini held her hand out before he reached the door, she pushed him into the wall. ‘Your actions have terrible consequences Master. You will stay here and listen. Feel the soul you share, feel what you have done to him. Remember this. This is what happens when you fail him.’

The Dark Lord could feel it. He felt all of it.

Harry’s terror-induced state drowned them both. Voldemort’s soul wept inside him in tandem with the boys wails of grief. With mournful eyes he watched Nagini enter the rooms and heard her comfort the boy, in a way he couldn’t. Harry’s shame ripped through him, and he sank against the wall.

This was his first taste of the connection they shared. He hadn’t opened it willingly before now. And what an awful beginning it was.

He stared ahead blindly with watery eyes and bared teeth. He only felt self-disgust. He’d done this. He’d created this monster writhing inside the boy.

*Your bleeding little one, you’ve hurt yourself.*

*I can’t- it’s – I don’t want that – I don’t want them to know that – I -.*

Voldemort wanted to cover his ears like a child, but he didn’t let himself.

Flashes of the boy’s memories resounded. Sneering children, questioning smirks, helplessness, loneliness, trapped with a family who scorn him.

Voldemort was worse than any of that.

*Vol-de-mort.* The name now left a bitter taste in his mouth. Nagini was right; who was he to tell the boy to face his fears? His own name, flight from death, was proof enough of his own cowardice.

The boy’s sobs quietened. But now he had replaced the anxiety under thick numbing detachment. Nagini’s assurances didn’t reach him and the boy was well versed in acting in a manner that placated those around him.

The Dark Lord closed his eyes and thumped his head against the wall behind him.

He hadn’t ever grieved before, not really. Even when he was young, he had forced himself to quiet those kinds of things in favour of indifference. He had wanted an image that reeked of self-control and superiority. Aloofness, he thought then, suited his cold features. The matrons at the orphanage whispered that he’d had evil eyes and that he would one day end up in the clanger for something
awful. He scared them with a child’s face that knew too much about adult frailties and weakness.

He hated them for it. He hated the Muggle’s even before he learned he was different from them. Oh, and how she rejoiced when he discovered it was on a genetic level. Tom was thrilled he shared nothing with those beasts whom dealt only in rejection, loathing and scorn. He was nought but the bastard son of a snivelling Muggle father who’d spat on him in disgust. He was ashamed of that name, that awful Muggle name.

But if Harry had called him Tom, then Tom he’d become once more.

He opened his eyes and found Nagini sitting across from him, orange eyes staring at him in cool calculation. Her inky black skin looked dull; her eyes tired. ‘He does not deserve this.’

Tom shook his head and looked away from her. ‘No.’

‘And what of his mind?’ She whispered.

He shook his head again as he dragged his hands down his face.

‘Fix it.’ She stated. ‘Or my loyalties shall be questioned.’ She murmured. Nagini stood and cocked her head down the hall. He stared at her for a few beats and then rose to join her.

As they descended Tom clung to the small whispers of Harry’s mind and mourned them.

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Actually feeling so dark after that.

But hey hey, nice Tom's out to play.

For anyone interested knowing the song that Harry plays it is Path Solo by Max Richter. I've been listening to it obsessively since I started writing this and it's behind a lot of the motivation to start it. It's kinda cool cause it sounds like it's being played in a huge hall too. I imagine Tom's part as being a lighter harmony over the main melody after the first two bars.

Well, that's enough gushing about a piano solo. Though imagining Harry playing it make me all sorts of fluffy.

What did ye think? How did ye all feel?

Thank you for reading so far, been reading the comments and I'm all pink in the cheeks now. Happy, so happy.
Harry almost, almost regretted agreeing to a tutoring session at this godforsaken hour.

He hadn’t had much sleep and Snape’s monotone drawl was doing very little to keep him awake. Maybe if the subject matter were interesting, Harry might have been able to pay attention. However, listening to an account of the small list of benefits when one infuses grindylow intestines with hard wood objects was hardly invigorating.

Harry also almost let his eyes slide together and allow himself to be carted off to the place where sweet, sweet sleep happened. The young man thought it was strange to feel hungry for sleep too. But then images of bacon butties reminded him the growling of his stomach wasn’t for sleep. That meant however, he’d have to hold off one to satisfy the other. Eat or sleep. Sleep or eat. Eat then sleep? No, sleep then eat. No, that didn’t sound right. Maybe he could do both? Eat in his sleep or sleeping whilst eating – they were much of a sameness though, weren’t they? Harry drooled.

‘Potter!’

Harry snapped to attention and then he flailed knocking over his inkpot, green bloomed over the surface of the table and his fingers as his fumbled to right it. He then looked at Snape and gave him a sheepish grin.

‘Have you been listening at all?’ Snape said slowly. Harry gulped.

‘Eh-.’ Was his inspired response.

‘Potter, need I remind you that I am sacrificing my coveted spare time to tutor you, so that you might one day make – an albeit painfully average – attempt at your exams?’ Harry cringed with each syllable.
'Sorry sir.' Harry mumbled as he Vanished the green from his desk.

But his wand slipped in his slack grip and the green ink flew. Splat. Now Harry looked at Snape in horror; the Professor's hair and face were dripping with the alarming shade of green. There was an even more alarming shade of purple skin under it too.

Snape was vibrating with a promise of violent intent.

Harry thought it might be a good idea to run; it may allow him to live a little longer.

'Potter.' He intoned dangerously, wiping the ink from his eyes which only made everything worse. 'Circe, save us.' Harry watched in morbid fascination as Snape attempted and failed to remove the substance. Everlasting ink, his mind supplied. In the interest of remaining uninjured, it would probably be best to keep that little titbit to himself.

Snape placed both hands on the desk in front of him and stared Harry down. Harry thought his lip might start bleeding for how hard he was biting it as a bubble of hilarity choked him. 'What hope do you have at passing your exams if you refuse to listen and seem to neglect casting even the simplest spells with any sort of success – at least not without potentially wounding those around you?' Snape was all acid and venom.

Harry mumbled his apologies and set to Scourgify the too bright ink saturating his tutor's skin. Snape held up his hand abruptly. 'Forgive me Potter but understand I will not risk you casting to clean me when you pose the risk of cleaning my head right off my shoulders.' Snape looked akin to a grotesque Christmas tree; Harry had to grip his thigh painfully to not laugh - hard. Harry thought that if Malfoy were here, he'd be in tears – small mercies, he mused.

The Potions Professor righted himself, although a sickly green sheen still stained his already concerning parlour. A renewed round of laughter threatened to escape, but he valued his own life too much, Harry had to hold his stomach to stave the temptation. 'What is going on? You are not usually this distracted – well, not recently at least. Falling back into old patterns are we Potter?' Snape put a hand through his hair and all but snarled when his fingers came away wet and green.

Harry bit his tongue before he'd processed Snape's question, and then he went slack. 'Didn't sleep much.' He said with his eyes downcast.

Snape paused in his futile attempts to right his appearance. 'Pray tell, what was more important than suitably preparing yourself for this lesson?' Snape's words sounded harsh and biting, but Harry had learned to interpret the scathing remarks and cutting jibes for what they really were – genuine attempts to inquire into his well-being. After a solid week of sharing your mind with another person, you tend to know them a lot better afterwards.

To that end, Harry knew that Snape revered honesty above all else. 'We had fight at dinner – it was pretty bad. He said some things I- I didn't want to hear.' But Harry's honesty could only go so far.

'Did he hurt you?' Snape asked softly.

'No.' Harry replied a little too quickly. Not in the way you're thinking, he amended internally.

'What did he say?' Snape searched his face. 'It has obviously shook you.'

'He called me a coward for running away from him. Nagini tried to help, but I ended up running anyway.' That was as close to the truth as Harry was comfortable with.

'Running away from him is not cowardly Potter. In fact, most would say it's intelligent.' Snape
smiled. ‘Don’t let what he says affect you – the man is hypocritical as he is poorly informed.’
Harry’s eyebrows rose then, Snape spoke about his old Lord as if the man were, by any stretch of the imagination, a normal human.

Harry went to spoke before he was interrupted by Nagini. ‘Oh, sweet Severus is here! Ah, today is a blessed day indeed!’ The snake slivered and proceeded to wrap around the exasperated Professor who – as Nagini tightened her hold – seemed to resign himself to his fate though highly uncomfortable.

Harry cocked an eyebrow, landing a questioning gaze at the pair. Snape huffed. ‘Nagini seems to enjoy my company, why is beyond me.’

‘Ah, his voice is like the rub of velvet against my ears.’ Nagini nuzzled her face into Snape’s hair. ‘Always to slick with sebum. It smells divine.’ The snake cooed as if in heaven. Harry couldn’t help himself; he barked a laugh even though slightly disgusted.

‘She likes your hair apparently.’ Harry translated, his tone dripping with mirth. Snape totalled him a scathing look as Nagini slithered to wrap herself around his shoulders.

‘Tell him that his eyes are beautiful too! So black and alluring, like onyx gems sparkling in moonlight.’ Harry had to hide his face in folded arms on his desks due to the shaking and tears from silent laughter.

‘Your eyes too.’ He choked out before the laughter turned into a full bellied guffaw.

Snape considered the snake, clearly miserable and fatigued. ‘One word of this to anyone Potter and I’ll make your life a living hell that the Devil himself would cringe at.’ Harry knew that the threat was a very real one and then promised to keep his mouth shut.

Snape proceeded through the lesson and the homework he set Harry seemed a lot more taxing than usual. The young Gryffindor suspected foul play.

‘We will aim to – hope beyond hope – advance your potion crafting skills. I suspect that without Weasley there to distract you, you might improve. However, I shan’t hold my breath.’ Snape then gestured to a cauldron which had been bubbling since the beginning of their lesson. ‘We will be working to build a rather complex – for you anyway – potion. These private lessons I am so graciously offering, afford us the time to delve into the intricacies of potions development.’ Snape brought the cauldron over to the table after sending Harry’s textbooks and parchments into his bag. ‘Knowing your utter disregard for the exciting potentials of this art, I have deigned that a more suitable learning method may be of benefit to you, and more importantly, my sanity.’

‘Oh?’ Harry peered over the edge of the cauldron. ‘And what might that be?’ Harry tried to hid his interest out of stubbornness – but the potion was calling to him almost, as if it were drawing him in. Though, Snape could clearly see through the guise and smirked at his attempt.

Snape tapped his wand on the edge of the potion. ‘This one is a particular favourite of mine. The potion is Revelmente Mortis and is a rather fascinating variation on Veritaserum combined with structural elements of the Draught of Living Death. Highly dangerous to make, potentially lethal to take.’

‘It smells like Death.’ Nagini agreed.

‘Potentially lethal?’ Harry asked, interest well and truly piqued.

‘Yes, if consumed, it allows the brewer to ask any question of the recipient. Even though
compulsion potions generally have the intended effect, strong minds can refuse them. But no one can reject poison through will alone. The potion keeps them on the edge of death, if the subject refuses to answer truthfully— they will die. For every truthful response, the recipient steps closer to their original state.’

‘That sounds awful.’ Harry’s face was contorted in distaste. ‘Who’d think to make something like that?’ He sounded of repulsed.

‘Someone desperate.’ The snake chortled.

Then a disconcerting grin bloomed on the Potions Master’s face. ‘Me.’ He grinned further. ‘This is my creation.’ Harry would have laughed with Nagini if the image of the horrific take on truth or dare the potion forced wasn’t swimming through his head.

‘Circe, why?’ Harry couldn’t understand what would drive Snape to create such a ghastly substance.

‘Espionage Potter, I am extremely intimate with the practise. A practise which sometimes necessitates strong arming. Like I said, compulsion potions can loosen tongues, but willful persons can shake them off. But nothing loosens tongues quite like the threat of death.’ Harry shivered at Snape’s gleeful expression. ‘This then a well-cast Obliviate ensures discrete answers to important questions.’

‘You ever used it?’ Harry wasn’t sure he even wanted to know.

‘Yes, on occasion – but only as a last resort.’ Snape seemed to remember something and then his expression lost its joviality. ‘I created it during the War before your parents died, used it then and again laterally when rumours of the Dark Lord’s return started sounding.’

‘So, it was used on both sides.’ Harry said more to himself than Snape.

Snape nodded. ‘Again, important questions needed honest answers.’ Snape sighed. ‘We are diverging from relevance.’ Snape took a book from his satchel and laid it on the table. ‘Potions can be interesting if you allow them to be Potter. Now, I know you’d sooner run for the hills than pour over books like these to familiarise yourself with the theorem and method, like how Miss Granger does with a concerning degree of rapture.’ Harry snorted at that. ‘However, I have had the privilege of teaching a broad range of students. Some prefer transcribing tomes, others prefer brewing repeatedly until something sticks, and others like to know the outcome of the potion and work back from there. You fall into the latter category, but you lack incentive; simply achieving good marks doesn’t seem to be enough for you.’ Snape rolled his eyes. ‘So, instead, we will synthesise a potion that achieves an effect of your choosing, like I did with this.’ He gestured to the potion cauldron. ‘This way you will know the outcome, learn the method and theory necessary to create it, and have the desire to actualise its outcome.’

‘You’re saying you will let me make a potion, from scratch, and it can do anything I want it to?’ Harry’s voice rose a little towards the end. The Potions Master was, for lack of a better term, a control freak. Any divergence from the approved curriculum was met with gross punishment. Harry theorised that to Snape would lay an egg if he thought any of his students were attempting to create potions without a Potions Master accreditation. Harry had heard of one girl who’d tried to make a variant of on Felix Felicis; she was suspended and was barred from ever attempting to make a potion again whilst at Hogwarts.

‘Yes Potter, as you so intelligently put it. But within reason; I do not want you creating something that will put lives in danger.’ Snape paused in thought. ‘Some effects are, so far as we know,
impossible to achieve with current theorem and methods. Like a cure for lycanthropy or vampirism for example. In that spirit, your intended outcome needs to realistic.’

‘So, if I wanted a potion that could, I don’t know -.’ Harry racked his brain for an effect. ‘-like, let you eat as much food as you want or something, then you’ll help me make it?’ Harry started smiling to himself and was, even though he’d never admit it, excited about potions.

‘Of course, you’d use it for something as moronic as stuffing your face. I suspect that’s Weasleys mournful influence.’ Snape shivered at the thought of Ron’s eating habits, Harry could sympathise, he then schooled his face into stoic professionalism. ‘And I will not help you make it. I’ll be acting as a guide only. But gaining the knowledge required to create it is all on you. I will simply be nudging you in the right direction and making sure you don’t kill yourself or anyone else.’

‘Okay, how do I start?’ Harry beamed.

Snape mimicked him in a mocking tone before he continued. ‘Circe. Think of the effect you’d like to achieve. Then we can build from there.’ Snape motioned for him to think on it. Nagini unwrapped herself and then climbed up Harry before resting on his shoulders.

Snape mumbled something about finding a cleaning solution and his next venture being an anti-idiocy deterrent before stalking off. Harry stroked her scales before grabbing his quill and writing down a few ideas.

Harry thought of Dudley’s old comic books he’d read at Privet Drive. Maybe a speed potion? One that makes you run faster. Hmm, no. Oh! An invisibility potion – in fact no – I have the cloak for that. What would I use? What about a potion that lets you see through walls? Harry recoiled from that idea when he imagined what Voldemort use it for if he got a hold of it. Nope. That’s a bad idea, a very bad idea. No. Something cool. Something that helps people. A cure for something, but for what? Something that needs cured, fixes something broken maybe. Something that- Harry’s thoughts froze.

Images of Merope Gaunt feeding Tom Riddle Amortentia came from left field. So did the information that children conceived under it effects would struggle to understand love. Hermione had explained it to him after they had seen the Pensieve memories. She said it would explain a lot of Voldemort’s behaviours.

Harry stared at the page of his scribbled ideas blankly turning the images of Merope tears and young Voldemort’s too-adult expressions over in his head. What if he could – what if – his thought burled nervously, unable to finish themselves.

‘What are you thinking of, little one?’ Nagini inquired and then stated. ‘Your heart has quickened.’

Harry’s eyebrows came together as an idea bloomed then solidified. This was mad, barmy even. ‘What does you Master think of love, Nagini?’ His hand hovered over the page, a drop of ink spilling from his quill.

‘Love? Why do you ask?’ Nagini’s head turned to face him directly. Harry thought that it was strange why the movement didn’t feel threatening anymore. Not that he’d ever been afraid of snakes, but that he trusted her enough that it didn’t feel uncomfortable - unlike his current train of thought.

‘I was wondering if he’d ever mentioned anything about it. But it doesn’t matter, it was just a silly question.’ He went to scribble down other ideas, all of which seemed a little ridiculous now.
Nagini stared at Harry and he did his best to not look at her curious gaze.

‘He has only mentioned it in passing. He has not ever been in love, if that is the answer you seek.’ Nagini offered, her tone soft and open. She was letting him know it was okay to ask more if he needed in the undercurrent of her Parselspeak.

‘What has he said about love?’ Harry was thankful that Snape couldn’t translate any of this, otherwise he might have died from mortification.

‘Only that it irritates him or that he views it as wholly unnecessary.’ Nagini nudged his head so that he would look at her.

‘He hates it then? That figures.’ Harry snorted. The morning sunlight burned his eyes slightly, he wandlessly dipped the blinds.

‘Nay…not quite.’ Nagini said wistfully as she dipped her head.

‘What do you mean?’ Harry could feel the snake tighten around him slightly, he guessed she was uncomfortable with discussing this.

‘Master is a man who prides himself in the knowledge he has acquired. Things that he remains ignorant of are either ignored or rejected as folly.’ She explained in a whisper. ‘Love…frustrates him. He understands how to provide for someone, maybe even care for them. But loving a person is far more than that. He does not know how to give himself over to another like that.’

Harry found it difficult to form his next question. ‘Do you think he’d like to become…enlightened if given the option?’

‘The answer to that is dependent on how to seek to exact it.’ She pointed her tail to his parchment. ‘Does it have something to do with this?’

‘Maybe. It’s just an idea.’ Harry mumbled embarrassed.

‘Tell me.’ She pushed gently.

‘It’s a stupid idea really. But I was thinking – that – eh - I could make a potion that might cure the effects of being conceived under a love potion?’ His speech rushed out in a too-fast garbled mess.

Nagini didn’t say anything at first but cocked her head as if considering his idea carefully. ‘If successful, would you force it on him?’ The undertone of her Parselspeak revealed that although she wouldn’t be opposed to the idea of a cure, she was to the idea of dosing her Master.

‘No, definitely not! He would only take it if he wanted to.’ Then Harry laughed. ‘It probably wouldn’t even get that far, I suspect he would throw a fit if he knew what it was and why I made it.’ Harry supposed it was a sign of how much he trusted the snake that he’d all but admitted that he wanted to give Voldemort some sort of cure.

Nagini shook her head, her eyes bright. ‘He might surprise you. As I said, he prides himself in knowing things. Remaining ignorant of this pains him. Even if he hides that affect.’

Harry scratched his head and Nagini chided him for disturbing his injuries, then he was reminded of last night’s events. ‘Pity it wouldn’t cure everything else.’ He sated grimly.

Snape then entered with a flourish. ‘Have you settled on anything yet Potter? I’d like for us to get started sooner rather than later.’ Snape was noticeably less-green, but it seemed that he’d missed a
‘Maybe. I’m not sure if it’s feasible though.’ Harry fidgeted uncomfortably until Nagini gripped his hands with her tail in a comforting gesture. ‘Or sensible.’ He amended.

‘It would breach my understanding of you if it were sensible Potter. Shoot.’ Snape took a quill to take notes.

Harry looked at him archly for the uncharacteristic, informal directive until he realised he’d have to try and explain the idea without revealing the motivation behind it, which was painfully impossible.

‘I’d – eh – like to try at a – cough - cure for those conceived under the influence of a -lo-love potion sir.’ Harry cringed so hard he thought his ears might shrivel off.

Snape looked up from his page and searched Harry’s face. When he’d found something he then leaned back in his chair and pressed his finger together. ‘Interesting.’ Snape mused. ‘It would have several particularly charitable applications if you achieved it.’ Then the Potions Master took a deep breath as Harry let out his. ‘We both know what inspired this idea, but the question still remains; what would you do with it, if successful?’ He asked softly.

‘I wouldn’t force anyone to take it.’ Harry thought that avoiding mentioning Voldemort by name would allow him to hold onto the scrap of dignity he had left.

‘Would you offer it to him?’ Well, there went any attempt at being non-specific.

‘I don’t know. I think he’d blow his top off if I did. Nagini disagrees though.’ The snake nodded and then nuzzled his cheek. Harry allowed the affection, even if the thought of Snape’s hair grease being wiped on his cheek grossed him out.

‘It would be a very compelling study if he were to accept it though.’ Snape took his quill and wrote on the parchment. ‘I like the idea though. Even if not given to the Dark Lord, it may help others, many others. Negative effects from love potion conceptions are far more common than one would expect.’

Harry’s chest filled with a little pride at that. Probably because it was the first potions-related compliment Snape had ever offered him. ‘Would it be difficult?’ Harry ventured.

‘Off the top of my head? I think it might be more taxing than it would be difficult per se. Love potions are governed by the lunar cycle, I suspect a cure, its antithesis if you will, would be dependent on a similar cycle that works in tandem with the body’s circadian rhythm.’ Snape explained thoughtfully.

‘So, why isn’t there a cure already?’ Harry had thought he’d be able to some previous examples, but Snape’s explanation eluded that a cure had not been attempted yet.

‘No, there hasn’t. As to why, dosing unwilling individual with love potions is considered a sordid practice, pregnancy as a result of those practices is frankly taboo. Thus, symptoms tend to remain undiagnosed until later in life and it’s too late to correct the behaviours. By then, the person affected tends to be a repulsive individual. So, for one to care enough about those affected enough to create a cure remains elusive. Also, to that affect, the persons effected themselves do not want to be cured.’ Snape’s expression was grim. ‘A common symptom is the notion that love and affection are unnecessary weaknesses. Others include the enactment of highly destructive tendencies and an appetite for violence. We see this develop naturally in the Muggle population too due to chemical
imbalances. They call it psychopathy.’

‘That means that if it were created, it might not even be taken?’ Harry mind filled with the futility of it then.

‘Maybe not among the adults of those affected. But, if administered early enough, the symptoms could be avoided entirely.’ Snape mused.

‘It could be given it to infants then?’ Harry perked up.

‘Yes, but that would necessitate a spell or potion to identify the presence of Amortentia at birth, or better yet whilst in utero. The parents tend to keep the administering a secret, for obvious reasons.’ Snape’s quill clacked against the table.

‘Then it’s a bit useless then?’ Harry said glumly.

‘Nay Harry, it is a beautiful idea.’ Nagini encouraged kindly. He smiled at her.

Harry turned to see Snape looking ahead in a deep sort of concentration. He was staring at the Revelmente Mortis bubbling away. It was silent for a few beats before he spoke. ‘I’ve rarely had the opportunity to help create something that would offer something so kind Potter. Children born under the influence of these potions lead awful lives. They tend to burn awfully bright only to die horrifically, often in very lonely and tragic circumstances.’ Snape seemed to settle into something before he continued. ‘I will help you with this, gladly in fact.’ Snape nodded to himself. ‘I will focus my efforts on the identifier we mentioned if you focus yours on a potential cure.’

Harry grinned. ‘Yeah, thank you – that would be cool.’

Snape smiled at that, then cleared his throat. ‘This is going to require a high level of knowledge and understanding on your part Potter. However, if you are successful, I suspect you may be able to present this to the Board with the request it be examined at N.E.W.T level or above. This goes far beyond what would be expected of an O.W.L student.’ Snape then smirked at Harry’s pale expression.

‘Merlin.’ Harry exclaimed.

‘Yes, quite. But we have time; you are not beholden to the Hogwarts curriculum now. You can learn at your own pace, which might be faster than your typical snails crawl now that you are suitably motivated.’ Snape then chuckled. ‘You might even prove me wrong. I’d thought your ancestor’s proclivity for the art had been lost in the last couple of generations.’ Harry growled at that slightly, but with no real bite. That only made the Potions Master laugh harder. ‘Another incentive for you maybe?’ He prodded with mirth. ‘With that we’ll finish our lesson. I expect an outline of the theory of curable applications and a list of potential methods by next week. I think three feet might do it. You need to understand the theorem intimately if you have a hope in hell of creating this successfully.’ Snape pushed several tomes in his direction. Harry groaned, but then the idea of starting perked him up a bit. ‘Meanwhile, I’ll do a bit of my own research. I’ll then be able to point you in a more specific direction afterwards.’

Nagini then flew to wrap around the Potions Master’s torso, whipping Harry in the face in her enthusiasm. ‘No, don’t leave yet. Stay.’ She whined uncharacteristically.

‘Infernal beast.’ Snape griped whilst pushing her in a futile attempt to shove her off. Nagini was all muscle and clinginess. ‘Unhand – tail - whatever - me.’ He huffed.

‘I think you should let him go Nagini, he is a busy man.’ Harry advised gently. Nagini gave him a
withering look and went to squeeze Snape a little harder. ‘He will be unhappy if you don’t.’ He reminded her. She then relented with a sigh then returned to Harry’s shoulder.

‘I might just lock him up. He always leaves.’ Nagini sounded with a glum expression.

‘Thank you, Potter for - whatever you said. That normally takes hours.’ Snape frowned at the snake and then rubbed his arms.

Harry doubted Snape was truly angry with her, that instead, he simply had an image to maintain.

Wouldn’t do to have our dour Potions Master being all cuddly now, would it?

Snape waved them both good bye and Nagini’s eyes followed his figure as escaped – hem – exited.

Nagini sighed loudly. ‘Now, what do we have here?’ Harry asked blithely. ‘Does the great Nagini have affections for a certain bat-like Professor?’ He grinned.

Nagini then transformed into her human stated and glared at him. ‘No.’ She denied forcefully.

‘Oh? So, it’s just his hair grease that gets your scales fluttering?’ He quipped laughing.

She stuck her tongue out at him. ‘I refuse to dignify that with a response.’ She murmured, clearly put-out.

‘Oh, Severus! Please stay! Your eyes light the fire inside thine soul! You are the light of life! You sickly complexion makes me-.’ Harry hadn’t been able to continue due to Nagini’s black hand smacking over his mouth, a little painfully he might have added. It didn’t stop his laughing, now a roar.

‘Might I remind you that my teeth are venomous and my grip is tight.’ She threatened him in a clear display of embarrassment. Harry’s stomach hurt for all of the chuckles. Seeing him laugh seemed to loosen something inside her and she reluctantly smiled back and released him. ‘Cease, you awful child. You would do well to respect your elders.’ She admonished.

‘Elders?’ Harry looked at her sceptically. ‘You don’t look that much older than me.’

‘I knew Severus when he was younger than you are now.’ She explained. ‘I came into Master’s possession when he was just a child.’ Her eyes glazed over in nostalgia.

‘I’m guessing these – friendly – feelings towards Snape have been going on for a while then?’ He smiled.

Nagini frowned at him before sighing. ‘Yes. I have enjoyed his company since he aligned with my Master. However, we are yet to converse.’ A cloud settled over her features. ‘He does not speak nor understand the serpent’s tongue, and I cannot verbalise his.’

Harry looked at her confused. ‘But you seem to understand us when we converse in –.’ There was no word for English in Parseltongue. ‘Eh – our mother’s tongue.’

‘Since Master gifted me this form, with human ears, I can understand it to an extent. But I cannot speak it. I’ve have not learned.’ She looked downtrodden. ‘Master deemed that there was little need for me to converse to anyone except himself. He was correct and, in the beginning, I did not care to converse with his human servants – disgusting and desperate as they were. But as time has moved on, I have found myself wishing for it upon occasion.’ She exhaled.
'When you wished to speak with Snape?' Nagini nodded and then her face contorted.

'Master was not well for a long time. Asking him for something of this nature might have caused a rift between us. I have always been his, so why would I need to learn your mother’s tongue? So, I kept my human form hidden and my mouth shut tight.' Nagini hugged herself as if she was admitting treason.

'I could teach you.' Nagini’s eyes lit up. ‘I may not be the best teacher, but I’m should I can remember how to go about the basics?'

‘You would do that?’ How anyone could turn down a grin like that was beyond Harry.

‘Of course! If only to freak Snape out once you master it, which should be in no time at all if you can already understand it when spoken to you.’ Harry grinned at Nagini’s bark of laughter.

‘That would be -.’ Nagini let of a strange hiss and then lunged to pull him into a tight, slightly suffocating hug. ‘When can we start? Now? Here?’ Nagini spoke too quickly.

‘Not right now, I suspect my friends will be arriving soon.’ Harry thought for a few beats. ‘You should meet them, as you are now.’ He offered.

Nagini’s eyes went wide. ‘Why- I mean, I could not, they- Master would not-.’ She stumbled.

‘You are my friend, just like they are.’ Harry pushed as much of the sentiment into the undercurrent of his speech as he could. ‘And they are my kin, like siblings without blood to bond us.’ Harry had been listening to the way Nagini and Voldemort explained things whilst conversing. The notion of family was different for snakes; he explained it as best as he could so that she would fully understand how much he trusted her and enjoyed her company. Despite only knowing each other for such a short time, Harry felt connected with this being at the cellular level. ‘If I asked them to keep it a secret, they would do so, happily. Their bond is to me, not to Dumbledore or the Ministry.’ He thought he’d chosen the right words, though Harry could’ve well been speaking the Parseltongue equivalent of broken-English.

But it seemed to translate. Nagini nodded and took his hand. ‘Let’s welcome them then.’ She beamed at him before dragging him out of the office.

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Tom stared at Lucius’ copy of *The Prophet* with a headache that thumped at his temples.

‘Have our ex-members been accounted for?’ He exhaled the question.

‘Yes, all except Lestrange, Dolohov, and Greyback.’ Lucius’ gestured at the paper. ‘But none of them would be capable of wielding such a complex display of magic.’ He explained. The Malfoy patriarch looked as wan as Tom felt at that moment.

‘Nevertheless, I need them accounted for. The blood on the Armistice is yet to dry and I am not interested in this potentially igniting a War none of us are now interested in.’ Tom leaned back in the high-back black leather chair and rubbed his face.

‘They will be, my Lord. Though, my sources tell me that already Dumbledore suspects we are behind this and he has said as much to the Minister.’ Lucius sneered whilst gripping the dragonhide gloves in his hand tight.
Tom snorted. ‘Trust him. The fool professes that he ‘knows my mind’ and yet he cannot think beyond his own ill-conceived assumptions.’ Tom threw the paper on the desk with a groan. ‘He must know that if I wish to murder en masse, I'm quite happy to get my own hands dirty.’ He grinned. ‘So, what have the papers omitted?’ He plucked a black feather quill and ink pot from his desk.

‘There have been sixteen attacks, not two as stated. The Inferi seemed to have infested the Wizarding Sewage System, through which they are travelling; one attack in Haddington, three around Hartlepool, four in the Sheffield area, three around Peterborough, and the London area has five so far. Although, the sightings above ground are the most recent development.’ Lucius sighed.

Tom’s eyebrows rose at that. ‘Above ground?’ Surprise colouring his tone.

Lucius nodded. ‘Thus, why everyone suspects foul play.’

‘Any of those sightings happen during daylight hours?’ Tom asked slowly.

Lucius summoned his noted and quickly scanned them. ‘Yes, in London and its surrounding areas – the most activity seems to be in the East, Islington and Surrey specifically.’

‘Inferi tend to be useless in direct sunlight, unless the magic used to animate them is powerful. Are the sources credible?’ Tom knew Lucius hated to be asked, but this was far more important than the Malfoy’s need to be correct at every instance.

‘Yes. To a fault in fact, each witness was described to me in excruciating detail – I missed my luncheon with the Marsh’s.’ Lucius did not look unhappy about that in the slightest. ‘My source was not a pleasant person to meet with, especially after they'd frequented those hovels the sewage workers call pubs. The smell was unbearable, I’d hate to think how it is first-hand.’ Lucius’ face scrunched up at the memory.

‘Any leads?’ Tom looked at from his parchment.

‘None. That’s the strangest thing about all of this. No trace, no magical signature, no motive, no residue. Nothing.’ There would have been a time when Lucius would have been trembling if he’d had to give such an answer to Tom. It may be a good sign that he was no longer in such a state, perhaps Tom seemed a little more human to those who knew him best. ‘Just seemingly mindless attacks up and down the country. Attacks which are quickly spreading in all directions.’ Lucius frowned.

‘Of course not, that’d be too simple.’ Tom groaned. ‘What’s the Ministry’s take on this?’ Tom suspected what it probably was, but he was above fatalistic assumption-making at this point.

‘Say as little as is feasible, tell their staff that the secrets are necessary by blaming a potential public panic, covering up their own misgivings and oversights, shut down access to the sewage systems, lay off a couple of thousand sewage workers under the guise of austerity, and hope for the whole thing to blow over. Then tell the public what a good job they did, if it does. All this whilst the Auror’s sit on their flat arses scratching them and their empty heads.’ Tom had always appreciated Lucius’ ability to fit an insult inside every sentence.

‘So, we are probably looking for an insanely powerful witch or wizard with an aptitude for Dark arts, namely necromancy. Ring any bells?’ Tom jested humorlessly.

Lucius smiled sympathetically. ‘I’ll set up a meeting with the Minister to quell any doubts. I’ll communicate how you are just as anxious as he is to get to the bottom of these incidents, despite
Dumbledore’s ranting and raving about your ‘involvement.’ Lucius looked to the door. ‘Where is our dear Snape?’

‘With Potter in a tutoring session. He should be finished soon.’ Tom went back to scribbling down notes.

‘How is the boy?’ Lucius asked smoothly.

‘He’s been better, I suspect.’ Tom paused. ‘He has befriended Nagini who, much to my surprise and horror, has become a source of comfort for the boy.’ Tom schooled his expression into unaffected boredom, he was anything but.

‘Circe help us all.’ Lucius snorted.

‘Yes, they are training together.’ Tom smiled, which still made Lucius instinctively flinch – though he was getting better at governing the urge. ‘He’ll be the embodiment of Deimos once she puts him through his paces.’ Tom wanted to shiver at the thought, but he shoved it down.

‘I would assume the opposite would occur after what I saw at the Armistice.’ Lucius smirked. ‘There is no love between me and the boy; he lost me a very good house-elf. But I found myself singing his praises after that delightful display, much to my own bewilderment.’

‘I would have thought a Malfoy is never bewildered Lucius.’ Tom jested, a more recent behavioural development which seemed to both horrify and amuse Lucius in equal measure.

‘Well, colour me shocked. Even my son is waxing lyrical about the boy.’ Lucius lit up with the thinly veiled praise for his only son. ‘Ah, whilst I remember; Bellatrix was kicking up a fuss when she last visited.’ Lucius groused. ‘She’s calling for blood.’

‘Oh? Pray tell?’ Tom chortled.

‘She was spitting feathers. Says Severus deserves to be lynched. Narcissa might have done an injury for how hard her eyes were rolling.’ Lucius’s mirthful smile slipped into a more serious expression. ‘She was also wailing about the Potter boy, something about ‘not deserving your attentions’ or something to that effect.’ He sighed. ‘If it were anyone else, I’d have brushed it off. But we both know that old Black mania and it’s potential.’ Tom nodded at that quietly.

‘You suspect she’d be foolish enough?’ Tom was not swayed by his rage like he’d been before, but if the bitch was purposely being forgetful of the very same rage, he’d be more than happy to remind her of it.

‘I know she is. We both do. Circe, even her poor husband knows how deep the obsession goes.’ Lucius pinched his brow.

‘Keep a close eye then, and maybe a little a chat about very real consequences for mindless stupidity?’ Tom smiled viciously and Lucius returned it with the same fervour.

‘Yes, my Lord.’

There was then a knock at the door, followed by black billowing robes. ‘Ah, speak of the Devil!’ Lucius announced jovially. ‘Finally deigned to join us?’ His tone dripping with faux chiding.

‘Forgive me, it seems that between Potter and your familiar, my Lord – my hands were quite full.’ The Potions Master huffed in exasperation.
'No need to apologise Severus. The boy’s education is more important.’ Tom ignored the way Snape’s eyebrows inched higher. Tom knew that they would one day become used to him like this and the change was only made recently. Snape moved to sit down, his face clearly tired.

‘What is that at your ear?’ Lucius pointed to a smear of acid green on Severus. ‘It’s a frightful colour, whatever it is.’

Severus when to rub the area. ‘Merlin. The result of Potter’s infuriatingly consistent dolt-like tendencies, pardon me My Lord.’ Tom shook his head smirking and motioned for him to continue. ‘The boy was drooling and mumbling something about bacon, then dropped an inkpot full of Everlasting Ink, in this horrific shade of green. I had been admiring the intensity of it before he attempted to Vanish the spillage, which then ended up all over me instead.’ Lucius was already laughing before Snape had finished, and Tom found himself snorting. ‘May I request the boy gets a solid eight hours of sleep before he enters my class? Any less than that seems to result in damaged property and persons.’ He sighed for a beat too long.

Tom thought as to why the boy hadn’t had much sleep, and then a dampened smile pulled on his features. ‘I’ll try but the boy is as fiercely independent as he is clumsy.’ Snape nodded in rapt agreement. ‘But, now that you’re here; may you scan this for me.’ Tom handed over his notes.

Snape’s eyes took in the page and then his eyebrows furrowed. ‘What’s your Potion Master’s accreditation got to say about this?’ It had always been a source of amusement within the Death Eater ranks of how proud Snape was about his degree. The Potions Master always took the gag gracefully, even if his eyes always did narrow at the corners; a clear sign he was planning something for you later.

‘You suspect potions?’ Snape’s tone didn’t bode much hope for the suspicion.

‘More like wanting it ruled out.’ Tom clarified softly from behind clasped hands.

‘It’s possible, if your brewing metric tonnes of Ago Mortem or it’s variants. Even then, it’s highly improbable, and you would notice that.’ Severus stated strongly.

‘How so?’ Lucius queried.

‘To flood a system at that scale would take an insane amount of the potion. It’s nigh on impossible to brew in large quantities larger than a litre cauldron; there’s far too many factors to control with meticulous precision. And I suspect that we would all see a massive dip in the British Dementor population if this were the case. These quantities would require around ninety-thousand skinned Dementors, not to mention how many Tentacula branches and Valerian roots you’d need. Probably more than what’s currently available on the Isle.’ Snape rubbed his temple.

‘Stockpiling?’ Tom inquired.

‘No, they’d need to be fresh – another reason why this is not likely.’ Snape established.

‘Do you suspect any foreign agents could do something on this scale? I heard the Mexicana’s enjoy this sort of thing.’ Lucius leaned forward.

Snape shook his head. ‘They have the numbers but lack the skill. I doubt the payoff even justifies the effort required, if I’m honest.’ Snape confirmed.

‘Well, that’s good. I get to cross something of my list.’ Tom mused. The men looked at him somewhat owlish, as if he’d grown a second head, as Muggles would put it.
‘Yes gentlemen?’ He probed.

They looked at each other, gaping slightly, but it was Lucius who spoke first. ‘Forgive us, my Lord. And I hope this is not to forward, but you seem a lot more-.’ Lucius trailed off, having a rare difficulty with words.

‘Calm. Sane.’ Lucius flinched at Snape’s description. What Tom liked about Snape was his tendency to cut through inane drivel in favour of direct exactitude. Even if at time he’d risk his neck for it.

Tom breathed deeply. ‘Yes. It a rather unexpected development. I suppose I can thank Dumbledore for one thing; realigning with the Horcruxes has offered me a clarity which was previously lost to me – or sanity as you so delicately put it Severus.’ Tom smiled at them both. ‘To say I was… unhinged before is an understatement. But please, it may be difficult for some time to come, I wish for you both to relax in my presence.’ Tom snorted. ‘Murderous rampages are not high on my to-do list at the present moment.’ He stated self-deprecatingly.

Severus offer him a wan smile. ‘It’s good to have you back.’ Tom nodded at that and Lucius seemed to let go of a breath he had been holding.

‘Circe, never a bloody boring day at the office is it?’ Lucius huffed. Tom suspected Malfoy might take liberties with his instruction to relax now that he’d offered it. But, Tom was quite happy to forget indignation and scare mongering in favour of gaining respect and trust, something he’d never really had in any true sense of the word.

‘What do you think are we looking at here then?’ Severus pointed to the notes. Another thing Tom liked about him; always business over pleasure.

‘Someone with massive magical reserves and - if one notes the scale of the operation - a preposterous motive.’ Tom announced grimly. ‘Which I seem to be the most popular poster boy for.’

‘Dumbledore being a git, as per?’ Snape questioned; his tone full of mirth.

Tom barked a laugh. ‘Yes, or as some might term it – being a miserable old cunt.’ They all grinned like schoolboys.

‘Still perhaps the best moment of my life so far.’ Severus chuckled.

Tom summoned the wine and shared a toast to Harry’s outburst and a laugh at Dumbledore’s expense.

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**Snape Voice:** I'm laying these chapters like chickens would eggs.

I think a little palate cleanser was in order after all the dark drama and sweet, sweet violence.

Thank you for reading so far!

I'm am on a diet of coffee, lemonade, compliments, and constructive criticism guys. **FEED ME!**

Comments are expected, paragraphs preferable. :P
At least someone is getting some use out of those hideous clothes, Harry thought wryly.

To Harry’s surprise Nagini’s foremost priority had not been to drag Harry straight to where his friends would be shortly arriving, but instead to his bedroom.

As Harry arrived the first thing his eye noticed was that his father cloak was laid on his bed. Harry rose an eyebrow at it. When did I leave you there?

Then Harry was grabbed for the umpteenth time and told, not too politely, to sit and be a good boy. Harry rolled his eyes.

‘If I am to meet your friends, I suspect I should dress for the occasion.’ She gestured to herself. ‘My current state of undress may shock them more than my true identity.’ She huffed whilst pulling out most of the dress garment the wardrobe had to offer.

‘But you have scales?’ Harry looked at her confused.

Nagini clucked her tongue and paused to tap her foot; Harry was instantly reminded of Hermione. ‘Exactly little one. I think you forget that scales are not a normal feature to possess.’ She shifted through more of the richly dyed tunics. ‘Honestly, your powers of deduction are left wanting.’ She picked one up and held it against her frame and then sent him a questioning glance.

‘I am the last person to seek advise from.’ Harry held up his hands in surrender.

Nagini huffed and threw it behind her. ‘What do your kind typically wear?’ She asked tersely.

Harry looked at himself. ‘Jeans, t-shirts, jumpers, maybe a hoodie if it’s cold?’ Harry hadn’t
bothered trying to translate that into Parseltongue, talking about clothes was simply not worth the nosebleed.

Nagini squinted at him trying to process it. ‘Show me.’ She said after a few seconds of mouthing the items he’d just listed.

The Gryffindor groaned and then opened his trunk his feet had been resting on. He pulled out each item he’d described. Nagini looked at them curiously. ‘Your females wear these too?’ She eyed them sceptically.

‘Not all, but Hermione does. These are what Muggles tend to wear if they just want to be casual or comfortable.’ He explained as Nagini poked at them.

‘That might explain why Master said he wanted to burn them.’ She mumbled, then her nose wrinkled. ‘A sentiment I may share; they look like bed clothes.’ She smirked.

‘These are far more functional than those monstrosities.’ Harry pointed to the pile of eye-wateringly expensive clothing on the floor. ‘And, tell your Master if he tries, I will return the favour.’ Harry grinned viciously.

Nagini barked a laugh. ‘I think you burn brightly enough as it is.’ Harry found it difficult to wrap his head around some of the metaphor-like terms that Nagini sometimes used. At first, he’d thought Voldemort and the snake were speaking in some sort of code, but latterly found that it was more like a dialect or a more formal type of speech.

‘I burn brightly.’ He repeated to himself slowly, trying to shift through all of the potential meanings of the phrase.

Nagini regarded him archly as he passed her some of the smaller items of clothing he owned. Dudley’s cast offs might’ve drowned her, literally. ‘I forget you are not fluent. I meant you are very passionate and very powerful; like fire.’ She recounted as she pulled on a pair of running shorts and a white band t-shirt. She twisted her body as if testing the feel of them. ‘Comfortable.’ She agreed.

‘I must sound like an idiot when I speak to you sometimes.’ Harry said glumly.

‘No… but you do lack tact, that is not of your making though.’ Harry must have looked confused since she felt the need to continue. ‘For example, Snakes use a type of honorific; you may have heard me call you Green-eyes?’ Harry nodded. ‘To look into another beast’s soul is a mark of respect. By stating their eye colour, you are announcing that you have done just that. To not do so is seen as contemptuous, like you do not deem the other worthy of your gaze.’ They had exited the rooms and were descending the spiralling staircase.

Harry plucked a violet from the banister and rolled it in his fingers. ‘So, I’ve been rude.’ He laughed and then stopped them both on the stair, looking directly at her irises. ‘Hello, please to make your acquaintance, Orange-eyes.’ He tucked the flower behind her ear.

‘Nearly.’ She chuckled. ‘I am Orange-one, since I am a familiar to my Master.’ She said smugly.

‘Forgive me, for I have nought but besmirched thine namesake, great, merciful Orange-one.’ Harry snorted as Nagini clipped his ear. She hissed something that sounded suspicious like arse before rushing him down the stairs.

‘You needn’t use it among friends or family. Except maybe when you incur their wrath.’ Her smile held a thinly veiled threat.
The bickering continued as they entered the reception, as Nagini had called it. When Nagini suddenly froze, Harry turned to see not just Ron and Hermione sitting – but also the Weasley twins and Sirius. It was his Godfather who moved first. They were early. Too early.

A gasp, then all eyes in the room landed on Nagini and wands were drawn.

Harry’s first instinct was to put himself between them and Nagini then flick his wand out of its holster. Everyone stood staring. His friends had their wands trained on the snake, their faces pale and slack. Nagini was pressed against him, but he could feel her muscles bunch as if ready to slip past him and spring. The twins had taken their wands out but kept them trained to the floor sharing a baffled look.

‘Put down your wands.’ Harry bit out.

‘Harry -.’ Ron swallowed audibly. ‘What is that?’ He croaked.

That. Harry snorted. ‘I’ll tell you if you get your stinking wands out of my face.’

Harry heard voices at the entrance behind him and a door shut.

‘Do not startle but Master is behind us.’ Nagini whispered so quietly he wouldn’t have heard her if she wasn’t so close. Harry felt the hairs on his neck rise with gooseflesh.

He caught Hermione’s gaze, who sent him a questioning look. He nodded to quell her doubts. She exhaled with a pointed look of ‘I hope you know what you’re doing Harry’ and ever the voice of reason, tucked her wand away before smiling tightly at him. ‘Harry, care to introduce us?’ Harry felt like he could have kissed her, the tension bled from the room; well, most of it.

‘Yes, everyone -.’ Harry quickly looked to his left. Voldemort was standing there, his wand arm was risen and waiting. The dark look on his features sent a shiver down Harry’s spine. He looked back, his heart in his mouth.

Trust me to start the next Wizarding War over a lunch meeting.

‘-eh. Yeah - right. Well, first sit down. Merlin, this is too tense.’ Harry rubbed his forehead. They all complied hesitantly. ‘Here goes nothing.’ He whispered to Nagini. ‘I have something to tell you all, but first I will need your word that this does not leave this room. I was only expecting Ron and Hermione, not all of you. She wanted to meet you to say hello.’ He looked at them all pointedly, begging them to understand. Then glanced back to Voldemort who was still glowering, he slowly shook his head and mouthed ‘No.’ A bead of sweat rolled down Harry’s back. He looked back to his friends, his heart thudding.

Well, fuck it.

When he didn’t receive an answer and silence ensued, he huffed. ‘This is important to me guys. Please. I wouldn’t ask otherwise.’ He pleaded them with his eyes.

They all looked between one another. ‘You have our word Harry.’ Fred was the first to speak, whilst trying to look around Harry. George nodded in agreement with a grin.

‘Mine too.’ Ron piped up, even though his hand was still on his wand. Sirius and Hermione echoed shortly after, albeit hesitantly.

‘Right, well. Everyone, this is Nagini - Nagini, these are my friends.’ He gestured between them.
All eyes went wide and mouths agape.

Then the room erupted.

‘What, the snake!’

‘How – what?’

‘That’s impossible – what – the.’

‘That can’t be, can it?’

Arms failed, fingers pointed, cheeks flushed, eyes stared, voices raised; the room was in chaos. Well, except for Hermione who sat and looked at Nagini silently as if she were a puzzle to be solved.

Harry chanced another look to his left and jerked; Voldemort was now a lot closer, standing at the lip of the alcove hidden from view, his teeth bared. His arm looked ready to grab Nagini away, but Harry shot out a staying gesture to him and held onto Nagini’s waist, who was staring at them all wide-eyed.

‘Guys! Shut it!’ Harry bellowed, the ground vibrated and the lights flickered.

Everyone was silent, looking at the floor and the walls around them until they returned their gazes to him in shock.

Ron clear his throat after a few beats. ‘Harry, are you trying to tell us that this is Nagini, as in You-Know-Who’s pet snake?’ Ron looked concerningly pale.

‘I am no one’s pet, little man.’ Nagini intoned lowly, Ron flinched. Harry squeezed her waist to silence her.

‘Yes. That’s right. As you can see, she has a human-form – courtesy of Voldemort. She’s actually a very nice person, and I’d prefer if you’d all take your hands off your wands because she’s not dangerous, she’s not going to harm anyone and she’s my friend.’ Harry had run out of breath by the end of his little speech. There was an acrid sting of magic in the air, Harry startled slightly when he realised that it was his magic coiling around them all.

Control it, calm down. He breathed. Harry had heard enough horror stories about people who let their own magic consume them. He wasn’t about to go nuclear with his loved ones nought but ten feet away from him.

The rustle of robes is all that could be heard as everyone sheathed their wands. Harry heard an exasperated snort to his left and he deigned not to give the man the satisfaction of a reaction.

‘Are you sure about this Harry, I mean-.’ Hermione’s eyes quickly glanced at the snake. ‘- you’re sure this is safe.’ Harry nodded enthusiastically.

‘So, she’s like a reverse Animagus?’ Sirius piped up in an encouraging tone.

Harry exhaled. ‘Yes, yes – exactly like that.’ His shoulders slumped.

‘That’s mental.’ Ron exclaimed.

Hermione put a quelling hand on his thigh. ‘To be honest, I’ve never heard of that.’ Hermione looked up interested.
'The great Hermione Granger, not knowing something – golly. Did I see a pig with wings?’ Fred quipped, to which Hermione stuck her tongue out.

‘It’s unlikely you would’ve. She’s a - eh - a unique case.’ Harry explained as he smiled at Hermione affronted expression.

‘You mean to say -.’ Fred began.

‘-That Voldemort was able to give his favourite pet -.’ George continued and Harry felt Nagini bristle again.

‘- Perhaps the most famous snake in Britain no less - a human body -.’ Fred continued, clearly amazed.

‘– And no one knows about this?’ George looked at them quizzically. Harry’s eye twitched after ping-pong balling between them.

‘No, and for good reason. I mean, think of what the Auror’s would do if they found out.’ Harry tried to explain. ‘What would Dumbledore do?’ Harry paled.

‘Or our favourite group of bullshit artists; the Wizengamot.’ George agreed thoughtfully.

All their faces seemed to light up in understanding. Trust their shared dislike of the Ministry and its affiliates to bring them all together on this issue, Harry smirked internally.

‘Exactly, she would have no rights or a trail; it wouldn’t be fair. They would just see her as some vicious animal that needs to be put down or something. She isn’t protected by the Armistice – not at all.’ Harry garbled. Hermione stiffened at that. The thought of creature rights always got her riled up. He gave Nagini a comforting squeeze.

Sirius cringed. ‘They’d probably target her…or worse, try and produce some legislation for it.’ Sirius sneered at the thought. His Godfather’s experiences around Animagus licencing had clearly left him a little bitter.

‘Especially if this is Voldemort’s brain-child.’ George added. ‘There’s no way The Ministry would let that fly.’ Fred nodded with him.

‘But, erm – I heard she’s done some things Harry, before you know -.’ Ron trailed off, clearly uncomfortable under the Snakes gaze.

‘Yep. Probably.’ Harry shrugged. ‘But she’s been nothing but golden with me.’ Ron looked at him sceptically, his mouth in a grim line.

Nagini this pulled herself from behind him, Harry went to stop her, but she held up her hand.

‘Speak your mother tongue for me?’ She asked softly.

Harry nodded and watched as Nagini walked slowly to Ron and Hermione who both tensed up.

Harry repeated everything as quickly as he could. ‘Hello, it is an honour to finally meet Harry’s family.’ She smiled at them softly then held out her hand, Hermione took it shakily whilst Ron just gaped. Nagini them pulled her into a hug and Hermione looked at Harry wide-eyed, eyes almost pleading for help. Harry chuckled at her discomfort.

The snake then quickly grabbed Ron to who yelped then froze when her arms wrapped around him. ‘I have yet to earn you confidence and your trust, but we have a friend in common now.’
Nagini turned to grin at Harry as he said it. ‘I swear to protect and cherish him in your stead, no matter what forces seek to impose harm upon him.’ Harry’s chest swelled as he repeated the proclamation. ‘It is too early to ask you to trust me, but in time I hope to call you my friends too – for Harry’s sake.’ Nagini pulled away from Ron and Hermione who tuned their gazes back to her. Hermione smiled and nodded at the snake, thanking her gently. Ron looked like he might faint, clearly uncomfortable with the contact, but gave his blessing anyway. The twins clapped and hooted loudly breaking the final bit of tension in the room.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in a sort of tense peace. Nagini began answering yes or no questions and seemed rather dizzy when she was cornered by the twins and Sirius. Harry was stuck between catching up with his best friends and translating for Nagini, who was asking questions with increasing distress from the sofa across from his.

Sirius had taken to show her his Animagus form which seem to fascinate her to no end. When told that Padfoot liked a good scratch behind the ear, she got to it straight away agreeing with him vehemently; comparing a good pet to ambrosia, the nectar of the Gods. Sirius returned the kindness by describing the technique that would allow her clothes to transform with her.

‘School’s been so boring without you there mate.’ Ron griped. ‘Though bloody weird too, the Slytherin’s are suddenly being all nice and fluffy!’ He squeaked.

‘Oh?’ Harry chuckled.

Hermione snorted. ‘Yes, they seem particularly taken with the idea of you being a martyr of some sort. Parkinson was gushing about you being her kind of saviour or some rot.’ Hermione’s nose wrinkled.

‘I know! It’s blinkin’ awful, never mind the whole mess with the Quidditch captaincy and those spirit-wankers, we’ve now been getting asked for daily updates about how you’re faring here! It’s creepy having Malfoy asking after you. And those Slytherin girls’ mate-.’ Ron shivered.

‘Wait, spirit what?’ Harry raised an eyebrow.

‘He means Spirit Walkers Harry.’ Hermione shot Ron a loaded look. ‘They’ve been sent by the Ministry to help with the ghost population.’ She took a sip of tea after checking it wasn’t poisoned.

‘I didn’t think there was a problem with the number of ghosts.’ Harry mused. There were like thirty at a push, and plenty of space to house them, he thought.

‘There wasn’t, not until recently that is.’ Ron rolled his eyes. ‘Can’t move anywhere without walking into one now. It’s like every two seconds whoosh another step-.’ Ron mimicked shuddering violently.

Harry raised his brows. ‘Exactly how many are there now?’

‘Too many, it must be in the thousands. They started appearing about a week ago out of nowhere, and quickly too. The Prophet was having a field day about it all; they were pushing rumours of Dark magic being used in the school – what a load of cack. Death doesn’t equal Dark. But it is strange, no one’s ever seen anything like it before.’ She huffed. ‘Between the ghosts and the reporters trying to sneak in, nobody’s getting much done at all. Dumbledore’s saying nothing about it though, just told us to welcome our new guests until they found new homes to haunt; hence the Spirit Walkers.’

‘Wankers.’ Ron coughed with a grin.
'Oh, stop it Ron! They are just doing their job.' She chided.

'I know, but *Merlin* are they arses about it. They’d give Trelawney a run for the ‘Whose Hogwarts Biggest Headcase Award’.' He snorted.

'Well, they are a bit enthusiastic.' She chortled.

'Enthusiastic? Blimey, is that an understatement. It all ‘Ooh, I can feel your presence – you have an affinity for the *beyond* – I can *feel* the colours of your soul *radiate* within you! I swear they are related to Trelawney somehow. Nobody wants to go anywhere near them and they bloody try to recruit everyone!' Ron exclaimed.

'Luna seems to get along with them, sort of.' Hermione hid her laugh behind her hand.

'Don’t get me started! They follow her like bees to honey mate. Says her ‘aura’ is - and I quote- ‘mystical beyond all comprehension’. ’ Ron shook his head. ‘Even the parents are starting to complain.’

‘Actually, she seems to barely put up with it. I’ve she her try to shrug them off a few times.’ Hermione cringed, obviously feeling bad for the young Ravenclaw.

‘And everyone thought *she* was loony.’ Ron chortled.

Harry’s eyebrows rose. ‘If Luna’s trying to shake them, then it must be pretty bad. She normally likes talking about that kind of stuff.’ Harry sympathised, suddenly feeling a little glad he wasn’t there.

‘That’s putting it mildly.’ Ron stressed and then flinched when Nagini interrupted.

‘*Harry, what is a ‘prankth’?’* Nagini said as she sat between the twins. Harry was a little awed after hearing Nagini attempt an English word.

‘A prank?’ He asked to which Nagini nodded. He then quickly turned to the twins and gave them a glare. ‘You better not be giving her any ideas, she’s lethal enough as it is.’

The grinned back with faux innocence. ‘Wouldn’t dream of it Harry.’ Then ‘Don’t know what you’re on about mate.’ Harry shivered; he knew that look. They were definitely planning something.

‘*Harry.*’ Nagini pushed. He quickly tried to explain the concept, to which Nagini asked why you wouldn’t just beat your opponent down if the aim was to humiliate.

Harry now had a headache.

Harry asked her to say the word again and she complied with pride. When Hermione sent him a questioning glance at his reaction, he’d explained he was looking to teach Nagini English.

‘Nagini is helping me with offensive training, it’s the least I can do in return.’ He’d explained, omitting the snake’s true motivations.

That started Hermione off on potential learning plans, suggesting books he might need, and bubbling about maybe studying the key differences between their language and Parseltongue. Ron had chuckled and patted Harry’s back sympathetically. But Ron had also expressed interest in the training, asking if he could join. Harry smiled at his friend’s enthusiasm; he knew that if they both saw Nagini fight, they’d be just as impressed as he was. He hoped that this would warm them to
the thought of Nagini the human instead of just her being Nagini, Voldemort’s pet snake.

Then, all too soon and suddenly, it got dark outside and the steady flow of conversation tapered off uneasily. They all started to say their goodbyes and to Nagini’s surprise and elation, she was hugged just as much as Harry was. Even if Ron still did so gingerly.

Harry realised that they had all overstayed the allotted time by some hours. He glanced at the alcove entrance, expecting an angry Dark Lord growling at him for the overstayed welcome. He wasn’t, Harry sighed in relief.

When they had left, Nagini kissed his cheek goodnight. She explained it was a good night for hunting prey because the full moon was high. Harry sighed when she left, running for the moonlit forest.

He turned, feeling slightly melancholy and walked up to his rooms.

By the second floor, he could feel the hairs on his neck rise and the air felt a little thin. Something pricked at the edge of his mind, like pins and needles. Even though all the portraits were asleep, Harry felt eyes on him. Something inside Harry wanted to answer it, to call out for it. It was a sensation he hadn’t been able to shake since that awful night at the graveyard; it was something Harry happily smothered.

‘Voldemort.’ Harry called out. ‘I know your there.’

There was nothing but silence and darkness in the corridor, until Harry heard something rustle directly behind him.

He turned, his wand in a firm grasp, to face grey eyes and a bone chilling smirk.

‘I must say Harry, that was quite an impressive stunt you pulled there.’ Harry could smell him; he was that close. The warmth from the older man’s skin blushed on his exposed flesh and Harry shuddered.

‘Was it? I’d hardly call holding a meeting between friends impressive.’ He parried, the confidence in his tone belying the quivering whine he wanted to release instead. ‘Though I expect it would be for you, you know, since you have none.’ Harry thought it might be stupid to poke the bear, but he found himself charging ahead anyway.

Voldemort cocked his head his grin faltering. ‘I have a few, one of which you placed in a great amount of danger tonight Harry.’ He then stopped slightly until Harry could feel Voldemort’s breath fan on his forehead. ‘Might I ask why you did so without prior notice or my consent?’ Grey eyes bored into his and Harry’s mouth went dry.

‘I asked her to, she said yes. Not much to say on the matter apart from that. And really Tom, you don’t strike me as someone who concerns themselves with the notion of consent.’ He spat and Voldemort’s eyes darkened. Harry’s face twisted then he gestured at the space around them. ‘Do you normally lurk in the shadows or are you simply too bored to do much else?’

Tom snorted then rolled his eyes before training them on Harry again. ‘You still haven’t answered why you didn’t tell me about your intentions of introducing Nagini to your friends.’

Harry narrowed his eyes. ‘I didn’t think that it was required. Nagini is her own person and really, the less I speak to you, the better I feel.’ He let a cruel smile bloom on his face.

Harry tutted. ‘Were you not ever taught to share? I suspect you were a nightmare in the sandpit.’ Harry chuckled humorlessly ignoring the sensation to reach out that clawed inside him. It was like a magnet in his chest needing to find something to latch on to.

‘Despite your assumptions Harry, I do respect Nagini’s autonomy, however, I do not appreciate her being put in harm's way.’ Voldemort’s canine bit into his lip. ‘Which exactly what you did; endangered her so that you could have your cake and eat it.’

‘Well, next time I’ll make sure to owl you, my Lord.’ Harry bit out sarcastically.

But the effect it had on the Dark Lord was not what Harry had intended. Voldemort’s grey eyes darkened, and he smirked leeringly. ‘You can call me that again, if you’d like.’

‘There are many things I’d like to do Tommy boy, but if I acted upon the urge, well, I’d die now wouldn’t I.’ Harry’s face beamed gleefully.

‘Then perhaps you’d enact the same restraint when it comes to the fate of my familiar.’ Voldemort cocked his head, shadows wrapping around it like gauze.

‘You seem a tad possessive Tom, though I suppose that’s one of your more benign character flaws.’ Harry breathed in a vindictive tone.

‘Ah, yes. We have already established that I’m a sick fuck, much to my unending amusement. But, tell me Harry, have you thought anymore on your flaws since we spoke last?’ Voldemort leered.

Harry stayed silent. He stared at the older man as the events rushed through his mind again. To his despair, the fear bubbled in him again. The sirens call sang through him and it was deafening.

‘No, nor do I care to.’ Harry snapped.

‘Don’t care to or can’t?’ Voldemort smiled. ‘From what I see, it’s definitely the latter.’

‘For a man who claims to see everything, you’re rather obtuse aren’t you? I couldn’t give less of a fuck about what you claim to see or about the hallucinations you’re currently confessing to.’ Harry gripped his wand tighter wishing very hard that he could hex the man in front of him without dire consequences.

Voldemort paused and his features morphed into a cool stillness that unnerved Harry.

‘Hallucinating, am I? Well, it must have been a fevered dream when I heard you sobbing, I must have imagined the soured scent of your magic all but screaming how frightened you were. Trying to tell me you weren’t choking at the idea your friends might discover you? Must have been an illusion when I saw your dear cousin attempt to cave your head in, accusing you of wanting it up the arse.’

Harry hands shot to his head and a wild panic.

Voldemort’s lips hadn’t moved for that last part, the voice wasn’t in front of him. It had been inside him.

The silence was thudding against Harry’s chest as Voldemort stood and waited for it all to sink in.

Then Harry saw bloody red.

‘Haven’t I told you not to piss me off Tom?’ Harry’s voice didn’t sound like his own at all. ‘Can’t maim me in person so you’ve switched it up to fucking with my head?’ His growl sounded inhuman to his own ears.
Voldemort winced and then rubbed his temples, taking several steps back from him. ‘Circe, Harry
tone it down. Conversing with you is difficult enough without your emotions stamping in my mind
like a herd of damnable hippogriffs.’ Voldemort presented himself as bored and unaffected, but the
slight warble at the end of his speech belied that.

‘You don’t get to do that; do you hear me?’ His voice shook. ‘Might have worked for your
sycophants, but you don’t get to throw Legilimency at me whenever you fucking feel like it!’
Harry raged.

‘You think that was Legilimency Harry?’ Voldemort snorted as he ran his hand through his hair.
‘Come on, you’re smarter than that. Think, little one. Think what else it could possibly be.’ He
goaded.

Harry’s mind raced and he spoke before he’d finished the thought. ‘Well, what else could it be?
You just spoke in my head like you were inside-.’ Harry croaked as the penny dropped. ‘-like you
were inside me.’

Voldemort looked at him archly. ‘Well, it’s only the whole reason for you being here, isn’t it?’ He
then stood forward and put a finger on Harry’s chest. ‘That little bit of me inside of you. You
didn’t think it just sat there and done nothing, did you?’

‘No. T-that’s insane. The book didn’t say anything about-.’ Harry stuttered.

‘About me having a little window into your mind, Harry? No, I suspect it didn’t. You are a very
rare gem after all.’ Voldemort leaning back and his gaze roamed over Harry. ‘Nobody really
knows what happens when a Horcrux – albeit a mistaken one – is made using a human host. But
you must have read how the inanimate Horcruxes react to the embodied original?’ Voldemort
seemed to drink in Harry’s hesitant disposition, like he lived to see Harry vulnerable and confused.

Harry mind searched through what he could remember from that awful book. ‘You can feel them,
they call to you.’ He repeated numbly.

Voldemort’s eyes lit up ‘Correct, got it in one Harry. I’m impressed. Now think how that might
affect a human host.’ If Harry focused on it long enough, which he always forced himself not to, he
could feel it. He could sense the soul entwined within his which called like a siren’s song towards
the man in front of him. Always wanting to get closer, always begging to be nearer.

‘It’s quite a mournful song, isn’t it? Always feeling the pull and yet never being able to reach out
for what it seeks. But it’s far more than that Harry. It’s been a part of you since you were an infant
and it’s grown with you, changed with you. And now it is woven into the very fabric of your soul.
Now, they are one and the same. You are me and I am you. That song is yours and it calls out to
me, always begging, always seeking.’ Voldemort’s voice softened to a whisper as he stared at
Harry’s chest transfixed.

Harry shivered as Voldemort echoed the thought he’d just had. ‘Why are you telling me this? What
do you stand to gain from it?’

Voldemort’s eyes shot back to his, the rest of him eerily still. ‘I want you to acknowledge it, to
accept it.’ He said it slowly, and each syllable creeped up Harry’s spine.

‘And what then? To acknowledge you, accept you?’ Harry shot back; his eyebrows raised like the
concept was utterly laughable.

Then Voldemort’s featured softened as he smiled gently at Harry. ‘Right again Harry. You’re on a
‘That’s not going to happen. I don’t trust you, will never trust you.’ Harry stated forcefully.

Voldemort then put his hand to Harry’s cheek. ‘Oh, but you might.’ Harry felt his thumb caress the skin under his eye. ‘And then the song might not sound so mournful.’ He uttered. It took more than Harry would like to admit to not lean into that warm hand and rub his cheek against it. His lips tingled at the thought. The expression on the Dark Lord’s face confused Harry and tightened something in his stomach and chest.

Voldemort stepped away from Harry suddenly. ‘On that note, I’ll bid you goodnight, little one.’ A strange expression clouded his features and then he turned back downstairs.

Harry watched his retreated figure absolutely flummoxed.

What in Circe’s name was that? Bloody creep.

Harry wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth however and decided to all but fly to his rooms.

But now that Harry had paid attention to the dark space between his ribs, he found it very difficult to stop. As he showered, the water cascading down his shoulders and filling the bowl he stood in, Harry listened to it. It quietly whispered; the voice felt like it was in his throat.

Harry realised he’d said the words aloud when they echoed around the too-big bathroom; want you, need you, always want you, always need you.

Harry stood on tall yellowing grass; it was everywhere – for as far as his eyes could see.

He held out his hands as he walked, the long stalks tickling his fingers. Looking up, dark navy and grey storm clouds roiled and squirmed in the sky, whipped and thrown by a wind Harry could only see but not feel or hear.

When he looked to the horizon again, he spotted a tall, stone arch in the centre; pale against the darkening sky. He marched to it mindlessly, his hands lashed by the too-sharp grass that seemed to go on forever, in all directions until the sky touched the ground.

Harry felt like he was moving underwater but one second the stone arch was too far away and then it was too close; Harry’s face almost touching one of the tall carved pillars supporting it.

Harry stepped back quickly to see the inside of the arch was shrouded in a thin, ghostly film which fluttering in the still air. Harry could hear voices through the gossamer fabric; a wail of misery, a group laughing, a moan of ecstasy and the wet sound of flesh slapping against flesh, a sob and a child’s scream. Harry made to touch it, but something inside him screamed not to. The instinct made him recoil and stumble back from it.

‘You are not meant to be here-.’ A sharp voice bellowed accusingly, the sound somehow muted and echoing through the forever-field at the same time.
Harry leapt back further when it had sounded. His head snapped to see a skeletal hand grasp the outside, as if arriving from behind it. Then a body. Harry stopped breathing entirely as it revealed itself inch by agonising inch.

What stood before him was horrific. It hulking figure stood in front of him, it’s skin white and in places rotten. It looked at him with blackened, eyeless sockets and a feral grin of fanged, greying teeth. Harry’s chest heaved with the urge to scream and he shook with the tension of it. He made for his wand to find his holster not only empty but gone entirely.

‘-not yet anyway.’ It finished and its grin looked like it might spilt the skin around it. ‘But what an honour it is to finally meet the fabled Harry Potter in the flesh.’ The way the creatures voice wrapped around the last word made Harry pale and tremble.

‘Who might you be?’ He, somehow, said in an even tone.

‘Oh, I have many names - too many some might say.’ The creatures voice sounded like a series of hisses and cracks that made Harry want to jump out of his skin with every syllable. ‘But, you’ll learn of me, everyone knows me in the end.’

The creature jerked towards him in an unnatural manner and for every step it took forward, Harry took another back. ‘How strange it is for me to find you here, especially when I had not been expecting you yet?’ It gnarled with gnashing teeth. Between each word it looked like the beast was taking a bite out of something.

‘Well, since you weren’t expecting me, I should probably leave you to it.’ Harry made to turn around, but the creature let out a slow warning hiss.

‘Ah but you are here now.’ It intoned silkily. ‘And so alone too. Have the Hallows not found you yet?’ It stood too still, like a predator before lunging for the prey and stared at him with it black, eyeless sockets.

The same instinct that made him move away from the arch now told him to lie.

‘They have, quite nice aren’t they?’ He attempted a smile which fell flat. He stuck to general statement, not knowing what exactly the Hallows were; they could’ve been anything, people, spells, objects.

‘They are, and yet you do not keep them on your person?’ Harry knew the thing could tell he was lying but all he could do was buy time that was quickly slipping through his fingers.

‘Well, I was sleeping, and I tend to roll around a lot in bed.’ Harry laugh came out more than a tad hysterical. He had to clamp his mouth shut to smother it.

‘How unfortunate – well – unfortunate for you, but marvellously fortunate for me.’ The thing’s blackened lips curved at the thought.

‘Unfortunate? And here I was wanting to get to know you.’ Harry lied through his teeth. This had to be a dream. This was too insane to be anything else.

Wake up. Wake up! He screamed internally.

‘You will and the company you keep will too.’ It’s snarled viciously. ‘You have already denied me on four occasions, there won’t be a fifth. And the man your soul bound to? My, what a prize he will be.’ The thing chuckled and Harry’s could feel bile rise up his throat.
Harry could feel the creature’s power with a sickening lurch.

And then it lunged.

Harry turned and ran faster than he ever had in his life. The grass sliced through his jeans and the skin of his arms as he flew forward. The creature’s footfall thudded right on his feet. Harry’s heart threatened to burst, and his lungs nearly collapse with the strain of pulling himself forward through the endless field. Nowhere to hide, nowhere to run to.

He felt the cold air of the creature’s breath at his neck and it felt like a Dementor’s kiss.

It grabbed his hand and sliced right through the skin to his bone and Harry landed on the floor.

It rounded on him, its teeth snapping.

Harry closed his eyes and screamed.

He woke and flew out the bed, the scream still on his lips.

He grabbed for his wand and stood on the mattress ready for the creature to bound towards him again.

But it was silent, and nothing stood in the darkness.

*It was a dream.* He tried to tell himself, but he knew he was lying. *It was just a dream.*

Harry gripped his wand tighter and pain cracked through his hand. Harry cast a *Lumos* to see a thick, gaping gash on the back of his hand, with blood pouring out of it and onto the satin sheet. Harry stood dumbly and watched the blood pool beneath him, blooming as it soaked the fabric.

Harry began shaking and terror nearly bowled him over.

*It wasn’t a dream.* He tried to tell himself calmly but feeling of the creature chasing him made him collapse on the bed.

Harry went to rub at the sweat on his forehead with the back of his hand but something scratched him.

He was wearing the Gaunt ring. Harry knew he hadn’t put it on. He looked around the room to see who had, but there was no movement, no breathing except his out in the too thick darkness.

‘*Harry! Harry!*’ Nagini skidded to a halt at his door then walked through the ward and ran straight to him. ‘*What has happened?!!*’ She saw the mess on his sheets and his hand. ‘*Fuck, what happened?!*’ She grabbed at his arm and he pulled away too quickly, his nerves still alight.

Harry saw movement at the door and his eyes locked with Voldemort’s as he came forward from the shadowy hallway. His gaze took in the scene in front of him, his eyes zeroing in on the blood and Harry’s shaking grip on his wand, still poised to defend himself.

‘*Harry, let me in.*’ He said softly, like one would to a skittish animal. Harry barely nodded and Voldemort strode through and then hoisted him up.

A sickening lurch of Apparition and then Harry was gently placed on a bed that reminded him of the Hospital Wing in Hogwarts. Harry could only feel nausea and a looming panic attack.

He was vaguely aware of Voldemort grabbing vials and first aid supplies. Harry would have
normally laughed at the strained expression on the Dark Lord’s face. But Harry didn’t trust that what would come of his mouth wouldn’t be scream.

Voldemort told him to drink the three vials he held in front of his face, Harry recognised at least two of them; Dittany and Calming Draught. He shoved all three down his throat in quick succession and let the swirl of their magic bring him back down from the terrifying heights his mind had climbed.

The Dark Lord then dropped concentrated Dittany on his wound, three drops at it began to close. He took his wand and waved it over Harry, murmuring spells he didn’t recognise.

The wand suddenly stopped moving as if frozen and Voldemort looked at him intensely as he grabbed where the wound had been to inspect it closely. Nagini then entered the room and sat beside him quietly, she and Voldemort seemed to share a silent conversation before Nagini placed her hand on Harry’s shoulder and rubbed it soothingly.

‘Are you calm?’ Voldemort probed gently.

‘Calmer.’ Harry mumbled; Voldemort searched his face then nodded.

‘What happened?’ He sounded calm, but Harry heard the edge buried in the question.

‘A dream – I think. *Harry did not think.* ‘Was in a field, then at an arch with voices behind it. Then a creature came out, said I wasn’t mean to be there. Said I’d denied him four times already and I wasn’t armed – so it ran after me. It did that.’ Harry glanced at his hand. Even though the wound had healed, greyish veins now webbed across it. Harry audibly swallowed. ‘Asked me if something had found me if something called a Hallow had found me yet, I lied and said it did, but it knew I was lying, and it chased me because of it.’ Harry stopped to wonder if he sounded insane, he probably did.’

‘What did it look like?’ Voldemort then took a needle and only gave a brief warning before he pierced Harry’s skin where the greyish veins had collected together.

‘Horrible. No eyes, grey fangs, mouth was too big for its face. Taller than Hagrid, white skin, bony and rotten in places. No hair.’ Harry was grateful for the Calming Draught when he’d had to visualise it. Voldemort took a small plate and put a tiny sample of blackened blood on a glass dish. ‘It mentioned you too, at least I think it did.’

Voldemort’s head snapped up at that and then he seemed conflicted about something. ‘Will you let me see it Harry?’ The Dark Lord raised his empty hand to brush his fingers along Harry’s arm.

‘See what?’

‘The memory of it.’ Voldemort’s voice never rose above a gentle whisper. Hesitation coloured Harry’s features and despite the Calming Draught, he felt the need to flee again.

*I think it would be best if you let him, little one.*’ Nagini pushed softly as if reading his thoughts. Maybe she could, Harry knew Voldemort could.

‘Yeah, okay.’ Harry said shakily before he thought better of it. Voldemort smiled and gave Harry’s arm a squeeze before his eyes glazed over.

Harry could feel Voldemort shifting through his mind. It was far more intense and direct than any attempts Snape had made during his week at Grimmauld Place. Harry felt the dark space in his chest unfurl and reach out tentatively to the man in his mind. It called to him again, pleading for
him to stay a little longer.

Then Voldemort snapped away and the sound of glass shattering filled the room when he dropped the empty vials he’d been holding.

The Dark Lord was shaking, and his skin was deathly pale.

‘What is it Master? What did you see?’ Nagini asked in a rush of fervent hisses.

Voldemort looked at Harry strangely, like he’d seen a ghost. ‘Seen it before?’ Harry knew that it was not just simply the visual of the beast that had shaken the Dark Lord, it was recognition.

Voldemort visibly tried to calm himself, breathing harshly through his nose. ‘Once.’ He answered as he wrung his hands. ‘I happened on a boggart after I’d made the locket into a Horcrux. I was in Norway researching De Kloka and trying to find a reputable Svartebok, a tome filled with Norwegian healing magic. It caught me unawares in the Bymarka Forests.’ Voldemort trailed off, his breathing erratic.

‘It turned into that thing?’ Harry’s skin raised in gooseflesh at yet another confirmation the creature was real.

‘Yes.’ He choked out.

Harry didn’t want to ask. But he had to.

‘Then what is it you’re afraid of?’ Harry wanted to close his eyes and for it to be all over.

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Voldemort let out a strangled laugh.

‘What was is it Tom?’ Harry repeated, now impatient.

‘Death Harry, I’m afraid of Death.’


*Punches air*  DEATHS ON THE FUCKIN’ SCENE GUYS

Hemhem, hello, and thank you reading so far.

I hope you are all enjoying yourselves as much as I am.

Which, let's be honest, is probably too much to be healthy.

Did yah get some tingles? I certainly did.

Comments, kudos, and your kind words are appreciated.

AND I INHALE EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM.

I do actually, the boyfriend’s, like 'sthapp already, yah big creep'.

Love you all, mwahh.
Tom sat in the darkened library with a tall stack of tomes casting a shadow over his strained features.

He hadn’t slept, he simply couldn’t after what Harry had unearthed. His new body needed to rest far more than his previous, Tom suspected it was because he was far more human than he had been in past decades – perhaps ever if he also considered how removed he was as a boy. How constantly he’d hated the notion of humanity, like pins and needles under his skin that would never wane.

However, Tom was anything but removed now. His memories of the Bymarka Forest had all but been forgotten before a few nights ago, and he’d preferred it that way. Admitting his own fears had never been an option and thus, they had always been tucked away in a corner of his mind he deigned not to explore too often.

Tom had only been in his twenties when he’d looked Death in the face – well, a boggarts best guess of the beast’s form anyway. What Harry had encountered made the boggarts interpretation look almost laughable. But even that pale imitation had done more than simply make him falter, he’d only felt pure, blinding terror for the five too-long seconds it had taken him to spring to action – the Riddikulus that followed had been the clumsiest attempt of casting he’d ever made. He couldn’t think of anything funny to transform it into, instead he’d just turned it into something less terrible – himself. He could only really laugh at himself when it had happened anyway.

Most Boggarts tend to leg it when they hear that particular spell, their pride so embedded in their survival instinct it always made them turn tail for fear of shame. The Norwegian Boggarts were particularly easy to humiliate, something Tom had been immensely grateful for at the time. If the creature had advanced again instead, Tom would have been completely useless to oppose it. He’d been reduced to shaking with his head in his hands on the floor of the dense forest with ever denser
snow at its bed.

After that his greatest fear had changed. He feared losing his Horcruxes more than anything because without them, he’d have to meet that foul creature. The idea of them being destroyed, cracked, and lifeless at his feet had always been a good motivator. He’d simply have to turn that image around in his mind and then he could do anything – because nothing could be worse than that. He could kill, he could maim, he could torture, he could all but die and spend just over a decade in sheer agony, he could lose his mind, his face, his very soul and still, nothing could compare to that image.

But now that he’d swallowed most of them, Tom wasn’t sure what a Boggart would show him now. He’d probably see it again now. That thought always made Tom ask; why didn’t everyone see that fowl beast when confronted by a Boggart? Surely it was not only the most sensible fear to have, but it had to be the most common too. How inane is a fear of spiders, snakes or clowns when you’re confronted with something like that.

Tom wondered what Harry would see if he were confronted by one. After the boy’s reaction last night, he would assume Harry might look upon the same poor imitation Tom had faced in his twenties.

How the boy had the wherewithal to run from the beast was beyond Tom. He knew himself perhaps too well and without a doubt that the fear would have frozen him and his own feet would not have moved with the same determination.

It didn’t shame him to admit that Harry was braver than he could ever be, not after even just the memory of it had turned Tom to stone. His previous self had been too conceited to utter such a staggering truth; a teenaged boy was far more of a man that Voldemort ever could hope to be.

Harry’s only fault is that he hadn’t been quick enough to pull himself from that plane. The injury he had sustained defied all logic; dreams couldn’t harm you. Nobody wakes up maimed from a dream or from the material which fuels even the most convincing hallucination, you certainly didn’t get cut down to the bone from a dream, and you definitely didn’t become infected with something that there is reference of in a library as old as this one. But, as per, here Harry was having suffered all of those things and after a brief reprieve via a very strong Calming Draught seemed right as rain again.

That ability to bounce back was not normal for someone so young and inexperienced. Tom faltered, actually, maybe he had quite a bit of experience facing awful beasts and terrible fears. The boy had been far younger than he was now when he’d first encountered Voldemort. Tom sneered in self-disgust. He’d been nothing but a parasite, so desperate for a corporeal form that he’d sank to latching onto a disgustingly desperate host. He had also lowered himself into becoming a beastly creature which lived only to suck at the vein of any unicorn he could sink his teeth into. And the great Lord Voldemort had the cheek to sneer at magical creatures like the werewolves and vampires that frequented the forest just as much as he did. And then, somehow, sank even lower when he threatened the boy’s life for a fucking stone.

It Tom could spit at himself, he would.

The tomes were giving him very little in the way of an explanation for the web of veins that now graced the back of Harry’s hand. It seemed that no one had been marked by Death in such a way before, none had lived to tell the tale apparently. Tom looked at the blackish blood in the petri dish and huffed, completely frustrated.

Nought on Hallow its connection to Death either, Tom pinched the bridge of his nose and leaned
back. Tom was no stranger to fruitless searches, but this was taking the mickey. Despite its infamy, very little has been recorded concerned the specific to Deaths being and doing. Most of what he’d come across was frustratingly flowery prose or morbid poetry of Witches and Wizards who’d obviously had one too many firewhiskeys for their undiagnosed artistic depression to cope with. You’d expect the Darker tomes to at least provide an account or vague description of the beast. But it seemed the beast was as elusive in his corporeal form as he was horrifying.

Tom was stretching out his aching hand as Nagini bounded in dragging a seemingly reluctant Potter behind her. The boy was trying to pull away from the snake ministrations with increasing determination, his cheeks aflame and his eyes cast down to the ground.

‘Master.’ Nagini grunting in greeting.

‘Good morning to you both.’ Harry was looking towards the exit, clearly desperate to escape. ‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’ Tom said behind a smirk directed towards the boy’s all too obvious discomfort.

Nagini pulled at the boy’s left arm and brought it, quite literally, under Tom’s nose. His eye caught the flash of a gem on Potter’s ring finger, he looked archly at the boy when he realised it was the Gaunt ring. Potter looked at him briefly before pointedly looking away, the flush at his cheeks now reaching his ears. ‘Oh, I can’t wait to hear the story behind this.’ Tom grinned.

‘Show him.’ Nagini directed at the boy who all but growled at her. He shook his head and made to leave before Nagini grabbed him back by his jumper. The snake seemed fed up of the boy’s protests and decided to grab his hand and snatch the ring from his finger and threw it across the library. Potter stared at the back of her head as if his green eyes could shoot daggers. Tom raised an eyebrow at them both; they had clearly lost their minds.

Nagini totalled him a withering glare. ‘Look.’ She pointed to the ring. Tom did as she asked with scepticism colouring his features and turned in his seat.

Nothing happened for a few beats and the boy seemed to let of a sigh in relief but groaned again when the ring shook, rattling against the floor.

The ring then flew through the air before stopping just before the boy’s clenched fist. It nudged his hand gently before, obviously now impatient, thumped against Potter’s fist. The boy yelped and then tried to bat it away, but the ring sneakily slipped onto his ring finger again. Once seated, it seemed to nuzzle at the base of his finger as if saying ‘ah, home again’. Potter then let out a colourful string of curses pulling the ring off again and lobbing it out of the open window. It flew at him again shortly after and nestled on his protesting digit after smacking him in the forehead.

‘It’s been happening since that night, it was already on his finger when he was being healed.’ Nagini’s eyes watched Potter’s failing attempts to remove the piece of jewellery. Tom stared and wondered how the boy had hidden it from him, or why the boy had hidden it from him. ‘We’ve tried to take it off him countless times. We even tried locking it in a box and when that didn’t work, the safe.’ Nagini looked at him sheepishly. ‘Both of which will now need repaired – there is a sizable hole in each.’ Tom’s mouth went slack at that, the safe was enchanted and warded with an eye-watering amount of magic. Nothing could get in – or out, but his family’s ring had obviously smashed through all of that just to reach the boys finger.

Tom noted the symbolic importance of the rings preferred digit. ‘Feeling romantic are we Harry?’ Tom asked, his voice dripping with devious frivolity.

The boy glared at him. ‘No.’ He snapped. ‘Get whatever enchantment you’ve put on this thing off
now Tom.’ Potter said seeming intent on giving Tom the third degree for something he did not do. How refreshing, Tom thought as he luxuriated in the feeling. ‘This is not of my making.’ He smirked.

‘I told you so.’ Nagini jeered at Potter, who was now a strange red colour.

‘Are you sure this is not of your making Harry?’ Tom bit back a giggle.

‘Of course it’s not me you prat! Now stop laughing like a bloody moron and get it off me!’ Harry spat in indignation.

‘Oh, I don’t know – I quite like it where it is. Seems it’s quite happy there too.’ Potter started vibrating like a lit but not yet exploded firework.

‘Get. It. Off.’ He intoned dangerously. Tom licked his lips and leaned back in his chair again.

‘I might. Depends what you’re willing to give in return though.’ Tom knew Harry wanted to smack the shit-eating grin off of his face, probably with his ring hand.

‘Bloody Slytherins.’ Harry hissed on an exhale. ‘Just get it off me Tom.’

Tom’s belly flooded with warmth when his name had been said. ‘I am a Slytherin Potter, well noted. So then you know that, as a snake, I don’t tend to hand out favours, at least not without the promise of something in return. Isn’t that what all good friendships are about Potter? You know, give and take.’ Tom let his tone drop for the last part in clear innuendo. Watching the boy squirm was delicious. Nagini rolled her eyes at both of them and then took a set seemingly to get comfortable for the ride ahead.

Potter ignored her huff. ‘I’d say before you start begging for a handout like a dog, it might be in your best interest to not assume a friendship exists where there is none.’ The boy shot back so quickly and with so much wit that Tom was left wondering why on Earth the hat had put the boy in Gryffindor when he was so clearly a snake.

‘And yet here you are, seeking my aid and it seems are in desperate want of that very same aid. If that doesn’t sound like friendship well – I don’t really know what does.’ Tom purred, needling at each nerve the boy had. Nagini tutted and shit him an exasperated look. Tom found himself wanting to chuckle at the snake’s disappointment.

‘I don’t tend to bargain with my friends if they need my help. But, then again, I’m not a smarmy git with a god-complex.’ Harry sneered.

Keep pushing Potter, see where it gets you. Tom exhaled deeply to out those kinds out thoughts away. ‘Then, you have simply missed out on many opportunities like any other moronic Gryffindor I’ve had the displeasure to meet. And which one is it? God or dog – I can’t be both.’

‘Dog.’ Potter said without flinching. ‘You know what? Bugger this, I’ll do it myself.’ Harry strode towards the door.

Tom wandlessly shut the door in Potter’s face to which the boy let out an annoyed whine.

‘Come here Potter.’ Tom said lewelly as if he wasn’t coiled tight at the thought of the boy’s continued proximity. He thought that the boy might know this about him and was right now using the need for it to his advantage.
How very Slytherin of you Harry, if that’s the case. Tom applauded internally.

He also thought he saw the boy smirk before he turned.

He didn’t look at Tom when he held his hand out, obviously as ashamed of the rings placement as Tom was gleeful for it. Tom hadn’t been lying when he’d said he liked it. The Dark Lord had hoped the boy would have donned the clothing and other jewellery pieces Tom had bought for him. But no, the boy thought himself above it; probably knowing what it signified – a claim of ownership.

Yet, the ring in its curious animation had done exactly that and seemed somewhat possessive in its attentions.

Tom took Harry’s hand in a soft grip and he drank in the boy’s expression at the contact. Potter was perhaps better at lying to himself than he was at fighting off Tom’s nigh-on fatalistic affections. And yet, Tom had noted how the boy’s gaze had softened around the edges since that night he’d met Death. It wasn’t as if Potter was looking upon him with any desire to be closer, but the boy wasn’t exactly imagining his head on a pike anymore either.

He waved his wand over Harry’s hand to taste the objects magical signature. His eyebrow cocked when he felt nothing except Potter’s alpine and verbena magic embedded within it. ‘You’re sure you aren’t summoning it?’ Tom asked.

The boy huffed again and indignantly muttered ‘You being serious?’.

Tom let himself stare fleetingly at the boy whose hair was backlit by sunlight before returning his attentions back the ring. First, he tried all the run-of-the-mill spells like *Finite Incantatem* and *Evanesco* but none of that touched the object. Tom then pulled from his more obscure magical know-how and attempted a few more complex and powerful spell in increasing vehemence. When that option was exhausted, he removed it to try and seal it away from Potter. None of the restraining spells even so much as nudged the ring and it always sauntered back to the boy’s finger. The boy groused when one of the spells had made the ring particularly hot, but he said it quickly cooled itself after the compliant. Now sweating, used any spell he could think of that wouldn’t damage Potter’s hand if exacted. When that proved fruitless, he took the damnable thing of his finger and hurled it with the same rage as the boy had when he first arrived – only to watch it float back onto the boy’s finger proudly, as if taunting them.

It was now Tom’s turned to spout colourful language.

‘It’s not coming off.’ Tom huffed as he threw himself back in his chair.

‘No, really?’ Potter drawled sarcastically.

Nagini just looked bored, as if the novelty of it had worn off. ‘Might someone else be causing this?’ She asked around a yawn.

‘No. Can’t you smell his magic on it?’ Tom griped.

Nagini looked at the ring and then Potter, her expression confused as she then walked over to the boy. She sniffed at the ring and then at Potter’s neck. Tom had to push down the senseless jealousy that rose from his gut at the sight.

‘Yes. But he smells strange.’ Harry then let out a growl in umbrage before Nagini chided him. ‘I did not say bad, I meant different you fool.’ She clipped his ear and the boy glared at her as he rubbed it.
‘Different how?’ Tom had been afforded the keener snake-like senses in his old form, but with his newly found humanity came dulled faculties.

‘Richer, darker - but not in the deviant sense.’ Potter winced before she corrected herself. ‘It’s still his scent, only now it is more layered, more complex.’

Did you know he smells like you? Nagini spoke in his mind with a smile.

With another repressed shiver, Tom rubbed his hands down his face – a bad habit he had picked up in the orphanage, one that he’d recently started again.

‘So, it’s on me for good then and I smell weird. Lovely.’ Harry seemed to accept the circumstances rather quickly. ‘The only question left is why then?’ Harry looked at Tom expectantly, as if her were a walking tome of all magic-related information.

Tom thought the boy just wanted to hear him say it. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, if you would be a dear and find out? That’d be great.’ Harry threw the question with mock-enthusiasm and was obviously not above projecting his frustrations on Tom.

The Dark Lord gestured to the pile of tomes beside him. ‘As you can see, there is already a backlog of questions which need answers – and some are more important than others.’ Tom pointedly inclined his head at Harry’s bandaged hand. Harry stilled as he was reminded of the event that led to said injury. ‘The ring doesn’t seem to wish you harm, only wants to be near you.’ Oh, the irony.

‘In that spirit, we will deal with any changes as they present themselves.’

‘If there wasn’t so much sweat on your forehead, I’d accuse you of not trying hard enough.’ Harry mumbled, put out by Tom’s answer.

Nagini shifted into her reptile form and then wrapped around Harry.

Before Tom could snap at him, Snape entered the library with Lucius in tow. The pair took in their glum expressions with cocked brows. ‘Oh my, it seems we have interrupted something Severus.’

‘Oh! Nagini look, the man with the shiny hair approaches.’ Harry grinned slightly at the snake who all but whipped his behind with her tail.

‘Do I even want to ask?’ Snape sighed as he turned to Harry, who currently looked as if a black cloud loomed over his head as he rubbed his back, glowering at the snake. The boy said nothing and instead brandished his hand up at them, the ring glinting in the afternoon sun.

‘We have definitely interrupted something Severus, I believe highly unexpected congratulations are in order?’ Malfoy smirked at the boy’s growl.

Harry then took the ring off and threw it at Lucius, missing his head by a mere inch, just for the ring to speed back to his finger.

‘My, my. You haven’t deigned to force your affections on the boy, have you Tom?’ Lucius chuckled. Tom just sat there and glared, imagining how cathartic it would be to repeatedly smash the blonds head against the marble table in front of him.

‘It won’t come off?’ Severus looked between Harry and Tom.

‘No – and don’t bother, we already tried everything to remove it. It seems particularly attached to
the boy.’ Tom huffed.

‘Since when?’ Severus probed gently, probably because he sensed the tension in the room. Then he seemed to take in the hand which was wrapped in gauze. ‘And do we have the regular kind of maladroitness to blame for that, or have you both got something to tell me?’ Snape smirked when Harry mouthed *mala-what* before fidgeting in discomfort.

Tom looked at Potter, trying to assess to what extent he was comfortable with revealing what they had come across.

Not very, it seemed.

‘We had an unexpected guest whose identity is yet to be confirmed, we are working on it, hence the wavering tower of books.’ Tom answered coolly, the tone warning them to not ask anything further on the matter.

‘The ring’s been here for a couple of days now.’ Harry mumbled, aiding Tom with the distraction.

Tom narrowed his eyes and wondered how he had not seen it before the ring afternoon. But then Tom remembered how Potter had pivoted every time he’d seen Tom in a room he had been about to enter, the Dark Lord had brushed it off as the boy’s usual aversion towards Tom’s company – but maybe it had been a more clandestine effort to hide himself and the ring.

‘Unusual circumstances, but it explains the bad mood.’ Lucius grinned lasciviously. ‘Pity. I’d have liked to buy a gift for you both.’ Harry went to throw the ring at the blond again but this time it decided it didn’t want to leave the boy’s finger.

‘Why are you here?’ Tom sighed in exasperation, feeling a headache looming.

‘To speak with you about current events.’ Severus pointedly glanced at Potter, obviously the information was sensitive.

‘The boy can listen, if he wants.’ Tom gestured for them both to sit. Lucius did so eyeing the slightly swaying pile of books wearily.

‘It concerns some of our recently dismissed brethren.’ Snape announced, clearly uncomfortable with Potter’s continued presence. The boy who had been idly stroking Nagini’s head piqued at what he’d said.

Tom waved for him to continue. ‘Yes?’

Snape sighed. ‘Dolohov, Greyback, and both Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange are still not accounted for. They seem to have made themselves scarce and their rumours surrounding their most recent exploits do not look promising.’

‘Narcissa has tried to establish contact her sister under the guise of a family dinner invite, but there has been no reply – which is highly unusual for both of them.’ Lucius didn’t seem perturbed by his sister-in-law’s disappearance, but Tom knew there was little love lost there.

‘And the rumours?’ Tom’s cool exterior belied the churning fury in his gut.

‘They seem to be recruiting. Picking up where you left off, as it were.’ Severus summoned a bottle of Barolo from his satchel and three glasses flew to the table. Tom checked his wristwatch. Well, late afternoon is still late, he allowed. He knew Snape was attempting to pre-emptively lighten his mood, but who was he to turn down such a nice vintage?
‘Numbers, names?’ He asked around a luxurious sip.

‘No exact estimates, but a few of the old regulars came to us saying they had been propositioned for a ‘new army’ of sorts.’ Lucius sneered around the title, as if their attempts were laughable and pathetic.

‘As for names – Jugson, MacNair and Mulciber have stated their disinterest. Though interesting Pettigrew, Rowle, Scabior, and Rookwood among others have not. Rookwood seems miffed that he lost his position with the Unspeakables when his true loyalties were revealed and is thus seeking alternative employment opportunities, albeit ill-advised ones.’ Severus said each name like it left a bad taste in his mouth which necessitated more wine to remove it.

‘What of Travers and Yaxley?’ Tom probed whilst noting how Potter’s hold on his chair had tightened and his expression had turned murderous. Snape had seemed to notice the change in the boy’s temperament too and sent a look to Tom which said, ‘I’ll tell you later’.

Lucius snorted. ‘Travers is ill – or so his wife says – and Yaxley was kind enough to tell us both to, and I quote ‘piss off’, though not before telling us he had no interest in realigned with any cult.’ Neepsey then appeared with a few plates laden with quail and truffle canapé which went perfectly with the vintage. ‘Though, it seems that those who remained unmarked are being contacted too, which widens the search parameters by some margin.’

‘But that puts it in the thousands.’ Potter muttered incredulously and was met with three sets of raised eyebrows.

‘Yes, how astute of you Potter - for once.’ Snape smirked, obviously still not forgiving the boy for the ink mishap, but the remark lacked the bite he normally wielded.

‘I didn’t think our numbers were public record Potter, so might I ask how you came by this information?’ Lucius sounded bored, but his boredom was often implemented as a guise when something had his full attention.

Tom motioned for both Potter and Nagini to join them at the table and Potter accepted hesitantly. ‘There is no reason to be anxious, little one. Silver-eyes has Master’s best interests at heart, and you are one of those.’ Harry nodded as he sat.

‘From the Order.’ He explained. ‘Know thine enemy and all that rot.’ Which earned him a rare inelegant guffaw from Lucius.

‘Do you think the Order maintained intelligence on the lower ranked Death Eater’s?’ Tom asked Snape.

‘I’m not sure, I was kept out of the loop on those matters due to the dualistic nature of my membership.’ Snape took another canapé and summoned another glass which he filled and then gave to Potter. Tom was reminded how young the boy was when he looked at the glass like he’d never seen one before. He took a tentative sip, Tom was expecting Potter to spit it out like he had when he first tried the beverage, but he didn’t. Instead his eyes fluttered closed and he smacked his lips which were now a rosy red. Tom found it hard to take his eyes off them.

‘Typical. Dismiss the gold mine they could have found in you in favour of suspicion borne from their shiny morals. How very Gryffindor of them - always leading with their hearts instead of their heads.’ Lucius griped.

‘Really? You’re moaning that they didn’t ask me to betray that kind of information?’ Snape tutted.
‘No, I’m simply highlighting the fact that if for one second those morons removed their righteous heads from their noble arses they might have save us from the headache Gryffindor’s often exact when they batter the rest us over the head with their effing morals.’ Snape settled in with his wine, evidently sensing a rant like Tom did. ‘Take dear Shacklebolt for example; a simple request to speed up an Auror charge against a known powdered alicorn distributor – that might I add would have saved the Ministry a great deal of negative exposure over the mishandling of the case – was snubbed, rather violently in fact. The Auror started touting on and on about ‘due process’ and ‘the letter of the law’ and as such, the case wasn’t hastened and yet again Ministry has another black mark against it that otherwise it could have avoided.’ Lucius sniffed haughtily.

‘If it’s the Ministry, then it probably deserves the bad exposure.’ Harry said absentmindedly. The sentiment surprised Tom; he’d thought the boy would have sung the Ministry’s praises as so many of his brethren in the Order worked for the institution.

‘Oh?’ Lucius purred. ‘And why might that be?’ Lucius was not loyal to the Ministry in any way, shape or form, unless disloyalty to it disturbed his own goals within it. Thus, he often enjoyed a good bitch about it from time to time.

Potter took a slow sip like he had far more experience drinking than what he’d had. ‘Saved my cousin from a Dementor this Summer.’ Tom winced. ‘The trace picked up on it. Not even an hour after the attack I was sent a letter saying I was expelled from Hogwarts and my wand was going to be snapped. Would’ve happened too if Dumbledore hadn’t stepped in.’ Harry then shrugged like what he had said wasn’t impressive.

‘Yes, tensions between Dumbledore and Fudge were heightened exponentially at the time.’ Snape chuckled and then turned to Tom. ‘Fudge was already jockeying to deny your existence before the Armistice blew that notion out of the water.’ Snape inclined his head to Potter. ‘Wanted to shut his trap by any means necessary. Foolish old coot, he should’ve known that any attempt to quiet the boy would result in severely unfortunate circumstances.’ Harry seemed to smile at the thinly veiled compliment.

‘It was a nightmare on our end.’ Lucius’ eye rolled. ‘Fudge wouldn’t shut up about it, he wanted the whole thing rigged. Even the woman who headed Potter’s case was chosen because of her bias against him. He was even pushing her – Umbridge, somewhat an affiliate of ours, if I remember correctly – to infiltrate the Hogwart’s faculty with a view to take over for lack of a better term.’ Lucius refilled all of the glasses and tipped the bottle unhappily when it didn’t quite fill his. ‘Thank God that idea was snubbed after the Armistice, the woman is a nightmare all wrapped up in a pink bow – literally.’

‘I’d heard he might still now with this whole ghost fiasco.’ Snape queried.

‘Oh, don’t get me started Severus. The Board are beside themselves! Everything’s ground to a halt since they started infesting the corridors. And it’s not like I’m allowed to complain about it, not with the mess we created at the Triwizard Tournament – which I probably should thank Esther for my continued position now that I think about it.’ Lucius groaned. ‘If that woman, that pink ball of horrid fluff, get her claws into the Board – I swear it now, I’m leaving!’

Tom watched Harry’s reaction carefully; the boy did wince and pale slightly then looked at Tom’s hands briefly before visibly shrugging it off. He went to stroke Nagini who had tightened around him to comfort him. She could now feel the boy’s mind like Tom could and now knew what he needed in that moment. But Tom still wished the boy hadn’t needed it in the first place.

*I’m sorry Harry. I’m so, so sorry.*
'Yeah, that Umbridge woman gave me the creeps.' Potter confirmed Lucius’ earlier comment, cleverly nipping any talk relating to the graveyard in the bud.

He found he didn’t mind the deviation from the original topic of conversation. For some years now it seemed his mind had been filled with *Potter-Plot-Plan* and this was a nice break from it.

Though, old habits die hard, especially where Potter was concerned. ‘How did you fend off the Dementor Harry?’ Tom hadn’t heard much else after Potter had announced it.

‘Patronus. Though that one was nothing compared to third year.’ He chuckled, his cheeks now flush from the wine. Tom and Lucius quickly shared a look in mutual jealousy as Neepsey returned with more wine plus charcuteries and freshly baked breads – which seemed to lighten Malfoy’s mood.

‘Might we see it?’ Tom asked before he could bite it back, apparently the wine was successfully loosening his tongue.

Harry sent Tom a curious gaze before nodding slowly, closing his eyes momentarily and then flourishing his wand. From it flew a full corporeal Patronus; a tall, sizable stag with antlers that seemed to scrape the ceiling above it. It turned to look at Harry and bowed his head before shifting towards Tom. It regarded him with a slightly cocked head, as if curious of him. The boy the waved his wand and it vanished in a delicate wisp of smoke. Snape had gone a little still too after seeing it.

‘Impressive - and *fitting* that your Patronus should be the symbolic king of forests and protector of all creatures.’ Tom mused.

Tom might have shivered at Harry’s blush. ‘Same form as my Dad’s. Didn’t think much of it beyond that.’

‘Stags are powerful, intuitive, and gentle to those in their care. But fierce in battle when it is necessitated. They always reflect the soul that casts them.’ Snape croaked. Tom knew *why* Severus looked discomforted and deigned not to draw attention to the fact.

Tom’s finger circled his glass slowly but stopped when it began to ring. ‘Do you think the Order might be open to the idea of shared intelligence?’ He asked the room.

‘Maybe, but as has been previously stated – heads tend to be lodged in cavernous arses where their concerned.’ Snape chuckled, the tension melting away from him with the distraction.

‘Wouldn’t hurt to ask.’ Potter offered. ‘I’m sure they’d be open to it if they knew what was happening.’

‘They might, but there one glaring issue with that plan.’ Tom pushed some of the food towards Potter who seemed to need an invitation.

‘Hmm?’ He sounded around a salmon blini. It wasn’t what Tom would have personally paired with the Châteauneuf-du-Pape that now filled his glass. But his house-elf had the rare talent of correctly catering to all tastes.

‘Your old Headmaster, he seems rather opposed to our help should we ever offer it to him.’ Lucius explained frostily, his distaste for the man colouring his tone.

Harry snorted. ‘That shouldn’t be a problem, he’s in the sin bin at the moment as far as the Order’s concerned.’
'Sin bin?' Lucius’ pure-blood sensibilities always shone through to a fault.

‘They’re not happy with him, went against their Gryffindor sensibilities, as you’d put it.’ Harry seemed adept at translating obscure Muggle terms, probably had to be with the Weasley brood. Tom also noted the boy’s willingness to share a light-hearted joke in the company of three ex-Death Eater’s and was somewhat enraptured by it.

‘Hah! Trouble in paradise? I’d have thought the Order would have to be scraped from the ceiling after having avoided a second Wizarding war.’ Trust Malfoy to hit one of Potter’s well-oiled buttons whilst laughing about it.

But the boy took the comment about his sacrifice on the chin with a graceful dismissal even a pure-blood would envy. ‘Nope. I don’t think anyone’s spoke to him since the tent. Nobody agreed with it.’ Harry stated whilst avoiding Tom’s gaze.

‘Nay, he did not seem concerned for your welfare in the slightest.’ Nagini chimed in. Tom rubbed his temple at the juxtaposition; Harry was now cared for by a snake and a Dark Lord in a manner which Dumbledore, a father-figure to the boy, had deemed beneath Potter’s needs and wants. It was the very same Dark Lord and familiar which had bayed for the boy’s blood only a year prior. Tom couldn’t fathom why the Headmaster hadn’t allowed the boy any luxury or affection out with his friends at Hogwarts. It simply didn’t make the slightest bit of sense.

‘Do you think the more disgruntled members you’ve mentioned would be open to an alliance of sorts?’ Lucius asked softly which Tom nearly snorted at. Malfoy’s tended to be at their most gentle when a deal was afoot.

‘If given the incentive of removing Dark Wizards? Absolutely.’ Snape laughed heartily; the wine obviously thick in his veins.

‘Like I said, doesn’t hurt to ask.’ Potter confirmed. Tom had the suspicion that when in Potter’s company, one should expect to be floored at regular occurrences. Here he was holding himself well in a conversation with men not only many years his senior but did so knowing that at least two of them harboured murderous intentions towards him before his connection to Tom was revealed. ‘They’ve probably kept tabs, you know, just in case.’ Potter gestured to them.

‘If they have, I might take back my earlier comment regarding foolish Gryffindor sensibilities.’ Lucius conceded.

‘I thought a Malfoy would never eat his own words.’ Harry quipped good-naturedly.

Snape and Tom then bellowed at Lucius’ expense. ‘He’s got you there Lucy!’ Snape roared.

‘That damnable son of mine.’ Lucius mumbled. ‘He never did understand subtlety, especially around his classmates.’

‘Learned from the best then didn’t he Lucy?’ Tom sniggered. He was as well versed on the Malfoy dos and don’ts as anyone else who’d have the pleasure of their company. In fact, he probably had the most experience if he counted his years with Abraxas too.

Shortly after that Lucius cast a Tempus and stood with Severus grumbling about a dinner Narcissa had prepared at the Manor for both of them. Tom heartily bade them farewell which earned him two subtle cocked brows before they each returned the sentiment.

The Dark Lord was more than a little tipsy as Neepsey served them dinner as they left.
Potter seemed to suddenly not know what to do with himself. They hadn’t shared a meal since the piano-altercation, as Tom had termed it in his mind.

‘Thank you Neepsey. Go ahead Harry, a belly full of wine always needs something to sop it up.’ He pushed gently.

Nagini returned to her human form and eyed her plate hungrily. Tom thought the snake had recently developed a preference to cooked meals over live prey. But, perhaps it was simply the opportunity of sharing in Potter’s company a little longer that motivated her.

It was certainly a good motivator for Tom.

The boy dug in almost greedily. Every meal he ate he did so like it might be his last. The thought brought a question to mind that he wouldn’t have otherwise dared ask if he weren’t merry off good wine. ‘Tell me about your family Harry.’

There was a few beats of tense silence as Harry dropped his cutlery. ‘Why, what would you like to know?’ It wasn’t an outright dismissal, which Tom was thankful for, but the boy was still somewhat suspicious of him. Probably because the Potter was too clever to not be.

‘Curiosity.’ Tom stated simply, although he was fizzling with the anticipation of learning something that was so highly private to the boy.

‘I assume you’re asking about the Muggle one?’ Tom nodded as he chewed slowly. ‘Not much of a family, so not much so say in that respect.’ Harry took a long pull from his nearly empty glass.

‘And in the other respect?’ Tom continued smoothly.

‘They hated me. Hated magic too. Didn’t know anything about it until I got my Hogwarts letter.’ Tom stilled. It was one thing to read Severus paraphrase the information concisely in his letter about this very subject, it was another thing entirely to hear it from Potter.

Tom stopped eating. ‘They knew and kept it from you?’

‘Yeah. Told me my parents died in a car crash, that my Dad was a drunk who’d caused it.’ The boy rubbed a hand through his hair.

‘And the accidental magic? I assume you’d have many incidences of that considering the mass of your magical reserves.’ Tom’s hand had tightened around the knife in his hand.

‘There was plenty of that. Got called a freak for it too. Didn’t have the slightest clue what it was though. Actually, one of them was the first time I spoke to a snake, let him escape the zoo whilst trapping my cousin in it pen – that was kinda’ cool.’ He smiled around his fork. ‘Though I got put my cupboard for a while after that.’

Tom was not smiling. Not at all. The boy was spouting these atrocities as if they were normal behaviours of guardians who were meant to care for him.

‘Your cupboard?’ Tom needed to calm himself, now preferably.

Harry noticed the tension and continued hesitantly. ‘My bedroom before Hogwarts. I think my acceptance letter being addressed to ‘the cupboard under the stairs’ raised enough eyebrows that they were strong armed into giving me Dudley’s second bedroom.’ Harry chuckled.

Tom pinched the bridge of his brow. ‘They housed you in a cupboard for years and yet you feel no
ill will towards these Muggles?’ Tom couldn’t believe his ears. At least at the orphanage Tom had been given his own room. Yet these Muggles had a spare still decided to shove him in a fucking cupboard!

‘I didn’t say that.’ The boy’s eyes had darkened. ‘There are plenty of things I hate them for and made me wish I could return the favour.’

‘Like?’ The notion of calming down had left the room.

Harry locked eyes with Tom as if unsure if he should continue. Then he cocked his head at the plate as something solidified with him, something that had Nagini shudder. ‘No dinners for a week was their favourite.’ Harry said lowly as he stared at the plate in front of him distantly. ‘Never fixed my glasses after they let Dudley get a hold of me.’ Harry carefully wrapped the linguine around his fork. ‘Even the Muggle school let the beatings happen.’ Potter held his fork in a white-knuckled grip. ‘ Bruises, fractures, breaks – that didn’t matter – there were chores to do and food to cook. Food that I didn’t get to eat, I didn’t deserve it apparently.’ Harry’s face curled in disgust as he raised the fork, dripping with sauce from his plate. ‘Never took me out anywhere – ever. Didn’t have birthdays either.’ Another drip ran off the fork and Harry’s eyes trailed it with a predatory edge. ‘Blocked the letters too, before they started flooding the building. Then they sailed us all to a remote tower on a stormy night to get away from them. Hagrid had to come get me – first time I ever saw magic was when he lit a fire with his wand, then gave Dudley a pig’s tail- also was the first time I had birthday cake too, before Dudley stole it.’ Harry licked the sauce off his hand and fork. ‘Vernon brought his rifle out too for the occasion, that was all very well and good before Hagrid bent the barrel.’ And then the boy’s face lit up with an awful smile. ‘But all that stopped when I got my hands on a wand.’ And then he ate the forkful like a carnivore would simpering prey. ‘Then they couldn’t do much of anything.’

They locked eyes again and then Tom knew there was no way he would have ever won. Not against this.

Then the memories that flooded both his and Harry’s mind whilst he’d been sobbing came to the forefront. ‘Except your cousin’s beatings.’

Harry stilled and swallowed audibly. ‘Yes, except for those.’ He said quietly. ‘Dudley didn’t seem to fear magic like his parents had taught themselves to. I suppose I can blame Petunia for that, she chose not to tell him.’

Nagini voiced the rage that Tom felt coursing through him. ‘Those fucking inbreds need to be taught what it is to suffer. How dare they harm their own blood!’

Harry shushed her softly. ‘They hated blindly. They hated because they feared what they did not seek to understand.’

‘Why didn’t you put him down like the dog he so clearly is?’ Violent thoughts piled on top of each other in Tom’s mind’s eye. Potter fat pig of a cousin pissing himself when confronted with a rabid werewolf. His Aunt raped then hung from the rafters of his dungeon. His Uncle skinned of all layers and kept alive right down to the veins and bone.

‘The Trace.’ Harry replied evenly.

‘And if there had been none?’ Tom needed to know.

‘Well, I might’ve had more than just my wand snapped.’ He chuckled darkly.
‘And Dumbledore knew?’ Tom’s voice had degraded into a slow burn.

‘Of course the oaf knew!’ Nagini spat.

‘Not sure, though Snape thinks he did. Hence why no one is speaking to him now. I probably won’t unless forced to. Most of the Order members are furious. If the Armistice hadn’t done it, that certainly did.’ Harry took another sip as if he were talking about the fucking weather.

‘And yet you would have fought by his side – even after all of that?’ Tom couldn’t understand it.

‘Not with or for him – no. He had me fooled though. I thought he cared. But, now I’ve had the chance to step back from it a bit, I realise he never did. I was a means to an end, nothing more nothing less.’ Neepsey lit the candles in front of them, and Tom thought it was fitting that the flame reflected in the boy’s eyes. ‘He always sent me back. Even after I begged him to stay.’ Harry uttered. ‘Saw he did the same to you.’

It was the first time Potter had acknowledged the memories Dumbledore had gathered. Tom had agreed for them to be shared so that they might be received as a promise of trust between them. ‘Yes. During the Muggle War too – and the gall of it when he questions why I hate Muggles.’ Tom sneered. ‘The question is how could you not?’ If the boy mentioned something whimsical, he’d throw something.

‘I hate some. I hate some Wizards too – I hated you too. I’m not above it, never have been. Probably would have made different choices if I hadn’t found Ron and Hermione.’ Harry snorted. ‘I was nearly sorted into Slytherin too! God, missed my ticket to Dark Lord infamy there.’ Bowled. Over. Once. Again. ‘Nearly sorted into Slytherin?’

Harry nodded gleefully. ‘Oh yes, the hat was convinced, I had to beg for Gryffindor. The hat was like ‘not Slytherin eh? Are you sure? You could be great you know. And Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness!’ Ron nearly shat a pygmy puff when I told him. Said it made sense when I started spouting Parseltongue in second year. Duel with Malfoy – don’t ask. Everyone was convinced I was the heir of Slytherin!’ Harry was reduced to hysterics.

Tom looked on dumbfounded. He considered everything quietly and Harry’s laugh tapered off when he noticed the pensive expression on his face. Tom looked at him and didn’t blink, not once. ‘It’s like looking at a mirror.’

Harry’s eyes narrowed slightly. ‘Not a perfect one though.’ He took out his wand and fidgeted with it slightly. ‘Though I have thought about it.’ He pointed to Tom’s holster on his hip. ‘You’re cores a phoenix feather, right?’

‘Yes. Yew, Thirteen and half inches, phoenix feather.’ He sent the boy a question glance, he found he had too many to convey with just a glance.

‘You know that the phoenix was Fawkes, Dumbledore’s familiar?’ The boy’s lips curled in a secretive smile.

‘No. I never looked into it.’ Though Tom was suspecting he should have.

‘Fawkes gave two. Just two. One is in your wand – guess where the other is?’ He grinned.

Tom pointed to the boy’s wand. ‘What’s the core Harry?’

‘Holly, eleven inches, phoenix feather.’ He twirled the wand. ‘Not everyone gets to meet the beast
who contributed to their wand, but I got to.’

Nagini hissed in awe. ‘It is as it was foretold. Even your wands know it. The boy is your equal Master.’

‘They’re brothers.’ Tom’s eyes had never been so wide. ‘The graveyard-.’ He trailed off as he caught himself.

‘Yep, got it in one Tom – I’m impressed. But I’d say they are more twins than brother’s’ Harry smirked.

‘I couldn’t never land a hit. I could never- they. Circe Harry. It never would have landed, they would never betray each other like that. They couldn’t.’ Tom sank back into his chair. He had been right, he’d never had a hope in hell of ever beating this boy.

‘Ollivander said it was curious. Though he was way more mystical about it than that.’ Harry laughed.

‘Can I – might I?’ Tom motioned towards Harry’s wand and knew that this was probably going too far, but he needed to. He needed to know.

Harry smiled cautiously but then slowly handed the wand over. As soon as he touched it a spark ran up his arm. It knew him. It had always known him.

Harry felt it too, his pupils had blown.

Tom cast a quick Lumos and it responded beautifully, his magic thrummed through it just like it did with his own wand. Tom gave Harry both wands quickly after that laughing.

Harry one upped him and cast his Patronus again. The Stag swept with confident grace from his wand – something that simply couldn’t be done with any other.

The stag strutted straight to Tom this time and bowed to him, as if he’d been waiting to have the chance to since they’d laid eyes on each other earlier in the day.

This was too much. It was all too much.

Harry held them both and went a little quite again after he’s waved the stag away again, clearly perturbed by its familiarity. ‘There’s a lot.’ He finally breathed. ‘It’s all connected. But it makes sense, sort of. I’m your Horcrux after all.’

‘Yes. Mine.’ Tom said it before he even thought how it might sound. But with wine in his belly, their magic in the air, their connections aired, and the mournful song sitting between them he couldn’t help himself. Because that was the answer to the song he’d been hearing since the graveyard.


Harry paled and then stood from his seat, knocking his glass over before making a swift exit.

Not this again. Tom sighed in exasperation.

Nagini caught him as he tried to follow. ‘I have asked you to fix it. Please do so.’

Tom shook her off with a furious nod and then swept from the room, feeling out for the boy through their connection which thrummed with such an intensity it felt like it might shake the very
‘Harry.’ He called when he could see the boy’s back. ‘Harry. Stop.’

The boy pivoted and then charged to Tom. The boy looked as mad as hell.

‘You stop!’ He shouted. ‘I didn’t fucking ask for this. We have one good conversation and there I was thinking ‘cool, the man isn’t a fucking maniac’ but then you had to go all fucking Dark Lord on me and start staking a bloody claim. Jesus, I’m so stupid.’

‘You called. I answered. You know it, I know it.’ Tom shot back, the sting of rejection still raw.

‘That was the fucking Horcrux or have you forgotten the distinction between it and me.’ Harry’s fists were shaking.

Tom growled. ‘There is no distinction. We’ve been over this.’

‘Oh there bloody well is. You just seem to have a tough time getting it through your thick skull!’

‘Really Harry? You want me to repeat, exactly how I know that isn’t the case.’

‘I don’t fucking care.’ Harry spat. ‘I don’t want you and I never will.’

‘I beg to differ Harry. You know why? I can hear it. I’ve always heard it since I first touched you. And you know what it sings Harry? I do.’

‘Oh shove off. What a load of shit.’ Harry never looked him straight in the eye as he denied it.


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‘I don’t care.’ Harry tried to push the words out as if he weren’t affected, but his throat had constricted too tightly around his windpipe.

‘Oh, but you do Harry – you care so much it drives you mad.’ He cooed lowly. Voldemort then pushed to fingers to Harry’s neck and his muscles screamed to run. ‘Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.’ Voldemort whispered against his ear in time with Harry’s erratic heartbeat. Harry shivered at the contact of cool skin against his heated neck. The Dark Lord’s fingers then brushed his Adam’s apple as it bobbed with a loud swallow.

Harry raised his hand to swipe him away, but Voldemort caught it softly by his fingers, his eyes never leaving his. ‘Don’t.’ Was all Harry could force out as he stared and blood rushed through his body filling dark, deep places.

The Dark Lord chuckled airily. ‘Don’t do what Harry?’ He murmured against Harry’s fingers, his eyes goading him and full of levity.

‘Just don’t.’ He whispered desperately. There was a roar in Harry’s brain that stamped on all coherent thought.

‘What, this?’ Voldemort pulled Harry’s fingers into his mouth. Harry’s stomach jolted and his eyes fluttered closed as he felt the wet warmth of his tongue and silken grip of his lips wrap around
them. He sucked on them, his tongue rolling around his forefinger. Harry opened his eyes and looked at Voldemort’s filthy expression as he parted his lips to bite on both fingers, his teeth then grazing from his knuckle down to his nail bed. Grey eyes devoured him too, cold and hard. Harry’s whole body shook violently as he watched those lips, his lips suckle at his fingertips, his tongue undulating around his lax fingers. The lewd suction reverberated in the hall and Harry felt the wetness soak the older man’s chin. Voldemort moaned as his hand travelled slowly from Harry’s neck and into his hair which he gripped and pulled. The tension and sensation filled Harry’s belly with a heat that bordered on agony; the sweet pain bared a wet, sticky fruit which Harry felt travel down his thigh.

There was something inside Harry screaming for the contact; it wanted to jump out of him so that it might be consumed by the feral creature with sharp teeth and a wicked mouth. I’m going to die. Harry rambled internally. Oh, Circe I’m going to die.

It broke the dam inside Harry. He could feel the older man – no – he could see him. Their minds reached out and grabbed each other then sang when they enveloped. Harry saw every splinter of Voldemort’s cracked and bruised soul. Each shade of Voldemort stared back at him, reaching out for him. They were all the versions of him he’d already swallowed back in and they wanted the same thing from Harry; to suck him in to their core so that they might become one once more.

Voldemort pulled Harry’s hand from his mouth and silvery saliva glistened on his fingers and his lips. He then pushed Harry’s fingers towards his already parted lips. In his shock Harry didn’t move and then the Dark Lord nudge them inside Harry’s mouth. Harry moaned as he felt the spit rub against his heated lips. Voldemort watched with his teeth biting into his reddened, wet flesh. Harry zeroed in on the flash of white, sharp canine and he groaned. His fingers were pulled away from him with a lewd burst of noise.

Harry’s head was pulled back further by strong hands and Voldemort lips were then just a hairsbreadth from his. ‘I know exactly how much you care, little one. I know about all of those things that drive you mad. Things that you’ve only thought about, and not been brave enough to seek. But I see it Harry, I see it in that soul of yours, coiled within mine. So deeply entwined, one might as well be the other.’ Harry’s lip trembled as he felt Voldemort whisper against them.

He shook with the temptation to push forward, to grab and take. The need for it was as heady as it was consuming. ‘And it’s painful, isn’t it? Shoving it down, pushing it away so much that it grows into something so ugly you can’t bear to look at it. It’s getting so tired of being ignored Harry and it won’t be too long before it claws its way back out – and make no mistake Harry, it’ll take you with it.’ Voldemort pushed Harry against the wall behind him and Harry felt his thigh thrust between his.

Harry’s breath came in rushed whimpering pants and at that moment he was little more than an animal; a slave to these torrid sensations. ‘And then the question is, little one; why suffer such an agonising wait when you can drown in the pleasure of it instead?’ Voldemort’s hiss sent a voltaic shot straight between his thighs. Harry gasped as he leaned in minutely, his mind warring with the very same question. He was pulling himself in two directions simultaneously until it felt like he was tearing down his centre, right down to his shuddering core. Voldemort’s gaze slid down to Harry’s lip then looked back with a question.

‘I can’t – not you – never with you.’ Harry garbled in a frenzied mewl.

‘No, me. Only me – forever.’ Voldemort pushed at him his expression just as frantic as Harry’s.

Then like a rock hitting thin glass, Harry shattered and pushed forward.
Voldemort took his lips on an inhale as he moaned Harry name in a whimper. Harry gasped for it; his body sang for it. His lips nursed Harry’s and pulled at them with his teeth. Harry growled against them and his hands latched onto the older man’s scalp. It wasn’t so much a kiss as was an attempt to consume each other. The tension that had begun the night he had signed his blood, their blood on the parchment, which had been smothered in his mind, burst between them and then Harry knew what it was. He could feel Voldemort’s – no – Tom’s mind as his own. The shivered like a strong wind through alpine trees and Harry could feel exactly where they were joined. He knew Tom, he was Tom. He had always been. They were each other reflection with only their flesh differentiating them. Harry sucked as if he could draw Tom’s soul into his. The feeling always bubbling under the surface was known now and it had a clear goal; to become whole again by whatever means necessary.

Harry knew what he was then, a piece of a broken whole. He’d always carried the sensation of being displaced, of feeling unwanted, not being needed and it was finally being soothed. The relief of it spilled as tears down Harry’s cheeks.

Voldemort enveloped Harry so hard he though his bones might break and liquify. ‘I’m you, oh God I’m you.’ Harry said on the edge of a scream. Harry wanted Tom to inhale his lips so that his mind could feel him inside. ‘Please – please -.’ Harry hissed as Tom’s tongue tasted his.

Tom cradled Harry and pulled him up the wall, Harry’s legs encircled his hips with a serpentine grace. He cried as Tom’s hips pushed into his, the roll of them reminding Harry of the lewd jerks of Latin dancers. ‘Harry.’ Tom called between gasps. ‘My Harry.’ Then he growled ‘Mine’. Harry could feel Tom’s need to be inside him, he could feel their souls begging for the union. All his shades needed Harry, coveted Harry within a terrifying obsession and all Harry’s soul could answer was ‘yes, please -take it.’

They locked eyes as they pushed and pulled at each other. Harry could fill an ocean with the ecstasy rising from deep within his core. The sensation was building, rising, grabbing, clawing, shaking. Harry drew a thumb along Tom’s lips and then pulled him to his mouth again, his mouth starving for his. Tom’s nails dug into his hips and Harry could feel the trickle of blood trailing down the curve of his flank. Then Harry was reduced to nothing but a tearful moan.

‘I want you to drown in me Harry – ah – I need it – always need it – its never enough -.’ Tom bit out, hurried and needy.

Harry growled against Tom’s neck and bit down. He needed under his skin, he needed to be inside him.

The thought was a cold bucket of water over his heated body.

‘Stop.’ Harry whispered. ‘Tom, stop. I need you to stop.’ He breaths were now panicked.

Tom’s darkened eyes bore down on Harry’s. ‘Don’t make me Harry. I – please.’


Tom lowered Harry and kissed his cheek as he did so. ‘Okay.’ He said with a shaking breath. ‘It’s fine Harry. It’s okay.’

Harry could only nod and then walk away on shaking legs.

*Don’t think about it. Don’t pay attention to it.*

But as the boy climbed the tower to his room, stripped, and then curled into his bed, that’s all he
could do.

The song was begging. The song was screaming.

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OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOFFTTT.

Now, not going to lie, I'm shocked I even had that in me.

Read it over and I was like 'damn gurl, you might need therapy.'

Or lemonade. There's always lemonade.

Hello and thank you for reading so far!

I did say the new chapter would be soon, and who am I to disappoint?

Harry narrowly avoided a bright pink hackney carriage as he crossed the road in London’s West end.

It had given him a start; his mind had been miles away and the driver wasn’t happy at all. That might have been an understatement, the man was now the same alarming shade as his taxi and there was spittle on his chin. But the crossing was green, and the driver was screaming, so Harry flipped him off and then slowly made his way to the pavement.

He then floated down the bustling streets of London’s theatre district with sweating palms and the occasional huff when someone barged his shoulder in their haste to get those last few Christmas presents.

London would be beautiful if there were no people in it, he thought.

The cold Winter sun and slush at the edges of the pavements didn’t help matters. Harry found himself squinting and his eyes rolling back more often than not – that paired with having to catch himself every time his rubber soles found black ice was setting his teeth on edge.

It made him miss the polite etiquette found in Wizarding streets; no barging, no jostling, the pavements cleared of all hazards – nothing tended to get in your way, and that lightened everyone’s mood.

Muggles were not so peaceful.

Beeping horns, shouting, cigarette smoke, car fumes, screaming adverts, too bright lights and every corner or cove having its own musician resulted in a particularly grievous assault on the senses.
But Harry plodded on with his fist clenched around his ticket.

Finally being emancipated was proving to be a thrilling experience. Though, his freedom could only be experienced unsupervised and unfettered for seven measly hours a week. So, Harry thought he’d make the most of it whilst it lasted.

He arrived at the theatre and allowed himself to catch his breath and smile slightly. Harry had never been in a theatre before, but since he had first picked up a music book, he had planned to make the trip.

He’d picked a ballet, simply because it had been the first one on the box office list that featured a piano accompaniment he recognised— well it was actually a symphony orchestra piece – but the piano was the most important part.

Harry took in his surroundings as he gave the grumpy, dusty man his ticket. Everything was red and gold - *everything*. The lights were dimmed and cast a soft glow on the grand staircase of dark red carpet and tarnished gold banisters. As he travelled through the double doors to his seat in the highest gallery, he noticed the colours were muted versions of the foyer. Everything was intricately carved, the seats were plush velvet and the theatre curtain look huge, even at this lofty height.

Despite the rush to get here, Harry was actually one of the first to arrive. He lent forward over the barrier, much to the theatre attendants’ derision, and felt a sense of vertigo. It was so high up from the ground, the seats below looked like little red currants.

As more people found their seats, Harry realised he was one of only a handful of people who’d picked the highest gallery. The young man thought it was odd; why would you give up such an awesome view just to be closer to the action? Sure, the tickets had been cheaper, but Harry thought that having an eagle eyes view of the event was far more appealing than sitting behind taller persons and having them block the whole thing. This way he could see it all and not have to suffer the neck strain of peering around someone else.

The downside of arriving so early is that it felt like a lifetime before the ballet started. But, the drone and swell of the instrument tunings was a kind of musical in of itself. Though, the waiting gave him time to think and Harry’s mind started following too familiar paths that led to aching chests and throbbing headaches.

His mind was on Tom as the players prepared. Harry willed himself to avoid it, but the thoughts lingered anyway and the fed the self-disgust.

The further from Tom he’d traveled, the worse the feeling in his chest was.

Much to Harry’s continuing horror, Tom was beautiful - had been since the Armistice. He was all cold, pale, flawless with an intense gaze and tight clothing. Harry had noticed the sensual nature in with he exacted himself. It was in everything he did; as he drank his tea, as he flipped the pages of a tome, in how he held a quill, in a stretch, in a blink – even the way he breathed had Harry watching with unconscious appetite.

It was no wonder that the man had pulled in those around him like a spider and her web. Tom drew you in simply by being. He theorised that many of Tom’s Death Eaters had fallen into that trap; needing his being with an obsessive craving that could only be sated by his presence.

In Harry’s case it was far more complicated than that.

Nobody had told him what it actually meant to be a Horcrux. None of the books, tomes or
references offered a warning or even a hint of the dark, heated thing that pushed and pulled at his own will, then blurred the lined between the Horcruxes needs and wants and his own.

A sirens song was a good way to describe it, but it was actually more acute than that – more like needing water or air to survive.

Harry had now had a taste of what relief felt like and it had him itching.

He bit his lip and blood pooled when he remembered Tom’s mouth, his lips. The way the man had stared the entire time like he was feasting on Harry – breathing it in each time Harry lost another one of his inhibitions and licking his lips when was on the edge of losing himself entirely.

Harry clenched his left fist as if he could crush the tingle that buzzed each time he remembered how the inside of Tom’s mouth had felt around him. Harry hated himself for it.

The morning after Harry had seen his reflection, his lips swollen, and his neck mottled. He drove a fist into it, cracking the glass, but it didn’t relieve him. The repulsion was constant, and it refused to hide itself like it once had. It was always at its worse in the middle of the night when Harry’s fingers grazed his own skin, sweaty, hot, shaking as the memory of Tom’s hands had him biting into his pillow. Harry had scratched where the skin was now broken on his flank and it drove him over the edge. The *Scourgify* after was always spat out and followed by a good rocking back and forth as his breathing settled.

‘What ails you, little one?’ Nagini had been so kind – too kind. He’d always paint his face with an enthusiastic smile and tell her he was feeling great, amazing, incredible, wonderful, *marvellous* and Harry commended his acting skills each time.

The curtain lifted to reveal a monotone setting, and ballerinas fluttered on stage in silence except for the *clud-clud* of their shoes. Harry felt one step removed as he took in the rising surge of the music fill the hall. He didn’t want to feel this – any of this. He couldn’t give in, he couldn’t feel, he couldn’t want.

It was a mantra that had begun long before Harry knew of Voldemort, magic, and the Boy-Who-Lived. He cringed at a very specific selection of memories when his mind was in this space. The blond boy in the playground that shook his hand away after he’d clasped his fingers in his. The excitement of rubbing his cheek against that same boy before being pushed away and laughed at for being silly. A girl who’d screamed and cried when he told her he couldn’t like her. Dudley and his friends sneering at him every time they visited saying he’d infect them if he got too close. When he realised he hadn’t set any privacy charms when he’d gasped Cedric’s name under soaked sheets. Whenever Malfoy had caught him looking somewhere that wasn’t his face and the giggle Pansy had let out after he’d whispered to her, staring at Harry. How hard he’s got during the Quidditch match in third year when Wood called his name and he imagined it was a moan, just sitting there for everyone to see. Vernon slapping his face and telling him he probably like it.

There were more, but those were the ones that tended to play on repeat.

How ashamed would everyone be if they found out? Circe, he’d even shared a bed with his best friend, Ron would be disgusted if he knew the dark corners of Harry’s mind. The need to be touched not touch, the want to be held not hold and how he ached for it and had tentative sought it out as platonically as someone as devious as he was could.

*You’re gay? How awful* would probably be one of the kinder comments if they found out.

And how quickly Tom had unearthed it freaked Harry out. He had resigned himself to the fact he’d
never be with anyone he wanted to be. The plan had been to wait until he’d finished Hogwarts, tell his friends, move if he had to and then find someone who didn’t make it feel so dirty and unclean. He had hope for twenty-something Harry – he would be happy and confident. He would enjoy good sex and a loving relationship and wouldn’t care what the rest thought of it. Now twenty-something Harry was just as fucked as he was.

Ah, the piano solo. A stunning Japanese woman tinkered at the keys and her torso moved to the beat in a sparkling black gown which showed off the tanned curve of her spine and hips. She had smiled all the way through the Beethoven piece. She was clearly eye-catching, even in the lowered platform her smile lit up the space. Harry wanted to appreciate that more intensely that the detached interest he currently felt. How good it would be to feel attraction towards someone like her, happy, shining, female. His derision was cemented when his eyes kept flicking to the danseur in his cream tights after trying to keep his focus on the feathered ballerinas, of which they were plenty to choose from.

‘Stunning isn’t it?’ He snapped to the soft whisper beside him. An older woman with painted red lips smiled at him. She sat right next to him despite having a plentiful choice of other seats to plonk her behind on.

Harry bit making a comment about it when he whispered back in a monotone drawl. ‘Yes. Lovely.’

‘Saw you from over there.’ She pointed to one of the golden boxes facing the stage. ‘You looked terribly lonely.’

Her voice made Harry’s skin crawl. ‘Not lonely, just alone.’ He pointedly looked at the stage and not her, hoping that she’d take the hint and leave.

She nodded slowly in his periphery. ‘It’s quite unusual to see someone as young as yourself here. Do you like Beethoven?’

Harry jerked his head, now very annoyed. ‘Yes. Heard it on a CD, decided to see it in person.’ He shoved the excuse at her.

‘Very unusual.’ She purred to which his face contorted. ‘I quite like unusual people.’

‘Good for you.’ He wanted to move to another seat. She was ruining the best part.

‘The views better from over there. Would you like to join me?’ Harry could hear the dualistic nature of her offer, his stomach roiled.

‘Not particularly.’ His patience was gone at that point.

‘Did you hear that John? He said he doesn’t want to join us.’ She turned to someone behind them. Harry turned and saw a man in his forties, smartly dressed, with greased back hair and a smarmy leer on his face.

Harry should have been scared, but honestly he’d dealt with far worse than these two morons.

‘Surely not.’ He whispered with a giggle that made Harry sneer. ‘Why don’t you come with us? We have food and drinks in our box. It’s much better than these seats anyway.’ The offer wasn’t an offer.

Harry ran through all of his potential routes out of this situation, trying to pick the ones that didn’t necessitate magic. ‘No.’ He growled at them both. The woman had the good sense to back way from him slightly, but the man leaned in more.
'Come with us, we can make it good for you.' The oily man huffed, his breath rank.

'I said no.' But the man reached out and trailed a finger down his cheek. Harry slapped it away and the pair smiled awfully, as if he were a kitten playing slapping a ball of yarn about.

'But you’re so alone.' The woman put a hand on his thigh. ‘We could fix that.’ Harry thought then that he must have a sign on his head that said ‘Come all psychopaths! Take a bite!’.

‘You’ll take you fucking hand off of me and leave, or I’ll be forced to take this further than either of you will be comfortable with.’ Harry growled.

‘Is that a threat or a promise?’ The man chuckled.

‘You fucking-.’ Harry was interrupted by a third figure approaching.

‘Now, what’s going on here?’ Tom smiled at the pair with bared teeth.

The what, how, why ran through Harry’s mind in tandem with his relief. ‘Nothing sir, now if you’d move along.’ The woman tried to shoo him away.

‘Nothing? Doesn’t look like nothing.’ Tom cocked his head and Harry now know him well enough to know that action promised terrible consequences.

‘Then it’s none of your business.’ The man with terrible breath said in a strained whisper.

‘I don’t know Harry, do you think this is any of my business?’ Tom said with a dangerous softness.

‘I think it is Tom, they’ve taken your seat.’ Harry pointed to the woman beside him. ‘I think that’s kind of rude, don’t you?’ The pair froze when they realised he had company and said company was seething. Harry wanted to chuckle when he saw them wither under Tom’s glare.

What a world Harry lived in; he was starting to have a preference for one psychopath over another.

‘Oh, sir. Seems like we made a mistake – read our tickets wrong.’ The woman spluttered and garbled.

‘Hmm. I don’t think so.’ Tom sat in the vacant seat beside Harry.

‘Then you’re sorely mistaken- ah!’ He had shot over Harry to grab a fistful of the woman’s hair.

‘In fact.’ He pulled on it hard. ‘I think you’re lying to me.’ The woman was shaking, her partner froze – clearly fearful of Tom and not wanting to draw anymore attention to the situation with such a large potential audience.

‘I- I didn’t mean-mean- I.’ She tried to take his hand from her hair.

‘You didn’t what?’ Tom said viciously. ‘Was that going to be another lie?’

‘Just let her go and we’ll leave.’ The man said shakily.

Tom smiled at his viciously then turned back to the woman. ‘I don’t like people trying to touch what’s mine. I suggest you run from the building. If I ever see either of your slimy hides again, I’ll fucking murder you. Do I make myself clear?’ The threat done something to Harry that he’d probably obsess over later. Clearly knowing that Tom wasn’t simply all bark and no bite the couple all but ran straight for the exit.
Tom slid back and then dusted himself off. ‘Well, wasn’t that was pleasant.’ He said with airy sarcasm.

Harry stared at his profile, waiting for him to explain exactly why Tom was here. When he simply kept his gaze forward, with a small all-too-pleased-with-himself-smile, Harry caved.

‘What are you doing here Tom?’ Harry said agitated.

‘Watching a ballet.’ He replied with faux-innocence.

‘No, what are you doing here?’ The gall of him. ‘Here, where I’m meant to be spending my time without you.’

‘I haven’t the faintest clue what you’re trying to infer Harry.’ Tom had the cheek to bloody-well chuckle.

‘Did you not read the unsupervised part of ‘unsupervised leave?’ Harry struggled to keep his voice quieter, now beyond incensed. ‘You’re not meant to be following me about.’

Tom flashed his teeth. ‘How conceited of you Harry. I actually happen to absolutely adore Beethoven, though I must admit, the dancing is a bit new age for my tastes.’ Harry glanced to see two dancers on soft shoes writhing against each other.

‘You’re trying to tell me you just so happened to be here at the exact same time, date and showing that I picked?’ Harry sounded more than a little sceptical.

‘Why yes. Great minds and all that.’ Tom turned to look at him. ‘Good thing that too, lest you be accosted by Muggle scum.’ He stated the term like it was dirt then grinned toothily.

‘You’re trying to change the subject.’ Harry huffed and slumped back into his seat, now mourning what would have otherwise be a nice day out.

‘And you are avoiding this one. Why did you let them near you Harry?’ Tom now had the nerve to sound pissed off at him!

‘I didn’t. Was happily watching the show, then they started pestering me.’ Harry grumbled.

‘Though, I suppose I can thank your overbearing nature that they left.’ Harry smiled insincerely.

‘And if I hadn’t so happened to be here?’ Tom cocked a brow at him.

‘Then I’d have handled it.’ Harry then snorted. ‘You forget, I’ve had plenty of experience dealing with psychopaths wanting to do bad things to little boys.’ Harry caught himself unconsciously rubbing at the scar on his wrist.

Tom’s eyes followed the movement. ‘Yes, you seem to flourish under such conditions.’

Harry huffed and then deigned not react. It was then a case of trying to lend all of his focus to the ballet, which was now an impossibility.

Harry’s fingers tapped on imaginary keys along with the Japanese pianist.

‘Gorgeous, isn’t he?’ Tom was looking at the stage, Harry followed his eyeline to the danseur now lifting the prima ballerina and his fingers froze.

Harry’s treacherous mind made the comparison between the male dancer, with his thick, muscular thighs and tousled sandy hair and the man sitting next to him. He wanted to stamp his foot when
his mind offered that Tom was far more attractive than the danseur in tights that let little to the imagination. He was even more exasperated when he realised, he was jealous that Tom had complimented him.

‘Probably.’ Harry answered with feigned neutrality.

‘Not your type then?’ Tom’s lascivious grin only fuelled Harry’s irate sentiments.

‘Really? You wanna have girl talk Tom?’ Harry levelled him as bored a look he could muster at that moment.

‘Who said such things were only discussed among the fairer sex?’ He purred. ‘I must say though, you seem to have a talent for avoiding uncomfortable questions.’

Harry knew he was goading, and the challenging tone was only meant to rile him up further, but he found himself answering anyway. ‘He’s not my type.’

Harry was already regretting his ill-advised decision when Tom turned in his seat to face him fully. ‘What are your preferences then Harry?’

‘Nothing specific.’ Harry kept his eyes trained on the stage.

‘Everyone has a preference, little one.’ Harry felt Tom’s fingers trace the back of his hand. ‘Some men prefer blonds.’ Tom traced Harry’s middle finger. ‘Some prefer blue eyes, others brown.’ He circled at the wrist. ‘Tall, broad, heaving with muscle, or slim, lithe and nimble.’ Harry’s eyes fluttered when his nail dug in a little at his knuckle. ‘Any of those ring a bell?’

Harry’s eyes pulled from the stage too easily and then he took Tom’s features in. Dark, silver, pale, tall, robust, perfect. ‘No.’ He croaked and tried to look away.

‘I can tell you mine if you wish.’ He pulled Harry’s face back to him slowly, like he was indulging in the action. Tom’s eyes drew all over Harry’s face purposefully, revelling in Harry’s blush and quick breaths. ‘Sun-kissed skin with the barest touch of freckles. Thick, dark unruly hair – enough to get a fistful of. Full, bee-stung lips that look delicious when wrapped around something.’ Tom traced Harry’s thigh and Harry’s eyes drank in the movement. ‘Willowy but agile, corded with a good layer of tight muscle.’ Tom gripped it and sank his nails in a little. ‘But do you know what really gets me going?’ Harry shaked his head jerkily. ‘Green eyes. Ones that darken when unbearably aroused, preferably.’

Tom was right, he was.

‘But one has to wonder what colour they’d turn when they finally feel the relief they so desperately need.’ Tom had bitten his lower lip, the corner of his mouth edged up in a slow smile and Harry zeroed in on the movement.

Tom’s fingers slowly inched higher, but never rose to the apex. ‘What those little moans and long screams would sound like when finally filled to the hilt. How good it would feel to sink in inch by agonising inch. It’s already agony knowing how good it might be after having a little taste.’

Tom’s smile was dangerously disarming when he cocked his brow like that. ‘The list of questions swim through my head, every minute, every day. Would he wrap his legs around me and pull me in deeper or would he push me down and take his own pleasure? Would he beg, would he want it hard and punishing or slow and aching? How beautiful it would be to know that I was the first to teach him that kind of dance, to ruin him, and bring that beautiful boy with the beautiful green eyes to the heights of pleasure. Yes, one has to wonder – sometimes to the point of obsession.’
Harry wanted to laugh, though this wasn’t the place and he was sure it’d end up quite messy – those nervous chuckles did run the risk of sliding into snotty tears and would do so rather quickly. It all got so deep under Harry’s skin; he wanted to laugh it off but in the same instance, he wished Tom would say these things more directly, say them about him explicitly.

Though, it was already pretty explicit.

‘This isn’t right.’ Harry wanted to do a victory lap for how even he sounded.

‘It’s not wrong Harry. There’s nothing wrong about it.’ Tom had this nasty habit of switching between emotions and states far too swiftly for Harry’s comfort or sanity. His voice was soft and encouraging, so much so that one might laugh if Harry told them this man was a homicidal maniac. That in of itself was terrifying.

But something had changed in Harry the night had seen Death, even though he loathed to admit it. Maybe in both of them if he thought about it carefully. It was as if Tom was softer around the edges. The too-quick violence was being kept as bay in both of them for – what? Harry didn’t want to know the answer to that yet.

Harry relented that there was dignity in denying everything, not with someone who could just figuratively crack open his skull and peer inside anyway. Yet, he did have several good reasons to remain inflexible.

‘There are plenty of things wrong about this.’ Harry gestured between them. ‘There’s a list of them – quite a long one in fact.’ Talking to Tom was becoming easier, and Harry didn’t have the wine to blame for it at the moment. His mind flickered to the connection between them and what he’d said whilst his lips were touching Tom’s. ‘All of them exceedingly unhealthy.’

‘Voice them then, all of them.’ Tom had let him go and was now sitting with his head resting on his arm. He was still so close, but it was a distance Harry could breathe inside.

Vexed, Harry blurted. ‘What for?’ Tom had again changed the tide of the conversation.

Tom leaned back looking forward, but not really seeing anything. ‘We are going to share the rest of our lives together and I’m the man who orphaned you – that’s the elephant that’s always in the room isn’t it? It’s something I’ll never be able to correct.’

Harry snorted. ‘Knew you were lying in first year.’

‘I’m good at that.’ He agreed with a sigh. ‘The fact that I gave you very little choice with regards to our maintained proximity is another said-elephant. We’re connected, will always be and on so many different levels too. So much so that it necessitates far more than just simply clearing the air between us, it demands honesty – no matter how painful those truths are.’ Tom little more than breathed the last part.

‘Then what? I’m meant to forgive you?’ Harry felt the incredulity, but it didn’t colour his tone nearly as much as he would’ve liked it to. He blamed the song thrumming between them again.

‘Merlin, no.’ Tom laughed humorlessly. ‘The air between us is polluted, and all of that is my fault.’ Was that a sorry? Did the Dark Lord just admit he’d done something wrong? Harry stared at him with wide eyes. ‘But it might make everything more bearable if we aren’t holding it in for the rest of our lives.’

He had a point.
It might have been the darkness of the theatre, how close they were, or the fact that no one was near them, but for the first time Harry wasn’t on the wrong side of the ever-present knife edge with Tom. He felt free to speak his mind and knew for some reason there’d be no consequences. He knew Tom would accept what he had to say, however he said it.

‘Fine.’ Harry relented. ‘You’re a homicidal maniac who murdered my parents in cold blood. You then tried to murder me and then had the nerve to attach a piece of your soul inside mine.’

Tom moved to give his excuses, but Harry ploughed on. ‘– yes, your fault. You hammered your own soul so much that the thing just bloody slipped out. Never mind that, I had to live with the Dursley’s because of you.’ Harry could see the realisation sink in as Tom’s features went slack. It’s like the man hadn’t connected all the dots on how he was the source of all Harry’s misery.

Harry hissed. ‘I lost my Godfather too, couldn’t even have that one happiness – we would have been happy together, he would have been a brilliant father. But that didn’t happen. Blamed for something he did not fucking do by one of your henchmen, he nearly went mad. Knowing he was innocent was the only thing that pulled him through it.

And there was the nigh-on yearly ‘let’s kill Harry Potter’ or ‘let’s get me a body’ plot. I was eleven Tom. Eleven the first time I had to fight you. Cause if you got your body back, you’d kill me. You’d kill everyone I loved just to get the chance to see me in alone and in pain.’

It was Harry’s turn to grab Tom’s face when he tried to turn away. ‘But you did it anyway.’ He intoned lowly. ‘Made everyone think I was a liar and a cheat and forced me into that fucking Tournament just so I might touch that portkey.’

Harry was not even an inch from Tom’s face spitting venom at him. ‘Cedric didn’t deserve to die; ‘kill the spare’ that’s what you said.’

The old guilt reared its ugly head. ‘You know he was only there because I’d cheated. Barty Junior made sure of it; on your orders I’m guessing?’ Tom nodded minutely in his hold. ‘I cheated and I felt bad, felt like I didn’t deserve it. I would’ve reached it first otherwise but then I had to open my stupid mouth and said we could both have it. It’s my fault he was there. But it was your fault that I was there in the first place.’

Harry’s laugh sliced and stabbed. ‘Kill the fucking spare, take his blood that now runs through my veins, you’re a child but don’t hide Potter, how cowardly of you, instead fight for your life Potter, try and survive one of the most feared Wizards to ever have existed and do so bravely so that we can laugh at you, let’s watch him flail and dodge each Killing Curse, how entertaining – oh, no wait, you’re my Horcrux Harry. Bless, come so I can lock you in a fucking tower and throw away the key. Let’s clear the air so that you might allow me to touch you again Harry.’ Harry jeered in disgust, mockingly imitating Tom.

‘Let’s clear the stinking air so that I coax you to my whims Harry. So then I can do what I want to you. Don’t you hear it Harry?’

He echoed Tom’s sing-song manner when he’d first said it. ‘The song is singing Harry, and you so obviously want me because of a fucking soul piece I attached to you the night I murdered your parents. Your screaming pathetic parents who begged for your life whilst I smiled and laughed.’ Harry spat at Tom.

‘And now I’ll never have a family, I’ll never have any one lo-.’ Harry cut himself off.

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‘What was next on the list Tom? Eh? What would have happened if I wasn’t a Horcrux? I think we both know the answer to that don’t we? Find Potter, torture him painfully, laugh at him when he begs, kill him when there little left of him, impale him on a pike and leave his cold dead body to rot where everyone can see. Let him rot slowly so that everyone can be reminded of what happens when you defy the great, powerful Lord Voldemort.’ Harry’s face was contorted so much he was barely recognisable.

‘Finish the job I started when he was just and infant. Kill him because the prophecy told me to.’ It was unnerving to hear Harry imitate thoughts that had flooded his mind in the past.

Tom had expected a blow-by-blow of his previous transgressions, but this was far worse than that. This was akin to skinning him alive; peeling back so many layers that Tom felt raw.

The boy was now just this side of enraged. And right now, he held all of the cards. The facts tumbled from him in tandem with his hate for Tom. A hate that sank into the boy’s bones it was that deeply rooted. Tom hadn’t predicted what he would unleash when he’d asked for it.

But Potter didn’t once lose control of his faculties. His voice was a droning, mocking rumble throughout. And now Tom had to suffer the consequences, deservedly so.

‘Probably, yes.’ Tom wanted to stuff every word and action he’d exacted on the boy back into himself. ‘I could plead insanity, but that wouldn’t be the whole truth. I did all of it. I would have continued to do so if you were not a Horcrux.’ That stirred the boy and strangely seemed to calm him down.

Truth was better than false attempts of pleasantry, noted.

Then that meant there was no saving face in front of the boy. Ever.

Tom still saw his old form when he looked in the mirror and he had learned to fear it in recent weeks. The deranged, violent insanity was still there if he looked hard enough. But the idea of hurting Harry now left him feeling cold. Sometimes he would dream of it. The light leaving Harry’s eyes by his own hideous, deformed hand and then Harry on the floor, not breathing, not staring back at him. Tom would wake up on a scream and had left his rooms on multiple occasions just to hear Harry’s soft snores through his door.

‘I couldn’t do it now.’ He admitted shakily. ‘Not just because of the Armistice but because the idea of you being dead frightens me Harry.’ Tom thought how his old self would have slit his own throat for such thoughts.

What shared with Harry in the hallway had cemented it. The need to protect him, to have him was so immense that his need for immortality paled in comparison to it. Harry’s mouth, his moans, his fingers.

*I’m you – oh my God, I’m you.*

The words had played on repeat since.

‘I thought you would rejoice.’ Harry mumbled.

‘Once.’ Tom whispered with a nod. ‘The idea of you being dead invigorated me. I would think that I could finally erase the only mistake I’d ever made; one I spent a very long time paying for.’
‘What happened? After, I mean.’ Harry’s eye may have been on the stage, but Tom knew he had his undivided attention.

‘I became a wraith of sorts. Spent most of a decade like that. Couldn’t even manage a corporeal form for most of it, most of my magic was gone.’ Tom swallowed thickly.

‘I can’t imagine what that would be like.’ Harry admitted.

‘Hell.’ Tom ran his hand along his own thigh. ‘Not having a body – there are no words to describe it. You can see, but not one is looking. Your mind starts sending the wrong signals when you’re like that, it thinks you’ve been stripped of all flesh and the pain is – it was -.’ Tom cleared his throat. ‘Nobody can hear you when you call out, they just walk right through you.’

Harry was silent for a few moments, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. ‘Why didn’t you just find one of your Horcruxes – or is that not how it works?’

‘I could have hidden in one of them. Wouldn’t have stopped the pain though. And I have a unique responsibility to the other versions of me; I’m the embodied self, my responsibility it to maintain the physical form.’ Tom snorted. ‘I was pretty shit at it if I’m honest.’

They sat in silence for some time after that whilst Harry formulated his next question carefully.

‘You couldn’t have just found someone to, I don’t know the technical term, drain from? That’s what the diary Horcrux did.’ Harry’s eyes seem to dull slightly as he remembered.

‘No. It’s has to be my body, the body if you will. Trust me, I tried a whole host of other options. Each of them ludicrous.’

‘Where they more or less insane than drinking unicorn blood and infiltrating Hogwarts for a stone?’

Tom laugh self-deprecatingly at that. ‘Not nearly as insane as manipulating an entire tournament so that you might touch a cup.’

‘Are you still glad you did though?’ Tom flinched at the question; it was so unexpected.

‘Yes and no.’ Tom didn’t want to step on another landmine, but in the spirit of full disclosure-. ‘Yes, because you’re here now. No, because of why you’re here.’

Harry laughed nervously. Then thunderous applause rolled through the theatre. The dancers and players bowed. Harry and Tom sat still throughout it all. Both listening to the connection pulse between them instead.

Tom turned to Harry when the hall filled with light again and it felt like a spell had been broken.

‘Do you have anything else to attend to?’ Tom asked stiffly, not wanting to let this finish quite yet.

‘No. You heading my way then?’ Harry asked his lips in a small curve.

Tom smiled and then offered his arm. They made their way through the thinning crowd to an alley next to the building. Harry kept looking at Tom when he thought he wasn’t watching.

He could feel Harry’s gaze all over as he walked in front of the boy, leading him throw the thickest parts of the crowd.

It felt like he was being stalked almost, the thought sent a fizzle of pleasure in his core. The idea of
Harry chasing him brought out something primal in him then, his steps became more purposeful.

The sensation was heightened when the turned into the alley next to the building.

When he turned Harry’s shadowed form, the only thing the light touched were his eyes. Eyes that were staring right back at him hungry and unblinking.

*I bet he doesn’t even know what he’s doing. Not aware of it in the slightest.*

Tom Apparated them to Slytherin Crest.

He thought the boy would run straight upstairs but surprised him when he took of his coat looked at Tom coyly and ascended them slowly as if in invitation.

Tom wasn’t one to decline such a gracious offer. He watched the boy as he moved; stealthy, graceful, and languorous. Nothing like the boy he’d watched roam the halls of Hogwarts, tumbling through them as if ashamed of his own presence within them. He caught Harry look back slightly, checking that Tom was still in his periphery.

The boy moved into the second floor corridor and it felt like that tables had turned again and he was the one stalking. No. Not that. It was like Harry was leading him into a sweet trap. Tom wasn’t the one in control here, the boy was. And Tom was more than happy to play the guileless herbivore and follow him.

Harry turned into the dining hall and rolled up his sleeves as he walked. Tom brushed away the sight of the blackened veins curling up the boy’s wrist and hand. Now was not the time to worry about that.

Harry flicked his wrist and moment later a thin book floated to his palm.

Tom cocked a brow, *since when was he able to do that?*

Wandless magic was a rare skill. For someone as young as Harry to do it with such ease was exceedingly rare.

Harry then opened the piano top manually, as if he enjoyed the sight and touch of revealing it to himself.

‘I didn’t get to hear my favourite part.’ Harry explained.

‘Sorry I interrupted.’ Tom chuckled quietly.

‘Not you, they did.’ Harry’s face curled up in disgust. ‘Just my luck.’

Harry settled the book and the stand and lifted the lid. ‘Is this the part where you tell me you can play Hammerklavier?’ Tom smiled as he stood by the piano.

‘Some parts, the slow ones.’ Harry beamed at him. ‘Those happen to be my favourite.’

‘They may be slow, but they are still very technical.’ Tom regarded him archly.

‘Too difficult for you?’ Harry’s lips curved and Tom’s belly filled with heat.

‘Not sure, never tried to play it.’ He wanted to now though.

‘Well you must think that since it’s too difficult for your Lordship, then a mere peasant like me
wouldn’t have a hope in Hell.’ Harry raised an eyebrow, challenging him.

*This.* This is what Tom wanted. Harry smiling with him, joking with him. It felt like sun breaking through dark cloud and Tom had to tap down a shaky inhale.

‘You could always prove me wrong.’ He gestured at Harry’s hands that were lightly brushing the keys.

The boy smirked and flicked the pages until he’d found the section he was looking for. Then rapt concentration coloured Harry’s features.

Tom closed his eyes for a moment when the boy started.

It was slow. Deceivingly so. Its dynamic was excruciatingly quiet before suddenly building the halting again, nestling right back into the hushed melody. It kept you on edge, always waiting for a *crescendo* that would never come. The piece pawed playfully with you with sudden sharp *staccato* and the long, luxurious *legato* minor notes.

Harry had dismissed some of the more *energico* sections for a more *rubato* interpretation. Harry heightened the sombre, melancholy undercurrent of the passage. The result was stunning and was quickly turning into Toms favourite interpretation of the famous piece. Harry ripped the whimsy out of the Beethoven piece in favour of a more realistic, human edge.

It was raw. It was needy and sensual. Nothing like the happy tinkling version they had heard in the hall. Hammerklavier was usually played with a smile, but this would have your mouth gaping.

Harry looked up at him with a smile and inclined his head to the space on the stool next to him.

Tom inclined his head at the offer and moved beside him. His fingers twitched to touch where their thighs met.

‘Shall I turn pages for you?’ Tom breathed.

‘No, you’ll play.’

‘With you?’

Harry caught his gaze and his eyes slipped to Tom’s mouth, never missing a beat.

‘Yes. Play with me Tom.’ Tom knew Harry meant to allude to the filthier connotations of the request.

*Fuck. I take it back; he knows exactly what he is doing.*

Tom swallowed thickly and looked to the ceiling in a silent prayer.

‘You seem scared I’ll show you up.’ Harry grinned.

‘Maybe, or I might show you a thing or two instead.’ Tom drank in how Harry’s pupils dilated at that.

Tom rounded on the key’s and harmonised for a short time before improvisation around Harry’s *rubato* style. Tom pushed at Harry’s cadence, turning and twisting the piece until everything but the bare bones of it remained.

It slipped into *homophony* as Harry and he seemed to have the same idea after some bars at regular
intervals. It was like they were of one mind; the improvisation was something shared in the space between them, within them. They laughed a little each time it happened, both of them surprised before they went back to trying to one-up the other.

Harry played like he did.

The boy would lean over the keys, staring down at them but then would move with the waves of sound as they swelled. Tom’s heart skipped when he saw one of his bad habits play out on Harry’s fingers. His hands were slanted so far down that his wrist was almost parallel to the keys.

Tom looked at his own hands and realised he had to correct himself from the same position.

The book laid in front of them, but never of them looked. The piece was so far removed now from the original; they hadn’t even adhered to the skeleton of it anymore.

They were pushing and pulling at one another. Harry would throw a curveball and Tom would have to catch it. Tom would show Harry exactly what his fingers could do, and Harry had to match the skill.

Tom had known how to play for the best part of a century, and yet the boy could match him.

Tom grinned slyly and then leaned over Harry to play a slow series of notes that boomed in the massive hall. They locked eyes as he did, Harry’s falling straight back to his lips.

*If you want it, little one – you should learn to take it.*

Tom smirked slowly at him and only then did Harry falter. Tom snorted as Harry tried to pick back up again, but was too far gone to continue.

Tom slowly ceased playing, the last few notes ringing out smugly.

‘You’re a big cheat.’ Harry huffed, but with no bite.

‘I didn’t realise we were engaged in competition, little one.’ Tom guffawed.

Harry stilled slightly and watched him as he laughed, something changing on his features.

Tom regarded him as his chuckles slowly jarred. ‘What?’ He mouthed.

‘You don’t look like you when you laugh. Properly laugh I mean. Like happily.’

‘You’re taking notes on how I laugh Harry?’ He asked slyly.

Harry looked unimpressed. ‘I do live with you.’ He parried.

Tom hummed with a nod. ‘Laughing happily is the newest addition to my emotional repertoire, so yes, it probably looks quite strange.’ He offered.

‘Not strange, just different – nice even.’ Harry’s voice had become a little small.

‘Thank you, I’ll take that as a compliment.’ Tom watched as Harry smiled whilst gazing down at the keys.

‘Has it changed a lot since you’ve taken the Horcruxes back?’ Harry looked uncomfortable with the question, as if he’d stepped over an imaginary line.
Don’t Harry. Ask me anything. I’ll tell you everything.

‘Yes, definitely. But for the better I think.’ No more unquenchable thirst for pain and violence. No constant hatred that seem to infuse itself in every step he took, every fist he raised. The need for ultra-violence had floated away from him slowly.

‘In what way?’ The boy went to play a simple melody.

‘Snape said I seemed calmer, saner. I have to agree with him. I feel…more human I guess.’

‘You weren’t before?’

‘No, we both know I wasn’t.’

‘Yeah, I saw what came out of the cauldron.’ Harry agreed. ‘Was the no nose thing on purpose?’ He sniggered softly.

‘Well, I wasn’t too vain. Didn’t care how I came out. Just wanted a body. Though I did seem to lend to the whole evil Dark Lord thing I was going for.’ Tom smiled with a frown.

‘Yes, you were a fright.’

‘Pfft. That’s one way of putting it.’ Tom joined in on the simple melody. ‘Though, silver linings; I couldn’t do that to you again if I tried. Or many other Dark rituals for that matter.’

‘Oh?’

‘They tend to necessitate the blood of an unwilling enemy.’

‘Saying I’d be willing now?’ Harry’s smile was falsely sardonic.

‘I’m saying your not my enemy, that much should be obvious.’

‘Then what am I now?’ The music suddenly stopped. Harry’s eyes went wide and then his face crumpled like he wanted to grab at the and take the words back.

‘That’s a good question.’ Tom paused for more time. It was landmines for as far as the eye could see in front of him. ‘Not enemies, but it’s a bit benign to say we’re friends.’

Don’t scare him Tom. God, don’t scare him.

Harry nodded too quickly and turned away from him. ‘What would you want?’ Harry said barely above a whisper.

‘Depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On what you’re willing to offer.’ Tom ran a thumb across Harry’s bicep. ‘I’ll wait for it, whatever it is, whenever you’re ready.’

‘To have me?’ Harry probed.

‘To have you.’ Tom echoed.

Harry slowly removed himself from Tom’s grip and he winced when the warmth left his side.
But Harry didn’t leave, instead he took out his wand and lit the fire to the far right.

He stood in front of it, staring into the flames with his arms folded.

‘It’s strange being here with you. I’m not comfortable with this at all.’ Harry admitted.

‘You know you had time left away from here. Why didn’t you use it?’ The question had been burning since the theatre.

‘I saw what I wanted to.’ Harry said softly into the fire.

Tom moved behind Harry, needing to feel his heat again. He stretched his arm out slowly and trailed the back of the boy’s neck.

‘I’d have thought you’d relish in the freedom of it.’ Tom whispered.

‘Me too.’ The boy breathed.

Harry jumped at the contact but didn’t turn around immediately. Tom let one of his fingers trail Harry’s wrist and he gently, slowly pulled on the cuff.

The boy took a couple of steps back, but still didn’t face Tom. He could see Harry’s chest rise and fall in quick succession. Tom held a breath, lest he lose all control in the frantic search for that face, those green eyes.

‘Harry.’ He whispered.

Want you, Need you. Always want you. Always need you.

He could see the tension in Harry’s shoulders. So close to running, wishing he didn’t want to stay – still wanting to deny that he did.

Tom wrapped his arms around Harry and breathed at his neck, verbena and alpine. Toms eyes rolled back behind closed lids. The boy exhaled sharply. His fingers trailed up Harry’s sides until the reached the top button at his neck. Tom undid the first one as he answered.

Mine.

The second. Forever.

Third. Always.

Forth. Mine.

Tom heard Harry’s teeth clamp down, holding something back.

He tugged softly again and rounded on the boy. Harry kept his face hidden, looking down at the floor. ‘Harry, look at me.’ Tom breathed.

Eyes wide, lips parted, cheeks flush.

Hungry green eyes.

Tom curved an arm around Harry’s back slowly, the only noise their soft pants and that crackling hearth.
He wanted to commit this to memory. This placid, soft version of Harry that was so rare. So precious. The one that plagued Tom’s nights and days. Every hour every minute, obsessing over the thought of it.

Tom pulled him in and took his lips. Slow, wet and it had Tom’s heart in his throat. Their souls meet at the cusp of that heady sensation, clasped hands and whispered in tongues.

The fear of inexperience was murmured in each of their touches, from both ends of the union. Harry’s lay in the physical actuality of it, but Tom’s felt deeper down, nearer where butterflies tended to roam when affection swooped down and caught you unawares.

Because Tom had no experience of this, and he feared he’d never be able to immerse in it fully.

The boys bitten lips were rough against his own and Tom revelled in the friction. Harry gasped, his arms and thighs shaking in small bursts.

‘Tom.’ He sighed.

He felt inside Harry’s shirt, his nails grazing freckled collarbones.

Tom found himself wishing for things that would never come to pass. Things that he’d hurled away from him since he was a boy. Since he realised he could never reach that kind of happy pinnacle that others could so easily fall towards without thinking.

And how glorious it would feel, to give something like that to the warmth in his arms. To give everything of himself over and pour it all into these sweet lips that were shaking at where fused together with his own hungry mouth.

Everything in Tom was taught with restraint. He couldn’t ruin this, he needed Harry soft and warm towards him. He couldn’t risk the boy turning cold again. The distance was always unbearable.

He tightened his hold around Harry at the thought. Coiling around him like a snake would; a cold-blooded beast in need of scorching heat.

Harry bowed into him, fully giving in and discarding the uncomfortable disquiet he flayed himself with constantly. He grabbed at Tom, pulling him in and moaning against his mouth.

Tom mourned it then and cursed his diseased mother. He wanted the dormant spaces, so dead and cold to revive, to fill with the same blood and need that palpitated in his chest.

Would it feel like plummeting to the Earth? A free-fall into oblivion or would it be more akin to flying up and up, as quick as your feet left the floor, you were now touching space?

He dove into Harry happily, so he thought it must be like falling. Tom pushed what little he could offer into Harry, like a spark that wanted to become a roaring fire. He gave Harry everything he could. Everything he had in the moment.

Tom wanted to know it and for the first time he wasn’t proud of its absence.

Harry pulled away from him with a lazy smile, like Sunday mornings and chocolate melted in clumsy, too warm hands.

What would Tom do to give this boy anything he wanted?

Harry roamed his face. ‘Dark, grey, pale.’ He murmured.
‘What?’ Tom’s head still felt cottony.

‘You asked for a type, so there it is.’ Harry grinned and then walked slowly backwards from him, his eyes not leaving Toms until he turned.

‘Goodnight Tom.’ He chuckled as he exited.

Tom turned back to the fire after staring at the space he’d last seen Harry’s foot before it disappeared in the shadowy hall.

‘Goodnight Harry.’ He croaked into the fire.

My, oh my. What have we got ourselves into now.

Hello and thank you for reading so far!

I got literal chest tingles when I wrote that last part.

Such strange noises too.

Boyfriend now thinks I’m a nut.

I say that like he didn’t already.

Wee lamb.

Please tell me what you think!

I’ll have to suffer the rotten diet pepsi today as I toast you all.

Fucking swine water.

Love. You. All!
The boy was putting Remus and Sirius through their paces, as was the snake.

The werewolf had been hesitant to stage their Defence practice in Slytherin Crest but when Harry had shown them the Arena, Remus found he did have much in the way of an excuse to not attend.

The spaces within is felt suffocating to his heightened senses, the walls were choking with Dark magic and the scent of misery and decay pervaded.

‘It’s just like Grimmauld Place.’ Sirius commented, somewhat awed.

‘Scarily so.’ Remus agreed. The same scent lingered in Sirius’ ancestral home, but it was never this potent or cloying.

Harry chuckled at his apprehension. ‘Nagini said a lot of Dark Wizards affiliated with Slytherin would gather here to prepare for duels and battles – in the dark ages ironically.’ Harry offered. ‘Maybe this is where your great-grandad got the idea.’ Sirius snorted at that.

Remus eyed the extensive collection of cursed weaponry on the wall. ‘I could imagine.’ He sated wryly.

Sirius caught Remus’ eye, smirking. ‘Oh, yes. *Toujours Pur* – seems right up old Cygnus’ alley.’ Sirius quoted the Black family motto, agreeing with the sentiment.

‘She’s been training with me.’ Harry explained as he tapped his wand against his thigh. ‘I said she could join if you two are okay with it.’

He was worried for the boy. Had been since Harry had given Sirius permission to tell him about
the snake’s human-form. Sirius had remarked how after just a few days in each other’s company, Harry seemed ready to fight to protect the snake. He had put his wand and body between them and the snake and asked them to understand her, to help protect her secret.

Harry was such a kind soul that he tended to forgive too easily. Or maybe is was inexperience, Harry hadn’t been alive during those awful times. The fear and panic when Voldemort first tried to assert his will upon the Wizarding world with that creature at his side. No, but Remus did.

‘Aye, bring her in! I’m curious to see what this fabled Nagini’s got up her sleeve.’ Sirius grinned jovially, in the same manner he had when he was a teen; always with a slight hint of wickedness.

Remus had been on his guard since they had Apparated here. Sirius had stopped them for a moment, and as he straightened the werewolf tie, told him not to be so obvious about it. There was no need to put the boy on edge, he’d said grimly, he’s already stressed enough as it is, with another pointed look.

But Harry had greeted them with an air of serenity and looked more than comfortable in the Dark Lord’s home. Remus wanted to question it, to remind Harry that he should remain on his guard, but the werewolf didn’t have the heart. It was rare to see Harry relaxed - and long may it last, even in these dire circumstances.

‘Alright.’ He beamed. Then the strange hissing sounded from his lips again.

Remus had to school his face and instincts when the creature joined them. It smiled at them as if nervous, but then her eyes shot to him and she bared her teeth slightly and hissed at Harry. Harry shot a look at Remus then nodded, looking concerned and confused.

Nagini seemed more than a little concerned about his presence and he returned the sentiment. His instincts were screeching to defend his figurative pack against this creature who reeked of venom and acid. His werewolf tendencies rarely came to the forefront, except obviously when the full moon was high. But Nagini seemed to be causing a reaction, one that he felt he had little control over at the minute, and his cub needed protecting.

Sirius could sense it. He always could. They’d once joke it was the canine disposition they both shared in, but Sirius was just keenly observant of Remus and tended to watch him like an overbearing mother hen.

Sirius inched between them, assuming a position from which he could protect Remus. Unlike when they were teens, he didn’t recoil from the protective act anymore – he’d spent too long without Sirius to not allow him this little indulgence. The werewolf wanted to laugh; Padfoot- the eternal defender of Remus from his own stupidity.

He didn’t laugh however, instead he had to clench his fists to hide how his nails had elongated.

Harry had a grip on both of Nagini’s arms, the contrast between their skin was startling. He seemed to be explaining something very slowly to the creature, as if almost cross with her. Harry let her go with a wan smile after she nodded slightly at him.

‘She says you smell offensive?’ Harry explained after sighing loudly. ‘What’s that all about?’

‘She’s a snake. I’m a wolf. We are natural enemies.’ Remus could only explain in clipped tones, still struggling to tap down the urge to lunge.

‘Ah. Well, could you both - I don’t know - hold your noses or something? I’d appreciate it if you both didn’t murder one another.’ He smiled at them both archly and Remus found himself
disarmed.

‘Sure. Probably best that neither of us duel though, best not to tempt fate.’ Remus grinned as he shucked off his coat. He caught the snake’ eye then inclined his head in respect, but not submission. They were both children of the old Wild Magic and that necessitated a few stiff customs every so often. She understood what the offer signified and returned it, holding his gaze; we will be peaceful in this place, but not outside of it.

‘Great.’ The boy beamed. ‘So, what are we working on today?’ He asked as he stepped onto the platform with Sirius.

‘Learning to protect against the undead, unfortunately.’ Sirius said flatly, Remus knew he hated this kind of magic – it was as difficult as it was taxing. Sirius tended to prefer those easy as air spells paired with a whole lot of spikes and jabs of movement. This was not up his alley at all.

‘Oh.’ Harry scrunched his nose. ‘That sounds…fun.’


‘I know your distain for it, but have you perhaps read the papers recently?’ Remus probed whilst Sirius shot him a ‘remember what I said earlier’ look.

‘Nah, I tend to burn them instead.’ Harry snorted.

‘Quite right.’ Sirius thumped the boys back, which seemed to have Nagini’s hackles raising. The boy quelled her with the strange hissing again.

‘I agree.’ Remus echoed. ‘But, recently they have reported a few instances of Dark magic we are particularly concerned about.’ Remus explained, biting back the urge to ask the boy a million questions.

‘Really? What’s going on there then?’ Harry said whilst pointing Nagini to something.

‘Inferius attacks.’ Sirius sighed. ‘That and an increased number of Dementor birthing’s strangely. Seems someone is meddling with stuff they shouldn’t.’ He explained, darkly amused by the prospect. Remus’ eye’s followed Sirius’ hand as he rolled up his sleeves; his arms now sported a patchwork of scratch tattoos - tally marks and diagrams.

‘Dementor births?’ Harry paled.

‘Yes Harry. Dementors are made in several different ways, all of them somewhat macabre.’ Remus sympathised with Harry, Dementors and Inferius were both a grim business. ‘Most Dementors you see in Azkaban, or have had the misfortune to meet in person--’ He gestured to Harry. ‘-are created. Typically through potions or, if one is so inclined, Dark rituals.’ Reus offered.

‘And these…births?’ Harry seemed to be equally disgusted and confused by the notion.

‘Some Dementors come about naturally, though it’s rare.’ Sirius explained whilst lifting an eyebrow at Nagini who was picking up a particularly sharp looking saber sword. His gaze returned to Harry, now slightly pale.

‘How?’ Harry asked with wide eyes before he tutted at the snake who suddenly looked downtrodden about her weapon choice.

‘They begin as ghosts Harry, very unhappy ones at that. Sometimes, when a ghost realises they’re
dead, they can’t accept it. They begin to crave life to the point of obsession. Ghosts that mourn the
fact they cannot interact with the world around them sometimes seeks way to do so.’ Remus
shivered before jumping when Nagini dropped the sabre that fizzled slightly then smiled at them
all sheepishly.

‘One way to go about it is to try and touch people’s souls, makes them feel alive – but only for a
moment.’ Sirius continued. ‘But when mere proximity isn’t enough, they corrupt themselves in a
manner of speaking. They start taking the souls for themselves so that they might feel what it is
like to live again, even if the sensation is fleeting.’

Nagini hissed something to Harry who then nodded slowly. She beamed at him then replaced the
sabre with an appallingly large mace. It seemed to piqued Sirius’ interest and he moved over to the
weapons rack.

‘That sounds awful. Is that what’s been happening recently then?’ Harry tapped his wand against
his thigh a little quicker.

‘We think so. There’s no tell-tale magical signature on the Dementors the Ministry’s examined.’
Then Remus snorted. ‘But I shan’t be taking the Ministry’s word for it. They’d obviously prefer for
this to be a natural occurrence than a sign that Dark magics being used en masse again.’

‘And the Inferius attacks?’ Harry asked the room.

‘They’re clogging the Wizarding Sewer system – one of the worker went missing. Some have died
fending them off, others just narrowly escaped after being attacked.’ Sirius called to them whilst
testing the weight of the saber Nagini had been holding. She watched him carefully as if put out by
the fact she’d had to return it. ‘There have been a lot of above-ground sightings too.’

‘During daylight hours.’ Remus stressed.

Harry winced. ‘I thought they couldn’t handle light.’

‘They shouldn’t be able to, not unless animated by a particularly strong Witch or Wizard.’ Again,
the need to question the boy about his fellow occupant rose in his chest.

‘Do you think it’s the Death Eaters? Heard they haven’t been happy with T-Voldemort recently.’
Harry asked, stunning them both in the process.

‘What do you know about that?’ Sirius shouted over whilst pulling at different drawers, his face
lighting up in delight at the cursed items inside.

Damn Black. Lupin chided internally as he rolled his eyes.

‘Snape and Lucius visited, we all had dinner in the library – strangest experience of my life to date.
They said some Death Eaters were recruiting apparently.’ Harry looked at Nagini fondly as she
handed Sirius a brutal axe, both of them smiling at it deviously - like bloody kids in a Honeydukes
cellar.

‘Yes, we have the same reports. Tonks and Moody have been keeping their ear to the ground, so to
speak.’ Remus explained as another drawer squeaked loudly as it was pulled open.

‘Well – about that.’ Harry shifted uncomfortably. ‘Lucius asked if the Order would be interested in
\( \text{eh} \) – swapping information on the subject? Snape said you all might have been keeping tabs on
Death Eater activity. I said I’d pass the message on.’ Harry toed the ground.
‘Old Lucy said that? *Hah!* Didn’t know he had it in him.’ Sirius guffawed.

‘Yeah – again, it was a strange lunch – he said they could set up communication. That you could all find the recruiters together if the Order are open to an alliance of sorts? His words, not mine.’

Remus noted how hopeful and abashed Harry looked, clearly finding the concept of an Order – ex-Death Eater alliance as strange as they did. The knowledge that Snape had been present soothed Remus slightly; the idea of Harry being alone with those two vipers did not.

‘Do you think they can be trusted?’ Remus asked sceptically.

‘Maybe. They all seemed pretty angry and have already done some investigating into it. But I got the feeling they thought the Order would know more – and that maybe you would all be interested in stopping them?’ Harry cringed at the proposal.

‘I dunno’ Moony, want to go hunting?’ Sirius winked at him whilst juggling some throwing knives, much to Nagini’s delight - then frustration when she tried to do the same but kept dropping them.

Remus ignored what the wink did to his faculties.

‘Possibly. We’d have to speak to the other first. Not sure they’d be too thrilled about potential liaison with a Malfoy.’ Remus mused.

‘Or a Dark Lord.’ Sirius added.

‘Ex-Dark Lord.’ Harry reminded them, which earned him a couple of raised eyebrows. He looked between them exasperated then sighed. ‘He’s not so bad now. Snape says the Horcruxes have made him a bit eh – saner.’

‘Well, I’d have to see that for myself before I take old Snivellus’ word for it.’ Sirius chuckled before sending a knowingly look to Remus.

‘Whilst we are on the topic, has he been treating you alright Harry?’ Remus asked in concern.

‘Yeah, it’s okay. Had a few fights at first, but he’s calmed down a lot since. Nagini keeps him in line, don’t you?’ He called to the snake who nodded enthusiastically. _That_ did not soothe Remus at all.

Sirius stopped playing with the knives regarded both Nagini and Harry. ‘It’s a little strange, isn’t it? You both seem so close.’ Remus let out a breath when Sirius voiced his concerns.

‘Very.’ Harry agreed. ‘We don’t know if it’s the Horcrux, but we feel – well – connected I suppose. Feels like she’s my sister or something.’ Harry and the snake both looked pleased at the prospect. ‘Happened soon after we started talking.’ He continued when he noticed how quiet the Marauder’s had become.

‘Well that explains why she made a vow to Ron and Hermione.’ Sirius nodded slowly. ‘Still, it’s strange.’ He shrugged before returning to his toys.

The snake stilled and then looked at Remus whose mouth was agape.

When children of Wild Magic committed to a vow, it was binding on an extremely intimate level. Nagini had named Harry as her kin in all but blood. It meant she would protect him from any harm, no matter where it came from. For her to lose Harry now would wound her, deeply. If she lost him, she would be too.
Remus had made the same vow to James. He still felt the loss like it was a gaping hole in his chest each time he thought of him, felt it even when he didn’t. He looked to Sirius who sent him a questioning gaze before the hound sniffed the air then looked on with wide eyes.

The werewolf strode over to her then extended his arm. Nagini looked at it cautiously for a moment before grasping his forearm in a firm grip. They both inclined their heads and bowed, bearing their necks to one another.

Remus gave the snake a small smile before returning to the platform, shaking off the excess energy.

‘Do I even want to ask?’ Harry sounded.

Remus went to retie his laces to hide how his eyes had probably changed to their wolfish yellow. ‘She’s your kin - made sure of it when she made a vow to your family.’ The werewolf gestured towards the snake. ‘Means she’ll be true to her word, so I’ve welcomed her as a sort of extended family.’ Remus croaked.

He didn’t like talking about the instincts he’d gained since being bitten. Remus had yet to tell Harry how his inner wolf viewed the boy; he was his pack, his pup. The wolf would never harm Harry, not anymore.

The shift from being James’ son to becoming nigh-on his own had been sudden and nobody knew about it, except Sirius and now Nagini.

He hadn’t told Sirius what the wolf saw him as either.

‘Brothers in arms is a better way of putting it.’ Sirius said, clearly awed.

‘Oh, so that’s good then?’ Harry looked between the three of them. The snake seemed to answer him. ‘Ah, great then! That-that’s really cool.’ Harry grinned.

Nagini cleared her throat and Remus snapped to look at her again. ‘Thankth yo-oou.’ She breathed more than spoke.

Sirius yelped. ‘Eh! She can speak English?’

‘Yeah.’ Harry was obviously proud of the snake. ‘Been teaching her some simple phrases.’ He cocked his head with creased eyebrows. ‘Still working on pronunciation though.’

‘Well, speaking of teaching – shall we?’ Sirius looked a bit manic as he brandished the axe like a loon.

‘Merlin help us.’ Remus sighed skyward. ‘Right, come on Harry. Patronus has already been covered. So, let’s get you familiar with some fire – related curses and dodges.’ He turned to the odd pair at the weapons. ‘You two, do …whatever. Though no maiming! Am I clear?’

They both looked annoyed at the instruction but then nodded eagerly.

_Bloody children, the pair of them._

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Then the entrance to the Arena opened to reveal both Ron and Hermione grinning at them all.

‘Hello you lot! How things going?’ Ron greeted them heartily but then paled when he saw both
Nagini and Sirius waving large weapons about. ‘In fact, don’t answer that. I don’t wan to know.’ Ron eyed them both warily.

‘Ah! Ron, Hermoine come to join us have you?’ Sirius bellowed excitedly. Both of them raised their eyebrows at the axe the hound was waving them down with.

‘We were both promised a duel.’ Ron thumbed to Nagini. ‘Came to make good on it. Not so sure about that now though.’

‘Are those cursed Sirius?’ Hermione frowned.

The hounds deigned not to answer and instead shrugged – it done nothing but confirm all of their suspicions. Nagini sniggered.

Harry then flew and swooped them both in a bone crushing hug.

‘Wasn’t expecting you, though this is a nice surprise.’ Harry grinned at them both excitedly.

Hermione groaned. ‘We’re so sorry Harry. Between exams and Dumbledore breathing down our necks we didn’t have time to write you.’

‘Yeah mate, heard Lupin was making his way up and we decided to drop by. Would’ve been earlier if Dumbledore hadn’t called us in.’ Ron griped with a dark look.

‘Called you in? What for?’ Harry’s stomach roiled.

‘Bloody prick was asking questions, too many if you ask me.’ Ron said as he half-hugged Sirius.

‘What kind of questions?’ Remus intoned seriously.

‘About Harry mainly.’ Hermione explained after giving a shy wave to Nagini who’d linked arms with Harry. ‘Asked how you were fairing and if you’d mentioned anything unusual about Voldemort recently.’

‘Unusual?’ Harry looked between them.

Ron hmphed. ‘Our question exactly. The old git wouldn’t explain. Told him most things tend to be unusual where snake-face concerned so he’d have to be a little more specific. Well, ex-snake face, anyway, he didn’t look happy with us at all though. It was like he was fishing for something.’ Ron scrunched his nose.

‘We then asked why he wouldn’t just ask you directly and he gave us such a strange look.’ Hermione said in a rush. ‘Then he started be so cryptic after that.’ Ron and Hermione looked at each other grimly. ‘We think he was trying to get us to spy on you or something. Asked us to report back’. She said, gesturing quotation marks in the air.

‘Spy on me?’ A burning acid flooded his stomach. ‘Why?’

Sirius gripped Harry’s shoulder to calm him before turning to Hermione. ‘What did he say specifically?’ He asked her softly, the axe over one shoulder.

‘He asked if Harry had mentioned any plans recently, wouldn’t elaborate when we asked what kind. He then started rambling about – eh.’ Hermione turned to Ron, trying to remember.

‘Yeah, I started zoning out too. Something about ‘dark motives’ and ‘strange activity’. Started talking about fate and important decisions too – it was really weird. Then the barmy old git asked
us to tell him if you or Voldemort started acting strange -.’

‘-Well, sort of.’ Hermione interrupted. ‘But we both got the feeling there was something else to it. It was more like he was pushing us …to consider you in a bad light Harry. Voldemort too but that’s a given’ Hermione paused, looking at Nagini apologetically. The snake smiled and shrugged, seeming to concede the point. ‘It was like he was trying to make us suspicious of you.’

Harry cringed internally. He hadn’t been all that cautious around Tom recently. Circe, he was even calling him Tom. If he told any of them what had happened recently with Tom, they’d all be rightfully suspicious of him – maybe his sanity too.

Remus put a hand through his hair, now stressed. ‘Do you have any idea why he might want you to consider Harry in that way?’ Sirius hissed at the question and let out a string of interesting curses under his breath.

Harry’s palms became sweaty. Could Dumbledore know how Harry now felt towards Tom? There was no way he could. Surely not.

Ron looked at Hermione who shook her head. ‘Not really.’ Ron spoke for them both. ‘It’s like he’d waiting for you to do something though. Something bad.’

Harry’s mind raced through his recent experiences. He couldn’t think of any reason that would explain Dumbledore’s actions – except, well - that. Harry shivered.

No. Harry thought forcefully - he was past feeling undone because of his old Headmaster’s exploits. To be honest, he was done with Dumbledore entirely.

‘Are you both sure about this?’ Sirius piped up.

They both hesitated. ‘As sure as we can be, like we said, he was being purposefully vague.’ Hermione confirmed.

Harry thought about telling Ron and Hermione about what had been going on between him and Tom and then hurled the idea away violently.

Then he quickly came to his senses and remembered what had been said in the library.

‘Do you think this has anything to do with the Death Eater’s recruiting?’ Harry asked the Marauder’s.

‘It’s the only thing that makes sense.’ Remus agreed, suddenly looking very tired.

‘Might be the attacks too.’ Sirius mused causing Remus’ eyes to widen.

‘Attacks?’ Hermione sent Sirius a questioning look.

Ron’s eyebrows rose. ‘The Inferius attacks?’ Sirius grinned then mimed shooting off little guns with his fingers at Ron. ‘Saw that in the paper. Dad wrote to me about it too – said he’s having a nightmare since their now in the Muggle sewers as well.’

‘Exactly – wait, what? The Muggle sewers too?’ Ron nodded at Remus who pinched his temples then huffed.

Sirius nodded quickly. ‘That might explain a few things. Dumbledore might be thinking you-know-who has a hand in it, especially if their going after Muggles now too.’
‘Oh?’ Harry queried.

‘Voldemort’s been known to use them in the past.’ Remus confirmed dismally.

‘To great effect.’ Sirius added.

Harry fidgeted. ‘I don’t think he’s behind these though, I mean, with the Armistice he can’t really do anything.’ Harry said uneasily before Ron snorted.

‘I think you’re right Harry, the Armistice forbids meddling by proxy.’ Hermione looked dour, like defending Tom made her feel a tad queasy.

Harry felt a little caught out by the fact that he had defended Tom somewhat enthusiastically, like he’d revealed too much.

‘He’s already out trying to find defectors hellbent on causing a riot. What would be the point of going to the effort if he were going to just use Inferi anyway?’ Harry couldn’t shut himself up it seemed.

Harry silently thanked Tom for how level that came out. Speaking to him had taught him how to stop stuttering like an idiot around tense topics.

‘Still doesn’t answer why he thinks you need to be watched.’ Remus exhaled.

They all went a little silent after that, all of them trying to rack their brains for an answer.

‘Guilty by association, as humans would term it.’ Nagini said beside Harry which almost made him jump as the snake had been awfully quite until then. ‘The old fool might not need an extravagant excuse to start sowing seeds of doubt. He never has.’ She huffed.

‘He knows why I’m here. Circe, he put me here!’ Harry griped then pulled at his hair a little. ‘So, what then? He thinks that because I live here, I’ve suddenly gone rogue?’

‘Probably.’ Hermione grunted indelicately.

That gave Harry pause. He never thought Hermione would be one of the first to doubt the old Headmaster.

Sirius sneered and inclined his head to Remus. ‘Merlin. Just because the boy doesn’t think the sun shined out the old codger’s arse anymore, suddenly he’s enemy number one. Bugger that! Bugger him and his holier-than-thou act. Bloody idiot. How could he do that to Harry after everything?’

Sirius was now pacing in a rage, his face an odd pink colour.

‘Sirius, I think it’s not wise for us to jump to conclusions. We can’t even be sure what’s going on in that mind of his.’ Remus suggested, ever the passivist.

Harry wanted to pout, he quite enjoyed moaning and griping at Dumbledore’s expense these days.

‘Hasn’t ever stopped him has it?’ Sirius said darkly. ‘And some of us fair worse than others when he does start pointing fingers.’

Sirius was right; he’d spent twelve years suffering one of Dumbledore’s assumptions. Speaking of fingers - that was all it had taken. One finger found, a body missing, then straight to Azkaban for murder.
His Godfather had more reason than most to distrust Dumbledore, Harry thought.

Remus couldn’t reply, instead his face darkened.

Hermione broke the silence. ‘What do we do then?’

‘Nothing.’ Harry sighed. ‘Let him think what he wants, it’s not like we can stop him anyway.’

‘Dirty old bastard. You’d think he’d know better than to blame Harry for anything.’ Ron moved away to the platform with a bah! obviously done with talking about said bastard. Harry snorted.

Sirius shook himself off, which was quite a feat with a hulking axe on his person. ‘Right. Enough for now. We have training to get done.’ Sirius the all but through himself into the Arena. Harry suspected it was to shake some pent-up aggression.

‘Harry, I’ll take you through those spells. Any volunteers for duels?’ Remus asked the room.

Nagini raised her hand enthusiastically. When asked who she’d like to duel, she pointed to Ron.

Harry caught Ron’s face as he watched Nagini heave the mace off of the wall again before making her way towards the platform with a manic grin.

‘Oh great.’ He drawled and shook his head when the Nagini dragged the mace and it screeched off the polished stone floor. ‘Brilliant, well it was nice knowing you Harry.’ Ron gulped then grabbed his wand and stomped towards the grinning snake.

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Severus was muttering under his breath after he’d barged into Tom’s meeting room. The Potions Master slumped in the chair to Tom’s right and leaned back, clearly in a huff of some sort.

‘Woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning Severus?’ Lucius asked across from him with a smirk, his fingers dancing along the black marble table.

‘Don’t you start. I haven’t the patience for your insipid drawl grating on my ears.’ Severus snapped.

‘Oh, someone’s a prickly pear this morning.’ Lucius cooed delighted.

‘Bugger off Lucy or I’ll hex your mouth shut.’ Severus said, resembling a hormonal teen.

Tom regarded him archly. ‘Might I ask what has you in such a good mood today?’ Tom asked, his tone a silken bite.

Severus rolled his eyes heavenward. ‘Potter, the bloody menace.’

‘Oh? He hasn’t been giving you trouble has he?’ Lucius piped up.

‘Not in the tradition sense, no. But if I have to look at one more of those smug grins of his, I shan’t be responsible for my actions.’ Snape said darkly.

‘Smug? Do tell.’ Tom pushed whilst failing to fully hide how thrilled the notion made him.

Severus eyed him scathingly. ‘The boy delights in defying my expectations. It now seems to be a running joke at my own expense.’ He griped.
'Isn’t that a good thing?’ Lucius asked now confused.

‘Not when he is so smarmy about it.’ Snape bit back.

‘And in what way does he defy your assumptions?’ Tom probed.

‘At every instance, no matter the difficulty.’ He huffed. ‘Take his Occulmency lessons as an example; went into those thinking the boy was obviously as pig-headed as his father once was but, no. Potter instead grasped the art with jaw dropping agility – he mastered in a week what would typically take Wizards many years his senior months to grasp.’ Snape then muttered unflattering curses under his breath.

‘You had a lesson this morning?’ Snape nodded angrily at Lucius’ query.

‘Did he perhaps excel at something else today then?’ Tom smiled, full of mirth.

‘This is not funny.’ Snape groaned. ‘It offends my sensibilities and my sanity. It was the one of the few things I could hold onto; the concept that he was as stupid as James was. Circe, now I don’t even have that – there’s now very little to dislike about the boy.’

Snape then produced a few items from his satchel and placed them on the table. ‘There look.’ He gestured for the men to inspect.

Tom grabbed a fairly benign looking candle whilst Lucius held two vials in front of his face, peering at them.

Lucius held up the vial with clear liquid inside it. ‘Veritaserum?’ Snape nodded. Then he shook the bright yellow vial. ‘Euphoria Elixir?’ Snape threw his hand out at the vial with a quick nod, his mouth set in a grim line. ‘Potter brewed them?’ Lucius’ eyes widened.

‘Perfectly.’ Severus complained.

Tom passed the candle between his hands. ‘And this?’

‘A challenge – one that I thought would cause him to fall flat on his git-y little face or explode something at the very least.’ Intoned sorrowfully. ‘I asked him to brew an Everlasting Elixir and infuse it with something that might be put to good use.’ Snape pointed to it as if accusing it of something. ‘The damn thing will bloody-well now burn indefinitely. The brat had the cheek to grin when he handed it over.’

Tom stilled a little. It had only been a few months since he’s placed Harry under Snape’s tutelage after hearing the Potions Master moan about how obtuse the boy apparently was.

Even Tom hadn’t been able to achieve this level of brewing at the boy’s age. He suspected Snape hadn’t either.

‘That’s pretty exceptional. Isn’t is difficult to use Everlasting Elixir in something solid?’ Lucius held the Veritaserum up into the sunlight.

‘Very.’ Tom offered whilst tracing a thumb over the surface of the candle. Harry made this, he thought smiling. He then got the strange notion to pocket it and proclaim a childish ‘finders keepers’.

‘Then I think you owe yourself a pat on the back; this is obviously a homage to your own excellent teaching skills.’ Lucius smiled as he gave the once-in-a-blue-moon genuine compliment.
‘Nope, I think it put me in a bad light.’ Snape slumped back in his chair.

Tom sent him a questioning look then Snape gestured angrily at the items. ‘The boy was an absolute dunderhead in my lessons at Hogwarts. Couldn’t tell you arse from elbow in my classes – and now he excels in advanced brewing? What does that tell you?’

‘The boy has experienced a growth-spurt of intellect.’ Lucius offered.

‘No. The boy always had the capacity to grasp it, I was just an awful teacher.’ Snape groaned and rubbed his face.

‘Now, now Severus. You are punishing yourself for no good reason.’ Lucius chided. ‘He does this quite often then? Highlighting your apparent inadequacies, as it were.’

‘You don’t know the half of it. Every interaction with the boy results in three things; aggravation, introspection, then bone-crushing guilt.’ Snape swiped the air as if he could smack a thought away.

‘Seems like you have a soft spot for the boy.’ Tom smiled.

‘I wouldn’t go that far. If anything, it’s begrudging acceptance that he isn’t as mentally challenged as I once assumed.’ Severus whined uncharacteristically.

Lucius sniggered. ‘Well, we all know how it pains you to admit any wrongdoing. Though it shouldn’t be too surprising to you, his ancestors have always had an affinity for the art.’

Snape totalled an unimpressed glare at the blond. ‘Bloody Fleamont will be doing the jig in his grave. That and now it I have more work to contend with. I’ve never had to up the ante in any of my lessons before, but if things continue at this rate, I’ll run out of material.’ Tom chuckled at Severus’ expression; he looked like he might weep.

‘He’s skilled – with that in mind, what do you now have planned for him?’ Tom’s chest felt puffed up with pride.

Snape stilled a little and tried to school the reaction, but Tom had caught it and he was now suspicious. ‘We agreed to a project when our lessons started, I think it might keep him occupied until I develop some new material.’

‘Pray tell.’ Tom pushed, not willing to humour Snape’s aversion.

‘Potions development. Asked him to create a potion with an effect of his choosing. Thought it might inspire the boy to actually learn the theory and complete the assignments for once – it seems to have done that and then some, never seen him so enthusiastic about anything. Well, if you discount him throwing himself into life-threatening altercations.’ Snape snorted.

‘That sounds exciting.’ Lucius intoned.

‘It will be presented to your Board for assessment – and if his progress if anything to go by, it may qualify for a Masters - level accreditation.’

Lucius raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s high praise coming from you. I will make the necessary preparation when the time comes then shall I?’ He asked cheekily. The blond loathed lifting a finger when extra work reared its ugly head.

Tom interrupted Snape’s retort. ‘What did he settle on?’ He was a hound and could smell blood.
Snape paused and looked at Tom for a few beats. ‘You should ask him. I stated I would not disclose the effect to anyone. It is quite personal to him.’ He said softly, willing Tom to understand and now push further – he wouldn’t betray the boy.

And he tries to tell us he doesn’t have a soft spot for the boy.

‘I will.’ Tom let the subject drop with a frown.

Neepsey then snapped into the room. ‘Neepsey be announcing the arrival of Order members, they’s be in the foyer.’

‘Bring them up.’ Tom ordered before turning to Snape holding up the candle. ‘Might I keep a hold of this?’ He asked and the house elf disappeared with a crack.

‘Have it, my Lord. I fear I might be tempted to do the boy an injury with it otherwise.’ Snape drawled.

‘Might I suggest the boy patent his creation.’ Lucius pointed to the candle. ‘Would make him a killing on the market.’ He added.

‘For the love of Merlin don’t tell him that, lest we all be flattened by his inflated head.’ Snape griped.

Tom chuckled and stated he’d look into to it with Harry’s permission before the Order members entered the room.

Time to face the painful music. He groaned internally.

Eight members of the Order greeted them with grim expressions; the room was suddenly a flurry of orange hair.

‘Please.’ Tom gestured to the table. ‘Make yourselves comfortable.’

Yasssssss. Finally.

Got a treat for you all. DOUBLE FUCKIN’ CHAPTER TIME.

Roll on to the next one, on the house.

Hello and thank you for reading so far!

Comments and love are very, very, very, very, very much appreciated.

Like so hard.

Love you all x
As requested, this chapter features sensitive topics of a sexually abusive nature. If you have experienced this type of abuse and experience adverse effects when presented with related stimuli, please proceed with caution.

‘Neepsey be bringing you lunch in your rooms. But only this once.’ The house elf fussed.

Harry had asked *very* nicely to take his lunch in his room. He even offer to make it himself since the elf seemed so insistent that he join everyone in the dining hall – every breakfast, every lunch, every dinner, every snack.

But Harry had research to do, a lot of it in fact. So, uncharacteristically he had complained until Neepsey gave into his request – albeit disdainfully.

Despite Harry’s begging, he now didn’t feel very hungry after pouring over all the references to utero Amortentia ingestion; what he found didn’t fill him with hope.

Harry always thought of the cure in terms of how it would affect Tom. Questions always flooded his mind when he researched; what would he do if he found out about the cure? Or, if he took it, what would happen? Would he take it? Could Harry pluck up the courage to give to him? Maybe he should ask Tom if he did?

Then, the final question always reared its awful head - *why did Harry want him to take it?*
He knew the answers to the other questions; Tom would probably murder him, Harry doubted he’d even make the potion successfully at the rate he was going – never mind ever being able to give Tom the damn thing. Tom would probably fly into the rage of all rages if he ever offered it. Harry paled at the thought of offering it, so the offer wasn’t likely to happen, and no way in hell was he asking Tom for his opinion on the matter – again, he’d probably murder him.

Harry deigned not to answer to the last one no matter how much clearer it became the more time he spent with Tom.

Harry wasn’t ready to acknowledge it and he doubted he ever would be.

Didn’t stop him from continuing in his pursuits of a cure however. Harry had found a quiet obsessiveness inside himself in trying to uncover it; the studiousness was something that had obviously lain dormant in his time at Hogwarts. He’s never been bookish like Hermione, yet here he was, already six tomes deep with ink under his fingernails.

He thanked Neepsey for the sandwich and lemonade, who still eyed the drink sceptically. Tom and Neepsey had looked somewhat offended at the fizzy beverage after he’d requested it. Harry had snorted at their disgust and told them they didn’t know what they had been missing out on – heavenly citrus goodness, that’s what.

Neepsey left in a right huff as Harry turned the musty page. He had the theorem and, much to Snape’s unending surprise, had grasped the more advanced brewing techniques.

Snape had thrown Borage’s diagrams of Everlasting Elixirs at Harry. He did so stating that if Harry could master it – which in his opinion was unlikely – that Harry would probably use it for something stupid, like an unending supply of Butterbeer. That was a trick scenario though as Harry had found – Everlasting Elixirs didn’t go well with organic perishables. The results would be somewhat disastrous if he had tried.

Harry had scraped a sample of the Everlasting Beeswax he’d created and given it to Snape with crossed fingers. Much to Harry’s unending self-satisfaction, upon the Potions Master’s analysis of it, jaws had hit floors.

Wobbly jowls more like, Harry sniggered.

His creation now fuelled the candles that now surrounded him, all of them ever-burning. Harry had grinned smugly when he wrapped on in a bow for Snape. He hadn’t taken it gracefully; Snape had looked at Harry forehead like he wanted to lob the gift at it.

The thought brought another self-approving grin to Harry’s face as he read what Borage had to say about Amortentia’s composition.

‘As with all brews which fuel the heart and aim to direct its desires, Amortentia is composed under lasting guidance of Mother Moon; the closest heavenly body to earthly beings.

Yet, even though it is necessitated, we must beware of such instruction. The Moon affects desire, but with a tendency to exact more aberrant behaviours.

McQuoid, an expert in the field, posits that this effect occurs due to the Moon’s
natural hold over earthly beings. Criminality, murderous intent, and conception; all acts of passion which increase in occurrence when Mother Moon is at her nearest – during the full moon phase.

Therefore, Amortentia despite its reliance on the Moon and her shades, can never achieve its lofty goal because of it; to bear true love unto the recipient.

Thus, those Masterful of the Art whom aim to enhance or alter Amortentia effects must be wary of substances which favour Mother Moon, namely moonstone, mother of pearl, and in particular, knotgrass – the binding agent.’

That would have at one point given Harry a nosebleed, but now it made him more pensive than anything.

Snape had drummed into Harry the importance of understanding the symbolic importance of ingredients; a concept that was difficult to wrap your head around but was necessary for cure development.

Harry had thought it would be slightly simpler, that maybe finding the true opposites of each building block of the love potion would bring about a cure.

He knew he was onto something, with a toe over the precipice of it. But his mind felt like a giant spawn was sitting in it, blocking the road to answers.

That notion was quickly shot out of the water after Snape’s lecture on how potions ingredients did not act like Muggle medicines which were more a case of cause and effect.

When Wizarding folk consumed potions, it effects their magical cores, not their biological systems. Magical cores are somewhat sentient in of themselves. Thus, any ingredients used to manipulate them would need to evoke a sentient change in the core. To change something that is sentient, you need to force a notion or a concept upon it.

Snape had repeated this more times than Harry could count on both hands, but he struggled to wrap his head around it.

Snape had huffed when the theorem had all but given Harry a nosebleed. So, in the snarkiest manner at his disposal, Snape had simplified it.

‘Take knotweed for example.’ Snape huffed. ‘In Muggles, the plant is used to soothe sore throats, coughs and some skin disorders. That is a changed exacted on a biological level. However, when given to Wizards in an infusion, it tends to bind the Wizard to something via an interaction with the Wizard’s core. Take Amortentia for example, the knotweed within it evokes a binding of the recipient to the owner of the hair inside the potion.’

‘So, ingredients effect the Wizard in the manner they are viewed symbolically?’ Harry tried not to wince at the headache. ‘The core reacts to how we view the substance, not its chemical effects’
‘Correct. Going back to our example; knotweed is used to represent the coming together of two entities. That’s why it tends to be used in bonding or marriage rituals.’ Snape then sighed. ‘That is why seeking a true chemical opposite doesn’t led you to a cure. Instead, you should seek ingredients which symbolically quell the effects of the original potion.’

Harry sighed. ‘This just got so much harder.’

Snape chuckled. ‘That’s why it is called advanced potion brewing Potter.’ The Potions Master took in the downtrodden air of his apprentice. ‘You have time. There is no need to rush.’ Snape said softly then tapped the tome in front of Harry. ‘I suggest you start with the one constant in Amortentia brewing; the moons cycle. It exacts the most influence over the concoction. Tackle that first, then the rest with fall like Muggle dominoes.’

Harry rubbed his eyes behind his glasses. He wanted to rush it so he could stop thinking about it all the time.

Stop thinking about him all the time.

Harry groaned and grabbed a quill, pushing himself to write freely. He’d heard that authors with writers block sometimes do this to help, Harry figured he needed all the aid he could get at this point.

What does the Moon symbolise? He underlined it. The dark, Harry thought before writing it down. The moon, it surrounds itself with dark, stands out from it. He then willed his mind to push outwards from the concept. Dark…there’s a foreversness to it isn’t here? It’s always there, always a coin flip away from light. In there dark there is nothingness yet there is plenty to find within it if one looked deep enough. But the moon wasn’t ever still or eternal in its appearance and it always showed itself proudly.

Harry shook his head then crossed out the concept of ‘pride’ on the parchment when he remembered the new moon phase, during which the moon hides itself.

The moon hides but it also pushes and pulls at people, especially women —. Harry blushed when he remembered Hermione’s rant about the woes of menstruation whilst stuffing her face with chocolate.

It had taken weeks for Harry to eat some after that.

Harry shook his head and willed himself not to be distracted.

The moon was a cycle, always moving and transforming within an inky ever-dark. It altered forever, always pushed and pulled people forward with each phase. It always shifted something primal in people and brought forth the headiest of desires, as Borage had put it.

It modified, it revolved, it developed, it adjusted, it advanced, it transformed.

Lightbulb.

Change. The moon symbolised change.

Harry’s eyes shot open with the epiphany. He let out a somewhat girlish squeal with it too, not that
he would ever admit that to anyone.

This was it, one step closer. Yes.

Harry scribbled down the thought and then started grabbing tomes for potions reference for change. He was already a few chapters deep when he was interrupted.

‘Might I ask what has you so excited?’

Harry jumped and spun to face Tom. He was lazily checking his nails at the entrance to Harry’s rooms.

He looked around and realised with a start that it was now dark outside and the moon he’d been obsessing over was now high - a third quarter moon, his mind offered somewhat distractingly.

He cursed not shutting the door before answer. ‘Nothing.’ Harry shut the tomes, hiding his notes within it.

‘Not for telling then?’ Tom drawled smirking at Harry.

‘Loitering again?’ Harry parried with a raised eyebrow.

Harry’s eyes shifted to the tomes, making sure the most incriminating titles were hidden from a certain someone’s view.

‘No, I was simply returning from a meeting with your Order.’ Tom looked far too smug.

‘It went well then?’ Harry pushed a tome under the desk with his foot.

‘Very. Who knew a mutual dislike of you old Headmaster would one day make us all allies? Though, I must thank you for approaching them with the offer.’ Tom’s gaze glossed over the papers surrounding Harry.

‘Did they agree to help?’

‘Yes, rather enthusiastically too. Your Godfather had an interesting term for the investigation.’ Tom stated airily.

‘Death Eater Hunting?’ Harry offered with a laugh.

‘Quite crass isn’t it? I like it.’ Tom chuckled.

Harry had worried about the meeting he’d help set up. He had also been slightly peeved he hadn’t been invited.

‘So, back to my original question; what are you doing?’ Tom held Harry’s gaze whilst the boy tried to school his features into a bored look.

‘Potions. Snape set another three-footer for the end of the week.’

‘Excited over potions? You don’t strike me as the type.’ Tom drawled.

‘I’m not. Just found an answer to a question I was struggling with.’ Harry tip-toed around the truth. Tom seemed to notice his hesitancy. ‘Enlighten me.’ He pushed.
‘It’s not that interesting.’ Harry avoided searching silver eyes.

‘I’ll be the judge of that. Go on.’ Tom purred dangerously before motioning Harry to elaborate.

Harry stared at him angrily before exhaling. ‘Was trying to figure out what the moon phases symbolise. Figured it was change.’

Harry’s heartbeat picked up a notch. He knew Tom was a very intelligent man and rivalled Snape’s knowledge on the subject. If Harry gave away too much, he feared Tom would quickly figure it out.

Tom cocked his head. ‘Process symbolism. You’re making a potion then?’ Harry nodded with a barely contained wince. ‘What are you attempting to brew?’

Harry tried to stay quiet but blurted an answer when the silence became unbearable. ‘Something.’ Harry’s mind was too blank with panic to fake an explanation Tom would accept.

‘Something. How interesting.’ Tom intoned lowly. He looked somewhat bored and goaded by Harry’s weak evasion. ‘You could tell me or I could hazard an educated guess?’

Harry spun on her chair to face Tom with a smirk. ‘I think I’d like to hear you guess. It’ll be funny to see how far off the mark you are.’ He challenged.

‘Better that than tell you the truth.’ Tom sighed. Harry ignored the image of Tom murdering him if he uncovered it.

Though, there was a small part of Harry that wanted Tom to guess correctly. That part of him was obviously suicidal, Harry mused darkly.

Tom sighed. ‘May I sit?’ Tom pointed to the armchair near Harry’s desk. The boy knew Tom was simply seeking an invitation to his rooms and he wanted to tell Tom to shove off. But, he also didn’t want to annoy him any further if he did so happen to guess correctly.

‘Be my guest.’ Harry said quietly.

Harry rubbed at his shirt where the black veins lay. Tom hadn’t been in his rooms since he’d dreamt of Death. Well, not in his waking moments anyway. His treacherous dreams had offered him plenty of visuals of Tom in his rooms, on his bed – on him.

Which was why it was more than a little uncomfortable to watch Tom glide over to the armchair and lean back on it with his legs parted.

Harry’s wayward eyes glanced to the bed behind Tom, and the visuals flooded unbidden before he shifted in his own chair.

‘I’d really rather you just tell me.’ Tom sighed.

‘Nope. I’d rather watch you fail.’ Harry grinned.

Tom cocked an eyebrow at the challenge and Harry ignored the rush of heat it brought.

‘Fail? But you have already given away so much.’ Harry’s eyes widened at Tom’s statement.

‘Oh?’ Look bored, look bored. Harry willed.

‘Yes, you spoke about the moon and what she symbolises, and you concluded it was change.’ Tom
leaned forward. ‘There are a few reasons why potioneers seek to assert a process or ingredients symbology; to build a new potion from scratch, to see how an ingredient might alter one that is already established, or to alter a potions effects if consumed.’

Harry squirmed as Tom got too close to the truth. But Tom smiled like he got an answer from him.

‘And the moon and her phases are only used in very specific potion-types.’ Tom mused.

‘How can you be sure its moon phases and not a moon-related ingredient, like moonstone or evening primrose–.’ Harry’s rambling was quickly shut off with a huff.

‘Because you deduced *change* was what this moon-related thing symbolised. Ingredients and processes linked to the moon only *change* in accordance with the phases.’ Tom said like it was totally obvious. ‘Though you’ve now confirmed it by trying to lead me away from it.’ Harry wanted to hiss at Toms shit eating grin.

Harry could only stare. ‘The use of moon-phases in potions brewing is not a common occurrence. Only a few potions utilise it. And your right Harry, it does symbolise change. Potions like Wolfsbane and Polyjuice harness it to either subvert or power a transition.’

Tom watched Harry like a hawk, and Harry tried not to move much in case it gave something away. It was moment like these when Harry cursed himself; he was all but on open book in Tom’s palms.

‘Though, those are physical. There are other uses for Mother Moon, like manipulating the senses, or emotions.’ Tom said softly, staring at him as if daring Harry to react. Everything in Harry tensed again.

*Too close, too damn close.* Harry was equally enthralled and terrified.

‘Really? That’s interesting. I’ll make sure to take a note of that.’ Harry pretended to do so while cringing at Tom’s amused snort.

‘Shall I tell you which potions use the moon phases to alter emotions Harry? Or you could just read from your notes…’

Harry nearly snapped his quill, his shoulders tense, his mouth clamped shut.

He saw Tom move from the chair and then felt his breath on Harry’s neck.

*Literally and figuratively breathing down my neck*, Harry amended as he tried not to tremble.

‘Calming Draught, Draught of Peace, and Twilight Moonbeam are all brewed under the new moon which symbolises new beginnings.’ Tom’s lips moved against Harry’s ear, and Gryffindor struggled to not flutter his eyes closed.

Tom trailed a finger down Harry’s neck, and he shivered. ‘Drink of Despair and Euphoria Elixir both necessitate *surrender* Harry, and therefore are brewed when the waning crescent moon is high.’ Tom murmured breathily.

Harry was gone. He had to hold on to the arms of his chair to not push a palm against himself. The urge to lean into that mouth against his ear was painful to push down.

‘But you mentioned *phases* Harry; as in plural – and there is only one potion that alters emotion which needs to be brewed under them all.’ Tom’s hand wrapped around his throat and Harry’s
lungs pulled in a gasp. Harry brought his arms to rest between his legs to hide himself.

‘Really?’ He panted.

‘Want to know what it is, little one? Though something tells me you already do.’ Tom’s mouth moved to where Harry’s neck met his shoulder and Harry shuddered when he felt Tom sucking, hot and wet.

Harry couldn’t answer. He didn’t want the answer.

Tom licked up his throat and then around the shell of his ear before whispering. ‘Amor-ten-tia.’ He said between wet bites on his earlobe.

Harry felt the icy cold grip of realisation, but it was overrun by the heats of Tom’s tongue.

He knows; I’m dead. Fuck, I’m dead.

Tom spun Harry’s chair and he caged the boy between himself and the desk behind Harry. ‘Ring any bells Harry?’ He asked as Harry tried to keep himself covered.

He could only stare at Tom’s lips, which glistened with wetness. He shivered when the cool air hit Harry’s neck and it pulsed where Tom had sucked.

Harry tried to shake his head; his voice gone. But all he managed was a jerked movement from left to right.

‘Really?’ Tom sneered darkly then pushed Harry back until his spine screamed in protest and then put his other hand on his thigh, squeezing as if he aimed to bruise. ‘All the evidence you’ve unwittingly offered my points to it. So, Harry – I must ask – what in the world would a young man such as yourself want to do with the world’s most potent love potion?’

Hearing Tom say love did strange things to Harry’s chest and belly. The feeling bloomed and spread; it felt like anticipation and despair coursed through him in equal measure.

‘N-Nothing.’ Harry spluttered.

Then Tom’s eye glinted as he growled.

The air in the room shifted, and Harry paled.

He grabbed Harry’s arms and caught his wrists in a punishing grip. Harry bit his lip to not mewl when his fingers brushed the hardness between Harry’s thighs.

‘I hate liars, little one. I thought we’d already established this.’ Tom loomed over him, his gaze trailing down.

Please, please don’t look. Harry wanted to beg. His cheeks flamed when Tom caught sight of the bulge under his black jeans. He looked back up at Harry and smirked before licking his lips.

‘Do you know what I do to people who lie to me Harry?’ Tom crooned.

‘Don’t.’ Was all Harry could bite out.

‘You already know then?’ Tom took Harry’s jaw and pulled it towards him and Harry tried to shake his head from the grip.
'I like to punish liars Harry.' He taunted before Harry struggled and bared his teeth.

Tom’s features contorted and then he hauled Harry with one hand in his hair and the other pulling his arm behind his back.

Harry knew that look. It was the look that plagued his nightmares. The one he hoped he’d never see again. It was the same look he’d seen as he held the stone, the same one after Cedric died – before Harry had to fight for his own life.

Then he marched them over to the armchair and threw Harry over his lap. Terror and chagrin and fear choked Harry.

He tried to whip out of Tom’s grasp, nearly tipping over as he did. Tom pulled on his arm forcefully; it felt like it might break.

Harry yelped, facing the floor and tried to push away. The older man groaned as Harry thrashed; his struggling moved his hardness against Tom’s thighs – Harry stilled, completely mortified and shaking.

He knew what this was, he knew what this position entailed.

Tom kept Harry’s arm firmly behind his back whilst the other roamed his lower back and thighs.

‘Don’t you fucking dare.’ Harry ground out.

‘I’ll think you’ll find your in no position to make demands of me Harry.’ His hand smoothed over Harry’s flank.

‘Stop - just stop.’ Harry cried out, his legs flailing trying to purchase that ground so he could run.

‘No.’ Harry then heard a whoosh of air and moving fabric.

He heard the crack too before he felt it.

Harry screamed.

It burned.

Harry’s chest started to heave; his vision went blank with the sensation.

Awful prickling pins-and-needles rolled under his skin.

Tom’s hand lingered and in the silence, Harry could hear the older man panting.

Harry eyes squeezed shut when he heard the stretch of Tom’s robes, the movement snapping the stitching.

Whack.

Harry felt the pain shoot through his spine.

My wand, where’s my wand. His eyes searched frantically, terrified.

‘Count them Harry.’ Tom demanded darkly.

‘No-.’ Crack. ‘Ah!’
'Count. Them. Out.'

Harry held in the fitful trembling in deep in his chest.

‘One.’ Harry was going to be sick.

Tom hit him hard again, a spasm of agony rushed from where it contacted.

How the fuck was Tom not dead?

The Armistice – it was meant to – SLAP!

‘I said count!’

‘Two!’ Harry howled. SMACK. ‘T-Three.’ He could barely breathe.

Each belt of Tom’s palm sent Harry hurtling forward into sheer panic.

CRACK. ‘Four.’

Somewhere between six and seven Harry started sobbing in earnest.

WHACK. ‘Eight.’ He pushed out around the tremors in his chest.

Tom’s whole body went into each hit, laying bruise after bruise until Harry was sure the flesh would be black with it.

He made Harry count out to twenty, by then Harry couldn’t speak. Thick tears stained his cheeks and rolled down his neck.

And yet his jeans were still tight.

He was disgusting. He must be.

It made Harry think a Killing Curse would be merciful.

The idea that Tom hated him again, that they were back to where they first started drew a pitiful moan from Harry. He couldn't bare to think about it, he wished he's stopped it. Why didn't he lie? He wanted Tom back, he begged for it inside himself. He wanted the slow smiles and the cheeky grins. Not this, never this. The song screamed between them in horror in tandem with Harry's pleading for it all to stop.

Please Tom. Please come back. Please, please come back. He mouthed against Tom's thigh.

Harry tried to pull in air, but it wouldn’t come. His chest squeezed with the shame and the awful terror.

The hits became harder, Tom was laughing in cruel contempt, he hit faster too - not giving Harry a chance to differentiate between one blow and the next.

Oh God please stop Tom. You need to stop. I can't - I.

The world around him stopped being.

His mind sank then, it drowned.

It went to dark places he didn’t often visit.
Maybe he deserved it? Vernon always did say he did. He was nothing but a vile wretch. A ponce, a faggot – Vernon said that too.

‘You fucking enjoy that boy?’ Another slap against his cheek.

‘You do don’t you, you’re filthy. Disgusting.’ CRUNCH – the sound of his cheek slamming against bone.

I’m filthy.

Disgusting.

Filthy.

I deserve it; I enjoy it.

I’m disgusting.

Harry started laughing.

‘Don’t come near us, you’ll infect us all.’ Dudley roared.

Filthy.

Petunia slapped him. ‘Wipe away that snot, you miserable boy. Stop wailing.’

Disgusting.

Malfoy giggling with the other Slytherins.

They know I’m filthy.

Harry screamed around the bubbling, manic giggling.

Then something pulled at him in the pitch black.

Harry stared into nothingness.

You’re disgusting, it answered.

The space reverberated with a sonorous echo that pressed against his ears.

Then he was face-to-face with himself, the face gnarling and warped.

‘Disgusting?’ it asked.

‘Yes.’ He whispered.

Then his reflection roared. It’s eye’s shifted from green to a sick yellow, its teeth blackened, and sharpened to a wicked point.

His reflection raised its fist and flew forward and Harry braced against the assault.

It cracked his skull right open.

He crumpled to the wet floor beneath him like a puppet without strings.
He couldn’t feel him limbs – only the cold of the dim around him and the water pooling at the corner of his mouth.

‘Harry.’ He felt a warm brush against his cheek. The voice was soft, familiar.

‘Harry’ it implored.

He tried to turn, but he was a mangled mess – the contents of his head poured on the watery floor.

‘Harry.’ A strong arm wrapped around him and pulled him into an embrace. ‘Please.’ He felt the brush of lips against his broken temple, the other half of his face fell to the floor with a sickening clunk.

‘Please Harry.’ The voice sounded sorrowful. Like the wail of a mother holding her dead child.

‘Please.’ It begged.

Harry tried to answer, but he didn’t have a brain. It was on the floor.

He tried to smile at the warmth. But then the blackness crept over him.

Then there was nothing.

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Amortentia. Tom sneered. The boy is making Amortentia.

Tom hadn’t had time to yank on the leash he’d tightly wound around himself; his control flew from him then.

All rational thought too, apparently.

Harry wouldn’t tell him what he was doing with the cursed potion. And that had Tom’s hackles rise.

Tom hated that potion.

Then the old madness creeped in.

He couldn’t separate Harry from the awful image of his mother forcing his father to consume the vile fluid.

Tom had seen the Pensieve memories too and the way Tom Riddle Seniors eyes looked glazed over and absent under its thrall.

Then he saw clearly what it had wrought upon him.

A young boy debilitated by the absence of warmth, of comfort, of love. So much so that the mere mention of the word made Tom feel sick.


Yet the boy in front of them thought he might wield it. He was being so sneaky about it too. Trying
to lull Tom into a false sense of security, faking that he was all-good, all-loving, all-innocent.

Tom was no fool – and the boy would learn that.

Harry needed to be taught a lesson.

He felt Harry’s humiliation as his beat him. With each smack, the boy’s sobs grow louder, more desperate. It only fuelled him and the beast snarling inside laughed.

The beast roared in hilarity with each number the boy screamed. His eyes drank in the way the boys back had arched and contorted to try and move away from the agony Tom was inflicting.

He could hear the heavy falls of Harry’s tears hit the floor and it made him grin.

But then the boy stopped counting. Tom had hit him after that, each slap harder than the last. He demanded the boy keep counting, but instead he trembled violently.

Tom’s hand faltered when the boy stopped making any sound altogether.

Then some sense crept back in.

He stood and caught Harry before he fell to the floor. Tom’s chest filled with acid.

He snatched Harry’s face towards him and called out his name. But there was no response, instead Harry’s eyes stared forward unseeingly.

Dread clawed at his throat as he thought about his nightmare; Harry cold and staring into nothing, dead by his own cruel hand.

He checked for a pulse and breath and some of the fear eased when he felt them.

Harry’s face was soaked with his own tears and his skin was deathly pale. Tom tried to shake him, but he wasn’t there.

Tom couldn’t even feel the boy’s magic.


Then a horrifying squeal of laughter gargled from Harry’s throat. His face was emotionless, his body still except for the hideous sound.

‘Harry.’ He called out, beyond alarmed. ‘Harry, come on. Harry.’

He called out for Nagini, but froze when he realised, she was out hunting.

Tom screamed a curse at himself. You fucking fool!

‘Harry.’ He shouted forcefully. ‘Stop this. Come on. Harry, please. Stop this.’ His voice sounded frantic to his own ears as it echoed around the room.

The boy kept laughing so hard it sounded like choking. The sound chilling as it reminded him of a reanimated corpse.

Tom searched his eyes, they weren’t dilating. He pushed his palm against Harry’s chest. The core was there, but it wasn’t thrumming.
Tom whined like a dog would and shook his head. ‘Harry, please wake up. You don’t want me to do this. You’ll hate me even more if I do. Please wake, please.’

If the boy didn’t wake soon, his core would collapse completely.

Tom steeled himself forcefully. He needed to calm himself for this. He needed to breathe.

Harry stopped laughing and started seizing inside. Tom pulled him into a tight embrace, forcing his own mind to stop racing.

‘Harry, I’m sorry – but I have to. I’m so, so sorry.’ He whispered against Harry’s neck.

He looked into Harry’s eyes and pointed a wand to his temple. ‘Legimens.’

Tom plunged in and what he found tore him apart.

Harry was in a crumpled heap on the floor. His minds image of himself laying in shallow waters, his head broken open and in pieces on the floor.

Tom choked on a gasp as he stumbled back from the body before rushing towards it.

He scooped mind-Harry up and started begging him. He touched his face, his arms, his waist trying to rouse him. Trying to do anything that might pull him back.

What have I done? He sobbed.

‘Harry, please. Please.’

What remained of his face twitched at the mouth and then the body slipped through his fingers and arms like wet sand.

‘NO!’ He bellowed. ‘No. Come back – no Harry come back!’

Tom pushed his mind outward, searching for him, for any spark of anything.

He flew through the mind, now a garbled mess of echoes and whispers.

Tom sank to his knees. ‘Please Harry.’ He croaked painfully. ‘No, don’t leave. Please.’

Tom sobbed on the shallow expanse of dark waters when nothing answered back.

Then the ground shook, his head snapped to the source.

Harry stood in the distance.

Tom charged forward to him, his footfalls loud splashes.

‘Harry!’ He called in relief before slowing when the boy cocked his head with an unnatural crack.

Then Tom saw his face.

Bright yellow eyes and monstrous teeth glinting in the low light.

‘Harry?’ Tom halted, sensing the wrongness of it.

He seemed to watch Tom for a few beats and then sneered, metallic teeth bared.
The boy then roared and lunged for him.

Tom fled the pithy black of Harry’s mind then scrambled backwards when he shocked into his own.

Harry was no longer laying beneath him; he was standing across the room.

With yellow eyes and awful teeth.

Tom snapped his wand forward and trained it on Harry.

The boy’s skin was white, his eyes shadowed by a greyish black. The veins on his hand were now wrapped around his neck, creeping onto his face.

‘Harry?’ He asked shakily.

The creature just stared, it’s body too still.

Then it took a step forward.

Tom threw an *Incarcerous* at it, but it deflected the spell with a flick of the wrist and his wand was thrown with it.

Tom scrambled back further in confused terror.

It then shook his head at him slowly. ‘*Tut-tut-tut. You shouldn’t have done that.*’ It intoned with an inhuman snarl.

It ran, grabbing at the air as it did.

Tom was pinned beneath it.

‘*Time to learn a lesson, Tom.*’ It smirked darkly.

The hairs rose on Tom’s neck before the creature’s teeth sank into it.

Tom spasmed as white-hot pain ripped him open.

He gargled wetly, trying to beg it off him.

‘*MASTER!*’ He heard Nagini scream as she bounded into the room.

Then black.

..........

*Fuckin BOOM.*

*Wit a nosebleed.*

*Well, I certainly was shoving tissue up there as I was typing.*

*Hello! THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING YOU MISERABLE WENCHES!*

*My beautiful wenches.*
Did yah shiver? Did yah curse me for leaving you high and dry?

Bet you did. *grins manically*

Concerned? Questioning life? Wanting your lovely voice to be heard?

Then, my sweet, sound off in the comments below~

Actually, please do - my need for recognition is crippling.

LOVE. ALL. YOU. BEAUTIFUL. WENCHES!
The sweet, warm aroma of Honeydukes wafted through the frosty air in Hogsmeade. The small, winding streets were filled with the shouts and jibes of the older Hogwarts students, all of which were casting warming charms and trying not to slip on ice-slick cobblestones.

Draco cursed several of the third year Hufflepuff who blocked his route to The Three Broomsticks both verbally and magically. A couple of them shouted in indignation before attempting to throw snowballs like Muggle children would. Attempted being the operative word, Draco deflected all of them straight back into their snot-nose faces.

Some might say that the Slytherin Prince was in a bad mood this afternoon. They would be correct – Draco had been in a bad mood all week, and the younger Hogwarts students had felt the brunt of it. Actually, to term it a ‘bad mood’ was somewhat asinine; Draco was incensed.

Not only had Draco had to suffer the half-witted students of Hogwarts, now he had to contend with the booming spectral population within the wall too. That plus looming exams, Parkinson’s shrieking, Zabini’s drawling, and a bunch of Gryffindor’s proclaiming they had won the nearly-War resulted in a somewhat tetchy, hair-trigger fury blond.
Silver linings though, Draco got to luxuriate in the concept of freedom for the first time in two years. His father was no longer rambling about ‘responsibility’ or ‘expectations’ and pushing Draco into another sticky Dark-related situation-come-death sentence. No. Draco was free from the cultish initiation which had hung over his head since his family members had started whispering of greatness, of purity, and of their Lord’s return.

Though, he supposed he had two people to thank for his new found freedom. Potter was the most obvious, the damn fool had given up his own freedom to save the rest of them – sorry sight it was. The other was rather counterintuitive – the Dark Lord himself. But credit where credit is due; his Lord had accepted the Terms of Armistice for the Potter boy and in return had somehow regained his sanity, and his looks apparently.

The absence of and insane leader had changed a few things in the Malfoy household. Father was no longer suspicious and twitchy or rambling, mother was no longer depressed or withdrawn and his Aunt Bellatrix had (thankfully) buggered off to god-knows where.

Somewhere far and inhospitable, Draco hoped.

Draco suspected the Malfoys had dodged a rather large bullet, as Muggles would put it. Their records had been expunged and Father was no longer branded as one of the Lord sycophants. Thank Merlin.

A Malfoy always pays his debts. Had been the thought sat squarely at the front of Draco’s mind since they’d all waved Potter off to his doom.

There was no tip-toeing around the notion that Potter had saved him or that he and Draco had almost switched places, figuratively at least.

Draco had been set up to be the Lord’s boy in a manner of speaking. Old Lucy had failed the Dark Lord twice, which was more times than anyone should be comfortable with by a large margin. The Dark Lord did not accept mistakes or failures. The Malfoy family had been waiting painfully for some sort of retribution for their deranged, murderous, unhinged leader- but now that wait was over. Gone more like, Potter had seen to that.

Now Draco’s father was the Dark Lord friend. What an absurd concept that would have been only months ago. The Lord did not have friends; he had slaves and servant – and it was typically difficult to distinguish between the two.

Even Snape’s normally peaky parlour had pinkened a little since the Lord had changed, and hope against hope, for the better.

As a young boy Draco had blindly accepted his father's position on most things. Marriage, political, economics, cuisine, blood-status, news – everything really. Family, friends, and visitors had all lovingly joked that Draco was a Lucius miniature and before, Draco took pride in that.

But the last two years had dissolved that pride, and rather quickly too. Draco had watched the horrors unfold within his own ancestral home; hate, murder, rape, torture, and other evils that Draco was sure the English language should not have a name for, they were that terrible.

Terror had slapped him in the face and told him to wake up.

His father’s views were not sound, not should they be accepted by any sane person. Draco had seen first-hand the people who accepted them did in their spare time. And over the last year, that was what Draco had feared he would swiftly lose; his sanity.
He saw the Thesral’s for the first time this year. Draco thought it was fitting, see an awful act then – *surprise* - you get to see an awful-looking creature.

It had only been a Muggle too. A large fat one at that. But Draco had watched his own family, both his Aunt and Father took turns to tear the man to shreds slowly, then the floorboards of the dining hall never seemed quite as clean after that.

They had all laughed loudly as it happened, and Draco pretended to as well. Though, he suspected if left to his own devices he’d either have sprinted out of the room then Britain whilst he was at it. Or, if Draco was being realistic, he would have pissed himself and then found a suitable corner to weep and shake into - that is exactly what he done straight after in the privacy of his own rooms.

Potter had saved him from death, horror, blood, sin, and sinew. All of which would have been a daily occurrence otherwise. Perhaps his own splattered on the floor if his father continued making rather large errors along the way.

**Potter had saved him. A Malfoy always pays his debts.**

But he didn’t exactly know how to go about it. How could Draco repay such an act of selfishness and bravery. Draco knew Potter hadn’t done it solely for Draco’s sake – but it had perhaps benefited him the most. Whispers of the Inner Circle had already put the words *task* and *Draco* in the same sentence. Once Draco’s chest would have puffed up with the knowledge that he had been chosen to aid the Dark Lord’s vision. But not after his father's mistakes. Instead, the knowledge had gifted him unending insomnia and anxiety.

Draco had spent the last five Hogsmeade's visit try to procure a gift that would match what Potter’s selfless act had afforded him. He had perused every shop and stall, his eyes scanning over the most expensive and luxurious items Hogsmeade had to offer. There was nothing that fit. All of his recent correspondence with his mother had circled around this topic, but still they scratched their heads. He had even snuck to Diagon Alley during a free period to seek out *something* that would communicate how thankful Draco was. Still, nothing. Golden quills, fine jewellery, artefacts which offered protection, luck, prosperity – none of them fit or could easily be deflected by the Dark Lord’s eye-watering magical prowess.

He did what he could in the meantime though. Draco had told the Slytherin’s to lay off of Potter friends; they were not to be touched or offended. Even Longbottom was to be treated with respect, because if Harry held him in high regard then so should the rest of the Wizarding world. There was to be no talk of ‘winning’ the war or to cheapen Potter’s sacrifice as a lewd, perverse transaction as he had done. This was not a win for anyone, this was a mournful loss that everyone should be thankful for.

Yet, no one had thanked Potter. Not in any real sense of the word.

The boy had saved them from a potentially bloody and harrowing war and had got nothing in return for it. Not a Merlin First Class, not a medal, not a gift, not a letter – nothing.

Draco’s bad mood could be chalked up to that in of itself.

How dare they forget Potter so quickly? How dare they assume they owed the boy nothing of themselves? They owed him their lives, their families, their livelihoods! But, as Draco’s mother had gently put it, none of them could know of the horrors that would have wrought upon them otherwise. That was a pleasure only a certain few were privy to.

That’s why he was pushing through the throngs of Hogwarts colours and snotty children in less
than optimal conditions. In the spirit of paying his debts Draco had agreed to meet with Granger and Weasely. Their request had surprise him, to say the least. A note had been left next to his cauldron in Potions asking him to attend the Three Broomsticks at four sharp for a meeting – Draco’s eyebrows had lifted at the official sounding, curt nature Granger had written it in – her style completely.

Too curt, he thought; no explanation had been offered alongside it, so Draco had spent the week fretting over it – another reason for his bad mood.

He had asked after Harry on several occasions since he’d left. The first time he’d approached Granger, he almost bit his own lip off he’d been that tense. But, Granger surprised him with a wan smile and a ‘he’s been better’. It was an infuriatingly unembellished answer. Draco wanted to know more, he wanted every detail, every nuance but he had relented; he didn’t want Granger thinking he was stalking the poor boy- though he probably would if he could.

After the fourth time, Granger had offered more in the way of concrete information – thank Merlin. She’s also asked if Draco wanted to join her in the library which she frequented more often than she did not. Draco had accepted, he was gobsmacked at the offer, and he had humbly accepted. Then she started inviting him every so often until it became a regular occurrence. They both found they had quite a lot in common during these sessions; wry humour, studiousness, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, and a secretive self-deprecating kind of humour to boot. Draco enjoyed the muggleborn’s company more than he’d ever admit to his Slytherin counterparts.

Weasley had not been happy about the arrangement at all. Well, at first anyway. But after a few intense chess games and shared stories over chocolates, Weasley had warmed up to him - pigs will fly it seems. Didn’t mean the boy was ecstatic to see Draco, but he wasn’t so verbal about it anymore. Small mercies.

Of course, they discussed Potter. They all seemed to need to. The idea the boy was now a slave to the Dark Lord’s intentions had given them all horrifically themed nightmares.

Draco found himself wishing he could see Potter, jut to make sure he was still real.

He shoved a particularly fat Ravenclaw blocking his entry to the pub and with another deflected projectile, Draco entered.

He hated the establishment. It was dirty, cramped and always too warm. Normally he’d refuse simply on that basis, but these were Potter’s friends – his best friends and family in some sense, and that demanded Draco’s respect and attentions.

Granger and Weasely sat in the far corner in one of the larger booths. Draco thanked the unknown power for small mercies, the booths were somewhat more tolerable than the benches or wobbly tables that littered the dank room.

‘Good afternoon, Weasely, Granger.’ He greeted them as he sat before discarding his outer robes and scarf.

Granger smiled pleasantly ‘Hello. How’re doing?’ She asked softly whilst pushing a large butterbeer towards him.

Weasely made no such attempt at pleasantry he looked like he’d rather deal with an angry hippogriff than greet Draco in public and share a drink with him. Draco wanted to huff, at least he was putting in some effort – he was even pushing down the urge to wipe his glass before he drank from it. But, the Slytherin understood, Weasely had a reputation to uphold and family to appease-
just like he did. Neither of them should be conversing with one another in such amicable circumstance.

‘Fine thank you, though a bit cold.’ He smiled like he’d been taught to in etiquette training.

Draco looked the pint, somewhat impressed. ‘Got the real stuff, did you?’ He grinned.

Granger inclined her head to Weasley. ‘Rosemerta’s got a soft spot for our Ron here. Little Ronny bats his eyelids hard enough, and we get a few pints on the house.’

‘Piss off.’ Weasley huffed at the nickname.

Draco snorted at Weasley’s flushed face. ‘So, to what do I owe the pleasure?’

The pair looked between themselves and with a small nod Granger set an impressive array of privacy wards and silencing charms. Whatever the pair wanted to speak to him about was highly sensitive then, he assumed.

‘Oh, this is all very serious.’ He cocked a brow with a mirthful tone.

‘It is actually.’ Granger defended. ‘Very in fact.’

‘Why are you whispering Granger?’ He gestured to the dome around them. ‘More bloody privacy charms than what’s on an Unspeakable’s bedroom door.’ He snorted.

Weasley seemed to appreciate the joke at least, Granger only rolled her eyes then scowled at him.

‘We’ll need them. This is…sensitive.’ Oh, look at Granger being all mysterious. ‘We both visited Harry a few days ago at Slytherin Crest.’ She still whispered, despite the muffling charm being so strong it buzzed, pushing against all their ears. ‘We...noticed a few things and we were wondering if you could help us make sense of them. We, eh – have a few questions.’

Draco leaned back, feigning boredom; he was more than excited to hear any news regarding Harry’s being and doings. ‘Ask away Granger, I’ll answer what I can.’ Though, God knows what they expected him to know if it concerned Potter.

Granger beamed, clearly having been worried Draco would refuse her request. ‘Right, well - good.’ She took a long pull of beer before clearing her throat. ‘We were helping Harry with duelling training and well, we noticed a few things out of the ordinary.’

‘Oh? Like what?’

‘Well, before I explain Malfoy – could you tell me what you remember before Harry, eh- for lack of a better term, beat you, Crabbe and Goyle up?’ She asked sheepishly.

He paled. Draco did remember everything that had transpired. In fact, he’d willing burned it in his memory.

‘Certainly.’ It was Draco turn to take a long pull of his drink. ‘I offended Potter by implying he was being sold for sexual favours to the Dark Lord and then he, rightfully, attacked me.’

Weasley looked somewhat gobsmacked. ‘Rightfully?’ He croaked.

Draco nodded. ‘Yep, I deserved it.’ He clarified since the red-head still seemed confused. ‘Not sure about Crabbe and Goyle though – they were rather traumatised after that.’ He chuckled, Weasley grinned cheekily too at the thought.
‘Erm, thank you for admitting that Draco, but that’s not what we were looking for. Sorry I should have been more specific.’ Draco waved her off, telling her there was nothing to be sorry for which caused her to smile again. ‘Can you remember how Harry looked or moved before and during it?’

Yes. His heart leapt.

Draco cleared his throat which had constricted. ‘I can. Though I suspect you both might think I may be a bit cracked - due to my injuries, of course.’ He made the joke, but apparently it fell flat. The air in Granger’s suffocating privacy bubble shifted.

Granger and Weasley both stiffened and leaned forward. ‘Go on.’ Weasley pushed.

‘Yes well, it happened really fast. Like really fast. Potter was...quick.’ Draco hesitated, not wanting to sound like a loon. ‘Unnaturally so.’ He amended when he realised ‘quick’ didn’t quite cover the ferocious blur Potter because as he’d charged toward him. ‘Though, like I said – I was injured. I may have misremembered.’

Draco had asked other’s in Slytherin, but no one except Crabbe and Goyle had confirmed what he had seen; they were all too busy reading the article. And neither Crabbe nor Goyle were the most cognisant of sources. His own self-preservation hadn’t allowed him to ask any further than what he’d already had. So, he’s forced himself to forget, again in the name of self-preservation.

Granger nodded. ‘Did you notice anything else?’

The way the Gryffindor’s eyes lightened with recognition when he had said ‘unnatural’ was the only thing that encouraged him to continue. That and he owed them complete honesty.

‘He was strong, scarily so. He more or less threw all three of us about and proceeded to pummel us into the ground. If it were just me, I would have dismissed it – I’m not the strongest nor the fittest when Muggle means of violence are utilised. But for him to do the same to Crabbe and Goyle? That’s unheard of and he isn’t exactly muscular himself.’ He swallowed thickly.

‘We saw that part.’ Granger confirmed. ‘We dismissed it though. I thought maybe adrenaline could explain it... and we both forgot about it; we were all in shock over the news.’ She looked to Weasley who squirmed.

‘But something made you reconsider?’ Draco probed.

‘Yeah.’ Weasley piped up. ‘We got to train with him before he was dropped off at Slytherin Crest, we were getting him ready for it.’ Weasley fidgeted. ‘But, during the training we noticed he...’ The red head seemed to struggle for the correct words.

‘Moved unnaturally, as you termed it. He was fast - impossibly so – and his magic, Merlin. He’s always been a little more powerful than the rest of us, but what we saw training was shocking.’ Granger exclaimed.

Weasley nodded frantically. ‘And then again, when we last visited it was much of the same. But then – he –eh.’

Granger interrupted his fumbling. ‘Malfoy, did you notice anything else that was unusual?’

The hairs on Draco’s neck rose. Draco paused and regarded the pair before nodding slowly.

They might think he was mad, everyone else certainly would if he voiced what he had seen. He hadn’t even told Crabbe and Goyle this part, they hadn’t mentioned it either. The conversation
between the three of them always ground to a halt over this one point. To voice it was *madness*, because surely it couldn’t be real.

But in uncharacteristic bravery and trust he pushed the words out of his mouth. ‘His face changed.’ He croaked.

‘In what way?’ Weasley was on the edge of his chair.

‘His eyes. His mouth too.’ Draco said shakily. Granger nodded for him to continue. He exhaled harshly, as if he could force the words out with the air and then gestured to his own face. ‘Yellow eyes, fanged teeth.’

The pair then let out a breath they’d been holding. His eyes darted between the pair. ‘You don’t seem surprised.’ Draco commented. He’d at least been expected a laugh or a snort.

‘No…We saw the same a few days ago.’ Weasley said quietly.

Draco had to school his jubilation. He wasn’t mad, he thought. Thank Morgana, he hadn’t imagined it.

‘What happened?’ Draco moved forward in his seat.

‘During the duel, things got a bit heated – you know, they always do.’ Draco nodded at Granger. ‘We thought it would be good practice for him to duel two on one. Harry said he could handle it, there wasn’t any doubt about that anyway. He’s frightfully strong now.’ Granger said into her glass.

‘We only lasted a few minutes. Harry all but smacked us both down. I mean, it was bloody brilliant, but-.’ Weasley looked a little indignant about it. ‘-But, just before he did, we both saw his face change. And it did just like you said…yellow eyes and fangs.’ He paled.

So, he hadn’t imagined it. Draco felt equal parts relived and horrified at the notion.

‘That’s - it’s not normal for someone’s features to change like that, even in Wizarding circles.’ Draco voiced his thought in trepidation.

‘We agree. I did a bit of research.’ *Of course.* ‘I couldn’t find anything which made sense except for maybe glamours and such the like. But I don’t think Harry used them, it didn’t look like it was on purpose.’

‘Has he been bitten?’ It was the only thing that Draco could think of.

‘No, definitely not.’ Ron said from behind his pint.

‘All we know is that it might have been caused by the duel, he hasn’t looked like that under any other circumstance.’ Granger was biting her lip. ‘And the way he smiled-.’ She shivered. ‘It was more than just his features changing, it didn’t even feel like it was _Harry_ in front of us’

Draco knew exactly what she meant. All Draco could think about for days after the fight was how Potter looked maniac, his eyes lit up with bloodlust and he *grinned* like he was finding rapture in the act.

It had taken *weeks* to talk Crabbe and Goyle down from constantly describing Potter as a demon or a prophetic omen of some sort.
‘And you needed me to confirm it. What made you think I’d seen the same?’ Draco asked.

‘The fight - what we saw, how he moved – it was just like when we were in the training room.’ Granger confirmed, her face pale.

‘Have you both spoken to him about this?’

‘No. We don’t really know what to say. And he hasn’t responded to our letters for the past few days.’ Weasley’s featured darkened.

‘Not typical for Potter to miss a few letters?’ Draco arched a brow.

Granger shook her head. ‘No, not since we saw him off. We write every day.’

‘Well, you do.’ Weasley corrected.

Both Draco and Granger deigned to ignore the oaf.

‘Do you think it’s the Dark Lord’s handiwork?’ It seemed like the most logical conclusion at this point, since the bite had been ruled out.

‘We don’t know. But Ron was saying he saw Harry wearing a ring…’ She turned to Weasley.

‘Yeah, a gold one with a black, squarish stone.’ He described behind furrowed brows. ‘He never wears jewellery.’ Weasley’s nose scrunched up like adorning oneself was a purely bourgeois concept. Well, for him it probably was.

‘The Gaunt ring.’ Draco knew that piece, he knew it very well.

‘Come again?’ Weasley probed.

‘The Gaunt ring, if your description is correct. The Gaunt’s were the last descendants of the Salazar Slytherin’s line. The Lord started wearing it a few months before he made the deal to get Potter. My father says it was one of the few treasures they didn’t sell off, poor bastards.’ Draco leaned back in his seat.

‘How do you know he was related to them?’ Granger looked more than a tad confused.

‘The ring, plus the fact he’s the heir of Slytherin – wasn’t hard for my father to put two and two together.’

Granger nodded then stilled. ‘Does it do anything?’

Draco shrugged. ‘The ring? Don’t think so, if it does then the Dark Lord hasn’t told anyone about it.’ Draco took another sip. ‘We have similar heirlooms and artefacts at the Manor. All of them need to be kept under a strong stasis spell, they are all so old and fragile. Any magic that was in them is nearly spent. I think if the ring did have any magical properties, the Gaunt’s would have bled them dry long before the Dark Lord got a hold of them.’

‘Why do you know about the ring at all?’ Weasley’s asked, his whole demeanour radiating suspicion.

A correct one. Draco amended.

‘Well, it’s no secret now that my Father was part of the Dark Lord’s Inner Circle.’ They both nodded, looking grim. Draco looked up to double check the wards. ‘I was…being considered for a
similar position. That offered me some privileges – though most of them were horrific and I found myself not really wanting to be considered for it after all, if I’m being honest.’

‘But, you’re so young.’ Granger, rightly, looked repelled at the notion.

‘Dark Lord doesn’t care about age, Granger. He cared about talent and connections – something that the Malfoy name tends to promise.’ Draco felt one step removed from himself as he recounted. ‘Something I need to thank Potter for.’ He held up his pint in a toast.

He had told Granger very little about his experiences with the Death Eater and their Dark Lord, but she knew enough to know that Draco had abhorred it.

Granger smiled sympathetically. ‘What else can you tell us?’ Granger had her hungry-for-all-information look.

‘Not sure. Father said the Gaunt’s were a bunch of inbreeds. Most pureblood family’s have in the past kept it in the family shall we say. A couple of cousins married off here and there every few generations or so. Smart families know to incorporate new blood every now and again though - hell my family even has a few Weasley’s and Potter’s in it.’ Weasley muttered ‘don’t remind me’ with a huff. ‘But the Gaunts? They took it too far, and often the familial relationship was much closer that first cousins.’

‘You mean siblings-.’ Granger wavered, clearly disgusted.

‘Yep.’ Draco said with a pop. ‘Disease, disfigurement, disability – the whole lot of them. The once ancient and noble house of Slytherin became a horror show. They had to pawn most of their own inheritance off just to stay afloat…I think father said they were pig farmers or something of the sort towards the end.’ Draco shivered at the thought.

‘Explains those messed up faces.’ Weasley said to Granger who looked a bit ill.

‘Hmm?’ Draco said around another gulp.

‘Long story.’ Granger dismissed with a wave. ‘Let’s just say we’ve seen what the Gaunt’s looked like.’

‘Bloody awful, that’s what.’ Weasley added.

The was a few beats of silence after that. Draco’s mind ran through it all before saying. ‘I think you should come to Potter with this. And we should probably look up the ring’s history whilst we’re at it, just in case I’m wrong.’

‘I thought a Malfoy was never wrong?’ Granger regarded him archly.

‘If there’s one thing I’ve learnt over the last couple of years Granger, it that a Malfoy can always be wrong, awfully so.’ Draco finished his pint.

Granger patted his hand. ‘Maybe not this one though.’ She offered.

‘One can only hope.’

……..

**Nagini** was livid and right now she cursed her mother’s tongue.
The house-elf was next to useless in procuring the items she needed with any sort of haste. The snake had to resort to signing for most of the items whilst the elf did little more than stare between her and their Master in horror.

What a weak, feeble, *snivelling* breed, she thought angrily. Utterly useless in emergencies and awful at interpreting, but Neepsey made Nagini good food sometimes, so the snake didn’t bite her – no matter how much she wanted to in that moment.

Her master was bleeding out and barely breathing, her kin was currently yowling and fighting his restraints upstairs and the elf was snotty and wet.

She sent a prayer to the Old God’s for a modicum of strength.

Nagini had found the healing potion, Gods how it stank. She had to rip her Master’s soiled shirt before pouring it on him. She pushed a palm to his neck, well what was left of it anyway. Holding the two flaps of flesh together to aid the binding liquid, she hissed as it burned her hands. The brew was sluggish, as was typical of the Wizard’s poor attempts at wielding Wild Magic for their own benefit.

Nagini sank her dull claws into the flesh, pushing her own magic to speed the damn thing up. If her Master became bruised from her ministration, it was well deserved.

*The man is a fool, for all of his infernal posturing!* Nagini hissed internally.

Her hands didn’t shake or waver, Master had taught her better than that.

She had never seen Master so wounded, not even when he had been a boy. In that moment Master resembled one of Nagini’s hunts than the proud, powerful being he normal was.

Nagini would slap him if the blow didn’t risk taking his head clean off his shoulders.

By the God’s, it served him right. He didn’t know what he’d been messing with. Nagini didn’t fully understand either, but now she had firmer suspicions.

And the boy was still roaring above them.

Every instinct in her screamed to avenge her Master against the creature growling above them. But, Nagini’s human sensibilities had kicked in and instead she had used the magic afforded to her to restrain it.

Whatever it was.

Neepsey had finally shook herself of the pitiful trance she’s found herself in. The house elf handed the snake heavy cotton gauze and Nagini hissed in thanks, Neepsey flinched thinking it was a warning call.

She could feel the creature above her, his presence was a deep, resonating pressure pushing down on them all. It wanted their submission, Nagini snorted. Well, it would have to earn it.

She didn’t let her thoughts question what this meant for Harry. Those questions would have to come later when her Master neck was firmly reattached.

She mimed at the house elf again and the thing just shook instead, beyond confused. The snake growled loudly and wanted to throw something, preferably the little whining beastie in front of her.
She then shook the vial of dittany at her and rasped out ‘Bloodth.’ That seemed to work, as the elf flew to a cupboard and started fumbling through it frantically.

Once the house elf handed the red vial over with a nervous hand, Nagini shoved it down her Master’s throat. She soaked the bandages in the dittany as her hands blistered from it. Hauling her Master up she pulled the bands hard in hopes the fold of skin would hasten to join.

The snake had returned from a warm, gloriously bloody hunt and as she entered her hackles rose. The little one’s magic permeated the air; thick, acrid, and soured from terror and shame. Nagini had growled before dashing up the four flights to Harry’s rooms in the tower.

But when she entered the corridor leading to Harry’s rooms his magic shifted. For a moment, it had ceased to be entirely and then it rushed through the floors and the walls brutally.

The magic was different, very different.

Nagini had to push against the urge to flee and steel herself against the assault of it. The oppressive darkness swirled and writhed around her, pushing at her, willing her to submit.

But Nagini was a proud creature and cowed to no being.

The snake pushed forward with her arms stretched out in front of her body, her fingers dancing in the air, ready to cast or strike the being in Harry’s rooms.

There was no doubt in the snake’s mind that something had infiltrated the space, the magic was as old and wild as her own. Whatever was in that room was a child of the Old Wild, and it had encroached on her territory.

And the beast should have known better than to enter it.

Her orange eyes scanned the halls as she moved forward with deliberate slowness. The painted spectres had flown their frames, seeking the safety of the vaults. They were all crying out and barging into each other in a frenzied panic.

Snakes were made of a harder substance than those flighty entities.

But then she heard her Master cry out in fear. The sound almost made Nagini freeze, for what could her Master be so terrified of when he’d been a monster himself.

Then her thoughts of her babe’s safety made her fling caution to the air. She screeched and barrelled forward with all her strength. She grabbed onto the doorframe and lunged forward. The wards were so weak she barely felt them.

Then orange eyes gawked at the scene in front of them.

She could only see his back, but once she’d passed the ward the scent of blood churned in the humid air.

Her Harry, her little one was mauling her Master.

Nagini lunged at grabbed the hatchling by the scruff and throw him off her Master. She heard the boy hit the wall behind her as she quickly surveyed her Master’s wound; gaping, bloody, deep. So deep Harry had almost eaten all the way through.

Her Master gasps were ragged, choking and wet; Nagini had to quell a scream of rage. She cast
staying magic to halt her Master’s slippery descent into oblivion and then swung to meet the eyes of her kin, the source of the awful magics.

Yellow eyes, bloody mouth, and teeth each a serpent would treat with extreme caution.

This was not her kin.

She tested the bonds, they were still there; forged deep within them both. But her senses screamed that her Harry was not present in the bloodied sneer the creature dared to exact upon her. It licked its lips before its eyes rolled back at the taste of her Master’s blood, it head lolling with the pleasure of it. Nagini snapped her teeth at it, demanding its attention, daring it to ignore her any further.

It looked at her then and smirked. She hissed dangerously through her teeth.

‘Name yourself beast.’ She growled lowly, she discarded the honorifics, she wanted the thing to know it was on paper-thin ice.

It cocked its head before crouching with its arms splayed out over its knees, feigning nonchalance.

‘Name yourself!’ She screeched at it, the Dark magics punching through every syllable.

The creature snorted as the blood from its face dripped onto the floor.

‘So quick to assume you do not know me, Orange-one and yet, you know who I am.’ Was its seething reply. The beast’s undertone spoke true; the fowl thing assumed it knew her too.

‘Filthy, deceitful imposter, you seek to beguile me? You are not my kin, my eye’s do not see you.’ She spat. It was one of the most offensive statement among children of the Old Wild; to not see someone was to dismiss them entirely, body and soul.

‘Oh, but I am Orange-one. I always have been.’ It bared it teeth and challenged her to deny it.

Nagini roared. ‘You lie, beast. I can taste death in the air, you reek of it. You claim that I know you, yet this is the first time our eyes greet the other.’

The snake then rose from her haunches, her clawed hands outstretched and ready to attack. ‘It is the Old Magic I scent within you, not the magics of my kin.’

The beast had the gall to laugh. ‘I never claimed to be your Green-eyed kin, woman. No, I am not your green-eyed babe – guess again.’ It goaded.

‘I shan’t play your pathetic games beast.’ Nagini moved closer and then the beings started to prowl around the room, around the bed, matching the other step-for-step. ‘You have possessed my kin, release him or suffer a mother’s wrath.’ Nagini intoned perilously.

‘That is a fallacy. I have not robbed him of anything except his senses. Understand, I mean no harm.’ It smiled gruesomely.

‘Lies!’ She screamed then gestured to her Master. ‘Blood – already spilled by your wretched hand this night!’

‘A necessary evil, Orange-one.’ He crooned softly, the delighted mania never leaving his eyes. ‘He brought harm to your babe, he needed to pay for such a lowly transgression.’

Nagini howled awful laughter. ‘The venom pours from thine mouth sickly sweet, fowl creature. You twist words as to seduce my intentions upon your person; this will only ever fail. Now, release my
kin – or suffer the consequences.’

‘And risk the life of your babe and Master?’ He taunted, his yellowed eyes glinting in the low candle light.

‘Yes.’ She answered with no hesitation.

The creature growled before its head lolled with a lazy grin. ‘You forget me so easily Nagini, for shame.’ It leered.

‘I do not know you!’ She roared in frustration.

‘You did, I am your master.’ It purred.

The abomination wanted her to submit to it! Nagin bared her teeth and snarled, her limbs vibrating with pithy murderousness. How dare the beast assume it held dominion over her.

Its arrogance contorted the last restraint she possessed, and she lunged towards the fowl beast.

Vaulting over the bed, she swooped low into the creature’s leg and swiped them. The beast rolled, correcting itself then landing on its hands and feet. From there it pushed forward with ferocious speed to tackle her, its black-veined skin blurring with its approach.

Nagini dodged it with a swift turn and dug her claws into its back. It turned with an arm slashing through the air. She released the embedded grip with a sickening *shluck*, barely missing the swipe of extended claws to her eyes.

The beast sank to the ground and cuffed her ankle with a bruising swat. It hissed as she fell with a *thud*, shaking the furniture. A vase fell and Nagini caught it before it smashed before sweeping her arm out to clobber it over the creature’s head.

It missed by a hairbreadth, pulling back at the last second. The beast pounced to swipe at her neck, gnarling and snapping its teeth whilst its eyes zeroed in on her neck.

The beast was swift, it fought like a raging wind, and with a demon’s strength.

Nagini kicked up into its looming stomach, vaulting the creature up and over her. It smacked into the cabinet which splintered from the impact. It pulled itself forward, grabbing and clawing at the air, rushing towards her.

She feigned a left and instead struck with her right fist right into the creature’s jaw. It stumbled back, for a fleeting moment stunned before roaring and clipping her wrist with razor-sharp nails.

It grabbed her wrists then threw her to the ground, her vision blackened as her skull rattled off the floor.

She was pinned beneath wet fangs and blood-thirsty eyes.

Nagini screeched. *Enough of this!* She screamed inside her mind.

She wrenched her magic and threw it forward and the creature was hurled through the air. Nagini rose and walked forward, her mouth in a grim line, her hand outstretched pulling at the wall her magic erected upon the beast.

With a twist of her clawed hand she snapped the binds; they wove in and through the beast, jerking it to the wall with a snap.
It screamed at her, writhing and clawing at itself to release the hold of Nagini’s magics. The creature wrestled and wriggled until Nagini lazy, and light-footed neared it.

Now face to face, it stilled with a contorted expression that promised a swift and merciless end.

The snake rounded upon it with barely contained wrath, their faces separated by nought but an inch.

‘Vile thief - seek to exact preponderance upon or belittle my might again and you will feel the sting of my venom in your veins.’ She sneered. ‘Weak and conceited, you will only fail in your pathetic attempts to dominate me.’ Nagini hissed cruelly. ‘This night, I have relented for my kin’s sake, though if you aim to scorn me once more, I will not be so merciful, wretched creature.’

‘Release me, Orange-one.’ It breathed harshly.

‘I think not, I have more important matters to attend to than wasting time on your worthless hide.’ She jeered.

The creature screamed, demanding to not be ignored and cursing the snake, promising pain and vengeance.

Nagini spat at the ground next to the beast’s feet and then turned to her Master.

Now, as she wrapped the gauze tighter around her Master’s neck and shoulders, the snake felt fatigued and the anxiety crept in.

Her kin was lost to her, bedevilled by a child of the Wild, the elf was a quaking mess, and her own injuries burned in the background.

.......:

**Everything burned.**

Any attempt Tom made to open his damnable eyes sent a fissure of sharp pain through his skull. And his neck was a torturous boil; white-hot at its centre then pulsing through his torso and head.

When he managed to peel back his eyelids, he was met with one furious and bloodied snake.

‘Good – you’re awake.’ She announced curtly as she pulled at the tendril of gauze with a cruel yank.

‘Circe, Nagini! Could you please be gentle!’ He croaked with a broken yelp before hissing at the shot of pain the shout caused.

The snake was suddenly in his face. ‘I’ll be gentle when you explain why I had to restrain an imposter posing as our kin!’ She spat.

‘Imposter?’ Tom blinked owlishly at her. He saw Neepsey sniffling into a too-large handkerchief. He turned to Nagini, his gaze question and her expression was dark. His eyes searched hers, confused until something sharpened in his mind when he noted the blood that was everywhere. Then the memories came flooding in and Tom curled in on himself in grief and shame.

Harry, too still, broken and wet on the floor, yellow eyes, fangs, veins, bite, blood, pain.
His breath left him in a rush. Tom moaned painfully as he realised that this was reality, that he had not dreamt of the awful events that burned behind his eyes.

‘Explain yourself!’ The snake snapped.

The Dark Lord looked at his familiar with fearful eyes, remorse and mournful aching swimming in his veins, clouding his mind in a convulsing, confused blackness.

He shook around each word as he forced it from himself. ‘I broke him Nagini. I was a monster and I broke his mind.’ He felt himself pale, his mouth felt numb and mumbling.

‘What did you do?’ She hissed.

Tom could see the scratches on his familiar’s face and arms; he knew she had fought Harry. The thought made a sob rise in his throat.

Then it poured from him. ‘I punished him – he wouldn’t tell me the truth – I didn’t – I didn’t even give him the chance Nagini. He tried to explain, he tried to get me to stop. I hit him Nagini, and he screamed. He was sobbing and I kept hitting him, even when he stopped moving – Gods Nagini. He was already gone and I kept hitting him! And his mind – he was gone. Broken and cracked on the floor, I held him. Oh - God, I called out to him and he turned to nothing in my arms, he bled away – ah – he’d gone. Fuck, he gone!’ His voice inched towards a wail.

He broke down in earnest now, weeping as the lights burned him. He felt flayed and broken – and he fucking deserved it.

This was worse than any nightmare imagined by his sub-conscious anxieties.

Harry was dead by his own grotesque hand, but this was far more cruel than the Killing Curse. Harry had ceased to exist and he’d been so afraid. Tom had mortified him, shamed him, laughed at him, and then kept going.

He’d died alone and afraid in his own mind, broken and cracked.

Nagini’s hands paused and shook as she stared at him. Her skin greyed then she shook her head frantically, her eyes welling up with unshed tears.

‘No. no. That can’t be true.’ She stated quietly.

‘It is Nagini, fuck – ah – he’s gone. Fuck.’ He sobbed brokenly in gasps.

‘It’s not true!’ She roared at him. Tom couldn’t say anything, his chest convulsed in sorrowful misery.

He’s gone. He whispered.

‘No – no. I won’t accept it. He is above us right this second. He is simply possessed. He just needs to be purged of that vile creature and then- then he’ll come back to us. There’s no way he’s gone Tom. It isn’t possible.’

Tom could feel him, or whatever it was that roared above them. It wails were muted, but loud enough to travel to the infirmary.

‘You-u will bring-th him ba -ack.’ Nagini spoke in broken English. Tom couldn’t even wade through the grief to be surprised that she had spoken in English. He was too far gone for that.
‘I can’t Nagini.’ He said numbly, his cheeks wet.

‘You will!’ She griped his arm hard. ‘You’ll bring him back, or I’ll kill you myself.’ Her eyes narrowed to pinpricks. ‘I will not lose him. Not because of such a pathetic error of judgement.’

He didn’t know how to, if he was being dreadfully honest with himself. He couldn’t voice it though, it felt too final. The image of Harry so grotesquely damaged and fragmented made him feel sick. It was sick, he was sick. It was too cruel an end for such a bright spark of light. Harry had been pure, good, loving, loved. He forgave and loved fiercely in equal measure.

He didn’t deserve it, Harry never deserved anything the Dark Lord had wrought upon him.

Tom didn’t deserve Harry.

He deserved better than that pitiful death.

The least Tom could do was to try and bring him back instead of licking his own wounds like the wretched creature he was.

Tom lurched and then pulled himself off of the bed. His hissed through the pain which made him nauseous as he ripped the covers off.

Nagini had to catch him a little as he stood before he made his way to the vial cabinet. He took everything he could get his hands on and downed most of them. He needed to be strong for Harry. He took his wand and put it to his throat and willed the injury to heal further.

‘Nagini, I need your venom.’ The snake nodded before grabbing a vial off of him, holding it under her teeth, the greenish liquid dripped. Her expression was stoic and unreadable.

He took it and then infused it into the Blood Replenishing Potion, maximising its potency. He shivered as he drank it, he’d deal with the headache from it later.

Nagini’s hands and arms bore large welts and cuts, taking the Asclepius Infusion he soaked her arms until the injuries eased into new, stretched skin. It wasn’t his best work, but it would have to do. If this was a possession, then time was of the essence.

‘You called it a creature, did you recognise it?’ He asked her softly.

She snorted without humour. ‘Nay, though it seemed convince that I should.’

He lifted a brow and then she added. ‘Before we fought, it said that I should remember it’s identity. He spoke our mother tongue. I hoped it was the little one for a moment, but it didn’t smell like the babe.’

‘Recognise the scent?’ He drank another vial of Invigorating Potion.

‘Death and the old Wild magic. Whatever it is, it’s powerful, swift – took quite a bit of effort on my part to restrain it. It wanted me to submit.’

Tom’s eyes widened at that. If Nagini had to push herself to contain it, that meant the creature was as deadly as she was.

‘Submit?’ He probed.

She huffed. ‘Yes, it said it was my master – arrogant little fuck.’
Tom felt out of his depth, his knowledge of Dark creatures was nothing to shake a stick at, but he couldn’t for the life of him think of something that fit the description.

He checked the mirror as he pulled off the dittany-infused bandages before thanking Nagini for her quick thinking.

The wound was bad, even now that he and Nagini had made an attempt to heal it. He hated to think what it looked like before the snake had healed him.

His thoughts rested on the Harry with yellow eyes. Nagini had said - whatever it was – it seemed to have possessed the boy. Tom remembered how the inky-black veins had pulsed on Harry’s arm and neck and asked himself if this was Death’s cruel bidding. Shaking the thought away, favouring facts over conjecture, Tom steeled himself and made his way to the beast.

Tom noted Nagini’s winced as they neared Harry’s rooms.

It was screaming Dark magic smothered them.

Tom’s heart lurched. It sounded like Harry.

The air was rotten and putrid, the magic lingered like a black cloud and every inhale was difficult to execute because of it.

The Dark Lord kept his eyes closed as he rounded and walked into Harry’s room. The wards were all but gone, and it was a dreadful omen.

The creature with Harry’s voice stopped screaming.

When he opened them, his knees wanted to buckle.

There was Harry.

Tom stilled as the boy’s eyes snapped to his, the peaky-yellow irises looked flat. For a moment Tom hoped that his Harry had returned, albeit with a few mutations. But no, the beast smiled and it’s black, pin-sharp teeth glinted.

It leered at him, as if it were mocking collapse into renewed despair.

‘Hello Tom, back on your feet already? So quick too, I’m impressed.’ It jeered.

Tom exhaled before he settled into the old, familiar role; he was the terrible Dark Lord again, and this was his prey.

‘Oh, forgive me. You were busy?’ Tom sneered.

‘Maybe.’ It chuckled. ‘You see, I’m a little tied up with something – care to cut me loose?’

‘Not on you life, beast.’ Nagini spat.

Tom smiled. ‘You heard my familiar. I could, but then I’d have to kill you.’ Tom parried with false airiness.

‘Wouldn’t that be a pity.’ It smiled with a bloodied mouth. ‘And there I was hoping that we could engage in civil discourse.’

Nagini growled, affronted – her hiss a warning.
It was Tom’s turn to laugh. ‘I think that ship had sailed, don’t you?’

‘I would hope not.’ It agreed with a dangerous tone. ‘You see, I have answers to the questions that you so desperately seek, Tom. Oh, it feels weird saying that - Tom.’ I laughed to itself before it seemed to shake itself, still highly amused. ‘You might not get very many answers without a little civility, it’s only polite.’

If Tom were so invested in said answers, he might have rolled his eyes. ‘I think your overestimating my patience, which I have next to none of presently. So, in that spirit – here’s how this is going to go.’

Tom flicked his wand at the binds grew tighter. ‘You’re going to tell me everything you know or-.’ Tom hit it with a **Crucio**, trying not to recoil from the screams which sounded like Harry’s. ‘We can keep doing *that* until you vacate the boy, and the premise whilst you're at it.’ Tom grinned, trying not to shake when Harry’s body shuddered in agony.

Nagini winced too before schooling her expression into a feral grin when the beast’s eyes met hers. The beast rasped and then laughed maniacally. ‘Hah-Merlin. It’s been a while since I’ve been hit with one of those. ‘Still using the Unforgiving on children are were Tom? My, how I’d hoped you’d grown out of that bad habit.’

Tom regarded the creature for a few beats, suspicion colouring his features. ‘You speak as if you know me, pray tell beast – do you?’

It laughed again, the sound grating on Tom’s ears. ‘Oh boy do I!’ It guffawed around a ragged breath.

Tom rushed forward and shoved his wand under its throat. ‘Forgive me, but I don’t seem to quite remember you.’

‘You should.’ It stared at his, expressionless. ‘You should know me as well as you know yourself Tom. Tell me, whilst we are on the subject of yielding Unforgivables, do you still wake up in a cold sweat after hearing Hepzibah’s screams?’

‘How-.’ Tom halted, his stomach dropped. **Of course-**

‘*Fuck!*’ Nagini shouted before kicking the bedside table. Tom turned to ask her, but then the creature interrupted.

‘Like I said, you haven’t had the best of luck when it comes to Unforgivables and innocent children.’

Tom paled and stumbled back. ‘No.’

‘Oh, yes Tom.’ It cocked a brow. ‘Nice to meet you again, it’s been what – sixteen years, give or take.’ An awful smile bloomed on its features.

He tried to sound confidence, but it fell flat. ‘That’s impossible.’

‘Really? Oh, come on Tom – you can do better than that. What? You couldn’t possibly be so foolish. You thought I just simply sat here like a good little Horcrux and done *nothing*? By Morgana, you are an idiot.’ It scoffed.

‘I feel him Master. It is difficult to sense under the old Magic, but it is there.’ Nagini admitted, and
the creature was smug.

It was him. The version of him that had just killed Harry’s parents. The black thing that laughed and jeered at their pain. This was Voldemort at his most diseased and deranged. And it lived – nay - it had \textit{thrived} inside the boy all these years.

‘Voldemort.’ Tom said more to himself than anyone else.

The creature snarled and threw itself against the bends, enraged and thrashing. ‘Wrong!’ It intoned in a disturbing sing-song voice. ‘Don’t you dare call me that! Don’t you fucking dare associate me with that \textit{infected}, paranoid mind.’ It snarled.

‘Then what-.’ Tom felt fogged by a chaotic turmoil over what the creature was raging about.

‘I escaped you!’ It interrupted with a roar. ‘I became free of that awful mind-.’ It pointed a finger at Tom’s head. ‘-that pathetic excuse you called an existence.’

‘You are me, you fucking fool!’ Tom seethed.

It rasped on a sneer. ‘The madness stopped the night you tried to kill an infant because of a fucking prophecy! I ceased to be Lord Voldemort the night you cast me aside like spare fucking change. And thank Merlin for that!’ It said lowly. ‘When the same infant you tried to kill embraced me, when that kind, \textit{good}, soul recognised mine-.’

‘He would never willing embrace it!’ Nagini threw a clock and it missed the beast by mere inches.

‘Now, now my sweet familiar- play nice.’ The creature crooned. Nagini went to throw and inkwell at it before Tom halted her.

‘He was an \textit{infant} – there was no way he could have possibly recognised you!’

The creature shook his head slowly. ‘Make no mistake Tom, his soul knew exactly what I was, and do you know what? He still fucking accepted me! He enveloped me within himself – something which \textit{neither} of us deserve. He did it anyway – and now look what you’ve gone and done!’ It screeched.

‘Nothing that you wouldn’t have done, funny that, we’re not so different!’ Tom shouted. This was madness. This should be possible, but here it fucking was screaming at him – his own soul.

‘I am different!’ It yelled. ‘I am him, he is me \textit{Tom}. More than your puny mind can fathom – we are one! He is mine. \textit{Mine}. And you? You’re nothing but a leech.’

‘Oh, this is just brilliant.’ Tom guffawed humourlessly. ‘You’re calling \textit{me} a leech?’

The creature stilled and glared at him. ‘I was there you know. For all of it. Every single minute, every day. I watched how your mania ruined his- \textit{my} life. All the pain, \textit{all} of it. You led him to those vile Muggles, into the arms of an incompetent Headmaster – you marched him time and time again into danger, to his \textit{death}. And you have the fucking \textit{gall} to imply that I’m a parasite!’

‘Merlin, you’ve actually deluded yourself into thinking you’re him, haven’t you?’ Tom couldn’t believe his ears. He could admit he was mad, but this was stretch of even the most full-bodied imagination.

‘\textit{He has been locked away in the boy’s mind for too long.}’ Nagini dismissed the creature.
The creature looked away like Tom was the unreasonable one. ‘Locked away? No Nagini - I’m there even when he is not.’ It rumbled.

Tom had to commend Harry. The boy hadn’t killed him yet, even though he was clearly the most infuriating being to converse with!

‘And what does that mean? Or are you purposefully being vague in order to sound all mysterious?’ Tom gibed.

It cocked its head watching Tom with a predatory gaze. ‘You still haven’t asked the most important question, have you? Ask yourself Tommy boy, why do you think I’m here and your little one is not?’

Tom shook his head. ‘I don’t know, but something tells me you’re about to enlighten me.’

‘My, you are catching up.’ It tone was dripping with disdain. ‘You don’t deserve him you know. I was there for him, through thick and thin – it was me who saw him through it all-.’

‘For the love of- Circe. Please, spare me the tale of you supposed martyrdom.’ Tom snapped.

The creature’s face contorted. ‘You have no idea.’ It said lowly. ‘You don’t have a fucking clue what that boy has had to face because of you – what I had to protect him from.’ It jeered quietly.

The hairs rose on Tom’s neck. ‘What do you mean?’

‘…You know about the beatings, the taunts, the neglect – but the rest? Fuck Tom. I had to step in, repeatedly. I had to save him from monsters like you. That sham of a family did way more than what the boy remembers. And I hid the worst of it from him, I took it instead. I took it to save him from the horror of it, so that he might stay sane. Because fuck was I going to let you rob him of that too.’ It spat, its fists clenching and shaking.

‘What horrors?’ Tom asked slowly.

The creature breathed heavily, seemingly trying to control itself. ‘They started when he was four Tom. Four. Began with belt lashings, soft side first – buckle side second. A knock on the head turned into a snapped wrist, then a broken leg. Then the burns, we can’t forget those. Hand shoved on the stove fire, weekend cigar stubbed out on his arm, holding his wrist to a Muggle lighter.’

‘If this is a lie-.’ Tom halted his familiar again.

Its smiled bitterly. ‘Dumbledore knew. Always did. He would threaten, and it would stop for a few days – then it started again, and it was always worse when it did.’

Tom felt a bead of sweat roll down his spine as inky, black hatred crawled up it. ‘Worse?’ What could possibly be-.

‘Uncle Vernon always did like little boys.’

No.

‘Really liked them. That started from small beginnings too. A photograph here and there, images on Muggle technology – so many of them too. Enough to make you sick. The boy found the first, he didn’t know what he was looking at – but I did. I never let him see the rest.’

He saw Nagini pace and pull at her hair with a whimper.
He barked a cold laugh. ‘Caught the brute pleasuring himself to those. Grunted like swine the entire time, smelled like a pig too. Then the wayward stares started to make a little more sense. Then I knew it was only a matter of time. Stares turned to touches, then requests, then demands. I could only sit and watch and wait, knowing it was coming. Tried to stave him off with accidental magic, but the boy was too weak – his core malnourished and frightened.’

Tom couldn’t bear to hear it. It was Harry’s voice recounting the tale, like the boy was in front of him recalling it.

‘It finally happened on his birthday. He was six. I hid him away in the small corners of his mind and I took it instead. Can you imagine it Tom? Being forced like that whilst trapped in an infant’s body? I can, I did.’

Tom’s knees finally buckled.

‘Why did you?’ Nagini sounded as horrified as he felt.

‘Would you have not done the same?’

Nagini looked grey, she breathed harshly. ‘Anything – I would do anything for him.’

The creature softened slightly at that. ‘I took it as penance for our sin.’ It explained. The creature’s voice was so quiet. ‘The irony of it was too much sometimes that I laughed whilst it was happening.’

The creature leaned forward as if he could claw through the binds and gouge his eyes out.

‘When I was you, I feared Death more than anything else. I would’ve have killed to avoid it, and we did, didn’t we Tom? We tortured, we raped, we murdered. We thought we had exalted ourselves from victimhood and we were proud of it. And yet there I was, finally, a victim of the first two and wishing for the third.’

The creature’s lip curled, clearly revolted with the man it saw before it. ‘I did it all for him, to save him because I love him. He taught me that you know – love. Still run for the hills whenever it’s mentioned Tom?’

‘Yes.’ Tom whispered because there was no dignity in deception at this point.

‘I thought so. And yet you’ve claimed him. You think you will have him, mind, body and soul. It wasn’t enough to corrupt him that night you murdered his parents, you needed to sink your filthy claws into the rest of him too.’

It chuckled darkly. ‘And you sneered at him – told him to stop running away from his fears and desires. Riddle me this Tom, how can a man who has constantly flown from his own fears claim superiority over those who do the same? Harry does, for good reason too. And he has far more reasons to run than you’ve ever had.’

‘I know.’ Was all Tom could push out.

‘Do you?’ It questioned, clearly affronted. ‘I don’t think you do. Otherwise you wouldn’t have attempted a somewhat disgusting seduction of a teenage boy. You wouldn’t have leered and told him how good it would feel- how he just needed to give in to you and then he would finally feel at peace with himself. You’ve never been on the receiving end of it have you? No. You don’t know what pain is. If you did, you wouldn’t have beaten him in a manner his perverted Uncle would enjoy. And you did enjoy it. I heard it. All of it.’
‘Small mercies that I did not.’ Nagini agreed with the creature sentiment.

Tom felt flayed, open and broken under the creature’s scrutiny. In the light of all this truth, Tom had not right to feel hate or hurt. He was not much better than the boy’s abuser. The thought brought a flood of bile into his mouth.

‘And we have no choice when it come to you Tom. Harry embraced your corruption that night I became his. By our very nature we will always want you, despite how it may have been otherwise.’

Tom’s head snapped up at the creature’s soft tone, sounding so much like his Harry’s kind words.

‘Want you, need you~ All the time, no matter what. It’s maddening Tom.’ Yellow eye searched his. ‘We have no choice, we never did.’ It croaked.

Tom’s mind was frantic, and he wanted to beat himself bloody. This creature loved Harry, it had sacrificed himself for the boy.

‘What would you have me do?’

The creature’s lip curled. ‘What could you do? You can’t seem to control yourself in any way, shape or form when it comes to Harry, to us. How can I trust you with such a gift when you risk breaking it completely, irrevocably – like you nearly did nought but a few hours ago.’

Tom’s heart thudded and his hands shook with hope. ‘Is he alive?’ His eyes hurt for how wide they were parted.

The creature stared at him, an indecipherable looked crossed its features. Please, please, please. Tom begged internally.

‘Is he?’ Nagini probed, her whole body vibrating with tension.

‘In a manner of speaking – yes.’ The creature answered levelly.

Yes! Oh Circe Yes!

Tom was lost to the relief of it and he sank lower in to the ground, cradling his head in his hands. He breathed out in small breathy sobs and he felt almost blinded with elation.

‘What manner do you speak of?’ Nagini obviously recovered faster than Tom did.

The creature tore it’s gaze away from the crumpled heap in front of him.

‘He is hidden and weak. He won’t return without an incentive.’ It looked back to Tom who stilled.

Tom looked forward unseeingly before meeting the sickly yellow eyes. ‘What? Anything, I’ll do anything.’ Tom begged, he wasn’t above it, not now.

The creature’s grin bloomed, and he finally looked a little more like Harry.

‘Anything?’ It pushed.

‘Anything.’ Tom held the stare unblinkingly.

Then the creature nodded.
‘I was hoping you’d say that.’

Y’all forgive me yet?

Everyone was like 'nooooooooooo' in the comments with the cliffhanger we parted on.

Not going to lie, I got a few jollies out of that.

Your despair that is.

The comments actually had me in tears - with laughter. Evil laughter.

Anyways, enough delving into my questionable psyche.

THANK YOU FOR READING SO FAR!

What do you think?

What did you feel?

Yah still mad bro?

Tell me.

*crosses fingers behind back* I promise I won’t laugh or derive pleasure from your pain.

Heh.

LOVE YOU ALL AYH BAYHOOTIFULLL HUNGRY BEASTS
Dumbledore stared at his desk, his fingers twitching as his arms fell limply at his sides.

His eyes searched the space; papers and parchment strewn over the twin black staircases. Books hanging from their shelves, ancient tomes scattered over the banisters, some had been discarded with such force that they had knocked over the glass and gold ornaments on his desk – all of which were now shattered on the floor.

He moved his feet slightly, toeing the pieces as they crunched beneath him.

The large arched windows at the back of his office were cracked in places, completely obliterated at their shared centre; like a massive Muggle bullet had blasted through. Its silvery yellow cracks reminded Albus of warm afternoons, spider webs in fields of barley, and a low voice whispering sweet nothings.

Ashes from Fawkes perch still lingered in the air, refusing to settle – instead the particles danced along the electric current of magic which had persisted.

It was all fairly beautiful, despite the chaos of it. The Headmaster noted somewhat distracted that the hole in the window aligned perfectly with tonight’s full moon. If he were otherwise inclined, he might have taken a picture of the scene.

Albus rarely got angry in his old age, but the aftermath of recent events had been the exception to a long-standing rule.

His fingers continued to tap a steady beat on his thigh. To an inexperienced eye, Albus may have looked calm and composed – maybe even enjoying the moment.
But Dumbledore had learned to bury a multitude of things pertaining to himself over the years and with a great deal of success too.

But not tonight.

Albus yelled and then swept his arms out at what remained on his desk; the items shot through the air before crashing into the opposite wall. He then carefully placed his hands on the desk and closed his eyes with a shuddering inhale. In his attempt to regain a modicum of control, Albus hadn’t heard the other Professor enter. If he had he wouldn’t have continued to breath so deeply, it was considered unsightly and unbecoming of his revered position.

‘You called for me Headmaster?’ Snape drawled.

Albus blanched incrementally with the slightest jerk. Without looking back he answered. ‘Yes, please take a seat.’

The headmaster heard Severus move behind him, then a swish of a wand cutting the air and the groan of the overturned armchair erecting itself.

Dumbledore pivoted and then leaned against the desk with folded arms, staring at nothing, his mind racing.

‘Headmaster?’ Albus looked at Snape fleetingly. The Potions Master’s gaze was surveying the wreckage around them with increasing discomfort.

Albus exhaled wanly. ‘We have an issue, a rather serious one.’

Severus had the good sense to nod and let the Headmaster elaborate in his own time. ‘There seems to have been a break in.’ Albus explained monotonously.

‘I can see that.’ Snape intoned whilst plucking a feather from his robes. ‘Who?’

The Headmaster ran a hand over his wand pocket. ‘I’ll need you to reveal that, my boy.’

Dumbledore sighed. ‘Whomever it is seems to have stolen my wand – and in their efforts to find it...’ Albus gestured to the carnage surrounding them.

_They've taken my wand, his wand._ Albus felt lost for a moment.

Snape cocked an eyebrow before nodding hesitantly. ‘Certainly, Headmaster.’

Albus followed Snape’s movement to the middle of the office with a grim expression. The mistrust and indecision his Order members exhibited around Albus was a new development, and an unwelcome one at that. Yet, despite the glares and the hisses that accompanied every meeting and social call, none of his brethren had deigned to illuminate him as to what the issue was.

Albus knew it was a curse he’d wrought upon himself time and time again. The Headmaster was no stranger to the responsibilities of difficult decision making and often had to accept the consequences of what resulted from his choices. He’d lost so much already that he felt a little thin now.

He knew that accepting the Terms of Armistice was going to splinter their trust and that they just needed time to adjust to it.

His dismissal among his closest friends was a first. It was something he’d been able to hold on to until the Armistice. But they were not called terrible consequences for no good reason.
Harry was just a boy. Harry had never deserved what Albus had brought to his door; something he would never wish on anyone. He had fretted over Voldemort’s proposal, only just bit back an outright refusal and a violent one at that. Still, Albus proclivity for seeking the greatest amount of happiness among the greatest number of people was the only thing that had stayed his hand.

Harry was a Horcrux, Merlin help them all, he’d thought. It explained so much, but Dumbledore found himself wishing he hadn’t happened upon the information in the first instance.

Why me? He thought in a moment of weakness before steeling himself in Voldemort’s presence. He was too old to whine about the injustice of it all.

The Potions Master waved his wand in a continuous figure of eight with incanting the *Homenum Sumat* spell.

Orange dusts swirled from the wand, filling the space with a sunset-like cloud before it quivered and flashed, returning to Snape’s wand.

Only a handful of people knew of the Elder Wand’s gruesome history, he couldn’t be sure if Voldemort did. The Elder Wand brought forward terrible memories. As was instinctual now, Albus’s thoughts lingered on lost love and the first of many terrible decisions before he swiped the thought away like noxious smoke.

Dumbledore was too far away to clearly heard the name whispered in the Potions Master’s ear. Snape had paled upon hearing it though, his face flooding with confusion before his gaze snapped back to Albus.

‘That can’t be right.’ Snape murmured before casting it again and was obviously dismayed when the same name was repeated.

Potential suspects reeled through his mind; a few Death Eater’s known for infiltration and theft. Some wandmakers who had happened on it before.

Albus elected to be patient over any sudden, rash behaviours could erupt.

‘Who has it detected son?’ He asked levelly, ignoring Snape’s grimace towards the endearment.

‘I’m sure this is an error, sir. But the spell suggests that this is Potter’s doing.’ Snape gave his wand a few taps against his palm, like a Muggle would with a broken radio.

Dumbledore looked around the room and sighed in frustration.

‘Definitely Harry?’ Albus didn’t really know what he’d hoped for then.

Snape paused for a minute, seeming to accept his wand was not faulty.

‘Yes. But we both know that can’t be the case.’ Snape’s eyes roamed the room again before scanning the walls. ‘Were the wards tripped?’ He looked at Albus.

He shook his head as he pinched his bridge. ‘No, nothing sounded.’ Albus removed himself from the desk on a long exhale. ‘And I doubt Harry possesses the know-how needed to get around them.’ He added.

Snape snorted. ‘Stranger things have happened. But I don’t think this is Potter’s style.’ He twirled his wand. ‘And then there’s the issue of his living arrangements.’
‘Does Tom notify anyone if the boy leaves?’ Albus turned and then started carding through his desk drawers.

‘Yes. Me. And no, Potter is accounted for.’

Albus found his original wand as the back of the bottom one under a spare pair of woollen socks. The black wood wrapped into the handle like fine roots, he’d almost forgotten how it felt in his palm. It thrummed happily in his hand.

Albus was almost tempted to cast a Prior Incantatem, the last days of the wands use were so blurred in his mind; most of the memories were locked away in vials next to the Pensieve in his private quarters.

He wondered if it would show that last curse. The last terrible curse.

The Headmaster unconsciously rubbed at the scar on his palm as he though of pale blue eyes and hair brighter than morning sunlight.

‘We should go see him soon.’ Dumbledore croaked before turning to Snape whose gaze was set on Albus’s scarred palm.

‘Certainly.’ Snape watched the Headmaster with a curious gaze.

Dumbledore dismissed him with a fatigued nod.

It was only when the Headmaster was alone that he allowed himself petty weakness.

He found himself climbing the old stone stairs to his own quarters. Albus remembered when he’d first set eyes on the circular room. Its painted mural of noble men in pale blue and paler greens, the roof draped with a dusty brown folded satin, collecting in the centre to reveal a sun; carved from sandstone, its rays forming pillars which clasped over the space. He hadn’t added much to it, except the bed from his parent’s house – black and rust velvet emboiders with griffins and merfolk.

It was the same bed that he’d comfort Ariana in, brushing back he sweated forehead when the noises and lights around her became too much for her heightened senses.

Dumbledore sat in it for a moment, his hands brushing over the blue-grey sheets as he imagined his sister and brother playing on it – jumping, giggling and happy in the afternoon sun.

His eyes flickered up to his own portrait that had been a gift from the previous Headmaster. Dippet didn’t know Albus very well apparently if he’d thought it was a good present; there was no one that Albus hated looking at more than himself.

But sometimes, he’d take a peek.

Before he could think better of it, he looked at the Pensieve cabinet and Summoned the vial. He plucked it out of the air and stared at it’s milky-blue contents whilst worrying his lip. There was something right about calling for the vial with his old wand, like they were puzzle pieces that slotted together forming a solid picture of that time, of that awful, awful time.

How many years had it been since he’d felt the need to see this?

He couldn’t remember if it was a comfort or a punishment to behold it again. Maybe it was both; bittersweet, precious and mournful.
It wasn’t a conscious decision to pour its contents into the Pensieve, it was more like a compulsion – a need to scratch an unbearable itch.

Or perhaps it was more like flogging your own back, whipping and whipping until the skin was raw and bloodied.

Albus clutched the edges of the bowl watching the liquid dilute into the clear waters. The last time he’d watched this, his hand hadn’t been so translucent or wrinkled. Now they were mottled with age spots and scars. These hands had done so much that Albus thought they would never be clean. He turned his palm and the scar stared at him. No, they were dyed red and wet, he thought.

Albus let out a shaking breath.

Then he went under.

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_Albus_ had made his decision, and now he had to see it through.

He and Gellert had promised each other a lot of things in their youth. Most of them had been broken, except for a few. Today, the last of those precious vows would fall through the cracks. The assurances made between them in heat and passion of youth and love would now be shattered, the comfort of them along with it.

Albus had driven himself to sickness thinking about today, about the polite exchange of letters with had set this in motion.

But it was one of the few promises he’d been allowed to keep.

The commitment was a simple one; if either of them had to betray the other – for whatever reason, they would meet one last time with the vial between them, their vial.

Dumbledore caressed it in his pocket, swallowing thickly as he ascended the steps to their agreed meeting place; a small Muggle bed and breakfast in the Scottish Highlands.

Albus hadn’t said it in so many words in their letters. Just that he wanted to meet on neutral ground, to talk without their wands pointed at each other, with no barriers between them. He hoped that the vague letter would be dismissed. But no – Gellert had replied, agreeing to it all. Albus was caught between feeling giddy anticipation and dread upon receiving his letter.

His handwriting hadn’t changed, neither had the pressure with which he wrote. He didn't have enough fingers for how many time he'd seen Gellert stab right through pieces of parchment. Albus’s fingertips had grazed the indentations with a small smile, knowing that Gellert would have been hunched over and his grip on the quill would have nearly snapped it as he wrote with heavy handiness.

He inhaled the forest air deeply before entering, his palms were so sweaty that they had slipped when he first tried the handle.

The building was completely empty, like they had agreed. Albus hadn’t asked how Gellert had managed it – but just for today he found comfort in ignorance.

The halls were dark and filled with painted landscapes, as if looking out a window was too
troublesome; all of them paled in comparison to the view outside.

Their agreed room loomed in front of him, the door was painted in a glossy black. *He's right behind this,* the idea strangled him. Albus’ thoughts then idled around the notion of Pandora’s Box and wondered if it had been a shiny dark colour too – he suspected it had been.

He rapt the door three times, again like they had agreed. Albus pushed away the knowledge that the letter which held that titbit had tear stains on it, and he also knew Gellert scent from it too.

He pushed the door open with pale, shaking hands. His eyes were downcast at first, as if he could shy away from it all.

Then he glanced up, and there he was.

*Gelly.* He wanted to call out in a hushed whisper.

Gellert sat on a trunk at the end of a four-poster bed, draped in thick grey curtains. Albus felt like his whole body moved with the thuds of his heart, which was so fast and sore.

‘Hello.’ Albus croaked, the sound barely above a whisper.

Gellert was different, he was the same, he was timeless. He was everything.

The harsh paleness of him contrasted the darkened walls and furnishing, and it made him look ethereal, like something out of the pages of a book.

But he was not unfamiliar to Albus. The young man had seen that face too many times in the Mirror of Erised to not know every flaw, every line, every pore. How he lost himself to it in those cold nights when the memories gripped him like ice-cold hands, forcing him to embrace them.

Now, he pulled in the air they shared greedily.

‘Hello.’ Gellert replied lowly as their eyes locked.

He tried to smile, for politeness sake if anything – but he couldn’t, he felt it would cheapen the whole thing.

Dumbledore pushed the door behind him and then leaned on it, staring at him the entire time.

And they stood and drank each other in, for minute or hours – he could never quite remember how long, but it was an eternity for them both because they willed it to be so.

Gellert was the first to move as he gestured in front of him. ‘Come, sit.’ He said softly like the brush of a low warm Winter sun on a frigid morning.

Dumbledore moved to the seat across from Gellert and found a strange comfort in the fact that he had moved it for Albus. He didn’t stop himself from running his palms across the arm rests, touching where he might have touched.

Any sane person would be on their guard but Albus dismissed the notion of self-preservation in those little moments, he didn’t want anything except more time with this man.

‘You look well.’ Albus smiled gently, pushing down the urge to touch the face that wasn’t made of reflective glass for once.

Gellert’s expression was unreadable. It always had been. ‘As do you.’ He replied, his eyes never
seemed to blink.

Gellert snorted. ‘I was surprised by your letter, rather out of the blue wasn’t it?’

He then searched the pockets of his dark robes, he brought out a familiar, thin silver box. One that Albus knew had their initials on the back, he’d engraved them himself.

‘We needed to meet. To talk.’ Albus’ attempt at nonchalance fell flat as he watched Gellert’s hands move.

He opened the case and then offered a black clove cigarette to Albus. He reached out and purposefully overextended to take it. Their fingertips brushed for a moment longer than necessary before Albus sat back, igniting it with a click of his fingers.

He almost choked on it; he hadn’t had one in so long.

Gellert looked regal when he smoked. Albus as a lad had loved it so much that they had made a small tradition around it — Gellert would offer him one and Albus would light them both in turn.

The blond let it dangle from his lips, he made no move to ignite it. Dumbledore’s stomach swooped at the silent request to honour the old tradition. Albus moved forward slowly and snapped his fingers, feeling Gellert’s warm breath on his fingers. He shivered.

Albus thought he saw the ghost of a smile before Gellert took a long draw, his jaw tense as he leaned forward.

‘So, what are we doing here Albus?’ Gellert had said his name and it softened something inside him. Though, he wanted Gellert to say the name he’d given Albus, not his full name.

Albus took a drag. ‘We’re here to talk, Gelly.’ He said on the exhale, willing the old familiarity to bloom between them with their chosen names for each other. Gellert’s eyes glinted at the old nickname as he exhaled a large cloud.

Albus thought it was fitting, since everything was figuratively about to go up in smoke because of what he was about to do.

‘Been sent to change my mind Al?’ The name felt like a punch to the gut. Gellert had said it so many times, in so many different ways; the memories of some crashed over him.

‘No.’ Albus breathed. ‘We both know I never could.’

‘Had a change of heart then?’ Gellert probed as he flicked the ash into a conjured crystal tray.

‘I wish. But, you never could change my mind either.’ His lips curled into what he hoped was a smile, but it felt too wrong on his face to pass as one.

Gellert paused and regarded Albus then over clasped hands and a bouncing, agitated knee.

‘Then, why are we here Al?’ There was a tension in Gelly’s voice that betrayed him; it was dawning on him quickly exactly why they were both here.

This was it. The beginning of the awful landslide.

Albus produced the vial and Gellert’s eyes snapped to it, then back to Albus again so quick you might have missed it. His eyes were wide, and his lips parted before tightening into a thin line. There was a flash of pain in those harsh, unforgiving eyes.
There was hardly any light in the room, except on both his face and the shining surface of the promise they had made together.

His hands clenched into fists in the moonlight, the white of his knuckles looked blue.

Gellert bared his teeth. ‘Ah, so that’s the knife I feared so much finally in my back. I could never imagine it would feel so sharp.’ Gellert’s breathing had become harsh and shuddering.

In that moment, Albus could hear something inside his chest break.

Albus stood and walked to the window, needing to look away for moment. It was too easy to be swept away by Gellert. An oh, how he wished for it. He had wished for it with every fiber of his being since that night he had left.

In his dreams Albus saw Gellert return to him. The Gellert of his dreams would say that there was nothing he wanted more than him, he’d stopped grabbing for power and influence with bloody hands. In Albus’ dreams they were one, together, with nothing between them.

But dreams were just that. Dreams.

He turned back to the blond, leaning against the window frame.

‘Do you remember the night before I returned home?’ Albus asked as Gellert exhaled the smoke angrily, like a dragon would over nested eggs.

Gellert looked at the vial. ‘Yes. We made a promise.’ Inhale. Exhale. ‘One we said we would never fulfil.’

Betrayal saturated his voice and it had Albus wishing for more promises and things that would never come to fruition.

Albus leaned forward and stubbed out his cigarette. The smoke escaped him in short bursts with his trembling.

‘After that - when you thought I was asleep.’ Albus smiled, though it did not reach his eyes. ‘One thing you said in particular. I never stopped thinking about it, you know. I burned it into my mind.’ Albus admitted because this was really the last time he could.

Gellert looked at him. Albus thought it might have been in confusion, but it was more than that. ‘Yes?’

With anyone else he would be embarrassed to reveal that he’d memorised every word, but not now – not with him.

‘You held me close and whispered in my ear – it was so hard not to move.’ Albus chuckled softly. ‘You said; responsibility quakes in the presence of a terrible decision. Terrible decisions bring terrible consequences for which we must bear responsibility. Responsibility cannot find comfort in time. So, hold your breath when you find yourself on that crumbling cliff. Hold your breath and then fall off its waning edge when you decide.’ Albus paused, taking another drag of the cigarette.

That was the first time Albus had heard Gellert say that he loved him. He had said it so quietly and Albus had pushed it into his skin. He didn’t move. He never got to say it back.

‘It’s beautiful. But I could never find the source.’ Albus saw Gellert’s body quiver, he now knew Albus had heard him say it; the let the revelation hang between them.
‘Eredatus, 503 B.C.’ Gellert quoted, his voice wavering. A thick tear rolled down his cheek as his eyes burned into Albus’.

‘We never spoke. Not really – but you did whilst I slept. You’d hold me and you’d tell me everything. I regret it – not saying anything back. For not telling you what I really wanted to.’

Albus had thought this would be cathartic, he was wrong.

He choked on each word and wanted to forget their past, their future and just simply be. To forget blood, fighting and war. He wanted to hurl the notion of sides and morality away from him and to be selfish, for himself – for his Gelly.

Gellert wrung his hands. ‘You are here to make a terrible decision.’ He stated lowly.

‘No.’ Albus breathed and Gellert’s eyes snapped to his, filled with hope and God did that hurt. Knowing Gellert still hoped like he did.

‘I’m holding my breath. Holding it before I finally get to keep this promise.’

Gellert stood with his hands in his robe pockets. ‘When I spoke to you in your sleep, I made a decision too. I would never break that vial. Ever. I was telling you that it would be your choice if you wanted it. So – go ahead. Do it. What’s stopping you?’ Again, that brutal hope flashed in his eyes alongside before he seemed to abandon it with a sneer.

‘Regret.’ Albus said evenly, even though every bone in his body shook.

Albus then took his wand and spelled the vial. It rose in the air and a tick globe of golden liquid surrounded it. The vial floated in the thick bubbles inside the sphere.

‘No.’ Gellert moaned, like his worst nightmare had unfolded in front of him.

They both knew this spell. It was their spell after all, created for this very moment, created with the hope it would never be used. But, maybe it was a sign of how much they loved each other; they would never tie the other to them if one day the love was gone. It was a way out of the blood bond.

Once set, the only way to stop the spell was to break it, then everything inside it would crumble into nothingness. Once cast, there was only one result – this was it, the final blow. The finality of it made Albus want to run and pretend he’d never cast it at all.

They looked at each other, with tears staining their cheeks; their tracks golden in the light of the globe above their heads.

Then it all poured from Albus. ‘I don’t want to regret anything. I want to say it all Gelly. Everything. Every thought, secret and desire I held back from you. I held them all back because I was scared you’d reject me for uttering them, that you would break me when you did. But not tonight. Tonight, I want to break.’

Albus moved forward until he could feel Gelly’s breath on his face. Gellert had bitten his lip so hard he’d broken the skin. His eyes were filled with horror and despair.

‘In this little moment as I hold my breath, I want to say it all. Do it all. I want to fall apart Gelly.’

Albus kissed Gellert, soft and true on the mouth.

‘Take me, break me.’ Albus breathed on trembling lips.
Gellert moved and then they crashed together like waves breaking over rocks.

They grabbed each other, holding their heads between frantic, searching hands. Between gasps and pants, tears fell. They only pulled at each other, trying to get closer, feel more, hold the other tighter.

Albus finally tasted the lips he’d wanted to touch since he was a boy. Gellert moaned against him, all heat, all life and frenzied movement.

They knew this and it was so familiar to them both; they had done this so many times before it felt like instinct.

But, at the same time it was new and frightening. The promise and the light of the globe loomed between them and made them seek each other with increasing recklessness and desolation.

They never broke apart, scared in the knowledge that this would be the last time their skin touched the other.

Gellert pushed Albus until they fell on the bed, he ripped and tore at the clothes separating them. They kissed everywhere they could reach. Gellert pressed his lips against each finger and every toe, his hands roamed over calves and ribs and moaned like it was the best thing he’d ever tasted.

‘I love you. I’ve always loved you – I always will.’ Albus murmured the words and they tortured them both.

Gellert stopped and looked at him, his thumb caressing Albus’s cheek.

Gellert shook his head and bit his lip with a sob. ‘I never wanted you to go. I always wanted you.’ Gellert brought their lips together again. ‘I love you.’ He breathed between their mouths and Albus inhaled with purpose then, like he could take them in.

‘I don’t want you to leave Al - want you to stay here forever.’

Albus tore at his shirt and trousers, always kissing Gelly – delighting in the skin that was quickly revealed.

‘I don’t want to – God Gelly, I never wanted to.’

They told each other their darkest secrets. Things so deeply buried that they had never seen or known light.

‘Please Al. Please.’ Gellert sobbed. ‘I don’t want this; I don’t want it to break.’

He kissed Albus’ scarred palm. Albus grabbed his in return and pressed it against his lips before they both reached out and clasped them together like they had all those years ago when they had made the blood pact.

Albus had never seen him like this. Gellert had always in control, always so careful and measured with his own emotions. Albus had seen glimpses of what lay inside this man in whispers in the dead of night, but this? It was as if Gellert’s chest had been cleaved into and now it was all spilling from him.

Albus wrapped his legs around Gellert as if he could trap him there. He wasn’t allowed to leave, he never wanted him to.
A little part of Albus wanted to die with the vial. At least then he’d die happy and without regret. At least then he would have to live with knowing their vow to each other was dead and that they were nothing more than enemies.

Gellert loomed over him, his body bare, his eyes drinking in Albus’s nakedness. ‘You’re beautiful – you always have been to me. So much – I – You’re the only thing that ever made me happy. So happy Al, I want it. I want it back. Please – God -I want that back.’

Each admission lacerated Albus. With each elation came crushing hopelessness. He wanted to scream – why was it only at the end that they finally told each other everything that needed to be said?

‘I don’t ever want to leave. Need you. Always. Keep me here, don’t let me leave’ He wept and gasped as the writhed in each other. Their skin slick with warm sweat, their limbs shaking.

They both knew their begging was fruitless, but they wanted the other to hear them say it. Their love was a burning thing; bright, hot – but it like all flames it would die soon.

Gellert bit into Albus’ neck, his hands held his back in a punishing grip. ‘I love you.’ He rasped. ‘God, Albus I love you.’

They moved together in fluid motion. Gellert took Albus, and they both cried into the union. Mourning for what might have been, greedily taking what little they had left.

Their bodies coiled and twisted around each other until one wouldn’t be able to separate the two.

‘I wanted - to grow old with you - would have died happy with you beside me, holding me. I always wanted that – I never doubted it. Not until I needed to leave. Not until you let me go so easily.’ Albus rasped between yearning moans.

Gellert made an aching, anguished sound at that.

Gellert brought their foreheads together and whispered. ‘I want you to be the one who does it. I want to let you kill me Al. At least then I know that I wouldn’t have to kill you – I never want to hurt you. I want you to live. Circe, I never want you to die.’

Albus sobbed. The cries wracked his chest and he crashed their lips together, kissing Gellert until they both felt frayed at the edges.

‘I’ll only ever love you, please – please remember that – know it. I’ll always be yours. Even when we have to – even when it happens – know that I love you Gelly.’ Albus gasped the truth, caught between hollow pain and painful pleasure.

They did everything they could, and never once did they shut their eyes. Gellert filled all of his senses, the relief of Gellert inside him took him over completely.

‘I always think about you. I dream about you.’ Gellert pushed into him so deeply.

Albus gripped him harder, his arm encircling his back. ‘Mirror of Erised – only saw your face. I looked – everyday.’ Albus panted as the voltaic shock rose in his thighs and stomach. ‘I’ll only ever see your face.’

Blue eyes widened, boring into Albus’ before his face crumpled. Gellert punched the bed before grabbing Albus tighter, his tears tasted of frustration and helplessness.
‘I want us to promise one more thing.’ Gellert dug his nails in Albus’ back as if he could burrow inside.

‘Anything, anything.’ Albus moaned in some sort of mania - twisting, writhing.

Gellert then held Albus’ head in his hands. ‘Meet me again. Meet me when it’s all over - when we are dead and buried. Find me again. Please find me again and hold me forever – never leave – never let me go.’ Gellert trembled against him with whimpering breaths.

His chest ached like it was afflicted with a terminal illness.

‘Yes. I promise. I’ll find you.’

Their magic weaved together, tying in knots. Albus knew that this would be so painful later, but he let himself bask in the bond – no matter how ill-fated and short-lived it would be.

Albus then thought of a perfect word he’s read in a Portuguese novel once; saudade.

Gellert lurched and sounded winded as the bond sang through them. ‘I can feel you Albus.’ Their teary eyes locked together. Albus’ eyes fluttered as he nodded.

This was old magic. Ancient in fact, and it revealed a terrible truth.

NO! Albus wanted to roar. Not this, don’t – I can’t – not after this!

Terrible decisions, terrible consequences, a terrible voice reminded him.

‘Albus.’ Gellert wept. ‘Don’t make me decide. I can’t- not like this I-.’ He echoed Albus’ internal scream.

Albus gently put a finger on his lips and shushed him with kisses and soft touches.

‘Neither of us can change.’ He lamented gently, as kindly as he could. He smiled and it trembled at the edges, the tears blurred his vision.

Gellert leaned forward and kissed them away. ‘Mine.’ He moved slowly, drawing a moan from Albus. ‘Yours.’ It sounded like begging.

‘Yes. Yours.’ Albus whispered sorrowfully.

Albus knew he would never love anyone ever again. That he was doomed to wish for this moment again and again until it drove him mad with its loss.

He’d die thinking about this, wishing for it.

The beautiful pressure built and grew and Albus lost all strength in his arms and legs. The kisses became harsher, their fluidity was dismissed in favour of brutal animalism.

They had gripped each other so tight when they finally came undone, they didn’t let go even after they had.

‘Stay.’ Gelly begged at his ear.

‘I can’t.’ he said as he stared at the soft blond hairs in the moonlight.

Gelly kissed his cheeks, his eyelids, his mouth like a mother would her babe.
Albus pulled his head into the crook of his neck and breathed him in.

Steeling himself he unfurled his arms and summoned his wand, and after a slight hesitation, Gellert’s wand flew through the air to his palm too.

Gellert stared at him as Albus passed him it.

‘I don’t want to fight you now.’ Gelly shook his head frantically.

‘Neither do I.’ Albus said softly before his eye landed on the globe. ‘I don’t want to break it alone.’ He admitted.

Gelly huffed a breathy laugh. ‘I promised I never would.’

‘What’s another broken promise between us?’ He smiled tightly as he curled around Gellert more.

Gellert nodded then looked at Albus’ wand. He took their hands and with the wands between their scarred palms, clasped them together.

‘Together.’ He breathed, his eyes only on Albus.

‘Together.’ Albus nodded.

They both cast the spell and as the globe cracked, Gellert took Albus’ lips again; it was wet with both of their tears.

Gellert and Albus both dropped their wands and sank into each other again.

It was done, Albus thought wretchedly.

They didn’t move from one another for a long time after that. Gellert whispered sweet nothings into Albus’ hair. Kissing his palms and fingers.

Albus rose with Gellert in his lap and hugged him close, he could see the pile of golden ash over his shoulder and it made Albus cringe.

‘I love you Al.’ It sounded like a goodbye.

‘I love you Gelly, always.’

Albus watched as Gellert summoned his clothes, he stood to put them on but Albus took them from him. He held Gellert’s trousers out for him to step into.

Albus peppered kisses on his limbs as he dressed Gellert. He held back the tears, on the edge of giving in entirely.

He pulled each item of clothing on him so carefully, as if the man in front of him would shatter then disappear.

‘We’re enemies now.’ Gellert whispered. Albus nodded into the crook of his next, not wanting it to end.

‘Then we had better be the most fearsome foes.’ Gellert rubbed his thumbs along Albus’ cheek with a soft laugh.

‘I would expect nothing less.’ His face crossed between a grin and a grimace.
'Don’t you hold out on me’ Gellert said shakily. ‘I want you to give it your all.’

Albus’ lips curled. ‘I promise.’

Then they shared their last kiss.

And then Gellert left.

Albus sat on the edge of the bed, his hands pulling at his hair.


But he didn’t.

The older Albus watched as his younger self wept, looking at the glossy black door listlessly.

He then joined his younger self on the bed, their backs to each other.

The elder Dumbledore then remembered that this memory was a punishment. One he used to warn himself of the consequences of his actions.

He’d been right then, Gellert’s face is all he’d ever seen in the Mirror.

The two men sat like mirror images of each other.

The wand had been the last thing of Gellert's he'd held on to, now it was gone.

And Albus let himself weep.

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*I am blubbing like a damn baby after that.*

*My partner is currently handing me wads of tissue.*

*Again, he worries for clearly unhinged psyche.*

*I blame hormones.*

*Hello and thank you for reading so far *blubbers cheerfully*

*Please tell me you all felt that punch to the gut too. I don't want to be alone in this.*

*Comments and kudos will soothe my aching heart.*

*I love you all so much! *sobs a wail*

*THANK YOU *kisses screen like the emotional wreck she is*
Tom woke slowly with the morning sun.

As he sat up, papers and books fell to the floor, his hair sticking up at odd angles and yesterdays shirt, merely unbuttoned in his haste to sleep, was creased and crumpled beyond recognition.

As least he’d folded away his trousers, he offered himself.

The gramophone was still crackling away and records with no sleeves were piled in a disorganised mess beside it. His old writing desk and matching chest of drawers looked as if a bomb had exploded inside them; clothes, belts, and shoes were thrown everywhere, all mixed in with crumpled pieces of parchment and Muggle paper.

He had never been so disorganised, and it had put Neepsey on edge. He hated people touching his things, he had refused her every offer to set the room straight. Hell, he had never liked sharing his space with anyone and would refuse anyone who wanted to invite themselves.

Everyone except one person perhaps.

Tom’s most recent headache seemed never ending. It had started after he’d left the creature that night only to bloom again when Neepsey brought letters addressed to Harry from his friends and family. No one had ever accused him of being moral, so he’d opened Harry’s letters and scanned them. His family, namely the Muggleborn and the Weasley boy wanted to visit saying they had something important to discuss. Tom had wrote them back, explaining that Harry was currently ill and that they’d have to rain check.
That hadn’t gone down well at all. The Muggleborn started sending letters with alarming frequency until the Dark Lord was forced to mollify her by allowing both her and Weasley to visit.

Tom frowned at the letters. The notion that Lord Voldemort would have stood a chance against these teens, Harry included, was steadfast becoming a far-fetched conclusion. The temptation to Crucio the letters, despite them being inanimate, was eyewatering.

He rolled his neck, the fragile skin stretched uncomfortably, and his fingers traced the wound. Feeling along its edges roused a strange sensation in his jaw and gut; is was as if the nerves beneath the healing flesh had thin strings attached which were being pulled on. It wasn’t an entirely unpleasant reaction and it tended to cause a nice shiver to roll down his spine.

Harry’s teeth had bitten into him, and the knowledge stirred something inside him.

Tom had always been attracted to the macabre. His hunger for animalism, for vicious acts of passion echoed in his own sensuality. He had always been a creature of extremes, and he’d exacted that in every facet of his life – even in his bedroom.

Painful moans, pleasured shrieks, tearful begging – they all had the same effect on him, ever since he was a teen. He had always been the wolf among sheep, and he liked it that way.

But now? Now he found pleasure in the notion of being chased, hunted, and drawn out from safe spaces. The wound had marked him, and the bite was not merely skin deep; it had grown roots that ensnared him and now it held dominion over his senses.

Tom wondered if it might happen again and then the next thought that always followed was; if it does, why do I want it to?

It was not as if Tom wanted to be mauled, no – but to be pinned down by something stronger, marked, and owned - well, that was a completely different set of circumstances.

He had never allowed himself to be vulnerable before. Vulnerability implied offering yourself to others as a result of gullibility or trust and Tom had neither the time nor patience for either of those. No one had deserved his trust, and only a fool could hope to beguile him.

Yet, Harry had forced it on him and for the first time he’d been allowed to experience it.

He used the name ‘Harry’ loosely. That thing that slept nought but three doors down from him was not Harry. The two beings shared similarities, but there was so little of his Harry in the way it spoke, moved or behaved that despite its proclamations, it made a poor imitation of the boy that was still lost to him.

Tom thought he could see himself in the creature’s dark pupils.

But there was a little of Harry in there too. Well, from what Tom had seen of the creature, which since they had released it, hadn’t been much.

It had dismissed both Tom and Nagini quickly, stating it needed to rest whilst cradling its blackened hand. There was a small pang of concern in Tom when he’d seen the bloodied back of the creature’s shirt. But Tom had swiftly reminded himself that it was not Harry, and being his Horcrux, could mend itself perfectly well on its own.

He hadn’t seen much of it in the week since. It didn’t take meals with them after forming a strange alliance with Tom’s house elf. Neepsy had stated that the creature was ‘wandering in his own mind’. Tom took that to mean it was searching for Harry, although he’d been offended he’d had to
hear it from the elf and not the horse’s own mouth.

In the creature’s absence, Tom had grown impatient – the thing offered no answers or updates as to Harry’s current state or wellbeing. The whole thing had Tom on tenterhooks.

He couldn’t shake the notion that the creature was holding Harry’s body and mind hostage. It was a notion that was only sated when he reminded himself that Tom was guilty of the exact same accusation; Harry was a prisoner here – even if he was allowed momentary leave.

All Tom could do was sit tight, research and obsess; the last two he exacted expertly, the first however had him wanting to gouge his own eyeballs out.

He looked at the mess that he’d cocooned himself within; books on Dark academia, ‘The Nature of Souls’, ‘Binds, Bonds, and Dualistic Beings’, ‘The Brothers Mark, ‘Soul Magicks and Applications’. Parchments and scrolls with claims and explanations that were doubtful at best – all of them theoretical with no proof to substantiate them. They offered very little in the way of answers. The precedent had not been set yet, and Tom found himself on new and very shaky ground.

Simply put, no one in their right mind would or has ever placed a piece of their soul in another living being.

This meant that Tom had potential been the first to do so – mistakenly of course. He doubted anyone could have done it purposefully, he’d ran through the events that night and there were too many variables at play for him to pinpoint the causal factors.

Through a slip of the tongue the creature had clarified some points which had previously evaded him. Lily Potter had sacrificed herself and there was power in that kind of act. Her sacrifice was beautiful, the creature had said. Tom found himself agreeing with a wince and then a silent thanks that she had done so.

Harry had been protected right up until Tom had forcefully taken his blood – the same blood that now courses through his veins and fuelled his sluggish heart.

Tom looked at his own wrist in a morbid fascination; there was a part of Harry giving him life, there was a part of Harry inside him.

The events that had transpired between them started to make a lot more sense after that. They were connected souls, Harry had his protected, Tom’s was unstable with diseased insanity, they shared a vague prophecy, their wand cores were brothers, the pasts were also similar, and then the blood. Their blood. Tom groaned internally.

The more Tom pieced together the puzzle that was Harry Potter, the more enthralled he became. If his previous self could see him now, he’d be sickened. Harry was quickly becoming his greatest weakness; nothing else mattered except the boy’s acceptance of him. Tom could think of little else since the boy’s arrival. Such desperation felt too human for someone who’d for the last seven decade had sneered at the notion of humanity.

‘Penny for your thoughts?’

Harry – no – the creature stood in the doorway to his rooms. Its yellow eyes scanned the space, its eyes resting on everything momentarily in an amused examination.

It’s here. He thought before he tapped down the strange relief of its presence. Harry had never been in here, Tom realised.
Through the thought may have crossed my mind. He amended.

‘Not a chance.’ Before Tom gazed at Harry’s clothes in confusion, doing a doubletake. ‘Are those mine?’ He pointed to the sable cable knit jumper and the soft pleated, dark moss brown trousers. His eyebrows rose even higher when he saw his scuffed laced boots in its feet too.

‘Yep.’ It said with a pop and smirk that Tom knew was his.

‘I haven’t seen those in years.’ He didn’t remember still having them if he was honest.

The creature moved to the gramophone and lifted the needle, tucking it away. Its eyes lit up when it spied the pile of records.

‘I know right? They were in a trunk in the attic.’ It said into the pile of disks. The creature pulled at the jumper slightly. ‘We hated them back then, but they fit quite nicely.’ The clothes were Muggle, he’d bought them just after the blitz and the damnable War had finished – it had been all he could afford at the time.

It picked up a few records and smiled at the older titles. Then his brow furrowed, and he started looking with purpose.

‘Not a fan of Harry’s clothes?’ Tom asked archly.

‘My clothes you mean?’ Tom snorted at that, which the creature deigned to ignore. ‘No, never liked them.’ It gestured to the trousers. ‘At least these stay up without a belt. Bloody awful hand-me-downs from my fat cousin were always too loose.’

‘Harry’s cousin.’ Tom forcefully amended which made the creatures eyes glint. Tom had to quell the urge to protect his neck.

The creature cocked its head. ‘You seem pretty adamant that I’m not Harry.’ It pushed up Harry’s glasses, but did not once break his gaze. ‘I may know that you think all Wizarding music is tacky and gauche, but that doesn’t suggest I am you.’

With a little ‘aha!’ the creature pulled a record out of it sleeve and placed it carefully on the gramophone. Then the soft piano of Alice Babs and Nisse Lind played quietly. The song it had picked had been Tom’s favourite during the war.

‘And yet you picked that song.’ Tom huffed and rolled his eyes.

‘Well yes – been a while since I’ve heard it. Cause, y’know – I was busy being Harry.’

‘You’re not him.’ Tom said softly, pointing to the gramophone. He cocked a brow as the creature mouthed the words to the song. ‘Not even slightly.’

‘Oh?’ Turned away from the gramophone and towards Tom. ‘And how did you come to that conclusion?’ It stood at the end of his bed, leaning against one of the dark teak posters.

‘I have eyes and ears.’ Tom deadpanned.

‘Though clearly not a mind.’ It parried as it rolled its eyes. ‘I don’t look or sound like your Harry then?’ Its lips curved and Tom saw that its teeth were no longer blacked, but the canines were still very sharp.

Tom sneered. ‘You would but - oh Grandma, what demonic eyes and teeth you have.’ He glared.
Its brow creased. ‘They’re not mine, or yours.’ It shrugged before holding up the hand with black veins curling around it and wiggling the fingers playfully. ‘Seems to have something to do with this – though I’m flattered by your insinuation that I’m a big bad wolf.’

‘Mauling me, was that not you either? Or is that my fault? That would be an interesting case of self-loathing if it was.’ Tom glared.

It chuckled. ‘Wouldn’t put it past you to be quite frank.’ The creature reached down and picked up one of the books before flicking through it absentmindedly. ‘But no, your right – that was all me.’ It grinned toothily before brandishing the scarred hand again. ‘Though this helped.’

‘I don’t think Harry tends to chew people. In fact, I’m sure it would offend his holier-than-thou sensibilities.’ Tom said with airy sarcasm.

‘So that’s what you think about me. And no, I don’t tend to bite.’ It said pointedly with a smirk. ‘Though, I’ll make an exception for you.’ It then held the book on soul-bonds up. ‘It’s this notion of separation that allows answers you want to continue to elude you Tom.’

‘You’re not him.’ Tom said whilst pushing away the image of Harry biting him.

It huffed. ‘I’ll admit I’m a fraction of the whole.’ It dropped the book back on the bed. ‘A fraction that just so happens to have originated from you.’

Tom bared his teeth. ‘Speak plainly.’

It barked a laugh. ‘God, you need me to dumb it down even further for you. I remember you being much more self-assured in your own intelligence-.’ Its eyes roamed down Tom’s body sitting in bed. ‘And so lazy too! My, how you’ve changed.’ It flashed it teeth in a wide, condescending grin.

But, Tom had caught the flicker of want in the creature’s eyes before its feigned nonchalance.

Tom hissed then summoned his wand and pointed it at the beast.

The creature looked down at it and then back at Tom, clearly unimpressed.

Tom cocked his head when the creature did not make for a wand. ‘I’ve yet to see you use magic.’

It arched a brow. ‘Oh, thank the Lord you’re still attentive – I was beginning to worry.’ It drawled. ‘And no – you didn’t leave me with much. Couldn’t even float a feather if I tried. I make a rather pitiful Horcrux, don’t I.’

It sounded like it was being self-deprecating, but really it was meant as a slight on Tom’s magical abilities.

‘If you’re Harry, then surely you can use your own magic.’ He challenged.

It sank more onto the poster, its arms and legs crossed, and looked at him lazily. ‘Not likely. You tend to need a full soul to wield magic.’ Then it gloated, eyeballing Tom. ‘And your sanity seemingly.’

‘Sanity aside, I never had an issue with using my own magic. Even with all six Horcruxes in play.’ Tom shot back.

‘Yes – because the magic was yours to begin with.’ It pointed to itself. ‘This soul piece doesn’t have that luxury.’
It turned back to the gramophone and put on a new record; Chet Baker’s melancholy coated the room in his warm, chocolaty tones.

‘That doesn’t even make sense. You keep speaking as if you’re separated but then decry the notion of separation in the same breath. Which is it?’ Tom groaned.

‘It is easier to speak as if I am my own person again when I’m like this.’ It seemed to say it more to itself than to Tom. ‘I haven’t been for years.’

Tom grumbled about being confusing for the sake of being confusing under his breath.

‘You said it yourself. It’s my voice you always hear singing.’ It added like it was talking about the bloody weather.

Tom stilled at the mention of the song.

‘Everything you said to him, you spoke to me in the same instance.’ It leered at Tom, turning its head slowly. ‘Everything you did to him; you did to me too.’ It stared pointedly at Tom’s lips.

‘To him. Not you.’ Tom breathed as the song filled his senses.

They stared at each other as they were pulled together as if under the thrall of an Imperio. Tom ripped his eyes away from the being in front of him.

It may wear Harry’s skin, but it was not him. It couldn’t be.

The creature frowned then walked to his desk and lifted the small pile of Harry’s mail. ‘So, you are a snoop as well as mindless and lazy – Gods, you’ve really let yourself go Tom.’ It jeered.

Tom dragged his hands down his face. ‘His overly-attentive friends are concerned; I’ve made excuses on his behalf to safe them barging in with the Aurors.’

‘On my behalf.’ It sniped. ‘You needn’t have done so; I wrote to them last night. Note my surprise that I had to threaten Neepsey with a sock for my own letters.’ The creature glared at Tom.

‘Good, that mudblood is bloody insufferable.’ Tom remarked.

Then the creature had a hand around his throat, and his head slammed against the headboard.

‘Go on.’ It goaded. ‘Call her that again – I dare you.’ The creature’s eyes glinted malevolently.

Tom’s eyes widened in surprise at the creature’s offense. He itched to remind it of its own previous transgressions towards mudbloods, but he knew he was on too thin ice to come out of the retort unscathed.

‘My apologies.’ He sneered. ‘Didn’t know you were so sensitive.’

‘When it comes to my family…Tom, I’d kill.’ It flashed its teeth before pulling its grip away from Tom’s neck with a shove.

Tom’s lip curled, rubbing his neck before watching the creature carefully as it moved back to the pile of letters, pocketing them.

‘Might I ask what you have told Harry’s friends?’

It stared for a few beats, clearly irritated. ‘My friends Tom. Please get that through your thick skull.'
On that note – get dressed. We have a meeting to attend.’ It announced.

‘Meeting?’ Tom’s voice rose an octave.

‘Yes, a meeting.’ It imitated Tom mockingly. ‘Hurry up, or we’ll be late.’ It said flippantly before sitting on Tom’s armchair, picking up a book on dream psychology.

‘What meeting?’ Tom groaned.

‘One with my concerned friends who are expecting you there with me – so best behaviour.’ It warned with a smirk. ‘They seem to have happened across something that is of interest to us both.’

Tom was exactly the opposite of enthusiastic towards such a gathering. ‘And you need me there because…’

It lifted its brows. ‘Oh? So, you’re willing to let me trample halfway across Britain unsupervised? You should have said sooner – I would have made more suitable living arrangements otherwise.’

Tom glared at the creatures knowing grin.

‘I’ll just wait while you get dressed then. Please be quick about it, I need you to Apparate us there soon.’ Its voice lilted at him breezily.

Tom bore holes in the back of the creature’s head before throwing his covers off angrily. He stretched whilst watching it, wondering quietly if the Armistice’s protections extended to it as well.

The creature’s eyes fleetingly glanced at Tom’s near naked state; only the white shirts and a pair of black briefs protected his modesty.

There, that’s him – there’s my little one.

He grinned to himself and then stretched like a wild cat would after a heated slumber. Tom could see the creature struggle to keep his eyes on the pages. It looked awfully uncomfortable all of a sudden.

He could finally see a Harry in the way it moved, pointedly avoiding Tom at every juncture.

Now intrigued, Tom then engaged in a small game of slowly picking up his clothes in full view of the creature, making sure he could see every line and arch of his body. Taking note of every squirm and shift it tried to hide from Tom. Tom writhed a little too when each stretch pulled at the delicate skin of his bite mark.

Those same teeth were now worrying full, plump lips. Harry’s lips.

Tom stripped of his shirt slowly, and he knew it could see him in its periphery. It swallowed thickly before letting out an irritated groan.

‘You going to keep prancing about like a peacock, or are you going to hurry up and get dressed.’ The creature drawled from behind the book.

Tom then stood right behind it, grinning toothily. ‘You’re asking me to strip?’

‘No, I’m asking you to-.’ It faltered when it heard Tom slide his briefs down before hitting the floor with a soft thud.

‘I’m starting to see the similarities.’ Tom announced casually. ‘You try and hide from me just like
your other self, but I can also see a little of me in the way you’ve made yourself right at home in my rooms.’ Tom leaned down and the creature flinched. ‘Makes me wonder what a being such as yourself would do knowing what right behind you.’

Then, rather unexpectedly the creature turned in his seat and then let his eyes roam Tom’s naked form.

‘You forget -.’ It said lowly as it licked its lips whilst trailing a finger down Tom’s stomach. ‘It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.’ The finger grazed lower but stopped just before the patch of dark, curled hairs. ‘I remember my own reflection just as well as you do.’ It smirked lasciviously before turning back to its book.

Tom’s breathes came a little too quick before he schooled himself to remain lax and casual.

‘Ah, but it’s not anymore. I can’t help but wonder what you see when you look at your reflection now.’ Tom purred as he flexed his hands to stop them grabbing at the body in front of him.

The creature did not move, except to bring the book up to its face. Tom chuckled at the hidden blush and then grabbed his clothes. He purposefully took his time peeling them on, testing the Horcrux’s resolve to not take another peek.

*It’s defiantly stubborn like Harry is – though I’m pretty inflexible too when I want to be.*

Tom stated he was ready, and the creature’s shoulders slumped in relief.

‘I’ll need a glamour.’ It pointed to its eyes.

Tom nodded and cast green eyes on the creature. Tom stomach lurched when it looked at him, the thin veil separating the creature from Harry lifted a little higher.

‘Where to?’ Tom drawled in faux nonchalance.

‘Gavroche, you know where it is.’ It said smugly, enjoying how uncomfortable it made Tom.

True, it was Tom’s favourite restaurant when he was in his twenties – when he could still appreciate the taste of good food and wine before the madness stole that from him too.

Tom rolled his eyes at the creature’s pride in knowing him so intimately and with a *crack* they arrived at a matte black door, surrounded with flowered ivy vines.

The creature smiled softly in the quiet seclusion of the Georgian town houses that surrounded him.

It was the same, Tom realised with a strange mix of relief and nostalgia. The tasteful red chairs and white – clothed tables were surrounded with rich, olive green walls adorned with tasteful paintings and soft yellow light fixtures.

Tom was shook from admiring the massive bloom of flowers in blueish vases by the Horcrux’s jubilant greetings.

He saw Harry’s friends; the mud-*muggle*born and the Weasley boy. Harry’s godfather was also in attendance, flanked by Arthur Weasley who Tom remembered from the Order meeting.

Not that many could readily forget that violent hair colour, he added snidely.
When the Horcrux moved from hugging Granger, Tom’s eyes then landed on Malfoy’s boy in confusion.

The creature made the rest of its introductions – in true Harry style Tom might add. It was as if it had wiped itself of all of Tom’s small quirks and mannerisms he had witnessed since the night Tom had been bitten.

Tom couldn’t determine if the Horcrux was acting or not. It’s smiled were bright and seemed genuine – as if Harry was in the room with them.

‘You know who this is.’ Harry introduced Tom rudely. ‘Tom.’ It beckoned when Tom made no motion to move towards them.

Tom stepped forward and inclined his head to each of them. Black and the elder Weasley nodded back grimly. Harry’s friends tried to smile, but the motion fell flat. Malfoy’s boy visibly gulped and looked about ready to piss his pants.

Good, he thought. At least some still react with appropriate behaviour when in my presence.

They all sat gingerly after that and the waiter took their orders. Tom, despite the lacklustre company, was actually looking forward to once again tasting his favourite; Lamb with braised onions and a petite pepper and saffron jus.

Though his uplifted mood was quickly dampened when the creature ordered the same – even down to the wine accompaniment.

Tom’s caught the cheeky use of a Confundus from Black when the waiter had inquired into the younger one’s ages. Black had then winked at the creature and Tom felt a nonsensical snap of envy at the closeness an the conspiratorial looks between the teens.

It’s not Harry. He pointedly reminded himself before sinking back into the chair.

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Everyone’s eyes popped out the sockets when they took note of the price list.

‘Don’t worry, Tom will catch the tab.’ The Horcrux said before happily catching how annoyed it made Tom.

‘Oh, well – thank you Mr Riddle.’ Arthur smiled tightly and like father like son, both Weasley’s scanned the menu with renewed enthusiasm.

Ron even rubbed his hands together whilst licking lips.

Good, Tom’s wallet is likely weighing him down. The Horcrux beamed.

‘This place is lovely Harry, though a little extravagant.’ Hermione smiled, attempting to break the awkward tension.

‘It was Tom’s idea. He used to come here when he was younger.’ Again, the Horcrux beamed as Tom’s knuckles whitened.
Tom huffed as he interrupted. ‘Speaking of great ideas, might I inquire as to the purpose of this meeting?’ He asked sarcastically.

*Gods, was I always such a git?* The Horcrux nearly chuckled as he dismissed the question. *No, of course I was.*

‘You could – or you could shut your trap and listen.’ The Horcrux shot back smoothly.

Everyone at the table visibly cringed, but the Horcrux just smiled and basked in the waves of rage wafting off of his previous self.

Sirius snorted loudly before winking at the Horcrux, his godfather was beyond please at the reproach.

Pointedly ignoring Tom’s onset tantrum, he marched on. ‘So, Hermione – you said you had all found something.’ He beamed.

Hermione looked between him and Tom, clearly more than a little uncomfortable – which he hated. His family were precious to him and their discomfort pained him.

Well, everyone in attendance except Tom’s and Malfoy’s – he took delight in theirs.

‘Yes, *hem*, we’ve done a little research since we were last up.’ Hermione wrung her hands before reaching into her bag to retrieve a pile of parchment.

‘With Malfoy.’ Ron whispered crestfallen in the Horcrux’s ear, which had the Horcrux stifling a snigger.

Hermione looked around guiltily, as if she didn’t want to mess up the -franky- poncey table arrangements. He’d once luxuriated in the refined nature of it all, now as Harry, it made him want to gag a little. The Horcrux waved a hand dismissively at the candles and flowers and moved them aside.

‘Oh? Seems I have something to thank you for.’ The Horcrux directed at Malfoy who he knew wouldn’t be happy with the sudden attention – especially in present company.

‘Don’t mention it.’ Malfoy said as if he really wanted to say *‘No, really - don’t mention it you effing bastard. Ignore me or I’ll happily murder you.’*

The Horcrux grinned at Malfoy’s squirming before turning to the parchments Hermione had now laid out.

He scanned them quickly – a skill he had his previous self to thank for – and looked back at Hermione and Ron somewhat confused.

‘The Peverell brothers?’

Hermione pointed at the Gaunt ring. ‘When we saw that, we had some questions – when you said you couldn’t remove it, we done a little digging.’ She said seriously.

Hermione had written to him about the ring, he had answered when he was still whole. The Horcrux had forgotten about it completely until now.

Out the corner of his eye, the Horcrux could see Tom had leaned forward – now *very* interested.

‘Can’t remove it?’ Sirius questioned haughtily, looking between the Horcrux and Tom - obviously
drawing the wrong conclusion from the finger the ring was placed on. Even Arthur’s brows were raised.

Hermione then set a fortress of privacy charms. ‘Go on Harry, show them.’

He proceeded to try and remove the ring before it, unfailing as always, sank back onto his finger.

‘This your doing?’ Sirius questioned Tom dangerously.

‘No.’ Tom clipped with equal animosity. ‘Though it looks quite nice there, doesn’t it?’ He smiled cruelly.

The Horcrux halted his godfathers violent advances and then stamped on Tom’s foot, hard – which he yelped at. Sirius seemed pretty mollified at Tom’s expense and proud of his Harry’s control over the situation after that.

‘The ring’s nothing special.’ Ron said, breaking the tension. ‘Used to be fitted with an emerald, before – when was it again Malfoy?’

‘The thirteenth century.’ He muttered with a croak, obviously wishing he was anywhere else. ‘It had protective charms before, was activated with Parseltongue – according to references in the Black Library.’ Malfoy looked anywhere in the room except the black presence beside the Horcrux, who was still seething.

_Merlin, Malfoy had really been helping._ The Horcrux allowed himself to be stunned at the notion for a few beats.

Hermione smiled wanly at Malfoy obvious discomfort. ‘Then it was fitted with that one-.’ She pointed to the obsidian jewel and the Horcruxes finger.

She then pulled out what looked to be a family tree. It was the same one he’d poured over as a boy, when he was still a broken little thing named Tom Riddle. The Horcrux looked at all of the surnames he’d once been obsessed with; Gaunt, Riddle, Sayre, Steward, Morrigan, Peverell, Slytherin.

He wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it, how consumed by this list he’d once been. The Horcrux glanced at Tom who looked at the tree in recognition but also…disgust? He made a mental note to ask about it later. This man was different to the Lord Voldemort they’d both shared in.

And it was all those respective differences they’d both experienced that enthralled him.

The waiter served them their meals. He seemed a bit peeved that the table was in such a disarray of papers, but he professionally worked around the obstacles with great care. He even tiredly smiled at Hermione’s quite but constant apologies. The Horcrux was already salivating in anticipation.

As Harry, he loved nothing more than a plate stacked high with steak pie, mash and gravy, but this fraction of his soul still longed for finer things. The lamb, which he knew would be tender and spiced delicately with the honeyed and floral notes of the saffron, made him drool as it was placed in front of him.

Tom seemed to be experiencing much the same, although much more gracefully than him.

‘Look, see here? The Gaunt ring is connected to that family.’ The Horcrux nodded, around a blissful mouthful of lamb and pepper, still missing how this was important. ‘We had these out in the Burrow over the weekend, then Arthur mentioned something-.’ Hermione looked at Ron’s Dad
with a small, encouraging smile.

Arthur was snapped from his obvious confusion over what he had ordered. ‘Harry, have you ever heard The Tale of the Three Brothers?’ He smiled grimly.

He knew of it – as a boy he’d heard pureblood’s use analogies from The Tales of Beedle the Bard.

‘Watch there, else you’ll be fooled by a stump.’

‘You’re like bloody wand-biting rabbit.’

‘Even King’s get laughed at when the dog doesn’t bark.’

He had waved them off as colloquialisms and refused to use them simply because they were childish. More like jealousy, he amended. He’d hated the fact those purebloods had their magical parents read these stories to them. He had nothing like that; no parents or magic growing up.

The knowledge that the man next to him was probably recollecting the same memories was more than a little strange too.

‘No.’ He said, simply because he knew, as Harry, he had never come across them.

Arthur then threw himself into an enthusiastic summary of the story. He told them it as if they were still all children, with flailing hand gestures and multiple pauses for effect, and it all had the Horcrux smiling.

He’d finally been told the story by a magical parent, he grinned internally as he nearly moaned at a sip of the Barolo wine he’d ordered.

The most expensive thing on the menu, at Tom’s expense. He thought gleefully.

The Horcrux wished again that his whole self was here to experience this. And, also to be able to tell his family about his current state – for them to get to know this little part of him too.

He had never been jealous of his Harry; they shared this hodgepodge family in common. But, since he’d felt the absence of Harry, the notion of separation and independence grew larger. And the Horcrux hated it. It made him feel broken and lonely; too close to his previous state, he thought disgusted.

Though, if his loved ones could accept him as a Horcrux instead of seeing this part of him as diseased and evil, he’d be happier for it. Both of his selves would be – at least he hoped.

Harry knowingly accepting the Horcrux would be pure bliss.

‘…And the last brother walked with Death as his friend, no longer afraid of what lay before him.’

Arthur finished with a good-natured chuckle.

Sirius, who had been quite until now, clapped loudly at the retelling. ‘Good show!’ He thumped Arthur on the back who grinned with rosy cheeks.

‘And how is this of relevance.’ Tom asked, again dampening the mood. The Horcrux had to tap down the urge to kick him.

‘Well, here is where it gets interesting.’ Sirius piped up conspiratorially. ‘Your Dad had looked back into his family history a bit when Lily was expecting you.’ Both he and Tom shifted uncomfortably. ‘And he found some interesting stories about the Peverell brothers.’
‘Ancestors you both share in common.’ Hermione interrupted, looking between Tom and the Horcrux.

‘What?’ The Horcrux nearly spat out his wine.

Sirius then plucked a piece of parchment from the pile, which Hermione whimpered at; she’d seemingly organised them in some manner, which had just been ruined.

He pointed a tattooed hand at two names on it. ‘Cadmus and Ignatius Peverell were brothers. Cadmus is the ancestor of the Gaunt’s and Ignatius is forefather of the Potter’s.’ He said as he trailed his finger down from Ignatius’ name right down to Harry’s.

Tom and the Horcrux looked at each other for a few beats.

‘Another connection.’ Tom hissed so lowly that only the Horcrux would hear.

‘That’s not the most interesting part.’ Ron spoke with a mouthful of food which made everyone at the table shudder in disgust. Ron then nudged Sirius. ‘Go on, tell them.’

Arthur regarded his son for a few moments, clearly lamenting his poor table manners before turning back to the Horcrux.

Sirius cleared his throat. ‘Your Dad happened on a few rumours associated with the three brothers. It’s believed that the Peverell brothers are the very same brothers which feature in the children’s story.’

‘Oh, well that’s cool – I guess.’ The Horcrux was beyond confused. Sure this was interesting, but not like important meeting level interesting.

Hermione huffed. ‘Merlin.’ She said as she rolled her eyes to such a degree it looked painful. ‘The three brothers in the story received three gifts Harry. What were they?’

The Horcrux remembered how much he disliked Hermione’s lecturing style. She’d never just give you the answers, she would make you work for them.

He bit back a long-suffering sigh. ‘Elder wand, cloak, and a stone – resurrection – thing.’

The Horcrux momentarily bemoaned his newer self’s idiosyncrasies; the bumbling and fumbling he could happily do without. But what was Harry’s was his too and the thought made him warm.

‘Yep. Any of those sound familiar?’ The Horcrux could feel Hermione’s impatient foot tapping away under the table.

Dad’s cloak. ‘The Invisibility Cloak.’ The Horcruxes eyes lit up with the realisation and Hermione smiled.

‘Exactly.’ Sirius commended the Horcruxes powers of deduction.

‘Wait, you are trying to convince the boy that these are real?’ Tom piped up.

Sirius totalled a scathing look at the ex-Dark Lord. ‘There’s nothing to convince.’ Sirius then looked pointedly at the ring. ‘Seems to act a bit strange, doesn’t it, even for a magical artefact?’

‘You said it was reset around the time the Peverell brother were alive?’ Tom mused.

‘Y-Yes, my Lord.’ Malfoy stuttered.
The whole table cringed at the title.

The Horcrux remembered when he’d been referred to in such a manner, and it left him disgusted. Malfoy took his expression to heart, thinking the flinch was his fault entirely.

Tom looked up at Malfoy, whose head had sunk in shame. ‘I’m no longer a Dark Lord, so do not fret Draco – it is an understandable slip of the tongue. Though probably best to leave honorifics at the door when in a Muggle establishment, even if they are mistaken.’

As Malfoy nodded emphatically, the Horcrux was yet again blown away by how little this version of Tom Riddle bore of the Lord Voldemort they had departed on.

‘So, you are all inferring that this might be the stone mentioned in a children’s fairy tale?’ Tom’s tone was saturated with scepticism.

Arthur then piped up. ‘All tales bare a modicum of truth, especially Wizarding stories, sir.’ The use of the honorific was strange on his part, but the the Horcrux caught the nod shared between Arthur and Malfoy and know it was mainly for the blond’s benefit.

‘And this suspicion arose from…?’ Tom asked the table.


‘Lovegood - Luna’s Dad?’ The Horcrux asked now baffled. He looked at Ron who nodded, rolled his eyes, and then shook his head in quick succession – apparently asking for the Horcrux not to ask any further.

‘Yes, we have him round for dinner sometimes. He’s a bit of a -eh- conspiracy nut, for lack of a better term.’ Arthur said before he was interrupted by Sirius’ ‘I’ll say!’

Hermione held up a hand, halting them all, then brought out a small tome and flipped the pages. ‘Here.’ She announced when she found it.

Her finger pointed to a strange symbol. A circle dived by a line, both housed within a triangle.

‘Lovegood has a pendant just like it. Asked about it once, Merlin help me.’ Arthur moaned which earned a sympathetic snort from Sirius.

‘Turns out he’s Hallows mad. Started rambling on and on about them and the legends surrounding them. I willingly forgot about the whole thing until Ron and Hermione visited with all of these-.’ He pointed at the pile of parchments, nearly knocking them over, which made Hermione flinch forward to save them.

Tom and the Horcrux flinched at the mention of ‘Hallow’ and shared a wide-eyed look.

With a small sorry, he continued. ‘Saw that and told these two about Lovegood’s nonsense about the symbol.’

‘Hallows?’ The Horcrux choked.

Hermione looked at him curiously. ‘Yeah…the collective term for the three artefacts in the story.’

The Horcrux swallowed thickly.

‘What did Lovegood have to say about these Hallows?’ Tom’s gripped his wine glass in a too-tight grip.
Arthur seemed surprised at Tom’s sudden interest. ‘The same as most Hallow-crazed Wizards and Witches. They all look for the items in the book because of the power they might gift them.’ Arthur took a slow slug of beer.

‘What might that be?’ The Horcrux asked, now on the edge of his seat.

‘Well, if all three are collected by the same person then, as the legend goes, they’ll become the Master of Death.’

The Horcrux dropped his cutlery.

‘Oh.’ Was his inspired response. He looked back down at the ring in a horrifically new light with that bombshell.

‘Death.’ Tom breathed.

‘Yes, the Master of-.’ Hermione offered, not knowing what was going on. ‘Harry…what’s wrong?’ She asked slowly.

The Horcrux looked up from the ring and glanced at every member at the table. ‘Eh-.’ He looked at Tom who’d become pale and was staring at the stone, like he was looking right through it.

‘Well. That-That’s interesting.’

‘Harry.’ Hermione intoned, not falling for the Horcruxes weak attempt at subterfuge.

He looked desperately at Tom again, who was less than useless at that moment.

The Horcrux sighed. ‘I had a dream.’

‘What about mate?’ Ron’s expression showed he’d sensed danger.

‘Erm, one where I meet a creature…it mentioned something about me having Hallows.’ The Horcrux didn’t know what to reveal and what to keep hidden, so again the bumbling took precedent.

‘You’re frightened. You both are.’ Malfoy said looking between the Horcrux and Tom. Bloody sod inconveniently chose that moment to let his voice be heard.

_Fuckin’ Malfoy’s._ The Horcrux cursed internally.

‘What’s going on pup?’ Sirius had stood and was now crouched beside him.

The Horcrux looked down and saw his godfather had caught the now visible shake in his arms.

‘It wasn’t a good dream.’ He said softly. ‘It-it might have been real. It chased me- the creature.’ The Horcrux then pulled its sleeve up. ‘I woke up with this.’ Sirius’ face paled as he looked at the wound.

_The creature did this?’_ Sirius had taken Harry’s hand and began inspecting it.

‘That’s a curse scar Black. A Dark one at that.’ Arthur said gravely. Sirius nodded before taking the hand and inhaling the scar softly. He flinched away a little before looking back up at the now trembling boy.

‘From a _dream_ Harry?’ He implored before the Horcrux nodded.
‘It seemed concerned that Harry might be in possession of the Hallows specifically.’ Tom said and it made Sirius’ head snap to him.

‘And where were you when my godson was being attacked?’ He asked venomously.

‘Quickly arriving at his side when he started screaming Black.’ Tom shot back with a growl.

The Horcrux felt as if he was underwater. ‘It asked if they had found me yet. The Hallows. Then it chased me when it found out I didn’t.’

‘Do you know what this creature was?’ Arthur asked tensely.

The Horcrux made to answer before Tom subtly cut him off. ‘Not yet. We have been looking into it though.’ He turned to Tom who gave him a fleeting glance, asking the Horcrux not to elaborate.

‘The ring was on my finger when I woke up.’ The Horcrux said whilst his eyes were locked with Tom’s.

_The cloak’s never where I leave it either._ His mind offered.

The dots connected with an alarming speed and the clarity they provided was cruel, harsh assault on his senses.

‘How do we find out?’ He asked Tom, then he shook his head trying to dismiss everything around him. ‘There’s no wand.’ He announced as if it made anything less real.

‘The stone and the cloak can be traced back to the brother’s though. You got the cloak from your Dad Harry.’ Hermione pressed softly.

‘The ring was passed from father to son for generations, until the Gaunt’s.’ Malfoy added. ‘I suspect the same is true for your father’s cloak.’

‘And the wand?’ Tom asked slowly.

‘The third brother, Antiloch Peverell, died in a duel.’ Hermione explained while giving the Horcrux worried glances. ‘Accounts given at the time say he was boasting about an invincible wand that could never be beaten.’

‘Fuck.’ Tom hissed in the serpent’s tongue which made everyone apart from the Horcrux recoil slightly.

_It’s real then. Death really did chase me._’ The Horcrux whispered to Tom.

Tom regarded him with a strange look. ‘Yes, that. And it seems the Hallows are finding their way into your possession.’ The Horcrux had never felt to scared. Not even at Vernon’s worse.

This meant the creature Harry had dreamt of was real. Meant it might one day meet Harry again and if he did so without the Hallows- he might not live to tell the tale next time.

He stared down at the scar; its awful feeling magic seeping into his skin, coursing through his veins.

‘If they find me, what happens then?’ The Horcrux didn’t want the answer to this question.

‘If old Lovegood is right, then you might become the Master of Death – though he was pretty vague about what exactly that entailed.’ Arthur huffed.
‘Master of Death? It sounds… promising. The Hallows may be of benefit to you, everything considered.’ Tom was obviously trying his hand at being comforting, which he was failing miserably at.

Master of Death did not sound promising at all.

‘Where is the wand?’ The Horcrux asked shakily.

‘No one knows mate. Hermione made me check the records, it gets a bit muddy after the sixteenth century.’ Ron said dismayed.

The fact that Ron had done any level of research showed exactly how serious they all suspected this was.

Hermione then went into different accounts and rumours of where the wand was last seen. Thank Merlin Tom took over then, the Horcrux felt as if he was stuffed with cotton wool and his ears roared with a terrible ringing.

They all politely declined desert after everyone seemed to have lost their appetite. The Horcrux went through the options of hugging them all, except Malfoy who instead shook his hand.

‘It’s good to see you well Harry. I hope we meet again soon.’ Malfoy said politely.

He made a mental note to ask Hermione why Malfoy had helped them in the first instance. In her letters, Hermione had recounted everything Malfoy had done since he’d left Hogwarts including that fact that Malfoy had told the Slytherins to back off Harry and his friends even Neville. She had also mentioned that he’d been helping and that he would be attending this meeting – but there was no why offered.

The Horcrux smiled at his past nemesis wanly. ‘I’m not always -eh- free, shall we say.’ Malfoy nodded. ‘Though I’m sure you could visit with your Dad.’ He offered.

‘That would be an honour.’ Malfoy then glanced at Tom. ‘Should it be permitted.’ He said quietly so that he wasn’t overheard.

Sirius held on the longest when the Horcrux embraced him, and he found himself nuzzling into his godfather’s warmth.

‘Be good pup. And don’t worry, we’ll all get to the bottom of this.’ No that was how you comforted someone, the Horcrux mentally directed at Tom.

When he hugged Hermione, she seemed to linger hesitantly. ‘We didn’t get to speak about everything we wanted to.’ She looked pointedly at the adults in attendance. ‘We noticed other things too Harry, and we’ll be speaking to you about them soon.’ She nodded, waiting for him to respond.

When he did she smiled softly and then waved him off with the rest of them.

He then saw Tom standing across from him with the same strange look on his face.

‘What?’ The Horcrux implored testily.

‘Nothing…come on, I’ll take you back.’ Tom led them out and then walked to the side of the entrance. Making sure there were no Muggles watching he then placed the Horcrux’s arm on his and with a snap they landed in the Slytherin Crest Library.
Tom made a beeline for the crystal decanter of firewhisky and offered the creature a glass.

It had sunk down in one of the armchairs, Tom’s armchair he regraded almost indignantly.

He normally would have told anyone else to move, but right now the creature looked so much like his little one that he found he couldn’t.

Tom passed him a tall measure. ‘So, Harry’s in for a big surprise when he comes back.’

‘Yes – even though it’s yet to be confirmed – Master of Death is a pretty big bombshell.

‘Then you’ll do well to explain it to him – thoroughly.’ Tom did not want the creature hiding any of this from Harry.

The creature groaned and slumped back like a pile of washing. ‘What I know, he will know.’

‘Really?’ Tom sat in the armchair that was normally reserved for guests. ‘You’re saying you’ll let Harry recollect everything you have experienced?’

‘Yes. Why wouldn’t I? Scared he won’t like what I’ve seen’ The creature challenged, letting his eyes roam Tom’s body purposefully.

‘Oh, I don’t know – you seem to have kept your identity a secret from the boy thus far, might be detrimental if you were to reveal it now. And, let it be noted I am not abashed at the thought of Harry seeing any part of me.’

It hissed then bared its teeth. ‘Except for Vernon, I’ve never had to take over – the blame for why I’ve had to rests solely on your shoulders Tom. For obvious reasons, I hid the memories of his Uncle from him. There is no need to do so with this.’ It waved a hand dismissively.

Tom noted the Muggle-scum’s name like a wolf would a sick deer among the herd.

‘Might give the poor boy a shock when he finds that you have been living vicariously through him.’ Tom stated harshly.

‘You really don’t understand it, do you?’ The creature looked as if he was spread too thin and that Tom was not helping matters. ‘I was only partly joking when I called you mindless earlier, but now its confirmed.’ It sated snidely.

‘You have offered very little in the way of detailed explanation.’ Tom shot back.

It took a deep inhale and grinned broadly. ‘Then I’ll lay it all out for you, shall I?’ The creature seemed to take pleasure in Tom’s frustration.

Tom gestured for him to continue indignantly.

It huffed before continuing. ‘Imagine a glass of clear water in front of you.’ Tom sent him a withering glare. ‘Humour me.’ It chastised softly before Tom rolled his eyes and nodded. ‘Now picture a drop of black ink released on its surface. What happens?’
Tom felt like he was being lectured like a common, dim-witted schoolboy and promised that if this didn’t offer any answer – Tom would strangle the bloody menace.

‘It sinks and disperses, turns the water grey.’ Tom intoned inelegantly.

‘Correct. And how has it changed from its original state?’ It stood to then sit on the arm of his chair with its hands in it pockets.

Tom became very aware of it suddenly. Thoughts of Harry being this close, feeling this warm plagued him mercilessly, and the image in front of him left him reeling slightly.

‘Its composition has altered.’ Tom breathed staring at the creature wearing Harry’s skin. ‘As has its state, it is no longer just water.’

‘Good.’ It smiled. ‘Now what would you see if you had a microscope?’

The creature shifted, making itself more comfortable. Tom forced himself to look anywhere else except at the body beside him.

Only a Horcrux could know that Tom had used and had knowledge of the Muggle contraption. Anyone else would assume he wouldn’t touch something Muggle-made with a forty-foot barge pool – it was a closely guarded secret that he did.

‘The molecules of both liquids, swimming around each other.’ He put a hand through his hair as if he could move his filthier thoughts to the back of his head.

It nodded. ‘We can see the different compounds if we look closely enough. But if you look with a naked eye at the glass, you could not separate one from the other – not without magic anyway.’

It seemed to pause, lost in thought for a moment whilst looking out of the window. The light cast from the fireplace made its eyes seem like they were glowing. ‘That’s what I am. Black ink in a pool of clear water.’

It turned to look at Tom with a strange expression. ‘My source was you – a bottle of dark and black. I was everything you were in that moment, the split second after you cast the Killing Curse and every memory that led you to it. When I was released for you, I was little more than a bloodied, aborted foetus with all those awful memories and painful experiences. But, like the water – Harry enveloped me, and I dispersed.’

It laughed softly. ‘It was stunning really. In that moment, I was a broken Horcrux, useless, faulty. If I had attached to an inanimate object, I really would have been a sorry sight. Probably just a constant scream, mindless and in pain.’

Tom could only stare, his lips parted and hands shaking. He remembered how it felt when he was little more than a wraith; a decade of agony and screams. He shivered. The creature caught the movement and nodded knowingly.

Then a smile bloomed on its features which made Tom swallow thickly. ‘In the next moment I dived into Harry’s mind. The infant looked at me and smiled, crawled towards me. He put his small hand on me and pulled, then I fell into him. I became him, scattered among neurons and it felt like star gazing.’ It directed its smile softly at Tom. ‘Memories of laughter, warmth and comfort filled me - filled the gaps that had always been there since you and I were infants.’

The creature locked eyes with Tom. ‘I felt love. I felt what it was like to be wholly and completely loved.’ It breathed shakily. ‘You never had that. Never got to experience it. And it’s beautiful Tom,
It’s the most magnificent thing in the world.’ Its face shone with the memory.

Tom was lost in his own musings; he thought of falling, warm lips and fruitless wishes beside a roaring fireplace and a dusty piano. Tom found himself wanting impossible things again.

‘But I still had your memories.’ The creature’s expression darkened slightly. ‘The madness that came with them too. And I couldn’t risk losing what I had just found.’ It shook its head vehemently. ‘So, I pushed myself down, deep down – past the subconscious and unconscious, as Freud would have termed it. I didn’t want him dreaming of it, I couldn’t let them echo in his thoughts or instincts – that pathway to Dark and destruction.’

The creature then flexed its corrupted hand. ‘It’s why I can’t use his magic. Like water and ink, his magic so different from ours. And my field of influence is so small too due to how damaged I was before he took me in.’

Tom found his voice. ‘What can you do?’

‘Not much. I can only really control the mind, to a certain extent. I can hide memories. I can push Harry behind me if I need to come forward. I make him to dream of certain things too. I used to make him dream of healing himself with magic so that his body would repair itself as he slept.’

The memory of what the creature had revealed made Tom feel ill.

Then confusion coloured Tom’s features. ‘You must have used magic when you fought me and Nagini. We both saw how powerful you are.’

‘Not me – this.’ The creature showed his blackened hand again. When Tom sent a questioning gaze it added. ‘Death has marked me – us.’ It amended when Tom arched a brow. ‘This is old magic. Very old. And Arthur was right it’s foul.’ It looked at its own hand disgusted. ‘I can control the magic within the wound. It’s the kind of magic my dark, twisted soul seems to have an affinity towards.’ It laughed self-deprecatingly.

‘Then you are me.’ Tom said softly.

‘No – I’m the worst of your Harry.’ A strange expressionfleeted over its features. ‘Like the magic, I entwined with every negative facet of his soul. If you were to look at me under a microscope, you’d see me swimming in every hateful thought, in the pain and the hurt. I’m behind every insecurity – all his deepest and darkest desires.’ The creature glanced at Tom before pointedly looking away. ‘In all of his most violent actions and screams. I compound them, heighten them just by simply being.’

It snorted. ‘You know I’m the only reason he couldn’t cast a Patronus on his first attempt? I may have gifted him the serpent’s tongue, but that pales in comparison to what he could achieve if I didn’t exist with him, as him.’

‘All of that and he can’t feel that it is you doing that to him?’ Tom asked incredulously.

‘Not until recently, though he is not aware of my sentience.’ The creature suddenly looked uncomfortable.

Tom regarded the creature and thought he could see his Harry in the way the creature worried his lip.

‘What changed?’ Tom asked, surprising himself with how gentle his voice had become.
‘You.’ It didn’t look at him as it said it.

‘In what way?’

The creature turned quickly then looked at Tom darkly. ‘You have no idea what effect you have – how you bring me closer to the surface in him, in us.’

‘You’re right. I don’t.’ Tom shot back.

It leaned back on the poster the bed with a low exhale. ‘What did you think would happen when you kept pushing? You are quite literally the source of every pain he has endured, connected to us on every level magic can provide. It took him weeks to feel whole after he meet the diary Horcrux, can you imagine what effect meeting the real deal has on him?’

Then it hissed. ‘Then you beat us. Mortified and shamed to the extent that our mind crumbled -and I couldn’t step in because of the fucking need-.’ It forcefully cut itself off. ‘Did you forget how you felt when the matron did that to us? What it was like to want something you shouldn’t?’

Tom cringed at the memory and an old anger rose at the injustice of it.

‘I was there each time you or one of your followers tried to kill us – fuck, I even had to navigate the mindfuck of heading off against that thing that sprang from the fucking diary. Every instinct, every dodge, every decision – They were made by both of us.’

It snorted humorlessly. ‘You know, even after all that, this is the first time he sank in our mind without me having to push him? God Tom. You made us both unstable to the point of insanity.’

The creature’s leg bounced as if it wanted to push up and strike. ‘I was there as he was sinking. I went mad, like how it used to be when I was you. I struck him for being so weak. Cleaved him in two. Watching you hold him made it worse for a second before it soothed everything. That part of me must trust you, because it’s the only reason he’s still in here.’ The creature tapped its head hard.

‘I’m…sorry.’ Tom looked at his own hands which were still bruised. ‘I lost control.’

‘You tend to do that.’ It snapped. ‘Save your apologies for when I have all my faculties back in order.’ It rumbled snidely.

They sat in silence. The creature was tense, clearly beyond angry. Then Tom could see it; there was a little of Harry in the way it tapped angry fingers on its thigh. Harry would take measured breaths when trying to control his emotions, the creature was doing the same now, biting its lip just like Harry would.

Then something the creature had said caught Tom’s attention.

‘I made it worse?’ Tom asked quietly.

Yellow eyes stared before narrowing. ‘Yes.’ In answered in a clipped tone.

Tom heart started beating harder. ‘For you or him?’

The creature exhaled a long-suffering groan. ‘You still don’t get it, do you?’ The creature whispered in the room before it languidly stood and pivoted around him.

It stood at the side of the chair looking down at Tom. ‘What he hates, I hate.’

The creature leaned forward. ‘What he needs, I need.'
It then crawled onto his lap looming over Tom. ‘What he wants, I want.’

It then grabbed a fistful of Tom’s hair and the man had to bite back a groan.

‘*Want you, need you.*’ It hissed into Tom’s ear, the serpent’s tongue overflowing with an undertone of complete desperation like Tom had heard a thousand times before.

His hand twitched to grab at the hips just inches from his twitching hands. It felt like Harry was here, saying the words he’d always wanted to hear from his bitten lips.

He was a hair triggers pull away from doing something he’d regret.

Tom was at war with himself. He promised himself he would never hurt Harry again. But the insane degree to which he needed to reach out and grab the body in front of him was maddening. Blood pooled south and he burned alive.

*It’s not him. This isn’t what you want. This isn’t what Harry would want.* He repeated brokenly inside his mind.

The Horcrux, like everything else between Tom and Harry, was shared. It was both of them in tandem, like some awful Frankenstein’s monster made of the darkest parts of them both.

The creature pulled his head back and simply watched him with a small perceptive smile, drinking in Tom struggle.

It made him mourn the boy’s absence all the more. He wanted Harry and all of his intricacies – the being panting over him was a mere shadow.

‘He isn’t here.’ Tom said out loud, he hadn’t meant to.

‘No.’ It breathed; its grip still tight in Tom’s hair. ‘And yes.’

Tom moved closer. He was starving for this, he needed this. His body moved like the lapping of waves on the shore, constantly pushing forward only to pull back again. ‘Seems all three souls in play are at war with themselves.’

Then it moved closer to Tom with unbearable slowness. ‘Lines are blurred by nought but vague definitions, and those breed such *dangerous* thoughts. I know myself enough to name what I seek, and what I have already sought. So, tell me, poor souls of dangerously defined thoughts – what do you seek and what have you sought?’

The creature breathed a 19th century poem Tom had read after he had first left Hogwarts. The book of poetry had been gifted to Tom by a student inside the Cambridge University Libraries who seemed to be enamoured by him. He had wanted to sneer at the Muggle and tell her where she could shove her gift. But she hadn’t given him the chance – running away before he could respond. It had been the first and only gift he’d received from a Muggle and despite himself, he found that he loved the passages within.

Tom was caught between his own past, and this awful present; hearing Harry’s vice utter the words compounded the effect it had over him. Harry, Tom and their Horcrux; all of this was happening because both he and the boy had poured their souls into this creature.

Tom growled and then flipped them, the creature gasped as he was pulled under him. Tom pushed at it with his hips until it was trapped between the chair and Tom’s vibrating limbs, and it mewled at the contact between their thighs and grabbed at Tom’s legs.
This thing in front of him knew him as well as one could know themselves, and yet it spoke and moved like Harry too. It claimed to be Harry first and foremost, more than the creature had ever been Tom. The notion that this was Harry beneath him intoxicated Tom so much so that his thin grip on control was quickly slipping.

He leaned down to the creature’s face, a hairsbreadth away from those damned lips. Tom wanted to make his own indentations in them. Tom’s breathed fanned over its face, splaying the dark hairs of its fringe with every exhale. He wanted to plunder that sweet mouth and feel the deep heat between their thighs too. And it would be so easy, to finally take what he’d craved for so much that he wanted to drown in it when he did.

He’d take Harry ruthlessly and constantly if it was ever offered. Tom wanted Harry to feel him everywhere, he wanted to coat his insides with his scent, smear himself with Harry’s come until it sank into his skin. He wanted to drink Harry in and be consumed in the same moment. Every moment, forever. Once trapped, he’d never let the boy go. Once trapped, the boy would always be marked by him, owned by him.

He pushed against it again and the pressure was exquisite. Though, it stoked the fire within him more than it sated. The urge crept up and up until his lunged burned and constricted his throat. Take it, take him. Do it. Do it! His mind screamed.

Yellow eyes fluttered as its back arched and the sight was enough to pull Tom from his reverie a little.

His hips canted forward and the creature’s hands gripped on Tom’s arms. Tom couldn’t tell if it was trying to pull him in or push him away.

Tom bared his teeth, control slipping through his fingers like sand. ‘You asked me to wait until he returns to apologise, then I think the same should go for everything else I wish to do with him.’ He didn’t sound very confident in his own conviction.

It moved up onto its elbows and smiled dangerously. ‘You develop a conscious in the most inopportune moments Tom.’ It licked those bitten lips whilst staring at Tom’s. ‘I know what I want. Harry would never tell you – though a part of him is desperate to. Do you know how long he struggled after his encounter with the diary? The dreams Tom, they were so intense he thought he might be going mad. The guilt burned him.’

The sight and the feel of Harry’s body against him made Tom want to roar and burn everything around him, including the clothes separating their hot flesh.

‘And then meeting you again in the tent? Not just a memory anymore, but warm, strong and so close.’ The creature whimpered. ‘Confused doesn’t really cover it.’ It shook it’s head, it eyes never leaving Toms lips and its grip on Tom’s arms tightening.

Its eyes snapped to his. ‘So close I could touch you.’ The words from the graveyard echoed between them.

He always wanted this; Harry trapped beneath him with that look of pure need in his eyes. But the eyes were the wrong colour, and the green ones he wanted so much were elsewhere.

The being in front of him was the only reason he had sought the boy out. Wasn’t it? He wanted the Horcrux, not Harry specifically.

Then Tom remembered fiery green eyes, full-bellied laughter, a heart wrenching piano piece, and a
sharp tongue. The way Harry had kissed back with fervour and pulled back with steadfast morality. The push and pull between them, and the horror Tom felt when the boy had slipped through his fingers.

He needed it to be Harry, not his just shadow.

The realisation stunned him for a moment.

‘Bring him back.’ Tom intoned lowly; he fought the urge to take the oh-so-willing body beneath him by pulling away entirely. ‘You’ve implied you’re an expert at it – so fucking do it.’

*Please, I might go sink if you don’t.*

Tom felt half-mad with the impulse to strip the body opposite him bare and bite wherever his mouth could reach. He pushed the urge away violently.

The creature leaned back with a slow smile. Tom shuddered with clenched fists. ‘He will when he is ready.’

‘That is not a fucking answer.’ Tom sneered.

‘It is not my prerogative!’ It snapped with a growl before it faltered. It slumped back with a huff, pinching its bridge.

‘He has to want it – and right now, there’s very little for him to want to return to Tom.’ It sniped. The creature’s hands were shaking, obviously just as affected as he was.

He had to stop his eyes and hands roaming when he saw its cheeks were flushed pink and its pupils were blown.

*Gods, it still smells like Harry.*

Tom pushed back silently, even though he wished to scream, to curse, to break something, anything. Anything that wasn’t important.

‘What would make him come back?’ Tom hated the forlorn edge to his own voice.

It sat at the edge of the seat, its hair mussed, and its lips wet. The tension in the room was unbearable. Both of them wanting what the couldn’t in good conscious have.

‘You said you would do anything to bring your Harry back?’ The creature said quietly as it moved forward from armchair.

Tom eyed the creature warily. ‘Yes.’ He said cautiously.

‘Hopefully he’ll come back – that part of it is outside of my control. Though, I fear he might not want to come out when he does.’ The creature tapped the side of its head with its back facing Tom.

‘And this fear is founded on...?’

‘It’s what I would be sorely tempted to do.’ The creature looked back at the chair. ‘Hide from you, that is.’

‘I don’t think you can control that either.’ Tom sighed, cursing himself again. He wondered for a moment if it would be overly dramatic to self-administer a particularly strong *Crucio.*
‘No, but I know what would tempt me out of safety of my own mind.’ The creature then leaned against that damnable armchair and stared at Tom unblinkingly.

‘What?’ Tom said in a clipped tone when the creature would not elaborate, only stare.

‘Do you remember what you were arguing about before–.’ The creature gestured to Tom’s mottled hand.

There goes the nausea again.

It made Tom miss his previous, unfeeling form – almost.

‘Amortentia, specifically Harry’s brewing of it. Care to elaborate?’ If Tom had to suffer this infernal beast, he might as well get some answers out of it.

‘It was never Amortentia. Pretty conceited of you to assume he’d brew that awful shit just to give it to you – assuming he wanted your advances in the first instance.’

‘He was surveying moon phases, as in plural. What else could it possibly be?’ Tom felt like he was quickly slipping into quicksand. He sorely regretted his actions that night, but a small part of him had allowed that the boy had been imbecilic for brewing it. The boy’s attempts to hide it from him had fanned the flame of suspicion that Harry intended to use it on him – because why else would he have hidden it?

The creature stared at him again, its face completely emotionless.

‘You said you’d do anything?’ It repeated.

Tom did not like where this was leading. ‘What do you suggest?’

‘Demand rather. This isn’t a suggestion – not if you want him to come back… to you specifically.’

Tom’s teeth were on edge, if this was not Harry’s body or his Horcrux – he’d have happily been slicing and dicing it.

‘Go on.’ Tom said dangerously, his tone dripping with impatience.

‘Whatever he brews, you’ll drink it. No questions asked.’ It cocked its head as Tom hissed.

‘You’d have me robbed of my will?’ Tom seethed.

The creature’s lips were set in a grim line. ‘I told you it’s not Amortentia – that’s all you need to know. And really Tom – do you really think Harry would give you anything that would harm or beguile you? He’s a Gryffindor through and through – the notion of deceiving or abusing others quite literally make him feel sick.’

‘He was willing to lie to preserve himself – that’s a Slytherin attribute if I’ve ever heard one.’ He spat.

‘He wasn’t ready. If you had exerted more of control over yourself, he would have told you when he was comfortable with doing so.’ The creature paused. ‘I think, with regards to you, Harry should be allowed to exact as much self-preservation as he sees fit. Don’t forget yourself Tom – you’re are the monster under his bed.’ It glared at him like one would a criminal behind bars.

‘Not anymore.’ Tom said weakly, thinking of how Harry had smiled after they’d kissed.
‘That’s not what I saw. I have the bruises to prove it – so do you.’ The creature pointed to Tom’s offending, bruised hand. ‘Merlin knows how you justified the intent. You should be dead, and it would have been deserved.’ It said through bared teeth.

Tom murmured. ‘I done it to teach him a lesson.’

‘Oh, then well-done Professor.’ It slow clapped mockingly. ‘Really showed him up there huh. Hey Potter – don’t lie to me lest my twitching palm strike you bloody – but oh no! Don’t think of me as a monster, no Harry – come to bed with me instead, I’ll keep you warm and sated. You don’t see why the boy might be a tad confused?’ It sneered.

The way in which it echoed of the conversation he and Harry had at the ballet made Tom feel a little dizzy.

The creature stood abruptly and then stood in front of Tom. ‘You’ll do well to throw yourself into anything which might land you in his good graces Tom. You need him. More than you’re willing to admit. It won’t stop, it won’t suddenly go away. No – the obsession has already grown roots inside you.

Don’t think I don’t remember it Tom. Because I do, intimately. As soon as you set your eyes on something, you need to have it to the point of madness. You won’t be able to help yourself – but he will. He is so much stronger than you ever were. He’ll fight you to the bitter end if you keep letting that ugly snarling beast out to play with him.’

It poked at Tom’s chest hard. Like he was trying to dig inside. ‘So, promise him you’ll drink the potion when it’s ready. And whilst you’re at it, swear that you’ll never raise you hand to him in that manner ever again. Because if you do –.’ Its fingers grazed Tom’s neck and he shuddered at the spark that sung through his veins at the contact. ‘I’ll bite right through next time.’ It smiled gravely.

With a snide smile and the threat of bared teeth, the creature stormed out of the Library and Tom was left reeling.

Tom knew the extent to which his ill-advised obsession went.

Clearly enough to drink an unnamed potion.

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There had been nothing but pain. Awful sticky pain, and then nothing.

Now cold and wet.

Harry opened his eyes as he floated.

Dark and blue.

He turned his head slowly, trying to blink back into focus.

His hand crept up and his stomach lurched when he realised his glasses were own.

As he moved his arms through…something, the sensations around him began to becoming more
defined to his addled mind.

Then he quickly realised he couldn’t breath as he choked on what he was floating in.

*Underwater-fuck! I’m underwater, must get up swim…up?*

It would be great if Harry knew which way was up.

He looked around, his heart thudding dangerously as he realised the precariousness of his current circumstances.

*I’ll die. Find up or I’ll die.* He screamed at himself.

Harry’s head tried to turn quickly, but it was too slow in the freezing water.

Then he realised he wasn’t alone.

Bodies swan in the distance, but they didn’t quite look right.

But quickly running out of breath, he only fleetingly glanced at them before pushing towards what was currently the direction of upwards.

Then something broke the surface of the water underneath him, then Harry realised he had been facing down and not up.

A pale white arm reached out to him.

Harry rolled and then grabbed at the hand which firmly grasped him and *pulled.*

When Harry came up for air, he found his lungs were already full of water and as he was heaved onto something wooden, he choked it all out.

He spent several second writhing on the floor coughing and spluttering painfully until he gulped down air into himself greedily.

He was lying on his side convulsing on a wooden floor when he first noticed a shape move away from him then returning quickly to his side.

Harry flinched and the through some fight or flight instinct made to sit up, but then the floor wobbled terribly.

‘Watch yourself.’ A strange voice chided him.

His eyes turned to the form crouched beside him, a woman.

‘You’ll rock the boat. Sit still, I’m not interested in getting wet.’

Black hair, white skin, white eyes.

‘Who’re you?’ Harry slurred, his head was suddenly spinning.

The creature cocked her head, or maybe did nothing at all – Harry was seeing double after all.

‘You can call me Thana, but I’m not important – that would be you.’ She said gently, wrapping him in a black blanket.

‘What?’
She didn’t answer and instead just smiled. ‘Hello Harry Potter – what a pleasure it is to meet you again.’

*Lucius Voice* 'My, my- how the plot thickens, and might I add it does so deliciously.'

That was a mindfuck to write. Half harry/half Tom Horcruxes are a nosebleed.

I hope you enjoyed it, I'm running out of tissue for my dripping nose.

Partner has informed me the last week has not been a pretty sight.

I agree - snot and blood don't really do it for me either.

Hello! and thank you thank you thank you for reading so far.

Please let me hear all your thoughts and feelings in the comments below!

I thrive off the comments like a pig in mud.

I LAV CHU ALL MAH BOOTIFUL CRETINS!

Nighty night x
Harry lay in the dark wood boat, watching the stars move above him.

It wasn’t the stars were moving, he was. The woman who called herself Thana pulled the oars over calm waters and Harry tried to breath to the gentle swell of it.

He was not cold, but he pulled the black wool blanket up to his neck in a protective manner. Harry felt numbed; again, he was in a foreign place adhering to the whims of a stranger who claimed to know him.

Something tangible was missing too. The dark space that normally resided deep within his chest was empty, the hollow sensation left Harry feeling something akin to grief. Yet Harry could not name what he was mourning for. His memories of before were now somewhat hazy; lit all floated inside his mind like dust motes in sunny air. Each time he pushed out to grab at a memory to pull it close, to inspect anything in detail, it flew away from him with equal force.

The only thing that he felt was substantial were his immediate circumstances- the rocking of the boat, the sound of water being pushed and pulled, the soft breathing of the woman at his feet, and mostly the strangeness of it all.

‘Where are we?’ He said quietly, the space around him felt too close and unfamiliar to speak at any volume.

Thana pulled on the hulking oars, looking off into the distance. Her frame was slight and yet she didn’t seem to be exerting herself with the strain of lugging the boat to shore.

She turned to him, seeming to struggle with the answer. ‘It’s a good question, but it doesn’t have a name – it’s never had one really.’
Harry sat up slowly with careful movements so that the boat didn’t jostle too much.

‘How can a place not have a name?’ He asked as he pulled the damp blanket around him.

She smiled softly. ‘It’s not a place either, more of like a moment in time. Hence why it’s difficult to name.’ She huffed a small laugh. ‘Though we jokingly refer to it as ‘Peace’ sometimes.’ Thana said as the oars rippled and splashed softly.

Harry looked around; the body of water was as huge as it was dark. The inky blue was still, too still. There were no waves or ripples apart from those caused by Thana’s disturbances. It was a glassy surface reflecting the start spattered sky and surrounded by thick alpine trees in the distance.

Harry regarded Thana carefully before continuing. ‘I seem to be missing the joke.’

Thana finally turned to face him head on, he thought her white eyes were staring at his, though he couldn’t be sure.

‘It’s the simple request on every tombstone, etched into an urn after every cremation, spoken in every final goodbye.’ She riddled.

Harry thought on it, staring at the stars reflections, then remembered Tom’s fathers lofty tomb and the crooked gravestones which seemed to close him in that awful space.

‘Rest in peace.’ He answered before a prickling panic began to burrow into his heart. ‘This is where the dead sleep.’ He said into the thick, muffling air.

Thana nodded carefully, watching his reaction. Her staring unnerved Harry; it was a difficult visual to be comfortable with.

The only thing that stopped Harry running or fighting was a small piece of rationality; this woman saved him, so why would she harm him?

It was thin reasoning – he knew that. But if he had to decide between trusting this woman and having to return to the water under them – he’d happily take his chances, even if her eyes were clearly not human.

‘I’m dead?’ Harry breathed, his hands twisting and pulling under the cover of dark wool.

‘No, not really.’ She offered; her eyebrows met in the middle as she said it. ‘Visiting.’ Thana smiled in a manner that reminded him of Ginny’s face when she was keeping a secret.

He was far too calm, Harry thought. He should be panicked or at least a little tearful. He didn’t even tremble– he was too busy reeling with the notion that this place that was not a place and the woman in front of him were somewhat familiar to him.

Familiar when everything was wholly unfamiliar.

Harry let out a shaky breath. ‘You said you’d met me before?’ He probed, trying to not look at anything too closely, scared that the was real and not just some strange dream’ at least that would account for the strangeness of it all.

‘We have.’ She confirmed with a nod and another pull of the boat. ‘Many times.’

‘I don’t remember.’ There was no recognition or notion of familiarity towards the woman. Harry was sure he would remember her face, it was striking.
'You don’t – wouldn’t rather.’ She chuckled softly before she turned to look behind her and then pulled the oars in earnest.

‘Sorry.’ Harry said, at a loss.

Thana then dismissed his apology kindly with a wave of her hand.

‘No, no – nothing to be sorry for Harry.’

‘Then, can I ask – who are you?’ Harry fumbled.

‘An old friend.’ She smiled as she inclined her head to the boat. ‘And don’t worry – you never remember at first.’ She sighed at Harry’s blatant confusion. ‘It’s difficult to know where to start, always is. There’s so much.’ She spoke softly, as if suddenly sad. ‘But we have time – this time.’

Harry thought that this woman had a hard time elaborating on her own statements.

He nodded whilst tapping down the urge to pinch his bridge.

‘You’ve been here before Harry – many times, over many different lives.’ Her voice sounded almost melodic with the sounds of the travelling boat breaking over the water. ‘That’s the beauty of souls, they never really die.’

Harry moved to question her, but she smoothly motioned for him to let her continue. ‘This is a place where souls come to rest before they return.’

Yep, I’m dreaming. Harry chuckled internally.

She looked off into the distance, her eyes did not seem to point in any direction – there were no pupils to direct her gaze with.

Harry looked behind Thana and saw that they were approaching land, he couldn’t see anything of interest, only a thick forest which blanketed the space.

The sky felt massive, more so than what he was used to. Even at Slytherin Crest the stars never shone this brightly – there were so many.

They looked like home.

Harry knew somewhere deep down in a place where instinct tends to roam that he had been among them once. He couldn’t validate the knowledge, but he felt like he knew it as well as he knew his own name.

Tom.

Then Harry remembered arguments and beatings over phases, potions and intentions.

‘There’s no moon.’ He commented as his chest felt like it was being crushed.

It seemed to be the most redundant of observations he’d made since he had been pulled out of the water, but he didn’t have the wherewithal to voice the others.

‘No – and those aren’t stars.’ She added as the boat rocked as if trying to lull Harry to sleep.

He sent her a questioning glance.
Thana then pointed to them. ‘Those are souls. Ones that are resting before they return.’

The stars did not twinkle, Harry noticed then. They pulsed, like heartbeats.

Thana pulled them to shore as Harry took in the surroundings again, feeling more than a little perplexed and lost.

When he looked down, he nearly jumped back enough to tip the boat entirely.

There were bodies floating under the inky, glassy surface.

Harry didn’t make a sound, except for a small splash of the boat. He sat in a painful tension after.

He had swum in the water with all of those bodies, the thought made his blood freeze.

‘Don’t mind them. They won’t hurt you. They can’t do much of anything to be honest’ Thana sounded as if she was telling him not to mind the monster in the closet. ‘Nothing here will.’ She waited for him to indicate he’d heard her.

After Harry nodded, she smiled and stood up in the boat before dropping into shallow waters, pulling the boat rope along with her.

Harry’s eyes caught on a body that was floating a little too close for comfort. None of them were decaying or bloated as he would have otherwise expected. They looked more like sleeping ghosts or silken fabric, swirling and writhing in an undercurrent that never broke the waters too-still surface.

‘What are they?’ Harry asked in a whisper.

Thana looped the rope then hurled it over a dead tree stump.

‘Lost souls. One’s that have yet to return to the sky.’

Harry huffed in frustration. In one moment, this place seemed strange, unfamiliar – completely alien to him but also it felt like he knew this place like one knows the colour of their own eyes; never seeing it except upon reflection.

Thana frowned at Harry’s obvious irritation. ‘All souls return – one way or another – most through death, though other’s are lost before then. Madness, grief, heartbreak, killing another soul – they all make you lose grip on yourself. The bodies in the water are the souls who lost themselves to those things – and they’ll stay there until they happen on a way back.’ Her mouth shifted into a grim line. ‘Though that rarely happens.’ She sighed.

Heartbreak. Madness. Grief. Harry nodded to himself as he pushed his most recent memories of Tom down.

He quietly wondered if there were any souls in there that he knew.

Harry shivered in his wet clothes as the memories of precious dead threatened to break a weakened dam.

He had been pulled from those very same waters. ‘Was I…lost?’

‘A little.’ Her hand then rested on his arm in a soothing gesture when Harry’s body tensed. ‘Lost your way a bit, but not for much longer.’ She promised.
‘Shouldn’t you pull the rest of them out too?’ His voice was shaky now.

‘Woefully, I can’t. That’s Fate’s decision – not mine.’ Thana looked at the water and her expression had darkened slightly.

‘Then why was I?’ He watched Thana carefully, slowly acknowledging that this was perhaps not a dream.

‘By virtue of who you are and what Fate has decided for you.’ She chuckled. ‘Come – we have much to discuss.’ She instructed him as she motioned for Harry to take her hand.

After warning him that it might be a bit slippery, Harry took her hand gingerly and let her pull him off the boat and onto the small pebbled back shore.

It struck Harry then how quite everything was. The silence of everything was pushing against his ears.

Just like the field that seemed to never end.

Even their voice did not carry, as if they were speaking into a soft wall of cotton.

‘I’m following you?’ Harry asked and the closeness of it panicked him a little.

She smiled as she knotted the wrist-thick rope around a stump of a dead tree.

‘Only a small ways.’ She then pointed uphill to a soft glow of light in the otherwise pitch-black forest. ‘Then we’ll settle in for a chat.’ She turned away from Harry, who after looking at the water and shivering slightly moved to follow her.

He hesitated when his steps started to edge into the shadow of the forest. Thana seemed to sense his apprehension, which was very justified under the circumstances, and turned back to him.

‘Like I said Harry, nothing here will hurt you; not me or anything else.’ Thana didn’t need to raise her voice for him to hear her, it was like she was speaking to him from only a few inches away when really, she was twenty meters in the distance.

Harry pulled at his hair, confusion and indecision warring within him. He found he was scared of those shadows, and yet not of the woman who offered to guide him through them. She had said it would be a short trip and the knowledge steeled something inside him.

She offered her hand again with a knowing smile. On an exhale Harry pushed himself towards her and took it.

He was gently pulled through the trees. Her hand was willowy and seemed solid against his but at the same time it felt like if Harry were to tug at it, her hand would disappear entirely.

There were no other flora or fauna except for the looming trunks of eye-wateringly high evergreens. Each of them were as thick as a car and taller than even London’s structural attempts to touch the sky.

They traveled in silence as the stony shore behind them grew smaller and the glowing light before them grew brighter.

Then suddenly, like pulling in a breath, a clearing emerged from the too-tall trees. The ground was covered in greying twigs and bright red leaves.
The a strong glow burned to the left of the clearing. A small glass structure lit by hundreds of candles inside and out lit the ground at its edges and not much more.

As they neared it with silent steps Harry saw that the greenhouse-like building was nestled under a thin layer of flowering ivy.

Though the flowers were dark in colour and unlike any Harry had come across before’ they were some strange mix of petunia, violet, and peony.

Thana pushed on a small door and softly pulled Harry inside.

It was beautiful, Harry thought.

The ivy had crept inside and over the greenhouse, carpeting the floor. Rows and rows of shelves lined the back wall, holding a strange array of objects and tick tomes. Their shadows moved with the flicker of each candle surrounding them. The panes of the glass walls arched until they met in domed centers, their points touching like knights swords.

‘Here.’ Thana pushed the bottom of his back toward a thin wooden chair next to an unlit fireplace that housed candles of all shapes and sizes, all melting into the hearth.

Thana opened a cupboard and brought a tea-set from it, as she placed in on the small wooden table between them, Harry realised the cups were already full and steaming.

Despite being a Wizard for some years now, he still felt surprised about its presence here – which was ridiculous considering how odd this whole experience had been so far.

As she sat on the wooden chair opposite him, she pushed a delicate china cup to him. It side were painted with a battle scene in thin red lines. His Aunt Marge had cups like these – or well shitty imitations of the one he was holding now.

Harry looked above them whilst sipping his tea, which was exactly how he took it.

‘So, tell me about your dance with Death Harry.’ She questioned from behind her teacup.

Harry snorted. ‘Which one?’

Thana smiled knowingly; her expression filled with something akin to pity.

‘Terrible isn’t it? Being so young and yet needing me to clarify which experience. Fate’s always been interested in you – Death even more so. Such interest tends to lead to several sticky situations.’ She inclined her hand to the deep scar which graced Harry’s hand.

Harry’s skin shivered into goose-flesh. ‘I think I met him.’ He swallowed as the memory of unseen eyes and teeth clambering in a too-wide grin rushed towards him.

Thana nodded. ‘Had a rather horrible dream of him, didn’t you?’

‘Yeah.’ Harry breathed and then looked down to his hand. The scar was still there, though it was as if all the black had been sucked out of it. ‘It was.’

‘Fate was furious. It wasn’t meant to happen, not whilst you’re still unprotected and unprepared.’

None of what this woman said made sense.

‘You speak as if Fate and Death are people.’ Harry asked as his hands shook as he remembered
being chased through the too-quite field.

Thana snorted. ‘People? No – perish the thought. Though, they do exist in corporeal form – if that’s what you’re asking.’

Harry let a shudder escape. ‘Is he here?’

She reached to drop a sugar into her tea before stirring slowly and shook her head. ‘No, though it is very assertive of you to realise this place and the field in your dream are one and the same. Humans have a lot of names for where you’re sitting now. None of them quite hit the nail on the head. They used to know this place and it’s keepers, but that was a long time ago – and mortals memories are short.’

She eyed Harry’s chattering teeth then stood and pulled open another cupboard before taking another blanket out to pull around Harry. ‘Purgatory, Tartarus, the ‘beyond’ – *Hell.*’ She sat down with a mirthful look as Harry paled. ‘None of those quite fit. Neither does Heaven or Olympus – though the Greeks might have been onto something. Newer stories do tend to be beguiled whispers of older fables.’

Harry thought he understood, though none of this felt real. The day Harry had learned there was magic was the day his own realm of possibility stretched. With each new discovery in his new world he accepted the fantastical with more and more ease.

But this was probably beyond his range of accepted realities.

Only the assurance he would not meet harm and that he was not dead kept him seated.

Harry nodded slowly, not trusting his words at the moment. He could feel it now, how similar this place felt to the never-ending fields that Death chased him on. The silence, the stillness, no wand. All of it. The knowledge made Harry’s eye flit over every noticeable item in his surroundings, trying to locate the danger hidden within.

‘And Death’s story is one of the oldest.’ She added solemnly.

‘You know him?’ A shock of fear fizzled down Harry’s back and arms.

Thana turned and the shadows flitted over her face, then suddenly Harry thought he could see a resemblance to the creature that chased him in that never-ending field.

‘Yes.’ She answered.

He pushed back in his chair away from her, his heart thudding in a rapid staccato. He tripped back and then was pushing across the floor to get away from her.

Thana quickly placed the teacup back on the tray, the thud of it was too silent. She put her arms out in a mollifying gesture as she shook her head.

‘Just- let me go- please – I - please.’ He begged now terrified that he couldn’t see an exit – his wand holster awfully empty again. He pinched himself repeatedly, until the skin on his forearm began to bloom with bruises.

Thana then walked slowly with her arms out and then crouched in front of him and gently pulled his hands away from his forearm where bruises were beginning to bloom.

‘You’re not dreaming Harry. This is real and I know that frightens you. But, nothing will hurt you.’
She breathed, her white eyes staring. ‘Nothing here wants to hurt you Harry. Death- well, he’s a bastard – unsurprisingly – but he dwells elsewhere – he cannot find you here.’

She picked up the blankets which had fallen off him in his haste to get away from her before wrapping them around him again. ‘You know, we’ve had this conversation before. Many times. And each time I think it’ll be a little easier – but it never is.’ Her smiled eased the coiled tension in Harry’s chest.

Thana then pulled him up and Harry let himself be pulled back to the chair.

‘That’s why you’re here – your dream. Death asked you something when you saw him, didn’t he?’ Thana probed gently as she picked up pieces of Harry’s teacup; he hadn’t even noticed it had smashed.

‘He asked me about Hallows.’ Harry said the word numbly. ‘What are they?’

‘You find yourself a victim of change Harry. It isn’t often Fate changes the rules of her game – but when she does, the consequences can be awful.’

‘Consequences?’ Harry probed.

Thana looked at him silently for a few moments. ‘You’ve made a rather life-altering decision recently.’

Harry didn’t know if that was a question or a statement, but he nodded anyway. ‘An Armistice.’ He answered. That sounded more eloquent than admitting he’d sold himself to nip a growing War in the bud.

Thana expression remained soft as understanding flooded her features. ‘I mentioned that you have had many lives before this, which granted is an odd concept to wrap your head around. It’s the body which is mortal, not the soul. You have returned here more than most Harry and in each life it is much the same: you and Tom repeat the same awful mistakes again and again like snakes encircling, eating each other’s tails.’

Harry gasped at the mention of Tom’s name and Thana apparent knowledge of him.

She sat, placing the broken pieces on the tray and regarded him for a few beats.

‘But not this time.’ She added.

‘What do you mean?’ Harry felt a headache bloom before he questioned if souls could get headaches.

Thana then paused after taking another sip of her tea with eight sugars.

‘Show me?’ Harry swallowed around a lump in his throat as he remembered exactly what Tom’s diary had offered in his second year.

‘Fate wants you to know everything.’ She smiled as she offered yet another weak explanation.

Thana then stood and motioned for Harry to follow. They exited the greenhouse through a different door, which was hidden under a thick cover of flowering ivy.

Thana then guided him to a back garden of sorts – though it was far removed from any garden
Harry had seen before.

Trees with blackened leaves and odd shaped fruit waved in a non-existent breeze. Around them stood larges stemmed flowers, which all glowed in a luminescent blueish-green light.

Thana stopped at the edge of a small soundless brook, she put her hands into the water and pulled a dark-blue and glistening vine from it.

‘Not many people know about the Hallows, Harry – and for good reason. At one time, everyone man, woman and babe would have been able to tell you exactly what the Hallows were and what they do –.’

Thana then took Harry’s hand and place the squelching vine within it.

‘-but like all legends- time corrodes memory of their relevance and importance. Wizarding folk are far better than their Muggle counterparts at keeping old knowledge alive. I think the fact that even Wizards have forgotten for the most part shows you how old the Hallows are – even they regard the Hallows as a mere fairy-tale.’

She pulled at Harry’s fingers until they fisted over the strange, wet plant.

‘The Hallows are not strangers to you. Like me, you have met them before.’

Thana’s white eyes stared into Harry’s as if willing him to understand something.

‘They have only one purpose. And that is to find you Harry.’

‘Why me?’ Harry heart felt too heavy in his chest.

Thana then gestured to his closed fist. ‘Eat and you’ll see.’

Harry eyed the blue plant suspiciously. It reminded him of Gillyweed, though it did not smell as putrid – instead it smelled like sugared lemons - like it might be quite delicious to eat.

With one last long-suffering glare at Thana, Harry tipped the slimy plant back into his mouth and swallowed quickly.

Nothing happened at first but then Harry felt at pressure run down his chest as the vine sunk lower into him. It was like a warm hand was travelling down his chest and then the sensation changed. Icy fingers traveled up his neck before finding their destination at his temples.

Then it burned.

Harry’s eyes felt like they were being pushed into his skull. His temples were burning with a roaring flame, the sound of it bellowing in his ears.

Harry grabbed at his face, trying to pull his glasses off only to realise they weren’t there in the first place.

And yet, despite the pain – he was laughing as he crumpled to the ground.

Harry thought it might be from the shock, or simply a method for his body to gulp down enough air to douse the flames in his head.

Then light. Pure, blinding light.
The sensation of being pushed into something forcefully was like a bucket of ice-cold water over his charred head and immediately he stopped laughing.

Even as his eyes were closed for that split second, he knew he was now in a small space – his breaths sounded like his head was in a helmet.

His eyes snapped open and he saw vines. Hundreds of thousands vine weaving around him – bright blue and wet looking even in the absence of light.

Harry pivoted and saw that he was trapped – cocooned within them.

His arms flew out and he grabbed at the writhing walls surrounding him. He pushed, but they would not give.

Terrified now, he tried to claw at them and begged uselessly, his hands and nails slipping against the slimy surface.

Then his eyes zeroed in on where two tendrils were now creeping towards his feet. He tried to stamp on them, but they wrapped at his ankles and pulled.

Images of Fleur being swallowed by the maze hurled against his panicked senses.

*Not me too.* He wanted to scream, just as he did then.

He crashed against the wall with a scream as the two vines wove up his legs and thighs. Harry fingers scratched and grabbed at the twin binds, but it was useless – they kept creeping around him, reaching higher and higher until even his arms were trapped in their bind.

These plants were going to bury him alive, he thought. And like a man awake in a coffin six feet under, Harry tried to use tooth and nail to escape – with the same futility too.

Harry heaved and threw his body around as he struggled. In all of his recent brushes with death, he never thought mummification by sentient flora was how it was finally going to happen.

Well, that’s what you get for trusting strange women in strange places, his mind spat at him.

Then the two tendrils pointed at his face after weaving around his neck which was burning with his screams.

*No, no – please no.*

The vines then shot forward and pierced his eyes, sinking within before weaving around those too.

Everything turned blue before it went black.

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**Horrified,** Harry screamed and kept screaming until a scene started to pulse and bleed into his vision.

Then Harry could see again that he’d returned to the glassy waters, his feet planted heavily within the pebbles of the shore.
Harry’s now freed hands flew at his face and eyes – the vines were gone – no longer burling into his skull. He wasn’t dead. He nearly buckled with the relief of it.

His lungs felt like they might collapse with the strain of his gulping breaths.

Harry then thought he heard something move behind him. He scrambled forward to the water away from the towering forest. Away from women wielding hallucinatory plants.

‘Unusual, isn’t it?’

His eyes shot to the source of the voice. He then saw Thana’s boat.

Two women sat on it, facing Harry. His feet started to take hesitant steps back, the pebbles suddenly sounding too loud in the balmy air.

‘Yes.’ The other voice replied, seeming not to notice the terrified boy on the shore.

‘Have you seen anything like this before?’

Harry stopped when he was struck with the realisation that one of the women on the boat was Thana and that neither of the two were looking at Harry.

Instead their gazes were skyward.

‘Never. I welcome the novelty of it.’ The woman beside Thana commented before Thana snorted.

Harry thought he shouldn’t be able to hear them; they were so far away. But, again, it felt like Thana was speaking into his ear.

Harry tried to shout and wave Thana down. But she did not see or hear him.

‘I should think so.’ Thana offered. ‘We’ve both seen too much to often be surprised by new developments.’

He knew then that they couldn’t see him; and just like when he’d tipped his head into a Pensieve, he was now in a memory.

Though a Pensieve paled in comparison to this. Everything was razor-sharp and just as colourful as it was in real life – if not more so.

Thana then pointed to the sky behind Harry. He turned to see it, but whatever it was blocked by the sharp spikes of the evergreen forest.

They both gazed at the patch of sky, their eyes full of wonder.

Then Harry really wanted to see it too.

‘Care to hazard a guess as to what they are doing?’ Thana asked softly.

The elderly woman beside her shook her head. The rattle of many wooden beads adorning her threadbare cloak sounded with the movement.

‘Not a clue. Again, a lovely novelty.’ Her voice belied her old age, she sounded much younger, girlish almost.

He jumped and he could see a pulsing light which glowed like the ring around a full moon. But he
still couldn’t see what was causing it.

If Harry were more relaxed, he might have whined.

Harry turned again and backed up to the waters edge trying to get a glimpse of what they were looking at, his feet kicking several stones into the water. He still couldn’t see.

In his rapidly festering frustration, he looked at the water and thought about wading in.

‘For them to orbit each other like that -.’ Thana’s voice wavered off.

The elderly women nodded thoughtfully. ‘So bright too.’ The woman pointed to them; her finger swirled in a circular motion. ‘See how they pull the rest in too?’

Harry’s curiosity had now reached a crescendo, and he huffed before toeing the water gingerly.

But the water did not give and was solid like it had frozen over.

Harry’s foot then moved forward until he bore his whole weight on one foot.

Then another tentative step forward, then another, then another.

It’s solid. He sang victoriously inside his mind, tapping down the urge to fist the air.

Almost hunched, he moved forward over the waters surface carefully, still not trusting it wouldn’t suddenly give.

He kept glancing over his shoulder, constantly checking if he could see it yet.

It wasn’t until he’d reached the boat that he could.

For a second he was perturbed when the older woman seemed to look right at him, but her brown eyes were glazed like she was looking at something further off into the distance.

Not being able to bare it anymore, Harry turned his back on her and looked up.

In the sky, high up – there were two stars, or souls rather. They moved, unlike the rest. An they were circling each other, pulsing in tandem.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ Thana breathed.

‘It is.’ Harry found himself replying, even though neither of the two women could hear them. The souls moved in perfect sync, as if possessed to constantly follow in the path of the other.

The sky around them was coloured in a paled blue; their light bleached the sky around them.

All the other souls seemed helpless to stop themselves from being drawn in to such a perfect union.

‘Makes me wonder what will happen when they fall.’ The elderly woman smiled before her face suddenly contorted as something in the air began to crackle with tension like static before lighting struck.

Reaching out, the woman dipped her hand into the water with furrowed brows.

‘Feel that?’ The elder woman asked.

Thana sounded startled. ‘Yes.’ Her eyes widening.
Harry could feel it too.

The souls were pulsing, with every revolution they quickened. The hairs on Harry’s arms and neck rose, and the waters surface rumbled in a soft but constant vibration.

And then they started moving closer.

Harry looked at the two women who were now clutching onto each other, their mouths agape.

The stars surrounding the orbiting pair looked as if they were being pulled into them too.

They spun at a sickening pace, closer and closer, until they looked to be almost touching.

Then they did.

The stars crashed together like they were consuming each other. Harry’s eyes squinted and he tried to block the roaring light of the explosion with his hand.

Then they started falling softly.

Towards them.

Harry tried to run away as Thana flailed to grab the oars.

The souls hurtled towards them with ever increasing speed, and Harry ran with his heart in his mouth, slipping and sliding across the too-smooth surface.

With a shrieking splash they crashed into the water.

Harry paled as he saw a huge wave loom towards him, he shouted before the wave engulfed him – the force of it hurled him backwards.

The two women in the boat were jostled violently and they both yelped as they tried to grab onto the wooden edges.

Harry was also now wet again; the water’s surface had given, and he was submerged.

‘What was that?’ Thana yelled.

The elderly woman shook her head violently before banging her temple to rid the water in her.

‘I don’t know.’ She grinned manically. ‘And how bloody marvellous that is! Quick messenger, follow them – find them.’ She pushed at Thana.

Thana looked at the woman like she had lost her mind.

In a panicked manner Thana then nodded jerkily before moving to dive into the water.

Harry stared at patch of sky where the two souls had collided, and a strange sensation pulled at his gut. The explosion had scattered the other souls like dust from a chalkboard.

He bobbed in the water, quietly watching the elderly woman, wishing he could ask her for some help.

Then something wrapped around his ankles and he was yanked under the water.

Suddenly, he was thumped into a wooden chair. He blinked for a few second before taking in his
surroundings.

Black and white Wizarding photographs adorned the walls alongside medical diagrams of the human body. The linoleum floor was blanketed in dirty, wool carpets. Each of the windows were covered with a different set of curtains, some flowery and frayed at the edges – others looked the cleaner and non-descript hospital-issued kind. Art deco lamps bathed the room in a yellow light which clashed with the blue-white of fluorescent bulbs overhead.

A hospital, his mind supplied. Though the room was a mishmash of new Muggle machinery and old, yellowing fixtures. It was as if the room was spliced between a modern ward and a Gregorian bedroom.

Harry looked at the bed the chair faced and then his face contorted in confusion.

‘Push, push!’ Two different nurses shouted in tandem, their bodies seemed transparent; one overlaid the other. One was dressed in regular blue scrubs, her hair permed high, tied back with a velvet scrunchie. The other wore a longer white dress, a red cross stitched into a pocket over her breast matched her red lips.

The visual was more than a little disturbing, like a three-dimensional fata morgana.

The chimeric nurses were shouting and holding onto two different women in the same hospital bed. Harry recognised both of them.

Merope Gaunt and Lily Potter.

Harry heard the pacing of footsteps behind him, and there he was – James. His father.

All of Harry’s breath left him in a gasp.

*Mum.*

Harry wrenched himself forward to the untied bodies, both obviously in the throes of labour.

He looked back at his Dad, who was pale and clearly anxious.

‘Come, hold her hand Mr Potter – don’t let her crush it though.’ One of the nurses chuckled.

His father moved through Harry to Lily’s side, smiling down at her lovingly, though with a creased, sweating brow. His face was nought but inches from Harry’s own.

‘You’re doing so well love – that’s it – just a little bit more and we’ll get to meet our son. I’m so proud of you Lily – so, so proud.’ James whispered into her ear.

Harry’s stared at them in wonder, his grin almost bursting his face wide open.

He realised then that he was about to witness his own birth…and Tom’s.

The women struggled and writhed; it looked like they were sinking into and away from one another. Both faces were sweating, Merope was screaming – Lily was crying.

‘Go on, that’s it. Push.’ The two nurses encouraged in unison.

Harry’s hand reached out and touched Lily’s face, a face which looked gruesome with Merope’s strange features dancing over it.
His mother was in pain, Tom’s mother was in pain.

Harry felt his mother’s forehead, and gently tried to push back her red hair back – but it didn’t move.

Then both of their faces screamed – Harry felt as if Lily was looking right at him as he did.

‘No, shh. It’s okay Mum. It’s going to be okay.’ He said with a trembling voice as he held her face with shaking arms.

‘Good, here he comes! Push!’ The nurses said out of sync.

Then two wails cut through the air, thin, reedy and gargling.

Harry then heard running footsteps approached the room, then Thana burst inside. She was soaked and heaving. She stared at the bloodied infants as the curses both cut two different umbilical cords.

Thana looked around her, her face oozed confusion before it paled.

Harry watched the babes as they were both wrapped in soft cotton blankets. He couldn’t tell which of them was him, not until they were placed in their mother’s arms.

Then a strange strangled sound seemed to rip through the air.

As Lily beamed tiredly at her husband and the infant in her arms, Merope coughed up blood.

Harry jerked back, the visual was as horrifying as it was dizzying.

‘Mum.’ Harry choked out when the blood seemed to dribble down her chin too.

‘No – no you don’t Miss Gaunt! Miss Gaunt!’ The nurses finally separated as one rushed to Merope’s quivering body. Her neck and arm muscled corded with the strain of whatever her body was trying to fight.

‘What will you call him?’ Lily’s nurse asked with a happy smile as Merope’s nurses hands moved over her stomach, pressing and pushing with increasing frantic urgency.

Merope cried as she held her baby with shaking arms. Tears stained her paling cheeks as the puddle of blood underneath her pooled underneath her, turning the white sheets an awful red.

‘Harry.’ His mother said giddily.

At the same time Merope weakly gasped ‘Tom. His names Tom. After his father – Tom Riddle.’ She desperately garbled out like it was the most important thing she had ever said in her life.

The nurse tending to Merope suddenly stilled after feeling something in the woman’s abdomen.

‘I’m sorry Miss Riddle – I’m so, so sorry.’ The nurse murmured.

Harry knew this – he knew that Merope died in childbirth. But the knowledge didn’t prepare him for this.

Merope didn’t seem to notice her nurses alarm, and instead stared at Tom like he was a precious jewel.

‘So, like you father – Tom. Yes, my beautiful Tom. So, so beautiful.’ She sounded enraptured as
she stroked the baby’s forehead.

‘So…beautiful.’ She wheezed and it sounded like a balloon suddenly losing all of its air. Then Merope’s face sunk back, and Harry could see it through his own Mother’s torso.

Merope’s nurse caught Tom before he slid out of his Mother’s last embrace.

Her dead eyes stared forward. She stared at both Harry and Tom’s infant bodies as they were held in the same spot by Lily and Merope’s nurse. She had died alone whilst Harry’s parents had kissed one another in bliss.

Harry suddenly felt sick.

The elderly woman from the boat joined Thana’s side. Thana stared onto the scene completely still and expressionless.

The elderly woman’s brown eyes crinkled in sadness.

‘Born apart.’ Thana announced gesturing to the room. ‘Different times, yet they mirror.’

The elder woman looked on as if the situation was as fascinating as it was awful.

‘We should keep an eye on them – I’ll trust you with this task, faithful messenger.’

Thana bowed slightly accepting the charge. She turned away from the seen but quickly looked back worriedly before leaving the room.

Blue vines then snaked around Harry’s chest and yanked him through the wall.

They tore his eyes from the scene in front of him; his parents cuddled around an infant surrounded by pooling blood, now dripping onto the floor. Lily sat, her legs still sharing the same space as the bloodied dead body – Merope forever staring in front of her where Harry was held. Tom was crying as he was taken away from macabre scene by a shaken nurse.

The next few scenes dizzied him further.

Harry and Tom shared a body in each memory, each echoing the other like their mother’s just had.

He had already seen the first few, having lived through them and viewing Tom’s in the Pensieve. All of his experience with traversing memories did not make him any less terrified.

Harry was ripped through each of the scenes, the vines constantly pulling him backwards through rooms upon rooms. Always momentarily pausing before they snatched at his chest again.

Each of the visuals of their shared past felt like a punch in the gut.

The vines pulled him into the nursery he knew so well due to his nightmares of it. In this memory Tom and Harry had finally collided again, not as star-like souls this time – but instead in a flash of fatal green whilst Lily’s dead eyes stared unseeingly at the ground. It was just as bright as the first time they found each other, but so much more terrible.

Both of them toddlers as they were slapped by fat, imposing adults. Vernon and the matron sharing twin sneers. Harry’s ears were still ringing with his mother’s scream from the previous memory. ‘Freak.’ The guardians spat in unison before pushing the children to the floor.

In the next, Harry and Tom were spat at by the Muggle children in spliced gardens, both frosted
over with the chill of Winter.

Harry wanted to reach out to and hold them both, but the vines pulled him back before he could step forward.

He crashed through another wall; wooden splinters flew as he was unceremoniously dumped in front of a chalkboard. He spied the child versions of himself and Tom instantly. Now they were a little older – no longer toddlers. Harry watched their shared bodies in horror as he took in the familiar surroundings. The hellish St. Grogory’s Primary School mixed in with another even more austere classroom with its slate boards and starchly brown uniforms and miserable looking children – Tom’s Harry assumed. Both of them sat and stared at teachers who screamed at them – their knuckles rapt with rulers for getting their answers wrong.

He knew the next hallways intimately, though the walls were the wrong colour. Harry watched as the boy’s shared body was shoved back into their rooms by seething guardians, Harry into his cupboard – Tom into his grey, dank room. They both fell back and yelped. As mirror images, each flew forward - both screaming to be let out, thumping their respective doors.

Thana dark figured watched all the scenes of their miserable childhoods as Harry did; pale and sickened.

_They found out about the Wizarding world in tandem._

‘A Wizard? Me?’ They both asked stunned in dark rooms as Dumbledore and Hagrid both nodded, one happily – the other slowly with tight features.

_The day they found their wands was the first time Thana truly smiled at what she was witnessing._

‘…inches, Phoenix feather core.’ Two Ollivander’s said merrily as Harry and Tom grinned at their wands.

_Both poured over the diary with furrowed brows in vacant common rooms. The scratch of their quills following the same beat as did their murmured whispers._

Harry and Tom being pulled by their shoulder by burly boys, one ginger and the other shockingly blond. ‘You can speak to snakes?’ The eyewatering mash of blond and red hair asked incredulously.

‘Nothing wrong with that.’ Thana huffed indignantly, invisible to both Harry and Tom.

Then the entrance to the Chamber of Secret loomed in front of Harry. ‘Open.’ Harry and Tom hissed after their fingers grazed the metal snake carved into the silver tap.

Harry running from the Basilisk as Tom was running towards it. Thana had screamed at him to run, her fingers reaching forward as if she wanted to save him.

They constantly mirrored each other in each memory, each awful scene – most of which Harry did not want to have to witness again.

Tom’s head and shoulders rising as his classmates glared, whilst Harry hunched, cowering under his peers scrutiny.

_Being sent back to homes that loathed them._

‘You’re not wanted here, boy. You should be grateful we’re willing to take you in at all!’ Vernon
and the Matron growled together before slamming doors in the young teens faces.

Even Dumbledore’s suspicion of them was the same. ‘Is there something you wish to tell me?’ ‘Nothing sir.’ Dumbledore, young and old staring at them both for a beat too long. ‘Very well.’ Dumbledore acquiesced.

What Harry saw next was not anything he had experienced. Yet there was his naked body under Vernon’s rutting form. Tom was being lashed from behind too, although with a clothed guardian with a belt. Both of them shared the same expression; dark, stoic, murderous as the belt slashed and his Uncle grunted.

Thana stared on, thick tears rolling down her cheeks as her fists shook with white clenched knuckles.

Harry legs gave from underneath him as the vines heaved him back again. No more. He begged. Please, no more. Harry wanted to gouge his own eyes out – there was no way that could have happened.

The vines pulled him back a little more gently after that.

He gasped through the next few memories, trying to swallow back the rising bile.

Tom and Harry were then staring at music sheets with pinched brows. Their fingers moving with the same hesitancy and frustration in perfect synchronicity. Thana and the elder woman clapped along when they both became more confident. The same pieces, the same hunched figures.

Then he saw his own youthful, fervent expression as he held his fathers cloak for the first time. It was the same as Tom’s as he looked upon the Gaunt ring.

The memories began to bleed and burn together, the two of them always sharing the same body, moving in tandem with the same lethal grace.

Tom was casting Avada Kedavra at his parents as Harry’s parents sprang to save him from the very same man and spell in Riddle’s graveyard.

Harry’s eyebrows rose at the next completely unfamiliar memory. He looked older than he was now when Dumbledore brandished the Gaunt ring with a blackened hand as the snake-like Voldemort showed it off to his Death Eaters on his thin, spindly fingers.

And yet, Harry felt like these memories were his. He could remember everything from this other life he had not yet lived. His mind scrambled to rationalise was he was witnessing. Was this his and Tom’s future? Had Thana given him a piece of what was yet to come?

Tom and Harry both looked like young men as they palmed the Slytherin locket resting below their throats, their eyes fluttering in unison as they did. They were both too thin and their eyes were dark and sunken like they had been starved.

They both held the Hugglepuff cup above their heads in triumph - they had both waited so long for it, now it was finally in their grasp!

He watched with rising confusion and certainty at what he was watching. This older version of Harry’s memories were now his too. The Horcrux hunt, the War, the deaths, the loneliness and weight of baring such an awful prophecy on his shoulders.

The vines placed Harry on a massive tower of odd objects. He watched as memory-Harry walked
step-for-step with Tom through towering piles of discarded things, taking the same path with the
same hurried steps. Then they both paused suddenly, looking around before one took the diadem
from their pocket placing it down carefully. The other then plucked it back up in a frenzied rush,
needing to hurry back to his friends.

Twin silent screams roared soundlessly from them as they thrust their arms out. Harry was trying to
catch Dumbledore as he fell, Tom was trying to reach out an invisible hand to strangers who
simply passed him, unable to hear his screams in his ghost-like form.

‘The Master of Death?’ Harry questioned sceptically Luna Lovegood’s erratic father.

‘Vol-de-Mort. Fly from Death? What kind of name is that?’ One of Tom’s Knights questioned
whilst chucking before he was silenced with by Tom’s Crucio.

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches.*

The Deathly Hallows passing from hand-to-hand over eons – constantly searching, constantly
seeking. Harry watched his and Tom’s ancestors pass the ring and the cloak from father to son
rapidly, like flipping through a photo album as he was constantly pulled into scene after scene. He
saw his own father hold the cloak for the first him, his smile was just like Harry’s had been when
he had been gifted it. The wands journey had been far more bloody, each hand it passed to an from
turned cold an dead.

*Born to those who have thrice defied him.*

‘Join me.’ Tom had asked James when Lily tummy was round with her child.

*Neither can live whilst the other survives.*

Harry folded the cloak and tucked it away in his trunk in the Gryffindor dorm.

*Born as the seventh month dies.*

‘Join me.’ Tom bared his teeth as James refused him yet again, red eyes flickering to the feminine
figure with flowing auburn hair in the doorway – two pairs of green eyes stared back, but Tom
couldn’t tear his eyes from the smaller set.

*Neither can live whilst the other survives.*

Harry’s parents, Sirius and Remus all guiding him through the forest to his death before he dropped
the Resurrection Stone on the forest floor.

*And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal.*

‘Join me!’ Tom screamed at James before striking Harry’s father down when he’d denied him for
the third and last time.

*Neither can live whilst the other survives.*

Harry smiling at a bloodied Ron and Hermione before snapping the Elder Wand then hurling it off
the bridge, Hogwarts in flames behind him.

*Either must die at the hand of the other.*

Harry and Voldemort desperately trying to kill each other. Voldemort grasping the Elder wand
desperately as Harry held onto Malfoy’s. Their wands locked together as the red streaming from
Harry’s wand slowly engulfed Tom’s green Killing Curse. The dead bodies of Harry’s friends and enemies lay strewn in rubble and dust.

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches.*

Harry felt like he was being pulled through cool waters as the vines tugged him into the next scene. The memories continued to flood forward as if he had lived this life. Harry’s fingers grazed his chest and neck, touching them to see if the scars were now on his body too.

This new place had the same still, thick air as the place Thana nicknamed Peace did. Then Harry knew it was one and the same.

‘Harry, you brave, brave man. Let us walk.’ Dumbledore’s spectre gestured down the too-white station. The world between final destinations.

A bloodied foetus whimpered and moaned – in agony once again.

‘Professor, what is that?’ Harry asked as the space in his chest felt too hollow and completely barren.

‘Something beyond either of our help. A part of Voldemort, sent here to die.’

Harry stared at the small body, and he held a painful breath trying to fill the now gaping hole in his chest.

When he married Ginny, when he first held each of his children, every birthday, every Christmas, every kiss, every ‘I love you’, every grandchild – always the space in his chest remained hollow.

Harry then stood at another hospital bed and he stared on numbly. Old and wrinkled, Harry’s last breath escaped him – surrounded by those he loved most. But Harry did not fear death, not as much as he mourned the hole forever present in his chest.

‘Finally.’ Was Harry’s last thought before his eyes closed for the last time.

Then they returned to the sky above balmy air and a glassy pool of water; orbiting, circling, drawing closer and closer until once more they crashed together violently.

Tom rose from the cauldron, his eyes never leaving Harry’s. His blood running through both of their veins.

‘I can touch you now.’ Voldemort barked with a crazed laugh as Thana shook her head solemnly.

*Finally,* Harry’s last thought echoed.

She was crying again. In most of the memories she wept for them. Harry sobbed too.

They both screamed when they finally did touch again.

The vines released their grip as he slumped in the final memory. Thana sat in the vacant chair across from Voldemort who now had bright silver eyes instead of scabby red. His brown hair was haloed by the light of the fire.

It was the only memory were Harry and Tom did not share a body.

‘Master, why do you seek immortality?’ Nagini asked quietly as she coiled around Tom’s shoulders.
Tom flinched before he schooled himself into passivity.

‘Why does anyone? To live outside the shadow of death.’ He answered calmly before taking a long sip of honeyed whisky.

‘Why do you fear death?’ She hissed as her head rounded to meet his gaze.

‘I always have.’ He admitted comfortably. ‘I fear it with all of my soul.’

‘And yet you have willingly given up all the other Horcruxes?’ She queried.

‘Yes. It was worth it.’ He nodded with a slow smile.

‘It would seem that you would go to any length for the boy.’ She commented with a huff.

Tom swirled the glass in front of him, the liquid a swirl of caramel, amber, and yellow.

‘I would.’

‘Why?’

Tom looked into the fire; his pupils fully dilated. ‘So that I can finally have him.’ He answered with a broken smile.

The elderly woman joined Thana once more with a tired smile on her lips.

Thana beamed at her. ‘My, Fate you’ve outdone yourself.’ Thana inclined her head back to Tom’s silent figure.

Fate shrugged. ‘The Hallows are tired and so am I.’

Thana snapped her fingers and two glasses filled with red wine appeared, she gave one to Fate.

Harry watched them very so often, but he couldn’t tear his eyes from Tom for very long.

‘To new beginnings.’ Thana toasted.

‘To novelty.’ Fate returned happily.

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Then Harry was sucked back in to the cocoon of vines, the two tendrils shuddered around him then loosened gently. His eyes still burned, but he was too listless to rub at them.

The cocoon released him, and he fell on his back and laid in the soft grass of Peace trying to stay his own lungs and heart. He stared blankly at the souls shining in the sky above him.

He felt Thana crouch next to him as his stomach lurched. She pulled him up into a sitting position before he hunched over and threw up a blueish liquid.

‘Those weren’t my memories.’ He gasped as the last of the bile left him.

‘Not all of them, not in this life.’ Thana offered gently. ‘But they are yours Harry.’

‘You have, you did.’ Thana murmured as she pulled him up again to sit on a bench overlooking the brook.

Harry slumped forward, his head in his hands as each of the memories danced and thudded behind his eyelids.

‘I have watched you both for centuries – I don’t have enough fingers and toes to count how many. It’s always the same. Your lives are spent in constant orbit of one another, drawing each other in – all so that one might consume the other.’

Thana played with the hem of her gossamer, dusty, moth-eaten skirts.

‘I’d seen some of that in the Pensieve.’ Harry admitted, his mind still reeling. ‘We are the same.’ He muttered dejectedly.

‘I usually show you this at the end of your life. Each time after you’ve seen it all I offer you two options; to either sink into the waters and sleep forever, or to return to the sky once more and repeat everything you’ve just witnessed.’

Harry thought about it, and sleeping forever did sound awfully tempting.

‘You always ask where Tom is. And then you always choose to return to him, to repeat the cycle even though it makes you sick.’

Harry looked out at the brook where the blue vines floated with in soundless bubbling surface.

‘That’s our future? We both suffer, then I kill him and suffer some more?’ He gestured angrily to where the cocoon lay open like a cracked egg, its vines now dry and crumbling.

Harry remembered that emptiness he’d felt in his old age, constantly wanting and waiting for it to end, to feel whole again. The same emptiness filled him now as he rubbed at his barren chest.

‘Not in this life. As I said earlier- Fate has changed the rules of her game.’

‘Why me?’ He shouted. ‘Why wait for me of all people?!’

Thana huffed shortly. ‘Because you reject them at each juncture Harry and they are sick of waiting.’

‘Death needs a Master, and you are the perfect candidate.’ Thana stared at him unblinkingly. ‘You have defied Death in every life. Even when it was so awfully tempting, you returned- even when Death offered to return all your loved one whom you have lost fighting the man your where destined to kill. The Hallows have waited for you patiently for eons Harry, because you solely are worth the wait.’

‘You showed me all of this because I snapped a wand and dropped a fucking stone?’ Harry questioned in a snappish manner. Harry flew up to his feet and began pacing so that he might not hit something, hard. ‘I don’t want them. That hasn’t changed. I know what that kind of power does to people. I didn’t need to remember all of that Thana. And now I feel like I’m going insane because I have.’ Harry spat.

Walking to his death in that dark forest. Waiting for death every moment after he returned.

‘I show you this time and time again because you are the only one who can keep a leash on Death without succumbing to the power he would offer in return for his freedom!’ She snapped back.
He wondered for a moment if this is how Tom felt when he merged with his Horcruxes; not being whole but instead suddenly as the sum of many fragmented parts.

In Harry’s mind he was at once a child, teen, a man, and dying in old age all at once – knowing how that felt, remembering things he hadn’t done himself. The sum of his whole life was now embedded in his own mind and it was maddening.

Thana rose to meet Harry head on. ‘Fate has given you both a gift Harry. What? You would prefer to remain a slave to that awful, awful cycle? You can’t seriously think Tom does. I can’t imagine a greater Hell than the eons you have both spent wanting and needing each other only to lose each other again and again – always waiting, always seeking.’

Harry recoiled with a jerk. The notion that he and Tom were fated to always seek each other out made him feel sick. Why would Harry ever want such a monster? The same monster who had beaten him, who time after time tried to kill him and relished each time he nearly did.

‘The Armistice?’ Harry asked incredulously. ‘You call that a gift?!’

‘It is and you know it!’ Thana shouted before grabbing Harry’s shoulders. ‘You have no idea how special you both are. Soul’s don’t just randomly appear in our sky and then change that course of fate when they crash to Earth. You both burned so brightly.’ Thana began to sob. ‘We both watched, amazed and then in complete despair ever since. The cycle is now broken All Fate asks in return is that you accept the Hallows, to become the Master of Death.’

Thana let him go when she saw the hard set of Harry’s jaw.

‘If you don’t, Death will find you both – you know more than anyone that there are fates worse than simply drawing your last breath. You and Tom have both defied him too many times. Between Horcruxes and rejected offers he is now salivating over the thought of claiming you. And make no mistake Harry, that dream has thoroughly whetted his appetite. He’ll take you both and everyone else with you.’

Thana sighed and sat back down on the bench. ‘Death exists for one thing only – to destroy and claim the ruins. If he could he would destroy everything- and he has, several times before. He would again if not for Fate’s manipulations. I witnessed that level of destruction first hand; it is how I came to be who I am today.’

Harry paused. ‘You witnessed it?’

Thana nodded slowly, looking away from Harry. ‘I was one of the first souls, the first trail in the grand experiment we called life. There were few of us then, only a small village. We called it Eden.’

‘I thought that was a garden?’ Harry queried with furrowed brows.

Thana smiled though it did not reach her eyes. ‘Another modicum of truth within poorly informed legends.’

‘And it was destroyed by Death?’ Harry’s eyebrows rose.

‘Yes. Death is always hungry, and there were too few of us to satisfy his appetite. So, one day he burned everything – all of it. Every man, woman, child, flora and fauna alike. There was nothing but fire and ash. Nothing – except me. I ran Harry. I ran from the fire and Death’s fury. I had just lost everything, everyone I loved – my husband, my children all dead, burned alive before my eyes.’
Thana then chuckled humourlessly. ‘Then Death caught me and offered me what he offered you too. To move on, to be reunited with my loved ones. And like you, I refused him. I thought how dare he, how dare he take everything from me, to make them suffer in agony to the just smile and ask to burn me too. Then he cursed me, told me that I was never die – that I would always walk the earth alone...forever.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Harry whispered, horrified.

Thana shook her head. ‘That was an age ago. Fate admires those who can resist that kind of temptation. And like you she gifted me something precious; I was charged to look after all the souls that had been lost to me and had returned to the sky. To watch the water and deliver those who can be saved.’

‘And the Hallows?’

‘Created that very same day. Fate was sickened by what she saw. She used to trust Death you know. But after that she’d had enough of his appetite. You see Harry, nothing tethers Death to the living. He can eat and eat and there are no consequences for when he goes too far. So, Fate created the Hallows and charged them with one task – to find the being who could control Death and the power he wields without succumbing to it themselves.’

Then Thana was smiling again. ‘That’s why they keep returning to you no matter how many time to reject them, because you’re the only one who can.’

‘And if I accept them?’ Harry asked as he stood in front of Thana.

‘You can save everyone from that awful hunger. And make no mistake about it Harry, nearly catching you in that dream has whetted his appetite. He hungers for you and Tom in particular, he sees you both as prizes - and he’ll fight tooth and nail to finally claim you both.’

Harry shuddered which thought of mass extinction, gnashing teeth, and running from terrible creatures swam in his mind.

He thought of all of his friends, his family being burned and having to watch the earth blaze until there was nothing left. His new memories came forward then; the pain of losing Sirius and Remus. Andromeda and Molly’s pain over losing their children. The way George wept at Fred’s funeral. Mad Eyed Moody’s eye in Umbridge’s office door. Hedwig. The countless others who had met grizzly ends in a War they did not ask for.

A War that had been narrowly avoided by Fate’s manipulation.

Harry smiled at the woman who had watched him all these centuries and he felt something loosen inside of him.

‘Okay.’ He breathed. ‘Fine. I’ll do it.’ He said quietly.

A slow grin bloomed on Thana’s features. She lunged forward and grabbed him, hugging him so hard she nearly crushed him.

‘Thank you.’ She whispered in his ear. Thana then pushed him back before wiping under her eyes. ‘That’s -great. That’s really-.’ She warbled happily.

Harry regarded her for a few seconds before he cleared his throat. ‘eh,so speaking of accepting grand titles and all that – any chance you know how I might get back? Don’t want Tom thinking I’m dead...again.’
Thana barked a laugh and then nodded jerkily as she sniffled. ‘Of course, of course. Though, speaking of – Fate’s got a gift for him too, if you’re willing to deliver it?’

‘Oh?’ Harry queried hesitantly, no looking forward to another well-meaning manipulation.

‘Yes - come with me and I’ll show you.’

Thana grabbed his hand and then they ran back through the forest to the shore front before Thana all but pushed Harry onto the wooden boat.

As Thana rowed furiously, Harry looked back up at the patch of sky where he and Tom had once collided. The thought of returning to Tom somehow soothed Harry and he had to wonder why. Why they orbited and crashed together constantly before living as reflections of one another.

‘Here.’ Thana announced as she stayed the boat. Harry arched a brow other when nothing obvious happened. Thana then grinned excitedly before whistling – loudly.

Harry’s eyes then followed at disturbance in the water, a body breaking the surface.

He looked over the boat and his eyes widened when he took in the form underneath.

It was Tom.

‘What - How?’ He spluttered.

‘The Chamber of Secrets. This is the part of Tom that was held in the diary. That there-.’ She pointed to his sleeping, submerged body. ‘It well over a third of his soul.’

Harry then reached forward and touched his chest, a mournful sensation rose in his chest.

‘He was lost.’ He said to himself.

‘Fate wants you to return him to Tom. And given his current temperamental nature due to his lack of a soul- he can only only improve if given more stability.’ Thana said around a small smile.

He wanted to sneer and kick the body away - Tom had beaten him mercilessly and Harry had broken because of it. But after everything he'd just seen - all those memories and experiences that flooded forward- Harry found he couldn't.

Tom was Harry's reflection, the face he now saw in every decision he'd ever made.

He wanted nothing more than to have Tom in his arms again.

'Go on, bring him up.' Thana encouraged with a nudging elbow.

Harry's heart soared before standing and jumping into the water. He pulled at Tom’s body and with Thana's help he pushed Tom onto the boat.

‘How do I bring him back?’ Harry asked as Thana pulled him up too.

‘A kiss.’ She said airly. ‘Sleeping Beauty is another fable drawn from old knowledge. Kiss him here, then kiss Tom when you return – the soul will travel back to him through it.’

Harry’s cheeks flushed. Thana giggled before pointedly turning her head away to give him some privacy.
Did Harry even want to save this man? He had tried to kill him - God, Tom hated him. Always had, and maybe always will.

But then Harry thought back to hungry kisses and needy moans and his hesitancy floated away.

His hands touched Tom’s wet chest unbidden. He was still wearing his Slytherin uniform, and he looked the same age as Harry was now – he probably was.

Harry stared at his pale lips as he thought about what this version of Tom had said in the Chamber.

I have been waiting for you since we arrived here.

Killing Mudbloods doesn’t matter to me anymore. For many months now, my new target has been you.

Those words passed through the same lips he now couldn’t tear his eyes away from.

Harry hadn’t been able to tear himself from dreams that had followed after he’d slayed the Basilisk. He had dreamed of these lips every night for months afterwards.

And each morning he had woken up terribly ashamed.

Filthy.

Disgusting.

After have lived in years of quiet, hollow misery after slaying Tom in that final Battle, the notion of shame became laughable.

Harry then dipped his head down, and with a feather light touch, he pressed his tingling mouth against the cold of Tom.

The kiss was forever and only for a few fleeting moments.

And then Tom turned to vapour and Harry greedily inhaled him inside his mouth.

Harry then shook with the cold sensation that filled him. The same sensation quickly filled the hole in his chest which had been ever-present since he’d been pulled from these waters.

Harry chest felt so full that it might burst, but anything was better than that terrible emptiness.

‘Home time Harry.’ Thana murmured softly over his hunched form.

With one last hug and a kiss on his cheek she then tipped him overboard and he sank down, sinking lower and lower into shadowed waters.

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Hello my sweets! Did yah miss me?

I missed me too. This past week I had lost myself to a sea of dissertations, assessments, and deadlines.

Not. Pretty.
Tell me what you think of the media at the top. I love me a good mood board, do you?

Sorry for the longer-than-usual update - though it is exam season so FORGIVE ME JESUS.

Not to mention I've rewritten this chapter this six times and I'm still tetchy about it.

My security issues are running rampant.

Tell me whatcha think tell me whatcha feel, hmmmmmm?

Love you all, please sound off below whilst I lick the many paper cuts I have due to lofty University expectations.
‘I think we should give you a name.’ Tom had announced.

‘A name?’ The Horcrux replied, his amused tone covering the shock somewhat. ‘Whatever for?’ He kept his smile light and airy around the harsh hiss of Parseltongue.

He wanted to scream.

He was Harry. His name was Harry. He was also Tom, but he had discarded that name the moment that young soul had healed him.

The Horcrux knew it was a difficult concept for others to wrap their heads around. Even Tom with multiple selves roaming inside him didn’t seem to quite grasp it.

‘I’m beginning to tire of referring to you as ‘it’ or ‘creature’.’ Tom said coolly as he squinted his eyes against the morning sun.

‘Oh?’ The Horcrux said as he stepped over another fallen tree. ‘You don’t risk offending me if you do. Though it’s understandable that you still want to think of me and my other wayward soul as separate beings – we are right now I suppose.’

It had been Nagini’s idea to roam the forest that surrounded Slytherin Crest. She had complained that they were both too pale, and could use the fresh air.

Neither he nor Tom had been instantly enamoured by the demand guised as a polite request. Spring had yet to fully set in and the last clutches of Winter still hung in the air. But, both he and Tom...
knew that Nagini’s rages were frightful and her mothering tendencies needed to be sated.

What surprised the Horcrux most was that she had referred to them both as her ‘Masters’ – the pluralism left the Horcrux gobsmacked momentarily.

And now Tom was offering to refer to him as something human – a thinking, felling being – and an autonomous one at that.

But, the notion of autonomy hadn’t sat well with him for the majority of two decades.

Nagini continued up ahead, chasing a rabbit or some other poor defenseless creature. He knew the familiar was simply toying with the poor thing, instinctively relishing in its fright, she could catch even the fastest hare in a matter of seconds.

‘You are him. He is you. I know.’ Tom nodded, his eyes downcast. ‘But you are me also.’ He added carefully, knowing that this was thin ice. ‘You are you also.’

The Horcrux stared at his previous self for a few beats with a strange feeling in his chest. Knowing, wanting, having, being, loving - they all swam in the bottom of his stomach. It was like having a twin and an unrequited lovelorn crush in the same instance. It might have felt incestuous or narcissistic if the Horcrux didn’t feel so wholly woven into the fabric which was Harry James Potter, a sixteen-year-old boy with his own hopes, dreams, and, desires.

He did. He was. He would always be.

Though he knew Harry and he diverged in some fashion. This version of Harry was more than happy to act on his desires, wants and needs. The greater soul piece that was currently absent offer their dynamic a more wholehearted attempt at restraint; he dismissed and hid a lot of things in favour of embarrased dignity. Harry cooled the Horcruxes rage and hate, he severed the murderousness and replaced it with forced kindness and a need to understand those around him – to help where he could instead of destroying everything when it became too much.

For that, the Horcrux would be forever grateful – because of it, he loved Harry. Loved him his chosen family with all of his heart.

He loved him because he had gifted him love.

In that spirit, the Horcrux decided to unfurl the reins on the notion of complete and utter unity with his Harry, his greater soul piece.

When he and Harry would meet, maybe the Horcrux would need a name. After they meet, Harry wouldn't just merely know of him nor continue thinking of the Horcrux in abstract, object-like terms. The Horcrux would suddenly become a person, a thinking, feeling thing. Then Harry would have to come to terms with not being the sole occupier of his own mind and body for all of these years.

The thought brought ice into his veins. He knew Harry like he knew himself. But, the Horcrux was never the one latched onto – Harry was. In that moment he felt every bit like that parasite he was.

‘Do you have any you would suggest?’ The Horcrux continued with the same unaffected tone.

The forest was just on the cusp of bursting into green, lush life again. The trees were threatening to bloom soon, their beds almost shivering with the need to shoot forward with thick leaves and blossom which promised the baring of ripe, juicy fruits.
Tom looked at him for a short time, as if considering his options. Naming someone was difficult apparently – but whatever Tom uttered he would take and keep for himself. It would be his and his only. He thought of both Harry and Tom using it one day and a happy, golden feeling washed out the ice in his veins.

But then that would mean he'd never be *Harry* and that swiftly depressed him.

Then he knew Harry should return soon before the concept of autonomy grew arms and legs.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps something already familiar to you?’ Tom suggested.

‘Well, me and my absent soul can’t share the same name – defeats the purpose of a name really. Not to mention how awfully complicated it would make everything.’ The Horcrux wondered if Tom was catching on to the unbidden sarcasm in his voice.

Tom snorted. ‘No – I don’t think you should be called Harry. I couldn’t imagine the headache if you were.’

‘Perhaps ‘Thing Two’ then?’ The Horcrux chuckled thinly as he stopped to end down to get a closer look at some alpina violets that had flourished a tad too early. ‘Always loved Dr Seuss – I have the hair for it too!’ He beamed at Tom whilst pulling at his unruly locks, though the smile felt cracked at the corners.

Tom kneeled alongside him and offered him a small pair of tongs and corked jar.

‘No. You’re not a thing.’ Tom said softly. ‘And you’re not secondary to something else either.’

The Horcrux stilled, his arm extended and ready to pluck at the wet petals.

When he looked at Tom then, he could only really see him through Harry’s eyes. The grey eyes were not looking at him, though he wanted them to. Then burned in the morning light like molten silver. His lips were beautiful when they held that small smile too. The Horcrux finally understood what people had meant when they had called him beautiful all those years ago, when he was still a teen drowning in psychoticism and cold hatred.

Tom was magnetic, awfully so.

The Horcrux hid his musings under another laugh. ‘Horus then. Horus the Horcrux – has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it.’

Tom groaned as the Horcrux plucked the petals. ‘You’re not naming yourself after that pathetic excuse for a potions professor either.’

He snorted. ‘No? I thought you quite liked him – if that was even possible back then.’

Then the Horcrux knew he had led them both in muddied waters. For the past month they had both resolutely avoided the topic of their shared history. Failure to do so had resulted in the worst of their arguments and strained their tentative co-habitancy further.

Tom always bristled when the Horcrux mentioned his intimate knowledge of his childhood, the tense teen years or the murderousness of his adulthood. The fact that someone knew all of his closely guarded secrets put Tom’s teeth on edge. Knowing that the Horcrux knew it did only fanned the flames of his ire.

In one really bad argument the Horcrux had mentioned Hepzibah Smith again – the only woman
who had shown Tom genuine kindness. She was the only person Tom ever regretted having killed.

Hepzibah had accepted Tom for what he was. She knew his fascination for the Dark Arts and instead of shunning him for it, had instead shown him the beauty of it. Over many tomes and cups of ginger tea, she’d revealed the mostly overlooked applications of the most hated art. How it wasn’t all death, doom and gloom but instead a medium where sacrifice, pain, and sin could be transformed into cures, protections, and alternative treatments for even the most diseased bodies and minds.

‘You know blood-wards are a form of Dark magic?’ She had asked as she passed Tom a biscuit – ginger like the tea.

‘I didn’t know that.’ He had replied as he accepted a biscuit in one hand and the book she had just picked up in the other.

‘Ach, aye – all blood magic is. It’s utility is just found in destruction, but also in fortification and sanctuary too.’ As she had said it, something tight loosened in his chest.

His obsessive need for immortality had waned somewhat after he had left Hogwarts. He didn’t feel so needy for it once he had surrounded himself with likeminded individuals who didn’t hold him in contempt nor fear him.

Meeting and knowing Hepzibah had been a sobering experience. It made him think a little on what a peaceful life would look like. He would always champion the Dark Arts and his Slytherin heritage – but could he do so and still live harmoniously with others? He had never been comfortable with other beings before Hepzibah who knew the depths of the dark inside Tom but was too polite to push him for details. He expected Hepzibah had had the same darkness once too, maybe had even murdered for some of her well-polished artefacts-come-trophies she surrounded herself with.

‘Not all Dark is evil.’ She said proudly. ‘Magic is not dichotomous either. It’s all shades and sorts.’

Tom wanted that. He wanted that confidence and the happiness that came with it too.

But he lost that when he murdered her.

She had caught him stealing the cup in the dead of night. Hepzibah was a curse fist, ask questions later sort of person. Tom more or less confirmed Hepzibah’s murderous streak there and then. She didn’t see it was him, only thought it had been one of the many petty thief’s that were stupid enough to chance their arms with her collection – which was so heavily guarded it would make an Azkaban guard shudder.

She had sent an Entrail-Expelling Curse which had only missed him by mere millimetres, and so suddenly frightened, he responded instinctually with a Killing Curse.

When she fell, Tom did too. Then for years after the nightmare of it fuelled his need for the security of immortality and the unfeeling madness it afforded him.

So, when the Horcrux spat her name at Tom in an argument over the still-absent Harry – Tom had seen red.

They didn’t speak again for a week after that.

The Horcrux waited with bated breath as he stood and waited for Tom’s rage over the jibe he just
made.

It didn’t come.

Instead he huffed. ‘Nobody liked the man. You know that.’

‘At least you didn’t have to suffer Snape’s tutelage.’ The Horcrux smiled, though Tom wouldn’t know it was with relief.

‘I could imagine it was ghastly.’ Tom motioned for them both to continue walking. ‘There was no love lost there, I heard.’

‘No, but it’s better now. Despite my apprehension, the Occulmency lessons helped.’

‘Ah – yes. I was wondering how you managed to stay hidden all through that.’

‘Not much to hide except the memories. And they had been buried long before either Snape or Dumbledore tried to pry.’ The Horcrux smiled as Nagini finally pounced on the rabbit she had been chasing in a dizzy circle.

Tom stopped at a tree that had red fungus creeping up its sides. He’d take out another smaller jar before he spoke again.

‘I’ll admit I was surprised when you said you wouldn’t continue to hide yourself from Harry.’ He said it softly, but the Horcrux knew there was an edge of curiosity that demanded elaboration on his part.

The Horcrux produced a small utility knife when the tongs proved incapable of prying the spores off. Tom regarded him archly as he took the tool before thanking him.

‘Me too.’ The Horcrux breathed. ‘But he deserves to know, especially as I have acted on his behalf for nearly two months now.’ He watched as Tom cut the bark off of the tree with skillful grace before ignoring the swell of need the image brought.

‘And our memories?’ Tom leveled him a cold glance which told the Horcrux to be careful with how he answered.

‘Yours. Not mine. And it will remain that way. The cross he bares is heavy enough without them.’ He said as Tom passed the utility knife back. Where their fingers had grazed now thrummed and tingled.

‘Good.’ Tom uncharacteristically sighed in relief before tilting his head side to side like he was pondering between two decisions. ‘What about Thomas?’

The Horcrux rose a high eyebrow at that. ‘Name myself in your honour? I think not.’ He dismissed the awful suggestion with a wave.

‘And there I was thinking it was quite a lustrous offer.’ Tom smirked at him.

‘It’s not.’ The Horcrux titled his head. ‘In fact, I might even go as far to say it’s somewhat narcissistic.’

Tom shrugged. ‘It’s like your old name.’

The Horcrux snorted, knowing that saying ‘yours, not mine’ was an overused statement between them at this point.
Then the Horcrux thought on it a little more. ‘Your suggestion stinks, but it has some merit to it.’ They both walked up a steep incline that lead to a stunning valley of bluebells with a small pond.

‘Oh?’ Tom queried lightly, though still clearly put out that his offer had not been jumped on.

The Horcrux jogged ahead to the pond. ‘A variation of a name sounds quite nice.’ He shouted back to Tom’s strolling figure.

‘Of Harry’s?’ Tom said loudly as he bent down to forage something which had caught his eye.

‘Yeah.’ The Horcrux spied some orange buds under the waters surface and his heart leapt. Ephedra – otherwise known as ‘Wet Werewolf’ was a plant which is highly reactive to the full moon phase. It’s sugary pollen attracts all sorts of magical water-dwelling creatures because of its potent healing properties.

But it was notoriously averse to magical means of extraction. Not that the Horcrux could use magic right now anyway – nor would he be comfortable asking Tom to aid him, all moon-phase themed animosity considered.

He bent down to test the water on his fingers – it wasn’t frozen, but it wasn’t exactly tepid either.

‘Well? Out with it.’ The Horcrux jumped when Tom’s voice sounded right behind him.

For a split second he thought Tom was speaking about the plant, but then realised he had been referring to the name.

The Horcrux then smiled luxuriously at the taller man. He shucked off his jacket and laughed at how Tom had began to frown in confusion.

When he’d divested himself of his shirt, Tom’s eyes roamed.

‘I’ve thought of one. Don’t know if Harry would be too happy about it though.’ He continued to grin at Tom’s obvious discomfort.

‘Can’t be that bad.’ Tom croaked before clearing his throat.

‘Have to wait and see, won’t we?’ Tom’s eyes zeroed to where the Horcrux’s thumbs were inside the band of his trousers. Those same thumbs shook a little as he tried to seem unaffected by that heated stare.

‘See what?’ Tom gasped softly, obviously unbidden and not referring to the name choice.

The Horcrux slowly pulled down his trousers, holding Tom’s stare the entire time he did.

‘How he feels about me taking his middle name.’ He said around a smile.

‘Middle name?’ Tom spoke like his mind was too far gone to know what a middle name was as he breathing became laboured.

‘Yes – please tell me you know what it is?’ The Horcrux bit his lip, reeling from this merciless tease.

‘James.’ Tom exhaled, his pupils fully dilated.

That done something strange to the Horcrux. Something heated and a little unstable.
'So glad you remembered. Though perhaps a variation would be more tasteful – we did kill him in cold blood.' The Horcrux tried for an indignant huff, but it sounded much more carnal than he had intended. Harry’s anger was his anger after all – though that anger seemed to be doing nothing except fuelling his lust at the moment.

Tom’s fist clenched at his sides and the Horcrux knew he was willing himself to stay still.

‘What are you doing?’ Tom asked before licking his lips nervously.

The Horcrux grinned before cooling his features into mock-seriousness. ‘Getting wet Tom.’ He said innocently.

He drank in Tom’s hunger before he let out a full bellied laugh and running into the bloody freezing waters with a yelp.

He dove in, even though his body cringed against the assault of cold. The Horcrux used a little of the power Death had mistakenly gifted him to push down hard and fast towards the ephedra. Harry’s body relished the exertion of being pushed past its limits – always had. The Horcrux thought of his previous body’s slothful nature and narrowly avoided snorting in water as he laughed to himself.

There were fewer pleasures to him now than the burn of going too hard and too fast. It was another gift Harry had given him.

The Horcrux was careful to pull the keep the roots of the rare plant intact so that he could collect samples of the diamond like full moon secretions. He pushed off – somewhat woeful that the temperature of the water wouldn’t let him swim longer.

He hadn’t swam since the ill-fated tournament. The Horcrux thought on that too – it wasn’t so ill-fated anymore, was it?

He didn’t know if Harry would agree with that or his name choice.

He broke the water to see Tom regard him contemptuously.

‘It’s fucking freezing and you decided to go for a swim?’ He asked with a raised voice.

‘It’s more of a retrieval if anything Tom.’ He parried back with a slow smile.

‘Retrieving what?’ Tom asked waspishly.

The Horcrux brandished the ephedra with a grin. ‘Surprised you didn’t spy it first, and you call yourself assertive.’ He mocked with a tut-tut.

‘Was it really necessary to risk hypothermia over?’ The thinly veiled concern in Tom’s voice warmed him by no small measure. Though, if he were being honest, his skin did look and feel a little blue.

‘It will be.’ The Horcrux said more to himself than to his affronted companion.

Nagini then bounded up to them sniffing the air. ‘Masters.’ She greeted before her nose flared and her eyes flicked to what the Horcrux was holding, and then to his’ state of wet undress.

‘Wolf’s Song?’ She questioned as if the plant offended her.

‘Yes. It’s quite a useful ingredient – if used correctly that is.’ He answered lightly as he caught
how Tom’s nose flared.

‘I can’t think of any good use for that damnable plant.’ Nagini sniffed.

‘Don’t like it?’ The Horcrux questioned, not understanding her aversion to it.

‘Nay, it curdles in veins of cold-blooded land-dwelling creatures.’ Nagini’s skin greyed, as if the thought made her feel ill.

‘Ah.’ He hummed. ‘Well, I shan’t ask you to ingest it.’ He gave her a warm smile before he went to grab his clothes. He began to put them back on gingerly as the cold wetness of his underwear seeped through the wool of his trousers.

Tom approached him then and wandlessly cast an intense warming charm at his flank. The Horcrux blushed at the resulting steam and the way Tom’s magic curled around him.

Nagini snorted and then ran to a tree to catch another unsuspecting victim.

‘Care to tell me what you intend to do with the ephedra?’ He asked the Horcrux frostily.

‘Only if you promise to not act like a blast-ended skrewt if I do.’ He replied lowly.

Tom stared him down for a few beats before relenting. ‘Fine. I promise.’ He then motioned for the Horcrux to elaborate.

He buttoned up his shirt and pulled on his cloak before he answered. The Horcrux needed that time to think where the line was between what Harry would be comfortable revealing and what was enough to sate Tom’s curiosity.

If was times like these he was glad he’d been two people.

‘It might find its way into the potion Harry is brewing – if what we’ve read is correct.’ He said carefully, avoiding Tom’s eyes.

‘You’re helping him with his studies?’ Tom asked with raised brows.

‘Correct. Here – make yourself useful and cast an Aguamenti in a Bubble-Head at the roots and buds.’ He passed the plant to Tom in hopes that the task would divert him from asking anymore questions.

As the Horcrux was tying his shoes again he spied Tom’s footsteps walk slowly until they were right in front of his face.

‘You keep surprising me you know.’ The Horcrux heard above him as he pointedly stared at the ground. ‘It’s not how I thought a Horcrux of mine would act.’

The Horcrux stood and met Tom’s gaze again, although he found it difficult to – his faux-bravado felt especially thin in that moment.

‘You not what I remember either – if that’s what you were insinuating.’ The Horcrux said softly. ‘And I’m glad for it.’

Tom smiled slightly – they both knew then what the other meant. *I’m happy that neither of us are what we used to be.*

They continued walking southwards in their impromptu hunt for potions ingredients.
Though, the Horcrux knew that the gnarling beast still resided somewhere in the man before him, it did not take precedence any longer.

Harry’s proximity had sparked a need in Tom which had rendered the insanity useless and at worst destructive in his intentions towards the boy.

The Horcrux could see the shades of Tom’s soul – splintered and detached – no longer forming a whole.

He could see the seventeen-year-old who had hate singing in his veins. Then the eighteen-year-old who felt lost and floated in a world full of magic after finally escaping the clutches of the matron. The two soul shards from his twenties both seeking to the escape from twisted emotions that Horcrux creation offered, to hide from what they had both done by burying the feelings awful memories brought forth.

Then an older soul, so unlike the rest, so far removed from his brethren that it was barely recognisable to them – hate. Pure unadulterated hate. A dark beast who would happily kill and maim for pleasure; Lord Voldemort in his prime, at his most unhinged. A foul, loathing creature which sought out the weaknesses of others and wielded them in order to break them completely. An evil in the truest sense.

The Horcrux was happy that he had never known what the aftermath of that particular creation, that he’d avoided an even more tortured state of mind.

But Tom had known it, he had lived it.

‘What?’ Tom asked curiously and then the Horcrux realised he had been staring at the shards for a moment too long.

He pointed to Tom’s chest. ‘They haven’t unified.’ He said simply as he kicked a acorn into the distance.

‘You can sense that?’ Tom seemed surprised, though somewhat amused by the prospect.

‘I can see it.’ The Horcrux clarified as Nagini let out a victorious cry as she caught a field mouse.

Tom sighed. ‘I really should start taking notes on all of this – I could probably give old Bullock a run for his money.’

The Horcrux laughed at the thought of Tom becoming a Dark Art’s author. ‘I suspect so.’

‘What does it look like to you?’ He asked with bright eyes.

There, right there – that was the Tom Riddle who might have been saved all those damned years ago. The boy who was curious and blown away by what magic had to offer. He was a young man enthralled by all of magics possibilities, before the notion became polluted and diseased in favour of magic’s purity and not its potential.

‘Like…mirror splinters floating in the air. Each fragment catches a different light. All of them reflect different faces.’ The Horcrux stared and wondered what he would look like now to his brethren.

He hoped he looked like Harry.

‘Do you miss it?’ He asked, his years of being Harry shining through in the way he garbled it –
totally embarrassed. He hid his flushed cheeks by inspecting a small cluster of brightly coloured bluebells.

‘Miss what?’ Tom cocked a brow.

The Horcrux toed the ground. ‘Being whole.’ He forced the words out.

Tom snorted. ‘I can’t remember and there is no point wishing for things that with never come to pass.’

The Horcrux studied his own hands before he looked to where Nagini was whooping and laughing among the treetops.

‘You would miss it.’ The Horcrux said quietly. ‘Harry’s soul it’s – it’s wonderful.’

The Horcrux moved upwards and onwards without looking at Tom – he didn’t want to see how his previous self had taken that.

‘You have never been whole either.’ Tom commented.

‘No, but I want to be. I’d give anything to be.’ The Horcrux smiled sadly to himself. ‘But…I don’t think Harry would want that.’

He felt Tom’s flinch more than he saw it.

‘You wish to merge with him?’ His voice had risen, it sounded slightly strangled.

‘More than anything. It’d be so easy too.’ The Horcrux admitted.

Tom grabbed his shoulder and turned him around. ‘How is that even possible?’

The Horcrux’s heart leapt at the contact. Tom looked out of breath strangely, as if he’d been kicked in the gut.

‘Harry would have to destroy my memories – my time as you, then he’d just have to accept me.’

As the Horcrux said it, the old anguish reared its ugly head; he knew Harry would never do it. The Horcrux was a piece of Tom originally, quite literally the man who had killed his parents. It would be an offense to their memory – to everything they had sacrificed for him.

He’d forever exist on the edges of Harry’s mind only, cast aside – pushed away. Once more he’d be the ugly thing that only lurked in the worst of Harry’s experiences; his grief, anger, hate, shame, disgust.

Though he supposed the lust was kind of nice.

‘You’re nervous.’ Tom stated as he backed away. ‘Not because you would cease to exist – but because you would exist.’

‘Got it in one.’ He laughed around what he hoped was a smile.

Tom regarded him strangely then, as if he had seen something new in uncharted territory.

‘I hope he does.’ Tom smiled tightly. ‘Then at least one of us will be whole again – I’ve only just started to appreciate how important that is.’ The taller man unconsciously rubbed his chest.
‘I think he makes us both feel that way.’ The Horcrux stared forward – not really seeing anything. ‘He does that just by being.’

Tom exhaled slowly. ‘Wish he’d damn well hurry up about it.’

‘Aw – not enjoying my company anymore Tom?’ The Horcrux chuckled.

Tom cocked his head and then perhaps the kindest words he’d ever said tumbled from his mouth. ‘It’s not that. I want all of you back. I want you whole, Harry.’

Tom had chosen to call him by his real name, not another or a variation upon it.

The Horcrux’s first reaction was to pivot away from those soft, grey eyes and bite his lip hard. He could feel the rush of tears prickle behind his eyes as the rush of want, want, want threatened to overthrow him. One choke racked his frame before he willed himself to cool his lungs with greedy mouthfuls of fresh forest air.

‘Thank you.’ He said when his chest felt strong again.

Tom walked ahead, this time back in the direction of the castle.

Tom sighed comically. ‘Suppose I’ll have to make do with one Horcrux. Won’t I Nagini?’ Tom shouted at the treetops.

‘The last but by no means the least!’ She heartily laughed in reply.

‘Don’t you have a potions project to be getting on with?’ Tom asked without looking back.

The Horcrux tilted his head back with closed eyes and a trembling smile.

Tom called him Harry. Tom asked him to work on the potion.

You see Harry? He didn’t kill us. He chuckled internally.

It wasn’t until Nagini tackled him to the ground that he moved. He chased the snake with a roaring laugh, promising a swift and merciless, his tears happy in the milky yellow sunlight.

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They had stopped waiting with obsessive impatience after that.

The Horcrux had dived into his homework, training, and letters with his best friends.

It had now been well over two months without the presence of his greater soul – without Harry.

The whole time the Horcrux still couldn’t shake the thought that he was merely existing in a state of limbo. This wasn’t living – not really. Life was somewhat two-dimensional without the majority of your soul. And two months was far too long to exist without one.

His memories of being Harry were bright, colourful- a magnificent sensory experience. His present felt like eating warm, tasty foods without the tastebuds to appreciate them; he simply fueled his body, kept it breathing, he didn’t live it.
So, when Harry did finally return – the Horcrux failed to immediately identify the what had changed.

Then he felt the pulse of too-strong, too-bright magic and the roaring thrum of tangible life spread through him. He could taste Harry in his mind, and by the God’s it felt good.

And when he did he screamed excitedly, the full spectrum of emotions Harry afforded him beat him over the head like a well-natured sledgehammer.

He screamed it all the way down the halls that lead to Tom’s favourite reading place - a window in the second-floor library.

‘He’s back! He’s back!’ The excitement poured from his mouth as he ran with an electric skip and jump, his hands thrown in the air.

Tom tumbled out of the library door to meet him, his eyes wide and his whole body disheveled. He looked like someone who had woken to a fire alarm.

‘Harry?’ Was all Tom could seem to croak out.

‘Yes!’ The Horcrux bounced, the energy coursing through him was too much for much to remain still. ‘I can feel him! He’s here!’

Tom was speechless and looked completely dumbstruck before a massive grin broke over his features.

‘Is he awake?’ Tom finally asked after the Horcrux did a strange victory-pivot around himself.

He stopped as he processed the question, his mind running too fast for the reality around him.

‘I don’t know. I think I should wake him. I’ll bring him out!’ The Horcrux went to close his eyes before Tom clamped a hand around his arm.

‘Wait!’ Tom all but shouted.

‘What?’ The Horcrux shouted back, impatient to meet his Harry.

‘Just – I won’t – I won’t see you again.’ Tom looked as if the Horcrux had grown a second head. Then it dawned on him what Tom meant.

‘Oh.’ He said, suddenly feeling a little small. ‘Right.’

The Horcrux then threw his arms out and hugged the taller man.

‘It’ll be fine.’ The Horcrux said to himself more than anything. ‘He’ll be back, and it will be fine – though I suppose in a sense this is good bye.’ The Horcrux pushed Tom away to hold him at arm’s length. ‘You shall sleep soundly after this, my teeth won’t be so sharp anymore.’ He grinned toothily to accentuate the dark humour.

Tom laughed, clearly caught up in the whirlwind of it all. ‘I suspect so.’ Then something sad crept over his features. ‘I hope all goes well for you.’

‘Me too.’ The Horcrux breathed. ‘But, to be honest – anything is better than nothing’

Tom nodded in understanding – he knew how it felt to miss Harry too.
‘Okay well – here I go.’ The Horcrux beamed, his original excitement flooding through him again.

Tom smiled slowly. ‘Goodbye Harry. I’ll see you when you wake up.’ He said it in the same manner one would say ‘goodnight’.

Then all the Horcrux could do was kiss him softly. The featherlight touch was nothing racy or heated – it was simple happiness in its purest form.

‘See you when I wake up.’ The Horcrux said softly against his lips, marvelling at the feeling of it. Looking into Tom’s grey eyes for a moment, just in case he wouldn’t be allowed to again.

He chose that exact moment to close his eyes – perhaps for the final time as a thing wholly separate from Harry.

He hoped that he would wake finally whole.

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Harry couldn’t make up his mind if he was a sixteen-year old with several lifetimes-worth of memories or if he was a being who’d lived several lifetimes and was now sixteen again.

Both, neither – it was a thin line that distinguished the two modes of thought. He couldn’t pick one and stick with it, and he feared for his sanity if he didn’t choose one soon. Not doing so felt akin to floating in a rubber dingy in the middle of a massive ocean with no anchor to keep him in place.

Instead of running headfirst into an existential crisis, Harry decided to focus on his present.

He had somehow landed himself in the Gryffindor common room.

Well, a version of it anyway.

Harry was getting quite sick of being unceremoniously dumped into places – that were not really places, and all that quack.

He and diary-Tom were now sprawled on the well-worn carpet of the common room. They both should be massively injured from the height they had fallen.

The fact that he wasn’t even winded was Harry’s first clue that this wasn’t really the Gryffindor common room. The second indicator that pointed to this being a dream or a mindscape of some kind was the blurred-edge quality everything had.

He nodded to himself when he couldn’t read the titles that were inlaid on the spines of the many books the common room had to offer; the words moved like quicksand. That was the third indicator that he was inside his own mind. The fourth was the lack of specific detail in any of the object around him; pictures were merely blobs of colour, there was no scenery outside the window, the fire wasn’t really burning instead it was a blurred glow.

Again, it was more than a little odd having all this new knowledge or old knowledge depending from which angle he looked at his own situation. Harry had taken to dream mastery when he was in his thirties when the Silencing Charms were not cutting it anymore. He had scared his son James when the toddler had heard him screaming as he dreamt of insane raven-haired Black’s and his
godfather slipping through the veil.

He was sixteen and he’d been married with three children. Merlin, he’d had grandchildren – even great-grandchildren in his later years.

Then maybe he wasn’t really sixteen anymore – his mind and soul were not anyway.

How strange everything would now be. He was now a man who knew how it felt to mourn the thing he’d been fated to destroy and to feel black, sticky guilt weigh him down when he thought on the hollow feeling too much.

He didn’t know how to face Tom after this – his previous hang-ups seemed so juvenile and whimsical now. No, now he had to deal with that beast of a man in this new light, with this new knowledge. Knowledge that seemed old as time itself – a connection between them quite literally forged in the heavens.

Harry thought that if Thana were here now, she’d laugh heartily at his inner monologue – he wished he could.

But no. He was now a man who’d survived a War and ended it at the tender age of seventeen. He had trained with the best under the Auror’s and had, through his own skill and determination, rose to Head Auror. Harry had personally captured and locked up the most vile of criminals – lost a few good men for his efforts too.

He lifted his hand to his eyeline wondering if the magical burns Dolohov had inflicted were still there. They weren’t to his surprise, neither was Umbridge’s skin deep punishment which Dolohov curse had seared off.

Then he felt his chest, and his stomach swooped when the scar from Voldemort’s Killing Curse wasn’t there either.

Harry was now a man who knew the secrets of the Ministry that his position as Head Auror had afforded him. He had caught Greyback, the Carrows, Dolohov, Rookwood, and MacNair during his long and fruitful career. He’d watched each of them receive the kiss too.

He’d watched Lucius Malfoy rot in jail in his many visits accompanying the stoic, calm, collected Draco – a man who he’d learned to respect. A man who had become his partner in the Auror corps and who he’d grown to think of as a brother after the war.

Harry was now a man who had lost his loved ones in a tragic war. But now those people had both never died and at the same time were still alive. Sirius, Remus, Fred, Dumbledore, Moody, Tonks – God, he hadn’t even met Tonks yet – all still alive, all of them breathing.

He had happily grown old with Ginny, Ron and Hermione in each life.

Teddy, James, Albus, and Lily – they hadn’t been born yet. Then the sickening realisation came that they might never be.

He swallowed the bile down. Harry knew he had to shake this; he had lived that life many times before – this was a different set of circumstances entirely. A new life. A new chance.

He had watched all of his children grow up – they had known true happiness -they had lived. He’d watched his friends and family grow old, he remembered the eulogies he’d given at many of their funerals – the dates on their gravestones. Only Ron had outlived him each time.
He had lived thousands of lives, he had died a thousand times.

But now he was a teen again. They all were and now nothing would ever be the same again. Fate had changed everything, and his old life would never repeat again.

Harry closed his eyes with bone-deep weariness.

No – Harry thought selfishly – I want it to be different this time.

_I don’t want to have to mourn him any longer._

That was then the fourth and finally indication that this was a dream; diary-Tom was sprawled out beside him in the middle of the Gryffindor common room.

Harry stared at the figure beside him, now solid and breathing. He had met this boy a thousand times too – and had killed him in each. He reached out a hand to touch the Horcruxes back, something which he had never done before.

He was warm, he was alive. That had never been the case before.

The Tom Harry had known in his previous lives had been cold to the touch. He’d been dead the next time Harry had felt his skin.

He had to swallow down the lump in his throat at that memory.

Ron had watched him as Harry had trailed a finger down Voldemort’s emancipated face for the first and last time. Hermione soon joined, and when Harry had turned to them with tears trailing down his face, they both looked at him as if they understood.

_‘It’s finally over.’ _Hermione had nodded at him, as if he needed to be reminded – as if she could will him to believe it too.

Little did they know that what flooded his chest in that moment felt nothing like relief.

No – it is was agony.

‘Harry?’

He snapped up and looked towards the alcove and then stared at the dark figure with it.

Harry didn’t recognise him at first; in all of his lives he had never had the opportunity to meet this version of Tom – even though it had resided in his chest for all of those years.

It looked like Harry – except for the paleness of its skin, the blueish veins under its skin, and the scab red of its eyes. He could feel its Dark magic – what little it had anyway. It felt like a whispered secret in his ear; mirthful and tempting. It was what could turn a disagreement into a bloody fight or the push from dislike into hate.

It was the same feeling which pulsed within Harry in his worst moments.

It was what had left him feeling hollow and listless after the Battle of Hogwarts. For the rest of his life really.

‘Hello.’ Harry croaked when it dawned on him who this being was.

Images of the bloodied heap of skin and bones writhing and moaning on the floor of King’s Cross
Station slammed against the forefront of his mind. The emptiness of his chest that had followed him every moment after he’d returned from the Station echoed like phantom pain would.

The being slowly smiled, clearly nervous. ‘Hello.’ It said softly. ‘It’s nice to finally meet you.’

‘Likewise.’ Harry exhaled heavily whilst trying to steel himself against the roar of emotion that bloomed in his chest.

Speaking to this being was akin to the disassociation one felt when speaking to their own reflection. Harry often had when he needed to give himself a quick pep talk before he walked into some of his toughest days.

He’d done it just before he walked into the Forbidden Forest, before his first interview with the Aurors – when he had to interrogate Greyback. Before he helped carry Hermione’s coffin, before he gave the eulogy at Ginny’s.

He did so constantly after the final battle, telling his reflection to get a hold of himself when the guilty grief began to overshadow what should have been happy milestones in his life.

‘Is it?’ It asked shakily with a self-deprecating smile.

Harry nodded then stood and carefully approached the Horcrux.

He wasn’t thinking consciously when he reached out and touched his Horcrux’s face. But eons of mourning this being moved his limbs. His cheek was soft, his red eyes were wide and curious.

The Horcrux he’s grieved was here, right in front of him. He now had a face. He now had a voice.

Finally. Harry’s dying thought echoed once more.

‘I missed you.’ Harry said as tears welled in his eyes. The Horcrux’s eyes widened, vexed by Harry’s reaction.

Right. He doesn’t know. Harry reminded himself that the Horcrux hadn’t been gifted with eons of context as he had.

‘You know what I am?’ It asked cautiously, as if anticipating Harry was experiencing a lapse in sanity.

‘Yes.’ Harry replied. ‘I’ve…found out a few things.’ He admitted with a dark chuckle.

When the Horcrux’s brows furrowed and the beginnings of a question graced his lips Harry stopped him and took both of his hands.

‘Look.’ Harry encouraged, keeping his mind open – willing all of the memories to flood between their palms.

Harry had Draco to thank for this – he had taught him advanced forms of Legilimency a decade after the war. They sometimes communicated like this, during Auror meetings or in tense missions – always when breaking silence was ill-advised or could prove fatal. They had saved each other’s necks more time than he could count as well. But more often than not Draco used this to privately moan and gripe to Harry about people who were in close proximity – his wife mostly.

The Horcrux’s eyes rolled back in his head before his eyes fluttered closed.

Thousands of years were shared between them in a matter of moments. The force of it made them
both crumple to the floor.

Every moment, all of their memories. Him and Tom. Tom and him. Constantly reflecting, constantly encircling. The Horcrux had both stopped breathing and when they finally shared everything his eyes snapped open and his lungs gasped for air as if he had been drowning and were now just breaking the surface.

It said Harry’s name brokenly when it came to. Its eyes flickered from left to right as if scanning each memory – the sum of both their lives in their totality slowly filtering through him.

‘We – he. Oh God.’ The Horcrux garbled. ‘He kills me. You don’t die.’ Then the Horcrux’s eye’s snapped to his. ‘I don’t die.’ The Horcrux’s eyes widened and Harry knew he was envisioning that pitiful, broken body. Then the Horcrux rounded back to stare at Harry brokenly.

It now knew everything. It knew how much Harry had missed it, grieved it.

‘Every time.’ Harry whispered.

The Horcrux sank back against the wall behind it. The weight of everything seemed to make it slump.

‘But not this time.’ It said slowly, as if I didn’t truly believe it.

‘No.’ Harry confirmed.

‘I’m sorry Harry. I’m so sorry.’ Its gaze was intense. ‘I never got to say it. I always wanted to.’

Harry knew it was referring to the night his parents died, that this was the version of Tom which had murdered them.

That’s why he’d always felt guilty for missing it after the battle.

Harry had had years to forgive it. And since Thana had shown him these memories, he felt reborn. And with rebirth came a new understanding of his reality – of Tom’s reality too.

‘I don’t think it was your fault.’ Harry words made the Horcrux flinch. ‘I don’t think you really had a choice.’

‘I did.’ It growled. ‘And I chose wrong. I killed them Harry – and yet you still accepted me. Circe, Harry – you saved me.’

Harry cocked a brow. ‘Saved you?’

It snorted humourlessly. ‘What happened that night was a mistake – I shouldn’t be – I shouldn’t have…’ It struggled to form the words. ‘It rebounded, and I latched onto you and you accepted me Harry. I was broken – faulty. You took me in a made me whole again, you did that by giving over a piece of yourself.’

The Horcrux then crawled the short distance to where Harry was sitting. It was only then that Harry realised he’d been crying.

‘I was sick with his madness Harry – but you fixed that. You healed me Harry.’ It garbled.

It pressed it palms against Harry’s temples and visions flooded forth and stained his mind like spilled ink on paper.
They were less visions and more disembodied thoughts – millions of them. Everyone of them the Horcrux had been thinking of Harry, experiencing life vicariously through Harry.

Harry felt the first time the Horcrux became whole, how deep its roots became within Harry’s mind and soul after it tasted love and laughter for the first time.

He felt this first time the Horcrux stopped thinking of Harry as *him* and when the he started referring to Harry as *me* or *myself*.

The overwhelming urge to protect the small boy with round glasses and the lighting bolt scar surged through him. The Horcrux had hid his memories of Voldemort, not for his own sake – but for Harry’s.

The Horcrux was willing to do much more than that to ensure Harry’s sanity.

Even suffer Vernon when he had to.

The Horcrux had been with him in every step and waking moment. It had been drawn out to just beneath Harry’s skin when the rage, hate and fear ruled his mind.

It had made him faster when he ran from the Basilisk, form Voldemort, the Death Eaters – even Death. It had forced him out the path of every curse and hex – it had been Harry’s keen senses and instincts in his most perilous brushed with death and danger.

It loved him. Utterly and completely.

And it would do anything for Harry to ensure his happiness – even if that meant ceasing to exist altogether.

‘No.’ Harry interrupted the memories.

‘No?’ The Horcrux looked at Harry as if one word would crush him.

Harry shook his head. ‘You’re not leaving. Not now, not ever.’ A storm of rage quickly built in Harry at the thought of losing this being again.

He was still reeling from lifetimes-worth of mourning, he refused to live another second of it.

‘I thought you would want me to Harry.’ It lowered it’s hands, utterly disoriented.

‘Don’t you dare.’ Harry growled. ‘Search the memories – see how I mourned you. See how I mourned Tom too. How every moment after I killed you both I grieved – I never felt whole again. Not even when I had a family who I loved, who loved me.’

It stared at Harry with wide, red eyes. ‘But I was the man who killed you parents, I was the man who tried to kill you too.’

‘You saved me. I saw what Vernon did. I know what you did too – you took my place.’

‘Lord Voldemort hurt you far more than Vernon ever hurt me.’ It tried to wave Harry off.

Harry shook his head furiously. ‘None of what Lord Voldemort did mattered, not after you both died. I died – I died and every time I did, I only thought about the gaping hole in my chest and the guilt. My family were all crying around my deathbed and all I could think about was you – and *him*. I forgave everything. There was nothing to forgive.’
The Horcrux had gripped Harry’s arms and stared unseeingly at the ground. Its breaths rasped and its chest heaved.

Harry thought then that it looked how he felt when he searched the memories too.

‘It was all Fate. All of it.’ The Horcrux breathed.

Harry nodded uselessly. ‘We were puppets – strings and all.’

The Horcrux stood like a newly birthed foal before it stared at the third figure in the room.

It cocked its head and regarded the other Horcrux emotionlessly.

‘I’ll stay. Happily – and I’m honoured for having the chance to.’ It said softly before turning to Harry. ‘But I won’t be him, not any longer.’

‘What do you mean?’ Harry asked, now vexed after more clarity than any sane person could endure. He actually relished not knowing things when it felt like he knew everything.

‘I’m not Lord Voldemort, I’m not Tom. I’m you Harry. Have been since the night our parents died.’ It paused for a moment, worrying its lip with a dark expression. ‘I don’t want their to be a me and a you either. I want to be you completely – in every sense of the word.’

‘But then you’d stop existing, isn’t that the same as leaving?’ Harry muttered.

‘No – not at all Harry. We’d simply become one. It’s the antithesis of leaving.’ Then it smiled.

‘I’ve always wanted that. Nothing to distinguish us or divide us. No us. Just me, myself and I – just Harry.’

*I’m Harry – just Harry.*

Was this where the burning desire for normalcy had been forged? The need to just be himself, no titles, no accolades. Just himself existing in complete mundane normalcy. Harry James Potter – not the Boy-Who-Lived, not the *Saviour* – just Harry.

Was this why when he finally obtained the long-awaited normalcy, it felt flat and tasted like ash in his mouth?

*No, I’m not sixteen.* Harry thought then. *I’ve never wanted to be* just Harry *either.*

Because when he finally became Harry after returning from King’s Cross Station, he’s returned alone and only Harry.

‘Will I still feel you?’ He said with a rush of possessiveness.

Harry’s answer rested on this and this alone. He would refuse if it meant he’d have to experience one more second of the gaping hollowness.

‘Yes. But not as I am now.’ It answered slowly.

‘Okay.’ Harry smiled. ‘Tell me how.’

The Horcrux beamed at Harry then walked, stepping over diary-Tom, to a bookcase in the corner of the common room. From it, he retrieve a book that looked suspiciously like the aforementioned diary.
It passed the black leather book to Harry and it was far heavier than it looked.

The Horcrux crouched down to Harry’s sitting figure then pointed at the book which Harry now knew was a replica of Tom Riddle’s diary.

‘This is where I buried his memories, from when I was Lord Voldemort. Everything that I don’t want to be is in that book Harry.’ It swallowed thickly. ‘I need you to destroy it.’

Harry smoothed a hand over its cover before snorting. ‘Again, you mean.’ He said referring to the thousands of basilisk fang he’d thrust into the diary in every repeat of his life.

The Horcrux smirked after gazing fleeting at the sleeping figure in the middle of the room. ‘Well – at this point its tradition.’ He laughed.

‘Will anything be left once I destroy this?’ Harry asked, his hands gripped the book a little tighter.

‘Only the part I want us to keep. Some knowledge, some talents and preferences.’ It explained and when Harry looked at the Horcrux archly it continued. ‘Things like piano, knowledge I gained in my last life. A more refined palate too perhaps. Bangers and mash are great and all – but knowing a Sauvignon Blanc from a Riesling is nice too.’ It quipped softly.

‘And the Dark stuff?’ Harry queried, addressing the elephant in the room.

‘That too.’ It peered at him then. ‘You’ll know of it, know how to use it – but you’ll still choose whether or not to do so. I wish for you to keep that knowledge so you can recognise it and defend yourself against it, not to wield it necessarily.’

‘I won’t become Lord Voldemort two-point-oh?’ Harry flashed a wry smile.

‘No.’ It said before its face contorted like it had smelled something bad. ‘I don’t think either of us want that.’

Harry nodded in agreement.

‘It’s strange – meeting you that is. We never did.’ Harry remarked gently. ‘I always thought you’d want to return to him, like the rest do.’

‘Nope.’ It said happily, as if proud of the distinction. ‘A life as Tom was torture Harry – I didn’t deserve to find you. And if I had ever met you, it would only be to ask for this.’

Harry looked at the diary again. ‘Is Vernon in here too?’

The Horcrux paled then nodded. ‘We don’t need those experiences. The fact we know of it is enough.’

‘Thank you.’ Harry said with every fibre of his being.

The Horcrux looked embarrassed at Harry’s gratitude before grinning. ‘Thank me by getting rid of it Harry.’

Harry nodded and imagined the book burning, seconds later it burst into flames that did not scorch the hand holding it.

A blissful smile grew on the Horcruxes lips and it touched his arm before slowly sinking into Harry’s body.
Then it felt as if something clicked into place. The space in his chest wasn’t so dark anymore, this new sensation was like taking a lungful of clean, crisp air.

Harry felt an overwhelming sense of peace, and he couldn’t tell if it came from the Horcrux or himself.

*Both.* He told himself. *Me.* He repeated when the notion of separation left a bad taste in his mouth.

He could still feel the differences between the two souls which had now merged, it was like knowing the old from the new. He could feel the Horcrux’s emotions and his worldview shifted slightly because of them – but only for the better really – it was simply fuller, more colourful.

The first thought after they merged boomed in his head like it had been there this entire time. *Tom – I need to get to Tom.* Harry smiled sardonically at his own chest knowing *that* particular thought was a result of the soul merge.

He didn’t disagree with it. He wanted that too.

‘I think it’s time to wake up.’ Harry said to himself tentatively before a warmth bloomed in his chest in agreement.

He moaned as he stood up with aching limbs. ‘Ugh – I hope talking to myself doesn’t become habit.’ He remarked before a small chuckle rose up in reply.

Harry was two souls, one whole. He’d have to get used to that quickly, he thought dryly.

*Tom?* He reminded himself. Then Harry felt a headache come on; this was really bringing the concept of treacherous thoughts to a whole new level.

Then Harry remembered the last couple of months waiting for his greater soul piece to return.

He flushed a violent red when images of biting Tom in rage, making him agree to drink the potions and Tom’s *very naked* body battered against his skull.

‘I didn’t.’ He whined, completely mortified.

*I did.* His thoughts intoned in equal parts glee and solemnity.

Harry pinched his brow a little harder than normal before sighing.

‘I guess I have a potion to brew.’ He huffed.

*It won’t be so hard now that I have an encyclopedia of potion brewing knowledge now lodged in my head.* He offered himself.

Yep. This was going to take some getting used to.

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*Tom* held Harry’s body and waited with bated breath.

He guessed he’d been sitting there for some hours now that the sun was setting. The entire time,
Tom hadn’t taken his eyes or his hand off Harry. He was trying to be patient, but that damnable Horcrux hadn’t given him a timeframe to work with.

At first he assumed Harry would quickly open his eyes. But as the minutes ticked by, he sat on the knowledge that Harry and the Horcrux were probably conversing about the possibility of undertaking an insanely complex magical process. The he accepted the fact that both of those things would probably take time, and that Harry would return when he was ready to.

*If ever.* He reminded himself cynically.

Tom had never apologised for any of his action, no matter how gruesome or macabre the results.

But he’d be begging for forgiveness after this.

He sincerely hoped for both the Horcrux’s sake and his that Harry accepted the soul merge. If he didn’t, well – it made the prospect of Harry ever accepting Tom unlikely.

And didn’t that just freeze the blood in his veins.

The thought made him pull Harry in closer, and now Tom held Harry like a parent would their infant. His hands carded through the thick, unruly hair as he placed soft kisses on his cheeks and temples.

*Please.* He asked with graze of his lips. *I’m sorry.* He said with others.

Tom wondered if this is what love felt like. This fear of losing another due to his own stupidity or immutable characteristics dominated his every attention, all of his focus was obsessed over this one exchange between them.

He hoped that love didn’t feel like this; it was worse than a lengthy *Crucio.*

He would do anything for this boy – and that frightened Tom. His hands and arms shook as the possibility of rejection loomed before him.

He felt weak, and yet he welcomed it. He feared for his sanity, and yet anything was better than losing this warm body in his arms. He wanted to scream, but that was still preferable to the despondency he’d feel if Harry never came back.

Tom willed himself to change then.

He now knew that simply discarding ones title was not enough if he wanted to maintain this precious proximity. Tom had to control himself, he had to be more than what he was now.

He needed Harry to know how much he wanted -nay-needed him.

*Become that which he wishes to surround himself with.*

There was no room for violent tempers in that. He couldn’t force his will upon the boy. Tom hadn’t truly understood what Nagini had meant until Harry became lost to him. Harry was not a possession with he could covet then discard at will. It was far deeper than that.

Harry was his reason for being, and thus should be treated with the same value he had for his own life.

Tom wanted to love Harry. He knew he couldn’t, but he’d do everything to make Harry feel loved, to feel cherished.
He would give him everything, and he would ask for nothing in return.

Now knowing he was in there, Tom itched to slip into Harry’s mind. But the newfound respect he had for Harry and the Horcrux wouldn’t allow him that invasion of privacy. Tom knew the decision that lay before Harry was a difficult one, and that he didn’t need Tom to interrupt it.

Tom stayed his palm on Harry’s chest instead and basked in the warmth emanating from his magical core; magic that he had lamented for these past months.

He had sunk into a strange mantra of softly kissing the boy and internally begging for his forgiveness whilst slowly rocking back and forth – so much so that he hadn’t noticed Harry had woken and was now watching Tom silently.

It wasn’t until Tom felt the flutter of Harry’s lashes against his neck that he looked down.

Then green eyes – wide, beautiful green eyes – were staring back him.

Tom’s breath left him in a rush. He thought he might have garbled Harry’s name by the couldn’t be sure, his mind felt as if it were exploding with relief.

Then he felt scarily human, almost naked with the vulnerability of it.

Then Harry smiled, and whatever speech Tom had prepared for this moment was blown out of the water.

‘You’re smiling.’ Tom voice aloud.

Harry nodded in the crook of Tom’s arm. ‘And you’ve been waiting.’

The boy had said it so serenely that Tom was left feeling more than a little off kilter.

‘Why are you smiling?’ Tom’s mind couldn’t move past this one logical conundrum; this was the last thing he had expected.

‘Because you’ve been waiting.’ Harry then grinned as if he’d been told Christmas had come early.

Tom shook his head softly, thinking that he must be imagining this. Harry looked knowingly at him before Tom felt the press of warm fingers at the back of his neck.

‘It’s okay.’ Harry whispered. ‘I forgive you. I forgave you a long time ago.’

‘Harry, you can’t possibly – I hurt you badly I – God, I lost you-.’

Harry interrupted him with a swift finger pressed into Tom’s lips.

‘It’s okay.’ He repeated. ‘You won’t do it again.’ Harry’s eyes roamed over his face as Tom nodded his head frantically.

Tom didn’t know where this sudden confidence in Harry had in him came from. The boy looked like he’d reached some strange enlightenment and the statement was steadfast like a seer’s prophecy became after it was uttered.

‘Never. I’d sooner kill-.’ Harry shook his head and sat up abruptly whilst softly shushing Tom.

‘No talk of killing. Please.’ Harry said hollowly. ‘I’ve had enough of that.’
Of killing? What – when? Tom made to question it but froze when Harry brushed his thumb against Tom’s lips.

Harry locked eyes with him, and Tom then began to curse the need to blink. ‘I have something to give you.’

Harry moved into Tom slowly, his eyes glancing down to Tom’s lips before meeting his again. ‘I hope you’ll forgive me.’ Harry whispered and Tom’s stomach swooped in equal parts anticipation and confusion.

Then Harry kissed him, fully - completely.

Harry kissed Tom like he would never be able to again and that the thought of never doing so would slowly kill him.

It was fevered and it stopped Tom’s heart.

Tom moaned into it as Harry pulled him closer with a strong grip of fingers woven into the roots of his hair.

The kiss was painful in its intensity. The pain was exquisite.

As Tom and Harry opened their mouths, Tom felt the rush of something wholly foreign and familiar dive into him. It sank down his throat before bursting in his chest like molten ore on a sword maker’s anvil. It forged roots within him and his other soul pieces cried out with a roar as they were finally united with their brother once more. His soul filled his chest until he felt too full with it, the life it breathed into his deadened state was almost painful in its intensity.

His soul. Harry had given him his soul.

And yet that still paled in light of Harry’s body and lips upon his.

Harry kept up his assault and they rush of sheer joy Tom felt had him pulling the boy up into a tighter embrace.

‘Thank you.’ Tom murmured brokenly against Harry’s rhapsodic lips. ‘Thank you.’ He praised again as a small sob broke deep in his chest.

Harry whole body surged forward, his arms wrapped around Tom’s quivering shoulders.

‘Wanted you.’ Harry growled lowly before utterly demolishing Tom’s senses. ‘Now I have you – now you’re mine.’

Tom felt a surge of pleasure so pure and consuming at Harry’s utterances that he nearly came untouched right there and then.

Tom thought he must have sounded like a wounded animal with the moan that escaped him with it.

Harry pushed his tongue in deeper and Tom could hear him swallowing down the wetness they shared between them.

Tom’s eyes rolled back into his head at he heard it.

Then with a snap and a pull of at his navel, Harry had Apparated them to Tom’s bed.

Tom paused to stared at Harry dumbfounded.
He wasn’t meant to be able to do that.

Not that Tom could think on the sudden revelation for long; Harry mercilessly pulled him back down onto his hot, wet searching lips.

‘Why?’ Was the only thing Tom could rasp as Harry coiled around him.

Harry pulled back with wild eyes and ruddy cheeks. ‘Why?’ He echoed, with an exhilarated exhale.

Then nothing could have prepared Tom for what happened next.

Harry brought their foreheads together with a rough pull at Tom’s neck.

At first it was Harry’s sheer need and impatience that roared as he enveloped Tom’s mind in his.

But then Harry pushed Tom down deeper into where his memories lay.

Look. Harry implored.

Tom saw the strange shores and the fated stars in orbit.

Isn’t it beautiful? Yes. It defined the term.

He saw them crash and in the wave of the descent to that hallowed earth, he found himself thrust into what he could only describe as a hall of mirrors.

Their birth in duality, separated only by the hands of a clock.

The Avada Kedavra that broke them both, then their guardians sneers.

‘Freak.’ As Tom saw it, he wanted to recoil.

But Harry wouldn’t let him, he kept kissing him as if he could soothe the ache of each insult.

He kissed him through cupboards, orphanage bedrooms, and too-cold classrooms.

They shared in the joy of their first moments in the Wizarding world – how right it felt, how good it was to hold their wands for the first time. They both laughed with it, their bodies writhing together hungrily.

The diary, the serpents tongue, the Chamber, the Basilisk – their return to awful Summers and undeserved punishments.

Tom growled against Harry’s mouth when images of his uncle flashed between them, and Harry accepted the comfort, he accepted Tom’s hate as his own as their lips became bloodied.

Harry held him tighter, he told him he wasn’t scared.

The Horcruxes, the Hallows, the prophecy, the Potters, the infant that grew with every meeting.

Tom opened his eyes to see those very same green eyes stare back at him knowingly.

Then the forest. Both of them dead. Harry reborn.

You died. Tom muttered, horrified. His own death was dismissed so quickly that Tom now knew what his greatest fear now was.
He knew then why he’d sought immortality, why he feared his own demise beyond anything else. In the chasm of his soul he’d sought Harry out, needing him before even his own sanity.

Though, Tom would never fly from death again, not when he worshiped its master.

Tom wept against Harry, his hands searching out to make sure he was still there beneath him.

Then his heart broke further: Harry living on in constant grief – needing him, wanting him, the guilt sodden in his veins, the relief always out of reach.

Harry silent lamenting over the soul he’d been parted from, for the man he’d been fated to eradicate. Family, children, their children, honourable responsibilities – none of that mattered in the face of want he’d lost, what he had never known he’d wanted, and that keen absence was like a sharp blade twisted in vulnerable organs.

Finally. He said when he died again. Harry choosing him over the promise of final peace.

Fate had gifted them this. Fate had allowed them this reprieve from a deadened ouroboros-like state.

Finally. Tom echoed.

Harry pulled from Tom and they grabbed at each other, finally colliding as they had wanted to since before time started flowing.

‘Mine.’ Tom groaned in the serpents tongue. ‘Harry you’re mine.’

They ripped and tore at the layers of clothing separating them, refusing to be kept apart by anything ever again.

Tom now knew the meaning behind Harry’s first words to him earlier.

Tom had always been waiting for him, just as Harry had always been waiting for Tom.

Harry vanished the offending garments, his patience a far-gone conclusion.

Tom pulled back onto his haunches and Harry tried to follow him, his eyes darkened, his expression lax as if possessed. Tom pushed him back so that he could look at his naked form.

Tom’s member was aching at the glorious sight before him. Again, like the reflections in Harry had shared between their minds, Harry gazed at Tom with the same crazed hunger.

Harry was all corded muscle and graceful limbs wrapped in skin even the most ripe and juice-laden apricots would stare at longingly.

Tom bit into the flesh of Harry’s thigh mindlessly, his tongue roaming the indents and his eyes drinking in Harry’s whimpers and moans through parted lips.

He pushed Harry’s thigh back before licking a long, slow stripe up the back of it as his other hand roamed within the soft, dark curls under his navel.

‘You’re young enough that I shouldn’t be doing this.’ He murmured as his licks and kisses traveled across Harry’s honeyed hip and belly.

Harry stared at Tom’s ministrations with sheer animalism.
‘I’m probably older than you are now. Older than you ever were.’ Harry intoned lowly.

Mentally, yes. Physically…

And the thought caused a surge of adrenaline straight to the apex of Tom’s thighs.

Tom smiled luxuriously at the dark-it-was-almost-black humour. ‘Then let me revel in the sin of it for a moment.’ Tom’s fingers then softly curled around Harry’s bronzed shaft before greedily sucking at the tip then swallowing down the pearl of liquid that had oozed from it.

Harry tensed, his stomach muscles suddenly strained and defined as his exhaled in blessed ecstasy.

Tom then felt the scar on his neck buzz and tingle with the strain of making pushing onto Harry so that he’d sink deep into him.

‘Tom.’ He hissed the undercurrent of his Parselspeak sounded a chorus of prayer, a choir of praise, and an entranced begging of a hundred starving souls.

This was far beyond need. This was stronger than any compulsion even the great Dark Lord could muster.

This was as necessary as air, and as constantly wanting as lungs without it.

It had never simply been the pull of the Horcrux between them, it was far more incredible than that.

Harry had pulled himself up until he loomed over Tom. At one point this position would have made Tom sneer; it was wholly subservient in its needy shamefulness.

But there was no time for notions of superiority or shredded dignity here, Tom thought as Harry carded his fingers through Tom’s undulating head. His mouth salivated with the taste of him on his desperate tongue like a wanton whore – greedily, hungrily.

‘So good to me.’ Harry moaned and Tom’s belly filled with the praise. ‘So hungry for me.’ Harry murmured and all Tom could do was nod slowly and suck him deeper.

Tom then felt Harry reached under himself, his magic swirling between them then the delicious sounds of wet suction around probing fingers.

He pulled back again to watch Harry prepare himself with expert grace, and then Tom knew Harry had done this many times before in his other lives.

What Harry was preparing himself for then dawned on his stupefied state and his cock leaked onto Harry’s calf.

Harry stared at Tom with bitten lip, smeared with red.

He then wondered if Harry had ever given himself over to another man in a moment of martial weakness over the constant cycle they had both been trapped in. The thought filled Tom with sharp jealousy and erotic curiosity as he watched those long fingers push into the pinkened flesh.

He pulled Harry’s fingers away, spelled his own palm with silken liquid before breaching the space he couldn’t tear his eyes from.

‘Yes.’ Harry roared as his body arched with the same tension as a drawn bow waiting to release a fatal blow. Tom splayed his sweating palm over the strung muscle of his stomach, feeling the
solidness of it with shivery appreciation.

Tom felt the tight, still-innocent heat; his fingers pushed into Harry brutally as he lapped at the trail of liquid that had escaped in the assault.

Harry was writhing beneath him, begging for more, quicker, harder, deeper.

ʼMake me feel helpless, I want to burn with it.ʼ Harry pleaded mindlessly. ʼMake me yours.ʼ And it all beguiled Tomʼs last shred of coherence.

Tom cocked his head watching Harry garble as he shamelessly pushed his fingers against that sweet-spot deep within the undulant body at his mercy.

Harryʼs face crumpled as he watched Tom remove his fingers before suckling them in his mouth.

ʼI dreamt of this every night.ʼ Tom admitted as he slowly placed a palm against Harryʼs sternum, guiding him back. ʼYour eyes staring back at mine, wanting – waiting. Do you know how much Iʼve ached for this? How painful it was to wait for it? ʼMake me yoursʼ you say.ʼ

Tom crawled to kneel between Harryʼs thighs, then lifted Harryʼs hips until his weeping entrance kissed him. ʼWell, Harry – Iʼll grant your wish. Iʼll take you so deeply you wonʼt remember autonomy or independence – you wonʼt wish for it after the deepest parts of you have soaked by me and my seed seeps into the flesh of those places. Youʼll be mine – forever. Just as you always have been – just as you always will be.ʼ

He then pushed in, never stopping, not letting Harry do slow and safe. Tom had waited far too long for that – they both had and the were mindless for it to the point of madness. Harry whimpered at the breach with a wet sound in his throat.

But it wasnʼt in pain, it was for more. Harry rose up through the strength of his core alone until he wrapped his arms and legs around Tomʼs back.

ʼMore.ʼ Harry demanded against his lips. ʼI want more.ʼ

It was with a small wave of Harryʼs hand at his back that then everything loosened slightly, the muscle relaxing minutely so that Tom could sink Harry down on him without it being agonising.

Though, Harry had clearly chosen not to loosening it so much that it didnʼt hurt.

ʼWant you, need you.ʼ Harry echoed the song that flowed between them.

And it was finally sung from Harryʼs wet, warm mouth.

The knowledge brought a feral grin to Tomʼs lips and he pulled Harry down with a suddenness that all but impaled Harry on his cock.

Harry screamed, his hole shuddering around him.

Still, Tom didnʼt let Harry breathe.

Their lips found each other again, they lapped at the wounds they had both inflicted on the otherʼs wet flesh.

Tom rolled into Harry, his arms and thighs burned and he found he adored the burden of Harryʼs full weight upon them.
Harry’s hips waved to meet him, their breathing beyond laboured, their moans inhumane and boarding on unnatural.

Their movements were cruel and worshiping in equal measure; Tom thought that he’d happily slip into insanity again if it meant he could have this.

‘Harder.’ Harry said as his eyes rolled back with demented bliss.

‘Beg for it.’ Tom said before sinking his teeth into where he knew Harry’s jugular pulsed frantically.

‘Please. Harder. Please.’ His moans were asphyxiated as he tried to gasp.

Tom then threw them both onto the mattress and he pistoned his hips in earnest.

He held Harry with a crushing embrace and heated, wet flesh.

Harry then bit into Tom’s neck and his scars fizzled with a mind-numbing pleasure that sank to where their bodies met in sinful union.

‘Mine.’ He growled against as shivering ear.

‘Yours.’ Harry’s tongue licked the reply into his.

It was constant, this sucking pleasure. Harry never relented and neither did he.

There was finally no time, no prophecy, no war between them – they finally found a torturous relief in the others flesh.

Harry’s hands roamed just as greedily as his did, his hips just as desperate as Tom’s were.

Tom and Harry tensed in perfect synchronicity as they reach the precipice of this perfect piece of forever.

They both screamed into each other when they finally toppled over it.

Tom pulsed, his whole body pouring into Harry – the slick velvet enveloping him palpitated and swallowed him deeper, as if it were Devil’s Snare and Tom had finally yielded to it.

Then all of Tom’s strength left him and he collapsed over Harry as gently as he could.

They still held onto each other tightly with nothing but their thrumming breaths echoing around the room.

Tom moved slightly, knowing he must he crushing Harry. But he couldn’t move far when Harry’s arms tightened around him, his fingers digging into the flesh of Tom’s back.

‘Are you okay?’ Tom whispered against Harry’s ear.

‘More than.’ Harry murmured as he mouthed the shell of Tom’s ear.

‘For once, I find myself speechless.’ Tom laughed quietly as his mouth nuzzled into the curve of Harry’s neck.

Harry chuckled breathily. ‘That’s all it took? Remind me to visit the afterlife more often.’
Tom then pulled himself up to rest on his elbow before grinning at sleepy green eyes and slick, pink cheeks.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever suffered so many pleasant tortures consecutively like that before.’

‘Oh.’ Harry intoned with faux seriousness. ‘Should I have been more gentle?’ He asked mirthfully.

‘No.’ Tom breathed. ‘It was perfect.’

Harry then placed a palm against Tom’s chest. ‘How does it feel?’

‘Good… whole. There aren’t enough words.’ Tom smiled softly.

Then Tom motioned to Harry’s chest. ‘And you? Is he in there?’

Harry nodded, his expression serene. ‘He is. I am. We are one and the same now.’

Tom couldn’t help the grin that threatened to split his face in two.

‘I finally found you.’ Harry then said.

Tom then tucked a wayward lock of hair behind Harry’s ear. ‘We found each other.’ He stated tenderly. ‘Though, you’re so young now.’

It was strange speaking as a soul as old as the ages, even with seven decades under his belt – Tom now felt so small in the glaring light of it all. He now knew a Harry that had been in the throws of old age – some fifty years older than Tom had ever been in each cycle, and it humbled him.

Harry could have chosen to sleep forever instead of returning to Tom on the ever-spinning earth. But he had, and Tom knew why – and he ached with the knowledge he could never fully give himself like that in return.

‘Bodily – yes. Mind and soul? Not anymore.’ Harry smiled, the wisdom of his newly remembered lives shining through each word.

‘It’s a good thing Fate didn’t offer you this when I still wanted to win – I make a sore loser.’ Tom’s eyes roamed over Harry’s lips as they curved into a stunning grin.

‘Between that and our Horcrux, I’m now quite the adversary.’ Harry agreed.

‘Damn it. He’s given away all my secrets.’ He stated gravely around a smile.

Harry shook his head. ‘None of the memories.’ He clarified, knowing Tom’s implied question. ‘Just some skills, talents – preferences too.’

‘Ah, so you’re no longer an uncultured philistine?’ Tom smirked.

‘I could murder an Ata Rangi Pinot Noir if that what you’re asking.’ Harry parried.

‘That was almost enough to make me hard again.’ Tom admitted.

‘Almost? Should I have when for the Chateau Margaux instead?’ He teased.

Tom groaned. ‘That is a particularly good vintage.’

‘Now, now Tom – no need to disrespect your elders.’ Harry quipped.
‘Well – if I’m being honest, I’d much rather drink you.’ Tom purred.

‘That’s a given.’ Harry then gazed at Tom with such a happy, carefree expression that Tom’s chest tightened at the sight of it.

Tom struggled with what he had to say next, Harry sensed it and waited patiently as he tried to find the right words.

‘I will always want you Harry – I’ll forever need you. But I’m…broken in some sense. I always have been-.’

Harry shushed him kindly with a waved hand. ‘I know – it’s okay.’

‘You know?’ Tom probed with equal benevolence.

‘Your mother, the Amortentia. I know what happens to those conceived under it.’ Harry said carefully, as if Tom were the one who would break under the revelation.

‘And you’re fine with that?’ He asked, now completely mystified with the being under him.

‘Yes. Though I want to help you in that regard…’ Tom noticed that Harry’s eyes darkened with worry and his both was now tense.

‘You’re worried – why?’ Tom wanted that carefree expression back, and he would happily murder to get it.

‘I – I’ve started something. Something that might help. I hope it can anyway. If it doesn’t that’s also fine.’ Harry rambled.

‘What?’ Tom made sure his whole being communicated kindness in that moment – the idea that Harry was uncomfortable with his reaction now made him feel ill.

‘It’s what we were fighting about before I-.’ Harry cleared his throat. ‘It’s a potion, one that might help the negative effects of the love potion.’

Tom wanted to strangle himself, hard.

He had beaten Harry over a cure. A cure that was aimed to help people like him. One that Harry had actually hope-beyond-hope had thought would help Tom’s broken emotional capabilities.

‘I don’t deserve you.’ He stated. ‘I’ll never deserve you Harry.’

And wasn’t that the ugly truth of reality smacking him in the face.

Harry’s eyes hardened before he grabbed Tom and pulled him into a searing kiss.

‘I’ll decided that.’ He stated firmly against Tom’s lips, Harry’s eyes burning into his. ‘And only me.’ He hammered the point home.

‘The Horcrux made me promise I would drink it.’ Tom nodded. ‘And I will – I promise. I would even if I didn’t know what it was.’

‘I asked you that.’ Harry’s hand held Tom’s jaw steadily, not letting silver eyes cower away from the burning green.

‘I will when it’s ready.’ Tom echoed his promise. ‘I want to…try. I want to know.’ Tom cut
himself off, not even able to say the word in the space between them.

‘Then I’ll try my hardest.’ Harry beamed before his expression softened. ‘If it doesn’t work – I want you now matter what.’

The tightened coil in Tom’s belly loosened with that. Again, he knew he didn’t deserve this, any of it.

‘I’ll cherish you Harry. No matter the result.’ Tom kissed him again.

Harry nodded and Tom felt the wetness on his cheek. He kissed the salty tears away and then they shared in each other lazily, contentedly.

And for the first time, Tom happily shared his bed with another in an entangled embrace as they softly fell into sweet slumber.

That was the first time Tom slept with a smile on his face too.

::::::::

IT FINALLY HAPPENED OMFG

I'm so fuckin' happy.

I need to calm down.

Quite literally doing a victory lap at 6:30am.

Hello, and THANKYOU for reading so far.

Just lay down all the thoughts and feels down below - I need us to share in this FUCKIN WIN GUYS

hemhem, if I do so myself anyways.

I love you, you sordid beasts.

Goodnight/morning (lol) and I’ll see you soon for the next chapter xxx
Author Announcement

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Hello my beautiful wenches,

So, here we are again - another damnable announcement.

At this midpoint in the story, and due to the time of year I feel that this is a good time for me to factor in a hiatus of sorts.

As many of you already know, I am in my final year of University.

*Cue weeping over piling commitments*

This is EXAM SEASON guys!

In that spirit I will be taking a break from writing until the season concludes.

Education is important. Painful. Awful. But important.

I know most of you will now be screaming at me vicariously through your reading device screens.

*Especially when I tell you this hiatus may last up to five weeks.*

So - I'll make you all a deal.

But when I return I'll have several chapters prepared.

If I'm really on the mark, maybe the rest of the story.

Maybe.

This will not only allow me to focus on my education, but will also let me plan this bitch out a little better.

I want to give you all quality content, and writing this chapter by chapter sometimes does not allow for that.

Plot holes are not my friends.

They have no place here.

In that spirit, alongside the (maybe) final chapters, I will be editing what had been written thus far.

Ironic when you consider my username.

I want to create the best fucking tomarry fic on this site, so I fucking will.

Still screaming at the screen?

No?

Good.
I foresee a glittering friendship in lieu of (very) delayed gratification.

But in all seriousness, thank you for reading so far.

And trust me, you won't be disappointed after the wait.

I have so many things up these baggy sleeves.

I. LOVE. YOU. ALL.

Even if you are still screaming at me.

Love, RewriteParagraph.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!