A Snake Named Voldemort

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Summary

After being turned into a snake and unable to change back, Lord Voldemort is forced to turn to the only other living Parselmouth, Harry Potter. After making a deal, Harry agrees to help the Dark Lord return to his human form. SLASH HP/LVTMR

Notes

"Regular speech"
:Parseltongue:
'Thoughts'
"Spells"
:Spells:
Chapter 1

:Potter!:

Dressed in plain black robes, a relatively petite young man with untamed black hair and circular, wire rimmed glasses paused, startled at the abrupt call of his name. Especially, he thought as he looked around, when there was no one in sight.

"Erm, hello?"

Something hissed in clear aggravation.

:Down here,: the voice said in a scathing tone, if not with a somewhat mournful ring to it as well.

Harry looked down. :Oh.: Down by Harry's feet, on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, lay coiled a pure white cobra, the front part of its body sitting upright, its hood proudly flared. The snake's pink mouth parted, displaying its fangs. It was a rather large and impressive specimen, but upon closer inspection, Harry thought it looked a little worse for wear, and very exhausted despite its intimidation ploy. Not to be mistaken that Harry wasn't still wary of it, but, barring Slytherin's Basilisk, he'd never met a snake who'd ever tried to hurt him, and therefore wasn't feeling very frightened of the cobra.

Although, he had to acknowledge, he hadn't exactly met many snakes in the first place to make a true generalization…

Nevertheless, Harry crouched down to be more eyelevel with the striking snake. Besides, he was an intrigued Gryffindor …they sometimes did things that may not be particularly smart.

:Um, you know my name,: Harry said, bewildered now that he actually registered this tidbit of information.

The snake hissed again. Apparently it had a bit of a temper, but still it made no move to attack him.

:Of course I know your name, boy. I know everything about you, more so than anyone else.: Something about the snake's tone and mannerism clicked in Harry's mind, but it was when he noticed not the reddish-pink eyes an albino animal usually had, but the unsettlingly blood red ones this cobra carried that everything fully fell into place.

With a choked cry, a wide-eyed Harry Potter fell back on his bum in shock. The voice wasn't quite the same as the one from his nightmares, lacking the high, ethereal quality, and for the fact it was coming from a snake's mouth, but now it was unmistakable.

:V-Voldemort?:

:No, Albus Dumbledore. Of course it's me, you stupid boy!: Harry frantically glanced around, hoping there was somebody, anybody, out and about to at least go inside and warn somebody else that the bloody Dark Lord was here at Hogwarts and he might need a little bit of help. Meanwhile, his hand was scrabbling for his pocketed wand.

‘Of all the times to go sneaking out after curfew…’ Harry thought to himself when his search for help came up for naught. He turned to face Voldemort again, taking care to point his retrieved
wand at the wizard-turned-snake.

:How uncouth.: Voldemort hissed, flaring his hood even wider. :Does it look like I have my wand, Potter?:

Harry narrowed his eyes. :You're a poisonous cobra, it's not like you're unarmed. Besides, do you really think I'm going to let my guard down around you?: Harry spat.

The snake seemed to snort in dismissal. :I will not bite you—put your wand away. You're the only one who can understand me, so I can't kill you.: They both knew the "yet" was implied.

Harry was confused, but that did not make him put his wand down. :You mean Parseltongue? What does that have to do with anything? Why are you here?:

Voldemort coiled his body tighter, eyes flashing, and said, :You are the only other person apart from me who can understand Parseltongue, and since I am a snake, you are the only one who can understand what I am currently saying.: ‘Well duh,’ Harry thought.

:That told me absolutely nothing. Now give me an actual answer before I make you. Why did you come all this way to talk to me as a snake? Sorry your followers are less interesting than I am,” Harry mocked in false arrogance, “but I would rather you just change back to your…regular snake-face form and chat with them. I have nothing to say to you, except maybe to piss off or die in a fire.: It was then that Harry witnessed something he thought he would never see: a glum Voldemort. Granted, as a snake there wasn't much facial expression to work with, but the way his slender body slumped in an obvious pout spoke volumes.

Voldemort hissed-mumbled something too low for Harry to hear.

:Excuse me, what? I couldn't understand you.: The snake sighed, his whole body inflating and deflating in succession. :I said that I can't.: Harry lifted a dark brow. :Can't what?:

Voldemort susurrated under his breath again.

Harry made to stand up, realizing belatedly that sitting wasn’t exactly the smartest thing in this situation. :Well, since you don't want to talk to me then I'll just be going…: Voldemort spat out an angry hiss and stood to his full height. :I said I can't change back, now are you satisfied?:

Harry didn't respond. He was too busy gaping at the Dark Lord who, apparently, was stuck as a six foot snake and, Harry twitched, the only one who could understand him and therefore help him was his mortal enemy.

He couldn't help it; he snorted. And then he chuckled, which slowly morphed into tickled laughing and then loud guffaws. Harry fell backwards again before rolling around in the grass, tears streaming down his cheeks as he laughed at the Dark Lord's plight. He couldn't remember laughing this hard in his entire life. Soon his sides hurt and his breath came in short, agonized gasps, and yet he could not stop. The whole time a slew of hissed curses and vile retorts flew from Voldemort's
poisonous mouth, but they were lost on the wind and in the sounds of Harry's amusement.

Finally, after several minutes, Harry's merriment trickled down into quiet giggles. He wiped the tears off his face with his sleeve and sat up into a kneeling position. Voldemort had flattened himself into the grass and was watching him with a murderous expression. Ah well, it was a well-known fact that, if one wasn't a Basilisk, then looks couldn't kill no matter how much a Dark Lord may wish they could. Harry would have been dead a long time ago if that was the case.

:Are you done yet?: Voldemort spat, obviously disgusted by the display he'd just witnessed.

Harry, still grinning widely, nodded. Venom pooled in Voldemort's mouth.

:Tell me, my dear Dark Lord, is there something I can do for you?: Harry queried, face like a Cheshire Cat's.

:Potter, wasn't it you who said my bite was poisonous?:

:Yes, but if you killed me then where would that put you? Stuck as a snake and with no Parselmouth to help you get unstuck,: Harry said smugly.

Voldemort hissed a curse under his breath. They both knew Harry was right.

Voldemort rose to his full height again. :I have come to make a proposition.: Harry nodded, face still full of mirth and gestured with his hand for Voldemort to continue. He hadn't known a snake's face was capable of much expression, but the Dark Lord certainly had sneering down-pat in his new body.

:A few days ago, an infiltrator, I do not know who or how, managed to put a potion into my tea.: Harry blurted, somehow shocked at the idea of the Dark Lord Voldemort at teatime.

Who knew snakes could growl? Harry just shrugged and once again gestured for Voldemort to continue with his narration.

:The potion was, most aggravatingly, completely unknown to me by taste. I only took one sip before immediately knowing there was something in it, but that was all that was required; the effects were instantaneous. Before my full resurrection, my temporary form had been created from both snake and human materials, and the hybrid effect transferred to my completed body, though with a far more human emphasis. However, the potion I took seemed to have somehow overwhelmed the human portion of my body with the snake portion, resulting in my… transformation.: Harry snorted. :Really, that's all you've got? Maybe I should just kill you now.: Harry's voice was now cold and dead serious, a complete turnaround from moments before. They both knew that “deal” was one he would never accept because of its pittance.
Voldemort hissed sharply. :Fine, what do you want?:

Harry rested his chin in his hand and appeared to think for several moments.

:Well, I would say for you to just give up the war entirely, but I imagine you'd merely bite me and live the rest of your life as a snake out of spite. That doesn't really help the both of us, though, does it?:

Voldemort merely answered the question with a hateful glare. Harry chuckled, until Voldemort said ominously, :You’ve already seen what happens when I die…it doesn’t work.: Fearlessly, Voldemort slithered closer, rising up as a cobra can to his full height. :My forces know this now, too; they will not stop, in my absence. Precautions and plans have been made, on both my and their parts. War will come no matter what, because it has been brewing in our world for too long. Know this, Potter, and chose your next actions carefully.:  

Externally, Harry remained indifferent, but inside he was wavering upon indecision. Voldemort had only spoken his fears…the Triwizard Tournament, Cedric’s death, the ritual in the graveyard, Voldemort’s rebirth, were all still fresh in his mind.

:I could lock you up somewhere.:  

:That would only buy you time. No one will be safe in the end.:  

_Time…safety._ That’s what Harry needed, the first for himself, the second for those he cared about. For the first time ever in his life, Harry had the power to control his situation. He had the chance to make a choice. He didn’t know how much of Voldemort’s words he could trust, but he could not doubt that the probability of at least most of it being true was high. The storm was building, events moving, and he was afraid nothing could stop it.  

_Time…safety…choice._  

:Let me live my Sixth and Seventh years in peace while you go brood in your evil lair, and afterwards you leave Hogwarts and its students and five selected people alone. We can go back to being mortal enemies or whatever, but as long as the people I love are safe then I don't care.:  

And that was the truth…Harry just didn’t want to see anyone else suffer for this war. No doubt it was a hopeless fantasy, but with that…that _damn_ prophesy, and the ominous statement about how _he_ was the only one capable of defeating the Dark Lord, then he would do his best to keep the fight between he and Lord Voldemort. Perhaps, what was happening right now was his chance.  

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_Do it, do it_, a part of him whispered, and his wand hand actually shook in want to obey. But when he actually took in the image of his enemy before him, all he saw was a semi-helpless and exhausted creature, sitting on the cold ground looking so beat up and _pathetic_ despite his attempt at defiance that a different part of Harry couldn’t stomach the thought. It was not a fair fight in the slightest, and how Harry hated people who picked on the little guy just because they could.  

_But it’s Voldemort!_  

‘Yes, yes, I know…’ Harry whispered to himself, but even then, it made little difference in the mental picture he’d already formed of the delicate circumstances laid out on a plate before him. Voldemort had come to him, totally defenseless, knowing it could very well mean his death by Harry’s hand. It showed a twisted sort of confidence—Harry thought of calling it _trust_, but doubted Voldemort was capable of that—he had concerning Harry’s ethics and nobility regarding
life.

In that moment, Harry felt about as dejected as Voldemort probably felt, because he suddenly knew he was letting his best opportunity yet to rid the world once and for all of the Dark Lord slip through his fingers on account of his ridiculously mushy heart and conscience. Besides, while it might buy him time just as making a deal, the amount of which would be uncertain considering Voldemort could be in a new body the next day for all he knew. Damn.

Voldemort was taking too long, and in a bout of irritation—whether at Voldemort or himself was anyone’s guess—Harry declared, :Take it or leave it, Riddle, but that's my only offer.: 

Harry knew, despite his stipulations, that he was at least still using this situation mostly to his own advantage. The deal was vague and hardly had any consequences to his own self, save for probably having to put up with a snakey Lord Voldemort for who knew how long, as it gave no time frame for his end of the bargain. Hell, he could take 100 years to figure it out. But, it was then that Harry understood just how desperate Voldemort was, because, baring his fangs, he hissed, :Fine, we are agreed.: 

Magic had been hanging in the air, and the moment Voldemort agreed to the terms it snapped and sizzled in such a way that indicated the terms were binding. Harry blinked in befuddlement; it was someone else's magic—not Harry's or Voldemort's—magic old and strong. And then he knew what it was, and almost hit himself. Right, this should be made into a magical bargain. Duh, he could have blown the whole thing by giving Voldemort a way out. At least now there wouldn't be an easy way to get around the agreement now that Hogwarts had bound them to it. It was nice to know at least someone—thing?—was looking out for him, and perhaps even supported his decision. Voldemort looked very resigned now. Bastard.

The two sat in awkward silence for several moments. :So, uh, what now?: Harry ventured.

:Think, boy! It was a potion that did this to me. Where would you find a Potion's Master?: 

Understanding dawned on Harry's face. :Oh, right, you think Snape's one of your Death Eaters.: 

Voldemort snarled, and Harry realized what he’d just done. Shit. 

:What do you mean, I think he’s one of my Death Eaters?: 

Harry paused, wondering if he could somehow explain away his slip of the tongue, or if he now had to inform the Dark Lord of a certain piece of information about his supposed loyal follower. In the end he figured he was such a bad liar and, despite the man being a greasy git, he could put Snape on his "Do Not Touch" list…that is, unless he does something to piss Harry off before the end of Seventh year, in which case the spy would be on his own.

:Um, well, I hate to break it to you, Tom, but Snape is a spy. Now that I consider it, I think Snape is probably the one who poisoned your tea in the first place. He's part of Dumbledore’s Order.: 

Rage burned in his scarlet eyes, a combination at Harry’s use of his true name and for the information he’d given him. Voldemort reared back and showed his dripping fangs, screeching in fury. :WHAT? That vile traitor!: 

Harry shrugged imperturbably. :Sorry.: 

Voldemort began slithering across the grass, back and forth in a mockery of pacing. 

:If it was him, he would know the antidote, maybe even already have it brewed. I must find out!: 
He stopped his snake-pacing and looked at Harry. :You must take me into the castle. I swear everyone will remain unharmed.: 

Harry stood. :How am I going to explain my new pet *cobra* to everyone? They already thought I was the next Dark Lord back in Second year when they found out I could speak to snakes.: 

Voldemort's body moved in an odd way that could have been a shrug. :Tell them you found me by the forest and wished to nurse me back to health. I am an abandoned pet that was close to death from cold and starvation and you, being the bloody Savior, couldn't let me die. Do a good job and people will believe you, since you Light people love sob stories.: 

Harry considered the story before nodding slowly. :I guess that could work. Can you handle being coddled, my poor little lost snake?: 

:If anyone attempts to coddle me then they lose their rights to remain unharmed.: 

"I'll just have to let everyone know you're a drama queen," Harry mumbled in English. 

:I *can* understand you still.: 

"I'm so scared," Harry said with fake melodrama. He approached the large white snake and looked down at it. 

:So, um, shall I just carry you? Can I even touch you without it...hurting?: 

:It was the magical part of our connection that caused you pain, and since in this form my magic is bound, there should not be any discomfort.: The snake sounded disappointed. 

:Oh, okay. So, I'll just pick you up now.: 

Harry hesitated before bending down and wrapping his hands around Voldemort's slender body, making sure he had a secure hold on him before lifting him up. It was at that moment he realized his little story about his new "pet" may not be much of a lie. Harry could tell the Dark Lord was somewhat thin, and very cold. There were various scratches among his scales, and the way he hung fairly limply in Harry's hands suggested he was exhausted. 

:Have you eaten anything?: 

Twisting his head around, Voldemort answered, :I've spent the last few days crawling through a forest to find a bloody brat amongst hundreds of others. When would I have had time to eat?: 

Trying to ignore the snappish answer to a simple question, Harry turned his back to the forest and walked towards the vast form of Hogwarts Castle. 

:How'd you get into the Forbidden Forest anyway? You couldn't have Apparated in. Speaking about that, what about wards? Oh wait, you don't exactly have the proper magical signature right now do you…: 

Snapping his jaw, Voldemort told him, :I am currently lacking *any* magical signature. And it was Wormtail,: the snake scorned. :That sniveling rat found me and deafened me with his feminine screams before banishing me here. He actually shot a *Killing Curse* at me, the wretch, but my home is charmed so if that particular curse is ever aimed at myself, present in my self even in this form, the wards would transport me elsewhere before I was hit.: 

Harry frowned. :You'd think Wormtail would be smart enough not to kill any snake found in your
home:

:Nagini is the only snake in my home that has my explicit protection. After all, you are a Parselmouth yourself and may be foolish enough to send one of the reptiles after me in hopes I wouldn't be able to speak to it beforehand.: Harry rolled his eyes at the paranoid Dark Lord, internally laughing at how that paranoia was almost his downfall.

:Hey,: Harry enthused suddenly.: Who'da thought Wormtail would try and exterminate you. I imagined that as a fellow pest, Wormtail would have felt some sort of sympathy, even though you're his Animagus form's natural predator:.

Voldemort hissed at the suggestion of him being a pest.: A dry bite may not be deadly, but it still hurts, Potter.:

:Bite me and I leave you here:.

Voldemort sneered but dropped his head with obvious pain in his shriveled soul.

"Good snake," Harry said happily, turning back to the castle with the snake held out awkwardly away from his body with both hands.

At first Harry hadn't wanted to touch the snake, let alone pick him up. But now that he could feel and see the condition Voldemort was in, he felt an uncomfortable itch of pity for the Dark Lord. Damn his Savior tendencies. The Dark Lord's muscles were tense, and Harry suspected it was because he was cold. Granted, it could have been from all sorts of hate and anger directed at him, but Harry thought that at least some could be from the cold. Snakes relied on their environment to stay in the optimal body temperature range, and currently it was early winter in Great Britain, which was significantly colder than what was comfortable for a tropical reptile. Voldemort was lucky it hadn't snowed yet.

But how to get the stubborn snake warm? Harry knew the git would never admit to being cold. Luckily a very legitimate excuse made itself known to Harry.

:Voldemort, you're going to have to curl around my neck so my hands are free:.

:Fine,: came the clipped reply. Smirking slightly, Harry maneuvered the snake so he could curl up around his shoulders, subtly making it such that he had to slither under his outer robe and closer to Harry's body heat. Once the man-turned-snake was settled around Harry's neck, the young man pulled out his Invisibility Cloak from his pocket and covered the two of them with it so he could sneak back into the castle, hating that he'd have to give up this secret, but it was use this or the Marauder’s Map to avoid a detention with Filch.

:Where did you get an Invisibility Cloak?:

Harry shrugged. Maybe he could play this off?: I borrowed it:.

:I know you’re lying…I can smell it on you:.

Sighing, Harry admitted,: It was my father’s. You know, the one you killed? I use it to sneak out:.

:Yes, I was quite surprised to be fortunate enough to see you wandering the castle grounds so late at night by yourself:.

Harry snorted,: Yeah, lucky you. Now be quiet:.
Harry had years of experience avoiding detection during his afterhours sneaking around, so it didn't take long for the two to make it back to the Gryffindor Common Room. Unfortunately, it was a bit more difficult to avoid detection there.

"Harry, where have you been?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "For a walk, Hermione. I told you that before I left."

The girl with uncontrollable brown, curly hair and a brain perpetually starved for knowledge gave the Boy-Who-Lived a scolding look. Ron was sitting on the couch and completely ignored the familiar confrontation, too absorbed in this month's issue of his Quidditch magazine.

"That was a long time ago. You're never gone that long."

Harry shrugged. "It was a nice night, and I lost track of time." Here he took a deep breath, deciding it was now or never. "And, I may have found a new pet." Ron looked up from his magazine and turned his head to Harry.

Hermione swept her eyes down his person. "I don't see any 'new pet'."

Trying to act nonchalant, Harry unbuttoned his outer robe and let it fall open, revealing the smooth, gleaming white scales of the Dark Lord in disguise. The evil bastard rose up and flared his hood, giving a mean hiss.

Hermione gasped and took a step back. Ron squeaked and ducked further into the couch cushions.

Harry, growling, flicked the Dark Lord on the nose. Indignant, Voldemort shot a rather nasty insult in Harry's direction, but nevertheless, ducked back down into his robes.

"Harry, that's a snake," Ron moaned.

Harry had to try really hard not to roll his eyes again, but he allowed himself to say, "Oh? I didn't notice. Thought he was a starving kitten, not a starving snake."

Hermione shot him another scolding glance for his cheek but gave the snake a concerned look and took a step forward. Ron merely looked at her like she was mad.

"It's starving?"

Without fully realizing what he was doing, Harry brought a hand up and stroked Voldemort's pearly scales before replying to Hermione. "Yeah, hungry and very cold. He, well, he told me he was abandoned in the forest. I couldn't just leave him there to die." Surprisingly, Harry didn't have to entirely fake the pleading tone, but he didn't let himself linger on the thought.

"Aww, poor thing. What's his name?"

Put on the spot, Harry thought quickly before breaking into a shit-eating grin. "I'm going to call him Tommy."

Another rather unpleasant rant on how his many deaths would occur and a tightening of the coils around his neck told Harry the Dark Lord was not pleased with this name.

Hermione eyed him with a critical and disbelieving stare. "Harry, that is eerily close to You-Know-Who's real name."

Harry shrugged, still grinning. "Well, he does kind of remind me of Voldemort, what with being
white as death and having red eyes. But that's because the snake's an albino, and besides: who's going to be afraid of a snake named Tommy?"

:Potter, I can't tell if you're a sadist or a masochist.:

Harry merely responded by patting the Dark Lord on his head.

 Later that night, after introducing his new "pet" to the rest of his Sixth year dorm mates, Harry placed Voldemort on his bed before heading to the bathroom for his nightly routine. When he came back, dressed in his dark blue, cotton pajamas, he crawled into bed next to the snake and shut his curtains, putting a sticking charm on them and silencing the area.

:Hungry?: he asked. Voldemort grumpily nodded his assent after a second of stubborn hesitation. Harry summoned a rat for him and petrified it.

:Mmm, looks tasty,: Harry commented, trying to see the humor in the situation instead of the unsavory part.

For a moment Voldemort had a look of utter disgust before his eyes went dull and he lunged at the rat, engulfing it with his mouth and swallowing it whole. Harry felt a little ill.

:What happened there?: Harry asked the now content Dark Lord, a visible bump in his belly.

:Instinct,: Voldemort sighed. Smiling in sudden amusement at the resigned tone, Harry brushed a finger down the snake's head, though the man-snake effectively maneuvered away from the touch. Shaking himself, Harry wondered why he did that.

:Where are you going to sleep?:

:You are short,: Voldemort huffed while Harry scowled at the jab; he was on the short side of average, thank you very much, not a midget. :I shall sleep at the end of the bed.:

Harry was momentarily surprised but hid it with a casual shrug. :Suit yourself, just no biting my toes and no sneaking off. I've spelled the curtains to give you a nasty shock if you try and leave.: 

:Where did you learn that?:

Grinning, Harry shook his head. "My secret," he said in English. Thank you, Hermione. With that he crawled under the covers and settled into the mattress. :Goodnight,: he murmured awkwardly.

Voldemort was already asleep. It was very surreal to Harry, seeing the Dark Lord in such a moment of weakness—a moment that happened to occur in his bloody bed! Harry briefly wondered if he'd gone insane. The answer was "probably," but still, Harry felt strangely nonchalant about it. He was about to take his glasses off when a thought occurred to him, and he pointed his wand at the sleeping snake, casting a heating charm. Voldemort, in his sleep, seemed to sink deeper into Harry's comforter. Shaking his head, Harry placed his glasses beside his bed, his wand under his pillow (in easy reach), and fell asleep.
That night Harry blessedly slept dreamlessly, and as a result woke up fresh and ready for the day. That is, until he opened his eyes and found himself face to face with a red-eyed cobra.

With a yelp, he flailed his covers, flinging the snake and himself off the bed with a large *thump* and a much smaller, simultaneous one.

"Potter you imbecile!"

"Uh, Harry, you alright?" Neville Longbottom asked from where he stood by his bed. The boy looked as if he wanted to stand upon it to keep out of reach of the cobra on the floor.

Wincing, Harry stood up from the cold wooden floor, rubbing his backside to ease the sting.

"Er, yeah, Neville, I'm fine." The other boy gave one last wary glance before leaving the dorm room. Harry walked around to the other side of the bed where Voldemort had landed.

"So sorry. I don't usually wake up with Dark Lords in my face, watching me sleep," he told the snake sarcastically.

Voldemort gave him a hateful glare, obviously wishing he could *Crucio* the boy. :I was not watching you sleep, merely trying to decide how best to wake you up:.

:Well, I'm up now. Happy?:

:You're alive, so no:.

Harry huffed and rolled his eyes, opening his trunk to grab the stuff he needed to get ready for the day. Before he left for the bathroom, he toed the Dark Lord towards the bed. The snake hissed at him for his efforts.

:Go hide. I don't know how my friends will react when they get back from the bathroom to find you loose while I'm gone. Don't want them to accidentally curse you now, do we?: Harry was lying, of course.

Grumbling, Voldemort did as he was told and snuck underneath the bed.

Several minutes later, Harry came back fully dressed in his school robes. Around him, his fellow dorm mates were in various stages of dress as well. Luckily for Harry, none of them seemed to be overly worried there was a cobra underneath Harry's bed.

Grabbing his bag packed with his class materials, Harry slung the strap over his shoulder and then looked warily at Voldemort, who had come out from under the bed once Harry returned from the bathroom.

:Erm, do you need to use the bathroom? I'm not really familiar with the toilet habits of snakes…:

‘Did I really just ask him that?’ Harry wondered, appalled.

Voldemort growled something that was definitely a *no*. Harry swore if snakes could blush he would have been bright pink. Or maybe not. Hesitating only for a moment, Harry bent down and picked up his mortal enemy, causing said enemy to twitch before he relaxed into the hold. Harry
allowed the snake to settle himself around his shoulders, trying not to wince as cool scales brushed against bare skin. They had decided it would just be best to try and not hide the fact Harry was keeping a snake, and would be going out in the open together as owner and pet. That thought cheered Harry up a little with its black humor.

Well, just let me know if you ever do. That goes for anything else, too. I'll get you one of those self-freshening pet boxes, but in the meantime feel free to let me know if you need something—food, water, whatever. You are my pet, after all, and I'm supposed to take care of you,: Harry said, snickering. Voldemort flared his hood, probably incensed about the fact he had to rely on a boy for some of his basic needs.

"Oh, get over yourself," Harry mumbled, taking the stairs down to the Common Room where he met up with his two friends.

"Good morning Harry and…Tommy," Hermione greeted, pausing uncertainly before saying hello to her friend’s new charge. Harry poked Voldemort, who told him rather rudely where to put it in a loud hiss.

Hermione looked to Harry, who shrugged and said, "He says hello." Hermione's eyes widened minutely.

"Can he can understand me?" She seemed quite flabbergasted at the idea.

"He's a smart snake who's lived around humans all his life," Harry merely replied.

"Well, I think he's bloody creepy, Harry. Are you really keeping him?" Ron asked as he sidled up next to Hermione. The girl hit Ron on the arm, telling him something along the lines of speaking ill of people—er—snakes when they were present. The three turned in unison and left out the portrait hole to head down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"I find him better conversation than some people I know," was all Harry responded with. Ron looked dubious, but didn't say anything further as he rubbed his bruised arm. If he happened to walk a few inches further from Harry than normal, no one commented on it.

Entering the Great Hall, the trio sat in their usual spots at Gryffindor's table and piled their plates high with the foods set out for them.

As more students trickled in, Voldemort made a point to sit upright on Harry's shoulder with his hood flared, giving anyone who dared look at him a sharp glare in return. Everyone gave Harry and his new companion a wide berth, faces pale and eyes troubled.

"Down, boy," Harry sighed. "You don't want to be forced back into the cold, now, do you?" More quietly, he said, :You're not a Basilisk, so quit with the death glares.: Voldemort seemed to regain control of his temper, until Dumbledore decided to make an appearance, that is, in which case the Dark Lord started shooting death glares and insults in the Headmaster's direction before Harry was forced to grab the snake's head and shove it under his robes.

:Cool it! Do you want your cover blown? Granted, I won't be heartbroken if you get caught.: Harry tried to hiss under his breath, but still the students around him were giving him wary looks. Harry made an effort to smile sweetly to put them at ease, not at all confident with its effectiveness. "He fell off the wrong side of the bed this morning," he told them in explanation for the snake's seemingly bad temper. That actually might not have been a lie, either, Harry mused with a grin.
Throughout breakfast, Harry tried to act natural while shooting glances up to the Head Table, whereas everyone else was shooting glances at him. While the students seemed overly aware of Voldemort, the teachers hadn’t seemed to notice his new addition until halfway through the meal when said evil bastard decided to slip out from under Harry's robes again. Now much of the teachers' attentions were on him and the poisonous snake around his neck.

The one Harry was most worried about was Snape, since if his prediction was correct and Snape had somehow, quite cunningly, slipped Voldemort the potion to transform him into a snake then he would be the most likely one to recognize the Dark Lord for who he was. Harry was riding on the hope Wormtail had mentioned he "killed" the snake. But Snape never showed up for breakfast that morning, so Harry could at least relax about that for a while still. Dumbledore, though, kept shooting Harry curious glances such that Harry knew he would have to explain himself very soon.

Sure enough, as the Great Hall emptied as students went off to class, Dumbledore crossed the room to where Harry sat. As he neared, the elder wizard used that strangely blackened right hand of his to absently smooth down his snowy beard. Harry wasn't positive, but when Voldemort seemed to catch sight of the hand he made a curious hiss that might have been in shock. Harry didn't have time to press him for answers before Dumbledore reached him.

"Good morning, Professor," Harry greeted politely. Voldemort coiled tighter around his throat. Harry knew that the snake was probably restraining himself from reacting overtly to the old man.

"Good morning, my boy. I couldn't help but notice your new friend here." Harry made a choking sound to hide his laughter. Oh, the irony! He covered it with a cough, which was assisted by how Voldemort was practically strangling him with his tensed coils now.

Around him, Harry noticed the few students left who didn't already know about his snake were giving him a great amount of attention, eavesdropping on the conversation.

Reaching up to pet Voldemort's scales, Harry said to the Headmaster, "I found him half-starved and freezing yesterday" — he tried to make it sound as if he wasn't out past curfew— "as I was walking by the Forbidden Forest. He says he had been abandoned some two weeks ago near Hogsmeade from what I gather, and believe me, he looked it. You have to understand, Professor, I couldn't leave him there. He's been in captivity his whole life; he doesn't know how to survive in the wild, and he definitely wouldn't survive the winter." Harry made his eyes as wide and pleading as possible.

"Harry, that's a very dangerous snake. Hogwarts doesn't usually allow venomous pets." Dumbledore eyed him critically from behind his spectacles, and Harry ducked his head.

"I know, Professor. I promise he won't hurt anybody. Tommy's all bark and no bite."

"Tommy?" Here Dumbledore seemed half amused and half alarmed.

Harry let himself smirk slightly in a mischievous manner and spoke quietly so only Dumbledore could hear. "Well, you have to admit he has a certain resemblance to another Tom we know, but that's where the comparison ends. I don't know, I just thought it was a fitting name instead of something like Venom or Spike. Of course, perhaps Fluffy would put people more at ease...?" Voldemort hissed in indignation. Dumbledore's eyes merely twinkled merrily.

"Very well, my boy. Your situation is unique, as you have a means of controlling the animal. I will, however, have to give your snake a probation period of two weeks to see if he really isn't dangerous. During that period you will keep him with yourself at all times. I do not want him loose among the students before his loyalty is assured. To ensure the students' safety during that time, I
must insist you allow me to place a proximity binding spell on the two of you as a precautionary measure. It will prevent you two from getting out of viewing range of one another, and thus you will always be aware of what…Tommy, is doing. Fair enough?"

"Yes, thank you Professor!" Harry gushed, grinning widely while internally he was thinking, *Oh Merlin! We're not going to have any privacy at all! How the hell am I supposed to go around with bloody Voldemort always around my neck? Screw our agreement, we're going to end up killing one another anyway.*

"I promise, Tommy won't touch a hair on anyone's head." Harry really hoped his smile hadn't turned into a grimace as muscular coils tightened around his windpipe.

Dumbledore nodded and silently spelled the two of them with his wand before making a shooing gesture with his hand. "Now run along, before you're late for class."

As Harry walked to his first class behind Hermione and Ron, Voldemort twisted under his robes so he was eyelevel with Harry.

:When did you become a Slytherin?:

Harry bobbed his head. :Oh, I think I've always had the capabilities for it. The Hat's first choice for me was your House, oh Great Slytherin's Heir. Oh dear, I seemed to have shocked you,: Harry said, unapologetic. Now several years after the fact, Harry had come to terms that he very well could have been happy as a Slytherin, and sometimes wondered what his life would have been like if he'd let the Sorting Hat place him in the House of the Snakes. Not to say he wasn't happy as a Gryffindor, because he clearly at least half belonged in that House as well, but sometimes he felt there were parts of him that would never fit in with the Lions.

After some silence, Voldemort finally responded, :Potter, I really hate being surprised by you.:  

:You, my dear Dark Lord, seem to be under the impression that I fit into some type of set "Savior" mold like everyone else. Well, I don't, and you and others who don't like it can kiss my arse.: 

:I'd rather not.:  

Harry laughed.

Classes went on as usual for Harry, except for the fact he had a large cobra wrapped around his shoulders. But said cobra was a genius, and actually quite helpful during class, even if his helpful remarks were often sandwiched between scathing and insulting ones. Nevertheless, Harry found himself more enjoying the lessons as Voldemort frequently supplemented the lectured material with less well known but increasingly useful information when he was appalled by the lacking information in the Hogwarts curriculum. The Dark Lord was probably bored if he was willing to help his enemy, or showing off.

As the day progressed, students whispered and gave Harry sideways glances whenever he spoke in the quiet hissing of Parseltongue, but he for the most part ignored them, no longer so self-conscious, per se, about his supposed "Dark" ability, but he tried to mostly use it surreptitiously just to avoid the rude stares. But then again, he never asked for their limelight, so he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of acting like they thought he should. The Slytherins even kept their distance for once, which was almost a bonus. At one point, though, he had to stop and comment to a group of obviously gaping Fourth Years, making sure to speak loud enough for everyone else in the crowded hallway to hear.
"May I ask why you are staring at me? It's quite rude, you know."

One confident boy, a Ravenclaw, stepped forward. "You're talking with that snake. You-Know-Who can do that, too."

"That he can," Harry nodded, using a duh tone of voice. "He even has his own snake, Nagini. What do you think of that?"

Everyone stood in rapt attention of the conversation. Many eyes widened at the mention of Voldemort's familiar.

"Are you becoming like him, then, Potter?" a voice called out. Harry couldn't tell who it was, as the rabble-rouser remained hidden in the crowd. Coward.

"Tell me, people, why might it be a good thing I am a Parselmouth?" Silence. Harry sighed, as if disappointed. "Well, if Voldemort — here everyone winced visibly — can talk to snakes, and I can talk to snakes, then that means he doesn't have that as an advantage anymore. You could say we are equals—"

:Not on your life, Potter.: 

"—in that regards," Harry finished, unendingly amused at Voldemort's repugnance.

Some faces, still pale at the mention of the Dark Lord's name, seemed to have a dawning understanding, while others looked confused or doubtful. For the pièce de résistance, Harry smiled roguishly.

"And come on, people, if I really planned on becoming the next Dark Lord do you think I would name my snake familiar something as lackluster as Tommy?" Shaking his head, he muttered, "Honestly," before wandering off, leaving behind the group of people, half of whom had amused expressions planted on their faces. Harry looked at the ground, trying to hide his smile.

:Potter, I really hate that name.: 

:Oh, but you have to admit, it comes in handy, right Tommy?:

Voldemort seethed in silence.

Harry didn't have DADA that day, so he didn't see Snape until dinner at night. But even then, the man did not deem Harry worthy of his gaze and so didn't see Harry's companion.

Ron and Hermione had finally become comfortable enough to mostly ignore the cobra Harry sported on his person, and for that Harry was glad. He didn't want to alienate his friends all for Voldemort's sake. The others in his House were also getting used to the sight, only giving hesitant looks every now and then. Harry knew that by now his little scene in the hallway earlier would have made it around the gossip chains. Hopefully his "I'm not a Dark Lord" spiel came out intact. Harry couldn't help but notice, though, that some of the Slytherin's looked depressed.

:Hey look,: Harry indicated to Voldemort. :Seems like the Slytherins were hoping I'd be on their side. Looks like I dashed their hopes to win,: Harry said with false sympathy. Malfoy, sitting at the Slytherin, noticed Harry looking over there and scowled at him. Harry grinned cheekily and turned away.

:Your humor is terrible.:
No, you just can't take a joke...or is it the truth you can't take?:

Shut up and eat your food, boy, so we can leave all this accursed chatter:

Later that night, Harry returned to his dorm room. Earlier he had made a request for the House Elves to leave him a small empty box, and so he was unsurprised when he found they had left a small wooden crate with the word "EGGS" on the side sitting on his bed. With a well-controlled cutting spell, he cut a hole in the crate's side and borrowed some of Hermione's self-freshening cat litter she used for Crookshanks to put inside.

Here's your litter box, Tom:, Harry said, placing the crate beside his bed out of traffic's way. Voldemort slithered up to it, hesitatingly at first, flicking his tongue to scent the air.

It'll do, despite its crudeness. And must you call it that?: he grumbled.

What, should I call it "The Dark Lord's Throne Room?: Harry giggled at the joke. It was all the Dark Lord was going to get, and if he didn't like it then too bad. He could find somewhere else to take a shit.

'Oh gods, Voldemort and bathroom jokes...’ Harry mused, somewhat appalled at himself.

Same as last night, Harry sealed shut his curtains and silenced them, letting Voldemort curl up at the foot of the bed before laying down himself. Harry read for a bit, listening to the almost inaudibly soft breathing of the snake before his eyes drooped too much for him to read further. Once again, he cast a heating charm on Voldemort, put his book and glasses aside, and fell asleep.

That night he dreamed. He was either in a forest with the biggest trees he'd ever seen, or else he was very small. It was cold and his belly felt like it was rubbing his spine he was so empty from hunger, but he forced himself to ignore it. Whenever he tried to cast a spell he momentarily felt a rising of panic, as no matter what he tired, from a simple Lumos to advanced spells, nothing worked. He felt helpless which he hated and strangely alone. The only thing that kept him going was the need for revenge and the possibility of help in the most unlikely of places, though this thought made him blush more so than his helplessness. He'd never had anyone to rely on, so why suddenly was he forced to now and with that one person, of all people? He felt pervasive rage and revulsion. All this he saw and felt in a broken and fragmented manner.

When Harry woke it was a soft transition. He noticed his skin felt a little clammy but he wasn't the sweat-soaked mess he usually was when he received visions from Voldemort. Squinting into the dark, Harry could just barely make out the ghostly shape of the cobra curled at the foot of his bed, still asleep. Harry put his head back down on his pillow, shifting onto his back.

This vision had been drastically different from the others. For one, it didn't hurt at all, and secondly, he didn't think it had been intentional. What he saw was Voldemort's sort-of nightmare, or perhaps more accurately, memory. Apparently their connection was in full working order, but didn't seem to be as controlled anymore...perhaps, like the pain from touch, control of the connection was an aspect of Voldemort's magic and ability to use Legilimency and Occlumency. Harry now wondered what exactly the connection was, and if Voldemort could receive his dreams as well.

Harry pondered these thoughts for a short while more before he fell back asleep and into his own dreams.

The next day found Harry sitting somewhat anxiously in the DADA classroom, waiting for Snape
to arrive. Voldemort was wrapped around his shoulders, partially hidden by his robes and attempting to act as inconspicuous (for him) as possible. Harry had given him strict instructions that he wasn't to react in any shape or form to Snape's presence, lest he give himself away. Luckily for him, the man-turned-snake was smart and knew that if he wanted any chance to find out if Snape had an antidote then he should act for all intents and purposes as nothing but a home-grown cobra.

Harry had his doubts the Dark Lord would be able to pull it off, and blamed the notorious temper for this prediction.

The moment Snape walked into the classroom, robes billowing out behind him, everyone made haste to shut their mouths and sit attentively in their seats. Harry followed suit, trying to ignore the choking sensation of Voldemort tensing his coils around his neck in an obvious effort not to lunge at the so called traitor to his cause.

"Please turn to page three-hundred and forty-three," Snape droned, positioning himself behind the podium as the classroom was filled with the sound of books slamming open and pages flipped to the one stated. Harry had to grudgingly admit that Snape was one of the most proficient of the entire DADA professors he's had in the past. His lessons actually turned out to be useful in a practical application. They might have been a bit Darker than some preferred, but anything to help him beat the Dark Lord Voldemort was good, right? Too bad Harry couldn't fully enjoy it as the man still had a burning grudge against him, or, perhaps more accurately, his father. Oh well, life as usual.

The entire lesson, Harry kept sneaking glances at Snape, searching for any indication he recognized, or suspected the snake around his neck. for the longest time it appeared Snape hadn't even noticed Harry's new accessory, but then Harry always did make a point to sit near the back so as to not draw too much attention.

So much for that idea.

"Mr. Potter," Snape said without even looking up, the bastard. "Please tell me how you would kill an Infirius?"

Voldemort actually snickered, probably at Harry's obvious blank expression. Harry remembered Dumbledore mentioning that Voldemort had once created an army of Infiri, but couldn't remember if he mentioned how to kill one. They were already dead, for goodness sakes! Harry also strongly believed Snape purposely asked him a question they hadn't even read about in the book yet.

"Erm," Harry voiced elegantly.

:Fire, you idiot.:

"Fire, sir."

Snape looked up with a sneer. "Correct," he intoned, before looking down once more, clearly intent on asking him another impossible question, but he stopped himself and did a most comical double take. His black eyes studied Harry and, more importantly, Harry's "pet". Clearly nobody had informed the man of the new addition to Hogwarts Castle.

Harry wasn't sure if Snape had seemed so surprised by the snake because he suspected who it was, or because it was simply a shock to see a dangerous animal wrapped around his most hated enemy's son. In any case, Harry, for added effect, reached up a hand and stroked Voldemort's head, surprised when said man-snake butted his head against the offered hand in return. It seemed Harry
wasn't the only one capable of milking the situation. The boy made sure to keep his expression carefully blank throughout the whole encounter.

Snape only gaped for a few seconds, barely anytime for students to take much notice, before he shook himself out of his minor stupor.

Calling on someone else, Snape continued the lesson and completely ignored Harry the rest of class. Harry didn't find it within himself to mind.

Afterwards, Harry found an empty hallway to address Voldemort in private.

:What do you think? I couldn't tell if he was merely startled at seeing me with a large snake or because he guessed it was you.: 

Voldemort's head hovered over Harry's shoulder as he answered. :I am unsure. His reaction was very vague.: It sounded to Harry Voldemort didn't care about the vague reaction, he just wanted the Potion's Master dead.

At that point, Harry knew what they needed to do, and smiled in anticipation.

:Well, Voldemort, have you ever gone sticking your nose in things you shouldn't with a Gryffindor?: 

:...You're going to get me killed, aren't you?: 

:Nah, I've already done that, and we know how that turned out. Besides, I think it's time you lived a little.: 

:Oh joy.:
Chapter 3

:Potter, what are you planning?:

Harry tilted the book he was reading down onto his lap and looked down the bed at Voldemort.

:What makes you think I'm planning anything?: Harry suspected his face looked suspiciously innocent.

:Potter, you've gone to bed still dressed in your robes. Your shoes are even on.: 

Harry lazily lifted his book back to eyelevel and answered, knowing it would irritate the man-snake, :Huh, so I am.: The corner of his mouth curled up as Voldemort, as expected, made an irritated rasp. Mercifully, Harry added, :Well, maybe I am planning something. How do you feel about sneaking into Snape's office?:

Voldemort's upper half rose up from the bed. :I assume your intentions are to discover if Snape was involved with my transformation. I shall also assume you have no plan for which to do this,: he commented dryly.

Harry kicked his legs under the covers as he casually rolled onto his side, displacing a hissing Voldemort from his spot on the comforter.

:Oh, I have some plans.: 

Harry continued to read, knowing Voldemort expected him to elaborate. Harry, of course, would not give him that satisfaction. He liked to think he was teaching the Dark Lord the art of asking instead of demanding.

:Potter, tell me how you're going to sneak into the quisling's office.: 

Harry mentally sighed. It was a work in progress.

:Fine, we're going to use this.: Harry pulled a blank piece of folded parchment from under his bed and placed it on top of his red comforter in Voldemort's line of sight.

:Potter, I've always thought you were an idiot. Glad to see I was not mistaken.: 

Grinning impishly, Harry gave up all pretense of appearing to read and shrugged. :Takes one to know one, right?:

Taking up his wand, Harry introduced Voldemort to the Marauder's Map, to which the snake commented it was a piece of junk only idiots would need to use. Harry took his words to mean he was rather impressed with the object. Harry hadn't really wanted to give Voldemort all his secrets-he already knew about the cloak from the first night-but what choice did he have? They needed to get down to the dungeons and this was the easiest way without getting caught and having to answer some awkward questions about what exactly he was doing, depending on where he got caught (Snape: “What are you doing in my office?”). Harry hoped that in the end, the benefits would be greater than the sacrifices taken to get there.

Inside the privacy of Harry's curtained bed, the two perused the Map, watching the halls clear of students and faculty as the night grew late. Harry focused particularly on Snape's movements, knowing the man tended to patrol the halls longer than most, getting his kicks by catching students
out past curfew and giving them arduous detentions.

While Snape was the DADA professor this year, he was still inherently a Potions Master, and thus had kept his personal lab and office in the dungeons for his use. The idea was that if there was any information on what potion he—may have—used on Voldemort, it would be found there. What that meant was Harry and Voldemort had to make their way down to the lower levels of the castle without getting caught, break into Snape's office, spend what could be minutes or hours searching for any evidence of his involvement in Voldemort's predicament, get out undetected and make it back to Gryffindor Tower.

:Easy. Well, except for the whole 'break into Snape's office' part…but the getting there and theoretically the getting away is easy.: Harry paused, carding a hand through his hair. :Maybe you could slip under the door…?:

Voldemort puffed up in indignation. :Potter! You may be an idiot Gryffindor, but I'm not:

:Oh-kay, no going under the door.: Harry propped his chin up with his hand, noticing that Voldemort seemed to be contemplating something.

:Get us to the dungeons, and I can get you into the charlatan's office.:

After thinking a moment before finally shrugging, Harry told him, :Fine by me.:

:…You better hope I actually have a way to get in. Stupid Gryffindor.:

:What if Snape wasn't the one to dose you?: Harry asked, ignoring Voldemort's comment. :What then? Should I approach him for help if that was the case?:

:It was him,: Voldemort said confidently.

Harry shot him an exasperated look. :You're just biased because he deceived you.:

:It was him, Potter. If I could not identify the potion, then it must be a vary rare or newly invented one. Only someone of his caliber, both in potions and in my ranks, could have gotten that potion into my tea.:

"I still can't believe you drink tea…" Harry murmured to himself, earning an aggravated hiss from Voldemort in response.

Finally, at eleven-thirty, the dot on the map labeled "Severus Snape" trailed down to the dungeons and into his private quarters. So, donning his Invisibility Cloak and silencing his footsteps, Harry snuck down and out of the Common Room and into the school corridors. He made faster progress than he normally would, as Voldemort kept his eyes on the Map ("'Piece of junk' my arse," Harry muttered) while Harry merely focused on walking. As a result, getting down into the dungeons to Snape's office was easy; the hard part was still to come. Thankfully, so far Snape seemed inclined to remain within his quarters. Harry didn't care to know what he was doing.

Invisible, the young man stood in front of the door of a chamber which held a rather large amount of unpleasant memories for him.

:Alohamora isn't going to work, is it?:

:Of course not. You're going to have to use Parselmagic.:

:….Excuse me?:
Voldemort hissed in annoyance. :You are a bloody Parselmouth, Potter. I've gotten word, and partially seen in your mind what happened your Second year. You got into the Chamber. Thanks, by the way, for killing me, again, and a thousand year old Basilisk.: Voldemort was clearly being sarcastic, and Harry did not appreciate it.

:You and your bloody Basilisk were trying to kill me! I'm the bloody Boy-Who-Won't-Die, what did you expect me to do? And get out of my mind, you bastard!:


:As I was saying, you were able to get into the Chamber; you can get into here.:

:Um, I'm pretty sure Snape didn't place a Parseltongue password on the door to his office…:

:And that's where Parselmagic comes into play. Saying the word "open" in Parseltongue can be just that, a word, but if you put magic behind it, it becomes Parselmagic. Because it is so rare, and a different kind of magic all together—some would call it creature-like—most normal spells can't protect against it. Severus Snape is a smart and capable wizard: —this was said reluctantly— :but there are some things he cannot account or prepare for.: Harry carefully absorbed what he was told. :So, I used Parselmagic to get into the Chamber of Secrets? How did I do that without knowing what I was doing in the first place?:

Voldemort flicked his tongue, the tips of it just brushing over Harry's cheek, causing it to twitch at the sensation. :You have to intend for what you say to act as a spell. Focus it. When you opened the Chamber, you intended for the passage to open, and so it did. Right now, if you intend for the door to open when you speak, it will.: Harry was slightly awed by the prospects. He'd researched a little about being a Parseltongue, but, naturally, Hogwarts' library did not have much material to work with. He'd never known Parseltongue could do more than let him communicate with snakes.

:Won't Snape notice?:

:The spell won't act against the normal spell he placed on the door; therefore, as is, opening the door this way will be untraceable. So no, he won't.: More assured yet still doubtful, Harry asked, :Do I need my wand? I guess I didn't really use it for the Chamber…:

:It helps at first, but you don’t need it. Now get on with it, you're wasting time!: Cocking his head at the door and lifting his wand, Harry mustered up the belief and anticipation for what should happen when he spoke, hoping he was doing it right. It shouldn’t be that hard, he told himself, since he had done it when he was twelve without even knowing he was doing it in the first place.


:Focus, and try again.: Voldemort prodded, not necessarily gently but at least he didn't put more pressure on Harry, which the young man was grateful for.

Pursing his lips, Harry focused on the image of the door opening, believing it would, and hissed the word again.
Immediately he noticed the difference from the last time, the slight tingle as magic flowed from his core and affected the environment around him with a free sort of current unlike the magic taught within the school. With sudden ease, Snape's office door swung open with minimal sound.

Well done, Potter.: It was said with little enthusiasm, but Harry grinned at the compliment nonetheless and quickly slipped inside and shut the door again.

Once inside, Harry pulled off his Invisibility Cloak and draped it over his arm so he'd always have it within easy reach. He lifted his wand, the Lumos charm already glowing from the end, and inspected the room.

Where should we start?:

Flicking his tongue, Voldemort said with a beleaguered tone, The potions shelves.: The you dimwit was implied.

Nodding his head, Harry approached the wall that contained a multitude of vials and bottles of all sorts of shapes and sizes, each containing a colorful fluid. Some he recognized, but most he couldn't even dream of guessing at.

Working together, Voldemort rising up from his perch on Harry's shoulder and looking at the shelves above the ones Harry looked at, they went through every single potion in one section before moving on to another. Each glass was clearly labeled, so at least they weren't stumped on that aspect. Harry, having had questionable motivation to actually learn Potions, had to ask Voldemort what several of the concoctions were when he didn't recognize the name.

Soon, after several minutes of searching, it became clear that, while there were quite a variety of potions there, none of them were anything of particular rarity or interest, or even unknown. Harry postulated that maybe one of the vials was purposefully mislabeled, but Voldemort had another idea.

He must have another place for the really interesting potions.: Harry took a moment to digest that, before bemoaning, Oh Merlin, do we have to break into his quarters now?: Harry winced, stepping away from the shelves and rubbing his forehead, brushing over the famous scar. What do we do now? Like I said, we don't even know for sure if Snape's the one who dosed you. We could be on a wild goose chase.: Voldemort was silent for several moments, his tongue rapidly flicking in and out of his mouth. Harry took that moment to check the Map, making sure Snape was still where they'd last saw him. Oh shit!

As Harry's luck was fond of pissing on him at the most inconvenient times, naturally, when he checked the Map, Snape's footprints were no longer stationary in his room, but snaking through the dungeon corridors in a path that would lead right past his office. Whether or not he was actually going to stop there was unknown, but Harry wasn't going to take any chances. We've got to go.: Wait! I can taste cold air and dirt. I think there is a room below this one.: His tongue flicked out again, perhaps to confirm his findings.

I don't care, we can come back later. Snape's on his way here and I'd rather not get caught.: Voldemort was clearly very unhappy as Harry tossed his Cloak over the two of them again and quickly left the room after making sure nothing was disturbed. Snape's magical lock automatically
reinstated itself the moment he shut the door behind him. Observing the Marauder's Map, Harry watched as his name trailed away from Snape's. He felt justified in his hasty retreat when Snape stopped by his office door just a few moments after Harry had left and entered the room. The man wasn't in there long, though, before he continued walking in Harry's direction, much to Harry's dismay. Cursing, he powerwalked so as to put distance between them, not trusting his Invisibility Cloak to keep him completely undetected from Snape's perceptiveness.

Using the same system they had before, with Voldemort watching the Marauder's Map and Harry doing the walking, they retraced their steps to Gryffindor Tower.

Suddenly, Voldemort hissed, :Stop!: in Harry's ear, and the boy immediately froze and glanced down at the Map, trying to see what the problem was. Currently he was just outside the Great Hall, and coming in the opposite direction was Albus Dumbledore. Behind him, Snape was also approaching.

:I want to see what they're doing.: Hesitating before reluctantly nodding, Harry sidled up to a wall and pressed himself against it, covering himself in the shadows even though there was nothing visible of him for the shadows to actually hide. asked

:You think one of them might have fire-called the other?: Harry queried softly, a pair each of red and green eyes intently watching as the two dots got closer and closer until they intercepted each other. Voldemort didn’t answer. Harry turned his attention to the real-life representative of the Map's dots as they came into view and tried to hear what they were saying.

"Severus, what seems to be the problem?" Dumbledore asked in his congenial manner.

The Potions Master looked around before silently casting a privacy charm. Harry cursed under his breath, but Voldemort told him to cast "Listen" in Parselmagic. It took two tries again, but immediately they could hear through the privacy barrier once it was cast.

"The wards in my office were tripped. I went to investigate but the intruder had left."

Inwardly, Harry winced. How could he have forgotten about wards? It probably goes to show how distracted Voldemort was to have forgotten too. Or maybe Snape was just more paranoid than they both considered him to be.

Dumbledore, however, seemed unconcerned. "Perhaps it was a rat. Was there anything disturbed or taken?"

Snape huffed. "The anti-theft wards were intact, so no. Headmaster, why did you not inform me of Potter's new… pet?"

Dumbledore twisted his blackened hand in front of him in a gesture of conciliation. "Ah yes, I see what you are getting at. I wanted to see if perhaps you'd ask the same questions I did. Has there been any sign of Voldemort since you administered the potion? By the way, well done, my boy. That had to have been difficult."

“Yes, it was,” Snape drawled irritably. “House Elves are unendingly protective of the kitchens and the items within. I managed to pour some into the cream the night before.”

Harry was glad he'd put a silencing charm on, because at this admission of guilt Voldemort had sibilated out a sharp hiss, spitting venom in the process. Without thinking, Harry lifted his hand and smoothed it down Voldemort's head and hood, trying to calm his temper, all the while thinking, ‘He takes his tea with cream?’ because he found that odd. For some reason, the
unconscious gesture worked, though, and the snake went silent and focused on listening again.

"No sign," Snape reported, ignoring Dumbledore's compliments. "As I said, that despicable excuse for a wizard Wormtail claimed he killed a large white snake on the same day. I, of course, had the rat Obliviated. There were no remains as proof, though, but it hasn't been spotted since by those allowed into the Dark Lord's base, and Wormtail insisted it was dead."

"Hmm, if that is the case and that was Voldemort, then the result of the potion was certainly unexpected, among other things.” Dumbledore said that in such a way, somewhat dry and huffy, that had Harry thinking he was missing something, but he hoped things would become clearer the more he listened.

“Apparently,” Dumbledore continued, “we had not accounted for some aspect of how it would react with Voldemort's body and magic. A snake! Imagine that! I thought for sure that particular concoction would result in a transformation to the temporary body before the ritual with Harry, or even the shade from before that. The purpose of the potion was to use past weakened states as a template for transformation. Perhaps that was his Animagus form? Hmm. I wonder if the other…”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Snape groused, interrupting whatever Dumbledore had to say and inserting his own words. “The counterpart would most likely give interesting results as well. In any case, it is of no consequence. What I need to know now is if you think Voldemort has been banished once more?”

Idly, Harry wondered at Dumbledore's word choice. Why "banished" and not "killed"?

“That would be the preferred case.” Snape muttered something under his breath that Harry couldn’t hear properly—something about "gone for good," and he decided he could probably fill in the rest.

Louder, Snape said, "But you're not sure. Don't you find it odd that days after Wormtail found a strange white snake in You-Know-Who's manor that the Potter boy should find one as well?"

Dumbledore seemed unaffected, as always. "Yes, it is a strange coincidence, isn't it? Coincidences are a tricky type of magic in this world. You don't really think Harry capable of assisting Voldemort, though, do you?"

Sneering, Snape said, "He's a Gryffindor; I would not put it past him to be that stupid."

Harry felt very affronted. Perhaps getting called stupid by Voldemort several times a day gave him a lowered tolerance for others calling him such. At that moment, Snape was officially off his "Do Not Touch" list for after Seventh Year. That git could fend for himself. Never mind that Harry actually was assisting Voldemort…but that was beside the point!

"For Voldemort to have made it all the way to Hogwarts as an ordinary snake in such short a time would be quite a feat. However, I put a binding spell on Harry and his snake as a precaution. I assure you, during the snake's 'probation' the next two weeks before break, the snake will not be able to get more than ten feet away from Harry. If someone had indeed gotten into your office, it is highly unlikely it was Harry's snake while Harry himself resides in Gryffindor Tower."

When Harry heard how Dumbledore spoke of the binding charm, he grew apprehensive about the implied danger to Voldemort should he decide to get away. Harry wouldn't put it past the man-snake to try. He then wondered if he feeling concern for the Dark Lord, but couldn't quite come to a conclusion about it. Around his neck, Voldemort remained uncharacteristically silent.
"What makes you trust that Potter wouldn't help the Dark Lord if he is that snake?"

From where Harry hid, he could just make out Dumbledore's serene expression firm up to something more serious. "Come now, Severus, we must trust Harry. He is the only one capable of defeating Lord Voldemort, and if he really is banished once more, then Harry will have the time to complete his task."

Bless Dumbledore and his guilt-inducing speeches. Harry frowned, pushing the feelings aside to hear what else may be said.

"I still think putting all your hopes on a boy is extremely foolish."

Dumbledore's face was once more jovial. "Ah, but Harry is no ordinary boy, is he? Come now, it is late. I'll see you in the morning, Severus."

Snape mumbled a cheerless goodnight before rotating on his heels and heading back down to the dungeons. Dumbledore went back to where he came from as well, leaving Harry and Voldemort alone in the dark.

:Well?:

Voldemort flicked his tongue. :How very curious,: the snake hissed almost absently.

:Um, hello, Tom, the potion? Were you at all paying attention, because you don't seem to care too much.:

:Of course I care, you brat, but there were some other interesting bits of information divulged as well.:

:Huh,: Harry mused, :Like how I apparently am the only one who can kill you? Me, a sixteen year old kid with hardly a fraction of knowledge as you do?:

:It appears you may be more than you seem.: 

Harry scoffed and threw up his hands. :Not you too! I figured of all people you would refuse to see me as a title such as the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One, or the Savior. In reality, I'm nothing special.: 

'Why am I telling the Dark Lord this exactly?' Harry exasperatedly remarked to himself.

Voldemort's tongue flicked out in a curious sort of way. :You survived the Killing Curse.:

:You know what Dumbledore thinks? He thinks it's the power of love that I have which will defeat you. What am I supposed to do, hug you to death? I survived that Killing Curse because my mother sacrificed herself for me. You listened to only part of that bloody prophecy and lo and behold, it was self-fulfilling. If you hadn't gone there that night I wouldn't have been marked as your so called equal and you'd probably be ruling the world right now.: 

Voldemort was contemplatively silent for a moment before hissing softly, :You know the prophecy, don't you?: 

'Oh shit!' Harry thought. 'I didn't mean to say so much…'

:You mean you didn't get that from my head?: Harry asked, stalling.

:No. Tell me, Potter, what does it say?: the snake-man said sweetly. Er, sweet er than normal, that
Harry sighed. Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound. Maybe Voldemort will finally realize everything was his fault for even listening to the stupid Prophecy in the first place.

:After the Ministry last year, Dumbledore took me into his office and showed me the memory of when the prophecy was first spoken.: Harry explained.

Shutting his eyes, he whispered, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

Harry hated that prophecy. Because of it, his whole life had been one huge disappointment. Dumbledore thinks it's his ability to love that will defeat Lord Voldemort, whatever that means. In reality, Harry barely knew it; he grew up in a loveless household, and even now he's not sure how pure the love he and his friends share. Sometimes it seemed it was only a conditional love, instead of unconditional. A marriage of convenience. Other times they were the best friends in the world. It was so confusing.

Voldemort gave a delicate snort, breaking Harry from his brooding. :You are not my equal.: 

:Yeah? Tell Dumbledore that, because he seems to think this prophecy is accurate. I would argue that my supposed secret power is dumb luck, but I think, if anything, you do know that,: Harry derided.

:Yes, very irritating, that is. But let us leave this subject for now, as it is getting us nowhere, and get back to the Tower.: 

:Yes, Master,: Harry grumbled mockingly, checking the Map before heading off.

Once safely ensconced in his bed, Voldemort curled up in front of Harry, red eyes gleaming. They were now able to discuss what they had overheard about the potion Snape used.

:From what I gather, the intention of the potion was to transform a person into a past weakened state. The results of such could range widely, depending on the person, as there are all sorts of weaknesses a person could be subjected to.: 

Harry considered this, weighing it against his own assumptions he'd made from what he overheard from Dumbledore. :I think you're right. But, wouldn't most people simply revert back to infancy? That seems like the weakest state possible.: 

Voldemort bobbed his small head. :Perhaps, but like I stated, it would depend on the person. I have to admit, Severus Snape is a brilliant Potion's Master. The potion he gave me is powerful in that it is unspecific. Something like that would be very difficult to brew, let alone invent, if that is what Snape has done. It would require more than a little bit of magic siphoned into it, as well.: 

:How is it 'unspecific"?:

:Think about it; your observation of infancy being a person's most weakest state is accurate, but say a person went through a period of depression? In that case, they are emotionally weak, and may in fact meet the terms for the potion. Or, perhaps a person was temporarily blinded, or cursed. I suspect Snape's potion could bring a person back into any of those states. I imagine it might even be able to kill, if there was a person who had died but was brought back to life before the soul had
a chance to depart fully. Whatever it is, it must be a state of almost complete helplessness, is my conclusion.:

Harry was just beginning to wrap his head around the whole concept. :So, for me my weakened state might not be as a baby, but maybe how I am when Dementors are around, or when this one particular bastard possesses me.:

Voldemort had the audacity to chuckle. Harry shot him a glare.

:But for you, Snape and Dumbledore meant for it to revert you back to that…whatever body you had before Wormtail tossed you in the cauldron the night of the Third Task, or into that spirit form. Why did you turn into a snake, then?:

:To explain: it is simply my most weakened state. Even I would not have accounted for this outcome, but now that I contemplate it, it makes sense. While I was in spirit form, I wasn't completely helpless as I could possess other wizards, and while in the temporary form I was able to access my magic. Both states I had to rely on my followers, but only to an extent. So instead, the potion drew forth the snake portion of myself Dumbledore had not accounted for. I suspect my magic had tried to protect me, but because the potion is not magically inert—as I said, most likely requiring it while being brewed—my magic reacted badly and thus gave the volatile potion the power to give me a truly weakened form. As I am now, I'm at my most weak. After all, I have to rely on you, not my followers, but my enemy. Only you can understand me, and only you might be able to help me.:

Harry was awed. :That's…that's something,: he responded inelegantly.

:Yes,: Voldemort hissed. :That potion is indeed a significant piece of magic and skill.:

The two sat in silence for several moments. :They mentioned a counterpart potion,: Harry finally said.

:They did,: Voldemort agreed, :but I am unsure if he spoke of it theoretically or if there really is one. I am certain Snape had a hidden storage cellar under his office. Many Potion Masters do. There was a current of air that did not fit with the rest of the room. If anything, he would keep it there.:

Harry sighed. :We made a mistake tonight forgetting about the wards and…oh, please, don't give me that look, even Dark Lords can slip-up. Anyway, we're going to have to lay low before we try again. Christmas break is in two weeks, and by then the Binding spell Dumbledore put on us will have dissolved. We can try again then, since I'll be staying in the castle.:

‘Yeah,’ Harry thought glumly. ‘There is no way I’m going to the Weasley’s for the hols this year… not if it’s with Voldemort.’

Voldemort grumbled but had to acquiesce. Suddenly, he cocked his head in an odd manner and focused his scarlet eyes on Harry.

:Did you know he's dying?:

Harry frowned, startled. :Who?:

:Dumbledore,: the snake said matter-of-factly. :His blackened hand is the result of a dark curse. It seems the Headmaster has been prying into things he shouldn't.: Voldemort dark tone implied that he knew more, and was very angry about something, but Harry was too stunned to bother asking.
"He's dying?" Harry whispered. "I don't believe you."

"Then you are a fool."

The worst part was, that was the thing Harry could believe.

Harry shook his head dumbly. Not Dumbledore! The man, while externally looked wizened, to Harry he seemed timeless, some constant that would always be there. That seemingly wise old man who, Harry had eventually come to understand, could be just as blind as Voldemort about how the world works. The man had made mistakes, but he's allowed that; it's a right of being human.

But now he was dying?

It would be the end of an era. Dumbledore had been the icon of the Light for decades now, ever since his defeat of Grindelwald. If Dumbledore died, where would that leave them? Panic began to rise in Harry's throat.

But then he focused on Voldemort again and forced himself to calm down. He needed to look at things rationally, to pull himself away from the immediate reaction and to think, because now there was a bigger picture that he'd been missing all along…the missing piece of the puzzle he didn't know he'd been stupidly sitting on was now retrieved and put in its rightful place now.

Dumbledore had been trying to tell him something, to teach Harry something about Voldemort. He had known that ever since the Headmaster had brought him to his office to look at old memories about the very enemy sitting on Harry’s bed. He was trying to impart Harry with some sort of knowledge before he died. But what? And why was he doing it in this odd, roundabout way? Harry was all for figuring out things for himself, but sometimes it was just simpler to have someone figure it out for him, especially if time was of the essence.

Whatever it was, Dumbledore was letting him find it out on his own, and Harry wasn't sure if he was meant to before or after Dumbledore's death. In any case, Dumbledore's and Snape's plan to weaken Voldemort was beginning to make more sense. While Dumbledore's time was running short, he apparently was trying to ensure Harry's ran a little longer. Harry didn't understand things yet, but he knew Dumbledore purposely withheld information from him. It was just the way the old man worked. It irked Harry, but in the end he had decided that as long as he understood this, he would let the Headmaster play by his rules…for now.

Voldemort was growing impatient with the silence. :You're not going to cry on me, are you Potter?:

Harry wondered at the crassness but then remembered this was the Dark Lord, being a bastard was just in his nature and he couldn't care one bit if Dumbledore died. Still in a slight bit of shock, Harry shook his head.

:No, don't worry, I wouldn't want to cause you any emotional pain in return.:  

:Spare me, Potter. And good, because I don't want to have to deal with your blubbering over the next Merlin knows how long.:  

:Oh, don't worry.; Harry told him with watery cheerfulness, pushing aside all thoughts of Dumbledore. :The weeks will fly by, especially when you're having fun with me!:  

Voldemort hissed out a moan. :Weeks! My Death Eaters are going to get themselves killed, I just know it, while you remain within my reach and I cannot even touch you.:  

:Look on the brightside.; Harry said. :You'll have lots of time to build your troops back up while I
finish school:

:Go to sleep, brat:

:Yes, Master:
Harry was in the Great Hall at breakfast when Hermione startled mumbling something angrily under her breath, her nose buried in the Daily Prophet.

"What's wrong, Hermione?"

The girl laid the paper down on the table in a huff, in the process covering her and Ron's plates. Ron scowled and retrieved his plate, pulling it to his chest protectively and taking another bite of pancake. Harry raised his brow and smirked.

"It's You-Know-Who, Harry. He's been too quiet lately. He's planning something, I know it," she said with conviction.

Harry choked on his pumpkin juice. Voldemort mumbled, :And they call me paranoid…: Harry's coughs increased as he simultaneously tried to clear his throat and stifle his laughter.

Hermione continued, oblivious to Harry's reaction. "There have been all these break-ins and raids, werewolves on the prowl and all around discord and anarchy the past months, and now suddenly nothing? You can't tell me that's not suspicious. There has not been one peep or inkling of Death Eater activity since three of them were captured last week."

Coughing under control and with a carefully schooled, concerned face, Harry asked, "Last week? Oh, you mean the pub fight."

Hermione gave him a look. "They were trying to kidnap that half-blood witch who turned one of the men down. Everyone is saying to be on high alert," she told him gravely. "I wonder what Dumbledore thinks."

"Yeah, I wonder…" Harry murmured. It was while he was in the middle of spooning some oatmeal into his mouth that a thought occurred to him. "Hey, wait a minute!" he exclaimed around his mouthful of food, the hand holding his spoon still frozen in the air. Swallowing that one last bite of sustenance, he gathered his things and told his friends he would see them in a little bit, ignoring their flabbergasted looks as he hastily left his seat without a word of explanation for either his outburst or his sudden exit. Walking casually yet quickly out of the Great Hall, Harry headed in the direction of his first class, but stopped in an empty classroom he found on the way. He placed Voldemort on a desktop and set a privacy ward before placing his hands on his hips.

:I thought you said your comrades would know to continue on your brand of mayhem and dissent even with you gone.:" Voldemort flicked his tongue out. :And they did, but you heard the Mudblood; the imbeciles got themselves captured.:"

:I thought you said your comrades would know to continue on your brand of mayhem and dissent even with you gone.:" Rising up into an S-curve, managing to appear smug even in his current form, Voldemort said, :I told you they would know what to do if I happened to lose my body again. They have no proof of that at this point. What, did you think they would suddenly begin calling their own shots after only a week of my absence? How insulting.:" Harry glowered. :You tricked me into thinking nothing would change even with you gone.:"
Voldemort’s eyes gleamed with malicious glee. :No, you made too many assumptions. The war will eventually go on, but after enough time for my followers to come to the conclusion about why I am absent. It could take months, if Dumbledore stays silent about his suspicions of my banishment.:

1.

:So, what do you think? Is the evil Lord Voldemort planning some new devious scheme? Or perhaps he's given up…any thoughts as to what it might be?:

Voldemort sneered, flicking his tongue out angrily. :I do not like your cheek, Potter.:

Harry grinned before chuckling. :A pub fight…seriously, shouldn’t your people know not to hit on the girlfriends of Aurors?:

Voldemort coiled up tighter sulkily, almost appearing to be contemplating something he’d rather not be. :I need you…” Voldemort bared his fangs in some unknown frustration. :I need you, Potter, to do me a…a favor,: he finally ground out bitterly, no doubt unused to having to ask for things rather than simply ordering everyone around.

Harry's brow wrinkled in wonder at the request. :What? And before you ask, I am not going to Crucio myself.:

The snake lifted his head up, completely ignoring the statement. :I need you to send a letter to Lucius Malfoy.:

Harry's first thought, of course, was something along the lines of, Not on your life, Voldemort. But, he decided to go along with the request for the time being, and see what Voldemort's intentions were.

Snorting, Harry asked, :What shall I say? I think I rather like, "After some thought, I have decided that all Death Eater robes should now be pink." Am I close?:

:Potter!: Voldemort warned. :I will tell you what to write. You can owl it tonight.:

Harry's face turned firm as he narrowed his eyes in suspicion. :Why do you need to send a letter to Lucius Malfoy?: he asked heatedly. There was no way he would relay any orders from Voldemort.

:Why do you think? My followers are staying low now, and I'd like to keep it that way and not have a repeat of the…incident—:

:Pub fight.:

:—from last week,: Voldemort finished, ignoring Harry’s correction. Malfoy will most easily be able to spread the word. They are not to do anything without my permission.:

Well, that was certainly interesting.

:Wait…you want me to send the Death Eaters a letter telling them they're not allowed to do any, er, Death Eater things?:

:That was a term of our agreement, wasn't it? If you've changed your mind I'd be happy to order them-:

:No, no,: Harry hastily interrupted. He knew the terms weren't really active yet, as he hadn't
fulfilled his part of the bargain, and he suspected Voldemort knew this as well but was just using it as an argument to convince Harry to write his stupid letter. He obviously didn't trust his followers to not do anything idiotic.

"Fine, I'll write your letter," Harry said with long, drawn-out sigh, although in reality having the Dark Lord himself order the Death Eaters to lay low was perfectly fine with him. He pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill and ink from his bag. "So, the Death Eaters really don't know you're missing? Well, Harry gestured with his hands, "I guess they call on you, not you calling on them. So, for all they know if you don't contact them, you could just be taking a little vacation down in the Mediterranean."

"I'm a Dark Lord. We don't do "vacations".

"Yeah, well maybe that's your problem..." muttered Harry, making sure he was out of Voldemort's bite range. "That just seems like such a disadvantage. There has to be someone who would know you're missing, right?"

Voldemort briefly flared his hood before tucking it back against his body. "No, of course not. They may suspect it, but they do not "know". They are not my friends."

Harry frowned. "But, what about the night you lost your body? Everyone knew then."

Sneering at the mention of his "death," Voldemort told Harry, "That's because your people had to shout it from the roof tops. The snake snapped his jaw. "I have to allow that there was a significant change in the branded Dark Marks, as they are all connected with my magic. That night heralded a period of time where my magic was disconnected from the Marks. Currently, my magic has been bound, but not disconnected."

Harry felt a momentary feeling of panic, but tried to appear calm. "Um, how does the Dark Mark work? For instance, Harry made a vague gesture with one of his hands in the air, "could one of the Death Eaters use the Mark to find you?"

Harry had to remind himself that snakes can't smirk...but he swore that this one could. The bastard knew what he was getting at, of course.

"Why should I tell you? You may be willing to share your secrets, but I am not so gullible."

With a shrug, Harry gathered up the parchment and quill to put them back in his bag. "Suit yourself, I'll just leave you to find a way to write that letter..."

"Potter, you ingrate," Voldemort spat out. He really was just too easy, Harry thought gleefully to himself. Voldemort raised his upper body from the desk and trained his gleaming scarlet eyes on Harry's bright green ones. It was odd, but Harry swore there wasn't the same malice in the snake's eyes as there was in his scathing insult. Maybe the Dark Lord...approved of Harry's almost Slytherin methods?

"No, they cannot locate me through their Marks. Why would I let any of them have a means of finding me no matter where I am? If they have something to say to me, they may request it, but I am by no means obligated to suffer their presence if I do not wish it. They can only come to me if I summon them."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Good. At least the Death Eaters had no way of knowing the Voldemort was currently at Hogwarts...that is, if Voldemort wasn't lying.

"So, what happens if you are injured or something and couldn't contact them? Now is a perfect
example. Wouldn't it be best if they had a way to find you?:

:I shall ask again, Potter: why would I do that?:

Harry blinked. :Uh, duh, because if you needed help then they could find you to assist you.: Hadn't Voldemort learned his lesson from the whole time spent as a bodiless shade? Well, obviously he hadn't because the man had come to Harry, his destined enemy, for help. He could have had his Death Eaters kidnap Harry or something for use as a translator and then kill him once they didn't need him anymore. Honestly, Harry was constantly questioning that man's status as a genius. Of course, stupidity was often a side-effect of insanity, and Harry had no doubts about that pleasant aspect of Voldemort.

:I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Potter,: Voldemort snapped. In that instant, Harry almost felt pity for the Dark Lord.

With a disbelieving snort, Harry, in a moment of epiphany, said, :Right. No, I get it; you can't trust any of them to not stab you in the back. I guess I can't blame you, what with the type of people you hang out with.:

Harry seemed to have hit it on the nose. :Better them than the ones you associate with,: Voldemort seethed.

Harry raised a questioning brow. :That's the best comeback you have? Anyway!: Harry interrupted whatever Voldemort might retort with and straightened out the parchment and picked up the quill on the desktop in front of him. :What would you like me to write?:

Harry had to rewrite the letter twice after trying to insert some of his own opinions of certain Death Eaters in the first letter, and was forced to rewrite the second after putting several frowny-faces in and signing it with *Tommy Voldemorty-warty*. Voldemort, to say the least, was not amused. Harry was beginning to think that once Seventh Year was up he should probably just kill himself instead of letting Voldemort do it, because, while he found irritating Voldie to be Great Fun (yes, good enough to have that capitalized), he was starting to get a little worried about his promised death. Voldemort had even considered making him immortal so he could just pass on killing him in favor of torturing him the rest of forever. After that one, Harry had (probably very stupidly) replied he was touched that Voldemort wanted to spend the rest of his life with him.

Once the (third) letter was finished, Harry immediately noticed a problem: unless that connection between them meant they also shared handwriting, it would be obvious to anyone familiar with the Dark Lord's writing style that he had not written this particular letter. Harry brought this up with Voldemort.

To Harry's shock, Voldemort merely twisted around and bit into his own tail, drawing blood as red as his eyes.

:What are you doing?!: Harry squeaked in alarm. Had Voldemort finally cracked? No, wait, he had already done that…

:Give me the letter,: Voldemort demanded. Wide eyed, Harry held it out to the snake, who promptly wiped a crimson trail of blood across the bottom of the page.

:Now cast *Morsmordre* on the parchment.: 

Harry blanched. :Can I even do that here?: He glanced around warily.

Voldemort gave a long-suffering, sibilant sigh. :Cast it in Parseltongue.: After a moment, he added
Harry rolled his eyes but nonetheless did as he was told. Once cast, Harry watched as Voldemort's blood spread across the parchment, merging with the inked words Harry had written and morphing the handwriting into something with sharper lines and elegant curves. The black ink took on the crimson color of the blood, and at the bottom of the parchment appeared the Dark Mark, the snake wrapping itself around the skull and opening its mouth in a silent hiss.

":Huh. Looks like you,: Harry commented.

Later that afternoon, after classes were done, Harry and Voldemort made their way to the Owlery. Voldemort, with Harry dictating on the parchment, had told Lucius to spread the word about refraining from all "unauthorized" activity while he (Lord Voldemort) was absent on important business. Under no circumstances were they to risk getting caught by the Ministry on raids and whatnot they were not ordered to perform, no questions asked. All Harry had to do now was send the letter off by owl.

Wrinkling his nose, Harry could tell from the moldy and rancid scent that he was nearing the Owlery. Idly he wondered when was the last time a student had to clean it as a detention, and guessed it had been a while. Up in the tower, the quiet coos and hoots of the owls greeted his ears, and as soon as he stepped into the room a snow-white shape came darting at him and landed on his offered arm.

"Hello, Hedwig. How's my sweet girl?" Harry pulled out a handful of owl treats, always prepared to spoil his first and most loyal friend. He wasn't going to use her to send the letter, as he didn't want to risk her safety and she was highly identifiable as his.

Hedwig took the offered treats, before turning her luminous eyes on Harry's other companion. She hooted in mild curiosity.

"Hedwig, meet Voldemort. I know, I know, you must think I'm absolutely mad right now. But I had to tell someone, and I know you won't tell anyone, will you girl." Harry smiled fondly as Hedwig nibbled his finger affectionately.

":Talking to birds, now, Potter?:

"Talking to birds, now, Potter?"

Harry had to fight the laughter bubbling in his chest at Voldemort's chuffed expression for his echoed words before schooling his face and turning around to greet the haughty figure of Draco Malfoy.

"Hello, Malfoy." To Voldemort, Harry said. :Pay attention, this is what you get when purebloods interbreed too much.: Harry shooed Hedwig off his arm and to the safety of an overhead perch.

Malfoy had narrowed his eyes at Harry's sibilant hissing. "What are you telling that ugly snake anyway?" Voldemort was not pleased with this statement and hissed. Malfoy, not being so smart, continued talking. "A bunch of lies, probably. That snake must be mentally deranged anyway for associating with you of all people.:

Voldemort rose up from Harry's shoulder and bared his fangs. :I don't like this boy; he's rude.: Harry smirked when Draco took a step back. "He says he doesn't like you. I think it’s because you called him ugly." If only Draco knew!
If Draco was surprised that an animal might be able to understand him, he hid it well. "You shouldn't even be able to do that, Potter," Malfoy said in his sharp, arrogant tone. "Only Slytherins are worthy of being Parselmouths."

"What, you mean Lord Voldemort?" Harry watched satisfactorily as Draco flinched. "Or perhaps you are jealous, that a 'worthless Gryffindor' whose mother was a Muggleborn can do something that you can't?"

"Watch your mouth, Potter," the blond boy snapped. Harry had to admit, Draco did catch him by surprise when he, quick as lightning, pulled out his wand and shot a mild though painful blasting curse in Harry's direction. Harry was tossed backwards, his back sliding across the dirty floor of the Owlery. Voldemort had come loose from Harry's shoulders and had landed a few paces away, hissing madly. Harry winced and pulled himself upright, resting his weight on one arm.

"Finally found your place I see, Potter: among the filth."

Now, Harry was used to name-calling and getting slapped around a little, but he still had his pride, and at that moment it was telling him that Draco Malfoy had gone too far. He stood up.

"Get out, Malfoy," Harry spat. "I'm sick of your feebleminded and biased prejudices." Harry's eyes were reflecting the winter light and shown a bright Avada Kedavra green. From above, a white flash unexpectedly descended upon the Malfoy Heir. Draco tried to ward off Hedwig's attack, but she kept swooping down and pulling out of reach.

"Hedwig, it's okay," Harry called out, not wanting her to get injured by the incensed blond. Hooting smugly, she flew to a high-above perch and set her large, golden eyes on Malfoy. The boy was holding his hand to the scratches on his right cheek where Hedwig had managed to catch her talons on. From somewhere beside him, Harry heard Voldemort mocking about how pathetic Draco was for letting a bird get the best of him.

:Maybe you should consider replacing a few of your Death Eaters with owls. They might be more effective.:  
: I'm beginning to think you're right, Potter, if this is the next generation,: Voldemort concluded dryly, making Harry chuckle as he turned back to Malfoy, who was eyeing the exchange with a suspicious look.

"What is with you and the bloody animals, Potter? That bird is a menace to society."

"Don't you touch Hedwig!" Harry ground out, remembering the whole fiasco with Buckbeak.

"I can bloody well do what I please, if it will help clear society of dangerous animals. Starting with this one." He trained his wand on Voldemort's pale form. "Diffindo!"

"No!"

Harry simply reacted, with only one thought going through his head: Am I really going to jump in front of a spell for Lord Voldemort? Yup, apparently I'm THAT wacked...

Voldemort had ducked down in clear alarm, but he wouldn't have enough time to get out of reach of the spell without landing severe damage to his small body. Diving on top of the snake, a Parseltongue spell already on his lips before he hit the ground, Harry instinctively cast a protective shield around them. He didn't even know if it would work. But it did work, and successfully cast without a wand, the shield glowed a shimmery white as Malfoy's spell hit, dissipating it instantly. Turning his face towards the caster, Harry gave him a murderous look. The boy in return looked
more than a little astounded.

"H-how'd you do that?"

"I believe I told you to leave, Malfoy," Harry replied coldly, not answering the question. He pushed himself once more up off the ground. Voldemort uncoiled underneath him and rose up, hood flared in obvious aggression. Harry flickered his eyes down at the snake and then back up at Malfoy. "My snake is angry, and if I were you I'd leave before you find out how truly dangerous and mentally deranged he is."

When Draco made no immediate move to leave, seemingly frozen in place, Harry hissed, sending the boy stumbling out the doorway with Parselmagic. Now Draco looked even more shocked, and he narrowed his eyes at Harry.

"You really are a freak, Potter."

Malfoy, with one last disgusted glance at Harry, left the way he had come, though his face looked sickly pale.

For good measure, knowing how to treat a bully, Harry hissed a few more words in Parseltongue, and smiled satisfactorily as Draco yelped as his clothes vanished, leaving him only in lovely pink boxers, and his hair turned an excellent combination of red and gold. Because of the Parselmagic, the boy would have a right time trying to \textit{finite} the hair spell.

"Huh, I like that magic," Harry murmured. And then he groaned, thinking, \textit{I really hope Malfoy will keep his mouth shut about this}. Harry was fairly confident he would, as Harry had effectively humiliated the boy. The problem became, would the Malfoy heir tell his father? After all, they knew of only one other person who could perform magic using the snake-language.

Harry pulled himself into a sitting position, seeing Draco's forgotten letter on the ground in front of him. Picking it up, he broke the seal and read the opening greeting: \textit{To Mummy}. Harry looked to the bottom, reading, \textit{From your little Dragon}. Sighing in what could have been disgust or pity, he tossed the letter to the side before pulling his knees up and wrapping his arms around them, eyes glazed in thought.

So…he'd just saved Voldemort from a rather anticlimactic and humiliating death. Wonderful. Getting him back to human was one thing, but saving the same man we was supposedly destined to kill seemed a bit much, wouldn't one think? \textit{‘Honestly,’} Harry thought as he shook his head, \textit{‘I probably really should have let that spell hit him.’} But that thought just didn't seem right, for the same reasons he had Voldemort with him in the first place.

Shaking his head again and sighing, he got up on his knees and looked at the snake that was more trouble than he was worth.

Harry, kneeling, inspected the naturally pale form of Voldemort, who was breathing heavily and actually trembling slightly with the adrenaline, his small body probably going into shock. Certain death did that to a person—er, \textit{snake}—Harry knew. He ran a hand down his scales in an attempt to soothe.

:Hey, you going to be alright?: he asked. Voldemort, shaken, still managed to unfurl his hood in a gesture of indignation.

:Of course I'll be 'alright': he snapped. As Harry, with infinite care, picked the Dark Lord up from the floor and placed him around his shoulders, Voldemort said, :Lucius Malfoy will be sterilized at
the next opportune moment.: Harry laughed.

:Now that is something we both agree on. Should I add that in the letter?:

:No, I wish it to be a surprise.: Harry chuckled. Voldemort was still for a moment, then, :It's cold here, Potter, do hurry on with your business.: the Dark Lord said as if he was being subjected to horrible room service, but Harry knew better. He cast a heating charm.

Owing to how out of sorts that admission proved of Voldemort, Harry selected a plain barn owl from among the school owls and tied the letter to its leg, sending it off to Lucius Malfoy. Once done, he left the Owlerly and walked back down the multitude of steps in the West Tower.

:I'm covered in bird crap.: Harry observed, pulling on the sleeve of his robe. :You're pretty dirty too. Fancy a shower?:

:Not with you.: 

:Ah, I wasn't really planning on it.: For some reason, Harry blushed.

Back in the dorms, Harry tossed his dirty outer clothing into the laundry chute, knowing the House Elves would take care of it. Luckily he hadn't met many people on the walk back, and none of them were bothered enough to ask why he looked like he rolled on the floor of the Owlerly. Of course, his answer would have been, "Because I did," but Harry suspected that would have labeled him even more of a nutter than he already was.

‘Thank goodness no one asked,’ Harry thought with a shake of his head.

From his trunk, Harry withdrew his shower toiletries before he and Voldemort made their way to the bathroom. He placed his things by an empty stall and then walked over to the one next to it, turning it on.

:I'll scrub you down and you can rinse off yourself. I'll leave a towel in the corner so you can lay on it and dry a bit while the shower is still running. I think the steam will do you some good, as your body has had a bit of a shock today.: 

:How thoughtful of you.: was the snarky reply.

:Yeah, yeah, you're welcome.: Harry grumbled, pulling the ungrateful menace off his shoulders and coiled him around one arm before holding him out underneath the warm water of the shower. Voldemort acted very curiously, lifting his head up and placing it right in the spray, appearing to enjoy the hot water running down his scales. Harry bit his lip, trying not to smile at the sight. Who knew the Dark Lord could enjoy something as simple as a hot shower?

Harry took some of his shower gel in his free hand, hoping it was mild enough so as not to irritate Voldemort's skin, and squeezed some onto Voldemort's long back. Hesitating as he wondered about the strangeness of the situation, he set the shower gel down and used the once again free hand to scrub the soap into Voldemort's scales. He took care to clean all the bird droppings he could see, gently scrubbing at one spot under the snake's chin. Voldemort took that time to speak up.

:We will never speak of this. Ever.: 

Harry made a choking sound and grimaced.

:Believe me, I won't say a word.:
After thoroughly scrubbing down the Dark Lord so he was covered in lather, Harry placed him down on the tiles so he could rinse off. As promised, he place a towel in a corner the shower spray did not directly hit before shutting the curtain and moving on to taking care of his own shower. The water was set to turn off in a few minutes, so he didn't have to worry about turning it off himself before he was through.

Taking off the rest of his soiled clothes, he shut the curtain and turned on the water. His reaction was very similar to Voldemort's as he let the water, magically set at the perfect temperature, spray down on his face. He brushed back his wet fringe and set to scrubbing himself down. Next to his stall, he heard it when Voldemort's shower turned off.

Harry was just getting to his hair when he heard someone come in to the bathroom and drop something on the floor. He had finished rinsing when he heard the scream.

"Argh, what the-!" A loud crash followed. Harry threw open his curtain and stepped out, praying to whomever would listen that he didn't have to face some sort of unknown enemy starkers.

"Ron, what are you doing?"

A pale faced, naked Ron lay sprawled on the floor, a towel precariously covering his lap. The items of his toiletry bag he had presumably tripped over were scattered around him, and he was pointing at the stall next to Harry's with a trembling finger.

"Th-there's a snake in there!"

Harry tried, he really did, but he couldn't stop the laughter that bubbled from his chest. Voldemort took that moment to slither from the stall and into view, where he rose up and eyed the fallen boy with what could only be amusement. That evil bastard loved it when he intimidated people, Harry knew. At this particular instance, however, Harry found he could enjoy it too and continued to laugh. Voldemort glanced at him.

:Potter, please cover yourself. That is entirely too much of what I ever wish to see of my enemy.: Blushing furiously, Harry grabbed his towel, grumbling, :Then why aren't you looking away?: That seemed to catch Voldemort off guard and he twitched violently as he looked back to the fallen Ron. Still blushing, Harry wrapped his towel around his waist.

"It's ok, Ron, he was just taking a shower. He's done now, as you can see."

Ron sputtered, incredulous. "'He was just taking a shower'? Are you bloody serious, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, still reveling in Ron's bewildered disbelief. "He was dirty."

Ron shakily crawled to his feet. "I don't bloody believe you. Warn a guy next time your snake wants a shower, will ya?"

Harry laughed again, picking Voldemort up from the floor. "I promise."

Ron sighed in relief. "Good. And, uh, don't tell Hermione? She'll have a field day with that one."

"Don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

"Thanks, mate."

"Not a problem." Harry had gathered his toiletries and waved goodbye to Ron, chuckling as he
made his way out.

Once dressed again, Harry lay on his bed reading a textbook for class the next day. He had just fed Voldemort a few mice, a small meal since he had ate a large rat just a few days before, and the Dark Lord now lay coiled in his usual spot on the comforter.

:You're stupid, Potter,: he decided to inform the young man.

Harry didn't even raise his eyes from his book. :Is that so?:

Voldemort made a sound akin to a huff and sidled his way up next to Harry, lifting his head.

:That Malfoy brat was aiming to kill me and you stopped him. It wouldn't have worked, of course,: he said arrogantly, and Harry had to roll his eyes, :but you couldn't have known that. Yet you jumped in front of the spell at the risk of your own safety anyway. So yes, you are incredibly stupid, Harry Potter. A stupid, noble, too-kind-for-his-own-good Gryffindor extraordinaire who couldn't even let his worst enemy die. Tell me, Potter, were you just trying to save my death for yourself or should people start to be concerned about the Chosen One's seemingly ability to kill me?:

Harry lay the book down on his lap. :Maybe I _was_ just saving you for myself. But then again, to see the look on Malfoy's face once he realized he killed the Dark Lord might have been worth it. I would even had helped you get resurrected again just to see you punish him.: 

:Really?: Voldemort seemed highly interested in his answer. Harry pretended to think about it.

:Eh, on second thought, let's just go with the whole "I'm stupid" thing and call it a day. But now that you've pointed out my flaw, I shall endeavor to correct this mistake next time and let you die.: Harry raised his book back up, appearing to read more. Voldemort hissed with indignation.

:I really wish _you_ would die, Potter.: 

:And I wish you would stop insulting my friends, but we both know that's never going to happen. We just can't get what we want, can we? Although, I have always wanted a kitten, and we're learning this new animal-to-animal spell in Transfig—: 

:Finish that sentence, Potter, and I'll give you to Bellatrix. I'm _very_ good at torture, but she's got that unhinged creativity with it.: 

:Like you would let anyone else torture me,: Harry muttered.
Chapter 5

Harry soon came to realize after that first week that a bored Dark Lord was almost worse than one that was tossing Unforgivables at him. Voldemort had taken to entertaining himself by insulting the various residents of Hogwarts and how he wished he could kill every single student at Hogwarts because all their teenaged angst was in turn killing his brain cells. The first day it was amusing, but by the second it was starting to get very annoying hearing how all his friends were going to die, and by the end of the week Harry was downright as grumpy as Voldemort.

It was a Saturday night and Harry was sitting lazily in front of the fireplace in the Common Room watching while a group of his fellow Gryffindors played a rowdy tournament of Exploding Snap. Harry was amused by the proceedings, but Voldemort simply found it obnoxious and decided to voice his opinions. Harry tried to be patient, he really did, but after the fourth nasty comment, the young wizard lost it.

:Will you shut up!: Voldemort hissed in anger at the outburst, but before he could retort Harry shut him up once more.

:No, don't say anything. This whole week I've done nothing but listen to you whine and throw a fit about every little thing and now I'm done! Those are my friends whose deaths you are planning and I'm sick of hearing about it. I know you hate being here with me of all people, but do you think I'm enjoying it any better? No, I'm not. My parents' murderer is sleeping in my bed with me and I have to bloody carry him around my neck every day! I don't care if you tell me how I'm going to die, but when you start threatening my friends then you can just piss off and find a way to become human on your own.: Face set in anger and Avada Kedavra eyes gleaming, Harry none too gently peeled Voldemort's slender body off him and dropped him onto the chair he'd just vacated. Glancing up, Harry vaguely registered that, as everyone's attention was on the card game, nobody had noticed Harry's little tirade. Even if they had, Harry honestly couldn't bring himself to care, though he knew it would mean he'd be getting funny looks for an indeterminable period of time.

Sweeping from the Common Room to the staircase, Harry took two steps at a time up to his empty dorm room and flung himself on his bed, spelling the curtains shut. Fuming, he stared at the stone ceiling, cursing the unfairness of life and why it was always him licking the bottom of Fate's boot.

After a time, he noticed a vague pain that had increased steadily since he left the Common Room. He impassively realized that this must be Dumbledore's binding spell on him and Voldemort. Harry sneered at its uselessness and wondered why Dumbledore even bothered, because other than a slight tugging sensation and the oddly detached twinge of pain he could easily ignore the spell.

A few moments later, Harry heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs to the room.

"Erm, Harry?" Ron's voice called from the other side of the curtain. Sighing, Harry sat up and pushed aside the barrier and looked at his friend.

"Yeah, Ron?"

The redhead looked slightly uncomfortable, but Harry couldn't immediately tell what the problem was.

"Is there something wrong?"
"Yeah, it's your snake."

Harry scoffed. "What's he doing, throwing a temper tantrum and threatening the other students? I hope he gets a book thrown at him."

If Ron thought this comment strange when talking about a seemingly ordinary snake, he didn't say anything.

"Erm, no. Actually, it kind of looks like he's under some sort of pain curse."

Harry blinked at the boy. "What?"

"Yeah," Ron said, ruffling a hand through his hair. "He's writhing on the floor and making these strange hissing sounds. It's scaring the others."

Harry's face paled as he suddenly understood. That vague, detached pain he was feeling was from the binding spell, but it wasn't his pain. It was Voldemort's, coming across that strange link they shared. Dumbledore's spell apparently wasn't as weak and useless as he thought; it really just targeted Voldemort, not Harry.

It made the wizard wonder if perhaps Dumbledore suspected about Voldemort more than Harry thought he did.

"Bloody hell!" Harry cursed, jumping up and running down the flight of stairs, once again taking two at a time. He noted that as he got closer to the Common Room, that detached pain lessened but anger and an overwhelming exhaustion began to take its place.

Downstairs, he found that, unlike only minutes ago, several of the students had turned their attention away from the tournament and had taken notice to what was happening by the fireplace. With a sense of urgency, Harry approached the corner and found Voldemort's pale body half-hazardly coiled around himself.

Harry felt shocked at the sight. Voldemort's sides were heaving, and his mouth had faint traces of lather around the edges. His red eyes were dull and looked disturbingly like old blood, the bright red color faded to a ruddy brown. Harry didn't think he was fully conscious.

:You look awful,: Harry whispered. It went to show how equally awful Voldemort must have felt when he didn't reply. This was one of the times Harry hated being a Gryffindor, for the guilt he felt over Voldemort's suffering. This was the Dark Lord, murderer of innocents; in all likelihood he deserved the pain he received. But all Harry felt was the strange tangle of guilt, pity, and something else as he almost tenderly picked the snake up off the floor and pressed the long body as best he could to his chest.

:You and your luck,: Harry muttered under his breath, once again making his way out of the Common Room and up the stairs. Around him, his fellow Gryffindors whispered amongst themselves and did not move from their positions until Harry was out of sight. As he reached the top of the stairs, he could hear that they had resumed their loud card game.

Back in the dorm room, Harry crawled into bed again and settled onto his back, Voldemort still cuddled to his chest. To an outsider, knowing who the two were, the arrangement might have seemed a bit odd but all Harry currently felt was concern for his would-be killer. His hands were still wrapped around the pale body, his fingers absentmindedly stroking the smooth scales in a comforting gesture. Though Harry hated to admit it, he felt a stab of pity and understanding for Voldemort's situation. He himself had spent ten years and several summers trapped with people
who hated him and whom he felt rather poorly about as well, unable to escape and completely reliant on whatever reluctant services they offered him to satisfy the needs of survival. Yes, he'd certainly been in Voldemort's shoes before.

Several minutes passed without much signs of life from the man-snake other than the steady rise and fall of his sides as he breathed. They had been further apart than the limits of their ten foot range for quite some time, Harry recalled, and Voldemort had been under the binding spell's effects for most of it. The pain wouldn't have started out that bad, giving Voldemort plenty of warning so he could close the distance between them to satisfy spell. With a start Harry realized that where he found the wizard indicated he had actually crawled away from the direction Harry was in. That probably made the spell's effects all that much worse.

_Stupid stubborn Dark Lord_, Harry chided in his mind.

What to do now? There was one thing Harry could think of. But…Harry had never tried to access their link himself; it was always Voldemort who took advantage of it. Could Harry connect to it as well? Closing his eyes, the young wizard felt within himself for that strange thread connecting their two minds, feeling for any clue as to the state Voldemort was in. With a start, Harry discovered that finding and accessing it was easy, and that Voldemort had no walls preventing the intrusion. Apparently with his magic bound, Voldemort's Occlumency shields were inoperable.

Knowing from experience how it felt to have someone else look into your private thoughts, Harry concentrated on not digging too deeply. He didn't take the time to wonder about this courtesy he gave to the Dark Lord because then he would just have to hit himself for missing the opportunity to search the man's deepest thought and plans. As he wasn't so skilled in this type of magic, Harry wasn't sure how deep was too deep, nor what was required for him to analyze Voldemort's current state. What he was getting were imprecise emotions, but no actually thoughts. Harry could feel Voldemort's consciousness there, but ultimately he had no clue what he was doing or how to wake the man. Returning for the most part to his end, Harry resorted to a different method: he gently flicked the top of Voldemort's head.

_:Hey, snake-face, wake up.:_

There was a burst of what Harry could only describe as wakefulness coming over the link, and he knew Voldemort was coming around. Harry watched as the dull eyes brightened to the normal gleaming blood red. The snake's body twitched.

_:You alright?:_ Harry asked softly. Voldemort shuddered.

_:I hate Dumbledore,:_ was the slurred, sibilant reply. Harry laughed and unthinkingly stroked a finger between Voldemort's eyes, bizarrely happy at the Dark Lord's return to form.

_:I have to agree that that was a pretty mean binding spell. It specifically targeted you if we ever became separated. I think Dumbledore is more suspicious of you than we thought.:_

_:How delightful,:_ Voldemort grumbled. Harry thought he sounded exhausted.

The two lay in silence for several moments, Harry still petting a lax Voldemort's scales. His green eyes were staring blankly upwards as he considered his next words.

_:I know you hate being here with me,:_ Harry whispered softly, _:and I just want to tell you I know how you feel. When I'm with my relatives,:_ Harry said, unsure if Voldemort even knew what he was talking about, _:I would love at nothing if only I could tell them how I feel about them. But I can't, because I'm stuck with them and there's nothing I can do about it without making things a
hundred times worse. I know you're angry that you have to rely on me, your worst enemy, but please try and understand how I feel about it as well. It's been hard looking my friends in the eye knowing the person who would like to torture and kill them for daring to even breathe is hanging around my neck, cursing the day they were born.:

Harry swallowed. : I've been asking myself if I'm a traitor, helping you, even though I've given them a few more days of peace. I mean, you're stuck as a bloody snake, what are you going to do to me, bite me? I could have stood way out of range and thrown an *Avada Kedavra* at you and there'd be nothing you could do about it.:

Harry sighed, Voldemort's body rising and falling with Harry's chest but otherwise still. This had been bothering him for a long time, but there had been nobody he could tell—save Voldemort—but for obvious reasons, Harry had been reluctant to do so. But now, Harry couldn't shake the urge to speak of his inner turmoil.

: Call me a stupid Gryffindor all you want, : he told the snake, : but it would feel wrong if I killed you that way—cowardly. Somehow I couldn't let the greatest wizard in the history of magic die a poor man's death, unable to defend himself, even if it meant saving the Wizarding World from war. Or maybe I'm not brave at all for wanting to face you as a man, but a coward for fearing killing you at all and becoming like you.:

:Harry…:

The use of his name broke Harry out of his state of mind. He froze his stroking fingers, realizing what exactly he was doing and to whom. His green eyes met small yet brightly burning red ones.

: You really are something else…or maybe you are just very stupid. : Voldemort flickered his tongue in the air. : I will try and curb my…opinions to cater to your delicate sensibilities.:

Harry smiled, because he knew Voldemort had just offered him, not really an apology, but perhaps the closest thing to one he would give to someone like Harry.

: Ok…thanks.:

Harry settled back into the mattress, feeling an odd sort of contentment surrounding the two of them. As he lay drifting off to sleep, his fingers resumed the slow stroking of Voldemort's scales as the Dark Lord's exhausted body forced him to fall back into slumber. Harry followed shortly after, not really stopping to think how utterly mental it was to do so with the Dark Lord still curled up on his chest.

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During the night, Harry woke briefly to find Voldemort had crawled to his usual spot at the end of the bed. Shivering slightly, Harry pulled the covers he'd fallen asleep upon over his chilled body, careful not to disturb the sleeping Lord, cast a heating charm over him, and curled up before falling back to sleep.

The next morning, a Sunday, Harry woke and got ready for breakfast. Voldemort had always come with him into the bathroom so he could bask in the warm steam from all the showers running, but now he realized the necessity with such a nasty binding spell placed on him. Without a word between them, Harry let the snake curl up his arm and settle around his neck. Idly, Harry wondered when the weight of the snake's body upon his shoulders had become a sort of comfort before heading to the bathroom. Minutes later, Harry was fully dressed and made his way down the stairs and out the portrait hole of his House, Dark Lord in-disguise in tow.
The Great Hall was less crowded than normal, as was common on Sundays with many of the students opting to sleep in. Harry waited until he saw Dumbledore, dressed in sunny yellow robes with polka dots blinking between blue and lime green, rising from his seat and making his way out of the Great Hall before getting up and approaching the man.

"Sir, may I have a word…?"

Flashing blue eyes met his, Dumbledore smiling amiably, and the sudden realization that this man was dying made Harry feel cold even while he had feelings of disappointment in him.

"Certainly, my dear boy. Is this a matter that would do well in a more private setting?"

Harry nodded, following Dumbledore when he indicated for him to follow the older man to the room off the Great Hall he recognized as the one from Fourth year after his name came out of the Goblet of Fire. Gesturing to a plush forest green armchair, Dumbledore sat in the chair directly across from the one he'd indicated for Harry to sit in. After both of them were comfortably settled, Dumbledore focused on Harry.

"Now, Harry, what is it you wished to talk about?"

"Well," Harry started, absently reaching up to stroke Voldemort under his chin. "Yesterday, I discovered some disturbing aspect of the binding spell you placed on us. You see, I forgot that you had even put it on in the first place, and left Tommy in the Common Room to run upstairs for something, when Ron came up and told me that something was wrong with him. That's when I remembered the spell and came back down to find my snake passed out from pain." Harry tried to keep the accusation out of his voice and his face carefully blank, and for the most part he felt he succeeded.

"Now, Professor, I understand the purpose of the binding spell, but really, can't you use a less harmful one? It wasn't Tommy's fault that I left him behind, and yet he was punished for it. Please, Sir, I really don't like seeing my friends in pain."

Harry was looking up into Dumbledore's face when he suddenly felt the press of something in his mind, and with a start he recognized it as a similar magic to what Voldemort used on him. It had a slightly different feel, probably because this wasn't over that unique link he and Voldemort shared, but still, Harry could tell Dumbledore was trying to access his thoughts. As skillfully as he could, he brought forth within his mind the feelings from last night when he'd found Voldemort on the floor, only letting the Headmaster see that for a brief second before casually dropping his eyes. Harry pretended to be fascinated with the flickering dots on Dumbledore's robes. He was relieved to feel the external presence fall away from his mind, and hoped he'd only given what Dumbledore wanted to see in that miniscule amount of time he'd allowed the man in his mind.

Harry wondered how often Dumbledore fished for information in his head, and felt a stab of irritation. He had known Dumbledore was a Leglimens, but this was the first time he'd noticed something peculiar happing with those twinkling blue eyes of the man's. He wondered if Voldemort would be able teach him Occlumency…anybody had to be better than Snape teaching him. The bastard was in his mind already anyway, Harry thought with a mental roll of his eyes.

Dumbledore sighed, and Harry discreetly flicked his green eyes back up.

"I am sorry, Harry, to have caused you and your snake distress. I was only looking after the students' safety."

"Tommy hasn't done anything, as promised," Harry returned.
Dumbledore nodded slowly. "And so he hasn't. Alright, Harry, I will instead put a binding charm that acts more like a tether. You will feel a tug, as if a string is attached to you both, and it will prevent Tommy from getting away, much like a leash on a dog. Will this suit you?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "Oh yes, that sounds much better. Thank you, Sir. I don't mean to be much trouble."

"Think nothing of it, Harry."

Pulling out his wand, Dumbledore finite'd the original spell and placed the new one on Harry and the disguised Voldemort. As a test to make sure Harry was satisfied, he had him place "Tommy" on the chair and walk away. Once Harry reached the other end of the relatively large room, he felt a distinct tug on his left wrist, as if he had something tied there that was now pulled taut. Stepping further away, he noticed Voldemort's body sliding across the cushion of the chair. The spell worked exactly as Dumbledore said; it was like both Harry and Voldemort had opposite ends of the same rope tied to their persons.

"Brilliant," Harry said, pleased with this new charm.

Dumbledore smiled. "Well then, if that is all…?"

"Oh yes," Harry nodded. "Thank you for your time."

"Anytime, my dear boy, anytime."

Leaving the Great Hall, Harry wandered the castle for a while, not ready to go back to Gryffindor Tower. Dumbledore’s intrusion into his mind pressed heavily on his thoughts.

:Potter?:

As if to assure the man he was alright, Harry reached up and smoothed Voldemort's scales, a habit he seemed to be picking up rather quickly.

:I felt Dumbledore in my mind. I didn't really like it.:  

Voldemort hissed in displeasure, flicking his tongue and raising his hood slightly. :Old coot. Potter, why haven't you been taught Occlumency? Aren't they worried the evil Dark Lord in your head will find out all their secrets?:

Harry snorted at the rare joke Voldemort offered. :They did try to teach me, but as you've seen for yourself now, the person whom Dumbledore chose to do it doesn't really like me much.:  

The small hint was all Voldemort needed. :He had Snape teach you, didn't he?:

:Yes,: Harry said glumly. :As you can tell, he didn't get very far before we quit the lessons. Can't say I feel sorry. He stopped when I looked into his Pensieve and saw some memories that were quite personal.:  

Harry turned his head to look at Voldemort, who in turn also twisted his head around so they were more or less face to face. They were so close that when Voldemort flicked out his tongue, a snake's habit, the tips of it brushed the corner of Harry's mouth. Harry's lips twitched at the sensation, and he suddenly thought the very odd question of whether that counted as a kiss or not. Mildly shocked and appalled at where his mind went, Harry dismissed the whole thing as what it was: an accident.

Ignorant of the infinitesimal seconds of thought process his touch had caused within Harry's mind,
Voldemort offered what was on his.

:Potter, why do you trust Dumbledore? After all, he did try and sneak into your mind.:

Harry sighed. :I don't trust him in everything. Like you said, he tried to get into my mind and for that reason I can't give him my complete trust. But that doesn't mean I hate him. Dumbledore has made mistakes—many in fact—but despite the fact many see him as such, he is not omniscient or infallible. But what I do trust is that he believes the things he does are for the Greater Good. Because of a prophecy he believes I am the only person who can defeat you, Merlin knows why, but now that it's been made Dumbledore has taken it upon himself to ensure his side's weapon—me—is still on 'his side'. This is war, and not all the fighting is going to be kept clean...you know this yourself. I may not like his methods or all his ideals, but I don't like yours either. His side is the lesser of the two evils, I suppose you could say.:

:Hmm, Potter, sounds like you want to go create your own army.:

Harry laughed. :Maybe I should, but would that mean I'd be against both you and Dumbledore? Merlin, I get enough from him and you already to make you both my enemies.:

:Oh, Potter, don't you know that I would help you take him down?:

:You would.; Harry said, shaking his head in amused defeat. :So.; Harry said slowly, nonchalantly, :since Dumbledore tried to look in my mind, aren't you worried he'll find out who you are?:

:Potter, I am not going to teach you Occlumency.:

Harry shrugged. It was worth a shot, right? But Voldemort wasn't done.

:However...if you got into the Restricted Section you may find a book titled "Magicks of the Mind" there that might be helpful…:

Harry grinned happily. :Always looking out for yourself, aren't you?:

:Hush, boy, I'll have none of your cheek.:

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That Sunday night, Harry wasted no more time in getting started with Occlumency. Using the Invisibility Cloak, Harry snuck into the Restricted Section of the library and borrowed the book Voldemort had mentioned to him. He had cracked it open the moment he got back to his dorm room. Even after the first chapter Harry could tell just how bad Snape actually had been at teaching him. Instead of what Snape put him through, typically the first step to learning to shield one's mind was apparently to go through several breathing exercises. This, Harry found, was much more effective in reaching a meditative state than having a wand pointed in his face.

Without all the usual thoughts flying through his head, Harry fell asleep easily that night.

The next morning was the start of a new week and the last one before Christmas break. Harry had been busy revising with Ron and Hermione for the end of term exams that occurred during the week. Privately, Harry had discovered Voldemort's unexpected knack for teaching whenever Harry came across something he didn't quite understand. Harry knew the man had applied for the DADA position not once but twice, but Harry had always thought the idea of Voldemort teaching a bunch of snotty children magic as being extraordinarily laughable. However, now he was under the impression that the evil Dark Lord might actually have been good at the job. Who would've thought?
At breakfast in the Great hall, Ron and Hermione were discussing their plans for Christmas Holiday, and Harry realized he'd forgotten to tell Ron he wouldn't be going to the Burrow with him. He knew this little piece of news was not going to go over well. Harry corrected this omission by telling the other boy, whose mouth gaped comically open.

"But…but Harry! Why on Earth would you want to stay here? It'll be so boring! Mum and Dad were excited to see you."

"I have to agree, Harry," Hermione piped up. "Do you really want to spend the whole break in a practically empty castle? I don't see what's keeping you here."

Harry shrugged, buying time to put together his excuse he had only half come up with. He made a point to glance around, as if looking for any signs they were being overhead. Taking the hint, Hermione threw up a privacy shield.

Harry put on a suitably worried expression. "I overheard Dumbledore and Snape talking about how Voldemort has been suspiciously absent the last few weeks."

Hermione and Ron frowned. "What do you mean "absent," Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know, but apparently no one's seen him, not even the Death Eaters. It's like he vanished or something."

"I think that's just rubbish. A Dark Lord just doesn't disappear," Ron scoffed, taking a bite of toast, a manifestation of his nervous eating habit, Harry knew.

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "Voldemort's planning something; I know it. That's why I think I should stay here."

"Uh, I still don't get it, mate."

Harry sighed. "I'm staying here in case Voldemort's plans involve me."

His two friends were silent while they mused over Harry's logic.

"Harry," Hermione finally said hesitantly, but Harry just shook his head.

"No, I've made up my mind. I don't want to put anyone else in more danger than is necessary."

:Playing the savior card, are we?: Voldemort butted in. Harry fought not to react either in a scowl or a chuckle, trying to keep his expression appropriate for his conversation with his friends.

"Hogwarts is the safest place for me to be right now. Besides," he smiled, trying to put his friends at ease. "It will give me lots of time to work on my winter assignments and do some research. I've put off studying more advanced magic for far too long, deluding myself to believing Voldemort would play nice and use only school level spells."

A certain snake hissed out something that sounded suspiciously like "in your dreams." Harry ignored it.

Both Hermione and Ron recognized the stubborn, set look in Harry's face and slowly, reluctantly, nodded.

"Well, Harry if you do change your mind, Mum will always love to have you. Christmas will be boring without you, now," Ron pouted, sipping his pumpkin juice forlornly.
"I'm sure it will be fine, Ron, what with the twins and all."

Ron's face paled. "Don't remind me! I just know I'm going to end up as an experiment for their new pranks. If I come back as a toad, you know what happened and I am going to blame you entirely because you weren't there to stop them."

"Like I could!" Harry laughed. Hermione dropped the privacy charm and from there on they finished breakfast with lighthearted conversation. Harry couldn't help but feel a little guilty that he was withholding truths from his friends, if not outright lying to them. But when he reminded himself he was doing all this for their benefit that he could push those feelings to the back of his mind. Guilt was probably an emotion that was going to be with him until he could get Voldemort sorted out, and there was not much he could do about it at is.

In truth he was actually looking forward to being alone at Hogwarts with only a Dark Lord disguised as a snake for company. Sure, he had Voldemort around his neck nearly 24/7, but that didn't mean he had time to actually talk with him. Between school work, Quidditch, and his friends Harry never had time for a heartfelt discussion. There were many things he wanted to ask, things only Voldemort himself could answer.

Or perhaps the reason he didn't mind staying here with Voldemort as his main source of company was because Harry might have started to consider his parents' murderer as a sort of…friend. Or perhaps "friend" was too strong of a word—he certainly wasn't planning on coming up with secret handshakes with him—but there was definitely a sense of camaraderie to their relationship now.

And here Harry thought his life couldn't be any more messed up.

Harry dispelled anymore thoughts and followed his friends to first period.

:So, Voldemort,: Harry asked later that day as he sat at his desk in the DADA classroom, waiting for class to start. :How does Hogwarts education compare to your time?:

From his desk, Snape looked up with an odd look on his face.

:Why do you want to know?: Voldemort said, irritated.

:I'm curious. Am I learning the same things you did?:

:For the most part,: the snake grudgingly replied. :Obviously you are learning some things that were not known back in my time.: 

Harry chuckled. :Yeah, back in your time. You're really old, right?:

Voldemort recoiled, indignant. :Potter, I am not old,: he spat, the word sounding like a curse.

:But aren't you, what, one hundred?:

Voldemort hissed sharply, drawing more than a few startled glances, including Snape's. The man actually looked quite pale…er, paler than normal.

:Potter, I will kill you one day, and I will enjoy it immensely.: 

Harry pretended to pout. :You wouldn't really do that to me. I mean, I did give you my blood for your resurrection ritual. Doesn't that count as something?:

:What part of "blood of the enemy unwillingly given" don't you understand?: Voldemort drawled,
far from amused. Snape continued to stare, the quill in his hand frozen over his parchment, a black ink stain slowly growing on the paper where the quill tip hovered over.

:Oh, yeah, I forgot. Hey, it's five past and Snape still hasn't started class. That's never happened before…:

Voldemort subtly glanced at the dark-haired man in the front of the room, and saw that he was staring at where the Boy-Who-Lived sat, expression frozen. Voldemort turned back to Harry.

:…You've been using our conversation to bother the traitor. You've been using me...!:

:Brilliant, wasn't it? Hey look, he's still staring.:

Voldemort looked back and saw that, yes, Snape was still looking at them.

:You know, Potter, I may actually approve of your tactics. If you join me I might make you a strategist.:

:Not on your dreams, Voldie.: Harry said cheerfully, ignoring Voldemort's usual death threats and giving Snape a break by shutting his mouth and looking attentive.

He had to admit, though, that had been dreadfully fun.
Chapter 6

Harry wrinkled his nose as he pulled out some newt's eyes from the main stores and dropped them into his smaller vial, taking them back to his desk. Taking a peek at his outwardly new but inwardly heavily-used potions textbook, he read the handwritten notes from the Half-Blood Prince one more time. With a smirk, Harry placed four of the newt eyes into his smoking cauldron, one less than what was stated in the true potion's text. The liquid inside turned a neon orange, signaling that Harry had successfully brewed the required potion for today's lesson.

:You know, Potter, wouldn't you say that's cheating?:

Harry sniffed haughtily. :I have no idea what you are talking about.: 

Voldemort issued a hissy chuckle, which was actually a rather pleasing sound to Harry's ears. Unfortunately, Voldemort's rare amusement was interrupted.

"Ah, Harry m'boy, lovely work, as always," cheered a ruddy-cheeked Professor Slughorn as he leaned over Harry's cauldron. Harry, a stiff smile on his face, tried to unobtrusively move away from the crowding Professor.

"Er, thanks, Sir."

"Now, hurry and bottle it up. Go on, go on."

Slughorn placed a pudgy hand on Harry's shoulder in encouragement, accidentally brushing against Voldemort's cool scales. The snake instantly reacted, raising up from Harry's shoulder and spitting out a hiss. Professor Slughorn stumbled back in surprise.

:Do not touch me!: Voldemort snarled.

Rolling his eyes, Harry stroked Voldemort down his spine. As usual, this action calmed the Dark Lord enough that Harry could shove him back under his robes. Warily, Harry glanced up at his potion's professor to see his reaction. As expected, Slughorn was slightly pale-faced and wide-eyed.

"Sorry, sir, he's a little, um, protective of me."

Right, that was a huge lie. Voldemort only protected himself from the dangerous cooties other people might contaminate him with. Nevertheless, Slughorn didn't know that. The professor had been extremely wary of Harry and his new addition. Perhaps the only thing that kept the man from keeping any sort of distance from Harry was his status as the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry, in no small terms of the notion, was too much of a valuable addition to Slughorn's "collecting" habits. Harry begrudgingly allowed the attention, too polite to tell the man to bugger off.

"Ah…that's alright, m'boy. Hmm, I think I see young Longbottom about to pour merfolk tears into his cauldron."

Harry winced. Poor Neville; that would throw his whole potion to waste.

:I have to say that I have come to realize something,: Voldemort told Harry after Slughorn had turned his attention away.

:Oh yeah? What's that?: Harry asked as he ladled some of his potion into his vial.
I made the wrong choice when I came after you that night.

Harry froze his movements. Wait, what? Was this Voldemort…apologizing?

Oh?:

Yes; it should have been the Longbottom boy I "marked" as the prophecy child. Somehow I doubt I would have had much trouble getting rid of him as I do you.

Harry processed what Voldemort said before he scowled darkly, placing his vial of potion down on the table a tad bit too hard, making some of the students turn and look at him. From the Slytherin side of the room, Malfoy (still with slightly pink and yellow tinted hair) kept giving Harry sidelong glances without being obvious that was what he was doing. Harry caught his eye and deepened his scowl, causing the Malfoy heir to look quickly away. Harry, in his sudden foul mood, felt rather satisfied with by that.

The Malfoy heir had the unfortunate luck of running into the squib Filch before he could properly cover himself after Harry spelled his clothing away the other day in the Owlery. Because of his Malfoy pride, he couldn't very well tell the man that Harry Potter did it to him (and thus eventually reveal the fight he started) and he couldn't say he did it to himself; either way he was discredited. But still owning a measure of self-preservation, he thus claimed someone else did it to him but wouldn't say who. Filch, of course, didn't believe him and as a result, Draco now had three days of detention, ironically cleaning the Owlery, for indecent exposure.

The other Slytherins hadn't been much of a problem for Harry lately either, and all he could say was good riddance; at the moment he had enough trouble with the one Slytherin wrapped around his shoulders.

Turning away from the blond pureblood, Harry addressed the snide snake around his shoulders. That was so uncalled for. Just admit it already, you'd be bored without me around.: 

No, I'd be ruling the world right now.: 

Harry cuffed the Dark Lord on the side of the head, earning a cold hiss in response.

Don't complain, you deserved it.: 

Potter, you dare—?" 

Yes, yes, I dare, now get over it. I'm not in the mood to deal with you.: 

Voldemort pressed himself deeper inside Harry's robes and was moodily silent. Harry packed his things and walked out of the potion's classroom.

A few twists and turns later, Harry sighed happily as the final flight of stairs brought him up into bright sunlight. The dungeons could wear on a person's mood after too much time spent in the dreary settings. Maybe that was Snape's problem…

Turing a corner, Harry took two steps before he stopped dead in his tracks. There in front of him stood Albus Dumbledore, Professor Snape, and a man who Harry knew for a fact was not one of the other professors. Even with his back turned to Harry, the teen was easily able to ascertain that Lucius Malfoy was in Hogwarts.

Instinctively, Harry pulled himself back around the corner, hiding most of his body save for his eyes, which remained peering around the wall. He could see the three men were having a
conversation, but couldn't hear. So, just like when he eavesdropped on Dumbledore and Snape, Harry cast :Listen: after making sure any students in the area were mostly ignoring him. Harry only heard the tail-end of the conversation, but it was enough to discern at least the outward reason for the Malfoy patriarch's presence in the school. Harry glanced at the snake on his shoulder.

:You wouldn't happen to know anything about Lucius Malfoy's reinstatement onto the Hogwarts Board of Governors, now, would you?:

:This is war, Potter, of course only put the best wizards are put into the most important roles,: the snake replied in a rather pleasant tone with his snakey shrug. Harry, though, knew better and it prompted him to wonder just how far Voldemort's forces had infiltrated. Lucius had been under a lot of suspicion of being a Death Eater, which was in fact true, but still he managed to confound the general population and retain his high status in the Wizarding World. It frustrated Harry to no end that the Wizarding population could be both so suspicious of some people and trusting of others at the same time.

The three men finished their conversation and separated and dispersed to whatever business they needed to attend. Lucius, however, remained in the Entrance Hall with his back turned to Harry and Voldemort.

Now, Harry had two choices: he could walk up to Mr. Malfoy and hand over the Dark Lord and spill all or he could turn and run in the opposite direction and feign innocence. He figured he could let Voldemort decide for himself.

:Um, Voldemort? Would you like to go say hello to Lucius Malfoy?:

But Voldemort would have none of that. :Potter, don't let him see you.: Harry was in a very delicate position. As weird as it sounded, Harry and Voldemort were allies of sorts, bound together with the common goal of getting Voldemort his body back (though Harry was still struggling over the fact he was even bothering....). In this case, he and the Dark Lord were pitted against Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape, the two responsible for Voldemort's transformation. Wouldn't it be easier if they had someone else to help in this twisted endeavor?

:What...why? Don't you think it'd be better if he could help...?:

:Just do as I say, Potter!: As Harry's luck would have it, Lucius decided at that moment to turn around. Harry's eyes widened.

"Fu---"

"Harry!"

Whirling around at the call of his name, Harry barreled into Ginny Weasley and pushed her back around the corner he had just circumvented.

"Wha---"

"Hey, Ginny!" Harry prattled, hooking his arms around the girl's elbow and walked her in the opposite direction he had seen the Death Eater, hoping the man hadn't heard Ginny's enthusiastic greeting.

"Harry, what's wrong? You look like you're trying to avoid someone," Ginny said as the young
man practically dragged her down the hall.

"It's Lucius Malfoy, okay? You'd run too."

Ginny recoiled. She knew who was responsible for the whole fiasco in her First Year, and was not a fan of the head of the Malfoy family.

"Harry, would you care to accompany me to, well, somewhere else?" Now it was Ginny who was dragging the other down the hall.

Harry was happy to follow the red-headed girl's path. "Gladly."

"What is Lucius Malfoy doing here?" Ginny complained, kicking open a door to an empty classroom and shoving her companion inside. Harry took the time to rub his forearm where Ginny had been holding on to him as he watched the seething red-head pace the barren room.

"Well, I'd like to think he's here to tell his son what a disgrace he is, but I doubt that's the reason," Harry informed her. Ginny gave a wicked smirk. "So, how long do you plan on staying here?"

Ginny crossed her arms and sat heavily down in a free chair. "Until he leaves, because I might hex him if I catch him in the hallways."

:This one has potential.: 

:You can stop right now, she's not joining the Death Eaters,: Harry told Voldemort with a bored tone. :She didn't take kindly to you possessing her in my Second Year,: Harry noticed that Ginny was staring at him.

"Oh," he said, scratching the back of his head, "I'm sorry Ginny. I should have realized my talking to him would make you uncomfortable."

But Ginny seemed to snap out of it and just shook her head. "No, it's fine Harry. I actually think it's a bit fascinating, really, though it does bring up some unsavory memories. But, you're fine with your ability so I guess I can be too."

"Really?" Harry asked. "You're okay with it? I mean, after what happened…"

Ginny grimaced. "I'll admit what with Lucius Malfoy here and you speaking Parseltongue I'm having a bit of a flashback, but then again I don't really remember much in some ways. It's all blurry, you know?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess it would be."

Awkward silence filled the room. Harry shuffled his feet before deciding to take the seat next to Ginny's.

"Ha-harry?" Ginny stuttered, giving the boy a sidelong look.

Harry frowned. "What is it, Ginny?" He watched as the younger girl shifted in her chair.

"Have you ever thought about…about us? Together?"

Harry's mind drew to a halt.

"Eh," he voiced inelegantly. Ginny scooted closer to Harry's side.
But Harry’s reflexes weren’t exactly working up to speed, and so he was unable to stop it when Ginny leaned in and placed her warm mouth on his. She pressed close, slotting her lips together with Harry’s. After a heartbeat she pulled away.

Voldemort, in the meantime, was struggling to free himself from Harry’s robes.

Harry was blushing heavily and could not find the proper retort to Voldemort’s complaints. The whole time Ginny was kissing him, he just felt how wrong it had been. For one, there was a sense of guilt and betrayal that Lord Voldemort had quite literally been pressed between them, and for another thing Harry just didn’t like it. Ginny was…a friend. For a while he had been wondering if there was something between them, but after what had just happened, he realized it was merely a really strong sense of family. It was like Harry had been running under some sort of set guidelines for how relationships start: boy meets girl, boy and girl grow up and go through harrowing adventures together, boy and girl fall for each other and live happily ever after.

Except…couldn’t the boy and girl just become really good friends?

"Ginny…"

The girl bit her lip and looked down.

"I know, Harry. I shouldn’t have done that…it wasn't right."

Harry's face morphed into a grimace. "Are you ok?"

Ginny seemed to ponder the question. "Yes, I think I am. Maybe a little disappointed, but you know, I had to try."

Harry couldn't help the small smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth. "It's the Gryffindor."

:You should try having that removed, Potter.: 

Harry honestly found that little quip funny and chuckled. Ginny looked at him confusedly. "Er, sorry." Harry gestured at the cobra around his neck. "He said something funny."

: I wasn't joking, Potter.: 

"Oh yeah, of course. This one here is a real laughing stock."

:I really can't stand you, Potter.: 

"I never knew," Ginny mused before suddenly getting to her feet. "Okay, I guess we really can't stay in hiding forever."

Harry sighed. "You're right. Snape will take it none too kindly if I miss DADA. Are you sure everything’s alright between us?"

Ginny smiled reassuringly. "Yes, Harry. Don't worry about it. There's nothing wrong with us just being really good friends, right? Don't take this wrong, but some of the other girls kept telling me
how good we would be together and that's what got me thinking about it. Truly, I'm not going to break down weeping just because we wouldn't work together well romantically."

Harry beamed. "I'm glad. Well, shall we?" He gestured towards the door. Ginny walked out the classroom with Harry following closely behind. They retraced their steps and separated, hurrying to make it to their classes before the bell.

As Harry panted up the stairs, Voldemort deigned to comment, :Potter, that whole display with the whelp was despicable. Do not ever subject me to such a scene again. Do I make myself clear?:

:Jealous?: Harry quipped.

…wait, does this count as flirting? Stop stop! You can't just causally forget this is Lord Voldemort! Harry told himself.

:I do not even deem that question worthy of an answer.: Harry couldn't help but feel a little relieved…what the hell would he have done if Voldemort responded back in kind?

Harry's embarrassment didn't last long with the class bell threatening to go off. He had taken up too much of the transition period between classes with Ginny. Normally being a little late to class was okay, as he'd probably just get some points taken, but it was a whole other story when DADA was next with Professor Snape.

:Shit, he's going to kill me!:

:Better not be literally; that's my pleasure to have.: 

Harry flew up the great stairs, ignoring Voldemort and trying to reach the third floor before the imminent bell rang, signifying the start of a new class period. Voldemort had to tighten his coils around Harry's shoulders to keep from being jostled around and was quietly hissing his distaste of this treatment. Harry could care less.

His toe fell just short of the DADA classroom doorway just has the bell rang. Snape watched with a triumphant look on his face as Harry clambered into his seat next to Ron.

"Mr. Potter, detention in my office tonight. This time do not be late."

"Tough luck, mate," Ron whispered subtly. Harry sighed heavily and pulled his notebook and wand out.

:If you'd only—"

But Voldemort could not finish because Harry had cast a silencing charm on him. Doing that had been on his To Do list ever since First Year when he found the man could talk excessively. The snake could still make sneering faces at the young wizard, though.

Harry suffered through class, a prime target for Snape's contemptible mood. That day they were learning a counter-curse to a Dark spell which temporarily cut the air off from reaching his lungs, and guess who happened to be Snape's chosen guinea pig…it took Harry several tries before he finally managed to counter Snape's bombardment. By the end he was gasping for breath and feeling very lightheaded, as well as a little more than perturbed. Once he was allowed back to his seat, he picked up Voldemort from where he had overly-courteously placed him on an empty chair and collapsed in his own chair in the back of the classroom, a scowl etched on his face.

Finally, DADA ended and Harry more or less bolted from the classroom, tossing some vague
excuses to Ron and Hermione as he bypassed the route to the Great Hall and instead ran to Gryffindor Tower. While on his way, he cut the silencing spell he had put on Voldemort.

:You know, for a traitor to your cause, Snape sure acts like I'm his number one enemy.:

:You're just that annoying, Potter.: Harry sighed irritably, but Voldemort of course did not care.

:Are you going to check to see if Lucius is still here?:

:Yes.:

:Potter, for once we seem to be thinking alike.:

Harry was in his dorm, pulling out the Marauder's Map. :I know, how horrifying.: Harry sat on his bed and opened up the Map, swearing he was up to no good as he tapped it with his wand. His eyes scanned the parchment, trying to find out if Malfoy was even still on Hogwarts' grounds.

:By the way.; Harry said, :why didn't you want me to approach him? Isn't he basically you're most trusted Death Eater?:

:Please, Potter, that slippery worm is merely good at his job, not trusted. If he were to figure out my current…situation, who knows what he might decide to do in his puny mind.:

Harry frowned. While it was true that Lucius Malfoy had after the first war claimed he was under Imperius Curse, he had seemed for the most part to remain loyal to Voldemort's cause. He acquired a high position in the Ministry and, once Voldemort had returned to body, had showed up promptly in the graveyard and risked much going to the Department of Mysteries. Yes, Malfoys were proud and craved power within society, but did they have enough meddle to betray even a weakened Dark Lord when it had been proven he could survive death already?

:You mean you wonder if he's really here to stab you in the back or something? Yes, I suppose he could be that stupid.; Harry decided, inadvertently complimenting Voldemort. :But why not take the risk that Malfoy would help you? Quirrell and Wormtail did.:

Voldemort sneered. :Quirrell and Wormtail were weak, mindless fools.: 

That was true. Voldemort was actually able to comport some control over Quirrell in the possession of him, and it was already proven that Wormtail was afraid of a venomous cobra even without knowing it was Voldemort. If he found out who it was that he shot the Killing Curse at he probably would rather go jump off a cliff than face the Dark Lord now, whether he's still a snake or back to full form.

:Honestly.; commented Harry, :if you tried to make more friends with loyalties than just fearful followers who could turn on you at any minute for their own gain. Tell me, Voldemort, do you really not trust anyone?:

Harry actually cared about the answer, so he brought the Map down onto the bed and twisted his head around so he could more or less look Voldemort in the eye.

:No, I don't.:

Harry's lips thinned as he pressed them together. :That's truly pretty sad.: Harry honestly felt a twisting in his gut.

Voldemort scoffed and would not look at Harry. :Why do you care, Potter?: he hissed thickly. Harry glanced away, suddenly uncomfortable.
I don't know. Just because you're a Dark Lord doesn't mean you can't have friends, right?:

I don't need friends. You're deranged, boy.: 

Harry absently rubbed his scar as he considered the ever increasing pity he was beginning to feel to Voldemort. There was a growing apprehension in his gut at these wayward feelings…how could he continue to hate someone who he pitied and was slowly coming to understand? Oh, he knew Voldemort was not exactly justified in all he did, and still needed to be stopped, but did Harry really want to be the one to kill him? Why should he even have to?

Harry pushed these prickly thoughts away. Now was not the time to think about all that. For now he needed to focus on why Lucius Malfoy was here at Hogwarts. Another stray thought caught his attention, though, and this one he couldn't push away. His eyes brightened and he grinned, turning back to Voldemort.

Hey, Voldemort, you wouldn't perhaps be unwilling to get noticed by Lucius Malfoy not because you're worried about him having dreams of glory, but perhaps because you're—I don't know—embarrassed?:

Harry decided that the reason he couldn't kick the habit of teasing Voldie was because the man-snake just gave too wonderful of reactions. Voldemort's whole body stiffened in enraged tension and the snake's jaw snapped right next to Harry's ear.

P-potter! I am not embarrassed.: 

Harry narrowed his eyes at the suspicious stutter from the Dark Lord. :I don't believe you.: Harry concluded. In reality Harry knew that Voldemort probably wasn't embarrassed in the sense of the word, but maybe he didn't want the Death Eaters to see him as weak. That type of thing didn't work for the Dark Lord image. It wouldn't do for them to know that so soon after his resurrection he was already once again indisposed.

Just shut up and find where Lucius Malfoy is!: Voldemort snapped in retort.

After minutes of searching, Harry finite'd the Map and folded it back up. :He's not here anymore, so rest assured that your terrible secret is safe with me.: 

Because that makes me feel better.: Voldemort growled. Harry furrowed his brow and cocked his head at the pale cobra.

But you still trust me with it.: 

Voldemort didn't say anything in response. There was still time during lunch period, so Harry picked the snake up and left the Tower to grab a bite to eat.

The moment Harry stepped into Snape's dungeon office, this time invited even with last year's decree that he should never step foot here again, he was accosted by a hand gripping the collar of his robes and a pale face with a hooked nose and dark eyes filling his line of vision.

"Tell me, boy, how often have you been reading up on Dark Magic?"

Harry tried to pull away. "I don't know what you're talking about," he grit out. He was trying not to let the panic leak into his expression.

"Don't lie to me," Snape growled. "Young Mr. Malfoy can attest that you used a very dangerous
and rare form of magic."

"Is that why Lucius Malfoy was here, because Draco told him what I could do and so he's come to spy for his Master?" Harry surprised himself with the demanding tone in his voice. Maybe he'd been hanging out too much with Voldemort for inspiration.

Snape's expression tightened. "Malfoy was here because general incompetence of others allowed him to be reinstated on the Board of Governors."

Harry, of course, already knew that but wasn't going to let Snape know that and so kept silent. Surprisingly, so was Voldemort, who usually took any opportunity to curse the traitor. The snake was tightly coiled around Harry's shoulders for how tense he was. It bordered on being painful, but Harry didn't really take much notice of it.

Snape gave Harry an infinitesimal shake before violently releasing his hold on Harry's clothing.

"Of course you must know the only You-Know-Who is capable of Parselmagic. Where did you learn it?"

Harry knew there was probably no denying it, though it put him at a disadvantage; Draco Malfoy may be an idiot, but that didn't mean he was stupid per say (yes, there was a difference). He obviously told Snape about Harry's new talent. Harry wondered if he told the man about the whole incident, though...

Harry emboldened himself. "I found out on my own. I've been speaking the language for a while now…it just happened. I don't see what the problem is. Why should I let Voldemort have an advantage when I am perfectly capable of matching him in this?"

Snape glared menacingly, never blinking as he pinned Harry with his gaze. His black eyes flickered briefly to the snake around the younger wizard's neck and it made Harry wonder...

"Sit down, Potter," he finally said, turning away. Harry ducked his head and took a seat at the spare desk Snape kept specifically for detentions, his heartbeat slowing from the confronting encounter. A moment later a box filled with old parchments was dropped onto the desktop, tossing up a cloud of dust. Harry coughed, and even Voldemort sneezed delicately. Next to that a fresh stack of parchment was dropped, followed shortly by a well of ink and a feather quill.

"You will copy the pages from within the box. I require that the copies be neat and flawless. You will work until ten."

Typical Snape detention: perform menial tasks just to fill time. Sighing inwardly, Harry pulled out one of the dusty parchments from the box and laid it down on the desktop. Eyes roving the paper, his inward sigh turned into a groan when he found the faded ink marks to be horrendously difficult to read. He picked up the quill and dipped it in the ink, and settled in for two long hours of a tedious and overly boring task.

A few minutes in, Voldemort offered his observation of the whole situation.

:"This is quite fascinating.:"

:"You can't be serious,: Harry growled before blowing on the first finished page and setting it aside, reaching for another.

:"I never had detention; is it always like this?: That damn Dark Lord actually sounded genuinely curious."
:Sod off, you bastard. Are you really telling me that you never once had detention in the seven years of school? Merlin, who knew Lord Voldemort had been such a suck up.: 

:I resent that, Potter. I was not a "suck up"...I merely acted one. There's a big difference.: 

"Potter!"

Harry jumped at the sudden intrusion of his shouted name.

"Sir?"

Snape, from behind his desk, had his fists resting on the space in front of him and his mouth twisted in a tight scowl. "You are to remain silent."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek to keep the threatened smirk from slipping past his expression of innocence as he remembered the time in class the other day. Harry wasn't quite sure what about his talking to a snake disturbed the professor so much; maybe it was the fact that the only other person who could was Lord Voldemort, and rumor had it that he was never very pleasant about it. People fear the unknown, and Snape had no idea what Harry could be possibly talking about with a venomous cobra.

Harry wasn't going to smile, but that didn't mean he wouldn't milk it a little. "Oh, I'm sorry Sir. I should have realized it would bother you."

Good grief, all the dastardly gits in this world were just too predictable; whether it was Voldemort or Snape he was subtly baiting, they all reacted the same: with indignation and denial.

Snape reared back. "If what you are suggesting is that Parseltongue makes me uneasy, then you are in error. You are in detention, Mr. Potter, and as such should remain silent."

"Sorry, I just figured Voldemort might have given you bad memories." Harry ducked his head back down and returned to work, conscious of Snape's malignant expression. Harry was aware of how actually alike his father he was acting right now, what with baiting Snape like that, but after years of never being given the benefit of the doubt he was beginning to tire of trying to change the professor's mind.

Now condemned to silence, Harry focused on the scratching of his quill on the blank parchments, his eyes growing more and more exhausted from squinting at the faded words on the old sheets. The subject of the parchments weren't even interesting...basically it was a detailed list of the weather for the past five hundred years. Harry imagined Snape searching Hogwarts' storage rooms for torturously boring detention material such as this. The man seriously needed to get a life.

Halfway through, even Voldemort decided detention wasn't all that great.

:Don't ever get detention again, Potter. I fear my brain is drying up this is so dull,: he hissed quietly enough so only Harry could hear. Harry only sighed in response, silently agreeing to Voldemort's statement.

Near the end of the night, both Harry and Snape were still bent over their respected desks, neither paying much mind to the other. It was around that time that Harry felt Voldemort slipping from his shoulders. Flustered, Harry tried to grab for him, but the snake silently snapped his jaws at the young wizard's hand and so he was unable to stop the cobra from dropping to the stone ground. Once again he had to remind himself about the dangers of bored Dark Lords and their tendency to go look for amusement. He made a grab for the snake's tail but this only resulted in him accidently knocking all his papers to the ground.
"You are now required to stay an extra ten minutes," Snape intoned, never ceasing writing on his own parchments. Harry wanted to scream in frustration. A hissy snickering floated over from where Voldemort had escaped to.

"You are in trouble," Harry hissed sharply under his breath as he fell to his knees to gather up his wayward papers. Voldemort either ignored him or didn't hear…probably the former.

Harry watched nervously as the pale cobra slithered across the floor of Snape's office and right to the owner himself. Harry had sat back at his student's desk but had completely stopped copying in favor of watching the snake's path with panic building in his gut. All he wanted to do was demand to know what Voldemort thought he was doing, but he couldn't without bringing attention to his insubordinate "pet".

Instead he concentrated and found that link in the back of his mind and pushed an image of him strangling the Dark Lord, hoping that would get the man-snake's attention.

It did. Voldemort jerked on the floor and whirled around, baring his fangs in a silent hiss, his hood flared. Harry merely crossed his arms across his chest and gave him an admonishing stare. Harry jabbed his finger downward, indicating that Voldemort should get back here right now. The Dark Lord ignored him and turned back on his original path. Harry really started worrying that the man-snake had plans to kill Snape right then and there by snakebite. Harry wondered if he was about to watch his reputation get flushed down the drain...no matter how much of an asshole Snape was it wouldn't be right to kill him. Harry's chair scraped across the floor as he moved to stand.

"You are not finished, Mr. Potter," Snape told him, not even bothering to look up. The man still hadn't realized there was a cobra loose in his office.

"But—" Harry began, only to be interrupted.

"Sit," Snape said with finality. Reluctantly, Harry sat back down and picked his quill back up, eyes never leaving the roving Dark Lord, who was just now disappearing behind Snape's desk out of Harry's line of sight. Harry began alternated between glancing up and copying one word at a time. So far Snape seemed completely oblivious, and Harry had no way of knowing what Voldemort was doing. Harry's knee began jumping up and down as he nervously waited for the Dark Lord to reappear.

Finally, the pale cobra came back around the front of the desk, circling around the edge. Harry saw his tongue flicking madly and remembered how he had mentioned after their earlier visit here that he had thought there was a hidden room. Harry relaxed the tiniest bit, suspecting Voldemort was only looking for it as he slithered now along the perimeter of the office.

Harry was so engrossed in Voldemort's escape that he didn't notice that his detention had finally come to a close.

"Are you going to continue copying those all night, Potter?"

Harry looked down at his work before looking back up and slowly standing. He couldn't see Voldemort once again. The problem was that Harry was expected to leave now, but he couldn't do that without Voldemort, so that left him standing awkwardly in the middle of Snape's office.

Snape noticed Harry had not left. "Is there something you wanted?" he asked in an annoyed tone of voice, expression already flippant.

"Um, well, ah..." Harry stuttered. "Just wanted to thank you for the detention..." Harry could have
smacked himself.

Snape was not amused, and his black eyes displayed just how much he didn't believe a word Harry said. "I do not want to see your face before next class. Leave now."

Harry sighed. There was no getting around it. "Accio snake."

A pale cobra came flying over Snape's shoulder, causing the man to jump out of the way in shock, mouth gaping as he watched Harry catch the hissing snake.

:Potter-!

:Tell me later, but we have to leave now.; Harry said lowly, irritated with the man-snake and his sudden Gryffindorish need to go exploring.

"Sorry Sir," Harry said to Snape. "He smelled a rat."

Harry hustled out of Snape's office.
Chapter 7

:What gives?: Harry demanded as he climbed the stairs to reach Gryffindor Tower. His mood was decidedly unsavory, what with a sore hand from the torturous copying during Snape's detention and the irritation over Voldemort's little escapade. Really, if the man already didn't want to kill Harry, he would be the death of him from just how much of a handful he was.

:You're willing to get caught running loose around Snape's office but you aren't willing to reveal your situation to Lucius Malfoy, an actual loyal Death Eater?:

:It was worth the risk.: Voldemort responded, indifferent to Harry's near-concern…because that's what it was. Harry maybe wanted to deny it, but he had been worried that the Dark Lord's impatience was going to get him into trouble; after all, it's happened before, Harry thought with a slight shake of his head. Somewhat frustrated with all that had been occurring to him lately, he blew his dark bangs out of his eyes as he heaved a heavy sigh.

:So…was it? Worth the risk, I mean.: Voldemort nodded, a gesture Harry saw from the corner of his eye. He was still amused at the human expressions the snake managed to use.

:I know definitively there is a space beneath the floor. The scent is strongest behind the desk near the back of the office.: Harry sighed again. :Snape knows about the Parselmagic now…getting into his office may be more difficult now.: 

:Indeed. You may want to research wards in preparation.: Great; more work.

:We're going to have to wait until he is completely gone from the castle.: Harry continued. :Let's hope he actually leaves over the hols. I think he suspects you, but can't prove it. I'm beginning to think I should have Obliviated Malfoy. We already suspect he told his father as well…saving your arse just made my job harder.: 

Harry laughed over the absurdity of that statement. He was, after all, the Chosen One to defeat the Dark Lord, not save him. He was working in the opposite direction, and really was quite literally making his own job harder. But he had to face the truth; he found saving people easier than killing them.

If only saving Voldemort and defeating him was the same thing…

Voldemort grumbled something indiscernible, perhaps uncomfortable with the notion of his rescue.

Harry stepped in front of the Fat Lady's portrait, but delayed saying the password in favor of making one last comment to the Dark Lord in disguise.

:Next time you decide to be a Gryffindor, warn me will ya?: 

:Only if you never Accio me again. How uncouth.: 

Harry had the audacity to giggle.
"Ah, Harry, may I speak with you for a moment?"

Harry glanced up from the stone floor of the hallway he'd been walking through to meet the ever gleaming eyes the Headmaster.

"Of course, Sir."

Dumbledore sidled up next to Harry and walked beside him. "I see you've signed up to stay over during the holidays. I had thought you would rather stay with your friends. May I ask why you are not?"

Harry felt a twinge of panic and tried to erect the barely-there Occlumency shields he had developed with the book Voldemort suggested. But it had only been a few days of practice, and Harry knew they were mostly useless. So Harry just kept his eyes forward and tried to not look bothered by the question, or at least not as if he had a secret.

"Well Sir," Harry started, "I'm worried about Voldemort. The incident with the Ministry has made me…" Harry swallowed hard. "It made me realize the sort of risks my friends put themselves in by being around me. Voldemort would stop at nothing to get to me. It would kill me if something happened to any of them because of me."

Frowning, Dumbledore placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, halting Harry's forward motion. Voldemort subtly shied away from the black, wrinkled hand, but otherwise did not react. Harry felt rather uncomfortable with that hand there, too.

"Harry, you can't live your life in fear of Voldemort. While it's true that there is a certain risk for those around you, I think you would find that they gladly accept it."

"I know that Sir," Harry assured him. He decided to just give the same excuse he had given his friends. "But Voldemort has been quiet lately, and I wonder if he's planning something. I'll have a better holiday knowing that if I stay in the castle there will be less chance my friends would be in danger if those plans involve me. It's about due time for his annual 'Try to kill Potter' attempt," Harry said dryly and risked a glance into Dumbledore's eyes, which were slightly chastising. "Besides, Hogwarts is more my home than anywhere else, and it won't be hard to spend Christmas here."

Dumbledore arched a bushy eyebrow. "Harry, wouldn't you rather say home is where those you love are? You shouldn't limit yourself."

Harry looked down again. "I know; I'm not…I won't. It doesn't hurt anybody if I stay here, though, so that's what I've decided to do. Don't worry about me, I'll still have a happy Christmas here."

Harry smiled at the Headmaster, a genuine expression that was only slightly dulled by a slight amount of guilt he felt from lying.

Studying Harry for a moment before slowly nodding, Dumbledore said, "If you are sure, my boy. In that case, I trust you don't mind meeting me up in my office again, do you?"

Harry's brow crinkled when he widened his eyes in slight surprise at Dumbledore's indication that he would be given Voldemort "lessons" over break. "Oh, no, that would be great."

"Very well, I shall see you later."

Harry bid the Headmaster goodbye and continued his journey to his dorm.
"You better be grateful, you asshole, for all I do for you," Harry grumbled. Sometimes he wished it wasn't the seasonal break from Quidditch, in which case Voldemort would have been forced to come along for the ride. He could always pull his broom out anyway…

Voldemort said nothing in response.

Plopping heavily down on his bed once he was in Gryffindor Tower, Harry pulled out his wand to place it on his nightstand, but paused and rolled the stick of holly wood between his fingers.

:Hey Voldemort?:

:What?: the snake said with a slight acerbic grumbling.

Harry ignored his tone. :Why is it, do you think, that we have brother wands?:

Taking the time to slither down Harry's arm and down onto the comforter, Voldemort curled up at the foot of the bed as always while Harry shifted so he was facing the snake.

:How do you mean?: the snake asked in a rather neutral tone. Encouraged, Harry continued in his train of thought.

:I mean…if you believe it, we're destined to kill or be killed by each other, and yet here we get chosen by wands that are ineffective against the other in a deadly fight. Maybe there was some sort of clause to that prophesy that said we had to have an epic sword fight to the death instead of using magic?: Harry said lightly, genuinely amused when he thought of it. :How droll.: 

:Yes, : Voldemort hissed slowly, :it is somewhat…curious.: 

Harry nodded. :That's what Ollivander said. It is strange, isn't it? Here we are, "mortal enemies", and our wands tell us…what? That we are supposed to be, er, friends? Oh shush, I'm just saying.; 

Harry said, interrupting Voldemort's tirade against the use of "friends" in a sentence involving the two of them.

:I blame you, Potter,: Voldemort informed the younger wizard.


:I blame you because it is clearly your fault.: 

Harry drew back. :Wait a minute, you were the one who marked me as your enemy. Doesn't that make it your fault?:

:Of course not, I had my wand first.: 

Harry rolled his eyes. :Your logic sucks.: He fell onto his back, placing his arms behind his head. While Voldemort clearly didn't see much into their brother wands, or at least outwardly didn't, Harry still felt there was something significant about it. What were the odds that two enemies would have wands incapable of actual battle against each other? It was just so stupid.

:It wouldn't, I mean…: Harry rolled onto his side, his cheek pressed into his pillow. :Does it have anything to do with our connection?:

Voldemort didn't respond right away. :I suppose it could,: he answered slowly, reluctantly.

:I've been meaning to ask,: Harry said after a moment of deliberation, :if you knew what exactly it is, because you can't tell me it's normal.:
This time Voldemort did not answer.

:You don't know, do you?: Harry tilted his head so he could look down the bed at the snake curled there.

Voldemort flickered his tongue in and out of his mouth. :It is highly unusual,: he admitted to the younger wizard.

Harry wanted to ask more, but at that moment Ron walked into the Sixth Year boy's dorm and addressed his friend.

"Hey mate, are you coming or what?"

Harry sat quickly up from the bed. "Oh, right, I forgot we were all going to study tonight." Harry stood, picking up a lax Voldemort and his bag of books and followed Ron down to the Common Room, where Hermione was waiting.

"There you are, Harry. Now," Hermione said, placing a piece of parchment—wait, was that a lesson plan? Ack, of course, this was Hermione—in front of where Harry sat down at. "I think you need to focus on your Charms theory, Harry, you've been struggling with that…" And on she went, as usual taking control of the study session. Harry worked quietly while Voldemort lay wrapped comfortably around his shoulders.

If Harry didn't know any better, he'd swear the Dark Lord was napping.

:Honestly, Potter, can't we just get this over with now? Stop preening.: Harry sneered at the image of Voldemort in the mirror while he adjusted his collar.

:Just because I look young and pretty and you don't doesn't mean you have to complain about it… you made yourself snake-faced, not me. I really wish I could leave you behind, but the tether won't break until midnight tonight.: Voldemort hissed in simultaneous retort and agreement while Harry made his way down the stairs into the Common Room where he met up with Hermione. He'd managed to skip out of Professor Slughorn's Slug Club meetings, but now he was trapped into going to the man's Christmas party. Hermione was invited too, for being such a brilliant witch, but Harry knew he was only invited because he didn't die when he should have. What a thing to be famous for.

Voldemort had grumbled about being subjected to the flamboyant torture of the Professor's "collecting" habits he'd thought he had long escaped. Harry told him that at least he wasn't the focus of said collecting anymore.

"You ready?" Harry addressed the polished Hermione. "You look beautiful, by the way."

:Potter, need I remind you that I forbade you to consort with the female sex while in my presence?: Harry wrinkled his nose and looked down at the constricting dress robes he wore. Hermione blushed and looked down at her crème, shimmery dress, smoothing a hand down the front of it. "Thanks, Harry. You're looking quite dashing yourself."

Harry laughed at his expression.
As Voldemort very well knew, Harry and Hermione were just going as friends. Hermione had planned on bringing Ron, but they recently had a falling out over what Harry considered petty happenstance. Really, Harry wondered, when were his two friends going to get their act together and realize what they meant to each other? Harry had suggested they go together instead and that way they would both know they would have a good time.

Harry had actually been semi-serious about his earlier comment to Voldemort about other males. In the Muggle world homosexual relationships had been ostracized, but when Harry entered the Wizarding World it hadn't really been a problem, though typically the older bloodlines were expected to produce an heir somehow regardless of sexual orientation. Harry had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the world he was born to, and it wasn't hard to adopt the customs that made sense. Harry thus far hadn't had much luck with the ladies—the Cho Chang fiasco had just been awkward, and Ginny was more of a sister—so maybe he should give the men a try…?

Granted, right now he had way too much on his plate to even consider any kind of relationship. He was in a complicated enough one right now with Voldemort, as odd as it sounded. Yes, right now he'd rather go to party with Hermione, confident in the knowledge that they both saw and would always see each other as really great friends.

The twosome, technically three, left the Tower and continued on to Slughorn's party. Walking side by side, lost in mindless banter, the two arrived at Slughorn's large office where the party was being held. As Voldemort had told Harry to expect, the room was swathed in greens, reds and metallics, accented by ornate candles strewn around the room. The air was heavy with perfumes and other scents, and somewhere there was cheery music playing.

"Oh," Hermione gaped. "Isn't this…lovely."

Harry immediately left to get some punch for him and Hermione. If Harry had wanted his presence to stay inconspicuous, he was sorely disappointed.

"Ah, Harry m'boy! When did you get here? Never mind, never mind…so glad you could make it! Are you enjoying the party?"

Harry nodded, carefully pulling the cups of punch he held in both hands out of the way of Slughorn's flailing hands.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you for inviting me," Harry said, turning his attention from the punch back to Slughorn.

"Oh anytime, anytime, child. After all, it wouldn't have been a party without the Boy-Who-Lived, now would it?"

Inwardly Harry scowled while on the outside he planted a stiff smile on his face. Luckily, Slughorn got distracted by some other well-to-do guest and excused himself so Harry could get back to his friend and give Hermione her the punch.

The party actually turned out to be mildly interesting. After all, there was a great deal of famous or notable people present, including a vampire. Voldemort would whisper the names of some of the people he recognized, and even told Harry to go introduce himself to a few. Many people at first were a little taken aback by the snake draped as unobtrusively as he could manage around Harry's shoulders, but soon word got around that the Boy-Who-Lived had rescued a snake from certain death, which at least placated some. It was a well-known fact, sometimes a rumor, that Harry Potter was a Parselmouth, what with every student at Hogwarts knowing it would have been a hard secret to keep anyway. It wouldn't take long before the piece of info that he actually used the rare
ability to converse with his pet snake to get out, either. Harry wasn't exactly thrilled with the prospect of even more "going Dark" rumors, but he was prepared for and used to it.

Now, if it ever got out that his snake was Voldemort...now, that would truly be something to witness. Oh, the panic...Ha, it might even be worth it, Harry mused in his mind.

As for Hermione, she herself was rather pleased with the party as well, finding a well-known author to converse at length with.

Partway through the night, Harry was approached by a tall wizard with dark brown hair and dressed in flattering slate grey robes, complete with deep maroon trimmings. He had a pleasant smile on his face as he held out his hand in offer for a handshake.

"Hello, I'm Danton Drusferd." His voice was a light tenor that easily traveled the distance between them.

Harry glanced at the hand before he looked up into the other wizard's rather unremarkable grey eyes, though they looked friendly enough. He took the hand in his. "Hello, I'm—"

"Yes, Harry Potter. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes. That was the fifth time that night he hadn't been allowed to introduce himself. Nevertheless, he replied, "It's nice to meet you too. Were you a Hogwarts student?" Harry asked, making light conversation. There was something slightly familiar about the other wizard. Danton looked relatively young, no older than twenty-two. His face was thin, with rather prominent cheek bones and a straight nose. He wasn't overly handsome, but he did have a sort of an allure about him.

"I was a Fifth Year when you were in your First," the other boy replied. "I remember because that was my OWL year, and you were quite a distraction by all the mischief you caused. I was rather impressed; making the Quidditch team, fighting a troll, taking out that twisted Dark Arts teacher. Yes, quite impressive," he repeated with an amused smile. Harry couldn't help but smile back. Voldemort stirred underneath Harry's robes.

"I hope your OWL grades didn't suffer because of me," Harry quipped. Danton chuckled lightly.

"Oh, don't worry. I was a Ravenclaw," he said as his only explanation, but Harry arched his brow in understanding. "It was quite interesting to watch you take Hogwarts by storm," Danton continued, eying Harry with a strange, engrossed expression on his face. Harry felt the need to fidget, and he scratched the back of his neck.

"Well, I'm glad I could provide such spectacular entertainment," Harry voiced dryly, but his expression was undaunted. "How do you know Professor Slughorn?"

Danton shrugged. "My mother was part of his little club. She brought me along as her guest. Can't say was I excited about the prospect," he said, shrugging again and looking straight at Harry, "but I now find it was worth it."

"Oh, ha," Harry stumbled, "why is that?"

"I got to meet you," Danton said with an easy grin. Harry's eyes widened fractionally. He hadn't expected this. A slow smile crossed his face. Sure, he had just told himself he didn't have any time for a relationship, but flirting wasn't any kind of commitment. And besides, when was the last time he got to feel and act like a real teenager? Furthermore, he found he didn't mind that it was another male he was chatting up. Perhaps he was on to something here.
"This party has turned out to be rather interesting," Harry agreed. Danton seemed to catch on and leaned in a little closer. The cloth of Harry's robe began rippling, but neither boy seemed to notice.

"Harry, would you like to—"

But Danton didn't finish because Voldemort rather abruptly decided to make his unobtrusive presence far more…obtrusive…by propelling his head out from under the collar of Harry's robe and rearing it back in the classic cobra S. From his venomous mouth came a series of low, inarticulate hissing, mostly meaningless save for one word: mine.

Huh?

Danton, in the meantime, had taken a step back. "Why is it doing that?" he asked, not exactly afraid but cautious.

"I don't know," Harry answered with a glare a then offending figure hanging over his shoulder. "Sometimes I wonder if his stint in the cold loosened a screw or five in his head.

"Oh," Danton said blandly. His eyes flickered around the room before turning back to Harry, who was beginning to feel an awkward silence fall between them. "Well, Harry, my mother wanted to leave the party early. We're vacationing in America for the holidays, and we leave tomorrow." He paused. "It was really nice meeting you."

"Yeah," Harry said, feeling a little disappointed, "you too."

With Hermione still otherwise occupied, as soon as Danton was out of Harry's line of sight, the teen found himself in a secluded corner.

:Why'd you do that?:

:Do what?: Voldemort growled out sourly.

Harry threw up his hands. :You scared him away! Merlin, it's like your only pleasure in life is to sap all the fun out of mine.: Harry nearly face palmed, because on many levels that may very well have been true. Death threats and attempts really put a damper on life, and Voldemort sure has made a hobby out of that.

:…I did not like him.:  

Harry blinked. :You didn't like him,: he said slowly, incredulously. :Are you for real? You don't like anybody, how was he any different than everyone else I associate with here at Hogwarts? And what's up with you saying "mine"?:

Voldemort curled his upper lip in a sneer. :I don't know what you are talking about. I never said that.: Voldemort turned away and refused to say anything further. Harry huffed in frustration and decided for what must have been the thousandth time that there are some things he shouldn't even bother with, like trying to convince an insane Dark Lord that his actions did not make any sense. Maybe he really had just misheard.

:Eh, he was probably just talking to me 'cause I'm the 'Boy-Who-Lived', whoop-dee-doo,: Harry
groused.

Harry was still brooding, for a lack of a better term, in his corner when Professor Slughorn approached him once more. The man was quite flushed in the face and Harry suspected he was a bit tipsy.

"Hello Harry, still having fun? Good, good." Slughorn collapsed his weight against the bare stone wall next to where Harry stood and sighed. For once the elder wizard was silent. Voldemort shifted restlessly around Harry's shoulders.

It was then that Harry began to think that the man next to him had been one of Tom Riddle's professors. They had discussed it once or twice briefly, but Slughorn had been very reluctant to talk about it much. Harry supposed he couldn't blame him, but there were many things he was curious about.

"Professor?"

"Yes, Harry?"

Harry hesitated, before asking, "When you had Christmas parties before, did Tom Riddle go?"

From the corner of his eye, Harry saw the man swallow heavily before he answered quietly, "Yes, I dare say he never missed one."

"What was he like?"

Interestingly, Voldemort seemed poised to hear the response as well. Slughorn's eyes glazed as he peered into the past, alcohol keeping at bay any sort of reluctance to speak of Tom Riddle as he normally had.

"Oh, Harry, he was the star, the best and the brightest. His mere presence drew everyone's attention. I know now he probably never really enjoyed the parties, but at the time you would never have known otherwise, the way he smiled and laughed with everyone else. Only he knows the lies he had hidden beneath those blue eyes of his."

Slughorn closed his own while Harry studied him intently.

"He could have been great, you know. He had so much potential to do good instead of evil. People listened to him, would have done many things for him all without bloodshed. He could have been Minister, Headmaster, anything he wanted. Not all his ideas were bad, Harry, and I had hoped that in time he would come to see the benefit of changing his opinion about some of the others. He was smart, ever so smart; it wouldn't have taken him long. But then he...I told him...But then he changed," the man finally finished, wincing at whatever would have completed that fragmented sentence. Guilt fell off the suddenly wizened man in waves, and Harry wondered what Slughorn blamed himself for.

Slughorn pushed himself from the wall, looking for all intents and purposes completely sober.

"But that was then, and no matter how much of a genius Tom Riddle was, I very much doubt anything could make V-Voldemort change his mind now," he stuttered, surprising Harry that he even uttered the forbidden name. "It is getting late, Harry, you best be going off to bed now. Goodnight."

And with that Slughorn walked off with nary a glance back at Harry, who stood in the darkened corner which felt more desolate than it had before.
Is he right, Harry?: Voldemort hissed quietly, an indefinable note to the sound. Harry didn't even realize he had used his first name.

Yes.: Harry said, although he didn't know what he was really agreeing to and he suspected Voldemort knew that as well. Glancing around, he spotted Hermione waiting for him by the door and went off to meet her so they could head back up to Gryffindor Tower.

Harry tried to sleep that night, he really did. But he couldn't, accomplishing nothing but rumpled bedcovers from all his tossing and turning. He tried to keep from disturbing the sleeping Dark Lord (Merlin knew that man needed his sleep to stay fairly tolerable in mood) but apparently his best efforts weren't enough.

Potter, what will it take to get you to sleep?: a grumpy-sounding Voldemort hissed from the far end of the bed just over Harry's toes.

How about a bedtime story?: Harry mumbled into his pillow.

Once upon a time, there was a fatuous Gryffindor—:

Never mind.: Harry interrupted, rolling onto his back and kicking off the covers from one of his legs. I've never had a bedtime story before, so I don't even know if I'd fall asleep to it anyway.: Harry sighed. Wanna do something else?:

Not really.: Ok great, I have just the thing.: Voldemort groaned as Harry crawled over him to the end of the bed, pulling aside his deep red curtain so he could slip out. As slowly as he could so as to keep the squeaking of hinges to a minimum since he was outside his silencing barrier, Harry opened his trunk and reached inside for his desired object. When he scuttled back into bed, he had a small rectangular object clutched in his left hand. From under his pillow he grabbed his wand and uttered a quiet Lumos.

Voldemort shied slightly away from the light before adjusting and flicking his tongue in Harry's direction.

Are those...Muggle cards?:

Yup.: Harry pulled the tin lid off the card box and set it aside, flipping the bottom over so the cards fell into his waiting hand before setting that aside as well.

You intend for us to play a game of Muggle cards?:

Yup.: Harry repeated confidently.

Potter, I don't know if you realize this—I know it's very hard for you to understand this with your puerile mind—but I don't have any hands.: Hardly har har, you really are so funny. I like that in a person, you know?: Harry shuffled the cards in quick snapping motions, breaking the deck in half before slotting them together again in a new order. I know you might not believe this with your inflated ego but you are not the only wizard alive.: Voldemort sneered as his previous insult was tossed back in his face. I'll magic them so they float in the air.: Harry explained. I also promise not to cheat, since I have more class than others in my current company.:
Voldemort scoffed. "War is messy, boy. Life isn't fair, anyway."

"Isn't that the truth," Harry whispered in English. He then proceeded to set the pile of cards out in front of him.

:I suppose you might know some Muggle card games, but do you know cribbage?:

:Yes.: Voldemort was staring at Harry like he was the insane one.

Harry ignored him. :Well, do you know how to play it?:

:Why would I want to learn a game played with Muggles?:

:They didn't let you play, did they?:

:How much exactly do you know about my childhood?: Voldemort growled, clearly not impressed by Harry's blasé inferences.

:I'll tell you later. And don't worry, I was never allowed to play either.; Harry said sympathetically. Harry wasn't sure just how much of his own childhood Voldemort knew, what with the man getting into his head on a regular basis, but he hurried on before Voldemort could respond. :I learned eventually, though, so I'll teach you.: 

:I don't want to learn a childish game!: 

:Heh, you sound childish enough right now to me.; Harry retorted. :Please, just bear with me. We can make up for our piss-poor childhoods now. Please play with me? I think you'll like this game, and it'll help me sle-ep," Harry sing-songed, widening his gleaming green eyes pleadingly at the cobra. Harry could almost say that the Dark Lord's upper lip curled in a grimace before his body inflated in a drawn out sigh.

:Fine, Potter, one game only.; the snake grumbled, shifting his long body into a better position.

Harry's brows rose to his hairline. :Really?: Harry had honestly got the cards out to play solitaire because he didn't think Voldemort would agree to play. That he actually had agreed was…nice? Confusing? The result of a sleep-deprived brain or simply a dismal childhood?

:Don't make me repeat it.: 

Well, even if Voldemort agreeing had been unexpected, that didn't mean Harry was going to mention that and have him back out.

Harry beamed radiantly, thrilled that he had managed to convince the Darkest wizard in history to a game of cribbage. He wondered what else he could convince Voldemort to do when promised sleep, because it obviously couldn't be Harry's sob story and pleading eyes that persuaded him…

:Okay, here are the rules…:

Later, once Voldemort was briefed on how to play the game, Harry grabbed his wand again and cast a spell he had learned from the Weasley Twins on the card pile set out in on the bed. The cards glowed briefly before six cards were magically dealt to each of them, the given hands levitating in the air in front of them. From under his bed Harry pulled a dusty cribbage score board. Harry told Voldemort to cut the deck to get the starter card, which resulted in the snake using his nose to push half the deck aside. The corner of Harry's mouth quirked at the sight before he flipped the new top card: a five of hearts.
Harry looked at his hand and discarded a pair of eights to the crib while Voldemort chose two cards from his hand to discard.

:I go first,: Voldemort declared. Harry just rolled his eyes.

:By all means,: Harry told him with a sweeping gesture of his hand. Never mind that it was his turn anyway.

Voldemort tapped a card and a jack landed face up on the bed. Harry looked at him expectantly.

:You've gotta say it.:

Voldemort snapped his jaw. :Ten,: Harry smirked and tapped his own card, and a five was laid down.

:Fifteen for two,: Voldemort grumbled as Harry moved his peg on the cribbage board.

:Twenty-two,: Voldemort huffed out after he tapped his seven card and it laid itself down.

:Twenty-eight for three,: Harry said triumphantly as he laid down this six, resulting in a run.

And so the game continued. Harry was in the lead after the first round, but Voldemort dealt the next hand and evened out the score rather quickly.

:Perhaps we should use this game as a gamble for the Wizarding World,: Voldemort said pleasantly in a sickeningly sweet voice.

:Just because I'm a Gryffindor doesn't mean I'm stupid,: Harry intoned, expression bored.

:You said it, not me,: Voldemort returned. Harry chuckled, but then Voldemort scored his crib and got a score of sixteen. Harry pouted petulantly as his peg fell behind of Voldemort's. The snake hissed in pleasure.

They played several more rounds, the only talk between them being the traditional phrases for game.

:This is fun,: Harry commented offhandedly.

Voldemort flicked his tongue out. :If you say so, Potter,: He cut the deck again for Harry's deal.

:Hey, I could have made you play Go fish. And this is fun, trust me, because I think we can both agree I'm a better judge of that than you,: Voldemort placed down an eight to follow Harry's eight, getting a pair. :Twenty-six for two. Are you insinuating that I do not know how to have fun?:

:Ha! Thirty—can you follow that?—then thirty for one. By the way, torture and mindless killing does not count,: Harry articulated with a roll of his eyes. Voldemort issued a hissy chuckle.

:And how would you know, Potter? That pathetic attempt of yours at the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix cannot be considered a proper effort,: Harry winced slightly at the reminder of what happened at the Ministry. His previous lighthearted
expression dimmed. :It's your turn,: he said blandly. Voldemort eyed the teen for several moments before he twitched and tapped a card.

Voldemort ultimately won the game. He seemed quite satisfied with this accomplishment.

:Wanna play again?: Harry asked.

:I said one game only.: 

:Oh, alright…: Harry gathered the cards into one pile to put them pack in their case.

:…Will you be able to fall asleep now?:

Shrugging, Harry said noncommittally, :Maybe.: 

:We will play one more game to ensure I will not be subjected to your restlessness…it keeps me up.: 

They played one and a half more games. Harry fell asleep during the third, hence the half game played. It was a relatively abrupt transition from wakefulness to sleep, if appearances were to be trusted. Harry's body lay on top of his card-covered comforter, and the teen's head was cushioned by one arm while his feet were huddled under his pillow. In the crook of his neck and shoulder rested a pale, triangular head, lidless red eyes vacant in sleep, and curled around one of Harry's fingers was the tip of a smooth-scaled snake tail.
Chapter 8

The next morning found Harry still curled up with his feet at the headboard and his head at the foot of the bed. Draped lazily around his arms and neck was Voldemort, pressed up into Harry's body heat, perhaps instinctually and perhaps consciously. Rumpled playing cards were skewed all around the bed, and some had fallen to the floor.

Voldemort woke somewhat disoriented but strangely calm despite the confusion. He felt…warm, relaxed, and most notably, safe, almost…protected. He lazily flicked out his tongue to taste the air, and twitched when the appendage hit something warm that tasted like sweet blush wine. He tilted his head to get a better view of the startling close object, feeling a stab of surprise when his eye met the gaze of a soulful green one.

::This is cozy,: Harry drawled, but otherwise seemed unconcerned by the arraignment as he adjusted his crooked spectacles. He yawned and stretched the kinks from the awkward sleeping position, inadvertently brushing up against Voldemort's long, slender body every now and then, eliciting that odd sensation in the snake's nerves that caused his muscles to relax.

Shaking the opposing emotions that rose from the close contact and realization he had spent the night nestled against his enemy, Voldemort hissed, ::I am not a teddy bear, Potter. Do try and resist next time you wish to use me as such.: 

It was irritating but not unexpected when Harry only grinned at him. ::Aww, but you use me as perch and a transportation device, don't you think it's only fair?:

::Life's not fair, remember?: Voldemort refused to consider the fact that part of him hadn't minded continuing the daytime arrangement they had. As a snake, human body heat during the winter proved to be an exceptional means to stay the ideal temperature, and at night the heating charm wasn't always as satisfying as natural heat.

Once again, the boy wizard seemed to effortlessly brush off what was intended to at least cause a slight amount of irritation. Oh, how he hated being trapped in this ineffective form. With a slight shake of his head and a crooked smile in Voldemort's direction, Harry pulled his bed curtains open, cutting all the nightly privacy spells and pulled himself away from the snake on the bed. For an odd reason, Voldemort felt as if more than just the privacy spells had been broken.

Everyone else in the dorm was already up, completing the final packing before they caught the train to head home for the holiday break. As typical Gryffindors, they were unduly loud and messy, hastily tossing clothing and books into their trunks in hopes they would all fit. Voldemort had no doubt that the Slytherins in the dungeons had been packed for days and scorned the House of the Lions. How Harry Potter could have ended up with these simpering whelps Voldemort simply could not understand…

Voldemort did not immediately realize he had just complimented his would-be vanquisher, and when his tongue began to rapidly flick the air from the emotions that had very recently been getting away from him.

Blissful silence; that is all Voldemort could think about as he lay curled up on Harry Potter's pillow, which was soft and smelled nice…

*Oh Merlin, I'm turning into a house pet,* Voldemort thought grumpily to himself. He watched as
Potter walked back into the room after saying goodbye to his friends, or whatever he called those stupid dimwits.

:I'm taking a shower, wanna come?:

Voldemort was appalled at how excited he got. Again, he cursed the snake potion of himself that occasionally got the better of his dignity. He wished he could strangle his rejoicing inner cobra that danced at the prospect of basking in the hot shower steam.

It was all Potter's fault, he just knew it.

Instead of voicing this, though, he merely sighed and lugubriously said, :Fine:.

Voldemort, now ensconced in the corner of his own shower stall with the hot water running, let his mind wander to try and drown out Potter's off key singing of the numerous Christmas songs from the Muggle world. He was doing it to aggravate him of course, Voldemort decided.

There were so many things wrong with the annoying Boy-Who-Lived. He was brash, reckless, horrendously irritating, cheeky, and so pointlessly heroic that he was willing to put his own life into danger in favor of protecting even his worst enemy.

And yet…Harry Potter was also intelligent, cunning, insightful, brave, and different from anyone else Voldemort had ever known. There was a spark in those ironically Avada Kedavra colored eyes that spoke of a person older than the sixteen and a half years since the boy had been born as July came to an end. He remembered those same eyes on a child, and how even then, as Voldemort raised his wand to kill him, those green eyes had looked at him so somberly and intelligently that at the time, without knowing what was to come, Voldemort's wand had waivered in the air.

This train of thought was not going where Voldemort expected it to, and since his shower had automatically turned off, he nosed his way under the curtain intent on finding something else to do. The magical tether Dumbledore had subjected him to was broken, and he was free to do what he wished.

Potter was already out of his shower and standing in front of one of the sinks. He had a towel wrapped around his waist that covered his pert derrière and his hands were running through his damp locks as he attempted to flatten them to his head. Voldemort mused that even his magic wouldn't be able to tame the young wizard's hair.

Voldemort sat up in the classic cobra S, his plans to do something that didn't involve Potter completely forgotten as his small, slit-pupil eyes panned downward from Harry's head and watched transfixed as the teen's muscles flexed under his pale skin. Voldemort couldn't fault Potter for his body condition, save for perhaps he was a bit on the skinny side. No wonder that insufferable, pathetic boy from the party had taken an interest in Potter. He really was quite—

:Oh, that floor must be cold. Here,: said Harry as he bent down and scooped a dazed Voldemort up into his clutches and with smooth movements that spoke of much practice he draped the cobra's long body around his bare shoulders.

Voldemort's inner snake practically purred at this living heating charm, but to the man the bare skin against his scales practically burned so much it felt like something was melting inside him.

:How was your little meeting with Dumbledore?: Voldemort asked snidely the next day, unendingly amused by even the thought of Dumbledore teaching this boy anything useful.
Potter dropped down at the end of the bed across from where Voldemort lay curled on the pillow. :It went very well, thanks,: he said rather pleasantly. Voldemort was immediately suspicious. :You know, he's been teaching me how to defeat you. Really, it's been a blast.: 

:Oh, to defeat me, you say?: Voldemort continued the banter, enjoying the back and forth. :And what have you two been doing…spells, weapons training, hugging sessions?: 

Voldemort watched as Harry choked on his laughter at the reference to "the power of love", feeling strangely satisfied before the young wizard smoothed his face into a nonchalant expression. 

:No, nothing like that.: 

Voldemort was very curious, and his red eyes glinted and his hood flared ever so subtly. What was Dumbledore up to? 

:Then what is he teaching you?: he asked. 

:…I have no bloody clue.: 

Voldemort inwardly smirked, and forced himself to forget that he had even been worried for those few seconds it took Potter to answer. 

:Sometimes I think Dumbledore wants you to kill me.,; Harry moaned, and if Voldemort could, he would have arched an eyebrow in the teen's direction. 

:What's wrong, Potter, starting to get worried you won't actually have anything to defeat me with? Maybe I should go easy on you…at this rate, keeping to school level spells truly won't be much of a hindrance.: 

Harry tossed a glare at the arrogant cobra. 

:Oh, shut up you bloody bastard.: He was silent for a moment. :Dumbledore has been showing me memories. I know you hate your father, but you really should feel grateful to him for giving you his looks. Your mother and her family weren't exactly charmers. It really is hypocritical of you to preach that blood purity shite when you're a half-blood.: 

:I will not debate this with you now.: Voldemort pulled himself up, feeling troubled once more over many things. :He's shown you memories of my…relatives.: That was…unexpected, and slightly bewildering. 

Harry shrugged. :That and the time Dumbledore went to the orphanage to talk to you. You were such a cute kid.:; Harry said sarcastically and giggled childishly. Voldemort was thoroughly ruffled. 

:Why is Dumbledore showing you those memories? Tell me!: he demanded, because all of a sudden he sensed that this was something important. 

Again, Harry shrugged. :Know your enemy? I don't know, Dumbledore never tells me anything.: 

Voldemort was beginning to feel very frustrated at Potter's inability to give him any definitive answers. 

:Pouting is not a good look for you, Potter,: he grouched. :Now quick, tell me what you've been shown.: 

:Well,: Harry said slowly in such a way that made Voldemort feel like he stumbled into a trap. :I
saw the memory of a Ministry official visiting your grandfather, uncle, and mother. Like I said: charming lot, if you enjoy the company of the barking mad. That was back in September. In October he showed me his meeting with you when you were eleven and…oh right, and one of your mother when she was pregnant with you:

Voldemort tensed. What was the purpose of Potter seeing these?

:And today,: Harry continued, :I saw your visit with your crazy uncle and a memory from the time you were at school.: Here Harry paused and turned to fully face Voldemort and look him in the eye. :Voldemort, what are Horcruxes?:

His reaction was immediate. Rearing back, hood extended to its fullest, Voldemort hissed nastily before sliding from the bed and making haste towards the stairs.

Death. The ultimate weakness, the limiting factor in a human being's life. By dying, one risks becoming ordinary, becoming just like everyone else that dies inadequate, forgotten, abandoned to the ground. Voldemort vowed that he would never become that plebian, and his secret to immortality would remain just that.

Dumbledore knowing of Horcruxes was never part of the plan.

:I'll kill him!: Voldemort fumed, eyes seeing nothing but a red hot haze as he focused on one thing only: killing Dumbledore. :That meddling old coot will die today, mark my words!:

He didn't stop to wonder why his first reaction hadn't in anyway involved the intent to harm his young enemy who also was on the cusp of learning his clandestine accomplishments.

Harry jumped off the bed behind him. :Voldemort, wait!: Making a grab for Voldemort's tail, Harry's quick reflexes were the only thing that kept him from being bitten as the snake twisted and lunged at him, fangs bared with full intention to bite. Grimacing, Harry withdrew his wand and shot a quick Stupify at the Dark Lord. The white snake fell still, utterly incensed.

Calmly putting his wand away, Harry approached the frozen Voldemort. :I can't help but feel a little jealous, Tom, that you would rather kill Dumbledore than me right now.: If Voldemort had eyelids, they would have widened at the truth in Harry's statement. The Boy-Who-Lived had sat right in front of him and he hadn't even tried to touch him, magical contract or no.

:He's found your secret, hasn't he?: Harry picked up the slender body and returned him to the bed, sitting upon it again himself.

:The memory I saw today was of you asking Slughorn about Horcruxes. The memory, however, had been edited so it seemed Slughorn told you nothing and sent you away. But he didn't, did he? That's why Slughorn seemed so guilty at the party. He told you exactly what a Horcrux was.: Voldemort, unable to move, was equally unable to stop the memories of the party from coming forth. He had always thought of Slughorn as a simpering fool, a man so shallow and childish, unworthy of being a Slytherin. But Voldemort had felt something bend to near breaking point inside him as he lay within Potter's robes while Slughorn recounted about the brilliant boy he once knew.

He hated this. He hated how he was forced among these people, and he was growing steadily tired of all this…doubt.
Doubt made him weak, and he was not weak!

Potter seemed oblivious to the inner turmoil Voldemort was going through, and the old resentment inflamed.

"Now, I myself don't really know what it is, but I can make a guess. You, Tom, fear death more than anything else, so what better way to make sure you never die than to make yourself immortal? Whatever you did, it clearly worked. What did you do, Tom? What's a Horcrux? You know I will eventually find out, so you might as well tell me."

Voldemort couldn't help but feel partially impressed by the younger wizard's perception, but that did not mean he was pleased. In fact, at that moment, he felt an old, never forgotten fear welling up with new intensity within his chest.

Silently, Harry finite'd the Stupify and Voldemort came to life with a deadly hiss, but Harry had brought forth his wand once again and had it trained on the Dark Lord. At that moment, the Voldemort felt very much like a wild animal caught in a hunter's trap.

"It's Soul Magic," the Dark Lord reluctantly spat. It was true there were ways for Potter to find out what a Horcrux was, and if he didn't tell him now it would only be delaying the inevitable.

A Horcrux is an object that contains a piece of a person's soul, split off from the main one. By having one, a wizard cannot die, their soul bound to the living plane by the soul piece. Anger simmered like a lava pit under Voldemort's skin as he told Potter about Horcruxes.

"That's why you didn't die," Harry realized. "How do you split the soul?"

"Murder," Voldemort bit out, his tone indicating how much he'd like to do just that now.

Potter did not look surprised.

"So, you made a Horcrux, and that's what kept you from completely dying all those years ago." Harry paused. "No, wait. The diary..."

Voldemort waited, tongue flickering in and out.

"The diary was more than just a "memory", wasn't it? When you said I "killed" you in the Chamber of Secrets, you really meant I killed a piece of your soul. But then, if I destroyed it, you wouldn't have had an anchor anymore and wouldn't have been able to return." Harry's eyes widened.

"You made more than one," he said in English, horrified, but Voldemort had no incentive to appreciate it as he rose up from the bed.

Voldemort remembered the many times he split his soul. The first time had been painful, but it was nothing compared to how it felt during the subsequent times he shredded his soul and tossed away the parts of himself he found derisory. But the pain had been necessary; he couldn't let anything hold him back.

"Very good, little Potter," he hissed darkly. "It seems you are smarter than you appear."

"You know, I am rather insulted whenever you call me stupid. Seriously, it can't be all luck that's kept you from killing me. So, how many Horcruxes do you have?"

Voldemort almost laughed at the question. "I refuse to tell you."
You're afraid, aren't you?: Harry shoved the tip of his wand against Voldemort's nose when he made to lunge at him again. The man-snake backed down, murder still glinting within his rubicund eyes. Potter was coming dangerously close to the Dark Lord's breaking point. But the younger wizard backed away from that line.

It's ok, you don't have to tell me. We both know eventually I'll find out, and knowing all the facts right away makes things rather boring, don't you agree?:

Harry put his wand away and stood up before Voldemort could even come up with a response. You know, Tom.; he said quietly. I never wanted to kill anybody. I might have even preferred to die that Halloween night, so I wouldn't have to save the whole bloody world from you. And maybe I should tell everyone to piss off and fight their own war, but I can't. One of us has to die, according to that prophecy. But I don't want to die, and neither do you, so where does that leave us?:

The boy sighed while Voldemort's own breath stilled.

"Do whatever you want, there's no binding spell to stop you. I'm going to lunch."

He left Voldemort alone.

The following days, Harry and Voldemort avoided each other like the plague. Voldemort felt trapped; trapped in his body, trapped in the Tower, trapped by anger and fear and his inability to do anything about it. For the first time in a long time, he felt the despair of his situation.

He had taken to sleeping downstairs in front of the fire, but it did not keep him warm.

Christmas morning dawned with a fresh blanket of snow coating the ground, not that Voldemort took any notice of. But he couldn't easily ignore what happened next.

"Accio snake."

Harry, dressed in warm black robes and cloak, boots, and a red and gold scarf wrapped securely around his neck, awkwardly caught the flying pale snake in his arms. He had to press the writhing form to his chest to prevent the incensed man-snake from getting away.

Voldemort was enraged at his humiliation. What the fuck, Potter? You said you would never do that again!:

So sorry, I forgot.; Harry said in a completely unapologetic tone, which only further angered Voldemort. We are taking a trip, and I didn't want to deal with trying to catch you.: Harry placed the snake on his shoulders, seemingly unconcerned it was an infuriated cobra he put there, and walked downstairs and out the portrait hole.

Where are we going?: bit out Voldemort, idly making plans of escape. Not for the first time he wondered if it was a mistake coming here. He was the Dark Lord; he didn't need help.

Hogsmeade.; Harry told him. Professor Slughorn agreed to accompany the few of us here with permission slips for a trip down. My guess is he wants to spend Christmas at the Hog's Head. Anyway, thought you might like to get out for a bit.: Voldemort didn't say anything, but had to admit he was more willing to go along with this stunt.
They met up with a small group of students and Professor Slughorn at the Entrance Hall. Harry had been the second to last student of the seven of them to arrive, so they didn't have to wait long before Slughorn gave them the all clear to leave. The man, as was expected, spent the walk down to the Wizarding village chatting to Harry about trivial things in a lighthearted conversation. Voldemort felt a bitter resentment towards this useless ex-Slytherin, for being as weak as he was. He decided with finality to forget everything the man had said at the Christmas party, because in the end it truly had to be the drunkard blathering of an old, insignificant man. Tom Riddle had become the Dark Lord; what greater achievement could there be? He would bring greatness to the deserving…and despair to those who aren't.

Hogsmeade was filled to the brim with festive decorations, by appearances putting Harry in a cheerful mood, while Voldemort merely saw it all as refuse.

Harry purchased a glass of warm cider from one of the taverns and found a bench outside to sit upon. To Voldemort's confusion, he pulled out his Indivisibility Cloak and tossed it over the two of them. Before Voldemort could even ask why, the boy spoke to him questioningly.

:Are you warm enough?:

Voldemort was slightly surprised by the question though he kept his answer neutral. :Your heating charm is adequate.: 

Harry brought the cider to his lips and took a sip. Voldemort could feel the heat of the cup whenever the younger wizard drank from it. Potter, while he warmed his hands on the glass, did nothing more than watch the people as they walked by, completely ignorant to his presence. Voldemort's anger was beginning to return full force, and he had half a mind to choke the brat then and there with his coils.

Before his anger could manifest itself in a violent act, Potter surprised him once again.

:That's the Sheldon family,: he hissed quietly, pointing out a middle-aged couple that walked down the street, a young girl between them holding one of each of their hands and a small boy on the man's shoulders. :The mother's a pureblood, and the father's a Muggle who's the brother of a Muggle-born,: he said matter-of-factly. Voldemort did not react, except to, perhaps, feel a jolt of disgust at the interbreeding.

:They live in a Muggle village not far from here, and come to town on special occasions. Jack, the boy, wants to be a wand maker when he grows up, and Tonia, the girl, wants to be a princess, although I think she already is one by the way her father treats her,: Harry said, a soft, fond smile on his lips. The family disappeared into Honeydukes. Voldemort shifted within Potter's robes.

:The father,: Voldemort spat, :he's a Muggle?:

Harry nodded nonchalantly, which irritated the Dark Lord. :Yes, he is,: he said simply. And then he pointed out a young man wearing clean but obviously secondhand clothing. :That's Jonathan Sorhagen. His father was recently infected by a frightened werewolf that had used their shed to hide in, and now can't get a job, so his son works two to support himself and his parents.: 

Two pairs of eyes, one green and one red, perhaps a festive coincidence for Christmas, watched as the man walked, whistling, down the lane.

Another couple came out of the tavern Harry had gotten his cider at. The woman had long, dark brown hair and the man was a dirty blonde. They were laughing as they passed Harry and Voldemort, but the woman's grey eyes seemed sad.
She's a pureblood, coming from a family made up of mostly Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. She, however, was sorted into Slytherin. She hasn't seen her family since she left home after turning seventeen; from what I understand they kicked her out. She met her fiancé when she visited France. He went to Beauxbatons. Once they are married I don't think they plan on staying in England:

Voldemort contemplated all he had been told, vaguely fascinated by the younger wizard. How do you even know all this?

Harry shrugged, taking another sip of cider. I'm the Boy-Who-Lived; a lot of times people come up to me, wanting to talk and shake my hand because of something I don't remember doing. I don't know why, but they like to tell me about their lives and those of their friends. I just listen. Much of the time, though, like this I wear my Invisibility Cloak here and walk around. I like being invisible, because then I'm me and not who they see me as. Again, I just observe. You can learn tons of things when you do that, you'd be surprised. Just because you want the world to be something, envision it in your own way, doesn't mean that's how it really is. You may be right about some things, or it could be that you just don't know the truth yet:

Voldemort shifted on Harry's shoulders, a strange sort of emotion welling from the shadowed portion of himself. How was it that Potter could make himself wonder about his very self? There shouldn't be anything to doubt; he was the most powerful wizard alive, what was there to question?

But it was hard to keep that focus when there was something of worth in what Potter had to say. Voldemort wanted to stay angry, but he was intrigued. He also felt quite disoriented.

Harry spoke again. I don't think you've ever really looked and listened, have you? Instead you—:

I've scrutinized, I've calculated, I've made sure I had their attention. Voldemort finished for the boy, no longer able to resist this nameless urge inside him. Harry Potter, I think you are trying to reform me. Voldemort accused with halfhearted malice. Harry simply smiled and laughed softly as he stroked a hand down Voldemort's head. The action only further drew that knot of anger inside Voldemort smaller and farther away, more insignificant. For the first time in several days, his mind felt clear. There were other things to focus on right now.

Maybe I am—doesn't hurt to try. I am a Gryffindor, after all. We tend to take on the challenge of lost causes.

Something twisted inside the Dark Lord. And am I a lost cause? he asked nonchalantly, though there was a genuine note to the question.

Only if you want to be. Harry told him quietly. He was silent, and then said, Has there ever been anything you regretted?

Voldemort trained his rubicund eyes on the young man. What do you think?

Shaking his head insecurely, Harry said, I honestly don't know. I mean... He ran a hand through his messy midnight locks. For a long time, I've seen you as nothing more than a monster, inhuman. But you've been living around my neck for the past couple of weeks, and, it's got me wondering if, perhaps, you are a little human after all. Voldemort confessed. You're probably completely insulted now, aren't you? Harry said with a weak chuckle.

The snake flicked out his tongue, tasting the young man's emotions. They were sweet and bitter at the same time and they tasted like his own. Humanity was weak, he purposely purged himself of that by ripping his soul apart, so then why did it mean something to him to hear Potter say he had some left?
Will you answer my question?: Harry asked the silent cobra, who seemed to shake himself.

About regret? Other than not killing you, you brat...no, I don't think I do.: he finished solemnly.

For some reason, Potter looked...disappointed, and Voldemort in turn sensed that he had missed something. He felt the need to explain himself, never mind that he was not obligated to.

I don't regret the things that have happened, the things I've chosen, because I would be weak, trapped in a cycle of "what ifs". I am a cold, bitter, tyrannical bastard, you know this Harry, and so you know I won't let myself regret what has brought me here.: Voldemort did not realize he used the younger wizard's first name.

Wrapped around your enemy's shoulders and stuck as a snake?: Harry said with a crooked grin.

Voldemort scoffed. You know what I mean. I've told you this before: there is no good or evil, only power and those too weak to seek it. I've made my choices, Harry, and I don't regret the path I've chosen, the path to change and grandeur for the Wizarding World. And remember, Potter, I too have seen far too much these last weeks about my prophesized enemy, and I know you see what I myself saw all those years ago, that you dream things could be different. And they can be, if only someone had enough initiative to get what they want.: For an inexplicable reason, Voldemort wanted Potter to understand this.

Harry set his empty cider cup to the side. Maybe I do wish some things were different, but I don't see that same dream you saw. You talk of power, but, if what you say is true, then wouldn't you need the weak to even have power at all? They give you your power, because if they weren't weak then where does that leave you? You practically admitted it yourself, that you've been blind to some things because you haven't paused to actually look. There is too much prejudice and oppression in our World for it to ever be what it could. You contribute to that by being the typical kill-first-ask-questions-later Dark Lord. There's a place for everyone, if people only allow it.:

You could make them,: Voldemort slipped in slyly.

No,: Harry said sharply. I'm not like you; I can't force people to see something they don't want to. I won't become what you have. But I believe, maybe, that I or someone else could convince them, or prove how much better things could be if everyone ignored outward biases and moved on to something.... magical.:

There was a moment's pause before Harry laughed again, the sound like spring rainfall and wind chimes rolled into one. His cheeks colored pink in slight embarrassment. Voldemort's tongue slipped in and out of his mouth rapidly, sitting in rapt attention of the young man.

That was really very corny, wasn't it?: Voldemort twitched.

I would say so. Potter, are we having a heart-to-heart?:

Harry's green eyes danced merrily, reflecting the light from the enchanted candles that decorated the village as the sky grew dark. I think we are. What an odd thought. If anyone told me I'd be sharing my Christmas with Lord Voldemort I would have thought them to be completely loony. Oh, uh, I guess that reminds me: happy Christmas.:

Voldemort was still for a moment before he settled deeper into Harry's robes. Happy Christmas, Harry Potter.:
elsewhere, Harry had forgotten to put on heating charm on before he went to sleep. Now, the snake's body temperature was suffering. Feeling sluggish, Voldemort slithered over on top of the sleeping young man, intending to wake the young wizard up and demand he put a heating charm on, but once Voldemort felt the soothing heat Harry's body emitted, he with little hesitation curled tightly up on Harry's chest with a yawn.

Voldemort savored the feeling of his body heating up to a more comfortable temperature as he idly thought about all the days he spent with Harry Potter. Today had been the first time in a long time he had much to do with the Yule season, as the holiday had never meant much to him. He had even forgotten he had been trying to avoid Potter, out of anger, out of spite, out of fear. He had been doing that more and more lately, forgetting. Furthermore, there was something increasingly uncomfortable growing, building up within his psych.

Voldemort knew he was doing more than giving himself immortality by creating Horcruxes. He was also shedding himself of his humanity. He had no need for the human condition, those emotions which more often than not made people weak with things like regret, hope, and love. He didn't need those. All he needed was power, control, and this numb, cold feeling where the necessary organ called his heart beat in his chest. Harry Potter was weak because he was human. He had regret, he dreamed, he hoped, he loved, he gave everything of himself with little question to those he sacrificed himself for.

Inexplicably, a debate he once had with Potter about Muggles, whom Voldemort hated on principle, came to the forefront of his mind.

> Why don't you like Muggles? I mean, you and I both have had horrible experiences with them, but you do know it's illogical to pass judgment only on a few examples, right?:

> They are irrelevant. They think they are superior while it is in fact wizards who deserve their respect. Magic is might, while Muggles have nothing but their hubris and shriveled, insignificant minds.:

> You're just being prejudice. You know.; said Potter, :in the end, we're all human, and magic is the only thing that makes us different. Otherwise, we are all alike.: 

Voldemort sneered. That was preposterous.

> We are not like them…!: 

> Yes, we are!: Voldemort recoiled at Harry's outburst, by the strength of the young man's conviction.

> It all comes down to one thing: human nature and the choices we make. Both Muggles and Wizards choose to ostracize things they don't understand.; Harry hissed. :The same goes for other things; even Light and Dark aren't that much different. Sure, someone may choose to only practice Light magic, but they still are capable of lying, cheating, and murder just like any other human being. I know there are Dark wizards out there who are capable of honesty and kindness and compassion, because as a human they have the ability for it.: 

Voldemort reared his head back, hood flared as Potter leaned in very close.

> But I wonder, Voldemort, whether you are human enough to even understand.; For an inexplicable reason, the boy sounded sad; it made Voldemort uncomfortable.

> You are a fool, Harry Potter.; he said blandly.
No matter how he tried, Voldemort couldn't get that conversation out of his mind. It was borderline maddening how Harry Potter could cut deeper than anyone else ever could.

Ever since he first split his soul, Voldemort had grown used to the blank pieces of himself, the foggy, blackened areas he was unable to access anymore, and he could care less because he didn't need them. They were worthless to him.

Except now, the more time he spent with Potter, the more times he kept running up into these barriers, colliding with a shadowed mass that blinded and choked him until he was forced to retreat. He didn't need those, so why did he keep inexplicably looking for them?

It was distinctly a disconcerting occurrence. He accounted it as being a result of this sufferable weakened state allowing the infection of the epitome of all that was a soft-hearted human to enter through the direct link to his mind. The boy was an enigma. When Voldemort first came to him to offer him a bargain, he had only expected a grudging acceptance of assistance and a hoard of resentment at every turn, maybe even attempts of sabotage in the effort to find a way to reverse the potion's effects. But instead of being treated as the enemy he was or a hated prisoner, the ever noble Harry Potter treated he, Voldemort, as a favored pet, or, dare he say it, a friend.

If Voldemort didn't know any better, it was like the boy...cared.

Voldemort's upper lip unconsciously curled at the thought. Nobody cared about him, not when he was the infamous Dark Lord, nor when he was nothing but a forgotten small boy. He had never really been a child, but he had been young once, and he used to wonder what it would be like to be cared for, even just cared about. He thought he had long cleaved those longings, but now he wondered if they had merely been forgotten.

No, they had been gone, he knew it. What frustrated him now was that these were new. Impossible.

Yet he couldn't deny the strange affect the young wizard had on him. Voldemort's eyes gleamed in the dark as his pale body rose and fell with Harry's chest as he breathed peacefully in his sleep. Voldemort studied the young man's face, everything from his pale skin set against the dark backdrop of his tousled hair that never laid flat to the red lips slightly parted in slumber. His eyes drifted to the curse scar carved on his forehead. Voldemort felt disconnected again, but to what he couldn't discern, and this time it worried him far more than ever before. The sensation was similar to the feeling of when there was something he should know, but couldn't figure out what.

Voldemort shook his head and flicked the air with his tongue as he turned his gaze to the garish red curtains that surrounded the Gryffindor's bed.

:Harry Potter: what are you doing to me?:

Harry did not answer the quietly hissed question. It was mostly rhetorical anyway.

Voldemort fell asleep, lulled both by the warmth and soothing movements of Harry's chest. That night Harry's dreams invaded his own. The wizard was playing Quidditch, and for a moment the Dark Lord and the Chosen One saw through the same eyes without pain or fear. It was Harry's dream, and together he and Voldemort felt only joy and peace as they raced after the Snitch on their
broom, both completely absorbed in delight of the chase as wind whipped into their face and blew their robes in waves behind them. Harry caught the Snitch, but in that strange dream realm, it was no longer a small winged-ball, but a pale cobra with red eyes. Voldemort grew dizzy as the colors of the dream world bled together and then straightened once again.

Harry Potter's face came into focus and he smiled at the snake in his hands. Voldemort felt a twinge of confusion at the shift in point of view. Whose dream was this now?

"I caught you," said the smiling dream Harry before he passed under the sun, blinding Voldemort's vision again before the picture came into focus, this time with that same smiling Potter held carefully in pale white arms. Voldemort felt himself smile and he leaned in closer to that unconcerned, beautiful face and felt something remarkably like want and something even sweeter he couldn't identify.

"Ah, but now I have caught you," he said. Freeing one of his hands without dropping the boy, Voldemort brushed away midnight bangs from his forehead, revealing not a lightning bolt scar, but an animated cobra etched into the skin. Voldemort pressed his slender, clawed finger to the mark, and the snake seemed to nuzzle against it.

"Mine."

The word he had unintentionally spoken at the Christmas party echoed in his head as Voldemort woke again, this time not from cold but from shock as, like invisible puzzle pieces, many things fell into place to create a picture horrifying and beautiful in its irony. Beneath him, Harry sighed and shifted, bringing a hand up only to unerringly and blindly entwine his fingers with the snake's tail.

Something changed inside Voldemort as he watched the younger wizard reach out to him. As if a brisk wind blasted through the intricacies of his mind, a part of himself that was only moments ago muffled came into clear focus. That indefinable longing came into sharp definition, and Voldemort knew that he would not kill Harry Potter, because Harry Potter had become his. He knew now what he had been trying to solve about this attraction, this pull by prophecy, by circumstance, by mind that always connected he and Potter together. And now he understood why. With Harry Potter, he could not fail.

Oh, Dumbledore, you almost had me, Voldemort thought with the insane glee of a man having one-upped his enemy. Voldemort, as he settled back down to sleep, vowed there and then to possess Potter mind, body, and soul. He no longer had to fight with himself, no longer had to pretend that a large part of himself saw killing Potter as a waste.

But really, Potter was already his…after all, he was his Horcrux.

Except…as Voldemort once again fell asleep, he forgot the part where Harry Potter caught him first.
The morning after Christmas, Harry woke easily and unburdened, save for one thing.

:Ah, good morning,: Harry greeted, a little surprised to see Voldemort, er, *snuggled*, on his chest. Voldemort's red eyes studied his living mattress.

:…good morning,: he said slowly, as if forcing himself to be polite, never mind that he would never normally bother. Harry arched an eyebrow at him, but then shrugged.

Harry sat up carefully, Voldemort slipping down onto his lap. He went to reach for his glasses, but found his movements were impeded by the snake's tail wrapped around his index finger. He tugged gently, but still the appendage wouldn't come off.

"Uh," he uttered, tossing a glance at the passive cobra. :Can you let go?:

Harry, after a couple weeks now with Voldemort, knew that snakes did not have any eyelids, but at that moment he found it a little unsettling how the Dark Lord was just staring at him unblinkingly. Also, there was still the snake tail around his finger.

:…please?:

His finger slipped free. Giving Voldemort a questioning look, he gathered the snake into his hands and stood from the bed, placing him back down on the covers. Harry shook his head.

He would never understand that man.

As Harry lazily brushed his teeth, he studied his sleepy face in the mirror. He looked quite comical with foamy toothpaste running down his chin and his hair sticking up in all directions. After spitting and rinsing his mouth, Harry ran his fingers through the midnight locks, pulling his bangs away from his forehead in the process. For some reason, the scar he had lived with for as long as he could remember was suddenly fascinating. His eyes stayed fixated on his reflection in the mirror as his finger lightly traced the zigzag of the lightning bolt shape. The faint traces of a dream flickered through his mind, but like water it flowed through his fingers and he couldn't get a good grasp on it. Chuckling to himself he gathered his things and left the bathroom, feeling silly for deciding just now that the scar would have been quite fetching if only it didn't cause him so many problems.

When he returned, Voldemort was in the same place Harry had left him. The young man carelessly stripped himself of his sleeping shirt and rummaged through his trunk for a fresh outfit. He was idly shaking a clean shirt to clear it of wrinkles when he caught sight of the man-snake on his bed who was still looking at him.

Now, Harry had been all sorts of undressed (he still blushed when he thought of the "shower incident") in front of Voldemort several times over the past few weeks, and before that he had spent years living with other boys so he wasn't exactly shy, but for an odd reason the way the man was practically studying him made Harry flush slightly and quickly pull the shirt over his head, followed by a blue-and-grey striped sweater. His sleeping pants were quickly replaced by a pair of jeans, Harry stoutly ignoring the other presence in the room. He shook his head, feeling a bit inane from his paranoia over...well, he didn't exactly know what that had been about.

Slipping on a pair of socks and shoes, Harry headed for the stairs.
Where are you going?: Voldemort barked out. Harry stopped in his tracks and looked back over his shoulder.

Uh, breakfast?:

Take me with you.: the Dark Lord demanded. Harry walked back to the bed.

Fine, don't get your knickers in a twist.: They went to breakfast together.

Later, Harry sat in the strangely empty Common Room, being only one of three Gryffindors that had stayed for the holidays, a book on wards sitting in his lap while his fingers languidly drummed the back cover. Voldemort was wrapped around his shoulders, his head hanging low in what Harry thought indicated he was reading Harry's book, but he came to realize it was not the text Voldemort was studying.

Can I help you?: Harry asked, exasperated. Why are you looking at me?:

Voldemort flicked out his tongue, the tips of the forked appendage brushing against Harry's cheekbone.

The book, of course,: Voldemort responded. Harry snorted amusedly.

Hmm, right.: the young man said with a roll of his eyes. He went back to his book, ignoring the gleaming, red eyes trained on his forehead.

After a few more minutes of reading, Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at the nearest empty chair. Using a spell from the book that was used to cast what was essentially a training ward to practice various things with, Harry stood up from the couch and approached the warded chair, reaching out to poke the air around it and receiving a zap for his efforts. His goal now was to, not destroy, but disable the ward so that he could eventually enable it again and draw less attention to the upcoming break in.

Picking up the book in one hand, he reread how deactivating a ward worked and then pointed his wand once more at the chair. With a mild flick of his wrist, he used his wand to search for the magical barrier, trying to get his magic to connect with the ward system. After several minutes of trying, he gave out a frustrated huff and dropped his wand to his side.

Voldemort, who had been silent the whole time, finally decided to contribute his opinion of the display. Giving up already? Potter, you are useless. In my Sixth Year, I could—:

Oh, come off it already. I know you are a genius, yada yada. I'm not like you.: Harry sat heavily down on the couch.

Hmm, perhaps.: Harry's eyebrow rose inquisitively at the strange, noncommittal reply but said nothing. The Dark Lord continued, Tell me, Harry, why is it that you have not been taught more advanced forms of magic? Ward breaking is a useful tool for further studies as it helps you learn how to feel for magic and manipulate it to your will. For the Chosen One, you are quite lacking in advantageous skills to use against a pixie, let alone a Dark wizard.: 

Hey, I could say it's your fault I'm lacking in certain skills, since rumor has it you were the one that cursed the DADA position so we ended up with a new professor each year. Maybe the reason I can't defend against a pixie, to use your oh so flattering example, is because the crock Gilderoy Lockhart taught us that particular lesson.: Harry shuddered, remembering the ill-qualified professor. The young wizard was silent for some time before he said softly, I'll admit I've wondered...don't get me wrong, I don't always mind being treated like any other student, but the
truth of the matter is…I'm not. Who else has a maniac Dark Lord out, literally, for their blood?:

:No one now…I got what I wanted.:

Harry rolled his eyes. :You know you just admitted to being a maniac, right?:

:Shut it, boy. But I have to agree, you are treated like any other student. How rather unfortunate for you, and very curious. Even without the proper education, you should have pushed yourself to be capable of more.:

Carding the hand on his forehead through his hair, Harry asked, :Why are you telling me this? Giving tips to the enemy seems counteractive in war. To me it would make more sense if you tried to break my confidence, not boost it up. You must be terribly bored or something.:

:Who knows? Maybe I am telling you this to persuade you to my side. Or maybe this is what the Muggles call Stockholm Syndrome, Voldemort said dryly.

Harry smiled. :You really enjoy those steam baths, don't you?: His smile weakened and disappeared.

Harry tried to not show how much Voldemort's words affected him. Oh, he had plenty of determination in his repertoire, but there was definitely a lack of skill, and furthermore, a lack of confidence. He couldn't lie and say that he had much confidence to begin with, what with the years he grew up being called a "useless freak", and the yo-yo of opinions about him from the general Wizarding population had done a number to his confidence as well.

But after facing Voldemort a total of five times in an actual confrontation, including when he was a baby, and only scrapping by on luck and existential circumstances, he certainly didn't feel like an equal match to the man. To take it further, while everyone seemed to expect him to take on Voldemort, nobody, save wizards and witches his own age, was really putting the effort forward to assist him in acquiring the needed skills. He now understood that Dumbledore's memories had been to teach him something about Horcruxes, but why couldn't he just tell him directly and use all that extra time to teach him more powerful magic?

And really, something must have gone wrong in this whole "Harry Potter is the Savior" spiel. He had the perfect opportunity to finally end this once and for all, he instead is helping the Dark Lord. It just goes to question if he, a sixteen year old wizard, was really worthy of the responsibility to defeat of the Darkest wizard alive? Should he have to be?

:Try it again. I'll tell you what you are doing wrong,: Voldemort said, forcing Harry out of his silent musing. With a quiet sigh, Harry stood and raised his wand again. If none of his allies were going to teach him, then he'll settle from learning it from his enemy.

Following Christmas, Harry had begun watching the Marauder's Map in earnest, searching for the best possible time to sneak back into Snape's office. Now that he and Voldemort were on speaking terms again, they were working together to make sure things would go well when the time came. They were taking a chance that Snape would leave the castle at some point, and if not then they would have to wait until he was asleep some night. Sure, Harry doubted the man had a social life but could he really spend the whole break at Hogwarts? Didn't he have some bat cave he could go brood in?

From watching the Map, Harry knew that Snape stayed in his office most of the twenty-sixth and returned again in the morning of the twenty-seventh, spending the rest of the day in a nearby
potions lab. It was the twenty-eighth now, and Harry could tell that Voldemort was growing impatient with the waiting game. It had been almost three weeks since he'd been turned into a snake, and for one like Voldemort that was pushing the boundaries of his endurance of the situation. The man was no stranger to waiting, but his current circumstances in all its peculiarities could drive many a lesser man insane.

Harry wondered if it was even possible for Voldemort to go "more" insane. Although, he was beginning to question the validity of Voldemort's insanity. Was he really insane in the typical definition of the word, or had he just tossed away everything that made a normal person human when he divided his soul up the first time at sixteen years of age?

Now that Harry knew about what Voldemort did to his own self, he felt like he understood him better. Well, he could never understand what would drive a person to shred their own soul into who knows how many pieces, but it made him wonder just how much about the man was result of that nasty piece of magic and how much was a natural aspect of the man himself? He was more than slightly horrified when he thought about how such a brilliant wizard like Tom Marvolo Riddle would believe that splitting his soul was a good idea.

Harry was pulled from his meditation by a very interesting article in the Daily Prophet that had been dropped onto his table midway through breakfast. It seemed the general Wizarding population would finally learn about the Boy-Who-Lived and his pet snake. Hardly anything about his life stayed private. Harry showed the article to Voldemort.

:Hey, we are in the Prophet, though I hope you're not insulted it isn't the first page.: 

:What! Let me see.: Harry stuck the paper under the snake's nose, allowing him to read the article. Harry was only mildly irritated. At this point in his life he was accustomed to these invasions of privacy. Still, he would have preferred that the writer—a Rita Skeeter wannabe—had made a direct inquiry to him…it wasn't like he was trying to hide anything.

Well, except for the fact that snake happened to be the Dark Lord…

:I'm honestly surprised this hasn't gotten out earlier. And, this is actually one of the better ones about me.: 

Voldemort finished reading the article and looked at Harry.

:You call this better? Potter, I never knew you enjoyed being accused of following in my footsteps.: 

Rolling his eyes, Harry started stroking down Voldemort's back.

:Yes, the only reason I want to kill you is so I can take over the world myself. Nah, to me this article is rather pleasant. It's far better than being called a liar or insane.: 

:How can you stand a group of people who have such fickle opinions of you?: The man-snake's head was so close that when his tongue flicked out it tapped Harry's nose. Wrinkling the appendage and smiling, Harry good-naturedly shoved the triangular face out of the way.

:That tickles.: Harry settled back into his chair and opened the paper to read the rest of the articles. But first, he took a glimpse around the Great Hall to the smattering of students left over the holidays, and scowled slightly at the obvious glances he was getting. He sighed. :It is rather depressing, how so many people could believe anything they read.: Harry said somberly. :It's a fault of society; they've been trained to believe it as a means of control. Fudge used the Prophet to
discredit me and Dumbledore over your return in order to make the people believe he was still handling things.: Harry sighed.

:I could take care of them for you, Potter.: Harry chuckled. :And maybe if you weren't such an evil bastard I would let you.: As he was prone to do over break week, Dumbledore greeted Harry after breakfast.

"Hello, Mr. Potter. Terrible weather we're having, wouldn't you say?"

Harry nodded his head. "Yes, Professor, I wanted to take a walk outside this afternoon but I can see that it'll be rather unpleasant with the snow. I guess I'll have to make due with homework." Harry grimaced.

"Hmm, yes, I fear visibility would be quite ghastly if you tried. I myself will have to brave it briefly, though, as I've been called into the Ministry for a small matter."

Dumbledore would be gone today? Now if only Snape would disappear…

"I hope nothing bad, Sir."

Dumbledore smiled genially and shook his head. "No, no, just important business. I dare say it will be more boring than not."

Harry gave him a genuinely sympathetic look. If Dumbledore's meeting was half as boring as the Hogwarts' History of Magic class, Harry could easily empathize with the older wizard's predicament.

Harry left the Great Hall sometime later and eventually made it back to his House. He pulled out the Map and saw that Dumbledore had left straight after breakfast. Scanning the parchment, he was disappointed to see Snape's dot still hanging around in the dungeons. With a long, drawn-out sigh he pressed the Map harshly into his lap.

:This would probably go a lot easier if your rotten luck wasn't contaminating my brand of providence.: But Voldemort wasn't paying attention to Harry. :What is he doing here?:

"Huh?" Harry followed Voldemort's line of sight back to the Marauder's Map. The words "Lucius Malfoy" trailed after a new dot down in Snape's office.

:Did he just come in through the Floo down there?: Voldemort nodded.

Harry snorted. :Because it's not at all a coincidence that Lucius would be here the moment Dumbledore gets called away to the Ministry.: Harry suddenly laughed. :He doesn't know Snape's not on his side. Wonder what they are talking about.: But Voldemort wasn't paying attention to Harry. :What is he doing here?:

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Well, as always, his luck held.

"Let me get this straight," Snape droned. "You think that the Dark Lord, who has been strangely absent the past three weeks, is here at Hogwarts."

Harry felt his face blanch.

"That is not what I said, I told you I tracked the owl he used to send that letter to me back here," Lucius informed the other man. Harry sighed as Voldemort hissed out obscenities at Lucius’ supposed insubordination.

"You tracked the Dark Lord's owl?" Snape replied, vaguely incredulous and partially amused. "And for what reasons do you plan to tell him if he finds out?"

"He won't," was Lucius' conceited reply.

Harry fought a snigger as Voldemort chuckled darkly.

"May I ask why you tracked that owl?" inquired Snape's disembodied voice.

"Because," Lucius said, "there is something strange going on. The Dark Lord disappeared weeks ago, with no sign and no indication he was even leaving. A week later, I receive a letter signed with his blood from an owl that came from the Hogwarts Owlery. Highly irregular. Why aren't you concerned?"

"I never said I wasn't on guard," Snape calmly defended. "I simply do not know what to think. This may be either some elaborate plan of the Dark Lord's or it could be Dumbledore's. You need to be on alert in any case, lest our Lord needs us. The Wizarding World is on the brink, and it will not do to have a repeat of last time where all our hard work was reversed."

:Snape sure is good at what he does,: commented Harry.

:Indeed,: hissed Voldemort grudgingly.

There was a pause in the conversation and shuffling noises coming from inside the room.

"Do you think it is connected to Potter's ability to use Parselmagic? Draco told me about this new…talent. And that article in the Prophet this morning…” The Malfoy patriarch's somewhat muffled voice was faintly contemplative.

Snape gave a humorless chuckle. "If you are suggesting what I think you are, then you do not know Potter at all. Let us go, you should not have come here. People are too suspicious these days."

"I was hoping to have a look around…”

"You know very well that is not a good idea, Lucius. I will let you know if I discover anything, as always. Now come."

As Harry's heart beat rapidly in his chest, he heard both men use the Floo connected to Snape's office fireplace to disappear to Malfoy Manor.

Snape was no longer at Hogwarts. They were now free to break into his office which, conveniently, happened to be right in front of them.

:Now, Potter,: Voldemort commanded. Harry did not immediately react.
It suddenly struck him that this might be the last day he spent with Voldemort, if they were successful in their endeavors. Doubtless, the man-snake would want to take the counter-potion immediately, and then he couldn’t very well stay with Harry anymore during school. He would leave, and the next time they saw each other it would most likely be on opposite sides of a battlefield. It left Harry feeling…bereft.

When had Harry come to enjoy Voldemort's companionship? The man was evil, snarky, and an all-around bastard, but that wasn’t all he was, Harry realized. Whatever the man had done to his soul, it obviously had affected him and left him less than human, but Harry was beginning to wonder if perhaps there was still a shadow of Tom Riddle within him. Voldemort, after all, had been shockingly tolerant of some things, willing to give Harry extra information during class or assignments, telling him about Parselmagic, and even seeming to listen to all that Harry had to say to him. Really, for enemies, they surprisingly got along well. Maybe it was their connection, in that they could learn more than just outward appearances about each other; after all, having a direct mind link to another person didn’t always bode well for privacy.

Unfreezing and pulling out his wand, Harry felt for any ward magic like he had practiced, and after several moments detected the simple yet efficient security ward surrounding the office like a thin film. It was harder then he thought it would be to take control of, and small beads of sweat broke out on his brow the more time that passed without any luck to disable it without fully dispersing it.

:"Let me in to your mind.:

Harry blinked dumbly. :What?:

Voldemort snorted in frustration. :Draw me into your mind. From there I can help direct you to the strings of magic.:

Harry's reflex reaction was to venomously shake his head.

:"And have you mess around in there? I don't think so.:

:"Potter, just do as I say. I give you my word that I will do nothing more than draw your attention to where you should focus your magic.:

Did Harry believe him? This was a matter of trust, after all. Had he any reason what so ever to trust Voldemort?

Harry decided that, at least in this matter, yes he could. Voldemort had more to lose than he did.

With slow, mental moments, Harry took down those fledgling gates that were his new Occlumency shields, and reached over the bond he shared with Voldemort to allow him access to his thoughts. As promised, Voldemort only touched on the magic Harry was feeling, and directed him through the process of crippling the ward around Snape's office before he immediately drew away. Harry sighed, whether in relief or something else, as he felt that extraneous presence leave his mind. With a low hiss, his unique Parseltongue spell unlocked the door. He found that as he reached for the doorknob, his hand was shaking. It was probably the adrenaline flowing through his veins. Snape could be back any minute, for all he knew.

:"What if it's not here?:

:"It has to be here.,: Voldemort said, and the impression Harry had was that he was mostly convincing himself. Harry felt the urge to assure him, as he would with Ron and Hermione when they were anxious about something. He would always tell them that things would work out. He
wanted to tell this to Voldemort but he didn't. They were not friends, and he was not obligated.

Perhaps he didn't say anything, but his hand, unbidden, rose and smoothed itself once down Voldemort's scales before falling to his side again.

Snape's desk was impeccably tidy, as was the rest of the office. For a man who appeared rather lacking in personal hygiene, he sure kept his living space clean. Harry walked around the desk, looking for any change in the stone floor or obvious cracks that might indicate where the entrance to an underground storage room might be.

:Try revealing it. It might be camouflaged.: 

Nodding, Harry crouched down on what would be Snape's side of the desk and touched the cold stone floor and cast a revealing charm.

Nothing happened. Harry tried twice more, but still the floor stubbornly stayed that: a solid, stone floor. Harry stood, the blood rushing to his head momentarily causing his vision to go fuzzy.

:Why isn't it working?:

:It seems,: Voldemort mused, :that the Potion's Master is more paranoid than we planned. There must be some other mechanism, or as Snape is also well versed in spell creation, some sort of spell may be required. Hush for a moment, and let me think.: 

Harry did as he was told, and opted to peruse the room, seeing if he could discover maybe a lever or object that had been charmed to open a trap door. His palms grew clammy the longer their ideas failed. They had no idea how long Snape would be gone. They had been here for half an hour already.

In the back of the room, there was a small shelf of potion vials. Harry had looked at them already and had found them to be quite ordinary. Harry looked at them again: Pepper-Up, burn salve, a common poison antidote, various tonics, lily extract…

Harry paused, brushing a finger over the word "lily" written on the label. The glass vial was small, simple, with a dropper attached to the stopper. To his knowledge, lily extract was rarely used in potions, with most opting to use the actual flower, and even that was rare. What was Snape doing with a mostly useless ingredient?

Without really thinking too hard on it, Harry took the vial and walked to where they suspected the door to the hidden room might be. Unstoppering the vial, he filled the eyedropper and pulled it out, letting a few drops fall and land silently on the floor. He watched, fascinated, as the stone vanished to reveal a simple wooden trap door. Studying the vial in his hand keenly, Harry felt a strange curiosity about why had chosen to use this particular ingredient to unlock his storage room…an ingredient that shared his mother's name.

:He asked me to spare her, you know.: 

Harry jumped, having nearly forgotten Voldemort was there. But he was less shocked by the sudden break in silence than what it was Voldemort had to say.

:He what? I don't…I don't understand…:

:It was Snape who overheard the beginning part of the prophecy, and it was he who told me it.: 

Harry suddenly felt very cold.
He condemned her to death, he said flatly, and yet you're telling me he asked you to spare her? Why would he even bother? Unacknowledged, Harry clenched the bottle in his hand.

Snape is a very private person, though I do know he grew up in an unhappy household with his witch mother, Eileen Prince, and Muggle father, Tobias Snape.

He's a half-blood? Harry had not known this. Wait, his mother was a Prince…?

Yes. I believe they lived in a Muggle village, near where your mother lived, and that they had been…friends. Voldemort explained slowly and dispassionately: I would even go as far as saying that he…loved her. That word sounded strange coming from Voldemort's mouth.

My mother and Snape? Harry blurted. The idea seemed so surreal. Harry, after looking in Snape's Pensieve, knew how horrible James Potter treated the young Snape, so horrendously that it made Harry ashamed of the way his father acted. But Snape and his mother? Unexpectedly, some things began to make…sense.

Then Harry remembered the other thing Voldemort said. So he asked you to spare her…why didn't you? There wasn't any malice in Harry's neutral tone. One didn't expect the Dark Lord to take requests of followers, especially ones as petty, in certain people's opinion, as sparing a member of the opposite side, and a Muggleborn at that.

I tried to. She had already made her choice.

Voldemort was going to let her go? Harry didn't know what to think about that. Then again, he still killed her, in the end.

But he did know one thing. Lily Potter chose to die, to save her only son, to save Harry. Harry had never been more proud of his mother than at that moment.

Come, Harry, let us get this done, Voldemort prodded, but his tone was merely suggestive rather than demanding. Harry appreciated it.

Harry pushed away thoughts of the past and placed the vial of lily extract in his pocket before he crouched down once more, easily opening the trap door to reveal a small, darkened room, cut crudely into the stone base of Hogwarts. A ladder served as a means to climb down into what was little more than a hole in the floor. With little hesitation, Harry went down the ladder and produced a Lumos with his wand. Several shelves of potion bottles set into rough stone walls gleamed eerily in the light.

As before, they searched simultaneously, the two going down the shelves while looking at different levels to save time. If Harry had thought to potions upstairs were difficult to make, many of the ones down here were things he in a million years of potion's lesson still wouldn't even dream of achieving. Felix Felicis, Veritaserum, elixirs, draughts, much of which Harry had never heard of let alone seen. And Snape had all of these hidden in the dungeons.

What does he use all these for?

These, I believe, was what he used to keep his cover.

Ah. These are the potions Snape supplied when he "worked" for the Dark Lord.

There., Voldemort said. Harry bent down to see what he'd found. It was a small crystal vial, the bottle rather dull with dust and age, and was half full with a liquid
that looked almost like molten gold. It sat on the left-hand side of another, identical bottle, this one filled to the brim with a molten silver-like potion inside. They had no labels. How did Voldemort know this was the potion Snape used on him?

:Of course; even with the odd effect it had on me, how could I have not realized?:

:You know what it is?: Harry asked, bewildered.

:It's very old, I only recognize it by the color and the nature of the vial: crystal, not glass. Glass bottles would have degraded over time because of the potion's potency. I've only come across it once in all my readings, and that was in Slytherin's library down in the Chamber of Secrets. It has no name.: Harry wanted to ask about this library, but knew there wasn't time. :I don't even think Snape could have brewed this. Because of its nature, it's speculated that it is brewed with Time Dust, though from what I read it was never proven but pure conjecture because of how it is supposed to use the body's memory and make it the present.: 

:But it didn't use your body memory,: Harry pointed out. :Are you sure this is the one you're thinking of?:

:This potion looks to be very old. We have no way of knowing how it withstands shelf life, so that could have been an aspect. And like I said before, I think my magic tried to protect me, but might have actually enhanced parts of the potion. It might have negated the Time Dust's effects.: 

:Weird. This other one is in the same bottle,: Harry observed, fingering the crystal side of the twin vial. :Will this counteract the one you were given?:

:No, it is not the counter potion, for there is no "cure" in the common sense of the word for what was done to me. This other one merely does the opposite.: 

'It gives you your strength back,' Harry said to himself. Suddenly this didn't seem like such a good idea.

Harry picked the vial up. He held it in his hand, looking at it with a strange feeling in his gut, one that very may have been either foreboding or anticipation, before pocketing it carefully.

:Good. Now hurry,: Voldemort said, eyeing the room above. Harry didn't need any more encouragement, but first he grabbed a plain glass bottle that was sitting on one of the shelves and transfigured it into a duplicate of the crystal vial still left of the shelf. Voldemort had made him work on the duplication spell the days beforehand in preparation for today. Finally, with a final touch, he performed the Aguamenti charm inside the transfigured vial and shaded it silvery to look like the potion Harry had stolen. That done, he climbed out of the hidden potion room.

Once back above in Snape's office, he shut the trapdoor and pulled out the glass of lily extract and let fall individual drops until the appearance of the door was once again that of a solid stone floor. Lastly, Harry put the lily extract back where he found it. Grabbing the Map and checking it briefly, satisfied they were still in the clear, he threw the Cloak on and hurried out of the office, unfreezing the wards and doing a magical signature wipe, also at the recommendation of Voldemort. Harry had to admit he liked this mixture of Gryffindor brashness and Slytherin guile they had going together.

:Will that do?:

:Yes, now go,: Harry could tell that Voldemort was anxious, undoubtedly from the knowledge he was only moments away being rid of Hogwarts and Harry. What Harry felt about that was…
confusing.

Silenced and invisible, Harry ran back through the halls, taking an unobtrusive exit and stepping out of Hogwarts Castle. He was immediately bashed by harsh winter winds and snow, causing the Invisibility Cloak to flap in the breeze and reveal his legs to prying eyes. Cursing, Harry batted down and trudged through the several inches of snow, eyes focused forward into the white. Ahead of him loomed the figure of the Whomping Willow tree.

Dodging the vicious attacks from the tree, Harry pressed the knot that immobilized it and turned it docile. That done, he was free to slip into the secret passage that led to the Shrieking Shack. Yet again, he wondered how difficult it would be to Obliviate Voldemort, because for all intents and purposes he was painting an "Attack Here" sign over Hogwarts by showing him this passage. His only consolation was that since the Headmaster knew of this tunnel, the wards protected it. He slipped the Map and Cloak into the pockets of his robes and shivered in his light outer covering, not having expected that they would manage to get the potion today.

:My father and his friends used to come this way,: Harry told Voldemort nostalgically, breaking the silence for the first time since Snape's office. Now that they were alone and away from the castle, the adrenaline was beginning to wear off. :They were the ones that actually gave the Shrieking Shack its name. One of his friends was a werewolf, you see. They kept him company on full moons in their Animagus forms.: Voldemort didn't say anything in reply, but Harry hadn't expected him to.

The walk was long and almost lonely, both Harry and Voldemort lost in their own thoughts. Finally, the entrance to the Shrieking Shack appeared before them. Harry pushed open the door.

He had decided to use the Shrieking Shack as the easiest and safest place to go once they had the potion. For one, it was off school grounds, and two, hardly anybody knew how to get in. Here Harry would give Voldemort the potion and if it worked let the man go on his merry way, expecting to not see each other for another year and a half once the terms of their agreement were up. Harry didn't know why, but he was almost going to miss his hated enemy. The past few weeks had been…interesting, to say the least. If it weren't Voldemort Harry would willingly call themselves friends of a sort. But, Harry mused with something almost akin to regret, Fate itself had placed the two on opposite teams; even if Harry did wish it were true, Voldemort would never agree to let them be any more than enemies, now that Harry's efficacy was almost used up.

Harry sighed imperceptibly as he placed the snake form of Voldemort onto the dusty bed of one of the bedrooms. He pulled the silvery potion from his pocket and held it in his palm, eyeing it warily.

:Are you ready?:

Hesitating, Voldemort flicked out his tongue. :I am…apprehensive of the results of the potion will be.: 

Harry nodded. :Because of its unpredictability? You have no idea what it will do to you, especially since with the other you reacted the way you did and turned into a snake, which wasn't exactly reverting you to a past state of weakness. Well, it has to be back to the time before you tried to kill me or after your resurrection, right? Those were when you were at the peak of you power.: Or, Harry mused, it could be something even worse. Would he be allowing Voldemort to turn himself into something indestructible?

Voldemort shifted, and Harry could almost call it a nervous fidgeting. ::Yes, that's correct,: he said firmly. But then, why did Harry sense he was unsure through the connection?
Harry studied him with concern. :Is something wrong?:

Voldemort rose from the bed and flared his hood. :Of course not. Now give me that potion, Potter.: 

Harry was shocked to find himself feeling hurt by Voldemort's snappish reply. He hid it, though, as he unstoppedered the vial, hesitation keeping him from holding it so Voldemort could swallow it down.

But he never got the chance to do so, because at that moment two figures, one dressed all in black and another in maroon and pink robes, stepped through the entranceway of the bedroom. Harry, thinking fast, stoppered the vial again and returned it to his pocket. Voldemort hissed, spitting venom.

:Potter, betraying me?:

:No, of course not! Idiot. I…I think we were set up.: He thought hard about it, feeling stupid for dismissing all the strange hints. :I think they knew this whole time,: he whispered. Still baring his fangs, Voldemort fell silent. Harry turned to the two figures.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said, eyes directed at the person in black.

Snape sneered and brought his ebony wand higher. "I could say the very same thing about you, Potter. Now give me that potion."

Harry didn't move.

"Harry? Let us take care of this," Dumbledore said. Harry was having trouble looking him in the eye, not just because he was worried the man would use Legilimency.

Harry knew how this looked: it looked like he was a traitor.

"Now, Potter!" Snape growled.

"Severus, let the boy explain," Dumbledore tried to placate, but for once Snape wasn't listening.

"Potter, don't you know who that is?" Snape ground out.

Harry grimaced, insulted. They did know. "Of course I do," he said evenly.

"Harry…why? Why are you helping Voldemort?" Dumbledore took a step forward, and instinctively Harry took a step back. He knew Dumbledore was crafty, and didn't want him to get any advantage.

In truth, Harry wasn't entirely sure what he was doing. The only terms he had with Voldemort was to help the man return to human form. Well, he had gone as far as getting the potion for him, but now that he had been found out, what was stopping Harry from just letting Snape or Dumbledore kill the Dark Lord now? To a sane man, nothing, but Harry had long ago decided that *Avada Kedavra* to the head when he was a baby had clearly killed some of his brain cells because, Merlin help him, *he didn't want Voldemort to die!*

He was so fucked.

Placing one hand on the bed, he told Voldemort, :Climb up my arm and focus on how to Apparate.: 

:Potter, what are you planning to do?: Voldemort asked suspiciously.
Harry barred his teeth. :Just shut up and do as I say!: Voldemort did as he was told, and Harry could care less if it was because he trusted Harry's judgment or because he had no choice. Snape and Dumbledore weren't going to let him out alive.

"Potter, what are you doing?"

Harry first looked at Snape, dismissing him as unimportant with his eyes and turned to focus on Dumbledore.

"I'm sorry," he told him. "I promise to explain later but...I'm sorry." That was all he could say. Seeing that the young man had something planned, Snape took a step forward, clearly calculating what he should cast at the boy.

But Harry wouldn't be there to catch the spell. Looking inward to that curious little bond he shared with Voldemort, he found the information about Apparition within the Dark Lord's mind, not having enough knowledge yet to do it on his own. Not allowing himself to dwell on the almost overwhelming number of things that could go wrong when an untrained wizard tried to Apparate, he focused on Voldemort's memories and tried to place himself within them, attempting to feel the knowledge of how to do it. Taking a deep breath, he pulled forth his magic just as Snape shot a jet of red light at him. With a loud crack Harry blinked from view right as the spell reached him, but he was gone before it hit, causing the stunner to harmlessly batter the wall behind where Harry once stood. He left behind one very irate Potion's Master and one quietly calculating Albus Dumbledore, who was wondering what exactly the Boy-Who-Lived had planned, and what it meant for everyone else.
Harry landed on his back with a harsh thud onto a dark hardwood floor, and he swallowed heavily to keep the contents of his stomach down. He groaned and lifted his arms into the air above him, checking to make sure that they were, in fact, still attached to him. Next he wiggled his toes, assuming that if they were still there then the rest of his legs would be too. That done, he took several even breaths, eyes closed, as he calmed himself down. Only moving his eyes in an attempt to keep his head from spinning, he looked for Voldemort. The Dark Lord was twisted around himself next to Harry on the floor, his head pressed into his coils and looking quite pathetic.

:Voldemort? You alright? Nothing splinched?: Voldemort's initial response was to twitch a bit.

:Ugh. That was the worst example of Side-Along Apparition I have ever experienced. Never again, Potter.: Even in his shaky condition, Harry had to roll his eyes. :What is with you in insulting me every time I save your bloody life? I'll stop, if you want. If you can't do something right, then don't do it at all, isn't that what they say?: They fell silent, both trying to put their molecules back together after Harry's first-time Apparition attempt.

:Thank you,: the snake said quickly and lowly before grimacing as if the words tasted bad.

Harry froze; literally everything stopped—heart, lungs, brain, everything.

:Wha—what?: He didn't imagine it, did he?

:Don't make me say it again,: Voldemort complained with a sigh. It took a moment for Harry to learn to breathe again.

:You're welcome,: he eventually murmured. He lay for what felt like hours on the hard floor, merely staring up at the ceiling, trying to put his thoughts together. Harry could tell that Voldemort was just about as confused as he was over the previous events, so that meant they weren't going to get any answers from each other.

Finally, Harry heaved a sigh and sat up slowly, wincing from his bruised muscles. He combed his fingers through his hair and looked around.

:Where are we?: Voldemort finally asked.

Harry and Voldemort were sitting in the front foyer of a small house. Like Grimmauld Place, the house was decorated in a way Harry would call modern gothic or maybe Victorian, with dark wood floors, lush furniture, and ornate trimmings. The visible walls were painted a deep crème, and supported several old tapestries and scenic paintings that moved with an invisible breeze. To the left appeared to be a sitting room, and down the hall to the right Harry could just make out what looked to be a red-walled dining room. Unlike Grimmauld, however, was the condition of the house. There wasn't a cobweb or speck of dust in sight.

Harry crossed his legs, picking Voldemort off the floor and setting him around his shoulders in the process as he leaned gently against the wall.

:We are in one of the Black family houses out in the country. Sirius Black, my godfather, made me
heir to all their holdings. Dumbledore doesn't know about this place. No one knows, really. Sirius wanted me to have a safe place to go, if I ever needed it. He never really got to take care of me, so he did what he could.: Here Harry paused before quietly saying, :He snuck me here last holiday break.: It was more or less exactly a year ago. Harry was glad he did, so he could Apparate here.

:He was killed at the Department of Mysteries. By Bellatrix.: Harry wasn't going to wait for a reply from Voldemort. They both knew he wasn't going to say anything like "sorry". His thanking Harry for saving his life was far more than the teen ever expected from him.

Maybe it was because his wits were still somewhere in orbit, but Harry was in a bit of a chatty mood.

:Out of curiosity, how much of my life have you seen in my head? For instance, did you know I lived in a cupboard under the stairs for ten years?:

Voldemort seemed rather shocked, if the strange hissing coming from his throat was anything to go by. :The Muggles put you under the…stairs…: Voldemort repeated, disbelief coloring his voice.

:Ah, so you know about my Muggle family, but you really didn't know that?: Harry asked. And here he thought his mind was like a freaking open book to the man.

:Of course I would know about the Muggles, just as I know where you live in the summer.: Harry arched an eyebrow. :There are some rather irritating wards around their home,: Voldemort added rancorously. Harry shrugged, not really apologetic.

:Ah, and here I thought I was being all sneaky living in the Muggle world. So why did you never bother prying all the juicy details of my life from my mind?:

Voldemort made a disgruntled harrumphing sound. :There is only so much of your mind I can see. You may not be skilled in Occlumency, but that doesn't mean your mind is an unprotected, open book for anyone to read.: Harry nearly laughed at Voldemort's wording, since he had just thought them to himself. Voldemort cocked his head at Harry's seemingly inappropriate expression, and the teen just waved his hand dismissively and schooled his face.

:Tell me about your life, Harry.: 

Harry hadn't really expected such interest and shrugged. :It really is quite funny how much we actually have in common. The Horcrux from the diary even told me so. We both sorta look, er,looked, alike, both parentless, Parselmouths, and we were both raised by Muggles who hated us and treated us like freaks. I can see why you could be so hateful, jaded, and angry. That sort of life really, really sucks.: Now, Harry wasn't one to willy-nilly share his sob story of a childhood, not even with his friends, but for whatever reason he felt it was important for Voldemort to know, to realize that Harry understood. And, in a way, for Harry it was okay to share because he knew Voldemort might understand, too. He suddenly chuckled. :Interesting how you got all vengeful while I'm all for forgiveness.: 

Voldemort was still for a moment before he stretched around Harry's shoulder so they could see eye-to-eye. Harry held the red-tinted gaze steadily.

:You really confuse me, Potter.: Voldemort admitted solemnly. :How is it that, as alike as we are, that in the end we have turned out so different?:

Harry thought for a moment before he tilted his head to the side. :I know you don't think much of love and all that mushy stuff, but maybe it's because I at least spent the first year of my life with
people who cared. I doubt you had that. I knew how it could be…and you never did. I'm sorry you didn't.: Harry added quietly. Voldemort studied the young wizard a moment longer before he retreated to the side silently. Perhaps he just didn't know what to say.

Feeling like a solid person once more, Harry stood and walked down the hallway and into the kitchen. Here there were clean, grey tiled floors and dark marble counters and all the usual magical appliances a wizard household would need. Harry snapped his fingers. With obedient promptness, a small House Elf with a bulbous nose popped into existence.

"How can Scavy assist yous, Master Harry?" Harry smiled at the little elf. Unlike Kreacher at Grimmauld Place, this elf had a far better temper and way more sanity. It probably helped that he was living here with his mate instead of alone with a whack job of a portrait.

"Hello, Scavy. I will be staying here for…" Harry really wasn't sure how long he'd be here, so he settled for, "…sometime. I won't require much, just a few meals a day and some general housekeeping things. Is that alright?" Harry didn't have to ask, he knew, he just thought it was polite.

"Oh, yes, Sir! Scavy and Jip takes good cares of yous," the elf exclaimed.

"Thank you, Scavy. I'll be up in my bedroom now, in case you need me."

The elf bowed and left with the usual pop. Harry left the kitchen and found the stairs, climbing them to reach the second floor. Down the hall, he knew, was the Master Bedroom. He didn't feel entirely comfortable sleeping in such a big room and bed—he was used to something ten-by-ten and smaller or a dormitory, after all—but he was the Master of the house, now, and that was where he was expected to be. He went there now, walking through the open, teak-wood doorframe and into the elegant bedroom. The color scheme was neutral blues, browns, and greens, and the flooring was the same dark wood as the rest of the house.

Commanding the attention of the room was the large, four-poster bed carved from cherry wood, silk blue and crème sheets neatly tucked under the mattress. There were matching cherry wood nightstands and an armoire which Harry intended to someday fill with clothes that actually fit him. Other than the main door, there were two others in the room, one that led to a grey marbled bathroom with a shower and a bathtub, and the other door led to a closet. The only additional object of significance was the brick fireplace, but other than that the room was pretty bare. The Black family hadn't actually lived here in quite a while, and thus only the bare essentials were kept here. There weren't even any portraits left.

:Well, what do you think?: Harry asked cheerfully.

:Quaint,: was Voldemort's unenthusiastic reply.

:Oh, so sorry it's not decorated in Slytherin green and sliver with human skulls hanging from the ceiling.: From what Harry understood, this house was inherited into the Black family from one of the families married in. It probably explained the cheerier décor as opposed to the house in London, which was a Black house through and through.

:I resent that, Potter,: was Voldemort's response to Harry's jibe. :What kind of Dark Lord do you take me for? You forgot to mention the blood dripping from the walls.:

Harry gaped, shocked by the joke, before he burst into a fit of laughter. :I've corrupted you!:

:Hardly.:
Harry continued to have a grin on his face before it faded from his expression as he noticed the weight of the potion vile in his pocket and he remembered the events that led him to being here. He reached into his pocket and pulled the vial out.

:Well, are you ready to try again?:

From his place on Harry's shoulders, Voldemort nodded, never having really gotten rid of the human gestures throughout his time as a snake. It didn't matter, Harry supposed, because he would be getting his body back as soon as he drank the potion. Or, that was the theory, at least.

Harry, perhaps as an escape from the nervous churning of his stomach, said, :You know, you'll probably end up as ol' snake-face again, sure you want to take this potion?: Even to Harry's ears the joke didn't have as much luster to it. Harry decided to blame it on his being still a bit woozy from Apparating.

Voldemort was unmoved. :Let's just get his over with.: Nodding numbly, Harry set Voldemort on the crème rug that spread out across the floor and knelt beside him. He uncorked the vial.

:How much?:

:A small sip should work.:  

With a far steadier hand than what Harry thought he should have if his nerves were anything to go by, Harry poured a small amount of the silvery potion into Voldemort's waiting mouth. The reaction was instantaneous.

Harry was tossed backwards by the force of the magic at work. He landed in a heap, dazed, the potion in his hand flying free from its bottle to splash across Harry's clothes and face. In a reflexive action of getting his breath back, he swallowed, unaware a single drop of the molten silver liquid had landed in his open mouth. He pushed himself back up, bruised back muscles now even worse than before. The abused wizard winced both simultaneously from the pain and from the sight of the empty crystal vial in his hand. He wiped his face clean with his upper sleeve and looked at the spot where a white cobra had last been.

Now, kneeling on the floor and propped up with his arms, was the Voldemort Harry had seen rise from the cauldron in Fourth Year. Like last time, he was naked. Harry noted the pale, gaunt body, the almost scaled, hairless skin, the sunken, snake-like nose and, finally, the burning scarlet, slit-pupil eyes of the Dark Lord. His breath caught, but not quite in fear. Instead, it was from the look in Voldemort's eyes as they stared into Harry's. It wasn't hate, nor anger or disdain, but a sharp glint of greed and confident determination. It was almost smug in its fortitude.

As quick as the snake he once was, one of Voldemort's hands reached out and snatched the fabric of Harry's robes and reeled the boy in closer. Harry's eyes widened in shock as he came face-to-face with the enemy. "Mine," Voldemort forcefully whispered, and before Harry could do so much as process what the hell was going on, he was pulled in even closer and his lips covered with Voldemort's smooth, nearly lipless mouth. It was like all the air in his lungs was sucked away as Voldemort kissed him vehemently, possessively. Harry, to say the least, was shocked, stunned, flabbergasted, dumbfounded, and all other manner of surprised by Voldemort's actions. He couldn't focus on anything, save for the cool lips against his own, the clawed hand wrapped around his one shoulder, and the breath against his face.

After what could have been a mere second or a whole hour, Voldemort pulled away enough that
Harry could, for one, breathe before he looked again into the other's eyes set in a face filled with confusion. Like before, they seemed to glow with some emotion, this time with something akin to fear, or something Harry couldn't quite identify. There was one thing he could identify: the Dark Lord was feeling...

"Harry," Voldemort said softly, his voice once again high and ethereal, but now it held none of the cold arrogance. With slow, trembling movements, Voldemort lifted his pale, long fingered hand to Harry's forehead and gently caressed the famous lightning bolt scar. Harry nearly flinched, in preparation for the pain.

But there was no pain. The kiss hadn't exactly hurt either…

And in the end, it was Voldemort who suddenly gasped in discomfort, wrapping his arms around himself as if he was holding himself together. He cried out again, this time falling forward and into Harry. Pulled from his stupor, Harry barely had time to catch the Dark Lord with his arms. His hands pressed into Voldemort's cool flesh, but despite the skin's temperature the man was sweating. Harry could feel Voldemort's sides heaving as he panted for breath, the hot air brushing Harry's neck where the man's face rested. Harry felt acute panic, completely clueless of what was happening to his enemy and unable to help.

Having not been able to think of anything else, Harry dove into the link, hoping to find answers there. In hindsight, that might have been a bad move. Instead of answers, what he found in Voldemort's unshielded mind was pain pain pain pain.

Harry also felt what could only be described as several other presences, and yet they weren't foreign because they were also Voldemort. It was all very confusing and Harry couldn't make sense of any of it, and all the while the panic kept rising. And suddenly, he was screaming along with Voldemort as something pulled within his core. It pulled and pulled until Harry thought it would break but still it stubbornly refused, so all Harry could see was white as the agony increased. He simultaneously clutched Voldemort's body as well as clawed at his forehead because it hurt…

'Please stop, please stop, oh Merlin it hurts!' Harry chanted in his mind since only harsh cries could be forced past his lips.

Just as Harry thought for sure he would die, because nobody should be able to survive this pain, it did stop. All of it. Harry collapsed to the side, Voldemort still wrapped weakly in his arms, unmoving. Only, when Harry looked, it wasn't Voldemort anymore but Tom Riddle, not quite the same as the Horcrux from the Chamber of Secrets but still, it was him.

'How…?'

'Sca-scavy," Harry called out weakly, throat hoarse from screaming. The elf popped into the room, gasping in shock at the sight of the two wizards on the floor.

"Help…get us to the bed..." Harry coughed, unable to speak further. A moment later he felt his body rise up off the floor and return to something much softer and then he knew no more. He fell unconscious, unaware Voldemort still lay within his arms, held to his chest.

Harry woke slowly the next morning, having slept through the rest of that day and all of the night. He ached all over, but despite that small discomfort he was surprisingly comfortable where he lay. Scavy must have placed the comforter over him yesterday after he'd passed out, because Harry was quite toasty snuggled in the sheets up against an especially warm pillow.
A pillow that breathed.

Harry opened his eyes to a blurry image of the world. The window curtains were drawn, but it was daytime so there was enough natural light seeping through and Harry was close enough to his companion so that when he looked upwards he could make out the aristocratic features of one Tom Marvolo Riddle. Who was pressed to Harry's chest. And was still naked.

Blushing furiously, Harry gently pulled away, sitting up and feeling the nightstand for his glasses, assuming Scavy would have placed them there. House Elves were very thorough. Once found, he put them on and studied the man who spent the night with him in bed.

Somehow, someway, Voldemort, the old snake-face, no longer resembled the awkward hybrid of a human and reptile. His skin was still pale, but naturally so, not the bone white of before. He had a nose, for one, and hair for another. His nose was straight and streamlined, while his hair was a similar shade of black as Harry's, and currently looked about as unruly as his as well. All in all, Harry could find not much different other than age between this Tom Riddle and the one from the diary, and even then it was hard to tell just how many years separated them. Voldemort's current face had an almost timeless appearance, and while in reality he was well over fifty years old, he looked like he could be anything from twenty to his actual age.

Harry watched as Voldemort's bare chest slowly rose and fell, appearing to sleep peacefully save for a slight worry line in-between his eyebrows. Harry turned away and as carefully as he could so as not to disturb the sleeping Dark Lord he slipped out of bed. He wasn't sure, but as he was heading to the bathroom, he thought he heard what could have been a whimper, as silly as it sounded, come from the older wizard, but when he stopped to see if it would happen again he was met with silence.

Downstairs, Harry snapped for one of the House Elves and this time it was Jip who showed up. He asked the petite-featured Elf for a small breakfast, which she readily provided for him. Harry opted to simply eat at the modest-sized breakfast table in the kitchen, not worried about the formality of eating in the dining room.

Spooning some oatmeal into his mouth, Harry contemplated how yesterday was the weirdest day of his life. And that was saying something, considering the life he has had. First, he finds out that Severus Snape—the greasy git from the dungeon—had been friends with his mother. Then, it turns out that the whole time he spent with Voldemort, both Dumbledore and Snape had known, or at least suspected, it was the Dark Lord he was harboring. And that leads him to the event that Harry was still trying to wrap his head around: Voldemort kissing him. Who would have guessed that would ever happen? And it wasn't like it was a friendly kiss on the forehead…no, there hadn't been much of anything chaste about it. And, well, the problem became…how come Harry wasn't completely appalled by it? Compared to the kiss with Cho Chang, he could name several other things other than it being "wet" to describe it.

Was that a good thing, or a bad thing?

And finally, the pièce de résistance, was the transition from snake-face Voldemort to Tom Riddle. He definitely wasn't quite sure what happened there.

Harry felt like if he thought about yesterday much more he would break his brain. So he stopped, because at this point it was getting him nowhere, save for uncomfortable from the growing headache.

After breakfast, Voldemort still hadn't woken up, so Harry figured there was one thing he could do to pass the time: fire-call Albus Dumbledore.
Harry had a lot of questions for him.

With Jip's help, Harry connected the fireplace in the small sitting room to the Floo Network and stuck his head in, the appendage appearing in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts.

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry called out softly, unsure of whether the Headmaster would even be in. If anything he could be out looking for the same student whose disembodied head floated in the fireplace. When he didn't immediately get an answer, he tried again, and then a third time. He was about to give up when he heard the inner door swing open.

"Professor?"

There was silence at first, and then: "Harry?"

"Here, Professor." Dumbledore came into view as he walked in front of the hearth and crouched down. Before he could say anything, though, Harry blurted out, "I want you to know I haven't done anything just to help Voldemort. He made a deal with me in exchange. I just wanted to let you know that, in case you thought I was a traitor or something." Harry hadn't really meant for so much desperation to leak into his voice. After all, he really didn't regret his actions, so what did it matter if Dumbledore approved?

Dumbledore just shook his head genially. "Harry, it's ok, I understand. Where are you, my boy? Please tell me," the old man said beseechingly. Harry merely shook his head sadly, refusing because this was his private place, his safe house.

How contradictory that he brought Voldemort here.

"I'm sorry…I can't."

"Why, Harry? Is Voldemort keeping you somewhere, is that it? We can help you."

"No, no, that's not it," the young wizard said dismissively. "I'm not his prisoner or anything. Although now that I think about it, it may actually be me who's holding Voldemort captive. He's a bit…indisposed."

If Harry thought Dumbledore would be surprised or curious, he was disappointed. In fact, the Headmaster's worried expression actually faded and was replaced with a look of utter calm and nonchalance.

"He took the potion," Dumbledore said in such a way that he already knew the answer. Harry would almost say he was pleased. The young man frowned, confused by the reaction and complete unconcern Dumbledore seemed to express.

"Sir, do you want to know what happened?"

Dumbledore actually smiled. Now Harry was really confused.

"Voldemort appears quite human now, yes?"

Dumbly, Harry nodded. Dumbledore's smile widened and his eyes were blazing blue and clear as the afternoon sky. How did he know…?

"Then I believe, dear boy, that when Voldemort took that potion, it gave him his soul back." Here the Headmaster suddenly reached into his robes and pulled out a golden ring with a dark stone set into it. He held it in his palm, contemplating it while Harry wondered how it was suddenly
Dumbledore who was explaining the events of yesterday.

"Hmm, yes, I do believe I am right. I was going to destroy this, but there is no need to now. Harry, do you know what this is, or perhaps more accurately, was?"

"A Horcrux," Harry immediately answered, recognizing the ring as the one on Marvolo Gaunt's finger in one of the memories Dumbledore showed him. A sudden epiphany made Harry realize what the true purpose of his seeing those particular memories were; Dumbledore was showing him the clues to figuring out what Voldemort had entrusted pieces of his soul to.

"Very good, my boy. I think you know what a Horcrux is by this time then, yes? Well then, as you said, this ring was one of the objects Voldemort placed a piece of his soul in. I can feel it is, however, no longer a Horcrux. The soul piece that resided in here is gone."

Harry stared at the ring. "And…you think it returned to Voldemort? Because of the potion?"

The Headmaster nodded. "The others too. I am unsure about the piece from the diary you destroyed in your Second year, but it is my belief that all the soul pieces Voldemort had split from himself have recombined to give him, more or less, a complete soul. He his mortal now."

Harry's eyes widened and his body went numb with shock as realization dawned within him. Voldemort, without his Horcruxes, could be killed permanently. There would be no way for him to resurrect himself like last time.

"I don't think this was what he had planned when he took that potion," Harry uttered, somewhat dazed.

"Tom always did underestimate the worth of being capable of emotion, of having a soul that was whole."

Even as Dumbledore said that, Harry remembered the hesitation and uneasiness from Voldemort while they were in the Shrieking Shack before Harry was about to give him the potion. Maybe he wasn't as clueless as Dumbledore thought. Suddenly, another thought struck him, and his brow furrowed as he searched Dumbledore's twinkling eyes.

"You planned this, didn't you?" Harry asked softly. Dumbledore, it seemed, was far too at ease with the situation.

Expression fading to something more serious, though there was still a slight smile on his lips, Dumbledore shook his head. "Not entirely." he said in a way that suggested that if anything had been planned it certainly didn't turn out the way he had intended. "His being transformed into a snake was never an outcome I had expected."

Harry nodded. "He said the potion probably reacted with his magic strangely. That's why he got turned into a snake, as it truly was his most weakened state, having to rely on me to help him."

Nodding himself, Dumbledore said, "Yes, that is what I suspected myself. That little result changed our original plans, among other things," he said almost dryly. "If there was anything I would have predicted, it would be the prospect that Voldemort would have identified that it had been a potion in his tea that caused the change and it would have only been a matter of time before he contacted Professor Snape for help."

"But that didn't happen, because as a snake, the only possible person he could contact was me." Harry was feeling a little stupid. It almost sounded like he could've gone straight to Snape and asked for the potion. Granted, in a way it should have been Dumbledore or Snape who came
forward. Harry, after all, was just a student, and they were the responsible adults. Harry wondered what Snape thought about all of this.

"Knowing what had happened from Severus' report, when I saw you with that cobra around your neck," Dumbledore told him, "I must confess I nearly had a heart attack. I had a mind to end it right then and there…but I didn't. I do trust you, Harry. I wanted to see what would happen."

Harry shook his head. "I don't understand why you didn't do anything. Why the set up?" Harry asked, a little miffed.

"Well, there still was the benefit of the doubt that it really wasn't Voldemort. But after you tripped the wards in Snape's office, we knew with some certainty that our intuition was correct. I find that this result was far more preferable to the one I had originally intended," was Dumbledore's conclusion.

Harry blinked, calamitous thoughts rolling through his head. "How can you say that? I had to live with him around my neck every day for the last few weeks. How could you even let that risk slide by? You knew it was him, and yet you let him into Hogwarts, and even let me help the man who murdered my parents. I'm sorry, Professor, but to me that seems too risky of a gamble to take." Of course, Harry was also thinking back to his First Year, when Voldemort had hitched a ride on the back of Quirrell's head. Now it somehow seemed unlikely Dumbledore had been oblivious to that either.

"And yet," Dumbledore said, "it was a gamble that I believe paid off in the end."

"But," Harry protested, "why did you do any of this in the first place? And I don't understand why you didn't just give him the potion that would give him his soul back instead of the weakening one, if you were so sure that would have been the result."

Dumbledore shrugged almost sheepishly. "I must confess that, while I had a plan from the beginning, virtually none of it really came to fruition. To start with, apparently the information Snape had on the potions was wrong about which was which."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Oh." Well, he supposed it would have been an easy mistake to make. Even Voldemort had only read about the potions once, and that was in a thousand year old library, and from Snape's stores there had been further motivation for picking which to take from it being the silver potion that was completely full. "But after that, how come you didn't just lock him up?"

"I did, in a way. I bound him to you."

Harry tossed him a dubious look. Dumbledore just acted the wistful old man.

"And, what you may not know, is that I also put a charm for if he ever lay a, ahem, fang on anyone, he would have been instantly incapacitated." Dumbledore looked at Harry's head in the fireplace over the rims of his glasses. "I know you, Harry, and I trust you enough to discern that if you were helping Voldemort, you must have had a good reason. It warranted seeing things through."

Harry was silent for a long time. "Why didn't you tell me about any of this?" he finally asked softly, fed up of being left in the dark all the time.

Dumbledore looked at him with sad eyes. "Harry, please know that I did not make the decision lightly, but in the end I realized I had no choice. I think, ultimately, it always had to be you to complete the task I began. Voldemort is now mortal, and like you said, in your possession. You
can defeat him now, as prophesied."

Harry blanched. Dumbledore still intended for him to kill Voldemort?

A dark voice inside Harry's head said, 'Of course he does...isn't that your destiny?'

Harry's stomach recoiled at the thought. But why did the idea make him react so negatively? It was Voldemort, and he was entirely vulnerable right now. It would be quick, and in all probability very easy to do. While Voldemort lay asleep, he would be unable to stop Harry from aiming the Killing Curse at him. Yes, it would be so simple, and then the threat of the Dark Lord would be no more, and the Wizarding World would be free from fear and oppression.

Except... in reality, Harry doubted it would be that easy. From just the thought of killing the man, Harry knew it would be hard—very hard—for him to actually complete the action. And Harry knew—with his very soul—why it would be so hard.

It was very simply: he cared for Voldemort. Somehow over the last few weeks, the evil bastard had wormed his way into Harry's good graces and now Harry didn't want to kill him. He had found there was much more to the man other than the evil, heartless, overlord persona Harry had originally painted him with. And while, yes, Voldemort was quite a bastard, and has done many terrible things, and was terribly wrong about so many others, but he wasn't simply a monster; he was a man who's made bad choices in his life. If there was anyone who needed a savior in their life, it was him.

And it just so happened that Voldemort had one at his disposal.

"I won't kill him," Harry said quietly, so quietly that Dumbledore did not hear him.

"What was that, Harry?"

Harry swallowed, before saying, "I won't kill him, Professor. I'm sorry."

Dumbledore's brow furrowed as he studied the face of Harry Potter in the green flames before a soft smile graced his lips and he nodded. "I understand, my boy. Just tell us your location and we will come and do the job. You've done enough, I think, if that is your choice."

But Harry simply shook his head. "No, you don't understand. I won't let him be killed."

At Harry's words, Dumbledore dropped his small smile but still didn't seem that concerned, merely curious. "What do you mean? It is the prophecy, Harry. I abhor the idea of killing just as much as you do, but I think in this case we both know it's necessary. He may have his soul back, but Tom Riddle was always Voldemort."

It was there that Harry wondered if perhaps he understood Voldemort better than even Dumbledore did. "I don't think so," Harry whispered, almost as if he was talking to himself. "I think...I think that if I worked with him, if I just got him to understand..."

"Harry," Dumbledore said with quiet urgency. "You know he cannot be reasoned with. No matter who he is, either Tom Riddle or Voldemort, he will stop at nothing to get what he wants. He will destroy us all in his path of destruction. You know he must be stopped. Don't let what he's told you cloud your judgment. Harry," he said, his voice morphing into something more gentle, "I had not told you this, but now that you already know about them, I think you should know that on the night he murdered your mother and father and tried to kill you, he accidently made you one of his Horcruxes. For the past fifteen years," the Headmaster said gravely, "up until the time you fed him the potion, you carried a piece of Voldemort's soul within you. Such an impossible, unexpected
result of what happened that night, but nonetheless, it happened. Harry, *that* was the source of your connection, how Voldemort marked you as his equal. Tell me, can you still speak Parseltongue, or sense the connection anymore?"

Harry, to say the least, was utterly stunned. He was a Horcrux? All this time, his soul had existed alongside a piece of Voldemort's, and he hadn't known? Or better yet, why had Dumbledore never told him? And then Harry had another thought: how had Dumbledore planned for Harry to overcome Voldemort if the Horcrux in Harry would ensure he couldn't die? What could they have done?

But Harry didn't voice the question aloud, because deep down he knew. He knew that in order to destroy Voldemort, he would have had to be destroyed as well.

Dumbledore seemed to sense Harry's roiling thoughts. "Harry, my dear boy, I know what you are thinking. You believe that I had intended for you to die at some point. In some sense, you are right, because if the Horcrux within you had continued to survive, than Voldemort would be able to come back. But that is why I came up with an alternate plan; I did not wish for you to die."

Closing his eyes, Harry felt the press of tears under his eyelids and he nodded to Dumbledore to show that he understood. Of course Dumbledore, a man who was his grandfather in all but name, would have looked for some other way, so Harry didn't have to die. The young wizard may not fully trust the man to make all the right decisions, but he simply had to trust him in this.

But, in the end, Harry also realized that if it had come down to it, he would have willingly sacrificed himself if it meant the people he loved had a chance. But now he was wondering if that really was the chance they needed….

And then Harry thought: was the Horcrux truly gone? Like Dumbledore said, one method would be to see if he could still speak Parseltongue, but that might be misleading incase that particular skill had gotten incorporated into his own magic and didn't need the soul piece anymore. No, the best method would be to see if he still had a mind connection to Voldemort.

Still with closed eyes, Harry reached deep within himself, a familiar action he had become accustomed to over the past weeks, as he searched for that tunnel that led to the Dark Lord's mind. Expecting to find nothing where that link used to be, Harry nearly fell over in shock at what he did find.

That mysterious connection, the one that allowed he and Voldemort to see into each other's minds, to share their dreams, a connection that was created with unintentional and unprecedented Soul Magic, the one that should have been gone… *was still there.*

What the hell did *that* mean?
Chapter 11

He woke up wondering when exactly he had been *Crucio'd* and who the hell was going to pay for it.

Voldemort curled in on himself, intent on hiding his pounding head in the depths of his coils, only he found that his body was incapable of bending that far. Instead he just buried his head in his hands.

Hands? Fingers too.

For this Voldemort was willing to crack open his eyes just enough for him to study the twin appendages he now held away from his face. There was a moment where he thought he was mistaken, and that these really weren't his because, well, he didn't recognize them. He opened his eyes a little further. He changed his mind when he was continuously able to flex the delicate, un-clawed fingers. So these were his.

It was then that his jumbled mind caught up with another piece of information. He placed those soft, slim fingers back on his face to examine the nose that must be his as well. He'd almost forgotten what it was like to have one. He moved his hand downwards and felt his full lips, and then trailed upward again to brush against his eyebrows. He carded the hand through his thick head of hair in fascination, feeling the mid-length strands fall back against his ears.

So, he had his body back. His *old* body. There was a certain amount of pleasure in this conclusion.

Gingerly, Voldemort sat up against the headboard and looked around the room. He remembered how he got here, in the form of a pale cobra wrapped around Harry Potter's shoulders. And then… yes, he took the potion; that he knew for certain. Beyond that, though, there was a distinct lack of clear, definable recollection. Voldemort rubbed his temples with his new hands, trying to fight the daze that had settled over his mind.

He remembered… a burst of magic… glowing, green eyes… heat, skin, confusion… and then pain. Lots of it. It really was the only clear thing he could remember. Everything else was a blur.

Voldemort hissed in discomfort as he slid out of bed, absently noting that he was unclothed. He flexed his toes against the cold wood floor, nonetheless enjoying the sensation. He would never take his hands and feet for granted again.

Hanging from one of the bed posts was a set of plain black robes. He took them, and dressed himself, feeling a bit more ready to take on the day.

Still barefoot, he padded across the room to the easily identified bathroom. He stopped and looked at himself in the mirror. There it was: his old face. His eyes were still red, he idly observed, but that was of little consequence. Voldemort had to admit the initial investigations of the changes with his fingertips really didn't compare to seeing it with his own eyes.

One would be hard pressed to find someone unwilling to admit that, intellectually, Voldemort was a genius. It didn't take him long to use his virtuoso to deduce what had happened yesterday. No matter what he did, whatever rituals or rejuvenating spells he used, there was only one thing that would reverse the inevitable effects on his body as a result of his Horcruxes.

It was because there weren't any Horcruxes. He was no longer immortal. He was human.
Part of Voldemort watched with a detached fascination as the panic and shock that had held off until that moment colored his expression while the other part of him experienced these emotions to their full extent. That same, disconnected portion of himself grudgingly admitted with wry humor that the old coot Dumbledore may actually had been right about something.

Voldemort's chest was tight, and he placed a hand right over his rapidly beating heart. This, apparently, was him in his prime, in his greatest point of strength and fortitude. His soul, his emotions, his mortality, his humanness...all brought back by a potion meant to re-claim the strength of bygone days.

It seemed, perhaps, that he had miscalculated something along the way.

Voldemort pressed his hand more firmly into his ribs. He wasn't sure if he could ever admit it aloud, but all the things he was feeling inside—this heat and ice, harmony and discord, and fullness to the point it almost hurt but never emptiness—were things that he might have actually missed. He remembered everything from his life. He remembered the pain of splitting his soul, and the resulting vacant and numb emotions that settled in his core. He remembered it, but he didn't feel it anymore. The offset was strange.

And because Voldemort could remember everything, he could honestly say he had never felt better in his entire life.

His eyes gleamed with vigor as he stared at himself in the mirror, deep in thought.

Voldemort pushed away from the sink he was leaning on and exited the bathroom, already bored of the bedroom and needing a new environment. Before he left, though, he paused and picked up an object that had been abandoned on the floor and put it in his pocket.

He wanted to find where Harry Potter had run off to.

From memory, Voldemort easily navigated the small house until he found the tail end of the Boy-Who-Lived. He quirked an eyebrow at the sight of Harry's backside and head in the Floo. Being who he was, Voldemort was very interested in knowing who was on the other side of the Fire-Call. Using a bit of magic he learned at some point during his life, he helped himself to firsthand knowledge of the conversation Harry was having.

He immediately recognized the voice of Dumbledore. This brought him a certain amount of discontent.

Voldemort listened tensely yet passively as Dumbledore explained his plan to incapacitate him. He could say he was honestly impressed by Dumbledore's cleverness. Idly he noted how, not calm, but generally stoic he felt, considering he should be raging at having been trapped and conned so fully. But then again, he wasn't alone in the deception; Harry Potter was his partner in this.

Strange, how it was now that he experienced a twinge of anger. Did his emotions have a delay mechanism? This having a soul thing was going to take some getting used to and practice interpreting all the curious little quirks.

After a pause in the conversation, Voldemort heard Harry asked softly, "Why didn't you tell me about any of this?" He waited for the answer, also wondering why the great Light Lord would keep his precious Savior from knowing the truth.

Ah, there was the ranging anger he had expected. It was a relief to feel the urge to reach through the flames and wring Dumbledore by the neck using his own insufferable beard. In a way it was a
little shocking—though perhaps not by much—to learn that Dumbledore, the man who had
defeated Grindelwald and left him to rot alive in Numengard, a man full of talks about
righteousness and concord, had created a plan quite devious in nature that would ultimately end in
his death at the hands of Harry Potter, a wizard not even of age yet.

Voldemort recognized the signs of his newly regenerated soul freezing until he could feel nothing
but cool hate and resentment. Almost unconsciously, he planned for his survival. Harry Potter was
no longer his Horcrux...after the year and a half required of the deal, there was no reason he
couldn't retaliate if the boy wanted him dead. He ignored that tiny crack in the ice that radiated
what might have been...disappointment.

But then that crack grew and shattered the ice inside as Harry said something unexpected.
Dumbledore didn't hear him the first time he said it, and that was alright for Voldemort because he
needed to hear it a second time to believe it.

Trust Harry Potter to be harebrained enough to give his enemy a chance.

These damn emotional Wronski Feints were going to give him whiplash. He always despised the
useless game of Quidditch.

He could almost sympathize with Harry once Dumbledore told him about the accidental Horcrux.
If Harry's reaction was anything to go by, he was about as dumbfounded as Voldemort was when
he found out.

There was something unusual going on, though, as at that very moment a familiar link was brought
to Voldemort's awareness when he felt someone prodding at the other end.

Harry's eyes snapped open, the green orbs glittering with some intense emotion.

"It's still there," he whispered, voice filled with wonder.

Not only was the connection not gone, but it was very strong, too, and exceptionally clear.
Yesterday, now that Harry could stop and analyze what happened, he remembered he could feel
something pulling, trying to merge back with Voldemort. It hurt...a lot. It was never torn from
him, though. The feeling of stretched elastic was the last thing he remembered before he dropped
into unconsciousness.

"Did you say something, Harry?" Dumbledore inquired.

Meeting Dumbledore's eyes, Harry opened his mouth to repeat himself, but he was suddenly
dragged backwards and held against a solid body.

"Hey, what…!"

"Potter, if you have any intelligence at all, you will tell Dumbledore nothing."

Harry had only a moment to digest that Voldemort was apparently awake before he turned to the
more immediate situation. "What? Why?"

Voldemort growled in frustration. "What do you think he will do once he figures out his plan
failed?"

Harry hesitated. "I don't know."
The hands gripping his upper arms squeezed painfully. "Yes, you do."

Trying to wriggle out of the restraining hold, Harry said, "I won't let him manipulate me again. But let me tell you this...if I'm wrong and you do need to be stopped, I will not hesitate to ensure your last Horcrux—me—will not be in the way," he finished firmly.

"No, you won't," Voldemort agreed solemnly, though Harry wasn't sure to which of his statements the Dark Lord was agreeing to. "Now, try keeping a secret from Dumbledore for once," Voldemort ordered.

Harry stopped his struggling. Without any further preamble, Voldemort shoved him back into the Floo flames. Dumbledore looked rather alarmed by Harry's abrupt exit and sudden return.

"My dear boy, are you alright?"

Harry let out a nervous chuckle. "Ah, yes, I'm fine."

"What happened?"

Harry could feel a hand tangled in the back of his shirt. No doubt Voldemort was prepared to pull him back out at a moment's notice.

"House Elves can be surprisingly insistent," Harry told him. "I told one of mine to give me hourly updates about Voldemort, and he did as ordered," Harry lied smoothly. He was always good under pressure.

"Ah," Dumbledore said. "And what is the news?"

"Sleeping like a baby still," Harry jibed for Voldemort's benefit. That hand on his shirt gave a sharp tug. Dumbledore seemed both amused and disturbed by this description.

"Harry, I really must insist you let someone else go to where you are. I do not think Voldemort will be asleep forever, and when he wakes up I doubt he will be as agreeable. You don't need to be alone when you face him," he added in a way meant to be reassuring, but Harry was not comforted. It was clear Dumbledore still expected him to fulfill the prophesy as he saw it. Didn't the man understand he didn't want to?

Harry was still overly conscious of the presence at his back.

Harry said softly to his long-time mentor, "Professor, you are a great man, but you don't know everything. You are fully capable of making mistakes; just like me, and just like Voldemort. What if you are making one right now? You think Voldemort has to die; I think he can be saved."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "He won't change, Harry."

Harry cocked his head to the side. "Change? Probably not. If he's smart, though," Harry said, pausing to empathize the point to a certain eavesdropper, "then he will realize that if he wants to get anywhere in the world and actually have one to rule over, to have any semblance of what he envisioned, then he will stop being a selfish bastard and stop making this a war between Light and Dark and choose to work on the things that actually matter."

"And you think he will listen to you?" Dumbledore asked doubtfully.

Harry shrugged, forgetting Dumbledore probably couldn't see the gesture. "Everyone in their life needs help at some point, and though he may think it, he is not excused from this. I don't think..."
anyone has been brave enough”—'or stupid enough,' Harry mused—"to tell him he's being an idiot."

Dumbledore visibly thought long and hard about what Harry had to say. "Perhaps," he said finally, "I have been a bit single-minded, and have not considered other possibilities. But, I cannot find it within myself to trust him."

"I just need you to trust me right now, then."

Dumbledore studied the face of one Harry Potter for several long, quiet moments.

"Alright, my boy," he said slowly. "I will trust you to do the right thing…whatever that is, when the time comes," he added, hinting to Harry that he hadn't fully given up on his original ideals.

Harry nodded. "Good."

"What will you do now?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry told him, "Well, I'd like to finish school. I don't know exactly if I'll make it back before the term starts again, but I promise to make up any assignments I've missed. I would come back now, but…I think there are some things I need to take care of here."

"I understand, Harry. I am glad to hear you are coming back, because otherwise I would have insisted that you did so."

"I made sure I would be able to finish school; it was part of the deal I made with Voldemort for helping him become human again. Hogwarts herself ensured the terms were binding, so for until the end of my Seventh Year there won't be a war, or at least not the bloodshed kind. But…I'm hoping there won't be one at all."

Dumbledore ran a hand down his beard. "Just remember this is not a normal person we are talking about, Harry."

Harry nodded. "I know. I have to go now, Professor."

"Alright, Harry. I'll be here, if you need anything."

"Thanks, Sir."

Pulling his head out of the fireplace, Harry disconnected it from the Floo Network and sighed, mind in turmoil over all he had learned. And, it kind of felt like he had just adopted a dog that had been labeled dangerous. But how exactly does one muzzle a Dark Lord?

The hand on his shirt was gone, but Harry remained kneeling on the ground, eyes focused on the sooty bricks in the floor of the hearth.

"You heard all of that, didn't you, even though Fire-Calls should be private." Turning to look over his shoulder, one eyebrow arched questioningly, Harry spotted Tom Marvolo Riddle, who had retreated across the room to lean a shoulder casually on the doorframe of the sitting room, a quiet and contemplative expression on his face. He was dressed in the plain black robes Harry had Scavy run out and get for the man. As Harry inspected him, Voldemort smirked.

"You know me too well," he remarked, and Harry couldn't help but enjoy the smooth, rich tone of his voice. His voice vaguely resembled how he sounded both as a snake and as snake-face, though compared to both it sounded more masculine and far less hissy. Yes, Harry liked it very much.
"So, it seems to me you're going to let me take over Wizarding World now," Voldemort commented mildly, "if I…behave."

Harry dropped his chin towards his chest and groaned. The way he said it really did sound like Harry considered him to be a stray dog. Then again, substitute the term "dog" for the term "snake" and one may have an accurate description of this whole situation…

"War is messy and wasteful. I don't understand why you didn't try the Slytherin way; you know, by being clever, subtle, and cunning. Really, for being Slytherin's Heir you chose a very blatant way to get what you want."

Glancing back over his shoulder, Harry saw Voldemort scowling at him. Hey, someone had to say it. Harry turned back towards the fireplace.

"So," Harry drew out slowly, "what do you think?"

Voldemort—or maybe he was Tom now? Harry wasn't sure—Voldemort-Tom lifted up one of his pale elegant hands to eyelevel and looked at the back of it before turning it over to view his palm. He flexed his fingers before spreading them wide again.

"I don't know, it's quite a change from being a snake, and I have to say I enjoy looking in a mirror far more than I have recently." He rolled his eyes up to glance at Harry, who noticed both that they were still scarlet and that they were gleaming impishly.

Harry glowered and stood up, turning around so he could lean his back against the fireplace. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well, at least we know you're still a snarky bastard. You knew what I was asking," he accused, though his voice sounded more amused than anything. He looked across the room at Voldemort, eyes searching his face for any sign of what the man was thinking and feeling, but of course there was nothing to see but a carefully composed expression. Harry himself was trying to appear just as calm, but knew that at least some of his nervousness was leaking through in his body language.

He really wished he knew what Voldemort was thinking.

"Harry Potter," Voldemort said in an amused and soft sort a way such as the young wizard had never heard him say before, and Harry felt something clench inside his chest. Pulling his Gryffindor courage to the forefront, he pushed away from the fireplace and crossed the room so he stood directly in front of the other man, who had straightened away from the doorframe. Green eyes stared into red. This close, Harry could see that Voldemort's eyes, while still scarlet, had pupils that weren't slits anymore, and the red color didn't remind him of fresh blood. Instead, they resembled the shade of a faceted ruby or red wine, which in truth didn't make much difference color wise, but to Harry it made all the difference in the world.

Just as he did yesterday before his body was ready to reabsorb the Horcrux soul pieces, Voldemort reached up and brushed Harry's fringe out of the way before he caressed Harry's scar, his finger gently tracing the lightning bolt shape. Harry knew it wouldn't hurt, but he hadn't expected for it to feel so nice either, to have that simple contact with the man who was and probably still would be the Dark Lord.

"Why am I still a Horcrux?"

Voldemort reached into his pocket and pulled out an empty, crystal vial.

"Harry, did you by chance take some of the potion yourself?" he asked, with dry humor.
Harry's first response was to send his brows up to his hairline. "No, of course not, I wouldn't—"

He stopped and nearly pulled his hand up to smack himself in the forehead.

"It spilled and splashed onto my face when I was knocked backwards by the magical backlash. Maybe I accidentally swallowed some," Harry told Voldemort bewilderedly. He never would have taken the potion on his own free will—he just didn't think that it would help him in any way. And now that he had accidently took some and knew the results, he wasn't sure how "helpful" it was.

Harry had caught on to the implications that the Horcrux, that foreign piece of soul he harbored, was actually a good thing…supposedly.

"I took it first," stated Voldemort, his expression calculating.

"So, what?" Harry said. "You took it first and were in the process of regaining your soul, but then I had some and it caused me to hold on to the Horcrux and did not let it be taken?"

It made sense, but to Harry it still wasn't quite right. "It was like we were having a tug of war with it," Harry murmured. "But I don't remember there being a winner." Harry had already thought about the new strength of the connection, but he hadn't yet acknowledged how much stronger it was compared to before. It was almost tangible, a trail of magic leading to the other who owned the piece within Harry.

Harry questioningly looked up at Voldemort, who was at least a head taller than him. "Could it be possible that our magics combined could have altered the effect of the potion, much like when you turned into a snake?"


"Yes," Harry agreed. "We both took the potion more or less at the same time, and the effects were working in opposite directions. So, what if, as a concession, the soul piece stayed with me, but you have full access to it?" He tapped his scar with his finger. "Can't you feel it?" Harry paused. "It's so strong."

Voldemort, in a rare sign of disgruntlement, rubbed his hand against his forehead. "It's very difficult to tell that it is not with me." He had a very odd expression on his face.

Neither said anything for several beats.

"You're human now, Voldemort," Harry remarked softly. "Really human. What does that mean to you and what will you do now?" Harry was surprised at the strength of his voice as he critically questioned the Darkest wizard in history about his plans.

Voldemort's hand fell back to his side and he inhaled deeply before slowly breathing out. "I don't know, Potter. I haven't been human in so long that I can't truly remember what it was like to begin with," he mouthed deprecatingly. All throughout, he kept looking at Harry's forehead.

"Did you know about it before?" Harry inquired.

Voldemort ceased his scrutiny of Harry's scar to look into the other's eyes. "Just recently."

"Ironic, isn't it?"

Voldemort huffed. "If I had killed you I imagine you would have found a way to come back just to laugh in my face," he said wryly.
"Of course, I could never miss that chance." Harry paused after the gentle teasing, surprised at how nothing seemed that different from the time Voldemort was a snake and now, and then he asked, "Are you...are you mad? That your Horcruxes are gone save for...the one in me? As much as you'd like to kill me..." Harry snapped his mouth shut and looked down at the ground. He didn't know why his voice wasn't working. He could feel Voldemort's gaze on the crown of his head.

"I won't—can't—do it now," Voldemort blandly finished for Harry. "It's strange, as I probably should feel angry—I don't like not being in control, after all—but I'm not. I am angry at one Albus Dumbledore, though. Old meddling coot may have more Slytherin than even me, Harry."

Harry stole a glance upwards. "...hurts to say that, doesn't it?"

"Does it hurt you to think, Potter?" Voldemort snapped, and while Harry flinched slightly, he didn't back away. Voldemort looked at Harry with narrowed, irritated eyes before he dropped the glare and sighed resignedly. "Maybe just a little..."

Tentatively, Harry offered a smile. So maybe there were some differences from before. Teasing the Dark Lord while he was a snake had been an easy and relatively safe (for the moment) endeavor, but now that he was presumably at full, magical strength, he was, even without a wand and the snake-face, still very intimidating and dangerous.

"Do you want lunch?" Harry abruptly blurted. "I'm starved, and I'm sure you'd like to eat something that wasn't a rat for once, huh?"

After giving him a narrowed-eyed look, Voldemort agreed, and Harry led to way to the kitchen where the House Elves had left two plates of food on the table Harry had eaten at earlier. Harry remarked that it was a little creepy how they did that. The Dark Lord had simply rolled his eyes and sat down.

Lunch was decidedly awkward but not overly so. Neither Voldemort nor Harry offered comments that could lead to deeper, more complicated discussions. Those were better left for later.

It was as Voldemort was taking a bit of meatball from his pasta that Harry remembered something he'd said earlier and grinned wickedly, asking, "So, when do we get to go castrate Lucius Malfoy?"

Voldemort promptly choked and spat the meatball back on his plate. Glaring murderously at Harry, he wandlessly cast a stinging hex at the boy, causing him to yelp and fall out of his chair.

Pulling himself back up using the tabletop as support, Harry groaned but still had a slight smile on his face. "You've been waiting to do that for a long time, haven't you? I hope that counts as an act of war and you've just lost your magic."

Voldemort merely responded to that by sending another hex, clearly showing that he had not, in fact, lost his magic.

Harry drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair. His eyes were scanning everything in the room save for the Dark Lord sitting in the other seat.

They had relocated to the sitting room again after lunch. It felt oddly domestic. He found this room to be the coziest and most relaxing room in the house, especially after he had lit an actual fire in the fireplace. He sat in one of the overstuffed sandy-brown chairs, while Voldemort sat in the other next to his so that they both partially faced the fire and partially to the other person. They were supposed to be talking—or something—but Harry didn't know where to start and Voldemort wasn't exactly offering much either.
Well, Harry could try something…

"Um…"

Voldemort cocked an eyebrow at his elegance.

"Yes?"

Harry drummed harder. "So…"

Harry scowled at himself. This wouldn't be so hard if he hadn't had one particular question on his mind. To be fair, it wasn't everyday one had to ask their mortal (ex?) enemy what sort of dastardly, conniving plan involved kissing said enemy.

Harry fidgeted in the seat he sat on, alternating between looking into the fire and glancing at Voldemort.

"Potter, if you don't sit still I'll be forced to petrify you to ensure you do," he said, all high-and-mighty.

Harry wrinkled his nose. "I'm sorry, there's just a lot I want to ask you and I'd rather not get cursed if I say something wrong."

"Terrified I will enact all those torture threats I've made over the last weeks?"

"Thought you wouldn't kill me 'cause I'm your Horcrux," Harry grumbled and sunk deeper into his chair.

"I said torture threats, Potter, not death threats."

Frowning, Harry looked at the other man full on for once in disregard of possibility of pain. "Do you really not want to kill me anymore?"

Instead of right out answering, Voldemort said, "You said you didn't want to kill me…is that true?"

Harry cursed Voldemort's non-answer and his emotional control of his expression. Would it kill the man to just give a tiny hint of what he was thinking?

Nevertheless, Harry responded to the question given to him first. "Yes, it's true. I'm not an assassin."

Voldemort's expression was still blank, but his eyes now held a certain intensity to them. "You're my Horcrux. I take good care of the things which are mine."

Harry blinked at the underlying possessiveness to the statement and his immediate reaction was to say, "I'm not an object, and I'm not yours."

Harry only had to blink once more and he was up and out of his seat and pressed against the nearest convenient wall as Voldemort held him against it. He probably should have expected such explosiveness from the Dark Lord, but he hadn't exactly considered just how much Voldemort might actually feel he was in his right.

"Hear this, Potter, you are mine. My soul, my Horcrux."

Harry squirmed, trying to free himself before finding it a useless endeavor and stilled to look Voldemort in his burning eyes.
"Yes, it's your soul, but I am myself. I am not your property to control."

"And what do you suggest I let you do?"

The two were so close Harry could feel Voldemort's breath of his face.

"It's the prophesy."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "What?" he spat.

"I'm your equal."

"You're also the one supposed to kill me."

Harry scrunched his nose in a grimace. "I hate divination," he said almost conversationally, as if it was normal to talk to someone while he was pressed against a wall. "I always thought it was a load of rubbish."

"Get to the point," the Dark Lord snapped.

Harry shrugged. "Basically, I think we should just ignore our prophesy."

"You just said you want to take the 'you're my equal' part literally," Voldemort sniped irritably.

Sighing, Harry said, "Fine, if you're going to be so difficult, let me ask you this: when you woke up this morning, how did you feel?"

"Sore."

Harry huffed in frustration. "That's not what I mean. You just got your soul back. You can't tell me, that after years and years of going around with only a fraction of it—oh, and add the years you spent as a shade or a little golem—you can't tell me you've never felt more alive. I don't know about you, but spending every year with a homicidal maniac chasing after me intent on my death makes me feel more like I'm surviving than living."

Now there was a sharp, contemplating expression of Voldemort's visage. Harry knew he was smart and that it wouldn't take him long to catch on to what he was trying to say.

"You think…that the prophesy is already fulfilled."

Harry cocked his head. "A piece of crap, fulfilled," he sing-songed, "whatever way you want to see it. Why not say it's done and over with?"

"You think you've vanquished the Dark Lord, then?" Voldemort asked, relatively amused.

In response and without really knowing why, Harry brought up a free hand and trailed the pads of his fingertips down Voldemort's cheek, the touch so light it almost wasn't a touch at all. Voldemort's eyes changed once again, losing something of the intense concentration.

"The Dark Lord Voldemort never looked this good," Harry stated mildly as he met Voldemort's eyes. "You look like Tom Riddle. Do you remember what Professor Slughorn said about him at the Christmas party?" Almost unconsciously, Harry caressed Voldemort's cheek again. "I think you should listen to him."

While Harry was still set against the wall, Voldemort's clutch on his collar had gradually loosened so it was more like he was resting his hand on Harry's shoulder than gripping it. The heat of it
almost soothed the place where that same hand had held a little too hard.

"Very well, Harry. I will think on it." That felt like an ending to the conversation, but Voldemort did not immediately move away. Harry tried not to fidget at the close proximity. But eventually the older man stepped away, his eyes, which had stayed locked with the younger wizard's, turning to another part of the room. Harry sighed.

'For a moment I thought he would kiss me again,' Harry voiced in his mind. That dark voice inside him whispered, "'Thought' or "hoped"?"

Harry squeaked and moved away from the wall.

"Tell me, Potter, what do you see for the Wizarding World?"

Harry, feeling awkward standing in the middle of the room, returned to his chair. Voldemort did not, instead looking perfectly natural where he stood.

"Well, how cliché would it be if I said peace?"

"Enough to make me gag."

"You really are a charmer," Harry muttered under his breath. "Fine, you tell me what you really want."

Voldemort smirked. "I want Dumbledore dead."

"Because that's not cliché," Harry reproached scathingly. And here he thought he'd managed to make a dent in Voldemort's brain, while maybe all he had been doing was knocking his knuckles on solid steel. "He's already dying, what does it matter to you?"

"He is the leader of the Light. They will be much easier to control if they are first broken by their leader's murder."

Harry gaped. "'Control'? 'Murder'? Dammit, Voldemort, what kind of political move is it if you declare war on them? They won't just back down because he's murdered by your hand. The thing is, I think you know that," Harry accused. "Why do you really want Dumbledore dead? Revenge?"

Voldemort's condescending visage was shaded in shadow as the light outside faded over the horizon. His eyes burned the red of a dying sun. He sneered. "You can't tell me you aren't furious at Dumbledore for hiding almost every important detail about your life."

"Of course I am!" Harry exclaimed loudly, standing up from his still-cold chair. And he was; Dumbledore had resorted to manipulation rather than telling him the truth his entire life. "Nothing about my life has ever been what it seemed."

"Then why don't you do anything about it?" Voldemort suggested.

"I am doing something about it. Don't you see? I refused to kill you because I don't think I need to, in case you don't remember."

Great lot that was turning out to be. Harry was beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake. He and Voldemort were still…not quite on opposite sides of the war, but far from seeing eye to eye on how things should be. And maybe Voldemort really couldn't see anything else but what he wants.

Harry couldn't call himself strictly on the Light side, but he wasn't Dark either, and nor was he
strictly Neutral in the sense of the term. He supposed he fought for a fourth party in the Wizarding World which to make it simple could be called Grey in whatever shades it came in. If he couldn't find a way to get the Light and Dark to get along, then there was a possibility the Wizarding World would always be divided. Things were coming to a head, and pretty soon something was going to have to give.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed as he stepped closer to Harry, a tantalizing, almost predatory glint in the ruby red. "And what are you hoping to accomplish by letting me live? In that very act you are giving me permission to do as I please. You know who I am, how there is no guarantee I would ever listen to you or anyone else. I'll give you that having a complete…soul has proven to be rather enlightening, but that hasn't changed the integral part of who I am." He took another step closer, but Harry stood his ground. "Tell me, why did you really not want to kill me?"

Something about the way he said it threw up metaphorical red flags in Harry's mind. "I'm not a murderer," he supplied assertively. "Everyone deserves a second chance," he added in a softer tone.

Voldemort was very close now.

"But why me? Maybe you've forgetting that I can see into your mind, either with Legilimency or through the Horcrux?" the Dark Lord hissed almost beguilingly. Harry frowned. What did that have to do with anything?

"You see, Harry," Voldemort emphasized, "I saw what you were thinking, just a short time ago."

Harry honestly had no clue what he was talking about. He figured his blank expression would clue Voldemort in. In fact, when he didn't react, Voldemort's eyes narrowed even more.

"I saw your…fantasy."

That got a reaction from Harry, because he immediately knew what he was talking about, but he probably was not reacting how Voldemort was expecting.

"What!" he exclaimed before falling into a fit of unhinged laughter. "That…is not…oh Merlin…a fantasy of mine!" Suddenly all humor washed out of Harry's aura and his laughter was borderline eerily cut off. "That was a memory. Of yesterday, hello? You should have it too, only at a different perspective."

Harry could visibly see wheels turning in Voldemort's mind, and it was almost comical how Voldemort took a stumbling step backwards when he connected the dots. Harry wasn't going to let him off the hook that easy though. He brought it up, he was going to have to finish it. Harry followed that step back with a step forward of his own and gave Voldemort a solid poke to his breastbone.

"It was you who kissed me, so don't go accusing me of being the one with fantasies."

Harry had only seen such a shocked expression on this face when he was down in the Chamber of Secrets stabbing a Basilisk fang into an old diary.

"That…was real?" Voldemort choked out.

"Sure was, Riddle. You don't remember? Gee, I don't know if I should be glad or insulted," Harry voiced sardonically. "I didn't even know you liked men," Harry muttered, suddenly feeling a bit flustered. "So, ah, yeah…since you don't remember it I'll just forget it ever happened too." He moved to make a quick retreat but found himself frozen with Voldemort latched onto his arm.
It was clearly harder for Voldemort to just casually brush off this knowledge like he normally could, but eventually he straightened his shoulders and smirked roguishly, never giving up his grip on Harry's bicep.

"Did you like it?" he asked in a way that had Harry blushing and fumbling for a retort.

"Ah…I…you kissed me!" he finally settled for and immediately realized how useless that was. Voldemort gave him a wry glance that seemed to indicate that was a useless thing to say as well.

"There is something attractive about you," Voldemort admitted. "And there certainly is more incentive with you being my Horcrux."

"That doesn't make me your plaything." Harry was beginning to panic, and didn't know why. He just suddenly had to get away, and said the first thing that came to mind. "Look, this isn't working. You're free to leave whenever you want, I'll see you in a year and a half if it comes to that." With a short burst of strength Harry freed himself from the only mildly restraining grasp and bolted.

Not bothering to check if he was being followed, Harry fled upstairs to the master bedroom and locked the door behind him. He was Master of this house, and it would not let anyone in whom he didn't want.

Emotions in turmoil, Harry sat on the too-big-for-one-person bed and drew his knees to his chest, resting his chin on them as he stared at the wall. He felt like a quitter and a failure…what was the point of all this that the moment he panicked he fled? Why did he panic? Harry decided put all his effort into trying not to think.

Voldemort would be gone in the morning, Harry figured. There was no reason for him to stay.

Voldemort sat in the sitting room for a long time, watching as the magically-fueled flame sputtered in the hearth.

That boy was seriously more trouble than he was worth. If ever he doubted before, he couldn't doubt now that if Harry really wanted to, he would be the death of him.

There was something building within him, something that started the moment Potter picked him up and warmed his chilled snake's body with his own human body heat, even before Voldemort knew about the Horcrux within the young wizard. It was easy enough to ignore initially, but with the loss of his Horcruxes came the loss of his numbed emotions. It was only now that he couldn't ignore the pull that had been there for a while to something he could not rightfully explain.

There had been hurt in Harry Potter's eyes as he so quickly gave up on even trying to make their odd allegiance work before he left. It made Voldemort feel uncomfortable…even troubled. He supposed that maybe Harry was correct by saying it wasn't going to work in the end. Yes, he could see it now. He had his ideals about how things should be, and if Potter didn't like them why should he, a Dark Lord, care about what a sixteen year old boy thinks?

A boy surprisingly smart and insightful for his age…so remarkably like him at sixteen and yet so utterly different there was almost no comparison.

Damn, his thoughts never got away with him before. They were gallingly fragmented. It was possible he was having a break down—a side effect of the potion, perhaps.

Voldemort looked down at his slender hands. Harry was right about one thing…these weren't the hands of Lord Voldemort. Alive, Harry said, and he was right about that as well. When he breathed
now, it felt like a necessary pleasure, rather than a boring routine.

But ultimately it came down to a choice: was he Tom Marvolo Riddle, a half-blood orphan prodigy, or the Dark Lord Voldemort? Either way, he's been changed by the circumstances of the past weeks; by the potions' effects, or perhaps by other things. He would be lying to himself if he said he hadn't gained a new sense of…humbleness…while being in the care—good care—of Harry Potter. He could go back to the way he was—it might even be easy—but he thought it would almost be cheating himself.

Did he want to live? Or did he want to die? Live, of course, but did that depend on the decision of Tom Riddle versus Voldemort? It was all under his control, and yet his life felt like it was running wild. It simultaneously angered him and caused him fear.

Voldemort straightened in his chair and felt for the other wizard in the house. It was so easy to do, even more than before. Harry was sleeping, but it wasn't peaceful.

He should leave. He really should. Harry told him to. Harry had already given up on him. Who was the failure in this?

But he was the one who kissed Harry. Why? He didn't do that to anybody, not even when he fucked, which, admittedly, hadn't been in a while.

Nobody possessed as much weight in his life like Harry Potter. It wasn't arrogance if he said he had a similar stance in Harry's life as well.

Harry had saved his life…multiple times. What had he ever done for him? Why did he care?

All he was doing was asking himself questions and not finding any answers. Voldemort felt tired. And cold, despite the fire. He stood up and thought of his private home, where Nagini and his wand would be waiting for him. He gathered his magic to Disapparate.

The magic dissipated unused as he instead walked upstairs.
Chapter 12

Sometime during the evening, Harry fell asleep. When he awoke again, it was dark out and he had missed dinner. Feeling better after his nap though still a bit gloomy and more than a little hungry, Harry got off the bed and stepped up to the door. There, he paused with his hand on the knob. Voldemort really wouldn't still be here, would he? He'd left the wards open for the Dark Lord to Disapparate from, but he wouldn't be able to Apparate back in.

Feeling silly for waiting to go down for a midnight snack, Harry opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

"Gah!"

Harry cried out as he tripped over absolutely nothing. He was about to smack (again, Harry sighed to himself) into the hardwood floor but he never made impact. He squinted at the floor that was inches away from his face as his body hovered over it. The Levitation charm on him was dropped and he landed with a lot less force than what he would have, but it still wasn't painless.

"Ow," Harry more or less whined, pouting as he pressed his cheek into the cool floor.

"Clumsy, aren't we Potter?"

Harry rolled over and propped himself up on his elbows so he could glance up at a smirking Voldemort, who was standing over him, his arms crossed across his chest.

"That was a dirty trick. And what the hell are you doing standing here in a dark hallway?"

Voldemort's grin persisted for a split second more before it was replaced with an expression of insouciance as he shrugged. "This is what I always do when I'm waiting for temperamental teenagers to come to their senses."

"Come to my senses? What does that mean? In any case, I'm just hungry. I'll go now and fix that while you wait here."

Harry moved to get up but Voldemort had magically trapped his legs so Harry was unable to push up off the floor. Harry felt a slight twinge of panic in his gut. This was Voldemort, after all, and it was usually his policy to stop at nothing to get what he wanted…whatever that was. So what did he want now? Surely he wasn't going to call Harry out about his sudden change of heart, was he? While Harry deliberated with himself on Voldemort's motives, there was a voice in Harry's mind that whispered how the confident look on Voldemort's visage made him even more attractive than what his natural looks gave him.

It was in that moment, as he lay pathetically on the floor, Harry realized how earlier he'd been running away from something he didn't want to face. He was afraid of what was happening to him. Never would he ever have guessed that he'd end up liking something about Voldemort as he did now…and that maybe more than he should. Problem was, he was letting his confusion and fear get in the way of what he really needed to focus on. He had been protecting himself from the disappointment his life liked to dish out to him on a regular basis, because now there was something else he might want that was so bizarre as to be unlikely to ever come true. But just because he was having certain…feelings…he shouldn't let them control him and cause him to forget the rest of the important things. Even though he never asked for it, Fate had given him the responsibility to do something about this war, and it was his noble heart that gave him the
compulsion to comply.

As a result of his roiling emotions, he had never paused and given Voldemort a chance to think about all he said, never let him make a decision…what happened if he did? He could just keep on ignoring the other…things.

"Voldemort?"

Harry held the man's gaze for several beats of time before the gestured at the younger wizard's legs and said, "If I let go, will you stay and talk?"

Harry nodded with private resolve. "Yes."

Voldemort allowed Harry to stand up. He felt a hand wrap around his wrist in a restraining hold. The touch was warm, which Harry found wholly dissimilar from the ice cold touch of snake-face Voldemort. It was pleasant, soothing, and more so, it felt right. He almost wished it didn't.

"Hey, you said you'd let me go. What gives?" Harry shook his wrist, trying to rid himself of Voldemort's possessing hand.

Glancing at Harry with a wry eye, Voldemort said, "You have a rather annoying habit of getting away from our confrontations. Therefore, I am taking due precaution." Without any further notice Harry was pulled into the bedroom he had just vacated and pushed down to sit on the bed. Voldemort then resumed his cross-armed stance from before and stared at Harry.

"Why didn't you leave?" Harry asked rather neutrally.

Through the dim lighting, Harry could discern the conflicted expression on Voldemort's face.

"I don't know," the older man finally said and did not offer more. Harry found that he could sympathize with that; there were many things he's done lately for reasons unknown to him…but for reasons he didn't care to look too closely at.

The bedroom was dimly lit for the time of night it was, with only a warming fire giving off an orange glow as it burned in the hearth set in the wall. Voldemort's crimson eyes seemed to pierce through the drab light as he looked at Harry. Though the shadows caught the low planes of his face, emphasizing the sharp, chiseled angles of his handsome bone structure, it only served to highlight his pensive expression.

"Potter…you gave me a decision to make and then made it for me." His tone was condescending and dissatisfied, and Harry felt he deserved it.

Harry's free hand picked at the loose fabric of his pants as his shadowed green eyes studied the fascinating planes of his thighs. Right at that moment he felt far from being a Gryffindor; his mettle seemed to have abandoned him.

"I did, didn't I?"

Voldemort made a harrumphing noise in the back of his throat. "Yes, you did. So will you give me a chance to decide for myself?"

"Yes," Harry responded unhesitant.

"Good, because, like it or not, I can make some decisions you may actually agree with, Harry." Voldemort's use of his first name struck something within Harry. It was that subtle, almost
encouraging gesture that gave him the courage to look up into Voldemort's eyes.

"You said I could be…saved. Merlin knows what made you come to that conclusion, you stupid boy, but you did. I find the term inadequate to describe the situation, but for now we will use it," Voldemort continued, prompting a response from the other wizard.

"I did say that," Harry voiced softly, "and I stand by it." He was surprised by the openness Voldemort was displaying. He clenched his hands into fists and turned to look into the magically-burning fire. "But when I say 'you' I mean Tom Riddle. Voldemort is only a person you created, not the person you were born as. Voldemort is an insane wizard drowning in his own shallow agendas."

Harry felt Voldemort's eyes on him and he instinctively looked back at him.

"Something's happened to me," started Voldemort. "I am not certain, but as I have a habit of blaming you for all my problems, I'll say that I believe you've corrupted me."

Harry snorted in what could have been humor, but also chagrin at Voldemort's brilliant logic. Besides, he'd remembered mentioning something like that to the man earlier. "I already told you that—"

Voldemort completely ignored Harry's snarky comment and interrupted him as he stepped in close. :Your soul has corrupted mine for the past fifteen years,: he hissed, speaking in the seductive tone of Parseltongue. :It is the only thing that I can come up with that makes sense. You protected it, cared for it, however deliberately or unconsciously, and as a result it changed. You accepted it as your own fifteen years ago, took in what I discarded.: 

"Sounds like we're talking about an abandoned puppy," Harry muttered. Voldemort gave him a berating look.

"I am trying to have a serious conversation," he patronized exasperatedly.

Harry cleared his throat sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Harry," Voldemort said, shocking Harry when he closed the distance between them and leaned in close.

"I have made my decision. I can't be Voldemort. He is weak. He will die a failure."

'Who was this man?' was Harry's immediate thought. His brow furrowed from a sudden onslaught of emotions.

"Are you saying that because of what happened with the potion? Or do you believe it?"

Voldemort chuckled, the sound loud in Harry's ears as he pulled away and stepped back.

"I told you: you corrupted me. What my soul lacked, it has now gained from you. The past few weeks you've been trying to tell me things…important things. I didn't fully understand, not then, but I think I knew that. It frustrated me, this not knowing the full extent of what you did; I loathe not knowing."

Smiling, Harry rolled his eyes while trying to hide the shiver from the contrast from the warmth of Voldemort's body when he had stood close and the coolness of the open air.

:You see, Harry,: Voldemort—Tom? To Harry that felt more appropriate for the first time in ages
—Tom hissed in Parseltongue, :it's *you* who is Voldemort's greatest weakness as much as it is you who is…Tom Riddle's greatest strength,: he said after a brief hesitation over his given name.

:You've always carried the burden of whether I lived or died. For some reason, you want me to live; how can I deny you that option?:

Harry started to fidget and look down. The Parseltongue was almost…distracting.

"Harry," Tom chided and grabbed hold of Harry's chin to force the teen to meet his eyes. He swallowed heavily.

"You see, I would still very much like to win, but you were right; I've been very selfish. I need someone to tell me when to be self-sacrificing. You are very good at that," he said drolly. "I need a balance…I will always be cruel, ruthless, and quick to anger. But you can be kind, forgiving, and tolerant. We are two sides of one coin. You asked me about our wands, once, and I didn't have an answer. Now I do: we were *meant* for this."

Harry bit into his bottom lip for the few moments it took him to considered things before he released it. The light in the bedroom had caught half of Tom's face, and Harry saw that the shadowed half gave the impression of an old man who'd been seen many things through his years, but it was the other half that Harry focused on—that side of Tom looked so young and confident.

"Alright," Harry said simply. "So what happens now?"

Tom's face looked victorious. "A compromise between two sides, perhaps?" Tom said amusedly, and Harry's mouth twitched at the reference. There were many lessons learned recently about compromises.

Harry suddenly grinned cheekily. "You know, first people have to see how Light and Dark leaders can get along. I have it under good authority that the Light leader has grown quite old, and that the person who will no doubt be seen as his replacement is open to different possibilities. As for the Dark Lord…well, I think I am in the process of convincing him the advantages of this idea."

Tom arched a dark brow. "Indeed?"  

Harry, with an airy shrug, replied, "He seems eager to speak with me, enough so that I've been tripping over him. That hurt, by the way." Harry jabbed the air in Tom's direction with a disciplinary finger. But before Harry could pull his hand away, it was snatched up into Tom's slender one. Harry's muscles wound up tightly as he was somewhat startled by the sudden piercing look in the other man's ruby eyes.

:Nobody but you could convince him.: Just as fast as the expression had come over Tom's countenance, it vanished as one of calm replaced it as he jumped back to English. "And you deserved it for all the times you *Accio'*d me."

Harry sniggered, not at all sorry for that. He closed his eyes as if reminiscing. He had to open them again into glaring slits, though, when his efforts to retrieve his stolen hand weren't fruitful. Tom merely looked at him in innocence, a guise that he pulled off very well, much to Harry's ire.

"Ever the control freak, huh? Tom," he said, testing how it tasted on his tongue, and said man seemed to subtly flinch at the name but didn't react otherwise. "That's *my* hand," Harry complained, once again trying to pull his hand out of Tom's bigger one. With sudden flourish, Tom pulled Harry up from the bed.

"You said you were hungry," was all he said in explanation, and as he still had Harry's hand firmly
clutched in his, Harry had no choice but to follow the wayward Dark Lord. He didn't miss the odd expression on Tom's face as he subtly glanced down at their clasped hands.

The rest of the small house was as dimly lit as the bedroom they had just vacated. It was, after all, in the middle of the night. In the sitting room, Harry could see there was still a fire idly heating the room with banked flames, but Tom bypassed the space in favor of stepping into the kitchen.

Harry dropped himself heavily into one of the kitchen chairs placed around the small dining table. Tom, having finally let go of Harry's hand, sat in the chair opposite of the younger wizard. He turned to the small female House Elf who had popped into existence and was waiting on their beck and call.

"Harry and I would be grateful if you could bring us some dinner, as we both missed it earlier this evening," he said pleasantly to Jip, who responded in an enthusiastic positive.

The Elf popped away to some other part of the kitchen, returning as promised a minute later with the chicken dinner that she probably had prepared earlier and had put into preservation stasis when the two wizards who would have eaten it hadn't shown up at the usual dining period. Before the food had arrived, Harry had tried to appear wholly fascinated with his hands that were clasped together on the tabletop before him, all the while pretending to be indifferent to Tom Riddle's stare.

"Is everthings being okay?" Jip asked, wringing her hands together as Harry and Tom inspected the plates placed before them. Harry placed a watery smile on his lips and nodded.

"Thank you, Jip, it looks wonderful. We'll call you if we need anything."

Jip squeaked happily through her toothy smile and disappeared with a pop. Now alone, Harry picked up his fork and hurriedly scooped up some mashed potato, stuffing it into his mouth and swallowing dryly. The food was tasteless, not because of Jip's bad cooking, but because it turned out Harry wasn't as hungry as he thought. Tom, with far more elegance, also took a bite of potato, appearing to swallow it with ease. Harry scowled into his plate and put his fork down, turning his eyeglass-covered gaze at the man sitting across from him.

"Vol—Tom, how can I believe that you would just willingly give up everything you've been fighting for just because I said that you've been wrong? Forgive me if I'm being judgmental, but past experience has not given me much confidence in your willingness to see anyone's point of view other than your own. You don't change your mind. People don't usually change in one night."

Tom's face became solemn. "People usually don't gain their soul and sanity back in one night, either."

"That's true," Harry agreed quietly. His lips thinned as he pressed them tightly together. "What about everyone else? The Death Eaters...how do you expect them to just go along with your sudden radical change of heart?"

Tom, who had never physically looked tense, somehow now radiated an aura of relaxation. He let a slow, sneaky grin stretch across his face. "They are my followers; they will do what I tell them to."

Harry fought the urge to throw his biscuit at Tom's face. But, in some aspect, it was comforting to know the man hadn't changed too much. He knew that what Tom said probably wasn't the best solution, but they had time to work on it later.

They didn't speak much more through the meal. Harry found his appetite again and eventually
pushed away his empty plate and stood up. Tom was instantly on his feet as well, and Harry almost thought he was going to confiscate one of his limbs again. He placed his hands behind his back in precaution.

"I'm going to bed."

A warm body trailed closely behind as Harry made his way back up the stairs and down the hallway towards the master bedroom. As the young man passed all the guest bedrooms and still his shadow remained, he frowned. Stopping abruptly, Harry felt Tom's hot breath on the back of his neck, as the other man had stopped within inches of Harry. Whirling around, Harry found himself nose-to-nose with Tom Riddle. They were so close Harry could feel the body heat radiating of the older man. He tried to breathe normally, but it was hard with Tom this close and somehow causing all the air in the house to vanish. What kind of magic was that?

"Um, where are you going? This is my bedroom; find your own."

Harry actually witness something he'd never thought he'd see: confusion, and perhaps…unhappiness?...on the Dark Lord's face. But the quick as lightning expression disappeared as if he'd imagined it as Tom's mouth quirked upwards in a salacious smirk.

"But, Potter, haven't we been sharing a bed these last few weeks? Why stop now?"

'That was completely different,' Harry's mind supplied.

Harry poked Tom in the chest with a deflecting finger. It didn't make Tom step away, but at least Harry was able to back up a step and keep Tom where he stood.

"Because there are plenty of other bedrooms you can sleep in. Now shoo."

With a lingering look, Tom slowly turned back and selected the closest bedroom. Harry watched as he disappeared into the room before letting out a sigh and backing into his room, slowly and quietly shutting the door with a soft click. He'd won that battle, but for some reason it felt hollow. Maybe he had been a bit hasty when he'd turned Tom away…

Harry huffed in frustration. The young man took the time to consider the possible ramifications of the soul connection they shared. Harry had a piece of Tom's soul inside him. Maybe that was why he was feeling so…attached to the other wizard. How much more intimate can they get?

For some reason, that thought made him blush. Wrong wording, perhaps…

It was odd to think that through all the things he's been through where he thought he'd been going through alone, he hadn't been alone. There was always a little bit of someone else there with him. Not that he had noticed it at the time, so in a way it didn't count.

But now he knew better. And what's more, he could feel the presence of the person he was connected to. It was comforting. And Tom had said something about Harry's soul changing his small piece he'd accidently given him. Maybe it was an equal bargain and they both got something out of it.

Harry crawled into bed and curled in on himself. Using his wand it upped the strength of the fire. At least he didn't have to worry about the Ministry and underage magic…the Blacks, being a "Dark" family, had protective and secrecy wards up to a person's eyeballs in all their houses.

Harry had slept a better part of the day way, but he felt exhausted. If only his mind and body agreed with each other. Even with his improvement with meditative mind exercises from learning
Occlumency, his thoughts just wouldn't untangle and let him rest. While this was his house, it was unfamiliar. The room felt too big, the bed too soft, and there was an almost overwhelming silence that pressed all around, making Harry feel cold despite the heavy bed coverings he huddled under and the flames in the hearth.

Harry rolled over for what could have been the hundredth time. He wanted to cry, laugh, or maybe bang his head against the wall and he couldn't tell why as he stared at the ceiling for ages, blinking only when necessity called for it. Sometime—minutes or hours later—his eyes closed and didn't reopen.

By the time Harry had cleaned up, dressed, and went down into the kitchen, Tom was already waiting for him.

Harry stood uncertainly in the doorway, waiting for the other man to notice him. It didn't take long.

"Sit down and eat."

Harry sighed exasperatedly and sat across from Tom.

"You ever heard of the word 'please'?" The Elves had made eggs for breakfast, and they were quite good.

"I have no need of it," Tom concluded. Harry rolled his eyes. "When are you going back to Hogwarts?"

The young wizard shrugged. "I don't know," he said softly. In all honesty he didn't feel like it just yet. "Not today," he added with certainty.

"Good, because I am taking you to my home."

"What?" Harry fell back against his chair, wincing as his still-sore back was abused. "What for?"

"I have been gone for several weeks, and I need my wand." Harry acquiesced that this was true and took another bite of his eggs. Tom kept looking at him though.

"You are just going to go along with this?" he asked, mildly incredulous.

Harry shrugged. "Sure. Is there a reason I shouldn't?"

Shaking his head, the other man said, "No, but there could have been."

Oh. Well, maybe Harry had been a bit quick to trust someone who was a Dark Lord despite all his assurances that he was no longer Harry's enemy.

Harry shrugged again. "I have to trust you," he said simply, eliciting a slight shift in Tom's expression, and then went back to his eggs.

A little later, Tom nodded at Harry's plate. "Are you finished?"

"Yes," Harry replied. Immediately Tom stood from the table, and Harry scrambled to follow suit.

"Are we going now?"

"Yes."
"Oh. Shall I pack a bag?" Harry said mordantly. Tom turned and gave Harry a look.

"No," he said blandly in a way that indicated for Harry to stop being stupid.

Harry sighed exasperatedly and trudged behind the retreating man. Had he really thought giving the man his soul back would improve his humor?

"Hey, uh, Tom?" The name took some getting used to. "Are there going to be Death Eaters there? Because, I don't think they like me very much."

His concerns were ignored. "Grab on tight." Tom held out the indicated appendage to the wayward boy. Harry bit his lip as he hesitated, knowing full well how Apparating felt. It felt even worse with a full and nervous stomach from the prospect of an uncertain destination.

Tom apparently noticed Harry's discomfort.

"Harry, don't worry; I'll take care of you just as you've taken care of me."

Harry's chest lurched at that easily spoken statement. "So says the Dark Lord," he mumbled out of habit but nonetheless placed his hand on Tom's arm with little further hesitation. From the corner of his eye he saw Tom smirk before his world was shoved into a tube the diameter of his fist. When they reappeared in the land of the normal, Harry tottered dizzily but before he could fall, a pair of strong arms held him up.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled, feeling his cheeks grow warm in embarrassment and something else.

As he righted himself, with Tom's assistance, Harry took a moment to look around.

"This is it? This is your super-secret lair?"

"Potter, you weren't really expecting the skulls and blood on the walls, were you?"

Harry twisted in Tom's arms—the man had yet to let him go—and looked into the scarlet eyes of his mostly ex-nemesis.

"No, of course not. But I was expecting the swelled head effect. Where's all the expensive furniture, the lavish decorations, hell, the rest of the room?" Harry asked as he looked around the very modestly sized space. Where he expected marble he found painted plaster and hardwood, and where he expected ivory inlay he only found simple carved wood. He'd expected a castle, or a large mansion at the least.

Tom's brows rose to his dark hairline, his hands still loosely resting on Harry's back. "So sorry my entrance hall his not to your liking, Potter. I had not realized your fame had gone to your head; you hid it well."

Harry sneered up at him.

"If it makes you feel better, this is my private home, where none of my followers know about. You have a safe house, and so do I."

Frowning, Harry questioned, "So this isn't the place Snape dosed you? I thought we were here to get your wand."

"We are."

Harry sulked when Tom refused to elaborate. "Can't you answer anything in larger sentences, or
better yet, paragraphs?"

:Master!:

Harry whirled around and pressed his back to Tom's body. Arms slowly reached up around his chest and held him there.

:Nagini,: Tom hissed, his tone genuinely pleased at the sight of his familiar. Nagini, all twelve feet of her, slithered across the floor to the feet of her Master. The viper aimed her large, triangular head in Harry's direction, who stopped himself just in time from ducking behind the only human shield available and forced himself to stay still. Sure, he had been very up close and personal with a deadly, very intelligent, bloodthirsty snake the past weeks, but that didn't mean he wasn't a little disconcerted by this one; Nagini was huge!

Nagini flickered out her tongue, tasting the air. :You look different,: she told her Master. :I like it,: the snake concluded, before studying Harry. :Who is this, Master? You smell of him, and he of you.:

Harry found his cheeks turning pink as he blushed. He was glad Tom could only see the back of his head and could not witness what Harry thought was a silly reaction to Nagini's statement.

:This is Harry, Nagini,: Tom told the snake, who's eyes glinted balefully.

:Harry Potter? When do I get to eat him?:

:Excuse me?: Harry burst out, forgetting that this was a twelve foot viper who was a Dark Lord's familiar. :You do not get to eat me.: Harry glanced back and up at Tom. :Tell her she doesn't get to eat me.:

Nagini hissed and coiled back in a striking stance. :Do not speak to Master like that! You will pay for your insolence!:

:Nagini, calm yourself. Harry is on our side now.:  

Nagini hissed in surprise. :Potter has joined you?:

Harry snorted. :Not bloody likely. He's joined me.:  

:Potter, that is not—:

:Sure is,: Harry interrupted. Tom sighed heavily, Harry feeling the movement of the man's chest against his back.

:We will discuss the…minutiae later. For now you two: behave,: Tom released his hold on Harry and walked out of the entrance hall with nary a glance back, leaving a confused snake and a triumphant, smirking Harry behind.

Nagini stared down the young wizard, her dark beady eyes not presenting any human emotion. Her black tongue tasted the air once more.

:You wouldn't have tasted good anyway…too skinny.: With that she turned away and followed after her Master. Harry was left lamenting the fact he had been so stunted in his growth that even an animal noticed. Sighing heavily, Harry followed the example of the other two and moved deeper into Lord Voldemort's home.
Peering his head through the few doorways he passed, he entered the study Tom and Nagini had disappeared into. He frowned when he noticed Nagini seemed to be having some sort of fit and watched as she heaved something up onto the floor of the study.

"Oh, that is disgusting! Are you actually going to touch that? Ugh." Harry grimaced as Tom indeed bent down and picked up the slender, pale object that Nagini had just vomited up. "She ate your wand? How is that even possible?" Harry was having flashbacks to the time he had shoved his own wand up a troll's nose. Yuck.

Tom flicked his thirteen and a half inch yew wand, magicking away the bile left on it from its time in Nagini's stomach. "It was the safest place for it in a manor full of potential traitors. She knows that if ever my emergency wards activate and my wand is left behind, she is responsible for it. I've rigged several portkeys accessible to her that can only be activated by Parseltongue, so if need be she can use one to reach safety."

Tom sat in his padded desk chair, and immediately was smothered in the large viper's embrace. A small but noticeably present smile lit his face as he more or less cuddled the massive snake to his chest. All Harry could do was stand in the doorway and stare in wonder. Never had he seen such raw affection on this man's visage, no matter which particular version he wore. It was utterly devastating how handsome and human it made Tom look.

:I've been so worried, Master. I did not know what happened.: 

Harry eyed the pair of them, and suddenly remembered that he had seen through the eyes of both these beings at one point or another.

"She was a Horcrux too, wasn't she? You had a connection with her…how could you have not known I was your Horcrux as well for the longest time?"

A sardonic mien covered Tom's features. "Blind contempt and a large dose of denial is what I infer," was his answer.

Harry shrugged. "Sure, I can understand that. How horrible for you to find out that person you most wished to kill was the key to your immortality. What a letdown."

Tom hummed in a noncommittal answer, his expression somewhat vacant.

"Do you ever wonder if there is someone watching all this and laughing their arse off?" Harry asked, scratching the back of his neck. Tom let out a short burst of laughter, the first Harry had heard from the man. It made him chuckle in return.

"It's the ultimate irony, Potter." He turned his attention to the snake in his lap. :How have you been otherwise, my dear?: he asked his familiar. Harry raised an eyebrow at the term of endearment.

:Bored. No one else comes here, and the House Elves hide from me.; the snake pouted. Harry's lips quirked at the display and he finally came to the realization he was still standing stupidly in the door so he moved to claim a free chair on the opposite side of Tom's desk. Harry found his eyes drawn to the long-fingered hand that was lazily stroking Nagini's head.

:Thank you for saving my wand.: 

:I live to serve you, Master,: Nagini responded formally while shoving her nose into Tom's chest. Harry knew from experience that that chest was quite warm…

"It's very strange, Harry."
The boy jumped at the call of his name. "Uh, what is?"

"I am no longer worry about the amount of affection I feel for her now," he said, his fingers scratching under Nagini's chin. Nagini hissed blissfully, and Tom said, :Yes, I know how good that feels now.: His mouth was quirked amusedly, and Harry sniggered when he remembered how often he had done that to the man while he was a snake.

"Before recent events she was the only living thing I had any sort of close regard for besides myself. I always thought I cared for Nagini because she was my Horcrux and is loyal, but maybe she is just loyal because I cared for her…"

Harry was silent as Tom mused through his newfound emotions. Even as someone used to feeling freely, he still couldn't always get them straight. He'd been feeling like that a lot, lately.

:Come now, Nagini, I have things I must attend to.: Nagini obediently uncoiled herself and slipped down to the floor. Tom stood and Harry followed suit. Harry had to look up at the taller man when he stepped in close, closer than what seemed to be needed. The young man drew his bottom lip into his mouth and bit it.

"Would you like to see the rest of my home?"

All Harry could do was nod. It was suspiciously difficult to speak for some reason. Tom walked past him, their shoulders brushing casually. Harry followed closely behind with little hesitation.

"I obtained this house around twenty years ago," Tom explained as they moved through the rooms. As what Harry had seen before, the rest of the decently-sized house had plenty of creature comforts but it was not excessive. Harry liked it very much.

"How many properties do you own?" Harry asked.

"A few," Tom replied.

"And how many is a few?" He was almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Five."

Harry shrugged. It could've been way more than that.

They ended up in the library, the only room which displayed any sort of lavishness and overabundance, but that was merely because the number of books Tom owned was beyond what any normal person would and should have. Tom leaned casually against a bookshelf while Harry wandered around in complete awe.

"You haven't actually read all of these, have you?"

Tom scoffed. "Of course not," he said. Harry sighed in relief, but of course Tom had to burst his bubble. "I had just acquired a few before I was turned into a snake and hadn't had the chance to read them yet."

"You are such a nerd," Harry admonished.

"I am a genius, not a...a 'nerd'" he said, his voice strangled, "as you so say."

Harry sniggered.
It was dark here.

After giving Harry a tour of his home, Tom had left him with a massive stack of books while he went off and did Dark Lord stuff…or so Harry liked to think. Harry occupied himself in the library, actually seeing the merit for him to read the particular tomes Tom had indicated which were full of magical, political, and social theory and methods. He also chatted for a bit with Nagini when she showed up. After a time—much longer than Harry expected—Tom came and collected him and they had dinner in his dining room. Afterwards, he indicated a bedroom Harry was to spend the night in and disappeared again. Harry had begun to feel a little lonely.

And now Harry was in this dark place and couldn't remember how he got here. He didn't think there was much to see, anyway as he wandered in this place of nothing. He was walking on a flat plane that was most likely the floor but was generally indiscernible to what could be called the walls or simply black empty space. He had a destination, but didn't know how he knew that or even what it was.

That is, until he tripped over it and fell into its arms.

"What is with you?" Harry exclaimed, wriggling in the grasp as he righted himself.

"You're not supposed to be here, so don't yell at me."

"Well," Harry said, twisting around on the ground so he could see Tom's face as they lay side by side on presumably the floor, "what are you doing on the ground?"

Tom shrugged. "I have nothing else to do. I don't know what to dream anymore."

Frowning, Harry tentatively poked Tom in the chest, feeling its solidness. He did seem to remember going to bed, but—"This is a dream?"

"What did you think it was?"

"A vision?" Harry said, unsure.

Tom's expression was contemplative. "I suppose you could call it that, but for all intents and purposes we are both asleep, and so the technical term would be dreaming."

"Oh." Harry fell silent, completely at a loss as to what to say further. "So what am I doing here?"

"Do you not want to be here?" Tom's voice was carefully neutral as he asked a question rather than answered Harry's.

"I don't know," was Harry's answer. They fell into silence, still connected by Tom's arms around Harry as they lay together in the dreamscape. Harry couldn't say why, but being this close to Tom felt natural. Maybe it was because he had spent the better part of three weeks in close proximity.

"You said you don't know what to dream about anymore," Harry finally said. "What do you mean by that?"

Tom closed his eyes. "I've just had more than half of my soul returned to me. Did you know the soul is directly correlated with the mind and so splitting your soul therefore affects that as well?"

"Yes," Harry said blandly. He wanted to add 'Duh' but refrained from the impulse.

Tom made a noise in the back of his throat and opened his eyes. "Dreams are so insipid and
uncreative when you only have a fraction of a soul to fuel it. Anyway, here I am with all this soul space to use and I don't know what to do with it. What does a sane, whole person dream about?"

From the corner of his eye, Harry caught sight of a single, glimmering star in the distance of a world that now seemed to have more substance. "I'm not sure if I know the answer to that," he stated in mild humor. Tom chuckled lightly, catching the gist of Harry questioning his own sanity.

"Tom?" Harry started after a minute. "Why did you make so many Horcruxes?"

Tom's brow furrowed and he said simply, "I wanted to see how far I could go—push the limits of magic—and, in simple terms, I didn't want to die. Both were obsessive desires. They aren't gone."

"But why do you fear death so much?" Harry asked softly. It was oddly freeing, being in this unreality. He pressed his palm to Tom's chest over his heart, not actually sure if he would be able to feel it in a dream. But there it was, a steady drumming in the older wizard's ribs.

Tom fidgeted, what Harry interpreted to be an almost nervous gesture. "Death is the unknown; I hate the not knowing. Death can break you. I didn't want to be broken. Death leaves you abandoned and forgotten; I never wanted to be abandoned or forgotten again. Mostly, I want to matter, to not be ordinary."

'You matter to me…' Slowly, Harry clenched the hand that rested over Tom's heart as that stray thought slipped through his mind. He closed his eyes and placed his ear over it so he could hear the sound of it beating. A few more stars had appeared in the sky.

"You could be extraordinary without being terrible," Harry said aloud. "Maybe you fear death because you've never lived."

Harry's own heart was fluttering rather quickly in his chest. He looked up. This close he could see the faceted pattern in Tom's gem-like eyes as they met his. There was a sudden shift in the mood around them. A slight breeze stirred the hair on the back of Harry's head.

"I used to hate you," Tom murmured. "But you made it impossible to keep it alive. I've never asked; do you mind having a little bit of my soul within you?"

Did he?

"No," Harry whispered, feeling a cushion of grass underneath his body. The night sky was filled with stars now.

"Huh, looks like you found something to dream about after all," Harry said. An odd look crossed Tom's features as he looked at Harry with sharp intensity. The wind picked up around them and Harry shivered, but Tom didn't.

"Are you cold?"

Harry frowned. "I must be." As if to prove the point, he shivered again. With resolve quietly glimmering within his eyes, Tom reached out and brushed away the bangs covering Harry's scar, and the younger wizard closed his eyes.

When Harry opened them again, he was back in his borrowed bedroom and had accidentally kicked off his comforter and feeling the chill in the air. He wasn't alone in the bedroom though as he had been when he first went to sleep. It didn't take him long to notice Tom's darkened form was
standing over him beside the bed, and it was surprisingly easy to scoot over to make room, even with that wave of smugness passing from the Horcrux connection to him. Tom slid in next to him, pulled the covers back over, and the two fell asleep again lying together much like they were in the dream.

Later when Harry took a moment to think about it, he realized that Tom had from the beginning found something to dream about. After all, what had he been doing in the Dark Lord's dream in the first place?
Chapter 13

It really was quite fascinating. Almost irresistible.

Tom couldn't help but think these things as he threaded his fingers lightly through a sleeping Harry's hair. Such a plebeian gesture. He'd never done this before with anybody. He'd never known how satisfying it could be.

Harry shifted in his sleep, and Tom halted his movements to make sure the boy didn't wake.

How did this happen? When did this happen? Tom's hand clenched and his face twitched, his visage morphing into one of unreserved incredulity from the fact that Harry Potter, this child once destined to kill him, had become someone he'd rather live with than without.

This was one thing he was definitely blaming Harry for. The brat probably planned this all along.

And yet, though he'd like to proclaim Harry had planned this, the utterly laughable thing was the fact Tom was almost positive Harry had no idea what he had done.

Tom had enough self-accountability to admit that yesterday, while it had been necessary to be away from Potter to conduct long-neglected business, it had served the dual purpose of avoiding him. He needed time away; to think, to focus, to stop touching him...

Tom's hand resumed their previous activity of fingering through Harry's black and horribly uncontrollable hair. He simply couldn't resist touching Harry. He had grown used over these weeks to almost constantly basking in the boy's body heat. He wasn't a snake anymore, and thus didn't need it, but perhaps he wanted it—a feeling akin to instinct.

It was the Horcrux; it could easily explain this need to be close, this possessiveness, and even fondness. Harry was the carrier of his soul, and therefore something that needed to be protected in order to protect himself. He was Tom's, no matter what Harry had to say about that; he was his to watch over, his to keep safe, his to keep close. There had always been a little bit of Harry Potter that was his, even before he knew of the Horcrux connection. Harry had been his to kill once. He had owned his death, and now he owned his life. How the world turns...

The rational part of his brain, the one with all the answers, assured him that Harry was his Horcrux and nothing else. Any and all things could be explained away by this. But, the new—dare he say it—emotional part of himself, the one that said logic really doesn't hold all the answers, traitorously whispered the one thing that would blow a hole right through his assessment of the situation using one little piece of evidence.

The fact of the matter was...the Horcrux connection was only the how, not the why of Harry being in his mind to share in his rather desolate dreamscape, something even his rational brain had to admit. The why was something else entirely; there was something more than the Horcrux at work. Nagini, his precious familiar, had been his Horcrux, but he hadn't stumbled across her in any of his dreams. It could be said that Nagini was a snake and Harry was a wizard and so entirely different, but ultimately that didn't matter. He had perfectly operable Occlumency shields, while Harry and Nagini did not, and no matter how close that little sliver of his soul lay next to Harry's, there was no reason for their minds to merge naturally, especially so easily into his mind, without any of them trying, unless one of them wanted it to happen. All Tom remembered was not being at all surprised Harry had met him in that undefined darkness.
Therefore, he could only conclude that he let him in. Why? Tom gritted his teeth and stared at the young face before him as the answer bubbled up.

Okay, fine; he had grown rather attached to Harry Potter and enjoyed his company. There, that wasn't so hard to admit...

…Tom could feel his headache coming back. What he wouldn't give to have someone to Crucio.

This was a whole new experience for Tom. It wasn't every day that he came across someone to whom he could be around and not feel like every second he did so was time wasted. He had never met someone quite like him. Harry Potter was no minion, or enemy. Harry Potter was…something else.

Tom didn't know how to define it. The sight of the young man caused a cascade of emotions once blunted by the purposeful mutilation of his soul. In his mind he couldn't negate the fact the younger wizard was his Horcrux. That elicited the emotional response he would give any of those objects, along with a bit of relief—at least it was this person to whom he'd accidentally given a piece of is soul, though why he should think that was ridiculous in itself.

But from there came a more complicated array of other emotions he felt for neither his inanimate nor his one other living Horcrux. Some Tom knew, some he didn't, and others he wasn't sure even had a name.

For Merlin's sake, he came here because Harry was cold. He wondered if it was this impulsive initiative that also drove him while his defenses were low as the potion took full effect to kiss the younger man. Dammit, maybe Gryffindor impulse really was contagious.

Because he was cold seemed only an excuse to get as close to him as they were in the dream. How terribly translucent it was. "Rather attached" indeed. And what's more, he was beginning to feel rather…impulsive again, what with the object of all his problems lying innocently before him.

Life was so much easier when he simply hated Potter.

'I am Lord Voldemort…no more,' thought Tom. 'I am Tom Marvolo Riddle, because Lord Voldemort would never feel like this for Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived to make my life complicated.'

He decided it was time to make Harry's life a little more complicated as well. He was still a Dark Lord; it was time he acted like one and took what he wanted now that he knew what it was.

Harry awoke swiftly and violently as he was drenched in ice cold water. He yelped, flailing among the suspiciously dry sheets as the icy tremors subsided and his conscious mind caught up to noticed he wasn't actually wet.

"What was that for?" he exclaimed, rubbing up and down his arms to further chase away the residual jinx Tom had used on him. Tom was standing, fully dressed, at the end of the bed, arms crossed and wand clutched casually in one hand. While his expression was blank, his eyes shone with satisfaction.

"It is eight in the morning," was Tom's excuse. Harry looked up at him, not satisfied at all with that explanation but willing to let it slide in favor of some other questions. He retrieved his glasses and put them on, because he felt a lot more secure knowing he could see things coming.

"I came into your dream last night," Harry said banally. Tom only stared at him. "Is it because of
"the Horcrux?" Harry asked hesitantly after a moment.

"It is how you could be there," Tom stated nonchalantly. His eyes flashed.

Harry accepted the answer as a positive. He nodded absently, his gaze trained on his one finger that was tracing the thread patterns in the comforter on his lap. Harry had come to terms...sort of...with the fact that he had developed feelings for Tom Riddle, a fact that was so insane, ridiculous, and downright stupid because for someone like Tom, Harry figured he would never feel anything like that in return. Not that he couldn't, but that he wouldn't. He was Harry Potter. Maybe for Harry the Horcrux Tom would feel a measure of regard, but that didn't necessarily translate to the same for Harry the person.

But, lately he had started to doubt certain assurances he had. He was perfectly capable of ignoring and writing off a fair share of facts as happenstance, but he wasn't blind and sooner or later happenstance turned into something with a purpose. It was impossible to ignore Tom's odd behavior of late, just as it was impossible to ignore his own responses to them. He wondered if Tom even recognized what he was doing, and what Harry was doing in return.

Only one way to find out. Gryffindors were nosy like that.

Making a decision, Harry pushed back the covers and scooted on his knees towards the end of the bed where Tom stood. It was the first time Harry had seen him out of his robes and wearing only black slacks and a white button up shirt. Somehow the look made him more approachable, and for that Harry was grateful.

"Tom, what was I doing in your head last night?" Harry asked point blank. If only he could make the man admit something, then Harry would be happy in the knowledge that he wouldn't have to guess anymore. He didn't know what he would do once he got an answer, but then again that depended on the answer given.

Sure, Harry had expected something, but not necessarily the blatant response he got and therefore didn't have much time to prepare before Tom's lips had descended down onto his. It was like déjà vu. There was a quick yet forceful melding of lips, enough to cause Harry's face to heat and for the sparks of electricity to tingle across his lips before Tom pulled away. Harry's eyes were wide, his lips parted slightly as he breathed through them, already feeling a loss with the absence of Tom's own lips and getting all flustered that he felt that way.

"Well, Harry, what did you expect? You knew that, even before his soul had fully regenerated, Tom felt something that compelled him to kiss you. But why?"

Harry swallowed hard and he brought his hands up to curl around the collar of Tom's shirt.

"Why'd you stop?" he blurted without thinking and then blushed heavily. "Uh, I mean..." He didn't know what he meant, but that certainly wasn't the "why" question he wanted to ask. Tom smirked down at him.

"Didn't want to overwhelm you; I've seen the extent of your experience, after all."

"Oi!" Harry exclaimed, leaning in closer to show exactly what he knew before he froze. Shock... this was shock. Oh, hell, maybe it was teenaged hormones. "Are you going to kiss me again? That might help—mmph." His voice was muffled by another mouth on his. He sighed into the kiss, eyes sliding shut under their own accord.

While Harry really wasn't exactly skilled in this particular talent, Tom manipulated his lips in such
a way that Harry felt like he'd been doing this all his life. It was a bit rough, forceful, and not sweet in anyway, but there was far more to say about this kiss compared to any other Harry participated in before. Perhaps it was the way Tom's fingers trailed lightly up his spine, a sensuous feeling even through the fabric of his shirt. Or maybe it was how Harry could feel the dual pounding of two hearts when he was pulled close the older wizard's chest by that same hand pushing solidly against his back. It could even have been the taste of Tom's tongue when it glided smoothly over his once it broke through Harry's lips. It was nice, but…

It was demanding, controlling, and possessive; his lips were being attacked, not loved or worshiped or all that rot from romance novels. Harry could do little but ride it out…not to say it wasn't enjoyable, just that it didn't quite have the emotions he wished it did. It really wasn't much different than when Voldemort had kissed him before, and left Harry feeling a bit disappointed. Soon enough, he used his hands on Tom's shoulders to push him away.

"Why?" he finally was able to ask simply.

Tom gave him a salacious smirk. "Why what?" Harry ignored Tom's mock thick-headedness.

"Why did you do that?" Perhaps the shock had made him bold before, but now that his brain had time to catch up to the events, Harry was feeling highly confused. Tom was so much older, more experienced, and very, very attractive. Harry supposed it could be merely lust the other man was acting on, but what could he possibly see in a sixteen year old boy that would attract such a sentiment? Harry was perfectly capable of accepting that he felt an electrifying current of emotion for Tom—once-Voldemort—though he was still trying to come to terms with the why and how of it—but that Tom could feel anything like…like that for him was not something he could expect. And in all honesty, he still wasn't convinced Tom did.

Was he Harry the Horcrux, or Harry the person Tom was kissing? That was the question, and Harry was a little afraid of the answer. Was this some twisted way to show ownership or something? Because that's what it felt like: being owned, not wanted. He was tired of being used at the whims of other people. He was seen as a servant, a savior, a tool, but hardly ever as an individual capable of his own thoughts and feelings.

Tom's expression evened though there was still amusement to be seen in the way his one eyebrow was raised a little bit higher than the other.

"Why did you do that, Tom?" Harry repeated again. He could still feel his lips prickling from their abuse, and for some reason it made him…sad. Tom opened his mouth, seemingly in reply, but a sudden fear caused Harry to not even let him answer his own question.

"If you say one word about my being yours, then I won't ever let you touch me again."

Anger caused Tom's eyes to flash a heady red, and the hand that had never left Harry's back now curled up in the hair at the base of his neck. Tom pulled, causing Harry's head to tilt upwards slightly. It didn't hurt, but Harry felt a little trapped by it.

"You wanted it," Tom accused, giving Harry's hair a short tug for emphasis. Harry made an almost inaudible noise in his throat.

"No, what I wanted was not that. And you may think that's what you wanted, but I don't think it was either."

"Nonsense. You are—"
Harry flung himself away with a huff.

"You idiot. Do you really go around kissing everything you own, warming it up at night, or spending the night with it in a dream?"

Tom did not reply, though his eyes narrowed.

"You are such a child sometimes," Harry exclaimed breathily. "Knocking your soul into lots of itty-bitty pieces really stunted your emotional growth."

Here Tom reacted.

"No, if there is anyone to blame for my so called 'stunted emotional growth,' it is the pathetic people that I am unfortunate enough to share blood with and the worthless ingrates who sought to destroy what little dignity an orphan child had. It is the rotten Muggle caretakers who did less 'care' and more 'taking' from a boy they could not see was better than them. It is Dumbledore, who ignored my plight because he had already made a decision about me. Why should I have grown to care about them when none of them cared about me?"

Harry sat stupidly on the bed, transfixed at the sight of Tom Riddle let loose. He stood stiff and stark at the end of the bed, eyes never leaving Harry's face as he took one single, centering breath.

"I will give you your previous point, about how Muggles and wizards really aren't all that different," he said almost conversationally, his voice eerily calm. "They both had that seemingly human," he spat, "trait of undermining and destroying the morality of a fellow human being. I split my soul because I didn't want to be like them."

"And look what you became," Harry broke in, rising on his knees on the mattress top so he could tower to Tom's height. "Something even worse than them." Harry eased up on the harshness of his voice a few notches. Now was not the time to get angry. "Maybe it isn't completely your fault, because you never got to see the best of what people can do. But then again, did you ever look? You're smart, Tom, and you know nothing is definitive until all other options are proven wrong."

To anyone else, Tom appeared fierce and unyielding, but to Harry, he just looked lost. Gathering his courage, he approached Tom again, ignoring the imaginary burn from his gaze, and laid a gentle hand on his cheek. Tom now looked a bit startled.

As if to prove his point, Harry gave Tom that sweet, gentle kiss he wished the one from before had been. One that shared, and didn't take. He ceased all contact with Tom by letting his hand fall from Tom's cheek and back to his side.

"That is what you are missing. Not everybody will forget to care about you, but nobody appreciates being treated like an object. Everything is mutual, Tom."

Tom parted his lips slightly as if to speak before he pressed them into a firm line and turned away to sweep out of the room.

'Impulse control, impulse control,' Tom chanted within his mind. 'When all is said and done, I'm either going to hate Potter again, or I'm going to…'

That sentence went unfinished.

His magic flared around him as he swept through the halls, his mind in haywire. He felt frustrated because this was a situation he'd never encountered before, and he didn't know how to handle it.
He knew what he wanted, but Potter was being difficult about it. His headache was back with a
vengeance, but still he didn't miss that odd aching in his chest. Tom wasn't finished with Harry,
though.

The first thing Harry inappropriately thought was how it was now proven that his "power" of love
was apparently so all-encompassing that males really did do it for him as much as females. He
snorted. Well, one question answered, a billion to go. He always did appreciate progress, he
thought sarcastically.

That hadn't gone how he'd hoped. He'd just gotten so angry and now wished he hadn't. Why did he
keep doing this?

Maybe he was still a bit afraid.

He sighed heavily and rose from the bed. Moments later, he was dressed and ready for the day,
whatever that meant. Coming out from the bathroom, he found he was not alone.

:Nagini,: he said in surprise at seeing the giant snake curled comfortably on his bed. :Make
yourself at home,: he mumbled.

:Stupid boy. This is my home.:

She had a point there.

:What did you do to Master?: she asked directly, apparently not one to mince words. Harry's
eyebrows rose to the top of his forehead.

:What do you mean? He was fine when I last saw him.: Well, physically at least, Harry acceded.

:I am a snake, and therefore do not feel or understand human emotion, but I can taste them and
even I can tell there is something wrong with him. Ever since you returned with him yesterday, he
has been different. This morning it was even worse.:

Harry exhaled deeply and moved across the room to sit beside Nagini's large head on the bed.

:Nagini, did you know what To—your Master put within you? Did you know what it meant to be a
Horcrux?:

Nagini lifted her head in pride. :Master said it was an honor.:

Harry's visage twisted in wry humor. "Uh-huh, it's been a real delight," he said only for his benefit
before he switched back to a language Nagini better understood. :He put pieces of his soul in you,
and in other objects. But they've come back to him now, and I think that is what you perceive as
him being different.:

:I see,: Nagini hissed slowly. :But what did you do to him?:

:Me? I didn't do anything, I told you, it's his soul becoming whole.: Harry wondered if this concept
was too incomprehensible for the snake.

Nagini snapped her jaw. :Foolish human. It is because he is attached to you, more so than even to
me. He wanted to kill you not long ago, and now you've become his. That's what is different.:

Harry groaned, way past tired of hearing about his supposed ownership. :Just because I am still his
Horcrux doesn't make me his!: 
Nagini's tongue flitted past her scaled lips. :Ah, so you still have some of his soul, then? That just makes you more special to him. So why do you say you aren't his, when you are his Horcrux?:

:Because I am more than that.:  

:Of course you are. I was his Horcrux, but now that I am not, as you say, I am still his.:  

:His familiar.: Harry said.

:Exactly. So what are you besides being the Horcrux? To Master, anything he calls "his" is something of great worth and importance to him. I have seen this in my time with him.:  

Harry contemplated what Nagini had to say. Her plain and simplistic view of Tom helped him step back and look at things at another angle. What did he really mean to Tom? It suddenly struck him that Tom may have been trying to show him. Harry shuddered internally as his mind supplied an imaginary picture of Voldemort kissing his followers to show possession over them. No, no, and no; obviously Harry was uniquely special enough as to warrant that treatment. Was that good or bad?

Well, if the heat spreading throughout his body was anything to go by, then this indeed was a good thing. He shook his head.

Harry considered the Horcruxes he at least knew about. There was Tom Riddle's diary—just from identifying it one could discern this would have been something Tom kept close because of its personal nature. The Gaunt ring—a family heirloom. Nagini—his familiar. Harry wasn't exactly sure how many Horcruxes Tom had made, but if the trend in the ones he did know of were anything to go by, they were all something that would have been important to him before he placed his soul in it.

But…Harry wasn't made one on purpose. Was he an exception? Well, he was already Tom's prophesied enemy, so he had some sort of significance. Could Tom separate him and the Horcrux inside him?

Now that he thought about it, Harry found himself relating to how Tom viewed such valued objects in his possession. Harry, as a boy, had grown up with almost nothing of his own, and once he got into the Wizarding World and finally bought his own things with money he never knew he had, it had been one of the highlights in his then (and still) short life. Of his possessions, he protected his wand, his Invisibility Cloak, and the picture album of his parents Hagrid had given him with reverence and devotion.

As a child, Tom Marvolo Riddle, ever since his mother gave birth to him in an orphanage and died, would have had almost nothing but his name, and that he didn't even like. He was already a bit of a messed up kid, what was one more complex on top of all the others?

He still didn't like the idea, but…maybe Tom meant more when he called Harry his. Maybe he just wasn't capable of feeling and expressing things like Harry did, considering his background. Everybody was different, and Tom and Harry were about as different as they came. The idea wasn't farfetched at all.

Thinking for that brief moment about Tom's mother caused something to niggle in the back of Harry's mind. He had forgotten something, and now it was right at the tip of his tongue.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, turning to Nagini. :It's New Year's Eve.: he told her. :December thirty-first.:  

The viper stared up at him blankly. Harry huffed good-naturedly.
It's Tom's birthday. Nagini picked her head up off the bed and flicked her tongue. Birthday is...hatchday?

Yes.

Nagini still didn't look impressed.

You know, humans usually celebrate their birthdays. But, I take it Tom does not?

No, not that I've seen.

Well, Harry in a way hadn't expected him to. He grinned mischievously.

Nagini, are the Apparition wards locked down? Harry wouldn't be surprised if Tom made it so he was unable to leave.

Yes. Nagini hissed, confirming Harry's suspicions. He considered his options, and the House Elf Dobby popped into his mind. Something like that might work.

"Scavy," he called aloud, hoping his inherited House Elf would be able to come to him. Without fail, the pale Elf popped into the room. Idly, Scavy eyed the surroundings, and more importantly, the very large snake lounging next to his Master.

"Master Harry, can I assist yous?" he asked nervously.

"I need to go home," Harry told him. "Can you take me?"

"It's being no problem, Sir!" Scavy held out his diminutive hand to Harry, which Harry reached out to take, but before he could Nagini hissed and wrapped herself around his waist. Scavy's eyes bulged out in distress.

Master does not wish you to leave.

I'm coming back. I think Tom just needs some time to...think—and so did he—"and I've a surprise in mind for him.: Harry paused to think for a moment, and then said, :You can come with me, if you want.: Fine.; Nagini said decisively, and brought more of her body around Harry's. Harry reached out and grabbed Scavy's hand and a moment later he was staggering in the entrance hall of the Black house.

Tom was furious. Not only was Harry gone, but his familiar was as well. The Floo was disconnected, and the Anti-Apparition wards were up, so he was unsure how that slippery wizard had managed to run off.

He wanted him back.

It was now evening and Tom had had all day to constantly and torturously go over every moment, every word, that he and Harry had shared. He was trying to figure out what exactly it was Harry wanted. He didn't know what it was, and he didn't know how to ask. This morning Tom knew what he wanted, and then Harry had to go and tell him he was wrong. It left him frustrated, angry, and with that constant headache. Harry was being so stubborn.

A shift in the house wards indicated the arrival of magical beings, but even without it he could feel that Harry was back. He left his darkened study and quickly made his way to that unique presence,
surprised to find it in the dining hall. He could feel the magic building in the tips of his fingers, ready to hex the boy for his stupidity.

"Potter, where have you—"

He stopped. Sitting calmly at the dining table, a familiar green viper wrapped au fait around his shoulders and waist, was Harry Potter. And he appeared to have a…cake?...set on the table before him.

"Uh, Happy Birthday, Tom."

Tom could feel his eyes widening, but he couldn't help that reaction. He looked from an entertained Potter to the cake and, indeed, there were a handful of small, burning candles stuck within it. He took a step forward. The cake was half green and silver—the colors of Slytherin, he presumed—and set in the center was an animated image of a white cobra. Tom grimaced.

"That is what you've been doing all day?" he ground out, and to his irritation Harry only smiled wider and nodded. Tom eyed his snake. :And Nagini, you let him?:

:He said it was your hatch—:

:Birth.; Harry interrupted.

:—birthday.; Nagini amended, :and that it is a day of celebration for humans.: 

"She picked the colors. I was going to make it red and gold," Harry told him. Tom grimaced deepened.

In all honesty, he had forgotten it was his birthday, and really he didn't care that he had. It wasn't like his birthday held any special memories, or that he had grown used to celebrating it every year. He would have been perfectly happy to let it go by unnoticed. He didn't even know Harry knew his birthday. Probably Dumbledore's doing that he did.

"Potter, I don't know what to say," Tom said pejoratively, fully intending for his displeasure to be known to Harry. This was such a ludicrous thing to go missing for.

"You could say something like, 'What a surprise,' or, 'Thank you, Harry and Nagini, for this wicked cake.'"

Tom grew exasperated. "I care nothing of my birthday, Potter," he said snidely.

Harry's expression hardened a little. "Well, maybe I do. I may have hated you for most of my life, but I don't anymore and I like to show my appreciation for the people I care about."

Damn the boy for making him lose most of his anger with a few simple words. That there was an easing of tension within his body that had been with him from this morning didn't go unnoticed, either.

"Well?" Harry's comment broke into Tom's thoughts.

"Well what?" he asked, somewhat more sharply than he intended. Harry still seemed mostly unfazed. Did he really not frighten the boy anymore?

"Are you going to blow out your candles?"

Taking out his wand, expression bored, Tom flicked it and the flames were snuffed out. Harry
sighed a bit overdramatically.

"Did you at least make a wish?"

"Yes, that you would be sucked into a different dimension so someone else will have to deal with you."

"You'd miss me," the brat said cheekily.

'Yes…'

"Probably not," Tom said aloud, ignoring the traitorous whisper. He wasn't sure if it was what he said or something else that caused the change, but the younger wizard's face suddenly sobered and he gently prodded Nagini away so he could stand up. He rounded the table and was soon standing just a few steps away from Tom. Tom noticed he was wearing fitted Muggle jeans and a sort of gold jumper that went well with his green eyes. How Tom even noticed that he decided not to examine.

"I do, you know. Care about you," Harry said simply, and Tom was forced to admit that statement was…precious.

"Why should that mean anything to me?" his mendacious mouth supplied, and he instantly regretted it from the way Harry fidgeted, looking like he wanted to take a step back.

"It should mean everything to you. In the dream, or whatever we want to call it, you said you didn't hate me anymore. But is that it? All you feel for me is just not hate and possessiveness?"

Was that even an emotion, "not hate"? And why shouldn't he feel possessive? Now Tom wanted to take a step back, but he felt like he was already backed into a corner. He didn't know how to answer, because the way he could describe how he felt apparently wasn't good enough for Harry. These sorts of emotions were a foreign language that was learned only through word of mouth and practice, because the books on it had never been written. He never wanted to try to learn it before, in any case.

Harry seemed to expect some sort of response. "Potter…"

Tom was almost relieved Harry interrupted him. "It's just as confusing for me as well. You're you, and I'm me, and we should never be friends, let alone anything closer. You killed my parents, and I killed you. We've been the banes of each other's existences. How could it possibly be that we can even stand to be in the same room?"

Harry's words finally helped Tom find that one word he was looking for. He was just going to have to make Potter listen for once until he finally accepted what he had to say.

"No."

Harry's visage twisted in confusing. "What?"

Tom took several steps forward so he could better see the pattern within the *Avada Kedavra* green of Harry's eyes. "No, it's not it. No, I don't hate you anymore, and yes, there are other things there now that I know are your fault. But you are my Horcrux," he said sharply, seeing Harry's eyes flicker in patient annoyance, "and that matters to me. It is significant because you are mine; my responsibility to keep close, and safe. But you're resisting it, you irritating fool."

Harry was quietly contemplative. Tom felt the tension grow again within his body. His head hurt.
"You don't go around kissing your followers because they are yours, do you?"

Tom sputtered, disgusted and affronted by the question. "Who do you think I am, Potter? Never any of them."

"Okay, fine," Harry said easily, surprising Tom at the sudden agreement. "But how about this: it may be your soul, but I own it right now, and therefore let's just say that you are mine as well. We're even that way."

Tom frowned, trying to decide if this was a good or bad thing. "And what exactly does that entail?" he asked slowly, wondering what the brat was up to now.

Harry was quite suddenly fidgety and tight-lipped. He shrugged. Tom arched an eyebrow at the odd behavior, and his eyes flickered over to the cake that was still waiting, uneaten, on the table. He suddenly felt like they needed a distraction.

Tom cleared his throat. "Did you want—"

"Yes," Harry immediately said and suddenly they were pressed chest to chest as Harry eagerly attacked the older man's lips with his own. Tom made an "oomph" noise, utterly unprepared, before he chuckled into Harry's mouth and letting his tongue follow, stroking the roof of it and delighting in the fact he caused Harry to shudder pleasantly.

That turned out a lot easier than what it was aiming to become. This certainly was a nice development. He now had Harry right where he wanted him.

Feeling every bit the teenaged boy he was, Harry enthusiastically kissed Tom, and it was a rare moment when his hands stayed for more than a second wherever they touched. Harry himself was having trouble keeping track of them. There was one in Tom's hair and one clutching the side of his shirt before everything shifted and suddenly Harry had a hand caressing the skin under Tom's collar and another at the back of his neck.

'What the fuck am I doing?' Harry thought to himself. And then his lustful mind supplied, 'Fuck indeed.' He's never done anything this intense before, and to suddenly be here like this, and with Tom Riddle no less, Harry could rightly say this was just one more unexpected thing about his life.

Granted, he's always been a little reckless, a little bold, and when something felt right there wasn't much that would stop him, consequences be damned. Not to say that he went around jumping people willy-nilly—quite the opposite, really—but something about Tom made him different. He spent all day making that damned cake before he'd really sorted out his feelings, so there must have been a part of him that had made up its mind.

There hadn't been any confessions of undying love or anything, but really he wasn't expecting that. Harry understood Tom was expressing what he could for now in this situation which was equally confusing for Harry. Finesse in what exactly this was would hopefully come later.

Their bodies shifted, and Harry knew that Tom had just found out just how excited this was making him. Abruptly he pulled away, sheepish and blushing.

"Ah," he uttered, beet red by his body's clear arousal. Stupid hormones. He cleared his throat, trying to say something intelligent—maybe sorry?—but couldn't clear his head enough get any words out. Tom's sudden smile was positively lecherous.

"You know," Tom said contemplatively. "I was only going to ask if we were going to eat that
Harry's face scrunched in embarrassment. "Oh. Right. Uh, sure." He took a jerky step back.

Still smirking lasciviously, Tom gracefully followed the step so no space was lost between them. "I've never had a birthday cake before. Will I like it?"

Harry found his face muscles automatically twitching into a grin. "Of course; it's Devil's cake."

Harry was pleased when Tom's grin turned into a genuine smile of amusement.

"I'm tempted," he said and leaned down to cover Harry's lips again with his own again. It was slow, almost cooling the burn from the one before. Maybe Tom was learning.

It was Tom who pulled away first this time, but only going far enough away that his nose still brushed Harry's. They were both still breathing a little heavier than normal, but Harry stifled his breaths as he leaned down and pressed his forehead onto the crook of Tom's neck. He froze, pulling his head back and said, "You're very warm right now." Harry frowned and placed his hand on Tom's cheek.

"Do you feel alright?" He flipped his hand over and put the back of his palm on the other man's forehead. "You're sweating, and though I liked it very much, I doubt it was from our previous activities."

Tom shook his head and pulled Harry's hand away from his face with an annoyed expression. "There is nothing wrong with me," he said curtly.

Harry pressed his abused lips together at the defensive tone and studied Tom with a critical eye. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," said Tom with a slight biting attitude. "If we're not having the cake right now, I have things to do." Tom walked away, leaving Harry behind, hurt and confused but not altogether dispirited by Tom's terse manner. If there was one thing he knew about the man, it was that he hated to be weak in any way, and now that he had a healed soul it still was no different.

But to Harry, it felt like Tom had a fever. Harry wasn't going to let himself be dismissed that easily. Tom Riddle should've known that once he fell in with a Gryffindor, said Gryffindor was going to try and worm their way into every little bit of business he might have.

In this case, Harry was right. Tom wobbled at the door and leaned a hand on the doorframe, inhaling deeply. Harry rushed over and wrapped a hand around Tom's bicep.

"I'm fine," the older man repeated, though his voice had less confidence in that statement.

"No, you're not. Come on, we should get you to bed."

Tom made a noise of frustration as he stumbled into Harry's side when he was pulled into the hallway.

"I am not sick."

Harry rolled his eyes and didn't respond, because they both knew that was a lie. Tom's body felt overly warm against his side, and he seemed far clumsier than he normally was as he walked beside Harry, leaning more and more on him for support. The young wizard was beginning to feel
extremely alarmed by the deterioration of Tom's condition as it happened right before his eyes.

:Nagini!: the boy called out. The green snake, who had followed them from the dining hall, slid up alongside the two. :Where is his bedroom?:

The snake lifted her angular head in alarm, seeming to take notice of Tom's predicament. :What have you done to him now?: she hissed sharply, accusingly.

:I didn't do anything!: Harry defended. :He's sick, and needs to be in bed. Please help me find it.:

:Do behave, you two,: Tom said in a strangely droll and amused tone.

Now it was Harry who stumbled. "Oh Merlin, you don't have one of those manic fevers, do you? I don't know if I could stand it if you started giggling."

"I do not have a fever…it's just a little warm in here."

"Oh, okay, I'll just let you go then." Harry loosened his hold around Tom's body and the man immediately staggered. Harry easily caught him before he could fall, but his amused mood was instantly shattered by worry. Not long ago Tom was fine, but now he could barely stand. There was something seriously wrong with him, and Harry didn't know what to do.

:Nagini,: Harry pleaded, and the snake must have recognized the urgent tone the wizard's voice carried because she turned and led Harry to a room down the hall (right next to Harry's, of course) and nosed open the door. Harry half-carried Tom to the large bed and helped him lie on top of the mattress. He brushed Tom's wavy locks away from his damp forehead and felt the skin there; he was burning up.

"Oh, Merlin, what's wrong with you?" Harry whispered, his chest constricting with anxiety.

"I—" Tom swallowed hard. "I think it's the potion. I've had headaches." He brought his hand up to rub his temple, wincing. "It's not a fever in the normal sense of the term. My magic has been blocking the effects, but it could only delay the reaction."

Harry blinked rapidly. "Why didn't you say anything sooner? Is it...are you going to be okay?" His voice trembled as he spoke the question. Rubicund eyes met Harry's.

"I don't know."

Harry bit his lip, understanding what Tom wasn't saying. It was stupid that the one thing that might have actually saved Tom Riddle from his own insanity was also the thing that might kill him.

Harry leaned in and placed his cool forehead against Tom's hot one. "You have the worst luck ever," he whispered. He placed a chaste kiss on that same forehead and pulled away.

"Tom, this is important," Harry said firmly, as the man in question was growing into a state of delirium. "Can you adjust the wards to let me Apparate in and out?" Harry reached into the man's robes and pulled out his wand, gently placing it in Tom's hand.

Tom's red eyes sharpened as he focused and he flicked his wrist, but Harry could tell nothing happened. Tom frowned and flicked his wand again, this time whispering an incantation until Harry felt something snap around them as the wards were changed. While he couldn't do it silently, it was still impressive he could perform such complicated magic quietly and in the state he was in. Tom's hand dropped to his side and his eyes closed, his body exhausted.
"Where are you going?" Tom rasped. There was only one reason Harry would have him adjust the wards for.

"I'm going to go get you help." Tom's eyes snapped open.

"Who?" he demanded. Even in his debilitated state, he could still be intimidating. Harry scratched the back of his neck, knowing Tom may not like the answer.

"Erm, well, you're sick, and you think it's because of the potion. So...ah...I think we need to consult a potion's expert first. One that might know something about the rare potion..." Harry expected some sort of explosive response.

Tom only blinked blandly and then groaned and turned his face into the pillow.

"Not Snape. He's so grumpy and boring," Tom nearly whined. Harry snorted in brief amusement.

"I'm so telling him you said that," he murmured to himself.
Chapter 14

After the comment about Snape, Tom's illness lost all its humor once again when the man shuddered and curled up into himself. It was a shock to see this powerful man struck down this way. Harry pulled out his wand and levitated the man a moment so he could pull the covers out from under him. He settled Tom back down on the bed and pulled the covers over him. He no longer seemed to be awake. Damn. Harry was hoping after mentioning Snape Tom would give him a better idea. Didn't he have a Healer or something among his Death Eaters?

Something bumped up against Harry's leg.

:Nagini,: Harry breathed when he found the snake nosing him.

:Is Master all right?:

Harry hesitated before he reached down and stroked Nagini's large head. :I'll help him. Nagini, are there any House Elves here?: Harry had yet to see them.

Compared to Voldemort when he was a cobra, Nagini displayed little human expression on her face, but her voice portrayed confusion. :House Elves? Of course. Their names are Sprit and Sprot.: 

Harry took a moment to try and translate the names into English and called for the Elves. Two lanky, near identical beings dressed in two pieces of the same table cloth popped into the room. Clearly, they were twins. Before Harry could even open his mouth to explain himself to the Elves, in synchronous motion, they bowed low to the ground.

"Master Harry, what can we do for yous?" the two asked at the same time, producing a strange resonating sound.

"How do you know me already?"

"Master told us—"

"—about yous yesterday when—"

"—Master returned."

Harry stared blankly at the volley of remarks. Who knew the Weasley twins had doppelgangers in a pair of House Elves? He shook his head. They were also remarkably well spoken for House Elves, as well. Leave it to the Dark Lord to find servants who were grammatically correct.

"Oh, well, good. I need you to keep a watch on your Master. He's very sick. I'm going to find a way to help him."

"We promise—"

"—to take care of Master."

Harry sighed. "Thank you." Harry turned back to the sleeping Tom. His face was pale now, and there was a small wrinkle between his eyes that indicated his sleep was not very restful. Harry tucked the green silk comforter in tighter around his shoulders.

:I'll be back, Tom,: he hissed in the soothing cadence of Parseltongue. He didn't know if he heard.
Nagini bumped his leg again.

:I'm coming with you.:

Harry looked at her. :You sure you don't want to stay here?:

:I cannot help him here.:

Harry nodded and allowed Nagini to wrap herself around him. It suddenly occurred to him that he was completely out of his element and had no idea what he was going to do now. This was not the right time to act and think like a Gryffindor. It was Tom who thought it was some side effect of the potion…Harry had to trust he knew enough to be right. Snape had been the first person to pop into his head because he was one of the only Potion's Masters he knew, but he was also going to be the most uncooperative in all likelihood.

Would Professor Slughorn be a better choice? It might be the safer option, but would probably be a waste of time considering the poor professor's guilt and fear of Voldemort and the probability that he would know nothing of what could be wrong. And, Harry had to admit, Snape's knowledge of all things potions was far superior to Slughorn, who was too distracted by his collecting habits to stay locked up in a dungeon all day with research.

Going to see a Healer was an option, Harry supposed, and he took a moment to consider it. If Tom was wrong and it wasn't the potion, but some ordinary wizard's flu, then going to St. Mungo's would be the best option. But what if it wasn't something ordinary? How could he possibly explain the circumstances of Tom's illness, or who he was? The Ministry was everywhere these days. And, furthermore, he was Harry Potter, not some nameless wizard people could care less about. Only very basic Glamours had been in his Charms curriculum thus far and he was far from good at them; otherwise, he would have gotten rid of the accursed scar and his other notable features whenever he went out in public, if only for a little bit of peace. It wouldn't take long for news to get out that the Chosen One was seen at St. Mungo's with a mysterious wizard, and then everyone would wonder what he'd been up to. People would overreact if it was ever found out before he was ready that he had associated with the Dark Lord.

But what of Dumbledore? He told Harry he would be willing to help if he ever needed it. But Tom despised him even more than Snape, and he wasn't exactly on Harry's good side either. Besides, Harry had no idea how much about potions and healing Dumbledore knew. At least Harry has seen Snape's capabilities. In the end, he figured Dumbledore would turn to Snape for assistance anyway. Harry preferred he got to him first, and on his own terms, because while Dumbledore trusted Snape, Harry didn't.

There was also the matter that Harry was curious about Snape; he'd already spoken to Dumbledore about his side of the whole plan, but he knew nothing of Snape's motives. Odds were Snape just wanted the Dark Lord dead. That just made Harry's plan to question Snape even more stupid, but something told him he had to go with this option first. His gut instinct had always helped him out before.

Frankly, Snape was a threat against what Harry and Tom were trying to do. Harry already got Dumbledore to, for the most part, trust him in this, but Snape was a whole different story, as he'd never liked let alone trusted James Potter's son. It felt like a test, to Harry, if he could convince Snape that he wasn't a complete idiot and that he could actually do something right. If things went bad, there was always Obliviate—a charm he'd just (barely) learned with Hermione's help—that could be used on Snape before Harry turned to someone else, like Dumbledore.

Ok, fine, Snape it was. What now? If there was anything he'd learned from Hermione, it was that
one needed pertinent information first before doing anything more without it being a waste of time— theoretically. Harry needed to know just what exactly the Potion's Master knew about the rare potion Tom took (and Harry as well, for that matter, but so far he felt fine). Harry feared it wasn't much, considering he got the two mixed up, but maybe he would know why it affected Tom in such a way, if that really was the case.

Harry considered trying to think like Tom in how to handle this, but his only plan came out to be placing Snape under Crucio until he talked. Obviously, that wasn't going to work. Manipulating like Dumbledore would take too long, similar to Hermione's approach, which would require hours in the library and an overly elaborate plan. So how does one approach what will no doubt be a reluctant Snape and get the information needed in a quick amount of time?

'Why,' Harry thought, 'you simply need to think like Snape himself.' That would certainly peeve the man off.

With a vague but at least existent plan in mind, Harry made a request of one of the House Elves, who left briefly only to return a very short time later to hand Harry the item he knew the Dark Lord would have.

Harry took one last glance of the man that used to be his enemy and Apparated back to the Black house. He wanted to be here, rather than risk taking Snape to where Tom was. Snape had been a part of the plan to kill the Dark wizard, after all, and Harry wasn't expecting him to be very chipper about helping him out.

Harry immediately summoned his own House Elves.

"Jip! Scavy!" Twin pops indicated their arrival. "I need you to do something for me. I need you to, well, kidnap a person named Severus Snape and bring him here."

Bless House Elves and their complete obedience, even enthusiasm—if they liked you—for whatever their owners asked of them. Jip and Scavy practically jumped at the prospect of the illegal activity.

"You can find him at Hogwarts, I'm sure, probably down in the dungeons. Try not to attract too much attention, and do it fast. When you find him, bring him into the sitting room and he, uh, will need to be restrained there."

When the two Elves disappeared, Harry went into the sitting room and sat down to wait, anxiously tapping his fingers on the arm rest. Nagini moved in front of the fire and coiled into a large ball. All he could think about was Tom lying ill and alone back in his home. He wished his Elves would come back soon, preferably with what will no doubt be an incensed Professor Snape in tow.

While he waited, it occurred to Harry that, while Tom may be dying, the ultimate outcome may not actually be death. Tom was, in a roundabout way, immortal as long as Harry was his Horcrux. He could come back, but what Harry feared was what the experience would do to Tom. He feared what it would do to himself. Harry preferred to think of that being Plan Z, because he'd rather try Plans A through Y first before he let Tom die in order to bring him back with the Horcrux. To him it was barely an option.

Luckily for Harry, he didn't have to wait much longer for Snape to arrive. House Elves were very proficient and prompt in their orders. He soon enough had Snape bound to one of his upholstered arm chairs in the sitting room.

He was so getting detention every day for the rest of his school career. Maybe his life.
"Hello, Professor."

"Potter! Just what do you think you're doing?"

"Kidnapping you," Harry said with a shrug. "You weren't going to come willingly."

Snape jerked against his magical restraints, but Jip and Scavy were very thorough. His black eyes met Harry's, his face scrunched in an angry sneer.

"And why, pray tell, have you kidnapped me? Where is this place?"

"Where is my home, er, I guess one of them." Dammit, that made him sound like a rich snob. "Why you don't need to know yet."

Snape did not look pleased.

Harry had his wand unobtrusively hidden up his sleeve, so it took only a split second to have it in his hand and a short moment more for Snape to be petrified. Even completely frozen his eyes managed to glare balefully in Harry's direction.

"Scavy, please remove any and all extraneous articles from his person, please. You can make a pile here," Harry said, indicating an end table in the room. A snap of his spindly fingers later, Scavy had amassed an alarmingly large pile of Snape's possessions. Along with a darkly colored wand, a couple shrunken potion's kits and empty bottles, there was also an assortment of tiny, thumb-sized vials of what Harry thought must be antidotes, serums, and whatever else emergency doses of potions a person living a dangerous life may need. There were other things, too, little trinkets that Harry wasn't sure were for. He didn't touch anything for this reason.

Taking the small potion vial that Tom's House Elf had retrieved for him from his pocket, Harry approached Snape and administered the Veritaserum to the unwilling yet unmoving Potion's Master. But using a potion on a Potion's Master was risky; Harry just had to hope that Snape would have had no reason or time to take the antidote to the Truth Serum. Even with the assumption that Snape was brought here without the antidote in his system, Harry was going to have a hard time, considering one had to ask the right questions to get the information needed without providing a loophole for the person being interrogated.

Nagini was rapidly flicking her tongue in and out. :His smell has changed,: she hissed.

With that little bit of reassurance, Harry studied Snape. This is the part where he'd have to wing it. He released Snape from the spell.

"Who are you?"

"Severus Tobias Snape," the man in question grit out harshly, fighting the potion.

"What is your profession?"

"Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

Those questions were things Snape would have no reason to not tell him. So now it was time for a harder question, one Snape would not want to answer. He was beginning to remind himself of a character from a detective show Vernon Dursley liked to watch on television.

"Were you the one to tell the Dark Lord Voldemort the prophecy about him and the one stated to defeat him, and thus make my parents and myself a target for Voldemort?"
Snape's eyes flashed, and a series of raw emotions blinked across his visage before it carefully blanked once more.

"Yes." Snape's voice was choked, his face pale. Harry didn't allow himself to pause for even a moment as he focused his questions on the topic he'd brought the man here for.

"Did you consort with Albus Dumbledore in a plot against the Dark Lord Voldemort, which involved two rare potions, once meant to weaken and the other to strengthen in ordinance of past conditions of the drinker?"

"Yes."

Harry figured he'd ask broadly about the potions first. He didn't want Snape to know what his purpose was just yet; better to keep him guessing. "And did you agree with Dumbledore on this plan?"

"No."

"And—wait, what?" Harry had only been half paying attention, already planning his next move, and so at first he had thought he'd misheard.

Snape looked like he could murder Harry with his bare hands. "I said 'no'."

"Oh," Harry said dumbly. "What didn't you agree on?"

With a nasty expression, Snape ground out, "I did not agree that giving the Dark Lord the strengthening potion first was wise."

Harry bit at his lip, deep in thought.

"Professor, you do know the significance of restoring his soul, and of the Horcruxes…and their relation to me, right?"

Snape twitched. "Yes."

"Then why didn't you follow Dumbledore's plan? Did you think it wouldn't work?"

The Serum would not let Snape pause this time and he answered immediately. "Soul Magic is very significant and ancient magic, unpredictable in its power. Voldemort broke this power. I had no doubt that the silver potion would revive his soul to full strength because of the discrepancy of what he used to be and what he became, but what I doubted was the ability to stop him afterwards. There is little to fear other than a sane Voldemort at the peak of his power. He would be near undefeatable…especially by a sixteen year old student," Snape reluctantly admitted but had little choice in the matter. "It was complete idiocy for you to run away as you did to give him the potion alone."

Harry shrugged. "I was safe. He would have been breaking an Unbreakable Vow if he harmed me."

Harry fell silent. He wasn't sure, but for some reason it sounded like Snape was…trying to protect him.

"Dumbledore still wanted me to stand against Voldemort afterwards, didn't he?" Harry asked quietly.

"It was the Prophesy…it had to be you, he said. I doubted you would survive."
Snape seemed rather uncomfortable with this confession. Harry simply didn't know what to feel about it. There was something that stuck out to him, something that should have made him suspicious before but didn't.

"Professor Dumbledore wanted you to give the strengthening potion to T—Lord Voldemort, right?" Harry added, remembering to make it a question.

Snape had been watching Harry while he was deliberating, and he gave nothing away in his expression when he was given the new question. "Yes."

Harry cocked his head to the side. "But Voldemort was given the weakening potion instead."

Snape did not answer, because he was never posed a question, merely a statement. Harry moved to amend for the misstep.

"Let me ask you this: did you purposely give Voldemort the wrong potion, according to Dumbledore's plans?"

"Yes," Snape voiced through gritted teeth. Harry's eyebrows rose. So Snape hadn't accidentally mistaken one potion for another, he had done it on purpose.

"What did you think it would do?"

"Originally I didn't care, only that it would buy time."

'For who? The Wizarding World...or me?' Harry sighed, really wishing Snape would elaborate more. He was getting tired of asking all these questions, and he didn't know how much longer the potion would last.

"But to what end? Voldemort was only a snake for three weeks, and then I was the one to feed him the silver potion myself. How did giving him the gold one first even help?"

Snape twisted subtly in his magical bindings, which continued to hold. His dark eyes glinted like obsidian. "I discovered a failsafe. You would no longer be the Dark Lord's defeater." Snape cocked his head to the side. "But perhaps I was mistaken. You were the one to deliver the opposite potion to the one I gave him, after all." An odd look crossed the older man's face.

Harry was unsure about Snape's words, and something akin to dread simmered beneath the surface of his emotions. "'Failsafe'?" he asked. What did Snape mean by that? This time it took longer for Snape to answer, and Harry assumed the Veritaserum was wearing off.

"You cannot take both potions without consequences."

"Like...?" Harry prodded.

"Death."

Harry sat down heavily.

"You didn't tell Dumbledore any of this?" Harry asked weakly.

Snape's visage twisted into a harsh scowl and his mood abruptly changed to something more normal for him. "And for good reason, apparently. Dumbledore has turned into a barmy old man for taking no action once you refused to kill the Dark Lord. What are you thinking, Potter?"

Obviously the serum had worn off. Harry glared at Snape defiantly, ruffled by Snape's next words.
"I realize you may think yourself the all-powerful Chosen One, but he is the Dark Lord... he will not spare you just because you refuse to do the same to him. Whatever he's told you, he was only lying to you."

He could be right, of course. But Harry believed he knew better.

"You don't understand..."

But Snape would not let him finish. "He tried to kill you! He killed your mother! Or did you forget that?" Next to the fireplace, Nagini hissed and inflated menacingly at the tone of Snape's voice.

Harry stood up again. "Of course I haven't forgotten he killed my mother and father," Harry emphasized, because while Snape might not have cared, his father was just as important as his mother to him, "and many other people."

Harry hated that Snape managed to strike a nerve within him. Guilt welled up in his psyche, guilt that he's been stoutly ignoring ever since he started suspecting his feelings for Tom Riddle—or maybe even Voldemort, he wasn't sure anymore because it was so incredibly outlandish that he doubted he could ever come to understand it, let alone anyone else.

How Harry could fall—or teeter dangerously on the edge, as it were—for his parents' murderer would never make sense. What was happening to them was like fitting the pieces of two wholly different puzzles together, and still making a complete picture. Things won't fit properly, but nevertheless something was still able to be made from it. Tom had been part of his life for so long, first as his would-be killer, then as his unlikely charge, and finally as his...whatever (he wasn't sure about it yet). Maybe it had always meant to be like that eventually. How could two people who were so interconnected in their lives not become as close? They knew each other's secrets, their fears, how they came to be today. Harry hadn't forgotten the things Tom did as Voldemort...but perhaps he has been able to forgive him. Snape, however, had not.

"He's not Voldemort anymore," Harry told him. Snape remained unaffected.

"You are foolish to believe that. It doesn't matter anyway, Potter, since the second potion worked as expected and he is mortal now...it will make the ultimate effects of taking the two potions simple. He will die as his magical core is destabilized from being unable to reconcile with the two extremes that it had been forced into, causing it to bleed from his body. Without Horcruxes, there will be no way for him to come back. I shall assume the reason I was...brought here is because he has begun to succumb to the effects, but what I still don't understand is why you would care."

Snape peered at Harry through narrowed eyes.

Outwardly, Harry stayed firm, but inwardly he quivered in glaring distress.

"There's nothing that can be done?" he asked, ignoring Snape's roundabout inquiry.

"Nothing," Snape affirmed coldly.

Harry's knuckles turned white as he curled his fingers so his nails bit into his palm.

:Nagini,: Harry hissed softly, calling to her because only she would know what he was feeling right now, even if they could not feel it in the same way, being two different species. The snake crossed the room to curl partially around his body. :He said there is nothing that can be done.: 

Nagini licked the air with her black tongue.

:I should eat him:
Despite himself, the corner of Harry's mouth twitched in something of a small, sad smile.

Harry had never liked Snape. Ever since that first day in the potion's classroom, Snape had judged him based solely on petty comparisons to his father, something which Harry had never known or understood until he had admittedly rudely looked into Snape's pensive. Snape had cared less that his father had been killed by Voldemort, but his mother…Snape had apparently been very fond of her, Harry had recently learned. It was hard imagining the dark-haired man liking anybody. Voldemort killed his mother despite Snape's plea to spare her. That act alone was seemingly enough for Snape to turn against his Master and turn to Dumbledore's side.

Harry looked back up into Snape's black eyes, and saw them filled with confusion. Snape's brow was furrowed, and he sat stiff and still in the chair.

"You can still speak Parseltongue," he voiced monotonously. Harry's brow rose sharply.

:Shit:, he inadvertently said in that damning language.

Well, that was stupid. Maybe Snape would believe the Parseltongue merely stuck…?

Yeah right. Here he had made sure Dumbledore didn't know his Horcrux was still there, and now Snape knows or will figure it out in mere moments—Snape, who wanted Voldemort dead. Cursing inwardly at himself, Harry braced for the consequences. It looked like he'd be Obliviating Snape after all. But first, he now had a chance to be completely open with the man.

"It never left."

In weary shock, Snape said, "Then the final potion did not work, after all."

Harry shook his head. "Oh no, it did work. Problem was, the backlash forced me backwards while the potion was still in my hand, uncapped. Turns out I swallowed a bit of it when it splashed into my mouth. It made me keep the Horcrux. I'm the last."

Snape looked like he would be ill.

With a blasé flick of his wrist, Harry asked, "Professor, what do you think that means?"

"You did not tell Dumbledore," Snape said, ignoring Harry's rather loaded question and Harry let him…for now. "Why?" Snape's voice held no disdain or censure, only curiosity.

Shrugging, Harry responded. "Riddle told me not to. I think he may have been worried about what Dumbledore would have done to me."

Snape scoffed at that. "For his Horcrux, you mean, but not you. Get it right, Potter."

Harry's hand dropped to Nagini's head which lingered in the air. He stroked her smooth scales, eliciting a hissy purr from the viper.

"Like you care," Harry suddenly said coldly. "What does it really matter to you if I have to die to make him mortal? Then you would never have to deal with me again, and the Dark Lord could be killed as well. That would just solve all your problems, wouldn't it? You asked Voldemort to spare my mother, after all," Harry said, watching the shock jolt across Snape's visage, "but not me. I bet it just kills you to think that she chose to give her life for me. And she did choose; Voldemort gave her an option. Dumbledore created this whole plot to make Voldemort mortal and to save me from sacrificing my life, and you went along with it, but not for my sake. Admit it…you just wanted Voldemort dead and as fast as possible. It was of little consequence to you if the plan protected me
from sacrificing myself, as I am nothing but the arrogant James Potter's son to you, his clone. Even with all that infiltrating of my brain during those Occlumency lessons, you never did figure out that I am not like that."

Harry paused, eyes distant. "Or maybe I am that arrogant, to be able to believe I can convince a man like Tom Riddle that all these years he's been wrong, to think that he could see me as something other than his key to immortality. You tell me, Professor, since you seemed to have me pegged," Harry finished irreverently. The moment he'd finished speaking, he instantly regretted how his emotions had let slip all those biting words past his lips. He hadn't meant to divulge so much to Snape, and it was sort of embarrassing how much the man's hatred had affected him. But all the desperations, frustrations, and sudden exhaustion had hit him hard, and he couldn't control himself. No matter what he sometimes felt, he still was only a boy sixteen years of age.

Snape looked at him with a vacant expression, though his eyes shone as they studied the young man from across the room. Harry pretended he didn't feel the gaze as he continued to idly stroke Nagini's head and focused on the ground, trying to regain his emotions.

"Potter," Snape said, voice void of emotion.

Harry did not look up. He fingered his wand, wondering if he could successfully Obliviate Snape now and be done with it.

"Potter!" Snape said more forcefully, and Harry reluctantly looked up at him.

"Why are you trying to save the Dark Lord?" he bothered to ask Harry for the first time.

Harry hadn't expected the question, and he didn't really know what answer Snape was looking for, or if he wanted to tell him the full reason.

Harry held his stance and decided what he wanted to say. "Because I'm a Gryffindor, and we love and forgive and hope far easier than what is probably good for us." Let Snape try and dissect that statement. "You became a Death Eater for a reason, once, before you became a member of the Order of the Phoenix. Tell me, has either side been what you hoped they would be?"

Snape was silent, but Harry could guess at what his answer was: No.

"We both know the way things are going will only result in war. One side will win, but only until the next war, because no actual problems will be solved. Both sides need to be appeased in order to have any sort of stability and prosperity."

Snape arched a challenging eyebrow. "And you think that can happen with Lord Voldemort still alive? You're thinking of working together?" He sounded, perhaps with good reason, cynical. "What of the Prophesy?"

Despite what Snape had said earlier about Harry being the one to give Tom the second potion, he didn't believe that was what the Prophesy meant. He stood by what he had decided earlier. "I came out the winner on that one," he told the other man.

Snape, of course, was not amused with the sudden confusion he was thrown into.

"I was under the impression he was still alive... that is the reason I am here, is it not?" he scorned.

"That person is not Voldemort," Harry said simply. "It never said I had to kill him. I couldn't even kill him when he was a helpless snake, and I didn't even know that it wouldn't get rid of him
because of the Horcruxes."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "You, Potter, make no sense," he growled.

"Sorry," Harry said, entirely unapologetically. "You know, somehow I doubt my mother sacrificed herself for her son in order for him to seek vengeance and kill in return. She was worth more than that…and I'm better than that"

Harry's expression faltered at the failure of finding a way to help Tom, despite all he had found out. Turns out Snape was the right choice but…to what end? Could he find something or someone that would refute what Snape had told him? Who could he trust? He looked down at his wand in his hand and rolled it around in his palm. "Look, I'm just going to send you back now. You can't help him…can't help us. I…I'm not that good at Obliviating, but I can't just—"

"Wait."

Harry pulled his eyes away from his wand.

"There is…one thing."

Brow furrowed, Harry said, "One thing what?"

Snape displayed little emotion save for reluctance and perhaps a bit of disbelief that he was saying anything at all. "I was not being truthful when I said there was nothing you could do."

Relief welled up within Harry's chest, and confusion. But it figured that the question he really needed to know was one he asked after the Veritaserum had worn off. Idiot.

"Why are you telling me this?"

Snape shifted, but continued to look directly into Harry's eyes, an unnamed emotion within them. He opened his mouth, and then closed it slightly as if changing his mind, before saying, "I'd rather you not Obliviate me."

While that was a very good reason, Harry doubted that was the full truth.

"Huh," was Harry's inelegant response. "Probably smart."

Snape looked like he was forced to eat a Lemon Drop. Taking a moment to consider the possible consequences, Harry hissed to Nagini, who moved closer to Snape to keep an eye on him, before Harry used his wand to rid the Potion's Master of his bindings. Snape subtly flexed his arms and wrists while Nagini watched him carefully. Harry took a seat across from him.

"Well?"

Glaring, Snape settled back into the chair.

"There is another potion, a derivative from the other two."

Harry frowned, feeling like he was missing something. Impatience made him intrude into Snape's explanation.

"Hold on…how do you even know this? For that matter, how did you find out about the other two in the first place?"

Irritation clear on his face from being interrupted, Snape explained, "You are aware, of course, of
Dumbledore's association with Nicolas Flamel," he said deprecatingly, obviously hinting at Harry's first year and the Philosopher's Stone incident. "At his death, Flamel willed Dumbledore a portion of his research. Flamel, throughout his exceptionally many years of life, had amassed a large collection of obscure texts and notes as research for his experiments. It was among those texts Dumbledore found mention of the Time Dust potions. With some further investigation, Dumbledore came to believe they may have become an experiment in the Department of Mysteries."

Now, if Harry thought about it, that shouldn't have surprised him.

Snape continued. "From the logs I found kept by the Unspeakables, the original creator of the potions had died after testing both of them on himself. It became a goal for the Unspeakables to stabilize the two, which they eventually did. The information was kept unreleased from the public, since thereafter the use of Time Dust became highly regulated, as the knowledge of its creation has been lost. The data was deemed useless, since the potions could never be brewed again and are, in fact, illegal. The last vial of each of the three was kept for archive purposes."

Harry felt a little guilty for demolishing the last bit of such a rare potion.

"When were you at the Department of Mysteries?" Harry asked. He didn't think just anyone could waltz in and walk out with illegal contraband.

Snape quirked an eyebrow in wry humor, displaying the first hint of expression in a while. "The same night you were."

Harry frowned. "Fifth Year? I don't remember seeing you there." And he remembered everything from that night…it wasn't one of his best.

"Exactly," Snape replied simply. "You did not see me because I was otherwise occupied."

Harry contemplated that for a moment before he said, "So where is it?"

Snape was silent for a moment. "I don't have it. I had known nothing about it when I found it among the other two, but once I realized its nature I knew the best course of action to take. I left it there. I would be doing no favors for the Dark Lord's death by making it easy for him to obtain the stabilizer; that is, if he ever realized he needed it. I had no qualms in thinking it would be too late for him by then."

Harry dragged his fingers through his hair. Of course it couldn't be easy. "Which room did you find it in?"

"The Time Chamber."

Since the Battle of the Department of Mysteries was at the forefront of Harry's mind, he was suddenly reminded of his brief glimpse of the Time Chamber Snape spoke of. He remembered watching as one of the Death Eater's got his head stuck in that strange bell jar, and how it proceeded to loop continuously through his lifecycle, the head morphing to that of a baby's, then to that of an old man and back again. It had been horrifying grotesque to watch. Now that he thought about it, though, it did vaguely remind him the nameless potions Voldemort took, at least in the part where it takes the person backwards in their life cycle.

"Fine, I'll just have to go in there and—"

"And get thrown into Azkaban," Snape broke in. "The Ministry is not the same as it was in your Fifth Year. It may be true that you got in before," he said in a rebuking tone, no doubt for Harry's
Gryffindor foolishness, "but that was under unusual circumstances. For one, you had Death Eaters working from inside the Ministry to clear the lower levels that night, and you also had an ignorant fool as Minister, who kept the Ministry protections to a minimum as a ploy to prove there was no danger of war. At this point, though, security is high and you will find it quite difficult to sneak past a hoard of Unspeakables and guards. The Department of Mysteries has been declared a high security floor because of its nature. They won't even let the Chosen One walk through those doors, after the destruction you caused," Snape concluded dryly. Harry fought from rolling his eyes.

"Well, who *is* allowed there?" From what he understood, Tom only ever had one Unspeakable in his Death Eater ranks, and that man had been captured after Voldemort's disappearance. He wasn't even sure how useful a person of that profession could be, considering the vow of unspeakability they have to take. Still, even if the man could never directly say what was occurring in the DoM, the position he held certainly must have been useful in terms of Ministry infiltration.

"The Unspeakables," Snape said in a *duh* sort of voice, and this time Harry didn't stop himself from rolling his eyes because he knew that, "and the higher level Ministry workers with clearance."

"Okay," Harry said slowly, deep in thought as an idea formed within his head. "Could Lucius Malfoy get in?"

Only the twitch in his forehead gave away Snape's dissatisfaction with that idea. "And how, exactly, do you expect to persuade him to do it?"

Harry shrugged. "Don't know."

Snape rubbed his temples with his hands.

Snape didn't give Harry enough credit. At least he had half an idea in his head.

"Sprit," he called out softly, hoping the House Elf would answer, even if he wasn't his Master. With enviable alacrity, the tiny being appeared in front of Harry.

"Yes, Master Harry?"

Harry would have laughed at the incredulity on Snape's visage, but didn't.

"Just how many House Elves do you have, Potter?"

"Oh, this one's not mine," he explained. "It's Riddle's." Harry didn't feel comfortable calling him 'Tom' in front of Snape.

If Snape had any thoughts about the name Harry used, he did not give them away in his expression.

"Now, Sprit," Harry said, addressing the Elf, "do you mind bringing Lucius Malfoy here?" Harry would have asked his own Elves, but they didn't know Lucius and he strongly suspected Tom's did and could find him with more efficiency.

"Is he coming as guest or prisoner?"

Harry's eyebrows disappeared under his fringe. Trust the Dark Lord's House Elf to ask that sort of thing.

"Prisoner?" he answered questioningly, not exactly sure what that entailed. Maybe it'd be good to have Malfoy sweat a bit. Well, that, and Harry didn't really feel like getting cursed the moment he was seen by the blond.
"Oh, for the love of—Potter, if that is truly the Dark Lord's Elf, then unless you want Malfoy brought here wandless, bound and gagged like a pig and frightened for his life, you will call him off."

With an anxious expression, Harry looked from Snape back to Sprit. "On second thought, Spirt, hold up." He turned back to the other man. "Do you have a suggestion?" he asked acerbically.

Snape sighed self-deprecatingly. "I will go speak to Malfoy. It will be best if he thinks Lord Voldemort wishes him to get the potion. I don't believe he will have much incentive to get it for you."

Harry felt silly for not thinking of that first, but then again he didn't expect Snape to be quite so helpful, other than willingly telling him what he had been hoping to hear. And even then he wasn't sure of Snape's motives.

Harry deliberated on another idea. "Professor, would they have taken into account a snake like Nagini getting it?" he addressed to Snape.

With a tilted glance down at the viper still standing guard over him, Snape said, "She is a magical creature, but not one of a high level. It should be fine."

"If Malfoy can get her in, Nagini can eat the potion to get it safely out."

Snape made a curious noise in the back of his throat. "What?"

Harry waved his wand at the snake. "She'll swallow it and spit it back up later. Nasty trick, but useful."

The corner of Snape's mouth twisted in a miniscule grimace. It wasn't like the man didn't use vial ingredients for his potions regularly, Harry thought. The expression passed and Snape held out his wide hand.

"May I have my wand?" he asked politely enough but in a tone that spoke of how much it cost him to have to ask in the first place. Harry, in a show of equally reluctant good faith, handed the slender object to its owner.

:Nagini, will you go with Snape to help Lucius retrieve the potion Tom needs?:

Nagini considered it. :Tell him to shrink me, and I will go.: 

The task was explained to Nagini further, with Harry translating Snape's recall of the room so the snake would have no misunderstandings.

Soon enough, Snape was prepared to Disapparate from Harry's wards. But before he did, Harry offered him one more item of note.

"Thank you, Professor."

Snape, with Nagini hidden in his robes, disappeared with a hollow crack.

Severus Tobias Snape, Potion's Master and Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Apparated inside the gates of Malfoy Manor without any trouble. He was welcome here, and it was not so odd that he should show up at this relatively late hour. He was, after all, a Death Eater along with Lucius Malfoy.
Only one of them really meant it.

Snape shifted stiffly, uncomfortable with feeling the cool scales of a shrunken Nagini against the skin of his neck. It made him feel oddly vulnerable. How did Potter stomach it, all those weeks, knowing the snake around his shoulders was actually the Dark Lord?

Snape had known the moment he'd seen the bone white cobra wrapped around the Boy-Who-Lived-to-be-Stupid that it was, in fact, Lord Voldemort. He didn't know what to think at the time, besides the sense that perhaps he should have seen that coming.

"Severus?"

"Good evening, Lucius," Snape greeted as the blond stood in the doorway of the main entrance, no doubt as Patriarch alerted to the arrival of someone within the wards.

Lucius nodded his head at Snape's greeting. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You may regret that question later," Snape thought to himself.

"The Dark Lord has a task for you…"

Lucius led the way to the sitting room. It went against Pureblood Code to speak to a guest in the entrance hall.

On the way, Snape recalled his decision to go against Dumbledore's wishes. When he had gone in search of the uncommon and indeed near non-existent potions the night of the Department of Mysteries break-in, he had not realized there was another option to Dumbledore's highly flawed plan. He found out from the archived notes stored there what the purpose of that third, far newer potion was, and made a split second decision. It was pure logic: why risk potentially disastrous consequences when one could choose a safer and more rational approach? They could almost literally take out the Dark Lord with hardly lifting a finger.

Lily's child would be safe.

Dumbledore was powerful, Dumbledore was wise, but he was not infallible. This Snape learned, and wasn't that a harsh lesson? If Snape was shocked to learn the Harry Potter was an accidental Horcrux when Dumbledore first approached him with his plan, the Potion's Master was positively appalled that the Headmaster intended for Potter to face the regenerated Dark Lord as the Prophesy foretold. Snape hated that Prophesy. He suspected Dumbledore had no idea how strong his conviction was when he vowed to protect Lily's son from Voldemort.

He would do anything for her, even if she was gone. So he made a new plan to fix Dumbledore's oversight.

If it wasn't for the whole *Harry Potter* interferes part, his plan would have worked.

Had the whole thing been a waste of time? Potter was still a Horcrux, and for that matter, the Dark Lord was still immortal. Trust that boy to ruin the one thing that would rid him of the Lord Voldemort's influence, make things easier for everyone, and ultimately save his life.

The result of Harry's accidental ingestion of the potion, however, was very curious.

"What is this task?" Malfoy asked, breaking into Snape's thoughts. They had reached the sitting room and were now accommodated in two separate chairs. Falling into the persona meant to fool, Snape ensured his blank mask was in place, though more and more it felt like his true face. He had
little these days to express any emotion for, let alone feel it strongly enough.

"You recall when the Dark Lord's familiar was sent to the Department of Mysteries, I assume? The Dark Lord decreed that you should assist her in repeating this accomplishment and ensure that the snake reaches the Time Chamber. There is a potion that must be retrieved. The snake is informed of her duty, and all that is required is that you do yours and guarantee she is safely returned. I need not remind you of the consequences should you fail."

Lucius, of course, showed the appropriate fear of failure, but was nonetheless pleased at the prospect of success. If only he knew. Snape stiffened as he felt the shrunken snake unfurl and slither down his body, her muscles gripping and releasing in succession down his arm. Lucius looked rather unhappy at the new addition to his wardrobe as Nagini settled around his neck, but nevertheless remained poised.

"When shall this be done by?"

"A soon as possible." A man such as the Dark Lord would take a few days to have his Magical Core drained, but it was best not to wait. "Contact me when you have completed the mission."

Standing, Snape bid farewell and showed himself out of the sitting room, not waiting for Malfoy to escort him out. Now that it was done, he could fully appreciate the implications of his actions and why he did it.

It all came down to one thing…or, more accurately, one person: Lily.

Potter had surprised him. Not only had he not killed Lord Voldemort on sight, seeing him in his diminutive and vulnerable form, but he had also brought him into Hogwarts Castle, among the very students Potter had vowed to protect. The boy certainly made the Potion's Master's own vowed task more difficult. Snape hadn't known who he wanted to strangle more: the Dark Lord for daring to come, Potter for being stupid enough to help him, or Dumbledore for being lenient and allowing the literal snake to stay.

After Potter's rather dramatic and abrupt departure, and then later Dumbledore's report on the conversation he'd had with the boy, Snape had honestly believed Potter had gone mad. Regardless of the "deal" they had made, in Snape's opinion there had been no reason for the brat's refusal to once and for all rid the world of Lord Voldemort. He was, in Snape's opinion, positively insane. No matter, Snape had ensured that one way or the other, the world would be rid of Lord Voldemort.

And then he'd been kidnapped, and found out that Potter was still a Horcrux. Snape grimaced in remembrance as he exited the Manor through the front door and made his way to the Apparition point.

He had to admit, though reluctantly, that Potter had rather successfully incapacitated and interrogated him. Who would have expected usually harmless House Elves to come into the dungeons of Hogwarts and snatch him away at the order of Harry Potter? It was rather embarrassing and surreal, and tasted slightly of revenge.

Potter was not the same person that had sat in his classroom the past six year. Even as he thought this, Snape pondered the idea that perchance the Potter he knew was nothing more than an illusion, or just what he wanted to see. The young wizard who had accosted him had been mature, clever, and had a fair share of bitterness about him as he accused his Professor of things close to the truth. Snape could see it in the jaded eyes, perhaps appropriately termed considering the color that they were. The older man had found it difficult to look away whenever he focused on them, and it felt like punishment…atonement for his role in Potter's life to cause such bitterness.
It was like Lily was watching him from the grave. It was like he was seeing Potter for the first time.

He had agreed; he had agreed to help Potter in this very poor, mock imitation of a good idea. Snape knew he could very well be trading the welfare of the Wizarding World in exchange for the vow he had made to protect the boy—to protect Lily's child. It was worth it. He had failed her once, and he would not do it again by failing her son.

Potter was still the Dark Lord's Horcrux—the only one left. Snape didn't know what would happen to a human Horcrux should the owner of the soul piece be in need of it. And thus the Potion's Master found himself in the opposite situation than before by trying to help the Dark Lord live.

There was one thing Snape was coming to realize: he was no longer Potter's only protector. He had little doubt, as long as the Dark Lord was alive, he would ensure the bearer of his soul would come to no harm. Was that enough of a reason to play this dangerous game, this gamble of the fate of the Wizarding World?

For Lily…and the boy, it was. Things were changing, the world flipping upside down.

Because of that, Snape felt the conflicting emotions of foreboding and something like optimism or excitement. Whatever happened, he felt it was worth seeing what came of it. As a man of two worlds, one Dark and one Light, and belonging to neither, the prospect of something different did not faze him.

Snape Disapparated away.
Lucius Malfoy decided he preferred stylized, artificial, *inanimate* snakes compared to the real thing. He nervously ran his fingers over the snake-shaped head of his cane in a yearning gesture as he felt another flutter of a thin, rapidly moving tongue brush against his neck. He had enough poise, however, to not shudder when he wanted to.

Snape had just left, leaving Lucius with a scaly tag-along; a very special tag-along. The Dark Lord's familiar was magically shrunken, but no less intimidating. It was rather unnerving that her poisonous jaws were so close to his vulnerable flesh. Lucius stood stiffly, keeping his upper body as still and undisturbed as possible. Though he could not understand Parseltongue, he swore the snake was laughing at him in little whispering hisses that slipped past his ear like silk. Why did she have to come along? To *babysit*? Lucius scowled at the thought, though he would never question the Dark Lord's wishes aloud. As his Master was a powerful Legilimens, it almost wasn't safe to even think such things.

He was given some odd instructions about the snake. How was she supposed to take charge of the potion if she has no hands? He glowered at that nagging voice in the back of his head that ranted about how Lord Voldemort apparently wasn't confident in his aptitude and sent him with a reptilian babysitter. *He* at least was evolved enough to understand the use of pockets and un-breakability charms.

Once he had retrieved the potion from the DoM, he was to return to the Dark Lord's home base and then...he didn't know what exactly. Wait, he supposed, for the Dark Lord to come collect his requested item. Snape hadn't specified what he was to do once he got there, only that it was where he was supposed to be.

He cleared his throat. "Flip," he called out. A wanly-colored Elf of indeterminable sex without closer inspection and dressed in a dull, old sheet appeared. "Fetch me my cloak," Lucius demanded of the creature, and it hurried to obey, returning only a split second later with the cloak. Without bothering to wait for any sort of thanks, the Elf disappeared again. Lucius threw the cloak over himself with deference to the snake now masked by the cloth.

He knew it to be around eight in the evening...not at all too late for his appearance at the Ministry. He had found it to be highly advantageous to be seen at all hours of the day in the building, precisely for reasons such as tonight's visit. It wouldn't be prudent to have anyone questioning him, considering the suspicion some eye him with. He would arrive there tonight by Floo.

To say that this sudden mission was odd was a bit of an understatement. Lately the Dark Lord had been reclusive, almost...missing...and now suddenly Severus Snape shows up with Nagini and tells him he's to break something out of the Department of Mysteries? Odd indeed.

"Father?"

Lucius sighed and turned to his son. "Yes, Draco?" His tone was only slightly accommodating, his focus already on his sudden plans for tonight.

Draco did not look at all bothered by his father's reticence, and asked, "Where are you going?"

"The Ministry."

Draco curled his nose in something reminiscent of distaste. "But it is New Year's Eve. What
"Business do you have there?"

Indeed it was. Several of Draco's friends were actually enjoying the Malfoy's hospitality for the occasion. It was because of this that Lucius was surprised to have even run into his son at all.

"Draco, do try and control yourself," Lucius started out first, unwilling to let his somewhat indulged son to get used to the habit of pouting. He did not say anything more, though, because a quick readjustment of his cloak revealed to Draco the blatant hint for exactly what business he might have. Draco's eye's widened and he actually took a step back. Lucius didn't know whether to chastise the boy for his indiscretion or to envy him the ability to actually step away.

"That's…"

Lucius nodded. "Yes," he said simply, because there was no reason to waste unneeded words. Draco, knowing exactly what could be at stake, simply bid his father good luck and rather quickly fled the vicinity. Lucius idly wondered not for the first time if he had sheltered his heir too much.

Flooding to the Ministry was, as expected, easy, though as Draco had said, it was New Year's Eve, which served to make Lucius' situation both easier and more difficult. Despite Lucius' careful preplanning for such an event as now to get people accustomed to his all-hours business, there was no one around to bat any sort of eye at him, questioning or disinterested alike. Because of the holiday, he was currently both unobtrusive and conspicuous.

"Let's just get this over with, shall we?" he said to no one in particular, though it could have been the snake he was talking to, but of course she couldn't understand him.

Lucius had to laugh to himself while he reminisced on the Ministry's competence, or lack thereof. While it was true security had been upped significantly—though how well that really worked considering he was still employed—there was a severe lapse in judgment concerning how safe the changes were. Using his particular mission as an example, there were serious flaws in how the security was maintained.

Lucius entered a lift and directed it to the ninth floor.

It had been rather fortunate for him to escape both the Order and the Aurors a year ago from the very place he was headed now. For one, it kept him out of Azkaban, and it allowed him to fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes now relatively painlessly. Unfortunately, the Department of Mysteries had been one of the places he was relatively impressed by the changes in security for it. They had better preventative measures to prevent theft. It seemed the Ministry was capable of "learning their lesson" and barricaded the DoM from any unauthorized admittance. Indeed, no unauthorized wizard or Muggle, nor creatures of intelligence such as House Elves or Centaurs, would be able to enter through the main entrance to the Department.

Too bad Lucius was authorized, and too bad snakes hadn't been deemed intelligent or magical enough to register in the wards…indeed, they were probably one of the animals used in experiments down there anyway. Nagini's last escapade to the DoM had largely been ignored, as the imprudent Order members involved couldn't make it clear what their purpose was for being there in the first place. Perhaps it was also because that particular incident had been swept under a rug, due to Fudge's deniability of the time, and thus was not widely known during the security upgrades, having been lost in the paperwork.

…Or maybe that paperwork had been accidentally shredded as Lucius was cleaning out his office one day.
Harry sat down heavily in his chair. Had he been a wizard of weaker constitution, he might have never made it there and instead collapsed on the floor. He thought he knew what emotional turmoil was before, but it seems he may have been mistaken.

While Snape was here, he hadn't allowed himself to fully react to their interaction. But now...now he could fully appreciate just how jumbled and ridiculous his life could be. He wished he had someone to talk to, but since he was alone in the house—save for well-meaning but terrible-as-therapists House Elves—he settled for talking to the empty chair across from him. There was a wrinkle left in the back of it from when Snape sat there that vaguely looked like a crooked face.

It would do.

"So," Harry told it, "Dumbledore, suspecting something of Horcruxes and my being one, came up with this grand plan to remove it and make Voldemort mortal. And then after, I could kill him, as per the Prophesy."

Harry propped his chin up with his hand and eyed the chair contemplatively.

"He got Snape in on the action, only Snape didn't like his plan. I guess—what?—he thought I would lose and get killed instead like? Did he really care?" Harry snorted dismissively.

The flames in the hearth flickered, changing the blank expression on the chair-face to one of wry agreement. Harry wrinkled his nose.

"Okay, so maybe he was right...and maybe he does care? Anyway, there really is probably no way I could have beaten that nerd after all those books he's read...I can see now why Ron and I have been scared of Hermione at times. Luck can only take me so far, I should think. I mean, really, my best luck would have been if his Killing Curse rebounded again or something ridiculous like that."

Harry made a face and dragged his fingers through his hair.

"Snape's plan did make more sense," he said quietly, his eyes drifting away from the chair as they went vacant, his mind focusing inwardly. "Why waste time on an uncertain prospect when you can ensure success?" He shook his head. "Why trust a sixteen year old student to kill the Dark Lord when you can do it yourself? And he was right...I couldn't even try, and not because I thought I would lose. I wonder what Snape would say if he found out why."

As funny as Snape's reaction might be, Harry wasn't feeling up to imagining it. Squeezing his eyes shut, he fought the inexplicable panic that bubbled in his chest. Right this very instant, Tom lay in his bed, dying as his magic drained away. From what Harry knew, if a witch or a wizard used enough spells, they would drain their core to the point they'd collapse, sapped of the energy so fully integrated with their very life-force, but as long as there is some magic left, their core will naturally regenerate. It would take days for someone with a lot of power to reach that point, and even the people with smaller cores would need hours upon hours of spell use to drain themselves. How long did Tom have before he had nothing left? How long before Harry's role as a Horcrux came into play?

"Leave it to me, chair, to somehow mess up a foolproof plan. It's so bad even Snape was convinced to fix it."

Harry studied the chair's expression.

"I know there might be more to it, but to make my life easier, I'm just going to pretend Snape is so frustrated with me that he's helping to save Tom in the hopes I will make him mad enough
someday that he’ll kill me, Horcrux or no.”

The chair's expression morphed into a silent snigger. Harry tilted his head at it.

"Have I gone mad?" It wasn't the first time the past weeks that he's wondered that.

Harry wasn't able to wait and see if the chair would answer as an odd sensation caused him to duck his head and squeeze his eyes shut. It didn't hurt, per say…or at least he didn't feel any pain.

But Tom was. Harry could feel the Horcrux inside him nearly quivering in distress. He had left the connection partially open, so he could monitor if Tom ever woke up. Currently a bundle of emotions and images ran just past the periphery of Harry's mind, and he suddenly realized he didn't know how long he had been away. Making sure he had his wand, Harry left the Black house and Apparated into Tom's. He stumbled, still unbelieving he was actually able to do that little piece of magic while keeping all his limbs attached. It helped he got all his knowledge from a very powerful wizard's mind. But that was only a small, wayward thought that he hardly dwelled on when he heard a crash coming from within the house.

Slamming open Tom's bedroom door, Harry stared in shock at the sight he saw. When he left, Tom had been fitfully unconscious on the bed; said bed was now empty, and indeed looking skeletal with the mattress lying on the floor.

Harry hadn't bothered taking a close look at the room before, but now he could appreciate just how much stuff there was. There were bookshelves, armoires, trunks, decorative pieces and a couple of odd tapestries. Most of these things were easily broken or ripped, as Tom was gleefully reveling in.

Harry watched in awe as the apparently very angry Dark Lord destroyed his room. Harry's body twitched every time something glass shattered on the floor, or when a drawer was flung across the room. Tom's face was terribly blank as he moved about, ripping down the wall decorations and tossing books at the walls. Eventually two small shapes gained Harry's attention. The House Elves Sprit and Sprot were tirelessly and almost happily following their Master around the room, fixing any and all damage with a snap of their spindly fingers, only to have Tom destroy it all over again.

What the hell brought this on?

Harry turned back to Tom, only to watch as he pulled out his wand and possibly tried to blast one of the bookshelves apart, only to succeed in simply making a few books tumble off the shelves. Harry must have made a noise in protest—he didn't think it would do Tom any good to use his magic in his state—and Tom turned his burning eyes on the young wizard in the doorway. Face still blank and wand held aloft, the man stalked up to Harry and leaned in close. Behind him, Harry barely noticed the House Elves putting the room back in order as if nothing had ever happened.

"Tom?" Harry whispered, unsure if the other man even recognized him. He couldn't lie and say he didn't fear that recognition of Voldemort.

:Get out, Harry,: he hissed coldly, his eyes distant and black, for once, from his dilated pupils. His request was the last thing Harry thought he should do.

"No," he simply stated softly. The man near shook with rage.

But then Tom's blank mask cracked, and he grimaced. Through the link, Harry felt that harsh anger that had caused Tom to rampage through his room, and he also felt the fear that must have sparked it. Now that Harry thought about it, he could taste something like electricity in the air, and felt tiny waves of energy rustle against his skin. It was Tom's magic, let loose as it leaked from his core.
There was no way Tom didn't feel what was happening to him, and while it had been Voldemort who was immortal, it was Tom Riddle who first feared death.

"Tom," Harry said, because he knew the man was afraid and he wanted to help.

Tom's face paled dramatically, and it was only Harry's quick reflexes that kept him from falling down to the hard floor. Harry was at once inordinately pleased that House Elves existed because the bedframe had a mattress and sheets to go with it again. Several stumbling steps later, Harry fell onto the bed with Tom, pulling him into the middle. Harry found him to be awake but broody.

"Do you feel better?"

"No," Tom said shortly. Harry harrumphed.

"The room does."

Tom, realizing he still had his wand clutched tightly in his hand, lifted his arm and threw it across the room to slam against the wall and fall with a soft series of clinks onto the floor. He proceeded to stare at his empty hand, and after a moment clenched it into a fist.

"When I die, it will be as nothing more than a Muggle," he stated with disgust. He may have found reason to not outright kill every Muggle on sight, but that didn't mean he liked them any better. Harry sighed and gathered Tom's fist within his hands. The man looked up, as if taken aback that Harry would even touch him…or maybe he was just surprised by the comfort Harry offered. Had anyone ever comforted him before? Harry tightened his grip.

"You won't die. I've got your favorite traitor and a pair of devoted followers getting what you need to live."

Tom's expression betrayed his dubiousness. "You really thought I would believe that?"

Rolling his eyes, Harry said, "I'm not lying. Snape is getting Lucius to retrieve a potion from the Department of Mysteries that will stabilize your core. Nagini will bring it here. Apparently taking both time potions is not good for your health."

Harry could practically feel the heat coming off Tom's body, and sweat was breaking out on his brow again. The exertion Tom displayed earlier must have negated whatever help his rest had done for him, if his ability to get out of bed in the first place was anything to go by. Harry was glad Tom seemed lucid for the moment, but wondered how long it would last.

Tom was looking at Harry with incredulity. "Are they under the Imperius?"

"Ah, no…" Harry drew out slowly. Tom blinked sluggishly, perhaps fighting to stay awake.

"What the hell did you do?"

Harry was stumped…how to explain? "It was, uh, an accident, I guess."

Even with fever-pinked cheeks and his one hand still encased in Harry's, Tom's narrowed red eyes made Harry gulp.

"Harry Potter, what do you mean 'accident'?"

Harry scowled, but it was good naturedly. "What do you think I've been doing my whole life? Do you really think I've been doing it all on purpose? Here Snape was tied to a chair and telling me
there was no way to help you because he made sure you would die one way or another, and then he found out I was still a Horcrux when I was able to speak with Nagini—"

"Potter…!" Tom groaned.

"—and then suddenly he decides to help you—or me, maybe, not really sure—and went off with Nagini to tell Lucius what to do." Harry paused to breathe. "So, yeah…an accident."

Tom looked to be semi checked-out from the world before he focused once again on Harry. "This doesn't mean I don't want to kill him anymore," he informed Harry sullenly, who in turn sighed. He might have to put Snape back on his "Do Not Touch" list, because as far as he knew, the magical contract Voldemort took under was still in effect for Tom.

Tom tried to pull his hand away, but Harry stubbornly refused and merely entwined their fingers in a handhold. The look on Tom's face was one of simple annoyance and complicated propensity.

"Stop thinking, and sleep," Harry directed. "I'm going to save you again."


"Sleep," Harry said past his chuckle. Tom did, but that's probably because his body gave him no choice.

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"Mr. Malfoy!" the single guard on the ninth floor, a dark-skinned man barely out of boyhood, said in surprise. Lucius inwardly rolled his eyes at the minimum security. There had been something of petty talks about overtime and holiday pay. Didn't they know that war does not take holidays? Not that he really cared…he just liked pointing out the Ministry's stupidity. All the better for him, in the end.

"What are you doing here?"

It was easy for Lucius to keep his visage even and the lie spilling over his tongue without hesitation. "Most inconveniently, an anonymous lawbreaker or perhaps good Samaritan dropped off a Dark Artifact at my home. They were probably trying to find a way to turn it in, and while I am glad it is out of unknown hands, I have children in my home tonight for the holidays and did not wish such an object to be in their reach. I am merely dropping it off for the Unspeakables to deal with later."

The guard had little need to be suspicious. Lucius had been cleared of all charges of being a Death Eater long ago, and save for the close call on this very floor last spring, there was nothing that damned him as working for the Dark Lord, not even the mark on his arm. It wasn't his fault, after all, that he had been under Imperio when he took it, and that no one has of yet found a way to remove it. Really, what a shame that was…

The guard bought the story with little hesitance and nodded at the Malfoy Patriarch. "Very wise of you, sir. I won't hold you any longer so you can get back to your family."

"Thank you," Lucius said with believable but mostly false pleasantry. A moment later he entered the main entrance chamber to the Department of Mysteries. The DoM had let him in without resistance, as his magical signature was one tied into the wards.

Lucius cursed as he waited for the room to stop spinning and he could finally get his task over with. A quick stop in a small collection room at the side to drop off his alibi was in order first. He
knew the object—a black amulet shaped as a Dragon's tooth—he'd found in one of the Malfoy vaults was mostly harmless save for a little Black magic, but it was suitable to warrant a concerned, law-abiding citizen of the British Ministry bringing it in for the Unspeakables to handle. Lucius smirked as he left the room to find what he was really here for. Nothing wrong with taking the long way out.

The blond wizard felt slightly uneasy, being here in the dark corridors with a squirming viper under his robes. He knew how to navigate the tricky rooms and hallways down here, but getting lost wasn't at the front of his mind. Perhaps it was the memory of not too long ago, when he had almost been caught with the Death Eaters and lost everything he had worked for. Bloody Harry Potter.

Lucius was troubled at the thought of the boy. He felt a strange mix of disdain and curiosity about him. Maybe it was because he was beginning to resemble something of the Dark Lord himself. Parselmagic? A snake familiar? Lucius badly wanted to know how his Master would take this sort of news…the bit about Potter's cobra had been in the papers, but Lucius hadn't actually seen let alone spoke with his Lord to even be able to inform him about the Parselmagic his son had been a rather unfortunate victim to.

Lucius fought the stab of something akin to jealousy that Snape had been the one to hear from their Master first after such a long absence. Besides this mission and that letter sent by a Hogwarts owl, which still caused Lucius much mental frustration as he tried to determine what that meant exactly, he had not heard word of the Dark Lord whatsoever.

Lucius had a lot of questions, and he feared they would never get answered. Who would dare question Lord Voldemort on his whereabouts, or on his plans? Certainly Lucius wasn't that stupid, or masochistic. Sometimes he wished…but no, the Dark Lord was who he was and stood as the best hope for the start of a better era in the Wizarding Word. Or so Lucius wished, because the babbling idiots he has had to suck up to certainly have done a good job putting a damper on his belief that they would ever be able to rise to their former glory and dignity. He just wanted what was best for his family and future lineage.

Ah, here it was: the Time Chamber. Lucius opened the door slowly. The room, as always, was long, rectangular, and filled to the brim with…stuff. Old, many times Dark or simply mysterious pieces of gloriously rare and forgotten magic. And a lot of junk. At least the valuable pieces made up for the useless knickknacks kept here only because they could.

There were dancing lights in here, and it put Lucius on a bit of an edge because of the moving shadows. He vowed not to touch anything, lest he be thrown through time like some cliché storybook tale.

Well, better get this over with.

The shelves were labeled with letters and numbers, and he passed through the rows looking for the one identified by Snape. Lucius was under the impression he had been here before.

Across the room, a bell jar displayed the lifecycle of a delicate hummingbird.

Lucius breathed when he found the shelf he was looking for. Vials upon vials of potions and other jarred substances sat innocently in labeled columns and rows. Lucius had to reach in the back for the one he was looking for: a milky, luminous liquid held within a crystal vial. His gloved fingers gripped the ampoule, and he held it aloft. What was so special about this potion? What did it do, and who was it for?

The crystal vial had a magical seal securing the stopper in place. Lucius was under the order to
entrust the item to Nagini, and that's where he was still confused. He cleared his throat and held the bottle up. "This is the potion," he said aloud, and immediately regretted it because of how silly he felt in continuing to speak to a snake. He was no Parseltongue.

He was momentarily and quite thoroughly distracted from his thoughts as a green blur shot out from under his robes to his waiting hand. In his alarm, he would have dropped the crystal bottle as he pulled his hand away in reflex if it weren't for the fact the snake was gripping it in her mouth.

No wait…she was swallowing it. He watched with gruesome fascination as the shape of the bottle moved under her skin to her stomach.

He did not want to think about how that was coming back out.

With a shudder, Lucius pulled his wand from his cane and incanted a duplication charm as he pointed the tip at one of the two conveniently identical crystal vials that had sat by the one he just took. Nothing happened. His brow furrowed, and he tried again, this time on the other, with the same results. Strange. Usually the only reasons that charm failed was if the object had a counter placed on it, or it was already a magically duplicated item. These jars must have the counter charm on them. No matter. Lucius pulled the first expendable item from his pocket, which turned out to be a Galleon. He transfigured it without batting an eye and placed the fake on the shelf before hurrying from the room.

He still couldn't believe the snake came along just to swallow the potion. Surely the Dark Lord realized he had pockets? Or perhaps it was for the snake…though he wasn't aware snakes could digest crystal and therefor get to the potion inside.

He was standing in the exit corridor, trying to decide the best way to circumvent the theft wards that would register the potion bottle…in the snake's stomach… when the slippery creature most unpleasantly slid from his body to the floor. Lucius tried to catch her, but a voice caused him to pause long enough that the snake was able to pass through the ward line before he could stop her. He tensed, waiting for the alarm, but there was nothing. Lucius composed himself.

"All set, Mr. Malfoy?" the guard from earlier asked as he approached. "I'm sorry, but it's protocol that I monitor the wards as you leave."

Lucius inclined his head accommodatingly, though he was annoyed. "Of course." Lucius stepped past the ward line and paused to glance back. The guard let him go and bid him goodnight.

Nagini was waiting for him by the lift, looking for all intents and purposes smug, though she didn't technically have any expression on her triangular face. He looked down at her, wondering at the types of protections the Dark Lord had put on her or if she was naturally immune to some types of magic because she had Basilisk blood in her ancestry. Whatever the case, her purpose was far clearer now. He picked her up, glad to have gloves on his hands, and left with no further troubles.

He went to the Dark Lord's manor. Bellatrix was there in the sitting room he had chosen to wait for his Lord.

Wonderful.

"Luci, what a pleasant surprise!"

Lucius cringed. Yes, just great that Bellatrix should be here.

"Not now, Bella." Nagini loosened her grip, and Lucius shifted awkwardly to accommodate. She squirmed more and moments later her head popped out from under his robes.
"That's Nagini! You have Nagini?" The words rushed out of Bellatrix's mouth with adamant excitement. The insane witch hurried over the Lucius and leaned in close, her wild hair invading his personal space and tickling his cheeks. Her gleaming eyes locked on the green viper. Much to the blond's discomfort, Bellatrix wrapped her hands around his collar to bring him in closer as she cooed over her Master's familiar.

"You have seen our Master?"

"No."

"Then how do you have Nagini?" Bellatrix barked, her mood no longer so exhilarated. Lucius tried to remain calmly indifferent in hopes it would elicit a more even temper from his sister-in-law.

"Snape brought her to me for a mission; I assume he has seen the Dark Lord."

Bellatrix snatched her hands away and backed up, to Lucius' relief, and her face twisted into a snarl. "Snape! And you didn't think that was odd that he should relay our Lord's orders instead of you getting them directly? Snape can't be trusted!"

Pureblood propriety kept Lucius from doing something plebian like rolling his eyes or sighing at Bellatrix's paranoia. "Bella, you know he's a spy. It is his requirement to associate with Dumbledore and his pathetic cohorts."

"No!" Bellatrix exclaimed. She whirled and grabbed something off a nearby table before shoving it into Lucius' face. "It's him!"

It was a page of the Daily Prophet from a few days ago, the one with a somewhat blurry candid shot of Potter with an albino cobra around his shoulders.

"That is Harry Potter," Lucius confirmed banally, really lamenting the fact his wife was related to this woman.

Bellatrix huffed exasperatedly and shoved the picture back in Lucius' line of sight, this time reaching up to tap the snake in the picture.

"It's him," she repeated with fervor. "Harry Potter has the Dark Lord!"

'Bellatrix, you really are a crazy bi—' Lucius stalled in his train of thought. That Hogwarts owl…

"What do you mean, Potter's cobra is the Dark Lord?"

Bellatrix pulled the paper away so she could look at it herself. She traced a finger gently over the shape of the pale snake in the picture. "I saw, and I knew...I knew it was him! It's the eyes..." Lucius was pretty sure she would have had to squint really hard to see the snake's eyes in that picture.

Bellatrix threw the paper down and snatched out her wand. "Accio cage!"

A small animal carrier darted into the room, and Bellatrix caught it with little delicacy or care for whatever might be inside.

It was a rat, with a small, silver paw.

"Wormtail?"

"He was here the day our Master 'left'," she said acerbically. "I checked him, and found he was
Obliviated recently." She suddenly grinned wickedly, her eyes widening. "I broke into his mind, made that icky charm go away."

There wouldn't be anything left of Wormtail's mind now, Lucius realized. Not after Bellatrix was done with it. Wormtail never did have much in terms of brains, but now he couldn't possibly be anything more than a true rat. Lucius shuddered at the thought of how much power this insane witch had.

"His Obliviated memory was briefly of Snape, and then of a white cobra in this very house that he tried to kill." She snarled at the bleary-eyed rat in the cage. "Stupid Wormtail, trying to kill our Master. I'm sure the Dark Lord would love to return the favor." She cackled gleefully.

Lucius, for his part, didn't know what to think. Was it true? Did Potter really have the Dark Lord? If there was one thing he knew, it was the Bellatrix was ruthless, insane, and devoted to their Lord. It would be she who would suspect a bizarre scenario such as Harry Potter keeping the Dark Lord as a pet and believe it, even finding evidence.

"Snape did something," Bellatrix ground out, giving the cage in her hands a shake just for fun.

"You still do not have any proof the cobra is our Lord." Lucius was not going to put all his trust in this crazy woman. It was very difficult for Lucius to picture Voldemort as Harry Potter's pet. If it was the Dark Lord, was he really stuck like that, or was it just something like an Animagus transformation? If the latter, Lucius couldn't fathom what exactly the Dark wizard's was planning. If he wanted to kill the boy with a poisonous bite, why hadn't he done it already?

The dark haired witch before him tossed Wormtail's cage to the side callously and turned her gaze back to Lucius.

"We must get him back! Who knows what those filthy Mudbloods and Blood Traitors are doing to him," she wailed angrily.

"Bellatrix, are you sure he's a prisoner? If Snape is a traitor, why would Potter have him? And that letter was genuine."

Bellatrix hissed in annoyance. "Potter is a Parseltongue, all they'd need is the Dark Lord's blood. It could be taken by force."

True, but…there was still something they were missing.

"How did Snape get Nagini?"

Bellatrix's face twitched. "Are you sure that really is Nagini? Potter could have gotten any snake to do his bidding. Shrunk down like she is you cannot tell. Let me see her again!" she demanded.

Lucius hesitated, and then brought his hand up to unwind Nagini from his shoulders. Only…there was no snake there. Bellatrix noticed this little detail too.

"Where is she?" Their eyes searched the room, quickly spotting that the snake had only made it halfway across the room. Bellatrix smirked.

"Finite Incantatem," she cast at the snake, and sure enough the six foot viper enlarged to her all her twelve foot glory. She reared back and hissed.

"That really is Nagini," Lucius said, even more confused about everything now.
"What if she's a traitor, too, sucking up to another Parseltongue?" Bellatrix sniffed haughtily.

Lucius doubted it. He knew for a fact Nagini would obey only her Master. For a moment Bellatrix had made him doubt the validity of his mission to the Department of Mysteries, but with Nagini cooperating, it may not have been false. But snakes could also be *Imperio'd*, and the potion he was sent to retrieve that may or may not be for whom he thought was currently getting away. He was left with the choice to let her go, assuming she had instructions from the Dark Lord, or to capture her before she could get away and possibly help the enemy.

Lucius rushed after the retreating snake, Bellatrix grabbing hold of his arm to follow. His fear of Nagini escaping caused him to forget about Wormtail's cage on the floor. He tripped, pulling Bellatrix along as he fall forward onto the duvet just as Nagini lay her large head on the small pillow his and Bellatrix's fingers brushed. There was a hiss echoing in his ear, and then an unexpected Portkey whisked them away.

Harry jumped up as he heard a large thump from down in the entryway. Tom had fallen asleep again, his burst of rage and resulting fever thoroughly knocking him out, and did not wake as Harry rushed out the room to find Nagini, who hopefully returned with the potion from the Department of Mysteries. He was glad Tom had left Portkeys for her at his head base, as it made it easy for her to sneak away to Tom's private home without Lucius finding out where she went or being able to follow.

:Nagini!: Harry called as he barreled into view, stumbling to a quick halt as he took in the scene before him. His eyes widened.

:Get off me you clumsy oafs!: Nagini struggled to unwind herself from a dazed looking blond man that lay sprawled on the floor next to an equally disheveled woman with wild, dark hair and gleaming eyes.

"Sprit, Sprot! Prisoners!" Harry called out, doing the first thing that came to mind. In an instant, the two Elves had bound and gagged a very much bedraggled Lucius Malfoy and furious Bellatrix Lestrange. The little Elves were gleefully standing on the "prisoners" backs, with their wands in one hand—or in Lucius' case, his snake cane—and tugging at their respective captives' hair with the other so their necks were craned backwards. Lucius' grey eyes were rather terrified, and that terror morphed into shocked confusion when he spotted just exactly who stood before him. Bellatrix only continued to rant and flex on the floor until Sprit stunned her with a snap of his fingers.

Harry just stood there and looked at the two newcomers. Then he turned to Nagini, oddly calm and collected. :Nagini?: he simply asked.

Nagini, now free, made her way across the floor to Harry's side. :Don't look at me, they fell, the idiots. The Portkey took them along.: 

"Huh," Harry uttered blandly. :Did you get the potion, at least?:

:Of course; I am not an idiot and am perfectly capable of doing my job correctly.: 

Harry was convinced Nagini spent too much time around her Master.

"Right, well…*that* one," Harry said, pointing at the incensed female hogtied on the floor, "can go get locked up securely somewhere. Malfoy can be made comfortable in my room, but keep him bound." He turned to Nagini. :Let's go.:
As the Elves moved to take care of their respective prisoners, Harry retreated back the way he came with Nagini trailing behind him. He wasn't even going to bother thinking about the latest "accident."

Once back in Tom's room, Nagini immediately climbed the bed post up onto the mattress and began licking Tom with her tongue, tasting him to find out about his condition.

:He smells like anger, fear, and wilting magic.: She proceeded to vomit up a crystal glass covered in stomach bile. For Harry, that was still disgusting, but it really served its purpose. :Will this help him?: the viper asked.

Harry didn't answer because he didn't know. He performed a quick cleaning charm on the potion vial before he picked it up. He pulled on the stopper, breaking the magical seal and bent over the unconscious Tom. He took hold of the man's jaw to part his lips so he could tip the milky substance into his mouth. Tom reflexively swallowed.

Harry carefully set the half-empty bottle down on the nightstand and studied Tom closely, fully opening the link in the recesses of him mind to try and determine if there was any change.

It had to work, because...because...

Harry pressed his palm onto Tom's forehead, finding it to be a normal temperature. It wasn't a definitive sign, because it seemed exertion brought on the fevers.

:Hey, Nagini, does he...smell any different?:

She flicked her tongue. :Minty:.

Harry heaved a sigh. She was only detecting the potion, which actually did smell like mint.

Harry suddenly felt really tired. Drained, almost. His arms he used to support himself as he leaned over the bed shook, and he wobbled. His eyes drooped.

It took everything he had to crawl into the bed before he collapsed on the floor. He had one thought in his head: sleep.

Hphphphp

It wasn't a cold water jinx but a hand on his shoulder that woke him up this time. Harry merely rolled over and pulled the covers up to his chin.

"G'way, Ron," he slurred. Someone snorted.

"Do I look like I have red hair?"

Harry's eyes opened, and he rolled back over and sat up. Tom was dressed and standing on the side of the bed, and Harry couldn't be happier at the sight.

"Tom," Harry breathed. He couldn't help it; he grew up as a Gryffindor, and they were oh so touchy-feely. Harry reached out and wrapped his arms around Tom's middle, uncaring how un-masculine or childish it may seem.

Harry pulled away not too long after, and if Tom seemed startled, he quickly hid it. But he appeared a bit distracted by Harry's actions, and did not say anything for a moment. Did the affection he showed bother Tom? Harry couldn't think much more on this when he was a bit
sidetracked himself as a headache registered in his nerve cells. He clutched his head, wincing.

"Ow," he hissed. Something smooth and cool was shoved against his hand.

"Here," Tom said. "This will help the headache."

Harry grabbed for it, uncaring whatever it was as long as it made the pain go away. He swallowed the contents of the regular glass potion bottle, recognizing the familiar taste of a pain reliever. He lay back down on his side, burying his face in what turned out to be Tom's pillow. After a moment, he felt a somewhat hesitant hand lay lightly on his shoulder, and he felt himself relax.

"What the bloody hell happened?" he mumbled, feeling better now that his headache was fading to a dull throbbing.

"Once my core was stabilized, it looked to restore itself. Turns out that works a lot faster if it borrows a bit of your magic," Harry heard Tom state nonchalantly above him.

"Huh?"

Fingers gently trailed up his neck and into his hair, which they lightly threaded through. Harry breathed deeply.

"We have a very strange, unique connection, one that very well may never be replicated elsewhere. Too many variables went in it. As it seems, apparently we are capable of sharing magic. We are… apart of each other. I borrowed some from you when I required it, and in all likelihood you could take from me if you needed to. I am far from fully restored, but you gave my core a boost it could not get on its own."

Harry groaned. "How much did you take, for me to feel like shit?"

Tom drummed his fingers on Harry's scalp. "Only what you could spare, but I took it all at once. Shocked your system."

Harry frowned, and shifted under the sheets. The hand in his hair pulled away as if startled by the movement, and so Harry sat up slowly. He had slept in his glasses, and they were rather skewed on his face, so he straightened them. Seeing better certainly helped his headache as much as the potion had. He saw the tip of Tom's wand hanging out from under his sleeve, and felt even better.

"Why wasn't I drained while you were sick?" They could have both been in trouble if Tom had exhausted both his and Harry's core.

Tom made a face of displeasure. "It's probably because my core was broken; yours was healthy, which protected it. Normally in general what happened is not possible, but…you let me have access after the potion took effect."

That was true. "I had the link open, trying to see if the potion worked."

With that same, reverent gesture he had done many times before, Tom brought his hand up to trace the shape of Harry's scar. "Very unique, indeed." Tom seemed to draw himself out of his thoughts, and his hand dropped to the mattress, right next to Harry's. Their fingers brushed. "I want to tell you that, well…thank you."

That was twice now that he had thanked Harry, and the young wizard couldn't be more thrilled at the simple, almost awkward gesture. Tom's hand was lifted in the air again, where it hovered in uncharacteristic hesitation before it was brought up to palm the side of Harry's head. Harry allowed
himself to be drawn into a slow, chaste kiss, which was just about as good as Tom's spoken gratitude.

Once they parted, Harry said, "I really hope I don't have to save your life again. I might have to start charging you for reparation of time and effort used."

Tom's eyebrow rose and his mouth twisted into something licentious. :I can think of one way to repay you,: he hissed suggestively.

Harry's eyes widened and he flushed crimson. Did he just…?

"Now, do tell me how it is I have Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange in my *private* home?" Tom proceeded to say casually as if he hadn't just made an innuendo.

Once Harry's muddled thoughts found their way around his astoundingly overactive imagination of Tom "repaying" him, he immediately pointed to Nagini, who was resting at the end of the bed. The viper in question raised her head and hissed in an affronted manner.

"Her fault, not mine."

Fangs bared, Nagini said, :I know enough English to understand what you just said, you uncouth child. Two-leggers are simply much too clumsy.: 
"Somehow I doubt it is Nagini's fault," Tom said, turning to Harry and looking pointedly at his living Horcrux.

"...You're going to blame me, aren't you?"

Straight-faced, Tom replied, "It's somehow always your fault."

Harry's only response was to cross his arms across his chest and sigh as he rolled his eyes to the side with a defeated expression.

:Master, you should know that Blondie and Lady have come to suspect your condition of recent,: Nagini supplied, breaking the silence.

"She calls that crazy witch 'Lady'…?" Harry muttered with aversion under his breath.

Tom ignored Harry and considered Nagini with a contemplative air. :And how did they come to that conclusion?:

Nagini twitched the tip of her tail and flexed her muscles, the movement visible under her scales. :I could not understand everything, but Lady was talking about Harry Potter's snake, Potion Man, and something about the Rat's mind.: 

Harry made a glowering face at the mention of Wormtail, but kept most of his opinions on the man to himself for the moment. "Snape said he Obliviated Wormtail after he tried to kill you and you disappeared. Could Bellatrix counter that?"

Tom took a few pacing steps. "With ease, but not sophistication. I doubt Wormtail will be bothering any of us for the indefinite future, unless the rodent dies in the wall and starts decaying," Tom added flippantly.

Harry looked down with an indifferent expression. He could pretend he felt sorry for the man…but he didn't.

When Harry lifted his head back up, Tom was looking at him introspectively. "Come," he said, "the House Elves will have breakfast ready."

"What about our 'guests'?"

Tom waved his hand dismissively. "I can assure you, they are not going anywhere."

Tom left the room so Harry could freshen up for the day. After he had finished dressing and was ready to head to breakfast, he paused and turned to Nagini, who was content to remain on the bed.

:Hey, did you ever give me a nickname, like you did for the Death Eaters?:

Nagini lifted her head, her black eyes shining in snake-like amusement.

:Yes...Dinner.: 

Harry scowled and stomped from the room.
Following breakfast—at which Harry forced Tom to finally eat some of the cake he had made, much to Tom's chagrin and protest that it wasn't the right time of day—Tom and Harry went to Tom's office to analyze certain points of interest that needed to be addressed. Harry sat down in a free chair and yawned. Tom snapped his fingers, and one of the twin House Elves popped in before Tom sent him away again to bring them both some more tea.

"I feel like I haven't slept in days," Harry grumbled, despite the fact he had only been up for an hour.

Tom was idly swishing his yew wand through the air, generating a glittering display of harmless, multi-colored sparks. He eventually sighed and slipped his wand away, picking up his teacup and taking a generous sip.

"Your core is working on building up what you lost. It takes effort and energy."

Hunched over his steaming, caffeinated beverage, Harry blew on it before taking a large gulp.

"Aren't you tired?"

Tom, Harry noticed, didn't even have the decency to look apologetic as he answered, "The boost of the magic I took from you was sufficient to give me a faster recovery time. I would say my core is only depleted to the point of a day's worth of difficult spell casting. I am used to such drainage, but I suspect you are not, still being underage. I didn't take enough of your magic to kill you but enough to wear you out."

"You sucked me dry," Harry complained.

"You're fine, imp."

Harry moodily drank more tea.

Tom observed Harry from across his desk, internally smirking at the young wizard's temperamental front.

"How are you going to handle Malfoy and her," Harry finally said, obviously refusing to say Bellatrix's name.

Tom considered the question, which had been at the forefront of his mind the moment he found out his home had been invaded by a pair of his elite. He could easily handle them both, if he so wished, whether it be something as simple as Obliviating them or the finality of an *Avada Kedavra*. That last, extreme option was a bit overboard for him at the moment. Lucius Malfoy, after all, was useful, and Bellatrix was loyal. He wasn't afraid to keep his new look and alliance from his followers, but it had to be done in the right way to ensure a smooth transition.

"I think it would be prudent to see how Lucius reacts to you," he told Harry, who blinked and set his tea down on the desk.

"Ah, the sane one," Harry said sardonically, and then: "Why bother?"

Why indeed. "You're not the enemy anymore."

There was warmth and a feeling akin to contentment in his chest at Harry's resulting smile. Merlin, he felt disturbingly soft when it came to that boy. Perhaps it was because Harry treated him like no other did, so he did the same for him. It didn't help that right now he just didn't care, having
understated a bit how exhausted he still felt, and not just physically. Emotionally he hadn't fully recovered from his near-death experience, and the amount of overwhelming, foreign affection he felt for Harry the likes of which he hadn't known he was capable of when the boy actually came through with his promise Tom had heard him make to Nagini just as he drifted off into unconsciousness the first time. There had been that dark conviction in the far reaches of his mind that said Harry would just let him die like he was supposed to do. When he woke up, alone, and with his magic bleeding from his body like an open wound, it drove him into a rage like only a frightened, wild animal could feel.

But Harry came back, and eventually saved him. And Tom was grateful. It was hard to hold back from Harry when he made Tom feel like that, the little brat.

"You say the sweetest things, Tom," Harry proceeded to tease, and Tom gave him a look and pretended that he didn't want to smile, in good-natured rout, at the comment.

"How do you intend to go about this?" Harry asked after he schooled his features. "You don't really look the same as you did before, and I think he believes you're a snake right now." He paused. "You know, this creates a great opportunity for some fun."

If Tom wasn't a dignified person, he would have dropped his head to his desk in exasperation. Harry was going to ruin his image, he just knew it. Harry's type of "fun" usually had no place in the Dark Lord business.

With a small amount of trepidation, Tom queried, "And what, dare I ask, do you have in mind?"

Harry picked up his teacup. "He thinks you're a snake." He took a sip, and appeared to wait.

Tom's face twitched. "And…?" he prompted irritably.

"You…are a snake to him, and I am your keeper."

"Get to the point, Potter."

Harry gave Tom a thwarted look and set his tea down again. "It'd be really funny if I brought in a cobra and he thought it was you. Imagine him bowing to a snake and calling it 'my Lord'."

"Mm, yes, hilarious," Tom uttered dryly.

"You're not going to let me, are you?"

"No." He'd rather not let his followers think he was still trapped in a mundane animal form and at the mercy of Harry Potter's hospitality, no matter for how short of time. It was bad enough Lucius probably already thought that, and Tom really didn't want to encourage it. He felt one of his brows arch upwards. "I fear Lucius Malfoy has been stretched beyond his limit."

Harry made a face. "Merlin forbid the aristocrat has his delicate sensibilities impeded on. Have it your way then, but don't expect me to be very civil to him, or Bellatrix."

Tom found the situation dreadfully ironic. "Oh, come now Harry, aren't I worse than them? And look how well you get alone with me now." Tom's tone suggested he was not merely talking about their new political alliance. His eyes gleamed as he watched a blush slowly color Harry's cheeks and neck. The sight was so ridiculously appealing, and when Harry said, "You grew on me," it was all Tom could do to stay seated and to not try and find out just how far down Harry's neck that flush traveled. Harry didn't blush often, after all.
Of course it was safe to say that he had never been attracted to Harry before, unless one considers blood lust as "attraction". He wanted to kill Potter before, not kiss him.

How things had changed. Blood lust had become...a different sort of lust. There was a recalcitrant, primal part of Tom that demanded he make Harry his in every way possible, make him willing and wanting it. Nobody had belonged to Tom quite like Harry did, and peculiarly it only caused him to want to make the connection even stronger.

As it intersected his current train of thought, he recalled the brief glimpses (and sometimes not so glimpses) of Harry's body. He wasn't as tall as Tom, but he was still pleasingly put together. Death threats and Quidditch apparently did him well. Tom had long ago brushed aside Muggle stigma against different sorts of relationships, having wanted nothing to do with Muggles and their way of thinking, and thus freed himself to consider any gender sexually. Harry, however, was the first person he had looked at with this kind of awareness in a long time. But there was also something different about it than times before.

"Tom?"

Harry's voicing of his name drew Tom out of his inner thoughts to realize his eyes were roving over the younger man. He cocked his head to the side.

"Shall we?"

The Elves had thus far been taking care of the prisoners' needs, and so Tom instructed one of them to escort Lucius to the study Tom and Harry were already ensconced in. Tom had been given Malfoy's wand, along with Bellatrix's, for safe keeping. It didn't take long for a blindfolded, rumpled Lucius to show up at the door. As soon as the Elf who guided Malfoy disappeared, the blindfold did too.

Harry had to stifle a snigger at the look on the man's face. He was sitting on the far side of the desk with Tom, who had hidden his eyes for the moment by keeping them downcast as he twisted Lucius' wand, pulled free from its holder, in his hands. Lucius himself stood awkwardly in the room. Who knew what he was thinking?

Tom looked up, and Lucius dropped to his knees, having caught the definitive red eyes. He wasn't stupid, after all.

"Looks much better, doesn't he?" Tom elbowed Harry subtly in the ribs for that comment.

"My Lord," Lucius murmured, and Harry could have sworn it was said in relief.

"And you thought I did him in, didn't you?" Harry blurted before he could stop himself. Tom slowly laid Lucius' wand down on the desktop while Lucius gave him a fearful glance, as if he was worried Tom would take Harry's comment in offence.

"Lucius, I do believe you know Harry Potter," Tom said in a wry sort of tone.

Lucius bowed his head. "Yes, my Lord."

"And I'm sure you're wondering what he is doing here."

'Among other things,' Harry thought to himself.

"He is mine now, and under my protection."
Harry wanted to either blush or hit him. Hit him would probably be preferable.

"Now wait a second, you're giving him the wrong idea," Harry exclaimed towards Tom, and then focused his attention on Lucius. "You know your theory about Voldemort being at Hogwarts? Congratulations, you were completely correct. He and I were spending some quality time together the past few weeks."

Lucius paled when Tom told him, "You will never track my owls again." He then dealt with Harry by sending a wandless stinging hex at him, who in turn rubbed the offended shoulder irritably.

"Mr. Potter and I have rectified our differences and have come to terms with certain items of note. However, it would be in your best interest to keep this quiet for now." The warning in Tom's tone was clear, and while Harry wasn't exactly pleased by the terror method, he understood that for now it was how things had to be. Lucius looked thoroughly convinced that discretion was the way to go. Tom had to take it a step further, in such a way that both irritated and amused Harry to no end, and also gave him a smidgen of warm pride. He guessed that Dark Lords do know how to have a little fun after all.

"You should note that, while Harry is under my protection, he has already demonstrated—with your son as an example—that he is fully capable of protecting himself."

Lucius didn't seem to be putting two-and-two together, so Harry thought he'd help him out. He jerked his thumb in Tom's direction. "He makes a very endearing pet," he mouthed sarcastically.

"Potter!"

Said wizard looked at the incensed one at his side. "What? We both know he already suspects that for the past three weeks I had a Dark Lord as a pet." Harry turned to Lucius. "You're lucky I stopped your son from harming my beloved snake." Lucius blinked.

"Wha—oh! M-my Lord! I…” Lucius stuttered, eyes wide and shifting between Tom and Harry. Tom gave him a blank, unflappable look while Harry merely sat there with his arms crossed smugly over his chest.

"You can thank your son for the sterilization procedure you may or may not be subjected to." Beside him, Tom sighed but did not say anything. How Lucius could become any paler than what he already was mystified Harry. He kind of looked like he was having an aneurism or something of that nature.

"I—please forgive my son, my Lord, for his ignorance and brash, uncouth actions. I ask to take any punishment in his place." Lucius was hunched over, eyes facing the ground in a submissive posture. It made Harry feel uncomfortable. He noted that every time he's interacted with Lucius, the man was a huge snob, but in the presence of his Lord he was thoroughly cowed. If fear was what kept them, what drove the Death Eaters like Lucius to Voldemort in the first place? Their whole expectation of what Voldemort would do for them surely wasn't a devastating war against the Light and Muggles, could it?

What did Lucius dream about when he let Voldemort brand his Mark into his skin? Probably not about all the times he would be Crucio'd, Harry decided. Surely Tom would stop that kind of thing now, right?

To Harry's surprise and chagrin, Tom actually pulled out his wand and aimed it at the blond. Without thinking about what he was doing, Harry slapped the hand away, the sound of it reverberating within the room. Tom turned burning, narrowed red eyes at the boy, and Lucius...
peeked at the two from under his lashes with sharp disbelief.

"Potter, what do you think you're doing?" His voice was cold, and Harry had to fight back the urge to shy away.

"You're being irrational."

Lucius was now uncharacteristically and blatantly gaping.

Harry spoke again. "Draco was not trying to kill you; he was only trying to hurt me because of our stupid little rivalry. There is really no need to severely punish anyone because of that, when he was only trying to help you, in a way, since as far as he knew I was the enemy. There is no way he could have known who you were."

Tom was staring at Harry, his body tense and looking like he was trying to hold back from saying something. At least he didn't look like he wanted to strangle him anymore. When Tom remained silent, Harry turned back to Lucius, who was observing at the young wizard with intense scrutiny. From the side of his vision, Harry saw Tom turn away from him to look at Lucius as well and internally breathed a sigh of relief.

"Mr. Potter," Lucius said slightly stiltedly, "I thank you for your defense." Lucius looked like he had licked a lemon. The man turned back to his Lord. "My Lord, my offer still stands." He waited, seeing if Tom would lift his wand again. Harry wanted to shake his head at the obsequiousness.

When Tom made no move from his terse position, Harry said to Lucius, "Just so you know, I don't like you, or your son, very much. I'm not trying to defend you because of any sense of comradery. But I am a Gryffindor, and we tend to be forgiving and lenient. I simply believe Draco served his penance in Hogwarts detention already."

Harry suddenly frowned and glanced questioningly at Tom. He hadn't meant to, but it seemed he had taken over this little meeting and made some decisions without consulting the other man first. Had he overstepped his bounds?

While Tom did not look at Harry, he did lift his wand again and before Lucius had time to prepare himself, a spell was cast at him, only with no visible effects.

"Leave, Lucius. An Elf will escort you out." On cue, Sprit (or Sprot) arrived and waited while Lucius rose warily to his feet. "Make sure you inform your son of recent developments, and feel fortunate the noble Gryffindor was here," Tom added as a final word.

Once Lucius left, Harry immediately dropped his gaze to his lap and said, "I'm sorry." He risked rotating his eyes so he could see Tom's expression, which remained inscrutable.

"Gryffindors," Tom finally ground out, and rose to his feet. Harry scrambled to follow suit.

"Are you mad?" he asked to Tom's back. The man turned around to face the boy wizard.

"I am angry I did not get to Crucio him."

Harry frowned. "But why would you do that in the first place? Yes, he offered to take his son's punishment, but Draco Malfoy didn't know it was you."

"Of course that little idiot didn't know it was me. He deserved a Crucio for trying to hurt you though," he snapped, retracing his steps towards Harry. And then Tom froze, a sort of dazed expression on his face. Harry's eyebrows disappeared under his fringe for a brief period, and
then he grinned widely.

"I think I've grown on you."

"You're such a brat."

Tom kissed him, and Harry in all his form went along with it. They were so close (when did they get so close?) that it was only a matter of leaning in a few inches for their lips to meet. Harry quickly realized that Tom was in control of this—he supposed it was all he could do for dominating the meeting with Lucius—but it wasn't exactly hard to part his lips for Tom's tongue. Harry lost awareness of the room, save for the desk which he ended up being pushed against, the edge digging into the small of his back. Not that he cared. His attention was solely focused on the warm body pressing him there and the hot mouth sucking the breath from his body in a very delicious way. Tom's hand had ended up at his waist where his t-shirt had ridden up, and Harry felt a thumb run on the strip of bare skin just above his waistband. It startled a moan out from the back of his throat. A second later he had to break the kiss to take in much needed air.

His overactive imagination was back. He'd heard some interesting things on what could happen on a desktop…

…except usually that involved two people, and since Tom was walking away now it seriously put a damper on what Harry's brain had conjured.

"Wha…?"

Tom smirked at him from over his shoulder. "I believe we still have Bellatrix to see to." With that he disappeared out the door, leaving Harry to stumble away from the desk and try to compose himself, which was a bit difficult when one was still trying to recover from being snogged half to death.

"What did you do to me, Tom?" Harry wondered under his breath, straightening his clothing before hurrying to catch up with the most confounding man he had ever met.

Tom looked inordinately smug when Harry reached his side. Harry's cheeks still felt hot, but at least he wasn't panting anymore. He cleared his throat.

"So…what spell did you toss at Malfoy before he left?"

"A secrecy charm. It'll keep him from giving anything away to the wrong people."

"Oh. Good idea." He paused. "When are we going to tell people? For that matter, what will we tell them? And how?" He rubbed his scar, but only in contemplation rather than pain. "Merlin, that's going to be complicated. People aren't going to understand what's different about you or that I'm not becoming the next Dark Lord or whatever." He sighed heavily, and a moment later felt a soothing caress down his cheek. He looked up at Tom.

"Later, Harry. Now, will you let me handle my Death Eater this time?"

Harry scowled. "She's all yours. Where'd the Elves put her?"

"The cellar; this house does not have holding cells but there is a storage room down there that serves the purpose. Harry, you really don't like Bellatrix, do you?"

"No," Harry admitted after a moment. "She killed the only person who was the closest thing to family I've ever knew."
"You did," Harry responded in an equally frank manner. "You've done a lot of things, many from decisions made under the exacerbation of splitting your soul. But...I can understand where you come from; I don't agree with it, but I understand what led you to your state of mind. I realize I could have easily become like you. And in the end, you decided to make my life easier by not forcing me to kill you in order to protect the ones I love. Bellatrix though...what's her excuse? Did Azkaban make her insane, or was she like that before? I'm not able to understand her yet, but maybe that's because I don't know much about her."

"Harry, would you like me to take care of her?"

Harry stopped moving, and stood in the middle of what was now a hallway in the cellar with his eyes closed. The word "yes" nearly pushed past his lips. He grimaced.

"Dammit," he murmured, and leaned against the stone wall. A shadow fell over his body, and warmed his side where it stood. The hand was back at his cheek, and Harry instinctively leaned into the touch, at once hungry for that type of caress that had only rarely ever been given to him.

"I hate her, Tom. But I hate murder more. I gave you a chance; shouldn't I give her one as well?"

"You don't have to; consider it an execution."

"No, I don't have to...give her a chance, that is. But I will."

Harry pushed away from the wall and took three purposeful strides forward. Then he paused again and looked sheepishly over his shoulder.

"Uh, I don't really know where I'm going."

Tom's appearance was distinctly amused. He caught up to Harry and led them a little farther into the brick cellar, and then turned through an archway into what seemed to be a wine cellar. The room was narrow, and lined with wooden racks partially full of various wine and liquor bottles. At the end of the room was a wooden door, deceptively feeble looking for a makeshift cell, but as Harry approached it he could feel, with the help of all that ward research he did to get into Snape's office, the additional protection entrenched into the door and the room behind it.

"Am I going in too?" Harry wiped his damp palms on his jeans, not really sure if they were like that because of the cellar atmosphere or because of his emotions.

Tom had to press in close to Harry's side in the narrow space. It was comforting.

"I'll probably be Obliviating her no matter what, but have yet to determine how much. She's already seen you, so you might as well come in too."

Despite the way he was feeling, Harry gave Tom a sidelong glance and said, "Are you sure you don't want to put some sort of Glamour on? Every time I've interacted with her, she seemed all hot and bothered for you, and that was when you were ugly. She may not be able to resist jumping you now."

Tom smirked, which was not exactly the reaction Harry was going for. "Are you trying to tell me something, Potter?"

Harry sputtered for a moment, and then instead of blushing like his cheeks threatened to do, he punched Tom lightly in the arm. Tom seemed thoroughly shocked by this action.
"Ow," he said thickly.

"Baby," Harry sniggered. "Be grateful I can't easily reach your nose anymore."

Tom made a face, and then waved his wand at the door before them and pushed it open. He spelled a light within its depths and walked in, with Harry behind trying to peer around him. From what he could see, Bellatrix was still magically bound and sitting on the floor. Taking a deep breath, Harry followed Tom inside the room, which was decently size and just a little smaller than his bedroom on Privet Drive.

Bellatrix immediately zeroed in on Harry.

"Harry Potter!" She screeched before turning to Tom, her eyes trying to adjust to the light. "And who's this?"

"Crucio."

Harry watched in dazed fascination as Bellatrix writhed on the floor, the sounds coming from her mouth staggeringly difficult to decipher as screams or delighted laughter.

Tom cut the curse, and apparently Bellatrix's bindings because she immediately prostrated at Tom's feet.

"Master," she moaned in elation. Harry felt sick. "I was so worried in your absence."

Tom looked down at the woman with an unreadable countenance. "Bellatrix, that is enough."

Tom's voice was cold and sibilant, and the kind of deadly soft tone Voldemort used. Harry shivered a bit in the clammy air.

Bellatrix turned her luminous black eyes on Harry, and sneered. "Itty bitty Potter, how dare you stand there without kneeling to Lord Voldemort." Harry took an indignant step forward, hands clenched into fists, and Bellatrix raised herself threateningly.

Tom intervened before Harry could say anything. "Harry Potter is not to be touched, Bellatrix, and is ranked above you. You will not speak to him in such a way." His voice was terse, and Bellatrix looked castigated.

"Forgive me, my Lord. But how can you trust him? He's been so mean to you, my Master," the witch pouted.

"Are you questioning me, Bellatrix?"

"No, my Lord." Bellatrix reached out and began petting the bottom of Tom's deep green robes, before she leaned in and rubbed her face against his leg. Harry's face spasmed.

"Oi, get off him!" he barked, and then slammed his mouth shut, surprised by his outburst.

Bellatrix's smile was sickeningly sweet when she rotated her face towards Harry.

"Jealous, Potter? Does my Lord not let a filthy Half-Blood like you touch him?"

Tom stepped back out of Bellatrix's reach, and she fell forward as her balance was eschewed. "You've forgotten yourself, Bellatrix." Harry, relieved by the distance between the two, glowered darkly at the witch and noted to himself that he had been, not quite jealous, but perhaps feeling something akin to possessiveness about Tom. He didn't like seeing that crazy bitch rubbing herself
all over him.

Harry could see Tom looking at him in the dim lighting, and then raise his wand and send a silent *Crucio* at Bellatrix. Harry didn't necessarily get satisfaction at the witch's pain, but rather was pleased Tom didn't encourage Bellatrix's behavior. The Dark magic in the room did make breathing difficult, though.

Tom ended the curse but did not lower his wand from the twitching woman on the floor. Harry watched inquiringly as the man waved his wand tip in long, complicated arcs that he had trouble following. Tom was speaking, too, but it wasn't English and spoken so low Harry couldn't decipher what he was saying. The room filled with a stifling amount of magic as Tom finished the spell, and Harry found himself blinking inanely as Tom's magic washed over him again and disappeared.

"What did you do?"

Bellatrix was no longer there. What was there was a cobra…a white one.

Harry arched his eyebrow. "Tom?"

"I haven't done a human-to-animal Transfiguration in a while," he merely stated lightly, seemingly pleased.

"Well, good for you. But…why that?"

"I figure you're going to need a replacement pet," he said with dry emphasis, "as I am no longer available. Saves you the trouble of explaining where the cobra everyone knows you had went. And, I believe she could use a new occupation, since I am no longer in want of her particular services." He paused. "This is her second chance," he said, looking Harry straight in the eye.

Harry grimaced. "Well, I did say to not kill her."

Harry looked down at the transformed Bellatrix, who was curled up on the cold stone floor. She was very similar in color to what Voldemort the snake had been, but some of the markings were a bit different and her body was thinner than he was. It was hard to tell in the dim lighting, but her eyes appeared several shades darker, more like a burgundy, than Voldemort's blood red. She twitched suddenly, coming out of the stupor she had been in following both the Unforgivable curse and Tom's spell.

Bellatrix the snake lifted her head blearily.

"Will she remember anything?"

"She has a mind of a snake and will work off instinct, which shall perhaps prove interesting considering we can understand her. I suspect much of her personality will be similar." Tom flicked his wand and levitated Bella-snake to him.

"And I thought I couldn't get a worse pet than you." Tom looked offended.

:Master?: the confused snake asked in her new sibilant voice, and Harry instantly wondered if perhaps she did remember who she was.

:I am not your Master. He is:; Tom hissed back, gesturing in Harry's direction, who in turn huffed and crossed his arms in a pout, not thrilled at all with the new development. :You will do your best to protect him and he will take care of you.: The snake—who had not reacted one way or another to a wizard speaking her language—merely turned her head towards Harry with an equally unreactive
expression which made Harry think perhaps she didn't know who she really was after all.

:Er, hello.: Harry said awkwardly.

:Master?:

Harry scratched the back of his head. :Uh, I guess.: Bella inclined her head.

:Yes, you will be my Master.: she stated decidedly. Smirking, Tom walked over and dumped her in Harry's arms. After a moment's hesitation, Harry wrapped her around his shoulders with practiced ease. Bellatrix the snake settled in with a satisfied hiss.

"Tom?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"I have a weird life."

Tom apparently had no proper response to that.

Moments later, Tom and Harry reappeared upstairs, where Nagini greeted them.

:Boy, you have a cobra around your shoulders.:  

Harry rolled his eyes at the astute observation. :Yes, this is Bel—: He stopped himself. :This is Lady.: he said after brief consideration—it was better for his sanity to think of her as someone other than his Godfather's murderer.

Nagini perked up.

:Lady? Has the same thing that happened to Master happened to her?:

:Nope, this is something new.: Angling his head around a bit, Harry could see "Lady" eyeing Nagini with interest.

:Who's she?:

:Nagini, the other speaker's familiar.: Harry hissed. Unwinding the Transfigured cobra from his neck, he set her down. Immediately, Lady began rapidly tasting the air with her tongue and swayed side to side in her cobra stance in front of Nagini.

:Touch my Master and you will die,: she abruptly declared.

Harry sputtered the same time Nagini hissed sharply and drew herself to her full height in imitation of the tinier cobra.

:You little runt!: Nagini struck out with her fangs, but Lady merely dodged to the side, a curious little sound coming from her throat that sounded a bit like cackling. Nagini struck again, but the smaller snake's reflexes were too sharp. Harry really just wanted to shut himself in a dark room and not come out. It was a good thing Tom had more sense about him.

:Enough,: Tom hissed, sending a pair of stinging hexes at the unruly snakes. :Control yourselves.: Nagini glared at Lady in the menacing way only the Dark Lord's snake of could accomplish, and the once-human cobra continued to sway her head in glee, seeming completely unaffected by Tom's painful hex.
Lady, behave.; Harry finally uttered with a sigh. Taking out his wand, he conjured a fat rat that would hopefully occupy her time. It worked, because as soon as the frightened rodent found its legs and took off down the hall, Lady chased after it.

Come here, ickle rat, snakey has a surprise for you!:

"Bellatrix Lestrange is a snake," Harry muttered. He felt very tired now.

Nagini watched the crazy cobra slither down the hall, and then turned to her own Master. It was a bit disturbing how much she looked like a scorned puppy.

Fine, you great beast.; Tom said with a huff and conjured a rabbit for Nagini to hunt.

It is the least you could do, Master, for letting that impertinent runt into my home.: With those final words, she slunk off in pursuit of her meal.

Once they were free of any and all snarky reptiles, Harry turned to Tom accusingly.

"Why couldn't you have been a dog whisperer or something so we could have cute, fluffy things as familiars? Snakes are so temperamental. Did you know Nagini called me 'Dinner' before?"

"Of course; it amused me."

Harry sighed dejectedly and swayed on his feet. A hand on his shoulder steadied him.

"Come, Harry." Harry allowed himself to be led down the hall and into what may or may not be considered his and Tom's shared bedroom. Tom gently pushed him down onto the bed.

"Sleep. Your body's still recovering from you core drain." Fingers brushed over his scared forehead. Harry kicked off his shoes, uncaring where they landed.

"You know, you can be quite chivalrous when you want to be," he mumbled into the nearest pillow, which smelled like Tom. Harry buried his face deeper, eyes closing. He felt his glasses being removed from his face.

"These things are such a liability," Tom muttered and Harry heard them being tossed onto the bedside table. Harry merely hummed at the comment.

He slept.

Tom watched, with a sense of amusement, as Harry fell into unconsciousness without any difficulty. He surprised him today, but then again he didn't really do anything unexpected. The way he handled Lucius Malfoy was just so Harry Potter-ish—Tom couldn't believe he was even thinking that phrase, but it was the only way he could describe it. And then with Bellatrix…it both annoyed and endeared Tom that Harry could be so principled.

He himself hadn't cared one way or the other what happened to Bellatrix. On one hand, she threatened Harry's safety because of the knowledge she had of him, and on the other she was devoutly loyal to her Lord and would have done whatever he told her to…except play nice with Harry, apparently. In a person as completely unhinged as Bellatrix, old habits die hard, and he himself took a while to see Harry as something other than an enemy.

Tom had once enjoyed Bellatrix's fervent devotion, but down in that cellar today it had irritated him more than anything. Where once he reveled in such zealfulness, to see such a powerful witch
—one driven insane by his own trainings and a long stint in Azkaban—groveling at his feet made him feel weary. He realized Bellatrix had no place outside of war.

Oh, but it had been so droll to see Harry all worked up when she touched him.

Tom could feel his tired eyes stinging as he continued to force them open. He probably shouldn't have done such difficult magic today when he himself was still recovering, despite the boost Harry's magic gave him. Punishing Bellatrix and completing her Transfiguration were not easy pieces of magic. He really should have just killed her and have been done with it. He almost did after she insulted Harry, and in turn himself, with the Half-Blood comment. Turning her into a snake and rendering her harmless but alive was purely for Harry's benefit.

Merlin, he was going soft.

With a defeated sigh, Tom shed his outer clothing and crawled into bed next to Harry, his body simply too exhausted to function properly without more sleep. He hated afternoon naps—they were so unproductive—but this nap was redeemed when his and Harry's bodies made contact as the other seemingly automatically rolled into him. The way Tom could explain it was as if they were both the opposite sides of a Muggle magnet, drawn together by an invisible force. If ever the phrase "opposites attract" was true for anything, it'd be for him and Harry. Tom no longer had any will or facility to deny how much the young wizard affected him, and how much he just didn't care that he did. Harry was too unique to ever want to let go.

Harry slowly came to consciousness, the warmth and all around contentment he was feeling after the rockiness of this afternoon nearly lulling him back to sleep. But he forced himself to open his eyes and take in his surroundings. He was in the same bed he fell asleep in, though he did not have the same pillow.

Tom was his pillow. Huh. He must have decided to take a nap too. This caused a smile to quirk Harry's mouth.

As far as Harry knew, Tom was still sleeping. The younger wizard took the opportunity to study him, not so much with his eyes—which were useless anyway without his glasses—but more with his other senses. Every breath Harry took caused him to inhale the basic scent that was Tom. It was an aroma that wasn't exactly definable as a whole in the human language, but take it apart and Harry could make out the scent of clean skin, cotton, and the mellow fragrance that was uniquely Tom's.

A heart beat steadily under his ear. There was a soft whoosh of air as it filled and was expelled from Tom's lungs.

As Harry was so...closely pressed up against the other man, he could fully appreciate the fact that he radiated living warmth capable of easing any tension within Harry's muscles and caused him to relax into an unconcerned heap. This morning's troubles were far away right now. Harry was fully slotted against Tom's side, and whenever he or Tom breathed he could feel the slight friction caused by their bodies rubbing together. A curious curling sensation warmed Harry's abdomen the longer he focused on how much they were touching, even if it was mostly through a barrier of cloth.

The only sense left to consider now was taste...
those "fantasies" Tom had wrongly accused him of having not too long ago. Even while Tom was disciplining Bellatrix, the feeling of his magic worked curiously on Harry's body.

Never had Harry felt more like a teenaged boy than he did now. It wasn't that he ignored the thoughts and imaginings of sex all throughout puberty…it's just that he had other things to distract him—like a psychopathic mass murderer out for his blood. At least he wasn't ignorant of his body's urges; the handy cleansing charm he learned in Second Year had quickly become his favorite around the time he turned thirteen for the times a nice, private shower hadn't been available for a quick wank. He had only ever distantly wondered what it would be like to do something like that with someone else before another disaster of some sort occurred.

Harry fidgeted, and then stilled when he noted he only succeeded in rubbing his body more firmly against Tom's.

Dammit! Why did Tom have to make that oh so casual suggestion, and then completely ignore the fact he had done so, leaving Harry reeling in the metaphorical flight of fancy?

Kissing Tom was…fantastic. How would doing more be?

He wanted to find out.

Maybe he's had it wrong all his life, and that he doesn't have a hero complex at all but is really an adrenaline junkie, in for the thrills and chills and that sense of danger. To think that his first sexual experience could happen with the Dark Lord—with Tom Riddle—sent a jolt of excitement down Harry's spine. Tom so far was the only one in Harry's young life that could get such a strong, metaphorical rise out of him, and Harry was more and more thinking that he was ready to take the plunge. He was young, a brash Gryffindor, and Tom—a man who was becoming a very significant person in his life—was lying in bed next to him. It could be that he would regret it later, but Harry was tired of trying to be responsible all the time and damn if the idea of Tom making good on his claim didn't sound inordinately agreeable.

Now, if only Tom would wake up so they could discuss the terms…

An odd thing happened the moment Tom woke up a half hour later. That burning anticipation Harry felt while waiting suddenly sputtered and died once the other man's eyes fluttered open. He must have stiffened in reaction because Tom gave him an odd look.

"Harry?"

The embers reignited enough at the sleepy, drawling pronunciation of his name to gave Harry the initiative to lean up and plant a kiss on Tom's lips. But then it happened again when Tom pressed back and Harry was rendered useless. Sure, he's faced possessed men, giant snakes, dragons, an army of Death Eaters, and a snake-faced megalomaniac during his life, but that was nothing compared to the thought of asking the man he'd grown overly fond of for something more intimate.

Tom pulled away and eyed Harry with an amused mien across his features.

"You're blushing," he said.

Harry's eyes widened and he desperately rubbed his cheek with his hand as if that would make the blush go away. It was hard to feel sexy and appealing when he felt so clumsy and awkward.

"I…"

Tom's eyes narrowed. "What is it? Did you manage to get into trouble while I was sleeping?" He
sounded very put-upon.

Harry, affronted, finally found his tongue. "No! I've been here the whole time, you prat. I just..." His voice trailed off. Tom had made the art of propositioning seem so easy. "I've been thinking—"

"You're supposed to warn me when you do that," Tom interrupted rudely. Harry scowled.

"Tom!" Harry huffed in frustration. 'Just spit it out, Harry.' He gathered his courage to ask, "Did you mean what you said before?"

Now irritation defined Tom's features, and Harry felt like such an incompetent virgin he almost decided to hell with it and move on to a conversation about the weather.

"Harry, I've said a lot of things. You're going to have to be specific."

Harry ducked his head and mumbled something into Tom's ribs. Tom pulled away and aimed to get out of bed.

"You are being insufferable."

Harry deflated as he watched Tom push the covers back. 'You are a Gryffindor so stop being a fucking pansy,' he scolded to himself. In a flurry of hurried movements, Harry pounced on the retreating Tom so enthusiastically that he ended up straddling a startled Dark Lord. 'Much better!' his inner voice cheered.

"What are you—"

"Repay me."

"...What?"

Harry leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "It was your idea in the first place." Tom smirked, and Harry's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Stupid Slytherin, you did that on purpose, didn't you? Left me hanging with that one, suggestive comment so that I couldn't possibly stop thinking about it and then you go and snog the life out of me and act like it was nothing and..." Harry slammed his mouth shut when he realized he was beginning to ramble. He glared at Tom, whose red eyes were probably matching the flush of Harry's cheeks at the moment.

"Can't stop thinking about it, hmm?"

Harry rolled his eyes before abruptly his expression changed from flustered chagrin to practiced solemnity. He forced his eyes to look into Tom's.

"You've become important to me, Tom. It really scared me when I thought you were dying. I've never cared about anyone quite like I do you. I just want you to know that." Harry's heart was pounding, and ached peculiarly with longing. "I...I like being close to you."

Tom's face twitched subtly, and the middle of his brow furrowed as he looked contemplatively up at Harry, who was still perched on his waist, pinning him to the bed. He sighed.

"You're the only one, Harry," he said simply, almost vaguely, but Harry understood and it drew a relieved breath from him.

"I'm glad," he said easily, and Tom nodded to him, allowing his brow to unfurrow and the cool expression to grace his visage once more. Harry suddenly became conscious of where exactly he
was sitting.

"Um, would you like me to move?"

"No."

"Oh. What—"

In the end Harry did move when he lost his balance as Tom tugged him down by the front of his shirt into a demanding kiss, his hands roving the other's body once he seemed assured Harry's wasn't going anywhere. Something within Harry sighed in delight, before a ridiculous thought came to mind and he pulled back, sucking in a deep breath so he could speak.

"You do know I'm sixteen, right?"

Tom gave him a blatant expression of disbelief and vexation. "Did I ever indicate to you that I care about any sort of rules whatsoever?"

This caused Harry to snort amusedly. "No, I guess not."

A/N: THIS PART IS RATED M!

"That's settled then," Tom said tersely and drew their lips together again. One of his hands roamed downward and pushed under Harry's shirt, drawing it up the younger wizard's chest. Harry broke the kiss again, face hot as he squirmed under Tom's scrutiny.

"Why so shy, Harry?" Tom said silkily, and with those seemingly residual snake-like reflexes, flipped them over so Harry now was pressed into the mattress by his larger body. Harry swallowed audibly. "It's nothing I haven't seen before, after all."

"You didn't care then," Harry mumbled, looking aside.

Tom hummed in amusement. "But that doesn't mean I didn't like what I saw."

Harry met Tom's eyes again. "I bet you hated that," he offered with a bit of a cheeky snigger. With his eyes still locked on Harry's, Tom reached over and took a hold of his wand from the nightstand. "Hey, what are you doing with your wand?" Harry asked nervously as he eyed the object in Tom's hand.

Tom flicked it.

"Hey, what did you do with my clothes!"

Tom cut off any further protests by shoving his tongue down Harry's throat. Despite his nervousness, Harry had been turned on since the very first kiss. The young wizard gasped as Tom simultaneously pushed his thigh in-between his two naked ones. The kiss broke as Harry reflexively tossed his head back in an effort to breathe.

"Is this alright, Harry?"

"Guh."

Tom chuckled. "Would you like me to continue?"

Continue? Harry never wanted it to stop in the first place. Here he was, naked in a bed with the Dark Lord, and he'd never felt more alive in his life. Tom resumed the previous activities.
By the way they were situated, he could feel Tom's growing erection that was still trapped in his pants. Harry felt inordinately underdressed…and perhaps a little smug?

"I-I think this is the part where…you get n-naked too," Harry managed to stutter out through his panting breaths and awkwardness. While his mind fought with the virginal timidity, his body had no qualms in bucking up into Tom's suddenly exposed thigh.

"Better," he sighed. "Now give me that!" he said as he snatched Tom's wand and threw it carelessly back onto the bedside stand. His cheeks impossibly heated further as his eyes caught a quick glimpse of Tom's body, but he couldn't really look away.

:Eager, are we?:

Harry froze, his eyes going wide as the timbre of the Parselspeech reached his ears.

"Merlin!" he gasped, thinking, 'when did that get so damn…erotic?' His hips bucked up again.

Now that they were both naked—which was far more progress than Harry had expected considering his abominable beginning efforts—the young man had no idea what to do. He decided the best course of action would be to ask.

"What do we do now?" His previously fervent hands, which had been roaming the planes of Tom's chest through his shirt, were now paused on the sides of Tom's ribs, frightened by all the bare skin accessible to them.

Tom was carefully studying the young man beneath him, and Harry squirmed at the scrutiny, but that only caused certain parts to rub against Tom's body, and Harry inhaled sharply as lights flashed in front of his eyes.

Tom hummed in his throat. "Maybe later for that," Tom mused quietly, almost to himself. Harry felt his flush return with a vengeance at the implications; he was pretty sure he knew what Tom was talking about. Harry wasn't certain if Tom was right, but it probably was better just to wait for anything more…intense. Harry trusted Tom to take charge for now. Something of what he was thinking must have come across through his eyes, because Tom's face seemed to relax as he made a decision. He leaned down and sucked affectionately on the edge of Harry's jaw. Harry leaned his head to the side to allow Tom to better execute this delightful activity.

And then Tom began trailing downwards. One of Harry's nipples went into his mouth.

"That…that…wow." Harry didn't know that could be so sensitive. Feeling a bit like a wet noodle as he just lay there and let Tom have his way with him, Harry thought he'd return the favor and rub Tom's own nipple with the thumb of one hand and carded through his hair with the other. The older man's body shuddered, and Harry smiled in victory. Tom bit at Harry's chest in retaliation and moved back up his body to capture the younger man's mouth.

Harry was feverish and hard, but he was beginning to feel frustrated. He needed something more, but didn't know what…until Tom pressed him down and rocked his arousal into Harry's own.

"Tom!" That and other things came out of his mouth, but Tom's name was the only articulate word Harry could get past his lips. His body automatically imitated what the other man had done and pushed back against the solid body, hissing as their erections rubbed again. Harry was startled from his reverie as Tom took hold of his hand and guided it downwards until together they gripped their twin arousals. Harry arched and spread his legs marginally, at the mercy of his body's responses. At least he was semi familiar with what to do with his hand down there. Instinctively he squeezed
and then knew no more.

There was hot skin and the sharp contrast of cold air; hungry, delicious kisses, quiet hisses and keening. Fantasy had nothing on the real thing, and this wasn't even *everything* they could do. The friction between their hands set Harry on fire. Barriers fell.

Harry came first a bit later, crying out as the metaphorical spring snapped after being stretched beyond its breaking point. He was probably going to have a bruise on his shoulder from the strength of Tom's grip there when he reached completion as well.

With cool grace, Tom settled down at Harry's side, breathing hard but otherwise unruffled. Harry, on the other hand, could do little but smile goofily.

Tom picked up his wand again and uttered a spell to clean their hands and stomachs of the sticky mess. Harry's eyes closed as the comforter was pulled over his sweat-chilled body, Tom's skin never really leaving contact with his own.
"You're an odd child."

"I am?" Harry asked automatically, and then frowned as the world shifted, giving him a sense that he had just sat up though he had been unaware he had even been lying down. But that was silly, because last he knew he was lying down asleep...

The voice spoke again, slipping pleasantly past Harry's ears like fine silk and contradictorily sounding faintly like the rattling of bones. "Yes, you are." Harry twitched as a thin film of woven cloth, oddly familiar in weight, brushed over his face and blocked his vision...which really didn't say much, considering there hadn't been much to see except a grey haze. He shivered.

"Tom?"

There was a soft chuckle. "You are odd—far too auspicious for your own good—but he's a cheater," the voice said conversationally and with humor. "Ah, but you are both so interesting. A favorite of Fate's as well."

Dry, bony fingers combed through his hair. Harry was oddly indifferent as he tried to comprehend this mysterious conversation.

"Who are you?" Harry questioned, trying to look around him but his eyelids were much too heavy, and they closed before he could see more than a black shadow.

"I am watching you," came the wispy reply, the last Harry heard before his mind drifted away.

It was a soft transition from sleep to wakefulness. Harry woke with that innate feeling of having had a dream despite the fact he couldn't quite remember it, his mind idly reaching for shadows. In the physical world, his outstretched arm told him he was alone in the bed, the spot next to him cold. He sighed, a little disappointed, and opened his eyes.

:Wakey wakey.: 

Harry yelped and sat up with a start, managing to bang his skull on the headboard. Wincing, he rubbed the bruised crown of his head to the ambient sound of twin snake laughter. He was having a flashback to the first morning after rescuing Voldemort, when he had similarly woken to the man-snake watching him on his chest. This was worse, though, what with there being two snakes staring at him with their unblinking eyes. He almost preferred Voldemort's insults as opposed to the hissy laughter now.

:Glad to see you two bonding over my pain,: Harry grumbled, still rubbing his head.

:Silly Master,: Lady hissed to him, winding her way around his neck, apparently getting cozy.

:So, have you two settled your differences now?:

:I would thoroughly enjoy crushing her in my jaws,: Nagini informed him.

:She couldn't catch me,: Lady said smugly. :Your mate told her to behave before he left.: 

Harry coughed. :Uh, my mate?:
Is that not right? It was Master who said what we saw was a human mating ritual.

I thought it was torture, from the sounds you were making.: Lady sibilated into Harry's ear. He made a gargled sound in the back of his throat. Meekly, Harry's mind provided, 'Well, it can be a form of torture…'

You… you watched?: He groaned, mortified. "Oh Merlin,"

That's not the name you said earlier.: Nagini commented.

Stop! Just…stop right now.: Harry could feel his face heating up. 'Dammit, I shouldn't be embarrassed in front of a couple of reptiles!' Harry thought. Aloud, he said, 'I'm leaving, try not to follow me.: Harry pulled Lady off him and kicked away the covers before he stood from the bed, only to belatedly remember his state of undress. Too late, though.

I don't know why my Master picked such a skinny mate.: Nagini found it imperative to tell Harry. Lady hissed and turned her attention to the much larger snake.

You will respect my Master. His power and might are more important than his small stature.: Lady defended.

Hey, I'm really not that short!: Harry hissed. He wished he had found that dark room to crawl into earlier. For now he'd just have to make do with the in-suite bathroom—it was decorated in black marble, after all. He ran to it and slammed the door.

It was just not fair that he should be punished for his selfless deed of requesting for Bellatrix to be kept alive. Not for the first time Harry cursed his own conscious…being virtuous was hard work, and occasionally had detrimental effects on his mental state. He should have simply let Tom have at her when he offered. It was just way too creepy having her as a "familiar".

Tom…Harry's cheeks flushed red, and he fought a giggle. He would have felt like a damn Hufflepuff, or worse, a girl, if he gave into that impulse.

He had thoroughly enjoyed what they had done. Unbidden, a question popped into his mind: had Tom enjoyed it too?

Harry carded a hand through his hair, wincing when he irritated his fresh bruise. Stupid snakes. Did Tom care he wasn't exactly a six foot tall rugby player? He was a Seeker, for Merlin's sake; lighter builds meant for swifter flying. And at least not all of him was small…Harry snorted at that thought.

'You're being so emotional,' Harry chastised to himself. But he couldn't ignore how vulnerable he felt; he'd been abandoned too often in his life history, had too much ripped violently away from him. With his experiences, he was bound to have emotional scars. He was feeling so out of sorts now because Tom was very much capable of ripping those old wounds open. Was that a risk factor of being with a Dark Lord, or simply because it was Tom?

Who would have thought that, of all things Tom Riddle could have done to him, the one thing Harry was most afraid of was a broken heart? Gods, should he be worried that he was the kind of person who could fall for the enemy? Harry was beginning to realize that he may actually be doing just that. There may be a day where he will wake up and find that he, quite astonishingly, loved Tom Riddle.
Or had that already happened?

Walking deeper into the bathroom, Harry passed a mirror, pausing for long enough to glance into it briefly before looking away. It took two more steps for him to realize what was wrong with what he saw.

Harry backtracked and leaned over the sink, narrowing his eyes at his reflection. Reaching up with one of his hands, he patted his face, confirming that what he was seeing was real. Standing straight now, he rotated slightly and held his hand away from his face to look at it.

He could see it. It wasn't such an odd feat, seeing, but considering he wasn't wearing any glasses it was quite the accomplishment. His eyesight was utter shit. So how was it he was miraculously viewing the world in crisp perfection?

Clearly someone had some explaining to do.

Deciding not to worry about it now—it honestly didn't bother him—Harry turned on the shower and stepped under the spray, glorifying in how it was magically the perfect temperature. He forced himself to blank his mind and focus only on the hot water as it eased his tense muscles.

Half way through his shower, Harry cursed when he realized he hadn't brought a change of clothing in. He did not want to be harassed by the oversized worms again. Really, he didn't even know where his clothes were, since Tom had done that sneaky trick and made them disappear to who knew where. This thought caused Harry to dually feel that pesky anxiety and a small curling of arousal at the memory. He shook himself, and shut the water off. He pushed back the black silk curtain only to immediately encounter red, gleaming eyes and the person who sported them.

Startled, Harry reflexively took a step back, slipped, and banged a fresh bruise into his head as it cracked against the back wall, though the majority of the pain he felt was focused on his backside, which he conveniently landed on.

"Fuck!" the young wizard hissed through clenched teeth as a white towel was dropped into his lap. Tom chuckled at his disgruntlement.

"I could," the older man responded, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall just outside the shower with fluid grace. Harry froze awkwardly with his hand still on his sore head, his brain trying not to misfire. He narrowed his eyes and stood quickly, making sure the towel was secure around his waist.

"You spent too much time around teenagers," he huffed, trying really hard to keep from blushing. He figured he'd already done enough of that for one day.

Harry tried to step past Tom, but the man wrapped a hand around his bicep and pulled him around. It was either relief or disappointment for Harry that Tom left a short distance between them, but he did reach out and place his hand on top of Harry's damp and unruly hair. Harry's scalp tingled, and the faint edge of pain he felt faded.

"Thanks," Harry sighed as the uncomfortable bump on his head was healed. "So, I couldn't help but notice my eyesight was miraculously fixed while I slept. You by chance wouldn't have had any hand in that, would you?"

Tom smirked. "Perhaps. Couldn't have my Horcrux go around with such dreadful blind spots, now could I? Magic is remarkable, but it can do nothing for you if you don't even see your enemies coming."
Harry rolled his eyes. "Is it permanent?"

"No, just a temporary spell. You can decide later if you want a permanent fix."

"I guess I can deal with that," Harry decided. Tom peered down at him thoughtfully. Damn, he was still only wearing a towel, Harry noted.

"Um, can you tell me where my clothes are?"

With a flick of his head, Tom indicated the main room outside the bathroom. "On the bed. The Elves cleaned them." He leaned his face in closer, expression a touch predatory. "Are you sure you want to put them back on, though?"

"You're familiar thinks I'm scrawny," Harry blurted with a glower, and then wanted to hit himself at how insecure that sounded. He risked a glance up at Tom's face and found him with an eyebrow raised at the younger wizard.

"She doesn't know any better. She's a female viper for which instinct says she look for a mate that is at least ten feet long and strong enough to suffocate a unicorn or kill it with a single drop of venom."

Harry felt better by that, but then his face screwed as he said, "Lady defended me…that's weird."

Tom hummed. "Considering who she used to be, yes."

"Tom," Harry said gravely, "they watched."

Tom looked unconcerned. "Next time I'll ward the room."

At the mention of a "next time," Harry's dour expression lightened in response to the silly, warm emotions that flooded his body and he ducked his head.

"So, uh, that was okay?" The words fumbled out of Harry's mouth, and he shifted his feet against the cold marble. He had his gaze focused on the middle of Tom's chest as if he were counting the threads of his clothing. A guiding finger on his chin forced his eyes to meet Tom's.

"You were worried, weren't you?" Tom enquired without amusement or mockery, for which Harry was grateful. He had been unimpressed with himself.

"I couldn't help it," he mumbled, shifting his feet again under the scrutiny he was receiving. He had no idea what the more experienced man's expectations were. "I…I don't know what I'm doing, and I don't really know what you want from me."

'Am I enough for you?' Harry wanted to ask, but didn't.

Tom's expression was inscrutable as the hand that was lightly holding on to Harry's arm dropped down to his hip, just above the towel. It lingered there a moment, enough to heat the skin, and then Tom traced his fingers up Harry's side, leaving goose bumps in their wake. Harry shivered; his breath hitched. His eyes had never left Tom's and he felt the man was trying to see into his soul. Maybe he could.

"That," Tom said. "I want that." Harry didn't understand, and he frowned even as Tom's hand now trailed up around his shoulder to lightly grip the back of his neck. He decided to not let it bother him when Tom leaned in and kissed him smartly. Harry chose that time to remember that the shower he had just used was quite large…
A rumbling protest sounded from Harry's stomach for having missed lunch earlier that day, and Harry pulled his lips away from Tom's to make a face in its direction.

"Sounds angry," Tom noted lightly. Harry looked back up at him.

"Yeah, like it's possessed by an evil wizard." Harry suddenly broke out into a ridiculous chortle of amusement. "What if you had ended up on Quirrell's stomach? I mean, the back of his head must have been awkward enough...look down and you'd see his bu—"

A chilly hand landed hard over Harry's mouth.

"Enough," Tom ground out, but Harry's eyes shined with mirth at how uncomfortable the older wizard appeared. Painful memories, perhaps? A muffled snicker broke past the barrier covering Harry's lips at the thought, and Tom narrowed his eyes as if he knew what Harry was thinking. Probably did, the bastard.

Harry eventually shoved Tom's hand away so he could speak again. "I'll stop teasing you if you feed me."

"I want a Wizard's Oath," was Tom's immediate reply.

"You're no fun," Harry quipped. Tom waved his hand, and Harry made a rather undignified sound as his towel disappeared, and he hurriedly grabbed the shower curtain to cover himself. Harry glared as he watched Tom walk out the bathroom.

"You like doing that, don't you?" Harry called out to him. Tom looked over his shoulder with a leering smirk.

"Meet me in the dining hall when you're ready," he said as he disappeared from view.

Harry was ashamed to admit it, but in order to not have to face Nagini and Lady while starkers out in the room, he employed a bit of Parselmagic to wandlessly summon his clothing to him. He didn't even know if the two were still out there, but he didn't care.

As it turned out, when Harry reentered the main room fully dressed, only Nagini still lay coiled on the bed.

:Where's Lady?:

Nagini responded blandly with, :Who knows?: Harry merely shrugged.

Just as he was about to exit the room, a smattering of pinging taps on the window caught his attention. Large golden eyes peered at him in expectation through the glass.

"Hedwig!" Hurrying to the window, Harry pried it open with some difficulty but managed a crack big enough for the Snowy Owl to swoop in along with a gust of cold, winter wind. Hedwig hovered in the air above his head, and playfully caught his hair with her claws as she maneuvered overhead.

"Ah, hey! Okay, okay, I'm happy to see you too. Clever girl, finding me here," he said, holding out his arm so the bird could perch on the limb. She clicked her beak and held out one of her legs, presenting the letter someone had sent her out with. Harry knew immediately it had to be someone from Hogwarts, as that was the only place the person could have found his owl. Harry realized he hadn't contacted Snape in any way to let him know the retrieval of the potion from the DoM had been a success and wondered if the letter could be from him.
Pretty bird.

Touch her, you die.; Harry hissed lazily without turning to Nagini.

I wasn't going to…: came the sulking reply.

Harry cooed to Hedwig and finished pulling the letter from her leg. It turned out it wasn't from Snape… it was from Dumbledore.

Getting Hedwig to perch on a bedpost, Harry opened the envelope and pulled the folded letter inside out so he could read it. Dumbledore's characteristic handwriting filled the page to create a relatively short missive. Harry read through the lines, his eyes roving over the words slowly so he didn't miss anything. Once finished, his eyebrows flickered upward in a gesture of contemplation. It was a letter of inquiry mainly, with Dumbledore wondering things like how he was faring and when he was coming back to Hogwarts. Nowhere in the letter did it imply that Snape had told the Headmaster anything of their recent interactions. Harry wondered if the Potion's Master had remained tightlipped to protect himself, to protect Harry, or maybe he did it just so he could sit back and watch Dumbledore figure these things out for himself for his own amusement.

Harry skimmed through the note one more time and carefully folded it back up before slipping it into his pocket. He snapped his fingers for an Elf and instructed whichever one it was—he had given up trying to distinguish the twins—to take care of Hedwig's needs (and to feed a pouting Nagini) before he exited the room and turned down the hall to find Tom.

Dumbledore's letter reminded him of certain things he needed to think about. The Holiday break was almost over, and he'd have to go back to Hogwarts soon. Hogwarts felt like another lifetime. Things were different now, but then again, there were a lot of things that remained the same. Nevertheless, Harry felt like he was trying to squeeze a square block through a round hole when he considered the then and now. The world had gone backwards the moment he saved the Dark Lord's life. He hadn't known then that was just the first overturned rock preceding the landslide.

Harry stopped in the hallway and leaned on the wall, his head falling back with a slight thunk, losing himself to his thoughts. Would Dumbledore be able to accept the change in Tom, or at least the death of Voldemort? The old Headmaster had such strong convictions about the human heart and soul. Surely he could believe even Tom Riddle was capable of redemption… or so Harry hoped. He would do anything to prove to Dumbledore that they needed Tom Riddle, despite the fact that it went against everything he had ever been convinced of.

For Harry, maturity came to him fast to him while growing up. He was Harry Potter…it was impossible for him to stay as a child for long. With age came clarity; there was something wrong with his world. For Merlin's sake, he was constantly shoved in front of the crowd and used as a human shield… what's not wrong with that? Bloody Boy-Who-Lived—more like Boy-Who-Lived-to-be-the-Scapegoat. He lived in a world divided, that much was obvious. It seemed a flaw of the human condition that pure agreement would never be had among groups of people. But what Harry couldn't understand was why the magical population was letting it destroy itself.

Harry by far was no sociologist, but just from observation he figured that the human species was inherently a herd animal. Where one person went, the group followed. It was a survival method, and unfortunately the saying "birds of a feather flock together" was relatively accurate. The way Harry saw it, wars started because at the heart of the conflict lie fear, misunderstanding, and a lack of comprehension of the reasons behind each sides' actions. One of the distinguishing features of packs and herds in the natural world was the presence of a leader, an alpha, the one intelligent and strong enough to keep their subordinates in line and safe from danger. Depending on the character and quality of the leader, a group either thrived or got laid to waste.
The problem in Wizarding Britain became that the very people who were looked to for leadership were corrupt and misguided, unable, unwilling, or uncaring to shoulder the burden of righting a world gone astray. As much as Harry hated to admit it, right now his fellow wizards and witches were quite similar to a flock of sheep, with a drunk shepherd carelessly watching over them. At least the Light side was...those that followed Lord Voldemort were more like a snarling pack of wolves, fond of nipping at the heels of the bleating sheep. Of course there were individuals that stood out separate from the rest, but those were few and far between.

Harry knew of two people who would be able, willing, and passionate enough to set the Magical Community straight: Albus Dumbledore, and Lord Voldemort. Neither were perfect candidates. Dumbledore confused Harry, continuously seeming to contradict himself. Here was a man who had risen to high esteem among wizards and who ran a secret organization to fill the holes where the Ministry was lacking and seemed to genuinely want to ensure peace to their broken Wizarding Nation, and yet he had turned down the influential and powerful position of Minister countless times. Lord Voldemort, in contrast, was very eager to take the world in his hands and shape it like clay to his liking. The main problem with him had been the small matter of insanity, bloated imperialism, and barbaric means of gaining power and control.

But now...there was Tom Marvolo Riddle. Perhaps it was a paradox to consider him as a separate person from Voldemort, but to Harry it was the one thing he most believed in. Nonetheless, he couldn't lie—the differences were slight. If there had been one thing he had never bothered to hope following the recent events, it was that Tom would suddenly find himself content to sit back and become a regular citizen of society. And Harry wouldn't ask that of him. It would be like trying to force a cobra to eat vegetables...eventually it would either snap at the warm flesh of the hand that fed it or wither away and die. It was enough that Tom should be willing to change his ways. Maybe that was just Harry's blossoming feelings for the man talking.

Tom—the Tom Harry was coming to see—would be able to lead Britain's wizards and witches to new heights, whatever that meant. Harry was no seer, but his gut instinct told him he was right. There was something in the way that Tom viewed the world, the way he was shaped, that separated him from most other people. The ordinary wizard could never operate the way Tom did. Tom was just naturally an alpha. When he became Lord Voldemort, he had abused and exaggerated his natural tendencies and became a dictator of sorts. Just as he proved his potential, he also wasted it away.

It was in typical Gryffindor fashion that Harry took a chance, a shot in the dark that he was doing the right thing by letting Tom Riddle live, to let him start over. In theatrical terms, Harry hoped Tom would settle into the role of the shepherd who also tamed the wolf, for all their sakes.

Like a ghost, Tom Riddle emerged from a shadow and approached Harry, perhaps somehow knowing that the younger man was thinking of him. His unique eyes reflecting the last of the evening sunlight coming through the window as the sun set on the day. While the man's wardrobe was rather monochrome, Harry had to appreciate that black looked good on him.

"You are brooding," Tom stated blandly. Harry grimaced.

"I am not...really." He shrugged. "You could say I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed."

"You're thinking too much; it was bound to happen."

Harry sighed dramatically. "Do you really have to imply I'm stupid?"

Tom made a harrumphing noise and gripped Harry's elbow, pulling him away from the wall and towards the dining hall. "Did you know you brood when you go without eating?" Harry looked at
him curiously, trying to think if that was true and feeling a little surprised Tom would have noticed such a thing. "And when you brood, you don't eat," he added indifferently but in a chiding tone that had Harry curling his mouth up in a slight smile. Someone seemed to be watching him. When had this man become someone he could lean on?

As much as he would love for Tom to drag him to dinner, Harry wanted to tell him about Dumbledore's message first.

"I got a letter from Dumbledore. He sent Hedwig to find me." That statement made Tom pause in his actions of leading Harry down the hall. "He wants to meet with you," Harry added, giving a sidelong glance up at Tom's face.

"Does he, now? Interesting."

Harry frowned. "That's it? That's all you have to say about it?"

"I am certainly not prepared to make any decisions at this very moment. It can wait until later."

As if on cue, Harry's stomach growled loudly for the second time that day, and Tom snorted.

"Fine, eat first, worry later," Harry said. The other man made an assenting noise in the back of his throat.

"There will be time to discuss all your concerns in the future." Harry nodded and followed him into the dining room.

But apparently they weren't to talk later that night, because as one thing lead to another, it came to be that their mouths were put to...different uses. Needless to say, Dumbledore was not at the forefront of Harry's mind.

Nagini and Lady were banished to the other end of the house, to Harry's relief.

"Tom?"

"Yes, Harry?"

It was the second of January, and the two of them were in Tom's office. The start of school was looming closer and closer, but Tom seemed to have it in his mind that Harry should be learning stuff now. Stacks of books covered the desk they were gathered around, and Harry was desperately trying to find a way to not read them. Thus he thought it prudent to nag Tom.

"I think you should speak with Dumbledore."

It was either that Tom had not expected Harry to suggest that, or that he had expected it, and as such when he glanced at Harry it was with a blank, unreadable expression.

"Is that so?" he asked calmly, still not revealing any of what he was thinking.

"Yes," Harry pushed. "You weren't really going to sit back and watch him die, were you?"

"I liked that plan. Why do you ask, though? Were you hoping I would speed the process up?"

Harry made a noise of discontent. "You shouldn't joke about it," he said knowing full well Tom didn't really do jokes and ignored the affronted, glaring look the man shot him for the idea. "You and Dumbledore have several things you need to work through if you don't want him causing
problems for you."

Tom sneered. "You are not a therapist, Potter." Harry snickered. "I have yet to weigh the possible benefits against the potential repercussions of such a meeting."

"You're just being stubborn," complained Harry. Tom made no moves to apologize for his faults. "You could gloat to his face about his plan failing and all that," Harry promulgated, trying to sweeten the deal to tempt Tom into agreeing. Tom, though, was obstinate. "You know very well Dumbledore holds half the influence in Wizarding Great Britain and a great deal in the rest of the world. If you're really serious about being smart when you take over the Wizarding World"—that said with raised, wriggling fingers and pompous sarcasm—"you're going to want Dumbledore's backing, or at least not his disapproval."

"I am always smart," Tom stated superciliously.

"Oh good, it's decided then."

Tom frowned. "It most certainly is not."

"But, you said—"

"Harry Potter, will you desist undermining my authority?"

Harry openly laughed at that. Tom looked murderous, his face closed off, making Harry feel a little bad for being so exuberant.

"I'm sorry, Tom, I'm sorry...I just couldn't help it. I mean, you did use my name," he stated, shoving his finger into his sternum, "and the request of respect for authority in the same sentence. Do you think I have any to begin with?" He paused. "Well, I do...mostly...but usually I choose to ignore it."

Tom did not look impressed.

"Harry, you do know that no amount of flamboyant enthusiasm or sincere assurance from Dumbledore will ever get Lord Voldemort into society's good graces, nor do I believe that anyone would see any further activity as a community service."

A dark look shadowed Harry's face. Tom actually appeared a bit taken aback at the change in the younger man's demeanor.

"Voldemort has no further business in the Wizarding World," he said decisively, his voice firm. Then his brow furrowed. "He never thought of you as Voldemort...not really. You were always Tom Riddle to Dumbledore, weren't you? He could always see through your mask." As soon as he said that, though, Harry wondered if that helped or hindered the situation now.

"Fine, Harry," Tom verbalized after a moment in a diplomatic tone, and Harry turned his head so he could meet the other man's eyes. "But don't expect any miracles."

"You haven't even spoken with him yet," Harry said with an eye roll. "Really, Tom, make friends, not enemies; Dumbledore is not your friend yet until you make it otherwise."

Harry's brows rose up his forehead at the shade of green Tom seemed to turn and his expression of revulsion.

"Uh, you don't have to hug him or anything..."
"Why not? My reputation will be ruined if I make friends," he spat, "with the man."

"I shall assume you are being sarcastic," Harry murmured casually. And then he chuckled, endlessly amused by an imagined image of a dour Riddle being forced to wear a friendship bracelet by Dumbledore…the Headmaster was odd like that.

Tom grunted, causing Harry to get himself under control. "Harry, what exactly do you hope to accomplish by Dumbledore and I coming to any sort of terms?"

"What do I hope to accomplish?" Harry said, with a deceptively thoughtful expression. "Well, I really want to see you two make up and Dumbledore then pat you on the head and call you 'my boy'."

"Be serious, Harry."

"Why would you want me to be him?"

Tom blinked blankly at the other wizard, obviously having lost the meaning of the witticism.

"Er, right, no serious/Sirius jokes."

Tom rightly scowled. "You know I would prefer no joke of any kind."

Harry sighed in a very put-upon manner. "Why do I spend time with you?"

Tilting his head to the side, an introspective glint in his crimson eyes, Tom stated, "I am a part of you."

Something inside Harry's chest did a funny flip-flop, and he was forced to try and stifle the sound of his hitched breath in reaction to Tom's blunt and truthful assertion. It was a statement, but a part of Harry wondered if it was also a question. Unbidden, a sense of possessiveness he hadn't know he could feel rose up within him. Tom was a part of him, in a way no one else could be. It wasn't exactly a wholesome thought, this notion of Tom belonging to him, but Harry now understood a little bit how Tom felt about him. Together, they just…complemented each other.

"Yes, you are," Harry breathed softly, and then wanted to slap himself at how emotional that made him sound. If Tom noticed, he pretended not to, but he did keep a steady gaze on Harry. The young man settled himself to return the regard.

"I could care less if Dumbledore ever feels inclined to hug you and call you silly pet names. All I want is understanding, a coming to terms. Mainly I'd like for Dumbledore to not actively seek ways to kill you. Even while dying he's a threat to you, as long as he still sees you as a threat as well."

"As he should."

"Surliness does not become you, Tom. Leave that to Snape. By the way, I don't think he has mentioned anything to Dumbledore about what he did. I still don't know what to make of him. You may believe he's boring, but I think he's turning out to be a very fascinating person."

"He's still irritating." Tom grumbled.

"Well yes, of course."

Harry cocked his head to the side, clearly in thought, and then he smirked quite roguishly.
"Kreacher!" he called out with a commanding tone. He waited a full minute before the ugly House
Elf finally deemed the call of his Master was worth his time. He turned his cloudy and hateful eyes to Harry and looked completely inconvenienced for being there.

"Master," he said glumly.

"What on Earth do you need that ugly creature for?" And then Tom's eyes narrowed as he surveyed the Elf closer. Kreacher turned to look the red-eyed man, and immediately curled back in fear, his whole demeanor changing from one of contempt to one of complete deference.

"Mister Dark Lord, sir, Master Harry Potter, what can Kreacher be doing for you?" the Elf croaked, eyes on the floor. Harry's brows shot up, and he glanced over at Tom. He knew that House Elves could distinguish each magical person's signature, but usually only if they had met them before. Tom's demeanor towards the Elf made Harry rather suspicious.

"He knows you, and...you know him?"

"This is a Black Elf, correct?" Tom asked, and Harry nodded. "Then yes, I do know him. I borrowed him from Regulus, once." Kreacher seemed to flinch at the reminder.

"It was being an honor, Master Dark Lord, sir," the Elf said, but was not inclined to go any closer to Tom or meet his eyes.

"What did you do to him? And who's Regulus?" Kreacher did look up at Harry then, and to the boy's surprise, the Elf had fat tears building up in the corner of his eyes.

"Regulus Black, Death Eater and brother to one Sirius Black," Tom stated monotonously. Harry's eyes widened, but he didn't say anything. Tom inclined his head towards Kreacher. "I used him to hide a Horcrux. The experience would not have been pleasant for him. I have to say I did not expect him to survive."

"Master Regulus called me back," Kreacher offered demurely.

"Ah," Tom said, apathetic. "Why did you call him here, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, feeling a touch of pity for the Elf he'd until then had rather disliked. "I figured it would be best to use him to contact Dumbledore quickly. Dumbledore already knows I technically own him, and I guessed he'd be a bit more cooperative if he knew about you...Kreacher has always been so fond of your side." He turned to the Elf. "How about that, Kreacher, will you behave for me now?"

Kreacher blinked, unrepentant of his bad behavior. But he did say, "Kreacher will do as Master Harry Potter commands him." Harry nodded and grabbed a sheet of parchment from the stack on Tom's desk and brought the quill and ink bottle closer as well.

"Now, I think a nice, open, public area will do for a meeting place, maybe a park or something." Harry tapped the end of the quill against his lips, and then dipped it in the ink and prepared to write.

"Harry, I don't recall agreeing to any sort of meeting yet."

Without looking up from the page he was writing on, Harry said, "That's because you haven't, but you will. Come on, Tom, it's not going to kill you to act civil for once. We can all make Wizarding Vows for a peaceful meeting, or something, to be safe if that would make you feel better."

"Fine, but I will be the one to dictate what the Vows shall be. Dumbledore is just going to have to
agree to that."

Harry shrugged. "We'll see what he says." Several minutes later, he handed the missive to Tom for his approval, and then gave it to Kreacher and sent him off to deliver it to Dumbledore. Harry predicted that it wouldn't take long for a reply.

Tom looked across the desk at Harry, trying (and quite rightly succeeding) to look to be in a foul mood while they waited for that ugly Elf's return. He had handed Harry a book and told him to read it—not *skim* it—while they waited. In the meantime he did other work and pretended he didn't want to meet Dumbledore.

That is to say, he really *didn't*, but he had to. He wasn't stupid. Harry was completely correct when he insisted Albus Dumbledore needed to be dealt with. Death would not automatically negate the loyalty the old coot commanded. Quite frustrating a fact, but a fact nonetheless. It was sickening how much blind faith Dumbledore, even when widely considered quite barmy in his old age, seemed to instill in those who looked up to him. Not to say that Tom wasn't jealous...he made his own kind of loyalty. But...there were limitations to who Voldemort could attract. Traditionalist Purebloods, especially the Slytherins, he knew how to bring in line, how to appeal to their loyalties and to get them to obey, but for the bleeding hearts of the world Voldemort was a monster. It was hard to be charming when his eyes ran red as crimson blood and more often than not he was goaded into *Crucio*ing the idiots for their blind inanity.

In short, he could not live up to the Light's golden expectations, whose loyalties leaned more for anyone whom they saw as being so "good" the sun shone out of their arse.

Tom really, really tried to keep that metaphorical embellishment and any thought of Dumbledore out of his mind lest his imagination get the better of him.

Tom felt he would miss the days where he was inclined to just get rid of them all so he didn't have to deal with them. Unfortunately, a certain brat and a rather sudden and forceful return to humanity made him realize that those insipid fools would have to stay. Tom wanted nothing to do with them, but he was coming to find that the things wanted...are more often than not different than the things needed. And really, Tom had to admit, it wasn't just them but people in general that tended to annoy him...perhaps that really wasn't a good excuse to kill them all. After all, they couldn't help it if he was the superior wizard.

Tom fought the sigh that threatened to escape his lips. Was this what a conscience feels like? Bloody Harry Potter.

He was in the process of reexamining himself. How could he not? It may have even started before he took the second potion...there had been little he could do but think while he was stuck as a cobra. There was something about the diminutive animal brain he had to use that filtered his thoughts. He hadn't wanted to admit it at the time, but the things Harry would say to him, and even things about the boy himself, had snuck under his skin and invaded his cognizance. It wasn't something he could resist, and he had a feeling part of the reason was because looking at Harry Potter was almost like looking in a mirror in some respects—a mirror to an alternate reality, more accurately. It seemed that the more they were the same, the more they were also different.

What did he really want? Power? Immortality? Yes, he did. That, he doubted, would ever change; it was an aspect of his personality, whether ingrained or acquired while growing up. He'd always actively sought power out, from the time he understood the concept while a child in the orphanage to the present day. And he gained it, easily. He grew drunk on it, let it take hold of him in an iron grip...he let it control him.
Had it been that the higher and higher he rose, the more he destroyed himself? And the more he destroyed himself...the more he destroyed the world around him.

He was selfish. He claimed he was seeking to ensure the power and immortality for the *Wizarding World*, but really he was just seeking it for himself. In a way he hadn't known the difference. He really, truly wanted to safeguard the world of Magic, simply because he found it superior to the alternative; the Muggle world would never mean anything to him.

With clarity unknown to him before, Tom was ready to do what needed to be done to make that happen. To *really* try. This was one thing he was sure of. And perhaps a part of him was hoping that with Harry Potter by his side, that unstoppable luck of his would rub off and he'd gain some additional bonuses.

Wishful thinking.

Tom saw Harry jump as that Elf, Kreacher, startled him with his return. He himself, of course, had more composure than that.

"Master, Kreacher did as commanded." Here the Elf scowled. "Dum-ble-dore," Kreacher said slowly and with derision, obviously forcing himself to say the name, "has given Kreacher a reply." He handed a folded piece of parchment to Harry. Tom didn't know how to feel about how he and a House Elf seemed to share similar viewpoints.

Tom observed as Harry read the note quickly and then took it and read it himself when Harry handed it over to him. It was nothing more than he expected.

Tom picked up a sheet of parchment he had been writing on and, with flourish, signed his name at the bottom—*Tom Marvolo Riddle*. He hadn't done that in a while. He pushed the page over to Harry. "Sign," he commanded.

"What is it?" Harry asked, picking up the sheet and reading it.

"Magical contract. Sign it and the spell takes affect for you. We'll send it off to Dumbledore to be returned signed by him as well before we even think about meeting face to face."

"Ah! 'So mote it be!'," Harry mocked after reading the contract. "Think you can handle not harming any Muggles or starting a cat fight with Dumbledore?"

One of these days Tom was going to curse Harry's mouth shut. "I hardly think that is an adequate description."

"Why am I included in this?" Harry glanced up at Tom, seeming to judge his expression. "Oh, you think Dumbledore may try something on me?"

"Your signature is just for Dumbledore's admittedly questionable state of mind. Your protection in it is for mine." He ignored Harry's teasing "My hero" statement. "We don't know for sure if Snape hasn't told him about the Horcrux still remaining within you. Now that I think of it, I am not pleased you didn't put a secrecy charm on him."

Tom didn't miss the kaleidoscope of emotions flashing through Harry's eyes, ranging from indignation to pleased partiality before his face settled in a grimace. "Oh, I didn't think of that. Actually, I don't think I know how to even do one."

"I abhor the ridiculous quality of Hogwarts education these days."
Disregarding Harry's eye roll, Tom handed the contract to Kreacher and sent him back off to Dumbledore.

"Are you really okay with this?" Tom looked up at Harry's timid question, his brow spontaneously arching. Harry was looking at him intently, worry in his eyes. It took a moment for Tom to recognize Harry was concerned about his feelings…or whatever.

That…was nice. It didn't stop him from saying, "Gryffindors," with disdain. Harry smiled indulgently. That was nice too. Without the glare of spectacle glass in the way, Tom could fully appreciate just how green the younger man's eyes were. If the Killing curse hadn't been reflected back at him he would have thought that it had merely been absorbed and locked into Harry's irises.

Tom had never expected to get Harry to so quickly agree to a physical relationship, but then again, Harry was unpredictable and neither had Tom himself expected he would ever try to entice the younger wizard there. He couldn't help it, though. Of all things in life, Tom never figured he would enjoy making Harry Potter writhe in pleasure rather than pain, to willingly give it, but then again there had been a unique sort of power to playing Harry's nubile body like a fine instrument. To him, Harry was…lovely, laid out that way and all his. Everything that he now knew about him made the younger wizard all the more tempting. An old soul in a deceptively young body at the cusp of adulthood. Harry was Harry, and no one else, except the part where he was a little bit of Tom's own soul.

What they had done thus far hadn't, in logistics, been the prime example of good sex, what with Harry's inexperience and it having been relatively tame. Nevertheless, the younger wizard's innocence and eagerness had been more thrilling than some of the other physical encounters Tom had participated in. As much as a part of him wanted to shy away from any sort of attachment, the majority of Tom's restored soul didn't care. So what if he wanted Harry as his in a way at odds with every conviction about himself he'd ever had? Harry was…his soul. And he was just…Harry. And compared to other people, he was just more.

Tom shook himself, mind a little fuzzy at his equally fuzzy feelings. But there was nothing he could do about it. His little Gryffindor, Horcrux, accomplice, irritant, was just that: his, if he had anything to say about it.

Harry had asked what he wanted from him, and Tom had given him an answer. He could see the younger man hadn't understood it, and truthfully Tom hadn't fully understood it himself. But what he saw in Harry's eyes when he was touching him…it was that which he wanted.

Whatever the hell that meant.

It was two in the afternoon when they Apparated into the edge of the park. It was still the holiday break for Muggles as well, and there were a handful of children and their parents milling around in the snow-covered space. The sun was out, and that in combination with the jacket Harry made Tom Transfigure for him kept him warm. Tom was wearing Wizarding robes, despite the fact they were in a Muggle locale. When Harry complained, Tom had simply countered that with Notice-Me-Not and Muggle Repellant charms it wouldn't matter. It was with those charms cast around them that they walked unbothered through the park.

"What is this place to you?"

"Just familiar," Harry said. "During the summers I live down the street, and I come here when I can just to get away. This was the first place that came to mind that I knew wouldn't be overly crowded or full of wizards—I think you'd frighten any. I'd bet you Dumbledore is all worried that I
brought you so close to my relatives' home. He may even be sweating that Muggles will be around. But that was what that contract was for, right?"

"Yes, must not forget to put the old man at ease."

Harry chuckled at Tom's dry response, and led to way to a park bench and sat down. With reluctant, Tom followed his example after casting a cleansing charm on the bench. Harry outright laughed at that.

"Being a Muggles is not a disease, so they aren't contagious, you know."

"No, they're just dirty."

:Birds!: 

Harry glowered and shoved Lady's head back under his coat. :Not for you.: Harry hadn't wanted to bring the snake, but she insisted. Persistently. And while that was going on, Nagini begged Tom to get the cobra out of the house so she could have some peace and quiet. Thus, Harry finally gave in just to get them all out of his hair.

The pigeons that Lady had been so enthralled by were flocking around the bench they sat at, perhaps looking for the tidbits park-goers occasionally brought them. Harry pulled a Chocolate Frog from his pocket, opened it up and broke its legs off before it could hop away. He tossed the pieces of chocolate onto the ground, and immediately the pigeons swarmed the food, which in turn attracted more birds to the general area. Tom elegantly crossed his leg.

"I know you did that just to annoy me."

Harry grinned. "Yes, maybe. I think it's what I do best." In response, Tom jinxed one of the birds, which squawked and flopped around, effectively scaring many of the birds away with its distress. Harry decided that next time perhaps animals should be protected under the Wizarding Contract.

"You are so mean."

"It's what I do best," Tom returned with. "You better collect your snake."

"What? Oh, Lady!" Harry jumped off the bench and rushed after the escaped cobra who was chasing after the poor jinxed pigeon. He wished he hadn't put that heating charm on her so the snow would deter the reptile from getting away. "I think Tom lied when he said she doesn't have access to her magic, because I swear she can Apparate," Harry muttered under his breath. The bird had flopped a distance away, and Lady was already halfway there. Luckily for the pigeon, the jinx wore off and it was able to fly away unharmed.

Just as Harry was reaching out to grab Lady's tail, a hollow crack rent the air, and Harry stumbled awkwardly, a squirming snake hanging from his hand and the shock of the color teal breaking the sharp white color of the snow in front of him. He looked up from the atrocious attempt at dressing like a Muggle to the bearded face of the man who thought a bright color would make him blend in.

"Ah, Harry, and…" Bushy eyebrows went sky-high. "...and Tom?" a very baffled Dumbledore questioned, his eyes locked on the snake that was pouting as she cursed in Parseltongue about a dinner lost. It was a case of mistaken identity.

"I'm afraid, Professor, it's worse than that," Harry told him mournfully.
"Worse?" Dumbledore questioned, perplexed, and Harry had a moment where he savored stumping the Headmaster for once instead of the other way around. At least Harry felt the need to explain himself and not leave the other man to find his answers for himself.

"Er, well, I guess 'worse' is relative—it's true, Dark Lords really don't make good pets—but, well...oh, bollocks," Harry huffed. "There's a new policy for the Death Eaters: misbehave and you become Harry Potter's pet."

It took a moment for Dumbledore to process that statement, and when he did his brow furrowed as his eyes widened in comprehension.

"Indeed? Well then." Dumbledore was even more off balanced. "That is a person then and not, in fact, a genuine animal?"

Shaking his head with a sort of indifferent smile on his face, Harry held up the arm which Lady had wrapped herself around. "I call her Lady now, but at one point she was called Bellatrix Lestrange."

Dumbledore's eyes got bigger.

"So yeah: 'worse,'" Harry rambled. "Don't worry, though, she doesn't remember who she was. Er, I guess you could say Lady may be my 'Tommy' lookalike for when I go back to school. Since, you know, the real one is over there...and a little heavy to go around my neck these days." Harry jerked his head in indication of the man behind him, and Dumbledore's gaze flickered in Tom's direction and appeared to study him for several moments. Harry, with his back to Tom, didn't know what the man was doing, but Dumbledore showed no reaction to seeing a noticeably different Tom Riddle before focusing back on his student.

"Even if she doesn't remember who she was, surely it's dangerous to keep her around when you cannot control her."

'Says you who let me keep Voldemort in the Gryffindor dorms,' Harry wanted to say. He didn't, though, and it took a moment for him to remember why Dumbledore didn't think he couldn't control her. He would have hit his head with a brick if he accidentally revealed he was still a Horcrux and could speak Parseltongue like he had with Snape. He would have to remember to keep his mouth shut if Lady really did come with him to Hogwarts.

"Tom gave her explicit directions. She won't disobey him." It wasn't quite a lie, but it wasn't fully the truth, either.

"I'll consider it, Harry," Dumbledore finally said. Harry made the mistake of studying the old man's face, trying to determine if he was suspected or not. Maybe he should have expected it, but when he felt a push in his mind against his still weak Occlumency shields he had to hurriedly rip his eyes away from Dumbledore's probing blue ones before he could read anything.

Straightening fully from his noticeable wince, Harry allowed Lady to curl herself around his neck as he took a moment to calm himself.

"If you're worried I'm Imperio'd or something, you're wasting your time," Harry said, somewhat coldly. "You know I'm impervious to that spell. I'm here, whole and unharmed, on my own free will. He didn't hurt me."
There was a long, tense moment of awkward silence as Harry stood before Dumbledore, giving the man the benefit of the doubt and meeting his eyes straight on once again. The only thing that slightly undermined the edgy interaction was the fact Lady was merrily telling an oblivious bird in the leafless tree that overshadowed them how much she would enjoy eating it. Gods, did she ever shut up?

After a time, Dumbledore sighed. "I apologize, Harry. Perhaps I have gotten paranoid in my old age."

Harry snorted, thinking about understatements, but he guessed he couldn't hold too much against Dumbledore. The man, after all, had spent most of his life fighting Dark Wizards. And maybe that was his problem, that he got so engrossed in his self-imposed task that he lost sight of certain things as they passed him by.

"Have you really been well, Harry? Tom hasn't…"

"He's been fine," Harry interjected. "And yes, I've been doing well. Limbs still attached, mind intact, and I'm still breathing. Obviously, things are good."

"Wonderful," Dumbledore said, but Harry could tell he was still dubious. Nevertheless, Harry watched, head moving to keep track of Dumbledore's movements, as the Headmaster brushed past him and took a seat under the skeletal tree on an identical bench from the one he and Tom had sat on earlier. Patting the empty space beside him in encouragement, Dumbledore smiled genially up at Harry and, after some hesitation, Harry stiffly sat down. Once settled, he lightly drummed his fingers on the side on his thigh.

"I see you've done something with your glasses."

Ah, so it was a casual visit now? Harry shrugged. "I guess Tom wasn't pleased with my peripheral vision."

Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully. "Tom?"

Harry shrugged again. "I call him that, and he lets me."

Silence again. Harry's toe worried at the ground as he shuffled his feet.

"Harry, why have you not come back to Hogwarts yet?"

Harry's brow furrowed as he frowned. "What do you mean? The hols aren't over yet."

"I don't see how that matters. Surely you'd rather be at Hogwarts, wouldn't you?"

"Oh," Harry said, his face twitching as it tried to decide if he was going to scowl, look amused, or narrow his eyes in suspicion. Eventually he settled on keeping his expression neutral. "I'm not his prisoner, if that's what you mean. I haven't returned yet because I didn't want to."

Dumbledore tilted his head down at him and peered over the wire rims of his glasses. "You want to spend your holiday with Tom Riddle?"

Harry sighed. He guessed he couldn't blame Dumbledore for still being overly suspicious of Tom. The things Voldemort had done were hard to forget.

"Yes, I do, Headmaster," Harry told Dumbledore. "You seem keen on getting me back to Hogwarts, though."
"I admit," Dumbledore verbalized slowly, "that I am uncomfortable that you are willingly remaining in such close contact with the man."

Harry almost snickered, his mind briefly flirting with the idea of informing Dumbledore on just how close of contact he'd been having with Tom. But of course he immediately dismissed the idea…the knowledge would either cause the old man's heart to fail or prompt him to drag Harry away to the mental house.

Instead, he asked, "I thought you said you trusted me to make my own decisions?"

"I do, Harry," Dumbledore assured him. "It's him I don't trust to not sway your better judgment."

Harry's lips thinned as he pressed them together. "What do you mean?"

"I am merely still concerned about your motivations of recent. If I may be so bold, I have to say they just don't seem like you."

Tilting his head to the side, Harry studied Dumbledore, daring to stare him down right in the eye, despite the earlier Legilimency attempt, and wondered if the man really knew him at all.

"You're worried that he's influenced me in some way, aren't you? Because I seem to be helping him…that I'm not doing anything to stop him, to cage him, like you think I should."

The glass in Dumbledore's spectacles flashed in the winter sun when his face slanted at just the right angle. "Am I to understand, Harry, that you want him to continue as he has been?"

Harry sighed. "Professor, of course I don't want him to continue on that way. But, I don't think he was entirely wrong for starting something in the first place. What if I feel he should start something new, because of the way he's changed?"

"Has he?" Dumbledore questioned softly.

"He's not Voldemort," Harry responded without pause. Conversation ceased for several moments as Harry let his Headmaster digest his words. The shrill laughter of children playing drew his attention and he watched a group throw snowballs at each other while he waited.

"What of the prophecy, Harry?" Dumbledore finally enquired.

"Prophesy?" Harry scowled in disgust, clearly displaying his thoughts on the matter. "I consider my job done." Harry wanted to say something about how horrifyingly vague prophecies were horrifying and how could anyone let one dictate their lives? The stupid thing was more self-fulfilling than anything. If Voldemort had known the full prophecy and recognized its nature, would events have unfurled the way they did? Of course, maybe it was fate that Snape, as his spy at the time, had only been able to hear and relay the damning first lines, enough to entice the Dark Lord into unknowingly releasing the flood gates.

Had Fate given them any choice in the end?

It made Harry's head hurt trying to decipher the strings of destiny. Whatever, he was pretty sure he fulfilled the stupid prophecy, in an unorthodox and perhaps underhanded sort of way. Of course, maybe that was the prophecy's intention? Ugh, he should really leave these deep thinking sort of things to brainiacs like Hermione or crazy people, like Dumbledore.

"I'd like you to leave him alone."
Dumbledore sighed. "I don't know if I can do that, Harry."

Harry fidgeted. "Think of it this way, Headmaster: if Tom Riddle had stayed Tom Riddle, would you have opposed him so much? If he had been just a man who wanted to change our world for the better...?"

"Tom...had a lot of potential," Dumbledore said slowly, his eyes staring into the distance.

"But then he made mistakes, didn't he? It started with his first Horcrux, his first kill, and ended with him squandering his potential on a petty, tyrannical cause. You know why, Headmaster?"

Harry swallowed thickly. "Because he was human, and because he was just a boy when it all started, a wizard who grew up in a Muggle orphanage and who had delusions of grandeur, perhaps as a way to escape the circumstances he lived in. Do you really think someone like Voldemort is just born that way?"

Harry suddenly jumped to his feet, abandoning his place on the bench in favor of pacing in front of it, hardly noticing Dumbledore's eyes following him, but somehow he could feel the other pair of eyes he knew was watching from a distance. He stopped pacing a moment and smoothed a hand down his face in nervous gesture, but really he was just disguising the fact he was whispering a Parseltongue spell for privacy. He didn't want Tom overhearing, not when he just knew he would be embarrassed by what he was planning to say if he knew the other man could hear it. It's for his own good, anyway, because Tom would probably end up gagging on the Gryffindor sentimentality Harry was about to spew.

"I'm going to tell you something, and what I'd like you to do is just listen, for a moment. Just...let me say what I need to say. Okay?" Harry asked, tilting his head in Dumbledore's direction.

"Certainly, my boy," said the old wizard with a small hand gesturing to continue, his expression passive.

Harry ducked his head down and stared intensely at the wet gravel path under his feet, one hand unconsciously reaching up to stroke the pale cobra head that rested up by his left ear before he remembered it wasn't really the one he was thinking of. His hand dropped and he raised his head.

"I don't know if you knew before I came to Hogwarts—I don't know if anyone ever bothered to check—but you must have known that I was miserable living with my Muggle family?"

Dumbledore's face paled, distress flashing over his features. He probably hadn't been expecting this, and neither, really, had Harry, but he felt this was as good a time as any to get some things off his chest.

"They hated me, and it hurt. They were my family, but they didn't want me. I wasn't their nephew; I was just the freak that lived in their cupboard. I didn't understand for the longest time, of course, that they were really just afraid of me. They didn't understand me, and I didn't understand them. I...I can't say that I ever loved them, just accepted them as the people who let me live with them, however ungraciously."

"Harry..."

Harry stopped him. "Don't...not yet." He paced, the monotony of it helping him think. It also helped that Lady had been thankfully silent, perhaps sensing his mood.

"Did it not occur to you how similar you were making us out to be? Tom Riddle and I...we have so
much in common. I am so much like him it used to scare me...still does, to be honest. I mean, I almost was him—I had a part of his soul living in me. I think, of all people, I am the one who could best understand why he turned out the way he did...which is what really scares me the most, because I can see how I could have been like him. I can see how he could have grown into his bitterness, into his desire to hurt others...like the way he had been hurt. It's terrible, Professor, to be hated, feared, distrusted...for being only yourself."

Harry suddenly threw himself back down on the bench limply as if he had just run a marathon. "You remember our conversation about how choices make who we are?" Harry didn't wait for Dumbledore to answer, because he knew the other man did. "You're right about that, but how do we make those choices? I thought about that for a long time. It may be that choices make up who we are, but isn't it our personal experiences that help us make our choices?"

Harry glanced over at the figure in the distance who was sitting on a green lacquered bench Harry was sure wasn't there before. It brought a slight smile to his face. "Tom and I...our experiences were awfully similar. Now, I'm not making excuses for him, but given all our similarities, there was one thing that made us so very and obviously different: I was loved. By my parents, my Godfather, and later by my friends. Tom...he had nobody. Maybe his mother loved him, but she died, and his father abandoned him, and I've never heard him mention any friends...he has 'minions,'" Harry said with a snort. "At least I got to see what a normal, loving family is like, even if as an observer, but for the longest time he only had other orphans who were probably about as messed up as he was in some ways."

Rotating his head to the side, Harry looked Dumbledore in the face. The old man's brow was heavily furrowed in concentration, but his eyes were clear and shining intelligently. "Voldemort's dead," Harry said bluntly, the conviction in his voice obvious. "Tom Riddle willingly let him die, and now he has a second chance of making better choices...his experiences are different from when he was a student and made his first Horcrux." Harry sighed.

"Tom Riddle is needed in this world. The British Ministry of Magic is crumbling, and I think you know that. Everybody has been so focused on good versus evil, wizards versus Muggles, that they've forgotten it's all secondary to the main problem. Voldemort was right about one thing, that we need some sort of change, but he just failed to see why and what was needed. Worrying about how to get along with non-wizards is pointless when we have yet to learn to get along with ourselves. That is far more important right now. Tom, I think, is more aware of that fact because, well...he had nobody but me to talk to for weeks, and little to do but observe what the real world is like outside of his deep-seeded illusions. I'd like to think I brought him down from his high horse and back into the stratosphere...I'm apparently very annoyingly persistent."

Dumbledore chuckled, and Harry smiled slightly with a shrug.

"Anyway, you know he's a genius, the best student Hogwarts ever had, and I think we should let him have the chance to prove just how great, and for once not how terrible, he can be. You can't force someone like him to pretend he's ordinary, because he's not. He was born a leader, which, granted, probably exacerbated his later issues concerning power and control, but that's what he does best. He's Slytherin's Heir, the last in the line, and magic is strong in his blood; let him lead and prove to us that we can be better and why we should want to be."

Harry fell silent, all out of words and feeling a little bit corny from his "speech" about Tom. Damn, Dumbledore could probably see right through his attempt to look like he wasn't completely besotted with the man. Through all his words, he didn't think he had any to explain why he let Tom do that to him the other night...
Harry could feel his cheeks grow hot as blood pooled there, and he had to remind himself that his Headmaster who also happened to be an excellent Legilimens was sitting right next to him.

Speaking of Dumbledore, the man had yet to say anything, so Harry allowed his head to tilt slightly in his direction to see if he could discern what the old wizard was thinking. To his surprise, Dumbledore had a rather bright expression, with a gleeful twinkle in his magical eyes.

"Well, my boy!" he suddenly exclaimed. "It seems like things are making a turn for the better."

"Er, yeah?" Harry fumbled, a bit lost in Dumbledore's enthusiasm.

"Excellent, excellent."

Harry blinked dumbly. "So…you're okay with this?"

"Well," Dumbledore drawled, "it sounds all well and good, but obviously you have some details you still need to consider. How do you two plan on sorting out the Ministry?"

"Er, well, I'm not sure. It's Tom, though, who will be doing most of that. Obviously I won't be able to do much; I'd probably just get in the way."

"Oh, don't be silly, Harry," Dumbledore demurred. "This kind of thing would work much more smoothly as a partnership, a combination of both aspects of your personalities and your resources. Of course you should help, and the Wizarding World loves you."

"Eh?" Harry uttered inelegantly, wondering which Wizarding World Dumbledore was talking about because it certainly wasn't the one Harry had been living in the past six years.

"And what of Voldemort?" the Headmaster broke in before Harry could object any of the man's assurances. "He can't just disappear. People will wonder…and will get all paranoid." Dumbledore looked rather put off with that prediction.

"Oh, well, I'm not sure of that either. We haven't talked about it."

Dumbledore hummed in the back of his throat in thought. "I recall reading a novel where the main character faked their own death in order to start over in their life. I really should dig that book up again, I fairly enjoyed it."

Taking the hint, Harry asked, "You think we should fake Voldemort's death?"

"Ah, Harry, it would hardly be faking if what you said earlier is true. It simply needs to be made obvious to everyone else. Oh, and it would be best if you had a hand in his demise."

Harry wanted to scoff, thinking of all the extra attention he would receive for that. "Why do you say that?"

"You're the Chosen One. Do you really believe Voldemort's death would be accepted if it were by any other hand save your own?"

"Professor!" Harry protested. "They…they'll never leave me alone, though! Merlin, I'm already in the papers enough as it is. Can't we say it was some sort of magical accident or revolt among the Death Eaters, or that a bunch of Order members did it? Hell, I think we could tell people Volde choked on the human heart he was devouring—because, rumor has it—that's the kind of thing he does—and people would be more than happy to believe that."
"My dear boy, you are forgetting that you are denying something that has already happened. You did just say you fulfilled the prophecy, did you not? Besides, it will be so much easier for you to take over the Ministry if people already trust and adore you."

Harry did scoff this time. "It was your plan in the first place, to get Voldemort's soul back. I just kind of got in the way. And you say I'm going to take over Ministry? Me, not Tom?"

The Headmaster smiled accommodatingly at him, probably only humoring his student. "Well of course, Tom too. But never go half way, Harry, is what I say," he relayed jovially.

Harry was feeling distinctly discombobulated.

"Are you sure you weren't in Slytherin, Professor?" Harry questioned, eyes narrowed accusingly.

Dumbledore full on laughed at that, throwing his head back, the wool flat cap on his head that must have been something he picked up after seeing a Muggle wearing one threatening to slip off.

"The Hat considered it."

"You too, huh?" Harry said wryly, his face nevertheless displaying an amused countenance.

"It said something like, 'No one will ever see you coming,' right after it put me in Gryffindor."

Harry shook his head in slight mirth, and a comfortable silence stretched between them for a moment. Both their eyes were drawn to shouts of laughter coming from the group of children Harry saw earlier, now busy putting together a snowman.

"Did you ever make one?"

Harry turned his head to face Dumbledore, a small, sad smile on his lips.

"No."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "I thought I was protecting you, from many different things that seem unimportant now. Can you forgive an old fool, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry responded easily. "Despite it all, the life I've lead has made me who I am now, and I can't quite bring myself to regret that."

"Voldemort never stood a chance against you."

Snorting, Harry said, "Don't let Tom hear you say that. He'll think you're gloating."

"Ah, speaking of Tom, I'd like to pop over and say hello to him." That was apparently happening now. For an old man, Dumbledore certainly was able to stand up quickly. Harry made to stand up himself.

"No need to get up just yet, I'd like to talk with Tom alone. Dear me, I haven't been able to have a civil conversation with him for many, many years!" The Headmaster looked inordinately pleased that it might be different now.

"Um, okay, but don't expect him to be very nice to you...he's changed, but not that much," Harry advised. He bit his lip, wondering how exactly he was going to pay for allowing such a chipper Headmaster to approach the more often than not temperamental Dark Lord. Dumbledore seemed to catch his concern.
"Don't look so nervous, Harry. Tom himself drew up that Peaceful Conduct contract. I'm sure it's solid," stated Dumbledore cheerfully.

'Now that I think of it, that's what makes me nervous.' Harry thought to himself, but Dumbledore had already straightened out his awful suit and was beginning to walk off in Tom's direction, leaving Harry behind.

When Dumbledore first showed up, Tom had stood stiffly where Harry had left him, his fingers twitching to pull out his wand and give the old coot a piece of his mind. Rather unfortunate, however, was the fact he had signed a contract that would prevent any untoward curses during this little foray. Yes, how very unfortunate. Of course, there was a loophole, but as long as Dumbledore upheld his bargain that aspect couldn't be exploited.

There had been a moment not long after Dumbledore arrived that the old man had looked in Tom's direction, meeting his eyes even over the distance. Tom had not let any of what he was thinking show on his face as he stoically held Dumbledore's gaze. It was only when the Headmaster looked away did Tom permit a slight scowl to cross his features. After a moment, when it appeared he and Harry were having their own private discussion, Tom really did pull out his wand, but only to Transfigure a pile of the otherwise abundant snow into a brand new, deep green bench across the narrow path from the weathered Muggle one. He sat down on his new creation with much less reluctance than for the other one and tucked his wand back away.

Looking back at the pair in the distance, Tom watched them with a careful eye as Harry now paced in front of Dumbledore. Of course he was quite curious to know what they were saying, and since it was harmless he was able to cast a listening charm to eavesdrop on the conversation. That however, as it turned out, was futile.

:Sneaky brat,: he hissed under his breath, secretly impressed that Harry had thought to cast the strong privacy charm he had taught him. He found himself drumming his fingers on the bench seat, and once he became aware of this he immediately stopped, appalled. It was Harry who fidgeted… he had more poise than that.

Tom kept most of his attention on the pair sitting the however many yards away, but occasionally his attention would drift to the rest of the park. He mostly ignored the Muggles that occupied it, and instead tried to envision what the young Harry Potter did while here. Harry hadn't said it aloud, but Tom had discerned that the boy probably came to this park to escape those he lived with, to forget or pretend it was all different. Tom knew this because once, long ago, he had his own places he would escape to for all the same reasons.

It was with some distaste that Tom some time later observed Dumbledore making his leisurely way over to him, face serene. Harry, it seemed, was staying behind. When the old Headmaster was close enough and obviously planning on occupying the space next to him on the new Transfigured bench, Tom stiffly slid into the middle and crossed his arms, pointedly looking at Dumbledore and then the ugly one across the path before looking back up at the approaching wizard in an obvious, silent demand. Just because they were within a stone's throw of each other willingly didn't mean Tom wanted to share a bench with him. The path across which they would speak was narrow enough that they at least wouldn't have to shout their conversation.

Dumbledore, catching that hint, rather cheerfully sat down on the mundanely made seat with that damnable twinkle in his eyes. Tom felt his own eye twitch in annoyance.

"Tom," Dumbledore greeted as if this was afternoon tea. "I must say you look quite well."
"You look atrocious," Tom responded with after the reflexive inner cringe at the old man using his birth name. Though he didn't mind Harry using it freely, Dumbledore's use of it instantly put him in a vexed mood, and nowhere did it say that he had to be polite today.

"Do you not like the color?" Dumbledore glanced down at his blinding Muggle-style suit. Tom could tell he had the same Notice-Me-Not and Muggle-Repellant charms on as he himself did, but Dumbledore seemed like the kind of person who would take the occasion to dress like a Muggle "just for fun." For a moment Tom wondered if maybe Harry was right and he had spent too much time around teenagers when he had to resist the urge to roll his eyes dramatically. "I quite thought it matched my eyes," Dumbledore said as he looked up from his polyester atrocity.

For the life of him, Tom would never understand why people actually listened to this bloody wizard.

"Harry appears well," Dumbledore commented. Tom couldn't help but smirk at Dumbledore's discretion.

"I think you mean to say that he's not dead," he stated dryly. "I wonder if you care that it is the same for me."

"Ah, ever histrionic, Tom."

Said wizard scowled.

"I'm glad you and Harry have been getting along. I have to admit I was a bit worried when he refused to return to Hogwarts, but like I said, he seems well. And you, Tom, how have you been?"

"Just wonderful," Tom grit out sarcastically, and regretted it immediately when Dumbledore seemed delighted by his answer. Tom was starting to find it difficult to remember why he was here, and his fingers twitched in wanting of his wand. He really did hate this man.

"I'm sure you're curious to know what Harry and I were talking about," Dumbledore said a little more seriously, which suited Tom much better than his previous gaiety. What irked him was that Dumbledore had been able to read him well, as he did want to know what they talked about behind Harry's privacy barrier.

"Harry, the dear boy, is a gem among the masses. I hope you realize now how worthy of an opponent he was for you. I dare say he is a greater person than any of us."

Tom found that he couldn't rightly counter Dumbledore's statements, so he just kept silent and let the Headmaster continue and make his own conclusions.

"Being, of course, a rather tactful boy, he didn't outright say it, but he nevertheless convinced me to say something to you."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "And what would that be?"

"I'm sorry."

Being a closed off type of person, Tom prided himself in not openly displaying his surprise on his face. "What?" he intoned flatly. What had that bloody Gryffindor done now?

Dumbledore shifted in his seat and placed his hands in his lap, the blackened hand on top of the wrinkled but otherwise healthy one.
"I made a judgment early on about you. I never trusted you, and I never gave you a reason to trust me. You were my student, and I failed to properly give you the attention you needed. I didn't help you."

Narrowing his eyes and nearly snarling, Tom hissed, "I didn't need your—"

"Hush, Tom," the wizened Headmaster said calmly, "and let me speak." Restraining his indignation, Tom settled his temper behind a cool mask for the time being and let Dumbledore carry on.

"I was your teacher, and perhaps the only one who recognized the danger you were in. I thought I understood you, but maybe I didn't. You were such a smart boy, the smartest there was; you were not just any student, and I should have seen that you needed something more than what the others did. Dear Slughorn doted on you, of course, but I think we both know he's not the most profound person there is."

Well, Tom had to give him that.

"I'm sorry," Dumbledore continued, "that I never gave you much credit when you said you didn't want to go back to the orphanage. Like I said, Harry didn't say it, but I think he wondered if perhaps I could have prevented you from doing some of the things you did, if I had shown more understanding, more care before you lost yourself. I have to say that there were times where I have wondered the very same thing."

There was stillness once Dumbledore finished. It amplified how somewhere, at the back of Tom's mind, or perhaps rather on the edge of his soul, he could feel another life pulsing in synch with his own.

"What did Harry say to you?"

"Just what I needed to hear. I'm afraid I hadn't really trusted that your intentions were fair. He brought to my attention how close I had been to making the same mistake with him as I had with you. He defended you quite easily, I must say, but I'd like to hear it from you: is he safe from you?"

Tom stared hard at Dumbledore, not letting any of his thoughts cross his perfectly schooled expression. He knew the risks of what he was about to do, but in light of the circumstances, there was only one thing that would put the Headmaster completely at ease. Despite his preference otherwise, Tom could accept in this instance that his old Transfiguration Professor did know him enough to understand his answer when the wizened man heard what he had to tell him.

"He's still my Horcrux."

Tom took a moment to feel satisfied at Dumbledore's gaping mouth.

"How?" the Headmaster finally choked out.

"How does anything happen with him?" Tom responded dryly. "By accident…or dumb luck," he proclaimed. "Really, Dumbledore, you should have known he would have botched something like feeding a cobra a potion and end up consuming a bit of it himself."

Dumbledore's cursed hand slipped to the bench seat and he leaned heavily on it. "Harry consumed some of the strengthening potion?" His eyes flickered over to the young wizard in the distance, who was turned completely on the park bench towards them and was intently watching the other two wizards in the park. "It did nothing to him but grant that he keep your soul piece?" the bearded wizard said as he focused his attention back to face his old student.
"Imagine that?" Tom said nonchalantly, trying not to feel too smug at Dumbledore's incredulousness. But he knew perfectly well Dumbledore would be able to interpret what exactly that meant. He thought he'd say it aloud anyways. "You know what that potion was intended for. Its magic dictated that he's better off as my Horcrux."

*Keeper of my soul…*

Any feelings of calm and common sense evaporated from Tom's self as the next words spilled from his mouth. "He's better off, and so am I."

Dumbledore's visage flickered in deep interest. "Tom?"

Tom felt himself scowl in distemper, but that was mainly because he was feeling so uncomfortable. He could sense something curling and twisting around inside his being, creaking around like an old, rusty wheel being used for the first time in a long time. There was also a flutter of panic, like a moth beating its wings against the glass of the jar it was trapped in. It was resistant, a remnant of the past that refused to die, or maybe he simple refused to let it go.

It felt so weak now.

"He will not be going back to those disgusting Muggles," Tom suddenly said. "He will be my charge from now on."

He was expecting some sort of opposition, but Dumbledore proved this to be an empty concern.

"It seems leaving him with them was simply me repeating a mistake I never learned from. I dare say he will be in better hands with you, now, than them. Quite ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes, quite," Tom said somewhat brusquely. He stood swiftly from his seat, his bench dissolving behind him in the wind while he took the scant amount of steps it took to stand directly in front of the much older wizard. "No ill will shall ever touch him again." There was a slight warning in that promise.

Tom backed away then, robes whipping around in the winter breeze as it gusted through the park. Clouds were looming in the distance, threatening snow for later in the evening. Tom's eyes searched for Harry's, and when they met a silent communication occurred between them, and Harry jumped up from his own bench and followed the gravel path back in the other two wizard's direction.

"He cares about you, you know," Dumbledore said from behind him, causing Tom to look slightly back over his shoulder. "It's quite obvious. Dare I hope that you have come to care for him, too?" murmured Dumbledore softly.

Tom looked away again and didn't answer. He had a feeling the smug old coot already knew the answer. From behind him, Tom could sense that the man had risen to his feet as well. Harry had reached them, now, and appeared to be wrestling Lady's head back under his coat while she kept trying to squirm out of his hold. Stepping up to Tom, Harry huffed in frustration.

"Um, I think she's bored…and hungry."

"So?"

Harry pouted slightly. "Can't you tell her I'll feed her later?"

"Tell her yourself."
Tom found himself amused when Harry made a face at him, looking sidelong at Dumbledore and then pointedly back at him.

"Uh, I can't anymore," he ground out. "Remember?"

"Oh Harry, you don't have to pretend anymore."

Harry's eyebrows shot up at Dumbledore's admission, and he looked, bewildered, to the red-eyed wizard before him.

"You told him?"

"Let's face it, Harry, you would have let it slip eventually."

Harry glowered. "Kept you a secret, didn't I?"

: And he found out anyway: Tom returned in Parseltongue, to disguise his mildly defeated tone. Dumbledore was chuckling at the exchange. While Harry hissed to Lady to behave, Tom sidestepped around so he and Harry stood side-by-side facing the older wizard.

"So," Harry said, tilting his head so he could glance up at Tom, "is everything okay?" He glanced now at Dumbledore.

"I'm old, Harry." Here, Dumbledore held up his cursed hand, twisting it in the air. "Dying, in fact." Tom's eyes flicked down to view Harry's expression, and he witnessed the younger wizard swallow heavily. Dumbledore's voice drew his attention back to him.

"I had already given you some of my opinions on these new circumstances, but I will tell you definitively that I feel I have meddled enough in the Wizarding World for my lifetime."

Tom couldn't suppress the condescending snort that escaped him. Harry elbowed him in the ribs for it. Dumbledore tilted his head knowingly at them.

"I don't believe I can adequately justifying butting into the affairs that will affect the younger generations, not when I have hardly any future left. It's more your world than mine now, Harry, and if you think Tom can make it into the one that you want, then who am I to stop him?"

Dumbledore broke his gaze with Harry to instead fix his odd eyes on Tom's.

"Voldemort never had as much potential as you have, Tom Riddle."

There was a moment of terse silence, broken after a time by Harry when he turned to Tom and relayed, "He…and I…think that the figure of Voldemort needs to die publicly in some way, so everybody knows."

Tom stiffened, the tiny coil of resistance pulling taunt in response to the idea, and he shot a glare in Dumbledore's direction. He couldn't help it; he had spent months as a student in Hogwarts trying to come up with a name much more suitable to his tastes than Tom, and then he had spent years making something out of that name. No matter what, he could not deny that Voldemort was still a part of him, and the thought of so casually throwing that person and that name aside was almost frightening.

But Tom could already see the logic of it. And maybe starting over was what he needed…or had he already begun to do just that?
In any case, there were far too many reasons and complications to continue on as Voldemort in the public eye. Voldemort would have to be overthrown in order for the bleating masses to feel *secure* in the fact that they weren't going to be contaminated with the *evil* Dark or die a gruesome death. Now that the topic had been breached, Tom had some ideas rolling in his head that would benefit them all, and it may be that living a double life will become commonplace for several people if the Light *insisted* upon doing it the tedious, nonviolent way.

Good Merlin, it's going to be rather difficult to keep his sanity without the occasional idiot to torture for stress relief. Taking over the Wizarding World never seemed like this much of a chore. Too bad Bellatrix had broken Wormtail's mind...he had always been a convenient target.

"What do you say, Tom?" Dumbledore said, butting into Tom's thoughts. "Can you, as a regular wizard, rise as high as Voldemort? Can you leave the monster behind and be as human as the rest of us?"

Tom, of course, recognized what Dumbledore was doing, the challenge he was issuing. He was daring Tom to prove he didn't need the persona of an immortal, god-like being he, as Voldemort, portrayed in order to succeed. Dumbledore was baiting him. Yes, Tom was very aware of the manipulation, but had no problem taking that bait. It was a challenge he was willing to accept.

"Of course," he told Dumbledore simply, giving the man a smug, challenging look of his own. Dumbledore merely nodded his head once, and then smiled, and Tom found the expression to be purely amicable and free of hostility. In his peripheral vision, Tom could see Harry grinning.

"I expect him back at the start of term," Dumbledore commented, a sense of finality about the statement. "I'll get the custody transferred over." The Headmaster looked over at the clouds in the distance. The wind was blowing harder, now, and it was only because Dumbledore had his beard tucked into his belt that kept it in place. "Looks like it'd be prudent to leave before the storm hits. Tom, you'll contact me if you need anything?"

"Maybe," he drawled, vowing to do his best to never need anything from Dumbledore again.

"You are so pretentious," Harry muttered from his side, obviously knowing what he was thinking. Dumbledore chuckled delightedly as he turned and walked a bit further down the path. Before he got very far, though, he stopped and turned to glance back at them.

"Ah, I nearly forgot something. Harry, if you would be so kind?" He gestured for Harry to go to him.

Harry hesitated a moment, but then he left Tom's side, a fact Tom himself felt a pang of displeasure over as he carefully monitored Dumbledore's visage for anything untoward. From the distance and angle he stood away from them, Tom couldn't hear what they were talking about, but he could discern that the older man had placed something in Harry's palm. After a mere minute of discussion, the Headmaster Apparated away, leaving Tom and Harry alone together once more. Slowly, Harry turned on his heel and walked back towards the other man, his hair taking full advantage of the increasing winds and flying in every direction.

"What did he want?" Tom immediately demanded to know. Harry didn't seem to pay him any attention, though, focused as he was on the small object he clutched in his hand. Now standing in front of Tom, Harry tilted his head up at him and held his hand out.

"Dumbledore told me you might want this back." He uncurled his fingers, letting the other man see what the Headmaster had given him.
It was the Gaunt ring.

Automatically, Tom reached out to the ring, letting his finger just barely brush the surface of the dark stone in the gold setting. The touch sent a shock through his nerves, a quick zap of residual magic and disconcerting memory. He pulled his hand away, feeling distinctively that the object no longer held much appeal to him any longer. It had once been important enough to be his Horcrux, but now it was only a sign of his shortcomings.

"I felt it too," Harry whispered to him, and when Tom looked he saw that the young man's exceptionally green eyes were filled with emotion; it wasn't pity, nor was it accusation, but a sort of acceptance and a warm comfort. Tom cupped Harry's hand with his own and forced the younger wizard's fingers back over the ring.

"Keep it; do with it what you will. I find I do not want it." He pushed Harry's hand towards his chest, brushing the fingers with his own as he let his hand drop back to his side. Harry gave him a slight nod, pressing his fist into his sternum before he slowly put the ring in his pocket. "It was weird. Before he gave it to me, he said something like, 'I'm going to see them soon anyway.' I wonder what he meant by that."

Tom didn't know. "It could be anything, with Dumbledore." Harry seemed to agree with that statement.

"Oh hey, and what did Dumbledore mean by getting the 'custody transferred over'? Do you know that?"

"Well, Harry," Tom said as curled an arm around the boy's shoulders in preparation to Apparate, "he's going to transfer custody to me, because I happen to be your new guardian." Tom smirked as Harry sputtered, his eyes widening in surprise. Tom didn't allow Harry much recovery before his magic sucked the two of them into Apparition space and dropped them out again in the entryway of Tom's private home.

What Tom really had the sudden urge to do was drag Harry into the bedroom and give in to the desire to express with his actions what he couldn't with words, to ensure Dumbledore hadn't somehow done anything to him. Instead, he sent Lady to find Nagini and led Harry, who still seemed to be a bit dazed by his transfer of guardianship, into the sitting room portion of his study, sitting down on the black sofa and pulling the boy down with him. Harry yelped as he was bodily situated so his back was against the armrest and his legs across Tom's lap.

"Cozy," he commented. Tom offered him a raised eyebrow, daring him to say anything else about the arraignment. Just because Tom was sure now it wasn't just possessiveness that drew him to Harry didn't mean he couldn't still express it. Harry awkwardly cleared his throat.

"So, how was your talk with Dumbledore?"

A sneer flashed across Tom's features for a mere second before it disappeared again.

"In all honesty, Harry? Not as I expected it to be."

Harry's brow furrowed. "How so?"

"I don't know what you said to him before—mainly because you used a privacy spell," Tom derided in annoyance, "but it prompted the old coot to say some very interesting things to me, things I hadn't thought he'd say. I have to admit I feel rather oddly about it." He made eye contact with Harry. "He apologized to me."
Harry's face twitched in not so much surprise, but interest. "Bet you never thought you'd hear him say that to you."

"Your knack for understatements never ceases to amaze me." Harry only grinned up at him, probably utterly pleased with himself. Tom couldn't bring himself to be annoyed about it.

"To tell you the truth, Harry, the things he said brought up some memories and feelings rather left forgotten, and some others that I hadn't known what to do with."

Tom's eyes were drawn to the hand that was placed on his arm, and then to the concerned eyes of the appendage's owner.

"Are you alright?"

Tom gave Harry a pointed glance, unimpressed with the question. "Yes, Harry, I'm fine."

Harrumphing, Harry said sardonically, "Well, silly me for suggesting you may need some comfort after an emotionally draining day."

"Hardly."

Harry sniggered, his body wriggling as he settled himself deeper into the sofa cushions.

"So, now that Dumbledore and you are on firmer ground, does that mean you'll interact with him more?"

"On the contrary, I never want to see him again. Apology or no, I can't stand the barmy wizard."

Harry folded himself in half so his forehead rested on Tom's shoulder as he laughed at the man's declaration. Taking advantage of the situation, Tom grabbed hold of the front of Harry's clothing and pulled him round so he ended up straddling Tom's lap. Without giving Harry any time to get his bearings, Tom took possession of the younger wizard's lips in an openmouthed, searing kiss. It lasted for a blissful few seconds before Harry had the audacity to lay a hand on the other man's chest and shoved him back.

"Wait a second! Don't think I haven't forgotten what you told me before we Apparated. You said you're my guardian now."

Tom gave Harry a cat-ate-the-canary smirk. "I told Dumbledore you weren't going back to those filthy Muggles. Since you probably won't let me kill, or better yet, torture them mercilessly, I decided this was the best compromise."

Harry aimed a deep scowl at him, before he crossed his arms over his chest.

"So, you're my guardian?" he questioned apprehensively.

Tom felt an eyebrow rise and his lips flatten in castigation. "Didn't I just say that?"

"But…what about, you know…this?" Harry made it clear as to what he was talking about by gesturing between the two of them. Tom had to chuckle at Harry's confused visage.

:Harry: Tom hissed seductively as he leaned in close, watching as Harry's pupils increased in size as the sound of his name in Parseltongue affected him. :Didn't I tell you that I care nothing for rules? I will kiss you anytime I want, which will be much easier to do now that I'm your guardian and you live with me.: As if to prove it, Tom captured Harry's lips again, dragging forth a moan
from the back of the younger wizard's throat. He hadn't missed the look of pure delight on Harry's face as it presumably registered in his mind that he really didn't have to go back to his Muggle family.

"And," Tom added, pulling away just enough to speak, "I seem to recall you saying something about how you choose to disregard authority yourself. I think you can agree that rules are overrated. Besides, I'm going to change them soon anyway."

Harry snorted in amusement, and Tom found the movement of his body in his lap to be very distracting. The younger wizard's bright eyes looked into Tom's.

"Dumbledore seems to think that I'm going to taking over the Ministry too, or some such rot."

"Of course you are."

"I'm mean, really, I'm just—wait, what?"

"Did you really think I wasn't going to use your influence as the Boy-Who-Lived to make my takeover easier?"

"Tom," Harry near whined, "you know I hate that title. And don't you need to ask me if I want to lead a coup?"

"You said Dumbledore thought it was a good idea."

Harry huffed again. "He called it a partnership," he mumbled. But then his eyes glinted mischievously and he smiled. "What's the phrase? If you can't beat them, join them?"

"I am choosing to believe you are referring to you joining me," Tom murmured warningly. Harry laughed.

"Mmm, I don't know, you did so well being my partner in crime while at Hogwarts."

"People have died for less than the things you say to me."

"And that's why you could never get the cooperation of the majority of the Wizarding population," Harry jibbed.

The comment moved Tom to address something he wanted to make clear with Harry.

"Do you understand, Harry, why Dumbledore insists that you play an active role in what we intend to do?"

Harry blinked, waiting for Tom to explain.

"It's because he knows I will not be kind, or forgiving, as things progress. I am a driven man, Harry, and I will not tolerate ineffectiveness or passive approaches. It may be that I have decided to change my...methods, but that does not change the fact that the vast adjustment needed in order to achieve our goals will make things messy at times. The friendly politician will not cut it in this. Dumbledore knows that, no matter who I say I am, I am fully capable and have no qualms to using aggressive methods. I may not be quite as bloodthirsty as before, but I am every bit as power-hungry as then. Dumbledore knows some things are inevitable. Perfect cooperation only happen in children's stories. But what he wants from you, I believe, is for you to do what you do best and do whatever you can to protect and shield the population from what I do best."
"You understand, don't you, Harry? To me, *failure* is not an option. You will be my only buffer, because you are the only one I will listen to. I made you my equal..." Tom smirked drolly, "so I guess I have to suffer the consequences."

Harry ducked his head and let out a soft snort, and it remained bowed as he presumably thought over Tom's words. Tom merely waited, calmly breathing in and out, for Harry's reaction.

Exhaling heavily and lifting his head, Harry nodded.

"I understand, Tom. Of course I knew, but that doesn't stop me hoping everything will be fine." He shrugged, unapologetic. "I'll be there, and I'll do what I can, because no matter what I'm a part of this—always have been—and it wouldn't be right for me to not see this through. I knew what I was getting into the moment I decided not to kill you when I should have."

Tom's eyebrow arched in inquiry. "'Should have'? So you think that I *should* be dead right now, hmm?"

A soft bark of laughter burst from Harry's throat. "Don't worry, Tom, I realized that I enjoy you much more alive than dead. I imagine you're prettier this way."

Tom treated Harry's backside to a rather nasty stinging hex.

"Ah—hey! That was a compliment!" In an effort to get away from the magical assault, Harry had thrown his body forward, which was pretty much ineffective since Tom's own body was in the way of him getting very far. No matter, this pleased Tom as he could reach Harry's lips without having to stretch his neck any distance at all. He was going to make sure Harry forgot how to speak, as often times what came out of the younger wizard's mouth was truly atrocious, and that was saying something coming from the Dark Lord.

Harry pulled away, short of breath. "So, 'anytime' you want?"

Tom smirked. "Yes."

"Well?" Harry asked. :What are you waiting f—umph!:  

Tom swallowed that last syllable, his tongue sliding along the crease of Harry's mouth. Harry sighed when he parted his lips and Tom's tongue slipped inside to graze every crevice it could reach. There was something oddly freeing about this, and it drove Tom further as he pulled Harry closer to him.

Eventually they had to break the kiss in order for the two of them to gasp for breath. Harry was looking into his eyes and seemed incapable of anything other than the soft, panting breaths.

Tom should have known not to underestimate the boy, and he realized his mistake when Harry opened his mouth to speak in that *ridiculous* way again.

"Are you thanking me right now?"

"For what?" Tom snapped, not understanding.

Harry grinned cheekily, the look slightly ruined by his flushed face and bruised lips. "For getting Dumbledore's approval, of course."

Tom scoffed, uncaring how tetchy it was. "I am not *thanking* you for something I could care less about."
"W-whatever," Harry stuttered, Tom's hands having found the bare skin of his lower back under his thin cotton shirt. "Wonder what he would have said if he knew the real reason you wanted to be my guardian."

"Apparently I am not distracting you enough," Tom muttered gruffly, an air of exacerbation about him. Harry issued a breathy chuckle that still managed to sound impudent.

"Well," Harry murmured shyly, "I guess you just have to try harder?"

Tom flashed a wicked, dangerous smile as he leaned in close to Harry's face, their breath's intermingling.

:"If you insist," he responded, and Harry visibly shuddered with each sibilant S, his eyes wide and his cheeks flushed from his daring. Their lips met again, and in a short flurry of movement, Tom had flipped them so Harry was now running lengthwise with the sofa and pressed into the cushions by the older man's body. Their hips met as Tom ground down into Harry, and the young wizard jerked away from the kiss as he arched into the sensation, a sharp gasp leaving his mouth.

The sight struck Tom with the question of how he could ever have wished this vibrant life, this bright soul, dead? It was no wonder that splinter of his soul had been attracted and stuck fast to this brother soul which was the opposite but complement to his. His mutilated soul had merely found the thing that would fill its missing pieces. He considered the question of whether or not that piece of his soul would have left Harry's even if the boy hadn't consumed the potion. It wasn't alone that way. And he realized something else: Harry would be missed by him should he ever go absent. It was yet another qualm he had against sending Harry back to Hogwarts, besides the proximity he would have to the old coot. Had he always been capable of feeling this way, or was it new from the process of his Horcruxes remerging?

"Tom?"

The sound of his name drew Tom from his reverie, and his eyes focused once more on the green ones before him. Those luminous orbs were looking up at him questioningly, and there was a slight frown on Harry's lips, which Tom immediately kissed away. Then he rested his mouth against Harry's cheek.

:"Do you want more?" he hissed, smoothing his fingertips down the exposed side of Harry's face, carefully tracing the features found there.

:"Yes," Harry sighed softly, pressing his chest up into Tom's. Tom exhaled against Harry's cheek. Maybe the day had affected him more than he thought. He was feeling possessive, protective, and perfectly content where he was now.

:"Good," he waved his hand, and Harry yelped as he was, once again, magically divested of his clothes. One of these days, Tom vowed, he was going take the time to do that manually, but right now he so enjoyed the peeved expression this method put on Harry's visage and the immediate results.

:"If you're going to do that, at least do it to yourself, too. I'm bloody naked and you still have a million layers on. Wizarding fashion is so uptight. Hey, we should—"

:"Shut up, Harry," Tom commanded, not interested in hearing what Harry thought about Wizarding clothes but nonetheless vanished his from his body as he had Harry's. To ensure Harry's continued silence, he kissed him again.
Tom was done trying to figure out and question this undeniable draw to the Potter scion, which only seemed to grow stronger with every little thing Harry did, or said, or caused to happen with his inexplicable providence. He couldn't be bothered by it anymore, no matter how much it went against everything that had once defined him. His entire makeup was being rearranged, reshaped, and remade, and the only thing he was bothered by was the fact none of this actually bothered him when normally he would refuse to let anything other than his logical mind dictate his actions.

Harry Potter was a bloody nuisance, and Tom wouldn't have it any other way.

So far everything intimate they had done together could be considered more baby steps to other things. But it soon became apparent there was a unique experience to be had when driving your living Horcrux into orgasm, in that through proper manipulation of the mind link those kinds of sensations can be transmitted, shared and doubled. And if anything, Tom couldn't say much against how quick a learner a motivated Harry was. The enthusiasm of youth was quite fascinating. And surprisingly addictive. And today, Tom wanted to try something new.

His hand had been working Harry's arousal, and his fingers were decently covered in precum so that when his hand slipped between Harry's legs and towards his back, his index finger slipped relatively easily into the tight entrance he found there.

Harry yelped in surprise, his muscles reflexively tensing around the intrusion. "Ah, Tom!" He looked bewilderedly up at the man hovering over him. Tom watched carefully, and figured Harry was alright when he finally reacted by giggling.

"Feels weird," he said as a squirmed, a blush darkening his cheeks.

"Do you like it?" Tom asked. Harry squirmed again.

"I don't know…"

With a little manipulation, Tom's fingertip found the sensitive bundle of nerves in Harry's inner walls.

"Oh!" Harry sucked in a breath. "Yes, yes, I like it!"

That oh so perfect reaction had Tom wanting to plunge into Harry then and there, to take what he asserted would only ever be his, but he refrained and instead worked on giving Harry a taste of what he could look forward to. Somehow he knew that Harry wasn't quite ready.

Tom remembered when he could care less about the wants and wishes of others. They didn't matter, not compared to his. And now, here he was, denying himself in consideration of another. What had happened to his inborn tendencies?

In reality, nothing, it was just that it was Harry that was the difference. He knew this…relationship…was anything but conventional, but when had he ever followed the norm? Either of them, for that matter.

Harry was thoroughly incoherent when Tom finally pulled his fingers free. The younger wizard whimpered and tried to press his body as close as he could to the older man's. Tom could feel Harry's heart pounding next to his own, the pace swift. It was reassuring, that heartbeat.

Harry fisted a hand in Tom's hair and used the hold to drag him down into a desperate kiss. A mere shifting of their hips and Harry was pushed over the edge. Soon after, Tom experienced one of the times where he found he didn't mind the Gryffindor penchant for fairness and returning favors freely when Harry slid down his body, trailing kisses as he went, and then proceeded to lay even
more openmouthed kisses all over Tom's still aching arousal until he shuddered in release.

Quick learner indeed.
"Harry James Potter!"

A dull, tinkering *clank* sounded as one Harry James Potter dropped his metal stirring spoon into the bowl of fudge frosting he was making for the toffee bars currently in the oven. It was a project he had initiated for no other reason other than for his own enjoyment.

It seemed his time in the kitchen was about to be interrupted, though. The whites of Harry’s eyes shown as he spun just in time to see Tom throw open the kitchen door without even touching it, his enormous amount of magic sizzling in the air around him. Harry pressed his lower back uncomfortably into the edge of the prep table he was working at, wondering what he had done to put such an absolute _murderous_ expression on Tom's usually handsome features.

"T-tom?" Harry stuttered meekly, the pit of his stomach dropping. Tom looked so angry, and it scared him.

Something wasn't quite right, though. However irate Tom looked, he also looked almost bewildered as well. In his one hand he held a few slightly crumbled pieces of paper. He held them aloft and jabbed them at Harry. At least the worst they could do was give Harry a paper cut, as compared to what Tom's wand was capable of.

"This is your fault!"

Oh, well, when wasn't it his fault according to Tom? Willing his body to relax to ease the pressure of digging his back into the marble tabletop, Harry, with a slightly quivering voice, said, "I don't understand. What is my fault?"

"I….He…" Tom's anger prevented him from speaking further. Harry's eyebrows jumped around on his forehead. He couldn't ever remember a time Tom had been so worked up that he was at a loss for words, and Harry was getting nervous that whatever caused the odd behavior was actually a Really Bad Thing.

"Tom, what is it?" Harry croaked out urgently. Tom snarled, red eyes flashing.

"He…" The sentence died. "As if I wanted his help," he was finally able to spit out. "This is your fault!"

Harry fought the urge to sigh. "Yes, you've said that already," he blurted in his exasperation and worry.

The thick pages Tom held were suddenly shoved into Harry's hands, who then straightened them out a little and scanned the words written on the top one. It was from Gringotts, he realized, before reading a little further. He blinked several times, wondering if the thing Tom had done to his eyesight was wearing off, because what he read couldn't possibly be right. He read it again, feeling his expression slacken in shock.

"It…it says you've been made his _heir._" In Harry's hands was a letter from the Gringotts division of Wills and Inheritance. It was addressed to Tom Marvolo Riddle, and within the body of the letter it stated in short, concise sentences that Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore had formally declared Tom Riddle as the heir to his name. Harry was actually quite familiar with this sort of document, and what it entailed. Sirius Black, his Godfather, had made him heir to the Black family, despite the fact Harry wasn't the most direct or close descendent of said family. Sirius had
given Harry basically everything, denying his cousins, namely Bellatrix and Narcissa, both née Black, any benefit. What Harry didn't get went to others of Sirius' choosing. Besides the vaults and Black properties Harry now had control over, he also had several forms of political influence, in terms of votes and even seats in some establishments in the Ministry, which he could choose to pursue when he came of age.

Harry could bet that Dumbledore, famed wizard that he was, had amassed a sizable amount of assets throughout his long life, but it was probably his influence and political power that were the most valuable of his possessions. Dumbledore was currently head of the Wizengamot and once had been head of the International Confederation of Wizards, though now he was just a regular member after being kicked out for one year. If this was for real, just by being Dumbledore's heir, it was likely Tom would be favored as a replacement member once Dumbledore could no longer participate.

"This…this isn't bad, right?"

"It practically makes me a Dumbledore."

Harry bit his lip. "Is that the only reason you're upset?" Because if so, Harry was going to laugh. Tom leered at him, as if sensing the other's thoughts.

"I think it may be a smokescreen, of sorts. As much as I hate to admit it, the fact that I have a new guardian will be front page news. You're going to be under heavy scrutiny; this could soften the blow, make you a safe person; somebody trusted by Dumbledore. Wouldn't you think that's what he's trying to do by this?"

"An acceptable and influential public face," Tom droned dispassionately, before exhaling heavily. "He knew damn well I am perfectly capable of creating one for myself, without his interference."

While he waited for Tom calm down, Harry amused himself by idly thinking, 'Affronted indignation is a little bit adorable on him.'

"A letter from the old fool was also sent with the Gringotts owl," Tom suddenly said. "You read it. I fear it will burn in my hands before I'll be able to."

Harry snorted. "I think you're overreacting." He shuffled through the few pages of parchment, skipping through until he found the letter Tom was talking about. "Tom" was simply addressed on the front, and Harry easily recognized Dumbledore's handwriting. He flipped it over and broke the wax seal, unfolding the missive to read its contents aloud.

"Dear Tom,

This letter and the documents that it came with may take you by surprise. They are the result of our meeting yesterday, for when I returned to Hogwarts, it was in a deep contemplative state. I have always enjoyed a long, intensive meditation session; there's nothing like a thorough examination of oneself. Last night's may have been my best yet, if I do say so myself.

I had already made my decision concerning the future of this conflict. Harry trusts you, and I trust Harry; since the two of you have come to an understanding, I am fully supportive of the alliance. But there was something more I could do for you. Making you, Tom Marvolo Riddle, the heir to my transmissible titles and assets was commonsensical. You may or may not be interested in some of my possessions, but I am well aware of what such a designation could do for you in the eye of the public. Just think of this as a small gift from an old wizard to help you and Harry succeed. As I said, I have faith in Harry, and importantly, in you. Do not be surprised, Tom, I had always known..."
your potential, I just failed to find the right thing that would allow you to rise to it. It is a good thing, then, that he found you instead."

Harry paused in his reading to peek up from under his lashes, trying to gauge Tom's reaction, especially to that last statement. All he found, naturally, was an unreadable mask. He cleared his throat somewhat awkwardly and focused back on the letter.

"I understand there is a chance you may choose to assume a new identity. That may be for the best. It seems you have a talent, anyway, for becoming someone else—wearing many different faces and personalities when it suits you, and I know you are fully capable of handling the details such a change would involve. As it goes, a new name also requires a new background. If you so care, my late distant cousin, Audrette Marielle Aleron may be of use to you. Audrette never married, dying relatively young, but she often spoke of her fondness for children and how she would have liked to have a son; a smart boy, she said, who would grow up to be a great man. I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you became that son, at least in part. In any case, it is just a suggestion; I'll leave you to the details of how you would like to reintegrate yourself into the public, and either way you will be known as my heir and as Harry Potter's guardian. I'm sure Rita Skeeter will have...what is it again? Ah, a 'field day'."

Harry groaned a little, knowing it was true.

"Speaking of Harry, you'll find that I've also sent you his guardianship papers, transferring his Magical Guardianship from me to you, and you'll find there is also a signed release from my brief visit with his Muggle family for the general transfer. That they so willingly agreed to disclaim a member of their own blood saddened and shamed me, and I wondered why I hadn't done this before. I can only be comforted by the fact that the right thing has at last been done. I can fully say that the irony of the situation has not been lost on me, but I have always been fond of the quirks and odd twists and turns life often deals out. Take care of Harry. He has so much to offer, to you and the rest of the world. I'll leave you to find out what all for yourself."

Harry felt a bit awkward and embarrassed by Dumbledore's high praise. He grimaced slightly and scratched the back of his neck in self-consciousness. He distracted himself by thinking of his relatives. He hadn't known Dumbledore would have to get their signed permission, but now that he knew, it made sense. He wasn't really surprised by their reactions. Maybe he should have felt bad about it, but he didn't feel a lick of remorse that he would probably never see them again. All he felt was relief. Eyes scanning the letter in his hands, Harry found there was still a little more left to read.

"On a final note, on Sunday I'll open the Floo to my office at five in the evening to allow Harry to come through, unless I'm told otherwise. Tell Harry hello in the meantime. Take care, Tom, and I genuinely hope to hear back from you soon.

"Sincerely, Albus Dumbledore," Harry finished, reading the Headmaster's signature. He looked up at Tom, found him to be catatonic, and went on to set the stack of papers down on the table and picked up his bowl of thick frosting once more. The pan with his baked toffee bar concoction had magically appeared on the tabletop once Harry's timer spell on the oven had run down, and Harry figured they had cooled enough by now for the fudge topping. He dumped a glob of the mixture on top of the baked goods and began whistling softly to himself as he smoothed it over top.

He did half the pan before Tom moved again.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Harry raised an inquiring eyebrow. "This? I'm making my Toffee Delight."
"Why?" Tom snapped.

"Because I was bored, and it tastes good." To emphasize, Harry stuck a finger in the bowl of viscous fudge, scooping some out and lifting it to his mouth, sucking on the digit and moaning appreciatively while coyly eyeballing Tom, who was watching the display intently. Harry slid the finger out with a slight pop, and went back to spreading the chocolate over the toffee bar.

"So, what do you think?"

From the periphery, of his vision, Harry saw Tom twitch as he exhaled sharply.

"What do I think of the letter?" Tom asked somewhat gruffly. Harry smirked impishly.

"Well, actually, I was asking about the Toffee Delight…"

Harry barely had time to toss the topping bowl down before he was bodily dragged sideways and spun around so Tom could press his back into the table edge. It was as uncomfortable as it was before, but now that Tom seemed to be feeling an entirely different emotion than anger towards Harry caused the young man to not mind too much. It was hard to notice the blunt edge of the marble-top anyway when Tom was apparently trying to sample the fudge topping by tasting what was left of it in Harry's mouth.

"Delicious," Tom breathed into his ear after he pulled back to let Harry breathe. Harry muffled his light laughter in Tom's shoulder while also attempting to hide his blush. Eventually he pushed Tom away and returned to his baking, receiving a disgruntled glare for his actions.

"Don't give me that look…you can't just ignore what Dumbledore's done. So um, yeah, he made you his heir."

Now Tom was really scowling. "I didn't believe him when he said he was done manipulating situations, but this…is expected." He picked up the abandoned stack of paper from the counter and flipped through the sheets. Harry's mouth twisted in wry amusement.

"You have to admit, though, that it really could be to your advantage. With Dumbledore actually claiming you as the one to inherit his holdings, wouldn't that make people almost automatically accept you? I mean, with Dumbledore, lead of the 'Light', basically vouching for you, that takes much of the effort of trying to generate a new image for the public. And, well, you do want to fake your identity, don't you?" Harry pushed the confection bowl away, satisfied with the now finished product. "I guess we never really talked about it, but I sort of assumed you'd be a sneaky Slytherin and infiltrate that way, at least initially. I know hardly anybody who would know Tom Riddle as Voldemort, but, uh, exactly how old should you be if any one checked your records? All I know is that it definitely is not how you look now. I know magic is capable of doing a lot of things, but…"

"What do you mean by that, Harry?" Said wizard could hear the smirk in Tom's suave tone of voice, and he wrinkled his nose derisively.

"You look bloody hot, okay? Merlin, all you do is fish for compliments. What I know is that you do not look like someone who could be my grandfather." Harry winced in reaction to both Tom's dark look and his own inner aversion to thinking those sorts of thoughts. He picked up a knife that was sitting on the prep table and began to cut his bakery creation into smaller squares.

"Okay, let's just forget I ever mentioned that. So, yeah, what do you plan to do? Can you use this whole…heir thing?" Harry asked, twirling his knife in the air. "Even Dumbledore thinks you should assume a new identity…I think appearing as Tom Riddle in public will ultimately be too
risky. There's always that chance someone could connect you to Voldemort." Harry snorted and flicked his glance over to Tom's. "You could pick a normal name, and try not to be an egotistical bastard about it by adding "Lord" in front. Just for the record, though, I happen to think there is nothing wrong with your given name."

Tom growled in the back of his throat and mumbled, "Says you, Harry James... how ridiculously plebian."

Harry stuffed the greater portion of a piece of his still-warm Toffee Delight into Tom's mouth.

"Our names remind us of our fathers; it's the reason you hate yours, and the reason I like mine." Harry looked expectantly up into Tom's face. "So, is it good? The Toffee Delight, I mean."

Harry spent the next hour hiding in the winter-bare garden, using the time to make snow angels and trying not to snigger too much at the memory of the Dark Lord simultaneously finishing the rest of the dessert Harry had shoved in his mouth and attempting to land a hex on the hastily retreating Boy-Who-Lived. A couple of those hexes had hurt, but Harry felt they were worth it to see Tom eating more of his baking.

Eventually a House Elf found him, insisting that he meet his Master in the study.

"We are taking a trip," Tom told Harry when he appeared before the man.

"Oh, really?" With careless indifference, Harry pulled from behind him and threw into the lit hearth the snowball he had brought with him for protection from any further hexes Tom might have sent. He looked up and met the other man's eyes.

"...were you planning on throwing that at me?"

"Course not. Where are we going?"

Harry was absolutely ecstatic that the first person they saw was Draco Malfoy.

"Nice place you have here, Draco."

"P-potter?" the Malfoy heir squeaked. The blond had quite possibly been either on his way out of his family home or had just returned from somewhere for him to be in the Floo and Apparition room of Malfoy Manor. It amused Harry to no end that Draco nearly tripped over his feet when the sound accompanying the arrival of a House Elf spooked him into a corner. From beside him, Tom, who was wearing a heavy black cloak with the hood pulled low over his face, made a noise of dissatisfaction in his throat, probably at Malfoy's obvious lack of notice towards him. They weren't worried about the blond wizard telling anyone about Harry's association with the Dark Lord, as the Secrecy charm Tom put on Draco's father would be active on him as well if Lucius did as Tom ordered—which meant without a doubt he did—and told the boy that Harry was not to be bothered again.

"M-master Y-you-Know-Who," the raggedy, female Elf stuttered, causing Draco to make another feminine squeak that seemed to almost be in imitation of the Elf. "Master You-Know-Who's g-guest, can Letty do somethings for you too sirs?"

"Tell Lucius of our arrival, and that we will meet him in the usual room," Tom uttered smoothly, a few long strides across the room bringing him to the entryway. Harry caught up to him after taking a split second to realize the man had moved in the first place. The Elf bowed a popped away. Tom didn't spare Draco any further attention, though Harry couldn't help but give the blond a cheeky
wave goodbye as he followed Tom out the room.

"He didn't even say hello," Harry pretended to gripe as Tom directed their path through the large Manor, clearly knowing exactly where he was going. "Manners these days." He clicked his tongue and shook his head ruefully.

Malfoy Manor was, unlike the Dark Lord's small home, exactly what Harry expected. It was big enough that sounds echoed, and filled with fancy tiles, gilded trims, heavy silk curtains, numerous portraits of old family members and sweet Merlin! Were those white peacocks he could see out the window in the mysteriously snow-free garden?

"Now this," Harry said grimly, "this is so ridiculously froofy it's borderline painful. Seriously, it hurts my eyes."

Tom said nothing to that, but from under his hood Harry swore he caught a glimpse of a one-sided smirk on the man's face. It made Harry grin in return and continue to examine the overdone display that had no purpose other than to scream, "We have money and you don't."

After what Harry considered an obscene amount of walking to get from one room to another in a single home, Tom slowed enough to push a pair of doors open to reveal a—what else—lavish sitting room. A tea platter was already set out on a low mahogany table, and a fire roared in the fireplace for light and warmth. The Malfoy's settee and chairs in this room were of an odd dark blue that appeared nearly purple depending on how the light hit it. Harry couldn't tell from just looking at them, but he figured as expensive they no doubt were they had to at least be comfortable.

Harry almost felt awkward standing in such a lush environment. Tom, in contrast, seemed right at home as he shed his cloak and uncaringly tossed it over the back of the settee. Gracefully, he sat down and looked expectantly at Harry, who still stood uncertainly by the door.

"You will sit by me."

A very soft and breathy bark of laughter escaped his lips as Harry moved to sit next to Tom. He wondered if the man had only sat on the couch so Harry could sit beside to him, as he seriously doubted that he usually shared seating arrangements.

"Tea?"

"Yeah, okay," Harry responded to Tom's oddly domestic question. Tom causally waved his hand over the tea platter, and within moments Harry had a cup magically served to him made exactly the way he liked it.

They only waited a few quiet moments, sipping their teas, before the sounds of swiftly approaching footsteps alerted them of the company they were sure to have shortly. There was a pause in the steps just outside the sitting room, as if the person there was hesitating, and then Lucius Malfoy, dressed in demure navy robes, appeared in the doorway. Outwardly, his expression and polite ducking of his head in greeting displayed none of the apprehension Harry suspected the Malfoy Patriarch may have been feeling.

"My Lord," he spoke, voice calm and clear. A stilted pause, and then: "Mr. Potter." Harry solemnly nodded his head in return greeting, all the while trying not to react to Malfoy's obvious disquiet to his presence.

"Lucius," Tom said pleasantly in a way that seemed to do the opposite of putting Lucius at ease.
Setting his tea down on the platter and rising to his feet, Tom causally approached the blond man, stopping an arm's reach away from him. Even from where he sat, Harry could see the stiffening of Lucius' shoulders.

"If you would, Lucius…there is someone else I would like to call for this little meeting."

Harry was confused by the request, but there was no such confusion on Lucius' part, for he immediately tucked his wand-cane under his right arm and held out the other, rolling up the sleeve. Harry's eyes widened minutely as the shockingly black mark on a background of white skin was revealed. At some point Tom had drawn his wand into his hand, and now he held it aloft to press the tip into the Dark Mark branded onto Lucius' left forearm. Harry was pretty sure that was supposed to hurt, but the blond man didn't even twitch. Harry could respect him for that, at least, though not so much for taking the Dark Mark in the first place.

"I'm sure our other guest shall be here shortly," Tom verbalized once he had pulled his wand away from Lucius' arm and had tucked it back up his sleeve. "Do take a seat," he commanded, his hand in the direction of an empty chair opposite to the settee Harry still sat at, to which Tom then returned to. Lucius complied with the direction, rolling his sleeve back down before sitting gracefully. Harry was curious as to whom Tom had called, but logically concluded he wouldn't tell him if he hadn't already.

If Harry thought about it, the actual idea behind the Dark Mark in itself was relatively useful—that of a convenient method to organize and summon a large group of people which otherwise would be notoriously difficult to coordinate. However, the way Voldemort used it, as little more than a mark of slavery, was something he simply couldn't condone. Harry didn't know if Tom intended to continue using his magical invention, or if he would choose or be forced to do away with it. It was one of those details that would have to be considered at some point. Harry realized that, from here on out, there were going to be things Tom decided that Harry might not like, and vice versa, but that they would simply have to learn to deal with. They were two separate people with vastly different opinions on certain things, and the only way to deal with that without causing a whole new set of problems was to compromise. Harry was not Tom's boss, and Tom was not his.

"So, nice place you have here," Harry casually commented to the Malfoy Patriarch. The corner of the blond's eye twitched subtly.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," he said stiffly. "Is the tea to your liking?" he added as an afterthought, perhaps a little too long after he had first spoken.

"Oh, it's wonderful, thanks."

Harry was so enjoying the Malfoy's hospitality.

They waited no more than ten minutes, in what could have been called unsettling silence—but only served to result in a Harry who was quietly drumming his fingers on his leg in boredom—before the same House Elf appeared in the room to announce the arrival of Severus Snape. Harry's brows shot up in surprise, his gaze flicking over to Tom in a questioning glance. Tom caught the look but offered no more than a slightly smirking expression in return.

:We did decide you didn't need to kill him, right?: Harry hissed, making use of the privacy Parseltongue gave them. Contrary to popular belief, and perhaps previous occurrences, he was making an effort to not openly undermine Tom's influence in his role as a leader. He really had no idea, after all, what this little get-together was about.

:Not officially,: Tom responded in kind. :I am slightly surprised that he actually showed up. Would
you consider such a move smart or foolish?:

:Tom…no needless murder.: Harry warned.

Tom took another sip of his tea and ignored him. Harry's brow furrowed in concern, and he looked towards the door.

Once again the sound of footsteps disallowed for any chances of a person sneaking up on the few seated in the comfortable gathering room. As expected, the owner of the footsteps was none other than Severus Snape, a man of many professions and talents.

Harry had to give the man credit that he failed to visibly react to any of the figures sitting in the room during his visual perusal of it, even when Harry was positive he knew who Tom was though he had never seen him with his new face. Snape might have reacted, though, if he knew Tom was going to shoot a series of spells at him with the wand that had suddenly appeared in his hand.

Everyone in the room froze. Snape, especially, stood stiff and unmoving, most likely assessing if he was still alive, if Harry could make a guess about it. That he was still standing proved to be a good sign, in Harry's mind. Luckily for everyone involved, Tom put the matter to rest by breaking the silence.

"Oh, do sit down, Severus, you're fine. The spells were harmless, meant for detection and secrecy. I believe you can understand my reasons for being cautious with you. Now sit down."

It took a few seconds more, but Snape finally came out of his cautious stance in order to unassumingly walk the required steps further into the room to an open chair close to Lucius. What little expression he had on his face when he first arrived had now been smoothed out into nothingness.

Harry leaned a little into Tom. :That was rude.:)

:He had it coming,: was what Tom replied with. :He should feel lucky he is still standing. My temper and tolerance to deceit has not changed in the recent events. He is, however, still useful and has made some recent decisions that indicate killing him now would be premature.:)

Harry nodded warily after a brief instant of deliberation on Tom's words.

:Murder is the easy thing, but maybe not the right thing,: he couldn't help but add, knowing it was a bit hackneyed but uncaring. Tom said nothing to that.

Snape may be a cantankerous bastard, but that was no reason to want another human being's death. Looking at Snape, Harry found the man to be similarly studying him as well, and the boy had the odd thought that maybe he was assessing if whether or not the child of Lily Potter was unharmed. Harry nodded at the man, to show that after their last meeting, everything was still fine. Dark eyes focused then on the more intimidating presence in the room.

"Severus," Tom said briskly and a little sibilantly, though still in the language everyone could understand. The only movement from Snape was the rising and falling of his chest as he breathed, and even that seemed a bit strangled. "I have come to understand it is mostly your doing which resulted in how I appear before you today. What an interestingly bold and clever move it was, defying both of your masters like that. What I am most interested in to hear, however, is if the unplanned results of such are to your liking?"

Expectation hung in the air. Harry was distinctly feeling a fond exasperation at Tom's "Dark Lord" personality, designed to intimidate when all the while using a pleasant, conversational tone of
voice. Much to Harry's chagrin, the method was working, even on him. He was a bit anxious to hear Snape's response. As much as he'd like to believe otherwise, Tom was not be opposed to darker methods of silencing someone he felt would be a source of trouble for his cause. And Snape, Harry understood, could turn out to be a very real threat for Tom. He was fairly confident it wouldn't come to that, considering how the double spy had assisted Harry earlier when Tom was sick.

Harry was so lost in heavy concentration of his inner thoughts that he almost missed Snape's elegant as ever answer.

"I find that they are, my Lord." That was all he offered, and seemed to be all Tom required.

"Good. Now, gentlemen, you have each had a few days to contemplate Harry's and my association together. I hope you came to the conclusion that with Harry Potter sitting unharmed next to me, a significant change in the current conflict is being planned."

Harry wished he could snort and mention something along the lines of how maybe they saw it as Harry sitting next to an unharmed Dark Lord that proved the shift in balance, but he knew that was petty and a joke Tom wouldn't appreciate at the moment. Nevertheless, he snickered internally at Tom's imagined reaction should he say aloud what was on his mind.

"You should also know that Albus Dumbledore and I have reached an understanding. He will not prove to be much trouble anymore."

Lucius Malfoy's carefully constructed Pureblood mask slipped perceptively, his eyes falling a millimeter wider and one of his arms jerking in reflexive surprise. Snape reacted in no such way, most likely already in the know concerning that information.

"You, gentlemen, are highly involved and situated in circles and circumstances I, as the Dark Lord, cannot truly breach with my high profile. It is my intention by being here today to gather your advice and opinions on the current conflict. Lucius," Tom uttered sharply as his gaze shifted to his target, and said man, still a bit unsettled by the earlier news, swallowed heavily. "How have the ranks been responding to my unannounced absence?"

Harry stared at the man interestedly, his posture one of clear engrossment. Voldemort had sent Lucius that letter about laying low, so he must have extensive connections to the Death Eaters. How had the "minions" reacted to Voldemort's unexpected and extensive disappearance?

"My Lord," Lucius spoke deferentially, "there are many who think nothing of it, and are indifferent. Others, however, are confused, suspicious, or even eager, thinking you are planning a large and complicated attack. Nevertheless, it has stirred up some discontent."

Tom hummed contemplatively in the back of his throat, taking one last sip of his tea before placing it back on the platter.

"How do you think they would respond should they think their Lord was dead?"

Harry was really quite impressed by the stoicism of both men across from him. Snape may be less inclined to continue playing the wholly loyal servant, but Lucius obviously had far less reasons to appear as anything less than devoted. He had no idea how to react to such a question, so presumably instead showed no indication of what he could be thinking.

Snape saved Lucius the trouble of answering. "There are many who have gambled their reputations and lives on this cause, my Lord. Should…" Snape seemed to consider his next words before
finally settling on, "Should Voldemort die, they know there is little chance for the cause to succeed, and that they will be thrown into jail, or worse. There will be those who would seek to retaliate, those who will quietly give up, and then there will be those who will be relieved."

Snape's carefully construed comments impelled Harry to ask a question he had always wondered about.

"To what point do most of them agree with Voldemort's ideals and intentions?"

Everyone in the room focused their attention on the youngest wizard present.

"Were you all really hoping on having the go-ahead to kill Muggles the rest of your life?" Harry queried dryly.

Lucius looked uncertain, but Snape, on the other hand, looked almost amused by the question. Harry's eyes darted back and forth between the two, before they finally landed on Tom, who merely sat next to in wait for an answer as well.

:Lucius looks a bit terrified at the idea of telling the truth,: Harry hissed, his mouth crooked sardonically.

Tom's eyebrows jumped in amusement, and the comment encouraged him to fix Lucius' silence. "You can answer Harry's question without consequences," he said airily. "I am well aware of the Death Eater's opinions, but Harry isn't, and I think he would like to hear it from an outside source."

Harry would have rolled his eyes, but didn't when Lucius finally decided to speak, though hesitantly at first.

"The consent across the ranks is highly inconstant, Mr. Potter. There are many things my Lord's followers want that he condones…and there are many things he condones that they do not."

Lucius fell silent, perhaps waiting to see if that would incite his Lord's anger. It did not.

Harry had a feeling Tom was enjoying throwing his follower for a loop with his indifferent patience.

"There are those who have no qualms concerning the Dark Lord's wishes, and gladly strive to achieve those goals. They are…few in numbers. The majority only feel partial consensus for much of the efforts." Harry noticed Lucius had carefully avoided mentioning his own feelings.

"Why join in the first place, to fight for something they only partially care about?" Harry wanted to know. He had never had the opportunity before to directly question one of Voldemort's Death Eaters on their reasons for joining the Dark Order. It wasn't like he could just walk up to one and ask for an interview.

"They are desperate."

The bridge of Harry's nose furrowed as the connotations to Snape's statement left him mildly unsure.

"The Dark Lord was the only one they could turn to, the only one who could possibly change things for them. Some join out of spite for others, out of pride, anger, or even fear…others because they believe they have no choice, have no one else to turn to. The Dark Lord wasn't the only one who refused to ignore certain failings in the administration—in addition to other focuses—"

'Let me guess: Muggles and Blood Traitors?’ Harry thought to himself while Snape continued.
“—but he was the only one who appeared to do something about it.”

Yes, Harry could imagine some cases where Lord Voldemort was the better option. Everybody needed somebody to believe in. Harry had little doubt that Voldemort had played upon that need to build up his ranks.

"Well spoken, Severus," Tom spoke softly. Harry blinked first at Snape, for his elegant speech, and then he blinked up at Tom, who seemed genuinely pleased with what the Potion's Master had to say.

"Voldemort will be dead by the end of this year or the next, depending on how events work out."

Efficient, quick to the point, and brusque…that was how Tom broke the news to the two wizards sitting across from him. Lucius' mask was shattered when a boggled expression crossed his visage, but the only reaction from Snape was an overly bright look in his eyes.

"What of the war, my Lord?" Snape calmly posed the question. Tom grinned wickedly, pulling out a thick, rolled up document from one of his robe pockets. He canceled the sticking charm keeping it closed and floated it across the room so that Snape could read it, knowing he rather than Lucius will better know the significance of who Dumbledore had declared his heir.

"Voldemort will be dead, but I am not abandoning my efforts. The war will be…modified. Tell me, what I shall do with this?"

It was quite obvious that Dumbledore hadn't bothered to tell Snape of his plans, because when Tom showed them the document that declared him to be the revered Headmaster's heir, the Potion's Master had an identical look of shock as Lucius Malfoy had.

Audrette Marielle Aleron was the last Aleron in her branch of the family, which was one of fairly moderate wealth and standing in the British community, but hadn't been prominent in the past several decades as the name got absorbed into other families, like the Dumbledore's. She wasn't Dumbledore's first cousin, but it was a close enough relation that no one would think twice if the childless Headmaster should choose her offspring as his designated heir. Audrette was a Ravenclaw, coming to Hogwarts in 1955 for her first year. She graduated and delved deep into her chosen field of study of creating non-Latin spell work and left the country to study it all around the world. She had little contact with people from Britain after that, so if she had had a child at some point, there weren't very many who could say otherwise. About five years ago, she died of a rare illness overseas.

Audrette would soon be gaining a son. Tom had decided that afternoon that yes, he would prefer to find a new name to live under. There were simply far too many reasons for Tom to cut ties to his true name than to use it in public, for the time being at least. There was always a possibility someone could connect him to Voldemort.

In the end, after having gone over the records he had Lucius Malfoy get people to pull from the Ministry yesterday after their rather insightful meeting, Tom had to concede that using Audrette as his "mother" was as good a plan as any. She was relatively anonymous, had no other close relatives aside from Dumbledore and some distant branches of other Wizarding families—not uncommon among purebloods anyway—and she was no longer living to protest the son claiming to be hers, and neither would Dumbledore for being the one to suggest it in the first place.

It brought Harry a sense of intense affection that Tom had agreed to essentially start on a blank slate, completely changing his tactics that almost totally undermined everything Voldemort had
worked for. What he didn't know was if it was entirely because he had convinced him, or if Tom truly found error in his previous ways. In the end, Harry didn't care. The fact that Tom had chosen to use recent events as a second chance to do things differently, instead of wasting such a rare opportunity, was enough for Harry.

Tom had mentioned to him, however, that "Voldemort" would still have his uses for a while longer. Harry listened to what he had to say about it, and eventually agreed that some creative moves on "Voldemort's" part could secretly be tactics designed to assist any political footwork of Tom's. Tom was not dropping his control over the Death Eaters, but their activity would be altered. It would be a double-sided attack of sorts, an inside and outside job all rolled into one, with only a few knowing it was a combined effort. Dumbledore's surprise support opened so many possibilities.

It seemed like such a simple thing, to claim to be someone, but Harry was already beginning to feel overwhelmed by the enormous amount of complications he could come up with to do it convincingly. The problem was, he wasn't familiar enough with hijinks like this to know if his concerns were unfounded or not.

"So, how does this work? Dumbledore claimed you as his heir legally. Wouldn't he actually have to put your new alias as his heir instead?"

"It doesn't matter," Tom proclaimed. "I can use an Secunda Nomine."

"Huh," Harry verbalized, his chin resting in his hand as he mused over the information that didn't really answer his question, because he had no idea what that was. "So..." he drawled out. "What exactly does that do?"

They were in Tom's study in their usual positions of Tom in his chair behind the desk and Harry sitting across from him. Nagini had opted to coil her huge body in front of the fireplace. Lady had waited until her much larger cousin was in a deep doze before surreptitiously creeping up and coiling her own body right on top of Nagini's. Harry was just waiting for Nagini to wake up so he could see her reaction. He wasn't positive, but he was pretty sure Lady had a sort of snake crush on the much large viper, which if Harry thought about it too deeply, disturbed him just a bit. But then again, if her devotion to Voldemort was any indication, Bellatrix must have had a thing for snakes...

And if his mind went much further, he was going to need to Obliviate himself. Luckily, Tom brought that train of thought to a halt by responding to Harry's question.

"Did you know, Harry," Tom said conversationally without looking up from the page he was writing on, "that the Hogwarts Magical Birth Register is the only means in Britain of definitively noting the birth of witches and wizards born who are eligible to attend Hogwarts? The Ministry has no way of knowing themselves when a magical person is born, let alone who they are and who their parents are."

"That's fairly...stupid," was Harry comment. "How the hell does the Ministry know who they are supposed to be, you know, ministering over?"

"You register when you come of age. It seems as if the Ministry is only concerned about those witches and wizards who can vote, and it's a method to note the Muggleborns who aren't born in the Wizarding system anyway."

Harry snorted, reaching out to pick up from Tom's desk an odd colored stone of some sort. He proceeded to juggle the object between his two hands to keep them occupied.
"That's right, now that you mention it I do remember hearing about registration. I think most people do it at the same time they get their Apparition license, so they only have to go to the Ministry once. I'm still not sure what that has to do with anything, though."

Tom gave Harry a look that clearly was meant to express how hopeless he considered the younger wizard to be. Harry returned with an expression he hoped was endearing and innocent.

"It means faking an identity is a lot simpler because of the Ministry's incompetence. I could plant a registration form with the information of my new persona and almost not have to do anything else. Add that together with the use \textit{Secunda Nomine} and things become even easier."

Harry sighed and put the crystal he was playing with back down. "I still don't know what exactly that is…"

"And this is why students should be taught Latin, considering it is the language used for most of all their spellwork. \textit{Secunda Nomine} is a ritual used to give oneself another name, secondary to your own. It lets you be two people at once."

"Great," Harry said, ignoring the jibe that may or may not have been more at him than his school. "How does it work? Wait, let me guess: it involves Dark Magic." Harry pretended to shudder in horror.

Tom exhaled in dry retort at Harry's tone and act. "Blood Magic, mainly, and a little spellwork. It's technically illegal, but most rituals of its age and type are, regardless of what they do or if they are even known about. There are spells to legally change one's name, but I won't be using them because they won't completely hide who I was before. I don't want to permanently have a new name, I just need a \textit{second} one."

Harry sniggered. "Right, legal is overrated," he drawled. Tom's eyes gleamed. "So, the ritual," Harry prompted, and Tom obliged in continuing on with his explanation.

"It doesn't change my name, it just conceals it. Identity spells or methods such as verbal interrogations with truth serums will give out the assumed name, rather than the original. I control when and where it is perceived. It's a disguise. I've recently become aware that something about the Time potions broke its effects, but when I assumed the name Voldemort, I did a ritual similar to \textit{Secunda Nomine}, aided by the fact my true name was hidden within the letters."

"Merlin forbid anyone ever found out your name was \textit{Tom}," Harry said in a rather light and teasing tone. "Sometimes it shows that you were a teenager when you first dreamed of immortality and crushing the world underneath your no doubt perfectly manicured foot."

Tom was scowling. "Would you like me to demonstrate the fact I was also a Dark Lord?" he asked flippantly.

"No, thanks," Harry clipped. He sat back in his seat and tried to look innocent. Tom appeared unconvinced, and Harry cleared his throat. "So… \textit{Secunda Nomine} …"

Tom's expression was still mildly riled, but he nonetheless picked up his quill again and resumed scribbling on the sheet in front of him.

"It'll be the foundation for my new identity…superficially no one will ever be able to discover I am someone else. Obviously other documents will have to be forged, for authentication, but creating a new background will be no problem for me. The Goblins may also need to be paid a sum for discretion concerning the inheritance, but that is only because they are immune to the effects of the
Second Name spell. As long as they are paid they won't care for Wizarding affairs."

Harry sighed. "Too bad I didn't know about that ritual before I came to Hogwarts…" he muttered.

"What, and cause the rest of the world to go up in arms at the fact their Savior did not show up for his First Year?"

Harry briefly basking in the fantasy of starting out as a completely anonymous student, a sly grin on his face as he also imagined everyone else's reaction if "Potter, Harry" was never called up to be sorted on that very first day. Then he let out a short bark of laughter and shook his head drolly. "Oh, the horror!" he tawdrily dramatized. "Of course, I wonder what they would say if they ever found out about your nefarious plan."

Tom's eyes rose to his hairline in clear confusion. "'Nefarious'? Really, Harry, I would say that's a bit of an overstatement…"

"What?" Harry said, shrugging. "Do you really think anyone would have guessed that you'd manage to get yourself named as Dumbledore's heir, change your name, and flaunt yourself as Harry Potter's new guardian against the malicious evils of this world? I'd say 'nefarious' is a pretty good description for something no one will ever see coming."

Tom's face had acquired a rather snarly expression, and after Harry had finished speaking, he warned the boy, "Don't expect me to thank the old kook."

Harry reached over the desk and patted Tom's hand, who in turn snatched his personal appendage away with a sour glare.

"You're just upset because you know you're probably going to have to speak with him again and pretend to like him if you happen to be in public together," Harry said with a smile that wasn't at all sympathetic, falling back into his seat. "Secretly you're just rubbing your hands together in anticipation of all the shrewd things you'll be able to do with that title. It adds to your nefarious plot of making the Wizarding World love you. Remember, fear is overrated."

Tom leaned back, his fingers on his temples and his features scrunched in a painful expression. "This may kill me."

"Nonsense. You'll love it in return."

"I'm not sure I believe you."

"And I really don't think handing out curses like they were sweets is a very good tension reliever. Hey, if you're using Dumbledore's cousin as your 'mother', who will you say your father is?"

There was a slight wrinkle between Tom's brows that betrayed the slight tension he felt while answering. "I've decided to make him a Muggle," he said coolly. Harry couldn't help the reflexive twitch of surprise.

"Really?" he said interestedly, leaning in a little closer to Tom, a puckish gleam in his eye. Tom frowned in slight besetment at Harry's muted glee.

"A dead one," Tom continued, glare driving Harry back into his seat with indifferent resign. "Muggles are quite prone to accidents and illness, after all. I made the decision under the assumption that it will make for less chances of anyone discovering any holes there might—doubtfully—be in my story. The Magical Community would never bother trying to look up a deceased Muggle I claim to be my father to see if he really exists. It'll be enough that Dumbledore
will vouch that the woman he suggested is my mother. All her records already exist and are easily substantiated without my having to create and plant them. People will be curious as to who has been charged with protecting their precious Savior."

Harry nodded in understanding of the explanation, though his grin sharpened. "And, you're being nefarious again."

"Hmm? Ah," Tom said, playing along with Harry for once. "No one would ever suspect that someone who openly claims to be a Half-Blood would ever be Slytherin's Heir in disguise is what you're getting at, correct?"

Harry smiled airily, a small indication of the sense of surrealism he was feeling.

Later, when Tom had left Harry alone in his home to complete a few tasks away from the house, Harry found himself settling into one of the comfortable chairs set up at the worn, rectangular table in the library. He had collected several books from Tom's library shelves, which amounted to a rather large pile on the tabletop. Essentially, he was doing research, while at the same time attempting to reconcile the fact that he was willingly cracking open thick tomes for reasons other than completing a homework assignment.

But this was a personal objective…Tom would be proud, Harry thought wryly, that he was endeavoring to increase his well of knowledge. All the books he had grabbed were mainly about the history of the Wizarding World. Professor Binns at Hogwarts was the absolute worst, and Harry usually only used his class period to catch up on some sleep. Besides, from the few chapters of the books he's skimmed so far, this type of history Professor Binns was highly unlikely to teach. Harry had gone to the library planning on spending his time reading boring but important facts, but what he found actually kept him interested and rapidly flipping through pages. Checking the titles and publications dates, Harry concluded that many of these books would definitely not be found in the Flourish and Blott's bookstore in Diagon Alley, and that they held more bare truth than the twisted history in the Ministry approved records. This was Tom's magically-expanded library, though, so in all honesty he hadn't been expecting the sugarcoated drivel from Hogwarts' textbooks anyway.

In the end, Harry could definitively say that he learned more in those few hours of private study about the history of Wizarding society than he had in five and a half years of History of Magic classes. The first thing he came to understand was that the history of magical people was old…technically he knew that, but he had never fully grasped it. Human kind was old, of course, but it seemed to Harry the more he read, that magic was older. And being old, it made history rather complicated. It didn't take long before Harry found some paper and writing utensils in order to take notes and organize certain facts and his thoughts about them. He felt like a regular Hermione, sitting there with several books spread out on the table, one or two in his lap, ink all over his fingers and (unknowingly) on his cheek.

Harry didn't know how long he worked, or noticed how the shadows had begun to creep across the floor as the sun trickling through the windows slowly faded, or that one of the House Elves had lit several candles to bring the light levels back up again. At one point he was interrupted when Lady found him and deigned to settle on his shoulders, seeming to seek comfort after Nagini had apparently told her off. Harry actually did feel some sympathy for the snake who had become his oddball companion, despite who she really was. Not so surprising, considering the events concerning his last serpent he had as a cohort. Every now and then he would reach up and scratch her under her chin when he wasn't writing anything down.

Tom eventually found him late in the evening. Harry had at some point sprawled himself down on
the large hearth rug in front of the fireplace, his chest propped up on a pillow and Lady was wrapped loosely around his neck while her upper body followed up and over the back curve of his skull so her head rested on his forehead. When Tom cleared his throat, Harry jumped slightly at the unexpected noise, and his quill left a funny-looking ink splotch on his parchment. Nevertheless, once Harry got over his brief shock, he grinned up at Tom in greeting.

"Hey Tom."

"Who are you and what happened to the Boy-Who-Hates-Reading?"

Harry sniggered, pushing himself up into a cross-legged sitting position, his back to the warming fire. Tom reached down a little to run his thumb diagonally down Harry's cheek, the tingling sensation left behind indicating he'd just used a gentle cleaning charm. Harry scrunched his nose at the feeling, figuring Tom had just removed some stray ink from his face.

"You missed dinner," Tom informed Harry while looking at him curiously.

"Oh," Harry said with a shrug, realizing that yes, he was starving and hadn't realized it until now. "So I did. I didn't know you were back. I am hungry, now that I think of it." He looked expectantly up at the owner of the house. If Tom was apt to such an expression, he would have rolled his eyes when he snapped his fingers, summoning the neglected dinner dishes onto the library's table. With a happy sigh, Harry stood and took a proper seat up off the floor, Tom taking the chair directly across from him. It seemed Tom hadn't eaten either.

After the majority of their hunger had abated, Tom finally addressed the matter of what Harry had been up to for the latter half of the day.

"Care to tell me about it?" he inquired. With flourish, Harry laid out his many pages of notes onto the tabletop next to his plate and proceeded to give Tom and overview of what he picked out from the books that he felt were relevant to today's conflict.

"I had just intended to fill in some of the, er, numerous holes I have in Wizarding History, only none of these books are quick overviews, like textbooks are, for example, so it took me a lot longer than I thought. Then again, I didn't think I would be as interested in it as I was. Hogwarts' history class really is complete and utter bullocks."

"Perhaps it just needs a new teacher. Care for the job?"

"Me?" Harry chuckled, while shaking his head in dismissal. "I don't know about that."

"Who knows?" Tom smirked.

Harry eyed Tom suspiciously, but the man had turned his attention to finishing his glass of wine.

"Hey Tom?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Wanna play Cribbage?"

"Is that a euphemism for something else?"

Harry laughed. "No…but do you think it should be?"

The following morning, Harry woke up in Tom's arms. That made him feel all sorts of things,
namely comfort and warmth, but also a bit of sadness because he knew he was leaving that day.
Again, that impression of a world on a tilted axis hit him, because when did he ever in his wildest
imagination believe he would miss being held in the arms of the Dark Lord?

Last night they played Cribbage…and then they played *Cribbage*.

It was almost embarrassing for Harry how tightly he had clung to the other man last night. Despite
their slow, amorous activities, there had been a tension in the air that tasted almost of desperation.
Could it be that Tom had been as aware as Harry had been that, for the first time in many weeks,
they wouldn't have any physical contact once Harry went back to school?

Would Tom miss him? The ever hopeful and optimistic part of Harry thought that, yes, he would…
possibly without ever admitting it.

Last night, Tom had been doing something quite delicious to Harry, leaving him panting and a bit
dazed. They were pressed together in the light of the moon and hearth fire, their slick skin sliding
easily together wherever they were touching. In his mind, Harry couldn't suppress any of the other
cliché, romantic drivel he could think of to describe how *right* it felt and if he had a mind to he
would have rolled his eyes at his own mawkishness. There was a moment where he almost offered
Tom his consent to do *more*, to take what he was feeling to new heights, but before he could say
anything Tom instead took away any coherency he might have been capable when he
did *that*. Anything new tended to immediately overload his system—he was still *technically* a
virgin, after all—and thus it wasn't long before Harry was shuddering and gasping in completion,
his mind inexplicably transmitting the sensations over the Horcrux link, almost seeming to surprise
an orgasm from Tom as well. Harry still felt smug when something he did caused that to happen.

Sleep came quickly after.

And now, many hours later, Harry was awake again and aware that he would be leaving in several
hours. Dumbledore had said the Floo in his office would be ready for him around five.

Was it wrong that he had grown so comfortable in Tom's home, or perhaps it was just with Tom, so
that returning to Hogwarts had lost a little bit of its appeal? Not to be mistaken, the school was still
home to Harry, but it now had competition.

Harry decided he was thinking in too many words when a simple "I'm going to miss Tom," would
suffice. Sighing, he buried his nose into Tom's collarbone.

"I think I told you once that I'm not a teddy bear."

Harry smiled. Tom didn't even try and add malice to his slightly mumbling tone to disguise what
Harry might call fond amusement.

"I was actually thinking that I'm the teddy bear in this situation."

Tom's chest jerked when he snorted as if offended, but even then the effort was halfhearted, and he
did not let go of Harry. It only caused the young wizard to break into a full grin.

"I won't tell anyone you like to cuddle," he whispered conspiratorially.

"You just can't help but push it, can you, brat?"

"It's a little difficult to be afraid of you right now," he told Tom with a shrug, playful grin still on
his lips.
At this point Tom would have usually hexed Harry with something or other, but as it was he remained silent and seemingly not indignant enough to let go of the imp in his arms.

That was fine with Harry.
Chapter 20

Hogwarts.

Once Harry cleared his airway and clothing of the soot from the fireplace, he acknowledged that he was once again at his school, a place he considered the home he never had during the majority of his childhood. Fawkes trilled at him from his perch, and Harry grinned at the brightly-colored bird in greeting. Lady hissed nonsensically at the Phoenix, raising her head in a display of curiosity.

Dumbledore—quite appropriately, since it was his office—was the next to welcome him.

"Ah, Harry! Good to see you made it without any trouble."

"Hello, Professor," Harry returned with.

"The rest of the students should be arriving in a couple of hours, so that will give you enough time to settle back into your dorm."

Harry nodded. "Great. Er, does anyone know that I've been gone?" Things could get awkward if he accidentally told a whole different excuse than the one Dumbledore would have given if anyone noted his absence.

"Your absence was noticed, yes, but to anyone that asked you had a right nasty illness, quite contagious. Madame Pomfrey took very good care of you, however."

"She always does," Harry stated with wry humor, having been no stranger to the Hospital Wing.

"So, Harry," Dumbledore said warmly, gesturing for his student to take a seat in one of the ever available chairs on the other side of his desk. "I hope our dear Tom wasn't too upset for my little contribution to his affairs?" Dumbledore looked eager to hear the details.

Having acquiesced to Dumbledore's indication for him to sit, Harry settled back against the well broken-in seat back, his face openly displaying his hilarity he felt in the situation. He shook his head, one side of his mouth curling in a teasing smile. "You should have seen his face when he got that notice from Gringotts. Be content in the fact you made him lose his composure for a short time. I think he really thought you went off your rocker—more than he normally believes, that is."

Dumbledore didn't seem at all offended by the idea Tom may still not be terribly keen on him. "I had originally planned on most of my inheritable assets to simply go to my brother," Dumbledore stated, causing Harry's brows rise, "but I have long known he never really cared for politics or family matters, and he has no children either for any further bequests. Of course, I consulted with him beforehand, but he made it clear I was free to do what I wanted and that he requires nothing of mine. I'm afraid we're not on very amiable terms."

"Oh," Harry said awkwardly, still trying to digest the fact Dumbledore had a brother he hadn't known about. "I'm sorry, sir," he thought to say.

"It does upset me," the old Headmaster told Harry truthfully, though with only a hint of maudlin, "but I do not blame him, and I understand. Don't worry, Harry, it is much better between us than it has been in the past."

Harry didn't know what else to say, so he simply nodded. Dumbledore had that patented twinkle in his eyes as he tossed some sort of sweet into his mouth.
"Oh!" Harry exclaimed suddenly, remembering he was to give Dumbledore a scrolled parchment which had written on it the bare bones of Tom's new alias for the Headmaster's knowledge, as he would have to be privy to the information considering it was his "heir". The memo, Harry was quite sure, was spelled so only certain people could read it, but he would bet that at some point today it would spontaneously burst into flames much like Fawkes the Phoenix on his burning day. Earlier, Tom had performed the Second Name spell, and already his contacts in the Ministry were working on getting the right information in the Ministerial workings. Tom had said it would be "easy" for him to procure a whole new identity, but Harry had listened in on a meeting with Lucius and to him it seemed anything but—Harry himself would never call something that would take a month easy, but hey, what did he know? Needless to say, it would be a while before Tom could step out in public with his new persona. Dumbledore's cooperation should ensure he had the time.

Harry rifled through his robe pockets before he found what he was looking for. He pulled it out and handed it across the desk to the Headmaster, who opened it up and skimmed over its contents. The rough idea was that Tom would play a Half-Blood, raised mostly by his mother and occasionally by his Muggle father—who lived in Wales—if his mother's occupational travels didn't allow for her to bring her son along. Since Audrette Aleron often brought him along in her travels, for schooling he was taught by her or had tutors (old ones, which were conveniently dead now, naturally), not an uncommon occurrence for many wizards or witches, even with a relative being the Headmaster of a well-known institute. After his mother died he spent several years following in her footsteps of studying foreign spellwork and traveled to numerous other magical communities around the world, though his focus was magic in general. A year ago he returned to the British Isles to settle down and try and do his part for the conflict his relative was heavily apart of.

If properly backed up and tweaked, the story would be rather convincing.

Dumbledore seemed pleased with what he read. "Hmm, 'Uncle Albus'…perhaps that is what he should call me," the old wizard pondered. Harry snorted, because damn, if Tom ever called him that Harry would die laughing. Dumbledore's eyes hovered over one particular piece of information on the page in his hands. "Ah, Emrys Rilind Aleron. It's a nice name, though I hadn't expected anything less from Tom." Dumbledore peered over his spectacles. "Do you happen to know its etymological origins?"

Harry's brow jumped on his forehead. "Uh, I hadn't thought of it…"

Dumbledore rose from his chair and meandered to one of his many bookshelves. "Ah, here we are," the Headmaster said, pulling down a relatively small book and flipping it open. He found the page he was looking for and ran a blackened finger of his right hand down it. "Just as I thought: 'Rilind' is an Albanian name that means 'rebirth'. You of course know Tom spent quite some time in Albania."

Harry did know that. "Well, the name certainly is appropriate. Does Emrys mean something?"

"Ah, Emrys," Dumbledore said, his mouth upturned in a looked that clearly spoke of his amusement. "It could be in reference to a Welch adaption of the tale of Merlin," the Headmaster mused speculatively. "However, would you be surprised if I said it means 'immortal'?"

Harry sighed heavily and rolled his eyes, dramatically portraying his exasperation.

"Right," he finally said. "Some things never change."

"Harry!"
Despite the warning, said wizard had the wind knocked out of him as Hermione gave him a hug in greeting, nearly crushing him in the process. It was probably a good thing he had left Lady up in his dorm so she wasn't around his shoulders at that moment.

"Yeah, I missed you too, Hermione," Harry said, chuckling. The witch pulled back and gave him a smile.

"Hey, mate," Ron said, lightly punching Harry in the upper arm. Despite it being a "man's" greeting, it hurt less than Hermione's had. Life as usual; Harry had missed his friends, and was glad to see them again.

Ron narrowed his eyes suddenly, examining Harry's face. "You look—"

"Different," Hermione finished for him. "Harry, where are your glasses?"

Harry shrugged. "Learned a new spell." Tom had it taught to him, since the magic that fixed his vision only lasted about a week. A potion regimen would be needed for a permanent fix, which would be best done later out of school. "I can see without them for now," he elucidated. He hadn't realized how much he hadn't been seeing with his glasses before. Magically corrected vision, beingmagical, perfected his vision to the maximum.

Hermione beamed at him, perhaps more excited in the fact he had learned something new rather than because he was spectacle free. "You look good. Quite the heartbreaker, with those big green eyes on display," she decreed.

Now that she mentioned it, Harry noticed there was a smattering of girls around them that were looking his way and…giggling. He eyed them warily. Ron glanced in the direction Harry was and frowned.

"Why are they looking at Harry like that?" the redhead asked. Hermione rolled her eyes, grabbing hold of Ron and Harry's upper arms to drag them towards the Great Hall, mumbling something about the male gender and cluelessness. Harry tried not to be offended.

"So, how was your guys' break?" Harry asked, the three of them naturally falling in their usual formation as they followed the crowd through the halls. They chatted for a bit, Ron and Hermione each taking a turn to summarize their holidays. To Harry's relief, theirs had been perfectly ordinary.

"How was your break, Harry?" Hermione questioned.

"Yeah, hope it wasn't too dull for you," commented Ron as they all took a seat at the Gryffindor table. Harry knew the question would have come eventually, but it having been spoken aloud shot a spike of anxiety down his spine. Before he had left his office, Harry had asked Professor Dumbledore if he should tell his friends about all that had happened. He wanted to…but if he did tell them the truth, how would one tell their friends that the snake he had been carting around his neck had in fact been Lord Voldemort? How could he tell them that he had been lying to them? Possibly putting them at risk?

Would they still want to be his friends?

Harry's consolation was the fact Dumbledore knew of everything—or, well, almost everything—and so hopefully Ron and Hermione at least trusted their Headmaster's opinion enough to hear Harry out. They were his friends, and despite certain cantankerous periods in their relationships, they were family, and deserved to know. Dumbledore also informed him that, at some point, he would have to bring members of the Order of the Phoenix into the fold. Harry, of course, saw the
need of it, though he realized it would be quite the undertaking to get someone like Mad-Eye Moody to accept the side responsible for his being locked in a trunk a whole year was now in an alliance with his own side. For now, though, the information would be kept to a minimal number of people, and any disclosure would only be done if needed.

In the end, Harry decided the best thing to do was tell Ron and Hermione the truth—everything, that is, except for a few intimate details. For now, that would stay a secret. If he let all the Kneazles out of the bag at once, he'd be drowned in felines.

Even without planning on telling them about his and Tom's relationship, Harry was terrified.

"No, Ron, it…it wasn't dull at all," Harry finally uttered, a bit hesitantly. Hermione glanced sideways at him, intuitive enough to have caught his odd behavior.

"Harry, did something happen?"

"You could say that," Harry mumbled into his plate. He looked up and turned towards Hermione, noticing her worried visage and smiled slightly to put her at ease. "It's not bad…but I can't tell you here. Tonight, okay?"

Once his friends agreed, Harry steered their conversation in a different direction for the rest of dinner. He ignored the looks they—well, "they" being mostly Hermione, what with Ron being busy eating and all—kept shooting at him, obviously curious about what he was going to tell them.

And later, he did tell them. It took nearly half the night. Silence fell over the Room of Requirement, the place he'd elected they should talk for the privacy it afforded.

"Unbelievable," Hermione finally blurted, breaking the overwhelming stillness that had been pressing on Harry's chest, making it hard to breathe. Ron jumped at the girl's outburst, looking pale and faint.

"Herm—"

Before Harry could finish saying her name, Hermione stood up and closed the short distance between them to slap him aside the head.

"Ow."

"Harry, you idiot!" Harry flinched, feeling his stomach drop. Did she hate him now? "Why didn't you tell us before?" Hermione continued her tirade with. Unexpectedly, she wrapped her fingers around Harry's wrist and tugged him to his feet and proceeded to squeeze the life out of him with her second bone crushing hug of the day. Harry accidently got a mouthful of hair, a side effect of having his mouth gaping open in shock. He assumed Hermione hugging him was a good thing, but then again maybe she was really just trying to suffocate him with her tight grip. Her last words before the surprise hug had been about on par with what Harry had expected, but her tone was not. She had sounded angry, but not with the righteous fury Harry feared from her. If anything, it was more concerned exasperation that she directed at him, if he accurately interpreted her tone of voice and exuberant hug.

"I'm sorry, I just…I didn't want to put you in danger, and I didn't know how to tell you," he meekly tried to explain when she finally released him. Hermione's warm, brown eyes shone with empathy.

"Well," she said slowly, "in all honesty, I don't know what we would have done if you had told us. In fact, things might have worked out completely different than what they have. I don't like it, but…you were doing it to protect us, weren't you? That's just what you do. And, I suppose it's
turned out tolerably, in the end. Dumbledore even believes things have…changed. All that you've
told us, though—it's almost fantastical, and if I didn't know you were impervious to Imperio… It's
so odd, Voldemort's your guardian, and Dumbledore's heir…" She seemed a bit dazed by that.

"It's Tom who's those things," Harry corrected firmly. Hermione looked at him and nodded slowly.

"Of course. Tom Riddle." She smiled gently, and Harry responded in kind. Then Hermione's face
grew serious again. "Oh, Harry, all this time, you were a…a…"

"A Horcrux," Harry filled in when Hermione struggled to remember the word.

Hermione nodded. "Right, a Horcrux. God, I can barely think about what you would have done if
none of this would have happened, and You—Voldemort—was still a threat." Somewhat
overemotional, Hermione quickly drew Harry into another hug. Harry allowed the embrace,
cherished it even, glad his friend still wanted to give him such a gesture. When they finally pulled
apart, Harry had a content grin on his face. But then his smile faded to uncertainty as he turned to
Ron, who had up to that point been conspicuously close-lipped.

"Ron?" Harry called out tentatively. The boy, who had been staring at the wall, now turned his
wide eyes on Harry.

"Y-you-Know-Who slept in my dorm," he finally spoke, his voice high and strangled. "He
took showers."

As if startled by that thought, Ron jumped to his feet. Harry, who was already standing, took a
small, cautious step towards him.

"Ron…"

"Harry," Ron squeaked. "Showers!"

"Er, yeah." Harry really didn't know what to say to that, and he scratched the back of his neck.

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed, turning to said girl for support. "My dorm!"

Hermione sighed, approaching Ron and grabbing hold of his arm. She looked back at Harry.

"He'll be fine once he gets some sleep. Let's get back to the Tower, it's very late—wouldn't want
you two to fall asleep in class on the first day back." Every practical, Hermione was. "Anymore
talk can wait. I do, of course, have several more questions for you." Harry nodded in
understanding.

Despite Ron's reaction, it seemed both his friends were handling what he'd told them, and as he left
the Room of Requirement that night, he couldn't help but feel elated.

And if later, while in bed, he sniggered at Ron getting stuck on the fact Voldemort took showers,
no one except Lady was there to witness it, and she certainly wasn't going to tell anyone else.

The new term, for Harry, started out relatively quiet. He went to class, did his schoolwork, had the
first Quidditch practice, and hung out with his friends. Though slightly off from his usual routine,
Harry ended up spending quite a bit of time in the library as well, continuing the research he'd
started in Tom's library. Hermione had been outright shocked at Harry's new interest, and Harry
himself was a bit astonished, but then again he was going to be partially responsible for future
events in the Wizarding government. He figured if he was going to start something, he sure as hell
better know exactly what he was doing.

Hermione, despite her initial supportive words, proved to have questions that showed how uncertain she was over the altered dynamics of the war. She was alight with curiosity, though, about Harry and Tom's misadventures, drilling her friend with numerous clarifying questions and making inquiries about how the Ministry was going to be changed. Over time, she actually began to be quite excited about the prospects; Harry had to remind her a few times that while there was definitely going to be a Muggleborn policy reformation, the rights of House Elves may be relatively low on the list of improvements. Hermione had only gotten a gleam in her eye that made Harry want to back away slowly, and he wondered if she might actually be able to convince and/or frighten Tom into the merits of S.P.E.W.

Harry felt it could be thoroughly possible.

Ron, as Hermione predicted, had woken up the following morning after the night Harry told his story, had called Harry "bloody bonkers," and proceeded to discuss the upcoming Quidditch match on their way to breakfast. Ron wasn't one much for politics, and tended to go with the policy of "out of sight, out of mind". He did have another catatonic attack at one point when the delayed reaction to the knowledge Bellatrix Lestrange, the new "Tommy", was his new dorm mate hit him, but he eventually got over that as well.

Things really were mostly normal, even down to the Death Eater activity that had been absent the past month or so. If Harry hadn't known what to look for, he would have missed how mild and merely distracting the attacks were, compared to destructive. They were a decoy for the real activity happening in secret. Yes, Harry would almost say that the start of the new term was peaceful.

Harry, though, knew the peace wouldn't last forever. It was only a matter of time before Tom was ready to appear as his new identity, after all the necessary documents and such were forged, and perhaps a few memories altered here and there.

The news, as anticipated, was the talk of the town the moment it became public about a month, also as anticipated, into the new term. The double whammy of the revered Albus Dumbledore naming an heir and the fact that the very same heir was also Harry Potter's new guardian was plenty a reason to run an article for it on the front page of the Daily Prophet, and enough for Harry to wish he could live the life of a recluse.

Anything to stay away from Rita Skeeter.

But, Harry had to admit, one good thing did come out of her visit to Hogwarts for what Harry was assured as being a "strategic" interview—though the knowledge that they were using the nosy reporter for their own gain didn't make Harry sulk any less about it when Dumbledore told him he'd agreed to the visit—was that Harry got a far more pleasant visitor as well.

"Master," Lady said while at lunch the day Rita was coming for the interview. Harry would often bring the reptile to his classes, having gotten used the company and weight of a snake around his shoulders. He might have particularly brought her along today to make sure Rabid Rita kept her distance.

"Hmm?" Harry hummed absently, busy hoping that this day would go by quickly. "Strategic interview" it may be, it was still going to suck. The plan was to gain the sympathy and trust of Wizarding Britain, which particularly required Harry to "endear himself to the public". Basically, Harry was going to give *dear Rita* a story she would give her first born for (not that he'd want it).
What had surprised Harry, however, was the fact Dumbledore told him to specifically say why his guardianship had been removed from his Muggle relatives, even if it would put them and potentially Muggles in general in a bad light. While Dumbledore did suggest not making it so the opposite of a witch-hunt would be called for, he did say it would be his excuse to subtly suggest that his policy of magical and non-magical humans living together may not have been the best interest for the Wizarding World. Harry already knew magical/Muggle separation would be one of the first things Tom worked on, and he was sure Dumbledore knew that too, but the Headmaster's new push for it shocked him. Harry asked why he would openly go back on his views, to which Dumbledore admitted that, while he still had hope, perhaps the world was not ready to live peacefully with each other yet. It was unfortunate, but sometimes the truth wasn't always pleasant. In all honesty, Harry doubted wizards and Muggles would ever be able to join together as they might have been a long time ago, but he kept that to himself.

"What!" Harry squawked loudly, drawing much attention from the Gryffindor's around him. Harry ignored them as he turned in the direction Lady was looking at. Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape—all absent from the start of the midday meal—were now making their way past the student tables, appearing to have a polite conversation with a fourth individual.

A quick glimpse might have left Harry with an impression of seeing a mildly familiar stranger, a person he'd glanced at before but never met. However, Harry's stare was no passing glance; that fourth person entering the Great Hall with his professors was very familiar to him.

'Stupid, you should have known he would come for this,' Harry scolded to himself. He sulked internally, thinking about how Tom and Dumbledore both decided to keep this little surprise to themselves.

Ooh, but it was such a nice surprise.

Harry had yet to see the disguise, indeed if any, Tom planned for his alias. There hadn't been any pictures yet to run in the Prophet. It turned out that he did change his features, in which it seemed Tom followed the phrase "less was more"—it wasn't like many people knew his true face anyway. Even so, Harry knew the man's appearance and mannerisms very well, and that was the only reason he could tell it was Tom despite the slight changes. Chestnut hair replaced black, brown eyes replaced red, his chin and cheekbones were a bit softer, though still aristocratic, and he was dressed in mid-hue blue rather than black robes, cut in a modern fashion popular with the magical crowd under sixty.

Tom Riddle had once been a master at disguising his true self and intentions; many decades later, that talent was not lost.

"Is...is that him, Harry?" Hermione whispered into his ear, her eyes as focused on Tom as Harry's were. Indeed, many eyes had turned to watch at the newcomer, and irrationally Harry felt a spark of possessiveness after seeing the ogling looks some students gave.

"Yeah," Harry breathed, answering Hermione's question. From the other side of him, Ron began shoveling massive quantities of potato into his mouth as his nervous eating habit kicked in.

Unfamiliar brown eyes met Harry's from across the Hall, but an oh-so familiar smirk curled at the man's lips.

It was nearly violent, the way Harry's insides tried to rearrange themselves. Harry had to look away
and focus on keeping a terribly ridiculous smile from spreading across his face. It was almost embarrassing how excited he was to see Tom.

'Don't you DARE get up and run to him like a love-sick teenager,' Harry demanded of himself. Restraint, here, was the key.

To say that Harry had…pined, in the absence of the man would have been pathetically accurate. For reasons of security, there had been very little contact between them. The few letters he'd received had been relatively informal, but they had been rather dry on personal sentiment and heavier on code-like information. The Horcrux link had served to be useful, though unfortunately long streams of contact did not work well over the distance, breaking down into quick flashes of images like his nightmares from Voldemort had before, and it would leave Harry feeling unrested in the morning.

And so, Harry was dreadfully aware that he was the poster boy of the phrase "absence makes the heart grow fonder". For a long time he had been hesitant of his feelings, the nagging guilt about it popping up every now and then, but the distance from Tom had allowed him time to think and come to terms with their relationship, consequences or impossibilities be damned.

In the end, it had been easy to admit that he had fallen in love with Tom.

What was hard was deciding what to do next.

"Ah, Harry," Rita Skeeter purred, making Harry want to gag. Or maybe that was her perfume clogging the air of Dumbledore's office. Either way, ew. To his disappointment, Lady didn't even seem to dissuade Rita in any way as she rose from his shoulder as the woman patted his cheek. He had just arrived after his classes when she had come in through the Floo, and she had zeroed in on him immediately. A camera man, employed to capture any and every juicy visual entertainment there might be, had followed her through and was now standing near Dumbledore, looking bored.

"So lovely to see you again, dear."

Harry tried to smile at Rita, but felt it came out more as a condescending grimace. He didn't say anything. Rita's smile wasn't much more sincere, with her reddened lips pulled back obscenely wide so her gold teeth shone in the light. Her eyes flickered over to the person who had just stepped up beside Harry and glinted with something akin to hunger.

Emrys Rilind Aleron, after all, was a savory story walking around on two (equally savory, Harry's mind supplied) legs.

"Mr. Aleron! Rita Skeeter, pleasure to meet you." She held out her manicured hand, which Tom took in his. He had hesitated doing so for a fraction of a second, hardly noticeably, but Harry had seen and it amused him greatly. Rita hadn't exactly been kind to Voldemort, after all, and the woman herself was more than distasteful.

"Oh, Rita dear," Dumbledore called out from further in his office in a sort of cajoling tone, "why don't you let Harry and Emrys catch up for a moment. You can set up over here."

Harry sighed as Rita obliged and left them alone for a moment. Immediately, cool knuckles brushed lightly against his scarred forehead, an outwardly innocent gesture, and Harry followed the hand's retreat so he now faced Tom.

Goodness, he was nervous! And already he was blushing! He really was a love-sick teenager. Apparently admitting his feelings to himself made him a giddy female.
"You look well, Harry," the man commented lightly, hand once again back at his side, but his words were enough to send a pleasant shiver down Harry's spine.

"And you look different." Harry was impressed with himself he had been able to so easily respond with that teasing statement. "It…it looks good." Ah, there's the stutter.

Up close, it was almost harder to recognize Tom without the bigger picture. The brown eyes were so unlike the bright, fiery red Harry was used to. It completely changed the dynamics of Tom's face and aura. That's not to say Tom seemed ordinary now, it was just that he appeared less threatening, if Harry had to describe it, but still his presence still demanded attention.

"I missed you," Harry suddenly blurted. 'You're a bloody schoolgirl!' he berated himself with a slight coloring of his cheeks.

The same smirk Tom had given him in the Great Hall crossed the man's features once more. "Did you?" he asked in overdone interest. Harry scowled, because he knew he was being teased.

"No. I only said that to make you feel good about yourself."

"Oh, boys!" Rita beckoned suddenly, causing Harry to wince and Tom's eyes to tighten in irritation, perhaps because he hadn't been able to say anything in retaliation to Harry's remark.

"It had to be her?" Harry mumbled sullenly.

"She has a lock on the system," Tom said lowly, equally despondent. With great reluctance, both wizards moved across Dumbledore's office and sat down at a table that had been conjured for the occasion…no broom closets this time. Tea and biscuits, along with a bowl of lemon drops, were situated on the tabletop. Tom avoided the tea, but Harry served himself a cup so he had something to keep his hands occupied with. Groping Tom or walloping Rita were both equally big no-nos.

"Now, remember our agreement, Rita," Dumbledore said pleasantly but with a warning in his voice that demanded to be heeded. Harry wondered what exactly he bargained for. Rita smiled stiffly, which Dumbledore returned genially.

"Of course, no worries." She dug through her leopard-print bag, pulling out a deep purple quill and her flip notebook.

"Well then, shall we get started?" She licked the tip of her magically ink-refilling quill and pressed it to the paper.

"Are you sure she's not a Death Eater?" Harry asked again. Tom gave him a wayward look that spoke of his abhorrence to the idea.

"I wouldn't want her even if she offered. And I thought I was evil."

"You, evil? Yes. Her? She's just…something else. I just know she's going to make me out as a teary-eyed child again. Merlin."

"In a way that is what we were going for, Harry." Said boy shuddered.

"At least that's done, now. You're big début!"

Tom quirked an eyebrow. "I suppose you could call it that. This way, Harry." Tom pressed a hand into the small of Harry's back, directing him away from the direction he had been headed and into
the one Tom indicated.

"Where are we going?"

"Guest quarters. Dumbledore"—Tom, now that he wasn't acting in front of others, didn't bother to hide how much saying the name absolutely pained him—"is allowing me to stay the night."

"What? Why?" Harry tried to ignore how much his heart sped up within his chest at the idea of Tom staying for a little longer. 'Schoolgirl!'

"You realize, Harry, that our agreement is still active? I cannot harm Hogwarts or its students, so there really is no danger for me being here. Dumbledore would have no qualms for me staying on the grounds." That was true...Harry had almost forgotten about it. That night he had found Voldemort the snake seemed like a lifetime ago. "He wondered if I would like to, for 'old time's sake,' as he put it, and I said yes," Tom continued, answering Harry's question.

"Oh, yeah?" Harry breathed out casually. "And why would you do that?"

"Here we are," Tom said, ignoring Harry's new question. Harry laughed at the tapestry they stood before, as it depicted a Quidditch match.

"I like it," Harry said cheerfully. Tom snorted as he drew his finger down the left edge of the wall-hanging, triggering it to contract to one side, much like a stage curtain though without any poles or wiring, revealing a wooden door. Tom opened it and stepped inside, with Harry following suite.

"I've never been inside one of Hogwarts' guest rooms. This is pretty nice," Harry remarked, looking at the spacious front room, complete with a muted bronze-colored divan and matching chair, a four-person table set in one corner, and strips of black carpet covering the stone floor in places of high traffic. Near the back was an open door which appeared to be a bedroom. Behind Harry, Tom closed the door to the hall with an audible click. The younger wizard made his way over to the divan and took a seat, letting Lady slip free from his shoulders.

"Dumbledore knows that you will be having dinner with me," Tom stated. Harry chuckled quietly, noting how Tom hadn't exactly asked him if that was what he wanted. It could be arrogance, but likely he knew Harry would choose to on his own accord. Last time Harry checked, it was nearing late evening, and so he knew an Elf would be around shortly to drop the food trays off.

When Tom sat down next to Harry, it was with his own face, the Glamours having been dropped.

"The changes were clever," Harry commented. Tom hummed in acknowledgment.

"Parseltongue Glamours. Finite Incantatum will not cancel them."

"Convenient, that is." Harry sighed, trying not to fidget awkwardly as he debated whether or not to give into his urge to lean into the other man. It really had been a long time since he'd last been able to touch Tom. His entire dilemma was solved, however, when Tom forcibly directed his body downward so Harry's head rested on his thighs. Both of them sighed when Tom's hand came and rested on Harry's forehead, right over his scar, which actually tingled, although pleasantly.

"What does it feel like, to you?" Harry asked quietly. "To me it feels like it's almost happy to have you near again."

Eh, that feeling might not actually be from the Horcrux, but close enough.

"Warm," Tom said after a moment. "My other Horcruxes made me feel cold, but you...", he trailed
off. Harry sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and worried it slightly with his teeth, again wondering if that was the Horcrux...or something else.

"I suppose that's a good thing. It hurt before," Harry finally said, meeting Tom's eyes. Nothing more was said immediately, as the expected House Elf, surprisingly round and squat in stature, popped in and dropped off their dinner on the dining table. With a sigh, Harry sat up from Tom's hold. Before he could get far, though, a sharp tug on his robes sent his chest sprawling into Tom's and his lips in the perfect position to be attacked. Harry laughed breathily into the kiss and wrapped his arms around Tom's neck to pull him closer. The goofy grin on Harry's face didn't abate until he took his first bite of dinner.

Their meal was full of light banter and numerous questions on Harry's part about how Tom had been handling everything. Heavier Parseltongue Glamours than the ones he wore as Emrys allowed him to appear as Voldemort at the reinstated Death Eater meetings. Tom, it seemed, still had full control over his followers. No additional minions had been made privy to the whole situation, but Tom told Harry he had formed a select group, much like his previous Inner Circle and included several of its members. The group was ranked with members who had had far more knowledge than the common grunt. In truth, there had been quite a shift in the ranks as Tom reorganized and played two different games, one as the Dark Lord and another as a political upstart. Harry didn't openly ask, but he knew some of the more recent "misfortunes" various Death Eaters had run into which caused them to be captured or killed had been no accidents. Harry knew, though, that not everybody could be saved, and that in truth the people Tom culled from his army were probably not worth saving.

As dinner neared its end, Harry started to get a bit jittery and nervous again. After the plates were magically cleared away, he stood from the table and went to stand by the divan, leaning against it while he stared contemplatively out the single window into the dark outside. There was something he wanted...something he was ready for but wasn't quite sure how to ask to receive. Tonight was as perfect of a night as any. He had outright yearned for Tom while he was away at Hogwarts, and now that he was here...well, Harry was a teenager in love...

...which perhaps explained the inelegant way of asking he finally settled with.

"Hey, Tom? Would you like to know what luck feels like?"

Tom gave him a look slightly laced with vitriol. He probably thought Harry was making a jibe about his markedly lack of providence in certain specific incidents. And in all honesty, Harry may have been doing that just a tiny bit.

"It is...unclear what you mean by that," Tom griped.

"Oh, well, I was just wondering if you wanted to get lucky tonight?" Harry tried to keep his expression teasing and coy, but something about his efforts must have failed if the way Tom was suddenly studying him was anything to go by. Harry resolutely refused to do something like shuffle his feet, look away, or even more telling, blush.

"How elegant you are," Tom teased. "Are you..." he ventured slowly, "...offering?" His voice had dropped down into a slithering purr.

Harry hoped Tom couldn't tell that his last breath had been shuddering.

"I am, if you'd like." He said it in a whisper, unable to bring much volume to his voice while under the weight of Tom's flaming stare. The other man moved in closer and leaned down a bit, his breath ghosting over Harry's chin.
If you're sure; he hissed, the sound causing Harry to arch his body a little closer to Tom's. He had missed the sounds of Parseltongue from his lips.

I'm very sure; Harry hissed back, meaning every word. Tom took that statement to heart, and closed the distance between them in one swift motion, his lips claiming Harry's and sucking the breath out of the younger wizard. The kiss both satisfied the yearning Harry had been living with and simultaneously made it all the more worse. His insides quivered in anticipation.

Harry was only slightly aware that there may or may not have been a sleeping spell shot at the resigned Lady curled up on the couch—an acquired precaution—as the two wizards migrated to the very convenient wall next to the bedroom door. Harry's back was pressed against the cold stone, a shocking contrast to the warmth emitted from the other wizard's body, and his hands rose up Tom's sides to his dark hair, where Harry tangled the strands to match his own tangled senses as Tom continued to kiss him to oblivion. Damn, Harry had hoped he would be able to remain mentally coherent, but that notion collapsed much as the strength in his knees did.

"You're bloody brilliant at everything," Harry gasped during a moment his mouth was free to even speak the words, feeling notably inadequate next to Tom and his wicked ability to utterly consume him. A quick tug on Tom's part had Harry's red and gold striped tie coming loose and falling to the floor.

"Harry," Tom uttered headily, tongue dabbing at Harry's surrendered throat. :We haven't even started yet,: he teased in Parseltongue.

'Fuck,' Harry's mind supplied lewdly.

Leaving his outer school robe on the floor next to his tie, Harry was guided into the bedroom, a simple affair with a standard fireplace already lit by a House Elf in all likelihood, a queen sized bed with a comforter done in the same bronze color as the other room's furniture, a wardrobe and matching bedside stands. Harry reveled in the feeling of Tom's mouth on his again and didn't really pay much attention to his surroundings. The edge of the bed ended up at the back of his knees, and with a little more encouragement from Tom, Harry collapsed back onto the shock-absorbing mattress. Tom pulled away, and Harry was instantly on guard, remembering the few incidents of the past.

"Don't you dare vanish my clothes!" he blurted.

Tom arched an eyebrow at him. "It will be a bit difficult to do this with your clothes on," the wizard said dryly. Harry stared dumbly a moment before he titled his head back and laughed, despite the burn still coursing in his blood.

"I didn't say you couldn't take my clothes off, I said you couldn't vanish them. That's just not romantic."

"Romantic?" Tom repeated, blinking in droll confusion, accented by a slight upward twist of his lips. Harry squirmed a bit.

"Er, you know...provocative," Harry elaborated, feeling a bit like a coward for trying to cover his slip, but he wasn't entirely sure what Tom would think about his true feelings. "Make it good."

Tom hummed pleasingly in the back of his throat. "If that is what you desire," he said mildly.

"Y-yes," Harry said, looking suddenly wary of Tom's concupiscent expression and wicked smirk. Harry idly wondered if he would survive the night after asking Tom to more or less ravish him.
Tom abruptly leaned in close, his face hovering in the air above Harry's for a heartbeat before he bent his head to nip once lightly at Harry's neck. Harry's breath hitched with just that one, ghosting bite, and he tilted his head to expose more skin for Tom to access. But, instead of continuing, Tom straightened and took a step back. Harry was about to protest, but the man gave him a hushing look. Harry tensed, and then relaxed back onto the mattress when Tom held up his wand but then merely placed it down on the mattress next to the boy. He then shrugged out of his outer robe, tossing it off to the side with seductive flair. Harry noted how gorgeous the wizard was standing in the orange glow of the firelight, and swallowed hard to keep himself contained.

At that point, Tom leaned over the youthful body on the bed, his hands supporting him on either side of Harry's shoulders, one knee pulled up on the mattress in-between Harry's legs as he leaned down and kissed the younger wizard properly. Harry closed his eyes and returned the kiss, willingly parting his lips so Tom's tongue could curl into his mouth and map out all the sensitive points there.

Soon, Harry's jumper was pulled over his head, messing his hair up in a whole new way than it was before. A warm hand crawled under the hem of his shirt, already pulled free from his trousers, and splayed out over his abdomen. The feeling of skin on skin was wonderful, so missed it had been. Harry wondered if Tom could tell that his heart was already beating way too fast, only partially from nerves while the other reason was because of an entirely different emotion.

It could appropriately be said that his heart beat for Tom's every touch.

While the disrobing spell was convenient, this new method of undressing came across as more intimate, as Harry expected. Inch by inch, a little bit more of Harry's body was revealed as buttons on his shirt were undone, a slow torture as Tom's fingers skated teasingly over every bit of skin revealed. Harry couldn't decide if he wanted it to end so his bare skin was finally pressed against the warm body above him or if he wanted it to continue on forever—was it too soon or not soon enough when that last button was finally released? A curious conundrum.

Harry's breathing had sped up considerably and his fingers felt entirely too clumsy and uncoordinated for the fine movement required to unbutton Tom's own shirt and pull it free from the man's slacks, but he managed well enough. He felt the muscles in Tom's abdomen clench reflexively as Harry ran his fingers over them, trying to show just how much this was affecting him. He tugged on the shirt to finish the job of getting it off, but Tom's position was inhibitory of completing the task, his arms unable to slip from the sleeves. Harry gently shoved the man's pale chest to push him away, though he hated to do it.

"Off," he commanded, yanking on the shirt again. Tom let out a rumbling chuckle, and stood up from the edge of the bed to comply with Harry's wishes. During that time, Harry rose up to his knees and met the man halfway, attacking Tom's collarbone with loving kisses, a touch of teeth, doing his best to give back what he could and not lie back like a shy virgin. Tom grunted slightly when Harry yanked his hips against his own, and Harry grinned delightedly as he ground those portions of their anatomy together. His moment of dominance ended when he was once again shoved onto his back, a heated growl sounding in his ear.

Harry endeavored to scoot further up the bed so his head now rested on a pillow, leaving room for Tom to settle fully on top of him. Harry knew Tom's hand brushing over the bulge in his pants on its way to Harry's side was no accidental touch. Harry gasped and automatically bucked upwards, but his hips only met air. A noticeably sibilant and vexed hiss left his lips at the lack of friction.

"Tom," Harry said, a silent plea. Though the other man didn't comply in the way Harry wanted him to, his long, slender, talented fingers managed to pull down and off Harry's slacks and
undergarments. The young wizard drew in a breath as he was exposed to the open air.

Breathing. Focus on breathing. Harry was trying to live in the moment, and accomplishing that rather well, but he was still fairly nervous. Theoretically he knew what to expect, but that didn't mean hardly anything in practice. Touches he'd felt before somehow felt entirely different now. Different, new—vital. He knew, without a doubt now, just how deep he was in.

Exhilaration, fear, excitement, happiness and overwhelming shock of all that he felt clashed and threatened to cause him to burst. There had once been a time where Harry was shaken and ashamed he could feel anything more for Tom than apathy at the least, and at the most raging hate. But here, now—guilt, panic, apprehension—it was all drowned out by the thrill of joy and pleasure. Harry loved Tom. This…this was his to feel; he could never take love, no matter who it was for, for granted.

At some point, Harry made an effort to rid Tom of his trousers as well, though he wasn't sure if it had been a team effort or more Tom who accomplished the final fact. All he knew was that every square inch of skin that could possibly be pressed against Tom's own was doing exactly so.

:Now?: Harry whispered a little later. Searching, red-stained eyes looked down at him. Harry stared steadily back, despite the thudding in his chest and roar in his ears from his racing pulse.

Tom picked up his wand from the mattress, and there was a spell spoken, an odd sensation deep within him. Empty, but he was soon filled with purposeful and slick fingers, and surely this means there's a charm for everything? Harry keened, rather than giggled this time (thankfully), his hips moving on their own accord to maximize the sensations. Tom artfully played his body with his free hand and mouth, tongue tracing sensitive spots while the hand seemed hell-bent on destroying every brain cell Harry had with counterstrokes to each thrust of his fingers.

And then it all stopped, utterly and completely. It was like Harry had been dumped on by cold water, his breath leaving his lungs in one harsh whoosh of air.

"Tom," Harry panted, looking up to ensure the man was still there.

"I'm here, Harry." His hands returned to Harry's body, maneuvering the younger's legs so he fit between them. 'Always be here,' Harry silently pleaded within his mind. Already, Harry could feel the stirring in the back of his mind that signaled an awakening, the quivering awareness of the one-of-a-kind connection they shared as their very souls began to connect. What was the point of being two when they could be one? His legs automatically wrapped around Tom's hips to try and bring him in closer.

:Shall I?: Tom said it softly, perhaps tenderly, but most definitely seductively. All Harry could do was swallow hard and nod.

It hurt, yes, but it wasn't anything Harry couldn't deal with. His arms had gone and draped around Tom's neck as the man steadily pressed inward, eyes hooded but never leaving the gleaming green ones looking up at him. Harry watched, fixated even as white spots intruded on his retina, as the man's facial features oscillated as he tried for control of his expression. There was a flickering in the back of their minds, the Horcrux link sending short bursts of pure sensory information to each other without any clear parameter. Harry sure as hell was in no condition to try and control it, and either Tom likewise wasn't able to or he didn't bother.

When the need for reprieve fell away under the cascade of pure want, Harry insisted to Tom in the sibilant language, :More.:
And more he gave. Harry couldn't hold back a cry of pure surprise and pleasure at the feeling of Tom inside him. Breathy hisses were uttered close to his ear, a rare occasion in which Tom was incoherent. And that was what made everything even better for Harry. He wanted—hoped—for Tom to feel as he did, spectacularly overwhelmed and the world consisting of nothing but the two of them. Harry was so lost, but that was okay because it was the kind where it didn't matter that he hadn't a clue where he was, as only the journey counted anyway.

If Harry was of a right mind, he might have been embarrassed at how silly that notion was.

Harry clutched to his only anchor, trying to press Tom even closer as he arched into him, meeting every thrust. When he shut his eyes, it wasn't blackness he saw but the colors of sensation as his body and mind were assaulted simultaneously and ohh right there!

"F-fuck!" Harry growled. "You are bloody good at everything," he said between panting breaths and arched his hips higher. Tom hissed as he inhaled sharply through his clenched, slightly bared teeth and Harry grinned. The man clasped of one of Harry legs and shifted it higher, muttering something about "demons" before he gave a rather brutal thrust. Harry keened helplessly, pulling Tom down and kissing him fiercely with all that he had, attempting to draw more sibilant hisses from the man's mouth.

Harry really didn't know which words would accurately describe the current activity, but thought he could start with "amazing" and work his way from there. As Harry's hands were busy clutching at the hot body pressed to his, it must have been Tom's hand which found the boy's aching arousal and finally kicked him over the edge.

Harry seized at the feeling of the world dropping out from beneath him, his eye's attracted and glued to the burning red of Tom's like a magnet, the man's name slipping from his lips in wonderment. His body was shaking uncontrollably.

At the peak of Harry's orgasm, Tom leaned down and captured Harry's lips in a desperate kiss. To the corner of Harry's mouth, he whispered something that Harry felt more than heard as the other wizard's lips just brushed the surface of his skin.

"Harry."

And then Harry held him as he came as well, bestowing him kisses as the echo of the feeling bounced through his own fried nervous system. He doubted that sex with anyone else could ever be like this, not unless the intimate and poignant connection of two souls existed. Two people couldn't be more joined than he and Tom were.

Once Harry had enough control over his limbs, he instantly wrapped himself around Tom when the other man collapsed next to him on the mattress. There were no regrets. He didn't say anything, not at first, just wishing to bask in the contentment he was feeling. A hand was idly threading through his damp hair, and Harry could have let himself fall to sleep, but he didn't want to...not yet. He shivered in the cool air, and the bedcovers were pulled over him, eliciting a grateful sigh.

He didn't know how much time passed—a few minutes, an hour, half the night—but Harry finally found the courage to whisper his deepest secret.

"I love you, Tom."

'Oh Merlin you said it aloud,' his mind immediately panicked.

He wasn't sure, but he thought that maybe Tom had stopped breathing.
"I just wanted to tell you," Harry uttered softly, a little awkwardly.

A moment more, and then: "I've been thinking, Harry." Tom's hand resumed carding through the boy's hair, and Harry could once again feel Tom's ribs press against his cheek every time he breathed in. He felt a moment of relief that Tom didn't seem to be taking his admission badly.

"Oh, yeah?" Harry asked casually, tilting his head upwards so he could see Tom's face. A shock of red filled his vision as he met Tom's eyes, which appeared to be studying him intently.

"Have you ever wondered about…immortality? About living forever?"

That's an odd question.

"I don't know what you mean," Harry said uncertainly, uncurling from Tom a little and raising his upper body by propping up on one elbow, hovering slightly over Tom so to more fully face him. "Immortality?"

"Horcruxes, Harry," Tom said, dead calm and unflinching. Harry pulled back a little further, frowning.

"I—what? Why would you be thinking of them?" Harry uttered stiltedly, confusion choking his articulation slightly. "Horcruxes are an unstable and detrimental piece of magic. What do they have to do with anything?" Harry was flabbergasted…surly Tom wasn't thinking of making more again?

"It's been proven to me that multiple Horcruxes are detrimental. One, however, has thus far proven safe," Tom countered, acting as if he was debating a trivial matter akin to the merits of sugar versus cream for tea.

"You already have one," Harry whispered.

"I do," Tom conceded. "You, however…do not."

Harry, becoming antsy, sat up next to Tom slightly curled over his knees, pulling the sheet higher up on his waist when he realized how vulnerable his nakedness at the moment was making him feel.

"I know what you're asking of me, Tom. The answer…is no."

Harry could never make a Horcrux for himself.

Harry watched, torn, as Tom rose from bed, uncaring of his own nakedness, though he did summon his fashion robe and changed it to a plainer black dressing robe with a wave of his hand before he put it on. He turned back around, silhouette dark and daunting, towards Harry, who was warily waiting to see what he had to say further. Maybe it was his imagination, but to Harry it felt as if the room had dropped in temperature, and he had to fight a shiver.

"You are my Horcrux," Tom said bluntly. "You are my Horcrux, Harry, a magical means to expand my lifespan, but...your lifespan, is limited. The lifespan of my Horcrux is limited. Should you die, it is likely the accidental and unconventional protection from death you provide for me will cease. It is not just connected to your body, but to something vital that would disappear upon your death." Tom's expression was blank, and it unsettled Harry, along with what he had to say. But it was nothing compared to the sharp stab of the frank words that followed. "It's rather pointless."

Harry closed his eyes, feeling ill. Pointless?
"Nagini…"

"Nagini is my magically bound familiar," Tom interrupted. "She only dies if I die, and thus why I made her a Horcrux. You, however, were an accident."

_Accident._ "I…" Harry swallowed hard, his throat feeling like sandpaper and his tongue thick and clumsy in his mouth.

"Think of it, Harry—never having to die, alive forever with _me_," Tom purred. He had approached the bed again, and was leaning over it so his mouth hovered near Harry's ear, his breath blowing against Harry's cheek. "You know what I want, Harry," Tom told him archly, hand caressing Harry's cheek. "What I've always wanted, among many things. I want immortality, and the only way to ensure that right now is if _you_ were immortal as well."

Horror. Betrayal. Harry could feel them punching him in the gut as if they were a physical presence. He already knew Tom wanted him to make a Horcrux, but the reason for it had Harry feeling dejected and empty.

The realization came out as a harsh gasp, a choked whisper. "You want me to make a Horcrux for _myself_...so _you_ can be immortal." Not because he never wanted Harry to die, to be with him forever, but because _Tom_ didn't want to die.

Tom didn't even seem to understand the difference, and continued on as if he hadn't completely shattered Harry. "My previous experiences have proven the dangers of excessively splitting of the soul. While I doubt one more Horcrux would be overly detrimental, why take the risk? Death would never touch you, Harry."

"Murder, Tom!" Harry cried out suddenly, emotions boiling over. "You're asking me to _murder_ someone! What would make you think I would agree to do that? I…I _know_ you don't care, but me…? I can't!" Harry jerked his body away from the looming man, though Tom had already straightened and walked to the hearth, turning his back to Harry. Against the flames, Tom looked like nothing but a tall, black shadow. Harry shivered again, wondering if he should get dressed again, but before he could get his limbs to move Tom spoke again. This time, his low voice was cold and almost threatening.

"Harry, I've been quite accommodating for you thus far. Don't you think it's only fair if you gave a little in return?" He whirled around, eyes flashing bright and bloody in the firelight, and he looked dangerous. "I _have_ put some consideration into this. Haven't you ever wanted," Tom purred silkily, beguilingly, a complete shift in his demeanor once again, "to give your Muggle relatives what they…_deserve_?"

Reflexively, Harry mouth parted a bit in shock.

"See, Harry? It wouldn't have to be any random someone," Tom noted casually. "It could be someone you _hate_. Someone who's hurt you. What would their murder matter then?"

Something broke within Harry, snapping suddenly and painfully, but in its wake rose a hardened fury that drove him to action. He didn't know how he did it, but one moment he was naked in bed and the next he was standing beside it fully dressed. His emotions were running so high he didn't even notice the spontaneous magic.

"Right, because that makes their murder _fucking okay_!" Harry spat, circumventing the bed so there was no longer anything in-between him and Tom, whose body was still partially turned to the fireplace, face expressionless. "What makes you think that justifies anything for me? Not after
everything. Yes, I don't like them, and yes, they've hurt me, but I don't want to kill them. It's not me. I—" Harry bit his lip to stop its sudden quivering, clamping down hard enough he drew blood. "I love you, Tom. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" Harry asked weakly.

A pale hand shot out and grabbed hold of his bicep in a painful grip. Harry's eyes went wide as Tom leaned his face down towards his, expression turbulent and rubicund eyes gleaming eerily. "Exactly, Harry," Tom said sharply. "It's me you love, not them. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" he mocked, throwing Harry's words back at him. Harry exhaled quaveringly, and wrenched his arm free.

"You think murder of someone who's hurt you is acceptable," he stated lowly. "Well, you've hurt me in the worst ways possible, and I didn't kill you. When you were weak and helpless, and completely at my mercy, I still didn't even try. What does that say to you? I am no murderer. And you…you know this, and yet you still ask it of me. Do you know how that makes me feel?" Harry asked, pain evident in his voice.

Tom's eyes flashed, a split second of lost composure, before his whole face tightened once more. "You asked if it meant anything to me. I do not believe I can return your feelings, Harry, unless you do this for me." The composed, inflection-free way he said it made Harry flinch horribly.

"You'll…love me, only if I commit a murder and split my soul," Harry stated dully, feeling numb. Tom looked at him straight on, icy eyes chilling Harry to the bone, suffocating him. For the first time in a while, Harry could see Voldemort in Tom Riddle.

The man's voice, when he spoke, was unapologetic. "Yes."

Harry blinked up at him. "That's not love," he ground out. Tom's jaw muscles clenched visibly.

"Perhaps not…I wouldn't really know. It could be I am not capable of it, just as Dumbledore has always said. Perhaps you are as my mother, and how she fell in love with someone who could never lover her back."

Those words struck Harry at his core. His breath left his body as if he had been punched in the gut, but it couldn't be compared to the pain in his chest which had nothing to do with his burning, oxygen deprived lungs. He wanted to run—oh, more than anything he wanted to run, to find someplace that was anyplace but here, a place he could express his hurt and anguish like a wounded animal. He didn't, however, and the moment passed, though he still felt like he might die from the invisible hole in his chest.

It had happened: he had fallen in love with Tom, and was now wondering if he should regret that. The worst part was the fact that he had thought that perhaps Tom had felt something for him in return. No, not thought, he knew it was there—he had seen it in Tom's eyes, heard it in Tom's soft whispers, had felt it over their link earlier that night. It would take a great actor, even one of Tom's prestige, to fake all that, not when the majority was unconscious. Or was it all simply what he had wanted to see? This cold, unfeeling man before him was not the same person from even moments before. There was no sign of Tom's emotions in him now, standing there in the firelight, appearing so caustic and stony.

Maybe Tom really was incapable of love, and Harry was left the fool.

And then Harry remembered that a fool…was just who he was, and that had never stopped him before.

Harry'd had too much heartbreak and disappointment, and too much pain in his life to give up in
what he believed in, though this was a different battle than he'd ever faced before. Nevertheless, his eyes turned steely as he walled up his pain and faced Tom once more, courage and stubborn conviction fueling his determination.

"You're wrong, if that's what you think."

Again, Tom's eyes flashed strangely—uncertainty—a little longer than before, and Harry grabbed a hold of that sign for dear life.

"How so?" Tom hissed, though still English, his expression cautionary. Harry lifted his chin.

"You can say anything you'd like, Tom, about you not being able to feel love. Lie all you'd like, but I won't believe you. You see," Harry moved closer, crowding into Tom's space despite the warning glance from the man, "I could feel your capacity for it. Just because you've never used the potential, doesn't mean it's not there." Harry held Tom captive with his eyes, daring him to deny it.

"Is it because you're afraid of it?" Harry wondered aloud, voice soft. Tom's mouth twitched in reaction to what Harry said, but returned to the firm, thin line a moment later. "Like what you told me of death, and how you fear what you don't know. You worry it might destroy you, leave you as nothing, but you've never known what it is really like."

Harry reached out to lay a hand on Tom's cheek, and frowned when the man stiffened as it to pull away. Harry persisted, though, and Tom in the end allowed it. The younger wizard ran his fingertips down the side of Tom's face, just a short caress, before he let his hand fall shortly back to his side.

"I'm sorry, I won't make a Horcrux, no matter the reasons you give me. I do love you, but I can't do that for you. It would destroy me. If you think living a life of immortality is more important than me, then fine—I suppose I can't convince you."

There was a moment of silence, where Harry tilted his head to the side in a searching manner and Tom made no effort to speak. "Have you ever thought about what it meant when your father turned your mother out into the cold? I would say it that his cold-heartedness, fear, and lack of love and compassion for your mother that drove him to toss her away as if she were rubbish, without any scruple, and it being the reason you were born in an orphanage, growing up there because he didn't care enough. Do you really think lack of love is any better than the presence of it, knowing that? Nothing is without pain, but some things are worth it."

Rising up on his tiptoes, Harry kissed Tom's lips, despite how stiff and unrelenting they were, when just many moments before they sought to reciprocate any kisses passionately.

"I love you, Tom." Gods, even now. "I may be like your mother, but I'd like to think you aren't like your father, and I think we both know you've never wanted to be." Tom turned his head to the side.

"Leave me." Spoken softly, but with clear command.

Harry's eyes dropped to his feet, hiding their wet glittering. "Goodnight," he whispered.

And Harry left.
"Harry? Are you alright?"

Harry looked up from his breakfast, of which the only thing he had accomplished was pushing his eggs a complete three-hundred-sixty degree lap around his plate rather than eating it. Hermione was examining him with concerned eyes, and Harry forced himself to smile. He might have succeeded in that, but his face was rather numb so he wasn't sure.

"I'm fine, Hermione. I'm not very hungry this morning, for some reason." For emphasis, he dropped his fork down on the table and placed his hand in his lap.

"Are you sick?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so. Just…not hungry," he said blandly. Unwilling to draw more of Hermione's attention towards himself, Harry pushed away from the table and stood up. "I'm going to the library. I'll see you in class, alright?"

"Okay, Harry," Hermione said softly, still watching him in poorly concealed concern. Harry attempted another smile, and thought he had gotten this one right when Hermione smiled in return. Harry left the Great Hall and pointed his feet in the direction of the library, because it was as good a place as any to go. He wondered if there was a book there about how to pretend everything was fine when it really wasn't.

Harry had been emotionally hurt, before, and rather awfully at that. It didn't make the hurt he felt now any easier. He knew the risks; of course he did. Love was a perilous thing, after all. His happiness in general usually didn't last long, anyway, so why should he have thought things would be any different now?

There was no one who he could turn to, no one he could share his problems with, and since there was no one to talk to he simply gave nobody a reason to ask questions. His slip up this morning with Hermione wouldn't happen again.

Harry sighed and continued down the hall.

He went around the next couple of weeks on autopilot; externally, life for everyone, including Harry, wasn't much different than before. In the hidden parts of Harry's soul, thought, it was a different story. He just wasn't happy. Harry wanted to blame someone, or something, but he knew he would never be able to decide who or what to settle on. His mind considered such questions as: Why did his life always have to suck? Why did Tom have to be such a callous bastard? Why did he have to care so much? Why couldn't he, just for once, have something good happen to him?

Why did he have to fall in love with the bloody Dark Lord in the first place?

Harry hadn't forgotten who Tom was, not exactly. But, he had become enamored with the new side of him he'd never seen before; indeed, perhaps no one had seen. He didn't know if that part of Tom had been there all along, someone he'd always been but kept hidden, or if it was only what he could have been…should have been, if only his life was a little different. Harry hadn't been able to help himself, and love knew no bounds.

As far as Harry could tell, his and Tom's…disagreement…hadn't made the powerful man revert to his original policies. So far, everything was well, and Emrys Aleron was quickly becoming a popular individual, with Voldemort still working obtrusively in the background of everyone's
minds, but never overwhelming.

The fallout of Rita Skeeter's article had been as massive as Harry had predicted it would. Wizarding Britain talked about it for a long time; some people were scandalized, others felt justified, and then there were those who ooh'd and ahh'd over the article and fell right into the trap that had been set for them. Harry was pleased to see that the horrid interview with Rita had been worth it, but he had also come to despise it because of the amount of people that came up to him and asked about his life and his new guardian when he would have rather done without having to pretend things between him and Tom, or "Emrys", were perfectly fine. It just…it hurt to have to think about him anymore than he already did. He knew he was desponding, but he didn't care.

After a time, the harshness wore off and Harry quit trying to analyze his life, and just listened to that illogical part of himself that had rarely ever let him down before. Regret, for him, was not an option. He had hope that Tom was not yet lost to him. Fools hope? Maybe, but there were many things worth fighting for. Some might have considered falling in love with the enemy as the worst kind of curse, but for Harry…it was a bit of a miracle.

Being a miracle didn't make it hurt any less, though. Hope warred with despair in Harry's heart, because for the moment he had no idea what the future really held for him and Tom. He really had felt betrayed when Tom asked him to make his own Horcrux…to split his soul through _murder_. Harry wasn't disillusioned: Tom himself was a murderer, and had no qualms for it if it brought him closer to what he wanted. Harry had always known that, and even he could admit that sometimes…death was better. There was once a time he thought he'd have to kill Voldemort, to protect the one he loved. He would have gladly become a murderer for that. he had no choice before, but now he did.

Harry couldn't lie and say that, after the initial shock had worn off, he had let his mind wonder what would happen if he _did_ agree to making a Horcrux. Would it really be _that_ bad? Was he being unfair, letting Tom make all these sacrifices while he himself refused this one request?

But for Harry…the thought of killing someone for his _own_ gain made him feel sick. He couldn't do it…it was too much to ask for. If that's what Tom required of him to gain and keep his affection, then Harry supposed he didn't want it in the first place.

And that was the hardest part, because he still yearned for it and didn't know how he could ever stop.

At one point Harry finally gave in to temptation and stayed late after DADA class, cornering Snape before the man could tell him to sod off.

Harry approached his professor's desk, nervously shifting the strap of his bag higher up on his shoulder.

"What?" Snape barked with resigned impatience, never once looking up from the assignment he was grading (or using as a doodle pad, considering the number of red marks on it). Harry's mouth line flattened in hesitance for a moment before he steeled himself.

"Have you spoken with…with Tom, lately?" he asked stiltedly, doing his best to appear casual and not desperate.

Black eyes looked up at him for once. "Last week. Why?"

Awkwardly, Harry shrugged. "I wanted to know if he was…doing alright, I guess. I haven't seen him, after all, since…since he came to Hogwarts."
Dammit, Harry hated himself for possibly giving Snape a reason to be suspicious with his halting sentences. It was just that he had avoided talking about Tom, and he hadn't realized how tripped up doing so would make him. Not wanting to alert Snape even more to the emotions he held just beneath the surface, Harry forced himself to not fidget. Still, he was aware the Potion's Master was studying him in a far more interested light.

"He appeared well, as far as I could discern," Snape said neutrally. "It wasn't exactly an afternoon tea party in which I could enquire about his health."

Harry felt an actual smile curl the corners of his mouth at Snape's snarky comment—trust him to never change. "No, I suppose it probably wasn't." He paused. "If you see him again, tell him I said 'hello', if…if you don't mind, that is, sir."

Snape's eyes bore into his for a moment, and then he slowly nodded. "Fine," he said tautly.

Another small smile crossed Harry's face as he nodded at Snape. "Thank you," he said, genuinely grateful. With one last nod in Harry's direction, Snape looked back down at the assignments he was grading (doodling on) and, seeing the dismissal, Harry turned and left the classroom, feeling a little better than he had before.

A little over two weeks later, Snape called for Harry to stay after class. Fretfully, Harry waited while the other students cleared out, some giving him pitying looks because it was Snape's class and nothing good ever came from staying after. Harry didn't think he'd done anything that warranted a detention or anything (because, despite their newfound truce, Snape was still an irritable, children-can't-do-anything-right kind of professor) so Harry concluded it must be something relating to Tom that made Snape request him to stay.

Once the last student had left, Harry approached the man's desk, hands wringing themselves together in tension.

"You wished to speak with me, sir?"

"Yes," Snape said crisply, his fingers idly drumming a tattoo on his desk top. "I gave him your… message," Snape finally said after having to search for the term he deemed proper.

"Oh?" Harry said, casually, forcing his hands to stop strangling their own blood supply. "Um, thank you, sir. Did he…say anything?"

Snape arched a black brow, clearly displaying that he didn't quite understand the proceedings, but would go along with them nonetheless for the moment. "He sends his regards."

"Oh," Harry said again, and tried not to look either disappointed or happy, because in all honesty he wasn't sure which he was to begin with.

"He also would like you to be present whenever I am to relay information and progress reports to the Headmaster, and…regrets that he hadn't thought of it sooner. He decided neither you nor the Headmaster could be kept out of certain things, especially if things are to proceed smoothly," Snape finished, eyeing Harry shrewdly.

Harry's face alighted in shock, though he attempted to keep it muted. His indecision from before was gone, and he definitely decided that he was not disappointed. He had worried that what happened between him and Tom would ruin everything else, but it seemed that Tom wouldn't be cutting him off. It gave Harry hope that Tom didn't completely despise him, at least…

After the few seconds it took to compose himself, Harry cleared his throat and smiled excitedly.
"That's great. I would really appreciate it, sir, if you told him 'thank you', if you ever get the chance. And, uh, I hope you don't feel like a messenger, or something," he said awkwardly when he realized just who he was asking the favor from. Nevertheless, he looked hopefully at the Potion's Master, uncaring if he looked like a big-eyed puppy.

"Oh, don't bother, Potter," Snape grumbled, though he seemed more resigned than angry. "I've been the 'messenger' to a sadistic megalomaniac and a barmy old codger for more years than I care to think of. Next to them, you are more of a reprieve than anything," he said snidely. Harry grinned widely at that, making the man's mouth turn to a sneer as he waved his hand in Harry's direction in a shooing motion. "Get to your next class, brat, and be sure to go to the Headmaster's office tonight at eight."

"Thanks, professor!" Harry called out as he turned and fled, feeling lighter than he had in weeks. He was thinking that, perhaps, things might be alright.

It was late, and Harry was tired. He had been ensconced in one of Gryffindor's big, squashy chairs for much of the night, reading the book someone had left in his stack of textbooks one night while he was in the library. One might have said Harry would be paranoid, after previous experience with strange books finding their way into his hands, but this one seemed innocent enough. The Tales of Beedle the Bard the cover said, a simple, immobile illustration of a wizard beneath the title. Ron had seen him with it, and had exclaimed reminiscently how his parents used to read it to him all the time. Harry had a hard time after that being cautious of a children's book. He decided to read it, wondering if the stories inside would have been a favorite of his as a child had his parents been around to read it to him. Now that the book was finished, Harry was considering heading to bed, not knowing that sleep would yet be far to come.

"What the bloody hell?"

Swiveling his head around, Harry glanced towards the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room where a sudden commotion was coming from. A boy he recognized as a Fourth Year was standing in front of the portrait hole, appearing as if he was arguing with someone on the outside. Looking at the clock on the mantel, Harry double checked that it was well past curfew; it being a Friday night (now Saturday morning) and nearing a mid-month sweep of projects, practicals, and exams being the reasons why so many students were still up. Perhaps it was somebody's sweetheart, trying to sneak into the dorms, not an uncommon occurrence. Harry was about to turn away in disinterest, when the younger Gryffindor was suddenly shoved back and a slim figure pushed their way past the threshold and into the Common Room.

It was Draco Malfoy.

From among the Gryffindors, shocked gasps and shouts of outrage were let loose as they noticed the blond intruding on their territory. That Fourth Year Malfoy had shoved past was now leaning and tugging on the older boy's arm, valiantly trying to remove him from the Gryffindor house. Draco hardly noticed, his eyes frantically searching the room as he merely jerked his arm away.

"Harry Potter! I need to see him!"

Setting his book aside, Harry stood, effectively getting Malfoy's attention. The boy's eyes widened in relief and he practically scammed over to his childhood rival, dodging any attempts the Gryffindors made to grab ahold of him. When he got to Harry, he latched onto the other boy's arm and started dragging him back to the entrance portal. Lady hissed a bit at the rough treatment as Harry stumbled to keep upright against the unexpected force tugging at his body.
"Malfoy! What…?"

"No time for talk, you've got to come with me," Draco spouted frantically, the tone of his voice prompting Harry to follow dutifully along, a bit shocked at the Slytherin Prince's actions. He had actually broken in to the Gryffindor Common Room after curfew to get to him, so obviously there was something important going on.

"Wait, Harry, you're just going to go with him?"

Glancing over his shoulder, Harry waved his hand at Ron, who was deep into a chess game with sleepy Seamus, who seemed unable to comprehend the misfit blond invading the Tower, let alone a chess match. "It's fine, don't worry," Harry said complacently. Well, he wasn't actually positive if things were fine, but if Draco wanted to do something to him he wouldn't have revealed himself to so many witnesses, right?

Once out in the hallway with the portrait shut behind them, Malfoy let go of Harry's arm and started pacing back and forth in front of him, muttering under his breath, his fingers clenching and unclenching in anxiety.

"Malfoy, will you just tell me what it is?" Harry snapped, irritated that he'd been dragged outside by a possibly insane Slytherin.

When Draco stopped and pulled out his wand, Harry stiffened and moved to grab his own, but halted his actions when the blond simply threw up a Privacy charm. And then Draco finally began to speak.

"There’s going to be an attack. Tonight." Draco scowled exasperatedly at Harry's "so what?" face. "At Hogwarts!" Draco particularized sharply.

Harry could feel his face go slack in shock. "What?"

There was a slight sheen of sweat on Draco's forehead as he started rambling and shifting from foot to foot. "You have to tell Dumbledore, Potter! I don't know when they're coming, I only know it's tonight."

"Wait, why can't you tell him?" The thought crossed Harry's mind that Draco was having one over him, and he studied him suspiciously. Still, he could feel himself growing on edge by the seemingly genuine anxiety the other boy radiated.

"I can't," the blond said desperately. "I'll be expelled, probably thrown into Azkaban because I was the one to fix it and then accidentally let it slip to Crabbe and Goyle who told their fathers who told a few other people and now they're on the way here and I didn't even know those two could read let alone write a letter or have the brains to do a favor for themselves—"

"Draco!" Harry hissed, snapping the blond out of his yammering. "Try to make sense, please. What is happening?"

"I told you, there's going to be an attack on Hogwarts…tonight," the boy stated, frustrated, but a little more coherent.

"How?" Harry demanded to know.

Draco swallowed visibly. "The Vanishing Cabinet, in the Room of Requirement. I...I fixed it this year, in case it would come in handy one day. My father told me that if I wanted to earn the Dark Lord's favor, I would have to prove my worth to him. Last year, after we discovered your little band
of child warriors”—Harry scowled at that—"in the Room of Requirement, I went back and inspected it later. That's when I found the Vanishing Cabinet. I recognized it because its twin is in Borgin and Burke's. If I fixed it, it would serve as a connection for anyone who wished to get into Hogwarts. It…it was my secret project, but I may have told Crabbe and Goyle about it," Malfoy finished mumbling, shifting from foot to foot as he faced Harry.

Harry's expression was growing colder and colder. "You told those idiots how someone could get into Hogwarts?"

"I—I was bragging, I suppose. They planned to get marked, too, but I didn't know they'd tell their fathers, or that their fathers would want to use it as a means to steal the credit that should have gone to me!" Draco defended. "No one was supposed to know…If it's not under the Dark Lord's orders, no one would dare try anything."

"Nobody stupid enough would dare, you mean." Mostly that was true, but Harry knew it may be more than that. "Why would they want to risk it?"

Draco's teeth worried at his bottom lip in an uncharacteristic break of Pureblood cool. "You should know! The Dark Lord has been…strange. He underwent a massive reorganization of the ranks, where some people benefited, and others didn't. Crabbe and Goyle's fathers were the latter of those two groups. They wish to reinstate themselves in the Dark Lord's favor, believing they had done something to displease him. I found out about it when the two brutes' sons left a letter explaining the plan out on one of their beds, with the two of them missing."

Harry grimaced, and rubbed his palm over his face in vexation. "So, a bunch of Death Eaters are coming here tonight because they think it would please the Dark Lord?"

"And to steal the credit from the Malfoy family!" Draco huffed, and then winced when Harry shot him a glare. "What? It's true! They're jealous that my father is still highly ranked, and that I am sure to follow," the blond boasted. "Among the Death Eaters, it's a competition to see who can rank the highest." Harry rolled his eyes.

Harry had learned much regarding Tom's campaign at the meetings with Snape and Dumbledore. Tom, it seemed, had weeded out his ranks once he regained control a few months back. The ruthless wizards or witches of his Inner Circle or upper echelons who had no useful skills save blind murder and destruction had been demoted, per se, though it was more like they were given their own division. This new group was often left out on the secrets of Tom's political play, especially regarding Emrys Aleron. That was the privilege of a different set of people. Snape and Lucius Malfoy were part of the few that were more privy to the higher plans and motives, along with politically-minded and levelheaded wizards or witches who were subjected to Unbreakable oaths of secrecy, but for the most part Tom kept much to himself.

Emrys Aleron, to those who were deemed trustworthy, was a wizard cavorting with the Light side but secretly was an ally to the Dark. He was under the Dark Lord's influence, and it was he who was at the center of much of Voldemort's plans. Of course, no one, save for Snape and Lucius, knew that the Dark Lord was Emrys Aleron. Tom, for the most part, still cavorted around in his Voldemort guise for the majority of Death Eater meetings. Everything had to be carefully constructed and told to only the right people to ensure sensitive plans weren't ruined by any idiots unwelcoming of the changes present in the Dark.

The downside of all the secrecy, however, was the fact it was a secret. The uninformed, such as the supposed group planning on invading Hogwarts, had no idea that what they were doing was unnecessary and pointless. In the old campaign, though, taking Hogwarts would have been a great victory.
But now, it was, quite notably, a Very Bad Thing.

"Draco, you prat, this could put everyone in danger! Who cares if you were the one to let it slip, you should have gone straight to Dumbledore!"

"I almost did, but…I thought that maybe you'd be able to tell…to tell the Dark Lord as well," he said, voice quivering. Harry hid his own wince; he hadn't contacted Tom himself in over a month. "He could stop them before they get here," Draco insisted. "I just found out, Potter…if I'd known…" Draco huffed, clearly frustrated. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"We don't know when they're getting here, and I don't know if I can warn him in time," Harry said, hands fisting into his hair. Internally, he cursed the fact that McGonagall had an emergency somewhere, and she wouldn't be expected back until the end of the weekend. He would have gone to her first, but that wasn't an option now and he had to figure out something else to do.

"Come on," he suddenly said, grabbing hold of Draco's arm in an opposite configuration of what they composed earlier. He snapped the password to the Fat Lady's portrait, dragging Draco back inside the Gryffindor Common Room, ignoring more shocked gasps and confused whispers.

"Let me go, Potter!" Draco ordered, shaking his arm in an attempt to throw Harry off.

"Uh-uh, no way, you're coming with me. We're going to talk to Dumbledore."

"But Dumbledore's not up here! You're wasting time!"

"No," Harry opposed, "I'm saving time. Trust me." He led Draco into his Dorm room, knowing that Neville and Dean, who were both sleeping, had noise canceling charms and would not hear them. Harry steered Draco to his bed where he dropped the other boy's arm and proceeded to dig frantically through his trunk. He pulled out the Marauder's Map, quickly pulled his wand free from his pocket and tapped the parchment, incanting the passphrase for the Map's magic.

"Bloody hell," Draco whispered once Hogwarts' blueprint showed up on the Map, "That's how you do it." Harry ignored him, though, unfolding the charmed parchment and spreading it across his bed.

"Here, help me look for Dumbledore. His name will show up somewhere, and then we'll know where to find him."

Knowing Dumbledore's habits, the man could be anywhere if it happened to be a night he fancied a stroll around the castle. Together, Harry and Draco searched the Map, eye roving over the paper for Dumbledore's name. Ever since Draco told him of the attack, Harry had felt a sense of urgency coiling in his stomach, and he felt sick with it.

"Ah, there!" he suddenly exclaimed shortly after they started looking, his finger stabbing the parchment next to Dumbledore's name. "Good, he's just in his office." In typical Hogwarts curiosity, the entrance to the Headmaster's Tower had conveniently moved to the Seventh Floor recently, the same floor the Fat Lady's Portrait was on and thus it wasn't too far from the Gryffindor House.

There was a knock on the Dorm room door. "Hey Harry? Did you kill the bloody git or are you just holding him hostage?" The door swung open and Ron peeked his head through. Malfoy took two threatening steps toward him.

"Why you—"
"He's a hostage."

"Hey!"

Harry stood quickly and grabbed a hold of Draco's bicep again. "I'll just be taking him to Dumbledore, now."

Draco's face screwed up comically. "Were you not listening to me, Potter? I said I can't go."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You worry too much." He turned to Ron. "I'm not sure how long I'll be gone."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Ron gave Draco an overt stink eye, and the blond in turn deepened his scowl. "I don't trust him."

Harry waved his free hand dismissively. "No, I'll be fine. You should stay here." 'You know, in case there's a Death Eater attack,' Harry mentally added. He would prefer no one else got involved. "Let's go, Malfoy." He tugged on the surly boy's arm, forcing him to stumble forward.

Ron's brow was furrowed, probably knowing Harry wasn't telling him the whole truth, but called out to Harry's back, "If you do something stupid, don't expect me to defend you from Hermione."

Harry saluted him in acknowledgment. "Gotchya. See you in a bit."

"You're a bloody menace, Potter," Malfoy complained as Harry dragged him back down the steps. "I shouldn't have even warned you, and let the Death Eaters deal with your arse." Harry ignored him.

It was quite late, but nobody tried to stop Harry as he made his way through the Common Room, especially with Malfoy in tow. He and Draco left through the Portrait Hole for the second time that night.

"When do you think they're coming?" Harry asked as he led a sullen Draco Malfoy towards the Headmaster's office, never relinquishing the hold he had on Draco's robes to make sure he didn't run away.

"I don't know. Probably when everyone is asleep."

Harry, sensing Draco wasn't exactly in the mood for further conversation, grunted once and then fell silent. Their footsteps echoed down the empty corridors, and sleeping portraits snored in their frames. What worried Harry was the fact the Room of Requirement was on the Seventh floor, also, though in a castle the size of Hogwarts it left some buffer should the invaders get it. Still, it was too close for comfort.

As they were about to round the corner into the corridor with the Gargoyle statue, Harry remembered that Draco was a Prefect and likely knew the password to get into Dumbledore's office.

"Hey, Malfoy—"

"Stupify!"

Ducking reflexively, Harry fell back around the corner, inadvertently leaving Draco in the line of fire. Harry escaped the spell, but Draco did not, and fell heavily against Harry. Harry yelped in surprise and fell against the wall to steady himself. Quickly and not exceedingly gently, he let
Draco fell to the ground and pulled out his wand.

Hearing heavy footsteps coming his way, Harry quickly threw his Invisibility Cloak over himself and tried to even out his breathing so he wasn't heard. He had a pretty good idea who had just sent that stunner that hit Malfoy. And so, when Greg Goyle came into view, Harry wasn't surprised. Having been only able to see the stunned blond, Goyle was unprepared when Harry shot at him his own stunner, dropping the large Slytherin easily.

Harry flipped the Cloak back over his head and cast a *Rennervate* at the unconscious Draco, who immediately sat up before groaning and holding his head. His eyes trained on his unconscious housemate and he groaned again.

"Goyle stunned me!" He sent an angry glare at Harry. "You used me as a shield, you tosser."

"Oh, did not," Harry responded, though his attention to the blond was only halfhearted. It wasn't a good sign that Goyle had been here right now. With a sense of dread, Harry pulled out the Map again to check it, afraid of what he might find.

"Fuck," he cursed, eyes focused on the dozen or so names appearing just outside what Harry knew to be the unplotted Room of Requirement. Slamming his eyes shut, Harry exploded across the link he and Tom shared, breaking through the barrier between them in his haste in order to slam into Tom's mind. He could feel the tax the distance put on the link, but he persisted as sweat spontaneously broke out on his brow. Feelings of Tom flooded his senses, and he momentarily felt the flare of his rocky emotions regarding the man, but he pushed that aside in order to send Tom a message.

'Tom! Death Eater attack at Hogwarts! Come if you can!'

That was it. That was all the time and energy Harry could sacrifice. He knew Tom had received the message, but he couldn't wait for any reply right now. He pulled himself back into his own mind and opened his eyes again.

"We have a problem."

"Please don't say it, Potter," Draco beseeched as he scrambled to his feet.

"Okay, I won't," Harry said, still looking at the Map. "Malfoy, you need to warn Dumbledore right now. You know the password, so it should be easy for you to get into his office."

Draco frowned at him. "Why does it sound like you're not coming with me?"

"Because I'm not."

Draco eyed him shrewdly before coming to the conclusion, "You're going out there as bait, aren't you? Distract them until the Aurors or whoever the hell gets here."

"Yup."

"Why?" Draco asked incredulously. "They can't get into Dumbledore's Office without the password, let alone if Dumbledore doesn't want them to. Why bother?"

Harry sighed. "What makes you think they are only after Dumbledore? If they can't get to him and didn't know I was safe in his office, who do you think the next person they'd want to get at would be?"
Draco seemed to think a moment, and Harry gave him an incredulous look, and the blond's face in turn brightened as the answer came to him.

"Oh right, you."

"Yes, me," Harry said dryly. "It would put the other students in danger if they tried to get into Gryffindor Tower."

Draco scoffed. "Yes, knowing you Gryffindors, more than one of you would try for the heroics."

"Draco, they are getting closer. I suggest you shut up and get a move on."

The blond boy's face was blanched white, despite his act of bravado and haughtiness. "Right—warn Dumbledore." He took two steps forward before pausing again and looking back at Harry. "Please don't get yourself killed, Potter…I have a feeling more than one person would be out for my blood after that."

"Glad to know your self-preservation skills are intact," Harry noted.

"As if your utter lack of self-preservation skills will do you any better," Draco mumbled as he walked hurriedly away, wand out. "I hope you have a plan." Harry had to smile slightly at that, but only briefly before something occurred to him and he raced after the retreating blond.

"Hey wait." Before Draco could even turn around, Harry snatched his wand away from him, causing Draco to make a loud sound of protest.

"What are you doing?"

"I do have a plan," Harry semi-lied, "and it involves this." He waved the dark-wood wand in the air while the Malfoy heir glared threateningly at him.

"You're going to cast some illegal spells with it and blame it all on me, aren't you?" he hissed angrily, making a swipe for his wand.

Harry signed in impatient exasperation. "I'll wipe it clean." Draco, though, lunged again for the compensated wand, but Harry pulled it away. "Please, Malfoy," Harry implored, stepping backwards. "There's not much time left…get to Dumbledore now. I have it under control," Harry said under a façade of confidence. When Draco still didn't move, Harry pointed his stolen wand at him. "Run."

That got the blond moving. Harry watched him hurry down the hallway, while Harry turned to face the other way he knew the Death Eaters would be coming from. He checked the Map again to find their position, and estimated he had only three minutes before they got to him. Taking his bottom lip in between his teeth, Harry slipped into a shadowed alcove and pressed his back against the stone wall.

:Master, what's going on?: Lady hissed into his ear, her tongue waving madly in the air as she tried to sense the danger causing her Master's emotions. Harry titled his head a bit so he could see her out of his peripheral vision. Just moments earlier, a bizarre thought—that clearly indicated he'd gone mad—had come to him and resulted in his borrowing Draco's wand.

:Lady, would you obey me no matter what?:

:Of course, Master.: the snake responded immediately. :You're my Master.:
Lady pulled back, confused. :I don't—:

A pause, and then, :I swear on my Magic: After a pause, she mumbled, :Silly, strange Master:…:

It was a crazy idea, incredibly risky, foolish, and a whole lot of other adjectives. But he needed help, and he hadn't wanted to risk any of his friends' lives. Gritting his teeth in decided determination, Harry hissed at Lady to uncoil from his shoulders. She did so readily, and Harry set her on the floor in front of him.

Harry hesitated only a moment. :Remember your vow.: Pulling out his wand, he pointed it at his Transfigured companion.

:Finite Incantatum,: he intoned, willing his Parselmagic to cancel the strong magic Tom had put on her earlier.

Tom cursed under his breath as he scratched another line out of the addendum he was attempting to compose. Irritably, he threw the quill down on his desk and turned the paper to ashes with a flick of his wand in his fit of pique. It was the third one that night he'd done it to. Closing his eyes to try and rein in his temper, Tom deliberately set his wand down on the desk so he wouldn't be tempted to go destroy other things.

He told himself it was the Death Eater meeting earlier that night which had set him on such an edge. It wasn't wrong to say this; his followers had been particularly insufferable that night, and more than a couple of them had felt the brunt of his displeasure. But really, he couldn't blame the idiots.

Tom sat back in his seat, though if anyone were to ask, it certainly wasn't in defeat. He was just… acknowledging the fact his mind wasn't on the task he was trying to complete.

How could it be, when all his mind wanted to think about was Harry Potter?

It was all-encompassing, this continued mental referral to the boy, and he was completely unprepared for it. Harry was the puzzle he could never complete, the mystery he could never solve. He fascinated, vexed, and drove Tom to the brink of his limits. It was almost…unfair, because Tom had no precedence on dealing with such a person.

Their last conversation was the most frequent thing he focused on.

When Tom first faced the fact that he only had one Horcrux in the form of a mortal human wizard, it had caused some concern. Perhaps the death of Harry wouldn't have equaled the death of the Horcrux, but if it did, it would have been incommodious—a problematic flaw in his lifetime ambitions. Immortality had always been a goal of his, for one reason or another. One of the only benefits of that Halloween night many years ago had been the solid proof that his Horcruxes had kept him in the planes of existence. He hadn't died that night, not really. He had successfully cheated death. The price of multiple Horcruxes, however, had been steep—and more so than he initially realized.

The original solution he came up with had been simple: he would just have to come up with a traditional, inanimate vessel and make a second Horcrux with it. Problem solved.
But that didn't happen. He simply couldn't do it.

Getting his soul back had taught Tom a great deal. Mostly, a single-minded, delusional madman would not be able to conquer the Wizarding world. The healing of his soul had changed him, the return of his sanity being the obvious dissimilarity, but it was the unexpected innovations that made the real difference.

He couldn't make another Horcrux...he couldn't tear his soul. He didn't even try, but not of his own volition. His mind was willing, but it was the only thing that was.

It wasn't his ability to kill that had been hindered, though perhaps his conscious made itself evident at times...executions were kept cleaner, quicker, and more thought into whether it should or should not occur. Murder wasn't the problem...it was memory.

As if Tom's soul remembered how it felt to be split, it quivered and recoiled from even the thought of going through the ritual once again.

It was unfathomable. The very essence of himself was horrified at the prospect of breaking itself to pieces, of trapping itself in a cold, unfeeling object for eternity, to wait in darkness for the chance to be reunited with its whole. It put Tom's fear of death to shame, an irony not lost to him—it was the Horcruxes, after all, which he made in the first place to save himself from death.

He didn't know what to do. His magic actually turned on him if he picked up a chosen object, zapping his hand and forcing him to drop the intended vessel.

The problem was esoteric. There was nothing he could do to fix it...he was the problem. He had mutilated his own soul, had whittled it down to almost nothing, and when he got a second chance with it, it hadn't gone unaffected. It chose to protect itself, and wasn't that a strange conundrum, because its biggest enemy was Tom himself, and Tom was his soul and his soul was Tom. So really, though he may think he did, Tom, at his core, did not want to make any further Horcruxes. It was hard to argue with one's self.

It stirred Tom up until there were times he felt like two people, and not just Tom Riddle or Lord Voldemort. Or maybe that was it and he was simply having a harder time than he imagined finding himself. Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort, Emrys Aleron...which persona was the truth? Perhaps it was inevitable that he'd be confused at one point or another, what with the many faces he'd chose to show people. Tom's soul may be intact again, but he was still piecing himself together.

It wasn't long before Harry's mortality crossed Tom's mind. He toyed with the idea extensively. There was something that appealed to him about it...and then something that appalled him. Frustrations abounded, first with his own soul, and then with the vacillation over Harry's that he couldn't comprehend the reason for. It was such an odd idea—a Horcrux with its own Horcrux.

Tom left for Hogwarts for the interview with Rita Skeeter still undecided if he should even ask it of Harry, and hadn't even intended to bring it up just yet. He should have stuck with his original plan, but then he hadn't expected to get thrown into the deep end with one look into resplendent green eyes.

That February night, while they were together, Harry's mind had opened up to his. Tom had felt Harry's emotions, coupled with the sensations from his body as the young wizard had clung to Tom as if he never wanted to let go.

Tom witnessed the love Harry felt for him that night...an emotion unlike any he'd ever experienced himself, and suddenly his world changed again. He'd felt the feeling from Harry before, that time
at the Ministry, but then it had *hurt*, and wasn't all for *him*, and he hadn't been able to withstand it. Not this time. In that moment, Tom hadn't wanted it to stop.

Tom now knew why so many had fallen victim to the emotion. The *temptation* of it, to wrap himself in the feeling, to do whatever it took to do so. The yearning, and hot, burning want of it. Harry Potter's love had more impact than he ever could have thought possible.

It overwhelmed Tom…and it would have been a lie if it didn't frighten him. It was an addicting, dangerous emotion—something one could get lost in.

The spoken admission, said aloud by the boy later, had thrown Tom off-kilter even further.

*No one had ever said that to him before…*

He wasn't infallible. It was greed. Greed and an overwhelming desire to have everything he'd ever wanted: power, immortality, and *Harry Potter*. Once it was the boy's death he valued, but now it was his life. The trouble with his own inability to create a second Horcrux and ensure his immortality would be obsolete if Harry only ensured his own precaution from death. Harry had never been anybody's but Tom's, and would be his forever.

Tom had been so focused, so assured that things would go his way that he hadn't noticed the strange look in the boy's eyes, and the distant, pained expression. He couldn't see his…mistake. Yes, he realized that now. He *knew* Harry wouldn't agree to it. But in that moment, he didn't care, because he *would* get what he wanted.

It was arrogance and a flawed sense of the world which made him believe that since Harry loved him, he would be willing to do anything for him. Tom's impression of love had always been that it turned the bearer into a mindless creature, bound to the emotion and a victim to its whims—granted, that came from a bias assumption. But Harry proved Tom wrong. He had thought that Harry would have been compelled to sacrifice a tiny portion of his soul for the one he loved.

Harry said no.

Tom had been angry, and frustrated. Did Harry not say that he *loved* him? So why didn't he show it? Bitter resentment had roiled within Tom's chest, along with an old revulsion. Love was useless, then, after all.

Then why did he, later, still find himself craving it? Why would he dream of Harry's touches, of his soft words, of his smiles? Once again, his soul disagreed with what his mind thought was best… no, worse than that, because even his mind couldn't let go of the boy.

It had taken Tom a long time afterwards to finally admit to himself how *hurt* he had been when Harry had refused. And he'd handled it badly. Harry had come to matter to him…and that was the problem. Tom realized he'd made himself vulnerable to that pain, and then fell victim to it. He had never been able to associate himself with others, to put himself in their place—everything had always only been about himself—and perhaps because he was unused to doing so, it had taken him so long to see through Harry's eyes and fully comprehend what he'd done to the young wizard…his precious Horcrux…his Harry.

Harry had made himself vulnerable as well. He had given more to Tom than Tom had given in return, even. How would he be feeling any different than Tom? While Tom had felt betrayed, he suspected that Harry had as well.

He had regretted immediately telling Harry to leave, but he'd let him go anyway. He knew he had
been too worked up, still, too likely to make brash assessments. He needed to get away, to clear his mind, and rethink...everything. Only Harry Potter had the ability to look upon his very psych and force Tom to see himself in different ways. Harry's unbearable comparison to his Muggle father had made Tom physically ill by how much he was abhorred by the thought, and a fair blow considering his comparing Harry to Merope Gaunt only a few moments earlier. Perhaps Tom couldn't stand the notion because of how perilously close to the truth it fell.

Even when his anger cooled to nothing, Tom didn't contact Harry. He didn't know quite what he wanted to say to him. He still hoped that maybe Harry would change his mind, and the thought stilled him into inaction. He focused on his operations, which were, for once, going incredibly well.

And then, one day, Snape had given him a message from Harry.

Such a small thing...*Hello.*

It had the power to make Tom feel ashamed of himself, and what a feat that was. Inexplicable. But how could it not make him ashamed, when he personally was throwing away the thing that he had been cheated of all his life? Nobody had cared for him like Harry did. Tom was just coming to comprehend how much of a human heart he truly had...how it still desired the things he had once given up on.

:*Master?:

:*In here, Nagini,: Tom called out sibilantly, beckoning to his familiar. The large viper's familiar head appeared in the doorway, and she slithered along the floor until eventually ever last inch of her twelve foot length had slipped into the room. Instead of curling up in her usual spot by the fire, she chose to climb up and over Tom's shoulders, her extensive size forcing her to wrap her bottom half around the legs of the chair her Master sat on. She bumped her head into Tom's arm, demanding affection, and Tom automatically raised his hand to scratch at her chin. Nagini hissed in delight.

:*You smell stressed, Master,: the snake said after a time, slightly reproachfully and sounding like a mother. Tom sighed.

:*It can't be helped, my dear,: Tom picked his quill up, and wrote a few words on the fresh page before him.

:*Harry Potter could help. When is he coming back?:

The tip of Tom's quill froze midair as his hand stilled, surprised by Nagini's statement and question. Withholding his initial impulse to say Harry Potter most certainly did not ease his stress, and clearly only added to it, Tom asked Nagini demurely, *:Why do you wish to know?:

:*I like him. He made you happy,: It was noticeably difficult to swallow after that remarkably simple statement, so blunt and powerful in its straightforwardness. *Harry made him happy.* It had all the more impact because, in that moment, Tom knew that it was the nothing more than the truth. Harry Potter had the ability to reach into him, to distract him from the heavy-handedness of bitter pasts and tumultuous futures, to find the person he hadn't known he was capable of being. No one, single person had ever been more significant to Tom than that particular green-eyed wizard.

"Yes, he does..." Tom whispered.
He really had been so careless—and ungrateful. It was terribly recognizable now. For the first time in his entire existence, he had found someone that had grounded him into the fact that he was human, and that perhaps it wasn't the most abhorrent thing he thought it was. It was his saving grace. And how did he repay Harry? By demanding the one thing from him he had always known Harry would never be able to give.

Tom eventually saw why he had been so indecisive before about Harry making a Horcrux. The idea had appealed to him because then he would have that precious marvel for eternity, but then his traumatized soul couldn't bear the thought of forcing the one it admired for its purity to feel the same pain, to be spoiled. In a way, Tom was now bizarrely relieved that Harry had refused…it would have only further cemented in his mind his long-ago conclusions on love. But Harry wasn't truly a victim to it; he accepted and embraced it, but it didn't change who he was.

Perhaps it wasn't this horrible thing that should be avoided at all costs.

In fact, could it actually be that what Tom felt for Harry was—

'Tom! Death Eater attack at Hogwarts! Come if you can!'

Tom stumbled to his feet, knocking the chair out from under him and causing Nagini to slip abruptly from his shoulders with a strangled hiss as the doorway in his mind slammed shut once more.

Stress, indeed! Did that boy go looking for trouble, or did trouble just always find him? Tom had yet to decide.

:What is wrong, Master?: Nagini asked urgently, sensing her wizard's rising anxiety.

:I have to go.: He swept from the room, ignoring his familiar's questioning hisses. Tightly gripped in his hand, his wand glowed brightly at the tip as his magic surged forward in a rush to match the adrenaline pumped through his body by his rapidly beating heart.

He had anticipated some kind of trouble; it was only to be expected after the widespread reorganization of his ranks. It was the nature of his previous campaign that brought many the more unscrupulous witches and wizards to his side, and while fear kept most of them in check, it wouldn't be enough for everyone. There were those who flocked to him simply for the sense of power it bequeathed them, and in the past he had usually rewarded followers for any acts of opportunistic creativity.

Now that he thought about it, he remembered one of his followers just recently asking about his tentative plans he'd had concerning Hogwarts and Dumbledore's death from the beginning of the school year. He tried to remember what he had said—or what Voldemort had said.

"Those plans have been abandoned. There was too much complication and risk," he'd told the man—Pickety, if he remembered correctly.

"Master, what of Dumbledore?"

Tom had waved his hand absently. "I have different plans, Dumbledore will fall into my trap eventually." What the man didn't know was Dumbledore was already dying, and wasn't a problem anyway, not with Harry's help. Tom had expected Pickety to accept his statement, but the man had persisted further.

"Master, what if—"
At that point, Tom had grown impatient, and his wand had ended up pointed at Pickety. "I am very busy, and have no time to discuss this." Recognizing the threat, Pickety had bowed and left.

Tom should have listened to the man's further attempts for discussion, but he had not thought any further on the Death Eater's enquiry, even knowing the man was one of the more curiously odd ones.

It was Harry Potter's fault, of course, what with him being so damn distracting.

'Oh, this is so stupid,' Harry idly thought, watching as a brief flash of magic flared around the cobra on the floor. Oh, sure, he had made Lady promise upon the magic she didn't know that she had to obey him, but that may not mean a damn thing. He could simply be adding another rogue Death Eater to the halls of Hogwarts. Lady may call him Master, but it was quite possible Bellatrix Lestrange would rather choke on her own wand before she agreed to do anything Harry asked of her.

Ah, well, too late now!

The magic faded away, and Harry looked on as a very human Bellatrix pushed herself up slightly from the floor and glanced around in dazed confusion. Luckily for everyone involved, she was dressed in the same outfit she wore when Tom transfigured her all those months ago, preserved by the magic of the spell. Her wild hair frizzed around her face and fell in a dark cascade down her back.

Black, glittering eyes met Harry's.

Bellatrix moved her mouth, her lips forming words but her throat failing to make the sounds at first. She tried again, and managed to get out one, stilted word: "P-Potter?"

Pressing his lips into a thin line, Harry took a cautious step in her direction, watching carefully for her reaction. His wand was in his hand, but pointed down at the floor; he didn't want to threaten her into any untoward actions.

"Right at this moment, rogue Death Eaters are attempting to invade Hogwarts in a direct violation of the Dark Lord's wishes. I'm going to try and stop them, but I need your help. Will you give it?"

Harry was firm and direct to the point. Bellatrix, for her part, looked uncharacteristically lost and confounded, and Harry could almost see the cogs turning in her mind as she tried to comprehend her situation. Harry wondered how much she did and didn't remember, and how much her time as his "familiar" affected who she was now. Harry made no move to rush her, though his tense posture belayed how thin a veil his impatience was kept behind.

"Will you help me?" Harry asked again, eyes boring straight into Bellatrix's wild stare.

"I…will," Bellatrix finally said, her voice flat and a bit clumsy still, and almost confused at her own answer. "I will? Hmm, seems I have to," she mumbled strangely to herself. "I was ordered by…someone." She shook her head, glazed eyes clearing. Harry didn't know if it was the Dark Lord's order she remembered from just before he Transfigured her, or if it was his own, but he dared not question her.

The witch twisted her head around, taking a brief categorization of her surroundings, before she heaved herself to her feet. She staggered as she righted herself, one hand reaching out to press against the wall for support. Harry held his breath, still fearing to speak and break whatever spell that made Bellatrix agree to listen to him. Still leaning against the wall, Bellatrix held up her free
hand in front of her face, clenching and unclenching her hand and standing in rapt attention as she did so. Apparently satisfied, she let her arm fall to her side and rose to her full height, also taking her supporting hand away from the wall to tug on her skirts, straightening them. She gave Harry a haughty, slanting look that said, "Well? What are you still standing there for?"

"Eh, Potter? Who are these nasty, traitorous wretches that I get to tie up with their own innards?"

It seemed Bellatrix had recovered. Harry swallowed hard at the gleeful smirk she adopted as she outlined her intentions for the invaders. "Er, Crabbe and Goyle, seniors, for sure, but I'm not really certain who the others were." He hadn't recognized their names on the Map, and was too much in a hurry to stop and memorize them. He pulled out the charmed parchment and flipped through the folds until he found the section that named all the intruders. They were nearly to the Gargoyle's corridor now, and Harry felt sweat break out on his brow.

"Him," Bellatrix suddenly said, pointing at one particular name. *Jerande Pickety*. Harry had never heard of him before.

"Who is he?"

"Thinks himself to be important and always looking for grand opportunities to prove it," Bellatrix muttered contemptuously, and Harry had to bite his tongue to keep from saying, 'Sounds like you.' "Gryffindor, actually, and fancies himself to be the grand hero of the Dark Lord's. He's the brains of this sedition," Bellatrix answered Harry's question with. He frowned.

"How do you know? Crabbe and Goyle's sons were the ones to find the way into Hogwarts."

"Mmm, and knowing those two idiots, they were the ones to squawk to Pickety for them to have gotten this far. The Dark Lord was considering a break into Hogwarts earlier this year—"

"He was?" Harry squeaked, to his embarrassment. Bellatrix ignored him.

"—and Pickety was part of the group that would go. He was very excited about it...Dumbledore after all had a hand in sending his father to Azkaban in the first war, and ooh, wasn't he bitter about it! Anyway, Pickety loves throwing one over on the Light and Ministry whenever he can, and was disappointed when the Dark Lord chose to wait on Hogwarts. He's both smart and crazy enough to think something like this would work."

Harry's brow rose when *Bellatrix* made a comment about how crazy someone else was. Suddenly, the witch grasped Harry's shoulders and shoved him against the wall, bringing her face in close. Harry gritted his teeth and stared her down, heart thumping in his chest.

"You are telling me the truth about his, Potter? They must be stopped because my Master wishes them to be?" Her lips folded into a pout. "Master did say you were important." Her grip loosened, and she pet Harry's shoulders as if she was clearing his clothes of some dust.

"It's true. The Dark Lord has bigger, better plans than this." At least, Harry hoped Tom would want this to be stopped. Hogwarts was more or less already within his hands, with Dumbledore cooperating the way he was. Worried about how much time had passed, Harry glanced over Bellatrix's shoulder in the direction the invaders would come from.

Bellatrix must have noticed the look, because her smile widened so her less than perfect teeth, marred by her stint in Azkaban, showed as her lips pulled back over them. She suddenly slapped Harry smartly on his back, making him stumble forward a step. "This will be fun, Potter! Now, will I have to do this with my bare hands? But oh, I do so love a sharp knife...or any sharp object..."
"Er, no," Harry said, his face scrunched tightly. He reached into his robes and pulled out Draco's wand. "Here, it belongs to your nephew." He held the dark wand out to Bellatrix, and almost snatched it back at the all-encompassing delight that stretched across her mien. "Don't do anything unless I tell you to," he told her firmly. For a second, Bellatrix's eyes glared hotly with defiance, but then they mellowed out as a furrow marred the space between her brows. She nodded tamely, and wrapped her surprisingly dainty fingers around the handle of Draco's wand.

Harry watched her carefully for any sudden movements, body tense and ready for action should she do anything that called for it. Bellatrix, however, merely cackled and sent a pale yellow spell spiraling to the ceiling, singeing the stones slightly. Harry rolled his eyes and pulled out his Invisibility Cloak.

"Can you Disillusion yourself?"

"Of course," Bellatrix snipped, tapping her borrowed wand on her own head, and suddenly Harry had to concentrate really hard in order to get his eyes to focus on her.

"Brilliant," he breathed, and ducked under his cloak and disappeared entirely.

"Ooh, how very handy," Bellatrix said, seeming to be genuinely impressed. Harry gritted his teeth, and cast a Parseltongue silencing charm.

His eyes were on the Map, and to the new development he hadn't expected. "Dammit," he cursed under his breath. He turned to Bellatrix.

"Half of them are coming here, but the others are going in the opposite direction, I believe to Gryffindor Tower." Looking for me, is what he didn't say. "I think you should stay here, and I'll go after the others."

"How brave you are," Bellatrix teased as if talking to a young child. "Taking on big bad Death Eaters all by yourself. Don't let mommy know." She twirled her wand within the grasp of her fingers, and placed the tip against her lips. "Oops."

Harry controlled his temper. He made to take a step, but aborted that motion before it was executed. "Just so we're clear, we only want to capture them. No killing, got it?"

"Takes the fun out of everything," Bellatrix grumbled, sounding very put-upon.

Sticking the tip of his wand out from under his cloak, Harry cast a tripping jinx on the stone floor of the hallway, thinking that at least one of the pranks the Weasley twins had taught him would be put to good use.

"There—I'm sure you can find some enjoyment out of that."

Harry didn't wait to see her reaction as he slid out of the alcove and fled back down the corridor the way he'd come.

Dumbledore was only dozing, just having settled down into bed, when a chime went off signaling someone's use of the password to the stone gargoyle. Instantly on alert, the old yet still spry wizard stood up from bed, wand already in hand. He flicked it, and the outfit he had worn that day—a fetching sky blue, complete with floating clouds—settled once more around his body. A pounding on the downstairs office door quickened his steps as he hurried down the stairs from his bedroom. Down in his office, lights flared and Fawkes trilled at him questioningly.
It was young Draco Malfoy who stumbled in through the door when he opened it.

"Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore exclaimed softly. The poor boy was pale, with dark circles under his eyes and his breaths were escaping in hurried pants.

"Harry Potter's being an idiot, and you need to go help him," the blond stated in a rush. Indeed, Dumbledore didn't really expect that sort of thing to come from the young Malfoy's mouth, but the context of the statement perhaps didn't quite surprise him.

"Mr. Malfoy, come, sit down and tell me what's wrong."

But Draco only shook his head. "No, you don't understand, there's no time for that—"

Before Draco could explain more, the flames in the fireplace flared green and a disembodied voice called out, "Dumbledore, you incompetent fool! Let me through."

Now this was very curious. Suddenly Dumbledore found Draco Malfoy's warning to be even more serious than he'd thought, because it seemed Tom Riddle knew something he had yet to find out about, and it concerned him enough to get to Hogwarts. A quick drawing of runes into the air opened up the Floo channel. Tom didn't waste any time coming through the flames, though he drew up short when he saw the Headmaster and the young Malfoy heir already in the office. His red eyes settled on Dumbledore.

"Was I mistaken, or were your wards on Hogwarts supposed to keep out people with dangerous intentions?"

"They didn't go through the wards," Draco whispered, his hands nervously wringing themselves raw as he glanced fearfully up at Tom in such a way made the Headmaster suspect the boy knew exactly who stood before him. Tom's eyes gave him away. Dumbledore thought to offer him a lemon drop to calm his nerves, but feared there was little time for that.

Tom took a step towards the poor blond boy, and asked, "What do you mean by that?" The man suddenly swept his eyes over around Dumbledore's office, realizing something for the first time. "Where's Harry?"

"Mr. Malfoy here was just about to explain that, Tom," Dumbledore said, taking no offence to the dark glare Tom shot him, probably for the use of his birth name. Dumbledore never understood the aversion to it; Tom was such an easy name to say, rolling off the tongue quite easily. But that was neither here nor there. Besides, clearly his old student was quite worried for dear Harry. It really was quite endearing.

Tom's glance turned back to Draco, who seemed undecided between hiding behind Dumbledore's robes and ensuring his pride was intact. Really, Dumbledore wouldn't have condemned him for hiding, as Tom could be quite menacing for one as soft hearted as Draco Malfoy. The boy could never truly hide that aspect of himself from his Headmaster.

"Well? Where is he? What do you know?" Tom demanded of Draco. To help fortify the boy's courage, Dumbledore thought to pat the boy congenially on the shoulder.

"Go on, my boy. From what I can tell, time may be of the essence."

Draco wet his dry lips with his tongue before finally saying in nearly one breath, "Potter sent me to warn you, while he stayed behind to try and stop the Death Eaters that got into Hogwarts through the Vanishing Cabinet in the Room of Requirement."
Dumbledore was quite alarmed, but not surprised by the seriousness of the situation…he had expected it from all the clues he put together. Tom looked furious. Dumbledore figured he wasn't quite used to worrying about someone just yet. The Headmaster had to use his wand lock the door to his office to ensure Tom would stay just a bit longer and not storm out as he tried to, though he knew the man would be quite upset with him.

It hadn't ever occurred to the Headmaster that the war would end with Tom falling in love with Harry, and vice versa, but after living as long as he had these kind of surprises life throws out have become the highlight of his existence. Harry might have thought he'd concealed it from him, and Tom might have thought it didn't even exist, but Dumbledore wasn't fooled. Dare he say it, the thought of it often brought a satisfied smile to his face as he considered how wrong he had been—and thankfully so—when he thought Tom could never love. Ah, but at least he was right about it being Harry's greatest strength.

Of course, he was worried about how difficult things would be for the two, how complicated things would be, but he was a firm believer that those two were too stubborn and strong-willed to give up against opposition. In the end, he could do nothing but give them his blessing.

Dumbledore turned to his Phoenix familiar and told him, "If you would, Fawkes."

Fawkes sang a few notes of his favorite melody and flamed away, off to gather help. To Draco, Dumbledore said, "Stay here, my boy. When the others Floo in, tell them what you know and they will know what to do."

Giving the pale boy a reassuring smile and another solid pat on his shoulder, he silently directed him to one of the comfortable chairs he always had available for his visitors. He was aware there was much more to the story than the boy had shared just yet, but it was of little concern at the moment. Because Draco had come to him, Dumbledore would do all in his power to protect his student if need be.

On his desk, Dumbledore had a tiny silver gadget which he now laid his hands on. It was cylindrical and etched with runes, and when he twisted the top portion, he felt the wards around Hogwarts shudder as all the Houses were locked down and the alarm around the Castle raised. The Portraits had already filed out of their frames to give the rest of Hogwarts' occupants more detailed facts.

While he was completing his task, Dumbledore idly commented, "Tom, might I suggest you put your Glamours up?" It'd be easier to explain who he was if his face was familiar.

Tom slashed his wand, hissing something before the face of Emrys Aleron glowered in Dumbledore's direction at the momentary interruption of his trying to unlock the door. For all of magical talent he had, he never did think that simply asking for the door to "please open" would do the trick. Dumbledore had always valued the power of the polite word.

Dumbledore said the passphrase to unlock the spell on the door's lock, and it clicked cheerily open. He spared a glance at Tom. "Shall we?" The other man made a sound suspiciously like a growl as he filed past.

Dumbledore followed Tom's quick pace down the stairs, his mind as focused on the task ahead as he knew Tom's to be. The other man threw up a strong shield as the Gargoyle moved aside and they cautiously stepped out from behind it, not knowing what they'd find on the outside. The first thing Dumbledore thought was that the cackling laugh coming from just a few steps down the hall was awfully familiar. His next thought after they crept closer was how impressed he was by the amount of cloaked and masked figures lying on the ground.
"I had thought we might have been of use," Dumbledore contemplated aloud to himself. He was quite thrilled when he managed to make Tom snort in dry amusement as the man shot a pale-colored spell at a man, who dropped abruptly when it hit him square in the chest, quite unconscious. And hopefully not dead.

A feminine figure came out of the shadows, the woman laughing as she dueled with an unidentified man.

"Bellatrix Lestrange?"

"That brat is either incredibly smart or irreversibly stupid," Tom hissed. Bellatrix landed a spell on the person she was dueling, and he fell, writhing, to the ground. Now there was only Bellatrix standing, and five men on the ground. Despite the situation appearing under control, Dumbledore felt unease.

"Where is Harry?" It wasn't lost to him that he was repeating Tom's earlier question.

"Bellatrix!" Tom called out, causing the witch to fall into a low crouch, wand raised. The two gazed at each other for only a second or two, before a decidedly unsettling grin broke out over Bellatrix's face.

"My Lord!" she exclaimed, somehow recognizing him in his Glamours, and rather cheerfully if Dumbledore had to say, and practically skipped over the bodies littering the floor as she made her way towards them. When she got close, she bared her teeth at the Headmaster. "Dumbledore," she jeered, and said man only smiled. Bellatrix glowered at him and fell into a crouch before her Lord. Internally, Dumbledore clucked in distaste.

"Bellatrix, where is Potter?"

"My Lord, he—"

There was a crack and a folded letter appeared in front of Dumbledore's face. Calmly, he plucked it out of the air and opened it up. It was short and to the point.

"We have Harry Potter. Surrender yourself and he will live. You will be escorted to our location by the men outside your office."

Tom snatched the letter from Dumbledore's hand. "It seems they are unaware we are already informed," said Dumbledore. Tom flicked his wand and vanished the mask of the unconscious man at his feet. He examined the face revealed, scowling.

"The group split up. Potter went after the one headed to the Gryffindors," Bellatrix whispered, looking fearfully up at her Master as the fury rolled off him in waves. His jaw was clenched tightly, same with his fists, but still something possessed Dumbledore to lay a hand on the man's shoulder in comfort. Quick as a snake, the old wizard suddenly found a wand pointed at his chest, tip sparking, and despite the rush of adrenaline pouring through his veins, Dumbledore only smiled very softly in compassion.

"He'll be fine."

"I'll kill him myself if they don't," Tom proclaimed, though Dumbledore was not fooled.

"I think you'll find holding him close would be more satisfying."

Tom recoiled a bit, Glamoured brown eyes boring into the light blue one's Dumbledore had. His
lips parted, as if we was going to say something, but after a moment he changed his mind and his
lips closed firmly. Dumbledore dropped his hand from the man's shoulder, and Bellatrix looked
back and forth between them perplexedly.

With his wand still pointed at the Headmaster, Tom waved it in the air in a casual gesture. "You
know what they want. They called for your surrender. I suggest you comply."

Dumbledore agreed, because he knew if he didn't he'd be hogtied and dragged to them anyway.

"By all means," Tom's old Transfiguration professor said placidly. "Fawkes should have notified
the Aurors by now, and they will be here shortly. These men here," he said, gesturing at the bodies
on the floor, "shall be fine until then."

Dumbledore lead the way, his two unlikely companions following behind him, Disillusioned and
silenced.

It could be that he was walking to his death…he didn't know. He was more or less dead, anyway,
but he was optimistic that this wouldn't be his last night in his beloved school. But if it would save
Harry Potter's life, Dumbledore would gladly offer himself up.

The entrance to Gryffindor Tower was not far from his office, and soon enough he heard the low
rumble of voices, and particularly at one point a very familiar voice rising above the melee.

"Let me go! You're making a mistake," Harry Potter tried to warn, but a hissed order to be quiet
was the only response he got.

Calmly, Dumbledore tucked his wand up his sleeve. He was surrendering himself, after all, and
would not need it.

"Harry, it's alright. These men will find out soon enough what they've done."

Green eyes blinked sharply in the dim light. Each of Harry's arms was held by a different Death
Eater, who gripped the appendages tightly as the boy struggled to free himself. "Professor, don't
"

"It's alright, Harry," Dumbledore repeated. Only a few of the Death Eaters had their masks on,
prudently showing off their faces. Dumbledore focused on the man who seemed to be in charge. He
was only vaguely recognized by the Headmaster.

"Disarm him," the stranger said. Dumbledore felt a pang of dismay at that prospect. Surprisingly,
the Expelliarmus came from the young Mr. Crabbe, whom Dumbledore mourned his involvement.
The spell fell true as it hit him right in the chest.

Dumbledore felt his wand—the Elder wand—get ripped out from his sleeve, and watched it spiral
through the air and thunk into the temple of Vincent Crabbe. The boy bent hurriedly to pick it up,
and placed it in his outer pocket. The poor child had no idea what he'd just done.

"Where are the others?" someone in the shadows finally thought to ask, whispering it to the person
next to him. Many of the men, about seven in number, shuffled nervously at this observation.
Dumbledore smiled genially.

"It's a trick!" someone exclaimed, and now wands were all pointed at the Headmaster. Their attack
had been based on the element of surprise, and perhaps they were realizing they had somehow lost
it. Harry's eyes were trained sharply at something just over Dumbledore's shoulder, trying to peer
into the shadows. And then…he nodded. Dumbledore knew a voice had whispered something
within his mind, though he pretended he hadn't seen to avoid alerting the invaders.

Apparently Tom wasn't going to wait. Two powerful stunners hit the men on either side of Harry, allowing for the young wizard's release. Two others fell, while Harry, wandless, dived at the person nearest to him, the surprise and spry attack knocking the burlier wizard off his feet and to the ground, where his head cracked against the stones. Physically stunned as the person was, Harry was able to wrestle his wand away from him and pointed it at his captive's throat.

Harry had just disarmed Vincent Crabbe. Relief, and the sense of a fate exploded in Dumbledore's chest. He watched Harry jump as another man fell close to him, though not yet unconscious, which then spurred him to further action, with his hand fumbling to find the pocket he'd seen the younger Crabbe put his Headmaster's wand. Dumbledore appreciated the concern, but that wand would no longer work well for him.

Dumbledore could tell the moment Harry's fingers came in contact with the sometimes-labeled Deathstick, as the boy jerked his hand away and looked at it, appearing flabbergasted. Shaking himself, his hand returned to the wand and pulled it out, now holding one in each hand. Reaching out his own hand, Dumbledore summoned one of the fallen Death Eater's wands and cast an Incarcerous at the man on the ground who appeared to be trying to get up. Calmly, he approached his young student. Across the corridor, Tom was dueling the last two men, easily handling them with all the grace and talent he held. The Death Eaters hadn't been prepared to face their own Master, though they did not know it was he. The Headmaster was quite pleased that, for once, the man was working for the same goal as he himself, and with abject efficiency at that. Dumbledore wasn't sure where Bellatrix was, but assumed her presence here would be kept a secret.

"Harry, I'll take care of young Mr. Crabbe here." The dark-haired boy glanced up at him and nodded. He climbed to his feet, and held out the Elder wand to Dumbledore, trying to give it back to him. Dumbledore was about to say something, but many things happened at once before he could.

First, Tom sent one of the men he was dueling crashing into the other, sending them both tumbling to the ground near where Harry and Dumbledore stood. The spell from the man who got knocked into was sent astray, where it hit Dumbledore in the side. A blackened hand pressed into the wound, and came away tinged red with blood.

"Professor!" Harry took hold of Dumbledore's robes, helping the man stand upon his suddenly weakened knees. In that moment, the old wizard really felt his age. In his haste, Harry had dropped Crabbe's wand, though the Elder wand still remained in his palm—perhaps he instinctively knew how important it was. It was unfortunate that the wand he dropped rolled back towards the person it originally belonged to.

Vincent Crabbe picked up the wand. There was a flash, and Dumbledore feared the worse, but Harry was still standing, unharmed next to him.

"Tom," Harry breathed, and Dumbledore realized that a spell from the ex-Lord Voldemort had prevented Crabbe from doing anything. But it also distracted him from stopping the crouched leader of the group before he shot off a spell of his own straight at Tom's unprotected side. Dumbledore expected he would be able to shield himself in time, but it was well known that fear made people think irrationally. Harry called out Tom's name again, and his desperation was evident.

Suddenly, the boy was no longer by Dumbledore's side but in front of the spell. If he used his wand...a Protego...anything to help protect himself...
...but Harry didn't, and the spell engulfed him.

"No, Harry!" Tom cried, too late to stop him. He seemed...shocked. Dumbledore was also feeling a shaken. A suspiciously green curse flew from the tip of Tom's wand to hit the last offender, killing the man instantly. Dumbledore couldn't bring himself to care.

Tom was on Harry in an instant, crouched by his side and checking his life signs. From the shadows on the other side of the corridor, Bellatrix appeared as the Disillusionment fell from her body. She had dragged all the stunned and restrained Death Eaters to the other side of the hall. A staccato of footsteps echoed down the corridor, signaling the arrival of the authorities. Making a decision, Dumbledore pointed his borrowed wand at the witch and used his knowledge in Transfiguration to revert the spell held on her, and her body spiraled down until a cobra appeared in her place. It would be hard to explain her presence, and Dumbledore wasn't sure she deserved to be captured in payment for helping them today.

Harry still hadn't moved, and when the corridor was flooded with Aurors, Dumbledore closed his eyes tiredly.

Harry's sense of proprioception came back to him slowly. Pressure against his back told him he was lying on it, spread out on the ground. Everything was quiet. His eyes were closed, but bright light was shining through his lids until they fluttered open, and then Harry could see that the brightness was not from a light, but from the shock of all the white that surrounded him.

He was certainly not in the last place he remembered being, and logically, if that spell he took before he fell unconscious told him anything, he should probably be in the Hospital Wing. But he wasn't.

Well, shit...this must means he's dead. What else could this place be, other than some sort of afterlife?

'This sucks,' he thought.

Harry groaned softly and squeezed his eyes shut again. It was then that he felt something shifting on his chest, and it caused his eyes to snap open, much faster than before, in a startled reaction.

There was a face hovering over his. Harry's eyelids widened even further in amazement.

"Tom?" he croaked.

The pale cobra with bright, ruby eyes flicked out its tongue in response.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry's brows pulled together in quizzical concentration as he and the pale cobra stared at each other for a long, quiet moment.

"Tom?" Harry finally said again, slowly. The snake dipped its head in closer, and, in a strange show of affection for such a creature, began rubbing the sides of its face against Harry's cheeks and chin. Harry sucked in a breath as warmth spread through his mind in an array of images and emotions, wordless communication with no true, complete thoughts. He had little doubt where the foreign input came from. Quiet, nonsensical hissing, much like a cat's contented purr, reached Harry's ears as the snake continued to rub cool, smooth scales against his skin, the contact allowing for their minds to connect. Harry's hand came up and patted his chest, feeling the rest of the snake's body coiled above his heart.

"You're the Horcrux. You're his soul," Harry voiced in wonder, fingers gently trailing down the scales of the physical manifestation of Tom's soul to further confirm its solidity. In response, the snake pulled away and slithered its head down and around Harry's neck, wrapping itself securely around the wizard's shoulders and laying its chin next to Harry's throat. Harry was aware of a continued hum in the back of his mind, even more the contented purr than the sibilant sounds the snake-like Horcrux had made earlier. This was the origin of his and Tom's mind link.

"You're oddly adorable and cuddly," Harry told the Horcrux, which seemed to react favorably to his voice. "Don't tell him I said that, okay?"

Harry sat up, propping himself on his elbows to take a better look around. White white white. If this was what death was like, Harry could see it becoming boring very quickly.

"Do you know where we are?" he asked his companion, although he theorized he wouldn't be able to get much of an answer out of it. "Am I dead?" The question that had been on his mind since he'd first woken up fell from his lips with a quiver.

Underneath his palms, Harry felt the ground begin to tremble minutely, startling him. It would amuse him later when he recalled that his first thought in that moment was, 'Can mystical planes get earthquakes?'

Understandably concerned, Harry observed his surroundings once more. What had at first been white began to grey at the edges, like a dark storm cloud rolling in over the horizon. For some reason, that sent his heart rate skyrocketing. He didn't know why, but he was suddenly terrified. A high-pitching ringing began building within his ears.

Harry was briefly distracted from his fear when the Horcrux around his neck took that moment to tighten its grip, the input from its side of the link getting louder and louder. Eventually, that foreign presence in Harry's mind overwhelmed everything else. His fear fell even farther into the background as his mind raced down the familiar link, instinctively searching for a safe refuge to curl up in. Harry could see that it was better over here, lacking the ominous blackness that wanted to suffocate him from before. But it grew difficult to move farther way, like he was swimming through a viscous fluid flowing in the opposite direction, fighting for every forward movement. Harry grew exhausted, and giving up seemed more and more like the only option.
And then something found him. Relief that wasn't his own cradled him in protective warmth, guarding him from the fear licking at his heels. It soothed him as he curled up near it.

It felt like it lasted both an eternity and a second.

The rumbling had stopped, and while Harry would have liked to stay where he was, safe and warm, he allowed himself to be pushed away because the other presence insisted on it. And just like that, he stood once again in a crisp, white landscape, weary and a little bit dizzy. It was like nothing had happened here at all, and already the memory of it was fading. He still wasn't alone; he felt the Horcrux was still with him when it shifted against his shoulders.

He wondered what would happen now.

Something like a cool breeze caressed Harry's cheek, and he turned into it only to jump back when he unexpectedly came face-to-face with the dark silhouette of another individual. He hadn't seen the stranger approach and didn't know how he could have missed it, for the person stood as a stark shadow against the blinding white background, a smoky, hooded cloak completely obscuring everything but the vague shape of a body underneath. The person had a permeating presence, standing a mere arm's length away, and Harry stood frozen yet strangely indifferent. The Horcrux, however, tensed warily.

Without any warning or chance of comprehension, the figure pressed his palm against Harry's chest and was solidly shoving him backwards. Harry stumbled and lost his footing with his balance, gasping in surprise. He fell, and the soul-piece wound itself more tightly around his boy's shoulders as the edges of Harry's vision grew dark. The world blurred.

The next thing he knew, he was gulping in a huge breath of air, unaware he'd been holding it as his body jerked violently enough to crack against the hard floor he lay on. He tried to open his eyes, but he was just so tired…

"Harry…"

Harry barely registered the person calling his name before he once more succumbed to the peace of darkness, forgetting entirely the dark stranger and the touch of a cold, bony hand.

The next place Harry woke fully in was somewhere very familiar: the Hospital Wing. The air smelt of potions and cleaning solutions, and the sheets he was lying on were starched and pleasantly warm. A soft flittering of voices lulled him into a light doze, as he had yet to open his eyes, but the longer he waited, the more effort it seemed to lift his eyelids. What would more sleep hurt…

"I know you're awake. Open your eyes this instant."

Harry sighed and rolled onto his side irritably. Why couldn't Madame Pomfrey ever just let him be?

"Oh no you don't, Mr. Potter. Up you get, I've got a couple potions you need to take."

As if that was a better incentive to wake up. The potions always tasted nasty. But Harry resigned himself anyway, because past experience told him Madame Pomfrey fought dirty to get what she wanted.

He swore he heard a creak as he finally cracked his eyes open. They immediately pinched shut again, of course, because it was much too bright. Really, why did there have to be so many windows around? An impatient clearing of a throat prompted him to try again, more slowly. His
eyes watered, but soon enough adjusted to what he suspected was morning light.

Harry sat up slowly, thinking that for sure he was feeling an ache in every single muscle in his body. He bit the inside of his cheek to suppress a groan.

"Ah, good morning," Madame Pomfrey said wryly. Harry grimaced.

"Morning," he mumbled, his voice rough. "How long—?"

"Not that long. It's early morning now. Here." She held out a potion's vial, and Harry took it from her, eyeing it warily. It looked like ordinary pain relief potion, and those he was familiar with. He drank it down, making a face when he was finished. The empty vial was snatched from his hand, and another with a different potion was handed to him. Harry gulped down that one as well, uncaring of what it was for.

"So," Harry ventured as he handed the flask back to Madame Pomfrey, "am I alright?"

The Medi-Witch looked at him shrewdly, clearly unimpressed with him. "No thanks to you, young man. If Mr. Aleron hadn't known the counter-curse to that spell you decided to jump in front of, you'd have many more problems than a few aching muscles."

Yes, he certainly had those. Notably, Harry knew that, in most cases, counter-curses only worked if the victim was still alive. You can't counter death, after all.

"I really didn't die, then…" he mumbled to himself, though Madame Pomfrey caught the words.

"Goodness, no!" she exclaimed. "The curse that hit you was rather nasty, and death from it is eventual, but not instant. Mr. Aleron had countered it before anything more than a deep unconsciousness could affect you. Don't tell me you were hoping for something more dramatic than that?" she asked disapprovingly, her hand on her hip.

Harry coughed awkwardly and scratched the back of his head, winching when he pulled on his sore muscles. "Um, no," he told the Hogwarts nurse. "It's just that…I had a strange dream…" At least, he was relatively sure he had. Things were a bit hazy. Unconsciously, his hand reached over to his shoulder, as if it expected to find something there. When it found nothing, the hand fell back down to the mattress.

"A dream, you say?" Madame Pomfrey said airily. "I get students coming through here all the time mumbling about afterworlds and white lights. Some of them had been close to un-revivable death from freak accidents, but others had only suffered less fatal fainting spells and still others with high fevers. Muggles call them 'near-death experiences,' but it all has to do with the mind." Madame Pomfrey popped Harry lightly on his cranium, at which Harry shot her a peeved expression even though it didn't hurt. The witch ignored him.

"That curse you took," she explained, "was designed to constrict all the arteries in your body. It didn't stop your body functions instantly, though it would have in time. Nonetheless, for several seconds, your brain was deprived of fresh blood and oxygen. That sort of stress can cause you to experience some strange things, such as falling into a different sort of consciousness. It's been well noted amongst mind-magic experts. Rest assured, anything you thought happened while you were unconscious was not the afterlife, only your brain going haywire."

Well, didn't that sound comforting. "My mind," Harry intoned blandly. Was it, then, like that time he'd appeared in Tom's mindscape? Harry supposed he could believe that. If anything, he had to agree that being in his mind certainly was less dramatic than appearing in some limbo. Madame
Pomfrey gave him a no-nonsense look that said she preferred the unexciting and he'd better keep it that way or else. Harry hoped his expression looked innocent.

"Now," she said, fluffing up his pillows so he could sit up more comfortably, ever the caring nurse despite her sometimes strict conduct, "I believe there are some visitors that would like to see you now that you're awake."

Madame Pomfrey disappeared around one of the curtains that lined Harry's bed, separating his cot from the surrounding ones to create the illusion of separate space, and a moment later Albus Dumbledore replaced her with his presence. It was then that Harry's apparently short-circuited brain recalled the Headmaster had been injured the last time he saw him.

"Oh! Are you alright Professor?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a soothing smile. "Fit as a fiddle, Harry. Not even a scar, though I wouldn't have minded another." His eyes glimmered in good humor. "Now, I believe it was you who gave us more of a fright."

Harry thought back to the night before. He hadn't meant to get caught, of course, and in fact wasn't exactly clear on how it had happened. He was pretty sure, though, that the group of men had cast proximity charms which he accidentally tripped. They knew he was there, so he pocketed his Invisibility Cloak and went to face them. He recognized he was outmatched, but that didn't stop him. He had gotten a few spells in before they got a hold of him, unbelieving of their luck. They were suspicious, of course—why had he been out of his House past curfew? Harry chose an explanation they were more apt to believe: he had snuck out to meet with a girl. Lucky for him, with his reputation as a teenaged heartthrob of the Wizarding world (ugh), they didn't need much convincing.

And then Tom was there. Tom had heard his call, and he had come. Harry really shouldn't have been happy after Death Eaters had captured him and had used him to lure Dumbledore to them, but Harry couldn't help but be glad it had brought Tom to him.

Oh yeah, and then he took a curse for the man. Harry was pretty sure Hermione would rip him a new one. Ron had already asserted before all this that Harry would find no help from him on that front.

"What happened after?" Harry asked his Headmaster, not bothering to clarify what he meant. Dumbledore took a seat in the chair next to his bed.

"The Aurors arrived, and Tom was able to counter the curse you stepped in front of."

Harry bit onto his bottom lip. "Was he angry?"

"Oh, furious," Dumbledore said cheerfully, and Harry had to raise an amused eyebrow at the old wizard even while he felt a twinge of fretfulness. "I expect him to come in shortly and give you a good scolding. The poor man was quite worried, I do believe."

Harry felt a warm flush overtake his body at Dumbledore's words, apprehension briefly forgotten. Tom had been worried for him? Harry bit his cheek to keep from grinning inappropriately.

"Now, I believe these belong to you," Dumbledore said, reaching into his left sleeve and pulling out two long, slender objects. He lay them down on the bedside table within Harry's reach. Harry frowned when he saw what they were.

They were wands. Two of them, to be exact, and both he recognized but only one he felt belonged
to him, as Dumbledore seemed to think. He picked up his Holly and Phoenix feather wand, the grip comfortable in his hand. He only stared at the old wand he knew was Dumbledore's.

"Professor, that's your wand. Why do you say it belongs to me? Haven't you had it all your life?"

Harry was confused when Dumbledore only chuckled gaily. "My dear boy, that is not really my wand." The old wizard reached into his sleeve—the right one, as opposed to the left as he had earlier—and retrieved yet a third wand, one Harry did not recognize this time. It was a crooked thing—quirky, if Harry had a word for it—but it was smooth and looked well cared for, if the gleam in its polish said anything about it. "This, Harry, is the wand that chose me when I was eleven. That wand there," he said, nodding his head in its direction, "I won later. It is a story I will have to share with you some time, though you may already know it."

"Oh," Harry said, still uncertain. Dumbledore once again tipped his head in the wand's direction.

"Go on," he encouraged. Slowly, Harry reached out to the odd wand, glancing up at Dumbledore as he did so. The Headmaster only smiled, so Harry wrapped his fingers around the handle and picked it up, holding it carefully out in front of him. It felt...strange. His hand almost seemed to vibrate from it, and Harry might have almost called the sensation coming from it awareness. Harry remembered getting a similar reaction when he pulled it out of Vincent Crabbe's robes. In his left hand, he held aloft his Holly wand, which only gave him the warmth of familiarity, like a best friend.

"It's yours now, Harry," Dumbledore said, very softly. Harry looked up at his odd tone of voice. "You should know that wand is very old, and has quite a history. Many people have claimed rights to it, but not all of them truly deserved it. But, if there's anyone who would treat it properly, it would be you, my boy."

Harry rotated the wand in his fingers, feeling a bit like Dumbledore wasn't telling him something...nothing new there. It made him naturally cautious. Making a decision, Harry held out the wand to his Headmaster. "I don't really want it. I have a wand. You can have this back."

A gentle smile continued to warm Dumbledore's countenance, but he made no move to retrieve the wand from Harry's possession. "I cannot take it—it would not accept me."

"Why not? I'm giving it to you," Harry protested, his chin nodding in the wand's direction for emphasis. Still, Dumbledore did not reach out and take it.

"It does not work like that. Wand allegiance is fickle, with Masters wisely chosen, and that wand especially takes care in that task. I had my time with it, but that time came to an end. Whatever you may wish to do with it, it's yours now. You won it."

Harry reluctantly held the wand in front of his face as he scrutinized it. "But, what am I supposed to do with it?"

Dumbledore chuckled again, probably at Harry's confounded expression. "I'm sure, m'boy, that you can figure that out yourself." Something about the way Dumbledore spoke made Harry suspicious, and he eyed the Headmaster with a keen eye. Dumbledore, pretending to be oblivious while his eyes sparkled with mirth, merely adjusted his robes innocently.

"Professor—"

"Ah! Before I forget," Dumbledore interrupted Harry, "I also returned young Mr. Malfoy's wand to him, as well, in case you were wondering. Should anyone check, they will find the precocious lad
had practiced nearly the entirety of his Sixth Year Transfiguration curriculum last night before leaving his dorm. What did he say again?" Dumbledore seemed to think a moment. "Ah, yes, when I returned the wand, I believe he said you were a 'bloody menace to society' and that he hopes you've learnt your lesson, though he expressed that it may be unlikely with your 'feeble brain.' In my opinion, he seemed quite relieved you were alright," the old wizard murmured conspiratorially, a cheeky glimmer in his blue orbs.

Harry smiled in an equally audacious way. "I think I've made a new friend," he asserted, internally laughing at the expression he imaged Draco Malfoy's face would sport should he ever be present to hear Harry say that. Thinking about his fellow classmate segued Harry's thoughts to his other year mates who had a decidedly less helpful part played last night. "What will happen to the others?" he asked Dumbledore in a much more subdued tone.

Indeed, Dumbledore also took on an air of regret and sorrow. "They will be tried and most likely taken to Azkaban."

Harry didn't know how he should feel about that. On one hand, Crabbe and Goyle were most likely willing participants, but on the other he wasn't entirely convinced they had enough brain power (to put it as politely as possible) to fully understand what they were getting themselves into. Really, they were just kids, operating under ideals of a wizard who no longer existed as they thought of him.

"Is there anything that can be done?"

Dumbledore gave him a gentle smile. "Perhaps. I will have to testify about their actions, and they may request you do so as well. Depending how I or both of us word it, it may soften the blow, so to speak. It won't keep them out of Azkaban, but it may lessen their sentence. Tom turned them away for today, but at some point the Aurors will have to take your statement."

Harry idly nodded. "What of Malfoy? He—"

"My dear boy, all I know of Draco Malfoy's involvement is that he was the one to uncover the plot and bring the information to the proper authorities. I see no way he'd be punished for that."

Harry studied Dumbledore's seemingly sincere form with slightly narrowed eyes from the effort of concentration. Seemingly pleased with what he found, Harry smirked slightly and nodded. Just as he suspected, Dumbledore would protect Draco from any prosecution for being the one to actually fix the Vanishing Cabinet that allowed the Death Eaters in.

"Well!" Dumbledore said jauntily, standing up from his chair. "I'm glad to see you on the road to recovery. Now that you are awake, I believe there was someone else who would like to see you."

Harry watched his Headmaster start to disappear around the curtain. Before he did, the old man paused and turned back around.

"Will you come see me, Harry, sometime after you return to Hogwarts? I have much to discuss with you, and little time or privacy to do it properly now. You might even, by then, know what it is I am referring to."

Harry frowned. "Okay?" he said, utterly lost and uncertain as to what he was agreeing to.

Dumbledore smiled. "Worry about yourself for now. I promise to tell you the whole truth when you get back, and hope that you will understand. Until then, I wish you a swift recovery."

And then he was gone, leaving Harry with a strange, befuddled expression. Gee, why did he
suddenly feel like the old man was up to something?

Harry's contemplation lasted for no more than a few seconds, when the context of some of Dumbledore's words truly hit him. There was only one other person who might be allowed to see him right now, and that prospect sent his heartbeat skyrocketing in nerves and anticipation. He placed his two wands under his pillow for safe keeping and returned his hands to his lap. A moment later, one of them was attempting to tame his hair, but eventually he suspected he was only making the strands more ruffled and let it be.

He didn't know what to think, what to do, or say, mainly because he was insecure in what Tom (for surely it was he who was about to walk into Harry's little cubicle) would say to him.

There were footsteps, and soon a man most people thought of as Emrys Aleron stood at the end of his bed. Harry's eyes were drawn to the other's, and he couldn't look away, even though the truth of them was hidden by the Glamour in place. But that didn't last long, as Tom employed a Privacy Veil, allowing him to drop the Glamours and reveal his true face.

Harry gulped. The man did not look happy.

"Harry Potter...proof that a deflected Killing Curse to the head imports a wide array of brain damage. Tell me, Harry, would you not say that I am the most powerful wizard in the world?"

Now, normally Harry would have snorted at Tom's arrogance, but he had a feeling it would not help the situation, so he refrained.

"Well..." he said, but couldn't get very far before Tom spoke again, completing ignoring the fact Harry had opened his mouth at all.

"And do you not agree that I have mastered the art of dueling, both offence and defense?"

"Er..."

"Did you think it was my charming personality alone that brought me success? And was it not my men who decided, rather foolishly, that Hogwarts was the perfect target? Did you not think I could handle them?"

By this point, Harry was feeling both sheepish and annoyed at the direction he could see Tom going. He shamelessly crossed his arms like a pouting child, deciding he could cut himself some slack in this instant. He narrowed his eyes at Tom.

"You're complaining about how I saved your life again, aren't you?" he accused sullenly. Tom's eyes flashed a burning red to match the heat of his fury.

"I do believe you are mistaken," he said icily. "You did not save my life, because it was never in danger in the first place. What you, rather pointlessly accomplished, was a near suicide." Tom took a few steps forward so he now loomed over the bedridden boy, who tried to hide the way his breath hitched in either fear or excitement.

"You are lucky," Tom spat, scowling with the word, "that I am so accomplished and was able to save your life."

Harry searched Tom's face, trying to see past the mask of anger and cool indifference. The infuriated wizard was so close he could touch him, and the thought made his fingers itch. Harry hesitated from fulfilling his desires, though, because he couldn't yet tell if Tom was upset he had risked his life, or the life of the Horcrux. He couldn't bear the latter. The melancholy struck him
hard, and he looked away.

"Is it really my life you care about, or your Horcrux's?" he wondered, unable to keep the bitter taint from his voice. He jumped when cool fingers wrapped around his chin and forced him to look back at Tom, though the pressure was surprisingly gentle.

"You," Tom said after a moment, looking at Harry with suddenly tempered eyes. "It was you I was worried about, you ridiculous boy." Tom's fingers fell from Harry's chin, and the skin they had covered seemed to burn.

Harry was feeling dizzy, because Tom's admission had caused him to feel so elated he thought someone might have charmed his bed into a floating cloud. He should probably be angry at the man, or at least indifferent before they worked things out, but he realized he just didn't want to. He was still high on the relief of being alive, of everybody coming out of the danger last night more or less unscathed. He had forgiven Tom long ago, in any case, because he understood more than enough about him. The urge in Harry's fingers grew, and since it was already proven that he had little self-control, he reached out and took Tom's hand before it could fully retreat, entwining their fingers. His hand literally buzzed at the contact. Tom made no reaction, though Harry was encouraged by the fact he didn't pull away.

"I couldn't help it. I had to. I don't regret what I did, whether you think it was or wasn't necessary. I'd rather have done something than nothing at all in case something happened to you."

Tom stared directly into Harry's eyes. "You are the most ludicrous person I have ever met," he derided.

"I was scared, no…terrified," Harry said, unwavering and utterly sincere in response. Tom turned his head away then, jaw clenched tightly. Harry's hand squeezed tighter around Tom's, a desperate precaution to keep the man from pulling away—he couldn't let him get away now. He needn't have bothered, though, because Tom made no move to step back, and slowly he faced Harry once again. Harry knew that this time the effect Tom had on his breathing had not been so contained to secrecy as a soft gasp slid past his lips. Tom's face was completely blank, expression controlled, and he said nothing, but he didn't need to—his eyes said it all.

Harry could tell, in the instinctive way when it came to reading the man, to reaching out and feeling what he felt, that Tom had been scared as well.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered, and they both knew it wasn't in relation to his decision to jump in front of that spell. An ever so slight smile pulled at his lips. "I felt you. You tried to anchor me while I was unconscious…while I was, I guess, dying. It was comforting."

Tom seemed to scowl, probably at the reminder it had to be done in the first place. "Idiot. Since you refused that make a Horcrux, your life is fragile. Perhaps I should lock you up to ensure your safety."

Harry frowned. "You wouldn't!" he reflexively denied. He opened his mouth to speak once again, but he stopped himself, and his eyes dropped down to his lap where he drew his hand to after he let go of Tom's own hand. Now that the subject of their last conversation had been brought up, Harry's confidence retreated, hastened by the emotional exhaustion he was feeling. He didn't want to start another fight, and so he didn't know how to proceed. So far Tom had reacted positively to him, but nothing was definitive until the older wizard said otherwise.

Harry jumped, startled, when fingers briefly threaded through his hair and trailed down to his chin where they applied pressure to lift it and once more force him to meet Tom's gaze. Green met red
"I want you happy, Harry," Tom said softly. Harry's eyes widened.

"What?" he asked, breathlessly.

Tom exhaled, the sigh heavy though silent. "You don't want to make a Horcrux, so I won't make you. I will…respect your decision." Tom looked a bit awkward and unused to the statement, though he seemed entirely honest. "My intentions were…misguided, before." Tom appeared even more awkward now, and Harry's hands came up to clasp his once more just as he started pulling it away from the younger wizard's chin. Harry held the appendage captive against his chest.

"Thank you," he told Tom, and he was embarrassed to hear his voice quiver slightly. Harry was overjoyed to see Tom's face soften, and he smiled widely.

"And I won't lock you up if you promise to never risk your life again."

Harry's grin fell into a dry scowl. What a way to ruin the moment. "I'd like to see you try." As an afterthought, he added, "Bastard." He let Tom's hand slip through his fingers as the man pulled away, but not to walk out. He reached deep into one of his pockets and pulled out something Harry couldn't quite see. Tom hissed something under his breath, and Harry realized it must have been a magically shrunken Lady that he had taken out when a moment later the body of a fully-sized albino cobra overflowed out of his hands.

"Is she dead?" Harry wondered blandly, warily eyeing the limp snake.

Tom made an impatient face at Harry's blunt question. "Sleeping spell. She talks too much," he muttered lowly.

Harry cocked an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth curling a tad as he tried to contain his humor.

"Thought you'd be used to it."

Tom snorted. "She's been your problem the last few months. Perchance you're wondering, her memories as a snake are still intact. You're still her Master."

Harry reached out and relieved Tom of the Transfigured cobra. "I never thought that Bellatrix Lestrange would fight on my side," he commented as he arranged Lady on his lap. Despite her recent helpfulness, Harry doubted he would ever like or really tolerate being around Bellatrix. But, for now, he was able to overlook the woman in lieu of the animal—pet?—she was now. Her weight was comforting, especially after that dream—or whatever it was—as she reminded him of the affectionate snake-like Horcrux he almost missed.

"Dumbledore was actually the one to Transfigure her back."

Harry grunted at Tom's statement. "I guess I wouldn't have expected less of him. She did help, after all. Will you…?"

Tom pulled out his wand and cast the counter to Lady's sleeping spell. The snake came alive with a groggy hiss, her body pulling in on itself instinctively. Her tongue came out and tasted the air as she lifted up her head.

:I had a wonderful dream…: she hissed airily.

:What about?: Harry asked, scratching Lady underneath her chin.
Rats, I think they were, with white faces; the snake said after a moment. I caught and played with and ate them all. She uttered a pleased sibilant sigh and laid her head back down as if she wished to sleep and dream again. Harry wondered if perhaps she remembered a little more than just her time as a snake. Suddenly, her upper body reared completely back in the cobra S and she spat irately, seeming to have her eyes trained on Tom.

Master, your mate is very rude.

Harry snickered. Is that so…?

Tom made a noise of disgruntlement. Get your robes on. You're coming with me for the remainder of the weekend.

Harry jerked his head up. What? Why? How did you—?

"Precaution, of course," the man said smugly. "Until it is ensured Hogwarts is once again secure, your recovery will be done at my very protected home. I must also make sure the curse is completely removed, of course, and that you have a private and comfortable place to recover. Once I proposed it, the Headmaster and the Aurors fully agreed."

"Hmm, they just had to bow down to your genius, didn't they?" Harry teased, fighting a smile.

"As your guardian, I only do what I think is best," Tom said haughtily. He shot Harry a stern glare. "Clothes. Now."

Tom's Glamours came up once more before he dropped the Privacy Veil and left Harry alone with only Lady for company.

You're right…he is rude.; Harry whispered to his odd familiar, and the snake hissed knowingly back.

If Harry thought he'd be off the hook regarding bed rest while at Tom's home, he was sorely mistaken. The moment he stepped out of the Floo from the Infirmary, he was whisked away to the bedroom, totally at a loss as to why he even bothered with dressing when with a snap of an Elf's fingers he was re-clothed in some nightclothes and enfolded in the bed's duvet.

"I feel fine!" he complained loudly and abundantly. He was duly ignored.

"You will stay there while I'm gone. The Elves will take care of anything you need," Tom told Harry.

The boy frowned. "Where are you going?"

Tom stood in the doorway and looked back over his shoulder, a devil-may-care smirk on his lips. "I have it under good authority that Voldemort is not pleased with his followers' recent insolence and failures. I fear there will be massive repercussions to make sure it will never happen again."

Grimacing, Harry said dryly, "It'd be unreasonable for you to kill anyone…just my opinion." With a light (and slightly scary) chuckle, Tom disappeared from sight, and Harry settled back into the pillows. The bed was comfortable and the sheets warm. He burrowed down deeper under the comforter. He supposed sleep wouldn't hurt...

Harry woke up who-knew-how-long later; the curtains on the windows were drawn and he couldn't tell how far the sun had fallen in the sky. Crawling from bed, he noted that he was only sleep-sore
now, which merely a good stretch would relieve. He walked into the bathroom, and when he came out again, refreshed, one-half of the House Elf duo had opened the curtains and was waiting in the middle of the room. No doubt Tom had ordered that should he leave the bed an Elf twin would have to wrestle Harry back into it if he went too far. Harry sighed and pointedly sat on the edge of the mattress.

"Would you be wanting lunch, Master Harry?" Harry's stomach growled at the thought.

"Sure. What time is it?" Harry asked.

"Mid-afternoon," the Elf twin answered before popping away. He returned in good time, a tray with lunch piled on top in tow. It looked delicious, and Harry ate the majority of it.

It was only afterward that he got bored. Ignoring his own instincts, Harry got out of bed again. However, when he tried leaving the room, he first tripped over a laughing Nagini, who was coiled outside his door, and then got bodily hauled back—as predicted, he thought glumly—in the room by a very apologetic House Elf. Harry believed he was entitled to a good sulk over that.

"Can I have my bag?" he asked (not whined, dammit) to no one in particular, referring to the parcel that contained the things he brought for the weekend. His still apologetic and aiming-to-get-back-in-good-graces House Elf popped out and returned a few seconds later with it, which Harry then took from him and opened. Reaching inside the bag, the first thing Harry encountered was a book, which was odd as he sure as hell didn't request his homework to be packed (honest, it just slipped his mind…).

Frowning, Harry pulled the book out and discovered it to be the copy of _The Tales of Beedle the Bard_ he had found stacked in his books the other day. Funny how the book kept appearing among his things. He stared at the cover, tracing the letters of the title with a lone finger, and something niggled at the back of his mind. Shrugging, he set his luggage aside, thinking he might pass the time rereading some of the stories he'd enjoyed and try to distract himself from his restlessness before Sprit or Sprot was forced to tie him to the mattress.

Harry laid back against the pillows, making himself comfortable while he cracked open the book pages, idly flipping through and trying to decide what to read first. As he did so, something caught his eye. Flipping back, Harry found the page of interest and examined the marking on it closely.

It was a symbol, drawn in black ink and clearly added after the book was printed. When he first read the book, he'd only taken a passing glance at the odd character, figuring it was some sort of ancient rune. But now he took much more interest in it. He'd seen it before, he realized, and more than once.

Harry's right hand came up to his chest, feeling through his clothes the old Horcrux ring Tom had refused to claim again and had given to Harry. Harry hadn't known what to do with the object at first, but on a whim he decided to keep it on a chain around his neck. It was silly, he knew, but it reminded him of Tom, and not just because it had been a Horcrux. That was more of an unpleasant memory, but the fact it was a part of Tom's heritage appealed to him more than the Soul Magic it once held. Reaching around to unclasp the simple gold chain, Harry pulled it and the ring out from under his shirt. He let the ring slip from the necklace, and it landed in his open and waiting palm.

There, embedded in the mounted dark stone, was the same symbol drawn in the book, though the crack in the stone impeded the symbol's continuity. It was a vertical line that lay inside a circle, and the circle further rested within a larger triangle. Harry was a bit embarrassed to admit he had developed a habit of fiddling with the ring, enough so to have the symbol well memorized. Harry now wondered what it meant. Glancing at the page the same symbol was written on, Harry saw
that it was drawn just above a chapter title—"The Tale of the Three Brothers".

Harry had enjoyed this story, a touch morbid it may be. Of course he would take an interest in it, considering he could relate to how useful an Invisibility Cloak could be as demonstrated by the third brother in the story. Secretly, he was also intrigued by the Resurrection Stone, stemming from the fact how he'd always wanted to meet his parents, if only just once.

Shaking his head, Harry set the ring down on the bedside stand and picked the book back up again. He traced his thumb over the inked symbol on the page, wondering why it was written there. His mind once again turned to the ring. If he recalled correctly, Marvolo Gaunt in Bob Ogden's memory had called it the Peverell coat of arms.

But that seemed odd to Harry. In what one might call his "research" of Wizarding history, he had come across the symbol in reference to the Dark Lord Grindelwald's campaign. Like the Dark Mark was to Voldemort, this weird, triangular eye was Grindelwald's mark. What would a Dark Lord be doing using a coat of arms of an old Wizarding family for? Harry had also come across the Peverell name a few times, but he was pretty certain the family name had died out a long time ago. Feeling like he had nothing better to do, Harry decided to get to the bottom of the discretion.

"Sprit," he called aloud, getting an immediate response from the Elf as he popped into the room.

"Yes, Master Harry?"

"Would you mind grabbing a book on Wizarding genealogy, something that includes the Peverell family? And can I also get something on Grindelwald's war?"

"Right away, Master." Sprit disappeared, and Harry made himself comfortable while he waited. The small Elf returned in good time, a stack of three books that looked like they each weighed more than he did in his thin arms.

"This work for you, Master Harry?"

Harry examined the titles and nodded. "Yes, thank you." Sprit eagerly laid the book on the bed beside Harry, and asked if his young charge needed anything else before disappearing again.

An hour later, Harry sat back and rubbed his eyes, more confused than before, and even more intrigued. Grindelwald, it appeared, had no relation to the Peverells, and yet he was using a symbol that was indeed associated with the old family. Harry knew this because in a photo of the cemetery in Godric's Hollow—a weird coincidence on his part—was an image of an old gravestone of one Ignutus Peverell. Engraved in the weather-beaten stone head was the triangular eye. The Wizarding genealogy book made no mention of it, though, and the book on Grindelwald and his war did not say where the Dark Lord's mark originated from. And as far as what Harry could tell from the genealogy book, he and Tom, British wizards, were more related to the Peverells than the German-born Gellert Grindelwald would ever be.

Setting those two books aside, Harry turned to the third Sprit had left him, which appeared quite battered and old compared to the others he'd just read through. He lifted one of his brows in subtle curiosity upon reading the title. Why on Earth had the House Elf brought him a book on Wizarding myths and legends?

Believing it wouldn't hurt, Harry set the tome on his lap and flipped through a stack of its pages, wondering how he was supposed to find anything of interest in here. Flipping then to the front
page, Harry scanned the list of myths the book covered, trying to see if any of them caught his eye. None did, and he sighed before calling out Sprit's name again.

"Yes, Master?" the Elf asked once he appeared in the room. Harry tilted the book up to show it to the creature.

"Why did you bring me this?" Harry carefully kept any hint of accusation or anger out of his voice, knowing how sensitive House Elves could be if they thought they had performed inadequately. Even so, Sprit blinked his large eyes and clasped his tiny hands in front of him.

"You asked for Peverells, Master Harry. I used the word spell to summon your bookses. Is that one no good, sir?"

Harry quickly said, "Oh, no, it's fine, I just can't find what I'm looking for."

The Elf perked up. "Here! Sprit can show you where." Skipping closer, the little Elf snapped his fingers, causing the book to shuffle rapidly through its pages with his magic until it jerked to a stop partway through. Leaning over the page, Harry saw glowing, faint traces of magic highlighting the name "Peverell" in a small handful of paragraphs. Even more promising, the triangular eye was inscribed over half the page. Harry grinned.

"Brilliant. Thanks."

Sprit smiled widely before he left and once again left Harry alone with his book-bound investigation.

"The Deathly Hallows," he read aloud, wondering what the Peverells had to do with this particular Wizarding folk tale. He read the first paragraph, brow lightly furrowed and growing more so as he read further.

"That's weird," he murmured to himself after he paused in his reading. It seemed the Beedle the Bard tale was more than a simple children's story. The book Harry read now claimed that there may actually have been a true-life inspiration for the tale. It even stated the names of the supposed three brothers featured: Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus. Harry wondered if it was the same Ignotus as the person buried within that grave pictured in the genealogy book.

Harry flipped through the section, skimming the words and feeling uneasy as he did so. He learned that the triangular eye was actually a representation of the Hallows—the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone, and the Invisibility Cloak. So, the Peverell "coat of arms" Marvolo Gaunt was adamant about what was actually the illustration of three fictional objects? Wouldn't that have peeved the man! While Harry had found the Gaunts really were descended from the Peverells, it had come as a surprise to see that the Potters were as well. Granted, Pureblood families were usually related to each other in some fashion or another, so Harry supposed it wasn't too difficult to wrap his head around. There were dozens of other families that he himself could find a connection to. Besides, the last Peverell by name had died hundreds of years ago, and any familial connection through that line would be distant at best.

Drawing his mind away from the complicated notions of pedigree, Harry returned his eyes to the book in his lap. Flipping to the next page, Harry encountered another drawing, one that portrayed the anecdotal representation of what the Elder Wand looked like. Supposedly made of elder wood and thestral hair, its defining feature was the carvings of elderberries down its length it was said to have.

Harry stared hard at the picture. He blinked, and shook his head.
"No, don't be stupid," he told himself in response to the vague sensation of recognition that washed over him. He brushed it away, trying to move the sticky thought to the recesses of his brain. It did so, though sluggishly.

Or maybe not. Harry found his eyes sliding to the side, searching for and landing on his bag on the other side of the mattress. He hesitated, before reaching out and snagging the strap to haul the pack towards him.

Once again hesitating, Harry reached into the bag to pull out the slender wand he'd supposedly won by disarming Crabbe after the student-turned-Death Eater had equally disarmed Dumbledore. This Harry held lightly in his fingers, twirling it around and around with his fingertips. He blinked once, twice, three times before he suddenly burst out laughing.

"You've got to be kidding me," he croaked through his fit, reaching up to rub his hand heavily against his scalp. Harry's mildly hysterical reaction was due to the fact that, with little imagination required, the odd looking carvings running down the length of Dumbledore's old wand almost looked like…like elderberries.

"I suppose this is what Dumbledore wanted to talk about, huh?" he said aloud, completely ignoring the fact he was talking to himself—that would ruin the illusion of sanity. "'Much to discuss' my arse." Turning his head, his eyes landed on the Gaunt ring he had placed on the bedside stand not too long ago. This time, his laugh came out sounding more mildly harassed than hysterical. "I wouldn't be surprised if Dumbledore tells me that's the Resurrection Stone, and I would guess my Invisibility Cloak is the Invisibility Cloak." All pretense of humor dropped quite suddenly from Harry's demeanor. He sighed, grumbling, "As if my life isn't interesting enough, might as well add a group of fabled objects called the Deathly Hallows to it."

At this point, Harry almost expected some guy calling himself Death to show up and ask for his things back.

'Merlin, I hope that part's not true.' Harry was willing to believe many things—it wasn't so long ago the notion that magic was real had never crossed his mind—but he did have a limit, believe it or not, and the legend of the Hallows' origin was above that checkpoint. Some things just had to be impossible, or the likelihood of humanity going insane seemed like a reasonable possibility. Owning something made by a being called Death was a little out of his comfort zone.

Speaking of insanity, maybe he was jumping to conclusions? Human rationality was a very powerful source of misconception. He had to be off his rocker right now about all this Hallows business. But, how could he find out the truth?

Making a split decision, the kind he usually came with mixed results, Harry picked up the Elder Wand (was he jinxing himself if he was calling it that already?) and clutched it tightly in his palm. He held it aloft, pointing it at the fireplace.

Now, in hindsight, Harry would be able to see how much of a bad idea this was. Hindsight's a bitch, of course. Harry's spell choice might not have been well thought through, either.

"Incendio," he intoned firmly. The spell jetted out from the tip of the wand, hitting the banked flames in the hearth and sent them bursting past the grate and up the wall. Harry yelped as the heat of the fire pressed against his face, and with another wave of the demon wand he cast a panicked Aquamenti. The flames were drenched and died, leaving behind a smoky and slightly scorched room.

Harry, eyes wide and mouth a perfect O, sat motionless on the bed in disbelief.
"Huh."

That might have been an understatement. Harry's magic had been pulled through the wand so damn easily, and just as comfortably as his Holly wand. It was a rush, even while he thought he'd burned Tom's bedroom down. The power from the wand, it was his, but the best of what he could give. Effortless. He and the wand were perfectly in synch with each other—it wanted to do Harry's bidding, and it could. Now that Harry knew what casting with the Elder Wand was like, he could feel the magical conduction difference between it and his Holly wand. The Holly and Phoenix feather combination was quite powerful in its own right, but it could never stand on the same level as the Elder Wand.

Harry looked at the mess he'd made, and winced. The wall around the hearth was blackened and dripping wet. Harry looked between the damage and the wand and back to the damage again. With a shaky hand and perhaps a pair of tightly closed eyes, he pointed the wand once again at the wall and cast a Reparo at it. When he dared to open his eyes again, it was to see a completely spotless and perfectly repaired fireplace, not a scorch mark in sight.

Harry looked down at the Elder Wand in awe. "Bloody hell."

"Language, Harry."

Harry was loathed to admit he jumped like a spooked unicorn and uttered a rather feminine squeak at Tom's surprise entrance. The man did not look impressed by Harry's reaction, so the younger wizard quickly composed himself and shot a macho glare in Tom's direction. He prayed that Tom didn't notice anything amiss.

No such luck. The man's gaze fell to the wand in Harry's hand. "That is Dumbledore's wand," he said, obviously at a loss as to what it was doing in Harry's possession. "Why do you have it?" he queried.

Sighing, Harry laid it back on the bed. "Apparently, it's mine now." For a moment, Harry didn't know what to do. He could see Tom was not satisfied with his answer. But some old habits and bad memories die hard. Tom, no matter what state of mind he was in, would always crave power. It was just who he was, and this wand was purportedly supposed to be more powerful than any other. If this and the other objects really were what Harry feared them to be—a question Harry was slowing coming to a disturbing conclusion on—then would the temptation be too great for Tom? If he believed himself invincible should he gain possession of them, would that cause him to spiral out of control once more?

It was a matter of trust. In all honesty, if Tom desired the wand for his own, Harry wasn't sure if he would refuse the man. Harry himself could care less about power. While the concerns settled into Harry's thoughts, surprisingly they ultimately didn't mean much to him. If he truly wanted to be with Tom, he would simply have to trust him. In all honesty, it was only a small part of him that worried about what Tom would do should he relay Dumbledore's conjecture about the objects. That decided, Harry let his countenance fall into one of blasé curiosity.

"Have you ever heard of 'The Tale of the Three Brothers'?"

A small inclination of Tom's eyebrow indicated what the man thought of the question. "Children's tales, Harry?" Tom asked, smirking slightly. "Hmm, the Deathly Hallows. Is this a history assignment?"

Harry kept up his façade of indifference. "Interesting tale, isn't it?" Harry tapped the tip of the Elder Wand on his chin thoughtfully, watching Tom from the edge of his vision as he kept his eyes
pointed at the far wall. "A cloak, a stone, and a wand." Reaching out with the hand that didn't already hold the wand, Harry picked up the Gaunt ring from where he'd set it earlier and held it aloft in his line of sight. "I'm a bit afraid to check if this one works, yet."

Again Harry watched Tom, still silently but with a direct gaze, as the older wizard processed Harry's words. It didn't take the man long, as he expected. Harry observed further as Tom grew tenser the longer he stared the articles in Harry's hands, unblinking red eyes rather piercing the longer they remained that way.

"You think…" Tom didn't finish the softly spoken half-question.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. Dumbledore didn't tell me outright, but I think he told me enough to imply it. He can't ever seem to give up his addiction with words and mind play, can he?" Harry sighed. "This symbol," he said, running a finger over the surface of the stone set in the Gaunt ring. "Look at this, and tell me if it's possible."

Setting the two objects in his hands aside, Harry lifted the old book of legends back onto his lap, waiting as Tom sat on the edge of the mattress before maneuvering the large tome into Tom's hands so he could see for himself. As Tom read, Harry watched his facial expressions anxiously. After several moments, the man looked away from the book and towards Harry.

"Grindelwald, as you might know since he was the Dark Lord when you were in school, used that as his mark," Harry said. He retrieved the Elder Wand from where he'd briefly set it down. "Dumbledore said he had won this. Would it be reasonable to assume he won it in the greatest duel of his lifetime? If so, then it would make sense. I mean, if Grindelwald knew about the Hallows—knew that he owned one—then it would explain why he used them as his symbol."

"Yes, perhaps that does make sense. I knew the marks were very similar, but I hadn't given it much thought…" Shaking his head, Tom snapped the book in his hands shut, setting it down on the bedside table. "Do not worry about it at present. It's more important that you rest, now, and get more definitive proof later."

Harry huffed indignantly and crossed his arms. He kept his eyes peeled on Tom, though. There was something in the tilt of Tom's head that suggested the man may be downplaying his interest in the Hallows. What Harry wasn't sure of was in what form the curiosity manifested. He stood by his resolution, though, to place his trust in the man. That decided, Harry opened his mouth to protest his confinement to bed. Tom, though, did not let him get a word in edgewise.

"Don't argue. And, also…" Tom's expression turned airy as he leaned down close. "Why did the fire wards go off while I was away?" Tom asked rather amiably into Harry's ear, making the boy shiver.

"Um, well…" Harry started, a flush spreading across his cheekbone. He hadn't expected that question—or for Tom to even find out at all about his little mishap. "I fixed it?" he offered, already knowing that wasn't going to cut it.

For the second day in a row, Tom moved through his home towards the Floo hearth with intent to travel to the Headmaster of Hogwarts' office. The man had better have some damn good explanations for some things.

Tom thought that it might actually have been guilt he felt when he left Harry alone for the second time that day (and perhaps for tricking the boy into taking a Sleeping potion), but it was for the impossible brat's own good. Really.
When Tom Floo'd through, Dumbledore wasn't alone; Severus Snape stood near the far side of the office. Tom could see the way Snape's dark eyes subtly but intensely studied him, his scrutiny clearly bringing him to some sort of conclusion on his Lord's mood, for he gave a nod in both Tom's and Dumbledore's direction and turned to leave without saying a word. Once the Potion Master had left, Dumbledore smiled cheerfully at his old student.

"Hello, Tom. How's Harry?"

Tom skipped the pleasantries and went straight for the direct attack, placing the palms of his hands on Dumbledore's desk so he could lean over it and crowd Dumbledore's space.

"What game are you playing, old man?"

Dumbledore, sitting on his side of the desk, folded his hands together and rested them out in front of him.

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean," he replied calmly in that infuriating way of his.

"Don't give me that!" Tom snapped, pushing himself violently away from the desk. He stood stiffly and slightly sideway to Dumbledore and observed the old man with his peripheral vision, arms behind his back to prevent himself from reaching for his wand. "The Deathly Hallows," he ground out. "I was never interested in stories meant for children, but I know the legend."

"The Tale of the Three Brothers," Dumbledore said, almost reverently. "Peverells, it's believed. You can claim them in your heritage, and Harry too." Dumbledore's suddenly stern eyes landed on Tom. "Harry's Cloak is no recently acquired family heirloom. It is, in fact, extraordinarily old. I'm sure you know ordinary invisibility cloaks do not last long. There is no other one like Harry's. Legend though the story may be, I have little doubt in the existence of its inspiration." The old wizard said those words in such a way Tom could thoroughly note the depth of the Headmaster's conviction on that claim. What's more, he had little inclination to doubt the other man.

Tom's face twitched in ire. "So he has all three?" He kept his body angled away, but his head swiveled to better stare down Dumbledore. "What are you hoping to accomplish by pushing them on him? He is not your weapon. I could reason you are still trying to 'vanquish' me," Tom lampooned with a sneer.

Tom heard Dumbledore sigh, the noise grating on his nerves. For a man who was not long to death's door, he was still the most irritating person Tom had the displeasure to encounter.

"You've come to the wrong conclusion. I am very well aware of the unlikelihood that Harry would ever wish to fight you again," the elder wizard soothed, though Tom was not pacified. "Then why would he need something as outlandish as the Deathly Hallows?" he pressed.

Dumbledore sighed again. "Believe me, Tom, I realize the heavy burden they hold. Harry...his life has never been easy," he said with a hint of regret. "I admit I was partially responsible for that fact." Tom withheld his derisive snort, because "partially" seemed a bit of an understatement to him. He let Dumbledore continue uninterrupted, though. "Sometimes it is all too easy to forget his age."

Tom's fingers tightened on his own wrist, his hands still held behind his back. "I don't believe he ever had a chance to be young and naive," he murmured, voice a little coarser than usual. This time he was certain it was guilt he felt. He knew enough to realize it wasn't entirely his fault, but if Dumbledore could admit his involvement than Tom could too concede his responsibility for much
of what befell Harry the past fifteen or so years. It was a feeling he never thought himself capable of before.

"Perhaps not," Dumbledore uttered softly. "Do you believe in Fate, Tom?"

It was the sort of inane, inappropriate question Tom expected from Dumbledore. Fate. Did he believe in it? It was that ridiculous prophecy that was the catalyst of so many things previously. Was this the future it foretold? Or perhaps this was only one of many that could have transpired. Tom realized there was no real way to tell. Maybe the prophecy meant nothing at all now, or never had.

"What is your point, Dumbledore?" Tom returned with, not answering the question. Dumbledore didn't seem to mind.

"I could start with your recent stint as a snake and the events that led to how you are today," Dumbledore said with a raised brow, "but since we were on the topic, I will elaborate using the Hallows as an example.

"My interest in them goes back many, many years. I was a boy, foolish with youth and obsession," Dumbledore confessed. "But even with my visions of grandeur, I think I secretly believed the likelihood of actually finding even one of the Hallows, let alone all three, would be slim. Their significance had been lost to time. And yet, against all odds, all three end up here, and find their way into one young, extraordinary wizard's hands." Dumbledore looked steadily at Tom. "I could not have planned that."

In some ways, Tom knew that to be true. However, that did not mean he was convinced…and he wasn't referring to his supposed stance on Fate or whatever Dumbledore thought they should be talking about. "You claim you didn't plan it," Tom said scornfully, "and yet somehow all three passed from you to Harry. The Cloak, the ring, and the wand."

Tom kept his expression blank, but internally he frowned. It was hard for him to fully integrate the idea that he had within in his grasp for many years an object of legendary power and had not known. He had even poured his own soul into it and was none the wiser. But perhaps it was understandable, as, just like Dumbledore, Tom himself had been young and inexperienced. He was only sixteen when he first acquired it…but then, it was also around the time of his first murder.

Focusing back at the matter on hand, Tom saw as Dumbledore's mouth twitched in a half smile, the man's eyes gleaming in what Tom could only describe as in a cheeky manner. Much too youthful of an expression for an old coot. "Concerning the ring, I seem to recall that I entrusted it to him so he could return it to you. I know Harry would have done as I asked, so I can only assume that if it is not in your possession, then you gave him the ring."

By the gods, that man was obnoxious! Tom's sneer deepened, and the thought of why the hell the curse in Dumbledore's hand hadn't killed him yet flittered through his mind.

"I suppose you think it was Fate that directed my actions," Tom mocked snidely. Dumbledore lifted an eyebrow in an ambiguous answer. "And the wand?" asked Tom stiffly.

"That was all him," Dumbledore responded, almost sounding proud of Harry and showing it in the way the skin around his eyes creased. "He won it, fair and square."

Tom wasn't entirely mollified with this answer, convinced Dumbledore still had some sort of hand in it, but he let it drop. Dumbledore had his own Gryffindor stubbornness he was loathe to contend with at the moment. "Are they as they say?" he asked instead.
The old wizard was studying Tom with quiet eyes, for once. "I cannot say for sure. The legend of their creation may be greater than the objects themselves, or they may be exactly as they claim."

Tom snorted. "Made by Death."

Dumbledore hummed in the back of his throat, eyes gleaming. "I would say it is unlikely. If their descendants are anything to go by, the Peverell brothers must have been great wizards indeed, and perfectly capable of crafting such magical artifacts."

Shooting a wry glance at the Headmaster, who wore a small, mischievous smile, Tom internally huffed at what he supposed was a compliment but kept his chilly countenance intact as he laid a hand on the back of the chair in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"They say that the owner of all three becomes a Master of Death," Tom spoke coolly, head slightly bowed as his concentration focused on more than just the room around him. "If people knew, they would try and kill him for that power, real or no. It has become too much of a legend, too tempting for the greedy…a wand undefeatable, a stone to bring back the dead, a cloak that hides you from Death itself. Invincibility is what they'd attain, and I am not the only one in this world who is ambitious."

Dumbledore's demeanor had once more grown grown somber. "I spent a great amount of time studying the Hallows, but even I do not completely know the truth of them," he stated apologetically. Tom's lips twitched in distaste. "No one has ever possessed all three of the Hallows at the same time that I am aware of. The title may very well be misleading, in any case."

Tom gritted his teeth in frustration. "That does not mean people won't try to obtain it, even if it doesn't exist as they might imagine."

Standing, Dumbledore rounded the far end of the desk, stopping near where Tom stood. "You're afraid for him. I understand," he murmured softly, and Tom knew it was empathetic, and not meant to be demeaning. Even still, it spurred within him a reflexive vitriol almost comforting in its familiarity. It might be because he felt uncomfortable with how well Dumbledore could read him, even now.

"Will you try and take the objects for yourself, Tom? You've already implied your ambition, and it would remove the risk to Harry." Dumbledore's eyes were settled steadily on the other wizard. Tom blinked, startled by Dumbledore's blasé question but trying not to show it. "Immortality has often been cited as the privilege for one who is Master of Death," Dumbledore continued, as if he was trying to tempt Tom, while said man knew very well that wasn't the case.

It was an interesting question, though. Even more interesting was the fact Tom didn't have an answer. He found himself internally at war, and it was all very complicated. That ambitious drive he'd spoken of earlier salivated at the thought such items of power…even the wand by itself would be a great acquisition. But then he considered the conundrum that Harry was both better protected with such powerful artifacts and at risk should word of what he had ever got out. Tom had his own gain set against Harry's safety.

No matter how blank Tom had kept his expression while he pondered the issue, Dumbledore seemed to still know what went on in his head. "There is no reason to think so hard, Tom. In the end, you should see it is not your decision to make."

Tom lifted an eyebrow, and Dumbledore smiled, not a hint of mocking or humor in it, just calm warmth even Tom could recognize. "And whose is it? Destiny?" Tom taunted.
"Of course not," Dumbledore replied calmly. "It's Harry's. I trust you not to make it for him."

"Is that so?" Tom wondered in genuine droll curiosity, his initial disconcertment pushed aside. "And how do you know that trust is not misplaced?"

Dumbledore clearly recognized the challenge, but didn't quite rise to the bait, because instead he told Tom, "The Hallows are Harry's, yes, but he earned the title that comes with them. Their legend may be overstated, but there is a magic about them…they are unlike anything else. Only a truly marvelous wizard could wield them, and only the worthy could unite them. Separate, they could fall hand to hand, but for all three of them to land in and accept one hand is extraordinary. It would have to be a Master indeed. Even you must recognize that."

Here, Dumbledore held up his deadened hand to the light for him and Tom to see. Tom's gaze licked over the damage, knowing that while Dumbledore was fine now, he would eventually succumb to the damage. "I was selfish," Dumbledore said softly. "I was not worthy." Ardent blue eyes bored deep into Tom's. "Do you understand what Harry did for you in that hallway? Do you see its significance?"

Tom's chest felt tight when he realized what Dumbledore was referring to. "He nearly killed himself," Tom answered, and he felt the echo of the fear he was imbued with in the memory of what Harry had done. He hadn't experienced anything like that before.

"Yes, Tom," the old man agreed fervently, taking a step forward. "He meant to sacrifice himself for you. Doesn't that sound familiar?"

Tom's eyes widened a small fraction, the only sign of his whirling emotions. His mouth felt dry when he simply answered with: "Yes."

Dumbledore's face lit up with his widest smile yet, and for a fearful second Tom almost thought the man would reach out and try to hug him. Thankfully, the old wizard kept his hands to himself.

"We've run full circle. There can't possibly be anything you could want for, Tom," Dumbledore proclaimed. "Not now. Not with that kind of love offered to you, that gift of sacrifice."

"Harry didn't die," Tom insisted, unwilling to even consider that prospect and unashamed to admit it. Not anymore.

"No, no he didn't…but he would have, if you hadn't saved him or the curse been deadlier. And he knew that. He made a choice…and he made it for you. For your life. He accepted there were worse things in life than his own death. Perhaps one does become a Master of Death with possession of all three Hallows. I would argue, however, that Harry became that in a different way. It could be said that a master of death is a person immune to death, perhaps, but I believe it is someone who can accept death for what it is: inevitable, and preferable to other outcomes."

Tom was unsure. Death had always been at the forefront of his mind, always the shadow blocking his sunlight. He never accepted that it was inevitable, but then he tore himself so apart it was only a half-life he lived. Dumbledore did not allow him to dwell on his thoughts much longer, as he found he had more to say to Tom.

"What drove you to Godric's Hollow that night? Why Harry? There were two children that fit the prophecy. But it was Harry you chose."

Their conversation had rounded back to Fate, it seemed. Tom's eyes looked at nothing in particular while he listened to the Headmaster. His mind was instead seeing a night long ago, and a small
child with dark hair and bright green eyes.

"I think," Dumbledore said, "that it was always going to be Harry. Something always tied you two together. The one to both vanquish and save you at the same time. Debatably the only one who could. A wonderful sort of courage, to be able to love as he does. To love you, despite everything."

Dumbledore fell silent a moment, seemingly observing his quiet and uncharacteristically demure ex-pupil. Tom had found himself caught with nothing to say.

"You know, Harry's not the only one with courage and strength to overcome the past. You, Tom, have impressed me greatly, and I can't help but be grateful for that. You gave me hope."

Oh Merlin, the old man was getting maudlin. Tom grimaced. He was distinctly unequipped to handle Dumbledore in this state, and his patience was running thin. Dumbledore's irritatingly knowing smile was particularly offensive. It was only the geriatric wizard's next words that saved him from getting his facial muscles cursed into paralysis.

"Go home, Tom. Go home to Harry—care for him, protect him, and love him—and he will do the same for you."

Tom was more than willing to escape the old man and his barmy ways. Without saying another word, he Floo'd out of Dumbledore's office. He did not look back, did not acknowledge Dumbledore at all, but despite his less than friendly feelings for the man, he most notably did not deny the Headmaster's words.

Smiling softly to himself, Albus Dumbledore walked over to his Phoenix familiar and old friend, reaching out and stroking the brilliant feathers once he was near enough. Fawkes clacked his beak affectionately and tilted his neck in just the right angle to maximize the pleasant scratching.

"Well, old boy, what do you think?"

Fawkes issued a short, lilting warble, bumping his head into Dumbledore's palm.

"Yes, I thought so too," the Headmaster said, responding to a conversation only he and his Phoenix seemed to understand. "I gave up on Tom a long time ago, thought him too far gone. I was sure his death was the only option. I'm glad Harry was around to fix my mistakes. I think he'll be alright now."

Reaching into his pocket, Dumbledore pulled out a lemon drop and popped it into his mouth. Yes, things would be alright.

"I do feel a bit naughty for having understated my intentions for the Hallows, but Harry's a good lad and will be plenty fine with them. We must never tell Tom, however, that a dream gave me the inspiration," he whispered conspiratorially, "or he'll have my head. Quite protective of that young man, he is."

The pair spent several minutes in the contented silence of good friends who had known each other for many, many years.

"How very curious," the old wizard said lightly, breaking the silence. "Now that I think of it, I seem to recall having a similar sort of dream regarding the potion from the Department of Mysteries. I wouldn't have thought to use it on dear Tom had I not dreamt it. I'd forgotten about that until now. The subconscious certainly is a strange sort of phenomenon." Dumbledore chuckled once to himself. "What an odd assortment of events that became. Although..." the wizard
murmured contemplatively, "I do wonder, now, if it was a dream at all…"

Fawkes chirruped in agreement while Dumbledore contemplated life, death, and the strange things in-between. He had a feeling that Fawkes, an immortal creature who had seen far more than most in his peculiar lifetime, was laughing at him.

"Drat," Dumbledore suddenly said, snapping his fingers in a gesture of dismay. "I forgot to ask Tom something of import. You see," he told Fawkes, "I've had quite a lot of trouble keeping DADA professors for more than one year…"

As expected, when Tom reentered his bedroom, Harry was still sleeping quite soundly. Tom sat on the edge of the mattress, oddly content to simply watch the boy slumber. Harry's countenance was free of expression, save for the peaceful, sleep-induced relaxing of his features. Tom made no noise himself, and so was able to discern the quiet inhales and exhalles of Harry's breathing. The sound was comforting. Lady, who had reappeared after slithering off somewhere when they first arrived here, lay on Harry's chest and rose and fell as her Master breathed. Her eyes glittered as she suspiciously observed Tom. The man's eyebrow rose, thinking how peculiar it was to suddenly be second best in Bellatrix Lestrange's favor.

Harry was sleeping under his body's own will now, as the potion that sent him there was not meant to stay in his system long. Tom debated the merits of courtesy, but in this case he decided he could not wait for Harry to awake naturally. Tom's talk with Dumbledore had riled his emotions, left him anxious and in need to settle what was on his mind once and for all. Harry would understand.

Reaching out, Tom buried his fingers in Harry's inky locks, as always wondering how hair this impossibly untamable could be this delicate and soft. Tom carded his fingers through the strands, observing as Harry's facial muscles twitched in obvious signs of his awakening. A deeper, heavier inhale was followed by a louder, longer sigh. Tom abandoned the boy's hair to trail a single fingertip back and forth along the lightning bolt scar on his forehead, tracing the shape and reveling in the warmth that traveled up his arm.

"Will you make up your mind?" Harry mumbled, enough so that Tom at first had trouble distinguishing he had spoken a complete sentence with actual words at all. The young wizard's next sentence was a little easier to understand as Harry woke further. "I know what you did. D'you want me to sleep or don't you?" He blinked blearily, one cheek creased from the pillow he rested it on. Harry tilted his head slightly so he could better see Tom and possibly glare accusingly at him, but a yawn escaped before he could suppress it and so his efforts had little effect. Tom felt a pang of affection in his chest, and he could feel his gaze soften and was only slightly twitchy of that fact.

Lady sensed her Master's wakefulness and moved to the other pillow next to her Harry. Tom's hand retreated, and he thought he heard Harry sigh when he pulled it away.

"You know me, Harry," Tom insisted, his serious tone grabbing Harry's attention. The boy sat up, leaning against the pillows. "You know what I came from," Tom continued.

A deep furrow marred Harry's brow as he studied Tom intently, sleep perhaps still licking at the edges of his thought processing. After a time, though, he nodded, slowly, but in a way that showed how sure he was of himself. Tom was satisfied.

"Then you must know that I will not always be…adept, at expressing myself. I will not be perpetually nice, or thoughtful, or demonstrative. But I meant what I said before: I want you happy. And I want you, Harry. I want you in ways that shouldn't be possible for me. And yet I still do. You are important to me, and so it makes me willing to try. And I swear, if anyone so much
as scratches you again, I will…”

There was a blur of movement and then he had an armful of Harry Potter, and demanding lips against his own in an urgent kiss. Tom didn't even think of doing anything but allowing it, and to pull Harry in further. Harry's attack was actually quite vicious…and he returned it with wicked glee.

But then it was over, and to Tom it felt like a loss when Harry pulled slightly away. This boy wizard…this young man who defied all known laws of the universe in order to do the impossible. The only person he could ever…

"Tom?"

Said wizard stared into Harry's enquiring eyes, their brilliant color holding more depth than his own eyes ever could.

"I love you too."

Reflexively, Tom's arms tightened around Harry's body, knowing he understood. There was no denying the mystery of his soul, because Harry could see and feel it all. The nightmare of almost losing him yesterday was still fresh in his mind—a slimy, dark stain in his memory. The value of another life had never been worth this much to Tom, and for once he found himself truly understanding the joy and pain of love that had always eluded him. After everything he had done, there would be those who would undoubtedly say he didn't deserve this happiness, but Tom had no qualms with his own greed and arrogance to dwell on such things as his own worth.

Burying his fingers in Harry's hair once more, Tom drew him in, molding their lips together, the sealing of an unspoken vow he somehow knew Harry could interpret. Harry's arms folded around Tom's neck, accepting the kiss for what it was. Tom's hands were only interested in feeling the warmth of the younger wizard's body, of ensuring Harry's blood rushed steadily through his veins, and feeling each breath he took. He had to assure himself that there really was life residing within this menace to all things sane and proper.

There had been a time when Tom despised the vulnerability love, a time he would never have let himself fall into its clutches. And yet, here he was, soul defenseless and exposed to, of all people, Harry Potter. And while his hardened heart melted under each of Harry's touches, other parts of him were changed and fortified into something even stouter, and better than before. There was no going back now that he knew what it was like to be loved, something long denied him. It was a fever of the blood and addiction of the soul. He never said he wasn't greedy.

He wondered how Harry would react if he really did lock him up...it would better ensure Tom could keep him all to himself, after all.

Harry was in heaven, and he didn't care that it was in the arms of a wicked devil. He'd made peace with the past and now only had interest in looking toward the future. Life was complicated, messy, and sometimes the unexpected was the most desirable path to take. Harry was in love with Tom Riddle—the hows and whys were unimportant—and right now that was perfectly fine with him. He'd given up on ever having a boring life, anyway.

Harry wondered what Tom would say if he told him how grateful it was the other man had been turned into a legless reptile, considering all that came out of it. He'd probably react in righteous indignation, but Harry suspected he would secretly be thankful, or at least appreciative that it led to a pleasant outcome. Speaking of pleasure…
Harry let Tom press him down against the mattress, their kisses coming with more intent and fervent pressure. He didn't notice the forgotten Lady crawl up one of the bedposts, snake eyes glittering in devious delight as she settled herself down to watch.

As one of Tom's cool hands slid up and underneath Harry's top, causing gooseflesh to follow the trail of his fingers, Harry nipped at the other man's bottom lip once more before pulling away.

"Hey, Tom?" he lazily murmured, tracing the pads of his fingertips down the sides of Tom's face.

Tom's only response was a vague "mmm?" sort of sound as he worked on Harry's neck. Harry struggled to formulate the question he intended to ask.

"Ahh…uh, I thought I was on bed rest…or something. You seemed quite insistent on it." Huffing in good-natured humor when Tom didn't stop to explain himself, Harry pressed his palms on Tom's chest to push the man off so he could see his face. "I am in bed, but this seems a bit contradictory," he said coyly.

Tom leaned back a bit and moved his hand so he could finger the top button of Harry's pajama shirt, circling the tip of his finger around its edge. "I may have exaggerated your convalesce period a little," Tom said while he nonchalantly slipped the top button from its hole. "I imagine you've been mostly recovered since you woke up this afternoon before I even returned."

Harry squirmed slightly as Tom's hand moved to the next button. "What? Then why have I been confined to bed like an invalid?"

"Never can be too careful," Tom responded astutely. Harry figured he meant it was better to ensure he was fully recuperated, but what the man said next mostly shattered that assumption. "I expected keeping you in bed would in turn keep you out of trouble. Seems I was mistaken, though," he said a bit dryly as he opened Harry's shirt further, red eyes pinning the younger wizard to the bed even as simultaneously a sheepish and slightly offended expression fluttered across the boy's face at the oblique mention of his nearly setting the house ablaze.

"I told you, it was an accident," Harry mumbled, his eyelids drifting partially closed as he slowly surrendered himself to Tom's ministrations.

He supposed he was willing the let Tom get away with the teasing for the time being. He had plenty of ammunition for return play, after all. He would never let the man forget the time he was a snake named Voldemort…

…or Tommy, depending on who you asked.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter marks the official end of the story. Hope you enjoyed!

The following chapters are just little extras I wrote for your reading pleasure :)


In what appeared to be the bank of a calmly flowing river, an old man dressed in odd clothes sat on a blanket with his back propped against a gnarled Elder tree, eyes closed and looking for all intents and purposes asleep.

The environment around him, a vast field, seemed to go on forever under a soft evening sun…

A shadow suddenly fell over the man's face, and he immediately opened his eyes—perhaps not having been asleep after all—and found himself to no longer be alone. Unconcerned, he shut his eyes once more and resumed his peaceful expression.

"Well?" the old man asked, voice a bit rough with age, though warm in tone. The shadow across his face moved to the side as the darkly-clothed and hooded second individual sat down against the tree as well. If one looked closely, there was something strange about the second figure—something about the way he moved, or how light never chased the shadow under his hood out, or the way it appeared he wasn't really touching the grass he sat on or the tree his back rested against.

Though the old man had asked a question, the cloaked figure did not respond verbally, but merely gracefully held out with his spindly hand a velvet bag towards the other. Eyes open once again, the old man grinned excitedly and took the bag from his companion. "I knew it," the man said. As he placed the bag on his lap, there was no sound of metal clinking against metal, as would indicate the bag was filled with monetary coins of some sort.

"Yes, yes, you won," the cloaked figure spoke for the first time, voice harsh and smooth at the same time. "That is the last time I will gamble against you."

"You always say that," the old man said good-naturedly, patting his dark companion on a very thin shoulder.

"I don't know why I bother. It's not like you ever bet for anything of real interest," the skinny figure groused. The old man—who appeared to be a friend and used to the other person's grumbling—only chuckled lightly.

"You know me," he said, pulling on the string that kept his bag of winnings closed. Reaching in, he pulled a small object out.

It was a Chocolate Frog.

"I can't see how you don't like these. Ingenious, they are. Are you certain you don't want one?" He held the confection out, but the other refused.

"I'd rather not."

The old man shrugged and opened his sweet, expertly catching the animated chocolate before it could jump away. He took a bite and sighed in appreciation. Reaching again for the package the
chocolate came in, he pulled from it what looked like a rectangular card.

"Blast. Another Dumbledore." He frowned at the card before tucking it away in a pocket. Pulling out another Chocolate Frog, he opened it and ate that too. He laughed when he looked at that one's card. "A Harry Potter! How amusing."

"Hmm, yes," the hooded figure told his friend in a dry voice. "You know, he does remind me a bit of you."

"He's far more exciting than I am," the aged man said dismissively. "And what of the other? I can never keep straight what he goes by these days. I do like your nickname for him, though."

The cloaked man made a noise akin to a snort. "The Cheater of Death is protected by the Master," he said in reply. "They are far too tied together. Perhaps someday, if they wish, you will be able to meet them."

"A rather unique love story, it seems. You should tell it to me sometime." The hooded man shook his head.

"I will tell you when I figure out how it happened."

The old man chuckled knowingly. "Never bet against Fate, either. Or perhaps it's Lady Luck?"

The darkly robed figure huffed.

The two sat in comfortable silence for quite some time. The sun, however, never moved an inch further down the horizon.

Eventually, the dark figure rose, not a spec of dirt or grass on his clothing. "I must be going."

"Always busy, you are," the old man said with a fond smile.

"Farewell, Ignotus."

Ignotus Peverell waved to Death, watching as his friend disappeared from this current existence before he once again closed his eyes and peacefully listened to the gurgling of the river as it flowed by.

Somewhere on the island of Great Britain, Harry Potter opened his eyes to a dark room, awaking in a state of mild curiosity as often occurs after a strange dream. By morning, the intrigue would have been forgotten, as would the memory of the thing that summoned the feeling. Sighing, the boy rolled over, sleep once more tugging incessantly at the edges of his consciousness. With his face pressed into the warm side of his lover, Harry fell back into sleep just as the first rays of dawn lightened the horizon.
"Well, here we are," Harry said, face alight with nerves and equal excitement. "Tom, I can't believe we're actually doing this."

The surly eyed man next to the twenty-one year old gave an even deeper scowl than the one he wore just moments before. "Yes, I can hardly believe it either," he said with clear sarcastic enthusiasm. "It has always been my dream to open up my home to a messy, whiney—"

"Oh, hush Tom," Harry scolded, shooting a glare in his lover's direction. "I know you're doing this only because I've always wanted one, but I think you may actually grow to love the one we get, or at least enjoy their company."

Tom snorted in a sheer example of incredulousness. "I really don't think—"

For the second time in a row, much to his chagrin, Tom was interrupted from finishing his sentence, though this time it was by a person other than Harry.

"My Lords!" an elderly yet sprite woman exclaimed breathlessly from the doorway of the building Tom and Harry stood before. Her grey hair was pulled back in a severe sort of bun reminiscent of McGonagall, but the ecstatic smile (even in the face of the powerful Minister and ex-Lord Voldemort, revealed to the public only last year after a successful election—Harry's, the late Dumbledore's, plus others' endorsements prevented complete panic and mayhem upon the reveal) on her aged face bore little resemblance to Harry's old professor.

"Please, please come in! We've been expecting you. I must say, it is quite the honor."

With a final look in Tom's direction that clearly said, "Behave," Harry approached the woman easily, his excited grin once again in place on his countenance. With the obvious reluctance of a man who knew exactly what he was getting himself into and wishing he could escape his fate, Tom followed in a grim, stately manner after Harry.

The facility was clean and bright, the walls obviously covered in fresh paint and the wooden floors buffed to a mirror shine. It was a far cry from the orphanage Tom grew up in, and it left the man feeling a sense of ironic bitterness. How was this fair?

"Oh Tom! Just come look at them!"

Harry's obviously enamored call from a room off the left distracted Tom from his memories and brooding. Dread growing within him, he went in the direction his lover's voice had come from and walked into the room which all the...the things were gathered, Harry standing a short distance away eyeing each and every one. This sort of line up Tom was familiar with, despite the glistening paint and polished floors.
Harry's green eyes were bright with shining, joyful emotion, but there was a hint of dismay upon his features. He turned and looked up at Tom.

"How can we possibly choose?"

Considering the question, Tom looked once again at the choices. There were blonds, brunets, boys and girls...there was one obvious solution.

"Don't. We can still leave."

Harry looked positively aghast, and Tom nearly winced. Despite what he said, he realized it was too late. Harry had already seen them, and he wouldn't be leaving without one.

"How can you say that? Just look at their faces! You remember how it was…"

"Harry, how is this possibly the same thing?" Tom snapped, waving his hand over the heads of the cretins. He signed when Harry's bottom lip poked out *just enough* to be considered a pout. And damn, was it attractive.

Tom sighed, and once again resigned himself. This really was happening.

"Might I make a suggestion?" the woman who had greeted them before said, slightly timidly.

"Yes, please," Harry voiced eagerly. The woman forged herself at the young man's obvious enthusiasm.

"Why don't you go up to them, try and get to know them a little? You'll know the right one when you see him or her."

Nodding eagerly, Harry stepped forth, many pairs of eyes watching him with unguarded anticipation. Tom, refusing to move, stood by the wall and watched. What did it matter? It's not like whichever one Harry chose would ever come to care for Tom the same way as he or she was certain to do with Harry. Harry had a different personality than Tom did, and had an uncanny knack of drawing others in.

Tom saw the moment Harry spotted the one he'd unconsciously been searching for. A breathtaking smile overcame his features, and even in that moment Tom felt himself soften just a bit. He never forgot the reason he had even agreed to this—he did it to make his Harry happy. If it involved bringing one of these into their lives, then so be it.

Harry was now kneeling next to one with dark—most likely black—hair, placing a trembling hand on top of small creature's shiny locks. The object of his attention stood tensely, looking up at the young man with quiet yet adoring eyes. The *thing* then had the indecency to brush his grubby paws against Harry's trouser leg in an imploring gesture, and gave the most impish, toothy grin up at him. Laughing, Harry reached down and picked the cretin up.

Righting himself, Harry stood carefully, the brat nestled against his chest. His green eyes found Tom's.

"Him. What do you think?"

Tom scrutinized the would-be invader to their home.

"It looks stupid."
Harry shot him a glare. "He, Tom. It is a he. And he does not!" He dropped his chin to whisper in his new charge's ear. "Don't listen to him—your other daddy is just trying to be funny," Harry said while giving Tom a pointed look.

Tom studied the determined expression of Harry's face and sighed for the millionth time that day, not even bothering to react to Harry's use of "daddy" in reference to him. "If that's the one you want, I won't stop you from getting the mu—"

"Shh! Don't say it!" Harry looked anxiously at the thing (Tom still wouldn't think of it as anything else) as if worried it knew what Tom was about to say. Really, sometimes Tom wondered about his lover.

"Hmph, I still think a pureblood would have been better."

"You know that doesn't matter to me," Harry expressed, still cuddling the thing to his chest. He kissed to top of its head. "Really, you know there is no difference." Looking over at the woman still waiting by the doorway, he said to her, "We want him. Where do we sign?" That was all that was left, since they'd already filled out paperwork weeks before and the foundation had reviewed their files to ensure the adoptee would be going to a good home.

The woman beamed in obvious delight. "Excellent! I knew that sweet little gent would find a family soon enough. Come, we can go to the office to finish things up."

Smiling excitedly, Harry trailed after the woman, cooing all the way to the thing in his arms. Tom felt a twinge of worry when he noticed he was already feeling the beginning stages of jealousy. He knew that much of Harry's time would now be taken up by this thing, playing with it, teaching it, holding it. All Tom could think was there was no way the thing was ever coming into their bed with them, not even for nightmares or whatever. That was Tom's territory.

Harry, in his eagerness, had already finished signing half the paperwork by the time Tom reluctantly placed himself in the doorway of the office. The young man looked up at his lover.

"Okay, Tom, your turn!"

Tom thought to protest, but knew it was pointless at this stage and the arguments they'd had before. Harry wanted it to theirs. A few scrawling signatures, and the deal was done.

Tom wondered the prudence of getting Nagini to eat the new addition within the week.

"Will you give him a new name? He is young enough."

The woman's question drew Tom's attention towards Harry as the young man thought in intense silence.

"I think I'll name him after my Godfather." Harry turned in his seat to look over his shoulder at Tom. "Is that alright with you?"

Tom sneered, feeling a sense of satisfaction when the woman pressed herself firm to her seat back in intimidation. See, he still had it in him—it seemed as if many people had forgotten who he'd been before. Perhaps it was the lack of death and destruction on his part. Sometimes, like today, he really missed that...

"What would I care? He's," Tom emphasized to Harry, "yours."

Harry huffed. "He's both of ours, Tom."
"Hardly."

"You are such a mean bastard."

The woman hunched further into her chair at the causal shrug of agreement Tom cast his lover. Harry, for his part, only smiled and shook his head, not really angry.

Now that the paperwork was signed, the caretaker gathered them up and placed them into a file, closing it with a sense of finality. She glanced up with another smile. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Harry gushed, kissing the dark-haired head of his newly adopted charge. Rising from his seat in a flurry of hyperactive motion, Harry sidled up to and pressed himself against Tom's side, the thing sandwiched between them to Tom's dismay. "Let's go home."

With one last, wry glance at his pristine surroundings, Tom wrapped his arms around his younger lover and Apparated them to their front foyer.

His shirt felt wet.

"Oh! You poor thing. That is usually what happens to everybody their first time Apparating," Harry cooed over the beast that had puked all over the front of Tom's robes.

"You can't be serious."

"It's just a little vomit, Tom, it'll come out with a charm just fine. He couldn't help it."

"Harry…" Tom growled lowly, a warning in his voice.

Just then, Nagini, upon scenting that her Masters were home, slithered into view and sent the youngling in Harry's arms squirming and crying in fright when it caught sight of her. When it couldn't break free, it buried its face into Harry's shoulder, whimpering.

"Great, you got one that was afraid of snakes," Tom commented deprecatingly.

:Is that it, Master?: Nagini queried, twining her body around Tom's feet, her head propped up on a coil so she could look at the house's new addition. :It looks wimpy. If it is, I can eat it and you can find one better suited.: Tom gave a pointed look at Harry.

"What?" the younger of the two exclaimed. "She hated Lady at first too, but got used to her just fine eventually."

"That's because when she is not Lady, Bellatrix will shine her scales and find her the biggest game to chase and eat."
"I still think Bellatrix, and Lady for that matter, are lying when she, they—whatever!—say that they don't remember anything after changing one way or the other," Harry grumbled. The summer before Harry's Seventh Year, Tom had come up with a way to imbibe Bellatrix's Dark Mark with a Parselphrase-triggered Transfiguration spell, which allowed either Harry or Tom to change her into a snake and back. Instead of getting Harry an actual, honest-to-God-born-this-way cobra, Tom had insisted he continue carrying around the transformed Bellatrix, giving him easy access to a powerful dueler for protection should he need it. Currently, Bellatrix was human and banned to the care of her husband—Harry really didn't want her around in either form when he brought their new addition home.

A cry drew their attention to the youngling sitting at Harry's feet.

Tom, not wishing to deal with the thing anymore, turned on his heel and followed Nagini out the room, calling out behind him, "That thing better be toilet trained!"

Harry watched Tom's retreat with a soft smile on his face, knowing it was going to be a long road before his lover could accept the addition to their little (atypical) family. At his feet, little Padfoot made another whimpering sound, so the young wizard knelt down next to him and drew his fingers through the puppy's inky black coat.

"Don't worry, kid, you're going to love it here. It might take Tom a little while to warm up to you, but he will eventually. He may be a bit of a reptile person, but if you continue with those puppy-dog eyes and adorable expressions, then how can he possibly resist?"

Mollified by Harry's comforting, Padfoot yipped and wagged his tail hard enough his bottom shook side to side. Harry chuckled at the sight, and swept the young puppy of a non-discriminant breed off the floor.

"Come on, Padfoot, let's show you the rest of the house and your brand new bed! Tom wants it to be placed somewhere ("Anywhere!") other than the bedroom, but maybe just for tonight it will be okay…"

Padfoot yipped in reply and wagged his fleshy tail even harder.

Chapter End Notes

Lol, if I did it right, you had no idea it was just a dog! Hope you liked it XD I randomly thought of it one day and typed it up. It's hardly a proper sequel or epilogue, but I thought it was cute

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!