Wear Me Like A Locket Around Your Throat

by VivyPotter

Summary

“This is Mr Riddle, one of our Slytherin prefects. I’m sure he’ll make you feel right at home. Mr Riddle, this is Harrison Peters. He’s just been sorted into Slytherin and will be joining you in sixth year,” Dumbledore announced jovially, though Tom could see that sliver of constant suspicion in his gaze that had never quite faded.

“Harry,” the boy hurried to correct. “Just Harry.”

And then he stuck his hand out. How… plebeian, Tom noticed with delight. Walburga would probably faint.
This fanfiction has changed canon events. In this, Tom Riddle opens the CoS in his sixth year, not fifth. It's just small chronological changes, and some familial ones. Not major, but you may notice them :)

Pretty much all grammatical accuracy within this fanfic is down to Cutie_314, who is literally the nicest human being on this planet. Damn her for making me feel so inadequate.

DISCLAIMER: (I'm not sure if fanfic writers actually do disclaimers anymore because my eyes now automatically skip over them. I think we all know I'm not JK Rowling in disguise, but even if just for that old ff.net nostalgia, here's one I made earlier.) You know the spiel. I own nothing, it is all JK.
Tom Riddle had just been settling down to a delicious meal of roasted venison at the Slytherin table when he was interrupted.

“Uh, Tom? Mr Riddle, sir?” Olive Hornby, a third year Ravenclaw, hovered anxiously at his shoulder. She was a vapid, silly girl with plain features, a head of curly hair, and an excruciatingly annoying habit of giggling after every sentence.

“Yes, Hornby?” Tom’s patented fake smile slid over his features like ice, freezing the muscles into an image of charm.

Hornby tittered. “Professor Dumbledore asked if he could see you in his office. He, um, said it was urgent.”

“Did he specify why?”

“No. Sorry, Tom. I could, uh, ask if you want?” Hornby offered quickly, eager to please.

“That’s quite alright, Hornby. I’m sure I’ll find out soon enough,” Tom assured her, not wanting to prolong the interaction.

“Oh, of course.” Hornby hesitated and sank into a jerky sort of curtsy.

Atticus Avery snorted cruelly.

Hornby opened her mouth like she wanted to say something more, but turned bright red and closed it again. She let out a strangled squeak.

“You can leave now, Hornby,” Tom said.

Hornby nodded and turned to leave, shuffling back towards the Ravenclaw table. Her walk grew more and more confident with every step she got further away until, finally, she was greeted enthusiastically: the leader amongst her gaggle of Ravenclaw sycophants.

“Mudblood,” Montgomery Lestrange spat, running his teeth over his tongue as if to remove a foul taste.

“Her mother is actually a leading Unspeakable,” Cassius Rosier corrected softly, eyes never leaving the page in front of him.

“I’m sure she’s quite proud,” Tom said lightly, and revelled in the laughter that followed.

“Father’s worked with Unspeakable Hornby on something before, I think,” Orion Black piped up, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “The Veil of Death, I believe.”

“Of Death?” Tom asked.

“Ominous name,” Rupert Dolohov chuckled, and Orion laughed with him. A swift glare from Tom silenced them both.

“Continue?” Tom prompted, attention caught. He didn’t lean forward in his seat - it would be quite unbecoming - but he might have, had he been anyone else.
“Oh. Yes,” Orion said hesitantly. “I don’t think they know much about it yet, but apparently you can hear loved ones whispering if you get too close to it. Only if they’re dead, of course, but Father said it’s almost like they’re standing at your shoulder.”

“Didn’t one of the Unspeakables kill themselves over it last year?” Atticus said, sneering. “A recent widow, or something?”

Rupert leaned back on the bench, taking a swig of pumpkin juice. “Maybe one black veil wasn’t enough for her.” He laughed.

Tom felt a surge of disgust at the idea of killing yourself over love. Pathetic. His interest was caught by the idea of a door between the living and the dead – perhaps this was something he could explore in a future venture.

“What do they know how it works?”

Orion perked up at Tom’s interest. “Oh, no. Father didn’t say. But, apparently it’s like nothing they’ve ever seen before. Made from the same stuff as Dementor cloaks, they reckon.”

Dementors – now there was something Tom had never considered. Surely creatures with such a close relationship to death might have a way to avoid it?

“Tommy, don’t you have to go see Dumbledore?”

The slimy voice of Caspar Grahams was unwelcome to Tom. Grahams was a fellow Slytherin sixth year, but certainly not one of Tom’s closest. He was weak and needy – two things Tom had never been able to abide. He had little to offer appearance-wise, and his magic was, at best, average. Tom kept him at arms-length. And then there was that word.

“Tommy?” His voice was glacial and accompanied by a scalding glare. Tom wouldn’t have been surprised if Grahams melted into his seat.

“Sorry, Tom,” Grahams muttered, his skin whitening with terror. Perhaps he was recalling the incident last year, where he ‘accidentally’ fell into a cauldron containing an overpowered Draught of Living Death and remained in a coma until Christmas. Coincidentally, he had been working with Tom.

The rest of the group ignored the casual threat.

“What did you think the old goat-fucker wants now?” Rupert sniggered.

“No, Rupert, the goat-fucker’s his brother,” Atticus said, and Rupert dissolved into hysterics.

“Now, don’t be vulgar.”

Both stilled at Tom’s words and seemed to draw into themselves. Tom both bathed in the movement, and felt a strange frustration. He brushed off the feeling.

“I should go and visit our Deputy Headmaster. I will be back shortly. Save my plate.”

And so he bid a swift, cold, farewell to his companions and made his way up to Dumbledore’s small office.

The Transfigurations classroom had always been Tom’s least favourite space, filled with Dumbledore’s odds and ends as it was. The pokey office hidden through a door at the back was even
worse. Cluttered, colourful and disorganised – it was everything Tom hated. Dumbledore, predictably, seemed to thrive in it.

The Deputy Headmaster perched on his chair: an elaborate, wooden thing, various magical creatures and scenes carved into the rich grain. Tom resisted the urge to set it on fire.

“Ah, Tom,” Dumbledore said, his glasses twinkling. “Just the fellow I wanted to see. I have a task for you.”

“You called me out of the feast, sir?” Tom asked, a false smile playing on his lips.

Conversations with Dumbledore were never one of Tom’s favourite activities, and – from the figure hovering just behind Dumbledore’s shoulder – Tom assumed the task would be both interaction-based and menial.

“This is Mr Riddle, one of our Slytherin prefects. I’m sure he’ll make you feel right at home. Mr Riddle, this is Harrison Peters. He’s just been sorted into Slytherin and will be joining you in sixth year,” Dumbledore announced jovially, though Tom could see that sliver of constant suspicion in his gaze that had never quite faded.


Tom Riddle inspected the newest addition to Slytherin with idle curiosity. Harrison “Harry” Peters was an interesting mix of contradictions. He was a combination of Mudblood manners, Pureblood features, youth, yet Tom knew that there was more experience behind those green eyes than there should’ve been.

And then, there were the peculiar scars. Almost every inch of his skin was traced with thin, golden lines. They spread: vein-like patterns, running along his arms and creeping over his cheeks. They were almost unnoticeable, until they caught the light and then how they shined. He lit up.

Combined with the slow, lengthy movements the boy was fond of taking, and that rather familiar-feeling wand – why, it all created quite the interesting, suspicious package.

He was sure Abraxas would be able to find out more about the boy, should Tom ask.

“And what brings you to Hogwarts so late, Harrison? Sixth year is quite the starting point,” Tom enquired politely, taking the boy’s offered hand and shaking it firmly. He couldn’t help but discern a faint shudder from the contact.

Excellent. Maybe this one would be fun.

“Stuff,” Harrison mumbled, and Tom raised one eyebrow.

“My curiosity is piqued. Go on?”

“Harry has been previously pursuing a home-based education, but extenuating circumstances have forced our company upon him,” Dumbledore said, in his usual vague, waffling way.

“My parents are dead,” the boy spoke bluntly, meeting Tom’s gaze head-on, in a peculiarly confrontational manner.

Tom took note of the curl of delight that rose in the pit of his own stomach.
“These are dangerous times we live in,” Dumbledore said.

Harrison ‘hmm’ed noncommitally. Tom’s suspicion wasn’t sated. For someone whose parents had supposedly died, Harrison wasn’t exhibiting any of the usual signs of grief. The scab – to coin a muggle phrase – seemed to have already healed over.

“Well, I can only hope,” Tom murmured silkily, “that Hogwarts can offer a safe shelter during these turbulent years.”

“I’m sure,” Harrison grunted, and Tom narrowed his eyes at the short answer.

“I trust you’ll lead Harry back to the Slytherin table?” Dumbledore interrupted. “The feast is already underway, and I imagine Harry is feeling quite deprived of the sumptuous cuisine we so value here at Hogwarts.”

“I’m sure he’s quite hungry,” Tom murmured, a note of challenge hidden in his words. The faint frown on Dumbledore’s features told him it had not gone unnoticed.

Tom turned back to Harrison and gestured. “Come, I’ll lead you back to the feast.”

Harry was not pleased with his situation.

He’d been right in the middle of a bloody important fight, when - boom! - the Department of Mysteries had chosen that opportune moment to blow up. Bloody Unspeakables didn’t know when to pick the moment to build new Time Turners. Why yes, do it while a fierce battle between the Order of the Phoenix and Voldemort’s forces is happening next door. Good job.

Thank Merlin, Dumbledore and Dippet had swallowed his half-arsed story about a ‘poor homeschooled half-blood’ and ‘unfortunate parental death’ and ‘please, sir, Hogwarts is the only place left to go. I promise I won’t cause any trouble’.

Bollocks - when had Harry Potter ever caused anything but trouble?

Harry was perfectly aware that Dumbledore hadn’t believed a word: he’d gotten that same scheming, manipulative look that he always got whenever Harry made a mistake in their games of chess, but Harry would just have to take his suspicion on the chin. Tom Riddle had dealt with it for 7 years - it couldn’t be that hard.

Speaking of Tom Riddle, the boy was almost exactly as he’d remembered. Smooth, manipulative, a complete arse - but handsome. Perfect cheekbones, perfect smile, perfect eyes - Harry hated every inch of him. He hated every perfect dark hair on his perfect head. He hated the sharp swoop of his jawline and the rich, intelligent hazel eyes and that flawless white skin.

Harry just had to remind himself that this wasn’t Voldemort - for Merlin’s sake, he hadn’t even found the Chamber of Secrets yet! But that didn’t stop Harry from trembling with the urge to wrap his hands around Riddle’s neck and just squeeze.

Think of all the lives he could save.

Think of all the lives he could doom.

Harry had considered this. To be honest, his first thought when he’d realised he had arrived in August, 1943 was to kill Riddle. He could save his parents, Cedric, Quirrel, Sirius, all before they were even born.
But Harry was almost sorted into Slytherin, and that quiet voice, the one that sounded disturbingly like Hermione, had talked some sense into him. Bad things happening to wizards who messed with time... and he admitted that perhaps Hermione’s accusations of recklessness weren’t always inaccurate. If he killed Riddle, who knew what could happen? Without Riddle’s influence, would his parents even be born? What if Riddle’s exact presence at one moment in time saved the Wizarding World? Harry could be murdering everyone he’d ever known, all because he couldn’t control himself.

So Riddle had to live. That didn’t mean Harry had to be nice to him.

Money had been an issue. He was unable to get to his trust fund here - seeing as it hadn’t even been set up yet - but luckily, he was able to get both a loan from Gringotts, and the Hogwarts orphan fund paid for his books, equipment and uniform. He didn’t need anything else, really. Harry tried not to wonder if the fund had still been a thing in his time, or if there had simply been too many orphans to pay for them.

Harry had initially considered avoiding Hogwarts - and therefore Tom Riddle - altogether, and sneaking away to Albania, or something. But Britain was his home, and there was a part of Harry that shrank at the idea of abandoning Hogwarts’ halls for a strange land. He was stranded in a new era, alone and so, so scared. He could allow himself this little piece of familiarity, could he not? He could get a false name, avoid Riddle - Harry could be what he always wanted: just another unimportant face in the crowd.

‘Harrison Peters’ would have to keep a reasonably low profile. He didn’t want to become too memorable. And fuck, if he hadn’t bollocksed that one up by being sorted into Slytherin. Great job, Harry. Pat on the back.

The Sorting Hat had always been difficult and was less easily persuaded second time round. What a dick.

Which was how Harry came to be trailing after Riddle, hands clenched in the folds of his robes. Riddle strode quickly, long legs covering twice the distance that Harry ever could. The sound of his polished shoes, and Harry’s muffled trainers, echoed through the empty corridors.

“So how far along were you with the curriculum with your parents?” Riddle asked, his voice just as smooth and musical as Harry knew it would be. It was a far cry from the hissing creature that had risen in the graveyard just last year.

“Far enough,” Harry said shortly.

Riddle’s jaw twitched, and Harry took twisted joy in irritating his fellow Slytherin (and wasn’t that a weird thought?).

“What’s your favourite subject?” Riddle tried again, and Harry wondered why he was trying so hard. Probably attempting to bring Harry over to the Dark Side. Well a few quotes from ’50 Conversation Starters for Murderous Sociopaths’ wasn’t going to do that.

“Defence.” There wasn’t much danger giving him that much, was there?

Harry regretted it when he saw the smug look on Riddle’s face.

“Me too,” the future dark lord said slowly, and Harry wondered how Riddle could make just two words so slimy and unpleasant.

“I’m sorry about your parents,” Riddle said suddenly, his voice full of false sympathy. Harry
wondered viciously whether Riddle had just remembered how to be a human being.

“Me too.” Even Harry could hear how dull his voice was. He was emotionally exhausted. To be civilly discussing his dead parents with their murderer! Well, that wasn’t something he had ever seen coming.

“My parents are dead, too,” Riddle tried.

Oh. Well this… this was unexpected. Harry had known that Riddle was an orphan from his time with the diary, but that had been a detached acknowledgement. To have the real, breathing orphan in front of him… Harry knew what it was like to grow up without a family, alone and abused. He couldn’t stop a twinge of empathy.

*But think of how many people he killed!*

The righteous Gryffindor within him roared.

*What would you have done without Ron or Hermione, if all you had were the Dursleys…?*

Replied the Slytherin voice, which still bore a disturbing resemblance to his bookworm friend.

Deciding that these empathetic feelings he was sharing with Voldemort, of all people (*not Voldemort yet*, Hermione reminded him), were too weird to continue with, Harry shook his head. And realised that Riddle was still waiting for a response.

“Sorry,” Harry blurted out uncomfortably.

“When did they pass?” Riddle spoke smoothly, seeming to skim over the awkwardness. Harry doubted that it had gone unnoticed.

“When I was a baby’ was the automatic answer, and Harry had to bite his tongue to catch it. “A few weeks ago,” he said quickly.

“Recently, then,” Riddle remarked, eyes boring into Harry’s skull. “I imagine you’re still grieving, then.”

“Oh, er, yes.” What a rubbish answer. Harry wondered why he was finding this so difficult. It hadn’t been difficult to conjure up a few tears for Dumbledore and Dippet. Perhaps it was his distrust: that fear of showing weakness in front of Riddle that held him back.

“Who was it?” Riddle pressed, and Harry balled up his fists.

“Could you stop?!” he snapped loudly. It was the first time Harry had raised his voice above a low murmur, and the shout of ‘you!’ in his head was almost as loud.

“I apologise. I appear to have stirred unfortunate memories.”

The baby Dark Lord seemed genuinely sorry. Harry didn’t believe a second of it.

“They’re dead, and that’s the end of it,” Harry spat, and he held back his fury. It was fine: he was just imagining the haze around him, the taste of copper and electricity on his tongue, the way his wand twitched in his pocket. He could believe that. However, he didn’t think it was his imagination that caused the hairs on the back of his arms to raise. The air around him seemed to crackle.

Okay. So this was a new development.
Before Harry could reflect too much on his sudden loss of control, they drew to a stop in front of a familiar door. Harry frowned at it, remembering how he had stumbled, terrified, out of this door last year. It seemed a lifetime away, before the tournament, before Umbridge and the DA, before Voldemort, before—

“This is the Great Hall. We take breakfast here every morning at eight. Classes begin at nine, each an hour long, until twelve; where we have lunch until one thirty. Dinner is at six.”

Harry didn’t even bother to respond as he drank in the welcome scene, abuzz with energy and light. Even the floating candles seemed especially bright, dancing in the sky. The ceiling glistened with a thousand stars: every colour of an early evening mixed into just one palette. The hall echoed with voices, and Harry could catch bits of countless conversations.

It was so happy and light. He hadn’t realised how much he’d missed this. Harry’s fifth year had been dark, full of suspicion and mistrust, every meal shrouded in shadow. Whether the students believed Harry’s claims or not, no one had been in the mood to excitedly pour over various stuffings.

Despite the immediate familiarity, Harry could still spot differences: extra gargoyles, which were probably lost or decommissioned over time; dishes that had lost popularity; and evidence of wartime rationing. There were even changes in the way the students wore their hair.

“It’s beautiful,” he breathed. Hogwarts was home.

“I agree.”

Harry had, honestly, forgotten Tom Riddle even existed for a moment. Turning his attention back to him, Harry’s breath caught in his throat. Riddle’s face was alight, sharp lines softening in the flickering candlelight. He surveyed the hall with a warm pride and boundless hunger, but there was something protective in his gaze. Everything was softer and more open: he smiled.

Harry wondered: if this was the face that launched a Wizarding war, suddenly, everything made a lot more sense. Everything also became a whole lot more terrifying, because if this had been the man that greeting him in front of the Mirror of Erised… Harry wasn’t sure he would have said no.

Riddle seemed to regain himself, growing colder and more professional. “I’ll bring you to the Slytherin table. You can meet my friends.”

Voldemort doesn’t have friends. The lion again.

Not Voldemort, yet, you moron. A hiss.

Harry dutifully followed his future arch-rival and imagined what Ron and Hermione would say about this. It would probably sound remarkably like the conversation happening in his head.

The Slytherin table had not, to Harry’s knowledge, changed much. It still seemed to be the same mix of upper-class Purebloods, and the occasional ambitious Muggleborn, in distinct divides. Harry’s opinion very swiftly changed when Tom approached them.

Almost immediately, every Slytherin at that table seemed more alert, more anxious, and more reverent. A seat in the midst of a group was cleared instantly, sixth year boys shuffling along to make room. In fact, the effect was not limited to the students in green. Quite a few students from other houses seemed to quieten, girls and boys alike regarding Riddle with awe, and not a small amount of lust. Harry noticed one Hufflepuff in particular, giggling with her friends as she twirled a dark plait around her finger and eyed Tom. Harry wondered if she would be screaming over a dead body in
years to come.

Harry’s thoughts, as usual, were remarkably positive.

“Over here.” Riddle spoke softly and sat down without bothering to check if Harry followed. The group of boys closed ranks, crowding around Riddle as if he were a saint. There was nowhere for Harry to sit (and he certainly didn’t want to be in the middle of Death Eater central), so he decided to go next to the first years. At least they probably wouldn’t know enough magic yet to seriously injure him. But he had barely stepped in their direction, when:

“Not going to sit?” A snide, whiny voice that reminded Harry distinctly of Peter Pettigrew. The association was not pleasant. Harry tracked down the source of the voice to a tall boy, lanky and thin. He had close-cut red hair and a short, wide nose with small, narrowed eyes. His lips were twisted into a smile that was probably meant to be mocking but just looked slightly constipated.

“Not if it means sitting next to you,” Harry said plainly.

A few people laughed, the most noticeable of them an attractive blond-haired boy with high eyebrows and a long nose.

“Well, why don’t you take a seat next to Avery, then? Don’t worry, we all like to avoid Grahams.” Riddle smirked, gestured to the seat next to the blond boy and - oh, what a surprise - the young Dark Lord himself.

“I think I’ll just go and branch-“

“Sit.” Tom spoke firmly over Harry’s protestations.

“Loving the choice,” Harry commented as he reluctantly joined Riddle on the bench. “Really feels like a democracy.”

Apparently Riddle elected to ignore him, as he simply smiled blithely and waved at his companions. “I think introductions are in order. This is Atticus Avery.”

“Nice to meet you,” the blond boy said slyly, pointedly not offering his hand. “I’m sure you’ll be quite fascinating.”

Harry got the impression that Atticus would stab him in the back if he got half a chance. He nodded emptily.

“Orion Black.”

“From the noble and ancient house of Black,” the one with boyish good looks and dark hair tied back said, taking Harry’s hand and shaking it enthusiastically.

Well, fuck. The wound was too shallow. He had but a few days ago seen Sirius’ body fall backwards through the veil, crumpling like a sheet of old parchment as he was ripped away from Harry. To be confronted by Sirius’ father so soon afterwards… well, it was like being punched in the gut. Angrily, Harry felt his eyes fill with tears and furiously blinked them away. This hurt.

Luckily, Orion was still taking a mile-an-hour, blabbering on about his father and- France? for some reason. Harry prayed to Merlin that his little moment had gone unnoticed. He would save his sobs for later that evening.

“Black,” Tom said warningly, and Orion mercifully shut up.
“Sorry, Tom.”

“This is Montgomery Lestrange.”

And just Harry’s luck - a relative to the woman who killed Sirius. Looking nothing alike, of course, but Montgomery still looked fucking insane, with a familiar dark light in his eyes and sandy hair. Perhaps craziness was a requirement of carrying the Lestrange name.

Harry took a deep breath. He just had to get through this hour, then he could break down. Maybe he could sneak away to the Room of Requirement and break something.

Montgomery Lestrange regarded Harry with unnatural interest, wearing a bloodthirsty grin that looked out of place on his fifteen year old face. “Mudblood,” he said viciously, offering a curled and clawed hand.

“Halfblood, actually,” Harry replied icily, taking the hand and stabbing his nails into the soft flesh. This Lestrange didn’t have years of experience on him, and damn if he was going to be intimidated.

“Same thing,” Montgomery spat, smiling all the while.

“Not really.” Harry was so done with this conversation, so he turned back to Riddle, hoping for another introduction to distract him. To Harry’s horror, Riddle was watched him hungrily, one eyebrow raised.

*Fly under the radar,* he told himself.

“Cassius Rosier,” Riddle said, pointing to someone Harry hadn’t even noticed. But he noticed him now. Ah- here were Bellatrix’ features. Hooded, sensual eyes, a deep wood brown; and curled black locks the colour of panther fur, gleaming under the Hogwarts light. Next to Riddle, Cassius was easily the most attractive of the boys.

The reason Harry hadn’t noticed him: he had his nose buried in a book.

“Cassius?” Riddle repeated, and the boy merely hummed in reply. How very Hermione-ish. (And now Harry was seeing both Hermione and Bellatrix layered over one another; what a horrifying image.)

*The images: Bella, a triumphant smile on her face as she waved her wand and Sirius was sent sprawling-*

Riddle rolled his eyes, and Harry blinked; shocked at that very human gesture.

“And me!” The last boy was a whirlwind of long hair and freckles, wide smiles and slightly terrifying energy. “King of the puns and teller of jokes!”

“Yeah,” Atticus snorted. “Like your mother’s marriage.”

“Shut your mouth!” the boy hissed, turning on Atticus with a look of unexpected fury. “Or I’ll bring up the Ministry ball-"

“At least I don’t-“

“Gentlemen!” Riddle masterfully controlled them, cutting off their argument with a simple glare. Harry felt his dislike increase.

“Harrison, meet Rupert Dolohov.”
Rupert gave him a tight smile, but his enthusiasm seemed to have dimmed.

“Nice to meet you all,” Harry mumbled lowly, feeling incredibly uncomfortable. They all sat in silence, looking at him expectantly. Harry had no idea what they wanted and - quite frankly - would rather be in bed, even if it was in the dungeons.

“An introduction could be beneficial?” Atticus said slowly.

“But I’ve already met you all…?”

“This is Harrison Peters,” Riddle corrected amusedly, adopting a faint smirk.

Harry turned bright red. “Oh, er, yes. And it’s Harry, not Harrison. Just Harry.”

“All right, ‘just Harry’. What brings you to Hogwarts?” Rupert asked.

Shifting in his seat, Harry pondered how to answer. “The war,” he finally settled upon. It was an honest, straightforward answer, and Harry knew that the others would assume he meant Grindelwald’s war. Harry was rubbish at lies, so decided to try and keep his story as close to truth as possible.

“Could you be any more vague if you tried?” Atticus asked shiftily, narrowing his eyes at Harry. Atticus was becoming more and more unpleasant by the minute.

“Yes, he probably could,” Cassius murmured. “He could tell complete untruths, and then we’d all be doomed.”

Rupert laughed and slung an arm around Cassius’ shoulder. “Crazy Cassius, don’t ever change.”

He finally looked up from his book and blinked. “I wasn’t planning on it.”

“So, how come you haven’t come to Hogwarts before now?” Grahams sneered, leaning in and trying desperately to join the conversation. Harry tried to think sympathetically of the outcast - consider him another Neville Longbottom - but Harry couldn’t erase the image of a rat-faced man cowering on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, admitting to his parents’ betrayal.

“Well, my parents weren’t dead, before,” Harry said bluntly. He really was too tired for Slytherin machinations. Perhaps in the morning.

Grahams sat back, looking ashamed.

“Brilliant tact as always, Grahams,” Riddle sneered.

“What are those gold lines on your body?” Orion asked innocently, leaning across the table to get a closer look.

“Scars.”

Harry remembered the sight of Sirius falling, ripping himself out of Remus’ arms and tearing through the doors, running through corridors and hallways in desperate pursuit of Bellatrix’ high-pitched cackle when- boom! The shower of burning gold dust, as it seared to his skin. Harry remembered screaming. Harry remembered wizards and witches pouring out of the crack in the wall, babbling into his ear, but he hadn’t been able to hear a word. Harry remembered pain. He remembered waking, his skin raised and raw, every movement agony. Harry remembered seeing the golden scars, burnt into his skin and thinking: at least they’ll hide the one on my head. Harry remembered tears.
“I imagine Grindelwald’s forces aren’t kind,” Atticus said, and coming from anyone else, it may have sounded concerned. But from Atticus’ lips, it just sounded eager.

Montgomery started laughing: high shrieks of cold laughter. Bellatrix’ laugh. Harry felt a cool rush of anger within him. Luckily, Montgomery was already tapering off, bubbles of amusement shaking his body occasionally.

Harry sighed, pulled a plate towards himself, and started piling food onto it. The others had apparently already finished eating, but Riddle still had a plate of some kind of meat, and Harry was hungry. He chewed a sprout thoughtfully as he considered his situation.

This was all so fucked up.

Harrison Peters was an interesting specimen, Tom reflected. He was certainly awkward and uncomfortable, and he seemed to hold an unprovoked animosity towards Tom- but Harrison was interesting. He’d been watching the boy’s reactions to his new classmates, and there was really no explaining some of them.

Little to no reaction to Grahams, apart from dislike (but that was expected).

Suspicion towards Atticus, but that was just being sensible.

Conflict with Montgomery, but Tom got the impression that Harrison was just a confrontational person (he certainly hadn’t gone out of his way to be polite), and he clearly shared little to no values with Lestrange. Perhaps it was a natural clash.

Some sort of attraction towards Cassius? Tom couldn’t tell. Harrison was certainly interested in Cassius, but from what he could see it was a mixture of lust and… anger? But Tom couldn’t see what Cassius had done to deserve that.

Dolohov provoked little reaction other than annoyance, but perhaps that was Tom’s own bias.

Harrison seemed to hate Tom. He was doing little to hide it, and Tom found it… disquieting. What have I done to cause this, little snake? he wondered. What have you seen? This bore investigation.

But his response to Orion… now there was where the interest lay. Harrison had almost begun to cry. The others may have been caught up in Orion’s usual babble, but Tom had seen those shockingly green eyes begin to water. Tom thought little of crying: he had used it himself before, but felt no emotional connection to the act. But Harrison… he’d been feeling pain.

Tom wanted to know what happened: why meeting a boy you’d never seen before in your life could cause such horror. Harrison recently experienced trauma, and perhaps that could explain it away… but it didn’t explain why Orion provoked such a strong response. Orion: perhaps the most naive and unassuming of them all.

Harrison’s story was expected and becoming more common day by day. Grindelwald tore more and more families apart the further he spread, and Harrison was not the first orphan to sit, close to tears in the Great Hall.

But still… something was off. Something was strange. Something wasn’t right.

Tom had to speak to Abraxas, and he resolved to keep an eye of Harrison Peters. He was curious to see how this home-schooled student would perform at Hogwarts.
Tom spied movement from the corner of his eye, and turned to face the front of the hall. Ah, the festivities were drawing to a close. Professor Dippet got to his feet and gave a slight smile to his students. The hall quietened as people noticed him, and Dippet only had to lift his hands to achieve utter silence.

Tom quirked his lips slightly. Dippet may be an idiot, but that was impressive. He felt the ambition and longing rise within him. One day, Tom would be controlling entire legions with nothing but a nod. They would respect him.

“Hello students. And now we draw to the end of our first meal together but the beginning of a year. You all have hopes and goals which I’m sure you’ll achieve, but remember: nothing comes without hard work and a bit of elbow grease.” Dippet winked, and a few students laughed half-heartedly.

Dippet grew more serious. “These are trying times we live in, and I know there will be some among you suffering from losses too terrible to comprehend. I want to assure you that Hogwarts is behind you, and we will pull through this together. I also want to remind you that the practise of Dark Arts is being more strictly monitored this year and forbidden to students below third year. Let’s keep our corridors safe.”

Tom assumed he was referring to the incident last year, where a girl had been hospitalised after walking into the path of two Ravenclaw practising the disembowelment curse. Or so the story went. Tom found it difficult to believe it was just an accident. Frederik Lovegood had always been a bit strange.

“Now off to bed, and your schedules will be provided tomorrow morning.”

Tom rose to his feet with the crowd and tapped Harrison, who was still poking at a treacle tart with his fork, on the shoulder.

“I have to lead the first years, but follow Atticus. He should get you settled in.” Tom hoped Dumbledore saw how helpful he was being. Maybe he would stop throwing Tom that damnable frown.

Harrison looked up, glasses catching the light, and his skin glittered. Tom gave him his usual charming smile, and Harrison fixed him with a look of hatred- Tom was sure he wasn’t just imagining it. Tom heard a sudden crack in his ear. Harrison started, and scrambled to his feet, knocking over a goblet of pumpkin juice with his sleeve. He cursed and began to mop at it with a napkin, only succeeding in spreading the sticky juice further.

“Leave it,” Tom said. “The house elves will deal with it.”

Harrison muttered something about vomit (strange boy) and surveyed the mess with an unhappy expression. Atticus rolled his eyes and began to pull Harrison away, giving Tom a pleading look.

Tom bared his teeth in response, and took petty joy in the cowing of Atticus. It may have been unbecfiting of someone with Tom’s ambitions but, Merlin, it felt good. As long as he could control his classmates, he was safe.

Tom watched Atticus lead Harrison away, until the messy head of black hair and the blonde gleam had disappeared into the crowds. Tom didn’t miss the looks of confusion that were thrown Harrison’s way (perhaps due to his unique scars). Tom noted delightedly that the boy looked thoroughly uncomfortable with the attention and stuck close to Atticus (admittedly, with ill temper).

“Now,” Tom said, sweeping his gaze over the small, scared faces gazing up at him. “Welcome to
Later, entering the sixth year dormitory in the dungeons, Tom Riddle saw an extra bed. Surprisingly, the curtains were already shut. Was Harrison so tired that he needed to go to bed at eight? If he had strange sleep patterns, it was going to disturb the rest of the dorm, and possibly Tom. Speaking of disturbance, Tom couldn’t hear movement beyond the curtains - not even breathing. Strange; there was a light. Waving his wand at the bed, he realised there was a silencing charm over it, preventing any noise from escaping. Tom wondered why Harrison Peters would need to put up silencing charms. Presumably nightmares…

Tom decided he should probably cancel the charms at some point, just to see what happens. But not tonight.

Tom grabbed a jumper and left the dormitory. He would join his associates on the sofa downstairs.

Behind the curtains, Harry wrapping his arms around his knees and shook with sobs. He was thankful for the silencing charm- he’d grown accustomed to using them once Voldemort returned and the visions began. But Harry knew he was going to have a completely different kind of nightmare tonight.

Fuck. Sirius was dead.

His godfather; his connection to his parents and his last chance at a family- snatched away. And all because Harry was reckless and stupid. Charging into the Ministry: what was Harry thinking? He’d had no idea of what was going on. He’d been overly Gryffindor-ish and look where that got him. No- Harry was going to do better. He wasn’t going to do anything without thinking; he wasn’t going to get anyone else killed because he was overly impulsive.

Sirius.

He wanted to scream, and maybe break something.

Harry wrapped his hands in the sheet and gasped for breath. What would Hermione say about this?

Oh Merlin- Hermione. Ron.

He hadn’t even thought about them.

He felt another wave of self-loathing as he realised he’d completely forgotten about his friends, who had followed him loyally into a snake trap. Ron, wrestling with that brain, gasping as it wrapping feelers around his throat. Hermione, pale and falling to the ground, crumpling like a marionette with her strings cut. Luna, Neville, Ginny-

He had no idea what had happened to them. He’d left them in the middle of a battle, left his friends helpless and alone to, yet again, be reckless. Why the fuck did he run after Bellatrix Lestrange? What the hell could Harry do to a witch three times his age and power?

Arrogant. Snape would be delighted that he was finally admitting it.

He didn’t even know if they were alive.

He wanted to go home. He didn’t know how.
Tom Is A Bitchy Morning Person

Chapter Summary

Tom is a bitchy morning person, Harry meets a few new faces, and both attend classes.

Chapter Notes

I know Dorea and Charlus Potter aren’t Harry’s grandparents, as revealed by Pottermore, but this is where I’m going to take liberty with the plot. Sorry! It’s a very minor change, but an important one 0.0
Also, there are canon decrepancies. The chamber of secrets opening has been moved to sixth year rather than fifth year, for plot reasons.
However, any character differences are probably for a reason, and will shift over the story :) #characterdevelopment

Tom awoke promptly at 7:15, eyes fluttering open as he yawned. He never seemed to get enough sleep these days, no matter how early he went to bed. Only Orion was up already; but Orion always got up disgustingly early. He was a morning person. Tom ran his long fingers through his hair and decided that he needed a shower.

Tom massaged peach-scented shampoo into his hair and hummed.

By the time Tom had emerged from the bathroom, Atticus was already hovering outside the door, muttering a quick apology as he shoved his way into the bathroom.

“Oh, come on,” Rupert groaned from his seat on the side of his bed. Rupert always tended to spend long periods of time in the mornings sat with a sock in one hand, staring into the distance.

“What’s your issue?” Tom asked, finishing towelling his hair dry.

“The house elves haven’t washed my shirt.” Rupert frowned, glaring at a pile of white fabric discarded on the dormitory floor.

“If it were in the clothes basket…”

“I know,” Rupert growled. “But it’s not, so just leave it, okay?”

There was an uncomfortable silence as Rupert realised that Tom didn’t look pleased. He opened his mouth like he was going to say something.

“No need to apologise,” Tom said graciously. And then slightly more dangerously: “Just don’t let the morning take your manners.”

Rupert mumbled a ‘sorry’ anyway, and Tom let a pleased smile slip onto his lips. Rupert grinned at Tom’s approval.
Suddenly, Rupert perked up, adopting a bright visage. “It’s all good! I’ll just take one of Avery’s.”

The boy strutted towards Atticus’ bed, dipping into his wardrobe and letting out a pleased shout when he found what he was looking for. “I knew the idiot would have more than one. And they’re acromantula silk.”

By now, even Cassius was floating out of bed, passing into the bathroom as soon as Atticus opened the door.

“How does he do that?” Atticus complained.

“Magic,” Rupert whispered dramatically. “But seriously, mate, you know he’s just got a good memory for this stuff. You spend exactly 25 minutes in that room every day. It’s not hard to know when you’re going to get out.”

“How does he remember anything when he spends half of his time reading those stupid fantasy books?”

“He can do more than one thing at once,” Tom said quietly. Cassius was a peculiar one.

In his first year, once the students of Hogwarts had realised Tom’s talent and strength, he had started gathering select associates. Avery had been one of his priorities, Orion too. Both of them had magical ability, charm, and powerful parents. It didn’t hurt that they also had ambition; a yearning for superiors to elevate them to higher places.

Montgomery and Rupert had fallen into his lap; both powerful purebloods, possessing brute strength and the ability to intimidate. They flocked to him. Tom gathered links in other years: Malfoy, Nott, Mulciber; all possessing talent, connections, and all looking to Tom for leadership.

But Cassius had been unexpected. He’d drifted into Tom’s circle almost unnoticed, catching Tom off-guard with observations and witticisms. He made Tom feel uncomfortable: almost similar to how Dumbledore often did. He didn’t threaten Tom, per say; Cassius was far too ‘off’ for that, and had zero ambition. But Tom often got the impression that Cassius knew more than Tom guessed.

However, Tom valued intelligence, and Cassius had that in abundance. Just as long as Cassius didn’t get ideas above his station.

Tom frowned into the mirror and smoothed back his hair, so that a single curl fell across his forehead. Effortlessly perfect, as usual.

It had gotten to the moment in morning where everyone was up, apart from Harrison Peters. The curtains of his bed were still firmly drawn, silencing charm muffling all noise. Tom wondered if he shouldn’t wake his newest housemate. It was already 8:10: if Harrison didn’t hurry, he would be late.

Lateness was something Tom couldn’t abide.

He narrowed his eyes at the silver and green hangings, pursing his lips. Abruptly, he decided that it wasn’t his job to guide Harrison further- Tom had informed him on the timings of the day last night, and if Harrison hadn’t listened, well that was his error. Perhaps missing breakfast would teach him a lesson. Satisfied, Tom nodded, sparing a glance back at the occupied bed. Yes, Harrison would just have to bear the consequences.

His decision weighed well on him, all the way down to the Great Hall.
Sat at the Slytherin table and surrounded by his housemates, Tom felt the deputy headmaster’s attention burning a hole on the back of his neck. Should he turn around, Tom knew he would see narrowed eyes and a deep frown, as time crept by and Slytherin’s newest arrival remained absent.

Damn Dumbledore and his disapproving gaze.

Tom was sure that, in the old man’s eyes, he was shirking his responsibilities. Tom found himself caring very little.

Tom smothered his toast with crimson jam, and smiled serenely.

At 8:40, Harrison Peters rushed into the Great Hall. He was not alone of course; plenty of students ran in with him, the result of late nights or pranks. But- perhaps it was his newness, or the aura of fame that seemed to surround him? Whatever it was, Harrison attracted attention like an exploding cauldron.

His quick march to the Slytherin table didn’t go unnoticed therefore, pairs of curious eyes following his progress. Harrison headed towards the lower end of the table, where the first and second years chattered amongst themselves. He wasn’t going to join them, was he? Now this wouldn’t do. Tom had yet to unravel him; unwind every string of ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’, untangling the knots of motive and twists of instinct, and tie them all firmly to Tom.

Tom had things to learn about this boy.

“Harrison,” he called out firmly. Tom had learned very early on that he never really had to yell- his voice seemed to carry.

The boy froze, hands stuffed into the pockets of his robe. His shoulders slumped.

Tom’s eyebrows rose. He hadn’t encountered a reaction like that at Hogwarts since his first year. It was strange: he hated it, loathed it with a burning passion- how dare he look disappointed to hear Tom? How dare he dismiss him? On the other hand, the reaction brought a kind of excitement. He hadn’t had a challenge in years.

Tom levelled a charming smile at Harrison. “Why don’t you sit here? We saved you a seat. Atticus, move over.”

Atticus shuffled up reluctantly.

Harrison hesitated, like he could still make a run for it if he tried.

“Your tie’s undone. A rather scruffy impression on your first day,” Tom observed.

A few feet away, Harrison grumbled and began to fiddle with the folds of silver and green fabric around his neck reluctantly. Tom smiled, satisfied- he had him.

“Come on, Peters,” Rupert said good-naturedly. “You’ve got about fifteen minutes to grab as much bacon as you can.”

Harrison sighed and finally gave in, plonking onto the bench next to Tom and scooping bacon and sausages onto his plate- and a napkin, for some reason. “So I can take it with me,” he snapped in response to Atticus’ snort of distaste, and began pouring himself a huge goblet of pumpkin juice.
Tom patted his mouth free of crumbs and put down his knife. “You’re rather late this morning.”

Harrison muttered something about – ‘wrong old’? – and grumbled. “No one woke me up.”

“I considered it, but decided that missing breakfast made a rather neat lesson.” Tom considered the croissants absent-mindedly. “After all, punctuality is the politeness of princes.”

“Well, thanks,” Harrison said sarcastically. He seemed in a darker mood than he had been the day before. Tom did hope it wasn’t permanent.

Montgomery laughed. “Didn’t Mummy or Daddy ever teach you how to set an alarm spell? Or were they too filthy to hold a wand?”

Harrison turned half a shade paler and got to his feet abruptly. “Say that again,” he threatened lowly.

“Isn’t it a shame that they won’t have the chance?” Montgomery mused, grinning and running his tongue over his teeth lecherously.

It seemed only half a second later that Montgomery had a wand pressed close to his neck, and an enraged wizard leant over him. “I’ve seen some shit, Lestrange.” Harrison spat. “You’re nothing.”

“Tell me what you’ve seen,” Montgomery practically begged, leaning in closer to the wand. “Was it bloody?”

Harrison exclaimed in disgust, but kept his wand up.

“For Salazar’s sake, Tom!” Orion exclaimed anxiously, and Tom flickered his gaze towards him. “Do something.”

With a roll of the eyes, Tom drawled, “Harrison, sit down, won’t you? It’s far too early to be duelling. And Montgomery, take your potion.”

However to everyone’s surprise, Harrison didn’t move but set his jaw even more angrily. “I’m not your little puppet, Riddle.”

“Hm?”

“I don’t dance to your tune.” Harrison hissed.

Tom leant in, and the air around them seemed charged. “I’m not singing.” His voice was airy, sweet and sugary- clouds couldn’t have been softer.

“Could’ve fooled me.”

His green-eyed opponent apparently wasn’t moving. Luckily, Montgomery knew when to back down and slipped out of Harrison’s grasp, nodding contritely to Tom. Harrison Peters was left grasping at empty air, his wand held tight. He paused, muscles tensed, but sat back down, picked up a piece of bacon and began chewing morosely. The rage reduced, and he seemed… regretful of his actions.

“Potion,” Tom reminded Montgomery, wondering if he had time to scan the newspaper.

Lestrange fished the vial out of his pocket and let a few drops fall from the lip of the glass, drizzling into his water and turning the clear liquid a subtle blue. Montgomery necked the drink in a few deep gulps. He then got to his feet, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, and stalked away.

Harrison seemed horrified by the statement, sinking into himself and muttering something about parents. Presumably, they wouldn’t have approved of their son’s actions.

“First day and already causing chaos,” Cassius smiled slightly and shook the dark locks out of his eyes.

“He provoked me!” Harrison protested quietly. “He called my mum dirty.”

Tom noticed a distinct lack of fatherly mention.

“I don’t know what I’ve done to offend him so badly,” Harrison said miserably, picking at his food.

Orion leaned in. “It’s not about you. Between us; madness… it runs in his family. I mean, I think his first cousin once removed is fine, but rumour is that his great aunt was halfblood so…” Orion shrugged. “He takes potions to manage it, but sometimes he can’t control it.”

“Careful what you say,” Cassius murmured lightly, “Secrets, once unleashed, are difficult to return to captivity.”

“He’s living with us,” Orion rolled his eyes. “He was going to find out at some point. It’s best he knows now, before Montgomery has another incident. My point,” Orion finished, turning back to Harrison. “Don’t take anything he says to heart.” Orion looked almost disgustingly earnest.

Harrison almost softened. “You sound like my friend.”

The Black heir brightened. “Good!” and he laughed carelessly.

Orion didn’t notice the way Harrison flinched at the sound. Tom did.

“And don’t let the talk about parents get you down. They’re still in here, aren’t they?” Orion gestured to his chest.

Something inside of Harrison seemed to snap suddenly, and he stumbled away from the bench like a shot. “Gotta–gotta go. Don’t want to be late to Potions,” he muttered quickly, and strode away, cradling his bacon-filled napkin close to his chest.

Tom watched his swift exit with interest.

“What did I do?” Orion asked in confusion.

“You were sentimental, and he got offended, for some reason. He’s touchy,” Atticus said cuttingly, leaning in. “More importantly— why on earth did you tell him about Lestrange?”

“What? B-but he—”

“Yes I know– ‘he’ll find out eventually’. But you didn’t have to tell him the potions are for madness, for Morgana’s sake. It could have been a fungal infection, for all Peters knew or cared.”

“I don’t understand—”

“You’ve given away one of Montgomery’s most dangerous secrets to a stranger we met last night. So far, an unimpressive, reckless, impulsive stranger.” Atticus shook his head. “How long do you think it will take until everyone from the House Elf to the Minister knows about Lestrange’s affliction?”
“What do you care so much, Atty?” Rupert asked. “You’re normally the first person to throw someone under a speeding hippogriff.”

“I don’t care about Montgomery.” Atticus curled his lip. “But think of what it will do to my reputation if it gets out that I’m associated with a madman.”

Tom decided to guide this conversation. “I don’t think you have a reputation after the Ministry debacle, Avery. But I, too, care very little for Lestrange. I’m more curious about you, Orion.”

“Me?” Orion looked affronted. “What else did I do?”

“Why are you being so open with our newest arrival? What is so enthralling about him that you spill one of your companion’s deepest secrets upon second meeting? Even for you, that was… unpredictable.”

“Oh.” Orion frowned. “I… this is going to sound stupid.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll always have Grahams to make you look like a genius in comparison,” Rupert said breezily.

Orion quirked a small grin. “Peters– Harrison… he reminds me of Dorea, for some reason.”

“Dorea? Cygnus and Violetta’s girl? My father worked with her,” Atticus revealed, to everyone’s great amazement.

“More petty connections,” Rupert trilled. “When will it end?”

“How does he remind you of her?” Tom cut the other two off, focusing on Orion.

“I don’t know, it’s something in the face shape, or fingers… it’s strange. But she was always nice, only nine years older than me. I think we were engaged at one point, until she started seeing that Potter man.” Orion shrugged. “But also… I guess I just like him. Harrison has personality.”

“He doesn’t have anything, yet.” Atticus leaned back. “I’m curious to see him in Defence. See if he lives up to his bravado- he’s almost Gryffindorish, isn’t he?”

There was a silence, as everyone considered their new housemate.

“Cassius? What do you think?” Tom asked. Cassius, regardless of his strangeness, always gave valuable insight.

The boy in question sighed, slamming his book closed. “I think,” he said heavily. “That Harrison can do just as much good as he can damage.”

Atticus groaned.

“Piercing observation!” Rupert laughed in delight.

But Cassius wasn’t finished. “And, if you must know… regardless of his intent…” he smiled. “I like him. He has balls.”

“And a ringing endorsement!” Rupert declared. “Harrison’s racking up the points! But what does Tom think? He really seems to hate you.”

“He really does.” Orion nodded. “What did you do to him?”
“He has just experienced a trauma,” Cassius reminded them all lightly. “It’s enough to make anyone a little off.”

“I think,” Tom said lightly. “That it’s far too early to make a judgement. And Rupert, you know that I don’t like anybody,” he spoke drily.

“Like a stunner to the heart!” Rupert clutched his chest and fell forwards onto the table.

“You have jam in your hair.”

“Shit.”

The bell went to signal the end of breakfast, and the entire hall began to clear in unison. Tom, being more intelligent than the general populous, decided to wait until the rush was over. His acquaintances followed his lead.

The hall was nearly empty when, suddenly, Tom felt a tugging on his sleeve. He looked down and there, standing at his elbow, was a small first year Ravenclaw. He smiled down at her kindly, sure that not a hair of his ensemble was out of place.

“Excuse me, sir,” she murmured nervously.

“How can I help you?”

“One of the third years said I should go to you if I needed help. I, uh, don’t know where I’m going.”

Tom nodded seriously. He imagined her running back to her friends and telling them how helpful and handsome Tom Riddle had been, and the curious faces that would watch him for a few days, and then the respectful gazes that were sure to follow soon after. They would join the masses. (For some reason, Harrison’s expression of disapproval floated to the front of his mind. The masses, save one, perhaps.)

“Where do you need to go?” he asked, his voice dripping over consonants like melted chocolate.

She coloured bright red and squeaked, “Transfigurations, with, uh, Dumbledore.”

“Professor Dumbledore,” Tom corrected gently, the words tasting like acid.

“Yes. Him.”

Tom concealed his smirk and turned back to Avery and the others, who still waited, watching him for their cue. “You can go to your next lesson. I’ll lead Miss…?”

“Macmillan.”

“Miss Macmillan to her lesson,” Tom said, inclining his head. “Now, let’s get to the third floor…”

Luckily, the location of the Potions classroom hadn’t changed, so Harry was able to trot quickly down the stairs, lower and lower into the bowel of the school; until he reached the small, heavy door.

Harry used his few minutes until the bell rang to thoroughly beat his head against the cool dungeon wall. What the hell had he been thinking? He’d not woken in the best of moods (being later than most first years tended to do that. He’d just been so tired), and entering a room to see Tom Riddle’s
smug face was sure to inflict pain upon anyone. He’d thought that he might have been able to sneak past unnoticed, but no. And Montgomery…

Harry rested his forehead on the damp stone and groaned.

Thank god Rodolphus and Bellatrix never had kids- poor thing would have inherited a whole new kind of unhinged. Insane Black genes + insane Lestrange genes = extra crazy Lestrange-Black.

Urgh. Why couldn’t Harry just find it within himself to keep quiet? Ignore the taunts and hold his tongue until he blended into the background? He had to try harder. Insults about his parents weren’t anything new.

Orion, Lestrange, Riddle… his frustrations blended into one mix of absolute misery, which he was only broken out of by the sharp tones of the early bell. Ouch. Harry rubbed his head and regretted everything.

He did think he had a right to. Losing the only family you ever had, being ripped away from your friends, and being put in close proximity with your mortal enemy had to count for something, right?

Whatever, Harry sighed. He just had to get through each day as they came.

The Potions classroom was very different to how Harry remembered it. Snape had kept his class in a cold, damp space; dark, void of natural light. It had been boiling in the summer, the kind of heat that you can’t escape from, and icy in the winter, cold enough to freeze your tongue to your lips. Snape’s classroom had been like him: dark, dirty, and unpleasant to be around.

Slughorn was a very different sort of man — Harry could tell. His classroom was warm and luxurious, furnished with comfortable stools and burnished desks. The wall coverings disguised the mildew on the walls, and a luscious carpet muffled any peculiar echoes or noises. Cauldrons were provided, one between two, each one embellished with gold, and gleaming black.

Harry was distinctly reminded of something Hermione had once said: ‘everything that glitters isn’t gold’ or something. He and Ron had been playing exploding snap when she said it, so he hadn’t been paying attention.

“Welcome, young man!” A large man, with a round belly and two chins folded over one another. “The newest member of my house! I’m sorry I couldn’t welcome you last night, but I’m sure Tom took good care of you. I had a little tête-à-tête to attend to. You’ll understand, of course. Perhaps you could attend one in the future. I could introduce you to a few people.” The man winked.

Harry had no idea how to deal with this. “I–er–okay?” He’d never been good at dealing with fans, and this man managed to sound both self-important and admiring. It made Harry feel quite uncomfortable.

“Excellent, excellent,” Professor Slughorn rumbled. “Good lad. Take a seat. You’re a little early, but punctuality is the politeness of Purebloods, eh?”

Harry blinked, shocked. “Riddle– er, Tom – said that earlier. But he said princes.”

“That’ll be the muggle version. Poor Tom, try as he might, he never did overcome his muggle upbringing. Shame: he’s such a talented young man. He could be Minister, if he wanted to be.”
“I’m sure he could,” Harry said, meaning every word. He did wonder why Tom Riddle had never gone down the political route. He had the charm, the intelligence and the ambition.

“Are you enjoying your time here so far?”

“Mm,” Harry said distantly. Whilst anything was better than the Dursleys, he’d rather have been at the Burrow; surrounded by the Weasleys, spending time with Ron and Hermione. Ron and Hermione… were they worried, sat at the Burrow in tense silence? Or were they still lying in St Mungo’s, skin white as the sheets they lay on? Were Mr and Mrs Weasley arguing in quiet tones, as Dumbledore offered a calm facade of understand? Did Remus blame Harry for Sirius? Did he hate him?

Slughorn must have noticed how morose Harry had become, because he offered him a sympathetic wobble of the chin. “I’m sorry about your parents. I’m sure they were wonderful people. Did I know them?”

“Probably,” Harry said vaguely. It was strange; his parents were the least recent of his sorrows, but everyone seemed so concerned over them. “And they were. Wonderful. They were great.”

“I’m sure.” Slughorn clapped him on the shoulder. “Well, chin up. This war will be over before you know it.”

Harry snorted. He’d been fighting a war since the moment he was born, and it would still be raging fifty years from now.

The second bell rang, and students began to trickle into the classroom, conversing amongst themselves quietly.

“Harrison!” Orion said, bounding towards him. “You found your way here! I thought you might’ve gotten lost, it being your first day.”

“Yes,” Riddle said smugly, following at a distance. “I’m curious. How did you find the potions classroom?”

“Someone directed me,” Harry said uncomfortably. Suspicious bastard. What was he supposed to do; let Riddle walk him to every lesson like a first year?

“How kind of them.” Riddle raised a delicate eyebrow. He probably plucked, Harry thought viciously.

“Ah, Tom!” Slughorn chortled, clapping a meaty hand to Riddle’s shoulder. “Always so concerned about others. It’s that attitude that’ll get you places, my boy.”

Riddle gave a smile so forced that Harry was surprised Slughorn didn’t melt. “Thank you, sir. I’m glad you have faith in me.”

“Always, Tom. Now, why don’t you boys take a seat?”

Harry cast a look around the classroom, but the only empty chair seemed to be next to Riddle. He inwardly groaned: the universe had to be against him.

“Harrison, could sit next to me?” Orion suggested eagerly. He seemed to be sat next to the irritating boy from last night—Jaspar Gray, or something, so Harry wasn’t surprised that Orion wanted a replacement. He felt a sting of guilt—hadn’t Harry once thought about Neville like that? And then Neville had turned out to be one of the bravest people he knew.
“Nonsense, Mr Black,” Slughorn mused. “I’m afraid that Mr Grahams may explode something without your guidance. No, Mr Peters, I think you’d best sit next to Tom. I did have him working on more advanced Potions, but I’m sure he can look after you for the next few lessons whilst you catch up. If you have any issues, don’t hesitate to talk to me.”

Harry gave Slughorn a pained grin and went to sit down next to Riddle. He hoped he didn’t look as miserable as he felt.

“You needn’t look so disappointed.” Riddle observed shrewdly. “I’m not going to curse you.”

Apparently he looked exactly as miserable as he felt.

“We’re going to be learning about the Polyjuice Potion today, class,” Slughorn announced, and all attention was on him. “Now can anyone tell me what that is?”

Riddle raised his hand, of course, and Slughorn gestured to him. “The Polyjuice Potion is a potion that allows the drinker to assume the form of someone else, for a limited period of time. It is a difficult and complicated potion to brew, with many crucial steps and stages of brewing, and a lengthy stewing time.”

“Precisely!” Slughorn beamed. “Excellent job, Tom. 10 points to Slytherin. Can anyone tell me the characteristics of the Polyjuice Potion?”

Riddle’s hand shot into the air.

“—other than Mr Riddle?”

Riddle lowered his arm, laughing good-naturedly. Harry was the only one close enough to perceive his tenseness and the slight baring of his teeth. Harry, shrugging and throwing his cares over his shoulder, thrust his hand into the air.

Slughorn looked thoroughly shocked. “Yes! Mr Peters!”

“A really disgusting taste,” Harry said, pulling a face, “and different colours based on the person you’re becoming. And quite a thick, sort of sludgey consistency.”

“Correct,” Slughorn declared, looking utterly delighted. “5 more points.”

“I didn’t know you had experience with Polyjuice, Harrison,” Riddle murmured lowly.

“I don’t,” Harry said uncomfortably. Polyjuice wasn’t something that normal students brewed, was it? Harry couldn’t remember ever learning about it in Potions.

Riddle didn’t look like he believed him.

“And what are some of the dangers associated with Polyjuice Potion?” Slughorn asked.

This time Slughorn allowed Riddle to stick up his hand and answer the question. “If any animal hair should fall into the potion, or be mistaken for human hair, the drinker can take on animal characteristics.”

“And this is especially disastrous because…?”

“Because it’s difficult to get rid of. And takes ages,” Harry said quietly, remembering Hermione’s furry face and the horrifying time she had spent under Madam Pomfrey’s ‘gentle’ thumb.
“Right again!” Slughorn boomed. “Looks like we have quite the power couple here!”

Harry blanched at the word ‘couple’ ever being associated with Riddle and him.

“And so,” Slughorn continued in a dramatically low tone. “To properly examine the potion that Mr Riddle and Mr Peters just described, we’re going to have a little project. Polyjuice Potion takes several weeks to make, and another month to stew, but we’re going to do it!”

Pause for effect. Slughorn didn’t seem to understand why the entire class didn’t erupt with amazement, but he soldiered on. “Now, there are 2 distinct stages to brewing Polyjuice, so we’ll do the first stage this lesson and the next, and then leave it to rest for about a week.”

Slughorn waved his wand, and elaborate, curly writing appeared on the blackboard behind him.

“Instructions are on the board; ingredients are in the cupboard. You can find both lacewing flies stewed for twenty-one days and fluxweed picked on the full moon at the front of the classroom. Let’s get to it!”

Harry scanned the instructions quickly.

“I’ll get the lacewing and the fluxweed; you get the knotgrass and the leeches,” Riddle said, and swept to the front of the class before Harry could object.

“Not your Death Eater,” Harry grumbled, but retreated to the ingredients cupboard anyway. It wasn’t worth fighting over.

Riddle and Harry worked surprisingly well together. Riddle did much of the timing, adding and mixing, but he let Harry prepare the ingredients and didn’t fuss much when Harry took charge of some steps. They got through the lesson with minimal arguing.

They did better than some pairings, at least. Slughorn was a constant stream of: “Mr Black, stop him!” or “this could’ve melted your flesh away had you continued” and “that shade of pink indicates high levels of poison, Miss Babbage”. In comparison, Harry and Tom worked remarkably well together.

In fact, the lesson could have even gone close to what Harry would call ‘bearable’, if it hadn’t been for Riddle’s constant questions. In between the adding fluxweed and knotgrass, the stirring and wand-waving, Riddle was a constant stream of ‘how did you know that?’, ‘have you done this before?’, and he seemed strangely interested in Harry’s wand core.

“But what is it?” he persisted.

“I can’t remember,” Harry said.

“Unicorn hair? Dragon blood?”

“I said, I can’t remember!” Harry claimed. He wasn’t going to tell Riddle that he had the same wand core as him.

“How can you ‘not remember’? It’s your wand!” Riddle insisted.

“I have a rubbish memory.”

“You remembered the characteristics of Polyjuice well enough.”

“It was a fluke.”
“A fluke?”

“It was just something random. I think one of my parents made it once.” Harry could feel the frustration from Riddle build up, and to be honest, Harry wasn’t faring much better.

“Alright class!” Slughorn announced, clapping his hands.

Harry sagged in relief.

“Now these potions need to brew for 80 minutes before the next step. We’re nearing the end of class, so if you leave your cauldrons where they are, I’ll place a stasis charm on them once the 80 minutes are up.”

The class started packing away, and Harry felt a sense of immeasurable smugness. He could finally escape from Riddle.

“I’ll take you to your next class,” Riddle said quickly.

Shit. How could Harry get out of this? “I’m sure we don’t share any other classes.”

“Well, what are you taking for N.E.W.T.s?”

“Charms, Defence, Herbology, Potions, and Transfiguration.” All the ingredients needed for an Auror.

Riddle grinned triumphantly. “We share three classes: Potions, Transfiguration and Defence.”

“Well, I have double Herbology next,” Harry replied, curling his lip.

“I’ll walk you to the greenhouses. I have a free period.” Riddle half-snarled, stepping closer to Harry and looming over him. His breath caused steam to gather on Harry’s glasses. Not for the first time, Harry cursed his height. The air around them crackled with tension.

“Tom? Harrison?” Orion’s voice was like a well-placed repulso, shattering the atmosphere like glass. Harry turned away from the Slytherin prefect immediately, wiping away the steam on his glasses with his shirt.

“Yes?” Riddle’s silky voice settled around Harry’s shoulders, and he felt the tension melt away. He had to keep his cool.

“I was just wondering if Harrison wanted me to take him to Herbology? I have it next…”

“Yeah!” Harry yelled suddenly, grasping onto Orion’s sleeve. “What a great plan. Riddle, you can go to the library or something.”

And Harry began hurrying them away, pulling Orion along. The burning, furious gaze of Tom Riddle lingered between his shoulder blades, and he walked faster. He’d be safe if he just got around the corner.

“Thanks,” he told Orion, relaxing as they put several inches of solid stone between them and Riddle.

“Well, I had to do something. You looked like you were going to curse each other.”

“We probably would have.” Harry let out a huff of laughter.

“Listen, Peters–Harrison.” Orion drew them to a sudden stop. “You need to be…” you need to be
careful around Riddle, okay? He’s brilliant, but…” Orion seemed to struggle with the words. “Just be careful. He’s not someone you want to be on the bad side of. By all means, give him a little bit of attitude, Merlin knows Cassius does… just don’t take it too far.”

“I know. Believe me, I know,” Harry said honestly. He was touched that Orion cared so much.

“Good.” Orion beamed, bouncing into a walk. “That went much better than expected. Honestly, you give some people advice, and they bite your head off.”

Harry got the impression he was talking about Atticus.

“So Herbology now!” Orion began babbling. “I really love carnivorous flowers. They’re often quite delicate, but they have a hidden cruelty, y’know?”

Harry gave Orion that ‘mmm’ of agreement that had always annoyed Hermione, but his mind was elsewhere.

Library. He had told Riddle to go to a library. The place of books and knowledge. Where else to go to find knowledge on time travel? Maybe he could get home.

“After Herbology, would you take me to the library?” He asked Orion slowly, as they exited the castle and skidded down the bank to the large glass houses.

“Sure.”

The two hours of Herbology passed slowly. There wasn’t much to do: unlike Slughorn, Professor Beery decided that an introduction was needed. Half of the first lesson was occupied by a recap of previous years and the rest by repotting dittany plants.

Harry and Orion kept up an easy conversation as they worked together, and Harry found himself growing to like the boy more and more. He was similar to Sirius; all effortless charm and grace, but he had a more innocent quality to him. And Merlin, could he talk.

He could go on…

“My father’s an Unspeakable, in the Department of Mysteries. He’s actually the head of something. I don’t know what, of course, but he’s met a lot of important people. I’m very proud of him; we all are…”

And on…

“My favourite band at the moment is Unicorn Bath. They’re not very popular, but they’ve got some really good tunes…”

And on.

“Cassius told me that I could beat Tom at chess if I played him whilst a cat distracted him? I’m not sure how; none of us own a cat, and I don’t think Tom cares for them much. But I’ve been trying to beat him for ages…”

Inevitably, the subject of blood purity came up. Harry very soon wished that it didn’t.

“Now, don’t get me wrong; I have no problem with halfbloods,” Orion said gently. “Even some
Mudbloods are okay, as long as they have proper manners and breeding. After years in the Wizarding World, they can even erase some of the lingering stains of their birth. And I can even deal with Muggles, as long as they stay in their own part of the world. But I tell you, I can’t stand it when the parents of Mudbloods come into our world, poking around and just generally yelling their ignorance. They’re dirty, ignorant and hateful. It’s grating and insulting.”

“But they’re just people,” Harry said, shell-shocked. Where had this come from? He put down his spade. “Just normal people.”

“One of my ancestors was a victim of the witch burnings. They beat his head in until he couldn’t cast a single spell and threw him on a pyre. What they’re capable of...” Orion shook his head. “We need to make sure we don’t mix.”

“But they’re so much more than that now!” Harry told him. “They’ve changed, honestly.”

“But they still burn witches, don’t they? My aunt said-”

“Of course, they don’t!” Harry let out a disbelieving laugh. “Witch burnings haven’t happened since the 1700s.”

Orion looked genuinely taken-aback. “Oh.”

“And Muggles aren’t dirty. They have running water. They have education. They have everything wizards have—”

“Except magic.”

“Yeah, except magic.” Harry wondered if he should tell Orion about the semi-automatic rifles Muggles had to make up for their lack of magic, but decided that if Orion’s issue was fear, telling him about the murder-weapons that Muggles had created probably wouldn’t help.

This conversation had thoroughly shaken Harry. This stark and unabashed prejudice from one of the kindest people he’d met in this time... he’d never heard anything like it before, not in his lifetime. Maybe Voldemort had changed things.

“Muggles, they’re just like you and me,” Harry spoke slowly, passionately. He had to make Orion understand this, for some reason. “They have flaws, and cause violence, and hold radical views... but Orion, they’re just people without wands.”

“I’ve never been told any of this. I thought...” Orion still looked doubtful, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“I’ll take you.”

“What?”

“Summer holidays. We’ll go into Muggle London, and I’ll show you what they’re actually like. Yeah, they’re not perfect—” Really not perfect, Harry thought, privately remembering the Dursleys. “—but they’re not monsters.”

“Okay,” Orion decided, growing more excited. “Sure. I’ve never been into Muggle London. I’ve heard they still conduct public executions...” He trailed off upon seeing Harry’s face. “But that may not be true.”

“It’s not,” Harry said, of that he was certain.
“But we’ll have to make sure it doesn’t clash with Walburga’s wedding.”

“Her what?”

“Wedding. She’s getting married to one of our cousins, Apus Black. I have to be there.”

“But she married you.” And you have Sirius! Harry finished in his head.

“If only.” Orion sighed. “She’s amazing. I’ll introduce you at lunch.”

“Lunch? How old is she?”

“She’s a seventh year.”

“And she’s getting married?!!”

“Yes. Apus is a few years older, so he’s travelling back from Romania to marry her. She’ll be going back there with him after the wedding, I think. He holds substantial land there; the Blacks hold land everywhere, but Walburga’s always wanted to go abroad.”

Harry didn’t respond, still reeling from shock. If Walburga didn’t marry Orion, would Sirius ever be born? Or did Harry have his family members messed up? But Harry had been sure that Orion was Sirius’ father… and he’d met Walburga, unfortunately.

“Hey, Harrison,” Orion said quietly.

“Harry,” he responded, rubbing his eyes and focusing in on Orion. He could’ve sworn he’d already given them all permission to use that.

“Harry, then. How do you know all this stuff? About the muggles.” Orion phrased his words carefully.

“My mother was Muggleborn,” Harry said, steeling himself for the response.

“Oh.” Orion seemed reflective. “I guess you know what you’re talking about then.”

Orion was quiet for the rest of the lesson, and his plant-potting became automatic. He was lost in a world of his own. Harry let his own work become similarly thoughtless and therapeutic as he worked mechanically with a plant that may one day save a life. The lesson crawled by, until lunch arrived.

“Hey, Harrison,” Orion said quietly.

“I’ll take you to lunch first,” Orion told Harry enthusiastically, his spirits having bounced back. “And then I can take you to the library.”

“I have a free period next, anyway.”

“You’ll get plenty of time, then — maybe you could study with Cassius! He spends a lot of his time there. Tom does too, but he doesn’t like to be disturbed whilst working. Grahams tried to read over Tom’s shoulder once, and I thought Tom might turn him inside out.”

“Does he do a lot of that: turning people inside out?” Harry asked casually, trying to grasp where exactly on the threat level Tom Riddle currently resided.

“Not more than once,” Orion said cheerily. “She deserved it though.”

Harry thoroughly doubted that, but Orion seemed susceptible, and Harry thought he’d grasped
enough moral victories for one day.

The Great Hall at lunch was even more packed than breakfast. Clearly, some students had decided to skip their morning meal or hadn’t already finished by the time Harry arrived, because Harry would go as far to say that the numbers of students had almost doubled at lunch. The wall of sound that hit you upon entering the room was insane.

Harry pushed through the crowds of first years, and reluctantly reconciled himself with spending more time in proximity to Lestrange and Riddle. His favourite people.

“Oh.” Orion stopped abruptly, and Harry bumped into him.

“What?”

“We have guests.”

Harry peered over Orion’s shoulder. Lestrange was nowhere to be seen, and Cassius appeared to be similarly missing. Instead, there were new faces: three, in fact. Riddle seemed to be deep in conversation with them, his entire concentration caught. The three new arrivals were older; probably seventh years.

“It’s her,” Orion breathed.

“Walburga,” Harry murmured back, recognising the younger version of the portrait at Grimmauld Place. She was certainly prettier in her youth; hair the colour of coffee twisted back into a low bun, and wide, doe-eyes. Her face was soft and youthful, with a sweet button nose and full-lipped smirk. This girl looked like she would scream at the sight of the woman she would become.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

“She’s certainly something.” Harry frowned. He wondered what could turn the Walburga of now into the Walburga of the future; spitting and raving at her haunted and hollowed son.

Walburga laughed at something Riddle said, whilst batting her eyes playfully. Orion sighed longingly and started drifting towards her. Harry rolled his eyes, following behind reluctantly.

“Oh! Harrison!” Riddle greeted smoothly, flashing them both an attractive smile. “Won’t you join us? I was just talking about you to Abraxas, Harrison. All nice things, I assure you.”

“I was just talking about you to Orion, Riddle.” Harry shot back. “I wish I could say the same.”

Riddle laughed delightedly. “This is the kind of sparkling wit I was just telling you about, Abraxas.”

An older version of Draco Malfoy, blond hair and all, gave a polite chuckle in reply and reached out to shake Harry’s hand. “Abraxas Malfoy, wonderful to meet you.”

“Harry Peters.” And he shook the hand.

“I was so sorry to hear about your unfortunate circumstances. Tom didn’t say who your parents were…?”

“Wonderful people.”
“Yes, I’m sure they were. Quite, quite wonderful. But that wasn’t entirely what I meant. Their names...?”

“Lily and James,” Harry replied automatically. Using their real names meant that Harry was less likely to mess up (and felt like it was less of a betrayal).

Abraxas smiled thinly. “I’ve never heard of them...”

“Have you not? My father was a Pureblood, and my mother was a Muggleborn. I’m sure it was quite the scandal.” Harry sat down, and offered Abraxas a basket. “Chicken wing?”

“How very... singular,” Abraxas pursed his lips and ‘discreetly’ wiped his hand on his robes. “And, no, thank you. I’m a vegetarian.”

“Shame.” Harry smiled mockingly, slowly and obviously placing a chicken wing on his plate.

“Are you sure you won’t have a thighbone, Abraxas? The house elves do cook them wonderfully, and I think it’s a shame to limit your options so.” Tom suggested.

“Well, maybe a thighbone, my- my Tom,” Abraxas stuttered uncomfortably, taking the meat and nibbling on it.

Harry snorted; amused despite himself. He caught Riddle winking at him and couldn’t hide a grin.

“I’m Walburga, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,” Walburga introduced, extending the back of her hand across the table and giving him a coy titter. Harry kissed it awkwardly. “My cousin tells me you’ve been a great friend to him.”

Orion gave Harry a thumbs up.

“I hope we’ll become even better friends in the future,” Harry replied.

“I’m sure,” Walburga preened. “He did tell me of your summer plans — visiting muggle London, was it...?”

A few people, Abraxas, Atticus, and Dolohov in particular, winced and hissed slightly.

“Oh.” Of course. Harry hadn’t even thought about how potentially offensive people could find it, especially Sirius’ hag of a mother—

“I think it’s a wonderful idea. To understand those lesser than us, we must first walk in their footsteps. We’re also holding a charity ball during the Summer holidays, to raise money for those under-privileged few; like those poor Muggleborns. I do hope you can join us?” Walburga held out an invitation, and Harry took it uncertainly. “I know it’s a little early—”

“About a year early,” Rupert chimed in.

“But charity must never be last minute,” Walburga finished, looking almost angelic.

“’Burga’s very organised,” Orion said adoringly. “She runs all the women’s events, and they’re always brilliant.”

Said ‘Burga’ laughed prettily, fanning her face. “Oh stop it, you.”

Harry wondered if burgers had reached the Wizarding World yet. He also didn’t fail to notice that one new arrival had yet to be introduced; a hulking figure of a bloke, broad-shouldered and heavy set
in the face. He clutched his wand like a club, and glared down at all surrounding him. This had been Harry’s idea of a future death eater.

“This is my friend, Lucian Nott,” Walburga introduced regally. “He’s hoping to work in the Ministry.”

“Yeah,” Lucian replied, voice low and gravelly. Harry made a mental note not to get into a fistfight with him.

“So how are you finding Hogwarts so far, Harrison?” Walburga asked sweetly. “How are you adjusting? You were home-schooled, weren’t you?”

“Er, yeah.” Harry struggled to conjure up memories of first year. How had he felt? “It’s a bit weird being around so many new people. Sometimes, I feel like they’re all looking at me.”

“Oh, they are,” Walburga assured him loftily. “New students are always of interest. We’ve got one in second year, two in fourth year and… one in fifth year, I believe? And you, of course. Just ignore it: it all dies down eventually.”

“You have, er, a lot of us, then?”

“The war creates a lot of orphans,” Riddle said softly.

There was a long silence, before Walburga turned to Rupert. “So, how’s your mother? Tell her I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to the wedding; I had an urgent flower delivery that couldn’t wait.”

“She’ll understand.” Rupert perked up. “Flowers, eh? Hey!” He declared, turning to Atticus. “You ‘oak’ me a favour!”

Atticus snorted. “No, I don’t.”

Rupert waited a few moments before elaborating. “It was a joke.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Yes, it was.”

“I didn’t laugh.”

“That’s because you have a shit sense of humour.”

“I beg your pardon—!”

“I beg your foot up—!”

“GENTLEMEN!” Abraxas bellowed, raising his hands. “Please!” He glanced at Tom, who was attempting to read a newspaper.

Tom raised his head, wearing an exaggeratedly befuddled expression. Atticus and Avery shrunk into their seats. “Oh no,” Tom said chidingly. “Don’t stop on my part. I was fascinated to see how long this immaturity would continue.”

Walburga let out a forced laugh and directed the attention back to Harry, who didn’t appreciate it. “So, what do you like to do? Surely we don’t have yet another bookworm in our midst?”

“I like to play Quidditch.” Harry missed it, actually; the sensation of soaring through the air, diving
through the sky: entire being focused on one spec of victory… the exhilaration.

“Oh!” Walburga shrieked, clapping her hands together. “What position are you?”

“Seeker.”

“What luck! Our current seeker: Christina Day, is a seventh year. She’s leaving at the end of this year. Maybe next year you could sign up. I’m sure we’d all love seeing you fly.”

“No,” Tom said certainly, turning a newspaper page.

“Excuse me?” Harry asked, swivelling in his seat to face the object of his annoyance.

Tom blessed them all with his attention. “Harrison’s not playing Quidditch. It’s a foolhardy sport based on the possibility of breaking your neck. It’s not a worthwhile pursuit. You’d be better off studying.”

“Well, maybe I don’t care if you think it’s not a ‘worthwhile pursuit’,” Harry bit out. “I think I will join next year.”

“No, you won’t.” Tom chuckled.

Harry glared. “We’ll see.”

“Orion’s quite the Quidditch player,” Walburga said quickly. “He used to practice in the garden when we came to visit. Doing all these loops and tricks — an adorable little chaser.”

“I’d chase you anywhere,” Orion whispered.

Walburga shrieked with laughter. “He’s so funny!”

“Throwing off yet another suitor, Walla? When will it end?” came a droll voice from just over Harry’s shoulder. He pivoted, coming face to face (or rather: face to breast, due to his sitting position) with another girl.

“Don’t be silly, Ella. Orion’s just sweet. HARRISON!” Walburga said suddenly, fluttering her hands. “You haven’t met Ella!”

“I’m not sure how he’s coped,” came the sarcastic reply from the girl — Ella, as she leaned on Walburga’s shoulder.

“Harrison, this is Druella Rosier, one of my dear friends. This is Harrison Peters.”

“Hi,” Harry said, lifting an arm to wave slightly.

“Not kissing my hand?” Druella smirked, and then laughed when Harry rushed to apologise. “Don’t be — it’s refreshing.”

“Won’t you sit down, Ella? We were just discussing Quidditch. Ella’s the keeper — she’s very good.” Walburga told Harry fondly.

“Sorry, can’t stay. I’m looking for Cassie?” Druella rolled her eyes. “Mother’s getting worried. He hasn’t replied to any of her letters.”

“He’s probably lost in fairyland,” Sirius’ mother – and there was a weird thought – giggled.
“He’s in the library,” Rupert said, winking at Druella and wriggling his eyebrows suggestively. “You could always stay here…”


“Mm?”

“Is there anything in that newspaper of yours about the Witches Suffrage meeting?”

“Not that I saw,” Riddle flicked through the pages again, to check. Harry thought he looked quite annoyed. “No, nothing here.”

“Damn it—”

“Ella, language!”

“We’ve been blocked by the Wizengamot again, haven’t we? I’ll write a letter.” Druella frowned fiercely. “But I’d better find my brother.”

“Brother?!” Harry yelped in surprise, tuning into the conversation properly for the first time.

“Yes: brother.” Druella said, like she was doubting Harry’s intelligence. “Cassius Rosier? He did say you’d met.”

It wasn’t hard to see why Harry had a difficult time making the connection, despite the identical surnames. Druella and Cassius looked nothing alike. Druella was blond, for a start: curly, wild hair the colour of wheat. Her eyes were wild and bright, and her skin dotted with constellations of freckles. She was a lot taller than Cassius, too, and her limbs ganglier. And she was different in her existence — like she was more solid, more there. She didn’t feel like she could drift off at any moment. But the siblings shared the hooded eyes, and full lips the colour of strawberries.

And if she was Cassius’ sister… that meant she was Bellatrix’ mother. Looking closer, Harry supposed it wasn’t a complete surprise. The eyes, the hair… add on something from Cassius and a Black family member… yes, he supposed he could see it.

Harry realised he needed to reply. “Oh, we have. Er, met, I mean.”

“That’s good. Why the surprise then? Did he not tell you of his wonderful sister?”

Harry looked down sheepishly. “I just didn’t see the resemblance.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Druella said cheekily, and strode away.

“I really do wish she’d walk more lady-like.” Walburga pouted, watching her friend go. “She’s almost like a man.”

“Well, that’s the point, isn’t it?” Atticus said self-importantly. “Of that whole ‘suffrage thing’. They want to be more like men.”

Harry could only imagine what Hermione would say to that.

Riddle raised an eyebrow. “It’s really not, Avery. The suffrage movement aims to give women equality, not to turn them into males. The movement involves providing equal rights, opportunities and social standings to both genders. I suggest you do your research before making outdated and ignorant statements.”
Only Harry didn’t need to imagine what Hermione would say — because it had just been said. By Tom Riddle.

That was freaky.

Orion seemed to be momentarily recovered from the spell of Walburga Black, so Harry got to his feet and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Take me to the library?”

“Oh, sure.” Orion clambered up, almost tripping over his robes. “Bye Burga,” he said, reaching out as if to touch her.

“Bye, Orion!” She smiled, showing pearly, perfect teeth.

Orion swallowed and turned away, walking quickly. Harry hurried to catch up.

“I did okay, right?” Orion asked nervously. “I wasn’t too much of a fool.”

“You were fine,” Harry assured.

“Phew,” Orion exhaled. “Sometimes, when she talks to me, I just black out, and I don’t know what happens.”

“Perhaps that’s for the best.”

“Hey, are you okay?” Orion said, in a concerned voice, probably noticing Harry’s sickly colour.

“I’m fine. I just need to realign my whole world view,” Harry muttered, as they left the Great Hall.

Apparently, Tom Riddle was a feminist. And he hadn’t said anything in response to Harry’s mention of muggle London, or halfblood-ism. Harry was starting to wonder if Voldemort’s campaign hadn’t been based off of appeal, rather than actual belief.

The library, to put it frankly, was a bust. Not only that, but it was almost entirely devoid of any kind of books on time magic. Harry wasn’t sure if that was because they were too advanced, or because they hadn’t been written yet.

Harry leant back in his comfortable armchair and suppressed the urge to scream. He was completely surrounded by books, and none of them helpful.

So what else could he do?

He could go to the Ministry, but what would they do to him? Did he really want to tell them that he was a time traveller? What if they experimented on him or decided he was a threat to the timeline and locked him up? Plus, his fifth year hadn’t really inspired any confidence of government in him. He wasn’t sure if this time’s policy was still ‘when stuff goes wrong, blame it on the fifteen-year-old’. He didn’t want to risk that.

He could go to Dumbledore… but Harry didn’t trust him, not really. Dumbledore had spent the last year entirely ignoring Harry and acting like he was possessed or something (which hadn’t helped when Harry thought he actually was). How could Harry go and confide in a man that hadn’t met Harry’s eyes for 9 months? That let him blunder into the Ministry unprepared and get Sirius killed?
That left Umbridge in charge?

He couldn’t, was the answer. He couldn’t.

Which left, funnily enough, the place that had solved his issues last year: the Room of Requirement. But would that work? Could he really just wish for books on time magic and get them? Harry didn’t even know how the room worked. If someone had left a book in there once, could the room give it to Harry? Could the room retrieve a book from somewhere in the castle? Could it create one?

There was only one way to find out.

Unfortunately, at that moment the bell rang. Harry had to go to double Charms.

After, he vowed. After.

Harry’s first day ended with Harry sneaking out after curfew, lurking in shadows and longing for his Invisibility cloak. When he found the Room of Requirement, he wished desperately for books on time, walking up and down the corridor thrice, then opened the door. And there they were. A pile of tomes; thick, thin, ripped, pristine, just waiting for him. Harry didn’t know how they got there, but he wasn’t complaining.

He just got right to reading. There had to be something in here on time travel.

There had to be.
Dumbledore and Tom Have Unresolved Issues

Chapter Summary

Dumbledore and Tom have unresolved issues. Harry researches, has a Defence class, and a hospital visit to round it all off.

Chapter Notes

There has been some confusion over the Black/Lestrange/Rosier connection, so I thought I’d explain.

Bellatrix is the daughter of Cygnus Black and Druella Rosier (who we met last chapter.) Druella and Cassius Rosier are siblings, meaning that Cassius is Bellatrix’ uncle. Cassius and Bellatrix look remarkably alike (which is weird, but not impossible). The Rosier features are hooded eyes, height, and Cassius and Bellatrix share a face shape. The Blacks give Bellatrix her lips, nose, figure, etc. There is NO RESEMBLANCE between Bellatrix and the Montgomery Lestrange, because she isn’t a Lestrange by blood. The only similarity Harry is picking up on is insanity (and a surname).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry didn’t know how he got to bed, because he didn’t remember returning from the Room of Requirement that night. However, he awoke the next morning beneath his sheets, to Tom Riddle ‘politely inquiring’ about his state of consciousness.

Harry told him to piss off.

Riddle mumbled something about “only trying to help,” and Harry immediately felt bad (which was weird).

Later, when Harry passed Riddle a hairbrush and apologised for his rudeness, Riddle smiled and told him not to worry about it. Which, of course, made Harry feel worse.

Harry now seemed to be an honorary member of Tom Riddle’s little group—or at least their newest mystery. Breakfast was relatively civil, thank Merlin: Lestrange was subdued, Orion sweet as ever, and Atticus and Rupert kept their bickering to a minimum. Cassius was silent as a ghost, and Riddle restrained himself to little more than sharp glances and subtle insults. It was a peaceful affair.

Harry had left his timetable in the dormitory, so it was lucky that he and Riddle shared their first lesson. The Slytherin prefect ‘kindly’ offered to direct Harry to the Transfigurations classroom.

“So…. Transfiguration with Dumbledore, huh?” Harry asked politely, walking quickly to keep up with Riddle. He’d decided he may as well be cordial—as much as he could, anyway. Sulking and spitting wouldn’t help anything. With all luck, he’d be home soon.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Riddle corrected lightly.
“Merlin, you’re worse than Hermione.”

“Hermione? And who is that?”

“One of my best mates,” Harry smiled, his friend’s face filling his mind. “She’s great. She always cared what we called teachers, no matter how awful they were.”

Harry realised his mistake and felt like hexing himself.

“Teachers?” Riddle raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were home-schooled by your parents?”

“Yeah, I was.” Harry said slowly, brain whirring. “Teachers in primary school, I meant.”

“Hm,” Riddle allowed, inclining his head. “Was Hermione also taught magic by her parents?”

“No, she was muggleborn,” Harry said. “Dead clever. Better than any Pureblood.”

“Did she get invited to Hogwarts?” Riddle wondered, and Harry could tell that he was mentally running through list of Hogwarts students, searching for Hermione in the crowds.

“No. My parents taught her too.”

“And did she come to Hogwarts with you? I wasn’t aware you knew anyone here.”

“She died.” And she might as well have, Harry brooded. He didn’t know if he would ever see her again. Would she ever chide him into doing homework again? Would he ever see her argue with Ron over lunch, or curl in the Gryffindor common room stroking Crookshanks?

“How awful,” Riddle murmured. (Yeah right, Harry curled his lip. Like Tom Riddle would ever mourn a muggleborn.) “So many dead.”

“Yeah, that’s what happens when the Dark Lord launches an attack on your village. People die,” Harry said sardonically.

“Yet you survived. A chance of luck, perhaps?”

“My mother protected me,” Harry said proudly, and then—in case Riddle was getting any ideas: “And I’m not completely helpless.”

“Of course not.” Riddle soothed. “Anymhow, I imagine we’ll see your defensive skills later.”

“Huh?”

“We have Defence after lunch. We usually duel during the first lesson back. Professor Merrythought likes to call it a ‘forcible reminder of reality’.”

Harry wondered how his duelling skills would hold up against the sixth years of 1943. Harry had considerable experience in that field—not many fourteen year olds could say they duelled a Dark Lord and walked away—but perhaps the curriculum was harsher here? He supposed there was only one way to find out.

“So, what kind of teacher is Professor Dumbledore?” Harry asked. Harry couldn’t say he wasn’t curious about being taught by his former headmaster. Whilst Harry wasn’t at the height of his regard for Dumbledore, he couldn’t deny that the old wizard had always been insanely powerful.

“Oh, an excellent one. He’s really very qualified.”
Harry took pleasure in the fact that, to Riddle, those words probably felt like punches to the face.

“Someone said that he favoured Gryffindors.” He certainly had in Harry’s time.

“Every teacher has their preferences,” Riddle said diplomatically.

“Are you thinking of going into politics?”

“Why do you say that?”

“I just thought you’d be good at it.”

“Thank you,” Riddle said graciously, despite the fact that it hadn’t wholly been a compliment. “But I plan to teach. Pass on knowledge to the next generation, if you will.”

*Indoctrinate them, you mean.* Harry didn’t say that. “Huh. What subject?”

“Defence. It’s my passion,” Riddle said strongly, and Harry believed him.

“What about it interests you?”

“Oh, everything. The theory, the tactics, the decisions you make: split-second but oh-so-crucial.” Riddle practically glowed with excitement at the thought. “There’s nothing else that makes you feel so alive.”

Harry was genuinely captured by this Riddle, all aglow with joy, intelligence and anticipation. He was a world away from the cruel, cold figure of the future, scarlet eyes reflecting emerald green flashes of light. He was warm, and passionate, and sharp.

“I take it you like duelling then.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Riddle answered swiftly. “Perhaps we could have a bout later?”

“Maybe,” Harry allowed, already planning how to get out of it. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be utterly thrashed by Riddle in front of the likes of Avery and Lestrange.

“So, this is Dumbledore’s classroom,” Riddle pointed out, drawing to a stop in front of a door, studded with stars and planets. The large slice of wood was mottled and scarred with curse burns, and Harry could hear the faint murmur of a crowded classroom beyond. Harry narrowed his eyes at the over-sized poster of the universe, complete with a few added stars and planets that Harry was absolutely sure were fictional.

“You’d think this was Astronomy,” Harry muttered.

“He’s a little eccentric.”

“Tell me about it.” Harry said exasperatedly.

“Have you known the Professor for long? You seem familiar with him.” Riddle eyed him curiously.

“Oh, no.” Shit. “I just guessed he’d be a bit weird. From what I know of him. And meeting him earlier, of course.”

“Obviously.”

“What, don’t you believe me?”
“Of course I do.” Riddle replied, in the kind of way that suggested the complete opposite. “You just say the strangest things. It makes you rather fascinating. Perhaps that’s why you draw so much attention.”

“I do?” Harry asked, horrified.

“Why do you look so miserable? Doesn’t everyone want to be highly regarded?”

“I’d rather just left be alone,” Harry said earnestly.

“Perhaps you should learn a glamour to hide those then,” Riddle suggested slyly, pointedly eyeing Harry’s face. Harry’s hand flickered involuntarily to his forehead and the lightning bolt scar upon it. But then he realised that Riddle was referring to the golden lines tracing the veins and crevices of his skin, fainter on his visible features, but still apparent. Oh. Harry kept forgetting he had those.

“Perhaps you should learn a glamour to hide your face,” Harry said snidely, in the spirit of utmost maturity.

Riddle snorted in answer, and a small smile of what looked like genuine amusement crossed his features. It was tiny, but there.

“Are you ready?” Riddle asked, in a surprisingly thoughtful manner. Harry suspected he was testing the waters for weakness.

Well, Harry wasn’t going to show any.

“It’s a class, Riddle, not Azkaban.” And Harry opened the door, stepping within.

Dumbledore was an interesting teacher. He entered the classroom sporting a knee-length salmon-coloured robe, decorated with moving images of fish (probably salmons, now that Harry thought about it). He gave the class a seating plan (mostly pairing those of different houses) and told them all that this year would mostly be focused on Human Transfigurations.

However, some things never changed, no matter whether he was 100 or 150, headmaster or Transfiguration teacher. Dumbledore was still just as vague and mysterious as ever.

One girl asked, “Professor, how do you become an animagus?”

Dumbledore replied: “My dear girl, there comes a time in everyone’s life when they must make the transition from man to beast. It’s a moment, not a spell, and there is the magic in it.” But he followed that up with an in-depth explanation of the potions and meditative work needed to become an animagus, and the legal paperwork required to register, so Harry supposed he wasn’t completely without knowledge.

Harry had never been excellent at Transfigurations, but he wasn’t awful. Without Ron groaning about the work, and with a need to gain confidence in this new era, Harry found himself paying more attention and taking down copious notes. He wouldn’t say he suddenly became an academic whizz — he’d never have Hermione’s talent or work ethic — but he did at least keep his eyes open.

Harry did wish (for the first, and hopefully last time in his life) that he could have been sat next to Riddle, if only for the fact that he was sure the Slytherin would copy down every word said in the lesson, and Harry could probably have stolen his notes.
Instead, Harry found himself sat next to a Gryffindor girl, pretty but bad-tempered, who spent the entirety of the lesson eyeing him suspiciously and bending over her parchment like it held the secrets to life. Despite the lessened tension in this time, all was not well between Slytherin and Gryffindor. In his time, perhaps Harry would have found some sort of nobility within him to bridge the gap now that he was on the Slytherin side of things; to heroically lead the change in integrational attitudes…

But Harry didn’t see what it would do. It wouldn’t help him in the slightest, and it would surely make him more suspicious and strange in the eyes of his housemates. So he sighed to see the apprehension coming from the lions… and got over it.

Hermione would have been disappointed. Had she been here, she would have made banners and everything. She believed in the good in people, in second chances and giving the benefit of the doubt… But Harry found his personal morals all mixed up. Being in 1943, meeting Tom Riddle and, whilst not liking him, certainly not hating him as much as he should… it went against everything he’d thought he’d ever believe in.

Harry supposed he would have to partially abandon his moral code. It wouldn’t work here; it wasn’t relevant. The people to whom it applied weren’t those people yet.

Although, Tom Riddle was still a manipulative dick. There was no doubting that.

Speaking of Riddle: watching the battle between the perfect Slytherin prefect and Albus Dumbledore was thoroughly amusing.

The routine went like this:

Dumbledore would ask a question.

Riddle would raise his hand.

Dumbledore would look for anyone else to answer.

Everyone else would look at Riddle, arms at their sides.

Dumbledore would sigh and call on Riddle.

Riddle would provide a five-minute answer, complete with statistics, improvised magical diagrams, and sources.

Dumbledore would provide an even more complex elaboration on Riddle’s answer, adding on catchy songs, recommended texts, and eye-witness accounts.

It was brilliant. Riddle looked continually frustrated, and Harry got to write loads of detailed notes, as Dumbledore and Riddle one-upped each other. The rest of the class didn’t seem to have a problem with it, as they didn’t ever try to interrupt the pattern.

Harry admitted that he was in slight awe of Riddle. Even Hermione paled in comparison. Riddle was a bank of knowledge, quick wit and intelligence. Harry began to wonder how this became the Voldemort in the graveyard; hissing threats to his followers and making illogical decisions whilst screeching dramatically. Something completely crazy must happen, Harry mused, and he really hoped he wasn’t still around when it did.

He couldn’t be, right? No. He’d be out of here soon.

Speaking of that, he should go back to the Room of Requirement as soon as possible. Harry couldn’t
actually remember if he’d found anything (the night before was a blur), but he wanted to keep trawling through the books.

He didn’t think he could get there that night—Dumbledore set a large essay on the limitations of Human Transfiguration—but he reckoned he could sneak down there Wednesday night. Hang on—he had a free next period, didn’t he? Harry brightened at the thought and began bouncing slightly in his seat in anticipation.

His Gryffindor partner gave him a disgusted look.

“Mr Peters.”

Harry blinked and looked at Dumbledore. He was shocked—was the teacher actually engaging someone other than Riddle?

The Gryffindor girl next to him muttered, “What the hell is he doing?” so this apparently wasn’t a regular occurrence.

“Mr Peters,” Dumbledore repeated, beaming. “I thought you might want to contribute to our conversation on animagi. Surely you have something to add from your teachings? I always find our curriculum at Hogwarts so limited.”

“I, er, oh.” Harry said stupidly. He caught Riddle smirking at him and bristled. Harry scanned his memories- he’d had dealings with animagi before? What could he have picked up on that Riddle didn’t know?

Harry saw it in his mind’s eye: the flash of blue light, and Scabbers bubbling; fur peeling away to reveal pink, fuzzy skin. A hunched over man where the rat had been.

“Animagus reversal,” Harry blurted out.

“What?”

“The reversal… of the animagus… ness. Y’know. Through a spell.” Harry stumbled through his explanation.

“A way to reverse the transformation?” Dumbledore asked, peering over his glasses interestedly. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“There’s a spell. And blue light. And it forces the animagus back into their human form.” Harry announced triumphantly.

“Does this spell have a name?”

“It’s called the… the…” Oh Merlin, Sirius had told him this. Harry had asked him over the Christmas holidays… “The Homorphus Charm!”

“Well I wonder! Isn’t youth such a wonderful thing? To keep on teaching me even in my old age,” Dumbledore reflected happily, and he genuinely seemed delighted to learn. Harry noticed the scribbling of quills around him, and he realised that they were writing down his spell.

Harry sat back and glowed with satisfaction. Was this how Hermione felt after answering questions? It was like being allowed to sit at the dinner table with the Dursleys. He couldn’t imagine a more brilliant feeling.
When the bell came, Harry didn’t wait for Riddle or any of his sycophants to catch him up. He headed straight to the nearest staircase and began ascending. The seventh floor, and his treasure trove of information on how to get back home, awaited.

Unfortunately, he did not escape unfollowed.

“That was impressive, Peters,” came the cold tones of Atticus Avery. Harry turned around reluctantly. Avery lingered a few stairs down, leaning nonchalantly on the bannister.

“Dumbledore hadn’t even heard of that spell. Does it work, or did you pull it out of your arse?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Believe me, it works.”

“Does it really?”

“Yes! Find an animagus and try it if you want; I don’t really care. I’ve got stuff to do.”

Avery moved up a step. “I just wanted to say… if the spell does work… that was impressive. Even Tom didn’t seem to know about it.”

“Yeah well, Riddle isn’t the be-all and end-all of magic.” Harry rolled his eyes.

Avery gave him an assessing look and smiled thinly. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Do I have to?” Harry muttered beneath his breath, turning away and continuing up the stairs. He wasn’t followed.

The seventh floor was mostly deserted, so Harry encountered little difficulty in pacing three times and entering a vaguely familiar room. Harry had been too tired to fully appreciate this place last time, but now he that was more awake, he could take it all in.

The room had turned itself into a safe haven. All Gryffindor colours, decked out in gold and scarlet wall coverings and a thick crimson carpet, furnished with comfy sofas and armchairs. On the wall; a ‘subtle’ painting, depicting a proud knight astride a magnificent horse, holding a vibrant banner in one hand and a long spear in the other.


He got closer, examining all the little details. A maiden in the background, waving a sheet of parchment into the wind with an angry yell. A hulking beast of a man, standing tall in the background, supporting an eagle on one arm and strangling a dark figure with the other. It was a medieval setting, of course, made even more obvious by the castle in the background. Was that—?

Yes. The castle was Hogwarts; older and grander than Harry had ever seen it, but those turrets were unmistakable.

Harry got even closer, and then he spotted it. Crouched in the corner of the scene, half-hidden beneath a discarded shield, was a wild child. Pale and sickly, with a head of uncontrollable black hair. Harry knew that hair was uncontrollable, because he’d attacked it with a hairbrush every day of his life.

“It’s me,” he whispered, narrowing his eyes.

The very same painted, emerald orbs stared back, widened in terror. He was himself, but maybe 4
years younger, looking almost identical to when he faced Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets. Harry reached out to poke at himself but hesitated at the last minute, suddenly afraid that something awful would happen. But his finger touched the painting, and nothing exploded or set on fire. It was just rough, old canvas creaking beneath his fingertips.

Harry licked his lips and laughed uncomfortably. “That’s weird,” he said.

He placed his fingers around the edge of the portrait frame, and pulled, prising it away from the wall. He half-expected it to swing open, revealing a passageway which he would crawl through and emerge, unscathed, in a DA meeting. Perhaps this had all been a prank. Dean would take credit for the painting, and Ron would look sheepish.

‘Just a joke, mate’ he would say, and Hermione would roll her eyes, enfolding Harry in a hug.

‘I told him it was stupid’ she’d assure Harry, before reminding him that he’d missed nearly three days of homework. He’d laugh.

But Harry pulled the painting off the wall with a faint ‘pop’, and it dropped to the ground. The wall underneath was plain, empty of any kind of passageway or window. There was faint mildew and weird-looking mould, but that was all.

Oh. Harry felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, despite the fact that it had been a stupid theory. This whole charade would have been a pretty elaborate prank. Two months long, with a replica of Tom Riddle involved… he couldn’t imagine Dumbledore agreeing to it. Harry gave a bitter laugh at the idea of the DA crowding into the headmaster’s office, pitching an over-complicated plan to make Harry think he was in the 1940s.

Actually, that definitely sounded like something Dumbledore would agree to.

Harry collapsed to the ground in disappointment, slumping next to the fallen painting. He debated hanging it back up—the blank stone looked really dull without its decoration. But instead, Harry took out his wand and aimed it at the canvas, murmuring a faint spell.

The painting went up in flames; the noble knight’s face melting into the carpet, the maiden’s screaming mouth swallowed by embers, and the giant’s strong jaw line eaten by fire.

The miniature figure of Harry turned to ash.

Harry sprayed the small inferno with a flow of water from the end of his wand, and the flames dwindled with a hiss until there was naught but a burnt frame and scorched patch of carpet to show for it.

As soon as the painting was gone, Harry began wondering if, perhaps, he’d been mistaken. That couldn’t have actually been him, could it? Why the fucking hell would there have been an image of him in a centuries old painting? Merlin, he’d been stupid. And he’d just set it on fire? What the bloody hell?

Uh. This time travel thing was really messing with Harry’s head. Harry supposed he had just been lucky that none of the books caught on fire.

The books…!

Harry erased the painting incident from his mind and turned back to what he’d come here for. He could see the books that he’d gone through last night, littering the ground. But what he hadn’t seen were the bookshelves, holding more tomes. Not many, but enough to give Harry real hope that he
would find something useful.

Some of the books left on the carpet held bookmarks of ripped paper nestled in their pages. Harry assumed he’d done that to keep track of useful information. He settled himself on the floor, crossing his legs and pulling one of the thickest books onto his lap.

He blew on the cover, covered with dusty fingerprints; which read ‘Time Travel Throughout History’ and then opened it to the first bookmark. It read:

THE MYTH

Time travel is one of the most mysterious and strongest of magics available to wizarding kind, and certainly one of the most talked about. However, there have been no notable advancements in creating a stable and safe method of time travel any further back than a few minutes (see page 62), and certainly, none available to the general public.

Despite this, myths on time travel and its uses are rife. One such legend suggests that Rowena Ravenclaw, one of Hogwarts famous founders, was in possession of a time-manipulating beetle, which she had crushed into a powder and used to imbue enchantments upon an amulet. Thus, she was able to manipulate time through use of the artefact. This accounts for many claimed sightings of Ravenclaw throughout the centuries, despite the fact that she is recorded to have died sometime in the eleventh century. However, she is also rumoured to have created Ravenclaw’s diadem; said to enhance the wisdom of its wearer, which is Ravenclaw House’s most treasured attribute. As no obvious evidence of either object has ever been found, they remain myths.

Other uses of time travel in stories include many wizarding fairytales. The story of Cecily Time describes a witch who discovers an ability to travel through time from her grandmother and is promptly lost after killing her grandfather in a freak potion accident nearly 80 years before she is born. This is a cautionary tale told to young magicals to warn against meddling with mysterious magics like time.

This theme of fear perpetuates many time travel-related rumours and tales, and there seems to be an excessive—

Harry stopped reading. He didn’t need to know how scary time travel was (he’d sort of got that bit already, thank you very much), and made up artefacts wouldn’t help him one bit. He flipped to page 62, to read about the working time travel.

THE MINUTE PHENOMENA

In 1925, there was a case which rocked wizarding newspapers. A nomadic experimenter in dangerous magics (Gilderys Hawthorne) reported travelling backward in time almost 3 minutes, having a brief but enlightening conversation with himself, and promptly passing out. This case didn’t leave the headlines until weeks after the occurrence, and Ministry response was swift.

The Ministry launched an investigation into the events and demanded that the nomad’s methods be handed over for experimentation. The investigation into the events revealed that the nomad had been high on opium at the time of the incident and displayed evidence of hallucinations and mental instability. However, it was taken into consideration that at the apparent time of the event, every light, candle or fire in the area suddenly disappeared, and then reappeared exactly three minutes later. This suggested some magical phenomena of strength had occurred.

The method of time travel given to the Ministry by the nomad proved ineffective and was subsequently leaked to the newspapers. But cases have been reported of individuals repeating the
events both under the influence of different narcotics and ‘sober’, to varying effect. Some reported similar experiences, and some stated that they would have been better ‘soaking their undergarments in piss and choking themselves with it’.

So completely useless bullshit then. Harry didn’t want to go further back in time, and a few minutes wouldn’t help him with the fifty years he had to cross.

Harry considered the rest of the book and groaned. What he wouldn’t give to have Hermione.

The Clock In The Corner of the Room

The grandfather clock in the corner of Sarah’s room had been there as long as she could remember. It had been a gift to her mother from a great-aunt of some kind and was one of the most hideous pieces of furniture she had ever set eyes on.

“Sarah! Sarah! Sarah!” Her younger brother, Austin, bowled into the room. “Mother’s home!”

A disturbing number of the books were also apparently fictional, which Harry failed to realise until several chapters in and a fair amount of emotional investment. Harry wiped away a tear and picked up the next.

A few books later, Harry was glad he didn’t have Hermione. A disturbing amount of the texts cited the power of menstrual blood as a symbol of change. It was apparently an important factor when considering time travel. Harry was so desperate right now that he probably would have tried it.

He still hadn’t found anything else useful. Harry screaming in frustration and punched a pillow. He knew the answer was somewhere in here; he knew it!

Harry glanced at his watch and froze. He’d missed lunch. Damnit.

And he’d have to hurry if he wanted to reach Defence in time.

Harry sunk into the empty seat next to Orion and let out a heavy sigh of exhaustion.

Harry had been forced to run back to the dormitory to fetch his timetable so he could find out where the Defence classroom was. This meant that he had to sprint to the second floor (which had completely changed) from the dungeons, so he then spent a few panicked moments wondering where Classroom 31 was. Finally, he recognised a Gryffindor from Transfigurations entering a non-descript room to his left.

“This castle is a bloody maze,” Harry mourned, getting out his parchment and quill.

Orion gestured towards his stationary. “You’re not going to need that.”

“Oh, right.” Harry experienced a sinking feeling in his stomach. “The duel thing.”

“So you’ve heard about it! Don’t worry. She doesn’t really watch them unless they’re really good. Mostly, she lets us fire stunners at each other until someone cries,” Orion said, disturbingly brightly.

“That sounds… bloody awful,” Harry said slowly. Not even fake-Moody had been that intense.

“Nah. It’s nice to take out some anger in a supervised environment,” Orion said, looking like he’d never been angry in his entire life. “And she spends most of her time complimenting Tom anyway.”
“Of course she does.” Harry rolled his eyes.

Orion turned sideways in his chair, looking concerned. “So where were you at lunch? I saved you a seat.”

Harry felt touched. “You did?”

“Yeah. And then I checked the library, but you weren’t there.”

“I want back to the dormitories.”

“Why?”

“I had Transfigurations homework to do, and it was quieter there.” Harry could remember when Hermione would growl in frustration during homework and slink back to her dormitory, muttering about noise and the ‘sound of people breathing’.

“Wow.” Orion blinked. “Not even Tom does that. I’m not sure when he does his homework actually, it just always seems to be done. You must be really dedicated.”

“I’m not actually that great,” Harry said, feeling like an imposter. “I’m just feeling a bit overwhelmed at the moment, so y’know, I like the quiet. It’s a bit weird going from a small house to… this.” It wasn’t a total lie—it had been relaxing to sit in the Room of Requirement, just him, alone.

“I’ve always had a large family,” Orion shrugged. “Two sisters and a younger brother tend to make for a noisy household. I understand what you mean.”

“That’s a lot of siblings,” Harry said, wondering why Sirius had never mentioned so many relatives. “Do they go to Hogwarts?”

“They’re not the right age. Lucretia left Hogwarts last year, Meissa’s around eight, and Rigel’s only six.” Orion smiled at the thought, and bent over to get something out of his bag. He resurfaced holding a moving photograph and passed it to Harry.

The photo showed Orion, clad in dress robes and looking very well put-together, surrounded by his family. The girl to his left, who Harry assumed was Lucretia, stood out if only because she was blonde. She was quite short (Harry empathised) and kept fiddling with her hair. Meissa was a lively child, sticking her finger up her nose and giggling when the person behind the camera told her to stop. The baby, Rigel, burbled from Orion’s arms and tugged on his hair.

“Your hair’s longer in this,” Harry said in surprise. Orion looked even more like Sirius in the photo.

“Yes, it is. Rigel kept pulling on it, so I had it cut. He likes to grab onto things.” Orion took back the photo and smiled at it lovingly. He obviously cared a lot about his family. “So are you good at Defence?”

“I dunno if you’d say good, but it’s always been my favourite subject. I haven’t really duelled a lot, though.”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll duel you, and we’ll keep it civil.” Orion winked. “Just a tip: don’t duel a Gryffindor. Inter-house duels can get… aggressive, and Dark magic is only frowned on, not disallowed.”

“Dark magic?” Harry imagined what Riddle could do if he was allowed to use dark magic and strengthened his resolve not to duel Riddle like he’d suggested earlier.
“Well, they couldn’t ban a whole branch of magic, could they?” Orion laughed and then, seeing Harry’s concern: “But we’re not supposed to seriously injure each other, don’t worry.”

“Humph.” Harry sank back into his chair and frowned.

It was at that moment that Professor Merrythought swept into the classroom in stern black robes and steep stilettos. She was a dominating woman, similar to McGonagall but shorter and more sadistic looking. She also had a bob.

“Alright class, you all know what we’re doing. It’s duelling time. Pair up—wait.” Merrythought stopped at the front of the class and snapped round, pointing a finger directly at… Harry. “You. I don’t know you.”

“I’m Harry. Peters. I’m new.” Harry felt a little scared.

“You’ll catch up,” she snapped. “Okay class, let’s pair up.”

Harry turned expectantly to Orion, who grinned at him.

“Harrison Peters, would you do me the honour of being my duelling opponent?”

Harry snorted and bowed. “Why, Mr Black, I—“

“No.

Harry turned at the tap on his shoulder reluctantly, hoping that it wouldn’t be who he thought it would be.

It was.

“Riddle,” Harry said stiffly. “What do you want?”

Tom Riddle surveyed him with those dark, sinful eyes and gifted him a faintly amused smile. “I thought I’d make good on our earlier deal. Want a duel?”

“No, was the honest answer.

“Of course he does!” Orion agreed, pushing Harry forwards.

Harry protested, shooting Orion a betrayed look. “But we were going to—”

“Don’t worry about me!” Orion assured him happily. “I’ll find someone else to duel. If you promised you’d duel Tom, you should probably do it.”

“Excellent advice, Orion,” Tom said cheerfully, and grabbed Harry’s wrist, pulling him away to an open space.

The Defence classroom was huge. Only the corner of it was taken up by desks, but the rest was an open space. The pairs of students had swiftly found themselves small areas, and so Harry and Riddle did the same.

“Have you ever duelled before?” Riddle asked, rolling up his sleeves.

“Not really?” Harry really, really didn’t want to do this.
“The rules are simple: we bow, and then we duel. Dark magic allowed, but no fatalities,” Riddle smirked.

“How comforting.”

Riddle flourished his wand a little. “Shall we begin?”

Harry could feel his heart pounding in his chest. All of a sudden, the frustrations of the day: that bloody painting, the useless books, being stuck here with Tom Riddle—! bubbled to the surface. This was the man that would kill his parents. Even if he couldn’t win, Harry could at least try. This was something he could do.

“Why not?” Harry challenged.

They bowed: Harry’s barely a bob, and Riddle sinking into a low lunge. And then the duel began.

Riddle struck first; firing two consecutive stunners. Harry dodged the first and threw up a thick shield to halt the other. He acted quickly, firing a disarming spell and then a body-bind. Riddle side-stepped the disarmer and the bind barely took effect before Riddle cancelled it.

“Let’s make this interesting,” Riddle said.

A shower of burning arrows fell from the ceiling towards Harry in a blaze of light, who conjured a wall of water. The arrows sizzled and fell uselessly to the ground. Harry threw a slicing charm, which cut a thin line across Riddle’s cheekbone even as he dodged it.

A bead of blood trickled down Riddle’s face, and he advanced furiously, face set in a vicious snarl. He snapped his wand quickly and a barrage of spells flew at Harry; entrail-expellers, Repulsos, and Confunduses. Harry’s shield stopped most of them, but the Confundus got through.

The world turned hazy, and Harry felt himself swaying on his feet. With a yell, he shot a surprising “avis!” in Riddle’s direction, and the haze cleared. Harry saw Riddle yell as a vicious bird clawed at his face, but it didn’t last long. A bolt of electricity hissed in the air around him, and the birds fell to the ground, fried.

“Confringo!” Riddle hissed angrily, slicing his wand through the air. Harry rolled to the ground, the curse flying over his head and singeing the ends of his hair. It exploded somewhere behind him. From his position on the ground, Harry sent a gust of wind towards his opponent. Riddle was caught off guard and knocked to the ground, but the Expelliarmus Harry cast soon after was halted by a strong shield.

Riddle blew on the floor whilst twirled his wand, and Harry saw something move. Hundreds of little spiders began scuttling towards him, moving quickly across the floor to where he lay. When Harry began pushing himself backwards, Riddle smirked and a circle of flames erupted around them with a flick of his wand, stopping Harry in his tracks and causing heat to beat onto his back. When the spiders reached Harry’s skin, they began to bite at every available inch of him, each one a small shot of agony.

Harry screamed, clawing at his skin, but fought through the pain and cancelled the transfiguration. Dust fell from his body where the spiders had been. Harry laughed. Riddle scrambled to his feet, but Harry cast the Knockback Jinx. The Slytherin flew back into his conjured flames with a grunt.
Harry held his breath for a moment, but Riddle must have cast a flame-freezing spell or something, because he emerged from the fire swiftly, robes singed but undamaged. The flames exploded into sparks and drifted away.

Now Harry and Riddle were back on their feet, circling each other and glaring.

“Never duelled before, huh?” Riddle snarled.

“I guess it’s just natural talent.”

“Or beginner’s luck.” And with that, a pale white fog started to rise around Harry, slipping through his lips and quickening his breathing, whilst sticking to his skin and making it hard to move. He couldn’t see anything. “Densaugeo!” he yelled, the sound somehow muffled and sounding strange to his ears. “Densaugeo! Densaugeo!” he repeated, trying different directions. Finally, the fog began to clear away, and Harry saw Riddle clutching his mouth as his teeth erupted from his mouth. Unfortunately, it took little effort to cancel the spell.

Harry and Riddle began exchanging spells at lightning speed. Harry didn’t even know what he was casting: it was just instinct at this point. To an outsider, it would’ve looked like nothing more than cracks and flashes of different coloured lights. The two duellers got closer and closer until they were duelling practically chest-to-chest. Harry could feel himself losing ground, and Riddle only seemed to be getting faster.

Harry gritted his teeth and ripped his wand away, raising a disillusionment charm and moving swiftly away. He was lucky he did, because Riddle immediately sent out a pulse of magic about a metre wide. Harry didn’t know what it would have done to him if it’d hit him, but he didn’t want to find out. Harry cast another slicing charm, but Riddle side-stepped it, and returned with a ball of flames.

Harry could feel the disillusionment eating away at his energy, so he lifted it. He used Riddle’s surprise to cast a binding spell, holding his arms back with chains. Harry cast an Expelliarmus, but, before the spell could impact, Riddle cut the chains in half and flung a similar spell at Harry, leaving a wide gash on his forearm.

“Shit!” Harry cursed, covering the wound with his hand. It came away bloody.

Riddle now had a hand to his ribs, as they’d presumably been hit at some point. Harry couldn’t remember when. Both duellists were panting heavily, and even Riddle looked exhausted: a thin layer of sweet covering his brow.

“I’ll finish this now,” he spat, walking towards Harry slowly, twirling his wand between his fingers.

“You never do get over your dramatics,” Harry taunted, and played his last hand. “Expecto Patronum!”

The stag burst out of his wand, charging down the space between Harry and Riddle in a matter of seconds. It shone brighter than Harry had ever seen it, glowing a blue-silver in the dark classroom. It let loose a ghostly bellow as it charged into Riddle’s chest and sent him hurtling onto the ground. Harry followed close behind, falling forwards onto Riddle’s chest and pressing his wand to his throat.

Harry watched Riddle’s eyes widen with shock, lungs heaving and hair falling into his eyes.

“Check,” he panted viciously, driving his wand harder into Riddle’s jugular.

Harry felt an unexpected force press under his ribs. Riddle’s wand.
“Checkmate,” Riddle hissed, licking his lips.

Neither moved: both caught in a potentially fatal position. The tension between them buzzed and crackled.

“Excellent job!”

Harry looked around wildly for the source of the compliment and found Professor Merrythought looking mildly impressed. He also found the rest of the class, gathered around Harry and Riddle, and watching intensely. Apparently, they’d all abandoned their own duels at some point to watch Harry’s. Harry found Orion in the crowd. He looked slightly shocked, and extremely impressed.

Harry began to blush in embarrassment.

Merrythought clapped slowly, and was gradually joined by others. “Wonderful duel. You both made several tactical errors—especially you, Peters—but you have raw talent and skill. A perfectly corporal patronus, you don’t see that every day. I’d say you have a competitor, Riddle.

“Apparently so,” Riddle bit out, leaning his head back against the floor and sighing. “Would you mind getting off, Harrison, or should I forcibly removed you?”

“I’d like to see you try,” Harry muttered, but obligingly lifting his leg over, and fell onto his back beside Riddle. “Ugh.”

“Up!” Merrythought demanded. “Up! We’re going to analyse your performance, and see where you could’ve improved. Back to your seats. Enough drama.”

Harry sat up and immediately regretted it. “Head rush,” he moaned, clutching his temple. Lights were exploding behind his eyes. Suddenly, the pain disappeared, leaving behind a pleasantly warm sensation. “Wha—? Oh.”

Riddle put his wand back into his pocket and rolled his eyes. “It’s a simple healing spell.”

“Thanks,” Harry said grudgingly, and clambered to his feet. He offered a hand to Riddle, who grabbed it and pulled himself up, licking his finger and touching the wound on his cheek.

Harry ignored the curious gaze of the students around him and dragged himself back to his desk, where an even more curious gaze was waiting for him.

“That was amazing!” Orion enthused. “You were so fast. He was like ‘fire!’ and you were like ‘woah invisible’ and then he was like ‘spiders’ and you were like ‘light!’ Where did you learn to do that?”

“I don’t really know.” Harry couldn’t exactly say that he’d picked it up whilst annually fighting the Dark Lord that had haunted his life since he was a baby. “Around.”

“Well, it was brilliant. I’ve never seen Riddle that into a duel—or anything! I’ve never seen Riddle beaten!”

“It was a draw. We drew.” Harry still didn’t know how he felt about that. He took a deep breath. “Er, so why were you all watching? Weren’t you supposed to be duelling?”

“Well, we were. But, then you two got really intense, and there were ‘rings of flames’, and Professor Merrythought looked scarily like she wanted to hug one of you, so we all stopped. It was really, really, really good, and sort of terrifying?”
Harry was raising a hand to calm Orion down, when he got woozy. “Oh, bloody hell,” he winced, rubbing his eyes. His arm started stinging, and he suddenly noticed the blood soaking through his shirt. Red looks really serious against white.

“What’s wrong?”

“My arm…” Harry murmured.

“Merlin, you need to go to the hospital wing,” Orion panicked. “That doesn’t look nice. PROFESSOR! PROFESSOR!”

Somehow, Orion managed to persuade Professor Merrythought that Harry really couldn’t wait to go to the hospital wing, and no—he wasn’t being overdramatic, and it was quite urgent? And then Tom Riddle of all people volunteered to take him.

This day was weird.

“You’re both in a terrible state!” Madam Hallpepper fussed, tightening the bandage around Harry’s arm. “How you students are allowed to beat each other to death is beyond me.”

This visit to the Hogwarts wing proved two things to Harry: he could never go long without significant injury; and all matrons fussed exactly the same.

“Mr Riddle, your ribs are seriously bruised, will you lie down!?”

Riddle was also evidently injured. Apparently his act of kindness in accompanying Harry to the hospital wing had not been without ultimatum. How shocking.

Madam Hallpepper flapped her hands and tutted. “Honestly, it’s like you both want to stay overnight. I’m going to get more Painkiller Potions—don’t move!” she shrieked, and swept out of the room.

Harry lay back in his bed and scratched at the bandages, staring up at the familiar white ceiling.

“You were good,” Riddle said reluctantly, looking beautiful even when washed-out and injured. “That was possibly the most difficult duel I’ve ever had. Obviously I still won…”

“We drew,” Harry crowed. “I drew with you.”

“I think I clearly had the upper hand.”

“I was on top of you!”

“You had the most vulnerable position—”

“‘Most vulnerable’— I was sat on top of you!”

“I could have blown your intestines to pieces.”

“Did you miss the part where I had my wand to your throat?”

“You did, didn’t you?” Riddle said disbelievingly, and chuckled.
Harry rolled his eyes. “You’re impossible.”

Well, this wasn’t something Harry had ever expected to happen. Lying in a hospital bed, chatting with Tom Riddle jovially… he was so high on Painkiller Potions.

The tension between him and Riddle was still there; still crackling on the corner of every conversation they had. There was still that weariness between them, like two predators who weren’t quite sure who had the upper hand. Harry still really hated him, and he was pretty sure Riddle still found him unbearably suspicious. But tonight, at least, they could be civil.

“Do you think she’s going to let us go back to the dormitories?”

“No.”

“Me neither,” Harry said, resolving himself to a night in the hospital wing. “Me neither.”

Chapter End Notes

Rigel is the brightest star in the Orion Constellation. Lol for personification of stars. It also means foot, which has absolutely no significance in this fic. Literally, absolutely none. It’s just interesting trivia.
Also: so annoyed that Lucretia is not a star, but it’s the only Black sibling that’s canon (other than Orion) *rolls eyes*

So Harry seems (vaguely) more mentally stable and reasonable. Yay! But how much of it is because he’s focused on a goal now (e.g getting home)? Wonder what will happen if he doesn’t have that to focus on…
Harry Is Having A Great Day

Chapter Summary

Tom is not as infallible as he thinks, Cassius is more significant than you think, and I don't know I'm thinking.

Chapter Notes

I got a tumblr for my fanfiction, where I'll post stuff like updates, prompts, teasers, etc. Probably ramble a bit. I dunno- it's a work in progress. Please follow me. I don't know what I'm doing. http://vivypotter.tumblr.com/

This is currently unbetaed, because I'm going on holiday soon and want to get this up before I am deprived of wifi for a week 0.0 So if it is a mess, that's why. The betaed version will be up soon :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tom rubbed his abdomen absent-mindedly. It had been a few weeks since the duel, and his ribs were completely healed up, but he still felt phantom pains.

The duel… truth be told, Tom had only asked Harrison because he was bored. He knew that no one in that class could beat him, and perhaps proving his superiority to the new Slytherin would have entertained him. It was simply a bonus that Tom got more time to explore this new mystery. Of course, it hadn’t gone as planned, but at least Tom had gotten something out of it.

Harrison had slipped up.

Tom could remember it perfectly. *Harrison’s eyes narrowing with disgust and triumph, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. “You never do get over your dramatics,” and then the burst of silver light that had Tom falling backwards.*

Now what had Harrison meant by *that*?

Tom knew, admittedly, that he was more inclined to dramatics than he would have liked. He enjoyed taking his time, watching people realise they’d failed. That was what fascinated Tom: people, and the different ways they broke. He’d had plenty of opportunities to experiment in the Orphanage; to work up the children and then send them crashing down. He found it utterly enthralling. To feel that *power*, to know *you* were the reason for downfalls and uprisings.

It was how he wanted to feel for the rest of his life. He never wanted to feel helpless. He wanted to *be someone*.

Harrison hadn’t broken. Harrison had fought back. Harrison had sent aerial armies, and explosions, and waves to douse his fire. Harrison thought himself Tom’s equal.
Tom had never truly encountered that before. He’d met those who thought themselves above Tom: Dumbledore, Dippet, Mrs Cole. He’d sneered at those below him: Atticus, Rupert- even Cassius deferred to Tom. Harrison faced him like no other; completely equal. He didn’t know how he felt about it.

Harrison knew things he shouldn’t. He knew his way around the castle; he knew spells Tom had never heard of; he knew Tom’s weakness for wand flourishing. But how?

Tom frowned broodily and realised he had no idea. He’d put Abraxas on it.

“Tom? Tom!? It’s your move.”

He was brought back to the Slytherin dormitories abruptly.

“My move?” Oh right- he was played a game of chess against Orion, and winning.

“I just went. You’ve just been staring at nothing for ages.”

Tom reluctantly turned his attention back to the game, thoughts still lingering on Harrison. Orion sat expectantly across from him, wearing an exasperated expression and tugging on his tie. Black nodded towards the chessboard between them, and Tom sighed, pushing forward a piece without much thought.

His mind drifted again. Harrison had almost beaten him in that duel. He would have had Tom thoroughly cornered, had he not left enough lee-way for him to move his arm. Tom just didn’t understand how.

Harrison was not a poor wizard, but neither did he seemed a particularly exceptional one. He got by in his lessons from what Tom heard; excelling sometimes and falling behind at intervals, but mostly thoroughly average. Well, perhaps Tom was being harsh- above average then. However, there had been nothing to suggest that Harrison would be capable of almost beating Tom.

But during that duel, Harrison had come alive. It had been actually quite thrilling really. Peters seemed to think in a series of reactions- whilst Tom could plan a move and thirty different possible repercussions all at once, Harrison thought on his feet, constantly moving and evading. It was quite amazing to watch. He had none of Tom’s technique or strategy, but Tom had to admit that Harrison was probably more of a natural; more intuitive in his duelling style.

Tom was more skilled, more subtle; more inventive. But Harrison was strong, and quick, and seemed to know Tom’s moves better than Tom did.

You didn’t pick that up from parental home-schooling. You couldn’t; not unless Mr and Mrs Peters were duelling legends, and Tom would have heard of them if that was the case.

Why hadn’t Tom heard of them? Most home-schooled students came to Hogwarts thoroughly unprepared, not level to the best student in the year. What was Harrison hiding?

There were so many holes in his story. It’d seemed reasonable: but Harrison’s skill level, unawareness of current events (just that morning, he’d asked Tom why someone was crying at the Hufflepuff table. Honestly, like there wasn’t a war on), and sometimes he’d say the strangest things…

Just last Wednesday, Harrison had mentioned Puddlemere United gaining a new captain; Nathaniel Federer. It was only a few days later that the change was announced in the newspapers. Either Peters had unknown connections to the Quidditch team, or it was highly suspicious.
“Tom!” Orion insisted. “It’s your turn again.”

Tom narrowed his eyes. “I don’t need a reminder, Black,” he said coolly, but pushed a pawn forwards all the same.

Just at that moment, Harrison Peters stepped through the entrance to the Common Room. He did it unusually smoothly- most first years stumbled through the passageway for months. Tom added that to his mental list of strange things about Harrison Peters.

Harrison looked around, blinking owlishly behind his glasses, before he apparently spotted Orion and came hurrying over. “Orion!” He said, excitedly. “I got an EE in Potions! An EE! I’ve never got higher than an Acceptable!” He waved his homework in enthusiasm. Orion responded with suitable delight.

“I thought you weren’t getting the essays back until next lesson?”

“He marked mine first.”

Tom surveyed the two with distaste. This thing almost beat him in a duel?

Harrison caught his look and rolled his eyes playfully. “Oh shut it, Riddle. Not everyone can have an IQ almost as big as your ego.”

“I’m sure they could if they tried.” Tom said coolly.

“And the ego strikes again.” Harrison mocked.

“Well, perhaps you should move to Ravenclaw with a mark as high as that,” Tom replied sarcastically, gesturing to Harrison’s homework.

“I wish I did. Then I wouldn’t need to see your face every morning.”

“I’m sure the bathroom mirror shares your sentiment.”

“She told me my hair looked windswept this moment, actually.”

Tom laughed cruelly. “And that’s a compliment in your book?”

“I know you find it difficult to understand anything other than backhanded insults, but yes.”

“Checkmate,” Orion gasped.

“What?!” Tom demanded, turning back to the game of chess quickly. He felt nauseous the sight of the chessboard; where his king lay pathetically on one side, cowering beneath Orion's queen. He’d… lost?

“I won!” Orion squealed, looking like Christmas day had come early. “I won a game of chess against Tom Riddle!” Orion turned and brandished a triumphant finger at Tom. “I beat you!”

The Slytherin Common room became silent, and all attention fell upon the three. Tom gave everyone a dangerous glare, silently warning them to go back to what they were doing. They obeyed. He didn't need more people witness to his humiliation- he might not be able to control himself. Already, his wandhand was itching to curse someone.

“Becoming a bit of a pattern, eh, Riddle?” Harrison grinned tauntingly. “Better get used to losing—"
“The duel was a draw,” Tom corrected automatically, scowling at the board. “This can’t be right.”

“And yet it’s happening,” Peters sang brightly, before turning to the triumphant Black. “Hey, I’m gonna drop my homework off in the dormitories, and then when I come back we can celebrate. I’ll bring the Bertie Botts.”

“They’re my favourite,” Orion beamed, happily.

“I know,” Harrison said, disgustingly supportive. Then he did something odd. He held his hand up, palm facing towards Orion, and waited expectantly.

Orion frowned.

“Well come on then,” Harrison prompted. “High five.”

“What’s a ‘high five’?” Orion asked slowly, tilting his head at Harrison’s hand.

“Is it something to do with arithmancy?” Tom suggested.

“No! It’s… it’s like a congratulations thing. You give someone a high five if you want to say well done.” Harrison frowned.

“How does it work?”

“You slap my hand.”

Orion reached out and lightly patted Harrison’s hand.

Peters shook his head, laughing, “No, a proper slap. Like… I’ll show you. Put your hand up like mine.”

Orion copied Harrison uncertainly, raising his arm and flattening his palm.

“Now don’t move your hand,” Harrison said slowly. “I’m going to hit it.”

“Hit it!?” Orion gulped.

“It’ll be fine!” Harrison said, wearing a blasé grin. He raised his hand, delivering a smart slap to Orion’s palm. Tom knew he wasn’t mistaken when he saw a small, almost unnoticeable ripple of magic from Harrison upon contact. Orion yelped and staggered away, shaking his hand and clutching it to his chest.

“I think it has to be more mutual.” Tom rolled his eyes at Peters.

Harrison’s eyes were wide behind his glasses. He looked like a badly startled owl. “I’m sorry, Orion,”

“It’s fine.” Orion smiled through gritted teeth. “It doesn’t really hurt, honest.”

Perhaps that would have been a more believable statement if Black’s hand hadn’t been bright red, and his voice had been an octave lower.

“I didn’t mean to,” Harrison offered guiltily.

Tom heaved a great sigh- honestly, did anyone remember they were wizards these days? He considered leaving it, but Orion’s pained whimpers were irritating him. He stepped forwards and ran
his wand over Orion’s palm, muttering a low soothing charm. The redness faded, as did the pained expression on Orion’s face.

“Don’t be pathetic, Orion,” Tom offered, smoothly. “It was just a tap.”

Orion didn’t seem comforted, for some reason.

Harrison gingerly clapped Orion on the shoulder; declaring: “I’ll just go get the Bertie Botts, see if they make you feel better. We can celebrate your victory, yeah?”

Ah, the chess game. He had forgotten about that.

Orion perked up at the mention of sugar, and gave Harrison an enthusiastic nod. Harrison beamed and turned away to jog down the stairs into the Slytherin dormitories.

“Oh, before you go, my parents sent that book you wanted,” Orion remembered, holding out a thick tome. “I think it’s the right one.”

Harrison near froze, and grabbed the book quicker than a bullet. “This is bloody brilliant,” he told Orion gratefully, pouring over the cover- stroking it. “This is exactly right, yeah. Thanks.”

“It’s really new. It only got released yesterday. But you mentioned it at the beginning of the week?” Naïve curiosity peppered Orion’s question, and Tom’s interest was caught.

“I’d heard about it,” Harrison said dismissively. He opened the book to the contents and ran his finger down the chapter list.

“Everyone was really surprised when Cassandra Vablatsky published it. No one expected it.” Orion said innocently.

Harrison got a funny crease on his forehead and bit his lip. “ Weird. I, er, I’ll go put this in my dorm and get the sweets, yeah? You beat Riddle, remember?”

Orion perked up at the mention of sweets and seemed to forget his entire line of questioning. Tom sighed at his weak will.

Then Harrison was gone, to fetch the confectionaries. Tom grumbled at the theatrics of it all (a little hypocritical, he knew), and sank into a green armchair. They were making far too big a fuss of this— it was one victory. And it was all Harrison’s fault. He’d completely distracted Tom.

Tom restrained the urge to follow and curse him.

Orion was buzzing with excitement, now completely recovered from the ‘high five’ (pathetic, Tom murmured inwardly). “Cassius told me this would happen,” Black told him happily. “He said you’d lose when you were distracted.”

“Good for Cassius,” Tom snarled, really wishing they’d move on. Honestly, it was just a game. He’d never lost one before.

“I wonder if Cassius could tell me when the next Divinations quiz is.”

Tom rolled his eyes. “Why don’t you ask him about the Western Front whilst you’re at it?”

“Do you think I could?”

“Oh for heaven’s sake- Cassius will do what he does, as usual. You know he just likes to cause
chaos,” Tom snapped.

“Yes, but if you ask a question Cassie usually answers, even if he’s vague. It’s like he knows everything…” Orion mumbles.

“Don’t be idiotic, that’s impossible…” Tom said, with less derision than deserved. His mind began whirring. Tom may have been abrasive, but he couldn’t fail to notice the similarities between Cassius and Harrison. Perhaps on a different scale- Harrison didn’t possess quite the same otherworldly weirdness as Cassius and was certainly more direct, but Peters wasn’t exempt from mentioning things that he couldn’t have known, and he was strangely familiar with everyone…

“Just like Cassius,” Tom said wonderingly. “Where is Rosier?”

“He might be in the library. It’s where he usually is.”

“Of course.” Tom paused for effect. “Orion, that book: what was it called?”

“Unfogging the Future. Some sort of Divination thing, by this famous seer.”

“Indeed, I’ve heard of her. I didn’t know Harrison was interested in Divination?”

“Neither did I.” Orion shrugged, falling back onto a sofa. “But he really wanted it- he was desperate. He came up to me a few days ago, and said he couldn’t find it in the library. He wouldn’t have, because, as I said, it’s a really recent release, but he seemed quite surprised by that. So I wrote to my parents-“

“The library, you said?” Tom interrupted.

“Yes, he couldn’t find it in the library.”

“No, where I can find Rosier.”

“Oh yeah. The library. That’s where Cassius should be.”

Tom gave a cursory nod and left as soon as possible. He headed straight towards the library, robes billowing around his body. He knew the sort of image he struck: strong, beautiful and powerful: all dark hair and tall. He gave a tight smile to a small Ravenclaw with mousey brown hair and round glasses, and she looked delightedly shocked.

The castle was relatively quiet, as it always was during lunch. The students were presumably mostly in the Great Hall, still eating; or outside. Tom took a deep breath and was fiercely reminded of how much he loved this castle, even more so at its quietest. The scent of magic and age was fresh on the breeze, imbued into the very stone in the walls. Even the moss was ancient. Tom wondered how many great and famous witches and wizards had walked this path, and how many would in the future. He wondered what they would think of him.

He wanted them to know him.

The fresh wind tangled in Tom’s hair, dancing along the open corridor; ducking around pillars and battering portraits who complained loudly. A slight smile played on the corner of his lips, as he paused and leaning on the sill, staring out onto the courtyard.

He loved Hogwarts.

The grand trees outside were painted autumn shades; oranges, red and brown decorating their
branches. Fallen leaves blanketed the cobble stones, crunching under the feet of the students who walked outside; noses reddened and cheeks bright. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky above, and the light was that kind of crisp white you only get during the autumn months.

Tom inhaled deeply, shrugged off his sentimentality, and continued towards the library.

Cassius wasn’t difficult to locate, curled up in an armchair next to the fiction books, with a comic resting on his lap. He didn’t even need to look up to say softly, “Hello, Tom,” and gesture towards a seat.

Tom looked at the indicated chair, and sat down in the one next to it. It was the little things that mattered.

“You’re here to ask about Harry,” Cassius told him.

“Well, it appears there’s no explanation needed then. Tell me about him.”

“What makes you think I would know anything?”

Tom fixed Cassius with an icy-cold glare that had even Cassius flinching. He was not in the mood for Cassius' nonsense, having had a thoroughly frustrating day, and looking for some answers finally. “Don’t push me,” Tom said darkly.

“What do you want to know?” Cassius’s voice held significantly less attitude this time, but the slight smile on his lips irritated Tom to no end.

“Harrison. He’s suspicious. He says things that haven’t happened yet, and it’s like he knows more about us than he should. I want to know why.”

Cassius tilted his head. “I can’t tell you exactly—“

“And why not?!” Tom erupted.

“But I’ll say this.” Cassius raised a finger. “Look into the future.”

Tom raised an eyebrow.

Cassius leaned in like he was divulging a great secret. “Time is a mysterious thing, Tom Riddle. Sometimes it lets things… slip through.”

“Like visions…” Tom straightened up, an idea striking him. “Look into the future… is that what he’s doing? Is he a seer? He had a book, on Divination. And he’s been predicting things- being a seer’s genetic, isn’t it? There’ll be some history in the Peters family. I should have Abraxas get on that, research his parents… this would explain so much.”

Cassius gave one of his strange smiles, tucked a lock of hair behind his ear and said, “Glad to see you’ve got it all figured out. Have you seen Ella?”


“Gobstones advice,” Cassius said quickly. “Never mind; I’ll see her around. Abraxas just left Transfigurations, if you need him.”

Tom was always interested in collecting people of significance. Those with special skills or talents. You could never have too many powerful people under your control. Harrison had already proven his magical talent and- should he prove to have the oracle’s touch- could be perfect.
Tom stood up. He walked briskly away, without saying anything more to Cassius. He had a Malfoy to find.

Harry was having an excellent day. He’d gotten an EE in his Potions essay, got to see Riddle defeated, and now he had his favourite subject, Defence.

“This is a great day,” he told Orion, practically skipping towards the Defence classroom.

“Eh kno’ righ’?” Orion mumbled through a mouthful of jellybeans. “Gre’ deh.”

“Are we moving onto anything new in Defence?”

Orion swallowed his mouthful with a loud gulp, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “We have a few more weeks of recaps- she likes to cover everything. We did rituals last lesson. So it could be anything really: curses, creatures- but it won’t be anything you haven’t seen before, probably. What have you done?”

“Er,” What had Harry done; other than duelled dark lords and slaughtered basilisks? “A bit of everything: dark creatures, hexes, curses- the Unforgiveables, dark objects, enchantments-“

“The Unforgiveables?!” Orion exclaimed. “We haven’t done anything like that yet. That’s- that’s dark. Not that I care but- Merlin. You never struck me as the type.”

“My teacher thought we should be prepared.” Harry could still hear Moody’s rough growl and the flash of green light.

“Your teacher? You mean, your parents?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, wondering why it was that he couldn’t just keep his mouth shut. He improvised. “I mean my dad was really into all that ‘constant vigilance’ stuff.”

“What were they like; your parents?” Orion asked curiously.

Harry didn’t answer immediately. Orion took the silence as offence.

“Sorry! Personal question.” Orion winced. “I’m really bad at those, I get to know someone then suddenly- boom!- out with the invasions of privacy. It really annoyed Tom when we first got to know each other. He doesn’t appreciate people asking about his home life, as I learned.”

“Because of the orphanage.”

“Yes, how did you-?” Orion frowned.

“He mentioned it.”

“That’s not like Tom.” Orion shook his head, getting back on track. “So anyway, I’m sorry if you were offended by my question. I didn’t mean to. I forget we haven’t known each other for that long,” Orion gave him an honest smile.

“No it’s fine. It’s just a bit raw, you know.” Harry lied.

Harry realised he didn’t actually know all that much about his parents. What had Sirius really told him? Nothing much except for how he looked like them, and what ‘wonderful’ people they had both been. He didn’t even know their favourite colours. The only other thing he knew was how much of a dick his dad had been to Snape, and that was from a biased memory. His parents could have been
anything from monsters, to Ghandi reincarnated. (Fine, so maybe not to those extremes).

It made him incredibly sad. Perhaps, if he was still here in twenty years (not that he would be, he promised himself), he could get to know them? He wanted to talk to them. He wanted to see if they would have been proud of him. Would his dad have hated his ‘filthy snake’ of a son? Or would his mum have wrapped her arms around him and told him her love was unconditional? He’d always imagined what a mother’s hug would feel like.

“You know, I’m actually quite good at warding.” Orion said randomly, and Harry appreciated his attempt at distraction. “I came up with this new ward recently, it’s interesting actually. It’s sort of a muggle-repelling ward. It prevents those without magical blood from entering a building or area. But it doesn’t do it physically, it plants an idea in their heads: that they’re got somewhere else to be, and that they have to be there immediately. Much less suspicious. I really think it could have real life, important applications for magical entrances, and events, and such. It could really protect us all-“ Orion spotted what must have been a pretty shocked expression on Harry’s face. “-not that we need protecting, of course, because muggles are all lovely and not at all vicious.” He finished unconvincingly.

“You invented that?” Harry asked, remembering the wards over Grimmauld Place, the world cup, Hogwarts, Durmstrang.

“Yes?”

“That’s amazing, Orion. Really, that’s incredible.” Harry clapped him on the shoulder and gave him a sideways hug. “How did you manage that?”

“Occlumency,” Orion interrupted. “I’m good at that too,” he grinned. “So… you like it?”

“Yeah, ‘course. Just think, they could be using that to protect Hogwarts in a few years,” Harry hid a smirk.

“You think so?!” Orion exploded and then, calming down, “I mean, that is what I had in mind when I created it, but… it’s just such an inconsistent system we have now! Certainly, we have the glamours, but the odd muggle always wanders in and has to be obliviated- what if they get to a first year before we realised and hurt… themselves because muggles are so harmless, of course,” Orion mumbled sheepishly.

“I have to get you into muggle London. They’re not bloody demons.” Harry laughed, finding Orion’s terror almost funny now. And then he remembered that this terror led to countless murders as well as at least two wars, and stopped laughing. “So what are you going to do with the ward?”

“Oh, I’ll send it to the wards department in the Ministry, they’ll run tests for a while- probably a few years as it won’t be priority- to see if it’s safe, and then they’ll release it to the general public.”

“But won’t you get any money?”

“Why would I get money?” Orion chuckled.

“But surely you discovered it…”

“I can’t charge people to use a ward.” Orion scoffed. “Magic’s public property.”

Harry had never wondered about the invention of spells. Who did it, and why; if they didn’t get paid. Call him shallow (perhaps it was a value instilled by the Dursleys), but Harry just couldn’t see people creating things for other people without payment.
“You get recognition in all the proper academic circles, of course,” Orion admitted. “The journals, the guilds. It’s what I want to do: become a wardmaster. You’re paid for that.”

“How do you become one of those?”

“You need NEWTS in all the important subjects, and then you do TOADS beyond that—“

“TOADS?”

“Testing On Advanced, Defined Subjects? That’s independent studying, ended with tests at the Ministry. To be a wardmaster, you need Warding TOADS and Ancient Runes TOADS. Then you can do an apprenticeship, or you can write straight to the Guild of Wardmasters and ask to be taken on as a beginner. You work your way up from there.”

“Sounds longwinded.”

“It’s a great honour,” Orion assured him. “I can’t wait.”

“Hey,” Harry began, wondering if he was about to show his ignorance. However, Hermione had never mentioned them, and these TOADS things seemed like the sort of the thing that she would have been hassling Harry and Ron to do. “I’ve never heard of TOADS.”

“Not many people have. They’re quite obscure; only really needed for going into academics or becoming a branch master. There’s talk of discontinuing them, and making the NEWTS courses trickier, anyway.”

That would explain it then.

The two finally came to the end of the corridor, and drew to a close.

“Here we are!” Orion gestured to the door into the Defence classroom. “Milord,” he said teasingly, bowing as he held the door open.

“Shut up,” Harry replied, snorting.

“You’re late,” Merrythought snapped upon their entrance, bearing down upon them like an enraged eagle.

“Only a little, ma’am,” Orion wheedled playfully.

“Get to your desk,” Merrythought made a sound of disgust in the back of her mouth, and turned away.

Harry exchanged a look with Orion, and the two of them snickered quietly as they shuffled to their chairs. Harry most definitely did not see Tom Riddle watching him intently with a faint smirk, and most definitely did not wonder what he knew, and then immediately after consider how he got his hair to look that good. He also didn’t glare at Riddle in the distinctly confrontational manner that he’d promised himself he wouldn’t do.

He also didn’t think of the new book hidden under his bed, basically begging to be read. (This was practically his last shot; it had to be the one.)

Yes, he did all of those things; so hex him.

Harry promptly put all thoughts of Riddle out of his mind, and settled down for a good Defence lesson with a competent teacher. What more could he ask for?
“This lesson, class, we’ll be looking at Boggarts.”

Apparently a lot.

“Normally I wouldn’t cover a single topic in a class- I’d do all dark creatures, and expect you to keep up. But since Boggarts are such dangerous and individual creatures, we will be dedicating a whole lesson to them.” Professor Merrythought looked personally offended by the very thought. “Now, you all know what a Boggart is, and you are aware that I don’t like to waste a lot of time on ‘theory’ or ‘hypotheticals’,;” Merrythought said, using air quotes. “So I’m going to throw you in front of a Boggart and see how you deal. Any complaints?” She didn’t wait for a response. “Good.”

Harry didn’t like the direction this was going in. It felt very familiar.

Merrythought shrugged off her robes, revealing smart green trousers and white blouse. She continued. “Now I want you to get over any worries you may have about your ‘pride’ or ‘privacy’. If you can’t defend against your greatest fears in front of your classmates, you won’t fare well in the real world. Take this as a lesson in humility. Any issue with this; I don’t want to see you in my classroom again.”


“Or she didn’t want one,” Harry corrected lightly, wincing at the casual sexism. Product of the times, he told himself resolutely.

“You sound like Druella,” Orion rolled his eyes.

“Maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

“Oi! You two over there!” Orion and Harry jumped in shock, looking to the front of the class. Professor Merrythought glared at the two. “Yes, Punch and Judy, you.”

“Muggle reference,” Harry told a confused Orion, from the side of his mouth.

“Perhaps you want to volunteer to go first. Hmm?”

“No Professor,” they chorused together.

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“Perhaps you want to volunteer to go first. Hmm?”

“No Professor,” they chorused together.

“Funny that. Okay class, line up. Mr Riddle, at the front. You can show the rest of them how to do it.”

For once, Riddle didn’t look delighted about being singled out, plodding to the front of the room with an odd lack of grace. Harry supposed no one would be happy about showing their greatest fear to a room full of classmates, least of all Riddle. Harry didn’t blame him.

He was intensely worried about this. To be honest, he had no idea what his fear would be. Yes, it had been Dementors, but after the graveyard, Sirius, and everything… it was very possibly it could be Voldemort. And that could ruin everything. It would show Riddle who he was, reveal he’d been lying to everybody… they could lock him up.

Merlin, was there any use hoping that Merrythought would do the same things as Remus had, and skip him?

Probably not, he decided, taking a glance at his stern Professor, who was already wheeling out the Boggart-filled trunk. He doubted even a heart attack would stop her.
“Line up!” she yelled, and the few students who’d been anxiously milling at the back trudging into formation. Harry was around the middle, and wondered if there was any way he could get to the back without her noticing. He doubted it.

“Step forwards, Riddle. You know the spell?” Merrythought laid a light hand on his shoulder.

“Riddikulus,” Tom replied, and Harry was sure that it wasn’t his imagination causing Tom’s voice to be raspier than usual. Harry was also sure he shouldn’t have found it as attractive as he did.

“Good lad.” And with that, Professor Merrythought flung open the trunk.

Tom’s eyes widened, and Harry had to step to the side to see what it was. And what it was, was thoroughly mundane. Harry was almost disappointed.

It was a small gravestone, entirely unremarkable. A little moss growing on the stone perhaps, but nothing big; nothing grandiose. Nothing to suggest that this was the grave of Voldemort. It was a pale grey slate, not even marble. A few daisies laid at the base.

Harry knew Riddle feared death, but couldn’t he have come up with something more impressive? A fiery mass of flames? A flash of green light? A shark?

Harry read the inscription:

Tom Riddle, 1926-?
Unknown

Riddle looked utterly terrified. Suddenly, it dawned on Harry that the mundaneness of it all was Riddle’s fear. Dying unknown and ordinary: that was Riddle’s worst nightmare. Not being anyone.

Harry suddenly felt incredibly sad. Whilst he’d spent his whole life running from attention, Riddle longed for it. Despite their similarities growing up, here were their paths split. Or perhaps it was due to their similarities growing up. Different ways of dealing, he supposed.

“Riddikulus,” Riddle whispered, flicking his wand. The grave turned to a clown, smiling down at the class. Harry found it vaguely eerie. Riddle let out a laugh which may have sounded real to the rest of the class, but it was weak and tinny to Harry’s ears.

“Excellent work, Mr Riddle,” Professor Merrythought congratulated. “Parkinson, you’re next.”

The students went by in a blur: only a few fears standing out. A humungous basilisk with scales of glimmering emerald that set his heart racing, for obvious reasons. A yappy pink poodle that had a Gryffindor screaming, for some reason. A beautiful bride that enchanted the class, until she turned around and revealed half of her head missing, brain clearly exposed and gooey. Harry suspected there was a very personal story behind that one.

Avery was scared of dogs, as it turned out. Upon his stepping forwards, he was confronted by a huge slobbering beast that bore a disturbing resemblance to Fluffy, but with a single head.

Cassius approached, and the Boggart became a silent scene, everyone moving in slow motion. Harry still couldn’t work that one out.

Montgomery’s was freaky: a tall, gruff man bearing a striking resemblance to Lestrange: towering above them all and bellowing “WHERE ARE YOU, YOU LITTLE SQUIB?! I’LL KILL YOU. I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!” (“His uncle,” someone whispered to Harry. “He was locked up last
Caspar Grahams’ fear was a cauldron of some sort, with a white smoke rising from the surface. Harry caught a glimpse of Riddle’s face, standing at the back of classroom when the cauldron appeared, and he looked unspeakably smug.

Dolohov was scared of a woman, short, in a long black dress and veil. Harry noticed she held a bow tie in one hand, and wore red on her fingernails.

Finally, it became Orion’s turn. The young Black gifted Harry a nervous smile before taking a small step towards the Boggarts.

The Boggart switched between forms for a minute. A girl screamed.

The Boggart had turned into a small child; only a baby really, with curled silky locks and a sweet face. They were dead; skin tinged green and lying in a pool of blood. The jumpsuit the babe was dressed in bore the Black family crest and Harry realised with horror…

“Rigel,” Orion murmured, stricken.

Orion’s little brother.

“He’s sick, he-” Orion rushed to the body’s side, taking the little hand in his own. “Wake up, Rigie,” he murmured softly, and then louder: “Wake up!”

Harry eyes widened, thoroughly shocked. He looked at the teacher; surely she had to do something?

Orion pushed the little corpse so it was lying more fully on its back, muttering quickly, “He’s not dead, he’s just sick, I wrote a letter to him this morning- wake UP! Come one, Rigie, what’s Mother doing letting you wander around? She knows you get into trouble, eh? Just open your eyes-“

The corpse’s head flopped to one side, eyelids shuttered. “JUST OPEN THEM, DAMNIT,” Orion begged, taking the child’s cheeks between his hands. “Please.”

“Mr Black, that’s a Boggart, not your brother. Pull yourself together.” Merrythought intervened, not unkindly. She approached the pair, but didn’t get too close.

“Don’t say that,” Orion warned, voice thick with tears.

“Say the spell, Mr Black.”

“But, Professor, it’s Rigel, he’s sick-“

“And that’s not him-“

“I can’t leave-“

“It’s just a Boggart-“

“DON’T SAY THAT!” he repeated angrily, clenching his fists.

Merrythought stayed calm, face barely changing. “Say the spell.”

Harry could see Orion take a deep, shuddering breath. He bent down and pressed a loving kiss to the body’s forehead, stroking its head. Orion then stood and pulled out his wand, muttering, “Riddikulus,” lowly. Rigel’s corpse turned into someone tripping over a banana peel and falling onto
their face.

“Ha,” Orion said emptily, got up and left the classroom, letting the door swing shut behind him with a definite thud.

Harry wondered if he should follow.

“Mr Peters, you’re up.”

Harry didn’t have time to go after his friend, because Professor Merrythought was fixing him with a stern look and pointing her wand at the Boggart. Harry chanted please don’t be Voldemort, please don’t be Voldemort in his head, and moved forwards.

It wasn’t Voldemort.

It was much worse.

Rigel’s body- the Boggart- wobbled for a minute, before multiplying and shifting. Now, several bodies lay on the stone floor, messy streaks of blood surrounding their limbs. The skin on the figures shifted and bubbled, lengthening or changing features.

When it finished, chillingly familiar shapes remained.

Hermione dead; a brutal purple slash across her abdomen, blood trickling dully. Ron gone, the brain wrapped tightly around his upper body, pulsating on his translucent face. Ginny, her beautiful throat torn apart and fraying at the seams. Neville, missing a leg and looking so small, eyes vacant. And Luna, looking more lost than she ever had done before, clutching her knees and rocking forwards and backwards.

“Harry will save us, Harry will save us, Harry will save us.” she repeated numbly.

“Luna?” the name fell from his tongue before he could stop it. Harry was frozen to the spot. He couldn’t move.

Luna’s face raised, eyes darting to meet his. She glared at him accusingly, tears collecting on her cheeks. “Why didn’t you save us? Why aren’t you here?” she asked cruelly. “You lead us here, then you left. And now we’re dead because of you.”

“I’m sorry,” ripped from Harry’s throat, and he gasped for air. “I promise I’ll save you. Fifty years- I’ll be there, I swear.”

Luna laughed, and it sounded frighteningly like Bellatrix. “But that’s your thing, isn’t it? You let the people around you die to save your own neck. Think of your parents. Cedric. Sirius. It’s your fault. You let them die for you, and you’ll let us die, too.”

Harry heard a faint whining sound, and realised it was coming from him.

“You left us, Harry,” Luna bared her teeth. “You weren’t here, and you never will be-“

And then he felt a warm hand grasp his elbow, pulling him away from the macabre scene. “Harrison,” came a calm voice, and Harry recognised it as Riddle. “You should go outside. Find Orion. I’ll handle this.”

“Thanks,” Harry croaked faintly. He couldn’t drag his eyes away from Luna.

“That’s alright. You’ve given me quite enough for now.” Riddle said softly. Harry let himself be led
away, and sent stumbling towards the exit. He escaped into the corridor gratefully.

Harry found Orion curled up underneath a window, hair spilling over his shoulders.

“Hair-growth charm,” Orion explained shortly.

“Ah.”

They didn’t talk for the next half hour.

At the end of the lesson, Professor Merrythought called Harry, Orion, Lestrange, and a couple of other students that Harry didn’t recognise into her office at the back. Riddle left with the crowd of people who hadn’t had mental breakdowns, but Harry saw him shoot a concerned glance towards the group at the front. Harry was too emotionally drained to try and discern whether it was real or not. At this point in time, he didn’t really care.

Professor Merrythought looked more contrite than Harry had thought possible, and ran a hand over her face. “I want to apologise. When planning this lesson, I didn’t consider that the current climate and your advanced age could contribute to some… significant fears. That was foolish. There is no shame in being afraid, just in *not facing* it. You all faced your fear today— *all* of you,” she asserted. “You should be proud.”

There was an indistinguishable murmur of assent amongst the students, and Merrythought nodded in acknowledgement.

“And,” she added, “If any of you want to come and discuss your… feelings, my office door is open on all weekdays except Thursday, from 6 til 8— what?!” she snapped, to some affronted looks. “You can’t come in 24/7. I’m not a bloody therapist.”


Harry chuckled weakly. “Professor?” he asked. “How do Boggarts come about?”

“You mean, how are they born?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re not,” Merrythought shrugged. “A Boggart is an amortal non-being— meaning they were never alive to begin with, so they can never be killed. It’s not really a creature, as such. More of an idea, I suppose. But we include it under creature classification to make it easier.”

“What do you mean it can’t be killed?!” shrieked one of the students that Harry didn’t know.

Merrythought turned her gaze on them. “You can’t destroy a Boggart. There will *always* be new fear to feed upon. You can dissolve it, but it will reform. All you can hope to do is defend *yourself*.” She looked out of the window with a slight frown. “It’s a selfish world out there, children.”

There was a moment of silence.

“You can go,” Merrythought allowed, dismissing them with a wave.

Harry and the others did as they were told.
Tom stalked towards the Great Hall, mind still processing the events of his last lesson. For the first time: being picked to go before everyone else had been a highly unpleasant experience. Luckily, Tom’s fear had been predictable. Regrettable, but predictable. At least his was benign (on the surface)- it would hopefully go relatively unnoticed, especially amongst the rest of the drama that had occurred.

Tom hadn’t known Rigel was sick. He should probably send some flowers to the family. It might be useful in the future to have the Head of the Department of Mysteries on his side. Lilies were always a safe bet, weren’t they?

Speaking of in the future… Harrison’s encounter with the Boggart had increased Tom’s suspicions of him being a seer. The mention of ‘fifty years’- perhaps an unalterable vision of the future? Something Harrison ‘couldn’t stop’, hence the guilt. Or perhaps it was a merge of past memories from the slaughter of his village, and a future event? Maybe a vision Harrison had of his own death, hence ‘I’ll be there’?

Abraxas could provide answers.

Tom stopped at the Slytherin table, grabbed the familiar head of blond hair, and dragged him out into an abandoned corridor.

“What have you found?” Tom hissed, throwing the Malfoy a little roughly. Abraxas fell back into a wall, stumbling. He steadied himself, mouth already moving.

“In the last few months, there have been three muggle villages almost entirely decimated by Grindelwald’s forces. One of those had a wizarding couple by the name of Peters living in it. The village was Bideford, in Devon.”

“Quaint,” Tom commented.

“Quite. The couple was listed on a recently deceased list, but Harrison Peters wasn’t included because he is-“

“Alive, obviously.” Tom scoffed.

“I couldn’t find much about the couple: they were entirely unimportant. A lesser branch of the Peters family, which mostly produces magically weak children. The entire Peters family is rather boring actually: a family of shoemakers and plumbers.”

Tom shifted. None of this answered his questions.

“However, more interestingly… Madam Peters, Harrison’s grandmother- deceased now- apparently belonged to the Mildew family. And that family, though it’s mostly passed down the female line, has a history of…”


Abraxas’ chest swelled with pride.

“That Peters couple… they wouldn’t have happened to have been duelling experts, would they?” Tom asked casually, hoping that all of his queries could be answered tonight.

“Not my knowledge. There is, however, a very successful duelling club down in Devon.”

“That makes sense,” Tom nodded. That made perfect sense.
Tom considered Abraxas carefully. He disliked Malfoy and his attitude, and got much joy from lauding his superiority over him. Tom had dealt with enough spoilt brats at the Orphanage to know one when he saw one. However, if there was one thing you could trust a Malfoy to be, it was discrete. They were good at keeping information to themselves. They had a lot of practise at it, what with their French origins.

Tom pursed his lips. “You have heard, I presume, of the duel that occurred between myself and Harrison?”

“I don’t think there’s a soul in the school who hasn’t,” Abraxas replied diplomatically.

“We drew.”

“As was the rumour.”

Tom tilted his head to one side. Malfoy: tall, lean, powerful. Yes, a reasonable challenge. “We will duel,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

Later, Tom left an empty classroom twirling Abraxas’ wand between his fingers, and feeling as content as he ever had. Perhaps he would challenge Harrison to a rematch in the future.

But first, to get rid of that abominable dislike Harrison had of him, and instil some trust.

This would probably involve ‘friendship’.

Chapter End Notes

For any o’ y’all confused: Harry picked an entire village that got wiped out by Grindelwald’s forces, which had an actual wizarding Peters couple residing in it. Therefore no one can deny his tale. Otherwise known as: Harry uses his sneaky Slytherin attributes. Or: Harry worked on his story over the Summer. But the Seer heritage thing is all plot convenience XD

So, Tom wants to befriend Harry for his ‘seer abilities’. Let’s see how this works out. Ha.

And how badly has the Boggart thing affected Harry? It’s all coming up in the next chapter!

Also: bonus points to anyone who can figure out why Orion used a hair-growth charm after the Boggart thang. (It’s not significant, I was just curious.) The reason has been mentioned in a previous chapter…
October rolled around, and Harry’s nightmares were back in full force. Being confronted by the Boggart and his best friends’ dead bodies had stirred up all the awful fears he’d been trying to repress, and now he could think of nothing else. He was constantly haunted by the possibility that he wouldn’t be able to return to his time, and everyone who had relied on him would either be captured or dead. He almost hoped they were dead- he couldn’t imagine what Voldemort do to them under his control.

Harry possessed the ability to stop that from happening- to kill Voldemort before he ever rose to power. But he wouldn’t. He didn’t think he would ever be able to kill Tom, not whilst he went by that name. Despite Harry’s strong dislike for him, he knew Tom now. He was no longer a dark figure at the beginning of Voldemort’s timeline. He’d seen Tom laugh at a joke, raise his arm to answer a question, lose at chess… he’d seen Tom scared. He wouldn’t be able to kill Tom in the same way he wouldn’t be able to kill Malfoy- he may hate him, but he was an innocent. Tom wasn’t Voldemort; he was the cold, talented prefect with the unrivalled ability to piss Harry off.

This revelation made Harry realise how much Slytherin had always been within him. A noble Gryffindor wouldn’t hesitate. A lion would think of the lives Riddle would soon take, and strike him down where he stood. Harry couldn’t do that- not least because it would mess up the life he was building here for himself. As much as he didn’t like it, Harry had always had the capability for sneakiness. Living with the Dursleys had given him a strong taste for survival and a sharp tongue. Hogwarts had removed the need for that; it had sheltered him, and provided a home. Gryffindor had given him warmth, encouraged bravery and nobility, and it was where he found his friends.

This time travel thing had fucked that up, Harry was stranded in a whole new world, surrounded by suspicion and enemies. He was thrown into the literal snake pit. Survival had required Harry to adapt, and he’d always been good at that.

From the moment he entered this magical world; that first day in Diagon Alley, he’d become the hero the Wizarding World wanted. And yes, Harry was noble and brave and moralistic, but the hat had to be dissuaded from Slytherin for a reason. Harry could distinctly remember forcing Lockhart into a
chamber of death at wandpoint. Granted, it was to save Ginny, but was his method really the sort of
noble gesture that Gryffindors favoured? Probably not.

It was at times like this that Harry would give anything for Hermione’s gentle guidance.

These thoughts ran through his mind as he did what he did best- brooded in the Common room. The
fireplace provided an adequately dramatic backing for his thoughts, and he wrapped his arms around
himself. He hadn’t even gone to the Room of Requirement since last week: his nightmares made him
too tired to even consider it. And after an evening of reading the same page over and over, he’d
decided that it was useless. He hadn’t found anything useful anyway, and doubted he would if he
had continued. As he discovered, 90% of the books were fiction, and the rest were guesswork.

He considered going to a teacher, but he didn’t know or trust any of them. He supposed Dumbledore
would have been the obvious choice, but Dumbledore had also spent a year pretending Harry didn’t
exist, and any previous conversations with the headmaster consisted of Dumbledore scooting around
Harry’s questions.

So, hope of returning home lost; every waking hour was spent feeling dissatisfied and tired, and
constantly on the brink of tears.

Everyone who’d ever cared about him could be dead, and it would all be his fault. His parents died
for him. Sirius died for him. Cedric died for him. The DA put their trust in him, and he let them
down.

He didn’t understand how anyone could stand to be around him.

Orion had been very distant recently. Harry had barely seen anything of him- Orion spent most of his
time exchanging letters with his little sister, in which he asked ‘subtly’ about his brother. Harry let
him be- they’d probably just depress each other. The Boggart had really freaked them both out.

Bloody Boggart.

“Peters?”

Harry raised his eyes slowly. Oh, it was Avery. Great.

“Finally.” Avery sneered, having caught his attention. “Professor Dumbledore sent me to find you,
despite the fact that I am not his owl. He wants to see you in his office.”

Harry nodded wordlessly. Avery let out a ‘humph’ and spun on his heel; probably off to fantasise
over high-ranking Ministry positions.

Harry took his time getting to Dumbledore’s office, not looking forward to interacting with a
reminder of the future. Dumbledore: just who he didn’t want to see. Harry entered the office without
knocking.

“Ah, Mr Peters!” Dumbledore said kindly. The Transfigurations professor was wearing a
particularly fetching ensemble of lime green robes and a flowered cap. Harry couldn’t even find it
within himself to be amused.

“Hello sir,” Harry said dully, taking a seat.

Dumbledore’s smile fell at his tone. He laced his fingers together and looked sombre. “How are you
faring?”
“Fine.”

Dumbledore leaned back, surveying Harry thoroughly. It was nice to know that the x-ray vision was an ability gained early. “Harry-” he began, “can I call you Harry?”

He was going for that approach, then. “You can call me whatever you want, sir.”

“Harry, I’m sorry to say that your professors are worried about you. Professor Merrythought told me about your unfortunate encounter with a Boggart, and I understand that it may have stirred up some difficult memories. I’m aware that you’ve gone through a great deal of trauma.” Dumbledore looked devastated. “War is always more awful when it affects innocents. The loss of your parents must have been a difficult blow, and I know that you have been deprived of both family and friends.”

Harry let out a harsh laugh- he had no idea- but Dumbledore continued on undeterred.

“I must say, when you first arrived at the school, I was very impressed with how you handled yourself. But in the last few weeks, your grades have dropped dramatically and you have ceased all participation in class. We’re… concerned about you. Is there anything we can do to help?”

Harry hadn’t expected this intervention. During fifth year, Dumbledore had been a removed, disconnected figure of authority, and refused to even make eye contact with Harry. This was certainly a different approach.

“No sir,” Harry said, and then, picking at his cuticles: “Sorry, sir.”

“There’s nothing to apologise for, my dear boy.”

A silence lapsed between them, and Harry ached to escape.

“Was there anything else bothering you? How are you finding schoolwork? I imagine it’s been quite the change for you.”

“It’s fine, sir.” Harry said dully.

“I notice that you’ve fallen in with a group of friends. Friendship is one of the most magical things we have in this life, I’m glad you’ve found it at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said encouragingly.

“I had friends before,” Harry muttered.

Dumbledore acknowledged that solemnly. “I’ve also noticed interaction between you and Mr Riddle. When I asked him to look after you, I must admit I didn’t expect such a friendship to bloom-“

“We’re not friends,” Harry spat, but he remembered the weight of Riddle’s hand on his arm as he stared Luna in the eye.

“What a shame,” Dumbledore said, but Harry saw the hint of a smile hidden beneath his beard. Harry had no time for the Riddle/Dumbledore points scoring.

“Maybe I should change that though,” Harry said challengingly. “He’s not all that bad.”

“Glowing praise, indeed.” Dumbledore chuckled. “The most beautiful of flowers often hide the sharpest thorns, Harry.” He took a breath. “But, if you don’t mind me saying, I find that there’s nothing like hard work and friendship to stop one from focusing on doubts and fears. Don’t look at the past, but at what might be ahead of you. The future is boundless, and anything is possible if you put your mind to it.”
Harry wondered what greetings card Dumbledore snatched that bite of wisdom from.

“Can I go now, sir?” Harry murmured, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“Of course. And my door is always open, if you want to pop in for a chat.”

“Thanks.”

Harry stood up to leave. Before he could, Dumbledore opened his desk drawer and withdrew a packet. “Before you deprive me of your company, Harry, would you like to take a wine gum? They’re a muggle sweet which I find quite delicious and equally fascinating.”

Harry shrugged and took one, rolling it between his fingers until it was sticky. He could remember Dudley buying these, and then holding them in front of the grate on Harry’s cupboard door. The faint sugary smell had been agonising.

“Don’t worry,” Dumbledore assured him, misreading the situation. “I’ve been assured that these delights are completely non-alcoholic. Honestly,” he chuckled. “Wine gums with no wine. What will muggles think of next?”

Harry didn’t laugh, but he did pop the sweet into his mouth. It didn’t live up to the hype.

Despite the cheesiness of Dumbledore’s words, Harry couldn’t stop himself from replaying them over and over. The words about friendship had particularly stuck. He found himself longing for Orion’s sweet-tempered company, and the opportunity to just nod as Orion rambled on.

Without thinking about it, he ended up at the Owlery. The hoots and rustling wings soothed him, and without realising it, an involuntary smile rose on his lips. Hedwig had loved coming back here every year. It was sanctuary after six weeks of being stuck with the Dursleys. She was a very social bird, even if she was a bit of an attention seeker.

Harry found what he’d been looking for. Orion stood with his back to Harry, stroking a very proud looking falcon. His hair was still long, tied back in a loose bun. Harry remembered when Sirius could still do that, back before Mrs Weasley had gone at him with the kitchen scissors.

“Take that to Meissa, okay? Don’t let Mother see,” Orion murmured to the bird, and it gave a low squawk before jumping out of the window and winging away. Orion watched its progress distantly.

“How’s Rigel?” Harry asked, stepping closer.

Orion bit his lip, glancing at Harry. “Okay, I think. Meissa said he’s getting better, but Mother has the funeral arrangements already sorted out.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “What a bitch.”

Orion laughed in surprise. The laugh turned into a full on guffaw, and he clutched his stomach whilst his shoulders shook. Harry watched, the corners of his mouth upturned. It was nice to see Orion laugh, even if it was at a weird moment.

“A bitch!” Orion spluttered in amusement, before dissolving into peals of laughter again. He eventually trailed off, and Harry felt it was safe to continue.

“How could she *do* that?” Harry didn’t think even Aunt Petunia would be capable. Granted, he probably wouldn’t even *get* a funeral if he died at the Dursleys’. He wondered who would show up
if he did. Perhaps Mrs Figg?

“She has me; I’m the Black heir. She doesn’t need Rigel. And Mother never was one to get emotional over things.” Orion frowned, before nodding decisively. “That’s not going to be me. I want to marry someone who cares, like Walburga. None of my children will ever feel like they aren’t needed.”

Harry didn’t say anything, but recalled Sirius telling the story of how he hated his family so much that he ran away. Once again, Harry wondered what could change Orion so much that he would drive away his firstborn son. Hopefully, getting rid of some of Orion’s prejudices would help with that.

“Do you know what you want in the future, Harry?” Orion tilted his head curiously.

“I want a family,” Harry said certainly. He’d always wanted one of those, especially living with the Dursleys. If his real family didn’t want him, he’d have to make one that did. “And children, I suppose…” Harry ran a finger over one of the scars on his hand. “But I’m not sure if that’ll happen anytime soon- I mean, I want them not to live in fear. I- it’s a bit stupid, but-“

“No,” Orion said softly. “I get what you mean. It’s a weird time we live in, isn’t it? What keeps me going is the knowledge that in fifty years, this’ll all be over. I mean, it has to be, doesn’t it? And hopefully one day I can look at my children and tell them about all of this,” Orion spread out his arms. “And they won’t be able to comprehend it.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “Yeah. That’s a nice dream.”

“So you know I want to be a Wardmaster, but what about you? What do you want to do? Is it something with Defence? You’re really good at that- as good as Tom, even.”

“I don’t really know.” Harry joined Orion by the window, and the two of them looked out onto the grounds together. “I thought I wanted to become an Auror, but…”

“You’d be good at that, I imagine.”

“I’m just not sure if it’s what I want to be any more,” Harry frowned. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever actually wanted to be one in the first place even, it was just what everyone expected of him. To carry on fighting dark wizards for the rest of his life.

“My father said it’s difficult being an Auror. Most only last a few years.”

One of the owls flew onto Harry’s shoulder, perching and pecking at his hair. Harry stroked its feathers; they felt soft and warm beneath his fingers. It hooted. Harry wondered if it was just him: but the sound seemed mournful.

“I guess I don’t really know what I want to be, then.”

“You don’t have to decide now what the future will be. You can just let it happen.” Orion shrugged.

“I don’t think I can,” Harry scowled, angry at himself. It would be so easy to just forget where he came from, to dismiss it and carve out a new life for himself without thinking of what he left behind. But as Slytherin as he was becoming, he was still loyal to his friends. He had to keep trying, even if he didn’t know precisely how.

Harry felt fuelled with new motivation, and the early morning breeze rustled in the eaves. Maybe he didn’t know how he would get back- research hadn’t worked- but he’d find a way.

“The war will be over soon,” Harry said quietly. And then there will be a whole new one started by dear Tommy. “And you’ll survive it. Promise. That’s what I’ve learnt. People can survive mostly anything.”

“Except death,” Orion whispered.

“Except death,” Harry allowed. The owl on his shoulder shifted, digging into his skin, and he shrugged it off. It flew to a perch on the other side of the room and glared at him balefully.

“Harry, we are friends, aren’t we?” Orion said suddenly.

“Yeah,” Harry said, smiling gently. Orion may not be Ron or Hermione, but he was a genuinely good person. Harry was glad to call him his friend.

Orion grinned. “You know, I’ve never before become friends with someone as quickly as I have with you. I think it’s because you remind me of Dorea. I told the others a while back, and even then I knew we’d be friends.”

“Who’s Dorea?” Harry was curious, as the name rang a bell.

“Dorea Black. She’s related to me somehow- she may be a cousin of some sort? We were engaged before she started seeing Charlus Potter. I think they’re getting married during the summer.”

Those were his grandparents, Harry realised. His grandparents, getting married during the summer. His grandparents were alive! For a moment, he imagined leaving Hogwarts, tracking them down and introducing himself. They’d welcome him with open arms into their family, and then he could meet his father, become friends with him and his mother- no. They wouldn’t welcome him. They’d call him crazy and send him to St Mungo’s.

And he couldn’t meet them if they thought he was just a random stranger. He couldn’t deal with that.

“Harry?” Orion said concernedly. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Harry dismissed, blinking back tears. “I’m good. And yeah, it’s nice to be friends with you too.” And it was. At least he wasn’t alone in this strange new world.

Orion gave him a huge, warm smile, which Harry couldn’t fail to return.

“This has all gotten a bit miserable,” Orion remarked lightly, and Harry laughed.

“Yeah, it has a bit.”

“Well, it’s a Hogsmeade weekend, so we could always head down to the village with everyone. It’s a relatively nice day outside.”

Harry looked disbelieving.

“…Well, it’s not raining at least. It could be good to get out. And apparently Honeydukes have new stock- this incredible thing called an ever-changing lollipop? It changes flavours in your mouth.” Orion bumped shoulders with Harry.

“We could invite Walburga…” Harry said suggestively, and Orion turned a bright red.
“Th-that’s not what I was thinking about,” he stuttered.

“I know.” Harry grinned. “But it is now, isn’t it?”

Tom had been busy coming up with ways to approach Harrison and befriend him. Unfortunately, his fellow Slytherin had been distinctly downcast over the last few weeks, so Tom had been loath to approach him. ‘Friendships’ formed during dark moods never tended to last, and Tom wanted any connection he made with a seer to be secure.

Luckily, he didn’t have to take the initiative, because Harrison was the one to approach him. Wonders never ceased.

“Hey Riddle,” Harrison said gruffly, standing in front of him uncomfortably. Orion stood at his side, practically vibrating with excitement- their friendship appeared to have been renewed, Tom noted. The Boggart incident had cast a shadow upon it.

“Yes?” Tom asked politely, setting down his parchment and quill.

“I was wondering-“

“We were wondering,” Orion butted it.

“Yeah,” Harrison agreed, giving Orion a fond smile. “We were wondering if you’d want to, er, come with us to Hogsmeade? There’ll be other people,” he rushed to correct. “It’s sort of a group thing.”

“I’d be delighted to.” Tom agreed readily, already seeing an opportunity to get closer to Harrison.

The wizard in question looked shocked. “You would?”

“Of course.”

And that was how Tom found himself, wrapped up tightly in a coat and scarf, on the steps of Hogwarts with a group surrounding him. It was the usual crowd: Atticus, Rupert, Cassius, Montgomery, Orion, and now Harrison. Walburga had also been invited, and so of course Druella had tagged along with her. Abraxas and Lucian made up the rest. And obviously, they were all gathered beneath Tom.

Tom… and Harrison.

Tom eyed his companion on the top step curiously. He didn’t think Harrison even knew what he’d done: joined the top step that usually only Tom resided on. Apparently, Harrison was just a natural leader, or at least had no regard for the social standings of their group; something that made him even more fascinating. And even more curiously, Tom didn’t think he minded. It was a little irritating obviously, but there was nowhere near the amount of anger that would have been in him had, say, Malfoy tried to join him.

“So how long will this take?” Druella asked, voice muffled beneath her scarf. The hood of her robe couldn’t contain her mass of hair, and it hovered around her head like a curly, golden halo.

Tom opened his mouth to answer, but Harrison got there first. “We’ll be back for dinner, but you can leave when you like.”

Tom gave Harrison a sideways look, but let the moment past. Harrison had just said what he’d been
about to anyway.

“Shall we set off?” Tom suggested mildly, and everyone nodded in agreement.

They set off, quite the procession, down the path towards Hogsmeade. Tom fell into step with Harrison, walking close beside him. Harrison tried to speed up, but Tom kept up with very little difficulty, as one of his strides was equal to two of Harrison’s. Eventually, Harrison gave up and resolved himself to trudging glumly beside Tom, who regarded it as a personal victory.

“So what inspired this group outing?” Tom attempted to start a civil conversation; something that he and Harrison had too few of.

“It was Orion’s idea,” Harrison said briefly.

Tom nodded at that, not at all surprised. “I saw the article about Bideford in the newspaper.” He prompted. “That was your village, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Harrison muttered. “That was it.”

“The church looked beautiful,” Tom offered.

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t spend that much time in church.”

“An atheist?” Tom questioned. It didn’t come as much of a surprise; most of the Wizarding world were atheist, or at least had never considered the idea of a god in the first place. When he’d first come to Hogwarts, it had been quite the shock to his system. The orphanage was Christian, and Mrs Cole was quite the God-fearing woman. The cries of ‘devil-boy’ and ‘possessed’ had been regular occurrences in his childhood.

“I suppose so,” Harrison agreed.

“Did you go to the Duelling club nearby?”

“Duelling club?”

“Where you learnt to duel, and practised? I assumed your parents didn’t teach you all of the talent I saw earlier…”

“Oh, yeah. That’s where I went. That’s where I picked up all of my duelling skills. Good old DA.” Harrison said with a strange smile. Tom supposed he was surprised that Tom had researched the area so thoroughly.

“You must have duelled quite the opponents to be so talented.” The phrase ‘and to almost beat me’ hung in the air between them.

“Oh yeah,” Harrison grinned suddenly. “Loads of opponents. We all went by nicknames, like muggle wrestling, you know? Twoface, Basilisk, Wormtail, Noseless, and Blondie- I beat them all.”

Tom wasn’t familiar with the genre of muggle wrestling that Harrison was suggesting, but didn’t say anything so not to appear ignorant. Perhaps it was something he saw in a vision. “That’s certainly an array of aliases. And yours was…”

“Scarhead,” Harrison said, with a surprising amount of relish.

“That seems cruel.”
Harrison burst out laughing, extremely loudly and extremely hard. Tom felt the rest of the group peering over at them curiously. Tom had no idea what had prompted such an unseemly display.

“Yeah,” Harrison giggled.

“I don’t understand what’s so funny.”

“It’s just,” snort “you,” hic “commenting,” shake “on someone being cruel to me.” Harry wiped his eyes, tears of hysteria running down his cheeks.

“I’m not certain of what you-“

“Oh it’s nothing, Riddle, you’re an angel,” Harrison patted him consolingly on the shoulder, and snorted again.

Tom got the impression that he was being snubbed, and bristled. Then he remembered that he was trying to be friendly to Harrison, and smoothed down his quills. Still, Harrison was making it exceedingly difficult.

“Ah,” Harrison sighed, bending his neck back and bathing his face in the sunlight. “It feels good to laugh.”

“So where are we going first?” Orion bounded up to the two of them, still filled with energy. It was certainly a change from the sombre, dark figure that he’d struck for the last few weeks. He appeared to have put his brother’s plight out of his mind. Tom couldn’t work out if the change was welcome or not.

“We could go to Honeydukes and check out those lollipops you wanted,” Harrison said. “If everyone agrees.”

What followed was a general agreement, but then Tom would have been surprised if anyone said no to sugar.

“And they’ve produced this new product: sugared butterfly wings…” Orion told everyone excitedly. It didn’t surprise Tom in the least that Orion knew all about the latest confectionary.

“Made with real butterflies?” Walburga asked doubtfully.

“Real butterflies,” Orion confirmed, eyes alight.

Walburga squealed with disgust. “That’s utterly vile!” she complained.

Druella rolled her eyes at her friend. “You use ‘real’ toad eyes and newt skin in Potions quite happily. Don’t become a stereotype of the female gender.”

“Yes, but I’m not eating those, am I?”

Druella stared at her, bewildered. “What do you think we do with Potions?”

“That’s different,” Walburga insisted primly, throwing her scarf over her shoulder and walking faster. “Well, I’m on a diet, so I shall just have to decline Honeydukes. I need new quills, anyway.”

Druella hurried her pace. “Another diet? Burga, you really don’t need it- but I did want to stop off at Shrivenshaft’s anyway…”

Tom hid a smile at their antics. Whilst Druella’s constant social justice could get draining, he at least
appreciated her intelligence and strength of character. And the Witches’ Suffrage movement was something he could agree with, as Tom knew that there was very little difference between men and women—at least not in magical strength. He couldn’t abide uninformed idiots, which is what most wizards seemed to turn into when confronted with ‘women’s liberationists’. Tom lived safely in the knowledge that mostly everyone was below him, no matter their gender.

It was two in the afternoon when they entered Hogsmeade. Tom wasn’t sure what he thought of the little village; whilst he enjoyed the novelty of being surrounded by magic, he disliked the bustling loudness of it all. It was too bright for him; too commercial. He much preferred the darker aspects of the wizarding world like Knockturn Alley.

“Oh!” Rupert said, pointing out a small shop, gleaming with a glossy orange finish. “I didn’t know they had a Zonko’s in Hogsmeade. It must be new.”

“Just what was needed,” Atticus sneered.

“I know right?” Rupert whistled cheerfully, and grabbed Atticus firmly by the sleeve. “Come on, Atty. Maybe they have something for puncturing egos.”

Atticus protested weakly as he was dragged away. “But I don’t want to-“

“Tom will still be here when you get back,” Rupert said brightly. “No time to waste!” And then they were through the door to Zonko’s.

“Poor Avery,” Druella said drily. “He’ll come out a changed man.”

Harrison huffed in amusement, but frowned at the joke shop. “I’m just going to pop in and look for something.”

“But we were going to Honeydukes,” Orion whined.

“You go with the others. Meet back here in an hour, yeah?” It was addressed to Orion, but Tom was the one who answered.

“A sensible idea,” he agreed, raising his voice. “Change of plan: if anyone else has anywhere they’d like to visit, feel free. We’ll reconvene here for drinks at three.”

A rumble of agreement followed. Lucian Nott lumbered off towards the back alleys, slipping his hand into his pocket. Abraxas Malfoy drifted after him, saying something about new robes. Harrison patted Orion on the shoulder and muttered something under his breath. And then he strode off towards Zonko’s, drawing his coat closer to his body.

The people that were left split into two: Tom, Druella and Walburga headed to Shrivenshaft’s, as he needed new ink and he didn’t ever allow himself to consume copious sugar. Tom could only imagine Harrison’s response to that. Something like “don’t want to ruin your precious teeth, Riddle?” probably. The sentiment was technically correct. Tom could live without yellowed incisors like Mrs Cole’s, and sugar played havoc with his skin.

The rest of the group headed towards Honeydukes: an enthusiastic Orion leading the parade. Tom would just have to avoid the boy as he came down from his sugar rush. He didn’t envy Harrison, who may develop convenient deafness over the next few days;
Tom always enjoyed spending time with Druella and Walburga, as much as he could enjoy spending time with anyone. He didn’t often get the chance, as they ran in different circles and Tom didn’t waste a lot of time on people who wouldn’t amount to anything. Walburga would soon be a trophy wife in Romania, and Druella’s liberation movement was unlikely to gain support soon enough to give her a lucrative career. Still, they were both very academically inclined, and usually discussed literature. Whilst the constant jibing and name dropping amongst Tom’s associates was necessary and useful, sometimes it was good to get away from it all.

He picked up a pot of Evershine ink, considering the value, and listened to the girls’ conversation.

“Did you read Cauldron Embers, by J.R Juniper?” Walburga tossed a ringlet over her shoulder and dusted down her pleated skirt. “I think it was utterly enthralling. He captured the romance perfectly—just a hint of mystery and passion. I wish I were Martha,” she sighed.

“I think it’s completely over-hyped. It’s an abusive and controlling relationship, and the girl is so naïve! She just wanders around until Sir Henshaw tells her to sit.” Druella sniffed. “If you’re looking for a romance, what you want is Bluebird Wishes by Rose Shrewson. It’s brilliant.”

“But that’s a woman’s name,” Walburga said uncertainly.

“Precisely. Which makes it a lot more realistic when she writes from a woman’s perspective.”

“Huh,” Walburga considered. “I can see that.”

“She’s also a muggleborn,” Druella added.

Walburga cooed. “Well, she can’t help that, poor thing. What’s it about?”

“So it’s this story about the developing love between a muggle man and a witch, which is brilliant because it really gives some power to the woman in the situation, as she’s the one introducing him to this whole new world. And the authoress uses some really clever nature metaphors throughout the whole thing.”

Walburga clapped delightedly. “This sounds like precisely the sort of literature that should be available at my ball!”

“You’re still going ahead with that?”

“Of course I am.”

Druella pursed her lips and furrowed her brow, playing with the edge on a roll of parchment. “Ella… you know I’m delighted—really, honestly delighted— that you’ve decided to do something for the underprivileged, but this seems like odd timing. You’re to be married this summer. Will you really have time?”

“I’m only getting married at the end of the summer, silly, I’ll have plenty of time. And I’m sure Apus won’t deny his wife one small activity. Father’s footing the bill, anyway,” Walburga shrugged stiffly.

“Why not do it later? After all the marriage fuss has settled down?”

“Because I’ll be in Romania.” Walburga said quickly.

“…What?”

Tom’s eyebrows raised—Druella hadn’t known? From the moment Tom had heard about the match,
he’d assumed Walburga would be following her husband back to his homeland. But Tom supposed that perhaps Druella had thought that Walburga would be granted enough agency to stay at home, even briefly. That had been naïve of her.

“I’m going back with Apus, to live with him, of course. In Romania.” Walburga said breezily, tight smile entirely false.

“B—but you can’t,” Druella stuttered.

“I have to.” Walburga sighed, and for once she appeared worldlier than her friend. “He’ll be my husband- I follow where he goes.”

“It’s not right,” Druella said fiercely.

“Of course it is,” A soft smile. “What would I do without a husband? And I can’t exactly live in a different country to him. This is the best solution.” She winked. “And they’ve outlawed house elves in Romania, so I’ll have actual staff! I’ve been promised a ladies maid.”

“Of course you have,” Druella rolled her eyes, and hesitated. “I can kidnap you, if you want. If I take hostage of you, you won’t have to go anywhere.” Tom didn’t even think she was joking.

Walburga laughed though, and patted Druella’s cheeks. “You always come up with the silliest plans. I’ll be fine, Ella. Really. I’m going to be desperately, drunkenly happy. This is what I’ve always dreamed of.”

The two girls shared a fond smile, and Walburga reached out to squeeze Druella’s hand. “You have to visit, Ella,” she spoke almost desperately. “As much as you can.”

“So much that you’ll get tired of me,” Druella said confidently.

“That could never happen.”

The dawning intimacy of the situation caused Tom to feel vaguely uncomfortable. He’d never liked being around affection. He didn’t mind it directed towards him, as it created a power dynamic that Tom enjoyed manipulating. But being around people in love… it made them unpredictable and confusing, as it had always been the one emotion he had trouble understanding. Love was a disgusting sort of weakness that weakened the mind and resolve.

If what Walburga and Druella shared was love, Tom didn’t believe they would ever express it. Same sex relationships were generally allowed, although not encouraged, but male dalliances were preferred. Females had the duty of marrying advantageously and bearing children, something which a relationship with another woman wouldn’t allow for. Well-bred pureblood women never married other women.

He coughed, if only so they would stop staring into each other’s eyes. Almost immediately they broke apart, blushing fiercely. Walburga scooped up a quill, declaring how she thought the shade to be exceedingly pretty, and Druella agreed in a fluster.

Tom, despite himself, was amused by their embarrassment.

“So, how’s Peters settling in?” Druella redirected, the red on her cheeks dying down. “I noticed he was standing with you earlier.”

“Oh yes!” Walburga jumped on the new conversation. “How is the darling? I heard about your altercation. He’s quite the unexpected talent.”
“He is,” Tom agreed, thinking of the talents no one else knew about. Seerdom, for one.

“Good enough to almost beat you,” Druella pointed out lightly.

“Why do people keep mentioning that?” Tom said, the curl to his lips not entirely a smile.

“Probably because it’s so surprising. You’re the lord of the castle, Riddle. Peters is a… challenger, I guess,” Druella mused. “Or maybe more like a potential partner. You don’t seem to object to him.”

And Tom didn’t, he supposed. Normally, any attempt to act like Harrison had would be crushed. The constant jibes and pokes- Tom would have at least hexed or sabotaged him. But instead he found himself caught up in verbal battles, and so incredibly intrigued and amused by it all. There was a peculiar intelligence to Peters. Not academically, although Harrison was no idiot, but on a higher level. Tom got the impression that Harrison’s brain moved quicker and more strategically than the general population’s; he made leaps that no other person could. And he was so doggedly determined and brave- Tom could appreciate that. Even his recklessness added to his strength. Although Tom didn’t know why Harrison was put in Slytherin- he was awful at lying. His ‘seer’ secret had lasted a mere month around Tom.

“He’s such a sweetheart,” Walburga murmured. “And adorable if I do say so. Those eyes and that hair… he has such a distinguished face.”

“Should Apus be jealous?” Druella teased lightly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m just surprised he’s only a muggleborn-“

“Halfblood.” Tom corrected. “He’s a halfblood.” like me, he finished mentally.

“And with such magical power! It’s really quite impressive- he’ll get places in this world, I tell you. I was just talking with Lobelia Meadowes on the subject-”

“Peters doesn’t like you, Riddle, does he?” Druella said, eyes sharp. There was such momentary clarity in her vision that Tom wondered if she was in cahoots with her brother.

“I really do insist you call me Tom.” He said icily, and directed a sharp smile towards Druella.

“Don’t be silly Ella!” Walburga giggled. “Everyone likes Tom!”

Druella shrugged, assenting. “I’m just saying: Peters argues with Tom more than anyone else.”

The subject was dropped, and the conversation turned to lighter, more ‘pleasant’ matters.

“So,” Walburga leaned in. “Sofia Dolohov was seen entering Lucille’s Parlour this morning. She’s on the hunt again.” The resulting smirk was not unlike a satisfied cat.

“Didn’t she marry again mere months ago?” Tom inquired disinterestedly.

“Well, this one’s already lasted longer than the second one. He held on a matter of weeks.” Walburga revealed with a disturbing amount of glee.

“She’s Rupert’s mother, isn’t she?” Druella said vaguely. Tom could tell she had little interest in the gossip.

“Poor thing,” Walburga said sympathetically. “It must be difficult to see his mother flaunting herself like that. You have to admire her technique though.”
“Maybe she’s just a woman expressing her sexuality, instead of flaunting herself,” Druella suggested delicately.

“She’s killing people for money,” Walburga said bluntly.

Druella spluttered. “Y-yes, well.”

Tom rolled his eyes and checked the time on the wall. Still a while ‘til three. Perhaps he would work out how he planned to sway Harrison to his side.

Harry’s visit to Zonko’s had been a moment of madness. He’d been gripped with a strange curiosity, knowing that he had never visited this shop before. Shrivenshaft’s, yes. Honeydukes, yes. But never Zonko’s. Harry never was much of a pranker (to Sirius’ disappointment.)

Harry admitted that he wanted to feel closer to his godfather, wanted to experience and share some of that joy that Sirius was always going on about- had gone on about. Because he was dead.

Harry inspected the row of shock quills, and wondered if you were supposed to feel this morbid in a joke shop.

No. He didn’t want to feel like this. He wanted to regain that motivation, that purpose he’d found in his conversation with Orion. He was going to find his way home, and he was going to give Ron and Hermione a hug.

With renewed determination, he surveyed the nose-biting teacups. These would be funny, probably.

Zonko’s was an incredible place. For such a small shop, it certainly packed a lot in. It was just as vibrant on the inside as it was the outside: everything coloured a searing orange with purple details. It was a loud and busy place; featuring displays that disappeared and reappeared, models that sprang from caverns in the walls, and birds that would fly across the shop in a flurry of dropped feathers and bird poo every fifteen minutes. It also packed a lot of students, as the newly-opened shop seemed an attraction for the briefly-freed Hogwarts students. Harry held in a breath and wished for someplace quieter.

“You’re looking remarkably serious for a boy in a joke shop,” Rupert said, strolling up to Harry and slingig a breezy arm around his shoulder.

“I don’t know what to get,” Harry replied broodily.

“So don’t get anything,” Rupert shrugged carelessly. “Forget all that shit. I bought enough for everyone in here.”

“Yeah... you kinda did,” Harry agreed, eyeing Rupert’s several bags stuffed full to the brim with... stuff and things.

“Look, Peters. I like you. I like the way you stand up to Tom. Merlin knows someone needs to, and I’m too scared to do it.” Rupert said honestly. Harry was struck by his confidence- Rupert was never this sure of himself when Riddle was around. “But you need to lighten up. Play a few jokes, laugh a bit. You can’t always be miserable.” Rupert smiled a little, but there was an edge to it.

Harry grunted in reply, pushing his glasses up his nose. He wasn’t entirely convinced.
Rupert lowered his voice, and leaned in with a conspiratorial grin. “Want to be let in on a prank?”

“A prank on who?” Harry asked dubiously.

“Tom.”

Harry was already protesting when Rupert put a hand up. “Listen, all you’d have to do is give him one of these sweets we found. He trusts you more than he trusts either of us, probably- not that Tom really trusts anyone. He’ll never suspect it.”

Harry was about to say no, when he saw a little picture of Sirius in his mind’s eye. He was nodding emphatically, waving his arms, and mouthing encouragements. Harry sighed and asked reluctantly, “What kind of sweets?”

Rupert dug into his bag and pulled out a packet of ‘Bloody Boiled Treats, for night-time fiends’.

“They taste like blood,” he said helpfully.

Harry scoffed. “I never would have guessed.”

Rupert burst out laughing. “Sarcasm,” he chuckled, punching Harry’s shoulder/collar bone, causing him to stumble back a little. Rupert Dolohov was an intimidating physical specimen. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

“Wasn’t it because I ‘stand up’ to Riddle?” Harry air-quoted.

“Which makes you the perfect candidate for this task!” Rupert cheered, pushing the sweets into Harry’s chest. “Come on. Just tell him you went to Honeydukes after all, and offer him one. He’ll spit it out after he realises what it is, and it’ll give us all some shit to laugh about later.”

“Fine,” Harry rolled his eyes, but felt a stirring of excitement within him. “I’ll do it.”

“Great,” Rupert replied, rubbing his hands together. “It’s just coming up to half past, so you’ve still got thirty minutes until we’re all meeting up. Why don’t you head over to Honeydukes after all, and offer him one. He’ll spit it out after he realises what it is, and it’ll give us all some shit to laugh about later.”

The door swung shut behind Harry, and he stumbled out onto the pavement.

“Well, this took an unexpected turn,” Harry mumbled. “Er…”

Harry took a moment to get his bearing, before heading east. He might as well go to Honeydukes and see how Orion was doing, as it wasn’t like the sweet shop was very far away. His walk was brisk, and he longed to escape the cold just settling in the air. Harry had always been resistant to low temperatures- the Dursleys locked him out often enough, but that also instilled a hatred of the ache in your bones that winter could bring.

His coat was a thin, slightly pathetic thing. He’d had trouble making ends meet when he time travelled- loans and as many odd jobs as possible could only get you so far. (Honestly, the only reason he’d had a place to sleep was because Tom in the Leaky Cauldron felt sorry for him- Harry was certain that he’d lowered the prices without Harry knowing. Harry made sure to help out in the pub when he could, to say thank you.) And so all of his non-school clothes came from charity shops. Finding stuff that fit wasn’t easy, but Harry made do. It was better than the throw offs he got from the Dursleys.
Bloody hell. Harry needed to stop thinking about his lovely aunt and uncle. It was stressing him out.

Honeydukes was welcomingly warm, and the sweet smell of fudge brought a small smile to his face. He inhaled happily, closing his eyes in remembrance. He’d followed Ron and Hermione here, hidden under the slippery folds of the invisibility cloak. He really missed that old thing- he wished he’d been carrying it with him when the explosion happened. He hadn’t brought anything with him other than his clothes, glasses and wand- sometimes he wished that he’d had the picture of his parents folded in his back pocket, as he sometimes did. It would be nice to have something familiar to hold onto.

“Harry!” And there was Orion, pushing his way past students and waving excitedly. His other hand was clutching a bag spilling with sugared goods, which Harry was surprised he could carry. “You made it!”

“I said I would.” Harry had a sudden urge to give Orion a strong hug, like Hermione often would, but he restrained himself. They probably weren’t at that stage in their friendship yet.

“Come on, I want to show you the sugared butterflies,” Orion told him gleefully, and started pushing back towards the way he came. He was surprisingly efficient at creating a pathway through the crowds, through a combination of shoving and apologies. Harry followed, muttered a quick “sorry” when he bumped into anyone.

On the way, he saw Cassius murmuring to himself by a shelf of bubblegum, comparing the prices. The idea of Cassius, sitting in a chair in the Common room whilst he blew a bubble as big as Riddle’s head, made Harry snort with laughter.

He also caught a glimpse of Lestrange huddled in the corner, conversing darkly with a younger Ravenclaw. He didn’t want to know what that was about. But Lestrange seemed to sense Harry’s gaze on him, as he looked up at the precise moment to catch Harry’s eye. The dark, animalistic look that flashed across his features made Harry’s skin crawl. He was glad when he lost sight of him again.

“It’s just here!” Orion yelled, beckoning Harry with his hands. He was standing next to a display of colourful boxes, all containing sugar-coated, beautifully preserved butterfly wings. “Apparently they taste like oranges. They’re very delicate.”

“Those are…” Harry peered into the boxes. Each one contained a box of perfect wings, colours still vividly beautiful. The sugar grain glistened, and it was as if each one appeared to sparkle. “…Morbid.”

“They’re also rather expensive, so I only bought three,” Orion shrugged.

Harry looked at the price, which he hadn’t seen before and- fuck! Bloody hell. Orion had bought three?!

“Why don’t you get one?” Orion suggested brightly.

“I don’t think…”

“Septimus said they were excellent!”

“I don’t think I can afford them. I’m a broke orphan,” Harry said bluntly, not dodging around the issue. “I could buy a new pair of shoes for that price.”

“I’ll buy it!” Orion offered without a thought.
Harry’s eyes nearly bulged out of his skull. Bloody hell— was this how Ron had felt when Harry had offered to buy him things? “No, mate,” Harry assured Orion firmly. “I’ll be fine without.”

Orion looked like he was going to cry. Not genuinely—Harry had learnt that noble-raised Purebloods rarely expressed their emotions that easily: not even Orion, possibly the most open and naïve Pureblood to be born yet.

(But only because Neville was yet to be created.)

Still, Orion looked genuinely distraught. *Oh Merlin*, Harry thought.

“But you can buy me this, if you want!” Harry offered consolingly, going straight for the cheapest thing in the shop. “This…” he narrowed his eyes at the label. “…Banana chew.” Harry hated bananas.

“Really?” Orion asked doubtfully.

“Banana chews are my favourite,” Harry assured him with false enthusiasm. Orion exclaimed in delight and scooped it into his bag of goodies. Harry wondered if he would have to eat it in front of Orion later, or if he could throw it away without him noticing.

Harry and Orion spent the rest of their time browsing. Harry made sure to avoid Lestrange. He’d barely spoken to him apart from uncomfortable greetings at mealtimes and that first incident, but something about the other boy’s twisted gaze and savage movements set Harry on edge more than even Riddle did.

“It’s almost three,” Orion observed, flipping open his pocket watch. It was a beautiful thing: gold and inset with dark rubies; bearing the Black family crest behind the face.

“We should head back.” Harry slipped a hand into his pocket and gripped the packet of Blood Boiled Treats. He supposed it could be fun to see Riddle choking on one of those. And he could make Sirius’ memory proud.

On the way back to the meet-up point, Orion pulled out the banana chew and passed it to Harry, and then watched him expectantly. Harry obligingly (but reluctantly) slipped it into his mouth and began chewing.

Huh, it was tougher than he’d thought.

He repressed the grimace as the synthetic taste of bananas hit his pallet, and offered Orion a queasy smile.

“Itsh grea’,” he mumbled, lie disguised by spittle.

Harry was still chewing when they reached their friends, and joined the huddle. Harry rolled on the balls of his feet and blew out a breath of warm air, where it fogged in the autumnal sky. The metal of his glasses was cool on the bridge of his nose. By some coincidence, Harry had ended up standing next to Riddle, whom he sent a sullen look towards. Hadn’t he spent enough time with the git today already?

Apparently, Harry wasn’t as good at disguising his disgust as he thought, even though he thought he hid the deep crinkle in his brow rather well.
“Something you ate?” Riddle asked, smiling superiorly down at him.

“Oh, saw,” Harry offered bad-temperedly, swallowing down the awful banana mush and grimacing.

Riddle sighed, and looked very serious all of a sudden. “Look, Harry—”

Harry flinched and gazed wide-eyed at Riddle. Did he just call him Harry? “It’s Harrison,” Harry said fiercely, swimming in memories of Voldemort’s harsh voice wrapping tightly around the syllables of his name.

“Harry,” Riddle repeated nonetheless. “I understand that we got off on the wrong foot, but I’d like it if we could become civil. I do take some responsibility for our current status— I may have pushed you too far with my questioning, on occasion— but I think you can also admit that we share the blame. You have been quite… spikey, from the start of our association. I dearly hope we can work to resolve that?”

It was the most insulting apology Harry had ever received, but it didn’t take much consideration for him to accept it. Harry had already decided to try and be ‘nicer’ with Riddle— it would make everything a lot easier, and he didn’t need an unnecessary enemies. He was more than willing to attempt reconciliation.

But that didn’t stop the suspicion at Riddle’s motives. Why was he attempting to create some sort of ‘friendship’ now? Riddle was a manipulator down to the bone, and Harry didn’t trust it. This had to have some benefit for the other boy.

Harry gave a small nod in reply, and Riddle grinned; dark eyes gleaming with satisfaction. Harry wondered if he could sense Harry’s suspicion, or if his personal triumph had made him blind. Harry hoped for the latter: it was probably best to keep Riddle off guard.

To his left, Rupert elbowed him in the gut.

Harry took the hint, and reached into his pocket, delving into the packet of scarlet confectionaries and withdrawing one. He could feel Rupert straighten with excitement.

“Hey Riddle,” Harry said casually. “In spirit of all this friendship-forming, want a sweet?”

Riddle eyed him carefully, then reached out to receive it. Harry knew that the gesture was not without scepticism: Riddle was anything but stupid, after all. However, the Slytherin prefect couldn’t exactly preach civility and then refuse a gift.

Harry noted this couldn’t have gone better if he’d planned it.

He dropped the sweet into Riddle’s hand. Riddle held it up to the light; possibly wondering at the flavour. And then he popped it into his mouth, beginning to work it over with his tongue, cheeks hollowing.

For reasons unknown to him, Harry blushed.

Rupert was tensed, watching Riddle with bated breath. Riddle, raising an eyebrow at their interest, simply gave them a droll thumbs up before continuing absent-mindedly sucking upon the sweet, his hands placed casually in the pocket of his robes.

Harry turned to Rupert questioningly, but the other boy shrugged minutely. Harry had been certain that he’d given him the right sweet— he was certain, in fact. It must have been Rupert’s mistake.
Or maybe, Harry observed drily, Riddle was just a vampire.

In the meantime, Malfoy and the hulking boy- Nott, perhaps?- had sidled back; Malfoy bearing an expensive looking bag, and Nott with lighter pockets. Harry decided he would be better off not knowing.

Riddle swallowed, and smiled at the group. “Shall we get drinks?”

The Three Broomsticks was just as crowded as always, and Tom wished that he’d chosen a quieter spot. There was a small tea house not a ten minute walk away but- alas, they already had their tables. He surveyed the tipsy regulars clinging to the bar with distaste. That was why he avoided alcohol.

Someone came to take their drinks order. Those under-age went for either water or butterbeer. Malfoy ordered a Dragon Barrel Brandy, and Nott asked for Chocolate liqueur, of all things. Walburga chose some sort of cocktail that had a complicated name and ingredients list, and Druella ordered the strongest rum they had.

“So how did everyone’s day go?” Walburga asked sweetly. “Did everyone find what they wanted?”

“Zonko’s was very helpful. Atty loved it.” Rupert said, elbowing poor Atticus and sniggering. Ah, so that was where they found those disgusting sweets.

Tom wasn’t blind, nor was he ageusic. He knew precisely what had gone on earlier. As soon as Rupert had started practically vibrat ing, and elbowing Harrison; he’d known to be on his guard for some kind of trickery. And he was right. So he’d suckled on the foul thing for as long as he could manage- blood flavour, honestly-, before finding an excuse to swallow it. If he used a mouth-cleansing spell subtly after, well, no one knew but him. It was worth it to see the dawning confusion and disappointment on Rupert’s features. And Harrison’s too, he supposed, if on a smaller scale.

Tom just hoped that Harrison’s agreement to go along with the prank stemmed from a sense of camaraderie with his companions (which could be very useful to Tom), and not animosity towards Tom. He hoped that Harrison had gotten over whatever bizarre dislike he’d harboured for Tom upon their meeting- as their earlier reconciliation suggested. Tom was not foolish enough to think that all tension had departed, but this was a step in the right direction towards procuring Harrison’s loyalty and abilities.

Tom snatched a discarded newspaper from an empty neighbouring table. The Daily Prophet; biased, but factually accurate. He turned it over to the front page, and frowned.

“What is it?” Druella asked, as one of the more observant members of the group.

But it was Harrison who answered, peering over at the paper. “The war… it’s escalating.”

“The number of magical dead are increasing. Grindelwald’s closing in on us,” Tom elaborated softly. “Only a few of his radical supporters have reached our shores so far… but it won’t be long now. Perhaps a year or so. Maybe even the Dark Lord himself.”

“Well, he’d better not ruin my NEWTS,” Rupert laughed, and there was a grateful chuckle passed around the table.

“France is holding up well,” Orion said positively. “Father said it’s remarkable; what with the amount of pressure they’re getting from within the government. It’s rumoured that the Vice Minister
himself is one of his supporters.”

“Well, my father is close friends with the Vice Minister,” Atticus said angrily. “And I can assure you; ‘rumours’ is too strong a word. He is a lovely gentlemen, who’s always been very kind to our family, and we return the gesture.”

Rupert spotted the opportunity for trouble. “I’m surprised your father still has any friends after the Ball debacle—“

“Do you ever shut up, Dolohov?” Atticus spat.

Tom noticed Harrison looked confused, and saw the opportunity for further bonding. He leaned over subtly and murmured; “Atticus’ father suffered a rather public demotion at the Ministry Ball over the summer, and consequently conducted himself in a manner quite unbecoming of someone of his station- or rather, former station.”

Harrison grinned. “Were chairs thrown?”

Tom smirked lightly. “A few.”

“You’d think,” Harrison began quietly. “That with all this ‘pureblood training from birth’, they’d be able to handle themselves with a bit more tact. At parties and such.”

“All the training in the world can’t make up for weakness of character,” Tom commiserated, and the two shared a look; united halfblood orphans in a room full of purebloods. It was draining sometimes; to be surrounded by so many privileged people who could never understand Tom’s issues or struggles with money, family, muggles, etc. He and Harrison shared many similarities, now that he thought about it.

Tom wasn’t ashamed to say that he actually enjoyed these sorts of exchanges with Harrison, and wouldn’t be opposed to having more of them. Light, intellectual teasing was something he often found himself missing. Stimulation; that’s what he wanted. Someone not easily intimidated. Harrison certainly fit that bill.

Perhaps he would be useful for something other than visions.

“Tom!”

His attention was snapped back to Walburga.

“Tom, you’re awfully clever. What do you think will end all this, this…” Walburga flapped her hands in search of the term. “…Unpleasantness?”

“You mean the war?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“I think,” Tom picked his words carefully. “That a situation on this scale needs to be handled with diplomacy. Subtlety. Espionage is, of course, a very useful tool to avoid direct conflict—“

“What bullshit!” Harrison scoffed. The table went very quiet. “That’s such a Slytherin answer!”

Tom saw several people around the table bristle and look hostile. Even Orion appeared offended.

“You would do well to remember your audience,” Atticus threatened lowly. “And your own house. Or someone might remind you.”
Tom held in his groan of exasperation. Avery never had learnt delicacy.

“That’s not what I…” Harrison trailed off, looking taken aback at their reactions. “Look, there is such a thing as being too much of one house- or a trait if you want to call it that. Being cunning is all well and good, but you need some bravery in there too. Espionage,” he said, gesturing at Tom. “Is fine, but what do you do with that knowledge? Blackmail people until no one knows who has the upper hand anymore? These people don’t listen to ‘diplomacy’. You need to strike fast and hard, be direct, and take them down,” he said hotly.

Tom wondered if Harrison realised that he was slowly rising to his feet.

“Yes, you need cunningness for planning, and spying and everything; but not everything gets solved by talking things through. Whilst you ‘avoid direct conflict’, people fight for their lives. Whilst you use ‘subtlety’, people are dying.”

Harrison, Tom noticed, was a very good speechmaker.

“You speak with such experience, as if you know how to end this war,” Atticus said silkily, getting up himself.

“Maybe I do,” Harrison stood taller.

“I wonder who taught you. Your dead parents?”

“At least mine went down fighting for a cause,” Harrison said, hatred painted on every feature.

“At least mine have lives left with which to fight.” Atticus crossed his arms. “Your solution is to, what? Throw wizarding soldiers at the Dark Lord until he’s overwhelmed? How many will die then, hm? How many precious magical lives will we lose?”

Druella joined in now. “But how many innocents are already dying, whilst politicians hide behind legislation?”

“It’s only the muggles that are dying-“

“Have you even read the news?” Harrison exploded. “Twenty wizards and witches dead, caught up in the crossfire or attacked in their own homes by sympathisers! And besides, muggles’ lives aren’t worth any less!”

“Aren’t worth any less?” Atticus laughed cruelly. “Two people are held at wandpoint: a muggle and a wizard. Which one would you save?”

“Neither. I’d go for the bastard holding them.”

“What a very noble answer,” Atticus mocked. “Shame that whilst you were doing that, the wizard and the muggle died.”

“And where would you be, Avery, during this dramatic interchange?” Druella hummed.

“At home.”

“What a very cowardly answer,” Harrison spat.

“He’s a filthy mudblood!” Montgomery cackled. “His opinion means nothing! He’s dirt! Why don’t you run back to your disgusting parents and curl up next to them in the coffin?”
Harrison’s skin was pale as a sheet, and he seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Tom suspected it was a very thin thread that kept him from cursing his opponents where they stood. He trembled for a moment, turned definitely, and stamped out of the door. Orion’s eyes darted around, and then he followed after him like a startled rabbit.

“No,” Montgomery whined faintly, tracking their progress with distant eyes. “Take me with you…”

There was a pause as the door to the pub swung shut. The noise of the pub continued around them. It was almost shocking, Tom pondered, that the world hadn’t come to a halt in those last few moments. But it carried on like nothing had happened.

“Lestrange, that was very inappropriate!” Walburga hissed angrily, fixing Montgomery with a scorching glare. He sunk back down into his chair, whimpering slightly. Walburga could be quite intimidating when she wished it.

“And Avery!” she continued furiously, turning her attention onto the instigator. “Harrison’s a trauma survivor. What made you think bringing up his dead parents would be a good idea?”

“He insulted the entirety of Slytherin house!” Atticus countered, drawing himself up to his full height.

“Oh you know he didn’t meant it like that,” Walburga dismissed icily. “And I can’t say I disagreed with his points. Some of the arguments you used, however, sounded borderline Grindelwald-supporter.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. None of us are fond of muggles, but a Grindelwald supporter…” Avery blustered, looking around for support. “A stupid idea. Well, I suppose you can’t expect anything else from a woman, can you?”

All eyes turned to Druella, who smiled. It wasn’t a nice smile. “Say that again?” she said slowly.

“Well, it’s not like you’d be the one sent off to fight if the Ministry started subscripting, is it?” Rupert piped up foolishly. In a battle of wits between Druella and Rupert, Tom knew who he’d put his money on.

“But it’s not like the Ministry isn’t doing anything already,” Abraxas Malfoy pointed out smoothly. Goodness, Tom had forgotten he even existed. “I’m sure we all remember that Hector Fawley was foisted from his position just a few years ago, in favour of a more… decisive leader.”

“And look how much he’s done,” Druella snorted. “We all know the only reason Grindelwald isn’t arriving on our shores this instant is because of Dumbledore-“

“Maybe the Dark Lord should arrive,” Lucian Nott rumbled, confirming the rumour that he could speak.

Tension was rising, Tom decided to step in.

“Everyone needs to calm down,” Tom announced. As if by magic, he had complete attention upon him. “This is a very trying time for the magical community. We run the risk of irreparable offense, should be continue. Let’s just have our drinks, yes?”

Tom, as usual, had the final word; and the group cautiously went back to sipping at their drinks sullenly, but the atmosphere was tense. Well, Harrison had quite managed to ruin a nice day out, Tom thought grimly.
Tom had found that Purebloods tended not to enjoy discussing their political stances in public, or amongst those they might not find favour with. They instead displayed them subtly (or not subtly, in Avery’s case), through comments and the like. It was useful, because Tom found that he never had to say where he stood, just keep control of the situation.

And where did he stand? Truthfully, nowhere in particular, although he leaned more towards the anti-Grindelwald stance. Tom held no sympathy for muggles, the Orphanage had prevented that, but he was logical enough to realise that his childhood experience was not representative of all muggles. He was also logical enough to know that muggle were not the harmless creatures that people like Walburga seemed to think they were, nor the monsters that others considered them. They were people, plain and simple. Just people, no matter how distasteful.

Tom also didn’t appreciate the mindless violence of Grindelwald’s movement, nor did he appreciate the idea of being ruled. Tom was content just to sit back and watch it all play out without being involved.

He just wished that were entirely possible. It was difficult to ‘sit back and watch’ in the muggle orphanage, with the air raids, and the bombs, and the teeth-rattling explosions that rocked buildings and sent dust scattering into your eyes. It was hard to breathe sometimes, from the debris and the heart palpitations that came from knowing any moment could be your last. He could die unknown in a filthy dump, surrounded by whining idiots. He could be torn to bits, and no one would be able to piece him together enough to even know who he was-

Tom inhaled deeply, and took a deep sip of water. It was fine. He had a whole year until he had to go back. The war would be over by then.

Harry marched down the street on his way back to the castle, muttering under his breath angrily. He couldn’t believe what had just happened. Avery was practically singing Grindelwald’s praises! Thank Merlin for Druella. It was just another reminded that these were future Death Eaters he was laughing and pranking with… And he’d just agreed to be civil with the biggest Death Eater of them all.

“He’s not Voldemort, he’s not Voldemort,” Harry murmured soothingly to himself, feet thumping on the pavement. “He wasn’t even joining in with that bullshit.”

He heard pattering footsteps behind him, and a familiar voice. “Wait… wait!”

“I don’t want to hear it, Orion!” he yelled behind him, not slowing down.

“Just let me say something- wait!”

Reluctantly, Harry slowed to a walk, and he heard the panting sounds of Orion drawing close.

“Just… stop.”

Suddenly, Harry was spun around by a hand grabbing his elbow; and he came face to face with Orion. Or, face to chest, as Orion was quite a bit taller than him.

“I don’t want to talk to you, Orion,” Harry glared.

Orion pouted. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything—“
“No!” Harry objected. “How could you sit there and listen to that— that crap!? That anti-muggle nonsense! They’re *people*, Orion!”

“I know!” the other boy said quickly. And then, in response to Harry’s doubtful look, “Honestly, I *know*. I’m scared of muggles, I am, but I’ve been trying to be more open minded since you told me about them. And I would *never* support Grindelwald and his violence. It wasn’t right what they said to you, but, Harry…”

“Yes?” Harry asked coolly.

“You don’t make it very easy to talk to you. You just sort of blow up— and I know you were provoked!” Orion said hurriedly, after Harry opened his mouth to protest. “But this is Slytherin. You have to remember who you’re talking to. Sometimes people’s minds can’t be changed, and you’re not going to do it by shouting at them. They’ve been raised to think like this since birth; you’re just creating more enemies.”

Orion winced, closed his eyes, and held his breath like he expected Harry to erupt, and that was the thing that broke Harry out of his haze.

“You’re right,” Harry admitted in a breath.

Orion cracked an eyelid open cautiously.

“I’m not going to apologise to Avery and his cronies, because they were spewing prejudice rubbish back there but… I didn’t handle it well. I’m sorry.” Harry smoothed down his fringe anxiously. “I’ve been on edge, I guess, since the whole boggart thing. I thought I got over it this morning, but I obviously didn’t.”

“Yeah,” Orion’s lips twitched. “I haven’t been myself either.”

“It was a pretty stupid teaching move.”

“It was!” Orion exchanged. “I mean, think about your audience!”

The two boys laughed, long and hard, until there were tears leaking from their eyes. Orion stepped closer, and Harry let him.

“Your friends… the dead ones, shown by the boggart,” Orion ventured. “Were they… muggles?”

“Muggleborn, one of them.” Harry pondered. “Two of them were pureblood. I guess… I guess I don’t know everyone else’s blood status.”

“That’s amazing,” Orion said in awe.

“Not really,” Harry dismissed, but he wasn’t in the mood to get into another debate over morals. “Let’s go back to the castle, it’s freezing out here—”

“TIME PIECES! GET YOUR TIME PIECES! MANIPULATE TIME WITH THE FLICK OF A WRIST!”

The cry came from a side alley that managed to look dark and dingy even in the white light of late afternoon. Harry was immediately intrigued, by the call that seemed to answer all his problems. He felt the warm light of hope flicker in his chest. Harry knew, logically, that anything this mysterious person was selling would be a useless rip-off, but still…
“I’m just going to check that out,” Harry murmured, patting Orion’s forearm blindly, still staring into the murky depths of the alley.

“That? But… it’s a dirty old alley.”

“I just want to see what she’s selling.”

“They’re probably just broken watches. If you want to spend more time in Hogsmeade, we could go back to Honeydukes- Harry!”

But Harry was already walking into the half-light, crow cawing menacingly above him. The flap of wings only added to the slightly eerie atmosphere. He ran a hand along the ragged, rough bricks that pressed close to him either side, and heard Orion hurrying after him.

“You can stay behind if you want to,” Harry offered, because he wasn’t going to be responsible for dragging another friend into a mess if he could help it.

“This is actually quite exciting,” Orion admitted, beginning to bounce behind Harry. “It’s like an adventure. I’ve always wanted one.”

Harry let out a bark of laughter. “I’ve had enough of those to last me a lifetime.”

They were making quick progress and drawing close to the yells. The passage was long though, and Harry wondered how it all fit into the back streets of Hogsmeade. Perhaps it was an illusion; his anticipation exaggerating things- or perhaps it was just magic.

They finally turned around the last twist in the alley and stumbled into a small courtyard, blinking in the artificial light. Then they saw her. She was a buxom, tall witch, standing next to a comically small stall. Her dirty blonde hair was cut to a short bob, and her cheeks and lips were rouged with some sort of powder, but every other feature was left bare. Her dress was so low cut that Harry was surprised he couldn’t see her knees, and she wore a rather beautiful cloak around her shoulders.

She looked, Harry thought, a little odd.

“Cat!” Orion declared delightedly, and Harry glanced around to see him scurrying after a small feline body, disappearing further into the shadows.

At least Harry could browse unobserved.

“’Ello love,” the witch greeted with a low, husky voice. “What you looking for?”

She must be very proud of her wares, Harry theorised, as her chest seemed to be inflating with pride.

“You were, er, yelling about time pieces?” Harry scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably.

“I was, yes,” she said slowly, fluttering her eyelids. Maybe she had something stuck in her eye.

“Do you have anything that could go, y’know, forwards in time?”

The witch’s smile dropped, and the way she eyed Harry was surprisingly flinty. He felt like he was being judged, like she was looking into his very soul. He didn’t know what she was looking for, but she could probably give Albus Dumbledore a run for his money.

Suddenly, her smile appeared again; and her whole appearance changed. The cloak was drawn closer around her, she stood with more of a hunch, and the hair fell into her eyes. “I think I got jus’ the thing, love,” she told him gently, and began rummaging around in the drawer beneath her stall.
The table of wares she had wasn’t what Harry would call ‘extensive’. A few necklaces, a few rings, and some very suspicious looking gold teeth; but not much. The drawer beneath it sounded much more varied, and there were dozens of distinct clanks and clinks as she searched.

“’Ere we go,” she announced, pulling out a pendant on a long silver chain. “This’ll do the trick.”

Harry leaned in closer. The pendant in question was a deep, shimmery blue; the kind of colour the ocean wished it could be. It was dotted with golden flecks of colour, and if Harry looked close enough, he could swear something was moving within it.

“What is it?” he asked in a low voice, eyes wide.

“This ‘ere is a time pendant. Bit of a naff name, I know, but it fits. It’s a bit like that Ravenclaw one; with the fancy name—” Harry remembered reading about that, “—But this one does the same job, no fuss needed. Got essence of time beetle, innit? Y’jus’ put it on,” she rested the amulet against her breasts, “And think about the time you want, right? It’s one use only, mind, so I haven’t tested it. But I trust my source.” She winked.

That sounded perfect, if it worked.

“How much?” Harry asked eagerly.

“It’s bit of a rare piece, so the price is steep. But well worth it, I reckon. One galleon, ten sickles.”

Harry paid as quickly as he could, and slipped it into his pocket. It was lucky he did, because Orion came bounded around the corner a second later.

“The cat got away,” he offered in explanation, but he didn’t seem too disappointed.

“Thank you,” Harry told the witch heavily, and she gave him a grin.

“Thanks for y’service ‘n’ all. Be careful, loves!” she called after them, as they began walked back towards the main street.

“Did you buy anything?” Orion said curiously.

“No,” Harry lied, putting his hand into his pocket and clutching the amulet in the palm of his hand. “Like you said, it was all rubbish.”

Later that night, Harry sat cross-legged on his bed, curtains drawn around him, staring nervously at the jewellery in his hand. This could be it. The solution to all his troubles might have just dropped out of the sky and landed in his lap.

His heart was pounding in his chest.

Harry wondered if he ought to say goodbye to Orion first, or Druella or Walburga- maybe even Tom, now that they were on better terms. Harry snorted. Saying goodbye to Tom Riddle. Ha.

He would miss Orion though. He’d miss his enthusiasm, and his kindness and his- Merlin, Harry had only known him for a month or so.

He might as well do it now, Harry decided, nodded to himself. Yeah. He shouldn’t make the DA wait any longer.
Harry placed the amulet around his neck, and let memories of his time flood his mind. Ron, Hermione, Hogwarts, hell, even the Dursleys.

He felt a swinging, swaying sensation; a prickle of heat along his spine; and then it all went black.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter otherwise known as; Harry encounters a prostitute, and doesn’t notice.
ANYONE ELSE SHIPPING WALBURGA/DRUELLA? How did this happen? I was in my writing haze, stopped and realised ‘this is very gay’ (in all the best ways.) So I went with it.
The magical war effort at this moment in time: the Muggles are doing most of the direct fighting, and a few magicals are being caught up the bombings, and there are some hate crimes from Grindelwald supporters etc, but Magical Britain has mostly stayed out of it. The Ministry is trying to negotiate with Grindelwald and some other countries, but there’s no fighting force or direct opposition. Grindelwald is still focussing on subduing other countries, but he’s creeping closer to Britain, and the Ministry is doing very little about it.
Also: Harry is such an argumentative little bean. He’s like ‘fight me’.
There are more people in this little group who are Grindelwald supporters than say so, as openly supporting a murderer is a big social no no.
There is a LOT of conflict in this fic, but I think you have to keep in mind the times. There’s a lot to be in conflict about. Harry’s new and weird, the war is escalating, and they’re all only a couple of years off graduating and being thrown into a war torn adult world. It’s scary as shit, really.
At first, there was only white.

And then a piercing, deafening, *wrenching* ringing in his ears, and the screech of metal on metal.

Then the burning sting of heat that started somewhere inside of him and spread quickly; creeping fingers of fire ripping through his veins and culminating at his fingertips. His hands were on fire, his back was on fire, he was *burning godhewasburningmerlinsomeonehelphimhecouldn’tseeithurt*-

Harry took a deep breath, and his eyes shot open.

“Oh thank Merlin,” Sirius said with heavy relief, dropping his wand to his side. “I thought you were-“

Ignoring the fiery pain pulsing through his body, Harry threw himself at his godfather. He sobbed hard, scrunching his face as he breathed deeply, and pressed himself closer to Sirius’s robes. Harry couldn’t bring himself to speak, he was so overcome with emotion.

It had worked, goddammit. It had *worked*.

He was home.

And he would look around to see his friends. Ron would look worried, Hermione would fuss- Ginny would give him that vicious grin that made her whole face light up. And Luna would say something vague, but Neville would have a new kind of plant-

Sirius squawked and scrambled away, pushing Harry off of him. “What are you doing?” And his voice was higher than Harry remembered, but maybe it was the shock-

Harry drank in his godfather’s face hungrily. The sharp incisors, the scars, and crowfeet around his eyes…

Huh.
They weren’t there.

Harry grabbed Sirius’ cheeks with his hands, his pain-hazed vision fading. He took in everything; the thinner lips, the wide and panicked eyes, the longer hair, the rounder nose, the youth- the Slytherin robes.

“Oh,” Harry whispered, and it was like the word was torn from his very soul; tugged from his lips and smashed on the ground. “Oh.”

This wasn’t his godfather, returned from the dead; youthful and glowing. This was Sirius’ father, looking like Harry might attack him at any moment.

Harry glanced around, finally seeing the chaos he was in the midst of. But it wasn’t the chaos of the Ministry under Death Eater attack; this was the Slytherin boys’ dormitory; torn to pieces. Curtains sagging on railings, duvets and pillows burst and spilling feathers onto the carpet. Glass shattered, wood splintered.

Riddle’s well-pressed tie hanging at the bottom of a bed.

He was still trapped in the past.


“You were taking ages in the dorm,” Orion said, moving closer cautiously. “I came up to check on you, but you were unconscious. The room was a mess. And this-” Orion held up his hand, and for the first time, Harry noticed the time pendant clutched tight to his palm, “was around your neck, glowing. It was burning you- seared to your skin.”

Harry’s hand flew up to his neck, and he felt the raised, burned ridge encircling it for the first time. Harry bet that, should he put the pendant on again, his scar would match the chain perfectly. “I didn’t think-“

“What were you thinking?” Orion snarled, and he looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him. In fact, Harry didn’t think he had ever seen Orion angry. This was the key, Harry realised. To endanger those he cared about.

It was just bad for Harry that he was the one doing the endangering.

“I- I don’t know,” Harry admitted guiltily, throat hoarse.

“You told me you hadn’t bought anything from that whore,” Orion spat. “You lied to me.”

Harry rushed to defend himself, but realised that he didn’t actually have an excuse.

“Did you know what the necklace would do?” Orion demanded. “Was this some sort of contrived suicide attempt?”

“No.” Even to Harry, his voice sounded insignificant and small.

He’d been desperate, reckless, and blinded by anger at everything. He wanted to get away from these people, who talked like muggles were so insignificant- like they weren’t even human. And he was willing to do anything to save his friends. But now, after the adrenaline had faded and he saw his actions in a more rational light… he just felt ashamed and appalled. What had he been thinking? This was the kind of Gryffindor recklessness he swore he’d stamp out of himself.
Orion obviously felt the same.

“So you recklessly put on a necklace that you had no idea about, didn’t tell anyone what you were doing, and then almost died? What could be worth all that?”

“I wanted to travel in time,” Harry burst out desperately, wanting someone to know. “I wanted to save my friends. They’ll die because of me, I wasn’t strong enough, I’m so sorry-” Harry’s voice broke and he couldn’t speak anymore. He just cradled his face in his hands, and sobbed.

Suddenly, he was encased in a strong, warm hug. Harry leant into it, breathing shakily.

“You can’t change the past,” Orion said softly. Harry didn’t correct him- it was probably best that Orion misinterpreted what he meant. “Every day, I want to go back. I keep thinking that, maybe if I was earlier, I could do something to help Rigel, to stop the illness before it got this far. You mustn’t tear yourself apart over something you can’t change.”

“I can’t give up,” Harry said stubbornly, and already the tears were drying on his cheeks.

“The magic isn’t possible- it’s not been invented yet.”

“I have to try,” Harry muttered. “I have to find a way.”

Orion hesitated, and Harry withdrew from his arms.

“If you properly wanted to find out more about it,” Orion offered thoughtfully. “The Department of Mysteries is the only place really looking into time magic. I think Father was talking about a project…”

Orion’s anger seemed to have faded, now that he saw Harry wasn’t harbouring any sort of suicidal urges, and was no longer in immediate danger.

“The Department of Mysteries?” Harry asked eagerly. Could it be possible that the place that had caused all of this mess could fix it? Of course it was- how had he been so stupid? “If I were an Unspeakable…”

“I could probably put in a good word with Father,” Orion suggested brightly, caught up in the enthusiasm. “It’s not easy- you need TOADS in Magical Theory and something else, but I’m sure you could do it.”

“I could do it,” Harry confirmed, grinning. He had a destination. He had a goal; something reachable, something tangible. He felt lighter and airier immediately. It would take a few years, but what were years when he could get back home at the end of them?

There was a moment of calm between the two of them, like the eye of a storm. Harry felt happier than he had… well, ever since he got here. He had a goal: he was no longer stumbling through the dark in search of something. He knew where he had to get, and he knew how. He could bloody well dance for joy.

(Harry couldn’t ignore the sour taste of disappointment in the back of his throat from the failed pendant… but it was sweetened by purpose.)

“Oh!” Orion said in surprise, examining the jewellery in his hand. “Well, I don’t know why all this happened,” Orion remarked, frowning at the wrecked dormitory. “It was only a song pendant…”

“What?” Harry squawked. “But… it was like I was on fire.”
“It shouldn’t have done that. I know these pendants. Pedlars sell them to muggles and muggleborns because of their colouring, and pretend it’s something rarer. But they’re really quite common, and not at all dangerous.”

Why did these things always happen to Harry? “What kind of ‘song pendant’ is it?”

“I suppose that was a bit of an oversimplification,” Orion shrugged. “The necklace lets you listen to the sound of your magic. It turns it into music.”

“That’s… amazing,” Harry gaped. Even after 5 years, the Wizarding World could still shock him.

“Not really. There’s a spell that can do it more easily, so it’s how most pureblood children are sent to sleep. I remember when I was little…” Orion sighed in remembrance, a small smile on his lips. “But it’s done so often that most purebloods are bored sick of it by the time they’re grown.”

“Why didn’t I hear that?” Harry wondered. The ripping feeling inside of him definitely hadn’t been any kind of song.

“It must be a faulty one,” Orion decided upon.


They both looked at each other, and could tell the other one didn’t entirely believe it.

Orion settled for a bright sigh. “Well. We’d better clean this up, otherwise the others are going to think Grindelwald attacked!”

Harry reflected on one aspect of the future he wouldn’t miss.

Yeah, he thought dryly. I’ve got a lot of experience with cleaning.

It didn’t take long for the two of them to sort out the dorm. Magic made everything ten times quicker. It was only some of the organisation that they decided to do by hand, for fear of making more of a mess. A powerful *reparo* and *scourgify* solved most issues; the curtains knitted back together, the duvets sealed back up and the spilled feathers were vanished. The bed frames were as good as new, and Harry mended the crack on a picture of Orion’s family without the other boy noticing.

Harry was quite cheerful throughout all of this. Orion still looked a little on edge, but seemed to mostly have forgotten the whole thing. Orion was changeable, and didn’t linger on the bad stuff. Harry thought it was an admirable trait to have— he wished he were more like that. There was no way Harry would be so cheerful if he’d entered a room to see Ron, twitching and screaming as he burned…

Yeah, Harry winced, and felt a wave of guilt. Poor Orion.

Harry should make it up to him somehow. He wasn’t sure how yet, but he would. He remembered dragging Ron and Hermione around the past year, snapping at them when he got in moods, and rolling his eyes at their arguments. But had he ever thanked them, or done something thoughtful? Not that he could remember. Granted, Harry had always been pretty distracted by toads and dark lords…

And it wasn’t like Ron and Hermione were saints— but still.

Never mind. He’d make it up to Orion here, and then he’d apologise to his best friends when he got home. Maybe he and Hermione could show Ron a muggle film and watch his eyes bulge.
It would all be good.

“Are you really okay now?” Orion asked softly, plumping a cushion. Harry was surprised that he wasn’t leaving it all for Harry to do, but then that wasn’t the sort of person Orion was.

“Yes, ‘course.”

“It’s just…” Orion said delicately, resolutely not looking at Harry. He was being very thorough with the cushion. “You’ve been spiralling out of control over the past few weeks. Your moods- and your grades- have been everywhere. One minute you’re happy and determined, and the next you’re having a shouting match with Atticus. I thought what happened… earlier could have been the end result of all of it. Whilst I’m glad it wasn’t- is this just one of the high moments?”

Harry laughed slightly, patting Orion on the back. “I think I’m good, yeah? I haven’t been good in a long time but this, er, this feels like good.”

And it did. Everything was good.

Harry didn’t tell Orion that the golden scars tracing the lines of his chest glowed brighter and deeper for hours that day, aching uncomfortably, until the sun set.

He hoped it didn’t mean anything.

Tom went to bed late and woke up late. At least it was a weekend.

He took the opportunity that being behind curtains granted to fix his hair, and to rub away the grain collected in the corner of his eyes. He had to retain some dignity, after all. When he finally emerged from his bed, he was looking as flawless as usual, and he had the envious look from Grahams and Atticus to prove it.

Tom received an unusually bright grin from Harrison, and smirked to himself. Ah, friendships: so beautiful in bloom. Tom always succeeded in his schemes.

Admittedly, Tom had been worried that yesterday might have changed Harrison’s mind on their reconciliation, despite the fact that Tom refused to take a side in the dispute. But apparently, Harrison was satisfied with Tom’s neutrality.

It was very clear that yesterday’s argument was neither forgiven nor forgotten. The tension in the dorm was palpable. Atticus pointedly avoided looking at Harrison, but tittered when he tripped over a discarded pair of socks and dropped his glasses. Harrison barely even scowled at Avery, picking up his glasses and sliding them back onto his nose.

Orion fussed over his friend more than usual, checking that Harrison was okay and scanning him for injury. Tom frowned at the display. What could have prompted the protectiveness?

“Are you alright?” Tom asked lowly, as Harrison pulled on a jumper and Orion retreated to brush his teeth.

“Huh?” Harrison mumbled, tugging the disgustingly fluffy thing (homemade, and sporting a large, wobbly ‘H’) over his head. It made his hair look amusingly haphazard, and Tom resisted the urge to fix it. (He didn’t do body contact.)
“I couldn’t help but notice that Orion is being rather… watchful. Did something occur last night after you left the pub?”

Something flickered over Harrison’s features, but he wrinkled his nose dismissively. “Nah. That’s just Orion, isn’t it? Acts like a child, but he’s really a grandmother under it all.”

Tom concealed a smile at the surprisingly accurate observation. “True,” he agreed. Harrison had lied, though. Something did happen. However, Harrison didn’t seem injured and he was more even-tempered, so it probably wasn’t anything grave.

“We just came back to the castle, after Orion calmed me down. I may have overreacted a bit,” the other boy admitted sheepishly. “Avery was still being an idiot, though.”

Tom found his direct honesty refreshing. It was rare to find someone who didn’t skate around topics and motives in Slytherin house.

“I, ah, hope you weren’t offended by my… non-involvement with the discussion last night,” Tom said delicately. He didn’t think Harrison was, but it was probably best to make sure. “You understand how difficult it is in these political climates-“

“Don’t worry about it,” Harrison shook his head. “I didn’t expect you to defend muggles.”

For some reason, Harrison’s disregard angered Tom. It was true he held no fondness for those without magic, but still. “I don’t prescribe to Grindelwald’s philosophy,” he snapped, in an uncharacteristic loss of control. Tom wasn’t sure why he wanted Harrison’s good opinion, but perhaps he was just ruffled over the unprovoked hatred he’d received since they met.

Perhaps.

“I-“ Harrison seemed genuinely flabbergasted, his green eyes blinked behind his frames. “I- you don’t?”

“I may not believe muggles are entirely equal to wizards,” Tom allowed, because wizards had magic for goodness sake, “But I certainly don’t believe in the subjugation of their entire race. I also don’t approve of his mindless violence- it only encourages opposition. It’s foolish.”

Tom very rarely shared his truthful opinion with anyone, and didn’t know why he’d chosen to do it now.

Harrison looked like his entire world had been ripped away. “You, uh, don’t approve of the violence?” he stammered.

“Of course not. I’m not sure what gave you the idea that I did.”

“Wow. That’s- that’s- good for you, Riddle.” Harrison patted Tom’s arm dazedly.

Tom stared at the hand on his limb, but allowed it. It was only there for a minute, before Harrison removed it and wandered away towards the bathroom, looking shell-shocked. Rupert sent a pillow flying towards his back as he did, and Harrison was knocked, stumbling, onto the marble floor with an ‘oof!’

The tension in the dormitory only worsened at breakfast, where they were able to divide themselves through seating. Atticus, Rupert and Lestrange sat at one end, and Harrison, Orion and Tom (to even the numbers- he appreciated symmetry) sat at the other. Cassius wandered off and perched by his sister, who was engaged in a passionate argument about Quidditch with Christina Day.
Harrison didn’t talk much, but Orion more than made up for it. He seemed especially eager to fill the silence today, nudging Harrison whenever his eyes glazed over, and babbling on about the effect of runes on some kind of scent ward. Harrison was still regarding Tom with a strange look, like he was trying to fit a puzzle together. It looked painful.

Tom began to dice his fruit salad, and took great pleasure in sending Harrison a serene smile whenever he looked too conflicted. The answering confusion was exceedingly satisfying, and Tom almost vowed to reveal more of his hidden motives in the future, should the results prove as entertaining.

“Banana?” Tom offered the side of his knife, upon which a perfectly-cut banana slice rested.

“I, er…” Harrison regarded the fruit with suspicion. “Don’t really like banana, thanks.”

“You don’t!?” Orion demanded quickly, swivelling on the bench. “But you said it was your favourite!”

“I may have… exaggerated?”

“You mean you lied.” Orion pouted.

Tom popped a cube of melon into his mouth, and chewed.

“The banana chew thing was the cheapest in the shop! You looked like you were going to cry if I didn’t let you buy something,” Harrison said defensively.

“You lied about the pendant, you lied about sweets!” Orion complained. “Is nothing sacred? What else have you lied about?”

“Nothing else, I swear!” Harrison yelped, raising his hands. Tom wondered if he was asking for another ‘high five’. It seemed rather inappropriate, considering the conversation. “I just didn’t want to hurt your feelings, honest.”

Orion scowled, but accepted it.

“What?” Harrison teased. “No vows to never lie to each other, ever again?”

“Now that’s just unrealistic,” Orion said seriously.

And it was. Everyone in Slytherin had secrets, even ‘innocent’ Orion. Tom wondered if he’d told Harrison of how Arcturus Black snagged the beautiful young Melania Macmillan, despite their vast age difference.

Dumbledore swept into the hall, and Harrison perked up. “Professor!” he called, waving an arm to attract the teacher’s attention.

“Wonderful,” Tom muttered, and glanced around for a newspaper to hide behind.

The Deputy Headmaster acknowledged Harrison, striding over to the Slytherin table and giving them all a false smile. Tom felt the majority of the suspicion and hostility directed towards him, and was thoroughly unsurprised.

“Yes, Mr Peters?” Dumbledore asked sweetly, his beard twitching. Tom wondered what it would look like set on fire.

“Can I speak with you?”
Tom’s eyes narrowed in interest. Now what did Harrison want with Dumbledore? From what Harrison told him, they weren’t exceedingly close… perhaps Dumbledore knew of Peters’ Seer abilities? Perhaps Harrison had a vision?-

“Of course, Harry,” Dumbledore smiled, like Peters was bestowed him with untold honour.

Harrison rose. Ah, so this would be a conversation conducted away from the Slytherin table. Never mind- Tom knew how to cast an eavesdropping charm, which he promptly did when they were a few metres away. It was a little bit patchy, but he usually managed to catch the gist of it all. Tom listened intently.

“Orion… family.”

“Not sure… should really-”

“Needs… flew to…”

“Rigel… not here-“

Tom cancelled the charm. It was evident that it didn’t apply to him. Either it was completely unrelated to Harrison’s unique skill set, or Harrison had a vision to do with Orion, of all people. Either way; not worth further investigation.

Tom speared a chunk of apple, and wondered what to do with his day. He did have some homework that needed to be done- perhaps Harrison would like to join him. But alas, Dumbledore and Peters were already leaving the hall, still conversing quietly. Tom would ask later.

“What was that all about?” Orion wondered.

“Nothing to do with you,” Tom lied blandly. “So what has Harrison so happy this morning?”

“He’s found a new goal,” Orion shared eagerly. “He wants to be an Unspeakable.”

“Does he?” Ah, so Harrison wanted to explore his gift? “And why is that?”

“He’s interested in the future,” was all Orion would say on the subject, but Tom didn’t need any more. Harrison needed help if he wanted to become an Unspeakable, as he would need to improve academically.

Tom could help with that.

“Harry, what’s all this about?” Orion asked curiously, attempting to peer over Harry’s shoulder. “Why did Dumbledore want me to come to his office?”

“Because I asked him to,” Harry said, containing his excitement. Orion was going to be delighted with this.

“I’m not in trouble, am I?”

“No, no!” Harry rushed to reassure his friend. “Nothing like that.”

“Because Dumbledore isn’t exactly fond of Slytherins…”
“This is a nice surprise. I promise.”

Not seeing any reason to draw out the moment, Harry let the door swing open, revealing an open fireplace full of twisting, sizzling emerald flames. Dumbledore’s fireplace was a dramatic thing; covered with images of majestic, soaring phoenixes and nymphs dancing in forest glades. Harry liked to imagine that Dumbledore had done the sketches himself.

Orion took a step forward, frowning, before his features lightened with comprehension.

“You didn’t.”

“I did!” Harry sang, gesturing dramatically. “An open floo fireplace.”

“But why?” Orion knitted his brows together.

“I know how much you wanted to see your family-“

“I can visit home?!” Orion interrupted, his voice squeaky with exhilaration.

“Yep,” Harry replied with relish.

“But- but-“ Orion scaled back his excitement and ran a hand through his long, dark hair, shaking his head. “They don’t let you use floos in school. It’s not allowed.”

“Sometimes you have to break a few rules,” Harry shrugged—before adding sheepishly, “With permission from the Deputy Headmaster, of course. Apparently the floo powder’s complimentary.”

“How did you get him to agree to this? For a Slytherin, no less.”

“Mostly guilt,” Harry shrugged casually. “And you know, what with Rigel… I figured it’d be nice if you could see him, instead of sending all your carefully worded letters.”

Orion threw his arms around Harry for the second time that weekend, muttering a fierce, “Thank you.”

So they were doing hugs now. Harry was reminded strongly of Hermione.

“Thanks for last night.” Harry muttered into Orion’s shoulder. “I don’t know what would’ve happened if you hadn’t been there. You’re a good mate.”

“I am?” Orion asked brightly. “I always wanted to be one of those.”

Harry snorted. “And a Wardmaster.”

“And a Wardmaster.” Orion considered. “Well, now that you’re going to be an Unspeakable, maybe we can take our TOADS together!”

“I highly doubt I’m going to do an Ancient Runes TOADS,” Harry pointed out drily.

“You never know!”

“You should probably go now.” Harry nodded at the flames, which were even then dimming slightly. He wasn’t sure how long floo powder lasted, but it would be a shame to find out.

“I haven’t told Mother that I’m coming,” Orion fretted.
“Screw the hag,” Harry huffed. “You get to see your family.” An intense pang of longing so strong that it could be jealousy hit him, and his smile froze.

“I do, don’t I?” Orion was beaming, and Harry knew that he’d redeemed himself from last night. Orion was so ridiculously easy to please; if this were Ron or Hermione, Harry would still be dealing with sulking or mothering.

Orion stepped backwards, the smoke from the fire surging around him on a kind of mock-aura. He was illuminated by a green glow that made everything sharper; older. Harry was reminded of yesterday, of seeing Orion and seeing Sirius.

The pain in his chest was duller than it had been.

Orion gave him a small wave, one which Harry reciprocated. And then Orion’s lips moved, he turned on his heel, and he disappeared. The flames surged and roared for a short moment, blasting Harry’s face with heat. Then they simmered down, returning to warm, crackling sparks cradled in the fireplace.

Harry inspected the embers, feeling unusually poetic.

He peered around Dumbledore’s office, unable to resist the urge to poke around now that he was alone. Harry had always been curious about Albus Dumbledore, but he had always seemed such a distant, removed character. Did he even have a childhood? It seemed funny to imagine a mini Dumbledore, moon-glasses and all, running around someone’s garden and giggling.

Harry wandered over to the desk, sliding open one of the drawers subtly. It couldn’t hurt to satiate his curiosity, could it?

The first thing he found was a picture. It featured a boy whom Harry assumed was a teenage Dumbledore. He had his arm wrapped tightly around a blonde girl too young to be his girlfriend. Stood just behind the two of them was another boy; older than the girl but younger than Dumbledore. He looked angry, and glared at the camera like it had personally insulted him.

Harry turned the photo over. Scribbled on the back was Albus, Aberforth, and Ariana Dumbledore. 1899.

They were siblings, Harry realised. Professor Dumbledore had relatives. What were the dinners like? Did this strange-seeming family; delicate and wan sister, wise and twinkling brother, and this angry, surly-looking bloke gather around a table each Christmas? It was odd to speculate on something so mundane about Professor Dumbledore; that he might not spend his entire time thinking up how to sound increasingly vague, but might instead wonder about what brand of perfume his sister would prefer.

Ariana, Harry reminded himself, looking closely at the picture. She looked thin and sickly, but she still bore a sweet smile. She couldn’t have been older than thirteen, but she was so small! Harry wondered if she might have something wrong with her.

Perhaps the family dinners only featured two Dumbledore siblings, each steadfastly ignoring the empty seat between them.

Harry shook off his morbid thoughts, and put the picture back, picking up another. This one was markedly happier; and featured a young Dumbledore with a different boy. This boy was blonde and beautiful, with a wild sort of mischief about him. Dumbledore seemed brighter and more hopeful in this photo, and the look he threw at the boy next to him was filled with a warm affection. Harry
suspected that they may have been involved, despite the weirdness of Dumbledore ever being in a relationship.

Harry turned it over, but the back was blank; save for the date November 1898.

Harry searched through the rest of the drawers, but he found nothing of interest. Only exams and wine gums. The amount of essays waiting to be marked was astounding, and Harry made the firm decision never to become a teacher. No amount of ‘passing on knowledge’ was worth that much paperwork.

He slowly moved over to the book shelves, browsing the titles. He found gems like ‘Muggles and Magic: The Parallels’, and ‘Transphys: How Science and Transfigurations Link’. Dumbledore owned a surprising amount of fairy tales like ‘Snow White’, and more exotic titles including ‘The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage’. Harry also discovered darker tomes like ‘Magical Might’ and ‘The Evolution of the Wizard’- books that’d be more at home in the Malfoy library.

Harry’s eyebrows raised. They were controversial books to have, especially considering the war.

“What are you doing in here, boy?”

Harry jumped at the sudden noise, eyes darting around. They focused on a previously empty painting of a woman with jet black hair, a high forehead and sharp eyes. Her skin was a cool brown, and she frowned down at him with domineering eyebrows. Harry hadn’t even known eyebrows could be domineering, but these ones managed it effortlessly.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Never mind,” the woman snapped. “You may call me ma’am. It appears I have to repeat myself: what are you doing in here? I am quite certain I haven’t stumbled into the Slytherin Common room by accident.”

She was very intimidating; and this was coming from the boy who’d duelled Voldemort. Harry suspected she was one of the previous Professors, or perhaps even a Headmistress.

“I-I was using the floo-” Harry stumbled.

“Can’t you speak without stuttering?”

Harry was mortified to discover an embarrassed flush spreading over his cheeks, as he was sorely reminded of Aunt Petunia.

The woman softened a little. “Why were you using the floo?”

“For a friend,” Harry said, more strongly this time. “I asked Professor Dumbledore and he agreed.”

“Well, at least you got permission. Where is Albus anyway?”

“At a staff meeting,” Harry replied, and the woman looked disgruntled.

“He’s always late.”

“He probably got distracted by the beauty of friendship,” Harry remarked coolly, gaining confidence.

The painting smirked. “So the boy has a backbone,” she drawled, astonishingly similar to Snape. “Well now that you’ve used the floo to send your friend off to goodness knows where; why are you still hanging around?”
“I was just wondering why Professor Dumbledore had all these books,” Harry explained, gesturing to ‘Muggles Under The Boot; A Series’. “They’re a bit…”

“Disgusting, yes I’m aware.”

Harry looked uncomfortable.

“Oh, don’t pull that look on me, boy!” she said, eyebrows growing even more intimidating. “I’m a muggleborn myself, and I don’t hold with all that extremist nonsense. I always told the children that, but your Professor Dumbledore’s ideas were always more fanciful.”

“Fanciful?”

“Is there an echo in here?” the painting snapped. “I said fanciful, and I meant fanciful. He was full of ridiculous dreams about ruling the muggles, until the incident of course.”

“Incident?” Harry murmured, reeling over the fact that Albus Dumbledore had been a magical supremacist.

“The echo continues. Yes; ‘incident’, and that’s all I’ll say on the matter.”

“But I-“

“You’d better leave. Albus is due back any minute, and I doubt he’ll appreciate you perusing his reading materials.”

“You won’t tell him, will you?” Harry asked anxiously.

“Now why on earth would I do that?” the woman sniffed, and suddenly she was frozen. Harry shifted from side to side, watching to see if her eyes followed, but she was completely still. Harry scratched the back of his neck, but took her advice and turned to leave.

It was too late.

“Ah, Harry! My dear boy.”

Harry was halted by Dumbledore’s entrance, and his remarkably bright hat.

“I trust Mr Black made the journey safely?”

“I, er, think so. Yeah.”

“I, er, think so. Yeah.”

“Family is a precious jewel,” Dumbledore sighed. “We’re very isolated here at Hogwarts.”

Isolated from the muggles? Is that what you want? Harry questioned, but no- he was being stupid. If Dumbledore ever housed those kind of views- and the portrait might have been lying- they were long gone. He was the conqueror of Grindelwald, for Merlin’s sake. The champion of muggles. Walking poster-wizard for muggle-lovers everywhere.

Harry’s day was turning out to be very strange. Tom Riddle didn’t mind muggles, and Dumbledore used to be a magical supremacist?

“Are you quite alright, my dear boy? You look rather distracted.”

“I’m fine!” Harry said quickly. “That’s just… a very bright hat.”
“It is, isn’t it?” Dumbledore smiled contently. “My tailor was a little nervous about the colour combination, but I’m over the moon about it. Even Madam Hallpepper remarked upon its effect: she said it could wake a coma patient!”

Harry hummed his agreement, searching for an exit.

“Imagine that!” Dumbledore continued, chuckling lightly. “If bold fashion choices could perform medical miracles. Why, I think the world would be a better place, don’t you?”

Harry readily agreed. “I’m sorry, sir, but I’ve got to, er, go to the library. Now. I said I’d meet someone. About something.”

Dumbledore seemed taken-aback, but stepped aside and easily allowed Harry to flee. As Harry walked quickly away, he heard the dry tone of the woman in the portrait remark:

“What a strange child.”

Alone and without Orion, Harry found himself drifting towards the library. Perhaps, Harry thought, he could look up the TOADS you’d need for a job in the Department of Mysteries.

(He should probably also look up why the fuck a ‘song pendant’ set his veins on fire, but honestly Harry would be happy to never think about or remember that sensation ever again.)

And so he floated towards the careers area of the shelves, and picked up ‘Further Education in the Ministry’. It looked like a thrilling read. Hermione would probably salivate. Harry was just flicking through the first chapter, past the subsection on public health, when he was interrupted by a cough behind him.

Harry turned warily, rather bored of being snuck up on.

“Oh,” he blinked, wiping the lenses of his glasses with the sleeve of his jumper. “Hullo Cassius.”

Cassius gave Harry a slight smile, hair tumbling around his ears. “So this is the path you choose.”

“Sorry, what?”

“I was curious, you know. After everything that you’ve been through, what would you do? But you just keep on going, don’t you? Despite all the evidence that you’ll fail, and - to be honest – your steadily declining mental health. I wonder how that’ll turn out.” Cassius strolled closer, book held loosely at his side. He had his head cocked to the side, and seemed to be genuinely considering Harry.

“I, er-” Harry shook his head confusedly, gaping at Cassius. “How do you know what I’ve been through?”

“I’m a little bit psychic,” Cassius shrugged.

Well. Harry had been beginning to think that Cassius was very Luna-like, but Luna would never be this straight forward. Cassius was psychic? This was really becoming a day of astonishing character revelations.

“Psychic?”
"I just know things sometimes. The universe whispers to me, and it's practically *screaming* about you."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I got bored. I know your secrets, now you know mine," Cassius pouted carelessly. "I thought it would liven up the game. I like you better than I like Riddle, anyway. I wanted to give you an advantage."

"What game? I'm not playing any kind of game."

"You're *always* playing a game. Everyone is. Life itself is a game— it's a board controlled by the major pieces, who push and control the pawns. It's all just strategy," Cassius said quietly. The book in his hand, Harry noticed, was one on chess.

"And what am I?" Harry asked suspiciously. To be honest, this was all a bit much to take in. He just wanted to become an Unspeakable and go home.

"Neither," Cassius revealed, with as much glee as his monotonous, quiet voice could muster. "You're one of the chaotic pieces. I like the chaos— being a part of the shift. It's why I associate myself with people like you and Riddle."

"**Riddle**'s a chaotic piece?"

"He could be. It depends upon you."

"Do you have any proof?" Harry said slowly. To be honest, after the day’s revelations (Riddle’s decency, for one), Harry would believe mostly anything. However, he’d also been taught by Trelawney for three years. He held a healthy dose of scepticism for ‘psychics’ or ‘seers’. Last night had also been a scorching reminder to not take people at face value, especially not creepy people who approached you in deserted areas.

"You're a time traveller," Cassius said bluntly. "You had friends— an otter and a terrier? They died."

Harry's heart leapt into his throat.

"Or perhaps they didn’t…" Cassius finished, giving Harry an odd sort of smirk. "I can't see the future clearly like that. It’s more… ideas, or what they’ll become. I’m basing this all on your past. And it’s very dusty. Mostly I just *feel* things. It’s instinctive."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I already told you. I like the anarchy, it makes everything more interesting. But I can’t interfere too much, so don’t worry."

Harry groaned. He didn’t want to deal with a psychic that got their highs from screwing with reality. "This is crazy."

"And so am I," Cassius agreed readily. "Clinically insane. It’s fun, isn’t it?"

Harry felt vaguely disgusted by it all. Somehow, he found the idea of Cassius; playing god and courting chaos, to be more disgusting than Riddle, who at least appeared to have some human decency.

"So what happens?" Harry asked reluctantly. "If I follow down this ‘path’? If I become an
Unspeakable. Do I manage to get home? What then?”

“I’m not a seer,” Cassius tutted, and for some reason this seemed to amuse him. “I can’t tell you what happens in the future. You’re a wildcard: shift the world around you.”

“Shift the world around me…” Harry repeated. “If I can do that, I can get home, surely?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Cassius murmured, “I suppose you could.”

Harry couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across his features. This was it: a psychic, confirming what he needed to hear. It was possible for him to get home.

“What are you reading?” Harry offered in a show of goodwill. “You’re into chess?”

Cassius open the book, and slipped a thin comic from where it had been hidden within the pages. “It’s called Batman. It came out a few years ago.”


“For the dramatic reveal.” Cassius elaborated. “It’s a very good comic. I enjoy the Joker, myself.”

“That’s the one with the face thing, yeah?” Harry vaguely remembered the Joker appearing in a TV show that Dudley used to watch.

“He’s so much more,” Cassius mused. “Or at least he will be.”

Harry hummed in reply, his patience running out. “So I’m just going to take this book… and read it over there.” He said, raising the book on Ministry careers. Now that he knew it was possible, he was even more eager to become an Unspeakable. He also wanted to get away from Cassius.

The Rosier boy before had seemed like such a quiet, studious character; a more reserved Hermione. But Harry knew the truth now. Cassius was like a puppet master, in the detached, impersonal way that Voldemort had never managed. Cassius didn’t want to control the puppet, or lead it- he just wanted to watch it dance.

Harry began to walk away, resisting the urge to look over his shoulder at the beautiful, terrible boy. Next to Cassius, Riddle seemed mundane.

“Not every madman in this castle is as benign as me, Harry!” Cassius called after him. “I’d watch out if I were you.”

Well, that wasn’t ominous at all.

Tom’s prefect rounds were turning out to be just as uneventful as usual. He’d patrolled the third floor, peeked inside the broom cupboards, and was now making his way towards the grounds. He needed to check the greenhouses (students did hide in the strangest of places), and the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Then he only had to do the fifth floor.

The night was crisp and sweet on the tongue, and the only thing to ruin it was the faint buzz of insects. Tom sent a bolt of electricity rippling through the air, and the bugs dropped dead to the ground. Tom drank in the silence and sighed. Perfect.

His shoes cracked the frosted grass, and each step caused a satisfying crunch. He pitied the poor third
year who dared to disrupt his calm.

The figure on the edge of the forest, standing beside the groundkeeper’s hut, was shrouded in darkness.

Of course, there was always one.

“You should have been in bed an hour ago!” Tom called out, his voice slicing through the night like a well-executed cutting curse.

The groan he received in response was very familiar.

“Harrison?” Tom asked, and yes- now that he grew closer, the head of messy hair and large glasses focussed into the image of his classmate.

“No,” Harrison said flatly. “I’m his ghost.”

“Hilarious,” Tom drawled. “What are you doing out here, breaking the school rules? Your new friendship with Professor Dumbledore won’t help you if Professor Merrythought finds you out of bed.”

“Aw, don’t be jealous, Riddle,” Harrison simpered teasingly. “You know you’re my bestest friend.”

“The horror. And don’t be ridiculous: your best friend is currently weeping over his dying brother in London somewhere, not freezing out here.”

Harrison didn’t reply and, for a moment, Tom thought he might have gone too far.

“He’s actually playing snap,” Harrison corrected finally, “He owled. Meissa’s crushing him.”

“Perhaps he should get Cassius to predict him a victory.”

Harrison laughed shortly, but it sounded fake. “Predictions. Funny.”

“But wouldn’t it be amazing if someone could see the future?” Tom fished. Would Harrison reveal his abilities freely? Did he trust Tom?

“That would be useful,” Harrison said mildly.

Yeah, Tom would take that as a ‘no’, then.

Tom conjured a blanket (emerald green and tightly woven) and took a seat, looking at Harrison expectantly.

“Well, aren’t you going to join me?”

Harrison rolled his eyes and sat down beside him, gazing out pensively. The forest created a dramatic outline against the night sky, which sparkled and glittered with specks of starlight. It was beautiful: a swirl of colours and movement. Tom drew his knee close to his chest, and rested his chin upon it.

When he looked at Harrison, the boy was staring back at him with a strange expression.

“What?” Tom cocked an eyebrow.

Harrison turned a subtle shade of pink. “You have a stupid face,” he muttered, picking at the blanket.
Ah. That was moderately surprising. Tom knew he was attractive, but this was one of the first noticeable signs that Harrison was attracted to him. It wasn’t uncommon though— if anything, this would help Tom. Harrison was much likelier to trust him if there was an element of attraction.

“So I heard you want to be an Unspeakable,” Tom diverted, saving Harrison some of his dignity.

“Yeah,” Harrison agreed. “I want to… look into stuff. Orion suggested it this morning. It seemed perfect.”

“Stuff?”

“They have an innovative time department.”

“You’re interested in time?”

Harrison didn’t reply to that, but his silence was as much of an answer as any.

They sat that way for a while, side by side, staring into the depths of the forest with not a word between them. Tom saw glints amongst the branches, and wondered what eyes were staring out at him from the inky shadows. Probably a few unicorns, centaurs, wolves, bowtruckles…

He was glad he’d never taken Care of Magical Creatures.

“So what brought you out here?” Tom asked, breaking the quiet. “An opportunity to flaunt the school rules?”

“This is a good place to think. You realise… everything changes over time.”

“That’s rather the point,” Tom said with a smirk.

“But just consider it. In a few years, this will be all be different.” Harrison gestured specifically towards the groundskeeper’s hut. “Same place, same job, same castle… but different. And hey!” he protested. “I haven’t broken the school rules in almost a month— bloody hell, that’s weird.” He blinked. “That’s like a record. Fred and George would cry. Or prank me.”

“Who are Fred and George?”

“My friend, Ron: they were his brothers. Twins, actually, and total nightmares. Once tried to send a toilet seat to their parents.”

“They sound like they’d get along with Rupert.” Tom conjured up images of Rupert tripled, running through the castle; causing mischief and cracking terrible puns. He shuddered.

“Nah,” Harrison dismissed. “He wouldn’t have agreed with them.”

“Muggles?” Tom assumed, as Rupert could mostly get along with anyone; provided they were magical.

“Yeah,” Harrison said. “Something like that.”

Tom could sense the conversation was drawing to a close, but he wasn’t willing to give up on the interaction so quickly. He was actually quite enjoying it.

“Do you want to accompany me on the rest of my rounds?” Tom asked, deciding that although he disliked company, he wouldn’t mind so much if it was Harrison’s.
Harrison considered Tom carefully, and Tom got the transparent feeling that he only ever usually got around Dumbledore. Tom shifted on the blanket, fighting against the urge to pull at his collar uncomfortably. Finally, Harrison shrugged and said, “Might as well.”

Tom led them back into the castle, and they climbed the stairs up to the fifth floor corridor. There weren’t usually many students on that floor, as there wasn’t anything there except for a few empty classrooms, the music rooms, and the Prefect bathroom. Still, empty spaces were always a viable option for night time… activities. Students were remarkably creative.

“So this is what being a prefect is like,” Harrison mused, as Tom cracked open a door and checked inside.

“It’s not the most exciting job, I admit.”

“Ron must have hated this,” Harrison laughed.

“That’s your muggle friend, with the brothers?”

“Yeah. He was a prefect in his school. Really lazy- never did any of the work. He got Hermione to do most of it. Ron hated it when she made him do homework.” Harrison said fondly.

“And he became a prefect how, exactly?”

“There were no better candidates.” Harrison snorted. “No, that’s not fair. Ron had his moments. He was very loyal, and brave. He didn’t think about what he was saying a lot, but he always carried through. He stuck to his guns. And he was funny.”

“Sounds like the quintessential Gryffindor,” Tom observed, with some distaste.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“I suppose Gryffindors have some redeemable qualities. Bravery, for one. I’ve always admired bravery,” Tom said diplomatically.

“Well, don’t lay it on,” Harrison put his hand to his forehead sarcastically. “I might swoon.”

“You’re a Slytherin.”

“I know- I was speaking from a lion’s perspective. I have something called empathy? You might have heard of it.”

“Once or twice.” Tom said lightly.

“But you have admit,” Harrison insisted. “Gryffindors aren’t entirely useless.”

“I suppose every house has their good qualities,” Tom allowed. “Intelligence is always valuable.”

“What about loyalty?”

Ah, loyalty. A quality that Tom appreciated in others (directed towards him, of course), but saw little value in possessing it himself.

“Under certain circumstances, loyalty can be very useful,” Tom answered carefully.

Harrison chuckled. “A true Slytherin answer.” He yawned and stretched, leaning on a wall whilst running a hand over his tired face. “Merlin, I need a shower.”
“Well,” Tom suggested blankly. “The prefect bathroom is on this floor. We could take a midnight dip.” The upturn to the corner of his lips betrayed his humour.

“Fuck you, Riddle,” Harrison snorted. “I’m not taking a bath with you.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m an excellent bath mate.”

“I bet you steal all the bubbles.”

Tom sniffed. “I do no such thing. I am a firm believer in bubbles for all.”

“Right. And I’m sure you’d equally split the rubber ducks between us too.”

“Well, now you’re just being ridiculous. The rubber ducks are mine.”

Harrison burst out laughing, doubled over and clutching his stomach. Tom found himself also chuckling, albeit lightly, in entirely genuine mirth.

“I think you’ll find,” Tom said, once Harrison had recovered. “That many inhabitants in this castle would kill to share a space with me, devoid of clothes.” And then flashed him an arrogant smile.

Harrison turned bright red. That was an interesting reaction. Tom had expected a scoff, or a roll of the eyes (he got both of those as well), but Harrison also turned redder than a Gryffindor’s tie.

“Shut up, Riddle,” Harrison spluttered, cheeks glowing.

Before Tom had time to further explore that response, he heard a thump coming from inside the walls. Harrison spun around too, the colour fading from his cheeks at the loud noise, so Tom knew he wasn’t imagining it. Not that he’d ever doubt his own senses.

“Now where did that come from?” Tom wondered. “We checked the classrooms.”

“The bathroom?”

“No, the bathroom’s too far away.”

“Or maybe…” Harrison muttered, stalking towards a non-descript tapestry. “It came from here.” He pulled the hanging aside, revealing a wooden door. It was small; and looked very similar to a broom cupboard. “It leads to the Astronomy Tower,” Harrison explained.

“And you know that how, exactly?” Tom asked, challengingly. Even he hadn’t known that was there.

“Orion told me.”

“Of course he did,” Tom lamented.

“Oh, shut up. Should I open the door?”

“Well, staring at it doesn’t seem to be doing much.”

Harrison snickered. “You’re such a bastard.”

He pushed open the door, and a couple tumbled out; thoroughly entangled in each other. Both participants had thoroughly swollen lips, mussed hair, and flushed cheeks, along with heavy breathing- and Tom was pretty sure that wasn’t how buttons worked.
They moaned and writhed on the floor for a moment, before realising that they had an audience.

“Rupert?!” Harrison declared incredulously, stumbling away from the pair. “What are you doing?”

“Having an intellectual conversation, clearly,” Rupert replied cheerfully, recovering remarkably quickly. He jumped to his feet and dragged the poor witch up with him.

She was tall, with close-cut, flaming red hair and a thin face. She was pretty enough, Tom supposed, and had copious amounts of makeup smeared across her cheeks. She was also very familiar.

“Rupert, why are you locking lips with Avery’s latest accessory?” Tom asked, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

“Avery has a girlfriend?” Harrison yelped.

“I was shocked too,” Rupert declared, slinging an arm around the girl’s shoulder. “But then I pulled my moves on her, and I realised she’s just easy.”

The girl gasped in outrage, and slapped Rupert with surprising strength. The sound of her palm hitting his cheek cracked loudly in the stone corridor, and Tom saw Harrison wince sympathetically.

“You… are disgusting,” she spat, before marching away.

“That’s not what you were saying ten minutes ago!” Rupert jeered.

“Ten minutes ago, I was too busy faking an orgasm!” she bellowed back. A door slammed, and she was gone.

“Masterfully handled,” Tom drawled.

Rupert twitched. “Ah well, you win some, you lose some. She clearly didn’t know how to handle the experience of a lifetime.”

“Maybe you can work out how to improve that experience- since it so clearly needs it- in detention. Report to Professor Slughorn in the morning,” Tom answered smoothly.

“Come on, Tom…” Rupert wheedled.

“I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to learn all about your ‘intellectual conversation’.”

Rupert groaned. “Ah, well. It was worth it.”

“Was it?” Harrison asked doubtfully.

Rupert surveyed Harrison with unbridled pity. “Virgin.”

Whilst Harrison spluttered and coughed, Rupert offered a jaunty wave. “Have a good night, fellers!” And then he strolled away, whistling.

The journey back to the Slytherin dormitories passed in a blur for Harry. He could still feel the embarrassed heat prickling under his skin, and he did everything he could to avoid looking at Riddle. He wasn’t sure why the (truthful) jab about his virginity had bothered him so much. His life had always been too busy to think about things like relationships or puberty. A murderous dark lord took
He knew he wasn’t the only virgin in the Gryffindor dorm—Ron had never had sex, and only the driven snow was purer than Neville. Dean and Seamus had boasted about their experience, but Harry was certain he’d caught them snogging each other once, so he wasn’t sure how seriously to take their guarantee that they’d slept with ‘loads of girls’.

Maybe it was just that Riddle had heard. Riddle: who Harry was certain had to literally throw the girls away from him. Harry had never been without female attention, but he’d always partially assumed it was due to the whole ‘famous conqueror’ thing. And there was no way he was having a relationship now. Any of the people he picked here would be grandmothers by the time he got back home.

He brooded through dressing for bed, he brooded through cleaning his teeth, and was still brooding as he collapsed onto his bed.

At least, Harry considered, he had a way home. Maybe Ginny would still want to go on a date with him, or something. She was very pretty.

He smiled at the thought of her freckled face, and sat up to pull the curtains across.

“Harrison?” Riddle’s low voice was deafening in the near-silence of the dorm. Rupert still hadn’t returned, and Avery snored in a nearby bed.

“Yeah?” Harry replied softly, hands frozen.

“20 points from Slytherin.”

“20 points?” Harry exploded in a hissed whisper. “For what?”

“For being out after hours.”

Even without seeing his face, Harry could hear the smirk that Riddle was sure to be nursing. The sound of curtains sliding along a railing followed, and Riddle didn’t say anything else.

Harry drew his own curtains across with a jerk, and fell backwards onto his pillow. Although he was angry, he couldn’t deny he felt a little amused too. “Well-played,” Harry mouthed reluctantly.

His eyes closed, and he was dead to the world.

Chapter End Notes

Aww, that was almost like a date. Cute!
Tom Observes The Birth Of A Marauder

Chapter Summary

Harry has some fun, the terrible twosome are very repetitive, and Hogwarts receives some unexpected news.

Chapter Notes

WELP, it's been like a month :/ Life is stressful, and this fanfic is my only haven XD
Yay!
Also, I sometimes have people ask me 'is this the end of the fic'? Believe me, you will KNOW when this fic ends. I currently have 6th year, 7th year, and much stuff planned for after Hogwarts. This is gonna be a long fic XD And even if update time is lengthy, I will tell you if it's abandoned. I'm always working on it ;) That said, check out my tumblr for (maybe) updates, comments, and previews. #spon.
http://vivypotter.tumblr.com/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Wednesday, Tom found himself engaged in a passionate argument on the runic number system. The Slytherin Common room had significantly cleared out since the debate began, but the brave souls that dared to remain, stayed as far away from the couch as possible.

“No,” Druella argued fiercely, clenching a pillow. “Mankind represents seven. There are seven stages of life: being born, infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, old age, and death. And that’s why it’s the most powerful number: because seven represents us: magical kind.”

Tom rolled his eyes drolly. “That’s surprisingly naïve of you, Druella. Are we the most powerful magical beings? If mankind represented seven, why would seven be any more powerful than one? Do we hold dominion over unicorns?”

“I don’t see unicorns casting stunners, or crafting wards,” Orion pointed out. “We’re superior to them, surely.”

“I don’t see wizards cursing those who consume their blood with a half-life either.” Tom smirked loosely. “Our... creativity doesn’t necessarily make us magically superior to them. Not in a way that runes would recognise, anyway. And life isn’t unique to mankind.”

“Well, what’s the right answer then? Won’t the superior Tom Riddle grace us with his knowledge?” Druella spat sarcastically.

Tom sent a swift stinging charm at Druella, which hit her breast. She couldn’t rub or soothe the area-that would be quite obscene, as they were in public- so she settled for shifting a little and glowering. Tom gave her a satisfied smile in reply.

“I think,” he said slowly, and his companions looked interested despite themselves. “That it’s much
more likely for a runic seven to be represented by a phoenix. For the reasons you suggested; the stages of life, but a phoenix continually cycles through them. Therefore you get strength from life, dead, and eternity aspects of the runes.”

“That’s genius,” Orion breathed. “It would explain the constancy of the seven rune, and it’s compatibility with fire…”

“It’s a good idea,” Druella admitted. “Are you going to publish it?”

Tom waved his fingers mysteriously. “Now that would be telling.”

Orion’s eyes were wide. “You should. It could completely revolutionise Ancient Runes.”

Tom dismissed Orion’s comment. He knew it was an excellent idea, but Ancient Runes wasn’t a field he was interested in going into. Perhaps he would find a spare hour to write out his ideas with proper research, but he was currently focussing on Defence and the Dark Arts. It would also be quite amusing to see how long Orion lasted until he begged Tom’s permission to do further research on the theory.

The portrait entrance swung open, and the sound of raucous laughter followed. Everyone turned to see what had prompted the noise. Perhaps inevitably, Tom mused, Harrison was involved.

Rupert was the first to stumble through the portrait, roaring with delight as he tripped over his own feet. Atticus followed, tittering shrilly and snorting. He scooped Rupert up on his way past, and together they scampered towards an armchair, ducking behind it.

Harrison marched through the entrance with great purpose, looking both furious and ridiculous. His nose was several sizes too big, and span on his face. It was, Tom noticed, an excellent piece of charms work. Atticus must have done it.

Harrison glared at the hiccupping pair, before- surprisingly- he stomped towards Tom.

“Break the spell,” the large-nosed boy spat at Tom, his arms crossed.

“And you’re unable to do it yourself?” Tom leaned back coolly. Orion looked like he wanted to say something, but didn’t dare.

“If I could, don’t you think I would have already?”

Tom waited expectantly.

Harrison sighed through his teeth. “It was flashing before. I stopped that, but I don’t know how to cancel this bit.” He gestured to the large, spinning mass. “If I shrink it, it could do something to the…”

“To the what?” Tom asked, thoroughly enjoying himself.

“To the fucking rotation,” Harrison snarled. “Happy?”

“Ecstatic.”

“Bloody brilliant. Now fix it.”

“What’s the magic word?”

“Abraca-bloody-dabra.”
“Close enough,” Tom shrugged, and flicked his wand. Immediately, Harrison’s nose froze and shrank back to its normal size. Tom knew this transformation was a painful one, so he was mildly impressed when Harrison merely winced and gingerly poked at the bridge of his nose.

“You know,” Druella said, watching the pair with interest. “Abracadabra comes from the killing curse. The muggles heard and misunderstood.”

“Hear that, Peters?” Atticus taunted, poking his head up from behind a pillow. “Another thing your precious muggles got wrong.”

Harrison growled. “I swear to god, if you weren’t…” he trailed off into furious mutterings, his eyes flashing. Then he turned to Orion, asking pleadingly: “Get me out of here before I kill them.”

Orion leapt to his feet. “Let’s go to the Greenhouses! We need to get an example of a carnivorous nocturnal plant for Herbology… Have you done the essay yet? I haven’t done the essay. I’ve been too busy keeping up with Quidditch. Did you know that the Galloping Glimpies haven’t lost a match since 1822? I personally think it’s down to their unique broom line…”

Orion didn’t stop talking until the portrait door slammed shut behind the both of them. There was silence for a minute, and then a loud surge of whispered gossip took its place.

Atticus and Rupert emerged from their shelter and swaggered over to the couch, dramatically falling back onto the cushions.

“Well, I think we came out of that rather well, all things considered,” Rupert declared, and exchanged a satisfied nod with his blonde cohort.

“You’re looking remarkably cocky for idiots who just hid behind a sofa,” Druella drawled.

“But we live to prank another day, and that’s victory in my books.”

Druella liberated a pin from the elaborate hairstyle twisted against the back of her neck, and threw it at the two. “I hope you’re pleased with yourselves. This newfound rivalry with Peters is ridiculous.”

The pin bounced off of Atticus’ forehead, and he batted it away. “Well, if he would just admit that wizards are better than muggle, maybe we’d leave him alone.”

“But he’s never going to do that, because he doesn’t believe it.”

“I don’t particularly care if he believes it or not,” Atticus scoffed. “Just that he says it. Preferably in front of witnesses. Lots of them.”

“And you, Dolohov?” Druella questioned cautiously. “You don’t really care what Peters believes. What do you get out of it?”

“Atty here said, if I helped, he’d convince Daisy Meadowes that sometimes the grass is greener on the other side of the fence,” Rupert grinned lecherously.

“But she has a boyfriend.”

Rupert winked. “Precisely. I hear there’s trouble in paradise.”

Druella stood, dusting off her long skirt disgustedly. “You both have the maturity of leprechauns,” she sneered, and added, “Though I suppose shouldn’t have expected anything else from boys.”
“That’s sexist!” Rupert protested.

“I was referring to your age,” Druella sniffed, and then, with a sweet smile: “Though I suppose gender works too.”

She was gone before anyone could object.

“She’s only a year older than us, too,” Atticus complained.

“It’s certainly a mystery what a difference a year can make.” Tom just had to remind himself that he valued Atticus for his magical strength and connections, not his cutting-edge wit.

“I’d still bang her, though.”

But thank Merlin Tom had Rupert to provide scintillating commentary like that.

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The entire year, including Tom, watched Harrison for the next few days. They were waiting, with bated and slightly anxious breath, for his retaliation. Harrison Peters struck none of them as the type to take an insult lying down, especially not when the instigators were Atticus Avery and Rupert Dolohov. Harrison was a Slytherin, after all- if not a particularly subtle one. Underhanded vengeance was their middle name.

The vengeance didn’t come the next day. Neither did it come the day after that. Nor the day after that. Nor the week after that. In fact, life continued on quite normally; with Atticus and Rupert springing increasingly uninventive pranks upon an increasingly unresponsive Harrison.

The next prank they sprung was the standard hair-changing prank, tried and tested by millennia of Hogwarts students. Tom was unimpressed, and so vanished the pink from Harrison’s hair before the other boy had even noticed it was there. Now that was just uncreative.

The next prank was slightly more imaginative. Whenever Harrison went to use his wand, it would flop in his hand, and become like the consistency of jelly. This was marginally impressive, as charming things like magical conduits was difficult. Tom left Harrison to figure that one out on his own which- more impressively- only took an evening.

And then there was the next one: where Atticus and Rupert charmed a bucket to follow Harrison around, and dump icy water on him, every 30 to 40 minutes. Tom particularly enjoyed the moment when Harrison manipulated the spell into depositing rose petals instead, and got asked on a date only moments later. The look on Atticus and Rupert’s face was quite amusing, considering the girl in question was Rupert’s girlfriend at the time. Harrison said no.

“You’re handling this remarkably well, Harry,” Orion remarked one day, as rose petals wafted down onto Harrison’s head.

“Well, what else am I supposed to do about it?” Harrison asked, batting away a petal from the tip of his nose. “Go on a murderous rampage?” He laughed.

Orion and Tom exchanged a look.

“Well…” Orion began, twisting his fingers. “If we look at past experience…”

“Oh alright,” Harrison admitted. “But I’m turning over a new leaf. This is a new, chilled out me.”
“How admirable,” Tom remarked, and wondered how much money he could make if he started a betting pool on Harrison’s ‘chill’ would last.

“How are you doing it?” Orion asked. “No offence, but you’re not a very calm person…”

“Oh,” Harrison said sunnily. “I just remember that, insignificant as they are, they can’t cause me any pain.”

The next prank had Harrison in unimaginable agony whenever he took a step. This, Tom imagined, was probably more ‘significant’ than rose petals. But Harrison simply used a levitation spell to float himself from lesson to lesson that day, until the spell wore out. Curses of that magnitude never lasted long without an anchoring sacrifice, and apparently Atticus and Rupert had forgotten to ritually spill the guts of a cat.

The pranks increased in frequency, getting ever more elaborate. Homework went walkabout (as in, literally sprouted legs and walked away); bags mysteriously split, and glasses frames were charmed to show everything bathed in the soothing glow of disco lights.

But Harrison remained… ‘chill’.

Tom wasn’t convinced. He knew there was something wilder lurking beneath the surface of Harrison’s skin; something cornered and unpredictable. What makes someone more unpredictable than knowing the future, after all? Tom knew Harrison was just biding his time.

And, as usual, Tom was right.

It was a Transfigurations lesson when it all came to a head. Dumbledore had been particularly cheerful that lesson, and it was grating on Tom’s nerves. He’d already mastered the spell for that lesson- kittens into top hats, for some reason- and was now staring at Dumbledore as he rambling on, his features glazed over.

Suddenly, there was a loud and distinct bang!

Tom turned to the back of the classroom, and started coughing as a cloud of smoke hit his face. His eyes watered, but the fog soon cleared away to reveal Harrison, looking sheepish. He was brandishing his wand at Avery and Dolohov, who were clutching their throat and gaping.

Dumbledore wasted no time in sweeping towards the trio. “What’s going on here?”

“I’m so very sorry, sir,” Harrison fretted, comically over the top. “I was just trying the spell, and I think I did the wand movements wrong. I don’t know what I was thinking!”

It was very clear to Tom- and anyone else in that room- that Harrison had known what he was thinking.

“Don’t worry about it, my dear boy. We all make mistakes, especially in an art so complicated as Transfigurations,” Dumbledore soothed him momentarily, before turning his attention to the silent duo. “Now what seems to be the matter here?”

Atticus and Rupert mouthed without making a sound for a second, looking increasingly concerned, before Rupert blurted out: “Now what seems to be the matter here?”

“Ah,” Dumbledore said gravely.

“Ah,” Atticus squeaked, slapping a hand over his mouth.
“I see you’ve been gifted with the curse of repetition.”

“I see you’ve been gifted with the curse of repetition,” Rupert croaked reluctantly.

“But that’s just awful!” Harrison declared dramatically, flapping his hands and getting to his feet. “Oh deary me, what ever shall we do? Isn’t there any way you can remove the curse, Professor?”

Tom had a feeling that Harrison knew very well the answer to that question.

“No, my dear boy, the spell is a lasting one. I should say it will be a good week before we see the symptom alleviated. Fortunately, Misters Dolohov and Avery shall only be forced to repeat the phrases directly addressed to them, and not the entirety of what they hear, so it isn’t as bad as it could have been.”

“Shame,” Harrison said; and Tom knew exactly which part of Dumbledore’s statement he was referring to.

Tom grinned subtly behind his hand, not wanting Dumbledore to see his amusement.

“But Professor!” the Gryffindor sat next to Harrison said petulantly. “They’ll be so disruptive!”

“Nonsense, my dear girl. Just don’t address Mr Avery and Mr Dolohov directly. I’ll send a note around to your teachers.”

Of course, people did address Atticus and Rupert. Directly and frequently.

It became almost a game to see the increasingly ridiculous things that you could get the unfortunate two to repeat. Tom was very impressed with Harrison’s revenge- Rupert and Atticus were the subject of ridicule for almost two weeks.

It was actually a rather delightful few days. The constant tension of waiting for Harrison’s vengeance had been dissolved (obviously), and Atticus and Rupert provided mostly harmless fun. The teasing was reserved to seeing how fast they could repeat tongue twisters and other mature phrases like ‘vagina’ and ‘sex’. It amused the second years endlessly.

Certainly, Atticus and Rupert glared at Harrison a lot, but the menace value was lowered somewhat, by the fact that they were simultaneously repeating ‘anal penetration’ dully to the cackling of lower years.

The only serious moment occurred on Friday afternoon, when Harrison approached the pair for the first time. Harrison hadn’t actually taken advantage the curse yet, just casually told the population of Hogwarts about its existence whilst wearing a mock trite expression. He wore a very sombre expression as he entered the dormitory (which was were the only place where the cursed couple had been able to escape from the taunting). Harrison barely glanced at anyone else: not Orion, not Lestrange, not even Tom; but simply marched towards Atticus and Rupert.

They raised their chins anxiously.

Harrison stood, towering over them with his arms crossed. Despite his diminutive height, he seemed to tower over everyone else in the dorm.

*What a thrilling display of righteous anger,* Tom rolled his eyes, but was interested despite himself.

“What are you doing?” he asked lightly.
“Making my dad proud,” Harrison replied. “They’re going to repeat after me. I don’t believe in senseless killing.”

There was a brief heavy pause as Avery’s expression turned from mildly apprehensive to twisted fury.

“Come on then, say it,” Harrison insisted more confidently. “I don’t believe in senseless killing.”

“I don’t believe in senseless killing,” Atticus spat.

“Muggles are just as valuable as wizards.”

Rupert repeated.

“The dark lord will fall,” Harrison smiled with a hint of teeth.

“The dark lord will…” Atticus wrestled with himself, and for a moment Tom thought he might bite out his own tongue. At last, Avery relented, biting out: “…fall.”

Harrison grinned triumphantly. “Boobs.”

“Really?” Tom spoke over Rupert’s repetition.

“I might as well have some fun,” the green-eyed boy shrugged, grinning. “This is revenge for that afternoon I spent communicating entirely through operatic arias. I don’t even like opera!”

“It seems a little sad, though,” Orion reflected from his position on his bed, where he was crouched with quill in hand over a sheet of warding movements. He looked up for a moment, watching Atticus and Rupert. “I know you didn’t mean it, but it must be awful to be trapped in your own head, saying nothing of your own thoughts but reflecting back the people around you…”

“Even worse when the people around you seem to say nothing other than profanities,” Tom added drily.

“They just repeat stuff, and they can’t even reply to the constant laughing. I’d hate to be unable to communicate,” Orion said thoughtfully.

“Oh, I think they communicate just fine,” Harrison waved an arm airily. “A glare that ugly doesn’t need words.”

“It’s just quite humiliating for them,” Orion frowned.

Harrison looked defensive. “What? And singing wasn’t?”

“It was different when they were doing pranks on you. You’re more capable than them. This is like… kicking puppies.”

“Racist puppies.”

“I just feel sorry for them. Anyhow, I’m going to take them to Madam Hallpepper for their check up,” Orion decided, and stood up. He addressed the pair. “Let’s go.”

“Let’s go,” Atticus sighed, climbing to his feet.

“No, I didn’t mean for you to say that—“
“No, I didn’t mean for you to say that—” Rupert mimicked.

“Never mind.” Orion gathered his things, and made his way out of the dorm.

“Never mind.”

“Oh, stop it!”

The door swung shut behind them, leaving Tom and Harrison to watch each other cautiously, in the mostly silent dorm. The clock on a bedside table ticked steadily.

“It’s curious,” Tom observed slyly, catching Harrison’s eyes. “I never took you for a bully.”

He froze. There was no other word for it: Harrison’s face simply shut down. Tom could see the cogs and wheels turning. The boy gulped slightly, and his jaw clenched. Harrison swayed, like he was struggling to stay in place on his feet. “You don’t get to say that to me.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not the bully.”

“It seemed like bullying to me. You make someone vulnerable and then you kick them whilst they’re down.” Tom had plenty of experience from the orphanage. “I’m not saying they didn’t deserve it— they’ve been tormenting you religiously. I’m just saying you don’t seem like the type.”

“Well, I’m a Slytherin, aren’t I?” Harrison said challengingly.

“And up until now, I was confused as to why.”

Harrison worked his jaw. “My dad and his friends used to do stuff like this all the time.”

“Well then, your father and his friends were bullies.”

Harrison took a step forward, like he might lunge at Tom and enact unspeakable violence. His glasses flashed white.

Tom held up a pacifying hand. “I’m not saying I disapprove of your actions- they were highly amusing.” He smiled faintly.

Harrison blanched. “So you- what? Approve?”

“Exactly. That’s precisely what I just told you.”

“And it’s something you’d do?” Harrison asked uncertainly.

“Without a doubt.”

“And you thought I took the right course of action?”

“Absolutely.”

“Damn.” Harrison deflated, brushing his hand over his fringe. The tip of yet another scar peeked out from underneath, white and substantial.

“What?” Tom asked curiously.

Harrison practically pouted. “When Tom Riddle agrees with something, you know you’ve gone too
far.”

Tom bristled, but brushed the remark off. It was just another occurrence of that strange dislike that would soon disappear.

Harrison groaned and fished something out of his pocket, holding up a small bag, fastened by a silvery length of string.


Harry nodded sadly, before setting the little pouch on fire. It flared into an inferno, and Harrison dropped it quickly. The two boys watched the flames diminish and shrivel on the harsh stone floor. A blackened, curled lump of herbs and roots disintegrated, melting into the slates. The little yellow sparks of light licked, grasped desperately for anything to feed it, and then finally died.

“Well, that’s my fun over with.” Harrison complained, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Are you happy now?"

“I never said I wanted you to burn the spell pouch. You made that decision all on your own.”

“Well, whoopee for me,” Peters said sarcastically.

“You missed out the strengthening agent anyway. It only would have lasted another day,” Tom reminded him, having little time for self-pity.

“How do you know that?”

“Dumbledore said. A spell pouch of that strength should have lasted a good year, maybe indefinitely. But he said it would only last a week, if that. You missed out the crushed spider mushrooms.”

“It was written on the recipe in very small writing,” Harrison groused. “And I have awful eyesight.”

“You’re wearing glasses.”

Harrison touched the brim of his glasses protectively. “Well, they can’t do everything. And tiny, handwritten text is hard to read, if you don’t have eyesight as perfect as Tom Riddle’s.”

“Sounds like a burden,” Tom drawled.

“Yet luckily, one I think I can manage.”

“Yes you can, can’t you?” Tom hummed, observing the boy before him. He was surprisingly competent. He’d duelled well, stood his ground in arguments, and showed initiative in responding to taunts. Tom hadn’t expected it when they’d met. It just made Harrison more valuable, and proved Tom had to keep an eye on him.

Harrison went towards his bedside cabinet and slid open the drawer, rummaging through the content. Finally, he pulled out a small vial of something.

“It’s odd,” Harrison mumbled distractedly, staring into the glass. “I only came up here for a Pepperup Potion. That thing with Atticus and Rupert was all very last minute. I’d mostly been planning to avoid them.”

Tom cocked his head. “The things you made Dolohov and Avery say… they didn’t believe a single word.”
“I know.” Harrison replied with a wistful smile. He twirled the vial between his fingers. “I just wanted to hear them say it.”

Atticus and Rupert were at dinner, complete with renewed voices, but they were suspiciously quiet. Harry watched them over his pumpkin juice goblet, as third years approached the pair and then left disappointed. They said barely a word, but didn’t repeat anything either, so Harry knew that burning the spell bag had worked. Pity, he’d almost hoped it wouldn’t.

…Okay, so he might have taken this whole ‘revenge’ thing a bit far.

But in his defence, he’d just been pranked nonstop for several weeks and while, yes, nothing was too extreme, it was irritating. Harry was being pranked for believing that muggles were actual people, as ridiculous as that sounded, and he was pretty fed up of it. He’d always had a bit of a temper. He didn’t have to put up with this kind of treatment- he was the child of a Marauder.

He could handle this appropriately.

And so he spent a good day in the library, searching for a way to shut them up. And he found the iterum charm bags- a branch of magic he’d never even looked at, and was apparently pretty obscure- and it seemed perfect.

Orion hadn’t agreed. Oh, he didn’t know Harry had done it on purpose, but he thought the repetition curse was awful. After hearing so much complaining from Orion and so much endorsement from Riddle, Harry knew he had to end it early. Also, he’d gotten fed up of Montgomery sniggering in the background.

“Excuse me, students!” Dippett called, standing up and tapping on the side of his goblet with a spoon. “Excuse me!”

The noise died away, as all eyes turned expectantly to the Headmaster.

“Thank you,” Dippett said, frowning down at them.

Harry wondered if it would be terribly inappropriate to grab a Yorkshire pudding whilst everyone was distracted.

“I have some bad news. I’m afraid to say that Miss Daisy Meadowes, one of our seventh year Ravenclaws,” Dippett announced, “has been attacked.”

No amount of goblet-tapping could silence the Great Hall now. There was a huge eruption of noise, especially from the Ravenclaw table; where Harry could see some of her housemates begin to cry. The Slytherin table was actually the quietest; but even they had low exchanges of ‘did you know her?’, ‘Meadowes: awful family’, and ‘she was the one with the huge boobs’.

The noise was so deafening that it took Dumbledore bellowing “SILENCE!” and shooting a flock of orange doves into the air to quieten the students.

“Yes, thank you, Professor Dumbledore,” the Headmaster coughed, looking older than ever. “I suppose you should all know what happened. Miss Meadowes was bludgeoned viciously by an unknown assailant late last night, and then discovered early this morning. She was taken immediately to St Mungos, where she currently resides in a magically-induced coma. I’m sorry to say-“
His words were lost amidst the sea of students’ chatter.

“I am sorry to say!” Dippett said firmly, and the room quietened once more. “That I will not be allowing anyone to visit Miss Meadowes- except her sister, of course.”

A fifth year gave a broken sob.

“I will, however, say this:” Dippett continued. “There was something missing from Miss Meadowes’ person this morning; a locket, with a daisy engraving on the front panel. The Meadowes family would greatly appreciate this being returned, so if it is found, please bring it to my office.”

“But who did it?” A brave little Gryffindor boy piped, standing up despite his friends pulling at his sleeve.

“I’m afraid we just don’t know.”

“But you must know-“

“We don’t,” Dippett said firmly. “That said, if anyone knows anything about these events, please come forward. Your perspective would be valuable.”

“Are they going to get us?” A young Slytherin girl stood up this time, aiming her impetuous question directly towards the staff table.

“No, we believe this was a tragic incident that will not occur again. That said, all students should be on their guard. It is recommended that you don’t travel alone, and instead pick a partner and travel with them from class to class. That is all.” And he sat down.

The hall exploded once more.

“Poor Lobelia!” Walburga fretted, flapping his napkin fussily. “It’s just awful.”

Harry furrowed his brow. “I thought her name was Daisy?”

“Oh, no-“ Walburga shook her head. “Lobelia’s the sister. See the dear little girl crying at the Ravenclaw table over there? She’s such a darling, and quite the admirer of yours too, Harrison!” (Harry looked taken-aback.) Walburga dotted at the corner of her eyes with the linen. “Oh it’s such a shame. And in her owl year, too!”

Druella looked unimpressed. “I think we should be pitying Daisy, rather than Lobelia. You do remember Daisy, don’t you? The one in a coma?” She arched a brow. “I wonder who did it. They have to have some sort of idea.”

“Oh, it was her boyfriend, I imagine. He’s a complete brute,” Walburga said airily. “Daisy probably refused to visit a broom cupboard with him, and he beat her to pieces. She wasn’t a very capable witch, bless her.”

Harry gaped. That was very casual.

“It’s always the boyfriend,” Druella said grimly. “We’d all be better swearing off relationships.”

“Oh I don’t know,” Walburga sighed. “Not all boys are bad. Apus, for example, is a wonderful specimen. He sent me a Parisian handkerchief the other day- you know how I adore the French- and it’s simply divine.”

Druella snorted, but didn’t say anything in response.
“It could be someone other than her boyfriend,” Orion pointed out reasonably. “And I’m sure he wouldn’t hurt Daisy. George isn’t a complete monster.”

Walburga huffed. “You’ve never caught- or rather been caught by him at the Malfoy Ball, when he’s had a few too many glasses of mead. I’d like to see you try and defend him then.”

“He laid his hands on you?” Druella turned to her friend.

“He tried to. I halted him swiftly.”

Druella looked relieved, but gave Walburga a proud nudge nonetheless. The girls shared a smile.

Rupert leered at Walburga suggestively. “He was just doing what any red-blooded male would do.”

“You’re a disgusting misogynist, Rupert Dolohov,” Druella said tartly, popping her fork into her mouth.

Harry looked around their group, and focussed on one person in particular. Cassius was being very quiet- but he wore a slight smile, and Harry eyed him suspiciously. His mind flickered back to that conversation in the library, and the unsettling truths Harry had learned.

“Do you have something to add, Cassius?” Harry asked, an unspoken challenge in his words.

Everyone looked at the boy, who bowed his head. His dark hair fell into his face, and he looked almost angelic. His beauty was marred- like Riddle’s- by Harry’s knowledge of his true nature.

“Yes, Cassius,” Riddle hummed. “You always have such interesting contributions.”

Cassius took a long, theatrical breath. “I was the one to find the body this morning,” he said softly.

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. That was unexpected.

Walburga gasped in sympathy, but was drowned out by Druella.

“Body!?” she demanded. “You’re talking like she’s dead.”

“Not yet,” Cassius replied absently. “It was a lot worse than Professor Dippett described. She was really quite broken. I called for the teachers.”

“You poor, sweet boy,” Walburga cooed. “It must have been awful.”

“It must have been,” Cassius murmured.

“What were you doing out so early?” Riddle asked, and his eyes were narrowed. Harry hid a smile- he knew Riddle wouldn’t be taken in by Cassius’ innocent act. He was too smart for that.

“I was returning my book to the library. I needed a new one, when I just… happened across her.” Cassius’ eyes were distant, as if he was seeing the scene before him. For all Harry knew, he could be. “Spread across the floor like a discarded doll; like someone just snapped her strings. She was a human, until she was just a pile of flesh and a sticky floor. I think I must have screamed.”

“Very poetic,” Harry said doubtfully.

Riddle cocked his head. “Was there anything odd about the body?”

“Filthy.” Cassius said swiftly.
“She was dirty?”

“No: ‘filthy’. The word. It was written across her body in blood.”

Harry shuddered, both at the image created, and at Cassius’ disaffected tone.

“So she was a mudblood,” Atticus said, and he sounded relieved. Harry itched to go back to the dorm and craft another charm bag.

“No, she was pureblood,” Walburga corrected sombrely. “Their parents- Daisy and Lobelia’s- are quite respectable.”

“Couldn’t say the same for their daughter,” Rupert sniggered. “I’ve had a few romps with Daisy Meadowes. She was a good eight. Noisy, but the boobs made up for it.”

“Have some decency, for Morgana’s sake,” Walburga hissed, glowering.

“She was worth more than her body,” Harry added. Great, now he was the one talking about her like she was already dead.

“None of us are worth more than our bodies in the end,” Cassius said philosophically. “They’re all we leave behind.”

“We leave memories too,” Orion said, hopefully.

“And then those that knew you die, and it’s like you never existed,” Riddle said darkly.

The group sat in unified contemplation, and Harry saw Walburga slip her hand into Druella’s. Harry resisted the urge to glance back at the Ravenclaw table: to see Lobelia Meadowes, only a year younger than them. How did it feel; knowing a sibling was lying in a hospital bed, life gradually ebbing away whilst you sat, surrounded by friends, in the Hogwarts halls?

Harry stole a look at Orion, who had been unusually mute during this conversation. He supposed Orion would know.

“I liked Daisy,” Orion said abruptly. “She was my introductory Runes mentor. She used to combine the elemental runes to create mini weather patterns inside. She was brilliant.”

“I didn’t know you knew her,” Harry said.

Orion shrugged glumly. “I wouldn’t say knew her. We spoke for a few months in my third year, that’s it. But I liked her. Everyone thought she was just a pair of breasts and a short skirt, but she was sweet, too. She asked about how Rigel was doing, when the news got out.”

Druella scowled. “You don’t have to start mourning her. She’s not dead.”

There was a pause.

“Well, they have to take George in for questioning,” Walburga said airily. “They’d be irresponsible not to. Where is he, anyway?” She started looking around the hall. “I would have thought he’d at least be present. Have they taken him in already?”

“He’s been crying in the boy’s bathroom all morning, and he’ll be there for a while.” Cassius told them. “He’s clutching photos of her.”

“Guilt?” Rupert suggested glibly.
Riddle frowned. “Or perhaps he didn’t do it.”

“But if it wasn’t him…” Atticus said.

“Then it could be anyone,” Harry finished.

The hall felt suddenly colder as everyone (except Riddle and Cassius, of course), exchanged nervous looks. Harry peered over towards the Ravenclaw table.

Just then, the bell rang to signal the end of dinner. Everyone stood to exit the hall- the hustle and bustle was insane. As he was pushed from side to side, Harry felt someone latch onto his arm and pull him away. It was Atticus.

“I’m not a toddler,” Harry said irritably, as he was dragged back towards the middle of the hall. “I don’t need to be tugged.”

“Sorry,” Atticus muttered.

“So what do you want? We’re not exactly on speaking terms. Or repeating terms,” Harry smirked.

“Very funny,” Atticus said bad-temperedly, then turned almost… sheepish? “That’s actually what I wanted to talk about-“

“What, the repeating? Because I’m not apologising. I think it was pretty justified-“

“No,” Atticus dismissed. “I wanted to speak about our… relationship.”

“Our relationship.” Harry said doubtfully. “Do we have one?”

“That’s what I’m hoping. Obviously, my stance on the matter of… wizarding superiority hasn’t changed-“

“Obviously,” Harry drawled.

“But the situation in Hogwarts has changed. And I would rather not be at odds with one of the most powerful wizards in our year,” Atticus spoke, as if every word physically pained him.

Harry felt a pleased smile spread over his features. “You think I’m powerful?”

An eye roll. “Of course. You drew with Tom in a duel, you do well in classes, and you’re not entirely unintelligent. It would be stupid to disregard you, no matter how much I might dislike you.”

“Charmed.” Harry felt flattered, despite himself. Here, without the title of ‘the Chosen One’ or ‘the Boy Who Lived’, any compliment gotten was on his own merit. It was nice to have that assurance and still be told he was a decent wizard.

“I respect power,” Atticus said begrudgingly. “And I respect you, even if I don’t respect your opinions.”

“This is a very inspiring speech,” Harry laughed.

“I just… would rather not have you as an enemy whilst there’s a possible murderer on the loose.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”
“I don’t go out of my way to make enemies with people, you know. I can be reasonable.”

“So what’s with all the unprovoked hatred towards Riddle?” Atticus asked quickly.

“Riddle… he’s a special case.”

“Of course he is.”

“Don’t worry, Atty-boy,” Harry snorted, clapping the blonde Slytherin on the shoulder. “No matter my feelings towards Riddle, I’ll protect you.”

Atticus growled irritably and stalked out of the hall, robes tangling around his knees.

All of a sudden, Harry realised he was alone in the Great Hall.

It had been cleared quickly: students presumably not wanting to hang around after the news. And with Atticus gone, the silence immediately became apparent. He took a few steps back, and the sound of his shoe heels echoed through the eaves. The Great Hall was as magnificent as it would be in fifty years; all huge architecture and structure that couldn’t be achieved by muggle means. It was, without a doubt, magical.

Harry felt incredibly small, surrounded by years of aged stone and history. Without thinking about it, his feet carried him up the centre aisle, to stand just below the staff table. Harry just breathed for a minute, feeling oddly nostalgic.

He wondered how Daisy Meadowes felt, alone in St Mungos. Was she even awake, or was she floating in darkness, body broken and shattered? Had the last face she’d seen been that of her boyfriend, looming over her with a vicious grin? Or had it been a stranger, whose name she hadn’t even known?

Why the fuck did destruction and misery seem to follow Harry wherever he went?

Daisy had been a pureblood, so the attack probably wasn’t prompted by blood prejudice. Was it really just a handsy, aggressive boyfriend- who cried in the bathroom over images of her face?

For once in his life, Harry didn’t really want to know the answer. He hated the thought of a girl: scared and alone, without justice… but what could he do here? Here, he wasn’t the boy who lived, or the chosen one. He was just ‘Harrison Peters’; above-average wizard. He had no purpose other than to cause as little disturbance in the timeline as possible.

Had Daisy been scared?

Had she cried?

“Don’t be too sad for her- she welcomed death,” a voice promised solemnly, and Harry’s gaze darted to the large doors. Cassius lingered by the door frame, fingers lightly resting on the wood. How long had he been there?

“What?”

“Her end will lead to new things, and the upheaval of old.”

“That sounds dramatic,” Harry responded slowly, feeling an intense tickling apprehension in his chest.

“It will be.” Cassius smiled: slow and long. “If nothing else, I can promise you that. It will be.”
“Night!” Harry called, and received a few grumbles in reply. He ascended the stairs in the dormitory, leaving the rest of the sixth-year boys behind him in the Common Room. He opened the door to the dorm, and slammed it shut behind him.

“Oh!” Harry yelped, coming face to face with Caspar Grahams. “Grahams… I didn’t know you were in here, mate.”

The boy in question simpered, offering Harry a sickly smile. “Usually, I stay out until late with my numerous friends in Hufflepuff, but I just didn’t think it was safe to be wandering the corridors at night.”

“Good call,” Harry said awkwardly, giving him a thumbs up.

“Was… Tom downstairs, by any chance?” Grahams wheedled, looking hopeful.

“Yeah, he is, actually.”

“Wonderful,” Grahams declared, and Harry controlled his revulsion. “I’ll go see him then,” and he swept out the dorm without another word.

“I’m sure he’ll be delighted,” Harry muttered dubiously, picturing the scene where Grahams hung onto Riddle’s arm as he tried to play cards with the others. Poker had never been more inconvenient.

Harry kicked off his shoes and sat on the edge of his bed, mind still unsettled about the attack on the girl. *Hogwarts: the safest place in the world*. Harry snorted. Yeah right.

Harry stripped, and clambered into his pyjamas. He scooted back across the mattress towards his pillow, and threw his sheets over himself. He closed his eyes, sinking into the welcoming warmth of darkness, burrowing beneath the covers. As they settled over his face, he experienced the sudden sensation of suffocation, like someone had settled a hand over his mouth and was squeezing tightly. Harry began struggling, and it was as if the sheets were wrapping tighter around him. His heart strained at his ribs, and he kicked the white sheets off. His panting was deafening in the silence of the Slytherin dormitory.

He still had to clean his teeth. He groaned with exhaustion, but obligingly sat up, heaving himself sideways off the bed.

He stumbled to his feet, blinking at a clock. It was only 11, but Harry felt as if he’d been awake for days. Bathroom. Right. He plodded across the carpet, when suddenly his foot impacted on something, kicking it across the floor and sending it skidding. Harry let out an inaudible ‘humph’, but followed it to the corner of the dorm. He bent down to pick the thing up, rubbing at his eyes, but froze at the sensation of metal beneath his fingertips.

He scooping the little disc up, not daring to look at it. He weighed the object in his hand, noticing how light it was. Smooth, too. Finally, he gathered some of that famed Gryffindor courage, and peeked.

A little locket lay in his palm, about the size of his thumbprint. It was delicate and feminine; silver and elegant. And engraved with delicate little furrows on the first panel, was an unfolded, tiny daisy.

“Well shit,” Harry muttered.
It could be nothing, he assured himself. It could have gotten into their dorm in so many ways: one of Rupert’s various conquests; Cassius could have stolen it (he seemed the type); Orion could have picked it up and meant to return it… It wasn’t even necessarily the right locket. It could mean nothing.

Still, he squinted down at the locket, and ran a finger over its scratched surface. As he swung it on his finger by the chain, it glinted under the candlelight of the well-lit dorm. Backwards and forward, backwards and forwards…

Backwards and forwards.

Chapter End Notes

More notes: If anyone would be interested in maybe betaing in a more ‘read the chapter before publishing it and provide feedback’ way, that would be great. I have a wonderful beta who is wonderfully thorough, but her betaing is a lengthy process, and I would like some more immediate pre-publishing feedback. Just thought I’d put it out there: any takers? XD
Harry Gets Traditional For Halloween

Chapter Summary

Harry knows very little about tradition, Walburga is a pyromaniac, and Tom is as aloof as ever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Halloween crept up on the school quickly. An eerie atmosphere blanketed the students, as they travelled from class to class in pairs and little groups; whispering amongst themselves. The murmur of ‘Daisy Meadowes…” and ‘hasn’t come back…” rang through the halls, and little Lobelia had disappeared from Hogwarts’ halls days ago. The rumour was that she wanted to be there for her sister’s last moments.

George hadn’t been convicted of anything, but left the school just days after Lobelia did. It was undetermined if he attacked his girlfriend. Or perhaps that was ex-girlfriend, Tom considered. Everyone knew Daisy wouldn’t last the holiday.

Harrison, in particular, was rather on edge. He seemed paranoid, and would eye those around him with suspicion- especially the boys in their dormitory. Only Orion was exempt from this and- more strangely- so was Tom. Harrison had never hidden his dislike for Tom, although that had lessened in recent months, so it was strange that Tom was free from Harrison’s suspicion.

Atticus was also very on edge; but in a less of a watchful way, and in more of a ‘blind terror way’. It was significantly less impressive.

Tom was aware that Avery had, through some kind of low-level manipulation, initiated a truce with Harrison. Atticus was likely hoping that Harrison’s more compassionate nature would prompt the green-eyed boy to protect him. After all, it was unlikely Tom would go out of his way to protect anyone. And Harrison had proven that he, bare minimum: cared about people.

Avery was therefore sticking close to Harrison. It was a ridiculous decision- all it did was cause Harrison to become more and more irritated by the blond boy’s presence, and less likely to jump in front of him should the ‘crazed maniac’ attack.

Potions was one of the only lessons where Harrison was granted a respite, and was placed on the other side of the classroom to work with Tom.

Atticus was neither pleased nor subtle about his displeasure.

“Your shadow’s becoming impatient,” Tom pointed out drily, pouring half an ounce of toad vomit into the cauldron.

“Because Merlin forbid I get a moment of peace,” Harrison said strongly, crushing a spider eyeball with the side of his knife.

They worked in silence for a moment; Harrison scraping the contents of his chopping board into the cauldron, and Tom stirring on a low heat.
“So what was involved in this ‘truce’ the two of you set up?” Tom asked curiously.

The pair of them glanced at Avery, who was desperately attempting to keep Harrison- and Tom- in his line of sight, and was having to lean across the desk to do so.

“…Was it twenty-four hour protection?” Tom drawled dubiously.

“He literally just asked for us not to hate each other. This… stalking was not part of the deal,” Harrison complained, waving his knife in the air. “I don’t know why he’s being so weird. He was always so… closed off, and cold.”

“He’s been spooked. Purebloods are usually safe in the current political climate. For a well-bred member of society like Miss Meadowes to be attacked in such a muggle manner… well, it’s quite the statement.”

“You think it was a statement then?” Harrison asked, in the kind of tone that suggested he was trying to be casual, but failing. “So the person might try again? They could still be dangerous?”

“Statement was probably the wrong word to use,” Tom admitted carefully. “Perhaps, instead, consider these events as… an example of possibilities? It’s not like there have been many attacks on Purebloods recently. This is all bringing the likelihood to light. And for someone like Avery who values his personal safety very highly…”

“I don’t understand why he’s picked me out though,” Harrison protested. “He’s got you, who would be way more valuable if he was attacked.”

Tom inclined his head. “Yes, but Atticus is attempting to take advantage of your propensity for empathy.”

“You mean he thinks I’m more of a gullible git.”

“That’s putting it bluntly: but I suppose the general sentiment is correct.” Tom glanced at his sullen partner, and almost empathised. “Look… as I said, he’s been scared. He’s like an animal, latching onto the nearest figure of strength for comfort. He’ll realise that he’s being ridiculous soon, the girl will die, and you can both go back to antagonising each other over muggle and wizard relations. Perhaps then you’ll have your moment of peace.”

“My my, Riddle.” Harrison smirked. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were feeling sorry for me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tom spoke smoothly.

Harrison furrowed his forehead as he eyed Atticus. “So what does he do in the classes we don’t have together?” he asked. “He’s made sure he’s near me in things like Potions.”

“Oh, he sticks close to me instead. Apparently power makes up for low emotionality at a pinch.”

Harrison snorted. “It’s like shared custody. I suppose that makes you the dad in this deal.”

“And you the mother.”

“Yeah, but that would make us married.”

“Lucky you,” Tom said salaciously. “I’ve heard I’m quite the catch.”

Harrison shuddered dramatically, spots of red high on his cheeks. “Thank Merlin we’re making a memory erasing potion- I only have to suffer with that image for another 30 minutes.”
And I’ll treasure it for the rest of my life.” Tom winked wickedly.

Harrison turned a bright crimson.

Oh, but this was fun.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Harrison mumbled, echoing Tom from earlier.

“Using my own words against me, now? How Slytherin of you.”

Harrison snorted dismissively. “I’m going to get the wolf’s blood.”

He’d only taken a few steps before his foot slid on a discarded ostrich feather. Tom watched curiously as Harrison toppled over, flinging out an arm to catch himself. He hit the cobble floor with a muffled ‘hmph!’, and the sound of metal hitting stone. Out of Harrison’s pocket fell a gleam of silver, which skidded and finally came to a rest by Tom’s foot.

“What’s this?” he murmured softly, bending down to pick it up.

“It’s nothing,” Harrison said quickly, scrambling to his feet.

“Really? Nothing”

“Yeah, so if you could just give it back..?”

Tom squinted down at the locket, running a fingertip over the etchings in the front panel. “Flowers…” he murmured. “How familiar…”

“Familiar?” Harrison chuckled. “Of course it isn’t.”

Tom looked at him flatly. “This is Daisy Meadowes’ locket.”

Now why would Harrison have this? Tom didn’t believe he’d stolen it- or, indeed, taken it from the scene. Harrison wouldn’t be capable of something like that. He was far too moral.

“What?” Harrison blinked innocently. “No, it’s just a random necklace thing,” he insisted.

“No, I’m quite certain that it’s her locket.”

“You’re probably just tired--”

“It was missing from the crime scene.”

“Or maybe it’s my grandmother’s-“

“I’m not stupid, Harrison.”

The other boy slumped sadly, realising the game was up. “No, you’re not. That’s the last thing you are.”

Tom arched an eyebrow pointedly.

“Fine, then. It’s hers.” Harrison admitted. “I didn’t take it or anything- I just- I found it in the dormitory the night we were told she was attacked. I don’t know where it came from.”

“How peculiar. Do you suppose it means one of our associates committed the offence?” Tom hummed, probably not acting as alarmed as he should be.
“That was my first thought,” Harrison sighed. “I dunno- I know it’s not Orion, or Avery- unless he’s a much better actor than I thought- I know it’s not you-“

“How?”

“Huh?”

“How do you know I wasn’t responsible?” Now that Tom knew why Harrison suspected their dormitory of the crime, it was even stranger that Tom had been excluded. “I’m more than capable of it.”

“It’s not how you’d kill someone, though.”

“…Pardon?” Now it was Tom’s turn to blink in confusion. Harrison had been considering how he would kill someone?

“If you were going to kill Daisy Meadowes, you wouldn’t hit her, or kick her, or do any of that other ‘uncivilised’ stuff,” Harrison air-quoted. “You’d be… elegant about it. You’d use magic, for a starter.”

“I’m glad to hear you have such a high opinion of me.” Tom couldn’t deny that Harrison was essentially correct. The style of Miss Meadowes’ undoing was far from what Tom would accomplish if provoked. “You seem to have this all figured out.”

“I’m pretty experienced with murder,” Harry said ruefully.

Tom’s attention was drawn by Chloe Babbage nearby, who shrieked as a shower of red erupted out of her cauldron and showered down, plastering her hair to her forehead. The students around her leapt to their feet and scurried away, leaving Professor Slughorn to rush towards the panicked girl, throwing a cleaning spell towards her. The students further away barely glanced at the action, continuing to ladle oak toad venom. They were all so clueless, Tom mused in disgust. Barely considering the larger things, never looking beyond what they were told or wanted to think about. They were so ignorant.

“So what do you think we should do?” Harrison asked, a touch of reluctance colouring his tone.

“About what?” Tom asked, dragging his focus back to his partner.

“The locket, of course. Someone in our dormitory attacked Daisy Meadowes.”

“Well,” Tom considered. “Do we know that? It could have gotten into the room a number of different ways.”

“I guess…”

“I suppose we should inform the teachers. Perhaps Professor Dumbledore,” Tom suggested unwillingly. He did loathe interacting with the deputy headmaster.

“Or maybe not.”

Oh? Tom’s gaze flicked to the green-eyed boy. How odd. Harrison struck him as the moralistic, ‘we should inform the teachers of the murderer’ sort.

Harrison coughed. “What I mean is… well, Dippett’s quite incompetent, isn’t he? And… I don’t trust Dumbledore hugely.”
Tom raised an eyebrow.

Harrison rushed to explain himself. “We do live in a dorm with our suspects… maybe we should just keep an eye out. It was probably a one-time thing. It’s not like we have any actual proof, anyway.”

“If that’s what you feel is best,” Tom gave a small shrug. It wasn’t like he particularly cared.

“Plus…” Harrison added quietly, “Orion’s family’s one of the darkest there is- there’s no way they wouldn’t suspect him. He could do without that kind of suspicion… Rigel had a fit last night.”

So that was the real reason. Loyalty to his friend.

“Fair enough,” Tom dismissed. “I’ll keep an eye out.”

And with any luck, this shared secret between them would encourage trust and friendship. Another step down the right path.

“Thanks,” Harrison replied with a small smile. His eyes rested on the locket in Tom’s hand for a moment, and he seemed to be pondering something; a question flashing across his eyes. But Harrison’s lips pursed stubbornly, and he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Tom wondered what had just passed through Harrison’s mind, but dismissed it. It couldn’t have been that important.

The Halloween decorations were even more impressive than they would be in fifty years. It appeared that 1943-era Halloween was both gorier, gutsier and celebrated with more gumption than it would be in the future.

Blood literally dripped from the cracks in the walls, along with a weird puss-like substance. Unsettling laughter leaked from crevices and echoed around corners; whilst shards of pumpkin flesh crunched underfoot, and spiders fell from the ceiling. Even Harry was vaguely disturbed by the skulls that would appear lurking in doorways and dark classrooms; jaws clattering on their hinges.

“This is all very dramatic,” Harry mused, spinning on his heel to watch a crowd of bats winging down the corridor.

“Isn’t it great?” Orion said enthusiastically. “I mean… I could do without the dripping blood-“ he pouted, “-but Halloween is a time of renewal, of celebrating death as a gateway, instead of damning it.” Orion frowned shortly. “And I could do with some positive-thinking towards death right now.”


“In St Mungo’s. But they have a great children’s ward- highest quality care, I’m told- and the nurses really love him there. He’ll be having the time of his life. And Meissa enjoys their sleepovers so…” Orion twitched slightly, which may have been his attempt at a shrug. He brightened. “Anyway, Halloween’s a time for celebrating death. Seeing it a turnover- not mourning what could happen. And Halloween is great fun in St Mungo’s. They hand out these ghost sweets where the flavours disappear and reappear in your mouth. Rigel loves them.”

Harry grinned; happy that Orion was feeling so much better. This was the happiness he was trying to protect.
“So what’s the Halloween feast like?” Harry asked, curious as to how it was different. The Halloween feast had always been amazing at Hogwarts—when there were no trolls, petrified cats or deranged prisoners, that was.

“The feast? Incredible,” Orion breathed. “I never think it can get any more delicious, but they manage it every year. What were your Halloweens like, when your family was alive?” His eyes widened and he clapped a hand to his mouth. “Oh—was that an insensitive question? I’m so sorry—you’d think with… everything… that I’d know what was appropriate to say—“

“We didn’t really celebrate the ‘witching hour’,” Harry reflected. “Whenever it was Halloween, we’d stay inside.”

Halloween had been the one holiday where the Dursleys hadn’t indulged Dudley. No matter how much he whined, or begged, or cried, Dudley had never been allowed to engage in any of ‘that occult nonsense’. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon spent the evening of the 31st huddled on their sofa, watching Christmas films on high volume. Harry, of course, had been locked in his cupboard, but he’d always heard the screams and giggles of children from outside the house, and wished he could join them. They’d sounded so free.

“That’s awful,” Orion gasped. “Imagine not celebrating Halloween!”

“I don’t have to,” Harry responded drily.

“But Halloween’s such a big deal in the wizarding world. It’s all about indulging in magic, and connecting to the dead—how can you not—your parents were magical, weren’t they?”

“Yeah,” Harry remembered James and Lily’s happy faces, literally sparkling on their wedding day. “Yeah, they were. But they just didn’t agree with Halloween.” Or Halloween didn’t agree with them, he finished mentally.

Orion looked disapproving. “Well, whatever you do, don’t tell Walburga.”

“Walburga? Why not?”

“The Black family is very traditional; we get very into the ‘breaching of the veil’ and ‘communicating with the dead’. We always had to hold a Dead Man’s Fire.”

“Dead Man’s Fire?”

“It’s… sort of like a séance, I suppose, but without the dead answering back. We have a fire, and talk to any recently deceased. Usher them into the afterlife, if you will. It’s about finding acceptance, restoring your bond with magic—there’s supposed to be a strengthening aspect, but we never focused on that. Grandfather was a staunch traditionalist, and Walburga follows him closely in old rituals. I think it makes her feel closer to Uncle Pollux.”

“Her father?”

“He died when she was young. He was the one that Father and Walburga always contacted during the Fire.”

“Oh.” The Black family really had awful luck. “That’s so sad.”

“He had the same thing as Rigel. Aliquid’s Syndrome.” Orion said slightly bitterly. “Obviously, though—his progressed later.”
“So does the Dead Man’s Fire work?” Harry asked, trying to redirect the conversation.

“It’s more of a gesture than an actual working thing. But I think there is an element of connecting to the other side, yes. I always feel… something. Ghosts are stronger on Halloween- more tangible. I don’t see a reason why those who have already passed on shouldn’t also get closer.”

“Really?” Harry cocked an eyebrow. “I thought even in the magical world, once you’re gone… you’re gone.”

“Usually. But, as I said, Halloween weakens the wall between the dead and the living- or at least that’s what a lot of traditionalists believe.” Orion looked discerningly at Harry. “Didn’t your parents ever talk about this?”

“Oh, they were very modern,” Harry said dismissively. “And we were quite isolated in the village- mostly friends with muggles, really.”

“Sounds horrifying,” Orion shuddered genuinely, and Harry rolled his eyes fondly.

“I’ve told you before, they’re just normal people.”

“Oh, look!” Orion rolled on the balls of his feet, and bounced towards a portrait. “It’s a Dead Man’s Fire!”

Orion gestured at a painting. The painting gestured back: little witches and wizards sending angry scowls towards Orion. They were sat around an open novel: the pages of the book set alight and crackling merrily. The book was perched upon a pile of ripped papers, which we were similarly blazing. The witches and wizards were sat in a peculiar formation: triangular; all holding hands over their heads. The witch sat at the peak of the triangle had her head flung back, long strands of hair the colour of molten gold, turned russet by the glow of the firelight.

“Is there anything significant about the triangle?” Harry asked curiously.

“Oh absolutely,” Orion said enthusiastically. “The number three is very powerful. It’s represented by the runespoor in the runic alphabet. Its venomous qualities and the long associations of serpents with dark magic means that the number three is very closely connected with dark and death magic. It also symbolises balance, which is very important when performing death magics.”

“Balance?” Harry said doubtfully. “The number three is odd. That doesn’t seem very balanced.”

“The runespoor has three heads, all with different personalities and tasks. One’s the planner, one’s the dreamer, and the last is critic head. Often the critic head will be so negative that the other two heads bite it clean off, and thus the runespoor dies. Balance needs to be maintained between the three aspects, which is where the equilateral triangle comes into play.”

“Well, thanks for the lesson, Professor Black,” Harry teased.

“You’re welcome,” Orion said cheerfully. “I do love runes.”

Harry snorted, and they set off down the corridor once more.

The Halloween feast was indeed incredible. It was at lunchtime, rather than dinner- Orion said it was because many students were missing from dinner; either setting up rituals, or having been taken
home to engage in Halloween traditions with their families. The lunch feast was missing a few of Harry’s favourite treats: there were no bonbons, for one, but that didn’t stop Harry’s jaw from dropping as he entered the Great Hall.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Orion crowed victoriously.

Harry grinned reluctantly, and dodged as a bat swooped down, lightly skimming the top of his head.

The Great Hall had been transformed into an eerie cavern; the benches creaking ominously when students shuffled on them. The lights were dim, and flickering slowly between blue tones and red tones. The enchanted ceiling was pitch black: an ominous, dark mass of swirling shadows, causing the hair on the back of Harry’s neck to stand to attention. The stone walls were damp; dripping and moist with cloudy water.

“Peters!”

Harry glanced around the Hall, and spotted Atticus at the Slytherin table, waving widely.

“They’re already here,” Orion said delightedly, and began dragging Harry towards their gathered friends. “Halloween greetings!” he declared, pulling Harry down to sit next to him.

The plates on the Slytherin table were encircled by live, hissing snakes; hundreds of gleaming copper and emerald scales twisted and entwined. Harry picked up a serpent-shaped biscuit, sporting tiny edible spheres for eyes.

“Original theme,” he said drily.

Riddle responded with a lazy smile. “They’ve really gone all out.”

“Well, I think they’ve done a marvellous job,” Walburga declared, waving an arm. “I can’t stand it when they try and make Halloween funny. It goes against all tradition. I could, however, do without the blood oozing from the cobbles- it’s quite disgusting. Completely ruined my new shoes.”

Walburga lifted the edge of her skirt to reveal crimson stains on her shoes, which Harry assumed were some kind of fashionable, black patent things.

“Your ankle’s showing,” Druella pointed out airily, and Walburga let go of the fabric with an indignant huff, leaving the skirt to fall back down.

“I’m not quite that medieval, Ella,” she said severely. “I have very few issues with ankles. I’ve started wearing dresses to the knee, actually- it’s all the range in Paris. It’s when skirts show everything from the thigh to the derriere that I start to feel faint-“

“I heard ‘derriere’,“ Rupert responded suddenly, spinning around on his bench. “Who’s derriere? Because I’m looking at a great one right now-“

“It doesn’t concern you,” Druella sighed. “Why don’t you occupy yourself elsewhere?”

Rupert shrugged, and did so; getting up and crossing the hall to the Hufflepuff table, where he seated himself across from a girl and started flirting in earnest. Harry looked at the girl who had captured Rupert’s attention. She was a tall, curvy brunette with large doe-eyes and bright red lips. She was, to be honest, completely gorgeous- and she had the typical ‘frame’ of Dolohov’s conquests.

“Isn’t that Mariana Wheelan? She’s a fourth year,” Orion said obliviously.
“She’s a fourth year?!” Harry exclaimed.

“She clearly developed young,” Walburga said dismissively.

Druella, on the other hand, looked horrified when she heard of the girl’s year. “That means she’s fourteen!”

“Yes, it does,” Walburga agreed. “I would have thought Rupert would have better taste, honestly.”

Druella was fuming. “If I find out he’s actually done anything with her, I swear to Morgana, I will skin him…” she hissed.

“If they haven’t done anything yet, he’s clearly hoping to.”

“If he lays one finger on her…”

They all watched Rupert get closer and closer to the red-faced girl, until he finally stroked the back of her hand and gave her a wink.

“That’s it,” Druella said fiercely.

She marched towards him, and pulled him to feet. Harry caught Riddle raising an eyebrow as Druella gestured wildly and turned to the fourth year; Mariana, and began talking to her too; softly but just as firmly. Mariana gasped and looked like she might slap Druella, before hitting the table and storming out of the room. Rupert looked irritated, and began shouting at Druella angrily; who responded just as loudly.

“Does she… er, do this a lot?” Harry asked carefully.

Walburga winced, still keeping her eyes fixed on the altercation at the Hufflepuff table. “Only when Rupert gets too predatory.”

“And it just wouldn’t be a Hogwarts celebration without risk of grievous bodily injuries, now would it?” Riddle said, far too amused by it all; scooping some pumpkin pie onto his plate.

Druella returned from her quest- victorious- and sat back down, sweeping her hair over her shoulder.

“Where’s Rupert gone?” Orion asked.

“He decided his time would be better spent elsewhere,” Druella said sweetly.

“And Mariana?”

“She didn’t like being told that sex with a sixth year wouldn’t make her feel better about herself.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “That… that was harsh.”

Druella gave him a dismissive look. “I’m not letting Dolohov destroy another girl’s self-esteem when she’s too young to know any better. There are plenty of sixth and seventh year girls for him to leech off of.”

“I do wish you’d be less… aggressive, Ellie,” Walburga said, but seemed to know it would make very little difference. “It’s not a very attractive quality.”

“I don’t care,” Druella said determinedly. “If confronting the girl head on helps her, then I’ll do it.”
“What a rousing vow of feminist duty,” Riddle said, thoroughly bored. “Perhaps you should eat now. The food’s getting cold.”

“You’re such a mother,” Druella snorted, rolling her eyes. She took a leg of chicken anyway.

Riddle sent Harry a smug smile. “Oh no, it was established earlier that Harrison’s the mother. I’m the father.”

“When’s the wedding?” Atticus sniggered.

Harry groaned, and slumped on the table. “Kill me now,” he groaned; and then remembered that Riddle might take that as a genuine request. “I don’t mean that,” he said, glaring up at the Slytherin prefect.

“Oh course not,” Riddle smiled down pleasantly.

“Hmph.”

“So are you going home this evening, Burga?” Druella asked.

“No,” she replied, frowning. “Mother’s busy this year, and Grandfather died, so there’d be no one to lead it. Besides, everyone else in the family is visiting Rigel.” Walburga looked downcast at the thought. “This’ll be the first year we don’t do one.”

“That’s a shame,” Druella said soothingly. “But it won’t be the only chance you have to contact your dad.”

“I know. I just wanted to tell him about… you know.” She took a big breath. “Anyway, what’s done is done. Perhaps I’ll hold a Christmas séance,” Walburga said, reining in her emotions. She pushed the pumpkin pie around her plate with a fork.

“I’ll help,” Druella offered.

“Thanks, Ella,” Walburga smiled, and the two girls held eye contact for a minute before glancing away.

“My parents have called me home. We’ll be conducting a Dead-Man’s Fire together,” Atticus said self-importantly.

Silence followed the announcement. He’d obviously expected it to be bigger news than it was.

“Well, you’ve chosen the right night to do it,” Riddle said, with a smile that bared his teeth.

“Pardon?”

“If there’s any night that Miss Meadowes’ attacker will strike again, it’s Halloween, after all. The night of death, and ghouls, when evil walks the hallways and creeps through windows.”

No one should be able to say that with as much relish as Riddle did, Harry thought.

Atticus tried to appear unaffected, but he gulped visibly and pulled at his collar.

Harry glared at Riddle. He knew as well as Harry did that the perpetrator might be sitting amongst them—did he really need to be giving them ideas of prime murder time?

Riddle gave Harry an innocent smile, but Harry wasn’t fooled. He knew precisely what he was
“Daisy Meadowes is dead.”

Professor Dippett made the solemn announcement at dinner, taking off his pointed hat and clutching it close to his chest. Dumbledore bowed his head, and many of the staff members looked teary-eyed.

They weren’t the only ones. Several of Daisy’s Ravenclaw friends were clutching each other and bawling their heads off; looking like the heart had been ripped from their chest. One of the Ravenclaws let out a heart-wrenching scream at the news, and had to be escorted, shaking violently, out of the Great Hall.

Lunch was a sombre affair.

Harry felt awful. The locket burned a hole in his pocket. Perhaps he could slip it to Lobelia unnoticed.

Hermione would be appalled that he wasn’t saying anything. Even Ron would make some sort of doubtful remark. But Harry stayed strong in his decision not to tell anyone.

It wasn’t like he wanted Daisy’s murderer to go unpunished. He just… He didn’t have any real proof! It was just a bit of jewellery, after all. Like Tom said: it could have gotten into their dorm any number of ways! Everyone practically knew it was the boyfriend who did it, after all. It was definitely him. And Harry didn’t want Orion to be a suspect… or himself.

There was also a hint of self-preservation involved. It was Harry who’d found the locket, after all. If they suspected him, they’d probably bring him into the Ministry. And then they’d find all the inconsistencies in his story… there was no way that it would hold up in court. And how could he get back home if he was stuck inside a jail cell, or being experimented on in the Department of Mysteries? He’d never know if Ron and Hermione were okay.

And who would he tell? Dumbledore, the apparent Grindelwald sympathiser, and all round mysterious figure of ambiguous intent, who had- for all intents and purposes- given him the silent treatment the entirety of his fifth year? Or Dippett, the man who arrested Hagrid over Tom Riddle? It would probably be safer for Harry to take care of it. At least he had a track record for getting shit done.

Best keep quiet- anyway, for all Harry knew, this could be a major point in time. If he changed this, who knew what could happen? Would solving Daisy’s murder lead to even more death? Harry didn’t know anything- his every step could be altering the future. Putting someone behind bars seemed like a pretty big step.

So he swallowed the guilt and hunched his shoulders. It was done now, anyway.

“So that’s that, then. She’s dead,” Walburga said, shaking her head, and wiping away a tear. “What a shame.”

“She must have been so scared,” Orion said quietly.

To be honest, not much shock accompanied the news. They had all, Harry reflected, been acting like
Daisy Meadowes was dead for a while now. Ever since they heard about her attack, really. It had just been a matter of time.

“Her poor family,” Druella murmured.

“Do you think Lobelia will come back to school?” Harry asked.

“She has to,” Walburga said. “The funeral will be soon anyway. They’ll want to get it over and done with. It’s been dragged on long enough.”

There was a pause.

Orion looked down at his lap, and frowned. “I wonder what happens when you die. Where you go.”

“Technically speaking, we cease to exist,” Riddle said, obviously not feeling very philosophical. “Our consciousness is just electrical signals and pathways. Once we die, they stop. And there’s nothing left of us.”

“That’s very… interesting,” Walburga said slowly. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard of… electrical signals.”

“Muggle science,” Druella assured her.

“Oh, how quaint!”

“I hope the dead go somewhere happy,” Orion said feelingly. “Somewhere where all of your dreams are fulfilled. Surely we have to, to make up for all of… this.” He gestured around at the teary-eyed, sombre hall.

“The afterlife would be an awful place,” Riddle murmured. “So stagnant and… dull.”

Walburga’s eyes lit up, and she sat up suddenly. “I know what we should do! We should hold a Dead Man’s Fire! Tonight! To usher dead Daisy’s soul into the afterlife, and to reassure her that we’re all thinking about her. Poor thing must be scared stiff, and I doubt her family are in any state to hold one.”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Walburga!” Orion said excitedly, looking more than a bit like a puppy. There were hearts in his eyes. “But… who will take part?”

“Well, Ella will- won’t you, Ella?” Walburga asked expectantly, turning to her friend.

“Of course,” Druella replied, smiling. “If this is what you want.”

“And obviously, we’ll also have Tom, Harrison, Orion- and I suppose Rupert will have to join in too, to make it divisible by three. It’s a shame Atticus went home; he’s really good with these sorts of things, but I suppose Rupert will have to do.” Walburga frowned.

“Why don’t we ask Cassie?” Druella said quickly. “He loves all this ritual stuff.”

“Oh, Cassius!” Walburga clapped in delight. “Yes, he would do quite nicely. Where is the darling?”

“In the library, but I can go and fetch him easily enough.”

Walburga beamed. “Perfect. Myself, Druella, Orion, Tom, Harrison, and Cassius! I daresay this might be the most successful Dead Man’s Fire yet- Grandfather would be so proud.” She got to her feet. “Orion, darling, why don’t you fetch the sage? I have to go and prepare the site- oh, this is so
exciting! I love Halloween!” Walburga called over her shoulder, prancing away with as much dignity as she could muster, and the whoosh of skirts on cobblestones.

The table without her was much quieter.

Orion scrambled to his feet. “Well, I should- I er, I shoulder probably go and get that sage. Don’t want to keep her waiting!”

And he was gone.

“Whipped,” Harry murmured, and ignored the odd look he got from Druella.

“Well, with all this excitement, it’s almost like a girl hasn’t just died,” Tom said pleasantly.

The mood swiftly plummeted.

“Yes,” Druella muttered. “Burga never was one for sensitivity in the face of excitement. Neither was Orion, actually. Perhaps it runs in the family.”

Harry grabbed a handful of jellybeans, and shrugged. He was sure Sirius probably would have agreed.

“So, er, what’s the sage for?” Harry asked, watching Walburga rub green leaves into the wooden floor of an empty classroom. She was going at it quite viciously, grinding the waxy epidermal layer against the wood grain.

“Cleansing,” she replied through gritted teeth.

“Cleansing?”

“Yes. Stopping contamination of the ritual, magical incidents, unwanted spirits, etc. You may not have done it in your household, but we’ve always been quite thorough in mine. We should probably be smudging, but I don’t want to burn anything yet- speaking of burning, Rupert, would you please take that Morgana-forsaken tobacco elsewhere?”

Rupert raised his hands defensively, and wandered over to the open window.

“You should know better than that! Honestly, I don’t even know why you’re here.” Walburga frowned at Rupert, and then her best friend. “Ella, I thought Cassius was our sixth member.”

Druella looked apologetic. “He was busy. But I blackmailed Rupert?”

“It’ll have to do,” Walburga tutted. “No, don’t just stand at the window, Rupert, throw the awful thing out! And someone cover the clocks!”

Orion rushed to fulfil her wishes, conjuring a black clock to obscure the grandfather clock’s face, and making sure no one was wearing a watch.

“Er, why do we do that?” Harry asked, feeling more than a little dim.

“Why, to be respectful to Daisy’s spirit, of course! We don’t want the poor girl to think we’re working to a deadline! This should be her safe space. Honestly,” Walburga huffed, pausing in her work and turning to look at him, “Haven’t you ever performed a Dead Man’s Fire before?”
Harry glanced nervously at Orion, who shrugged.

“Well, strictly speaking… not really. No,” Harry said slowly, testing the waters.

“What!?” Walburga shrieked, jumping to her feet. “You poor boy! What were your parents thinking!?”

“Well, they weren’t, er, very… traditional?”

“They never even did Halloween!” Orion piped up.

“Oh, how awful,” Walburga held his face between the palms of her hands, and looked genuinely distraught. “Never mind.” She steeled herself. “We shall just have to make sure your first Fire is a memorable one.”

“You’re in for it now,” Druella said teasingly.

Walburga glanced out of the window. “The sun’s going down. It’s nearly time!” She clapped her hands excitedly. “Stand back!”

Walburga withdrew her wand and pointed it at the floorboards. As she muttered under her breath, a line was burnt into the floorboards, following the tip of her wand as she drew a large triangle, and then a circle within it. She crouched, and began etching smaller, delicate runes with barely a flick of her wrist, replicating them with ease. Before Harry could blink, the entire triangle was filled with complex, foreign, and admittedly beautiful shapes.

Harry wished for the first time that he’d paid more attention to Hermione’s Rune revision. Maybe then he’d have a clue of what was going on. “What do they mean?”

Orion answered, squatting down and scanning the formation. “A few for balance, a few for death, a few for communication- you’ve misspelt Ansuz.” He pointed.

“Oh, so I have,” Walburga blinked, and added an extra line to what now looked like a slanted F.

“Thank Mordred I didn’t take Ancient Runes,” Rupert drawled. “I never understood any of this shit.”

“Maybe if you had, you could have improved your spirituality,” Walburga said primly.

Rupert snorted. “I think I’m doing just fine without.”

“You mean ‘just fine’, as in flirting with fourteen year olds?” Druella sad cuttingly.

“Just because you’re about as adventurous as a flobberworm-“

“No negativity in the ritual space!” Walburga squawked.

The two fell silent.

“Good,” the Black witch beamed, and took a deep breath. “Now, I’ve prepared the fire source.”

She clapped, and a large pile of ripped pages appeared in the centre of the centre, upon which rested an open book: complete with missing pages.

Druella burst out laughing. “Is-is that the OWLs Arithmancy t-textbook?” she giggled through tears, clutching her stomach.
“Yes.”

Druella laughed even harder.

Walburga appeared taken aback. “What? It’s not like I’ll be needing it anymore. I hated that class.”

“F-fair enough,” Druella giggled, wiping her eyes. She tried to be more serious, although she couldn’t quite contain her hiccoughs of amusement.

Harry sidled up to Riddle, nudging the taller boy to get his attention. Riddle glanced down at him with vague interest.

“Hey,” Harry said quietly, “How come you seem to know what you’re doing? I didn’t figure you’d get much opportunity for rituals at the orphanage.”

Riddle’s eyelid barely twitched at the mention of his summer residence, and he gifted Harry a sharp smile. “The Malfoys let me attend theirs last year. It was quite… illuminating.”

“You didn’t believe a word,” Harry said, unusually perceptive.

“No,” Riddle agreed delicately. “I think magic has many reaches, but it is my opinion that the dead are beyond it. Once we die… we’re gone. Nothing of us remaining.” He seemed disturbed by the idea.

“That’s morbid.”

“Well, we are about to attempt to guide the spirit of a brutally murdered girl into the afterlife.”

“…I’ll take your point.”

“So what about you?”

Harry startled at Riddle’s curiosity. “What about me?”

“What do you believe happens to us once we shuffle off this mortal coil?”

“Oh. Huh.” Harry considered. What did he believe? The Dursleys had never pushed much spirituality onto him- if there was one thing the Dursleys were not, it was spiritual- but he supposed he had always expected that, once he died, his parents would be on the other side. He supposed he still believed that- although would it still work if he was back in time? His parents hadn’t even been born yet! Or was the other side timeless?

“I think…” Harry murmured. “We go somewhere where we’re reunited with our loved ones. Maybe it’s not heaven, but just… somewhere where we’re never lonely again.” And against his will, he smiled.

Riddle was watching him with an expression Harry had never seen before. It could have meant anything from ‘what an idiot’ to ‘I know your secret’ or ‘I want to slow roast you over a fire pit’, but Harry was sure it meant something.

“Right!” Walburga declared, clapping her hands once more. “Positions please! I want the most experienced members on the outer corners; so that’s myself, Orion, and Ella; and the other three find a place in between them.”

Harry quickly found himself sat cross-legged between Orion and Druella, directly opposite Walburga. Orion’s hand found his: elegant and long-fingered, with well-manicured fingernails.
resting lightly on Harry’s skin. Druella’s hand also slid into his, and Harry would have been hard-pressed to tell the two apart. He could only imagine what his own hand must feel like: nails splintered and fingertips calloused, and overall probably a bit sticky. He’d had a lot of jellybeans.

“And now, we begin.”

At Walburga’s whisper, the room plunging into absolute darkness. Harry doubted even a knife could have penetrated the thick pitch blackness of it all. A moment later, four candles flared to life; positioned at each corner of the room. Harry hadn’t noticed them before. It was barely a second before Walburga: the only one with both hands left free, reached out her wand very gently, and threw a spark at the pile of shredded pages.

They ignited with a burst of flames, and all of a sudden the tip of Harry’s nose grew very, very hot. It wasn’t a natural flame; it burnt too bright and too quickly, and flickered too swiftly between cool tones and warm tones. Through the fire, Harry could just about make out the figure of Walburga, looking somehow more imposing and stately through the flames. She reached out, a blackened herb in her hand, and dropped it into the fire.

The flames burned bright green, and Harry found his eyes closing as something not quite there crawled up his spine.

“Basil,” Walburga intoned softly.

On either side of Harry, he heard a murmured echo.

“Chervil.”

The same again.

“Dandelion.”

And again and again; Rose Hips, Caraway, Echinacea, Mint, and finally:

“Mullein.”

There was silence, and Walburga took a deep breath. Harry wanted to open his eyes, to see what the hell was going on, but he couldn’t. It was like someone was pressed down on each eyelid and murmuring not now, not yet.

Harry’s head tilted back, and he breathed in, smoky, earthy scents burrowing into every parts of him. He shivered. Never before had a fire been so cold.

He could hear murmurings around him, and whilst he was sure it was just the others, it was still eerie. He heard ‘Daisy’ in Walburga’s voice, and ‘Grandfather’ in Orion’s. He didn’t think Riddle was talking, and Druella was muttering so quickly and quietly that he didn’t understand a word. He didn’t bother trying to work out what Rupert was saying.

Harry mouthed the words, his lips forming around a ‘mum’ and then a ‘dad’, conjuring images of safety and warmth, but he couldn’t bring himself to reach out and confirm what he was fairly certain of; that he was too far out of reach for even the dead to find him. So he mouthed their names, and exhaled.

In the distance, someone screamed, shrill and soft and barely a whisper on the wind.

Harry wasn’t sure how much time passed—breathing in and out, tongue wrapped tightly around those
two words- until he heard the fire dying away. It hissed and spat, and crumbled away; taking with it the blanket of herbs and smoke. As it faded, it left a sigh; heavy in the air like the release of something heavy.

It wasn’t until the hands holding his broke the connection that Harry dared prise open his eyes.

The fire was indeed gone, having melted away, leaving only a pile of ash and a few unburnt scraps of paper. Harry squinted in the half-darkness, room now lit by just the four candles.

It was both anticlimactic, and somehow the perfect ending. If the flames had done something like… shoot all the way up to the ceiling, or vanish in a puff of smoke, or sing, it would have been dramatic, yes… but it would have been wrong.

Despite the underwhelming conclusion, the Dead Man’s Fire was still one of the weirdest things Harry had ever experienced. He did wonder if the purebloods still did this in fifty years. Had they just gotten more secretive about it? He knew the Weasley’s certainly didn’t perform one, but that didn’t count for much.

Harry rubbed the steam from his glasses; and then the grit from the corner of his eyes, feeling both sleepy and hyperaware. Orion offered a hand and Harry took it, letting his friend pull him to his feet. Everyone seemed a bit drained- even Riddle was paler than usual.

Walburga was the only one left on the floor. She was knelt, scooping the grey ashes into a jar and picking out the scraps of paper carefully.

What was she doing? Harry peered around for cues. Should he be doing that? No one other than Walburga was doing it.

Walburga looked up and, seeing Harry’s general befuddlement, elaborated. “We take the ashes and sprinkle them on the grave of the contacted spirit, for safe keeping. And some say that the words that haven’t been burnt away-“ she gestured to the page scraps, “-are a message, but mostly I just like to keep a scrapbook.”

“Walburga’s very good at scrapbooking,” Orion said bleary-eyed, but still adoringly.

“I am,” Walburga said, tucking the jar away in her robes. She looked tired, but content. “Well, I declare this a resounding success! I had a lovely chat with Daisy, and I’m sure she feels better now. Was everyone else as satisfied?”

“Yeah, it was great,” Rupert drew out sarcastically. “Can I go now? I have a hot date.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, heading quickly for the door.

Druella narrowed her eyes. “If I find out you’re seeing Mariana-!”

But the door slammed shut before she could finish.

“Idiot,” she muttered.

Orion grabbed Harry’s arm with enthusiasm. “And now for the best bit! We get to go and have drinks! There’s this great cocktail we’re supposed to have. Basil, lime, firewhiskey-“

“And this is a requirement, is it?” Harry asked doubtfully.

“Of course.” Orion widened his eyes innocently, and Harry chuckled, pushing him towards the door.
“Alright then,” Harry agreed.

Orion grinned. “I just need to grab the firewhiskey from our dorm. I’ll be back in a jiffy.” He hurried away towards the dungeons.

“Coming?” Harry asked the remaining three.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Riddle drawled.

“I hope you know I won’t drink anything uncivilised,” Walburga told him. “A lady must keep her decorum.”

“I always like to have the strongest stuff there is,” Druella shrugged.

“And you’re terribly embarrassing to attend parties with.”

“Excuse me, I’m the life of the party!”

Harry held the door open and everyone filed out; the sound of their footsteps and the girls’ bickering fading away until he could hear it no more. He smiled, feeling oddly content.

Harry paused for a moment, glancing back into the dim classroom and wondering who would tidy away the still-burning candles, but decided that the House Elves could probably deal with it. He spared a moment to wince at what Hermione’s response would be to that.

Harry stepped out of the classroom, pulling the heavy door shut behind him. As he turned to leave, he could swear he saw a shadowy figure dart away from the corner of his eyes. He shook it off, putting it down to the copious herb fumes he had just inhaled. But as he took a step and turned to leave, the back of his neck pricked and he spun around again. Nothing.

It was probably nothing.

He straightened his tie—green, Sirius would have a heart attack if he saw—and walked away, heels clacking against the stone slab flooring.

Chapter End Notes

I know very little about Wicca or paganism. Please don't hurt me. This is all from google and my imagination XD
Check out my tumblr for (maybe) updates, comments, and previews. #spon.
http://vivypotter.tumblr.com/
**Tom Gets Competitive When Prizes Are Introduced**

**Chapter Summary**

Coincidences occur, Tom and Harry team up, and Orion has very poor impulse control.

**Chapter Notes**

(Someone recommended I include recaps from now on, which I am now doing :))

LAST TIME: Tom found out that Harry has the locket, Harry attempted to justify his inaction, and Halloween drew upon them. Daisy Meadowes died in hospital, and her (ex)boyfriend was nowhere to be seen. Ideas of afterlife were discussed, and Walburga organised a Dean Man’s Fire; which mostly accomplished nothing. Meanwhile, Harry is followed by a dark figure...

This is a fun, slightly filler chapter. Although there are quite a few significant clues scattered in (see if you can spot them ;))

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The day was cold, the chill was brisk, and the sky was that muddy sort of grey that you only really notice in November. It was, Tom thought, the perfect day for enacting a plan.

He left the others still sitting in the Hall after lunch. Tom thought that his free period was a rather excellent opportunity that he should make full use of. And it just so happened that he had something hidden up his sleeve, waiting for a rainy day.

Tom intended to explore the possibility of a rather fascinating room.

The Seventh Floor corridor was mostly empty. Good. He would hate to have to scare away some unfortunate first years.

Tom took a sharp left, and let the corner of his lips upturn as he spied a familiar tapestry. He slipped a thin book from under his arm, and opened it at the third chapter. Tom had experienced countless difficulties finding this book, which supposedly held information garnered from various house elves, who were ‘encouraged’ to spill secrets through… less than legal means. He’d had to jump through hoop after hoop, and practically exhaust his list of contacts in the dark artefacts community which, thanks to Abraxas, were vast. Nevertheless, he had it now, and was ready to see if the information it provided was actually worth anything. Tom let his eyes slip down the page, focusing in on ‘The Come and Go Room’.

*The Come and Go Room; also known as the Room of Requirement; also known as That Weird Place On The Seventh Floor; is a phenomena located on the seventh floor, left corridor of Hogwarts School. Its exact location can be indicated by a small sun in the bottom right hand corner of a stone, marking the existence of its hidden doorway. Thus, the user just needs to pace backwards and forwards thrice, thinking upon the purpose that they wish the room to match. A door should then become visible; and beyond it, should be the room of the user’s desires.*
Tom raised an eyebrow and scanned the wall before him. A small sun, eh? Ah- there it was. Exactly where the book had predicted. Tom crouched, his robes billowing around his lithe frame, and ran a long finger along a sunbeam. He felt a thrum of excitement run through him- he would probably be the first person to discover this hidden gem of Hogwarts in decades, maybe even centuries. Tom would uncover more of Hogwarts than anyone before or after him, he was sure of it. And then this castle would truly be his home.

He straightened up, and took a deliberate step to the right. And then another, and another. And then back the other way, and the other again, all whilst thinking with cool focus ‘I need a place to hide things’. At some point his eyes closed.

Finally he came to a stop. His fingers curled at his side, and an unconscious smile found its way onto his lips. Each Hogwarts secret he uncovered brought him closer to knowing the castle more intimately than even Dippett or Dumbledore.

His eyes flickered open.

Oh.

There was nothing there.

Tom stepped closer. Where the book claimed there would be a door, there was only the same empty space of wall; the sun carving casting faint, smug shadows on the grey stone.

No door.

No Come Room, and no Go Room.

Nada.

Tom pursed his lips. Perhaps if he tried again?

A second attempt yielded no more success than the first, and finally Tom had to admit defeat. He was, admittedly, more than faintly disappointed. A room that could grant your desires would have been incredibly useful and… well, special was a rather childish word.

In a sudden flash of anger, Tom sent a vicious blasting spell at the wall, teeth bared, and dust followed soon after. When it cleared away, the stone was unmarked. Tom hadn’t managed to leave a scratch. He made a low sound of disgust in the back of his throat, and dropped the book to the floor. A flick of his wrist set the priceless text on fire.

Nothing in there could be trusted.

Inside the Room of Requirement, Harry glanced up. He could have sworn he’d heard a muffled bang from somewhere outside, but no one in this time knew about the room- so it was unlikely to have anything to do with Harry. No DA or Umbridge club to sneak around corridors- not yet, anyway. It was quite a sad thought actually.

Harry never thought he’d miss Colin Creevey.

He shrugged, and turned back to his Herbology homework.

To make an awful day worse, Dumbledore suspected Tom of something. Probably Daisy’s murder.
Of course he did.

Tom rolled his eyes and leaned back in his seat. It was a boringly predictable lesson. Dumbledore spoke in length about how to transfigure stone into weapons, whilst eyeing Tom with a subtle frown.

“I don’t suppose anyone would know about the easiest transfiguration of a brick into a weapon?” Dumbledore asked, looking directly at Tom.

Tom adopted that innocent smile that he knew drove the Deputy Headmaster around the bend. “Well, I imagine that a brick would be an adequate weapon on its own, sir,” he said drolly, and got a laugh for his troubles. He noticed Harrison in particular, hiding a grin behind his textbook.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said patiently. “But if you had to transfigure the brick.”

Tom sighed, and readied himself to deliver a perfect answer, as usual. “Transfiguration is easiest when there is as little change between the items as possible; so I imagine to sharpen it would be easiest, as there’s no material change involved. If you really must alter the material, then possibly a metal sword; as stone and metal share similar properties and the structure of a sword is very simple.”

Dumbledore’s frown only got more penetrative. “Excellent answer,” he replied, but in the tone that meant ‘I’m onto you’.

Tom thought that Dumbledore could probably take a leaf out of Harrison’s book, and think this thing through. Daisy’s Meadowes’ murder was hardly that kind of spectacle that Tom would create. He would- as Harrison said- go for something more elegant.

Thinking on the subject, it was curious how quickly Harrison had gotten to know him, after only having made Tom’s acquaintance a few months ago. Perhaps it was a side-effect of being a Seer? Maybe Tom would commit a murder in the future, and Harrison had seen an example of his handiwork? Tom wondered if he’d been impressed.

No, Harrison didn’t strike him as the type to be impressed by murder. Shame- it would have been easier.

Dumbledore took a step forward, extravagant robes rustling quite irritatingly. “Mr Riddle, what would be best to have on hand if you were attacked by an assailant?”

“A wand.”

The Deputy Headmaster’s cheeks twitched. “Yes, but what would you do with that wand?”

“Stop the assailant.”

“And how would you do that?”

Tom had barely opened his mouth when-

“In terms of Transfiguration.”

“Well,” Tom said delicately, taking pleasure in maintaining his composure whilst the teacher lost his. “I would find an easily transfigurable item- something solid and loose would be best, like a chunk of rock or a brick, as the earlier question indicated. I would then transfigure it into a weapon like a knife, or I would sharpen the object; and use it against the attacker. I could also use human transfiguration to give myself weaponised attributes, like claws; transfigure the actual assailant, or even change the environment; but I gather from the lesson topic that object to object transfiguration is
more relevant.”

Someone in the class clapped, but quickly stopped. Tom thought it might have been Orion.

“Mr Riddle,” Dumbledore began again, and Tom rolled his eyes heavily, not even bothering to
disguise it. Whilst he never shied from an opportunity to flaunt his intelligence, this was getting
boring.

Luckily, someone intervened.

“Sir,” a Gryffindor girl said, petulantly. “Are you ever going to ask anything to someone other than
Riddle?”

Tom didn’t miss a beat, jumping into the conversation with a charming smile, and swivelling in his
chair to make eye contact. “I really must insist you call me Tom.”

“Tom, then,” the girl corrected, blushing faintly.

“An excellent point, Miss Taylor,” Dumbledore said, his smile less charming. “I don’t suppose you
would know the closest material to sand when transfiguring, would you?”

“No,” the girl grumbled, slumping in her seat.

The point was made though, and for the rest of the lesson, Dumbledore took care to spread his
questions around the class, although he kept an obvious eye on Tom. It was a blessing when the
lesson ended.

“Dumbledore really has it out for you,” Atticus commented as they all left the Transfigurations
classroom, although he sounded altogether too pleased about it.

“I can’t imagine why,” Tom said breezily, his smile just a little more frozen than usual.

An answer came quickly. “It’s because he thinks you murdered Daisy Meadowes.”

“Yes, thank you, Harrison,” Tom bit out, faux-cheerily.

“He does?” Orion gasped. “But that’s awful! How could he think that? I mean, you’re not overly
nice, but you wouldn’t kill anyone!”

“He thinks Riddle’s a psychopath,” Harrison said helpfully.

Orion gasped even louder, and Tom thought there might have been actual tears in his eyes.

“Hey Peters,” Atticus said suddenly, turning to their fellow Slytherin. “Have you done the Charms
homework?”

“Yes,” Harrison admitted, “But I think Riddle would be more useful if you want homework
help…”

Tom preened subtly.

Atticus fixed Harrison with a dubious stare. “Tom doesn’t take Charms.”

Harrison shrugged. “Even so… He probably knows the course anyway.”

“Yes,” Atticus said slowly, “but Tom doesn’t offer homework help. He thinks it ‘encourages
dependence’ and ‘limits creativity’.”

Ah, Tom recalled fondly, the lies one came up with to get rid of clingy year mates.

“Oh,” Harrison blinked. “He gave me help.”

Tom remembered it well. He’d encountered Harrison in the library, frowning over the theory of an Alarte Ascendare spell. He had to admit it gave him a rush to help the boy, as Harrison did tend to edge over Tom in regard to the practical side of DA. He seemed to have a ridiculous amount of experience, and if Tom didn’t know better, he’d say Harrison had been fighting for his life for most of his childhood. Helping Harrison seemed almost like winning.

(There was also the strange, almost greedy relish that curled in the pit of his stomach when Harrison stared up at him in complete concentration. It was bizarre.)

And so Tom had explained the theory behind the spell (it was all about focusing on the movement of the air around the person rather than the person, and there was an equation on the ratio of will. It was all rather simple stuff). Somehow the image of Harrison nodding and obediently scribbling down everything Tom said was addictive- almost bewitching, really- and he ended up offering to go outside and practice the practical side of it. And at the end, when Harrison sent a statue halfway across the courtyard and whooped in delight, he turned to Tom and said ‘you’re a really good teacher’, with an odd tilt of his head. It had been strangely mournful, like some sort of opportunity had been lost- Tom could remember it well.

A strangled squawk drew Tom back to the present.

“He- he helped you?!” Atticus squeaked. “But he never helps anyone!”

“I remember you begging Tom to help with Astronomy last year. You cried, didn’t you, Atty boy?” Rupert sniggered.

“OWLs were a stressful period in everyone’s lives-“ Atticus huffed. “But that’s not the point! Tom never helps, even when you diplomatically request-“

“Whine like a baby,” Rupert coughed.

“-Even when you diplomatically request his assistance.”

Tom grew bored with the conversation. He had better places to be, and this conversation was doing nothing to distract him from the memory of Dumbledore’s suspicious smiles. He shut them down with a sharp, “Perhaps Harrison’s just special,” and an ‘I’m sure he’s more than capable helping with your homework Avery, even if you yourself are struggling.”

Atticus could do little but splutter in response.

December drew upon them quickly, and the prospect of Christmas crept near. Soon enough, Orion was waking Harry from a nightmare in which Luna and Hermione wrapped the Invisibility cloak around him tightly and dropped Harry into deep grave, whilst Ron read his last rites in a sombre tone at the graveside.

“It’s snowing!” Orion hissed excitedly.

“You’re an actual five year old,” Harry mumbled into the warmth of his pillow.
Orion wasn’t wrong though, and the effort of clambering out of bed and stumbling to the window proved worth it in the end. Overnight, Hogwarts had been covered by a crisp, clean duvet of white, and even sleep-clouded Harry was eager to go outside and leave his mark. There was nothing quite like being the first one to make a footprint in thick, new snow.

“I love snow!” Orion announced. “Lucretia and I used to make the most wonderful snow angels. Meissa tried to copy us, but she couldn’t walk very well then. Lucretia used to push her over.” Orion smiled.

“Lucretia sounds dangerous,” Harry raised an eyebrow, yawning.

“Oh, she is. Vicious, really. Mother wants to get her into a marriage as soon as possible- she thinks Cretia will scare off potential husbands- but Lucretia’s having none of it. I think she’s the only one of us who ever really stood up to Mother. And besides, there are always people willing to marry the first-born daughter of the Black family, even if Lucretia can’t inherit. She’s valuable.”

Harry couldn’t deny that it was vaguely disturbing to hear Orion discussing his sister like a piece of meat. *Product of the time,* he told himself. Besides, it was obvious that Orion loved his family deeply.

“Is Meissa the same? So… dangerous?” Harry asked, shrugging on a jumper.

“Oh no,” Orion assured him. “Meissa’s quite… well, I wouldn’t like to say disconnected… but yes, I suppose: disconnected. She’s an utter delight, and really quite sensible, but very removed? I mean, she’s a child, so it’s not like she’s emotionless, but… she’s not like Lucretia, no. I think it comes from being alone with Mother and Rigel. They’re quite high-pressure. She plays a mean game of snap, though. She wrote to me that she was bringing her cards to the next hospital sleepover with Rigel.”

Harry laughed. “I bet Rigel loves those.”

“I don’t think he’s ever had as many carefully-calculated makeovers in his life.”

The two boys chuckled.

“Can you both shut it? *Some* of us need the weekend for sleep,” someone in the dormitory groaned- Harry suspected it was Rupert.

“But why would you sleep when it’s snowing outside?” Orion asked brightly, bouncing slightly. Distraction was over, and he was back on track.

“’Cause I can’t run on hope alone?” Rupert muttered, chucking a pillow vaguely in Orion’s direction.

“And Binns is determined to kill us with homework,” Atticus added now in a muffled voice; little more than a shifting lump hidden under his duvet.

Lestrange let out a weird sort of hiss that probably also equated to ‘shut up’.

But Orion’s enthusiasm wouldn’t be quelled. “But the sun is shining-“

“Flickering,” Rupert mumbled.

“The birds are singing-“
“Screaming.”
“The day is beautiful-“
“Crap.”
“And the world is ready for the taking!”

Rupert keened pitifully.

“Oh, come on!” Orion wheedled. “Let’s have a snowball fight. We haven’t had one of those since first year!”

“And with good reason,” Riddle said smoothly, emerging from the bathroom, drying his hair with a towel. God, he even looked good in the morning, it was unfair really. And there was just that one droplet of water- Harry stopped that thought before it could run any further. “The last snowball fight ended in tears,” Riddle continued, directing his gaze pointedly towards Atticus.

Harry was sure that, if it hadn’t been Riddle- who the Slytherin boys were sizeably scared of, even in the mornings- who said it, Atticus would have replied with a ‘fuck you’.

Instead, Atticus bit his tongue and replied with an impressively controlled: “Snowball fights are common.”

“As are public demotions at Ministry balls, but your father would know all about that,” Rupert said quickly, sitting up and behaving suddenly more lively. “On second thought, a snowball fight sounds great.”

And that was all it took. Apparently the prospect of Atticus in tears was all Rupert needed to hear before he agreed to Orion’s proposal, and once Rupert and Orion were united in a goal, there was little that could stop them. Even Riddle agreed to participate once Harry asked him personally, and so by the time lunchtime rolled around, there was an interyear Slytherin snowball match all set up.

It was really quite impressive actually.

They met in the courtyard; little first years buzzing around the area, whilst seventh years looked vaguely more solemn and loomed in the corner. Harry caught Lestrange glaring at him with an expression of bloodlust on his face, but that was pretty normal.

“All right!” Orion yelled to the gathered Slytherins, who surged forwards to cluster around him at the foot of a frozen-over fountain. “This is your standard snowball battle. Teams and alliances allowed, but last one standing-slash-without frostbite wins!”

“What’s the prize?!” a voice yelled.

“The self-actualisation of knowing you won?!” Orion offered cheerfully.

Loud grumbles followed.

“And I’ll throw in a hundred galleons!”

There was much more enthusiasm in response to that. Even Harry felt a stab of interest. A hundred galleons was a lot. That was… Harry mentally did the maths. That was around five hundred pounds! That was the kind of money that Aunt Petunia would buy a new sofa with, and then boast to the neighbours about it loudly.
Amidst all the excitement, Harry’s ears tuned in to the familiar voice behind him. Huh. That sounded like Walburga.

“Of course I won’t take part in a ridiculous snowball fight, for heaven’s sake. I have my standards! I am not getting both cold and wet in one day!”

Yes, that was definitely Walburga. Which meant that Druella should be close by…

“Oh cheer up, ‘Burga! It’ll be fun. And we could get a hundred galleons.”

There she was.

“Or,” Walburga said loftily, “I could walk up to my room right now, and find more money than that in the pocket of my robe.”

Harry thought was bizarre to hear over five hundred pounds discussed in such a blasé manner. Yes, technically Harry used to have a huge trust fund, and was probably moderately rich. But before that he was practically a slave for the Dursleys, and now, stranded in the 1940s, Harry had access to nothing more than the pennies he could scrape in from various odd jobs, and the Hogwarts orphan fund.

Huh. Thinking about it, Harry could really do with that hundred galleons.

“Peters.”

Harry startled at being addressed. He spun around abruptly, and came face to face with Druella, who wore an amused smirk. She had apparently enjoyed his surprise.

Both of the girls were wrapped up warm; Walburga in a pea green coat and pink scarf, looking very put-together with her hair twisted back into some kind of French twist. (Harry remembered that Hermione had tried that once, before deciding it wouldn’t work with curly hair. There had been anger.) Druella was considerably less elegant, her hair still in a wild mess, spilling out from a thick Slytherin scarf, and her eyes alight with excitement. Her coat looked heavier and more waterproof than Walburga.

“You can call me Harry, y’know. Or Harrison, if you want.”

“Harry then,” Druella said, obviously humouring him. “More to the point: are you taking part in the snowball fight? Some people,” she looked meaningfully at Walburga, “aren’t very enthusiastic.”

“Er, yeah. I think so. I mean, Orion would probably kill me if I didn’t.” Harry shrugged.

“He wouldn’t kill you,” Druella said slowly. “He’d probably just cry. A lot. Or scream, maybe.”

“Orion’s a screamer,” Walburga said wisely.

Druella snorted.

“Ella!” Walburga gasped in outrage, apparently just realising what she’d said, and how it could have been interpreted. “There’s no need to be crude.”

Druella shrugged innocently. “It’s not like it’s unfounded…”

“We kissed once!”

Harry’s eyes shot wide open, and his jaw dropped. He’d thought Orion’s crush was a remnant of
childhood soppiness but… “You kissed?” he wheezed.

“It was Christmas and there was mistletoe,” Walburga dismissed. And then, more defensively: “All cousins kiss at some point.”

Harry wasn’t sure about much, but he was sure that he and Dudley had never kissed.

“No, ‘Burga, all Black cousins kiss at some point,” Druella correctly airily.

“Being cousins is nothing,” Walburga said flippantly. “I have an aunt who had an affair with her brother, and then married a prince.”

Druella grinned. “I love your family. They’re so much more interesting than mine.”

“I know,” Walburga bumped her shoulder against Druella’s. “I’m still not taking part in the snowball fight.”

“Oh, come on-!”

There was a hand on Harry’s shoulder, and a low voice on his left. “Are we all ready for battle?”

Harry jumped for the second time that day, as Tom Riddle’s lips practically touched his ear. Harry yelped: “Merlin, Riddle, what are you doing?” and leapt away, heart hammering.

Riddle blinked innocently, “I was just asking if you’re ready for the snowball fight. No need to overreact.” But the smirk pulling on the corner of his lips betrayed him- he knew exactly why Harry had protested.

Druella’s eyebrows shot up. “Tom, you’re playing?! You’ve never joined us for one of our ‘insignificant, little game’ before.”

She seemed to be quoting Riddle, which didn’t surprise Harry at all.

“How could I say no when Harrison requested me personally?” Riddle asked suavely, and whilst Harry’s cheeks flushed a little red, he mostly just rolled his eyes.

“That was all it took?” Walburga asked, oddly excited. “My, how curious.”

“Not really,” Harry shrugged, not seeing the point. As much as he hated to admit it, Riddle usually responded to politeness.

“STARTING IN FIVE MINUTES!” Orion’s amplified voice echoed around the courtyard, and Harry saw several enthused first years jumping up and down. They looked a bit like squirrels.

“Time for me to go back to the castle then,” Walburga said, smoothing down her skirts and drawing her coat closer to herself.

Druella pouted. “Really? You won’t stay? Even Riddle’s taking part!”

“Riddle’s not a lady,” Walburga said primly, “I’m far too sensible to throw snow at people for ‘fun’.” And then she turned on her heel and began striding away.

“Being a lady doesn’t stop you from having fun! Don’t let your gender define you!” Druella called after her, but Walburga was already back inside the warm castle. Druella mumbled something like, “Pathetic… stereotype… roles,” before groaning in disappointment, and leaving to find her other friends, with little more than a “see you later”.
And that left Harry and Riddle alone.

“Maybe Walburga had the right idea,” Harry said, shivering. It was bitterly cold, and the soles of his poor quality shoes weren’t doing much.

“You can do magic,” Riddle reminded him sardonically, but waved his wand nonetheless. Harry felt a warming spell settle around his shoulders, heavy and thick around him like a cloak of heat.

“Oh. Thanks,” Harry said, taken aback by the gesture.

“…It’s snowing again.” Riddle said, softly.

And indeed it was. The sky had opened up once more, and little crystals of ice were floating down, dancing on the air. The sky was sparkling like the candles in the Great Hall, and Harry opened his mouth to catch a flake on his tongue. The chill exploded on his taste-buds, and he licked his chapped lips. When Harry glanced over at Riddle, he had to laugh. The Slytherin prefect’s nose was a nice, ‘subtle’ red, and his dark hair was decorated tiny snowflakes, crusting at the tip.

Riddle sniffed. “I’m not sure why you’re laughing, you look just as ridiculous.”

“Sure I do,” Harry grinned. “So why are you over here, Riddle, chatting with me? You’re not one for small talk if it doesn’t benefit you.”

Riddle rolled his eyes. “It is my belief that we would have the best chance of success if we worked together.”

“I thought it was just an ‘insignificant little game’,;” Harry quoted dryly.

“Yes, but now it’s an insignificant little game that I intend to win.”

“You know there can only be one winner, right? And I know you’re not the type to split a prize.”

Riddle’s eyes flared with brief interest, but Harry didn’t know why. He covered it with a beatific smile soon enough. “We shall just have to make sure we’re the last ones left, and then we’ll see who wins from there. Although, I doubt it’ll be much of a contest…”

“Oh, yeah?” Harry smirked. “Try me.”

Harry and Riddle actually made a pretty excellent team. Riddle was incredibly tactically-minded- he would come up with elaborate yet effective plans to take down stubborn opponents. It was their concentrated, shielded pelting that finally caused Druella to give up. She limped away, looking bedraggled and dripping but thoroughly content. Harry, if he did say so himself, brought a raw instinct and recklessness that Riddle didn’t have. He went for the risky shots and was usually successful, and he lost count of the amount of times he targeted someone just before he or Riddle was hit.

It may have just been a snowball fight, but Harry thought it was probably the most fun he’d had in ages.

“So who actually won?” Harry asked Orion curiously. After the snowball fight, they had retreated to the Common room, hoping to warm up, and now most of the House was huddled around the fireplace. It was bizarrely friendly (although there was the usual posturing and intimidation attempts— it was Slytherin, after all).
“Mariana Wheelan. After you and Tom took each other out— (Harry and Riddle had gotten bored of teamwork, and decided it was much more of a challenge if they fought each other) —there wasn’t much left for her to do. She just had to distract Rupert long enough to dump snow down the back of his collar. And of course, Rupert being Rupert, that wasn’t difficult.”

“He didn’t seem that disappointed though.”

“No, after Atticus gave up, Rupert sort of lost interest.” Orion pouted.

“So what are you doing now?” Harry asked, peering over Orion’s shoulder. He appeared to be engaged in some sort of Ancient Runes project, and it all looked like the kind complex theory that made Hermione swoon, and Harry’s head spin. “Homework?”

“Oh no, this is just for fun.”

“…Fun?”

“I’m looking at my muggle-repellent charm,” Orion replied casually. “The wards department sent it back. Apparently it’s not stable enough to cover large areas, which obviously makes it a bit useless. I’m looking for a compatible stabilising unit, to use for the ward stones. I’m thinking some kind of wood, to ground it. Maybe cherry?”

“Would you find that in the supply cupboard?” Harry asked doubtfully.

“No, I don’t think so. We don’t use a lot of bark in potions, do we?” Orion mused. He didn’t let it bring him down for long. “I suppose we’ll just have to go into the Forbidden Forrest then!”

Harry blinked. “What, now?”

“Of course! They said if I send the improved charm back within 24 hours, it’ll be top priority!” Orion looked delighted, but even Harry could see that it was a vaguely-disguised corporate manipulation. “I need to get this ward completed as soon as possible, and I can’t do that if I don’t have cherry wood.”

Oh dear, Orion looked determined. It was very hard to dissuade Orion when he was got an idea into his head (Harry, if he was really honest with himself, was probably just as bull-headed), however Harry was going to try. The last time he’d wandered into the Forbidden Forest desperately hoping for the best, it hadn’t gone well (Acromantulas, centaurs, Umbridge screaming in the distance).

“It’s dark…” Harry said persuasively. Merlin, when had he become the sensible one, trying to steer others away from recklessness? Time travel did weird things to you. “Maybe we should wait, mate. At least until there’s light.”

“We have light! Lumos!” Orion said in reply, holding his wand up, the tip glowing a bright white.

Harry looked uncertain.

Orion sighed dramatically. “Look, Harry, I don’t expect you to come with me.” Despite that, Orion’s eyes widened pleadingly, and Harry was reminded strongly of kittens.

“Don’t do the eye thing- no, don’t.” Harry sighed, but felt a familiar thrill of excitement and daring run through him, regardless. “Okay, fine. I’m in.”

Orion beamed.
“You really should have been in Hufflepuff, you know. Or Gryffindor,” Harry told him.

“Maybe,” Orion admitted, “but Mother would have crucioed me. *Plus,*” he said defensively, “I persuaded the Hat to put me in Slytherin. That takes manipulation, right?”

It didn’t take *that* much manipulation- Harry himself had done it. Although, looking at where he was now… perhaps what Orion said had a bit of truth to it.

Just a bit.

The Forbidden Forest was so, so familiar. It was what Harry had been considering all those nights ago, when Riddle found him at the edge of the forest.

The castle- now that was different; it *looked* different, it had been shifted and renovated and altered over the years, so much so that Harry sometimes found himself getting lost all over again. But the forest, despite the fact that it was probably even more changed than the castle- well, the forest looked exactly the same as it would in fifty years’ time. (Except for the absence of the Whomping Willow, of course, but Harry could honestly say that it wasn’t missed.)

The trees were just as twisted and clawed as ever, reaching desperate hands into the sky and spreading their fingers wide. The branches grasped wildly at moonlight, thrusting sharp shoots at beams of fresh, white light, which was turned greenish-grey under the canopies.

“So, do you know where the cherry wood is?” Harry asked Orion, as they walked along something that was either a path or a long shadow- it was difficult to tell.

“No!” Orion’s answer was remarkably cheerful.

“…Do you know what it looks like?”

“Sort of?”

“…Do you have any idea what we’re doing?”

“Not particularly!”

Harry groaned. A shiver ran down his spine, and he longed for the comforting, scratchy warmth of Mrs Weasley’s scarves, knitted in Gryffindor red and gold. “So we’re just wandering around the forest until we find something?”

“Pretty much. Isn’t this exciting!?”

Harry groaned again, even louder this time. Was this how Ron and Hermione had felt when he’d dragged them into one of *his* improvised adventures?

“Oh cheer up!” Orion said, bumping his shoulder against Harry’s. “It’ll be fine! The Forbidden forest isn’t *that* big…”

Harry stared at his friend in horror. “You’ve never been in the forest before, have you?”

“No,“ Orion admitted airily, bouncing slightly.

“At least it’s a weekend,” Harry reflected. They had the whole night to search, and he wouldn’t have to get up in the morning. Harry was bad enough at waking up as it was.
Orion grinned. “Come on- cheer up! I’ve always wanted to have a proper adventure! And if I can get a ward approved before I’ve left school, I’ll have an amazing application to the Guild of Wardmasters.”

Harry still thought it sounded vaguely like something out of those roleplay games Dudley swore he didn’t play, but this was the wizarding world, after all. He probably shouldn’t judge. “Are you still doing your frogs first?”

“TOADS,” Orion corrected brightly. “And of course I am! Do you still want to be an Unspeakable?”

“Yeah,” Harry said determinedly, thinking of the knowledge hidden behind those spinning doors. He’d get home in no time. “Yeah, I do.”

“Well, you’d better start thinking about what to do in addition to Magical Theory TOADS,” Orion advised. “It’s only a year away.”

“A year and quite a bit,” Harry said dubiously. “I think I’ve got a- WOAH!”

Harry fell. And for once, it was not a dementor, or a troll, or a Death Eater that Harry had met his match in. No. It was tree root.

The night sky spun queasily above him.

“Are you okay? That looked like it might have hurt,” Orion fussed, leaning over Harry and flapping his hands concernedly. Honestly, it was like Mrs Weasley was in the forest with them.

“I’m fine,” Harry winced, pressing a hand to his tender head. “I just smacked my forehead on a rock.”

“I think it’s bleeding,” Orion fretted. “Don’t move too much! I would fix it, but I’m awful at healing spells- I never had to learn them, see, and Mother either didn’t want us to use them, or she could do it for us. And Tom’s the one who-”

“Stop worrying,” Harry said gently, shutting his eyes tightly against a sharp headache. “Ow.”

“We should probably get you back to the castle-“

“No, don’t be ridiculous. We’ve come all the way out here to find cherry wood- we are gonna find cherry wood,” Harry said firmly. “Now, if you would just, er, help me up…yeah, that should do it…”

As Orion rushed to help Harry get to his feet, something metal clattered away from them in the darkness, striking something wooden.

They froze.

“I think I kicked something.” Harry said slowly. Orion nodded, and together they crept forwards, nearing the dark silhouette of a tree trunk. Harry went to crouch down, but Orion stopped him, gesturing to Harry’s head, and instead bend down himself. Orion picked up a sharp, glinting object and held it up to the moonlight, angling it left and right.

“What is it?” Orion asked curiously, pressing his finger against the pointy end.

“It’s an arrowhead,” Harry murmured curiously, squinting painfully. “Must’ve been what I hit my head on.”
“But what in the name of Merlin is an arrowhead doing in the Forbidden Forest? No wizard uses arrows- only muggles use that kind of brutality.”

Harry was too distracted to reprimand Orion- finally, his addled brain caught up. “…Oh shit.”

“What?”

“Well, I, er,” Harry scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. “I may have forgotten to mention, but… a herd of centaurs live in this forest. And they’re, uh, pretty territorial.”

“Oh, I suppose we should avoid them then,” Orion said brightly.

“Might be easier said than done,” Harry pointed out sensibly, but agreed nonetheless.

The two made the decision to carry on eastwards, because Harry ‘thought there probably weren’t that many centaurs in the east bit of the forest, I meant I could wrong, but I thought they were westish last time, actually maybe we should just go north for safe measure’. If Harry was honest, he hadn’t really been concentrating on directions the last time he went into the forest. He had been too busy focussing on Sirius’ impending doom.

No, don’t go there.

Harry and Orion kept moving. The wind screamed through the trees around them, and Harry found himself glancing over his shoulder, sure he wasn’t imagining the sound of hooves in the background.

He wasn’t sure how much time passed before they came to a glade clear of trees, where the moonlight bathed it in swathes of milky light; dappling the grass with speckles of sparkling frost.

A proper, healthy unicorn, not like Harry’s first year, stood in the centre of the glade, tossing its mane and stamping the ground. It seemed to be made out of the same moonlight that flooded the grass; silky smooth and intangible to the touch. Orion stepped closer, shuffling into the open and raising an awed palm. The unicorn lowered its head to allow the contact, letting Orion run his fingers through its long mane.

“It’s beautiful,” Harry breathed softly, his breath crystallising on the breeze.

“This is amazing,” Orion breathed. “They barely ever let people come near them.”

Harry gazed up at the animal, pretty sure there were actual stars in his eyes. It was so pretty.

“Come and pet it,” Orion said encouragingly, beckoning Harry over.

“Don’t they really hate men?” Harry asked dubiously, staying where he was, despite his urge to move closer and hug it.

“That’s mostly the females of the species,” Orion dismissed. “This one’s a boy, aren’t you? Yes, you are; yes, you are!” he cooed, and the unicorn neighed in response.

Harry took an uncertain step forwards, frost-coated leaves cracking beneath the soles of his shoes. Hagrid had taught him, if nothing else, to be cautious around creatures, especially if they were supposedly ‘harmless’. However, once Harry got within touching distance of the unicorn’s white flank, he couldn’t stop himself from stretching out a hand to stoke it. As his fingers made contact, the animal moved.

Now, Harry was face to face with a curious unicorn.
He froze.

Somewhere outside his peripheral vision, he heard Orion go: “Aww, he likes you!”

The unicorn moved closer and closer, barely blinking. Harry was tense: too nervous to do so much as scratch his nose. Slowly, gradually, the unicorn leant down over him, and swiped a wet tongue across his forehead. From the sting, Harry realised that it had licked his forehead wound.

Harry desperately tried to remember if unicorns drank blood.

His shock made him blink, and he accidentally met the unicorn’s eye.

It was like being ripped apart, he thought, but it didn’t hurt. It was like being torn open and every piece of him searched and scanned for corruption. The only thing Harry could think was ‘please don’t see the fantasy about Riddle, please don’t see the fantasy about Riddle…”

Suddenly, there was a bright, hot pain in his chest, so similar to when he’d worn the pendant, but Harry still couldn’t break the unicorn’s gaze. He shrieked as the pain intensified, and the unicorn’s eyes flashed.

Harry hadn’t thought unicorns could scream, but he’d been wrong.

He fell backwards as the unicorn reared up on its hind legs, kicking sharply at the space where Harry’s head had been just seconds before.

Harry heard Orion yell, “Merlin!” and then his hands fastened under Harry’s armpits, and he was tugging Harry away. Harry helped, scrambling on his back away from the furious animal.

“What did you do?” Orion asked urgently.

“I dunno! It is normal for unicorns to do this?” Harry replied in panic, shielding his face from a spray of dirt as the unicorn tore at the ground with huge hooves and- Harry had never considered this before- but that horn looked really sharp. Harry could just envision it sliding between his ribs and out the other side, glistening with blood.

“Of course they don’t!” Orion hissed. “Unicorns never attack anyone!”

“Well, don’t I feel special?” Harry said sarcastically as Orion pulled him to his feet. “Shit. What so we do?”

“We can’t run,” Orion said. “It would catch us easily. And there’s no point firing spells at it: it takes a powerful wizard to bring down a unicorn, and some really dark magic that I haven’t learnt yet. So I suppose…” Orion gasped and they both scooted back as the unicorn surged forwards, “-that we should hide.”

“Hide where?” Harry asked, looking around wildly. “It’ll see us wherever we go! Is there an invisibility spell or something?”

“Unicorns sense magic.”

“But if we run and then immediately find shelter, we could confuse it?” Harry suggested.

But as the suggestion was made, an arrow came whistling through the air and embedded into a tree. Harry and Orion jerked, holding onto one another as the sound of a second pair of hooves came closer, and then a third pair, and then there were so many hooves that Harry couldn’t keep count.
A herd of centaurs burst into the clearing.

The unicorn let out an uncertain bray, the fevered light clearing from its eyes, and trotted backwards. The centaurs galloped forwards, forming a tight circle around the skittish animal. Their bows were raised, but no more arrows were fired. The centaurs simply surrounded the unicorn, keeping in a tight formation.

One of the centaurs: with dark skin, almost black, trotted forwards. He tossed his long hair (which was actually quite beautiful, Harry noticed), and spoke in a low gravelly tone. “You must leave.”

Orion didn’t get the memo, gesturing earnestly. “That was amazing! The way you just galloped in-with the arrow- and then the circle- and how did you know we needed help?! Why did you help us?! Why did the unicorn attack, they’re not supposed to do that?! And can you tell me what conditioner you use, your hair looks so soft-!”

“You exist wrong. You do not belong.” The centaur cut Orion off, but stared directly at Harry. “The unicorn has sensed that. A unicorn committing an act of murder would have stained this forest,” the centaur said slowly. “We do not care for humans, and have no such objections. Leave.”

Harry leant in to whisper. “Orion, I think we should go now.”

Orion, predictably, didn’t listen. “Just checking: has anyone got any cherry wood? Because I really need it for this ward I’m building- it’s actually a muggle repellent ward, and the ministry has expressed quite a strong interest- but I don’t know what a cherry tree looks like, you see-“

“You don’t know what a cherry tree looks like?” one of the younger-looking centaurs jeered.

“Not really.” Orion said honestly. “Do you?”

“Of course I do!” the young centaur snorted. And then he pointed at one of the nearby trees that looked mostly the same as the others. “It’s obvious.”

“Thanks!” Orion said eagerly. “If we could just take some of that-“

“SILENCE!” The older, dark centaur roared, and it seemed like the entire Forbidden Forest fell mute. The younger centaur startled and scrambled backwards, hiding behind another of the herd.

“You will leave. You will not touch the trees, and you will leave. Or I will kill you.” And then the dark centaur raised its bow and pointed it towards Orion’s chest.

Harry felt Orion tense. So now he got it.

“Oh,” Orion said softly, and Harry could hear how disappointed he was. He turned to Harry, and Harry saw the downcast glisten to his eyes. “We’ll go.”

Oh hell. Harry would regret this.

He darted forwards, sliding his wand out and firing a slicing charm at the cherry tree. He ducked as an arrow cut through the air above him, and keep running. Harry grabbed the fallen branch and kept moving, turning back and tugging Orion by the arm.

“Run!” he ordered, and it didn’t take long for Orion to work through the shock and start moving his legs. And then they were sprinting through the forest, back towards the castle, and safety.

“You are broken, human!” Harry heard the centaur yell, but ignored him. “You will
“What’s he talking about?” Orion asked breathlessly.

“Dunno, don’t currently care. Hope this is enough wood.” Harry panted, his feet pounding over the snow-covered forest floor. “Wasn’t sure how much you’d need.”

Orion ducked to narrowly avoid a low hanging vine. “Well, ideally I could do with a bit more…”

“Oh, shut it,” Harry rolled his eyes, skidding over a patch of frost.

“Are they still behind us?” Orion asked.

An arrow thudded in the trunk of a tree just ahead of them.

“Well, that answers that question.”

Somehow, Harry and Orion got back to the castle. Harry couldn’t quite remember how- he thought they might have hidden in a hollow at some point. All he knew was that he was cold, damp, and thoroughly satisfied. He’d forgotten how great it felt to be utterly stupid.

They got back to the castle very late, and very giddy.

“Shit!” Harry hissed, ducking back around a corner.

“What?” Orion asked, trying to poke his head around to see what was going on. Harry pulled him back.

“It’s Riddle on patrol.”

“But he’s right outside the Slytherin common room entrance,” Orion pouted. “How are we supposed to get in?”

Harry could see the cogs in Orion’s head turning.

“No,” Harry said immediately. “We are not sleeping in the library, or a classroom, or wherever else you can think of that will be cold or uncomfortable. We’ll just tell Riddle that we need to get in, and accept the punishment.”

“But Tom’s scary,” Orion whined, long hair falling into puppy-dog eyes.

“Maybe we can stun him,” Harry considered, tilting his head to one side.

“Stun who?”

Orion and Harry yelped, jumping around to find Riddle standing behind them, Prefect badge emblazoned proudly, wearing an unimpressed expression.

“I hope you’re not discussing attacking a Prefect,” Riddle continued. He gave a toothy grin. “You may just have to try your luck.”

Harry was so tempted. His fingers twitched towards his pocket, where he knew his wand rested, but Harry was also tired and more than slightly delirious from running through a forest at night, chased by angry centaurs- so he resisted. “Actually Riddle,” Harry said with a saccharine smile, “I think getting up the stairs to the dormitory might be more of a challenge, so if you could just…”
“Uh uh, not so fast,” Riddle held up an elegant hand to stop them, and Harry had never wanted to stomp on something so badly. “I still have a few questions.”

“Can we make this quick? It’s late and I’m tired.”

“Precisely.” Riddle gained a smug smile. “What draws you out at these late hours?”

“Charms practise,” Harry said confidently.

Riddle raised a thin eyebrow. “Charms practise?”

“Yeah. Orion said he’d help me with charms revision.”

“Any particular spell?”

“All of them.”

“Let’s say, for one absurd moment, that I believed you,” Riddle suggested. It was very clear that he did not believe them. “I am still curious about one, last thing.”

“What?” Harry groaned, wondering what petty grievance Riddle could have now.

“Why on earth are you dragging a branch in with you?”

As if in slow motion, Harry looked down at his left hand and—sure enough—he was still holding the huge cherry tree branch in one hand. Oh. “For something to practise on,” he blurted out quickly.

“And you’re bringing it back to the dormitories because…?”

“It’s my favourite… y’know… stick,” Harry said weakly. “And I didn’t want to… loose it, or something.”

“What a well-constructed story,” Riddle told them condescendingly. “I suppose you should get to bed now. You must be tired from all the… charms practise.”

Harry nodded stiffly—he still wanted to punch Riddle, perhaps it was the exhaustion speaking, or just his common sense for once- and grabbed Orion’s arm. But before he could get more than a few steps down the corridor—

“Harrison? Orion?” Riddle called out.

The boys turned to him. Harry was sure that he looked on the verge of murder.

“Thirty points from Slytherin. Each.”

“Each?!” Harry repeated disbelievingly. “That’s… that’s…”

“Sixty points,” Riddle finished smugly. “Wonderful arithmetic skills. Such a shame you didn’t take Arithmancy.”

Harry snarled at the irritating Slytherin Prefect, feeling a heated urge to do something curled within his stomach. “This is just because I got you out in the snowball fight.”

“I think you’ll find that I defeated you- and I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Riddle adopted a sweet, infuriating little smile, and waved to them. “Good night.”
“Prick,” Harry muttered—there was absolutely no fondness to his tone, none at all—and then he continued up to bed, dragging the cherry branch with him.

He did, however, stop on the stairs after spotting a handkerchief left lying on the ground. It should have been a light blue, but was stained with drops of red. Perhaps someone had a nose bleed? Harry peered down at the monogrammed letters in the corner, which spelt out something like e.e.l in overly-looped stitch.

Huh, Harry shrugged. Weird. And then he continued on his way.

Chapter End Notes

Check out my tumblr for (maybe) updates, comments, and previews. #spon.
http://vivypotter.tumblr.com/
The next chapter should be out just after Christmas, and will include all that good Christmas holiday stuff. It's a VERY major chapter, and promises to be lengthy ;) So look forwards to that!
Harry awoke in panic at ten o’clock, cursed, and threw back his duvet.

“What are you doing?” Dolohov mumbled into his pillow.

“It’s Monday!” Harry yelped. “We’re late!”

“It’s the Christmas holidays, you mudblood,” Atticus sneered, stepping into the room from the bathroom.

“Oh,” Harry said, deciding it wasn’t worth explaining why that was both inaccurate and offensive, and went back to sleep.

It was in the mirror whilst brushing his teeth that Harry saw it. A brief glimpse of mountain ranges (Harry recognised them from a postcard Hermione sent once, he thought they might have been French), and a dark figure: wearing a cruel-looking crown of dark, twisted metal. The figure was
faceless, but Harry glimpsed an angry snarl beneath the shadows.

And then it was gone.

The toothbrush dropped from his hand, clattering in the sink, and Harry was left panting and wide-eyed; nothing but his own wan face reflected back at him. His chest was tight; like something had been pressed against his mouth and held there. It was an oddly familiar feeling.

Harry took a deep breath, and cold air rushed to fill his lungs. The tension that he hadn’t even realised was there- his shoulders tight, and his knees locked- melted away, and he slumped.

“That was weird,” Harry murmured, frowning at his reflection. He ran a finger over the golden lines tracing his features- they had grown fainter over time, and often Harry forgot he had them- but that morning, they were subtly brighter.

“Weird,” he breathed, again. He should probably go to the Hospital Wing- shortness of breath wasn’t normal, was it?- but he’d never been fond of white walls and stern matrons.

It was probably just a cold. Winter was coming quick.

Riddle wasn’t at lunch, and Harry was surprised to realise that he… well, ‘missed’ probably wasn’t the right word, but he certainly noticed Riddle’s absence.

“Where’s Riddle?” Harry asked, peering around the hall for a familiar head of perfect hair.

“Merlin knows,” Orion mumbled through a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

“And where’s everyone else?” Harry realised slowly. Usually they were joined by a crowd at lunch, but today it was just Harry and Orion.

“Most of them have gone home for the holidays. Druella, Cassius and Walburga are gone, and Rupert is packing. Montgomery, Grahams, and Atticus are staying, I think, and- of course- Tom never goes home for Christmas.”

“What about you?”

Orion lit up. “Oh! I’m heading home this afternoon! I forgot to tell you, it was all very last minute. Rigel’s leaving the hospital for Christmas, so we’re going to have a traditional holiday, like we used to. Auntie Lycoris is visiting: she’s always a blast; and of course Walburga will be there-”

“Just avoid the mistletoe, mate. For your own sake,” Harry said suddenly.

“Oh,” Orion went bright red. “She told you about that?”

“About you two… kissing?” Harry grimaced. “Yeah, she did.”

“It was the best moment of my life.”

Harry shook his head balefully. One of the lower years tapped Orion on the shoulder to ask him something about Runes, and Orion was eager to engage them.

Suddenly, Riddle arrived at lunch, looking harried. He didn’t bother to sit down. Instead, he grabbed a pomegranate and sliced it in half swiftly, picking up a spoon.
“What’s got your wand in a twist?” Harry asked, raising an eyebrow at Riddle’s haste.

“Grahams wants to talk with me,” Riddle curled his lip, and seemed to spot something in the distance. Harry glanced in the same direction, but couldn’t spot a familiar head of red hair in the crowd. Riddle grimaced, and dropped the pomegranate onto Harry’s plate.

“I’ll see you later,” Riddle said, and left.

It was just a few minutes later that Montgomery Lestrange arrived at the table.

“Where’ve you been?” Orion noticed the new arrival and leaned over friendlily.

“Ran into Tommy,” Lestrange said quietly, an odd light in his eyes.

“But he was busy avoiding Grahams,” Harry interrupted.

“Haven’t you heard?” Orion said, frowning. “Grahams is in the Hospital wing. Some third-year pushed him down a flight of stairs. Luckily one of his Hufflepuff friends cast a cushioning spell—“

“So that must have happened this morning then? Just now?” Harry was confused. Otherwise, how could Grahams be in any fit state to be harassing Riddle if he was injured?

“No, Grahams went into the Hospital wing… two days ago, I think?” Orion corrected thoughtfully. “There’s no way he was anywhere near Tom this morning.”

Riddle had lied then, Harry thought. He wasn’t talking to Grahams. Why on earth had Riddle lied? There had to be a fairly significant reason- lying so obviously and without solid backup was a risky move, and Tom Riddle didn’t do risky moves.

“Maybe he got confused,” Orion suggested amicably. “Having Grahams be obsessed with you must breed some kind of paranoia. Perhaps Tom mistook him for someone else.”

“Because Tom Riddle is well known for his mistakes,” Harry said sarcastically.

“No one is perfect, Harry,” Orion said, not appearing to understand the gravity of the situation. “Not even Tom.”

“Yeah, but it means that it’s pretty significant when he’s not. A lie this obvious? Something’s going on.” Was Harry the only one who even vaguely understood how Riddle’s mind worked?

“I think Tom’s probably just a bit stressed. We were given a lot of Christmas homework, after all.”

Harry felt his heart stop. “We were?”

“Why do you look so shocked, and how can I make it worse?” Atticus asked drily, swinging his legs over the bench and taking a seat.

“Harry’s just very excited about the holiday homework,” Orion replied and- Merlin- he seemed like he believed what he was saying.

“Ecstatic,” Harry groaned.

“I’m sure Riddle will spoon-feed you the answers if you flutter your eyelashes enough,” Atticus said acidly.

“Bitterness isn’t a good look on anyone,” Harry replied, rolling his eyes at Atticus.
“And neither is that,” Atticus raised his eyebrows.

“What?”

“That thing,” Atticus pointed towards Harry’s chest.

Harry glanced down. Oh, he’d forgotten that he’d taken to wearing Daisy’s locket around his neck, feeling somehow safer with it on.

“I didn’t know you wore a locket!” Orion said brightly, reaching over to fish the necklace out from under Harry’s jumper. “It’s so pretty!”

“Yeah,” Harry said, carefully tucking the locket back under his clothing. “It’s, uh, pretty special.”

“Where did you get it?” Atticus asked, frowning.

Harry made the quick and simple decision to lie. “Er, someone gave it to me.”

“Oh, a special someone? Are you in love!?” Orion screeched, looking hopeful. “When you get married, you have to let me be your best man! And we can go out the night before, and hang out at this cool bar and tell each other our life stories, and have a zany adventure, and then almost be late to your wedding, but we’ll make it in time because the path of true love always runs smooth!”

“…That sounds fun?” Harry offered hesitantly. “But I’m really not in love…”

“Why do you have a necklace then?”

“I already said,” Harry repeated. “A friend gave it to me.”

“Because best friends always exchange jewellery,” Atticus snickered.

Harry glared at him and said cuttingly; “Careful Avery, or I won’t let you hide behind me next time something spooks you.”

Atticus sent Harry a scorching glare, but didn’t have a response.

Hooting overhead caught Harry’s attention, and he glanced upwards. The mail had arrived, a little later for the Christmas holidays. Owl after owl soared into the Great Hall, circling around the enchanted ceiling before descending.

“Did you know that a group of owls is actually called a parliament?” Orion said brightly, and Harry wondered- not for the first time- what was going on inside his head.

Before Harry could answer, one of the owls overhead, a grey and speckled one, dropped suddenly and landed on the table in front of Harry. The owl held a fancy envelope in its beak; the paper a tasteful shade of duck egg blue.

Harry winced. He was naming paint shades- Aunt Petunia had really rubbed off on him.

“That’s a Malfoy owl!” Orion said excitedly. “And a Malfoy invite! I can’t believe- quick, open it!”

Harry uncertainly took the letter from the owl’s beak. The owl gave him a haughty, acknowledging trill; and flew away. He inspected the envelope more closely, noticing the charm which caused the paper to glitter like ice, and then he broke the seal. Harry slid out a letter; unfolding it, and scanning the contents.
The Malfoy Family

CORDIALLY INVITES YOU TO ATTEND

A Christmas Ball.

This year’s theme: SNOW

23rd December 7:30pm

RSVP

“It’s an invitation to a Christmas party?” Harry said slowly. “I think? It’s a bit difficult to read the writing- it’s all quite… decorative.”

“I knew it!” Orion squealed, clapping his hands. “I mean I’d hoped but- oh, this is going to be so much fun!”

“What is it?”

“The Malfoy Christmas Ball is one of the most important social events of the season! And this just makes it even better! The party is always magnificent and the food is outstanding, but- and don’t tell anyone I said this,” Orion leaned in closely, lowering his voice. “Sometimes the company can be a little dull. But now that you’re coming, it’s bound to be delightful!”

“I haven’t said I’ll go,” Harry warned. A social to-do with the Malfoys sounded like the worst possible way to spend an evening.

“But you have to!”

“After all, you don’t want to piss off Tom, do you?” Atticus said snidely.

Harry rolled his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? Tom got you the invitation. There’s no way that Malfoy would send an invitation to a half-blood otherwise.”

Harry held his tongue about a certain tall, dark and handsome’s blood status. “Well, now I want to go even less.”

“You’re being silly,” Orion chided.

“Orion, mate, I can think of a hundred things I’d rather be doing than socialising with a bunch of purebloods who can barely keep their mouths shut about how inferior muggleborns are.”

“This is a very important opportunity. Don’t be ungrateful,” Atticus said viciously, getting to his feet and leaving. Harry watched him go and raised an eyebrow. Wow, Harry was really good at driving people off today.

“Don’t worry about Atticus,” Orion consoled him. “He’s just upset. The Avery family haven’t received an invitation since Atticus’ father made a spectacle of himself.”

“Oh.” Harry remembered the feeling he’d gotten so often at the Dursley’s; of being something shameful and hidden away, because of an offence he hadn’t even committed. He thawed, just a little.

“So you can see that an invite is really an honour, and you have to go! Come on! Tom and Abra...
are doing their best to welcome you into our culture. Don’t dismiss them.” Orion pleaded, looking quite desperate. And then, seeing that Harry still looked doubtful: “Please. I can’t sit silently by the chocolate fountain for the fourth year in a row.”

“Okay, fine,” Harry rolled his eyes. “But I don’t have any robes.”

Orion sighed in relief. “I can lend you some of my old ones. I get a new pair every year. You’re shorter than me, so they should fit you.”

Harry reckoned that Orion’s castoffs would be the most extravagant things he had ever worn in his life, but he agreed, not seeing much other choice.

“This will be the best Christmas yet!” Orion declared. “And now you have to help me pack, because I’m leaving in half an hour, and I haven’t started yet.”

Harry wandered through the corridors, feeling a little lost. Orion had left for home, promising to be back a few days before school started, and to send Harry his Christmas present by owl. Harry had explained that he didn’t strictly have enough money to buy Orion a present, but he’d do his best to find something. Orion had giggled, and told Harry that the point of giving presents wasn’t to get something back. It was to spread happiness, and to let someone else know you appreciated them.

Harry, once again, suggested that Orion should write greetings cards.

Orion seemed quite excited by the idea.

But he’d still departed, levitating a heavy trunk, and had left Harry all alone in the castle. For the first time in a while, Harry felt lonely- or perhaps he had just become more aware of it. The castle had emptied for the holidays, and it was quiet- almost silent, really. And so Harry found himself wandering down to the Quidditch Pitch. Perhaps he just needed to regain some of his old self, and fly.

And so he took the long walk down the north corridor. He’d grab one of the practise brooms and do some practise. They may not be great quality brooms, but Harry couldn’t afford any better.

*BANG!*

Something fell to the floor behind Harry, clattering on the cobbles. He spun, turning in time to see a sword fall from a suit of armour and bounce on the floor, wobbling over the stones. It came to a stop.

Harry glanced down the corridor, hair on the back of his neck prickling. He tensed, sliding his wand out of his pocket and clutching it in his fist. A step back. Another.

He was hit from behind. A sudden pain in his hand made him drop his wand, and he yelled as his face was smashed against stone. He heard a crunch and saw a crack in the panes of his glasses. Abruptly he was turned around, and the breath left him as his back hit the wall. Harry groaned, but blindly lashed out, and his fist hit someone’s head. Harry gripped at their hair, pulling and writhed, trying to escape from the binding grip.

Harry howled as he was smashed against the wall again. He felt a trickle run down the back of his neck. Blood. He kicked out, trying to throw off the grip, but a blinding pain followed. He thought his ankle might have been broken.
Harry finally slumped, head spinning and feeling queasy. He licked his lips, and blinked; eyesight focusing through his glasses. The figure was fuzzy at first, shimmering with every pound of Harry's headache; but gradually, they became clear.

"Lestrange," Harry spat, his throat hoarse.

Montgomery Lestrange grinned back viciously, eyes swimming with madness. He leaned in close to Harry, and sniffed at the blood shining in his hair. "Hello mudblood," he said, softly.

Harry struggled, fruitlessly thrashing.

"Uh uh uh," Lestrange said softly, holding up a hushing finger. "I'll be having this."

Lestrange reached up to Harry's neck, fastened his fingers around the chain of the locket, and then tugged brutally to the right. Harry winced as the chain bit into his neck, and he could barely breathe. His tongue felt heavy in his mouth, and he gasped desperately for air.

"Red is a nice colour on you," Lestrange said airily.

The chain broke, and the locket came with it. Air rushed back into Harry’s lungs, his chest heaving.

"S-stop," he gasped.

Lestrange dropped the locket, and stamped hard. It was crushed. "That solves that."

"You... you... killed Daisy Meadowes," Harry croaked, the pieces falling into place. Montgomery had been there this morning.... For almost every conversation, actually. In the dormitories, at the table...

"I did," he admitted eagerly, baring his teeth. "And she deserved it; filthy whore."

"Why?" Harry snarled, making an attempt to move, but being swiftly subdued.

Lestrange came close, tucking the hair behind Harry’s ear almost tenderly. "I heard her, you know. Screaming for help as her little boyfriend took her in the cupboard. His mother was a squib– their line is tainted. And she let that boy put his hands all over her, and spread his filth all over her.... I would’ve taken the boy, but he left and she had to do. They were both disgusting." Lestrange turned his head and spat on the ground, like the very word was poison.

Harry could see it in his mind’s eye:

*Lestrange stalking through the castle, halting as he heard girlish, muffled shrieks. He watched as a broom cupboard door swung open and out stumbled a girl, face red with anger. “We’re not going further! Stop asking!”*

"C'mon Daisy, just a quick go..." A boy followed her into the corridor, whining loudly.

"I told you George, I'm not in the mood:"

"You were in the mood yesterday!"

"I was drunk yesterday, George, I didn’t want-"*

*The boy moved closer, and she yelled “STOP ASKING!” with tears in her eyes.*

*The boy threw his hands up and marched away, muttering something about “crazy birds”. And then*
the girl was crying furiously, screaming something at him, heaving with angry little sobs and hugging herself tightly; and Lestrange was moving closer, and then his fingers were wrapped around her tiny little neck, and then he was dashing her skull against the floor, and watching the scarlet halo spread, and finger-painting in her shining blood that crusted and flaked on the naked flesh of her stomach, bruised and-

Harry retched, the taste of bile in his mouth. He wanted to slow his imagination down, but the sick gleam in Lestrange’s eye made him think he wasn’t far off, and he shook with the urge to vomit.

Lestrange finally let Harry go, stepping away like the idea of Harry throwing up was more disgusting than a girl’s murder. But Harry didn’t try to fight with his newfound freedom, too winded and nauseous to consider even running away.

“Why did you take the locket from… from her body?” Harry grunted, fighting to keep his lunch down. He had to know the whole story, for Daisy’s sake, the girl who had just been thrown from one disaster to another-

“It was pretty,” Lestrange said simply. “Far too pretty for her. But then Tommy so kindly told me you had it, and I knew that I had one last job to do, one last mudblood to grind to dust-“

“Wait, Riddle told you I had the locket?” Harry interrupted, his stomach sinking. Please no.

“This morning,” Lestrange grinned, like he could just sense that this was ripping Harry apart even more. “He told me of your suspicions about the locket, and then, when I saw it at lunch, I knew I had to move fast. I probably wouldn’t even have recognised it if dearest Tommy hadn’t told me you had it- sometimes memories just slip through.” Lestrange laughed, teeth sharp. “So you can thank him for this.” Lestrange raised a fist, painted with blood, and shrugged. “But you won’t thank him, of course, because you’ll be dead.”

Harry felt unspeakably betrayed. He had trusted Riddle, set aside his misgivings about his future and told Riddle something important and secret… and Riddle had thrown him to the lions.

A wave of hot anger and something that felt like sorrow rose within him, and Harry threw himself towards his wand, lying in the corridor a few feet away.

A heavy boot came down on his wrist, and Harry yowled like an injured cat; but simply changed his course, now heading towards Lestrange. Lestrange met him and threw blow after blow at his stomach and arms. Harry scratched and clawed as best he could, aiming for the eyes and throat; but without his wand, it was hopeless. In terms of physical strength, Lestrange was unbeatable.

God, Daisy Meadowes hadn’t a chance.

And neither did Harry.

Harry did get a moment where he brought his knee up and sent Lestrange reeling, but as Harry scrambled to flee, a hand fastened around his ankle and pulled him back down to collide, chin against cobbles, with the floor.

The fight was short-lasted. It wasn’t difficult for Lestrange to finally hold Harry down, crouch over his bruised, limp body, and then give the boy a bloody grin. “Time for the mudblood-“

“I’m a halfblood, you dick,” Harry interjected weakly.

“To die.” And Lestrange lifted a huge first, ready to deliver a blow that Harry was sure would send his skull shattering into a million pieces-
“Maybe take a rain check on that,” came a droll suggestion from further down the corridor.

Both Lestrange and Harry’s heads whipped around.

“Or don’t,” Tom Riddle suggested glibly, twirling his wand between his fingers casually, and strolling forwards. “I don’t mind.”

“Riddle,” Harry hissed. “Come to gloat?”

“Well, I did come to get you out of this rather messy situation you seem to have gotten yourself into, but I can always change my plans if you’d rather,” Riddle shrugged, wearing a faint smirk.

“That I seem to have gotten myself into-“ Harry squawked in outrage. “You told him I had the locket!”

“But you appear to have lost your wand.” Riddle sent a disapproving look towards Harry’s discarded wand. “And your balance.”

“Fuck off!” Harry said coldly. Why wouldn’t he just leave? If Lestrange was going to kill him. Harry could at least not have Riddle watching.

Riddle ignored him and sighed. “I honestly expected better from someone who only just lost to me in a duel-“

“It was a draw!” Harry wasn’t watching Lestrange, and that was a mistake.

A muffled blow struck Harry’s jaw, and he slumped back, dazed. His eyes clenched shut as his jaw throbbed, so he only felt Lestrange being blown away from him, and a crack that sounded like a body hitting a wall. There was another sound, and a pained sound that followed. Harry lay still, finally defeated. Maybe if he just didn’t move, the pain would go away?

“…You’re not dead, are you?” Riddle’s voice was unwelcome, even if it did have an odd tone to it. Harry mumbled in reply, blinking his eyes open. His glasses were fixed, the cracks vanished, and Harry wondered when Riddle had the time to do that.

“Well, get up then,” Riddle said impatiently.

Harry wondered if he could get to his wand in time to curse Riddle. Probably not. And so he turned his head away from the Slytherin prefect. Unfortunately that put Lestrange’s body, crumpled and still, directly into his vision. It lay at the foot of the wall, which was still spattered with Harry’s blood.

“Are you ignoring me?” Riddle seemed enraged by the idea.

“Well, you did sell me out to a maniac,” Harry said through gritted teeth, fixing his eyes stubbornly on a strand of Lestrange’s blond hair. “For all I know, you could be coming to finish the job.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, I never wanted you dead.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“If you would be reasonable-“

“Well, what were you doing, then?” Harry bit out.

Riddle sighed. “You were bait.”
Harry turned his gaze to Riddle, raising an eyebrow dangerously. “What?”

“I’d suspected Lestrange killed Daisy, ever since it happened.”

“You knew it was Lestrange?” Harry interrupted—probably quite rudely, but he didn’t really care. “How?”

“It wasn’t difficult,” Riddle said patronisingly. “It had to be someone unstable, strong enough to subdue a reasonably hefty girl, and Lestrange has been behaving shiftily ever since it happened. And once you narrowed it down to our dorm mates, it became obvious. Atticus is too much of a coward; Grahams is too weak; Dolohov wouldn’t murder a girl he’d had sex with; and yourself and Orion would never kill anyone. And knowing that it wasn’t myself; that left Lestrange.”

“So you thrust me into the path of a murderer, and just hoped I’d survive so you could—what, prove a theory!?” Somehow, this discovery made Harry even angrier.

“A fairly significant theory,” Riddle shrugged.

Harry clenched his jaw and bared his teeth. “I’ll kill you,” he hissed violently. “It’ll be difficult to do that whilst lying on the ground.” Riddle didn’t seem overly concerned.

Harry struggled to his feet, limbs shaking uncontrollably. He ached, and moving hurt so much. But the insatiable urge to punch Riddle in the face kept him going, and Harry pushed himself up, clutching his injured wrist tight to his chest. He winced as every twinge and stabbing sensation intensified, but he took a shuffling step towards Riddle.

Riddle looked bored. “You’re going to faint.”

“I’m not going to faint,” Harry seethed, taking another small step. “Are you sure about that?”

As the darkness prickled on the edge of Harry’s vision, he felt himself tip forwards. The buzzing in his ears distracted him, but Harry could swear he felt a pair of strong arms catch him as he fell. He mumbled something like, “’M n’t fainting, ’m sleeping” and tried to bat away the help, but his limbs just became heavier and heavier.

He was lost to comforting darkness.

When Harry awoke, he was lying on the floor of the corridor with something soft under his head. He still hurt, but the most piercing pain seemed to have faded. When he blinked open his eyes and glanced down, his wrist was no longer swollen and, rather than purple, it appeared to be a putrid shade of yellow. Harry supposed it was an improvement.

“You’ve been lying there for a while now.”

Great, just what Harry needed. Commentary from Riddle.

“I wonder why,” he said hoarsely, throat like parchment. “Could it be that you sent a murderer after me?” Harry wasn’t sure why he was so particularly offended— it wasn’t like it would be the first time that Riddle would be involved in a plot to kill him. Maybe it was just that Harry had begun to… trust Riddle, a bit.
“I couldn’t be certain that he was a murderer,” Riddle said delicately. “Not until he went after you.”

Harry finally looked at Riddle. The boy looked as unaffected as ever, leant casually against a wall, but if Harry looked closer, he could swear there was a tightness around his mouth similar to... dissatification? Maybe even guilt.

“I… apologise,” Riddle said, and the shock of it captured Harry’s attention immediately. Even Riddle looked uncomfortable with what he was saying. “This wasn’t how I planned for it to go. After I tipped him off, I had intended to be following close and to intervene before Montgomery made a move, but I was… distracted. I didn’t anticipate such a swift response. I came as quickly as I could once I realised that Lestrange was nowhere to be seen… I was, admittedly, a little late.”

Harry laughed shortly. “Tom Riddle made a mistake… there’s a first for everything.”

“Indeed.”

“…Well, help me up then,” Harry sighed reluctantly. They were both aware of the peace offering that Harry was extending.

Riddle took it. He moved slowly, and put an arm around Harry’s shoulder, helping to drag him up.

A wave of dizziness hit him, and Harry braced himself against a wall as it did. Once he was clear-headed again, he looked down at himself. His jumper was ruined, and he could see spots of blood in places. He would be covered in bruises by the next morning. “I would’ve thought I’d be in the hospital wing.”

Riddle shrugged. “I healed your most serious injuries, although there weren’t that many. A shallow head wound, a broken wrist- nothing grievous. The concussion was the most dangerous thing, but I fixed that. Besides, if I took you to the hospital wing, I would have to present Lestrange as well.”

The last Harry had seen of Lestrange had been just before he passed out. Harry’s attacker had been unconscious, left at Riddle’s mercy. He almost hesitated to ask: “Where- where’s Lestrange?”

Riddle ignored the question. “Tomorrow, Lestrange’s parents and the school will receive a letter from their son, stating that he has chosen to leave the country and his studies, in order to look for an answer to his madness abroad. They will not question it.”

“Neat and tidy,” Harry said.

“Quite.”

Harry was fairly certain that Lestrange was dead. Like 99% sure. But somehow, he struggled to care. Montgomery Lestrange had murdered one girl, ruined a boy’s life, and would have killed Harry. He felt his empathy ebbing away.

Harry could, he knew, go further down this path. He could pester and pry, and use the considerable evidence there was (Riddle had a spot of blood on his collar for starters) to do the right thing. The legal thing. The thing that Dumbledore would want him to do. After all, Riddle had probably killed someone… he needed to face the consequences.

But… Riddle had killed to protect Harry, or at least out of some twisted sense of justice. Surely Harry could let it go. Just this once? He was so tired of being so moralistic. Sometimes, Harry thought that some people deserved to die. Besides, if Lestrange was… dead, then he wouldn’t be around to pass on his twisted views to his daughter-in-law.
And so Harry nodded, acknowledging what they both knew was a lie, and moved on.

“Where’s my wand?” Harry asked suddenly.

Riddle held up his hand, drawing Harry’s attention to the thin stick of wood he held; dull and desperately needing a good polish. The smirk on his face reminded Harry of another boy, around about the same age, holding Harry’s wand in a chamber below the school; as a girl with flames for hair faded.

But the Riddle in front of him merely nodded towards Harry’s feet and said drily: “Swap?”

Harry glanced down, wondering why Riddle would want his shoes. He then realised that Riddle had actually been gesturing towards the folded item of clothing on the floor. The soft thing under his head had been Riddle’s coat, Harry realised; only now noticing that the Slytherin prefect was missing a layer.

“Oh, er, yeah,” Harry said quickly, scooping up the coat up and chucking it to Riddle. Riddle caught it deftly, and passed Harry his wand in turn. Harry shoved it into his back pocket.

“I’m lucky he didn’t snap it,” Harry mumbled.

“Montgomery would never have snapped a wand. It’s taboo in pureblood culture- you don’t destroy a magical conduit.” Riddle dismissed. “Although, granted, Montgomery wasn’t one for social norms.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, it’s not much of a social norm to murder someone.” A pause. “What I don’t understand is… why did he chose Daisy?” Harry continued quickly before Riddle could interrupt: “I know that she offended him by going out with someone he thought unworthy or whatever, but there must have been plenty of people in this castle dating someone, you know, unsuitable. Why her?”

“She was a convenient target. Alone, vulnerable... and their families were connected. They may have been playmates. Of course, the Meadowes family broke off the connection once the Lestrange madness became… overt; so their association isn’t well known.”

Harry laughed in disbelief. “That’s some pretty compelling evidence.”

There was a brief lull, before Riddle said abruptly: “Are you going to the Malfoy Christmas party?”

Harry blinked at the unexpected small talk. It startled a laugh out of him and, before he knew it, he was cackling like a madman, every laugh like a punch in the stomach as his bruised ribs ached. He thought he might even have cried a little. “Merlin,” Harry wheezed. “You’re really something else. But yeah- I’m going to the bloody party. Thanks to you, I guess.” Harry said, more fondly than was strictly necessary.

“I have no idea what you mean, but I’m sure I’ll see you there,” Riddle looked pleased with himself nonetheless.

“Sure you don’t, Riddle, sure you don’t.”

“…Why do you do that?” Riddle asked, sounding faintly curious.

“Do what?”

“Call me by my last name. I’ve told you before that you can call me Tom.”
Harry, to be honest, hadn’t really noticed doing it. He supposed it was a way of distancing himself from Riddle, of denying a connection between them. Riddle *had* saved his life though (after endangering it)... maybe he could give Riddle this much.

“Maybe I will then... Tom,” Harry said softly, and decided it was time for him to start giving instead of just receiving. ‘Twas the season’, after all. He stretched out the hand that wasn’t battered and bruised, and said with dignity: “Hello Tom Riddle, my name is Harrison Peters. It’s nice to meet you.”

Tom took his hand with a satisfied smile, and shook it firmly. “Hello Harrison.”

Tom escorted Harrison back to the Common Room, telling the battered boy that he should take a long bath. Tom knew that, whilst Harrison wasn’t seriously injured (anymore), he would be aching for days. Tom also wanted to get away from that strange pulling sensation in his chest whenever he looked at the particularly ripe lump over Harrison’s left eye. It was rather unpleasant.

He had a letter to send anyway. He’d taken the time whilst Harrison was unconscious to write a draft and then duplicate it (after disposing of the body, of course), but now he had to find an inconspicuous owl and make sure no one would come sniffing around after the missing student.

Tom’s earlier plan had gone a little awry. He genuinely hadn’t meant for Harrison to get hurt, neither had he meant to dispose of Montgomery so finally and thoroughly. But then he’d noticed Montgomery was gone, followed a tracking spell, and rushed around the corner to see the brute’s fist raised over Harrison’s still body... Tom couldn’t explain the rush of anger that had followed. Perhaps it was dismay at his plan having been so twisted.

Montgomery Lestrange had been a goner from the moment he touched Harrison Peters. The boy was fascinating and useful, and sometimes beautiful in his self-righteous fury- Tom would rather he didn’t die quite yet. Tom was only just making progress on their friendship, after all- he’d gotten Harrison to call him by his first name. Perhaps, Tom reflected, this whole ordeal had been a blessing in disguise. It *had* broken down some of Harrison’s boundaries; and only a vaguely misogynistic wildcard had to be sacrificed.

All’s well that ends well, as the saying went.

It was just Tom’s luck that he ran into Dumbledore on the owlery stairs.

“Tom, my dear boy!” The Transfigurations professor threw open his arms, showing off his lemon-coloured robes. Tom recognised them from Christmas last year.

“Good morning, professor,” Tom said, with a smile faker than Malfoy’s hair colour.

“Perhaps you can direct me towards our young Mr Peters? I notice you two have grown rather fond of each other this past few months.”

“I believe he was just heading back towards the Common Room, sir, after a long day. You might be able to catch him.” It would amuse Tom to see what Harrison would come up with to explain the bruises.

“Never mind- it isn’t pressing. I’m sure he wouldn’t appreciate the interruption,” Dumbledore chuckled. “Perhaps we could talk instead, Tom. I notice you’re staying in the castle for the next few weeks. Not heading back home?”
Tom gritted his teeth. “You know me, sir. I couldn’t leave the library.”

“Ah yes, studies are important. But you should always leave time for personal growth, as well.”

Why did Tom feel like he was being chided?

“Very true, professor, your words are always insightful, but I have to send a letter, so if you would just—” Tom took a small step forwards, trying to move around the teacher, but Dumbledore’s arm was in the way.

“A letter? Whoever to?”

Tom took a small step backwards, and his smile fell. “I don’t think that’s quite your business, professor.”

“Oh of course not,” Dumbledore said, shaking his head. “Forgive an old man for his curiosity.”

“Not quite old yet, sir,” Tom said smoothly.

“You’re too kind, Tom, but I must disagree. Why, only yesterday, I wasted an entire day knitting! I barely got any marking done. It’s the mark of old age.”

“Perhaps, sir,” Tom demurred, and wondered how long wizards lived for, and how many of those years Dumbledore had left.

“Your essay on Un-transfiguration was brilliant by the way. I don’t think even I was writing so well on such complex theories at your age!”

“Thank you, sir.” Tom fumed. Dumbledore knew perfectly well that Tom get the basis of his essay from one of Dumbledore’s papers, published when the man was just nineteen.

“I suspect it won’t come as a surprise if I tell you that you got an O,” the professor winked.

“Oh of course, I would be surprised. You should never get too used to things, sir,” Tom said lightly, and imagined squashing the old man’s head like a grape.

“Wise words from one so young,” Dumbledore chuckled. “Nonetheless, I imagine many of your professors expect O’s from you. You must tell me if it gets too much, Tom. We adults often forget the pressure we put on youth.”

“I would have thought that was a job for my Head of House, sir. Professor Slughorn is always very welcoming.”

“Oh of course, Tom, whatever you feel most comfortable with!” the old fool agreed cheerily. “I hear dear Horace invited you to another of his festive soirees, but you couldn’t attend?”

“I had rather a lot of homework, sir.”

“Too much to attend a rather excellent party?”

“You know how it is, sir. Adults often forget the pressure that they put on youth,” Tom said.

“Now wherever did you hear such wisdom as that?” Dumbledore asked with a teasing smile. Tom had never felt more patronised.

“I can’t quite remember.”
Dumbledore chuckled. “You mustn’t start losing your memory now, my dear boy, else you’ll be quite brain dead by the time you reach your 100s.”

“That’s how long wizards live?” Tom said with too much surprise. Damn it. Dumbledore always had a way of making him feel like a confused and suspicious eleven year old again.

“I often forget you are not of our world,” the Transfigurations professor said with a gentle smile, and Tom bristled.

“I don’t often encounter the same problem, sir. I find the wizarding world quite familiar.”

“Now there’s nothing with being a bit of an outsider, Tom.” Dumbledore soothed. “We do need fresh blood, else we stagnate.”

Tom couldn’t entirely conceal the flash of rage that ran quickly across his features. Fresh blood? He didn’t want to be ‘fresh blood’. He wanted to belong. He wanted to be as intrinsically connected and necessary to this brave new, fascinating world as, say, Atticus. But still he said: “I couldn’t agree more, sir.”

The silence between teacher and student became uncomfortable, deliberate, and then more. The boundaries between roles and status blurred, and for a moment, Tom felt taller than his teacher.

“Well, I’d best be going,” Dumbledore announced, breaking the moment. “Time waits for no man, especially not for this old fool.”

“You shouldn’t talk about yourself that way,” Tom replied. ‘Leave that to me’ went unsaid. “You’re quite the idol to some.”

“Oh, I know! There’s nothing so uncomfortable as receiving a letter from a fan.”

Excluding cowering and starving in an air raid shelter, of course; Tom thought bitterly. But he just said, “I wouldn’t know, sir.”

Another silence, and then: “Well, I’d best be off. Good luck with sending your letter, Tom. This is the season for spreading good will.”

“Thank you, sir.”

And then the two parted. Tom continued up the stairs, well aware of the eyes that followed him on his way, prickling the back of his neck. He ducked his head and rolled his eyes. Old dingbat.

Harry arrived back at his dorm to find a parcel wrapped in soft tissue on his bed. He squinted at the label, and smiled fondly. “Good old Orion.”

Harry made quick work of opening the parcel, ripping back packaging with relative enthusiasm. He had good memories associated with receiving clothes- he’d never felt as loved as when Mrs Weasley thought to buy him dress robes.

As the tissue fell away, he caught a glimpse of sparkling material. As the last of the wrapping fell away, a robe of silky, midnight black slid from Harry’s fingers and fell to the bed.

“Bloody hell, Orion. Your castoffs are pretty fucking spectacular,” Harry breathed, eyes wide. He held the robes up. They were elegant and surprisingly stylish, made of a fabric that was smooth to the touch, but Harry suspected would be pretty structured when on the body. It was the colour of black.
ice; glinting like starlight. It was, to Harry’s limited knowledge, beautiful.

He didn’t think he’d be able to currently deal with doing anything more strenuous than stripping off his clothes and slipping into a bath; but he couldn’t wait to try them on.

Which would probably be in two days.

When he had to go to the bloody Christmas ball.

And socialise.

Maybe even with Tom, whom still conjured feelings of faint anger and betrayal whenever Harry thought of him.

“Urgh,” Harry groaned. And now he had to run a bath. Effort.

As Harry stripped out of his robes and looked down at his body, he saw a mottled mass of yellows and purples; sure to be even tenderer in the morning. But even as he looked, the blood beneath his fingernails looked more pronounced, whispering to him as his stomach sunk.

“It was Tom,” Harry muttered to himself. “I didn’t do it. It wasn't me.”

And then he went to run a bath.

Chapter End Notes

How many of you expected that? (Genuinely, I’m curious. Was it obvious? Too obscure? Just obscure enough?)
I know some of y’all may be thinking ‘Harry was so pathetic in this chapter, he needed Riddle to save him; clearly Riddle is stronger, etc’, but that’s really not true. Out of the two of them, Riddle had a distinct advantage. He had his wand, knowledge of who the murder was, and a distracted opponent- and much more viciousness. Harry was unprepared, without a wand, and the target. Harry canonically doesn’t have THAT much strength. He’s pretty weedy- granted he does Quidditch, but I don’t think that would mean much against a wall of muscle like Lestrange. Harry did pretty well to hold Lestrange off/keep him distracted until Riddle got there (not that Harry knew that was what he was doing).

The Dumbledore/Tom convo went on for longer than I intended, but their joint manipulative/neither-of-us-say-what-we-mean-ness is really interesting to write XD

Also, is the timeline now irrevocably changed???
I hope you like the progression in their relationship. Daisy Meadowes’ murder served a purpose plot-wise ;) Harry’s finally calling Tom by his first name! It’s a start XD

Party next! So we can get away from the *cough cough* unspeakable violence, and onto fluffiness (kind of. It's not that fluffy).
And follow me on tumblr, under the same name ;)


Harry Goes To A Party

Chapter Summary

Harry is an awkward turtle, Tom transfigures some robes, and Orion gets cray-cray drunk (kind of).

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: Harry got invited to the Malfoy Christmas party, and Orion- along with several classmates- went home for the holidays. Harry was attacked by Lestrange, learning that Lestrange murdered Daisy Meadowes, and Harry was then rescued by Tom. Harry fell unconscious (fainted), and upon awakening, learned that Tom had murdered Lestrange. He'd also betrayed Harry, telling Lestrange that Harry had the locket that would lead to Lestrange's capture, and provoking Lestrange into his attack on Harry. Harry and Tom had a conversation, within which Harry made the decision to call Tom by his first name. Tom ran into Dumbledore and had a vague conversation. Harry returned to the dormitories, where he found a set of old dress robes left by Orion, and realised he would have to go to the party.
And that was what you missed on GLEE!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The party came sooner than Harry would have liked. The days leading up to it were spent dodging Tom and trying not to close his eyes: he heard the crunch of a body thrown against a wall every time he did.

At the beginning, he hadn’t meant to avoid Tom. It had just sort of happened. Harry went to the hospital wing to get a headache potion after he awoke following Lestrange’s attack, and then had proceeded to coincidently miss Tom in every lesson. And then when he’d caught sight of him at dinner…

An ugly, bitter wave of betrayal rose within him. Huh. He thought he’d gotten over that. But in the cold light of day… without a concussion or the desperate shaking of his limbs to distract… wow. Tom had really been a dick.

Harry had trusted him — told him about the locket, despite the hungry, almost serpentine flashes that sometimes lit the Slytherin boy’s features — and Tom had told Lestrange about it; and sent him violently crashing after Harry. It had been reckless, and badly thought out, and cruel. It had been cruel.

But Harry knew that Tom probably didn’t understand ideas like that. Tom was half emotionally-dead, after all (you had to be, to become what he would become). He’d acknowledged that he’d made a mistake, and he’d apologised. It was actually a bit of a miracle — Tom Riddle apologising, and seeming genuinely repentant. Well, Harry knew he couldn’t ask for more.

It didn’t stop him wanting more.
He would forgive Tom eventually, of course, he would — Tom hadn’t meant any actual harm — but Harry knew it would take time. Time, and the reminder that Tom was a palatable human being, but perhaps that would come later. Everything felt a lot less complex without the sight of Tom, so Harry ended up… just sort of… not seeing him?

It didn’t stop Montgomery Lestrange from haunting Harry’s dreams. He couldn’t close his eyes without remembering his death and feeling the heavy, hot weight of guilt. Harry had thought he’d moved on from that, thought he’d put it behind him — but apparently those nagging stabs of nobility just wouldn’t let it go. They weren’t as sharp as they would have been a few months ago, Harry was sure of that, but they were still there.

Merlin, couldn’t he get a rest?

Oh. Tom blinked as he entered the Slytherin dorms and saw Harrison on the other side, staring into a mirror with a thoughtful frown. For a moment, he had forgotten the other boy was attending the party that evening, despite how hard Tom had fought to get him an invitation.

Harrison was clearly in the middle of getting ready, dressed in shimmering, well-cut, expensive dress robes that Tom remembered Orion wearing two years ago. Harrison had better be prepared for snide comments. Although, Tom considered with a tilt of his head, perhaps the gossips would be distracted by other things. Harrison did look handsome, and the dress robes did all the right things to his shoulders and waist. Objectively, Harrison Peters was a beautiful young man and would surely attract attention.

Oh, this was going to be hilarious. Tom knew he’d wanted the boy at the Malfoy party for some reason.

There was just one thing…

“Your hair looks awful,” Tom said critically, stepping further into the dorm. “And you need to shine your shoes. Or maybe replace them.”

Harrison jumped, spinning around in an overdramatic whirl of stumbling feet and flailing arms. “W-what are you doing in here?”

“I live here,” Tom replied, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I know, I mean, I just—” Harrison stuttered, his cheeks flushing. “You shouldn’t sneak up on people! I swear I said this before…”

“Well, perhaps you should work on your peripheral vision, then. I made no attempt at artifice.”

Harrison huffed with something that could have been laughter. “You ‘made no attempt at artifice’? Most people don’t step with all the impact of a kitten.”

Tom wasn’t sure he appreciated the comparison.

“And what’s wrong with my shoes, anyway?!” Harrison continued defensively.

“They’re your school shoes.”

“They’re comfy.”

“They have a hole in the heel.”
“They’re well ventilated.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Tom hid a reluctant smile, giving up. “At least fix your hair.”

“Trying to do anything with my hair is pointless. It’s unfixable.” Harrison shrugged, running a hand through the bird’s nest atop his head.

Tom winced. “If I could just maybe use some water and a comb—” Without realising it, Tom had stepped forward and raised his arms, as if to forcibly wrestle Harrison’s hair into some semblance of neatness. He froze, and let his arms fall. “Yes, well.” He coughed uncomfortably.

Harrison shifted from foot to foot, glancing at the door. “What are you doing here?”

“I am attending the party too. I require some time to prepare.”

“Ah, yeah.” A pause. “I’m pretty much done, so I’ll just get out of your hair.” Harrison turned to leave.

“Where are you going now?” Tom asked quickly.

“I’m flooing to the party. I’ll see you later.”

And Harrison exited, leaving Tom feeling more bewildered than he had in years.

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Harry hated travelling by floo.

He stumbled out of the fireplace into Orion’s arms; his knees weaker than jelly.

“Woah!” Orion laughed, but held Harry up as he swayed dizzily. “Don’t throw up — I’m awful at cleaning spells.”

“I’m fine,” Harry mumbled. “I just really, really hate floo powder.”

“I love it,” Orion said cheerily. “It gets my blood pumping.”

“ Weirdo,” Harry replied fondly, and patted Orion on the back once the room stopped spinning. “Hey, mate. It’s been a while.”

Orion shocked Harry by throwing his arms around him and enclosing him in a tight hug. “I missed you.”

“It’s only been a few days.” Harry laughed, squeezing him back. It felt like longer — in fact, Harry felt like almost a different person after the Lestrange attack.

“I’m still allowed to miss you,” Orion said earnestly. “You’re my first proper friend.”

“Sap,” Harry said, but a burst of warmth filled his chest. At least something good had come out of this trip to the past. Harry had always had Ron and Hermione; he didn’t know what he would’ve done without them. He was glad he could give Orion the same thing.

“So, this is the Malfoy Manor, huh?” Harry said, looking around a large, space with a tall ceiling, elegant panelling and luxurious wallpaper.
“This is just a floo lobby,” Orion dismissed. “The rest of the house is much more impressive.”

Harry thought it was pretty impressive already, but he didn’t want to start an argument this early on — he was sure there would be plenty more lavish extravagancies to disapprove of.

“Come on!” Orion declared, grabbing Harry by the wrist. “We’re rather early, but a few people have arrived. I think the Rosiers are here, and the Li’s, and perhaps the Babbages. Oh, and we can thank Abraxas for a wonderful evening before the masses arrive.”

“We don’t know if it’s going to be wonderful yet,” Harry said snidely, but allowed himself to be dragged down a corridor.

They soon came to a large open archway, the view inside restricted by a curtain of falling snow. Harry extended an arm cautiously, putting a hesitant hand underneath the snowfall. Immediately, his hand warmed up, the snowflakes melting into his skin like pinpricks of fire. Curious, Harry stepped through it; and each snowflake that fell onto his shoulders as he passed under felt like a tiny spark of warmth. It was peculiar and wonderful, and heated Harry up from the very inside.

The hall inside was certainly impressive; Orion hadn’t been lying. Harry could see the main doors on one side, lit up with millions of lanterns and what might have been actual fairies, through which the guests for the evening were arriving.

“We got the Hogwarts-regulated floo,” Orion muttered discretely. “There’s another one just outside.”

The rest of the décor was just as overwhelming. They had certainly taken the ‘snow’ theme and run with it, as giant crystalline structures hung from the ceiling; some appearing like oversized snowflakes, some appearing like huge dragons and various other creatures, swooping down upon the guests from great heights. The ceiling was enchanted to the same effect as in the Hogwarts Great Hall, but this ceiling was much more impressionistic: the stars turned into swirls of bright light and the sky a mix of purples and greens. Sumptuous fabrics tumbled from open windows in waves of velvets and silks, and the floor was a sparkling, polished marble.

“It’s beautiful,” Harry admitted.

Orion sighed happily. “I know.” He perked up, looking excited. “Let’s go and say hi to Abraxas!”

“Yes,” Harry said, wearing a falsely cheerful smile. “Let’s.”

It wasn’t difficult to find Abraxas, as his hair shone brightly under the lights, glistening like silver. Harry was very certain he’d put some kind of glitter in it. Abraxas wore gorgeous purple robes, and they swept past his knees and behind him in an elaborate bridal train.

“Abraxas!” Orion greeted enthusiastically.

“Abraxas,” Abraxas greeted politely, nodding his head. He turned to Harry, and his eyes got colder. “Peters.”

“Thanks for the invite. I was so surprised to receive one,” Harry said, a saccharine smile decorating his features.

“Well, Tom was very persuasive.”

“It’s so nice that you listen to your friends’ advice about your own party guests.”

“And it’s so nice to see that you’re into recycling,” Abraxas retorted with a petty glint in his eyes.
“What?”

“Well, Orion wore those robes to our party two years ago.” There was a little snarl to Abraxas’ lip that made Harry want to punch him.

“You can wear clothes more than once!” Orion piped up helpfully, looking like he was trying to be genuinely helpful.

“Yes,” Abraxas acknowledged patronisingly. “But it doesn’t often happen at a Malfoy Ball.”

Harry clenched his jaw. “Perhaps that says more about your guest list than my outfit.”

“Perhaps.”

It was then that Orion decided to engage Abraxas in a passionate discussion about the decorations, and Harry was lost once they got onto the topic of ceiling roses. He drifted away, letting his gaze trail lazily over the growing number of guests.

Oh — was that a familiar head of smooth, neatly arranged hair? Shit. Running into Tom earlier had thrown him off, and he really didn’t want it to happen again. Harry ducked away in the opposite direction and kept his chin tucked into his chest. He wondered how long he could keep this up.

Tom arrived at the party in a pair of well-transfigured robes, sparing little more than a considerate glance to the towering walls and polished sculptures. He’d quickly found himself pulled into Walburga and Druella’s conversation and had stayed to satisfy his own morbid fascination.

The two of them had dressed for the occasion: Walburga in a long, elegant red dress with beaded silver snowflake details over her right rip, and Druella in a shorter white number, strings of gold-tinted pearls strung amongst her wild hair.

“It’s odd, isn’t it?” Walburga asked, taking a sip from a glass.

“What’s odd?” Druella sighed, frowning at a wall of male-centric portraits.

“The way that Montgomery disappeared so suddenly.”

“Very odd,” Tom added, a sly kind of smirk settling itself on his lips. He peered around the hall subtly, trying to see if he could catch a glimpse of Harrison. He’d been elusive these past few days — it was very out of character. Usually Harrison would join them and eye Tom oddly, whilst throwing in his passionate two sickles if anyone insulted Muggles or their offspring. Cassius was the one who slipped through meals and classes like a ghost.

“He went abroad, didn’t he? I didn’t think he’d ever expressed any interest!” Walburga pouted, like she was disappointed she’d missed out on the gossip.

“He called foreigners filthy, once,” Druella pointed out cynically. “I find it hard to believe he’d go to meet more.”

“If Lestrange decided to avoid everyone he deemed unsuitable or ‘filthy’, he might as well crawl into an early grave,” Tom said with hidden amusement. “And perhaps he’s decided that it’s not worth possibly throwing away a possible cure for his petty intolerances.”

“That’s the thing — he’s never indicated that he wants to cure his illness before. He just sort of spits
Tom had the urge to correct the conversation to past tense but thought it would be a little on the nose.

Walburga nodded her head enthusiastically in reply to Druella, fluttering a fan with her other hand. “Yes,” she agreed, swallowing. “He once told me his madness helped him to sniff out impure blood. Like it was some sort of sensor spell.”

Druella looked thoughtful. “He really is crazy.”

“In the politest and most politically correct way possible,” Walburga said quickly.

There was a new arrival at their gathering.

“So, Lestrange turned into a fucking globetrotter!” Rupert declared, sidling into place next to Tom.

Tom didn’t look towards him. “That’s what we were just discussing,” he said curtly.

“In a less crude manner, of course.” Walburga smiled sweetly.

“Who’d have guessed it, huh? Lestrange got out before all of us.” Rupert slung an arm over Tom’s shoulder, removing it quickly when Tom raised an eyebrow at him. “Although Peters might be next, with all that hiding in bathrooms and gazing at the sky he’s been doing. And he’s back to avoiding you! I saw him heading in the opposite direction just now.” He crowed triumphantly at Tom.

“We just haven’t seen a lot of each other,” Tom sad coolly. “He merely seems emotionally distressed. Perhaps he misses Montgomery.”

Everyone burst into laughter.

“Ha… ha!” Druella doubled over, clutching at her stomach as her shoulders shook.

“No one misses Lestrange.” Dolohov sniggered.

Walburga looked as if she might try a weak rebuttal, but gave up.

Tom smiled in satisfaction. He didn’t know what Harrison was sulking about. Clearly the world was better off without Montgomery Lestrange in it.

“How are you?”

The soft voice behind him barely made Harry flinch. “Hello, Cassius.” He sighed, turning to face his classmate remarkably. “That was a weirdly normal greeting.”

Of course, he shouldn’t be surprised that Cassius found him out here, even if it took Harry accidentally falling through an unlocked door to stumble upon it. The little garden behind the door had been quiet, modest, and beautiful; and Harry had quickly found himself a seat. At least Riddle wouldn’t find him out here, and it was a welcome respite from the party.

“I thought I’d try something new,” Cassius said vaguely. He joined Harry in staring out onto the courtyard, sitting next to him on the bench. “I can’t say the same for you. Still wallowing in guilt, I see.”
“I’m not wallowing,” Harry said hotly. He bit his lip uncertainly. “…Just reflecting.”

Cassius rolled his eyes. “You do too much of that.”

Merlin, it was like Hermione had joined him in the 1940s. “Yeah, I’ve heard that before.” Harry rubbed the back of his neck tenderly. It was still twinging from the Montgomery attack, but not nearly as painful as before.

“How’s your head?” Cassius asked him.

“It’s fine. I went to the hospital wing, and the Matron said I was okay.”

Suddenly, Cassius burst out laughing.

Harry blinked in shock and flinched, inching back away from the boy on the bench. “What’s so funny?”

“You told Hallpepper that you slipped in the shower?” Cassius giggled. “Only you, Potter.”

Harry turned red, both from the shock of hearing his real second name and from embarrassment. “It was the first excuse I could think of!” He spluttered. “I didn’t tell you about that, anyway.”

“You didn’t need to,” Cassius said, smiling enigmatically.

How irritating. Harry sat up as he spotted a dark head of hair in a distant window. He relaxed as the head turned, revealing a sharp profile and a hawkish nose. It wasn’t Tom.

Cassius, as usual, missed very little. He raised his eyebrow curiously. “Now, why are you avoiding Tom?”

“Can’t you just ‘psychic’ the answers?” Harry said bitterly, hunching his shoulders.

“I don’t know everything — that’s not how it works. But I can certainly guess.” Cassius looked like he was having far too much fun. “Anger? Fear? Guilt? Gratitude? All of them?” Cassius guessed, scanning Harry’s face.

Harry set his jaw stubbornly. “You’re talking nonsense.”

Cassius gave a coy, small smile. “You’re angry because he betrayed you; scared because he killed someone; guilty because he killed them for you… and grateful that he did it.” Cassius threw back his head in delight. “Gods, nothing was this interesting until you came along!”

“Someone died so you could be ‘interested’.” Harry snarled.

“Someone died because Tom got possessive,” Cassius dismissed. “I had very little to do with it. I just watched it all unfold.”

Harry made a noise in the back of his throat disgustedly. “You watched? Why didn’t you do something? Why didn’t you stop him?” Harry didn’t even know if he was referring to Lestrange or Tom anymore.

“Why didn’t you? Tom wouldn’t have killed Lestrange if you said something,” Cassius countered, with absolute certainty.

“I was slightly distracted,” Harry spat back.
“Or maybe you just didn’t want to stop Tom. Lestrange was an objectively terrible person, no matter how wonderfully unpredictable. Killing him saved lives.”

Harry turned away, feeling sickened to the pit of his stomach. “Riddle betrayed me,” he mumbled finally, furiously.

“He did,” Cassius agreed. “And he’d probably do it again. He didn’t mean for you to get hurt though — it’s incredible, he’d never have felt guilty before. You’ve changed everything.” The glee in Cassius’ voice was palatable.

“Glad I bring out Riddle’s soft side,” Harry said acidly, doubting Tom even had a soft side.

“No yet — but you will. I’m rooting for you two.”

Harry got to his feet, feeling even more conflicted than before. “Well, I’d love to stay and swap cryptic remarks with you, but I have a godawful party to get back to.”

“I’m not cryptic; I’m being perfectly candid.”

“Right,” Harry agreed blankly, and turned away.

“It takes two to tango!” Cassius called after him.

“That makes no sense!”

“Hey!” Orion called as Harry re-entered the hall, and his voice was slurred. “Y’ came back!”

“Course, I did,” Harry said, supporting Orion as he tipped forwards a bit. “Are you drunk?”

“Jus’ a bit.” Orion giggled. “Druella kept handing me glasses.”

“She did, did she? Let’s go and find her.”

Harry silently cursed as he dragged his inebriated friend across the hall. What was Druella thinking, letting Orion get drunk at — Harry checked a nearby clock — nearly 9:30? It was that late already? Harry must’ve spent longer in the garden than he thought. Harry threw Orion a guilty look that he was too drunk to comprehend. “Sorry, mate.”

“It’s all okay,” Orion assured him seriously. “I forgive you, even if you’re weird and say weird things. ‘Cause you’re my friend.”

“Brilliant,” Harry replied absently, catching a glimpse of extravagant red that was sure to signal Walburga, which meant Druella had to close by. “Come on.”

Harry dragged Orion past solemn-looking witches and wizards who paid them no notice, acting as if the presence of a drunk teenager was a common occurrence at these sorts of things. It probably was. Harry must have muttered “excuse me” a dozen times before he reached the girls.

“What have you done?” he asked, letting Orion sink into a nearby chair, giggling. “He’s off his head!”

“Oh, don’t be dramatic,” Walburga chided, barely looking at her drunk cousin. “He just had a few glasses of wine.”
“Besides,” Druella added, “He needed to loosen up. He got all worried when he couldn’t find you.”

Harry sent another guilty look towards Orion, who gave him a thumbs up.

Druella rolled her eyes. “It’s all fine. Orion’s not a bad drunk. He just sort of… gets even happier and compliments Walburga.”

“Walburga’s the best,” Orion agreed dreamily.

“Thank you, darling. Here, have another sip,” Walburga cooed, and pushed her glass into Orion’s hand.

“Is that a good idea?”

Druella raised an eyebrow in Harry’s direction and gestured towards Orion, who was enthusiastically taking great gulps of alcohol. “Do you really want him to come down from his high now? We’ve got to keep him peppy.”

Harry bit his lip uncertainly. “Just… just—make sure he doesn’t do anything he’ll regret.”

Walburga let out an offended gasp. “I’d never let Orion embarrass himself — it would be most unkind. Not to mention the scandal that the Black family would face.”

“He’ll just compliment people until he feels sleepy,” Druella said, prising the glass from Orion’s hands. “I reckon he’ll last ‘til midnight.”

“I in the morning,” Walburga challenged.

Druella smirked. “Whoever’s right gets to use the shower first in the morning?”

“Deal.”

“Oh, you’re going down.”

“We’ll see.”

“I just feel so happy.” Orion sighed, and fell off his chair.

Tom spotted Harrison across the hall. At first, he wasn’t sure if it really was Peters, but then he saw Walburga and Druella next to him; all three of them had gathered around a drunken Orion. Orion always seemed to get drunk at events like this, but it didn’t usually happen so soon.

Tom crossed the floor quickly, weaving around dancing couples. He didn’t want Harrison to get the chance to notice him, lest he jumped onto a chandelier, or did something else ridiculous, to avoid Tom. Luckily, Tom reached the group without catching anyone’s notice. He tapped Harrison on the shoulder, his classmate turning around in what seemed like slow motion, and somehow the first words out of Tom’s mouth were:

“May I have this dance?”

Tom didn’t know why he said it — perhaps he’d realised that, otherwise, he didn’t actually have a reason to interact with Harrison — he was just bored with Harrison ignoring him. However, the more Tom thought about it, the more he liked the idea of a dance. It would be private, difficult to
refuse — and quite possibly hilarious, from the panicked look on Harrison’s face.

“Of course, you can,” Druella answered easily, placing a hand between Harrison’s shoulder blades and pushing him forwards.

“But Orion—” Harrison protested weakly, digging his heels in.

“He’s drunk, not dying. Dance with Riddle before he cries.”

Tom was certain that he had never cried in his life, but Druella also looked a little tipsy, so there was little point in arguing. Anyway, her attempt at persuasive was successful: Harrison reluctantly took Tom’s outstretched hand and let Tom lead him away.

But before they could take another step, Harrison stopped and said stiffly: “Tom?”

“Yes?”

“I can’t dance.”

“Surely you must have some experience,” Tom said doubtfully.

“I mean, we all did some lessons for this ball thing about a year ago, but—”


“Like hell you will—!”

But before Harrison could protest further, Tom pulled him into the midst of the dancing couple, and they fell into hold. The music was slow and floaty, and the pair found themselves settling into a loose kind of waltz. Harrison was nearly as terrible at dancing as he had pretended. He wasn’t good, but he knew enough not to bruise Tom’s feet, which was more than could be said for many of his past dance partners. There was still a fight between them, though: Tom would lead in one direction, and then Harrison would abruptly change it, leaving Tom to stumble slightly as he adjusted.

They were not the only men dancing with each other, but their pairing was unusual enough to provoke curious glances from the other dancers, and both Harrison and Tom took great delight in sweeping close to the nosy pairs, leaving them to yelp and lurch backwards.

They danced mostly in silence for the first song, and Harrison would send Tom dirty looks when he thought the other boy wasn’t looking. It was delightfully aggressive.

However, finally, Tom grew frustrated with the silence. For some reason, Harrison was one of the only people whom Tom minded silence from. The idea of the boy never talking to him again, of never engaging in another carefully worded argument, or another moment of halfblood camaraderie, or another moment of shared exasperation was… unpleasant.

So, Tom tried for an outside spin, stepping elegantly into the waltz move. Harrison tripped over his robes, but Tom supported him enough that Harrison finished the move, and they returned to their stilted progression across the dance floor.

“Could’ve warned me…” Harrison muttered.

“But then it wouldn’t have been so much fun,” Tom said pleasantly, extending his right leg and leaning back. Harrison followed naturally.

“Sadist.”
“You’ve been ignoring me,” Tom said abruptly, and the immediate tensed muscles and panicked expression on Harrison made him feel much more at home. Best of all, how could Harrison escape whilst they were on the dance floor? “I can’t help but wonder why?”

“Ignore you?” Harrison chuckled falsely, as they fell into another outside spin. This time, Harrison didn’t trip. “I wouldn’t do that—”

“I have seen neither hide nor hair of you, other than earlier in the dorm. Not since our… little moment.”

There was a lengthy silence, and Tom got the unpleasant feeling that he’d done something wrong. Harrison’s step quickened.

“What did you say?” Harrison asked lowly, narrowing his eyes.

Ah, well. In for a sickle, in for a galleon. “Since our little moment, you’ve been—”

“Our little moment!” Harrison exploded, pulling Tom into a new direction sharply. “You killed someone!”

“He would have killed you,” Tom said calmly, glancing around to see if anyone had noticed. Luckily, the music had risen to a sudden crescendo and Harrison’s outburst appeared to have been masked.

“You took a life!” Harrison hissed, panting heavily. This had clearly been building within him for the last few days. “I let you take a life.”

“You were unconscious. Hardly in a position to—”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter about what?”

“It doesn’t matter if I was unconscious or not. You killed someone, and I didn’t stop you. And then I didn’t do anything, and there’s no way I will now, but I can’t stop thinking about everything—”

Harrison was getting steadily more panicked by the moment, and as curious as Tom was to see how long he would continue for, he stopped Harrison mid-ramble.

“I’m uncertain as to why you’re so upset.”

“Why I’m upset?!” Harrison repeated, with more incredulity than Tom thought his remark deserved. “Merlin, Tom, I’m feeling guilty!”

They narrowly avoided colliding with an elderly couple, and the lady cursed at them in French as she was twirled away.

“Guilty…?” Tom said slowly. “To my understanding, guilt is triggered by one’s actions. You did nothing. You were, in fact, the victim in this particular situation—”

“Don’t remind me.”

Tom scanned Harrison’s face; the scarred, elegant facial features twisted into some sort of angered façade, and his rigid, fixed grip on Tom’s hand and back. Tom pursed his lips. “You’re angry at me, too.”

“Yes,” Harrison bit out, his body language closing off.
“I was under the impression that you’d forgiven me.”

“Forgiven you?” Harrison seemed to be doing little in this conversation other than repeat parts of Tom’s phrases. “Of course, I haven’t forgiven you. I just decided that you deserved a proper introduction and to be called by your first name. I never really gave you a chance, did I? I sort of hated you from the start.”

Tom was confused. That had sounded like an admittance. “So, you haven’t forgiven me.”

“No.”

“I killed Lestrange to protect you,” Tom offered. Tom was fairly certain he would have killed Lestrange either way — he had been an unpredictable danger to the school, but perhaps highlighting the danger to his personal being would make Harrison feel better…

“Maybe, I could believe that.” Harrison snorted, oddly bitter. “If you weren’t you.”

Evidently not.

Time to try again. “I will admit,” Tom said slowly, trying to calculate how honest he should be, “that I encounter difficulties when empathising with your guilt.”

Harrison’s lips upturned. “You don’t say.”

“And I am… uncertain of what I should be doing to gain your forgiveness. I saved your life.”

“After you endangered it.”

The music was faster and sharper now, and Harrison and Tom’s movements reflected it.

“That was incidental.”

Harrison rolled his eyes. “Okay, fine. You didn’t mean for it to go so far, and you apologised. We can put the betrayal thing behind us, maybe.” He set his jaw. “But you killed someone, Tom. Lestrange may have been an awful person, but he was still a person. Do you even regret killing him, at all?”

“I regret my hastiness. It was sloppy.”

“Well, that’s something at least.”

Perhaps he should try the emotional angle. “I also regret causing you guilt. It wasn’t my intention.”

“I know.” Harrison looked conflicted, as he and Tom stepped swiftly to a quick drum beat. Finally Harrison relaxed, his grip on Tom loosening. “Just give it time, Tom. I need time to… fix everything that’s going on in my head.”

That was better than a no. In fact, Harrison was implying that forgiveness would be near on the horizon. Tom hid his satisfied smile (suspecting it wouldn’t go down well), and refocused on the music and their surroundings. Harrison was more relaxed too, and perhaps even wore a slight smile.

Tom searched for conversation material.

“That,” Tom pointed out a nearby couple subtly, as Harrison and Tom danced closer, “Is Minister Spencer-Moon. Rumour is that he’s rather close with the Muggle Prime Minister.” Tom raised his eyebrows suggestively.
“No.” Harrison scoffed in disbelief, craning his head to get a better look as they spun past them.
“Who’s he dancing with?”

“His wife.”

Harrison hid a laugh.

“He worked his way up the Ministry stepladder from a mere tea-boy to Minister for Magic. He’d been quite the success story. A halfblood, too.” Tom peered around the room for other sources of scandal. “And over there is Vice-Minister Payton. He’s rumoured to be a dark lord supporter, and his outdated connections have led to a call for replacement.” Tom spotted a familiar face. “And that is Dorian Mulciber: a year out of Hogwarts, who achieved one of the highest NEWTs results for Charms ever seen.”

Mulciber was actually looking over at Tom and Harry, probably wondering why Tom was dancing with a stranger, or perhaps guessing how much money Harrison would inherit.

“Was he one of your sycophants?” Harrison asked drily. “He looks sickeningly adoring.”

“We do exchange regular letters,” Tom admitted. Mulciber had shares in Bubble’s Potion’s Emporium, every pawn shop in Knockturn Alley, and was steadily climbing in the Auror ranks. He was useful.

“Who’s that woman dancing with him?” Harrison squinted at Mulciber’s dance partner oddly.

“Sofia Dolohov. She’s Rupert’s mother.”

“…I recognise her. She was his boggart.”

“Mmm. Whenever they interact socially, he likes to drink and pretend they don’t know each other. It’s probably the root of his serial dating.”

“That’s so sad.”

Tom kept Harrison entertained with gossip; and by the end of another dance, Harrison was laughing freely. As the music came to a swelling crescendo, Tom leaned forwards, pulling Harrison down with him.

But Harrison stepped out of his grip, and the music finished with a quiet violin pluck.

“You’re not dipping me,” Harrison said with a laugh. “We’re not at that point.”

“Not yet,” Tom replied with a small smile.

Harrison snorted, and put his hands in the pocket of his dress robes. “Well, thanks for the dance, anyway. I’d better go and check on Orion.”

And then Harrison walked away, and Tom stared after him for a moment. That had gone surprisingly well. He turned, and set off to find another partner.

Harry found Orion in a corner, nursing a goblet and watching Walburga and Druella sway together on the dance floor. It looked awfully intimate.
“They’re so beautiful together.” Orion sighed as Harry joined him, sliding the goblet out of Orion’s grip and taking a swig.

“But aren’t you upset? They seem pretty close,” Harry asked, seeing the genuine contentment on Orion’s face as Druella and Walburga danced.

“I just want Burga to be happy,” Orion slurred. “And she’s happy with Ella. Happy, happy, happy.” He pouted. “She won’t be happy when she’s married. She thinks she will, but she won’t.” Orion brightened. “Maybe Ella should go to Romania too!”

“I don’t think that’ll happen.”

“Maybe not.”

Orion and Harry watched the girls for a moment.

“Don’t they look happy?” Orion said quietly, and Harry had to agree. For once, Walburga had slumped from her perfect posture, and Druella had kicked off her heels so she was the same height as her partner. They both wore soft, kind smiles. Druella leaned forwards to whisper something in Walburga’s ear, and Walburga shrieked with laughter — not the soft, demure giggle she often gave, but a full, loud, delighted cackle.

“Were you happy dancing with Tom?” Orion murmured. “I want all of my friends to be happy.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, considering. “Yeah, I think I was. Eventually.” After the awkwardness, he’d actually enjoyed himself. Tom was a wealth of information about everything, and his stream of witty observations were endless.

“That’s nice. That’s very nice.” Orion yawned, rolling his head back. Suddenly, Harry heard him go: “oooo” and raise a shaky hand to point at the ceiling.

Harry followed Orion’s finger and glanced up. Orion was pointing at a sprig of mistletoe nestled in the high rafter, just above where Harry was sitting. Where Harry was sitting next to Orion.

Harry glanced back to Orion, falling back in shock when he saw that Orion was puckering his lips.

“No way,” Harry said firmly. “I’m not snogging my drunk friend.”

“But it’s tradition,” Orion whined, his bottom lip trembling. “We have to.”

“We don’t have to do anything, and certainly not anything involving lips and contact.”

Orion looked disappointed, but didn’t push it. Harry saw him glance towards Walburga and Druella with a thoughtful look. “We could try and get Walburga and Druella to stand underneath it, and then they could kiss and be happy—”

“That’s just cruel.”

Orion’s alcohol-clouded brain didn’t seem to be able to keep up. “Huh?”

“Walburga will be married in the summer, and then she’ll be in Romania.”

“So they could be happy before she goes,” Orion insisted.

“You can’t just… give her something like love and then take it away like that. I mean, I don’t agree with this arranged marriage thing — but she’s going to have to carry through with it, isn’t she? She
shouldn’t have to live with the memory of being happy, knowing it won’t happen again. And Druella shouldn’t have to watch her fly away, knowing they’ll never be together. She would never be able to live, knowing that was out there.”

Perhaps, Harry thought, the brief sips of wine he’d been taking him throughout the evening were affecting him more than he thought. How else would he explain that unusually-profound empathy?

Orion seemed to have found it moving though, as he gazed up at Harry with the twinkle of tears in his eyes. “That was so beautiful,” he whispered.

“And you’re so drunk.” Harry rolled his eyes.

They lasted until midnight, until Harry got tired of Orion slumping against his robes and drooling, and honestly had to fight to keep his own eyes open. Orion had mumbled, “Leh’s guh back to Hugwurts,” and Harry agreed. He hauled Orion out of the haul, nodding briefly to Tom who was talking passionately with the Minister. And then it was just a quick floo journey back to Dumbledore’s office, a painful shuffle towards the Slytherin dorms, and Orion and Harry collapsed into their respective beds, fully closed, before drifting quickly into a deep and heavy sleep.

Christmas Eve was dull. Harry spent most of it hungover and bored, playing obscure wizarding card games with Orion. The most exciting part of the day was when Orion received his letter of confirmation from the Ministry, saying that his ward had been picked up for production. Orion had excitedly declared it the ‘best Christmas Eve Ever’, and said that he was glad he could spend it with Harry.

It was at that point that Harry remembered that Orion had said he would be at home for Christmas. It was also at that point that Harry learnt that Rigel’s condition had worsened suddenly in the last few days, and Orion’s little brother would be spending Christmas in hospital.

“And so it wouldn’t be helpful for me to be at home right now,” Orion said robotically, and proceeded to get extremely drunk at the Hufflepuff Christmas party.

This time, Harry watched Orion’s drunken antics with a degree of sorrow, and hoped that Rigel would pull through. He had to, for Orion.

The sun rose on Christmas Day, and the grounds were blanketed with snow. Frost danced along the Great Lake, sending shards of light glinting and spinning over the blue-black ice. The grass was sharp and encrusted with frozen dew, and the sky shone with white-cold daylight glow, scattered with clouds.

Harry groaned as he opened his eyes. He shifted, and kicked something at the foot of his bed. Harry blinked and yawned, pushing himself up on one elbow and settled his bleary gaze upon a small pile of parcels at the end of his bed. Parcels… Presents… for him? His eyes widened, his heart leapt, and it was like first year all over again. Harry hadn’t expected to receive any gifts — after all, he’d only been in this time-period for — what? — five, six months? The Dursleys had known him for fourteen years, and he’d never gotten more than 50p from them.

“Orion,” Harry hissed, trying not to wake Atticus, Grahams or Tom.
Orion replied with a mumbled sigh that may have translated to something like ‘how can I help?’

“Orion, I have presents!”

At the mention of presents, Orion sat straight up in bed, looking wide awake with a huge smile on his face. “Well, of course you do!”

Harry took a moment to drink in the sight of the colourful little packages, just for him. “…Can I open them?”

Orion threw off his duvet, leaping across the room to sit on Harry’s bed. “What else would you do?! My present for you is under my bed, but you have to leave it for last.”

Permission gained, Harry set to work on the presents. The first gift was from Walburga: an elegant quill with royal blue feathers and a golden nib. Harry knew as soon as he saw it that it would be broken within the week, and took a vow to make the most of it. From Druella, he received a book on ‘The Origins of Feminism in Witchcraft’, which promised to be a thrilling read on the historical oppression of women. Harry suspected that Druella had taken ‘buy for others what you would want to receive’ to heart.

From Dolohov, he received a packet of cherry-flavoured sweets, shaped like penises.

“He buys them for everyone, every year,” Orion explained, chewing on one of the sweets from his own gift. “At least you didn’t get a box of condoms. That means he likes you.”

“Great.”

Harry also received a cracked mirror from Cassius, along with a note that read ‘stop’ in his small, cursive handwriting. He didn’t know whatever the hell that meant, and decided not to waste too much time on it.

“Oh, me now!” Orion said, clapping his hands and bouncing. He scurried back to his bed and knelt on the floor, dragging a package out from beneath the bedframe. It was long, and thin at one end, and looked very familiar.

Harry felt his heart both rise and fall at the same time.

“Oh, Orion,” Harry breathed, barely above a whisper.

Orion dropped the gift onto the bed with a delighted grin, and a command. “Open it!”

Hands trembling, Harry peeled back the wrapping paper to reveal polished wood, a dark handle, and glossy, well-groomed bristles. It was a state-of-the-art, bloody expensive, bloody magnificent broomstick.

“It’s gorgeous,” Harry said, choked with emotion. “I love it.”

“I remembered you mentioned that you loved flying,” Orion said sheepishly. “But I’ve never seen you with a broomstick. I thought it might have been destroyed when your house… y’know. I know you don’t have a lot.”

Orion barely finished his sentence before Harry wrapped him in a tight, squeezing hug. “Thank you,” Harry said shakily into Orion’s shoulder, and tried not to cry. He hadn’t realised how much he missed flying on his own broomstick, just him and the open air, and nothing else to think about. Orion had given that back to him.
“I haven’t gotten you anything,” Harry fretted, pulling back.

“That’s okay.” Orion shrugged. “You said you wouldn’t, and seeing you happy is a bit like a present, isn’t it?”

“No, I need to do something for you. You pick. Seriously, I’ll do anything.”

“Well…” Orion hesitated.

“Yeah?”

“Would you teach me the patronus?” Orion said quickly. “It’s just, I’ve always wanted to see what mine was, but it’s not on the curriculum, and you did one at the end of that duel and it was so cool —”

“Of course.”

“What?”

“Of course, I’ll teach you the patronus, mate. You got me a bloody broomstick!”

Orion cried out in delight, and enfolded Harry into another hug.

“Will you two shut the hell up?”

Harry and Orion looked over at Atticus’ bed, where said boy looked murderous in his sleepiness; red-ringed eyes glaring at them.


“I didn’t get presents for anyone else.” Harry frowned, looking down at his pile of goodies. “And I forgot to tell them not to get me anything…”

“No one will mind,” Orion assured him cheerily. “Plenty of people don’t give gifts! Tom hasn’t ever given anyone a Christmas gift, I don’t think.”

Harry glanced over at Tom who was somehow still sleeping, his hair looking perfect even deep in slumber.

“If you’re sure,” Harry said doubtfully.

“Of course, I am. Christmas day isn’t for getting jealous or worrying — just enjoy yourself.”

From the bright light in Orion’s eyes, he seemed determined to forget anything had ever been wrong. As unhealthy as that seemed, it also sounded really nice, and so Harry decided to join him.

Christmas day was a lot of fun. Harry and Orion ate until they could burst, sang loudly at a bemused Tom, and Harry took his new broomstick out for a test drive.

Christmas dinner brought crackers and hats, and some truly dreadful puns about cauldrons and winter. By the end of the day, Harry had laughed more than he thought he ever could, and had eaten more turkey than he thought physically possible. When he crawled into bed at the end of the day, he couldn’t help but feel a little bit grateful for where he’d ended up, despite the guilt pressed deep into his stomach.
i think the fact that I’ve both never been drunk or waltzed is abundantly clear. And follow me on tumblr, under the same name ;)

Chapter Summary

Orion conjures a new friend, backstories are overly expansive, and if it works once: do it again.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: Harry experiences emotional tumult regarding Tom's murderer status, and Tom is given the silent treatment. Harry goes to the Malfoy Christmas Ball and exchanges passive-aggressive small talk with Abraxas Malfoy. Tom arrives at the party, and people confirm that Montgomery Lestrange was NOT a good person. Harry escapes into a small courtyard, encountering Cassius (weird as usual), who makes him reconsider his stance on Tom's actions. As Harry returns, Orion is drunk. Tom asks Harry to dance, and they reconcile; despite lingering unresolved tension. Walburga and Druella dance together, and Harry takes Orion back to the castle. Christmas day dawns, and Harry receives a broomstick from Orion, and promises to teach him the patronus. Rigel's condition is worsening.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And then you focus on your happiest possible memory,” Harry said, his voice ringing through the empty Charms classroom.

“My happiest memory?” Orion frowned, pouting slightly. “But there are so many!”

“You need a memory that makes you feel lighter than air,” Harry explained patiently. “Something that could lift you off the ground- something so happy you feel like your heart might give out.”

Orion nodded with renewed determination, and screwed his eyes shut. After a moment he opened them again. “I think I’ve got one.”

“Are you ready to try?”

Orion nodded, and (with a prompting gesture from Harry), waved his wand, muttering, “Expecto patronum!”

Not much happened. Perhaps a single spark of silver came from the end of Orion’s wand, but it may have been Harry’s imagination.

Orion lowered his wand with a defeated expression and stuck out his bottom lip. “I’m terrible,” he whined, running a hand through his hair.

“You’re not terrible,” Harry rushed to assure him. “You just aren’t focusing on a good enough memory. What are you picturing?”
Orion smiled, and turned his gaze on Harry. “The first time you called me your friend!” he declared.

A warmth spread through Harry’s chest. “That’s… that’s really sweet, mate, but no wonder it isn’t working!”

“…Huh?”

Harry shrugged, glancing around. “We’ve only known each other for a few months, really. It’s great that you obviously care a lot, but this spell needs some seriously strong emotions… what about your siblings?”

Orion’s expression downturned. “A lot of my memories with Meissa and Rigel are… soured. Most of them take place in St Mungos,” he admitted.

“Okay,” Harry said softly. “But how do they make you feel?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Harry said awkwardly, “My happiest memory is my parents. And they’re… dead, obviously, so it’s sad- but that doesn’t make it any less happy?” Harry winced, aware he wasn’t quite getting his message across. “I guess, what I’m trying to say- sometimes sadness can make the happy moments even happier. Your memories aren’t soured… they’re emphasised. Don’t focus on the context of the memories, just how that moment, that person… made you feel inside.”

Orion looked like he was mulling over what Harry said, finally nodding in comprehension. “I’m going to try again.”

Orion flicked his wand, wrinkling his nose in concentration, and chanted: “Expecto patronum!”

A burst of silver-blue light, swirled and billowed from the tip of Orion’s wand like ash from a fire, lighting up the Charms classroom with a warm glow. Harry whooped and clapped a little, grinning at his friend’s success.

But Orion wasn’t satisfied. He set his jaw, pursed his lips, and said strongly once more: “Expecto patronum!”

A shape burst from his wand this time- not as defined as Harry’s (but not many patronuses were), but definitely recognisable. It moved around the room in a few short loops, before kicked its tail and fading into the air.

“A dolphin,” Orion breathed, his voice vibrating with excitement, eyes sparkling brighter than a lumos charm.

Harry was almost speechless. “Mate… that was a corporeal patronus.”

“Was that good?” Orion asked, turning to face Harry excitedly. “I think that was good- that was good, wasn’t it?”

“Merlin, yes. It took me ages to get a corporeal patronus-“

The breath was knocked out of Harry as Orion threw his arms around him in a tight hug. Harry stumbled back, putting his arms around his friend to steady himself as he let out a heavy huff of air. Orion leaned his head back to offer a sheepish grin. “Best Christmas present ever,” he told Harry. And then after a pause: “Now maybe I can do it again!”
“Slow down,” Harry laughed. “A patronus takes a lot out of you, especially the first time. It should be hitting you around about—"

Orion slumped in Harry’s arms, the colour leaked out of his face.

“-now.”

“I feel so heavy,” Orion said faintly, clutching onto Harry’s forearm and lowering himself to the floor.

“I brought some chocolate,” Harry offered, bringing a bar out of his pocket, and taking a seat beside Orion on the cobbled floor of the classroom. The chocolate was a bit melted, but Orion tore into it like a starved beast.

“Thish ish sho good!” Orion mumbled, his cheeks puffed out like a hamster.

“Effective against dementors and low blood sugar,” Harry said with a funny quirk to his lips.

“How do you know? Have you seen a dementor?!” Orion asked in awe, talking around a mouthful of chocolate.

“Fought off a couple hundred of them,” Harry said with a grin. “Wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Wow.”

“But what about you, huh?!” Harry nudged Orion’s shoulder playfully. “Corporeal patronus in a few hours. That’s pretty brilliant.”

Orion gave Harry a delighted smirk. “It was, wasn’t it?”

Harry snorted and tilted his head back, noticing the many scorch marks that decorated the Charms classroom ceiling. Ah, first years.

“…Do you want to know what memory worked?”

Harry flicked his gaze to Orion, who was gazing earnestly at him, a question written over his features.

Harry blanched. “I mean, I’d love to,” he stuttered, “But it’s a bit private—“

“It’s okay.” Orion rested his head on Harry’s shoulder, ignoring the way Harry tensed briefly. “If anyone could know, I’d want it to be you.”

Harry hesitated. As curious as he was, it felt a bit obtrusive to listen to Orion’s happiest memory. Still, Orion looked like he was happy enough to share, so Harry agreed. “Just as much as you’re comfortable with, yeah?"

His friend took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. “When I was younger, Rigel got sick for the first time. It came on quite suddenly, really. One day he was fine, the next he was heaving over the toilet, and his eyes were all yellow. He’d always been a bit chubby, but in a few days, all the weight fell away. It was like the fat melted from him- and then when I hugged him one morning, I could feel his ribs through my pyjamas. That was the day we took him to the hospital for the first time.”

Harry squeezed Orion’s arm lightly, but Orion shrugged him off, and continued:

“They identified that it was Aliquid’s Syndrome almost immediately. We have a family history, after
all. There were meetings, and doctors, and there had been an outbreak of dragon pox in the Children’s Ward, so they were understaffed. And then finally...” Orion tensed a little, the first time he’d halted. “And then we had to tell Rigel what he had. And that it didn’t have a cure. I had to tell him that. And so I sat down with him, and told him all about what would happen to him, and then I said that one day soon he’d be going on a big adventure, to somewhere new and exciting where no one could follow him, but that he shouldn’t be scared. And then he looked up at me, and asked if I was coming too, and he- “ Orion drew a shuddering breath. “He promised not to be scared if I was there.”

Harry thought he felt Orion sobbing lightly against his shoulder, but didn’t look at his friend in an attempt to give him some privacy.

“And that’s my happiest memory,” Orion sniffed wetly, rubbing at his face. “It’s weird, but the thought that I’ll be able to do something for him when... when he dies; that it’ll be easier for him if I’m there... it’s nice.”

Harry rubbed Orion’s back gently, letting his friend calm down. And then he asked the question that had been playing on his mind:

“But I don’t understand why you had to tell him. Surely your parents..?”

Orion shook his head. “Father was working, and Mother doesn’t like dealing with emotional children- plus Lucretia was throwing some sort of fit over exams, I think. And so Mother asked me to deal with Rigel.”

“What a bitch,” Harry said with wonder.

Orion laughed sadly. “Yeah.” Hesitation. “I... it’s not really her fault, though.”

“Not her fault?” Harry asked dubiously. “What kind of mother does that to her children?” Lily Evan’s thick hair and kind eyes drifted across his mind’s eye.

“Well, she never wanted to have us- or any children, really- but she... she didn’t really have a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Father, he...” Orion shifted uncomfortably. “We don’t really tell anyone this. But I suppose it’s okay... most people suspect, anyway. Their marriage was quite odd.”

“Most people don’t suspect what?”

“How Lucretia was conceived,” Orion said quietly.

“Oh.”

“I heard them fighting about it when I was younger, and Mother was pregnant with Meissa. They were shouting when I went downstairs to get a drink- they used to do that a lot. Things were quite uncomfortable for a long time. I thought they’d separate, despite the... scandal it would bring.”

“How was Lucretia conceived then?” Harry asked delicately, wondering if he wanted to know the answer.

“Love potion,” Orion admitted bluntly. “There’s a large age difference between my parents- a good twenty years, I think. When Mother was very young- it may have even been her debut ball- Father
slipped something into her drink. A few days later, she told my grandparents that she was pregnant. And then she had to marry Father- the scandal would have been too much if she hadn’t, it would have ruined her… I don’t think she’s ever forgiven him,” Orion finished quietly.

*And quite right, too,* Harry thought, absorbed the information with no small amount of horror, but he said nothing; choosing to offer silent support.

Orion finally spoke again, his painful admission echoing throughout the Charms classroom. “I don’t think I’ve ever forgiven him, either.”

“That must have been-“

Suddenly, Harry couldn’t breathe. It was like a hand had been pressed over his mouth, and his nose squeezed shut, and all he could do was clutch at his throat and gasp. He vaguely felt himself fall away from Orion and onto his back, writhing as he wheezed desperately.

And then the sensation melted into nothingness. He wasn’t breathing, no, but it was like he’d forgotten he had to. Instead, Harry’s mind focussed on one of the scorch marks in the left hand corner of the room, at the very top of a wall. He saw everything; the spiralling blackened scar, like a delicately spun spider’s web, blooming from a single impact point-

“Harry, Harry, are you okay?”

Harry blinked, and then air was rushing into his lungs, painfully fresh and cold as it filled his chest. He panted, shallow, quick breaths as his eyes stung with almost-there tears. Finally, Harry calmed, slumping back against the floor and taking deep, satisfying gulps of air.

“What was that?!?” Orion squeaked shrilly.

“I have no idea,” Harry admitted weakly. This had happened before, he distinctly remembered it…

“You were fine one minute, and then your face was turning blue- I couldn’t do anything,” Orion fretted, the previous conversation forgotten. “It was like with the necklace.”

“I dunno what it is, but it went away pretty quickly. I don’t think it was serious,” Harry dismissed with an air of bravado. He didn’t want to go to the hospital wing. He *really* hated hospital wings.

“Maybe you should ask Tom,” Orion suggested. “He could probably tell you what it is. Although he might be busy tomorrow, so you should catch him today-“

“Why will he be busy tomorrow?”

Orion looked at Harry like he was an idiot. “Because it’s his birthday.”

Oh.

“*You didn’t know?*” Orion asked innocently, as they strolled down the corridor towards the Quidditch pitch. Harry tried not to look at the walls around him… somewhere close, Montgomery Lestrange had drawn his last breath.

“Of course I didn’t know. How was I supposed to find out?” Harry said helplessly.

“So you don’t have a present for him then.”
“Oh yeah,” Harry rolled his eyes, “I have a random gift lying around just waiting to be given away.”

“Really?”

“No, of course not.” Harry said. “…Do I really have to get Tom a present?”

“It’s sort of the ‘done thing’ in pureblood circles,” Orion said doubtfully.

“Tom’s not even a pureblood, though!”

“I wouldn’t mention that when you tell him that you haven’t got a present for him.”

Harry wracked his brain, trying to think of something. Maybe Tom liked odd socks? He had plenty of those lying around-

“Now what’s this about presents?”

Orion and Harry froze mid-step. Harry recognised the voice with painful familiarity, and turned slowly.

“Tom,” he said with dismay, taking in the Slytherin prefect; groomed to perfection as usual, leaning against the wall with precise carelessness. Tom Riddle was inspecting his nail beds with fascination, and from the languid smirk curling at the corner of his lips, Harry suspected that Tom knew exactly what they were discussing. The wind ruffled his hair artfully as he inclined his chin.

“I was just heading down to the grounds for an afternoon stroll, and I couldn’t help but listen in. Apparently you’re in quite the conundrum?”

“It’s Harry,” Orion said quickly. “He doesn’t have a present for your birthday- ow!”

Orion bellowed in pain, hopping, and Harry subtly draw his foot back in. Thank Merlin that Orion didn’t want to work in the Department of Mysteries. The so-called ‘mysteries’ wouldn’t last five seconds.

“How unfortunate,” Tom said, with the kind of smug grin that made Harry want to punch him.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed dubiously. “Unfortunate. Although, somehow, I think you know what you want.”

“Well, a thought had just occurred to me a minute ago-”

“What a coincidence.”

“I want a rematch.”

Harry blinked. “…You want a what?”

Tom smiled. “You do remember our little duel, don’t you?”

“Who could forget?!?” Orion interrupted cheerily.

“Well, I want a rematch. Perhaps this time the proper result will out,” Tom raised his eyebrow challengingly.

“You mean you think you’ll win,” Harry said.
“Well, yes.”
“A bit presumptuous of you.”
“I suppose there’s only one way to find out.”

Harry felt his competitive spirit rise at the glint in Tom’s eye. He’d love to see that vanish…

“Fine then,” Harry conceded. He was sure that Tom would just wear him down eventually either way, and it was his birthday present, after all. “When are we doing this?”

“I was thinking: now.”

“What, right now? Like, immediately?”

“That is generally what the word implies, yes,” Tom said indulgently. “You aren’t busy, are you?”

Harry glanced at Orion, who gave a happy shake of his head.

Harry sighed, and glanced longingly out of the window at the green, open pitch in the distance. “Well, we were going to do some flying, but it’s nothing we can’t do later, I guess.”

“Excellent,” Tom said with relish. “Professor Merrythought lent me use of her classroom, perhaps we could head over there now?” He gestured widely.

Harry turned to his friend, who had stars in his eyes at the prospect of the duel. He didn’t think he even needed to ask the question, but: “Are you coming, Orion?”

“You couldn’t keep me away if you tried,” Orion assured him. “I’ll sneak in if I have to.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that exciting,” Harry replied with a teasing grin.

“Are you kidding?” Orion enthused. “Your last duel was one of the most exciting things I’ve ever seen. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

With that settled, they set off: Tom leading and Harry and Orion followed in his wake.

“I’ve never been to Professor Merrythought’s classroom when she isn’t there. I wonder what her first name is,” Orion said absently, bumping his shoulder against Harry’s.

“It’s Galatea,” Tom replied, calling back. “Galatea Merrythought.”

“That’s terrible,” Harry said with a snort, and wondered if anyone in the wizarding world had a normal name.

“I think it’s sweet,” Orion defended.

Harry sniggered. “Matches her personality perfectly.”

When they reached the Defence classroom, Tom set about preparing it. He moved the tables to one side to create a huge open space, and then opened the shutters, flooding the classroom with light. He motioned for Orion to erect a shield charm and stay behind it, and then Tom watched as Harrison removed his jumper, throwing it to the side, and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt.

Harrison was looking more casual these days, Tom realised. It wasn’t anything it particular about
him—just a general relaxed air. He seemed more comfortable in his skin.

“Come on then, Riddle,” Harrison said, rolling up his sleeves and smirking. “This is what you wanted, after all.”

And it was indeed. Their first duel had been playing on his mind for months—and the desire to finally beat Harrison had been strong. And when he’d heard Harrison and Orion talking about his birthday earlier… well, the seed had been planted. Tom never felt much towards his birthdays—they came, went, and he was another year older. But occasionally they were useful—especially when guilting stubborn year mates into rematches.

“What I want is to crush you,” Tom replied smoothly, drawing his wand.

Harrison mirrored him, rolling his eyes. “You never change, do you?”

“Orion!” Tom called out, not moving his eyes from Harrison’s. “Do keep back.”

And then they were duelling.

There were no bows this time around—they started slowly, circling each other with careful steps. Harrison seemed totally changed; focused, alert, tense. Whilst Tom found Harrison’s normal demeanour interesting; he found this heightened state equally fascinating.

Suddenly, Harrison sent a flash of red light hurtling towards Tom, who recognised it as a disarming charm almost immediately. It was simple for Tom to step out of the way. Harrison tried it again, casting another disarming spell. Tom threw up a shield this time, deflecting the blasting spell that he would have stepped into if he’d tried dodging.

“Nice idea. Shame it didn’t work,” Tom said, letting the shield charm fall.

“I had to at least try,” Harrison shrugged.

And they were moving faster, firing jinxes and curses back and forth, ducking and weaving away from the returning fire. Harrison sent a particularly vicious ear-shrivelling curse that had Tom letting out a short burst of impressed laughter. The flashes of light and following crashes were like a storm; energy crackling from their wands in concentrated strikes. Suddenly, Tom saw Harrison wobble, stumbling over a loose pavestone corner; and Tom took advantage of the opening to send a _flipendo_ hurtling into Harrison’s chest.

It impacted, the first spell to directly hit, and Harrison was sent flying back into the wall. He slid down the bricks, landing with a sharp exhale. Tom raised his wand, but too late he spotted Harrison, still on the ground, raise his wand and aim a _reducto_ at the ceiling above Tom’s head. Harrison’s aim was true, and a heavy rain of debris followed. Tom raised a hand to cover his face, and flicked his wand, creating a gust of wind that blew most of the rubble away from him. By the time the cloud of dust had cleared, Harrison was back on his feet, albeit slightly favouring his left side. A sting above Tom’s eyebrow alerted him to a gash, and he felt a trickle of blood trace its way down his cheekbone.

“We’re trashing Merrythought’s classroom,” Harrison said, cracking his neck.

“I’m sure she’ll get over it,” Tom replied with bared teeth. He slashed his wand through the air and an almighty crash followed, a bolt of lightning slicing through the air, crackling through the air towards Harrison. Before it could make contact, the lightning bolt turned to butterflies; a million different colours swirling through the air. They moved in a haze of pigment, descending upon Tom.
But as one of their wings brushed against his cheek, he gestured in irritation and the butterflies burst into flame; their tattered and charred wings floating to the ground.

Tom waved his wand over his head in a wide circle motion, bringing it around and around and around; stirring up the wind and dust; picking up papers at first, and then a chair, and then the whole classroom was moving; a giant hurricane of rushing wind and tumbling files. Tom could see Harrison through the dust, crouching and using his wand to knock away tables and chairs that came shooting towards him. Tom pushed through the storm, keeping his arm moving. Suddenly, Harrison spotted him (he must have eyesight like a hawk), and deflected one of the desks in Tom’s direction. Tom, seeing the huge mass growing ever closer, ducked.

The spell was dropped, as was the furniture. With an almighty crash, desks and chairs fell to the ground, splintering and breaking in half. Absently, Tom registered that Professor Merrythought might not be best pleased.

But then Tom was ducking balls of flame as Harrison threw them viciously; along with the occasional stunner, crackling with power. Harrison didn’t seem to show any sign of stopping, and Tom was forced to summon table legs and folders (he did hope they weren’t anything important) to defend himself, forced steadily back. He’d hit the wall soon.

He needed something to distract Harrison.

“Serpensortia,” Tom snarled, and a huge burgundy snake erupted from the tip of his wand, thick yellow stripes decorating the length of its body. It landed on the pavestones, uncurling itself smoothly.

“Flesssh,” the snake hissed viciously, taking a moment to scent the air and then slithering towards Harrison.

Harrison moved backwards uncertainly, muttering: “Why does this always happen? I bet you’re venomous too, aren’t you?”

The snake lunged a little, snapping its jaws playfully once or twice. Harrison jumped, and set the snake on fire, letting the sparks disintegrate and melt the reptile into little more than ashes. Harrison threw a repulso at Tom which was easily deflected back towards him. A slicing charm made Harrison yell out, clutching his ribs.

An idea struck. Tom murmured under his breath, and Harrison fell to his knees, clutching his ears and wincing under what must have been a deafening cacophony of noise. Tom smirked- the drone charm was always effective.

Tom moved closer gradually, twirling his wand around his fingers, weaving a spell-web. As he did, the temperature around Harrison plummeted lower and lower, the boy’s skin turning gradually blue-toned and frost-ridden. And as Tom leaned down over Harrison’s shivering body, letting a lazy smirk decorate his lips, he tore the wand out of Harrison’s weak grip and chucked it to the side; the stick clattering to the floor and rolling under a desk. There was no way Harrison could retrieve it.

He shouldn’t have been so confident.

Harrison, in a sudden blaze of movement, grabbed a handful of tattered butterfly wings from the floor and flung them into Tom’s face, using the distraction to send a strong kick towards Tom’s shin and scramble away; Harrison’s skin growing rosy as Tom’s spells fell away.

Tom roared in pain and staggered backwards, his shin burning. It was bruised at least, he was sure,
and he could only hope it wasn’t broken. He conjured a rough bandage around his leg; and hoped that the adrenaline would pull him through.

Tom threw a stunner at Harrison, hoping he could finish this quickly. But Harrison just kept moving, and dove behind a nearby trunk for cover as Tom sent another one.

The trunk exploded and Tom staggered back, wincing on his injured leg, as bodies tumbled out of the trunk. A brunette with a bloodied stomach; a ginger with a peculiar mass attached to his chest; another ginger, throat gaping and tangled; a boy, leg little more than a stump; and a blonde, with vague, peculiar eyes; all muttering lower than Tom could hear.

“I swear I’ll help you,” Harrison gasped, before scrambling away.

And now Tom was closest to the Boggart. The bodies flickered, outlines blurring and melting; until they became that awful, familiar gravestone, grey and ordinary; the fatal words etched across its surface:

Tom Riddle, 1926-?

Unknown

Tom was transfixed. It was a terrible idea to stand this still in a duel, he knew that, but he couldn’t help it. He was filled with such a gripping fear, it was like ice sliding down his spine; but there was anger too, an animal clawing through his abdomen. He wanted to rip the sadly-placed daisy from the foot of the grave, tear it into pieces and burn it to cinders.

By the time he tore himself away from his- boring, ordinary, muggle- gravestone; Harrison was charging across the classroom. He threw himself against Tom’s chest, and Tom yelled as Harrison’s weight landed on his leg. They tussled, Tom attempting to throw Harrison off and get some sort of leverage, but his wand hand was trapped under Harrison’s body, and his leg felt like it was on fire.

He shouted in pain as his head suddenly slammed back against the ground. Harrison had head-butted him. His head pounded, his vision swam, and his chest burned with exertion, and he knew that he was finished. All that was left was to make it official. Harrison, gritting his teeth, wrenched Tom’s wand out of his hand and pressed it against his throat, grinning viciously; leaving Tom to glare up at Harrison with something not unlike wonder, and very close to loathing.

“Well done,” Tom sighed, slumping; and the moment broke. “I concede. That was very resourceful.”

“Thanks. I was a goner for a while there,” Harrison breathed, not looking much better than Tom. He grinned suddenly. “Now you have to help me find my wand.”

“I hardly think that’s fair,” Tom raised an eyebrow. “That was my birthday present, after all.”

Harrison snorted. “And was it everything you dreamed of?”

Tom didn’t answer, but looked at the position they were in; Harrison sitting on his chest, Tom beneath him. “Have you noticed that we tend to end up in this position a lot?”

Harrison turned bright red, scrambling to his feet and lightly hopping away. “D-don’t be ridiculous,” he stuttered.

Tom shrugged, and pulled himself up. He winced, testing out his leg.

“Is your leg broken?”
“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tom dismissed. “I’ll take a simple healing potion, and I should be as good as new in a matter of hours. I suggest you do the same— you’re favouring your left side, and you might experience adverse effects from the cold.”

“And whose fault is that?” Harrison mumbled, poking his ribs and frowning.

“We’re placing blame now, are we? Don’t worry— I’m sure my leg was injured all on its own,” Tom drawled, exaggerating his limp.

“Are you sure it’s not bad?” Harrison said guiltily, fumbling with his glasses.

“Don’t concern yourself. I asked for the duel— and it certainly didn’t disappoint,” Tom admitted. It had been just as spectacular as he’d hoped, even if the result had been unexpected.

“Didn’t disappoint?!” Orion shrieked, breaking his shield charm and running over, gesturing excitedly at his friend. “That was amazing! You were like LIGHTNING, and he was like FIRE, and then there were snakes and- Harry, you won!” Orion grasped Harrison’s shoulders, jumping up and down.

“By the skin of my teeth,” Harrison reminded him, unnecessarily modest. “I wouldn’t exactly call it a resounding success.”

“But you beat Tom! No one’s ever beaten him!” Orion looked over his shoulder. “Sorry, Tom.”

“It’s perfectly alright,” Tom said graciously. “Harrison was the victor. We’ll just have to see what happens next time.”

“Next time?” Harrison asked suddenly.

“Well, I can’t let this be the end, can I? Best out of five?” Tom teased.

“I can tell that I’m going to regret everything,” Harrison groaned, and allowed Orion to help him towards the door, shuffling across the annihilated classroom. “I’d better go pick up those healing potions you mentioned, yeah?” Harrison announced, muttering: “My back’s killing me.”

“Indeed,” Tom replied. “I should head back to the dormitories myself.” And then quickly, before his classmate could leave, Tom called out, “Harrison?”

Harrison glanced behind him.

Tom nodded. “Well-duelled.”

“Well-duelled, Tom. Happy birthday… Sorry about the leg.”

And Harrison left; leaving Tom alone with his thoughts in the devastated classroom.

Tom was a little disappointed to have lost. If he’d been less arrogant— if he’d just disarmed Harrison from a distance instead of taking his wand personally, Tom would be the victor. Next time, Tom would take that on board, and Harrison would be crushed. Still, it was a lesson learnt— and even more valuable knowledge gained.

Harrison had spoken the snake tongue.

Tom hadn’t realised it in the heat of the duel, it had sounded just like English to him. But looking back, he recognised the elongated vowels; the exaggerated ‘s’; and the slippery consonants of snake speech.
And wasn’t that just fascinating?

Tom had always taken his ability for granted. He’d seen Dumbledore’s reaction as a sign that only the most powerful wizards could speak with snakes, if it was such a rare gift. And since Tom had never encountered anyone else who possessed or mentioned it, Tom had kept his talent to himself, covetous. The snake tongue had always been an embarrassingly important part of his life- he’d talk with the garden snakes behind the orphanage for hours- and he saw little need to share his gift with lesser wizards.

But hearing that Harrison shared his gift… well, this called for some research. The library had to have something.

But first he should call the House Elves. He really didn’t want his Defence teacher to see this mess.

The library did indeed have something.

Perhaps it was not the most conventional way to spend a birthday, but Tom rather enjoyed burying himself in the books: hunting down the tomes on the snake language or ‘parseltongue’, as it was apparently called, which led him to books on Salazar Slytherin, which led him into books on the Chamber of Secrets- and that was just fascinating.

From what he could gather, people who inherited the gift of parseltongue were called parselmouths; and were nearly all descended from Salazar Slytherin. Tom wondered how Harrison and the great Founder were related. Of course, it was possible that they weren’t (there were parselmouths unrelated to Slytherin- take Herpo the Foul, who frankly sounded like a genital disease), but obviously it was most likely for a British wizard to come from Salazar.

The gift was rare; rare and dark, which ticked all kind of boxes in Tom’s head. He found himself grinning as he saw the ‘related magics’: necromancy, curses, and something called horcruxes, which sounded curious. Perhaps that could be his next project.

Tom was captured by this idea of heritage. He devoured information on Slytherin’s Founder; absorbed the story of Slytherin’s Heir; read greedily about the tear between Godric and Salazar; and desperately wished. If Tom were, perhaps, the Slytherin Heir- then it would mean that he could be someone. Mean something. It wasn’t absurd to think he might be heir to this legendary figure: after all, who could be more worthy than Tom? He didn’t fully share in Salazar’s fierce loathing for muggles, but Tom had never experienced any trouble with conjuring hatred if he really needed it.

He wanted to be Slytherin’s Heir. No- needed to be. It might be a myth, of course… but the story had struck a chord somewhere within Tom, and a little voice said ‘this is it, this is your destiny’.

The monster in the Chamber would be some kind of snake; that much was clear. How else could Salazar make sure that the monster would be controlled only by those of his line? So it had to be a serpent: a basilisk perhaps, or a runespoor. Maybe even a cockatrice.

Tom grinned at the thought of getting his hands on such a legendary creature. Think of the stories they could tell, the magic they could share…

But perhaps he was getting ahead of himself. He didn’t even know where the Chamber was- if it even existed.

Tom appeared to have struck a dead end.
He picked up a copy of ‘Hogwarts: A History’, within which he’d discovered the legend of the Chamber of Secrets, and weighed the heavy book in his hand. If there was any information on the castle to be found, this was where to find it. Sure, centuries’ worth of historians had searched both the castle and the texts on it, hunting for the elusive chamber… but they hadn’t been Tom Riddle.

He flipped to the first chapter, and began reading.

Merlin, reading had never been so dull. Who had written this? The number of run-on sentences and purple prose was painfully impressive. Not even Tom could maintain concentration. After a while, his eyes began to glaze over, and even as he continued scanning the pages automatically, his mind was miles away.

Tom turned a page, something on inventions of the seventeenth century, maybe, when suddenly—hold on. There was someone just behind him.

“What are you doing?” Tom asked abruptly and dragged his attention away from the book, looking up at Atticus Avery; who had been attempting to peer over Tom’s shoulder conspicuously. Atticus looked shocked to be caught out, flushing red and stuttering.

“O-oh, hello Riddle. I was just, er, seeing what you were reading.”

“Hogwarts: A History,” Tom said, coolly. “It’s a fascinating read.”

“I’m sure it is. Just reading about Ilvermorny, eh?”

Tom glanced down at the page in front of him. Apparently, he was.

“Evidently,” Tom replied. “Was there a reason for your interest?”

“No, not really,” Atticus said, clearly hiding something. Honestly, how big of a tell was it to rub the back of your neck?

“Are you sure? You must have something interesting to say.”

“I did see Peters yesterday,” Atticus volunteered with a cruel smirk, “looking a bit worse for wear. Maybe he tripped over his own broom.”

“No,” Tom rolled his eyes. How petty could you get? “We duelled.”

“Did you crush him?” Atticus asked eagerly.

“Something like that.”

A brief pause, during which Atticus dropped his smirk and appeared to be steeling himself. Tom was sure he would hate wherever this conversation went.

“Riddle,” Atticus said, drawing a deep breath.

“Mmm?” Tom hummed, wondering how quickly he could get rid of Atticus if he threw a bone and told him to ‘fetch’.

Atticus shifted uncertainly. “You went to the Malfoy Ball, right? Did… did Abraxas mention anything about my family? About us… possibly getting an invitation next year.”
“No,” Tom said shortly.

“He didn’t talk about my father at all?”

“Not really.”

“Or any upcoming events that might be a chance-“

“To be frank, Atticus,” Tom interrupted, “There was no mention of the Averys at all. I don’t think he finds you overly significant.”

“Oh.”

Atticus looked a little shocked. Perhaps Tom had been overly critical…? No, he didn’t think so. The comment had been entirely warranted. If Atticus didn’t get some self-esteem and stop focusing so much on party invitations, he would forever be the shade of his family history and Merlin knew that wouldn’t be any use to Tom.

“Well,” Atticus said more quietly, looking contrite. “Thank you for telling me. I should… I should go. Happy birthday.”

And then he thrust a well-wrapped present into Tom’s hand and hurried away, probably already mentally composing a letter to his father.

Tom examined the gift in his hand, turning it this way and that way. Knowing his luck, it would be yet another set of quills. He prised back the paper at one end, and slid out a wooden box, opening it to see… definitely not quills; nor any other kind of stationary. No, nestled within the box lay a smoking pipe.

A pipe.

Did Atticus think Tom was some sort of Sherlock Holmes? Since when did Tom sit around smoking? Tom shook his head at the ridiculousness of it all. Honestly, a pipe…

Wait.

Something in the back of his mind tickled. His eyes came to rest on the book in his lap once more, and without being entirely sure why, he swiftly flicked forwards several pages. He refocussed his eyes, carefully reading his chosen page; at last coming to rest on:

‘The biggest Hogwarts innovation of the eighteenth century was, without doubt, the installation of an elaborate plumbing system. Working its way all over the castle, it eliminated the waste problem that the castle had been experiencing; as well as getting rid of the phantom smells caused by excessive vanishing spells. Much of the planning for the installation was credited to Ramsey Jugwell, although Hogwarts seventh-year student Corvinus Gaunt volunteered much of his time to help the architects, providing a ‘student perspective’; and was given a resultant award for services to the school (see page 562). The system first experienced a major problem two months later. Due to the size of the pipes, students were able to travel through them, taking a shortcut to classes. Unfortunately, this led to several fatalities, causing available access points to be blocked off. Many questioned the safety of the blockage, as hissing was heard from the pipes for several months, but as it had disappeared by the next school year, it was never followed up.’

There. Tom didn’t know why, but that was it. Perhaps it was the mention of how large the pipes were, or the hissing- but that was it. (Perhaps Atticus was useful for something, after all.) And if the secret to the Chamber of Secrets lay somewhere in the plumbing…
Tom guessed he would be visiting a lot of toilets in the months to come.

This was going nowhere.

After thoroughly searching over a dozen bathrooms, Tom was more than a bit frustrated. It had taken him two and a half months to search the seventh to fourth floors thoroughly; working from the top to bottom, checking every nook and cranny, timing his investigations so he would remain unseen, and feeling ridiculous as he hissed softly at sinks.

It had not been fun.

He was getting to the point where he’d begun researching his own heritage for fun, seeing if he could track it back to Slytherin, and at least get something solid to add to his hopes. Tom had always known he wasn’t a muggleborn, somewhere, deep within- but here, this connection to Slytherin… this was the proof. He refused to be like the other brats at the orphanage, so dull and lifeless.

The first thing he’d done when he reached Hogwarts in his first year was look for his family. He’d searched for his father in the Hogwarts records- sure that his mother wouldn’t have died from something as ordinary as childbirth if she’d been magical- but he could find neither hide nor hair of any Thomas Riddles. ‘Riddle’, evidently, was not a Wizarding name. Finally, desperately disappointed with the knowledge that his witch mother had succumbed to illness, he’d stopped looking.

Perhaps it was time to research his mother’s history.

All he knew of her was what she’d given him- his grandfather’s first name. Marvolo was unusual, but not unusual enough in the Wizarding world that Tom could be sure of anything. He’d have to look for muggle Riddles and wizarding Marvolos who’d lived in the same area seventeen years ago- that had to turn up something. It was going to take some effort.

He’d get Abraxas on the case.

Over the next few months, Harry watched Tom grow increasingly withdrawn. It concerned him more than it should, as there was something niggling at the back of his mind, something he was sure he should know, but couldn’t grasp onto. If only he could remember what.

The Slytherins gathered in the Common room one chilly February evening. It would have been like any other evening, except for the fact that Tom had joined them; joining Orion by the bookshelves after a brief exchange with Malfoy. Seeing Tom in the evenings was becoming increasingly rare, so Orion made sure to assuage Tom with the latest Quidditch news, in case he felt out of the loop. Personally, Harry thought that Tom probably couldn’t care less, but Orion disagreed.

Orion had already told Tom all about how they assigned placements for the European Quidditch Championships, and was eagerly babbling on about how to adapt a Quadpot stadium for Quidditch. Before he could stop himself, Harry made a comment about the Wimbourne Wasps that he probably shouldn’t have known yet (he kept forgetting which tournaments came when); and Tom’s eyes flickered to him suddenly, eyes dark with something that Harry couldn’t read. Tom put up a hand abruptly, ending his conversation with Orion firmly but politely. And then he made his way towards Harry, taking a seat next to him on the sofa.
“Hey Tom,” Harry said, putting a final full stop at the end of his Charms essay.

“I know your secret,” Tom said bluntly, and Harry’s eyes widened. His mind immediately cycled through all the things that Riddle could know: time travel, Voldemort, that time he put on Riddle’s underwear instead of his own by accident, his scar, Dumbledore, the Prophecy…

“W-what?” Harry stuttered, sure his face was turning white as a sheet.

“I know that you’re a Seer.”

Harry’s mind slowed to a halt. Tom knew that he was a what? But the more he thought about it, the more it made sense- from Tom’s perspective at least. The comments about the future, Harry’s brief obsession with time- even his Department of Mysteries ambition. *Merlin*, some owls had definitely been crossed in translation there. But he couldn’t complain: Harry was lucky that Tom had come to that (wrong) conclusion. At least being a Seer didn’t require Harry to be carted off to the Ministry for testing

Luckily Tom took his relieved slump as one of defeat.

“I won’t tell anyone, that’s not what this is about,” Tom assured him loftily.

“What *is* it about, then?”

“I was just wondering if you’d *seen* me… discovering anything.”

“Discovering anything,” Harry repeated shortly.

“Yes.”

“You’re going to have to be a bit more specific,” Harry said, deciding he might as well run with this. It made a convenient excuse.

“I’m afraid I can’t,” Tom said, not looking very sorry at all.

“Well then: *no*, I haven’t seen you ‘discovering anything’,” Harry replied, rolling his eyes.

“Could you look?”

“That’s not how it works.” If Tom had decided that Harry was a future-seeing expert, Harry might as well make up some convenient rules.

“No, you just see the Quidditch scores,” Tom said, eyeing Harry suspiciously, like he thought Harry was hiding the future from him. (Well, he was. Sort of.)

“I can’t choose what I see. If it’s there, it’s there,” Harry shrugged. He was curious to see how much he could bullshit his way through this. It seemed to working well so far. He’d been spewing nothing but bullshit ever since that time turner explosion, after all.

“Well, have you seen anything else?” Tom asked, and Harry wondered what he could make up, and how much of it Riddle would believe.

“Okay,” he said slowly, “I may have seen something.”

Tom raised his eyebrows, leaning in subtly.

Harry lowered his voice secretly. “I see a figure… someone closely entwined with your destiny-
you’re both standing in a vast chamber, the ceilings higher than the eye can see. You bend, falling to your knees, as the truth of your heritage comes crashing down upon you… The figure’s identity is revealed.”

“Yes?” Riddle asked eagerly, face alight with excitement.

“It’s Dumbledore,” Harry revealed in a distant voice. “He clasps you tight to his chest, his eyes filling with tears. ‘Tom,’ he murmurs softly. ‘Tom, I am your father’.”

There was a moment of gradual comprehension, and then Tom made a sound of disgust and rolled his eyes forcefully, looking thoroughly irritated. “You’re such a dunce,” he spat.

Harry tried to keep a straight face, but failed; he burst out laughing, shaking with amusement as he collapsed back onto the sofa. The look on Tom’s face was hilarious.

“The gift of Seeing is wasted on you,” Tom told him coolly, before turning on his heel and leaving for the dormitories. The billow of his robes was much like Snape’s would be in the future, and Harry wondered if that was where the Potion’s master would learn it from.

“What did you do?” Orion asked curiously, joining Harry on the sofa. “Tom seemed angry.”

“He’s fine,” Harry grinned, coming down from his high and resting his head on a cushion. “He just heard something unexpected.”

“I hope he’s okay,” Orion frowned, staring at the dormitory stairs. “He seems distant these days.”

“I’m sure he’s fine, Orion,” Harry assured him, despite that little nigglng feeling returning. What was Harry forgetting? “He’s Tom Riddle, after all.”

Chapter End Notes

Whoop whoop, hopefully this duel was okay. I hate writing them (I can’t do action :/), but twas plot necessary, so...
And follow me on tumblr under the same name if you want to occasionally read about how much I love Orion.
Tom Has A New Pet

Chapter Summary

Ohana means family, Harry gains new purpose, and the Wizarding World has some truly useless adults.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: Harry taught Orion the patronus, and Harry learnt all about how delightful Orion's father is (plot twist: he's not). Tom badgered Harry into a duel rematch, which Harry won, trashing the Defence classroom in the process. Harry slipped and revealed his parseltongue ability, evoking Tom's curiosity in his heritage. This led to discoveries about the chamber of secrets, and Tom's desire to learn more about his living family. Tom narrowed down the location of the CoS entrance to bathrooms, and began the long search. He also revealed that he 'knows' Harry is a seer, but Harry was unhelpful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was late March that Tom finally hissed at a sink and heard a whirring, clicking sound as a gaping hole appearing in the bathroom unit.

“Finally,” Tom breathed, watching the entrance appear with greedy eyes. “Finally.”

It was like an answer from the universe, murmuring ‘you were right, you’re meant for more’. It was the most beautiful sound he’d ever heard.

The hole was deep, cavernous and echoing, and Tom stared into it doubtfully. Now how was he meant to get down there? He doubted that Salazar Slytherin slid. It hardly suited his ‘dignified Hogwarts founder vibe’. An image of the Hogwarts hall flashed across his mind’s eyes, and Tom smiled. Perhaps he should try something out.

“Stairs,” Tom hissed, and the bricks changed. They shifted, disassembling and reassembling until they formed a revolving staircase, the stairs moving around and around like a corkscrew, vanishing into the dark depths below.

That was more like it.

Tom smirked, and stepped carefully onto a step, drawing his robes close around him so not to snag them. The movement of the stairs caught him off guard and he stumbled, but he was able to steady himself, finally settling himself securely. He watched the bathroom, so insignificant for what treasure it had been hiding, disappear as he sank further into the school’s foundations.

His heart gave a little skip.

The stone walls were slick with water, glistening and dewy. Tom resisted the urge to reach out and
stroke the surface, knowing his fingers would only catch and scrape over the rough bricks as he spiralled down. The staircase was moving quicker now, until suddenly it- and Tom- came to a rest with a dull crunch, settling in place deep beneath the school.

Tom stumbled a little at the unexpected landing, tripping into the corridor ahead. He straightened quickly and dusted off his robes, glad that no one had seen that. He’d have never heard the end of it from Harrison.

(Tom wondered what Harrison would say if he could see him now. Would he be impressed; green eyes wide with wonder as Tom took over the legacy of his- maybe even their- ancestor? No, Tom wouldn’t fool himself. Harrison’s eyes would be wide with disgust, perhaps even hate. Harrison held a disturbing amount of love for muggleborns.)

The corridor wasn’t as grand as Tom would have expected; all low ceilings and half-lit corners. He took a few, hesitant steps forwards, his footsteps louder than he wanted, but not loud enough to mark just how auspicious this occasion was- and took a deep, satisfied breath.

The air was musky, unpleasantly so, and carried the tang of centuries undisturbed, but it was just enough to remind Tom of this place’s history. He was probably the only person to see these walls for eons.

He began walking, a pace that wasn’t quite hurrying, but definitely wasn’t slow. Now that he’d taken it all in, he barely spared a glance for his surroundings, and he found his posture growing taller (some may even call it regal) as he drew closer to what he guessed would be a central chamber. The corridor was long and winding, but it couldn’t go on forever.

And it didn’t.

A wall appeared before Tom, wide and expansive, crafted of polished black marble. It boasted two intricately carved serpents, endlessly entwined and twisted around one another. Their heads were elegantly sloped, the light catching on their emerald-set eyes. Tom frowned- the colour reminding him of another pair of eyes, not much different- and he waved his wand, causing a dark film to spread over the precious stones. They glinted like onyxes now, and he relaxed slightly.

Tom took a small step towards the wall, tilting his head. Now how did this work?

“Open,” he hissed, and the walls melted away like theatre curtains tugged apart, revealing the stage beyond.

And what a stage it was.

The chamber was huge, stretching back for what seemed like miles, and the ceiling reached higher than the eye could see. The floor and walls seemed to be made of the same material as the door, but the pillars that supported the room were a dark, moody grey. Once Tom stepped into the room, hundreds of dancing green flames flickered to life; the candles dotted around the place.

As he glanced around, he didn’t see any doors or divergences from the chamber. It was momentarily disappointing- he’d hoped that there would perhaps be an office or a store of some kind- to think of the knowledge that could be stored down here- but he kept hope. Perhaps everything was elaborately hidden away. It seemed to have been Salazar’s style.

At one end of the chamber, there stood a huge statue of a stately, elderly wizard himself, dressed in robes that seemed to ripple to the floor in great swathes of fabric, despite being carved from rock. He glared down at the room, and even Tom felt a little intimidated under his gaze. He squared his
shoulders and tried to force away the feeling.

Now, what would he want to hear if he were a Hogwarts founder?

“Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four,” he said, feeling rather ridiculous. “I am your Heir.”

It seemed to work though, for the statue’s eyes shuttered over like a long blink, and his jaw began to slide open. From the blackness within, Tom heard a mindless, indistinguishable hiss, and then saw the glint that spoke of a pair of yellow, gleaming eyes. A basilisk.

Immediately, Tom clenched his eyes shut, leaving him to hear nothing more than a thump and the scratching of scales of tiles as the beast appeared to uncoil.

“Why is the boy closing his eyes?” the basilisk murmured in a soft, distant voice. “If he is the Heir like he says he is, we meet eyes as equals. If not…” The snap of the basilisk’s jaw followed, and Tom suppressed a shiver.

“I apologise,” Tom replied, keeping his eyes shut. “For my closed eyes. I simply find myself unprepared for your radiance.”

“Well, open up, open up!” the snake chanted. “It’s been so long since we had a meal.”

He had to do something. Unsteadily, Tom prised open his eyelids, and suddenly he was staring into the bright, eager eyes of the basilisk. Tom prepared himself for the arresting sensation of death- the seizure, the breathlessness- but nothing. The basilisk let out a sigh of disappointment and slithered backwards, bowing its head. “So hungry…” it whined.

The basilisk was strong and massive; covered in dark green scales that shone dully, and furnished with (Tom swallowed a gulp) rather enormous teeth.

“Beautiful,” Tom breathed.

“How long have you been down here?” Tom asked curiously.

“So long. We slept, and when we woke up, the water was still dripping. We want food!”

The basilisk was going to be no use, Tom realised with dismay, not in this state. Half-mad and starving, it was no more intelligent than a common grass snake. Still, perhaps it knew something.

Tom glanced around the chamber. “Did your master keep any books? Any papers?”

“The paper drowned,” the snake complained. “And it tasted disgusted.”

A flood then, Tom translated, and felt something die a little inside. Think of all that priceless knowledge wasted, just because the founders didn’t know how to properly seal a room.
“Are there any remnants?” Tom tried.

The basilisk turned away, pushing its way around the edge of the room. “Are you sure you don’t have food? Just a rat, or a dog…”

Tom wasn’t going to get anything out of the basilisk whilst it was this hungry. “You can leave. Feed, if you will, but return once you’re done.”

“Can I eat the little children?” the basilisk asked eagerly. “Can I bite their little heads off? The white is so crunchy-”

“No,” Tom said quickly, not quite prepared for that. “No you can’t. There’s to be no killing, do you understand me? You go to the forest, you eat a few deer, and you come back.”

“So dull,” the basilisk complained, but bowed its head in submission.

“Can you get to the forest unseen?” Tom asked in concern. If a huge snake was seen moving through the castle, he doubted this chamber would remain a secret for long.

“I suppose we’ll find out,” the snake hissed, its voice carrying an undertone of amusement. And then it turned and slinked away, leaving through a previously unseen pipe opening. Tom just hoped that the plumbing led to outside the school.

Tom took a moment to look around the chamber, took in the pillars and high arches, drank in the wet floor and gleaming marble, and laughed.

This was his.

He was the heir of Slytherin- him: Tom Riddle, demon of Wool’s Orphanage. He meant something. He’d gone from a pokey little bedroom, his wardrobe stuffed full of other people’s belongings- to this. A chamber and a legacy, all belonging to him.

It was glorious.

Tom emerged from the chamber a few hours later to a castle in panic. Students rushed past him, all conversing in loud voices and worried shrieks that Tom could barely catch a word of.. Tom grabbed a lone girl- Warren, perhaps?- and pulled her towards him.

“What’s going on?” he asked lowly.

The girl blinked up at him through hideous glasses, all at once the picture of girlishness helpfulness. “Didn’t you hear?” she squeaked.

“Clearly not,” Tom replied, though the acidity was lost on her.

“They found Septimus Weasley by the lake! He’s been turned to stone,” she shared.

“Stone?” Images of a page (‘indirect contact with the basilisk’s gaze will result in petrification’) flashed before his eyes.

“Yes,” the girl nodded. “Frederik Lovegood’s really done it now.”

“Lovegood? What’s he got to do with it?”
“Well, they think it was a prank gone wrong. Olive said it’s a dark wizard, but everyone knows she’d just paranoid ‘cause her mother works in the Ministry and she’s filled her head with all sorts of stories,” the girl said confidingly, leaning in like she was sharing some kind of secret.

“They think it’s a prank?” Tom spat, unable to contain his outrage. His legacy, his basilisk- claimed to be some kind of schoolboy mischief? It was insulting.

“But don’t worry,” the girl assured him. “Septimus should be fine when he gets the cure.”

Tom was so tempted to cut the girl open, watch the blood drip from her fingers, and paint ‘I AM THE HEIR. SEE ME. HEAR ME’ on the walls but- no. That would be the stupidest thing he’d ever done. Perhaps if there wasn’t another parseltongue in Hogwarts, he might risk it- but Harrison was probably just as capable of opening the chamber as Tom. If there was ever a way to get caught, it was pointing out exactly what people should be looking for.

If they wanted to think this the result of some sort of prank- fine. It benefited Tom perfectly. He just had to keep his head down and wait. He wondered how many petrifications the school could take, until they realised something bigger was afoot.

He nodded briefly to the girl, and she gave him an excited wave, hurrying off.

“Tom!” came the loud cry, rising above the crowds.

Tom glanced around, searching for the speaker, only to encounter the last person on earth he wanted to see.

“Tom!” Abraxas gasped, his face vaguely red as he stumbled to a stop in front of Tom, doubling over with his hands on his knees as he panted. “You’ll never guess what? Weasley-“

“Petrified, yes, I know,” Tom replied curtly.

“Oh. So you have heard.”

“It’s not like it’s being kept secret.”

“Well, I have something else to tell you, anyway,” Abraxas dismissed. “You remember you asked me to look into those family names? The muggle Riddle and a wizarding Marvolo?”

Tom pursed his lips impatiently. “I do remember what I said.”

“Of course, yes, you would.”

“So?”

“I found nothing,” Abraxas admitted quickly. “I looked through the records, called some people… but nothing. I must say, I’m at a bit of a loss. From what I can tell, there haven’t been any ‘Marvolos’ born into major wizarding families in the last century or two..”

“So look outside major wizarding families,” Tom said, feeling a deep pain within him as he did. “Look at the bloodtraitors, the squibs…” Tom’s teeth clenched. “Just find something.”

And then Tom turned on his heel, heading back to the chamber. Now that he knew the way, it took him little to no time at all; he quickly took the stairs and strode along the twisting corridor, coming to the snake-decorated wall, and then passing into the main chamber.

It was just as impressive as last time, but now there was something different: a long stripe of
glistening water on the chamber floor. It looked much like the snail trails that used to infest the orphanage gardens.

The basilisk must have returned. Tom followed the wet line carefully. It led towards the statue of the wizard, and took a sharp turn behind the legs. It was there that Tom discovered an entrance, a door set into one of the stone ankles. He pushed it gently open, letting it swing creakily on the ancient hinges.

Beyond the door lay the hollowed out insides of the statue, jutting rocks and stones on the walls providing shelves on which Tom presumed the basilisk would oft rest. It was mostly empty, and seemed cold and empty. Tom couldn’t imagine the boredom that would come from staying here for centuries. No wonder the basilisk was slightly insane.

“Are you in here?” he hissed impatiently, scanning the space. The only light came from the opening of the statue’s mouth, and even that was murky and green-toned.

Movement: the sound of scales clicking, came from above him, and Tom glanced up.

“What does the Heir want?” came the distant whisper. “We’ve eaten already.”

“I want to know what you did earlier. When you went out.”

“We went to the cold place with the many-tailed snake. There were eyes in the water. And then there weren’t.” The basilisk paused before adding gleefully: “And then we ate.”

A skull fell from a tall ledge above Tom and shattered on the ground next to him. It looked to be from some kind of horse.

If Tom had understood what the basilisk said correctly, Weasley had been swimming when the snake emerged from a pipe directly into the lake. He’d likely only met the basilisk’s gaze through the haze of the water. Lucky. And even luckier still, he’d presumably been washed up onto the shore, rather than sinking to the bed of the lake. That would be a miserable way to go.

“Are you angry?” the basilisk wheedled, and Tom saw the glow of its wide, curious eyes through the dim darkness.

“No,” Tom said slowly. If he told the basilisk to stop now, Weasley’s state would seem like a meaningless prank by an immature schoolboy. That was all his title would be worth. “No, I’m not angry. If we are to renew Slytherin’s legacy, unpleasant choices will have to be made. You did well.”

Tom managed not to flinch at the glimpse of teeth the basilisk gave him.

“Does this mean I get to bite the little children—”

“No!” Tom said firmly. “No killing. Not… not yet. You will find a way to petrify them, do you understand? And only a few students. Just enough that they’ll never ignore us again,” he finished quietly.

“Have you heard?” Orion asked Harry eagerly, jumping into the armchair next to Harry, bouncing slightly on the cushions.
“Hm?” Harry asked, glancing up from his book. Somewhere nearby, behind the shelves, the librarian hissed at them to be quiet.

“Someone’s been petrified. One of the Weasleys.”

“Petrified?” Harry asked, his head shooting up. And then when his brain rewound- “Hang on, petrified?”

“Yes,” Orion said excitedly. “Septimus was found by Artemis; half submerged in the lake, stone-cold. Some sort of prank, they think.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry breathed. “Oh bloody hell.”

His mind was racing, and he felt like slapping himself. This was what he’d forgotten. How could he have been so stupid? The fucking Chamber of Secrets, open for business once more. And right at the centre of it all…

“Where’s Tom?”

“Tom?” Orion blinked. “I haven’t seen him much recently. He’s been acting odd, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah… he’s probably been busy.” Harry replied. Because he’s been having pool parties with a fucking huge snake.

“Do you think we should tell him what’s happened?” Orion asked, furrowing his brow in concern.

“I’m pretty sure he already knows,” Harry said flatly, his mind racing to keep up.

The realisation this time was more horrifying than his second year, because this time he knew Tom. They’d laughed, and talked, and danced- but the fact still remained: Tom Riddle had petrified someone. He was dangerous. For some reason, Harry had forgotten that Tom would ever be a threat, that he’d ever kill someone.

Kill someone… his parents. Myrtle.

The familiar sense of betrayal was heavy in his stomach. Fucking Tom Riddle.

Perhaps Harry had wanted to forget that this era was still dangerous, that it had its own dark lord and its own mini psychopath to deal with. He’d wanted to pretend that he could be normal. But Harry wasn’t normal, he never would be, and he had an obligation to save people if he could. He had to save Myrtle.

Even at the cost of Tom.

“Anyway,” Orion said. “An assembly’s been called. In the Great Hall.”

“When?”

Orion glanced at his pocket watch. “Oh!” His eyebrows shot up. “It’s now.”

Harry stood up, swinging his bag over his shoulder, the steady thrum of purpose humming through him. His ‘saving people thing’ was back in action- he’d almost forgotten what it felt like. “Well, we’d better get moving then, hadn’t we?”
The atmosphere in the Great Hall was loud and reasonably cheery, students leaning close to each other and speculating in loud voices. The bright light outside meant that only a few candles were lit, and everything seemed happier and more innocent as a result. Clearly no one thought this would be very serious. It was rather odd for Harry, who knew how this situation would escalate unchecked.

He couldn’t let it get that far.

As Orion and Harry drew closer, Walburga and Druella were already arriving and sitting down at the Slytherin table. Their conversation became clear as Harry and Orion joined them.

“This is just what the school doesn’t need after Daisy’s death,” Walburga tutted, shaking her head.

“It’s not like anyone’s been murdered,” Druella said, flicking through the book she held.

“I suppose you’re- Druella, what are you wearing?!” Walburga squawked suddenly, and Harry jumped at the loud noise.

“Oh, do you like them?” Druella asked happily. “I got them shipped from Milan. They’re surprisingly comfortable.”

“Druella, dear, you’re wearing trousers.”

Harry glanced down towards Druella’s legs. She was, indeed, wearing trousers; a loose and well-tailored pair in a flattering shade of light brown.

Druella shrugged, tucking her hair behind her ear. “If men can wear them, so can I. Clothing shouldn’t have a gender.”

“What: do you think men are going to start wearing skirts, now?” Walburga snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I dunno,” Harry said, grinning viciously. “I think Tom would look pretty great in a skirt.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Harrison,” Walburga said. “That’s preposterous. It’s a good job that Tom isn’t here to hear you say such nonsense.”

“Where is Riddle, anyway?” Druella asked, peering around the hall. “This assembly’s for everyone.”

“He’s probably looking after his new pet,” Harry commented darkly.

“Tom doesn’t like animals,” Orion said innocently. “They make him sneeze.”

Harry snorted, finding the image of Tom Riddle being allergic to anything hilarious. But then he remembered that he didn’t think you could be allergic to snakes, and it was no longer funny.

“Move over,” came a voice from behind them, and Harry glanced around to see Dolohov and Avery. Harry shuffled over obligingly.

“I noticed Lovegood’s missing,” Avery commented, clambering into a seat. “I heard that he’s been taken in for questioning.”

“Did he really do it, do you think?” Walburga asked curiously, leaning forwards.

“He’s always been batshit crazy,” Dolohov said, a touch admiringly. “Do you remember last year?”

Druella frowned. “It wasn't just him, though. Wasn’t Rachel Beastone involved in that too?”
“That was just a rumour, I think,” Atticus dismissed. “The Hart girl only identified Lovegood… when she woke up three months later, of course.”

“Poor Melissa.” Walburga shook her head.

“What did he do?” Harry asked.

Orion turned to him, eyes filled with sympathy for this 'Melissa' girl. “Frederik Lovegood… he’s known for experimenting with dark magic. It never seemed to be that serious: a blood ritual here or there. We mostly found it funny, really. But last year… a girl walked in on him practicing the disembowelment charm. Apparently he tripped, and his aim went wide, but… well, he’s always been a bit off.”

“He’s done some wicked pranks though,” Dolohov said, smiling in remembrance.

“And he might have petrified someone,” Walburga reminded him sharply.

“He didn’t,” Harry said firmly, ignoring the curious eyes that turned to him.

“What are we talking about?” Tom had finally arrived at the table, slipping a leg gracefully over the bench and taking a seat. He was probably the only one who could make the usual struggle of climbing onto the bench look elegant.

“Peters here thinks that Lovegood didn’t petrify Weasley,” Druella said. “More importantly: do you like my trousers?”

“Very flattering,” Tom said without looking at them, and Druella sent a triumphant smirk towards Walburga. Harry felt Tom’s gaze fall upon him. “You don’t believe it was just a prank, then?”

“No. Because it wasn’t,” Harry replied, raising his chin to look Tom in the eye defiantly.

“Have you seen something?” Tom asked pointedly, and Harry decided to backtrack. It would be stupid to let on that he knew.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Tom just hummed, a calculating light in his eye.

“So where have you been, Tom?” Orion leaned over the table eagerly.

“Prefect meeting. They wanted to debrief us.”

Harry almost snorted. Sure they did. But before any more could be said, Dippet stood and tapped on the side of his goblet with a spoon, bringing the noise in the hall to an abrupt stop, and immediately capturing everyone’s attention. It was a morbidly familiar scenario.

“Hello students,” Dippet said, looking worn and tired. “It’s unfortunate that we must all gather again so soon to share in dark news, but I’m afraid needs must. So let me clear something up.”

The hall seemed to hold their breath as one.

Dippet’s expression was grave. “The rumours are true: Septimus Weasley has been petrified.”

A round of loud, curious whispers followed, almost deafening in their volume. Dippet had to tap on the goblet several times until the noise subsided.
“Earlier this morning, Mr Weasley was discovered at the lake by one of our own students. He was brought to the hospital wing, and subsequently transferred to Saint Mungos. Unfortunately, his condition is such that Mr Weasley will only be revived by a specific draught derived from matured Mandrake roots. And those Mandrake roots, as I am assured by Professor Kettleburn, only mature during a very specific lunar phase. Subsequently, we will not be seeing Mr Weasley until close to the end of the school year, and arrangements will be made for him to catch up. However, trust that he is entirely stable and well, and having him returned safe and sound to us will merely take time.”

Dippet heaved a deep sigh. “I know that there are rumours of a dark wizard or witch floating around the school, but let me assure you that these are false. Mr Weasley’s condition is simply that result of an immature prank, and is easily remedied. You are all perfectly safe, and will join me, I’m sure, in hoping for Mr Weasley’s speedy recovery.”

Dippet sat back down again, and a round of subdued applause followed.

“What was Weasley doing by the lake, do you think?” Druella asked curiously. “It’s a bit cold to be outside.”

“The Gryffindor Quidditch team swim as part of their training,” Walburga said, ears turning pink. She fanned her face subtly. “I see them, sometimes.”

Druella raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you do, do you?”

Harry shuddered at the thought of swimming in the ice cold lake, remembering how crazy Viktor Krum had looked. He was just glad that Oliver had never been insane enough to chuck them all in the lake and tell them to paddle. Harry probably would have drowned.

“It’ll be weird not to see Septimus at the Quidditch matches,” Orion mused.

Harry perked up in interest. “He played Quidditch?”

“Yeah- he’s the Gryffindor chaser. Or was, I suppose. I wonder who will replace him.”

Dolohov sniggered. “Do you remember when Weasley fell off his broom in first year? I bet he screamed like a girl when they attacked him too.”

Druella sent a fierce glare towards Rupert. “That’s a very misogynistic thing to say.”

“What is?”

“The derogatory way you said ‘like a girl’- like being female is a bad thing.”

“It’s not derogatory. It’s true. Girls scream like that, don’t they? All…” Rupert mimicked a weak, high-pitch squeak.

Harry winced. That wouldn’t go down well.

He was right.

“They do, do they?” Druella asked archly, and then when Rupert nodded, she opened her mouth and screamed like the dark lord himself had just strode into the hall. It was a god awful sound, one that sent Harry’s mind flickering back to Lily Potter’s final moments.

It felt like the entire hall turned towards their little gathering, all looking moderately shocked.

“Just proving a point,” Druella said sweetly but loudly, and turned her back on them.
“Morgana, Druella,” Walburga hissed, “Show some decorum.”

“You’re crazy,” Rupert said, disbelieving. “Completely batshit.”

“Well, if Weasley screamed like that,” Druella said, unconcerned. “I think he should be pretty proud. Especially considering he was petrified straight after.”

“How do you petrify someone anyway?” Harry murmured quietly, hoping that perhaps this whole thing really had been a prank and he didn’t have to go up against Tom. Maybe Lovegood really did do it.

“There are a few dark spells,” Orion volunteered. “They’re really difficult, actually. Whoever did it must be really powerful.”

“Or it was an impressively strong accident,” Druella said drily.

“You don’t think the attack was deliberate then, Druella?” Tom asked with a faint smirk. It would have seemed like a politely interested smile to anyone else, but Harry saw it and knew beyond doubt. Tom Riddle was responsible for this. The Heir of Slytherin was active once more. Or perhaps, rather: for the first time.

“I think,” Druella pursed her lips. “That this was a one time, isolated thing. Whether it was deliberate or not… it don’t think we’ll be hearing about it again. Not until Weasley wakes up at least.”

Harry doubted it. The gleam in Tom’s eye was distinctly greedy. No one would have noticed if they weren’t looking for it but, well… Harry was looking for it.

Druella sighed, smoothing down her blouse. “Now, do any of you know where Cassius is? I could have sworn I saw him earlier…”

They had no idea, Harry realised. No one did, and so people were going to keep being petrified. If Tom kept clever and didn’t do something really stupid, no would know how serious this thing could be until… until someone died.

Unless someone told them how to stop it.

Harry fixated his attention upon Dumbledore, who was wearing a morosely cheerful pair of yellow robes and beaming grimly down upon the students. And then it was just a matter of waiting for Dippet to dismiss the assembly, waving off Orion’s attention, and waiting for the rest of the year to file out as he fought against the wave of students to reach the Transfigurations professor.

“Sir!” Harry yelled, pushing a first year Hufflepuff in his struggle. “Sir, I need to talk to you!”

He had to do this. If Tom was caught now, before anything got worse- Myrtle didn’t have to die. This was something he could prevent, and he was bloody well going to do it, damn the consequences.

Harry squeezed past a group of giggling girls, desperately hoping he hadn’t groped them accidentally, and finally managed to tug on the sleeve Dumbledore’s canary robes.

“I need to talk to you,” he panted, looking up into the old wizard’s face. “Alone.”

Dumbledore led Harry into a quiet classroom, shutting the door with a wave of his wand and turned
to face Harry.

“It was Tom,” Harry blurted out quickly, the words spilling from his tongue. “The petrification- it was him.”

Dumbledore looked taken aback. “Do you have any evidence?”

Harry stared at his professor. “Do I… what?”

“Do you have any evidence to suggest that Mr Riddle is responsible for poor Mr Weasley’s condition?” Dumbledore asked patiently.

“Well- no-“

“There’s not much I can do, in that case.”

“What do you mean there’s nothing you can do? He petrified someone!”

“Purely speculation, I’m sorry to say.”

“But he can speak parseltongue!” Harry spluttered. It seemed insane to him that Dumbledore wasn’t jumping to arrest Tom already.

“I’m afraid speaking parseltongue isn’t enough to convict someone for attempted murder-“

“He’s the Heir of Slytherin!”

“There’s been no indication that this attack has anything to do with the Chamber of Secret thus far, my dear boy, and certainly nothing to link a muggleborn-“

“He’s a halfblood.”

“-Even if that were true, there’s nothing to link a poor orphan with the Slytherin line,” Dumbledore dismissed, and it suddenly became very clear to Harry that this wasn’t going to go how he’d expected.

“I can tell you where the chamber is!” Harry offered wildly.

“The Chamber of Secrets is a myth, one of Hogwart’s several. There’s never been any trace of it found, and many wizards more capable than Mr Riddle have tried.”

“I’m telling you,” Harry protested weakly. “He did it. Why can’t you take my word for it?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Yourself and young Mr Riddle have had several public altercations, where your dislike has been made very apparent. I’m afraid your word won’t count for much against such an… outstanding member of the school.”

Dumbledore didn’t seem like he believed what he was saying, but it was obvious that he wasn’t prepared to take any action against Tom.

“There were only a few duels.”

“And Professor Merrythought has yet to cease raving about the second- I’m not sure if she was impressed or infuriated by the state of her classroom. The whole staffroom is waiting to hear the latest news.”
“You have to do something,” Harry begged. “He’ll kill someone.”

“Mr Peters!” Dumbledore said sharply, and Harry’s jaw snapped shut. He’d never had Dumbledore talk to him like that before.

“There’s nothing to suggest that this was anything more than a prank gone wrong,” the Transfigurations professor said gently. “You can rest assured that the culprit will be caught, and no more harm will come to the school. Now, I believe you should be popping off to your next class. Don’t hesitate to speak to me if you see anything.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry muttered. For Merlin’s sake! Was every adult in the Wizarding World incompetent? They’d never helped him, ever. Harry had been left to languish at the Dursleys’ for ten long fucking years, constantly villainised and worshipped by people forty years older than him… He just wanted someone to go ‘yes, I believe you, and I will help’. Was that so much to ask? The only one who’d ever treated Harry like a bloody person… Sirius… was dead.

It felt like climbing uphill, and something deep within Harry shattered.

Harry marched out of the classroom with a deep anger simmering within him, and a voice spitting ‘I told you so’ from somewhere inside his chest. He threw his fist out, striking the wall with a loud roar, clenching his eyes shut to hold back frustrated tears.

God, why did no one ever listen to him?!

“I take it that it didn’t go as planned?”

Harry’s eyes shot open and he whirled around with a snarl, growling: “I swear to Merlin, Riddle-“

It wasn’t Tom.

“Cassius?” Harry asked uncertainly. “What are you doing here?”

“I didn’t expect you to tell Dumbledore,” Cassius admitted. “So I thought I’d stick close.” A smile, rich with enjoyment, grew along the curve of his features. “I was surprised.”

“Oh, you were, were you?” Harry rolled his eyes aggressively. “I’m sure it was the highlight of your week.”

“It was, actually.”

Harry sighed, feeling thoroughly defeated. “I suppose you know all about the chamber already.” If anyone could believe him, it would be Cassius.

“Of course I do. The basilisk is rather beautiful, don’t you think?”

“Well, the last time I saw it, it had a sword through its face,” Harry said, remembering the feeling of a serpent’s skull cracking as he thrust cold metal into the prickling heat of its jaws. “I wouldn’t exactly call it art.”

“There’s a certain beauty in destruction, though.”

“There wasn’t any beauty in the fucking fang that impaled me.”
“I’m sure Tom didn’t agree,” Cassius said, with an odd kind of smile that made Harry’s skin crawl. “But don’t worry- it’ll be someone else’s turn this time.”

Harry couldn’t understand him. “Well, why haven’t you done something then?”

“What do you mean?”

“You could stop all this. You’re a pureblood, they’ll listen if you talk-“

“But why would I?”

“Myrtle will die-“

“She’ll either die this year, or she’ll die at twenty in a mugging, or at sixty-two in a floo explosion, or at eighty after four years of agony, longing to finally pass. It’s difficult to get attached when you know how everyone you see will either cry, lie, or eventually cheat their way into an early grave,” Cassius finished, the slight rise of his voice practically a shout when compared to his normal monotone.

Harry blinked behind his glasses. He hadn’t thought the boy had that in him. “That sounds awful.”

“It’s interesting,” Cassius countered, returning to his usual, detached demeanour.

“You know how everyone will…” Harry could barely understand the idea of it. “Do you, er, know how you’ll die, then?”

“It’s most likely that I’ll be vanished by one of your Order of the Phoenix members,” Cassius said, rather matter-of-factly. “I can see it in your past.”

“They wouldn’t do that.”

“That’s not what your subconscious says- it’s really very talkative. I should probably thank you, actually. I’ve been Seeing so much more recently. It’s much easier to channel the future when you have a living relic here in the castle.”

“No, stop,” Harry said drily. “You’re making me blush.”

“And how, from what I’ve seen, my eventual death looks rather exciting. I suppose you’ll have to wait and see.”

“So you’re not worried?”

“Not really.”

Harry shook his head disbelievingly. “How are you so blasé about your own death?”

“Everyone dies eventually, and the same result is achieved no matter the method. I’m not scared of death. I’m not Tom Riddle. I just want my life to be as interesting and unpredictable as possible before I go. Which is where people like you,” Cassius nodded towards Harry, “come in.”

“So you’re not going to help? At all?”

“Well, that would rather detract from the interest of it all, now wouldn’t it?”

“Fucking brilliant,” Harry spat, and turned away. He’d just have to do this himself. Perhaps he would head towards the Room of Requirement, and hope that he could find some space within his
mind to work out what the hell he was going to do. It was taking a lot of effort not to run down to the chamber right now.

“Wait!” Cassius called after him, and Harry heard the quick thud of shoes on the ground as the Rosier boy ran to catch up with him.

“I don’t have time for you to tell me what you’re not going to do,” Harry rolled his eyes, not slowing down. “Leave me alone.”

“That’s not what I want.”

Finally, Harry let out an irritated growl and stopped, letting Cassius grab him by the shoulder and bring him around.

“What, then?” Harry spat. “What could possibly be troubling the great Cassius Rosier?”

“Druella likes ice cream. Strawberry and pistachio. Remember that, please.” For some reason, Cassius was looking at Harry very seriously as he said this, and Harry got a little shiver up his spine despite himself.


“Remember.”

“You’re so weird,” Harry muttered as he walked away, but ran over the information in his head anyway. Druella. Ice cream. He didn’t know when the hell he’d need that.

He had more pressing things to attend to.

Perhaps, if Harry had felt slightly less cautious and slightly more reckless, he might have attempted to kill the basilisk fifty years early- but he didn’t think he could take on the huge serpent without the sword, the hat, a handy phoenix, or a boatload of luck. And he definitely didn’t think he could defeat the basilisk and Tom Riddle combined, not least because… well, Tom would probably be fighting to kill, but Harry didn’t think he could do that.

Not yet, at least.

But the fact still remained, Harry was going to hold himself accountable for this. He wouldn’t let an innocent girl die- not if he could help it. If Dumbledore wouldn’t save Myrtle, he would just have to do it himself.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS! I HAVE FANART FOR THIS STORY NOW! *fans self with laptop* And it is beautiful.
Please check out this amazing magic that I fiercely love:

Harry Makes A New Friend

Chapter Summary

Harry makes one mistake after another, Myrtle is relatable, and Tom is enigmatic and a bit murder-y.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: Tom discovers the location of the CoS, and meets the basilisk (who's a little bit crazy). Tom releases the basilisk, but only after making sure it won't kill anyone. I'm sure this won't escalate... Septimus Weasley is petrified, and Abraxas hasn't found anything on Tom's family. Tom tells him to keep looking. Harry remembers that Tom is both the Heir of Slytherin and a threat (#wakeupcall), and Dippet calls an assembly. Harry attempts to tell Dumbledore that Tom is responsible for the attack, but Dumbledore doesn't believe him. Cassius approaches Harry, and Harry vows to save Myrtle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry was in Defence when he heard about the next ‘incident’.

“Helena Powell’s been petrified,” Orion muttered, leaning subtly across the desk towards Harry.

“Who?” Harry tried to remember if he’d ever heard of that name before.

“She’s a third year Ravenclaw. Bit of a Morgana, but friendly.”

“And she was petrified?” Harry was a little taken-aback. He’d expected the body count to rack up, but not this soon. “When did it happen?”

“Just before breakfast, I think.” Orion winced. “They found her in the girl’s bathroom. She’d just had a shower.”

“…Ah.”

“They…” Orion paused, evidently trying to search for a tactful way of putting it. “They clothed her, afterwards, so they could take her to the hospital wing.”

“Who was it that found her?”

“Professor Beery.”

“That’s our Herbology teacher,” Harry realised, his mind summoning images of a heavily-moustached man who felt very strongly about the value of sunflowers.

“He’s also Head of Ravenclaw. Apparently her roommates were worried that she’d slipped and drowned or something, so he had to break down the door. She was in there for quite a while before
anyone noticed though—almost 45 minutes, they guess.”

If the Ravenclaw bathrooms were anything like the Gryffindor and Slytherin ones, Harry had an idea of how the basilisk had managed to petrify this girl. He could almost see it in his mind’s eye… the shower basin covered by a thin layer of water, the grate dark and cavernous. A quiet hiss from below, and a girl blinking downwards through the steam to see a pair of luminescent, yellow eyes staring up at her from the darkness, swimming in the ripples.

Harry shook himself out of the vision, spine crawling. “Before breakfast, you said?”

Harry glanced across the classroom at Tom, who sat hunched over his Defence textbook obediently, wearing a small, satisfied smile. Tom hadn’t been in the dormitories when Harry woke up, and he’d been late to the morning meal.

“Yes,” Orion confirmed. “Poor thing. She’s an only child, too. No one to visit her.”

“Won’t her parents come to the school? Weasley’s parents came last week.”

“They’re muggles.”

Orion lowered his voice as Professor Merrythought swept closer, but it was too late. The long shadow of their Defence professor fell over them, and Harry and Orion exchanged a tentative look before glancing up slowly.

Professor Merrythought raised a thin eyebrow and glared down at the pair. “Having a pleasant conversation are we, boys?”

“Yes actually, madam,” Orion said honestly.

“Completely relevant to the course, I’m sure,” Merrythought said wryly.

“Obviously,” Harry agreed.

“Any more detail to add to this story?”

Harry smiled innocently. “We were just talking about the best defence for petrification, weren’t we, Orion?”

Orion nodded eagerly, and Merrythought looked unimpressed.

“Fascinating. Well, I’m sure you wouldn’t mind sharing this conversation with Mr Riddle, now would you, Mr Peters?”

Harry blanched. “Perhaps Orion and I should finish the questions on the board first—”

“No, no,” the Professor insisted, gesturing for Harry to stand up. “You and Mr Black are obviously already such experts on severing charms that you don’t need to complete the assigned task, especially if you’re finding time to discuss petrification. Maybe you can offer tips to Mr Riddle here, who is clearly quite busy at work.”

Right on time, Tom offered their teacher an angelic smile.

Harry wondered if it was possible to set someone on fire with your eyes, and proceeded to try very hard. Unfortunately he was unsuccessful, as Tom continued to smile away, smoke-free.

Merrythought crossed her arms. “Come on then, Peters: up,” she insisted.
“I’m not a broomstick,” Harry muttered, but he reluctantly got to his feet, dragging his heels along the cobble-stones as he shuffled towards Tom’s desk.

“Do try to look more like you’re walking to your execution,” Merrythought said with a heavy eye roll. “I don’t think we’ve quite got it yet.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry said sullenly, and dropped into the seat next to Tom with a bad-tempered thud.

Revenge, Merrythought returned to the front of the classroom, and Harry and Tom shared an awkward pause.

“I’m certain sitting next to me isn’t the worst thing that could happen to someone,” Tom said lightly, shattering the silence between them.

Harry focused on his hands, twisting them back and forth. He wasn’t quite sure how to look at Tom anymore. On one hand, Harry held a fondness for Tom, and enjoyed his company more than he liked to admit to himself. On the other, Helena Powell and Septimus Weasley… that was Tom’s doing.

“Have you… have you Seen something?” Tom asked, his voice holding rare notes of uncertainty that had Harry glancing up briefly.

“Oh. So they were having this conversation.

“Yes,” Harry said shortly, making a quick and probably foolish decision. “Yes, I have.”

“I don’t suppose I get a clue as to what those visions entailed?”

“I don’t know, Tom,” Harry said sardonically, finally meeting Tom’s eyes. “Maybe I could have a clue about where you were before breakfast this morning.”

Tom’s face betrayed a flicker of shock, and then his features smoothened out. “I was checking up on a pet.”

“So that’s what we’re calling it now,” Harry snorted. “Cute.”

There was an uncomfortable pause between them, and Harry watched the storms gather in Tom’s dark eyes. He suppressed a shiver that threatened to run down his spine. Whilst it may have been a stupid idea to reveal what he knew, Harry didn’t think he could have hidden it. He had never been very subtle regarding his emotions- there was no way that Tom wouldn’t have picked up on it eventually. At least, this way, Harry knew what Tom knew.

“…And so what are you going to do about these visions?” Tom asked finally, delicately.

“Nothing, for now.” Harry said, and then continued pointedly: “You know, it’s lucky no one’s died yet, what with all these attacks.”

“Yes,” Tom agreed, his lips set tightly. “Quite extraordinary.”

Harry was, for some reason, tempted to blurt out that Dumbledore knew about the Chamber- wanted to rub in that ‘don’t worry, Riddle, you’re protected’- but he didn’t, because that would have been possibly the most stupid thing he’d ever done. *(More Slytherin than Gryffindor,* he reminded himself, *more Slytherin).* It’d be like asking Tom to attack him. Even now, Tom watched him with deep, dangerous eyes, his shoulders ever-so-slightly tensed. Harry wondered if he’d go for his wand the
moment they stepped out of the classroom.

“It’s a shame,” Tom said slowly, “That they don’t know who’s behind the attacks.”

“I doubt they’ll find out,” Harry raised his eyebrow. “After all, the attacks are bound to stop soon.”

“Perhaps.”

And just like that, they were at an impasse. Tom thought Harry could tell someone about his identity (never mind that he’d already tried that); and Harry knew that Tom could kill him (although he wouldn’t go down without a fight). What a wonderfully awful situation to be in, and Harry suspected that he probably should have just kept his mouth shut.

The chime of the bell had Professor Merrythought rolling her eyes and dismissing the class with a “and for Merlin’s sake, do your homework!”

Harry scrambled away from his desk-mate as swiftly as possible, not liking the dangerous tension in Tom’s jaw. He quickly found Orion, gripping tightly to his friend’s arm and noisily helping him pack up his quills. Whilst Harry didn’t think Tom would kill him, he’d be less likely to do it in front of a witness.

As they left the classroom, Harry spotted Tom standing just outside the door, watching them with a carefully blank expression.

Could he look any more like a serial killer if he tried? Harry wondered, but shot Tom a careless grin as he passed. How far could he push his luck, he wondered, and decided not to find out. Harry quickened the pace, and resolved to get out of Tom’s sight as quickly as possible.

“I was thinking,” Harry said to Orion as they walked away, Harry not looking behind him, “that I might visit Helena.”

“That’s such a lovely idea!” Orion cooed, looking at Harry like he’d just hung the moon.

“Just, y’know, see how she’s doing,” Harry clarified, a bit uncomfortable with the way Orion was looking at him. How did his eyes get so wide?

“I’m sure it’ll bring her comfort.” Orion said with great feeling, “I think people can hear us, you know, whilst they’re in comas and such. I had an uncle who was catatonic for twelve years, and he swore ‘til the day he died that he heard my aunt cheating on him in the next room. Considering she poisoned him so he wouldn’t find out, it was all rather pointless.”

Harry wasn’t even surprised anymore. “Your family is so dysfunctional,” he said, shaking his head. Orion simply beamed at him. “I’m going to buck the trend.”

Harry imagined what Sirius would have said, to hear his father talk like this. Probably something disparaging, or perhaps a reference to a muggle rock song. Most of all, Harry thought, Sirius would have been angry. Harry tried to forget that uncomfortable little epiphany.

“So you’re coming then?” Harry swung open a portrait, revealing the passageway behind it. Moving via shortcuts should reduce the risk of a Tom-confrontation. Tom-frontation.

That was awful.

“Of course I am!” Orion enthused, following Harry into the passage without hesitation. “Perhaps I
ought to have brought flowers.”

“I’m sure you don’t think coma patients can see,” Harry said, with a touch of fond exasperation.

“Well, I had a cousin-“

They moved towards the hospital wing quickly, and all the while Orion wittered on. Harry was only half-listening, if he was honest, but Orion’s voice was a soothing background hum and worked excellently to help Harry forget the potentially huge mistake he’d just made. He seemed to be making a lot of those recently.

Finally, Harry pushed aside a tapestry and blinked in the sudden sunlight. He stepped out into the corridor, and held the fabric back for Orion, who exclaimed in delight at their new location- but it didn’t take much for Orion to be delighted.

That passageway was convenient though, and had led them to just outside the hospital wing door. Harry was glad that he’d memorised most of the Marauders Map before he’d left it in 1996, and tried not to miss it too much.

It took some effort to gently guide a still-talking Orion (who was now informing Harry about the time Lucretia went broomstick-diving and had to get stitches) into the hospital wing, upon which Orion stopped speaking rather abruptly.

It was very quiet in the room, as there were none of the usual skiving teenagers and sobbing first years. But that just made the stillness of the girl in the bed- small, fragile and very, very still- even more obvious. Beside him, Orion let out a shallow breath that sounded very like the word “oh”.

“Her hair’s still wet,” Orion said, voice caught in his throat.

The girl’s face was stiff and petrified in an expression of shock, her hair spread in tendrils around her face as if suspended underwater. Her head was angled, supported even as it was by an impressive pile of pillows, and Harry could see clearly how she had been frozen, peering at death as it slithered below her.

If Harry blinked, he could see the ghost of a girl with bushy brown hair and brave buckteeth, lying in the next bed over.

“She’ll probably be moved to St Mungo’s soon,” Orion said, regarding Helena Powell with an odd, distant expression. “Like Septimus.”

“Are you okay, mate?” Harry asked, taking a concerned step towards his friend.

“Yes, yes- I’m fine. I suppose I didn’t expect her to be so still. She looks almost… almost dead.”

“She’s not, though,” Harry offered.

“I know. I just… hadn’t expected this.” Orion turned away and moved to a window, his fists clenched.

Harry hadn’t considered that hospitals may not hold the best memories for Orion, but as he watched his friend’s back- so tense and straight- the realisation hit him like a bludger (as did the sad reminder that today’s decision-making was not going well for him).

Silence fell between them. Harry didn’t interrupt, feeling all kinds of guilt.
“Don’t mind me. You should speak to her,” Orion said at long last, trying for a sweet smile. “I’m sure she’d appreciate it.” His smile wavered. “Actually, I- I think I should go. I’ll wait for you outside.”

And then Orion left, giving Helena a look of deep sorrow on his way out. Note to self, Harry thought, keep Orion away from hospitals.

And then Harry perched on the bed next to Helena, alone in the hospital wing, feeling a little uncomfortable. Coming here had all been a bit off the cuff- mostly to avoid Tom and assuage the urge to do something- but now he was here, he didn’t know what he was supposed to do. Talking to her was a bit pointless. Harry didn’t think that petrification victims could hear anything- Hermione certainly hadn’t- and even if they could, why would a third year Ravenclaw want to hear from Harry?

Still, he’d made the effort to come, so he should probably try something. He cleared his throat, just knowing that this would be the moment for his voice to choose to crack.

“Hey,” he said, and promptly winced. Did his voice always sound that weak? Merlin, no wonder Avery rolled his eyes every time Harry spoke. “How are you doing?”

A lengthy pause followed, and suddenly Harry remembered that he wouldn’t be receiving a reply.

“Oh, right. Sorry, I, er, forgot you couldn’t speak. Or move. God, I can’t even imagine how frustrating that must be.” Harry frowned, adding quickly: “You won’t remember anything though, don’t worry! I had a friend who was petrified, and she said missing her exams was the worst thing about it. She always was a bit barmy, though.”

Harry smiled fondly.

“What do you talk about in a hospital wing?” he wondered aloud, glancing around the space. It wasn’t very inspiring. “The weather? It’s a bit grey, if I’m honest. I think it was sunnier earlier, but that didn’t last very long. Looks like it might rain, actually. That’s Britain for you.”

He snickered. This was what he’d been reduced to- talking about the weather like Aunt Petunia at the post office. Maybe he’d discuss a politician’s hair, next, or Mrs Figg’s divorce. What else did he really have to talk about? Other than-

“So, Riddle’s a prat,” Harry said suddenly, and snorted. Why did everything always come back to Tom Riddle? “Sorry- I bet you loved him. Everyone seems to. They’ll keep singing his praises, even as he sends a bloody death snake after them. I bet you’d walk into its jaws if he asked you nicely.”

Harry frowned down at the girl’s small face: her lips thin and gaping. “Sorry. That was a bit grim. It’s not even your fault- everyone’s fooled. Even me, sometimes. Tom’s good at pretending to be something he isn’t.”

Harry remembered the moments when Tom would glance over at him, perhaps as Avery was saying something particularly ridiculous, or when Walburga took it upon herself to give them all a lesson in etiquette, and then Tom would smile. It wasn’t a particularly nice smile: more of a ‘look at these idiots, ha ha’ smirk, but in those few seconds, it was like Harry and Tom were the only people in the world.

As Harry said, Tom was very good at pretending.

“Think of it this way,” Harry said encouragingly. “You could be dead!” Pause. “…That did not sound how I wanted it to. What I meant was…” he bit his lip and hesitated, “there are people who
might not be as lucky as you.”

And Harry watched as, before his eyes, glasses settled on Helena’s face, her hair grew mousey and her cheeks chubbier, until suddenly she was pale and transparent: wailing and, well, moaning as she hovered above a toilet seat, trapped where she died alone, forever and ever.

He blinked the image away, and gripped Helena’s cold hand with renewed determination.

“No one’s going to die,” he promised firmly, and it briefly occurred to him that if Helena could hear anything, this was going to be one of the weirdest one-sided conversations of her life. “I’m not going to let him kill her, I promise.”

It was then that Harry heard a muffled commotion from outside the hospital wing door.

“Mr Black!” Harry caught the dulcet tones of Madam Hallpepper, and then snatches of: “What… outside… vagabond… how dare… care!... quite inappropriate… I don’t think… see-“

The doors swung open with a loud bang, and Harry scrambled to his feet as Madam Hallpepper thundered into her domain.

“Mr Peters!” she shrieked, “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

“…Visiting?”

“And who gave you permission?” Her eyebrows shot to dangerous heights. “Never mind, I don’t actually care- out! This patient needs quiet!” Her voice echoed around the hospital wing, rattling against Harry’s eardrums.

Harry checked the clock. “But it’s still lunchtime-“

“And so perhaps you should be eating instead of harassing this poor girl.”

“She’s petrified, so I don’t think she minds. Anyway, I was just giving her some encouragement-”

“That’s not the point!” Hallpepper said firmly, her volume finally coming down to rest at a normal volume. “Miss Powell needs medical care, not blessings from sixth years. Out!”

Harry at last conceded, and raised her hands defensively. “I’m going, I’m going!” he said, before escaping the angry Matron and the hospital wing quickly. “C’mon,” he said as he passed Orion, who’d apparently been sat against the wall for the past fifteen minutes.

“Where are we going?” Orion asked curiously as he scrambled to his feet, hurrying after his friend.

Harry clenched his jaw.

“We,” Harry replied, his voice low and steady, “are going to find Myrtle Warren, and then we’re going to keep her safe.”

“…Who?”

“Actually, on second thoughts, maybe you should just go back to lunch.”

And that was how Harry found himself awkwardly hidden in an archway as he listened to a girl cry.
He hadn’t meant to get himself into this mess—he’d just wanted to see where Myrtle was, and make sure she was staying away from first floor bathrooms. If he was honest, Harry was still working out the kinks in his plan. The latest incarnation involved somehow stopping the bullying of Myrtle. If she wasn’t teased, she’d have no reason to run into that fated bathroom in the first place! He was, however, still trying to work out exactly how he was going to achieve this.

His plan had not involved coming across Myrtle sobbing her eyes out underneath a window. Harry gritted his teeth—he hated hearing girls cry, but wasn’t entirely sure how to stop it. He couldn’t in good conscience leave her like this though…

Harry coughed, and the muffled sobs stopped immediately. Harry saw Myrtle lift her head cautiously, revealing red-rimming eyes and a truly hideous pair of glasses (not that Harry could talk). The younger girl glanced around, calling out: “Hello? Is someone there?”

Harry stepped around the corner, trying to look casual.

Myrtle spotted him almost immediately, scrambling to her feet very like a startled cat. “Who are you?” she spat, her shoulders so raised they were nearly up to her ears.

“Harry. Er, Harry Peters.”

“You’re the boy who argues with Tom Riddle,” Myrtle said accusingly, crossing her arms.

Would that always be his legacy, Harry wondered?

He coughed uncomfortably. “Er, I suppose I am. I do other stuff, though, too. Like…” Harry racked his brains, “homework?”

Myrtle looked unimpressed. “That’s rubbish.”

Time to change the subject. “So why are you crying?”

Myrtle sniffed, her expression darkening. “Olive Hornby said…” her voice broke, and she wrapped her arms around herself. “Olive said that it’s my fault.”

“What’s your fault?”

“That Helena died,” Myrtle whispered, eyes glassy.

Oh wow. So this was more serious than he thought. Harry tread closer, tilting his head sympathetically.

“She’s not dead, though. She’ll be fine when the mandrakes mature. And how on earth could it be your fault?”

“I was supposed to shower first this morning, but I slept in,” Myrtle said miserably. “And so Helena went in instead. It should’ve been me in that bathroom, and now Helena’s g-gone because of me!” Myrtle was full-on sobbing now, and Harry wondered if this was the moment when he was supposed to hug her.

He placed a hand on her back, patting gingerly. “There, there.”

Myrtle narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re not very good at comforting people, are you?”

“No one ever taught me how,” Harry said defensively. “I just wanted to help.”
“Well, first off: I’m a girl, not a farm animal. Stop patting me.”

Myrtle nodded as Harry removed his hand.

“What’s next?” Harry asked.

Myrtle immediately burst into renewed tears. “Now you leave me alone to die!” And then she curled up beneath the window again.

Harry was fairly that Myrtle was being overdramatic, although he supposed it was nice to know that she was the same in life as she was in death. He knelt down beside her, biting his lip.

“Come on,” he said haltingly. “I’m sure it’s not that bad.”

“I killed someone!” Myrtle wailed, her face turning red.

“I told you already: she’s not dead.”

“And I’m ugly!” Myrtle added, screwing her eyes shut. “Everyone says so.”

“You’re not ugly,” Harry said weakly. “Your face is, er, quite pretty, if you look at it the right way.”

For a few minutes, Myrtle’s whimpering was the only sound between them until, finally, she glanced up, with something like hope behind her eyes.

“…Really?”

Harry nodded. It wasn’t a total lie, and at least her acne hadn’t reached the heights of Eloise Midgen.

“Mm.”

“Oh.” Myrtle sniffed and sat back on her heels, considering Harry carefully. “Didn’t you say you wanted to help me?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed hesitantly.

She sighed, wiping away the tears with the back of her hand. “Well, I suppose you’ll do.”

“Do what?”

“You can sit with me at dinner,” Myrtle said firmly, setting her jaw. “If you’re there, Olive won’t dare to say anything.”

“B-but…” Harry stammered. This was not how he’d expected the conversation to go. “At your table? But you’re in Ravenclaw.”

“You can sit at other House tables, silly. People just don’t do it all that often.”

“Hang on, why am I coming to your table? I’m older than you- shouldn’t it be the other way around?” Harry crossed his arms.

“You can’t expect me to sit near Tom Riddle and not faint,” Myrtle explained, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Besides,” she continued gleefully, “it’ll really freak Olive out to have a Slytherin at the table.”

“I…”
“Thanks for agreeing! I’ll see you at dinner then,” she told him, getting to her feet. “And by the way—my name’s Myrtle Warren!”

And then she flounced away, leaving Harry to wonder if he’d just been outwitted by a third year.

After a lengthy Charms lesson, Harry and Orion took the short walk together towards the Great Hall. Whilst meals were usually the highlight of Harry’s week, the colossal room held little joy for Harry today. It did seem more subdued, anyway—Harry supposed the unexpected news of another attack had dampened the mood somewhat. Harry frowned around at the quietly gossiping students, and told Orion to go on without him.

“Sorry mate,” Harry shrugged, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “I’ve got to go and sit at the Ravenclaw table.”


“I made a pact with Satan,” Harry said gloomily. As this words passed his lips, he made eye-contact with the very object of his complaints.

Myrtle waved at him slightly, a little smile on her lips.

“She should be in Slytherin,” Harry swore. “Manipulative hippogriff.”

“So that’s Myrtle Warren?” Orion asked in confusion. “She’s the girl who followed Tom around for a week, picking up anything he dropped.”

“She’s an overdramatic nightmare, that’s what she is,” Harry bemoaned, and clasped Orion by the shoulder. “I can’t believe I’m going to save her life.”

“Harry!” Myrtle declared, gesturing to the space beside her which, coincidentally enough, was empty. “Sit down.”

“If I must.” Harry slid into his space, and glanced around him. He was surrounded by curious third year Ravenclaws, all peering at him with their beady little eyes— it was like his first year all over again. Not an experience he wanted to repeat.

“Myrtle,” one of the girls whispered unsubtly, red hair bound tightly in bunches. “Why do you have an older boy sitting next to you?”

“None of your business, Georgie,” Myrtle huffed.

‘Georgie’ looked Harry up and down, and he pondered on whether to remind them that he did have both ears and eyes.

Georgie leaned over to Myrtle, whispering again, “He’s cute.”

“I know,” Myrtle said with great satisfaction, taking a large bite of chicken.

“Why is he sitting with you then?”

“Because I want him to,” Myrtle said, stiffer this time, and her shoulders were tense. Luckily, Georgie seemed to lose interest, turning back to her friends.
Harry shrugged, deciding that if he was to be stuck on this table for the next however many days, he might as well eat. And so he began to pile up his plate with meat, taking a heap of peas when he visualised Hermione’s disapproval.

The younger Ravenclaws seemed to be content to carry on their meal without engaging Harry, other than through curious peeps. Myrtle wasn’t involved in any of their conversations, but this didn’t seem to bother her. Instead, she ate quietly and- when Harry properly looked at her- he saw a book propped on her knee, which she appeared to be reading as she ate.

He supposed she was a Ravenclaw, after all.

Harry took the opportunity to sneak a glimpse of the Slytherin table, and then- because Harry had the worst luck in the world, so why on earth would anything go right for him?- he made direct eye contact with Tom Riddle.

Tom’s gaze was, for lack of a better word, captivating (and maybe a bit terrifying too). Harry couldn’t tear his eyes away, sure he looked like a wide-eyed rabbit. To be fair to him, Tom’s gaze was rather predatory. At last, Tom’s eyes flickered away from his, looking obviously at Harry’s present company, and then, meeting Harry’s gaze once more, he raised his eyebrow.

And Harry, being the mature individual he was, turned his back.

It was just in time, too, as Myrtle’s little elbow dug into his side and she murmured, “Olive’s coming.”

Harry glanced around, and immediately spotted another third year girl coming towards them. She looked rather ordinary- although prettier than Myrtle, certainly. Her dark, curly hair was tucked behind her ear, and the sneer on her face twisted her sweet features. She froze when she saw Harry, clearly rethinking her plan, but wasn’t halted for long.

“Did you bribe an older boy to sit with you?” Olive laughed, stopping just behind them.

“I asked him,” Myrtle said, suddenly quieter and smaller somehow.

“Asked him? Did you cry too?”

“…No.”

“Are you going to kill this one too, Myrtle? Is he your next target, freak?”

“Helena Powell isn’t dead, actually,” Harry spoke for the first time, swinging a leg over the bench so he could face Olive. He was suddenly aware of how much taller he was than her, even if Harry had always been small for his age, and a cold smile settled on his features. “So Myrtle hasn’t killed anyone.”

Olive pursed her lips. “It was her fault though-“

“It really wasn’t,” Harry said shortly.

“And who are you to say that?”

“He drew with Tom in a duel,” Myrtle mumbled, gesturing in Harry’s direction vaguely.

“And you’re a thirteen year old girl,” Harry added, loathe as he was to take almost-defeating Tom as any kind of qualification (again).
Olive turned bright red, but seemed more interested in Harry now. “You know Tom?” she asked.

“Is that all anyone’s ever gonna ask me?” Harry shook his head. He supposed it could be worse—people could be interested in him because he was the ‘Boy Who Lived’ (shudder). This was a vast improvement.

“Why would someone like him hang out with someone like you?” Olive asked, cocking her hip and looking at Myrtle distastefully.

“Myrtle’s alright,” Harry defended.

“She’s not ‘alright’,” Olive said viciously. “She’s a spotty, scabby little freak!”

Harry shot to his feet, his wand suddenly in his hand. He didn’t point it, aware of eyes on him from the staff table, but Olive’s eyes flashed towards it.

“Take that back,” Harry said firmly.

“YOU’RE AN AWFUL PERSON!” Myrtle wailed. Well, at least she was backing up Harry in her own way.

Now, the majority of the Ravenclaw table was watching their interaction, and Olive was clearly aware of it.

“…Freak,” Olive hissed at last, and grabbed one of the Ravenclaw girls—Georgie—by the arm before marching away.

There was a pause, like the world was holding its breath and then—

“I think that went well,” Harry mused, sitting down again and reaching for a spoonful of carrots.


Perhaps it would be easier to protect her now, Harry reflected. He could always work around the hero worship.

Time passed, and Hogwarts held its breath. Harry watched Tom grow more and more smug, and felt himself grow more and more paranoid. Mad Eye would be proud.

He found little support from anyone else. Orion tried his best, but since Harry refused to tell him what was going on, there was only so much he could do. And to top it all off, after the last attack—a seventh year boy, found in the courtyard next to a puddle one morning—Harry was now avoiding Dumbledore’s eye. It had been during yet another uncomfortable dinner at the Ravenclaw table that Harry chanced a glance towards the staff table, and made eye contact with the Transfigurations professor.

And, boy, had Dumbledore looked suspicious.

It wasn’t fair, Harry seethed, pulling a book off the library shelf. He tried to do the right thing, and it always backfired. Worse of all, Tom seemed to be getting off scot-free, and the attacks still hadn’t stopped! Harry had successfully managed to avoid Tom since their last chat (he was getting good at Tom-dodging) but Harry knew he wouldn’t be able to keep up the charade for long. Someday soon, Tom was going to wonder why Harry hadn’t just told someone that he was the Heir, and then it
would all come out, and Harry wouldn’t have any leverage.

“Urgh,” Harry groaned in disgust, and slumped into one of the comfy armchairs.

“Harry!”

Harry glanced behind him, and his disgust disappeared. “Orion!”

His friend grinned, and joined Harry in his little ‘panic corner’. It was really quite snug- it had its own fireplace and everything.

“I didn’t expect to see you here without your entourage. Where’s Myrtle?” Orion looked around in surprise, and Harry didn’t blame him. It was a rare sight to see Harry without the younger Ravenclaw these days.

“She’s in the Charms section,” Harry replied darkly. “I’m taking a break.”

“So you’re still, er, protecting her then?”

Harry nodded.

“…From what, exactly?”

Harry winced. “Look, it’s a long story, and I know it’s a bit far-fetched- but just trust me. She will be in danger.”

Harry knew he was acting a bit odd. He’d barely seen Orion these past few weeks, as he’d avoided the Slytherins dorms. It was partially because he was protecting Myrtle, and partially out of his desire to avoid Tom- unfortunately, that also meant that he saw little of his best friend.

“I believe you,” Orion said simply, and took a seat next to Harry.

“Thanks mate.”

They grinned at each other, and immediately everything felt warmer.

“So what’s the gossip at the Slytherin table?” Harry asked, putting his book to one side.

“You,” Orion admitted, and they laughed. “And your newest, smallest friend. Rupert suggested some truly unsavoury things. Don’t worry- Druella gave him boils. Walburga thinks it’s sweet that you’re looking out for a younger student- she says you’ll make a great father.”

Harry blushed, but grinned teasingly and nudged his friend. “Well, if Walburga says it, it must be true.”

Orion turned bright red, casting a nice contrast with his dark hair. “Anyway,” he coughed. “Then Tom suggested that you might be taking on responsibility for someone younger in response to the trauma you’ve gone through, and everyone stopped talking about you after that.”

“Bastard,” Harry muttered. Tom knew full well that Harry hated being pitied- which was probably exactly why he’d said what he had.

“We mostly talked about Ronald Moore yesterday, though,” Orion shrugged.

Harry startled at ‘Ronald’, but remembered that was the name of the latest victim: puddle-boy. “Oh.”
“His parents came into school and took him to St Mungo’s themselves. No opportunities for visits there!” Orion said cheerfully, but Harry could see the haunted look in his eyes.

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” Harry said, and Orion gave a small nod of agreement.

Suddenly, there was a scream from somewhere in the library, and the sound of sobs following close after.

Harry leapt to his feet. “That sounds like Myrtle,” was all he said, and then he was already moving, pushing past students and a library assistant or two.

By the time he got to Myrtle, she was sat on the floor at the foot of a book shelf, rubbing her head and sniffling softly. Seeing that Myrtle was okay, Harry’s heart began to slow. Her glasses were cracked on the floor, though, one of the arms twisted out of shape. For a moment, Harry remembered a scrawny little boy, with wild dark hair and knobbly knees, crying in a cupboard as his cousin laughed.

That was not what he needed to think about.

What happened?” he panted, leaning on a nearby table.


From the high-pitched giggling on the other side of the shelves, Myrtle was probably right, but Harry felt a bit ridiculous for how panicked he’d been. It wasn’t like the basilisk was going to attack someone in the library.

He sighed and threw a *reparo* at the glasses, having dealt with broken glasses more times than he could count. As he placed a comforting hand on Myrtle’s back, she winced and shrugged it off.

“Remember-“ she mumbled.

“-Yeah, I know,” Harry sighed. “Not a farm animal.”

“Has she been successfully protected?” An amused voice had Harry looking up to see Orion casually leant against a wall, a smirk on his lips.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Oh, shut up.” But he felt a spark of fondness within him. He’d never had a little sister, but maybe this was similar.

Maybe.

Fear grew in the school during weeks that followed the Moore attack, and that fear only intensified as the end of the school year crept closer. Could the student body really go home without finding out who was behind the attacks? What would happen over summer? Harry, especially, became understandably more jumpy and tired, as the confrontation with Tom crept inevitably closer.

The pervasive fear only made Myrtle more ‘sensitive’ and so it was many more ‘boy who cried wolf’ instances later (which really should be called ‘girl who cried at literally anything’), that Harry spotted Myrtle bawling her eyes out and pelting down the corridor, face buried in her hands.

Harry rolled his eyes, too exhausted to chase after her and begin the calming-down ritual. Besides, he had a Potions lesson to suffer through.
“Quick,” Orion grinned, walking beside him with a spring in his step. “You’d better go after Myrtle. Maybe she’s been attacked by another book.”

“Or maybe you should go check that Walburga’s okay. You know all these attacks make her ‘terribly anxious’,” Harry replied, miming fainting dramatically with a hand over his face.

The tips of Orion’s ears went red, and he shoved Harry. Harry was just about to laugh when—oh. The conversation rewound before his eyes, and his stomach sank. “Er, Orion?”

“Yes?”

“Which direction would you say Myrtle was heading towards?” he asked urgently.

Orion frowned. “I would say the stairs? So probably the first floor.”

“Shit.” And just like that, Harry turned and ran after Myrtle, his heart leaping into his mouth. Shit, shit, shit, shit! He took the stairs three at a time, pelting past a flash of colourful robes and sea of school robes.

The first floor bathroom had never seemed so far away, and it felt like an eon until Harry was tugging on a wooden door and flinging himself inside.

“Myrtle?” he yelled, shuddering a little at the familiar bathroom. He tried not to focus on the gleam of the taps in the centre of the room.

Muffled crying gave him a clue about Myrtle’s whereabouts pretty quickly, as did her soft, “Harry?”

Harry scanned the room, noting where the sound came from. He ran towards a cubicle, pounding on the door. “Listen, Myrtle, we need to get out of here!”

The sound of sobs increased, and she wailed, “But I want to stay here forever!”

“You might just get your wish,” Harry muttered and then, louder: “Myrtle, someone else is coming, we need to go.”

“But I don’t care about anyone else!”

“For Merlin’s sake, Myrtle, don’t be an idiot!”

Myrtle was inconsolable now, and she hiccupped something like; “I can’t help it!” and then dissolved into hysteric.

Harry took a deep breath, pressing his forehead against the door. Clearly, he needed to change his approach, or he’d just scare her. He knocked again—lightly, this time. “Er, Myrtle?” he asked gently. “Can I come in? Please?”

There was long pause. At last, Myrtle sniffled, “Fine- but I’m not leaving,” and the door swung open.

Harry barely glanced at her red, snotty face, stepping into the cubicle and closing the door behind him quickly. It was crowded, but Myrtle budge over and Harry took a seat on the toilet lid next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

“So, er, why are you crying then?” Harry said. Perhaps if he could calm Myrtle down from her tantrum, they could get out of this bathroom quickly. If not, he’d just have to stun her.
Myrtle let out a tortured howl at the question. “Olive said my glasses were-“ hic “-hideous,” she sobbed. “A-and that they’d look b-better without my face behind them!”

“Don’t listen to her. I think your glasses look nice,” Harry said kindly. “They really, er, bring out your eyes.”

“You’re the only one who thinks so.”

“I’m sure I’m not. You said that Marlin was nice to you yesterday.”

“He wanted me to do his homework for him!” Myrtle wailed, and buried her head in her hands once more.

Just then, Harry heard the faint sound of a door being opened, and the breath left his body. He slapped a hand over Myrtle’s mouth, ignoring the snot and her muffled shrieks of surprise, and ‘shushed’ her quietly. The sound of footsteps made Myrtle freeze. Harry brought a finger to his lips, then got out his wand.

They listened in silence as the footsteps continued. Riddle, the prat, was really taking his time. Finally, Harry heard:

“Open, and come to me, serpent of Slytherin.”

(Well, it was nice to know that Tom hadn’t lost his dramatic touch.)

To Harry, this sounded like normal speech… but not to anyone else. He realised this only too late, by which time his hand had already relaxed. And so the snake speech drew a surprised squeak out of Myrtle, which echoed around the bathroom.

The hisses stopped.

“Is anyone there?” the slow, smooth voice of Tom Riddle had never been less welcome to Harry, and he groaned silently, banging his head against the wall.

“Hello?” Tom’s voice was followed by the crash of a cubicle door at the end of the row, and Harry suddenly knew he didn’t have long.

“Come out,” Tom said gently, seductively, another door crashing open. “I promise I won’t hurt you.”

If Harry were to open the cubicle door now, he was fairly sure he would meet the cold eyes of a basilisk before he could even raise his wand, and thus a very swift death. He could only hope that, maybe, if Tom knew who he’d be killing…

“Tom,” Harry said finally, his voice like a bellow in the quiet of the bathroom. “It’s, er, it’s me. It’s Harry.”

“Harrison,” Tom sounded vaguely surprised. “Oh. Well, by all means, why don’t you come out and say hello?”

He had little choice now. Reluctantly, Harry got to his feet, pushing open the door and leaving relative safety. Myrtle followed close behind him, and he let her curl her fingers round his hand.

As expected, Tom stood by what had been the sink, now a cavernous hole, looking very casual but for the miniscule twitch of his eye. The basilisk rose like a magnificent sculpture behind him, and Harry was relieved to see that it had its eyes closed, clearly on Tom’s orders. That was a good sign.
“Ah,” Tom said, looking at something over Harry’s shoulder. “You brought a little friend.”

As Myrtle set eyes on the basilisk, she screamed, loud and shrill, stumbling back and dragging Harry with her. Harry turned automatically to right himself, grabbing Myrtle when she almost crashed into a sink. That was a mistake. Before he could blink, his wand was ripped out of his hand and sent flying through the air, caught deftly by Tom.

Harry surged around, growling. “Give me back my wand,” he snarled, pushing Myrtle behind him.

“Now why would I do that?” Tom asked with a languid grin, twirling the wand around his fingers in a familiar move. “Now we can finally have a proper chat.”

“A chat?” Harry laughed mirthlessly. “Dunno about you, but I’m not really feeling tea and biscuits.”

Tom’s face shuttered up, and the air around them turned colder. The basilisk shifted, scales clinking on the cobbles. “Perhaps we’d best skip to the crux of the matter, then.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed. “Perhaps we’d best.”

“I am the heir of Slytherin,” Tom announced, and he sounded so proud. “But of course you knew that already.”

Myrtle let out a whimper, peering around Harry with wide eyes. “T-Tom, but I don’t understand—why do you have that—that thing?” She gazed up frightfully at the basilisk. “I don’t—”

“Silencio,” Tom said dismissively, barely flicking his wand.

Myrtle fell silent.

“Don’t you dare hurt her,” Harry threatened, taking a miniscule step forwards and feeling a wave of protectiveness. He directed the next part over his shoulder, towards Myrtle. “And—no matter what—don’t look at the basilisk, especially not its eyes.”

“How sweet,” Tom said drily. “But I think we both know who has the upper hand. You’re not in much of a position to be making demands, Harrison. Now hand over the girl.”

Harry frowned. “What?”

“I would…” a flicker of uncertainly ran over Tom’s features. “I am willing to leave you unharmed. You’ve already proven you won’t tell anyone about my heritage. But the girl knows, and now she must die.”

“I’m not letting you kill her,” Harry insisted.

“You don’t have much of a choice—”

“Yes, I do.” Harry gritted his teeth, and took a risk. “You’re not going to kill me. If you were, you’d have done it already: weeks ago, even. Now close the chamber.” It was all pure guesswork (who knew what was going on in Tom Riddle’s head), but Harry thought there might be some truth to it. Surely there was a reason Tom hadn’t already cornered and crucio’d him.

Tom laughed, and it wasn’t a nice laugh. It was cold and chilling, and brought Harry to a graveyard momentarily. “Now why would I do that?”

“Because if you do, I won’t tell anyone about this. You can get away with petrifying Weasley, and Helena and… and the other boy, but this ends today. And if you don’t, I will make sure Myrtle gets
away, and she will tell everyone.”

“And how will you do that? I have your wand.”

Tom’s features were almost unreadable, but Harry could see the uncertainty. Voldemort had always underestimated Harry- he’d just have to make sure that Tom overestimated him.

Harry gripped a door handle, ready to fling it open as a barrier, just in case. “I’ll do it,” he promised, shielding Myrtle with his body, “even if I have to die. You know I will.”

The pause that followed could have lasted years, but Harry wouldn’t have been able to tell. Myrtle shook behind him, and Harry steeled his resolve. She was innocent, he had to remember that. She was innocent.

Finally, Tom sneered and held out a hand. “Give me the girl.”

“I already told you-“

“I’m not going to kill her,” Tom said, frustrated, looking as if he’d like nothing better than to strangle Harry. “I’m going to obliviate her.”

Myrtle shuddered behind him, but Harry frowned. That didn’t sound awful- almost suspiciously reasonable, actually. “Only obliviate?”

“Yes.”

“Do you swear?”

“On my father’s grave,” Tom said impatiently.

“Your father’s not dead.”

“Oops.” Tom didn’t look very sorry, but he did look very impatient. “Look, I’m merely going to erase knowledge about the Chamber of Secrets, and anything else you told her. And then…” It looked like it was physically hurting Tom to say it. “And then I will close the chamber.”

Harry considered Tom carefully. Whilst Tom looked unconcerned and rather bored with the whole affair, Harry could see the tension in his white knuckles, clenching tightly to his wand. There was no way of telling if he would carry through with his promise. Harry would, he supposed, just have to trust him.

“Come on Myrtle,” Harry said gently, guiding Myrtle forwards. “It’ll only take a minute, and then you won’t even notice it happened.”

Harry could see Myrtle trying to say something through the silencing charm, but Harry ignored it. This was saving her life, he told himself. Nevertheless, Harry watched Tom carefully, and prepared to leap forwards at the first sign of trouble.

Tom tugged Myrtle closer tetchily, raising his wand and pressing it against her forehead. Tom hesitated for a moment, before he closed his eyes and murmured, “obliviate.” Myrtle’s eyes went dreamy and unfocused, and she slumped to the ground. Tom waved his wand in the air, like the memories were dissipating away. Harry swore he could almost see them melt into the air.

“Satisfied?” Tom asked, but Harry rushed to Myrtle’s side, brushing the hair away from her face. She was unconscious.
Tom appeared to ignore them, getting to his feet and moving towards the basilisk. “I release you from your duty,” he hissed. “Return to slumbering beneath the school. The chamber will close.”

“But master—“

“Do as I say.”

“I’ll be so hungry...” the snake replied petulantly, but sunk back into the pipes. “Farewell then, heir...”

The taps slid closed with a definite crunch, and Tom watched with undetectable emotion. His posture was strangely imperfect.

“Er, Riddle?” Harry asked timidly, all bravado drained out of him. “Could I have my wand back?”

Harry thought Tom muttered something like: “You didn’t even have your wand,” but he couldn’t be sure. Nevertheless, as Tom handed Harry back his wand, Harry almost felt sorry for him. Harry knew what it was like to cling desperately to some part of your family.

“They would have closed it, you know.” Harry said suddenly. “Hogwarts. They would have closed it if she died.”

Tom simply raised an eyebrow. “Well, it’s lucky she didn’t then, isn’t it? Ennervate,” he said, pointing his wand at the fallen girl. And then he swept out of the bathroom, sparing the pair nary a glance. As Harry watched him leave, it sunk in that Myrtle was alive. Tom had spared her. Harry resolved to later work out why that thought brought with it a spark of hope.

From where she was still sprawled on the floor, Myrtle’s eyes blinked open. They were hazy and confused, but she seemed unharmed. She pushed herself up onto her elbows, looking around her surroundings with wide, scared eyes. “W-what? Where am I?”

“You’re fine,” Harry soothed, running a hand over her back. “I think you collapsed.”

“W-who are you?” Myrtle stuttered, and her eyes held no recognition when she looked at Harry.

Damn you, Tom, Harry thought, but he smiled down at the girl regardless. “Don’t worry,” he said, his heart in his throat. “I’m no one.”

Chapter End Notes

And thus the Chamber of Secrets arc ends swiftly. And then school year is almost at an end- this came quickly! (Or not really if you look at the word count XD)

Myrtle is me, btw. Constantly crying at every opportunity.

I feel like this story should include the tag ’Enemies to Acquaintances to Enemies to Friends...ish back to Enemies then to... Friends? (Eventually to Lovers heh heh)’

Well, Tom doesn't want Harry dead! Tom REALLY doesn't want Harry dead! That's a start... right?

I promise we'll get Tom POV next chapter ;)}
Tom Learns The Meaning of Ohana

Chapter Summary

Tom is not a happy bunny, terms draws to a close, and Harry goes flying.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: Helena Powell was petrified, and Harry revealed to Tom that he knew who was responsible for the attacks. Tom was not best pleased. Harry and Orion went to visit Helena. Harry had a nice chat with her, and Madam Hallpepper came to kick him out. It was then that Harry ran into Myrtle, who manipulated him into sitting with her at dinner, and scaring off her bully: Olive. Harry did so. Harry protected Myrtle as the school grew more and more scared, and Harry grew more and more paranoid, and the two became close. And just when Harry least expected it, the 'Myrtle incident happened'. After Harry took a stand, Tom agreed to not kill Myrtle if Harry let him obliviate her. He didn't tell Harry that he would remove all memories of Harry, and thus the chapter concluded.

Surprise! Early chapter! And no, this isn't a new update time for all of you who have told me that my updates are too far apart (which I agree with, but I don't have time for more, sorry XD), but I have exam revision now, so writing is a great procrastination method (I am literally procrastinating now). The next chapter might therefore be a little later, soz.

So turns out y'all liked Myrtle way more than I expected 0.0 Myrtle is basically me, though- crying at literally everything XD I get a nice review, I cry, I get a bad review, I cry, I have pizza for dinner, I cry- it’s unavoidable.

Thank you for the incredible response last chapter. It was genuinely lovely :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tom strolled away from the first floor bathroom, hands resolutely clenched in front of him. He stopped for a second, bowed his head, and then he pulled out his wand, aimed it at a nearby painting, and screamed.

The portrait exploded, canvas shattered and fluttering to the ground like cut butterfly wings. Nearby paintings shrieked and flapped- someone yelled “that was her only frame, you bastard!”, but Tom closed his eyes and breathed.

For a moment, he’d wished that painting was Harrison’s head. Or perhaps, instead, the head of that insipid girl, giggling and wailing away as Harrison pandered to her every whim-

He’d lost the chamber. It was like a physical punch to the stomach- he’d lost the only physical connection to his heritage, his ancestors. Sure, he could go down there whilst the basilisk was asleep, but what was the point? What would he do in a damp, empty cave, alone with his own failures? If he could wake up the basilisk without consequence, he would- but there was no way in hell that he
could unleash a half-mad, eons-old basilisk without it killing or attacking someone (and then Harrison would object and Tom would go to prison. Or worse, he’d be expelled and sent back to the orphanage. That wasn’t going to happen.)

He’d just have to face it: the chamber was lost.

Lost.

If Harrison stood before him now, he’d crucio him. Probably. Maybe. (He didn’t even know anymore, and wasn’t that a horrifying thought?)

Harrison was probably comforting the girl right that instant, cooing over the poor third year like she was some kind of broken bird. Her memories would be fuzzy by now, Tom thought with satisfaction, nothing more than a blurred recollection that the boy in front of her had once helped her in the Great Hall. He would leave Harrison to work out the details surrounding her amnesia- he was sure the boy would work out something (Tom could think of at least three excuses on the spot).

Let Harrison be the one to squirm at the tricky decision.

Tom hoped he burned with it.

“Tom! Tom! I just need a minute-!”

Tom rolled his eyes as a familiar head of blonde hair came rushing around the corner. His favourite Malfoy, here to pester him.

“Yes, Abraxas?” Tom drawled, slipping his wand into his pocket. Let Abraxas make of the scene what he would- Tom didn’t particularly care.

To his credit, Abraxas barely glanced at the blackened portrait frame, instead eagerly drawing a scroll from his pocket. “I found something. About your family.”

An echo of Harrison’s “Your father’s not dead” ran through his mind. Well, it was always nice to have things confirmed.

Tom’s eyebrow raised. “Oh? Do tell.”

“It was difficult to find-”

“I should hope so. It’s taken you long enough.”

Abraxas flushed with embarrassment, and busied himself with smoothing down his robes. “Yes, well, I had a lot to do. I had to look and birth records from the last fifty years, and then I had to find a contact in the muggle government-“

“Heaven forbid,” Tom said sarcastically, but Abraxas nodded quite earnestly.

“Yes, quite. Well, I found a Riddle family, living in Little Hangleton. They’re quite wealthy apparently, in muggle terms- I don’t quite understand their archaic monetary system- and I found an article about the son in the local newspapers. His name is Tom, too, and the picture… well.”

Abraxas handed the scroll to Tom anxiously, who scanned over it. There wasn’t much information, just an address and a brief ancestry tree.

And a photo.
“Nearly identical,” Tom noted, softly, unable to conceal a sneer. The muggle was the spitting image of him, all dark, wavy hair and a sharp chin. They had different eyes, Tom noted, and he wondered if he got his eyes from his mother.

“And nearby,” Abraxas added eagerly, gesturing to a smaller address at the bottom, “if you check the wizarding families in the nearby area, you find the Gaunts. They’re rather poor and their magic is in a terrible state, but they are one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. And they’re most fond of boasting about their relation to— I think it’s on the page—“

“Salazar Slytherin,” Tom finished softly, taking in the information with a subtle gleam in his eyes. “How curious. Thank you, Abraxas,” he said at last, dragging his attention away from the tiny, oh-so-significant address. “This really couldn’t have come at a better time.”

Abrasax beamed, clearly delighted with himself.

“And now,” Tom said, “for your reward.”

Abrasax took a deep breath, still eagerly gazing at the younger student.

“Obliviate,” Tom murmured.

As they said; if it wasn’t broken, don’t fix it.

It was a much more subtle spell this time. A small widening of the eyes was all the physical reaction Abraxas had time for, before Tom dug into his mind. He was careful, drawing out the memories of Tom first approaching Malfoy with the task, sneaking around at the Ministry, and finally telling Tom his news. In the end, Tom left little more than a vague impression that Abraxas had been asked to do something, but it probably wasn’t all that important.

As Tom waved his wand gently to dispel the silvery streams of memory, Abraxas blinked blearily.

“I…”

“Abrasax,” Tom said pointedly, stowing his wand again. “You were just on your way to Runes, I believe.”

“Oh,” Malfoy nodded once, and then again; the memory settling into place. “Yes I must have been. Sorry for bothering you, Tom. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“I suppose you will,” Tom agreed amiably, watching the blond stumble away.

And then he set off himself, heading towards the lake. With the scroll in his pocket, all of a sudden he felt a lot lighter. Who needed a chamber? He’d have a real family, soon enough.

From the rumours that spread through the castle in the following weeks, Harrison had indeed come up with a believable story.

Tom heard many variations of the dramatic tale, and at last, the castle seemed to settle on one: Harrison had been checking on Myrtle when he’d heard her scream. As he ran into the bathroom, he’d seen her lying on the floor unconscious and a dark figure, apparently startled, had escaped through the window onto the grounds beyond. When Myrtle had woken up, she had no memory of the last few weeks beside a strong wizard facing a looming shadow, a very intense feeling of fear,
and the absolute knowledge that Harrison had saved her from certain death.

Or so the story went. It was well-constructed, Tom admitted, covering nearly all the plot holes. He was almost impressed.

Harrison had become an instant celebrity, praised for his heroics, despite his insistence that “I really didn’t do anything- seriously, stop asking me. Why are you taking photos-?”

It was only a few weeks later when people began to notice that the attacks had ceased. Immediately, the rumour optimistically escalated to ‘Harrison Peters scared away the dark wizard who was terrorising and petrifying innocent students’, and his popularity soared.

“He saved my life,” Myrtle giggled often amongst friends, having suddenly become a lot more popular. She could regularly be found conducting her own miniature ‘Harrison Peters’ sermons, where she described the attack in awe-inspiring detail. Tom wasn’t where she was finding these details, considering she had supposedly been unconscious for the whole thing.

Tom, on the other hand, was having the time of his life. He made up for his disappointment about the chamber by repeatedly bringing up Harrison’s ‘bravery’, prompting Orion to begin squealing all over again.

Harrison, of course, became steadily more and more horrified by it all.

“I hope they move on over summer,” Hogwarts’ ‘hero’ said gloomily at the leaving feast, stabbing his fork into a ham steak. He aimed a glare behind him, where Tom could see yet another group of girls gathering around Myrtle at the Ravenclaw girls.

“Try and cheer up,” Orion offered sympathetically. The Black Heir had finally calmed down from his excitement enough to recognise that Harrison loathed the attention, and had resorted to patting his friend on the back supportively whenever he was asked for his autograph.

“’M not a farm animal,” Harrison would say, and become even more miserable soon after.

This time though, Harrison simply groaned and let his head sink to the table, cushioned by his folded arms.

“They’ll forget about it soon enough,” Orion said.

“I doubt it,” Tom offered serenely, taking a bite of broccoli.

“They’ll be talking about it for years.” Rupert said gleefully, rubbing his hands together. “Do you know how many dates I’ve gotten by saying I’m friends with you?”

“We’re not friends,” Harrison mumbled darkly, face still hidden.

Rupert gasped dramatically, bringing a hand to his heart. “That really hurt, y’know? Like a cruciatus curse.”

“I’ll actually hurt you in a minute if you’re not careful.”

“How could I fail to feel fear, when a threat comes directly from the Saviour of Hogwarts?” Rupert simpered, his eyes wide.

Harrison’s head shot up. “Don’t call me that.”

“I don’t see what he did that’s so great,” Atticus said bitterly. “He just walked into a bathroom. I
could do that.”

Harrison nodded, and then he and Atticus shared a look of disgust as they realised that they agreed on something. Miracles truly did happen.

“But you didn’t walk into that bathroom, did you, Atticus?” Tom said sharply, and what a shame that was. He could have killed the pair of them and be done with it. “You were taking a nap.”

“I was feeling ill!” Atticus protested.

“Well, thank Merlin for Warren that the Saviour wasn’t feeling a bit nauseous,” Rupert snorted.

“I have a very weak stomach- my healer prescribed potions!”

“Oh, no!” Rupert cried out sarcastically. “Not the potions! Did you hear that, Grahams? Atticus’ healer prescribed potions.”

Caspar Grahams glanced over with a bright smile. “My mother sends me potions for migraines. They’re genetic.”

Rupert took a deep breath. “Your mother-“

“Stop, all of you,” Tom said, and then smiled slowly. “We were talking about Harrison, after all. Isn’t he such a hero?”

“Fuck you, Riddle.”

It was at that opportune moment that Druella and Walburga joined them, Abraxas and Lucian Nott following close behind.

“You’re late to the feast!” Orion pouted. “Your last one, too. I still can’t believe you’re leaving.”

“You’re leaving?” Harrison asked, surprised.

“Well, we are seventh years,” Druella said distractedly, examining something in her lap.

“It is rather sad,” Walburga said, with dignified tragedy. “But I trust I’ll see you all at my summer charity event next month! It’s to raise money for those under-privileged few; like the poor Muggleborns who are thrust into our world with little to their name. We’re giving to the Hogwarts fund!”

Tom’s neck warmed uncomfortably and he felt an unwelcome flash of humiliation. That was the fund that allowed him to come to school each year.

“I’ll be there,” Orion promised, stars in his eyes.

“Obviously I will too,” Druella agreed, like any other alternative was insane.

Tom wondered why love made people into such idiots.

“Good,” Walburga said with satisfaction. “Oh, this is so exciting! Life after Hogwarts is thrilling, isn’t it? I’ll be marrying dear Apus, Abraxas and Lucian have Ministry apprenticeships lined up, and Druella is…” Walburga turned to Druella. “Darling, what is it you’re doing, again?”

Druella shrugged. “Something with Quidditch? I’m not sure yet.”
“But you are going to start dating, aren’t you?” Walburga asked anxiously.

Druella rolled her eyes. “Here we go again.”

“Don’t be silly! I just don’t want you to be lonely when I go to Romania. And you’re precisely the kind of person to end up as a spinster-“

“Oh, thanks a lot!”

“-Because you want to be one!” Walburga insisted. “But you have to start thinking of your future.”

Druella smiled coldly. “At least there’s more to my future than being a trophy wife.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Walburga bristled. “I’m just saying, if you don’t have children, who’s supposed to look after you in your old age-“

“Oh, well I definitely don’t want children,” Druella snorted. “I can’t think of anything worse.”

“Druella!”

“Walburga!”

“Ladies!” Rupert said, rather laid-back. “Calm down. I’m sure you’ll both pop out babies and die alone. It’s inevitable.”

“What an awfully misogynistic thing to say,” Druella told him sharply. “Women are more than baby-producing charms.”

“Yeah, you’re definitely good for something else, too,” Rupert leered.

Tom couldn’t see that going well. Indeed, Druella stiffened and gave Rupert such a glare that hell might have felt a little chilly in comparison.

“Are you still seeing that fourth year?” she asked pointedly. “Can’t find someone your own age to screw in a broom cupboard?”

“Well, if you’re volunteering…”

“I’d rather have sex with Grahams. At least he has basic respect for women.”

“He also has halitosis.”

“Bad breath or objectification? What a difficult choice,” Druella said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“C’mon, Druella, every guy objectifies women. We can’t help it. It’s our nature.”

“Not ‘every guy’ has a one to ten rating chart of girls’ breasts plastered to the Slytherin noticeboard.”

Rupert grinned, unperturbed, and stretched lazily. “Oh, Dru-Dru, I’ll miss our little chats.”

“Every breath you take is a waste of oxygen,” Druella hissed.

“I’ll miss you all,” Orion declared happily, setting down his goblet with a ‘bang!’ He turned to the seventh years. “It won’t be the same without you guys.”

Tom doubted that was entirely true- he didn’t think he’d ever heard Lucian Nott say more than a rare single sentence, for example, but he was sure the sentiment was appreciated.
“I’ll miss you all, too,” Walburga said, consoled. “It’ll be so odd to not be at Hogwarts any more. No more sharing a room with Ella, no more lasagne on Fridays, no more hiding in the owlery- oh, Druella! That reminds me: what does that letter say? I swear I recognise the handwriting…”

Druella finally raised her hands from her lap, revealing a luxurious, white envelope; Druella Rose Rosier written clearly on the front in looped, cursive text. “I haven’t opened it yet.”

Orion eyed the letter curiously. “When did you get that?”

“This morning. I was just collected Emmeline from the owlery to put her in her cage so I don’t have to do it tomorrow morning, and one of the other owls brought it.”

“Who sends a letter on the final day of term?” Atticus snorted.

“I suppose we’ll find out. Go on. Open it, then!” Walburga demanded, excitedly clapping her hands.

Druella slid a knife along the seam of the letter and broke the seal obediently, opening the envelope flap and sliding a sheet of heavy parchment out. She unfolded it, and took a second to read the contents, her eyes darting down the page quickly.

“Well?” Walburga attempted to peer over Druella’s shoulder. She overbalanced and nearly face-planted in the mashed potato.

“It’s… it’s from Cygnus Black,” Druella frowned. She snorted suddenly. “Oh, the Third. Walburga, it’s from your brother.”

Walburga shrieked. “I knew I recognised the handwriting!”

“I didn’t know you had a brother, Walburga,” Harrison frowned.

“Oh, I don’t like to advertise it. He’s already left home, so we see very little of each other.” She let out a deep, exasperated breath. “Oh, what does he want?”

“I’m not sure,” Druella shrugged. “It just says he wants to discuss something of ‘utmost importance’…”

Walburga looked thoughtful. “He does work in the Department of Magical Games and Sports, and I have told him all about your keeping. Perhaps it’s about Quidditch! Oh, Ella, I’m so proud of you!”

Walburga enfolded Druella into a warm hug, and Druella tried to disguise her delighted laughter.

Their previous disagreement appeared to be forgotten- Tom was once again amazed at their ability to simply forget arguments.

The letter lay on the table, discarded.

A ringing throughout the hall signified Dippet’s last address of the year, and Tom almost felt nostalgic. (Almost- he didn’t do nostalgia.)

The Headmaster rose to his feet and the hall quietened down, all eyes turning to the front. Dippet looked unusually solemn- usually he was all smiles and sunshine during his end of year speech. Tom felt a prickle of unease.

“Students!” Dippet’s voice echoed through the hall.

Walburga and Druella disentangled themselves.
Dippet took a long, heavy breath, and smoothed down his robes. A small smile grew on his face. “I would like to welcome you all to the end of year feast, and I hope you are all enjoying the food. I think you’ll agree with me that the house elves have really outdone themselves this year, and will join me in gratitude. I would also like us all to bid a fond farewell to Professor Battlesdown; our dear Arithmancy professor, who is flying off for a relaxing retirement in the Carribean once term has ended.”

Polite applause followed.

“And of course, I do hope our first years have enjoyed their year here at Hogwarts, and will continue to do so for many years to come. It gets worse from here, I’m afraid.”

Even politer laughter followed.

Dippet’s smile faded rather suddenly. “This has, however, been a very sad year for some. It is with a heavy heart and considerable grief that I ask we all remember Daisy Meadowes, who died far too young. And also that we spare a thought for Septimus Wealsey, Helena Powell, and Ronald Moore, all of whom are recovering in St Mungos. The events of this year have been dark and- quite frankly-unforgiveable, and I personally don’t believe we could ever justifiably call Hogwarts a school again, if we didn’t do something to make sure these events never repeat themselves.”

Tom exchanged a raised eyebrow with Druella.

Dippet cleared his throat. “And so it is up to me to inform you that, henceforth, dark magic and its associated branches will be banned from Hogwarts’ halls.”

A collective gasp rose, as all House tables gained looks of shock. They were banning dark magic? Tom’s stomach sank. But they couldn’t!

“You are free to practise whatever magic you wish to at home, provided, of course, that is legal; but as a place of safety, Hogwarts can no longer facilitate the use of magic which might harm others. Our curriculum will receive an overhaul, and any dark magic from now on will either be theoretical or highly-supervised in a classroom environment. Let this past year remind us why we must gather as a school and support one another, making sure we are as safe as we can be. Thank you, and enjoy your summer holidays.”

And Dippet sat, receiving a light pat from Professor Merrythought. The headmaster looked worn and grey, and Tom wondered if this would be the year that finally finished the old man.

As usual, Dumbledore was glaring down at the Slytherin table, and Tom stared back, fully expected to make disapproving eye contact. Curiously enough, when he followed Dumbledore’s gaze, he found it focused on Harrison.

Usually, Tom would have relished dissecting this interaction and pondering on the possibilities, but how could he focus on anything when they had banned dark magic? It was obscene. Tom loved dark magic; he loved the power and the control of it, he loved the silky, seductive feeling as it slipped from his wand- he loved magic- and they wanted to take a part of that away.

“They can’t do this,” Orion said, looking shell-shocked. “That’s my family magic. They can’t ban my family magic.”

“Daisy Meadowes wasn’t even killed with magic. Cassius told me that someone beat her to death,” Atticus complained. “This makes no sense.”

“The petrified students aren’t even dead,” Rupert snorted.
Tom rolled his eyes. Idiots. They were so blind.

“Don’t you see?” Druella asked condescendingly- apparently she’d had the same idea as he had. “This has nothing to do with ‘the events of the past year’, or whatever else they want us to believe.”

“I doubt it even has anything to do with Daisy Meadowes,” Tom added.

Orion furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“It’s Grindelwald,” Druella explained, twirling a lock of curly hair around her finger. “He’s been getting closer- it’s all over the newspapers. They obviously don’t want dark magic to have any kind of foothold here. If they can stop any possible followers of his from practicing-“

“-Then he loses power,” Tom finished.

“I suspect they think it’ll reduce the chance of an attack on Hogwarts,” Harrison added.

Orion looked distressed. “But no one would attack Hogwarts. We have Dumbledore.”

“The Dark Lord’s more powerful than Dumbledore,” Atticus mocked.

Lucian Nott nodded.

Tom, however, didn’t entirely agree. Perhaps Dumbledore did give off a slightly dotty vibe, but he was powerful. There was steel behind the colourful robes and extravagant facial hair.

“Dumbledore is possibly the most talented wizard alive right now,” Druella said flatly. “You’re an idiot if you think he’s not a considerable factor in keeping the Dark Lord away.”

“I dunno,” Harrison said thoughtfully. “If a dark lord wants something bad enough… there’s not much that will stop him.” And then he looked at Tom with the oddest expression. Perhaps it was a Seer thing.

“You’re never as safe as you think you are,” Druella agreed.

“It’s so easy to forget we’re at war,” Orion said. “We go to lessons, and eat meals, and fly… but out there, somewhere, people are dying. For us.”

“People are dying in here,” Walburga pointed out archly.

“To be totally honest, if banning the dark arts keeps Grindelwald away…” Druella shrugged. “Well, I’m not going to complain.”

There was a low grumbling amongst the students, and Tom saw Atticus muttering angrily to Dolohov, who was being unusually serious and nodding along.

“So what was it like, Peters?” Druella asked suddenly. Immediately everyone froze.

Harrison shifted uncomfortably under all the attention. “What do you mean?”

“What was it like when Grindelwald’s forces attacked your village?”

Orion turned to Harrison. “You don’t need to answer,” he assured him.

Tom however, found his interest caught. He leaned forwards. “On the contrary, Orion, I think it would benefit us all to hear a personal story. Perhaps prepare us for what is to come.”
“It’s fine,” Harrison told Orion gently. “I can handle it.” He turned back to the rest of the group. He paused a moment, frowning deeply. Absently, Harrison rubbed his forehead. “There’s no time to think, when you’re being attacked. You just… run, and fight, and hope you survive. Sometimes you remember spells you didn’t even know you knew, and sometimes every single jinx disappears from your memory like it was never there. You… you don’t really think of anyone else, not whilst you’re fighting. You’re focused. But eventually you look around, and you realise that whilst you were living, people were dying. For nothing.” Harrison fixed them all with a pointed look, lingering, perhaps, on Tom. “War is an awful thing. People will die for nothing, and that’s never worth it.”

“Sometimes there are causes worth fighting for,” Atticus said, looking unimpressed.

“Not this cause,” Harrison shook his need. “Not ever.”

“And I suppose you’re the authority on this, hm?”

“My parents died because some idiots think that those without magic don’t count as people,” Harrison spat. “I’d say I have more authority than you.” He turned to Tom, a strange challenge burning in his eyes. “What about you, Tom? What do you think about war?”

He was back in the orphanage, the piercing screech of the air raid siren rattling in his ear drums.

“Someone grab the children!” a women yelled, and then a strong hand was fastened around his wrist. He was tugged out of the door, the surge of orphans spilling towards the London Underground. Suddenly he felt an elbow in his side, and one of the younger boys went rushing past him. He stumbled, falling to his knees. He reached into his pocket, but he didn’t have his wand, it must have been back in the orphanage, he was alone and he didn’t have his wand-

He looked up, but around him the streets were in chaos and everyone he knew was gone. In the distance, an explosion rumbled, the very ground seeming to shake. He crawled, half desperate- he was going to live, he would not die an insignificant rat, felled by a muggle- and curled up beneath a bench.

He lay, wide-awake, as the world burned around him.

Tom’s heart sped up, and for a moment, his vision tinted red.

“I think,” Tom said, bringing his attention back to Harrison, who was watching him knowingly as if he knew exactly where Tom had just gone, “that this conversation is growing a little dark, especially considering what has unfolded this evening. Perhaps we should return to lighter topics.”

“Yes,” Orion agreed enthusiastically. “For example, Walburga’s summer ball…”

Tom let Orion’s chatter fade into the background. He had more important things to focus on. The scroll, still in his pocket, was a constant reminder of his new goal. Come summer, he promised himself, he would see what this world could make of him. He’d find out who he was.

Harry took the opportunity, as the rest of the castle packed up and prepared to leave, to go flying. He hadn’t flown nearly as often as he would have liked recently, and in the past few weeks he’d been feeling the urge to just be free. Perhaps it was the uncertain prospect of another summer, homeless and friendless. Where would he live? He could try and find odd jobs here and there, but last summer had been… rough. At least it wasn’t a summer with the Dursleys.
Unfortunately, whenever he came down to the pitch, he was followed by fans.

*How had this happened?*

Harry had *just* been getting used to the idea of not being a celebrity, too. It had been amazing- he got all of the Hogwarts and none of the unfounded idolisation.

And then this had happened. Urgh. Hopefully it would all die away over summer- it wasn’t like he’d saved the whole wizarding world, after all. Just a girl.

Myrtle, at least, appeared to be having the time of her life. She was perfectly suited to being the centre of gossip- just dramatic enough, and desperate for some positive recognition. She did appear to finally have friends, though, so that was nice. And Harry still couldn’t stop a fondness from rising within him whenever he caught a glimpse of her. It was probably why he hadn’t hexed her yet.

But on the final day of term, the Quidditch pitch was completely empty-

“HARRY!”

… Mostly.

“I can’t believe I’ve never seen you fly,” Orion enthused, trotting alongside Harry as they weaved their way through the Quidditch stands towards the pitch.

“This year’s been a bit hectic,” Harry shrugged. “It kind of been one disaster after another.”

“It’s been the best year of my life,” Orion said fiercely, and Harry tried not to blush.

“Yeah, well…”

“I’ve got to see what you’re like on that broom, though, haven’t it? Check I haven’t wasted my money.”

“Cheeky,” Harry said, and elbowed him.

“So what position are you?” Orion bounced along beside him, hopping over a discarded scark.

“Didn’t you say you were a seeker?”

“Yeah. I don’t see how that matters though, I was just gonna fly around…”

“Don’t be silly!” And out of nowhere, Orion produced a snitch. Harry blinked, staring at the buzzing, golden ball.

“…Hmm?”

“You’re going to have to practice if you want to get onto the team next year. You *do* want to, don’t you? Christina’s leaving now, so the seeker spot is be open.”

“What… join the Slytherin team?”

“You don’t belong to any other House,” Orion grinned playfully. “Well?”

“Yeah,” Harry realised. “Yeah. I guess that could be fun.” It would be odd; playing for the Slytherin team (and he could only imagine Ron’s face), but it would be like getting a little piece of home back. Plus, he could distinctly remember Tom telling him not to join the Quidditch team, which immediately made the prospect more inviting.
“Excellent!” Orion beamed. “I’m going to release the snitch, then, and you’ll just have to catch it. In under five minutes, of course, otherwise I get to hex you.”

Harry laughed. “When did I agree to that?”

“A minute ago- didn’t you notice?” Orion said innocently, but there was a spark behind his eyes that spoke wonders.

_Sneaky git_, Harry thought fondly.

They finally reached the Quidditch pitch. Orion gave Harry a bright smile and a thumbs up, waving the snitch pointedly. Harry returned the gesture with a faint roll of the eyes, but swung a leg over his broom, and then he took to the sky.

The wind beat his face, whipping through his hair and stinging his cheeks. He grinned, the smile feeling like it might split his face. He felt weightless.

Harry guided the broomstick gently around, the command taking barely a thought and a slight sideways lean, until he was peering down at Orion from his vantage point high in the air. Harry saw Orion wave his wand and a ribbon of light burst from the tip, forming the shape of numbers. As the 5:00 turned into 4:59, Harry realised it was a countdown. And then Orion raised his hand, squinting up at Harry now, and released the snitch.

It darted away with a glint of gold on its wings.

Almost immediately, Harry spotted it reappear hovering just behind Orion’s ear. He leant, went to dive, and then stopped. Orion _had_ wanted to see what he was capable of…

So Harry straightened back up, keeping a careful eye on the snitch, and began to lazily circle the pitch. He tried a few loops and tricks, laughing as the broom shifted obediently beneath him. It was no Firebolt, but it was a damn sight better than a Cleansweep One.

He rose higher and higher, until the clouds kissed his scarred skin and whispered ‘_you are loved_.’ He felt invincible. The air felt thin and clean as he took a deep breath, and sunlight warming his face. His hands glistened, the golden lines glinting in the yellow light.

Harry glanced down and spotted Orion, only a speck now. The little Orion blob waved its wand and the timer grew, enlarging so that it was at least 10 times the size, and Harry saw that it now read 0:58. Show time.

Harry dove, plummeting towards the ground at a breakneck speed. It was as if gravity had suddenly wrapped around the handle of the broomstick and _pulled_. He fell with the broom, whooping as he pressed himself close, eyes concentrated on the smudge of gold behind Orion’s head. As he neared the ground, Harry gripped the broom and tugged upwards sharply, the tremendous effort burning in his shoulders and rippling through his back. The broom levelled out, his toes skimming across the grass as he shot towards his friend.

It was then that Orion leapt out of the way, flinging himself onto the springy turf as Harry shot by. Harry’s hand reached out, reaching, grasping, and finally caught the snitch where it hovered, unaware. Then he pulled his broom sharply upwards. It drifted slower, and slower, and finally stopped.

Harry sank to the ground, his feet finding solid purchase once more. The snitch in his hand fluttered, and his heart echoed the quick beats. There was something special about plucking magic from the air.
Behind him, Harry heard the sound of Orion staggering to his feet, and then the cheering began.

“That was amazing! You can really fly! Like, properly fly!”

Harry chuckled awkwardly, glancing away from Orion as he bounded to Harry’s side. “I’m okay.”

“You’re incredible. How are you good at so many things?”

“Mate, I can fly and I’m not terrible at duelling. I’m not exactly Dumbledore.”

“That’s two more talents than lots of people have,” Orion said loyally.

Harry laughed, slightly bitterly. “God, my relative would have hated you.”

“What do you mean?” Orion asked curiously.

“They thought I was worth less than mud.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“It is.” Harry frowned distantly. “I remember when I was eight, my aunt told me that I was an excellent case for nepoticide. I had to look it up in the dictionary.”

“Surely she was joking,” Orion insisted.

“My aunt didn’t have much of a sense of humour. She liked to laugh when the neighbours went through messy divorces, but that was about it.”

Orion tried to be positive. “Your parents loved you though.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed with a soft smile. “Yeah, I think they did.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Of course I do,” Harry replied, slightly disbelievingly. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Orion went very quiet. “I’m not sure I’d miss my parents.”

“You would,” Harry insisted. “You’d have to.”

Orion shrugged and shoved his hands into his pocket, falling silent. Harry realised he had said something very wrong, and desperately tried to think of how to fix it.

Luckily, he didn’t have to.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Cassius said, seemingly strolling out of nowhere. He looked as beautiful as anything, and Harry really wished he wasn’t as attracted to him as he was. Fortunately, Cassius’ looks didn’t make up for him being a total dick. “But I just had to say how beautiful that flying was.”

“I would have thought you’d seen me fly before,” Harry said absently, glancing sideways at his reticent friend.

“I have, of course, but it’s very different in person. More alive, somehow. The dragon never stood a chance.”

“That’s great, Cassius,” Harry said, grabbing Orion’s arm to leave, “But we’ve got to go and get our luggage-“
Orion shrugged Harry off, staying resolutely where he was, barely sparing Harry a glance. “Where were you at dinner, Cassius? You missed the leaving speech.”

“I had other things to do,” Cassius shrugged mysteriously, smiling slightly. “So where are you spending the summer, Orion?”

“I’m going home,” Orion shrugged, looking downcast.

“And you, Harrison?”

Harry glanced up in shock, scratching the back of his neck. He bent down to pick up his broomstick awkwardly. “Oh, er…”

“Harry?” Orion asked, looking over suddenly.

“I’m not really sure,” Harry admitted.

“What do you mean?” Orion was paying attention to him again now, cocking his head in a maternal way (not that Harry would ever tell him that).

“Well, my home was, er, destroyed, and I don’t have any relatives who’d have me. I spent most of last summer in an inn, working odd jobs to pay board. I’m fine though,” Harry added quickly. “I’ll find somewhere.”

Cassius let out a satisfied sigh. “Well, I’d better head off. The summer only lasts so long,” he said with a serene smile.

“Don’t let us keep you,” Harry said sarcastically.

Cassius turned to leave, and then paused, turning around to lightly add: “You will be careful in London, won’t you, Orion? Don’t let your new education get too comprehensive. It’s dangerous to teach an old dog new tricks.” Cassius began to walk back towards the castle, calling out as he left: “Sometimes a muggle’s bite is worse than its bark!”

Cassius’ laugh faded as his figure got smaller and smaller.

“Did he just compare muggles to dogs?” Harry scowled, following Cassius’ progress as he moved away.

“I think he just compared me to a dog,” Orion blinked. “An old dog.”

“Practically ancient,” Harry snorted. As his voice died away, the space between them became awkward once more. Harry studiously studied his broomstick.

“I’m sorry,” Orion said suddenly, softly. “For getting upset. I just… don’t like going home.”

“And I’m sorry for assuming you would,” Harry said. “I get it: the not wanting to go home. It’s just… if I still had parents, you couldn’t keep me away. I suppose I find it weird that you don’t feel the same.”

“It might be better,” Orion said pointedly, catching Harry’s eye. “If I didn’t have to go home alone.”

“No, listen! I hate being home- it’s awkward and uncomfortable, and it’s even worse when Lucretia decides to finally come out of her bedroom, and her and Mother have an argument, and then Rigel
cries- it would be nice, to have someone else there. And I hate to think of you; staying in some pokey little inn somewhere-

“Orion, I can’t just stay at your house!” Harry protested, although a little flicker of hope within him protested.

“Of course you can! We have plenty of spare bedrooms, and how else are you going to take me to muggle London, like you promised?”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” Harry mused. It would be nice to stay in a house, with a real family. Last summer had been pretty grim, and he didn’t fancy having to find a job that let him work every day…

“Okay, then,” Harry agreed finally. “I’ll stay with you.”

Orion squealed delightedly, wrapping his arms around Harry and giving him a tight hug. “Oh, this’ll be so much fun!”

“Don’t you need to ask your parents though?”

“They’ll be fine. Father and Mother barely even notice when I leave for school, never mind when I bring an extra guest back. They’ll politely ask who you are and then ignore you.”

“Sounds fun.”

“It will be,” Orion said, very passionately.

Suddenly, from somewhere behind a nearby seat came the sound of low giggles.

“They’ve found us,” Harry groaned, recognising ‘teenage girl/boy laughter’ anywhere. He grabbed Orion’s arm and, this time, Orion followed willingly. “We’d better get to the train before they ask for an autograph.”

“I can’t believe you have a fanclub.”

“It’s unofficial,” Harry said stubbornly.

Orion grinned. “So far.”

And that was how Harry found himself, luggage stowed away on the train back to King’s Cross, a new destination in mind.

Tom Riddle clenched his fingers tightly around a scroll and studied the photograph closely as the train rocked around him. He, too, had a new destination in mind.

The summer would prove interesting for all involved.

Chapter End Notes

As usual, I have taken liberties with dates of birth. I find it’s better to just not think about it (I’d advise you to do the same).

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Harry And Orion Take A Trip

Chapter Summary

Harry meets the Black famalan, Tom also has a family reunion, and Harry and Orion hit London.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME (a long time ago): Tom was not happy with Harrison's command to close the chamber. Luckily, Malfoy chose this moment to reveal what he'd found out about Tom's family: a Tom Riddle, nearly identical to our favourite Slytherin, living in the same village as wizarding family Gaunt, who have both a member called Marvolo and ties to Slytherin. Tom's plans for the summer were set. Harry became a celebrity from his 'saving' of Myrtle, and wasn't best pleased. The end of term feast arrived, where we bid goodbye to both Walburga and Druella, dark magic was banned, and Druella received a letter from Walburga's brother, Cygnus. Harry went flying, where Cassius 'subtly' prompted Orion to offer Harry summer accommodation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Number 12 Grimmauld Place was very different to how Harry remembered it being, fifty years later. It was more luxurious; reds and golds and royal purples covered the walls; tapestries dripping with glittering silks hung from the ceilings; and huge, beautifully embellished windows let golden light spill into the drawing room.

It also, strangely, felt larger than how Harry remembered. Perhaps it was the fact that none of the rooms were closed off, or perhaps it was the carefully styled furnishings, but Grimmauld Place, for the first time in Harry’s memory, felt truly like a home.

The Black family was also very different to how Harry remembered, in that there was a Black family. Arcturus Black had reacted little to Harry’s presence, merely looked him up and down, offered an unimpressed grunt, questioned him on his blood heritage, and then swept away to Merlin knew where. Probably the Ministry, Orion told him.

That had been when Harry was ferried into the drawing room to ‘meet the rest of the family’, which seemed to consist of Orion’s mother and sister.

Melania Black was a true beauty, and Harry could see how Arcturus Black would have been… overcome by her in his ‘youth’. She had blonde hair- more of a gold tint than a Malfoy shade of white- that would have fallen in soft curls had it not been severely tied at the nape of her neck. It pulled back her whole face, making her seem sterner than she would naturally. This couldn’t disguise her good looks though, and her gentle, doe-like features contrasted sharply with the cold cruelty in her eyes. She was still very young, Harry realised, only 17 or 18 years older than Lucretia.

Lucretia had her mother’s hair and her mother’s face, but Lucretia’s hair was free, free to tumble over her shoulders in a massive wave as she threw herself onto a sofa, an act that led her mother to shake
her head disapprovingly.

“Honestly Lucretia,” Melania said, with a voice like steel. “Have some decorum. You’ll never find a husband if you insist on acting in such a wild manner.”

Harry, awkwardly hovering with his luggage in tow, was left largely ignored.

“Perhaps I don’t want a husband,” Lucretia replied dramatically, like she had heard this conversation a thousand times over. “Besides, Mother, you’ve taught me that I just have to go to a party and leave my drink unattended. The men will come pouring in.” And she followed this up with a particularly nasty smile.

“Insolent child,” Melania said, her voice layered with ice. “I won’t have you speak to me like that, not after everything I’ve done for you.”

“The years of childhood trauma were really precious,” Lucretia said, voice heavily layered with sarcasm.

“I should have thrown myself down a staircase when I found I was with child!” her mother hissed.

“At least then I wouldn’t have been raised by you!”

“Are you fighting again?”

Harry turned to the doorway to see who spoke (the voice was flat and disaffected, but very young). Standing by the door, her head barely reaching above the handle, was a little girl. Harry recognised her from the photos; dark ringlets tied neatly in two bunches, but now her dark eyes were blank.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Meissa,” Melania said, looking suddenly more worn down. She seemed to sag, and the years fell onto her face. “We were simply talking.”


“That’s how conversations with Mother go,” Lucretia said archly. “You’ll just have to get used to it. Someday soon she’ll start throwing men at you too, in the hopes that one of them will buy you. Like a cow at market,” she spat disgustedly.

“For heaven’s sake, girl, I’m not selling you. You need a husband-”

“Forget it,” Lucretia spat. “I’m going out, or else I’ll cry myself sick. Don’t wait up.”

And Lucretia flounced out of the room. The sound of the front door slamming followed close behind. The room breathed in collectively, holding very still.

The faint sound of wailing echoed through the house.

Melania tucked her shirt into her skirt, and sighed. “Take your friend to a spare room,” she told Orion, her eyes moving over Harry. “And shut that thing up. I’m going to bed.”

And then she too left the room.

There was a long uncomfortable silence, and Harry wasn’t sure what to do. He sincerely hoped the entire summer wouldn’t be spent like this.

At last, Orion turned to his little sister and winced. “How long has she been like that?”
Meissa stared up at Orion and slipped her hand into his, her little expression very serious. “Ri, she’s
tired all the time. She keeps going to bed whenever Rigel screams, and she wouldn’t get up for
weeks. You need to fix her.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t need fixing,” Orion said helplessly. “She’ll be fine.”

“She started crying the other day. She never cries.”

“She’s just very sad, Meissa,” Orion said, bending down and wrapping his arm around her shoulder.
“Like we all are, right? We’re all sad about Rigel.”

“But she keeps yelling at Father. She won’t stop saying that it’s ‘all his fault’.”

Orion tried for an uncomfortable chuckle. “She didn’t mean that.”

Meissa frowned. “Ri, what did Father do?”

Harry imagined that Orion couldn’t come up with a sensitive way to say ‘he date-raped and
blackmailed her into an unhappy marriage’, so instead Orion just forced a comforting smile and said:
“He didn’t do anything, Meissa. Nothing at all.”

Meissa narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but finally nodded her acceptance.

And then she turned to Harry.

“And who are you?”

Harry felt a momentary flutter of panic- he hadn’t yet had to introduce himself. Arcturus Black had
held up a hand when Harry tried for a stuttering introduction, Melania Black had already seemed to
know everything, and Lucretia had acted like Harry didn’t even exist.

“I, er-

“This is Harrison Peters,” Orion said, his smile growing more real. “He’s my friend, and he’s staying
with us this summer.”

Meissa didn’t look convinced. “You don’t have friends.”

You have plenty of friends in Hufflepuff. And Slytherin!”

“Well, he’s never brought any of them home,” Meissa said decisively.

“Ta da!” Orion said helpfully, gesturing towards Harry.

“Okay then,” Meissa shrugged. “I’m going to see if Mother wants tea.”

“Don’t be silly. Let the house elves do that.”

“She’s already killed three of those,” Meissa frowned. “She doesn’t want to see the servants when
she’s like this. You should go and see Rigel. He got excited when he heard you were back. He’s
crying now, though. He keeps doing that.” She gave Harry a very intense frown, like it was all his
fault. And then she wandered out of the room, humming in that distracted way that only a child
could.

“She’s an odd child,” Harry remarked after a beat, not sure anything else could quite sum up the
situation.

“She’s stuck here all year round with Mother,” Orion sighed. “I’m not sure there’s any way she could come out of it normal. And Lucretia’s no help. Apparently she’s barely even here.”

“She seems a little off.”

“We’re all a bit off,” Orion admitted. “It’s this house that does it.” He glared at his surroundings, and Orion looked so much like Sirius that Harry couldn’t breathe for a minute.

“The house?” Harry raised an eyebrow. Perhaps he was biased, but compared to the future ruins, this house seemed remarkably homely and luxurious.

“In our own way,” Orion said, “I think we were all intensely lonely children. This place brings out the worst in us.”

“Meissa still is a child,” Harry pointed out.

“Perhaps,” Orion said, and he looked suddenly very old and very sad. Harry wondered if this was the ‘worst’ that he had just spoken of. Suddenly he perked up, and he was back to his eager self.

“Come on then! I haven’t seen Rigel in ages.”

Orion let Harry drop his luggage off in a spare room, and then led Harry to the topmost landing, where the sound of crying got louder. Harry was fairly sure one of these rooms would become Sirius’ room in the future, but for now it belonged to the youngest Black. The door bore a sign that read ‘MUGGLES KEEP OUT’ and showed animated figures: little wizards firing spell after green spell at helpless stick men, who all died horrifically.

“They’re just bedtime stories,” Orion said defensively.

He pushed open the door (the wailing got almost intolerably deafening) and motioned for Harry to follow. The room within was predictably huge: tall ceilings and high walls covered with murals of night skies that actually moved and glistened like real stars. The vastness of the room seemed even bigger against the tiny bed in the centre, which was engulfed by some kind of shimmering golden forcefield.

“What’s that?” Harry whispered, frowning at the globe.

“It’s a stabiliser,” Orion murmured, but didn’t appear to be paying much attention. His eyes were on his brother.

And so were Rigel’s.

The little boy had noticed them by now and his crying had stopped abruptly; his eyes were wide and disbelieving as he gazed at his brother.

“Orion!” he squealed, and jumped out of bed. Orion knelt, and his brother threw himself into his arms. They hugged tightly, and Harry thought his heart might have melted a little.

“You didn’t cut your hair!” Rigel declared delightedly, tugging on a lock of Orion’s hair and giggling.

“You know that,” Orion said in a gentle voice. “It was still long at Christmas, remember?”

“I don’t remember Christmas,” Rigel said distractedly.
“Well, that’s okay,” Orion said, fake smile firmly in place. “We’ll just have to remind you, won’t we? Starting with the presents I brought you from school! But first…”

Rigel screeched cheerfully as Orion attacked him with tickles, the pair falling onto the bed. Harry noticed that Orion was careful to protect Rigel’s head, keeping it safe against his chest despite the ‘violence’ of their play. When Rigel was out of breath (and it happened quicker than Harry had expected), Orion released his victim, and tucked Rigel against the cushions.

“So what have you done whilst I’ve been away, huh?”

“Lots of tests,” Rigel replied, his nose wrinkling in distaste. “I had to wait a bit ‘cause I had too much magic in me. Mei taught me a new card game, and ‘Cretia got a halfblood boyfriend so Mother cursed her. They broke up though, so it was fine.”

“Lucretia got a boyfriend?”

Rigel nodded heavily. “He was too stupid for her.”

Harry thought that sounded like a direct quote from Lucretia, and he snorted softly. Rigel appeared to notice Harry for the first time.

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“Your face is weird,” Rigel said very abruptly, and Harry blanched.

“What are you-“

“I think he means your scars,” Orion explained quickly, placing a protective hand on Rigel’s shoulder.

“Oh.” Harry’s hand shot up to his cheek, and traced along the faint golden scars. He always forgot he had those. “Those. Yeah. A bad man gave them to me.”

“Was it a muggle?” Rigel asked, his mouth falling open in a little ‘o’ of shock.

“Hey,” Orion said chidingly. “We talked about this at Christmas. We don’t listen to Mother about muggles, okay?” And he looked up at Harry, hopeful for approval.

Harry gave a thumbs up.

“Why is the shiny man here?” Rigel asked.

“Because he’s my friend. And his name isn’t ‘shiny man’, it’s Harry. You can call him Uncle Harry, though.”

“He’s not calling me Uncle Harry.”

Orion pouted. “But it would be so cute.”

“It’s not happening. Hear me?” he addressed the youngest Black. “Not happening.”

Rigel smirked up at him, mischief glinting in his eyes. “Okay… Uncle Harry.”

(Harry’s protest of “this isn’t becoming a thing” was ignored.)

Orion offered his little brother his hand, and said, “High five!”

“…What’s that?”
“It’s this thing that Harry taught me about,” Orion explained eagerly. “Look. You hit the flat bit of your hand against mine. See?”

Orion guided Rigel’s hand up, and gently collided their hands together.

Rigel started laughing. “Again!” he demanded.

Orion sighed dramatically, and repeated his demonstration, to great acclaim.

Despite the unfortunate nickname (that would not be continuing, no matter what Orion said), Harry grinned fondly at the pair. This summer was going to be ace.

Wool’s Orphanage had a less joyous atmosphere, which explained why Tom could barely wait to get out.

He lingered for perhaps a week of the summer, making sure to remind everyone exactly who was in charge and establishing that- no, professor Dumbledore, I couldn’t possibly have been looking for my family over the summer. I was at the orphanage the whole time. Just ask them.

And then finally, on a Sunday, he collected up his wand and a lantern and apparated into Little Hangleton. He arrived late in the evening, when the sky was cast in darkness and the only people around seemed to be drunk or homeless. Tom raised the light and squinted around. He frowned at a heavily-bearded man hovering in a doorway, puffing on a cigarette.

“Where can I find the Gaunts?” Tom called out, strolling towards the fellow.

The man didn’t turn around, grunting “piss off” and taking another drag on his cigarette. Tom didn’t fancy trying to talk reason to the muggle, so he abruptly grabbed the man by the shoulder, pulling him around to face Tom. The man reared violently, but Tom had already looked straight into his eyes and delved into the mind beyond.

A street in night time, but the image felt older and more tired, blurred by the haze of alcohol.

Stumbling out of the darkness, a drunken man bellowed and chucked a bottle into the road- there was an accompanying spike of irritation- ‘Bloody Marvolo Gaunt, disturbing the peace,’ came the thought.

And there he was: Marvolo Gaunt, Tom’s namesake.

“BRING HER BACK!” the drunken man yelled. “I DON’T FUCKING CARE.”

A policeman came into view, shaking his head and clasping his hands behind him. Tom suspected he was holding a weapon. “Come on, Mr Gaunt. You got in a lot of trouble for that business with the out-of-towner before you went away- you don’t want to get in any more, do you?”

“Bring her back!” Marvolo demanded, looking wretched.

“Your daughter just moved away, remember?”

“No- she was stolen. By that filth,” Marvolo spat. “I’ll find him. I’ll kill him!”

And Marvolo withdrew a stick that Tom knew wouldn’t look intimidating to the muggles- indeed, the mind he was in felt nothing more than faint amusement. Tom almost wished that Marvolo Gaunt
would show those muggles the true power of wizardkind-

But no.

Instead Marvolo Gaunt kicked a bottle in the road and it flew towards a lamppost, shattering on impact.

“Damn you all,” he mumbled pathetically. Then he turned around and shuffled away, out of town, down a road that led towards the large house on the hill.

The policeman watched his retreat and shook his head disapprovingly. “He’s a wrong ‘un. And he’s led his whole family astray.”

The mind Tom was in - Julius Worchester, the name bubbled up - felt a strong agreement. “Quite the shame. Is that boy of his coming back any time soon?”

“He’s still locked up,” the policeman shook his head. “Bloody Morfin Gaunt. He was always a vicious lad. It’s no wonder he turned out like he did.”

“It’s a shame about that girl- Merope. She was a sweet thing. But to run off with the Riddle heir-“

“-Not sure how she managed that one. Face like a horse.”

An overwhelming sense of amusement and faint pity. The sounds of laughter and further talking, but Tom was already pulling away, out of Julius Worchester’s mind and back into his-

Tom was thrown back into his own mind, and it took only a split second before he had Julius Worchester frozen still, his eyes glazed over with fear.

“Tell me about Merope Gaunt,” he hissed, squeezing tightly on the man’s mind.

“She- she was Marvolo’s girl,” Worchester stuttered. “Ugly thing. Used to- to follow him around town like a drowned cat. She ran- ran off with the- the Riddle boy. He- he was infatuated.”

Riddle felt a deep disgust. Love- how awful.

“How long ago was this?”

“Round 18 years, I- I reckon.”

The timelines matched up then.

“She never came back,” Worchester said quickly, “if- if you were looking for her. I-I’m sorry if she stole something-“

“I should kill you,” Tom spat, because he had seen the impression of Merope’s face in the man’s mind, and he knew. She was his mother, almost certainly, and they had talked about her like she was filth.

Perhaps she was.

He readied himself to cast the killing blow, the words burning bright on his tongue, but somehow, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Harrison’s voice was a faint presence in his ear, and Tom snarled. Damnit. With a savage twist of his wand, he painfully and viciously shut the man’s mind down.

When he awoke, he would forever be left with the faint, nauseating sensation that he had forgotten something incredibly important. It would likely drive him mad.
And Tom left Julius Worchester’s body lying on the pavement, setting off on the very same road that Marvolo Gaunt had travelled down so many years ago.

Tom, of course, was significantly less drunk.

It didn’t take long to come across a small, dilapidated shack, a snake nailed brutally to the door. Tom made his way down the little path to the entrance and hissed softly at the dead serpent, flicking its dried-out head.

And then Tom knocked on the door, raising an eyebrow as the cheap wood splintered beneath his touch. He waited a second, muttered a quick “alohomora” and then pushed the door open.

A candle was alight inside of the shack and so it took Tom a moment to adjust, blinking in the harsh glow. As his vision cleared, his eyes swept slowly over the hovel- disgusting and covered in mouldy food, he noted faintly- and finally came to rest on a man. Or what he thought was a man- it’d might not even have been human, it was so overgrown with hair and dirt. Tom wondered how it could bear to live with itself.

The thing staggered to its feet, clutching a knife and a wand in his sweaty grip. So he was a wizard after all, Tom thought. Shame.

“YOU!” the wizard bellowed. “YOU!”

And he staggered slightly pathetically forwards, holding the knife aloft like it might actually do damage. Tom doubted he would even get close to stabbing him after so many bottles of Firewhiskey.

Ah well. Time to test his family relation.

“Stop,” Tom hissed.

The man stopped.

Damnit.

The sound of pots clattering from the table was the only thing that breached the silence between them. Tom wondered what the other wizard was thinking, or if he was even capable of speech in his inebriated state.

(Surely there was a bath somewhere in this shack?)

“You speak it?” The other man’s voice was hoarse from disuse, and spittle painted his lips. Tom contained a shudder.

“Obviously,” Tom replied, rolling his eyes slightly and moving further into his house. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of rot as the door swung shut behind him. “Where is Marvolo?”

“Dead,” said the wizard, sniffing slightly. (Merlin, how yellow were his teeth?) “Died years ago, didn’ he? Everyone knows that.”

“I haven’t been in town,” Tom said with faintly amusement.

“No,” the wizard agreed and narrowed his eyes in thought- it obviously took a lot of effort. He fell silent, still glowering at Tom like he was trying to remember something.
“Who are you then?” Was this some kind of distant cousin of his? Uncle?

“I’m Morfin, ain’t I?”

“Marvolo’s son?” Tom asked, remembering the talks of vandalism and ‘children gone wrong’.

“Yeah.” Morfin pushed the hair out of his face, and Tom noticed a glinting ring on his finger. So there was something of value in this house, after all. Perhaps it was a family heirloom of some kind? It looked like it held a crest.

“Is there something on my face?” Tom asked with faint amusement, noticing the way that the man kept glancing at somewhere around his forehead.

“I thought you was that Muggle,” Morfin whispered. “You look mighty like him.”

“Riddle?”

“Yeah,” Morfin nodded. “That Muggle what my sister took a fancy to, that Muggle what lives in the big house over the way.” And suddenly Morfin spat unexpectedly upon the floor between them. “You look right like him. But he’s older now, in ’e? He’s older’n you, now I think on it... An’ he wears better clothes. All fancy-like.”

“But you can’t know that for sure,” Tom pressed. Perhaps this dirty little man knew what had happened to his parents. “He could be dead.”

Morfin looked slightly dazed and swayed a little, shaking his head vehemently. “No. He came back.”

Tom’s heart stopped. “Riddle came back?”

“Yeah. He left her and crawled back to Mummy and Daddy- and serve her right, marrying filth!” said Morfin, spitting on the floor again. “Robbed us, mind, before she ran off! Where’s the locket, eh, where’s Slytherin’s locket?” And he let out a sound that might have been a sob.

Tom did not answer, his mind moving quickly. So it had just been his mother that died poor in London; his father had crawled back to his muggle family. Perhaps he left when he had found that Merope was pregnant, or when he found that she was a witch. But he left his wife and his child to die, poor and miserable in the gutter... Tom felt a cold stab of rage in his stomach.

Morfin was working himself into a state again; brandishing his knife and shouting, “Dishonored us, she did, that little slut!...”

And he kept going on and on, but with that insult to his mother, Tom snapped. As Morfin glanced away, Tom fired a vicious stunning spell, and Morfin went crashing to the ground, his head glancing off the edge of a table. Tom contemplating ending his pathetic little life- it would be so simple to simply cut his throat, practically a mercy-killing, but no.

Perhaps Morfin Gaunt would be useful.

Tom paused, crouching to pick up a dusty photo from the floor, the glass in the frame smashed. He brushed away the debris and smoothed out the photo- some kind of Gaunt family portrait, he gathered.

He watched the little figures move, taking note of their little idiosyncrasies and traits. Marvolo Gaunt seemed like the kind of self-important imbecile that thought he was entitled to things but couldn’t explain exactly why. Morfin Gaunt in his youth looked similar to the tramp on the floor in the
present, if a little more clean-shaven.

And there was his mother. She was remarkably ugly, Tom realised- nothing like a ‘pureblood lady’, nothing like Walburga or even Druella. Merope’s cheeks were sunken, her hair was dirty, and she was so thin that the child’s dress she was wearing swallowed up her frame, making her look even more vulnerable.

Even more pathetic.

And no, Tom did not have her eyes after all.

He dropped the photo dispassionately, grinding it into the glass shards with the heel of his shoe. And then Tom moved on once more, leaving another body in his wake. He had a father to find.

The Riddles were having dinner when Tom knocked on their door. He waited for a second, enough to realise that no one would answer him, and then he whispered a spell, turned the handle and strolled in. He glided through the decadence of Riddle Manor, sneering at the game heads on the walls. Tasteless. It wasn’t difficult to find his family: he just followed the scent of perfectly cooked chicken and the faint sound of conversation.

And then Tom threw open the doors to the dining room, sweeping into the room, taking quick notice of three people around a table.

The nearest, an old, domineering man, rose to his feet. “Now see here, boy, what do you-“

With a flick of Tom’s wand, the curtains were on fire. The second person, an elderly woman, screamed shrilly, leapt out of her chair and scurried away from the burning curtains.

“Who are you?” the old man said, quieter this time, watchful of the towering flames.

“Tom Riddle.” He gave a cordial nod to his relatives. “I thought I’d make this a family reunion.”

They stared at him in stunned silence. Finally, the old woman- his grandmother- turned to the last place at the table and said with horror: “Tom, what have you done?”

Ah yes.

Tom Riddle Sr. looked shocked, his face wan and pale. He looked so much like his son that it would have been impossible to deny their relation, and Tom finally accepted his heritage. Abandoned offspring of a degenerate pureblood family and a muggle. He’d almost preferred not knowing at all.

Tom Sr. probably shared his opinion. He could barely speak. “I- I-“

“You told me that you left nothing behind. You said she lost the child,” his grandmother hissed, and none of them could keep their eyes off of Tom. He felt rather like a ghost back to haunt them.

“I- she-” Tom Sr. stuttered. “She bewitched me! I- I had to get away. You don’t understand-”

“Why are you here, boy?” his grandfather bristled, glaring protectively at Tom. “And how did you do that nonsense with the curtains- I won’t stand for circus tricks in my house-“

“Magic,” Tom said, rolling his eyes and sealing the old man’s mouth shut. His grandfather’s eyes widened, and he gestured angrily. Tom ignored him.
“What are you here for?” his grandmother tried for a more diplomatic approach. “If you want money, I’m sure we could provide something.”

“I don’t want your money,” Tom sneered, twirling his wand around his fingers. “I just wanted to see who birthed me. I confess myself… disappointed. I rather thought I might become part of the family.”

“You’re not a part of anything,” Tom Sr. said abruptly, having found his confidence. “I want you gone.”

The room flashed dark suddenly; the only light came from Tom’s lantern, eerily illuminating his twisted snarl. “Don’t tell me what I can or can’t do,” came his hiss in the darkness.

“We’re sorry!” his grandmother yelled out, and when the lights came back on, she had her arms wrapped tightly around her son. “Please don’t hurt us.”

“No,” Tom Sr. objected, pulling out of her embrace. “I won’t be pushed around by my own son. Listen here, boy, I didn’t want your mother and I certainly don’t want you. And you can tell her that, wherever she is.”

He came very close to Tom, and for a moment Tom could almost respect him.

“She’s dead.”

“Good.” And then Tom Sr.’s face went very dark, his eyes glazing over in memory. “You’re both freaks.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “You don’t want me?”

“No.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Tom shrugged, and then a streak of green light hit his father in the chest. He slumped to the ground, dead.

His grandmother let out a screech and rushed to her son’s side, shaking his shoulder desperately. She sobbed again as his head flopped lifelessly onto her hand.

“No,” she crooned softly, patting his cheek. “Tom, sweetheart, wake up.”

“He’s dead,” Tom said carelessly.

His grandfather, in the meanwhile, had crept to his feet and now tried to lunge at Tom. Tom rolled his eyes and flicked his wand slightly, sending his grandfather crashing into a wall. Time to wrap things up.

He glanced between them: his wretched grandmother and his fallen grandfather, with a second killing curse on his tongue-

But then, for some reason, he was reminded of Harrison. Perhaps because Harrison loved his own parents so very dearly. It was a rather foreign concept for Tom, especially within Slytherin. But Harrison would do almost anything to get his family back; he’d said as much.

And suddenly Tom couldn’t bring himself to wipe out his last remaining kin.

He grimaced and pulled his grandmother to her feet, staring into her eyes. He erased the memory of Tom’s visit and implanted one of her son telling them that he was going to confront that Morfin
Gaunt, get him to stop spreading rumours and belittling their name. He briefly revived his grandfather and did the same.

And then Tom set his father’s body on fire, and vanished the ashes.

What? He’d never claimed to be sentimental.

On his way back to the village, he made a brief stop to the Gaunt shack again, where he retrieved the photo he’d seen, and slid the ring from Morfin’s finger, pocketing it.

The short memory alteration was easy, and Morfin’s drug- addled brain was like putty. Tom resisted the urge to set the shack on fire as he closed the door behind him.

It would have perhaps been a little overdramatic, he decided, and disapparated.

Late July, and Harry had perhaps not thought through taking Orion into muggle London. Although he had remembered to put a glamour over himself (realising that golden scars weren’t normal in the muggle world), so perhaps Harry could count that as a personal achievement.

Orion had been fairly terrified as they stepped out of the doors of Grimmauld Place and set off towards the centre of muggle London, and clutched Harry’s arm every time a bus rushed past. To his credit though, Orion had soon grown more comfortable, and got to a point where he was merely eyeing the nearby muggles with suspicion.

It had not taken long for the questions to begin.

“I don’t understand,” Orion complained, squinting at a sign reading ‘GET YOUR OWN BACK: WAR TIME SAVINGS’. “Why do they have to do all this saving and rationing?”

Harry glanced around the street nervously, offering a smile to a nearby women, who clutched her newspaper tightly and scowled at the pair. Fortunately, the street was quite busy, so they weren’t easily overheard. Harry had already managed to talk Orion into wearing a shirt and trouser combo and to leave the robe at Grimmauld Place- he’d rather not be arrested for suspicious activity over a propaganda sign, of all things.

“Well, muggles don’t have instant transportation,” Harry explained under his breath.

“They don’t?!” Orion asked, much louder.

Harry shushed him. “No, they don’t. So they have to use boats to get things like food and fabric into the country. But the Germans have boats too,” Harry shrugged. “They attack the food supply, meaning the muggles don’t always have a lot of food.”

“Do the Germans use bows and arrows?” Orion asked curiously. “I’ve always wanted to see that.”

“No,” Harry said, imagining World War Two with horses and swords. “The muggles have upgraded since then. They have guns now.”

“What’s a ‘gun’?”
“Err…” Harry scanned the area. Luckily (sort of), a soldier was standing on the corner of the street, looking utterly bored. “That’s a gun,” Harry said, pointing at the machinery resting under the man’s arm.

“What does it do?”

“It fires metal pellets into people fast enough to kill them.”

Orion’s eyes widened. “Muggles are vicious,” and he shuffled away from a little girl playing piggy-in-the-middle alone. “This is what I was talking about before. They’re dangerous.”

“It does the same thing as a propulsion spell,” Harry said. “Both worlds are fighting a war, Orion. The muggles are just fighting differently. Machines instead of magic.”

“It is rather ingenious,” Orion admitted. “Although I could definitely improve it with runes.” And he glanced towards the soldier like he was moments away from snatching the gun and carting it back to his bedroom.

Harry pulled Orion down a side street abruptly, away from the tempting rifle. “Nope- hands off. We’re not getting arrested today.”

Orion pouted, but his attention was quickly caught by a flower stall, adorned with all kind of blossoms and foliage: bright yellow flowers that Harry thought looked like overgrown daisies, and the flowers that Uncle Vernon brought home from work sometimes.

“They’re so pretty!” Orion exclaimed. “I didn’t know muggles had flowers.”

Harry snorted. “Of course they do.”

“All the pictures just show them farming dirt.”

“That’s because you appear to have been looking at cave drawings,” Harry said, smirking at the idea of pureblood elites pouring over early drawing and murmuring about how they really must look out for those sabre tooth tigers.

Orion shrugged, apparently delighted with his discovery nonetheless. Hr marched towards the flower vendor with determination, calling out “I’m going to talk to her!”

“Oh my god,” Harry mumbled, watching Orion sweep into a low bow and declare to the perplexed vendor: “Your finest flowers please, my good woman!”

The vendor, a young lady with a tell-tale baby bump, blinked. “You off your rocker?”

“Oh my god,” Harry mumbled, watching Orion sweep into a low bow and declare to the perplexed vendor: “Your finest flowers please, my good woman!”

The vendor, a young lady with a tell-tale baby bump, blinked. “You off your rocker?”

“What did she say?” Orion asked, turning back to Harry. He had faint panic in his eyes- apparently this wasn’t going as planned.

“She asked if you were insane,” Harry said, joining them at the stall and offering the vendor an apologetic look. “Not unjustified, I’ll admit.”

“I just want some flowers,” Orion insisted. “Tell her I want flowers.”

“Tell her yourself. She’s not deaf.”

The vendor crossed her arms. “Bloody right I’m not. You gonna get something or what?”

“I’ll just have some of these,” Orion gestured widely across the wares.
The vendor rolled her eyes, but began gathering some random flowers. “I’ll have some of these’ she says,” she muttered, and finally presented Orion with a handful. “Spose it’s too much to expect you to have money?”

Orion scrambled in his pockets, cowed by the flower seller. Harry found it guiltily hilarious. “This should cover it,” Orion said quickly, presenting her with a golden galleon.

Harry covered his face in embarrassment, and wondered if 1940s pavements could swallow people up.

“What the hell is this?”

“It’s… it’s a galleon,” Orion said uncertainly. “I know it might be too much-“

“What am I supposed to do with a googlian?”

“No, it’s a galleon-“

“I don’t care what it’s called-“

“It’s gold,” Harry said, deciding to fix the situation. “Take it to the pawn shop- you’ll get at least ten times what these flowers are worth for it.”

The vendor eyed them suspiciously, but took the galleon. “You foreign or something?”

“Nope,” Harry said grimly. “Just as British as you are.”

“Lucky I don’t think Hitler would send spies who don’t know how money works,” the vendor grumbled. “I could be going straight to the Home Guard.”

“Well, we’re very grateful that you’re not. So, er, thanks,” Harry said quickly, and pulled Orion away. He wasn’t sure where he was going, just… away, away from the mortification.

“Are all muggle women that scary?” Orion asked, hurrying after Harry.

“She was nothing compared to your mother,” Harry said darkly, and Orion made a faint sound of agreement. Suddenly, the sound of Orion’s footsteps halted.

Harry turned around to see what had caught his attention. “Why are you stoppi-?”

Ah.

Orion was staring in horror at the ruins of a house. It could barely even be called a house anymore: reduced to little more than a pile of debris. It was odd: you could still see things like sets of shelves, plates, even cuddly toys hidden in the heap, but it wasn’t a home anymore.

The rest of London walked past the house like it wasn’t even there. A mother carefully guided her son around a pool of broken glass, and a man used his briefcase to push a broken tree branch out of his way. They didn’t see the damage.

“What happened?” Orion breathed, wide-eyed.

“Bombs.”

“What’s a bomb?”
Harry frowned. How to explain? “It’s sort of like a reducto contained in this big metal case. And when the muggles drop it from the sky, it explodes.”

“That’s horrible.”

“That’s war.”

“Will they bomb your village?” Orion asked, looking awfully concerned.

“I don’t reckon they’d bother. There wasn’t much left after Grindelwald,” Harry shrugged, remembering the smouldering remains of Bideford. He’d chosen a fairly miserable backstory.

“I suppose wizards and muggles can be just as bad as each other,” Orion said slowly, like he was coming to a world-changing realisation.

“That’s exactly my point!” Harry said excitedly. “We’re all awful! We just express it in different ways- doesn’t matter if it’s magic or machines. We all just want to kill each other in the end.”

Orion frowned up at the rubble, and Harry coughed. “I mean, some of us do. Actually, most of us are… er, nice, probably-” he looked around hopefully. “Look!” Harry pointed towards a nearby ‘OXFORD CIRCUS’ sign. “We can go on the tube!”

“We can… stand on a… pipe?” Orion said hesitantly, distracted from the debris.

“The tube is like an underground train system. Gets you around the city.”

“Like a floo network?”

“Kind of. Think of it like the Hogwarts train, but tightly packed, practically everyone stands, and a new one leaves around every three minutes.”

“Wow,” Orion said strongly, the sparks of excitement in his eyes reigniting. “Yeah. Let’s do that.”

After apparating into Gringotts and changing their money for muggle currency (Harry had learnt from the flower incident, although he still had a hard time understanding how shillings worked), they took the steps down into the Oxford Circus station.

Harry struggled with the ‘state of the art’ ticket machine, and almost got out his wand in frustration. Orion managed to calm him down. Harry was still fuming when they showed their tickets to the inspector, and Orion called out a cheery “he’s showing me the muggle floo network!” Needless to say, they were treated with suspicion.

Orion got very excited about the escalator, and Harry got very confused about why the steps were wood.

“But it’s wood!” he complained. “Why would they use wood?”

“Well, what else would they use?” Orion asked. “Bricks?”

Harry trailed into mumbles about ‘metal’ and ‘stupid out-dated station’.

The actual platform was brimming with men in army, navy or air force uniforms, and Harry felt very aware of their plain clothes. He awkwardly shuffled behind a gaggle of teenage girls, escaping the
gaze of a disapproving soldier across the tracks.

The teenage girls noticed.

“Hullo,” a particularly dolled-up girl said, turning around and waving at the pair of them. “Hiding from the uniforms?”

“No,” Harry said strongly. “…Maybe.”

“They are a bit intimidating,” she sighed longingly.

“I don’t them intimidating,” another girl said, rolling her eyes.

“That’s ‘cause you don’t have a heart, Daria.”

“Just because you’re a khaki-wacky-“

“Don’t you dare-“

“You’re both fat-heads,” the last girl said grumpily, checking through her purse. “Hitler will be able to hear you all the way from Germany.”

The first girl rolled her eyes, but she smiled brightly at Harry, red lipstick gleaming. “I’m Lucy. This is Daria, and this is Jo,” she said, pointing to the first and second girl in turn.

“Harry.”

“Orion Black, of the ancient and noble house of Black,” Orion said, his smile even wider than Lucy’s.

“Are you plummy or something?” Jo asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Don’t be rude to the nice boys,” Lucy said, nudging her friend pointedly. “We might see them again. Don’t mind Jo,” she told the boys. “She’s just being bad-tempered.”

“I had to sleep down here last night,” Jo snarled, snapping her purse shut. “It was bloody freezing and I couldn’t wash my face until lunchtime. So excuse me for not being Miss Happy-go-lucky.”

“You had to sleep down here?” Orion asked sweetly. “It doesn’t look like it! I never could have told.” Jo turned bright red. “Well… I… thank you.”

Harry thought positively that Orion was being remarkably charming and normal.

“Why did you have to sleep down here though?” Orion wondered out-loud. “Do you not have a house?”

Harry had spoken too soon. “No, Orion,” he said quietly. “They were hiding from the bombs. Remember?”

“You hid from the bombs down here?” Orion looked even more amazed.

“I was out when the air raid sirens went off- stupid, I know. This was the closest shelter,” Jo said, still blushing.

“It wasn’t stupid,” Lucy said comfortingly. “You can never tell with these things.” She turned her
attention back to Harry and Orion. “So how long until you two ship out? Or were you not caught by conscription?”

“We’re not old enough,” Harry said, stamping on Orion’s foot before he could ask anything weird about conscription.

“Really?” Lucy said suggestively, stepping closer. “You look older.”

A train pulled up to the opposite platform, and a wave of people spilled out, surging towards the exit.

“This place is so cool,” Orion said enthusiastically. “Everything’s so non-magical!”

Harry groaned, but Lucy laughed obligingly.

“So is this your first time in London?” Lucy asked, twisting a lock of hair around her finger.

“No, I live here,” Orion said earnestly.

Lucy laughed again, and Harry assumed that she took it for sarcasm. Thank god for British cynicism.

“The tube isn’t all fun though,” Daria said darkly. “Do you remember Balham?”

“What happened?” Orion asked curiously.

“Three years ago, a bomb exploded over a platform. Bus crashed into the crater during blackout, water and gas flooded the tunnels underneath. Over sixty people dead, trapped underground. The survivors had to swim out.”

“Woah,” Orion whispered, gawking around him like he expected black water to come gushing from the tunnels at any minute.

“And then down at Bethnal Green, nearly 200 crushed trying to get into the station. And there was that bomb at Bank—“

“Don’t scare them, Daria,” Jo said firmly, gaining back her confidence. “They’re nice.” And she beamed at Orion.

“Just telling the truth,” Daria said, a little superiorly. “We should know what’s going on.”

“I don’t think a tube station is really the place to talk about that, though,” Lucy pointed out. “It’s not very appropriate.”

“You’re not very appropriate,” Daria muttered.

“And some people appreciate that,” Lucy said, winking at the boys.

Harry felt an uncomfortable heat creeping up from his collar. And like an answer to his prayers, the train pulled up to the platform.

“Let’s get on the train!” Orion said excitedly, clutching Harry’s arm.

“Are you going?” Jo asked, sounding slightly disappointed.

“Yeah, sorry. I’ve got to show Orion around,” Harry said, shuffling back. “Are you coming on the train?”
“Nah,” Lucy shrugged, pouting a little now that she saw them leaving. “I’m just here to look at the servicemen. Dashing, aren’t they?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Harry said, pointedly not noticed how well-muscled the soldiers’ shoulders were.

Suddenly, Jo dashed forward and pressed a slip of paper into Orion’s hand. “My number,” she said quickly. “You should call.”

“Come on,” Harry said, dragging Orion into the carriage as the doors slid shut. Orion waved goodbye to the girls from the window as the train jolted into motion, and began rushing down the tracks. Harry awkwardly shuffled past a serviceman and dropped into a seat (the upholstery a rather hideous black and orange pattern). Orion took the seat next to him.

“So you have a fan then,” Harry said teasingly, nudging his friend.

“She gave me her number,” Orion frowned. “Her number of what?”

“It’s so you can call her.”

“Like a floo call? But she didn’t give me her address-“

“No, a phone call.”

“…What’s a phone?”

“It’s, er, it’s a machine. You talk into this receiver thing, and then person on the other end of this long line can hear you. They can be really far away- like another country, sometimes.”

“Muggles are quite inventive, aren’t they?” Orion said thoughtfully, glancing around the carriage.

“They don’t have magic, so they kind of have to be. Are you going to call her then? She was very into you.”

“Oh no,” Orion said firmly. “Mother would never dream of letting me marry a muggleborns, never mind a muggle. Besides, my heart belongs to Walburga at the moment.”

“She’s getting married this summer- you should probably move on.”

“I know,” Orion admitted, and sighed. “But she’s wonderful, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she’s, er, great. Speaking of the wedding- are we invited? I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“I am,” Orion said uncomfortable. “Your… well, you see, your, er- your blood status-“

“It’s fine,” Harry rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry. I know they wouldn’t want a filthy halfblood wandering around. It is actually a bit of a relief- I’d probably use the wrong cutlery.”

Orion frowned in disbelief. “How could you use the wrong cutlery? It was the topic of my first ever day out with my father.”

“That’s not normal,” Harry said very gently.

“Huh.”

“So what do you think of muggles then? They don’t even breathe fire,” Harry grinned.
“I think they’re nice. They seem like… normal people. Doing things without magic.”

“They are,” Harry smiled, knocking his shoulder against Orion’s. “Some of them are arseholes, but so are some wizards. Take Avery, for example. Proper git with magic, but he’d still be a git without it.”

Orion sniggered. “You shouldn’t say that. Avery’s family went through a difficult time.”

“So did mine,” Harry said darkly. “Doesn’t give you license to discriminate.”

“I know,” Orion agreed.

And they beamed at each other. Harry thought there might be hope for the wizarding world, after all.

Of course, not everything could go so smashingly. Awaiting them at home, along with announcements of an unfortunate engagement, was the news that Apus Black, Walburga’s fiance, was dead.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while! Oops. Hope this wasn't awful xx

Let’s talk about this; Tom Riddle Sr is presented in a reasonably negative format because this is Tom’s POV. But Tom Sr. is a victim of rape. Love potions and the Imperius Curse in this context are tools of rape and in my humble opinion, Tom Sr. is completely justified in ‘abandoning’ his rapist, and all reactions that followed.
But our Tom is also pretty justified in feeling abandoned (although not the murder) and pissed off.
Huh. It's a complex moral situation.
To cheer you up: I call Orion ‘Oreo’ in my notes.
Harry Becomes Everyone's Therapist

Chapter Summary

A dreadful announcement causes ripples, and let's all admit that Tom Riddle would be hot with a cigarette (but not the lung cancer).

Chapter Notes

EYYYY, bet you didn't expect such a quick update from me.

LAST TIME: Harry began his stay at 12 Grimmauld Place, 1940's edition, and met the Black family. Dramatic Lucretia, serious Meissa, adorable Rigel, and the unstable and distant Melania, and we were reminded of the unpleasant history between Arcturus Black and Melania, where Melania was given a love potion during her debut ball and knocked up by Arcturus, and then forced into marriage. We then went to Tom, who took a fun trip to Little Hangleton, where he met Morfin and the Riddles. He murdered his father, but spared his grandparents, remembering Harry's love for his family. He then framed Morfin for the murder, and stole the ring and a photo of his family. Later in the summer, Harry and Orion took a trip to London, where Orion acted generally suspicious, and they met a group of muggle girls in the Underground. Orion revised his opinion on muggles, and Harry felt hopeful. We concluded with the announcement of Apus Black's death.

I'm gonna admit I made a mistake last chapter, and corrected it on one site pretty quickly, but not the other. I'll clear it up: Arcturus Black is Orion's father. Apus Black is Walburga's fiance. And Apus Black is the one who died :) Orion's father is still sadly alive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Walburga’s fiancé is dead,” Arcturus Black told them all, sat very sternly in his armchair.

There was a tangible tension in the room as the Black family children exchanged looks. Even Lucretia was subdued, and Harry saw her slip her hand into Orion’s. Melania Black stood in the corner, her back straight as she crackled with fury. The Black matriarch in the presence of her husband was a very different being; the tiredness seemed to melt away, replaced by pure rage.

“How did he die?” Lucretia asked.

“In a duel with a muggleborn,” Melania said stiffly, sneering. “They encountered one another on Apus’ way to England. They argued over Grindelwald's occupation of Europe, and then they duelled. I am told Apus’ end was… unpleasant.”

Orion drew his hand away from his sister and sat up, looking very concerned. “How’s Walburga?”

“She is behaving like a true lady of the noble Black house,” Arcturus announced with gravitas.
“She’s devastated,” Melania said shortly, moving to the window and shooting a disgusted look towards her husband.

“But what’s happening with the wedding?” Meissa asked, fiddling with her skirts. “Who will Walburga marry now?”

“Orion,” Arcturus said.

Orion glanced up. “Yes?”

Arcturus smiled a little at the misunderstanding, a minuscule crack of emotion. “No: you. She will marry you.”

Orion’s face drained of all colour. “B-but-“

“It makes perfect sense. Your engagement with Dorea fell through-“

“Due to that Potter boy,” Melania muttered, and Harry jumped a little.

“-And now so has Walburga’s. The two of you will make a beneficial pairing. Both Pollux and Apus are dead, and therefore Walburga’s position in the family is uncertain without an engagement. It’s what’s best for the both of you.”

Harry wanted to speak up, not least because Orion looked like he was going to throw up, but Harry was also starting to doubt that Arcturus Black had any humanity. A ‘beneficial pairing’? This was his son!

“Of course,” Arcturus continued, “we don’t expect you to marry this summer. After you graduate Hogwarts, we can begin to discuss options and dates.”

“P-please,” Orion stuttered. “There must be other options-“

“The decision has been made.”

"But you can still change it-"

"I could. But you wouldn't let down your family, would you?” Arcturus asked pointedly.

“No,” Orion said quietly, shrinking. “Never.”

“Good. I’ll send word to Irma then, and confirm the engagement.”

Orion stumbled to his feet. “I- I’m sorry. I need to go.”

He ran out of the room.

“You’re both disgusting,” Lucretia hissed, rising from the sofa. “It isn’t enough to have one child miserable, you just have to keep going. Well, you’re not talking me into anything. I’m never marrying!”

And she stormed out of the room too. The sound of the door slamming behind her echoed down the corridor, faintly muffled.

Arcturus Black shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You give that girl too much freedom, Melania.”
“I know all too well what it’s like to be forced into marriage, dear. I can understand her anger.” Melania gritted her teeth and stared forward stubbornly, a storm brimming in her eyes.

“It’s a fact of life. She must accept it.”

Melania snorted bitterly. “Like you ‘accepted’ my refusal to dance that night?”

“I just wanted a chance, dear-“

“And what a chance you took.”

Arcturus scoffed. “Will you ever get over that-?”

“Get over it!” she screeched. “You’ve ruined me, Arcturus Black! I wish you were dead! I wish you were all dead!” And she sank to her knees, sobbing: “I didn’t want this. I don’t want any of you.”

Harry was seized by the sudden urge to shake her, to point her towards her son and tell her to look, to see how history was repeating itself… but he didn’t. Melania Black would be of no use to anyone, not like this.

And so Harry took Meissa— who was trembling slightly— and led the two of them out of the room, ignored by the still-arguing couple.

“She doesn’t want us,” Meissa said very dully. “Well, I don’t want her.”

“She’s your mother,” Harry said gently.

“No, she isn’t.”

Harry tightened his hold on her hand, but wasn’t sure what to say to this little girl who seemed both older and younger than him.

“Why don’t you go to your room, hm?” he suggested lightly. “Read a book or something.”

“Because that’s going to solve everything.” Meissa gave him a very dirty look, and retrieved her hand. “You should help Orion,” she said as she left, and Harry heard the unspoken ‘because you can’t help me’.

It was a good idea, nonetheless.

And so Harry hiked up the stairs to Orion’s room, where he heard muted sounds coming from behind the door.

“Er, Orion?” Harry called out, rapping his knuckle on the door. “Are you okay? Can I come in?”

Harry took the faint sob as an acquiescence, and pushed his way into Orion’s bedroom. He quickly located his friend, shaking and curled up in the corner of the room under the thrall of some kind of panic attack. Harry swore under his breath, and rushed to comfort Orion, sliding into the space beside him.

“Er…”

Harry’s hand hovered awkwardly above his friend’s shoulders. Did he hug him or give him space? A hug might be restrictive but-
Orion made the choice for him, curling into Harry’s side until he was nestled beneath his arm. Harry froze, suddenly very aware of where all his limbs were. Did he rest his arm on Orion’s shoulder, or hold it in the air? But Orion didn’t seem to care what Harry did, and his breathing slowed as he relaxed into the human touch.

It took a little while for Orion for calm down, and when he finally drew away to sit unsupported, his face still looked utterly miserable, his eyes red and puffy.

The fire flickered low and dull, but with a violent flick of Orion’s wand, the flames surged up until they were crackling merrily. It felt rather like a paradox.

“So, er,” Harry said, searching for a distraction. “How come we can do magic?”

“What do you mean?” Orion asked hoarsely, his voice not dissimilar to crackling paper. “We’re wizards.”

“No, I know that: but I mean out of school? Doesn’t the Trace pick it up?”

“What’s a Trace?”

Harry blinked in surprise. “It’s, er, a tool that the Ministry might use to find out when underage wizards do magic.”

Orion snorted grimly. “That sounds ridiculous. Besides, we’re in a war. They have better things to do.”

So the Trace was a thing of the future. Harry did his best to not outwardly react to this information, despite the odd sensation of freedom that it gave him. He could go outside and transform a lamp post into an elephant, and the Ministry would never know.

The conversation petered out and the silence returned, Orion glowering darkly at the merry fire. As the events of the evening turned over in Harry’s mind, he found several questions forming.

He wasn’t sure how to best phrase them.

“So, er…” he began, his voice unnaturally low in the stifling room. “I get that it’s not… er… fun, to be forced into marrying someone. But, I mean… you love Walburga. Why are you so upset?”

“I feel guilty,” Orion admitted wretchedly, wrapping his arms around his legs.

“Because you’re marrying Walburga?”

Harry had honestly thought that Orion might be happy about it.

“No, because she has to marry me.” Orion said, wincing like he was drawing a knife from a wound.

”...I don't see the difference."

“Look, I might love her, but I know she doesn’t feel the same- and honestly I didn’t mind,” Orion added quickly, shakily. ”I just want her to be happy. I want her to be happy and in love with Druella, so they can laugh, and shop, and gossip about Atticus- but she can't do that if she’s married to me.”

“At least she knows you. You're friends.”

“But that’s the problem, don’t you see?” Orion said desperately, almost angrily. “I told her once, you know. That I loved her. She laughed, and said that I’m like a brother to her. That it would be like
kissing Cygnus.”

Orion got to his feet, pacing irrationally.

“At least with Apus, she could start over, with at least the possibility of loving him- but now she’s stuck with me, and we’ll have to have children, and she’ll never get a chance.” And he let out a raw kind of sob, covering his face with shaking hands. “I’m a prison.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t see it like that-“

“She wanted to go abroad. And now she’ll have to see Druella every day, knowing they can never be together. I’ve killed her.”

“Surely they can still be, y’know, together? I mean, you wouldn’t mind-“

“Walburga would never do that,” Orion said furiously. “She’s loyal. She wouldn’t. And… and I don’t want her to. I don’t think I could live with it, knowing that my wife was sleeping with another woman. I want a marriage with someone who loves me. Not an empty contract.” He crumpled to the floor, the hopelessness creeping back over his features. “We’re going to end up resenting each other,” Orion whispered faintly. “I’m going to turn into my parents.”

“You won’t,” Harry assured his friend. “You won’t.”

But as they sat in silence, in mourning, the piercing loathing of Arcturus and Melania Black echoing through the house.

From what Orion had told him, Number 63 Ruesday Avenue was almost identical to Grimmauld Place, except located in Manchester. For a family that so loathed muggles, the Blacks had an awful habit of building houses in muggle populated areas. It was, however, where Walburga lived, and so Harry took a train and hiked across Manchester in order to find Number 63. It wasn't like Orion was going to do it- he'd said he felt too awful to face Walburga so soon.

As Harry knocked on the rather intimidating door, he wondered if he hadn’t perhaps made yet another hasty mistake. He was good at those.

The door creaked open, seemingly no one on the other side. Harry took a few steps back, and peered into the hallway beyond. Perhaps they were hiding?

“Yes? Is you wanting something?”

Harry glanced down, and found a house-elf peering up at him, well-kept but downtrodden behind the eyes.

“Oh, er.” Harry had never quite gotten used to house elves, not even after spending a summer with Kreacher. Perhaps because Kreacher was the least accommodating house-elf to have ever been born (which Hermione had found delightful, despite the racial slurs). “I’m here to see Walburga?”

“You is having a name?”

“Harrison Peters.”

The house-elf bent its head deferentially. “Ceely will inform the mistress, sir. You is coming inside for a minute?”

“Sure,” Harry agreed, and stepped into the hallway, stepping around the troll-leg umbrella stand.
Apparently they were quite the fashionable statement.

“You is waiting here now,” Ceely told him authoritatively, and disappeared with a crack.

Harry scratched the back of his neck and pulled at his collar awkwardly, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. He found himself automatically smoothing down his fringe, even though he had far too many scars now to hide them with hair. He glanced around him, inspecting the many portraits, who all seemed to be muttering amongst themselves suspiciously. He caught snatches like ‘breeding’ and ‘mudblood’, so it didn’t take a lot to guess what they were talking about.

“I’m a halfblood, actually,” he said loudly, and smirked when the portraits erupted into scandalised mutterings. He imagined it was one thing to speculate about blood purity, but quite another to declare it brazenly.

“Harrison. How unexpected,” Walburga said cordially, descending the stairs. “Grand-maman, do quiten them, won’t you?”

A portrait of a regal elderly lady nodded and snapped in harsh French at her neighbours, who all fell silent.

“Won’t you follow me to the parlour?” Walburga offered, dressed in very proper robes and a full, luxurious skirt.

“Said the spider to the fly,” Harry muttered, remembering a quote that Hermione had once used. He thought it might have been before one of Snape’s Potions lessons.

They climbed up the stairs, and Harry felt very unsure. Normally, Walburga would have been all glee and wittering on if someone called to visit, but she was acting very unlike herself. He wondered if this was how she’d decided to deal with the trauma- he supposed he was about to find out.

As they entered the parlour and seated themselves, Harry was still watching Walburga with caution. Walburga had never seemed dangerous before, but she was unpredictable now. She had become an unknown element.

“So what can I do for you?” Walburga asked finally, settling herself and smoothing out her skirts. “I have to admit, I don’t have much time. Cancelling the ball seems to have taken up more time than organising it.”

“You’re cancelling the ball? But you loved that thing.”

“It would hardly be appropriate now. Especially not the cause.”

“Er, what was the cause again?”

“Supporting the underprivileged. Like muggleborns,” Walburga said very coldly.

“Why isn’t that appropriate?”

“I’m not raising money for muggleborns after they murdered my fiancé,” Walburga hissed.

“You know that was just one muggleborn, right?” Harry asked uncertainly. “You can’t blame all of them for what one person did-“

“Who says?” Walburga spat. “Who says that I can’t? Who says that I can’t decide who ruined my life?”
“A pureblood murdered my family. I don’t hate you all.”

“Well, that’s your decision.” Walburga bit her lip, taking a deep breath. “I- I don’t hate muggleborns. I would never do that. I just now harbour a healthy suspicion. I thought they were someone to be helped, but I see now that I was wrong. What they’re capable of.”

"Apus died in a duel. Not a murder or an assassination or anything like that. Now I never met Apus, so I can't really judge, but he's got to be at least partially responsible-"

"You're right. You can't judge," Walburga said scathingly. She shifted, regaining her composure. “I’m sorry. This is a stressful period, I’m sure you understand.”

“Not really,” Harry said, and couldn't quite contain his glare. "I'm trying to figure out why you don't 'harbour a healthy suspicion' towards purebloods for murdering countless muggles and muggleborns across Europe, to be honest."

"That's different. Of course, I don't support their actions-"

"How is it different-?"

"Because that's not my life!" Walburga screamed suddenly. "They're not my fiance! I'm allowed to be selfish for once in my life, before I throw it away!"

Harry shook his head. There was no point in arguing with her- she was irrational and grieving. She was never going to listen to reason.

Walburga tried for a tight smile. “How’s Orion?”

“He’s a bit of a wreck, actually. Hasn’t come out of his room in days.”

“Oh.” For a moment, Walburga looked a little lost and scared, and more like Harry had expected. “Well.”

“We heard the news when we got back from Muggle London, actually,” Harry said, watching for her reaction.

Walburga raised an eyebrow. “And what were you doing in Muggle London?”

“Showing Orion that muggles aren’t savages,” Harry replied unashamedly.

Harry saw Walburga’s lips purse.

“I have been entrusted with bringing some dignity back to the British branch of our family,” she said steadily, her hands clenching. “And your… beliefs counter that. But I understand that you’re Orion’s friend, and I respect that. It’s his choice to associate with you. The last thing I want is to make Orion unhappy. But please,” Walburga said, desperation leaking into her voice. “Don’t turn him to your views. It will make things difficult for everyone.”

“What happened to you?”

It was beyond disturbing to watch someone who’d seemed so light and young grow visibly older before his eyes.

Walburga ignored his question again and instead rose to her feet. She swept across the room, where she began preparing tea. She directed a question behind her: “do you want a cup?” and Harry politely refused. He thought her hands might have been shaking. Walburga brought the tea back to
her seat and sat down, taking a dainty sip. The cup clattered minutely on the saucer.

“I’m stuck here now,” Walburga said very quietly in between sips. “I have to grow up, and start becoming the woman I’m supposed to be. I have to… break away from things I knew before. I won’t shame Orion.”

“Come on, Walburga, you know Orion wouldn’t be embarrassed by anything you do. He loves you.”

“I know he does. That makes it worse.” Walburga placed her tea cup on a side table. “I’m done talking now, if you wouldn’t mind. I trust you don’t need Ceely to show you out?”

“Oh,” Harry blinked at the sudden turnaround. “No.”

“Good.” Walburga nodded politely. “Goodbye then, Harrison. Have a good trip back.”

And then there was nothing left for Harry to do other than walk uncertainly out of the room. As he cast one last glance back, Walburga had her head bowed and her hands held tightly in her lap, her frame tense. Harry opened his mouth as if to stay something, but closed it again.

This was beyond him.

And so he closed the door gently behind him, the doorknob turning very finally. The sound of footsteps followed, and a click.

When Harry tried the door again, it was locked.

“I just need time to think- this is a huge decision-“

Harry paused in his journey down the stairs, raising his eyebrows as Druella came stumbling out into the hallway below him. She looked frazzled and exhausted, tear-tracks glistening on her cheeks. Harry had never seen her look so delicate. She was followed through the door by a young man, with Walburga’s hair and a stern, serious demeanour. This had to be Walburga’s brother: Cygnus.

“Come on, Miss Rosier, be reasonable-“

“Miss Rosier?” Druella laughed, but it sounded more like a cry for help. “Since when did you call me ‘Miss Rosier’? We grew up together!”

“Which is precisely why this proposal works-“

Druella threw her hands up. “But it doesn’t!”

“If you’d just be sensible- I really can’t see a reason for objection.”

“I don’t want to marry! I want to get a job in Quidditch, and I want to live independently, and I want-“ Druella hesitated, biting her lip. “I don’t want to marry,” she repeated.

Cygnus moved closer to Druella, and she shuffled back until she had her back to the wall and couldn’t go any further.

“You have to eventually,” Cygnus said. “It’s inevitable. Wouldn’t it be better to marry into a family you know would provide for you?”

“It’s not inevitable,” Druella objected, but she sounded like she was still convincing herself. “I don’t
have to.”

“If we were to marry, we would unite the Rosier and Black families, combine our influence, and you and Walburga could be sisters. Just imagine that!” Cygnus grabbed Druella’s hand and held it close to his chest, staring at her earnestly.

Harry could see Druella’s resolve slip at the mention of Walburga, the exhaustion painting lines into her cheeks that made her seem much older than 17 or 18.

“I-I-“ Druella stuttered, her cheeks very pale and her voice very quiet. “If- if we were to be sisters… she’d be mine…” The phrase was barely a whisper, but filled with a sort of desperate, intimate possessiveness.

“It’d be perfect. We’d be a family.”

Druella covered her mouth, her whole posture screaming want.

Harry was seized with an urge to stop this, right now. This was, without question, something that Druella would regret.

“Druella!” Harry called out, interrupting the couple. “I didn’t know you were here!”

“Peters,” Druella said woodenly, her jaw very tight, but she didn’t turn away from Cygnus. Harry and Druella never been close, and Harry now cursed this. “What ae you doing here?”

“Same thing as you, I imagine. Trying to talk some sense into Walburga.”

“Yes, well, good luck with that,” Druella replied, voice coloured with anger, and her eyes flickered to his. “She won’t listen. She’s determined to go through with this thing. It’s going to kill her- but maybe I can still be there for her…” and Druella’s gaze drifted back towards Cygnus.

Harry was losing her.

“If you’d excuse us,” Cygnus said politely, “we were discussing something rather important, and Miss Rosier was about to come to the best conclusion for the both of us.”

Druella didn’t seem to disagree, and parted her lips slightly, a hare’s breath away from agreeing.

Harry was not going to let this be the day that three futures were ruined.

Merlin, if only he’d been closer to Druella. He had to know something about her, something that could get her out of this absurd trance-

“Ice cream!” Harry blurted out abruptly, and Druella raised an eyebrow, breaking eye contact with Cygnus.

“What?”

“Strawberry and pistachio. It’s your favourite.”

Druella frowned. “How did you know that?”

“Cassius told me.”

“Oh Morgana,” Druella murmured, rather like waking from a dream. “Cassius. He’d never forgive me if I went through with this. He’s always said…” She trailed off distantly, but something inside of
her became present and *aware*, unlike before. Druella turned back to Cygnus and nodded cordially, her aloofness returning. “I’m sorry, Cygnus, but I’m going to have to decline your proposal. I shan’t be marrying you.”

“Very well,” Cygnus accepted, but his smile was markedly less pleasant than before. “I just thought I’d make my interest known.”

He brushed against Harry’s shoulder rather pointedly as he left, and Harry felt like he ought to assure him that ‘really, mate, it’s not what you think’. (He didn’t).

Harry turned back to Druella, suddenly unsure of what to do. He’d just interceded in her proposal, after all.

Druella, evidently, felt no such awkwardness.

“Well,” she said expectantly, throwing a silk scarf over her shoulder. “Shall we go then?”

“…Go where?”

Druella rolled her eyes impatiently. “Fortescue’s, of course.”

Harry followed Druella out of the door obediently, but not without pointing out that: “When I talked about ice cream, it wasn’t so much an *invitation*, more of a statement, but okay.”

“You just revealed that you’ve been discussing my favourite ice cream flavours with my *brother*, Peters, the least you can do is buy me a cone.”

The further Druella got away from Number 63 Ruesday Avenue, the surer of herself she seemed to become, until she was rolling her eyes like usual. Druella offered her arm, and Harry glanced down at it uncertainly. Was he supposed to escort her somewhere?

Druella sighed long-sufferingly. “For side-along apparition, Peters. I presume you haven’t taken the test?”

“I haven’t even had any lessons,” he admitted, gripping onto her coat sleeve.

“Most people’s parents teach them. Or take lessons during the holidays,” she admitted, probably realising that the former wasn’t really an option for Harry.

“Sounds like a fun way to spend the summer.”

“Means you wouldn’t have to cling to my arm like a flobberworm, though,” Druella suggested, and turned on her heel, dragging Harry through the uncomfortable tube of apparition.

Note to self: Druella got *mean* when upset.

Harry was surprised that Fortescue’s actually *had* strawberry and pistachio ice cream, but Druella seemed to know exactly where to go to find her favourite snack. Harry was rather impressed.

“Strawberry and pistachio sundaes, please. With raspberry sauce and sprinkles, and however much sugar you can pile on top,” Druella ordered in the store. She turned to face him. “Peters?”

“Oh, er, nothing for me.”
“Come on- you’re paying, after all.”

“I don’t really have any money,” Harry said uncertainly. “Unless they accept pocket fluff as currency.”

Druella sighed once again. “I suppose I’ll pay then. You can be forgiven considering your financial circumstances. He’s an orphan,” she told the cashier, who was trying desperately to ignore her politely.

Harry frowned. Even though Druella had a rather brusque nature, that was rather a lot, even for her. He supposed she was still off-balance.

But Druella got her ice cream and led them to a little table in the corner, where she proceeded to devour the huge sundae with vigour. Harry wondered what Walburga would say about Druella’s lack of decorum, and then decided sensibly to avoid that topic.

“So why were you there to talk to ‘Burga?’” Druella asked through a mouthful of ice cream, gesturing with her spoon. “You’re not very close.”

“I sort of came to argue Orion’s side,” Harry admitted. “I’m staying in Grimmauld Place for the summer.”

“Orion’s side’?” Druella said scathingly. “He doesn’t have a side. At least he’s in love with her.”

“You, er, know about that?”

“He’s about as subtle as the Malfoy family peacocks.”

“Yeah, that’s fair.”

Harry awkwardly fiddled with a sprinkle on the table, rolling it back and forth, as Druella decimated a scoop of ice cream.

“He’s really upset, you know,” Harry said quietly. “He doesn’t want to force Walburga into marriage.”

“Yeah, well, Walburga doesn’t want to be forced,” Druella spat. She groaned, and ran a hand over her forehead. “I’m sorry. It’s not even him I’m really angry at. It’s probably Walburga, if I’m totally honest. She doesn’t want this, but she won’t bloody tell them, for all the good it would do. At least it would give her a cause. But no, she’s determined to fulfil her ‘duties’, even if they’re going to make her miserable.”

“I still don’t understand though,” Harry muttered. “Why is it so awful to marry Orion?”

“You didn’t grow up with us,” Druella shook her head. “You couldn’t possibly understand. We were so close- we did everything together. It’s lonely, being a pureblood child. You get educated at home and don’t see many other children. We were each other’s havens.”

She traced little circles on the table with her spoon, lost in another time.

“Obviously, Orion developed some quite different feelings for Walburga, but Walburga loves Orion like a brother.” Druella’s gaze flickered back up to Harry’s, intense and angry. “I know you don’t have any siblings, but you can try to imagine. Walburga knows that she can never love him the way he wants her to, and that she’s going to make someone she cares about very miserable. It’s fucking bullshit.”
Harry leapt back, taken aback. “But she was marrying Apus before, and then she’d have to move to Romania. She’d have left all the people she cared about behind. Surely this is better.”

“Before, if Walburga couldn’t have m-“ Druella bit her lip. “If she couldn’t have the life she wanted,” she amended, “she’d at least get to leave it all behind. Now she’ll be stuck here, remembering what we can’t have. We’ll have to restrain ourselves, even though we could so easily just apparate-“

“Do you need a tissue?” Harry asked, spotting a glittering sheen in the corner of Druella’s eyes.

“I’m not crying,” she snapped, wiping away a tear. “I’m not- I- stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you pity me,” Druella hissed. “I don’t need your pity. I’m not being forced into a marriage, or being held to ransom by my family- just stop.”

“I’m not pitying you,” Harry insisted. “Really-“

“Well, why not?” Druella shouted, and buried her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking.

Harry felt quite uncomfortable, and glanced discreetly around the parlour. Luckily, it was practically empty.

“I’m sorry,” Druella muttered, scrubbing at her face with the palm of her hand. “I’m never emotional. I’m never like this.”

“What happened before I found you, earlier?” Harry asked, filled with morbid curiosity. “You were going to marry Cygnus. That’s not like you.”

“I know,” Druella admitted. “I- I-“ She took a deep breath, and stared intently into her ice cream.

“You won’t tell anyone what I say, will you?”

Harry shook his head.

Druella lowered her voice secretively. “You’ve guessed, probably, about mine and Walburga’s feelings for one another.”

“Well, our families still don’t know. It’s not altogether acceptable, not that I care, but… y’know. Walburga’s all about appearances. And so she suggested that since… since we’ll be staying close together after all, we should break off our friendship to… maintain the integrity of her marriage.” And against her wishes, Druella let out a little sobbing hiccup. “She’s going to leave me so we don’t cause a scene. She never cared before. I don’t care. She’s got some kind of idea to punish herself, I don’t know why. It’s like now that she’s marrying Orion, she’s not allowed to be happy again. She’s so stupid!”

“But she didn’t feel like that when she was marrying Apus-“

“Oh, Apus wouldn’t have cared. I’m fairly sure he knew about us. And it wouldn’t have mattered if we ‘met’ every few months in Romania, in her new life. It wouldn’t be perfect, but it would be ours.” Druella smiled longingly, and then her smile twisted. “But she cares about Orion. And so now that she’s staying here, she doesn’t want to ‘shame’ herself, or him. Apparently,” Druella said, her throat very tight, “I’m shameful. I thought that if I were married… well, no one would think anything
of it.”

“She’ll get over this. She just needs time. It’s a big thing to happen, for everyone—“

“Oh, but that’s not all,” Druella chuckled bitterly. “She told me that she ‘can’t be friends with someone who supports muggles anymore’. She’s got some kind of vendetta against them because of Apus, and she won’t listen to me, Harry. It’s like she’s grieving for herself. I refuse to compromise my views for her, but I want to. Morgana, I want to.”

“I’m sure she’s not that bad.”

Druella shook her head resolutely. "She's been fighting all her life against her stupid family's views. I think she's giving in. I don’t even recognise her. How can I not recognise the woman I love?"

“I don’t know what to say,” Harry felt helpless.

“Tell me about it,” Druella said balefully. “Thank you, though, for stepping in back there. I was about to do something really fucking stupid.” She took a deep breath. “I think I thought by marrying her brother, I could force the connection with her, but… it doesn’t work like that.”

“Was that what the letter was about, at the feast? Marrying you?”

“Oh. Yes. I thought he might have been offering me a job, maybe he was interested in my skills, but turns out he sees me as a political tool to be bargained with. Typical, really.” She tried to play it off, but Harry could tell she was quite deeply affected. “I’m just lucky, I suppose, that my parents let me make my own decisions. Not like Walburga’s mother.”

“Men are rubbish,” Harry said consolingly.

Druella tried for a wry smile, but it was shaky. Harry reached across the table, and patted her hand.

“It will get better, I promise. For women, and for you.”

Druella raised an eyebrow. “You have no idea if that’s true.”

“It is,” he said certainly. “I know it will.”

And they sat in the ice cream parlour, in a little corner of Diagon Alley, as three lives fell to pieces around them.

Harry got the bus back from Manchester to London, but couldn’t quite bring himself to go back to Grimmauld Place. He frowned, taking a few uncertain steps in the direction towards home, but didn’t think he could bear to enter that depressive, heavy space; where everyone drifted around lifelessly, tethered to earth by their own misery. Rigel had soon picked up on the dreary mood, and wailed almost constantly. It felt like a ghost house.

He honestly didn’t know how Sirius had stood it.

And so Harry turned decisively and went the opposite way. He might as well enjoy London in the summer heat, and make the most of not being forced to garden in t-shirt three sizes too big. And it was whilst he was wandering the streets that he spotted Tom Riddle.

Tom was leant up against a lamppost, dressed plainly but neatly in muggle clothes. He didn’t seem to notice Harry, raising a graceful hand and pressing a cigarette to his lips, inhaling deeply. Tom leant his head back and opened his mouth slightly, smoke trailing elegantly into the sky.
Harry did a double-take at the bad habit.

“Those things will rot your insides,” Harry called out, strolling closer. He might as well get a conversation out of his detour. Harry also glanced around curiously, wondering where Tom’s orphanage was. He kind of wanted to see it.

“Those studies were dismissed,” Tom said, looking unsurprised to see Harry appear out of nowhere. Harry needed to step up his game (or get some tips from Cassius).

“That’s because the tobacco companies have the newspapers by the balls,” Harry said, remembering when his primary school teacher had gone on a very long rant about the history of tobacco, ending in why her husband should quit cigarettes immediately. It had been unnecessarily fervent for addressing 10 year olds, but at least it was memorable. This had been before Harry turned her wig blue.

“Well, I suppose you’d know,” Tom shrugged, and flicked the cigarette to the floor. It died quickly.

Somewhere at the back of his mind, Harry was disappointed by the sudden absence of an excuse to look at Tom’s mouth. It was a very nice mouth. The majority of Harry, however, was just very, very surprised.

“What?” Tom said defensively, noticing Harry’s look of astonishment

“You listened to me.”

“Well, I’m hardly going to argue with you about future consequences, am I? That would be foolish.”

“Oh yeah,” Harry remembered, amused all over again. “Cause I’m a seer. Ooo!” He waved his hands mysteriously. “Prophecies! Divination! Lung cancer!”

“You don’t have to mock me,” Tom said, unimpressed. “You of all people should know the value of Divination.”

Harry snorted. “Cause it’s such a solid subject.”

“I meant the value of proven Divination. Seers and prophets. Not the school subject. It’s utterly useless—there’s very little future-telling that can be taught or gained without natural talent.”

“God, Hermione would have loved you.” Harry said musingly. “If it had been just the Tom Riddle now—‘he waved vaguely at Tom’s entirety, “—she’d have fallen half in love. Feminist, handsome and hater of Divination. You’d have been her dream man.”

“You think I’m handsome?” Tom asked with a smug little smile.

Harry went bright red. “No- that’s- if Hermione- not- oh, shut up.”

Tom grinned triumphantly. “Certainly. If it’s keeping you from admiring my handsomeness—“

Harry physically restrained himself from throwing a hex. “You’d be more handsome if you were less of a smug git,” he muttered.

“Oh come, Harrison, I’m only teasing.” A pause. “You can’t blame me for being so spectacularly good looking.”

“I swear to god, Riddle, I will curse you.”

“No you won’t,” Tom said lightly, gesturing towards a muggle couple, tugging their daughter along
behind them.

Harry conceded the point, and crossed his arms. He wasn’t ‘sulking’, he was conducting a strategic silence.

“So, Hermione?” Tom asked, apparently having gotten everything he wanted from that little exchange. “That’s your muggleborn friend, yes? The one taught by your parents.”

“That’s the one,” Harry agreed. It would be childish to keep up his silence (and took a lot of effort).

“She disapproved of Divination?”

“Oh god yeah. Only lesson she’s ever walked out of, I reckon. It was all far too… too vague for her. She liked Runes and Transfiguration and stuff. To be fair, I don’t think I helped though. I just sort of made things up for the dream journals- it used to frustrate her more than anything. She didn’t like half-arsed homework.” Harry smiled fondly.

“She sounds sensible.”

Harry wished more than anything that he could talk to his friends in that moment. ‘Hear that, Hermione?’ he’d say, ‘Voldemort called you ‘sensible’.’

Only, Tom wasn’t really Voldemort, not yet anyway, and this sort of proved it.

“How did she die?”

Harry’s mind stumbled a little at the blunt question. “Oh- er-” His tongue tripped over itself. “In the attack.

“Defending herself?”

“Yeah. And everyone else. It all came so fast: I- I tried- we all went to fight, but she was caught by a spell. She fell. She didn’t get up again.”

Harry could see it all over again: A Death Eater toppling to the ground and Hermione turning to him with eyes alight and a proud smile. “Well done, Ha-” And then the shock as she grimaced with pain, and fell to the floor as if in slow motion, her hair fluttering around her pale face. Harry had screamed, probably.

“How did she die?”

Tom’s voice sounded distant, like a dream.

“Which spell was it?”

“A curse. Some kind of purple one, like flames. I don’t know what it was. She looked like she was sleeping.”

“It might have been a rib breaker. That might have punctured something,” Tom suggested thoughtfully. “Or an organ liquidation spell. Perhaps a petrified heart.”

Harry went very cold and very sick, remembering the quiet “oh” from Hermione, before she had crumpled.

“I- no-“ Harry’s breathing went very fast, and his sight blurred. It was all his fault, all his fault. He couldn’t breathe, and he was staring at a single spot on the pavement, but it kept wavering, and he could swear he was watching a blade of grass growing, breaking through the concrete and stretching towards the sun-

By the time he came back to his body, Harry was covering his mouth and retching. There was a
comforting hand on his back, and Tom’s voice saying, “I’m sorry, that was a little insensitive—“

“‘You think?’” Harry coughed.

“I confess I didn’t expect such a violent reaction.”

“I’m fine,” Harry said, waving Tom away from him. “It wasn’t just that. I’m getting these ‘attacks’ recently, like that one. It’s probably left over from the attack. I was hit with a few spells.”

“You should go to St Mungo’s,” Tom suggested with an oddly concerned expression, and he looked like he almost wanted to reach out to Harry again.

“I’m fine. It’s manageable.”

“That didn’t look manageable to me.”

“It’s fine. There are worse things- it’s not going to kill me.”

There was a moment of silence between them, and Harry saw Tom’s hand twitch towards his pocket. Harry wondered if Tom had a pack of cigarettes hidden there. In the end, Tom seemed to decide against it.

“Life is short,” Tom said, frowning as he regarded Harry. “Brief.”

“It goes fast.”

It felt like almost yesterday that Harry set a snake on Dudley. Fond memories.

“Fleetinglly,” Tom agreed. “We’re such tiny moments in such a huge stretch of time. Insignificant, if you think about it.”

“I don’t think anyone is insignificant. Not really.”

Take Dobby for example. No one would have ever thought much of Dobby, but he ended up breaking Harry’s arm in several places…and, Harry acceded, did his best to save Harry’s life.

“Imagine if you could live forever though,” Tom proposed. “Think of all the things you could do. You wouldn’t leave anything undone, like this Hermione of yours, or my- your parents. You’d be unstoppable.”

Harry froze, alarm bells going off. “Immortality isn’t a good path to go down, Tom.”

“Why ever not?”

“Trust me.” Harry could remember Voldemort’s desperate attempts to grasp at the Philosopher’s Stone, and whatever twisted thing he’d done to tether himself to life again and again.

Tom tilted his head curiously, but seemed to accept the answer. Harry, however, wasn’t naive enough to think that was the end of it, and realised that he’d probably have to keep an eye on what Tom did this year. Make sure he didn’t murder any unicorns. (Although that unicorn from the forest would probably be more likely to murder Harry first).

Harry watched Tom run a finger down the lamppost absently, wrinkling his nose at the smudge of dirt on his fingertip. The sound of birdsong rang in the summer air, and a cool gust of wind blew over the back of Harry’s neck. It was almost idyllic.
Tom turned back to Harry expectantly. “So what have you been doing today? You looked rather unsettled earlier.”

Harry thought he probably still looked unsettled, but shrugged. “I went to see Walburga.”

“Ah yes, the Orion and Walburga engagement. Rather doomed from the start, isn’t it?”

“How do you know about that?” Harry didn’t think Tom would get many political updates in his muggle orphanage.

“I have my sources,” Tom said, with an enigmatic smile that really shouldn’t have made Harry’s heart wriggle in his ribcage.

“Vague,” he snorted, and tried to cover up the tremor in his voice. “Yeah, they’re all resigned to go through with it. If they’d just talk- I dunno. I don’t really know anything about pureblood politics. Orion’s dad just keeps talking about ‘keeping the money and blood in the family’, whatever the hell that means.”

“I presume you’ve been in the midst of it all, due to your summer lodging?” Tom asked mildly, and if Harry wasn’t mistaken, there was a seed of jealousy rooted in Tom’s eyes. Harry didn’t blame him- there was nothing as envy-inducing as seeing your friends enjoying themselves as you were stuck with people who hated you. The magical world seemed like such a distant dream when you were labouring over a stove and listening to the screaming of children.

“Yeah, I have. It’s a bit uncomfortable- I mean, I love Orion to bits, but there’s not much I can do to help him.”

“I’m sure he’s just grateful for a friend.”

“Maybe. What have you been doing this summer?”

“Oh, nothing nearly as exciting as you,” Tom said, and the corner of his lips quirked indecipherably. “Exploring a little.”

“Are you still living in your orphanage?” Harry asked suspiciously. He wouldn’t put it past Tom Riddle to take over some muggle’s house. Perhaps imprison them in the basement.

“No. I’ve taken over the Houses of Parliament,” Tom said very seriously.

“You’re an idiot.”

“TOM!” The call came from a grim building: surrounded by tall railings that hid any possible garden beyond. The brick was dark and streaked with dirt, and many of the windows were poorly patched-up with tape. Harry had dismissed it earlier, but now that he looked closer, he noticed the ‘WOOL’S ORPHANGE’ sign and the faint chatter of children beyond the railings.

Tom made a sound of disgust under his breath. “Stupid woman.”

“Looks like you’re being summoned,” Harry said, familiar with the sound of his name being yelled at an unpleasant pitch. Harry, however, had usually been addressed as ‘boy’.

“They can’t summon me,” Tom snapped, and clenched his eyes shut in irritation as there was another yell. “I should, however, go and see what Mrs Cole wants. It was nice speaking to you, Harrison.”

Harry bid Tom goodbye, and watched as he trudged into the orphanage. He’d known that Tom
Riddle also had a less than ideal home life, but it was a different thing altogether, to actually see the crushing misery on his face as he was called ‘home’.

It reminded Harry of how he also had to return home. 

*God*, he hoped Orion was in a better mood.

Chapter End Notes

Look, I know there’s a moment where Dumbledore implies that the Trace was still around when Tom murdered his relatives. But I refuse to believe that, seeing as his justification for Tom getting away with the murders was ‘the trace only picks up the magic, not the perpetrator’, so under-age wizards could theoretically do magic in magical buildings. But the Riddle House is not a magical building, so why would the Ministry not pick up on three uses of the Avada Kedavra in this muggle building? That’s pretty inept, even for the Ministry. And so my simpler solution: the Trace was introduced after Tom Riddle’s time (aka like a lot of child safety laws). And seeing as the Dumbledore/Harry convo happened in the sixth book, it’s not canon in this fanfic! Yay! So this is one of my ‘AU changes’ - sorry ‘bout it.

Also, the Black family tree is bloody confusing. So I made my own version. It’s not all strictly canon, but we can ignore that ;)

If you're confused about their motivations, I have a handy chart on why everyone's miserable. I- I don't think I can make this better, not even with a cheesy nicknames. I'm sorry (I call Tom 'Tombola', if it helps). Yeah, so this wasn't very cheerful. Pretty much everyone's in pain, and Harry can do absolutely nothing. I promise it will get happier in the future though, and this mess will get sorted out. At some point. And we saw a pretty major canon divergence here... MUWHA HA HA
Harry Uses A Lot Of Metaphors

Chapter Summary

Harry just wants people to communicate, Harry and Tom go shopping, and everyone heads back to Hogwarts.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: The Black family (and Harry) learnt that Apus Black, Walburga's fiance, was dead. And if that wasn't enough of a shock, they then learnt that Walburga would be getting a new fiance: Orion. Orion had a small breakdown as he faced the guilt of chaining Walburga to a loveless marriage and becoming like his parents. Walburga wasn't holding up too well either, as Harry learnt on a visit. She told Harry of how she blamed muggles for the murder of her fiance. On his way out, Harry ran into Druella and foiled a proposal attempt from Cygnus Black, possibly irreparably damaging the time line. As he took her out for ice cream, Druella told Harry of how Walburga had broken off communication with her, as she feared she wouldn't be able to remain loyal to Orion otherwise, and revealed the root of Walburga's anger: the fact that she loves Orion like a brother and will have to start a family with him, and her lack of new life in Romania, where she would have been free from judgement. Harry then ran into Tom. After first advising Tom to stop smoking, Harry had another 'moment', Tom's orphanage was really miserable, and we heard of Tom's increasing interest in immortality. That doesn't bode well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took another week of everyone moping before Harry finally exploded. He’d done his best to keep quiet and be a good friend- he didn’t want to impose his views on Orion, after all. The world of pureblood marriage and etiquette was not one that he was familiar with, and he didn’t feel wholly confident about shouting anyone down-

But this was really getting ridiculous. Orion had taken to hiding out in the Black family library, reading book after book on etiquette and history with very little sleep- it just wasn’t healthy.

“Orion,” Harry said tactically as he sat down beside his friend. “It’s lunchtime. Don’t you think you should eat something?”

“I don’t want anything,” Orion said, keeping his eyes fixed to the page before him.

“I made some cheese sandwiches-“

“I’m not hungry.”

“That’s ridiculous. You haven’t eaten anything proper since the day before yesterday-“

“I’m just not hungry.”
“You can’t let yourself waste away,” Harry said in frustration. “Rigel’s stopped eating now, too.”

Orion’s face, if possible, turned even more desolate. “I ruin everything—”

“You’ve never ruined anything in your whole life,” Harry said comfortingly, but as he reached out to pat Orion’s shoulder, his hand was knocked away and flung onto the edge of a bookshelf. Harry flinched and clutched his injured limb to his chest. It had been a solid hit.

“I’m sorry!” Orion gasped, already starting fuss. Obviously it had been an automatic reaction. “Did I hurt you? I told you, I’m the worst—”

“I’m fine!” Harry said quickly, concealing his wince as he wriggled the fingers of his hand. “Seriously, you’re not that strong. I live to duel another day.”

“Mother always said I was weak.” Orion slumping into his chair pathetically.

“Your mother’s a psychopath.”

“She mostly just sleeps these days,” Orion murmured. “I thought a psychopath would do more.”

“I don’t know,” Harry frowned. “I never did psychology. I bet Cassius would know.” Harry wouldn’t have been surprised if Cassius had the definition of psychopath scribbled down somewhere in pink, encircled by little love-hearts.

Orion frowned darkly. “Cassius once told me that my sweetheart would be my downfall.”

“You know Cassius,” Harry said helpfully. “A bit overdramatic.”

“He doesn’t lie though.”

“You’re not going to have a ‘downfall’, Orion,” Harry said patiently. “You’ll be fine.”

Harry saw that Orion was one encouraging word away from slipping out of his chair and onto the floor, so he gave his friend a pat on the shoulder (carefully, this time), and left the room. As he did, a knock sounded at the door, and Harry’s shoulders dropped in relief. “Oh thank God,” he muttered. Harry rushed to open the door, tugging it open with desperation-tinged enthusiasm. “You’re late.”

“A lady is never late,” Walburga said coolly, stepping inside primly and removed her silk shawl. “Merely delayed.”

“Pretty bloody delayed,” Harry grumbled. “You were supposed to be here an hour ago.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure if I’d come,” Walburga said stiffly, twisting the shawl back and forth.

“I’m glad you showed up,” Harry admitted, running a hand through his hair. “This is kind of a last resort.”

“How is he?”

“Worse than he was. ‘Time heals’ is a load of bullshit.”

“Very polite,” Walburga remarked, her nose wrinkling.

“Yeah well, there’s not much that’s ‘polite’ about any of this crap, is there?”
“You said he was worse.”

“He doesn’t eat, barely sleeps- and now Rigel’s picked up on it.”

“Poor dear,” Walburga frowned, and there was a flicker of a girl behind her eyes, soft and kind.

“Will you talk to him? Please?”

Walburga looked taken aback. “I didn’t agree to that. I was under the impression that I was summoned to discuss the terms of the betrothal with Arcturus.”

“That was a tiny lie,” Harry said meekly, pinching his fingers so that they almost touched. “Just a small one.”

“Oh. I think I should go—”

Walburga turned, but before she could leave, Harry fired a quick locking charm towards the door. Walburga rattled the doorknob and then withdrew her wand, but before she could act, Harry disarmed her and tucked her wand into his pocket.

“Harrison Peters,” Walburga hissed dangerously, turning back to face him with a vicious scowl.

“Give me back my wand. Now.”

“You just need to talk to him,” Harry said convincingly. “Work something out between you—”

“That’s a terrible idea. I’m sure he’d rather not see me now—”

“No,” Harry said strongly, getting angry now. “This isn’t about him, it’s about you. You don’t want to think about it. You want to avoid the guilt. And I get it. But listen to me.” He took a few involuntary steps forward as Walburga’s eyebrows twitched minutely. “He’s going to do something really stupid if he isn’t stopped. So get your head out of your arse and talk to him.”

Walburga’s cheeks flushed slightly. “How dare you?”

Harry rolled his eyes, entirely done with dramatics. “I get that you’re in a shitty situation, believe me, I’m familiar with them. But you have each other. You’re friends. And I know that’s part of the problem, but you can use it, for Merlin’s sake. Make an agreement, run away, I don’t really care- but you can do it together. You’re not alone. Get used to it.”

There was a long silence, as Walburga regarded Harry with shock. Harry, on the other hand, was breathing heavily. Whilst he was completely sympathetic towards Orion and Walburga’s situation, at least they had each other. At least they had some kind of love between them. Harry (and even Tom) never had that luxury. They’d been truly alone.

“Where is he?” Walburga asked at last.

“Library.”

“He always used to hide there,” Walburga said very quietly, so much so that Harry knew it wasn’t meant for his ears. “When we were children.”

“He needs help,” Harry said firmly. “And so do you. Help each other, or for fuck’s sake, I swear I’ll kill you both.”

“Touchy. You were much more ‘sensitive’ when you came to see me before.” Walburga noted archly.
“Yeah, well, back then I hadn’t been trapped in this house with a living corpse for a week.”

“…He’s that bad?”

“Yes.”

Walburga let out a low growl and wrapped the shawl around her shoulders, drawing it tight. “Is it locked?”

“It shouldn’t be.”

“If you listen in to our conversation, I’ll skin you alive.” Walburga extended her hand expectantly.

“What happened to the girl who was squeamish about butterfly wings?” Harry asked, as he handed over Walburga’s wand.

Walburga tucked the wand into her pocket, and made her way towards the stairs. She paused, and glanced over her shoulder. “She grew up.”

The talk took hours, and Harry spent most of it sat in the dining room, glancing up at the ceiling where the meeting was taking place. He didn’t think he’d ever drunk more tea before in his life.

Finally, there was movement and footsteps on the stairs. Harry perked up, and watched in interest as Orion and Walburga passed the doorway. There was noticeable distance between them; distance that wouldn’t have been there before this whole thing happened, but at least they were in the same room. It was a start.

There was the faint muffled sound of voices, and then the bang of a door and a lock sliding shut. Harry waited, and sure enough, Orion wandered into the dining room, heading straight for the bell on the wall. As it rung, a fresh cup of tea appeared on the table, joining the pile of empty cups from Harry’s nervous binge.

Orion sat down opposite Harry and picked up the cup, inhaling deeply and taking a long sip.

Harry barely waited until the cup was placed back on the table before he asked eagerly, “Well? How did it go?”

Orion let out a heavy breath. “It was okay,” he said hopefully. There was a spark of life back in his eyes.

“Any more details? Or was it just ‘okay’?”

“We made some agreements. We’re going to do our best to remain friends, at least. Walburga will produce ‘an heir and a spare’, and nothing more. We’ll be loyal to one another. She’s… she’s going to break off communications with Druella. She doesn’t trust herself,” Orion added quietly. “I wouldn’t object if she wanted to carry on the affair, but… someone will find out. And Walburga doesn’t want to tarnish our reputation. Not now. I’m almost glad,” he admitted.

“See?” Harry said encouragingly, trying not to remember Druella’s wretched expression at the concept of never seeing Walburga again. “It’s all going to be fine.”

Harry thought he might also have been trying to convince himself. Despite the apparent success of his plan, Harry felt uneasy. This moment felt like a fuse setting itself alight, blazing steadily towards
the inevitable explosion— but what else had Harry been expecting? What had he wanted to come from this meeting? He didn’t know anymore.

“We’ve agreed not to discuss it until after I graduate Hogwarts. I’ve got a year.” A small, determined smile broke over Orion’s face, and a slightly manic light shone from his eyes. “And I’m going to make the most of it. I’m going to have my career and my friends- I’m going to make sure of it.”

Well, Harry thought, if there was anything Orion was good it, it was smiling through eventual, inevitable tragedy. Just look at Rigel.

Harry was fairly sure this wasn’t a healthy path to go down (denial was basically just repression, and that never went well.) He couldn’t help but liken this fix to a plaster: obscuring but not solving the problem. But at least Orion was acting alive again. It was better than nothing.

“Did you, er, discuss her new views?” he asked hesitantly.

“We’re not going to discuss it. We’ll raise our children with tradition, she says. We’ll see,” Orion shrugged. “I’m sure she can’t hold onto all that anger. She’d burst! She’ll see that it isn’t all the muggles’ fault soon. Maybe I can take her into muggle London.” He smiled, small and eager.

Harry winced, pretty certain that this wasn’t the case (Sirius could attest to that), but he didn’t want to burst Orion’s bubble. Maybe it would all get better.

“But you feel better, yeah?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Orion agreed.

He seemed genuinely happier, but Harry suspected that this veneer of understanding between Orion and Walburga was like a fraying rope holding back the guillotine suspended above their heads. There was only so much he could do though- this whole marriage was doomed.

“Thank you for calling Walburga,” Orion took a sip of tea, and Harry tried to find comfort in the brightness of his eyes. “We’re going to get through it together, and… at least I know she doesn’t hate me now. I’ll be okay if she is.”

If there was one thing Harry was sure of, it was that Walburga definitely wasn’t okay. Orion was playing a dangerous game.

“Something might be broken,” Orion admitted quietly, “but it’s nice not to feel alone.”

Yeah, Harry considered, his mind flickering elsewhere. It was.

He could think of someone else who might appreciate that feeling.

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Dear Tom,

So, er, I guess you probably didn’t expect a letter from me, but… ta da!

This letter may be unexpected, but not as unexpected as how sorry I felt for you last week.

How’s your summer going? I hope you don’t find this too weird, but I got the impression that you might appreciate a letter the last time I saw you. I guess that Avery’s probably not a fun pen pal, so… here I am. Have you done all the homework yet? Charms homework is killing me slowly.
Orion and Walburga finally talked. (You’ve probably heard all about it through ‘the grapevine’ or whatever sycophant passes on news to you, but I thought I might mention it. It’s always nice to be kept in the loop.) They’ve made some kind of agreement: ‘an heir and a spare’ was how Orion phrased it, which I’m wholly against but, y’know, it’s not my marriage. I suppose my ‘half-blood upbringing’ makes me reluctant to call any child a ‘spare’- but then again I don’t really understand purebloods. You do though. You always seem like you know how to interact with them. I don’t. Half the time it’s like they’re speaking a different language.

Read any interesting books recently? I’ve done nothing but read for the past week—there’s not much else to do here. Orion hasn’t exactly been up for Quidditch. I’ve read a lot of sports journals, actually. Did you know that the Golden Snitch was originally a bird called the Snidget? Wizards hunted them to extinction. Wizards can be vicious, really.

Ignore the blood stains at the bottom of the letter. Orion’s falcon is crazy.

Harry Poeters

Harrison,

You’ll never get me to call you ‘Harry’, you know. It’s a ridiculous nickname. ‘Harrison’ is strong. Powerful. Harry’s a five year old at the seaside. Names can change us— you shouldn’t reduce yourself.

My summer is progressing, and that’s all I can really say for it. It’s certainly not fun. I appreciated receiving your letter, though. It livened up the place (which isn’t difficult.) If you sent me your Charms homework, I could certainly put you on the right path. I object to doing homework for anyone, but I’m sure I could let slip a few clues.

Funny you should mention that. Avery’s letter is sitting in my bin. He is an atrocious abuser of superfluous adjectives— it’s really quite shocking.

No matter what you may think, interacting with purebloods isn’t difficult. It’s about knowing when to give respect and when to demand it. You would probably excel if you tried. I’m not sure what it is, but something about you suggests leadership.

I haven’t been reading a lot, as there isn’t much access to books in Wool’s. If you can find it in the Black library, would you mind sending me ‘The Essential Defence Against the Dark Arts’ by Arsenius Jigger? I’ve been meaning to leaf through it. There are only so many times you can reread Huckleberry Finn.

Lastly, I know we haven’t addressed the Chamber of Secrets incident. I was hasty and reckless. I apologise if you were upset.

Disinfect your wound. Falcons are filthy animals.

Tom Riddle

Tom,

Harrison is the name of someone’s grandfather. Harry is my name. Besides that, I still don’t agree with you. Names don’t define us. I can be called whatever— Harrison, Harry, Delores— it doesn’t
make any difference. I’m still me.

I’ve attached my essay draft. I can’t get anywhere with it- I just keep arriving back to the point that a Summoning Charm is technically illegal. I know it’s not, but I can’t understand why. I’ve attached the book you wanted too. The library here is ridiculous- they have triples of practically everything.

I suppose it’s my temper that does the damage most of the time (with purebloods). I just can’t keep my mouth shut when they spew racist bullshit. See- that’s what I mean. It’s just the Gryffindor in me, I suppose.

The most important thing is that you stopped. No one is permanently hurt, thank god. I don’t know if I can forgive you for the fanclub though.

The wound did get infected, thanks for the late warning. Magical healing is a miracle.

Harry

Harrison,

The weather has been dreadful

Where did the sunshine go?

The children here are so effortlessly dull. Everything they say irritates me. Yesterday, Billy Stubbs broke up with his plain little girlfriend and cried about it for over an hour.

It’s a shame he doesn’t have another rabbit

I’ve attached some sources on the legalities of Summoning Charms.

Would you fancy meeting up in Diagon Alley to buy school supplies (I trust you’ve received your letter)? You can ever bring Orion if you must. Seventh year is important, after all.

We should make sure we’re prepared.

Tom.

Tom,

Sure. Sunday, 1pm?

Harry

Harrison,

It’s a date.

Tom
Tom waited beneath the flaking ‘Ollivanders’ sign, tapping his foot impatiently. Honestly, how difficult was it to be on time? Tom had managed it, and he’d had to fight past Mrs Cole’s suspicious bag checks and an air raid practise. He checked his watch, and scowled at the bustling crowd of people. Even if Harrison were here, Tom wouldn’t see him.

It was time to move on.

But just as Tom picked up his bag, Harrison emerged from the crowd, struggling past a large-bellied man (who bore a startling resemblance to Professor Slughorn.) The other boy wore almost-fashionable robes and his hair cut into some semblance of order, but that wasn’t what had Tom blinking in surprise.

Harrison, who Tom was beginning to realise would never fit into his neat picture of the world… had a small human on his shoulders.

“Come on, Meissa, stop kicking,” Harrison said, his voice distant and rough as he craned his neck to squint at the child.

The sound of Harrison’s exasperation was so familiar that it sent a shiver of… something running down Tom’s spine, electrifying his senses. His fingers stopped twitching towards his pocket, his lungs felt lighter.

He relaxed.

“You’re going too slow,” the little girl said, her expression unimpressed. “Orion said you were fast.”

“On a broomstick, yeah. Not Diagon Alley during rush hour.”

The child kicked her feet back and forth, assaulting Harrison with her heel. “Faster!”

Harrison fastened a hand around the girl’s ankle and held it away from his collarbone, but he didn’t seem genuinely upset. If anything, her childish tantrum seemed to make him smile.

Tom would never understand people.

Harrison finally spotted Tom, his eyes widening and his smile growing broader and friendly. Tom shifted uncomfortably - he never had that effect on anyone (other than Orion, but Orion was happy to see everyone). It was probably just Harrison’s crush. Nothing more.

“Tom!” Harrison called out.

Tom had never comprehended why people did that. They’d made eye contact; Harrison obviously knew that Tom had seen him- and it wasn’t like Tom could have forgotten his own name. There was no need to yell it out loud. Regardless, Tom smiled slightly.

It was good to be back in the Wizarding World.

“You seem happier,” Tom observed as Harrison shuffled towards him, bending under the child’s weight.

And he did. Harrison had seemed drawn and tired the last time that Tom had seen him, his usual dark skin bleached pale with stress. This Harrison was reinvigorated, and walked with a spring in his step. The panic had melted away.
“Well, Orion’s determined to be happier, so it’s sort of bled through into the rest of the house. This one,” Harrison bounced the little girl slightly, “is finally seeing some sunlight.”

“I’ve seen sunlight before,” the girl said petulantly.

“It doesn’t count if it’s through your bedroom window,” Harrison said cheerily.

“Says who?”

“Says me.”

“Who’s this then?” Tom asked, peering up at the girl.

“This is Meissa,” Harrison introduced, lifting the girl from his shoulder and setting her down.

“Meissa Black of the Ancient and Noble House of Black,” the girl said, extending her hand. “You’re Uncle Harry’s friend.”

“Uncle Harry?” Tom echoed amusedly, ignoring the girl’s hand. “How sweet.”

“’Uncle Harry’ is not becoming a thing,” Harrison insisted, and then when Tom smirked: “It’s not a thing!”

“I think it’s cute. You’re so… paternal,” Tom said, in a tone of voice that left even himself confused about whether it was a compliment or not.

Harrison didn’t appear to care, and simply rolled his eyes. “Well, are we shopping or not?”

“Certainly. I thought we could begin by heading over to Flourish and Blotts.”

“You’re the boss.”

“Oh, if only that were true.” Tom imagined a world where Harrison was as subservient as everyone else; where he cowered and held his breath whenever Tom raised an eyebrow. Where he gazed at Tom with blind adoration, or sighed as he left a room.

Perhaps not.

“So have you lost your twin?” Tom said curiously, as they set off down the street. “I can’t see Orion anywhere. Unless he’s shrunk several inches and put on a dress.”

“Orion decided to stay at home. He and Walburga are spending time with Orion’s parents, so we have Meissa instead!” Harrison said, grinning down at the girl. The smile was slightly off though, and Tom waited until Meissa was trotting in front of them, distracted by the sights, to lean over to Harrison.

“Is everything well with Orion?”

“Yeah,” Harrison said, and now Tom knew that he was lying. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Tom adopted a dubious expression, and let the silence linger.

Harrison broke. “It’s just… he’s a lot better now, sure. I just think… he and Walburga talked about all these ideas: ‘an heir and a spare’ and what with Walburga’s new ideals… he may be happy now, but I have a horrible feeling that one day, when all of this is actually happening, he’s going to wake up and realise that he never got out. That’s he’s still living in the nightmare. He was worried about
Walburga before… but I think he should be more worried about himself.”

Tom hummed thoughtfully.

“I don’t want to say anything though. He can’t go back to how he was before. This just feels like a very temporary fix. All these promises and agreements… they’re just hiding the issue. The problems haven’t gone away.”

“They never will though, will they?” Tom said thoughtfully. “The problem is with the match. The only way to solve it is to end the marriage.”

“Exactly,” Harrison said darkly. “This whole thing is stupid. At least Orion’s a bit happier now though.” He didn’t seem to believe what he was saying.

“Orion’s happiness is always relative.”

“Tell me about it,” Harrison snorted. He sighed. “How’s the ‘not smoking’ going?”

“Fine. It was barely a habit, really, just something to pass the time…”

Tom had only started smoking that summer, anyway. And _that_ was only because Billy Stubbs had started. Watching the other boy desperately search through the orphanage for his cigarettes as Tom took a slow, satisfied, stolen drag was a source of endless amusement.

“Good,” Harrison said absently. “Smoking’s a terrible habit. I could never snog a smoker.”

Tom’s attention shot to the other boy, and a delighted smirk crept along his lips. He loved it when Harrison wasn’t paying enough attention to censor himself.

All of a sudden (before Tom could work out how to best tease Harrison), his attention was caught by the child wandering in front of them. Whilst Tom had initially dismissed her, he now noticed how she watched everything with an eagle eye, very serious for her age. She was tiny, but crackled with contained anger. Like something used to being unnoticed, growing still more dangerous as eyes drifted over it.

“She’s a funny little thing,” Tom said, watching as the girl- Meissa?- carefully stepped around a pile of owl droppings and gave a little skip, like she was delighting in the filth.

“She’s been stuck in a house with her depressive mother and dying brother for most of her life. I don’t think she has a full grasp on ‘normal’. I’ve been trying to take her outside more.”

Tom gave a slow nod. A poor grasp on normal. He could respect that.

“…So, about that snogging comment-”

“Oh my god.”

Finally loaded up with textbooks, Harrison, Tom and Meissa made their way into Quality Quidditch Supplies.

“I just need some gloves if I’m gonna try out this year,” Harrison said, raising his voice to be heard over the crowd. The Quidditch supply shop always looked terribly crowded from the outside- Tom had just never thought that he’d have to actually go in. There was even a radio in the corner,
broadcasting some kind of sports… thing to an eager mob.

“You still want to try out for that ridiculous venture?” Tom asked, an unimpressed eyebrow adding extra emphasis. Nothing wore him out like sports. They were ridiculous, hyper-masculine ego-trips with very little benefit. (Tom, funnily enough, was rather terrible at anything to do with a ball.)

“Yeah,” Harrison agreed happily. “I love Quidditch.”

“Why?”

“It’s fun.”

“It has no real value.”

“I could say the same about Arithmancy, and that’s not even fun.”

Tom bristled. “No, you couldn’t say the same about Arithmancy, because Arithmancy happens to form the basis for-“

“-Every spell and potion ever made, I know, I’ve heard it before,” Harrison rolled his eyes, and then inhaled sharply. “Oo, is that the new Quidditch Quarterly?”

As Harrison dived towards a magazine stand, Tom blinked. He’d never been cut off quite like that before. “You’ve ‘heard it before’?”

“Mmm,” Harrison hummed distractedly, buried in the magazine. “Hermione was into all that Arithmancy stuff.”

“She was, was she?” Tom said, not sure if he was affronted or amused. “I’m beginning to think Hermione and I are the same person.”

“Don’t worry, you’re much more sadistic than her- did you know that they’re releasing the Cleansweep Five soon? The broomsticks these days all seem so medieval…”

On the nearby radio, the tinny voices rose to a soft yell as something ‘significant’ happened. A loud roar rose from the gathered crowd, and a fight promptly broke out.

“It’s loud,” the little girl said, pressed close to Harrison’s side.

“It is rather busy in here, isn’t it?” Tom asked, his lip curling in disgust as a harried-looking mother chased after her offspring, knocking her handbag into Tom’s chest.

For a moment, he and the child were united.

“You could always wait outside,” Harrison offered, ducking a broomstick as it was swung overhead by an enthusiastic first year and picking up a pair of brown leather gloves to inspect.

“That might be a good idea,” Tom agreed, and snapped out a sharp “watch where you’re going,” to an over-excited store assistant. God, he hated Quidditch.

And then, out of nowhere-

“Take Meissa with you,” Harrison ordered, pushing the girl towards Tom.

Tom, possibly for the first time in his life, was struck speechless.
“I… I… but…” His lips were moving, but no sound came out. He’d never experienced anything like it. “What am I supposed to do with a child?!”

“Just take her where you’re going.”

“But she’s all… little, surely there are safety measures-“

“Don’t sell her to child traffickers and you’ll be fine.”

“I hardly think that’s written anywhere in a parenting manual.”

“But it should be, shouldn’t it?” Despite Harrison’s surface carelessness, Tom didn’t miss the steel in his eyes as he glanced up from a page. “And if she gets hurt, I swear to Merlin, I’ll kill you. Or worse, I’ll set Myrtle on you.”

There was a pause between them, and Tom knew they were both remembering the last time a young girl had stood between them. Tom felt a stab of something that might have been guilt- Harrison had looked heart-broken when the Warren girl was scared.

"I’m putting trust in you, Tom," Harrison said very deliberately. "Don’t let me down.”

And that was how Tom Riddle found himself stood outside Quality Quidditch Supplies with a child hanging from his robes.

“I don’t let anyone push me around,” Tom said very quietly, like he had to convince himself.

The little girl gazed up at him seriously. “I’ve only known you for an hour and a half, and even I know that’s a lie.”

“Harrison Peters,” Tom said very grimly, “is turning out to be the exception. I don’t like exceptions.”

“You might as well accept it,” the little girl said, and Tom got the impression that she was laughing at him.

“You’re very… loquacious, all of a sudden,” Tom said distastefully, glancing down at his new attachment.

“I’m precocious,” the girl recited, obviously from experience, and then smiled. Tom wasn’t sure if eight year old’s smiles were supposed to be so unnerving. “Want to see something interesting?”

Well, Tom considered. He had nothing better to do.

“Mother goes here when she wants table toppers,” the girl- Melissa?- explained, leading Tom into Knockturn Alley.

Tom had been delighted when he learnt of their destination. The further they got down the inky street, the more relaxed Tom became, as he felt dark magic trail careful fingers down his spine. The heavienss of being in a goddamn Quidditch shop lifted from his shoulders. This was where he belonged.

Tom was very familiar with Knockturn Alley, but Melissa led him towards a shop he’d never frequented before. ‘Borgin and Burkes’: Tom read the sign above the entrance with interest as Melissa pulled them confidently into the shop.
They had barely taken two steps before they were accosted by an old man with a thick thatch of white hair lying thick over his forehead and a self-important dinner jacket. “Welcome to Borgin and Burkes!” the man greeted them, his enthusiasm wavering as he saw that they weren’t wealthy purebloods. His expression brightened upon second inspection of little girl.

“Meissa Black!” the man declared dramatically, sweeping into a low bow (so that was her name). “Back in my establishment! Well, I never. How’s your mother?”

“Still crying herself to sleep each night.”

“Good, good,” the man said, patting Meissa on the shoulder. “Bring her around soon. Who’s your friend?”

“This is Tom Riddle,” said Meissa. She turned to Tom. “Mr Burke is the owner of the shop. Everyone comes here.”

The man chuckled, and Tom was witness to an elderly man desperately try to ingratiate himself with an eight year old. Pureblood society was weird. “You flatter me,” Burke almost cooed.

“No, I don’t,” Meissa replied unemotionally. “It’s the truth.”

Burke just kept grinning, and fished around in his pocket. “Would you like a sweet? I get them just for madames like yourself.”

Tom was fairly sure that someone had once mentioned something about children and strange sweets, and he could only imagine Harrison’s face if he brought back the child poisoned.

“I think Meissa will have to do without confectionaries,” Tom said firmly, taking a step forwards and drawing the old man’s attention. “She’s only just had lunch, after all.”

“Of course,” Burke agreed.

“May I be excused?” Meissa asked, tugging on Tom’s sleeve.

Tom shooed her away. “Yes. Go and play with the severed heads.”

Meissa didn’t need more prompting than that, and disappeared amongst the shelves of curiosities with something close to eagerness.

When Meissa was far enough away, the veneer of respectability fell away from Burke, his shoulders sagging with age, his jaw sharpening defiantly. He looked Tom up and down, pursed his lips, and shuffled away behind his counter, taking up a cloth and resolutely beginning to polish the wood.

Tom took his opportunity to inspect the book selection; all of them ancient-looking and leathery (one bound in what Tom swore was human skin). He tilted his head to read the spine of ‘Torture Methods for the Modern Man’, and pulled out ‘Housekeeping Charms with Bite’. He especially liked the page on heating up saucepans until they melted into the flesh of whomever touched it.

Tom’s attention was at last drawn to an inconspicuous little volume.

“Death’s Hold Will Loosen,” Tom murmured, tracing a finger lightly over the title. He took a quick scan of the introduction.

Death’s permanence has never struck magical creatures as hard as it does wizardkind. Phoenixes have forever possessed the ability to cycle through lifetimes like slipping into a new robe, renewing
and rebirthing with a surge of fiery glory. Unicorn’s blood holds valuable qualities that can retrieve one from the brink of death and restore life, often used in early childhood by unicorn mothers to save their children from a dangerous developmental period. Vampires are forever frozen in time, caught in an idealised snapshot of their death throes and saved from their own mortality.

Wizards have no such gift. All attempts to gain immortality whilst retaining humanity have ended with terrible curses. Drinking unicorn blood for a mortal is like poison, gifting the recipient with a twisted half-life which leads only to the agony of a tattered soul and eventual suicide. Men who try to tether themselves to life forcibly face similar conundrums. The horcrux, first discovered by Herpo the Foul, is magic dark beyond comprehension, involving the manual splitting of one’s own soul. Whilst a horcrux does bind one to life, the fate that comes after the heart stops beating could, perhaps, be considered worse than the ruination it seeks to prevent.

Endless myths warn against searching for an escape from the Grim Reaper's grasp. The Tale of Three Brothers is a traditional bedtime story, telling of three powerful items; the Deathly Hallows, each individually cursed, that once united can save the user from oblivion by elevating him to Master of Death. No such occurrence has ever been proved, but the dark, blood-splattered past of these items only proves how irreparably intertwined wizardkind and Death have always been.

But do these myths hold any weight? And can eternal life be achieved, whilst circumventing the curses and doom that so closely follow? It is the hope and life’s work of so many that, if wizardkind could lift themselves out of the mortality they share with their muggle counterparts and live forever victorious, Death’s hold might, finally, loosen.

Tom felt a spark of interest as he read of the Deathly Hallows, but those were just myths. A horcrux… now that was real.

“80 galleons to read it,” Burke called out, and Tom smiled politely before pointedly placing the book back on the shelf. As the man glanced away, Tom waved his wand and sent the book slipping down into the space behind the shelves. He didn’t imagine Burke cleaned very often- hopefully it would remain there until Tom came to collect it. He’d see what time the shop closed.

Job done, he moved closer to the old man, leaning casually against the wall with a very open posture. Burke eyed him suspiciously, before putting down a cloth and ending all pretence of polishing.

“Babysitting’s an odd job for a young lad like you,” Burke announced, eyes narrowed and bushy eyebrows creased.

“It’s a favour,” Tom smiled politely.

“If anything happens to Ms Black, I imagine it’s your head on the chopping block,” Burke said, his threat utterly unsubtle. What a sad attempt to wrestle power in the conversation, Tom thought with disappointment.

“If anything happens to her, I imagine we’ll be checking her pockets for sweet wrappers,” Tom replied easily, wiping a speck of lint from his sleeve.

“Yes,” Burke said, his smile harder. “There are some odd characters on Knockturn Alley.”

“Aren’t there just?”

Burke fiddled around with beneath the counter, and Tom wondered if the old man was currently pointing a wand at him. How cute.

“Are you going to buy anything?”
“Oh no,” Tom mused, glancing around at the objects surrounding him. “I’m sure I could never reach any of your prices.”

“Just have to see what Ms Black comes up with, eh?”

“Such is the way of the world.” Tom wandered towards a mirror, cracked straight down the middle, and glanced at the price. 60 galleons. “You established this shop yourself?”

“Way back in 1863. It must seem ancient to a young ‘un.”

“Oh, he died young.” Burke lowered his voice to a disagreeable mutter. “Although suddenly his son wants to take up the co-ownership. Now that he’s lost that fancy job on Diagon, he’s finally ready to ‘lower himself’.”

“I’m sure you don’t need the help,” Tom said graciously. “Your collection is quite extensive.”

Burke’s chest swelled in the way that elderly men’s chests did when complimented. “It is, isn’t it?” he said proudly.

Tom took a look around the shop, standing up straighter and sliding his hands into his pockets, the picture of youthful curiosity. “This seems an interesting place to work.”

“Yes, you get to know everyone in a shop like this,” Burke said wistfully, finally relaxing under Tom’s interest. “I’ve had some characters in here, I tell you. I’ve had the goddamn Minister in here. Under a glamour, of course- but folks like that never realise how obvious they are. I even had a descendent of Slytherin, though telling the truth she wasn’t much to look at.”

“A descendent of Slytherin?” Tom asked sharply, his attention caught.

“She was a huge thing; nine months pregnant, I wager. Staggered in here desperate to sell it- I suppose she was running from an abusive husband or the like. Well, she sold it alright. 10 galleons- best deal of my life.” And Burke grinned, clearly very pleased with himself.

“It?”

“Slytherin’s locket.”

Tom’s eyebrows shot up.

Burke chuckled. “I know. That was my reaction, but I checked and it was the real bloody thing. I don’t think she had any idea what was stuffed down her shirt. There weren’t any tits, that’s for sure.” He smirked at Tom, expecting the other to share in the joke, and didn’t notice when Tom only let out a flat ‘ha’.

“Did she give a name?” Tom asked, perhaps a touch too eagerly.

Luckily, Burke was caught by his own story now, eager to share the details. “I think she did, yes. Can’t bloody remember it though- I might’ve written it down.” Burke turned around to select a book from the shelf behind him, taking one from the middle of the row. “Here we are. December, 1926. It
could have been yesterday.”

“That’s when I was born.”

“You sure know how to make someone feel old,” Burke said wryly, and finally found the page. “Ah, here we are. Slytherin’s locket, purchased for ten galleons from one Merope. It doesn’t appear she gave a second name.”

So it was her. His mother. Tom had known she’d been desolate and abandoned in London, but… it was odd to receive confirmation. He smoothed his expression, but Burke must have noticed some kind of reaction, as he asked: “you know her?”

“Vaguely,” Tom said with an uncertain lilt, mask securely back in place. “The name sounds familiar.”

“Funny. I always assumed she crawled off somewhere to die. Lots did, in those days. It was a different time.”

“Perhaps she did,” Tom shrugged. “I may be mistaken.”

Burke sighed, and lent forwards thoughtfully. “I tell you, all this talk about that trinket has me missing it. One of my biggest regrets: selling that locket. And to Hepzibah Smith too. It’ll never see the light of day again with that goblin guarding it.”

“Why did you sell it then?”

“Because this is a shop,” Burke snorted. “It’s our job. Ah, if I’m honest though, there are some pieces I keep back. There’s a necklace in the back that I’m very fond of. A few portraits. I only wish I’d done the same with that locket. Smith never sells anything in her collection- it’s vanished into the void.”

“I’m sure that’s not true, sir,” Tom said lightly. “No one’s immoveable. You just have to find the right incentive.”

Burke quirked an eyebrow, looking Tom up and down, assessing.

“So you have an interest in artefacts do you?” Burke asked, limping around his counter. Burke only came up to Tom’s chin, but he carried himself in a way that suggested he felt ten feet taller. Tom found the old man’s delusion quite precious.

“Certainly. I find the history of pureblood families utterly… fascinating.”

Tom picked up a house elf bone bracelet and glanced at the price tag. 5 galleons and 12 sickles—ridiculous.

“You know, a lot of folks on this street have a problem with mudbloods,” Burke said abruptly. “I don’t. I think starting from the bottom gives a man incentive. Teaches him when to blend and when to stand out. Makes him… flexible.”

Tom rankled at the assumption, but gifted the man with charming smile anyway. “Valuable skills,” he agreed.

“I always thought so.”

“Look!” Meissa’s little voice echoed through the shop as she wandered around the corner clutching a
vase to her chest. She held it up for Tom’s inspection. “It spits blood.”

Tom gave the object a perfunctory glance and confirmed that it did, indeed, spit blood.

Burke, charming fellow that he was, thought it relevant to mention that “if she holds that for another minute and a half, she’ll start to dissolve.”

Tom lifted the vase from Meissa’s grasp and placed it on a nearby table. “I think that’s our cue to leave. Harrison won’t be happy if I return you damaged.”

“He won’t care really,” Meissa said uncaringly. “No one does.”

“That’s certainly not true,” Tom disagreed. “Harrison is excruciatingly sentimental, even about you.”

Meissa, strange thing that she was, sighed like her own existence was an inconvenience, and slipped out of the door without another word. And then it was only Tom and Mr Burke left inside the shop.

“You know what? I like you, boy,” Burke declared, a calculating spark to his expression. Tom knew what he saw; handsomeness, charm and low-born enough to not be threatening. Tom could be a valuable asset.

The old man offered a business card. “Call me when you leave Hogwarts. Perhaps we can find a place for you here.”

“Perhaps,” Tom agreed, taking the card from the man. “Good day, Mr Burke.”

And Tom joined Meissa outside the shop, slipping the number into his pocket. It was always nice to feel wanted, and that locket sounded tantalising.

In Harry’s opinion, going back to Hogwarts couldn’t have been more overdue. Harry and Orion bid the two youngest Blacks farewell (Rigel burst into tears whenever Orion went out of view, and Meissa remained stubbornly emotionless). Melania and Arcturus luckily didn’t try to take them to the station, so they made it onto the train with minimal drama.

“They’ve never tried to take me,” Orion said wearing a small frown, once Harry had expressed his surprise. “I just tagged along with Lucretia.”

The Weasleys had always been Harry’s idea of a ‘conventional’ family, so it was very odd to realise that they were a rather idealistic family model. Not all parents hurried their children along to the train station fussily, wiping their faces and fixing their robes before running alongside the train and waving goodbye. Lily and James would have, though. Harry was sure of it.

Orion and Harry found a compartment on the train, heaving their suitcases into the top compartment. They took their seats, settling next to the window. (Harry ignored the younger students that passed by their compartment and openly oggled. He’d forgotten about the whole 'Saviour of Myrtle/Hogwarts' thing.)

“We’re going back to Hogwarts!” Orion declared eagerly, watching the bustling station with excitement dancing in his eyes. Getting out of the house had done him good.

“Yeah, we are. Hopefully this year will be less disaster-filled.”

“Disaster-filled?” Orion scoffed. “Last year wasn’t disaster-filled.”
“Daisy Meadowes’ murder, the petrifications, the prank war—”

“It wasn’t as bad as you’re making it seem.”

Before Harry could list any more of the terrible things that happened last year (carefully avoiding the summer), the rest of the Slytherins flooded in.

Tom was the first to join their compartment, entering with nary a knock and sliding his luggage alongside Harry’s, before smoothly taking a seat and burying himself in a book. Dolohov and Avery followed close behind, miraculously still friends despite their apparent dislike of one another. Harry wondered what bound them other than arseholery (but perhaps that was enough.)

Still, every familiar face that entered their compartment had his heart grow just a little lighter, until he felt almost like he did when sat on the train surrounded by Ron and Hermione. Familiarity and warmth at the end of a long summer.

This feeling lasted until Rupert opened his mouth.

“So I hear you’re engaged to Walburga,” Rupert grinned wolfishly at Orion, aiming a playful elbow at his ribs. “She ‘Walburgled’ your heart?”

There were groans from everyone in the compartment, but at the mention of Walburga, Orion’s expression dropped.

Rupert hadn’t seen the danger, and snickered. “Seriously though, well done. She’s got great tits.”

“I’d appreciate you not talking about my fiancé like that,” Orion said, his jaw set.

“Sorry, mate. It was just a compliment.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Tom said, not raising his eyes from his book. It was one of those old ones: bound in dusty old leather that could be human skin for all Harry knew, and it showed an ominous grim reaper figure creeping over the cover of the book, extending a beckoning finger. It looked extremely cheerful. Despite Tom’s averted face, Harry could see that his brows were slightly furrowed, in what Harry had come to know as an expression of disapproval.

Rupert snorted. “Walburga having nice tits isn’t a compliment?”

Tom sighed. “It was more of an invasive observation about Walburga’s body when she isn’t here to object. A compliment is defined as a ‘polite expression of admiration or praise’. I didn’t see anything polite about your choice of phrasing.”

Rupert rolled his eyes and shuffled back defensively, further into his seat. “None of my girls ever complained,” he muttered.

“No,” Tom said, his lips curling into a smirk, “not out loud.”

(“You okay?” Harry murmured to Orion, who returned a small smile and said, “of course.”)

But Rupert wasn’t done yet, and turned to Atticus (who Tom was far less likely to defend). “Your Daddy get kicked out of any more clubs yet?”

Atticus gave Rupert a snide glare. “My father’s financial situation is none of your concern.”

“Jeez, calm down, Atty-lad,” Rupert chuckled, sinking back into his chair. He glanced around the subdued compartment. “Tough crowd. I take it everyone’s backstories got a whole lot sadder this
“Actually,” Atticus said loftily. “Despite what you appear to believe, I had a wonderful summer. We had dinner with the Vice Minister many a time. It was wonderful.”

“’Many a time’, eh?” Rupert mocked, adopting a heightened upper class drawl. “Fancy.”

“Yes, it was,” Atticus said defiantly, crossing his arms.

The door to the compartment slid open partway, and Cassius’ face appeared in the gap. Harry’s stomach did that twisty thing that it always did whenever Cassius was involved- halfway between attraction and disgust. Cassius opened the door fully and wandered in.

“Has Rupert said his stupid thing yet?” he asked curiously, a comic hanging loosely from his hand. “There’ll be at least three of them.”

“He’s on his second,” Harry said wryly, and Cassius nodded.

“That sounds about right.”

“Are you going to join us, Cassius?” Tom inquired, finally glancing up from his book.

“Of course,” Cassius said, looking directly into Harry’s eyes even as his words were directed towards Tom. “Otherwise I might miss out on all the fun. This year’s going to be marvellous.”

Great, Harry thought, rolling his eyes. That wasn’t ominous at all.

Tom gifted Cassius a charming smile. “I’m glad you have such a positive outlook.”

“I’m not,” Harry muttered.

Cassius’ positivity rarely led to good things, in Harry’s opinion.

“Well, I think we’re going to have a brilliant time,” Orion said contently. “It’s our final year. All we have to worry about is homework and NEWTS.”

There was a series of disgruntled yells, and Orion was hit by several balls of scrunched-up paper.

“Shut up, Orion. I don’t want to think about NEWTS yet,” Rupert said, stretching languidly across the seat and whacking Atticus in the face.

“They will come,” Tom said warningly. “Whether you think about them or not.”

“You don’t need tho worry abou’ them, Thom,” Atticus said, covering his bloody nose with his hand. “It’th dithereht thor the reth oth uth,”

“I’ll still be revising, Atticus. We all should.” Tom flicked his wand in Atticus’ direction, and his nose cracked back into place.

“You got all O’s in your OWLS,” Atticus complained, rubbing his face gingerly. “You don’t need to pour over books until you can’t feel your eyes. Unless you feel like helping the rest of us…?”

“Actually, I was thinking Harrison and I could do some studying together,” Tom said with a genial smile.

Harry’s attention was snapped back into the conversation. “Wha’?”
“Well, you do still want to be an Unspeakable, don’t you? You’ll have to do well in your NEWTS to do Magical Theory TOADS.”

Oh yeah. In all the chaos of the summer, Harry had kind of forgotten that education was a thing. He’d have to buckle down this year if he wanted to stand a chance of getting home.

“Yeah, I might take you up on that offer,” Harry admitted. “I need help on Charms. Desperately.”

“And you aren’t… entirely useless at Defence,” Tom admitted reluctantly.

“Are you saying I’m better than you at something?” Harry asked, a delighted smile spreading over his features.

“I would never say that.”

“It’s Defence 'Against the Dark Arts' now,” Rupert said snidely. “My dad’s pissed. Says it’s an ‘outrage’.”

Harry suspected that was because Rupert’s father was a staunch supporter of Grindelwald, and wished for the subjugation of all muggles, but who was he to judge? (Just kidding, he did judge, and fiercely.)


Tom tilted his head. “I did flick through those textbooks we bought, Harrison, and they were rather… tame.”

“Dippet and Dumbledore are scared. They’re just halting the inevitability of the dark lord’s invasion,” Atticus said with great pomp, his smile very close to vicious. Harry, on the other hand, was very close to punching him.

It was then that the compartment door slid open once more, and the familiar figure of Caspar Grahams entered.

“Are we talking about the Dark Lord?” Grahams asked, a whine to his voice as he gazed at Tom for approval.

“We were just discussing his… increased proximity,” Tom said delicately. His look towards Grahams was carefully neutral, and Harry became suddenly sure that Tom loathed this snivelling boy.

Grahams didn’t appear to realise, and straightened up as he glanced around the compartment, realising he had an audience. He cleared the phlegm from his throat. “Well, did you hear about the attacks in Bristol?”

It was Atticus that answered, disturbingly eager. “No?”

Tom merely raised an eyebrow, and Harry was fairly certain that he knew exactly what had happened in Bristol, but was keeping carefully quiet.

Grahams looked delighted to know something of interest. “Grindelwald’s forces launched an attack on Bristol this summer, late July. Only muggles were killed or injured, so the Ministry is trying to keep the information from spreading. To prevent panic, I think. I only know about it because my father’s a newspaper editor and they were told to keep it quiet.”
“Very impressive,” Tom said quietly, and Grahams practically glowed.

“Well, if it was only muggles,” Atticus said, waving a dismissive hand. “Better them than wizards.”

“I’d say I’ve never heard so much bullshit before, but that would be a lie,” Harry said very coldly. “I know we’ve been over this, Avery, but it doesn’t seem to have stuck in your head. Every human life is worth the same.”

Rupert sniggered. “I’d hardly go that far.”

It all felt very familiar; events repeating themselves again. But this time, Harry wasn’t alone.

“I would,” Orion said fiercely, rising. “Harry showed me things this summer. Muggles are just like us, Atticus, but without magic. They’re not lambs for slaughter, or monsters in the night, they’re people.”

“They’re muggles,” Atticus said coldly. “Hardly worth reporting on.”

And then the biggest surprise of all, Grahams spoke up. “Everyone’s ‘worth’ reporting on,” he said, quivering slightly, but standing straight. “And m-muggle deaths should affect us just as much. I-if I were, perhaps, a halfblood, my m-mother’s death would be just as w-worthy to be talked about.”

Harry (and, indeed, everyone else) regarded Caspar Grahams with awe.

“This is why you have so many Hufflepuff friends,” Orion said slowly, understanding dawning.


Atticus sneered, an unpleasant curl to his upper lip. “Of course a Hufflepuff would support muggles.”

Tom cleared his throat. “Statistically speaking,” he said, very deliberately. “Muggles produce just as many magical children as purebloods do each year. They contribute to our society quite… monumentally.”

The shock of Tom Riddle almost taking a side seemed to jolt the compartment out of any tension that lingered. Granted, Harry thought, the opinion was more in favour of wizards’ gain than muggles in themselves, but… it was a start.

As the silence lingered on, Tom finally broke it.

“Thank you, Grahams, for paying us a visit. It was nice of you to stop by.” And with that, Tom dismissed Caspar Grahams, who flushed pink with pleasure at the acknowledgement.

“I’ll see you all at Hogwarts,” he said, the whine back in his voice, and stumbled out of the compartment.

“I can’t believe I suspected that guy of murder,” Harry said in wonder, watching Caspar walk into a window.

“You did what?” Orion asked.

Harry shook his head. It was far too elaborate to go into- it would take something like 4 hefty chapters to cover it all. “Nothing.”

They sat in silence for a little while: people getting out various books or scrolls and working quietly.
Rupert worked through a small pile of sweets, aided occasionally by Atticus. Atticus appeared to be sulking slightly, but Harry couldn’t bring himself to care. It was only when they began nearing the castle that Orion sighed and put down his quill.

“So many people left last year,” Orion said thoughtfully. “Abraxas, Lucian… Druella. It’s going to be odd attending school without your sister, isn’t it, Cassius?”

“Who’ll keep Rupert in check?” Tom drawled.

Rupert tossed his hair dramatically. “I don’t need to be kept in check. I’m a wild animal- nobody tames me.”

“Druella did,” Orion pointed out.

Cassius smiled secretively. “Oh, I don’t think we’ll miss her for long.”

A long pause, as everyone in the compartment narrowed their eyes and contemplated what Cassius could possibly be talking about.

Well, not everyone.

“…So if I can’t say how good Walburga’s tits are, can I at least comment on her arse?”

Harry sighed, remembering Cassius’ early warning. “And that makes three.”

Chapter End Notes

Aw, Tom’s so good with kids.

EVERYONE GO SEE THIS! It’s bloody brilliant. The details, and Tom’s badge, and Harry’s scars- and HARRY’S HAIR! Harry’s hair is incredible! I’m in love.<br />
http://wickedends.tumblr.com/post/163258068602/everyones-read-this-fic-right-right-%CA%83%C6%AA

AND THIS! Wtf is this beauty? Someone else agrees how hot Tom is when smoking (although bad Tom- don’t do it).<br />

GUYS, MORE COOL STUFF! I do not deserve this all. It’s gorgeous xx<br />
http://nephsech.tumblr.com/post/163810365612/heres-a-fanart-for-vivypotters-wear-me-like-a

Also, I have a goodreads page. This is the funniest/weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. Like an actual writer.<br />

I have my exam results this week. Help.
Harry tries out for the Quidditch team, Chloe Babbage is overwhelmed, and Tom's life plans are questioned.

LAST TIME: Harry attempted to draw Orion out of his moping by inviting Walburga for tea. Orion and Walburga reached an agreement about the terms of their marriage and Orion was cheered, but Harry was less optimistic about the future. Harry and Tom became pen pals, and agreed to meet and go shopping. Harry brought along Meissa, but sent her off with Tom as he investigated the Quidditch shop. Tom and Meissa went to Borgin and Burkes, where Tom found a book on Horcruxes and a potential job offer. Finally, everyone headed back to school on the train (Harry and Atticus got into another argument and Caspar Grahams turned out to not be a terrible person), ready for another year at Hogwarts.

Harry fell into the pattern of a new year with ease. It said a lot that the most jarring moment had been Tom producing a Head Boy badge from seemingly nowhere and pinning it to the front of his robes, to much griping from Atticus.

“He gets everything,” Atticus had moaned, but he’d gone very quiet when Tom compared their OWL results, and disappeared for the rest of the day.

The addition of ‘Against the Dart Arts’ to Defence had caused some controversy. Tom had been furious when he'd investigated the library and found all ‘suspicious’ books removed from the main area. Apparently Dumbledore had hovered in the background smiling smugly, but Dumbledore seemed to spend most of his time regarding Harry with suspicion these days, so he suspected that Tom might have been embellishing somewhat. (Harry did wonder if the events of last year would ever stop haunting him, or if he’d forever be followed by Dumbledore’s bad opinion and a gaggle of awestruck first years.)

He tried not to think too much about it. Harry was ready for Quidditch. He’d been a little ‘out of it’ during try-out season last year- Harry had barely noticed them happening- but this time ‘round he couldn’t escape. He was practically surrounded by posters screaming ‘TRY OUT FOR QUIDDITCH’, ‘DON’T MISS THE SIGN UPS’, ‘BRING YOUR OWN BROOM’.

Which was how Harry found himself on a Saturday morning, broomstick in hand, strolling down towards the Quidditch pitch and accompanied by an aggressively bouncy Orion. Inexplicably, Tom had decided to join them, despite his renowned distaste for all things sport.

And he didn’t let them forget it.
“This is a ridiculous venture,” Tom announced, a drag of reluctance in his walk and his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Why are you coming with us, then?” Harry asked, rolling his eyes. “It’s a weekend. Go and plan world domination.”

“Well, this is all you’re going to talk about for the next week,” Tom said bad-temperedly. “I may as well witness your ridiculous flying spectacle.”

“I think it’s going to be fun,” Orion said positively.

“You think everything’s going to be ‘fun’,” Tom drawled. “I could tell you that I was going to curse you and you’d get all tingly with excitement.”

“Well,” Orion stretched out, considering, “it depends what curse you use…”

“Kinky,” Harry grinned, and Orion shrieked in disgust, shoving him. Harry snorted at how red Orion’s face had turned.

“That’s not what I meant,” Orion huffed.

“Don’t worry,” Tom said, his tongue rolling over the words almost sinfully. “Everyone likes to mix a little pain with pleasure.”

It was Harry’s turn to blush fiercely, mumbling something derogatory under his breath, and scowling. “I don’t know why you’re so cheerful,” he grumbled. “You hate Quidditch and you’re choosing to watch amateurs.”

“Well, if you embarrass yourself, I might as well be there to see it,” Tom said with a slight smirk, and Harry rolled his eyes.

But Orion wasn’t convinced. “Harry won’t embarrass himself- he’s great at flying. And you know that. I think you’re being supportive.”

Tom snorted. “That’s ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous.”

“So is Rachel Maddens’ poetry, but that doesn’t stop her. Why should it stop you?”


“One of the Slytherin chasers. I think she’s in the year below us? She tried to set up a poetry evening last year. It… wasn’t well attended,” Orion said delicately.

“Huh,” Harry nodded, committing that to memory. “So who else is already on the team?”

He wanted to know his potential team mates. Perhaps he should have gone to a game last year, but if he was honest, Quidditch had been the last thing on his mind. And it had been painful; the idea of a going to a Quidditch match without Fred and George’s jokes, a match where Colin Creevey’s camera lens wasn’t snapping away, a match where Harry wasn’t playing. Quidditch had given him some of the best moments he’d ever had at Hogwarts.

Orion frowned, and Harry imagined he was flicking through his mental record of seemingly everyone in the school. “Well, Chloe’s the Captain this year. She’s a beater.”

“Chloe Babbage?” Harry squinted, his mind conjuring up a cloud of red-tinged hair and similarly scarlet lipstick.
“Yes—she’s in Potions with us. Disaster with a cauldron. She’s a little silly, but vicious with a bat. She once knocked out six of Artemis’ teeth in one swing,” Orion said admiringly. “Matthew Stein’s the other beater. He’s gentler. He tries to aim away from people, and tends to protect the seeker, I think. And Leo Piper’s a chaser. I don’t really know him,” Orion frowned thoughtfully. “He’s very quiet, which could mean anything in Slytherin.”


“Yes, there were lots of seventh years on the team last year, and all of the current players are sixth or seventh years. I think they’re going to try and fill it up with lower years this time.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably, repositioning his broomstick on his shoulder.

“But don’t worry!” Orion said brightly. “You’re brilliant. You’ll definitely get in.”

“And if not, you’ll have gained the valuable boon of more study time,” Tom mentioned, perhaps in an attempt to be comforting. He failed.

“I wasn’t nervous before,” Harry grumbled.

Orion looked heartbroken. “No, don’t be nervous! The Quidditch team has never had anyone as good as you on it. Christina was okay, but she was always more of a tactician than a flyer. She just wanted to be on the team. You fly…” Orion seemed to struggle for the words, and then his face brightened. “You fly like you were born with wings.”

Harry’s face heated. “That’s so sweet.”

“Perhaps you should join Rachel’s poetry evening,” Tom suggested wryly.

“I did try to take part in that, actually,” Orion said thoughtfully. “But she said my poetry didn’t fit her ‘aesthetic’.”

Harry cocked his head. “Well, what was yours about?”

“A niffler taking his first steps.”

“And hers?”

“ Mostly death. I think she dressed up as Hela, from Norse mythology? It was quite impressive.”

“A real delight at parties,” Tom smirked.

“Hey! Rachel’s got a lot of depth!” Orion protested.

“Such as?”

“Er…” Orion brightened, and brandished a finger triumphantly. “She likes puppies! She rescued one this summer. Called it Sky.”

Harry shook his head in disbelief. “How do you know everything about everyone? I barely even know our year-mates.”

“I like to make a point of getting to know most of the first years at the beginning of the term. Definitely the Slytherins, at least. It’s useful if they need any help. See!” Orion waved enthusiastically at a first year standing in the corridor, who beamed back. “That’s Max Babbage. Chloe’s brother.”
“You’re so nice,” Harry said, holding back a coo.

Tom let out a soft breath of laughter. “Orion’s not quite as selfless as he makes out. He has a neat little web of favours owed to him by the children of some very influential people.”

“I help everyone equally!” Orion protested. “Some of them just happen to be connected to the Wizengamot. It’s generosity”

“It’s how you got a personalised tour of the Ministry Warding Department.”

Orion couldn’t argue with that.

The Slytherin Quidditch try-outs were probably fairly busy by usual standards, but as Harry gazed around the pitch, he was surprised by how few people had turned up, especially compared to what he could remember of Gryffindor try-outs. Maybe it was because those try-outs had the attraction of ‘Harry Potter: Boy Who Lived’ or perhaps there were just fewer people in this year, but it came as a little bit of a shock. He mentioned it to Orion.

“Oh, plenty of purebloods think Quidditch is undignified,” Orion shrugged. “You wouldn’t catch Atticus dead on a broom. Although he probably would actually die if he tried, because he’s rather terrible at flying- anyway, I meant it like the phrase. More people try out in the other houses, I think. Derrick told me that Hufflepuff had loads. It’s mostly just Slytherin.”

Orion grinned cheerfully like he hadn’t just reminded Harry that he’d been sorted into the house of Satan, and dragged Tom away towards the stands, calling out well-wishes. Harry wondered glumly why he hadn’t been sorted into Hufflepuff. Or Ravenclaw. Or Gryffindor! But no, he thought grimly. He ended up in the house of the snobs who didn’t even properly like Quidditch.

“You look like someone sat on your chocolate cauldron.”

Harry startled at the familiar voice coming from somewhere to his right. He glanced over his shoulder and blinked, not trusting his eyes. Stood there, decked out in sports robe and sporting an easy grin, was: “Druella?”

Druella gave him a snarky little wave. “Hullo Peters. Bet you didn’t expect to see me here, huh?”

“But-but you left! You definitely left!”

“And I came back.”

There was a long stretched out pause as Harry tried to remember if it was possible to just ‘come back’ to Hogwarts once you turned eighteen. If so, he was definitely trying it.

Eventually, Druella got bored of Harry’s confusion. “I’m here as an Assistant Quidditch Instructor. I referee, schedule, do a bit of teaching- Madam Erkings can’t really handle it anymore, bless her. She’s getting a bit old. Keeps tipping off her broom.”

“But I thought you wanted to do professional Quidditch?”

“I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go pro or not. The female teams are rather underrepresented in the leagues- they don’t even count them sometimes. And it would be bloody awkward working in the sports department at the Ministry, after that… whole proposal debacle, seeing as Cygnus is Head of
something or other. I was a bit stuck for what to do, but Professor Dippet owled me about a free position free here, so I thought I’d go for it.”

“That’s amazing,” Harry said earnestly.

“Yes, it is,” Druella grinned. “My mum’s a little bit disappointed that I’m ‘ruining myself with a career’, but Dad’s quite delighted. He always wanted a sporty son, and apparently I’m just as good. And Mum doesn’t really mind, so long as I’m happy.”

“I’m glad. It’s nice to see that someone’s happy, at least.” Harry found his gaze involuntarily drifting towards Orion.

Druella’s gaze followed his. “I did want to thank you, for that day in the summer. You, er, really saved me there.” She tore her gaze away from the stands and smiled softly at Harry. “You’re a good sort, Peters. I’m glad you turned up when you did.”

In that moment Druella’s face was lit up, the soft, dappled sunlight sending sparks flying in her hair and painting a healthy glow onto the apples of her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled with good humour. Harry could understand exactly why Walburga fell in love with Druella, and he blushed.

“It’s fine. It was just a bit of ice cream.”

“Well, you might have infected strawberry and pistachio with the tang of sadness, but I think it was worth it,” Druella grinned. “And now I’ll be around for the rest of the year to keep Rupert in toe.”

“I’m sure he’ll be delighted,” Harry said, remembering how Rupert had jubilantly crowed the night before, as he described all of the girls he could chase now that Druella wasn’t around to swoop down like a harpy of judgement (somewhere in the castle, Mariana Wheelan’s left ear went bright red). Hopefully Harry got to be the one to tell him about her return.

“So you’re trying out for the team, eh?”

Harry shrugged. “I thought I might as well.”

“No, I think it’s a good idea.”

“Tom didn’t agree.”

“Oh, don’t listen to Riddle,” Druella said, shaking her head exasperatedly. “I don’t know where all of his enmity towards the sport comes from, I could never get him to try actually watching a Quidditch match. Anyway, I think it’s good you’re trying out. And between you and me, if you get onto the team, Chloe’s going to need all the help she can get. I fully support her blurring of gender roles, but I once watched her put sugar onto a cheese sandwich and eat the entire thing without noticing because she was distracted by a moth. I’m not entirely sure how the whole ‘leadership and tactics’ thing is going to work out for her.”

“Sounds like Slytherin’s going to do great this year,” Harry said doubtfully.

“Perhaps I’m being a bit negative,” Druella admitted. “She’s a brilliant flier. Have you heard about that time she knocked out six of Artemis’ teeth?”

“Yeah, Orion mentioned it.”

Druella chuckled, shaking her head. “Classic Chloe. But she’s a lovely girl- and our second female captain! It’s unprecedented.”
There was a moment of silence between them as they watched the students spill onto the pitch, chattering and jostling excitedly.

Druella sighed. “I’ll tell you what, though: it’s really bloody weird to see try-outs happening without Christina.”

“She was the last captain, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah. We may not have agreed on most things, but she was a genius. Of course, she’s engaged now. To a Crabbe, no less! It’s a disgrace.” Druella shook her head and tutted, a move which Harry suspected she had borrowed from Walburga. “Oh, they’re calling you! That’s Chloe, over there.”

And Druella pointed to a girl who was waving an enthusiastic hand, her reddish-bronze hair (tied up in a bun and secured by her wand, it looked like) shining like a beacon against the green of the grass.

“I know,” Harry agreed. “She’s in my Potions.”

Druella snorted. “Good luck with that. She burned down a laboratory in her third year- Slughorn nearly had an aneurism.”

“That does sound like Chloe.”

“Well, I’d best be off. Try not to get knocked off your broom, yeah?” Druella said bracingly, and awkwardly patted him on the shoulder. She retreated quickly, disappearing into the stands, presumably to watch the proceedings and make sure nobody died.

Harry wandered towards Chloe along with the rest of the gathered players, his broom a familiar weight in his hand. They ended up gathered in a corner of the pitch, milling uncertainly as Chloe turned away to consult a solemn-looking girl beside her. Harry ran his fingers through his hair, and mused how nice it was to anonymously attend Quidditch. No bias, no expectations- just the sport.

He had spoken too soon. Before long, one of the younger boys screamed rather shrilly and pointed an accusatory finger at Harry.


The boy fired off several rapid sentences that had Harry’s brain racing to catch up. Mostly, his mind began flashing red lights and blaring alarms of ‘CELEBRITY RECOGNITION ALERT’, barely enabling him to stutter: “N-no that wasn’t me.”

The young boy blinked, and turned bright red, the shade standing out starkly against his dark, almost black hair. He looked mortified. There was a long pause, as Harry saw the people around them mutter uncertainly. He crossed his fingers- maybe he’d get away with it this time.

Once again, fate was not on his side.

“Yes, it was,” one small fourth year said finally, with what seemed like a lot of unprovoked aggression. She was tiny, and Harry might have mistaken her for a first year if she’d been… less anatomically developed. As it was, he reckoned she was around fourth or fifth year. Despite her gruff demeanour, she was angelic-looking: all fine blonde hair and blue eyes, like a porcelain doll.

“Oh yeah?” Harry raised an eyebrow. “And how do you know?”

She scowled derisively. “The patchwork gives it away.”
And then she gestured to his scars, which Harry always managed to forget he had. His hand shot up defensively to his face, and he instinctively went to hide the golden lines creeping up his neck.

“I like it!” the boy said firmly, all smiles now that he’d been proven right. “It looks almost like *Kintsugi.*”

There was a murmur. As Harry glanced around, he saw mixed reactions to the Japanese term; a boy turned and spat on the ground, another boy smiled, and a group of girl whispered excitedly.

The girl sneered, but it was not as vicious as it could have been. “Remember your audience, Rowling. And what side of the war we’re supposed to be on.”

“It’s my heritage,” ‘Rowling’ said stubbornly, his little chin raising, and Harry noticed now that there was a slant to his eyes.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” the girl grumbled. “Don’t know why I fucking bother.”

“Watch your language,” Chloe chided, turning her attention back to the group.

“You don’t have authority over me yet,” the girl said defiantly, crossing her arms.

Chloe looked rather flustered at the girl’s irreverence, but she gathered herself back together quickly enough. “What’s your name then?”

“Rachel Beastone. Your new keeper.”

“Oh,” Chloe blinked, glancing between the morose girl next to her, and the tiny thing, still swearing. “Well, this is going to be confusing. I know!” she declared, clapping her hands delightedly, and pointed excitedly at the small girl. “You can be Bea! For ‘Rachel *Bea*stone’. Get it? And you’re a sharp little thing.”

Chloe seemed very pleased with herself, but ‘Rachel Beastone’ growled. “Why don’t I get my own name? I’m more interesting, faster, and in every way more superior to her.”

And the newly christened ‘Bea’ brandished an accusatory finger towards the solemn girl next to Chloe, who Harry was coming to realise was probably Rachel Maddens; the mysterious poet.

“Well, Rachel’s older and she’s been on the team for longer. And I like her,” Chloe said, raising an eyebrow and twirling a tight red curl around her finger. “You might not even need a nickname. You’re not our keeper yet.”

“I will be,” Bea promised savagely.

As the try-outs began, Harry realised that Bea was probably right.

Bea flew like a wasp: darting through the air, every movement powered by angry passion. She loved flying- it was obvious. And her love gave her speed. Harry had perhaps not quite believed that this tiny little elfin thing could possibly keep up with the game, but he was quickly proved wrong. She rocketed from hoop to hoop, broomstick flicking and slicing from seemingly nowhere to send the quaffle rocketing away towards the other side of the field. Hummingbirds couldn’t compare.

The rest of the keepers were good, but none of them quite matched up to Bea’s effortless agility. And she knew it. She watched the other keeper candidates with a smug little smirk, crowing loudly every time one of them faltered or missed. She was deplorably talented.
Rowling- the excitable fan- kept up a steady chatter next to Harry, describing over and over again how cool he thought Harry was and recounting an interview he’d done with Myrtle for the school newspaper, which was apparently a thing (but didn’t have very wide circulation). He only stopped talking when Chloe began reading out names for the Chaser try-outs, and ‘Peter Rowling’ was called.

The Chaser try-outs took much longer but they were at least a little more evenly matched. (Harry watched Chloe’s energy and focus throughout get steadily weaker and weaker, and wondered if she’d make it to the end). Peter was very good; fast and light with balls of energy. He was, however, knocked out of the sky by a bludger when he glanced down to check that Harry had seen a particularly good pass.

Peter wasn’t necessarily the best: there was another boy, whose age Harry couldn’t quite work out, but he had a very aggressive arm and managed to throw the quaffle through the ring from midway down the pitch. And another girl, perhaps a seventh year, seemed to know exactly where the quaffle would end up before it was even thrown.

The choice would be difficult- Harry supposed it depended on exactly who was already on the team. Whether Chloe wanted speed, power, or accuracy. Harry, if it were him, would probably go for the girl.

At last, the Chaser try-outs were over and it was Harry’s turn.

“Oh hello, Harrison!” Chloe said, looking rather frazzled; flyaway hair curling around her ears as she clutched her clipboard for dear life. “I didn’t know you were trying out.”

“I forgot to put my name up,” Harry admitted. He hadn’t gone through this whole process the first time around. It was actually very odd actually having to fight for his place on the team- it had always just sort of been there.

“That’s fine,” Chloe said breathlessly, looking like nothing in the world could have been less fine. She glanced down at her clipboard and her eyes widened. “Oh no,” she murmured in horror, and turned away to bury her head in the papers.

The potential seekers- Harry thought there were perhaps six of them- glanced uncomfortably at each other and wondered whether they should say something.

“So are you good at seeking?” Rachel Maddens asked suddenly, making eye contact with Harry. Her voice was low and gravelly, and she raised an eyebrow like she was just daring him to comment.

“I, er, think so?” Harry replied.

From across the pitch, Orion’s faint voice bellowed, “HE’S GREAT!”

Harry realised with embarrassment that they must be using some kind of listening charm. Probably Tom’s doing, at that kind of range.

“A strong commendation,” Rachel said, voice still just as quiet, but this time with a hard little smirk.

Harry felt himself shrinking back, envisioning the fires of hell rising to bathe her shoulders (Hela had been a really good choice). Harry took a deep breath and steeled himself, remembering that she was both a year younger than him, and as willowy as the whomping tree of the same name.

“He gets excited,” Harry said firmly. “He’s a good friend.”
“His poetry isn’t very good,” Rachel hummed, but she appeared appeased and gently nudged Chloe. Chloe jolted and spun back around.

“Right!” she said, her eyes very wide. “This is fine. There are only six of you, so we can do something a little more ‘fun’,“ Chloe looked like she doubted her own definition of the word. “I’m…” she lowered her voice and muttered sideways, “Rachel, what am I going to do?”

“You’re going to release five-“

“-right, I’m going to release five snitches, and we’ll see how many you can catch in fifteen minutes. They’ll stay in a small space, about forty metres wide, to make it easier. You don’t need to catch them all- it just gives us a chance to see some different manoeuvres. We’ll go in the order on my list because otherwise I might cry, so Harrison, you’ll be last.”

Harry agreed that was fine.

Chloe took a deep breath. “And so up first we have Alicia Smythe?”

A girl, athletically-built with dark, sweat-covered skin stepped forward, looking utterly terrified.

“It’s all about self-belief,” Chloe said very encouragingly. Alicia Smythe went grey, swayed, and then ran to the side of the pitch to promptly throw up.

“Oh dear,” Chloe fretted, and looked torn between running to help the girl and carrying on. Rachel solved the problem by marching over to Alicia and patting her on the back with an air of great suffering.

“Wonderful!” Chloe forced a bright smile. “Max Hughes?”

Harry was a little taken aback by the high standard. Every seeker managed to catch at least one snitch in fifteen minutes which was pretty impressive, seeing as it took professional seekers hours to find one. Harry supposed that having five snitches in a small space raised the chance of catching one pretty significantly, but still- there was a faint patter to his heart that he hadn’t felt since first year as his name was called and he took to his broom.

As his broom rose in the air, it wobbled slightly. Harry’s heart gave a leap this time- his broom had never done that before. The whistle blew, and somewhere at the back of his mind, Harry realised that meant he now only had fifteen minutes. 900 seconds. To catch five snitches. No big deal.

He felt a bit dizzy. Why had he never noticed how high brooms went?

Desperate to distract himself, Harry glanced over at the stands and saw Orion and Tom sitting side by side. Orion was whooping loudly, waving his hands in the air. Tom, on the other hand, was leaning back in his seat, arms crossed. Harry could just imagine his smug expression and how bloody unbearable he would be if Harry didn’t get on the team- and the fear melted away. Fuelled by the desire to punch Tom Riddle in the face- as he often was- Harry fell into a perfect corkscrew dive, and fastened his fingers around a golden snitch.

The rest of the time seemed to pass in a blur. All Harry could remember: the feeling of wind in his hair; fogged glasses as he squinted through the lenses; and chill metal against his fingertips, quickly slipped into his pocket. It wasn’t until his feet rested on the ground that he became aware of his surroundings again, and the raucous applause from the stands.

Harry pushed a hand into his pocket, still trembling from the adrenaline racing through his veins, and withdrew it heavier. He dropped one, two, three, four, five snitches onto the grass, and the world
seemed to hold its breath as he stared down at the glistening golden shells, counting over and over again.

Peter Rowling’s voice pierced the silence with a high screech. “THAT WAS AMAZING, YOU’RE AMAZING- mph!”

Harry wondered what he did to deserve Colin Creevey’s ancestor finding him in the ’40s. He looked for the boy and spotted him clutched close to Rachel Madden’s chest, a hand secured over his mouth and still faintly mumbling. Rachel ‘Bea’ Beastone was stood behind the pair, glowering at Harry in such a way that made him fairly sure that she was imagining him on fire.

“That was very impressive,” Chloe said, her eyes very wide, trotting towards him as quickly as her heels allowed. She knelt down to scoop up the snitches, inspecting them closely. Harry wondered if she thought he’d conjured them. “All five!” She declared, and started to scribble down the information with the desperation of a drowning woman.

“You’re very attached to that clipboard,” Harry said.

“I forget things otherwise,” she said, tongue poking out from the corner of her mouth in concentration. “In one ear and out the other. That’s what Rachel says.”

Harry watched for a few more seconds before taking pity on her. “The quill’s upside down,” he pointed out.

“Oh, yes,” Chloe said, turning very red. As she attempted some kind of fiddly manoeuvre to flip the quill over, it fell out of her hand. Harry bent to pick it up and Chloe must have too, because he suddenly felt blinding pain in his head, and when the white spots on his vision cleared, Chloe was lying on the grass.

“Do you want help up?” Harry rubbed his head gingerly and peered down at the girl, who wasn’t making any signs of movement.

“Just leave me here to die,” she groaned. “The team list will be up Monday evening.”

Harry nodded uncertainly and began to edge away, feeling certain Rachel would come to help her fallen teammate. As he wandered towards the stands, he thought he heard Chloe’s faint mutterings of “never should have taken the job…” and “don’t know how Christina did it”.

Yes, he agreed, catching sight of Druella’s wild curls bobbing behind a crowd of heads at the side of the pitch. Chloe Babbage was a bit all over the place.

Orion was beside himself with excitement as Harry came towards them, barely able to talk other than to assure Harry that he would definitely make the team. Harry thought- slightly resentfully- that Orion and Peter should start a fan club (which reminded him that someone might actually have set one up towards the end of last year, and he hoped to Merlin that had died a swift death).

Tom was the real surprise. He nodded reluctantly, and admitted that: “You were good. Better than the others, anyway. It wasn’t complete torture to watch.”

“That was almost approval,” Harry said cheerily, and considered hugging Tom to properly get the sarcasm across.

He didn’t quite go that far.
Tom had spent a lot of the summer considering death.

Apus Black’s untimely demise, despite Tom not having known him, had made the problem appear very immediate. Death could strike at any point and Tom was currently unprepared. That had to change. There would be no ordinary, unremarkable gravestone for Tom. He would have processions.

“What was it called?” Tom muttered, trailed a finger along the book spines in the ‘History of Magic’ section. “Ah yes, a horcrux.”

The book he’d picked up at Borgin and Burke had been frustratingly vague on horcruxes, and had mostly focused on magical creatures and the Deathly Hallows. Apparently horcruxes were too wretched for even that book. And so Tom had waited patiently. Hogwarts had one of the most expansive libraries in Britain- it had to contain something on horcruxes. Remembering that it had been dark magic (soul magic usually was), so it would probably be in the restricted section, Tom began to wander over towards the back of library. Before he could slip past the rope, however, Madam Longstock blocked his path.

“I’m sorry, Tom,” she said, with a genuinely apologetic expression. “But Professor Dippet has increased the age restriction to cover all years. You’ll have to get permission for any books you want from the restricted section now.”

Tom froze, and his jaw locked tightly. This had Dumbledore written all over it, and- though he hated to be self-centred (somewhere in the castle, Harry laughed suddenly and had no idea why)- Tom couldn’t help but feel like this had something to do with him specifically.

“That’s a terrible shame,” Tom said very delicately. “I had something rather important to do.” He drew himself up to his full height, adopted a charming smile, and stepped a little closer. The librarian had always been very ‘friendly’ to Tom- it was time to exploit that.

Madam Longstock turned pink, and giggled (which a woman of 40-something should never do). “Oh?” she asked, her voice a little higher. “What was that?”

“Just a personal project. It’s not for any subjects so I’m just…“ Here, Tom stepped a bit closer, tilting his head to look down on her with a suggestive smirk. “…A little concerned that perhaps the teachers might not be… receptive to granting me permission for a little pet project of mine.”

“Well…” Madam Longstock hesitated, her pupils very dilated. (Tom felt a distant stirring of disgust- she wasn’t a strictly unattractive woman, but she was at least double Tom’s age.) “It wouldn’t be anything bad would it?”

“Oh, nothing of the sort,” Tom assured her smoothly. “And it does seem rather ridiculous, doesn’t it? To keep wizards who are already 17.“ Tom smiled suggestively “-away from a few books?”

“A little ridiculous,” the librarian agreed, her voice never rising above a low hush.

“So it wouldn’t be the end of the world if you let me have a little nosy through, would it? And the teachers don’t need to know… It would be our little secret.”

“Our little secret.”

Tom let the corner of his lips turn up, and gently moved Madam Longstock to the side. “Thank you so much, Rachel,” he murmured softly. “I won’t forget it.”
And then he strolled past her, his shoulder barely brushing hers, never looking back. From the silence behind him, he envisioned the librarian staring after him, barely daring to breathe. Tom smirked, and plunged into the restricted section.

It actually took Tom surprisingly little time to find information on horcruxes. He headed straight for the darkest magic possible, and, after flicked through a few options, quickly found *Secrets of the Darkest Art*. It seemed like the kind of book that would include information on splitting one’s soul (the real clue was the glazed-over human eye embedded in the spine).

Tom heaved open the heavy cover (weren’t there lightening spells? Book-binders should be notified). He trailed a careful finger down the contents page and let out a soft breath of triumph as his eyes alighted on a spikily scrawled ‘horcruxes’.

“You always get what you want, don’t you?”

The familiar voice had Tom’s entire frame tensing. He turned his face slightly so it was in profile and murmured: “Cassius. I didn’t know you were joining me.”

Cassius let out a light hum, and from the thud, Tom guessed he had dropped a book of some kind onto a nearby table. “Honestly, why is no one ever happy to see me?”

“Perhaps you should work on a less ominous entrance if you’re looking for a warm welcome.”

Cassius laughed this time, like Tom had accidentally stumbled on an inside joke. “You’d know all about dramatic entrances, wouldn’t you?”

Tom finally relented and turned around fully, the tome clutched securely to his chest. “Or maybe you should cut down on the smug chuckles. People tend not to like feeling mocked.”

Cassius eyed Tom curiously, like the entire world was reshaping before his eyes. “No. No, you wouldn’t.”

Tom rolled his eyes (there was no point trying to translate Cassius- he was vague for the vagueness’ sake) and retrieved his wand from his pocket. He’d shrink down the book and take it back to his dorm to read in peace. “How did you get in here?”

“Well, I certainly didn’t seduce anyone,” Cassius said. “I just walked in. It was easy, because the librarian’s in her office now, you know, bent-“

“-I really don’t need to know what she’s doing,” Tom said firmly, his stomach rolling at the thought. “It doesn’t matter. Sacrifices had to be made.”

“And you’re certainly looking at a big one right there,” Cassius raised his eyebrows at the shrunken book that Tom was tucking into his pocket, like he could see straight through the cover and into the contents. “Have you talked to Harrison about that?”

“Why on earth would I talk to Harrison?” Tom nearly did something undignified, like snort. Cassius was talking as if Tom needed ‘permission’.

“You’ve only got a few strikes left. Splitting your soul is a fairly serious business.”

“Keep your voice down!” Tom snapped, half-expecting Dumbledore to spring from behind a book
shelf and declare ‘ah ha!’, but the library was silent. “I still don’t see what that has to do with Harrison.”

Cassius tilted his head and smiled slightly (Tom got prepared for the proverbial ‘bombshell’). “Well, if he’s going to commit to someone, he’d probably prefer a whole soul. More ‘bang for his buck’, if you will.”

“Commit? With Harrison?” Tom’s cruel laugh sounded more derisive than he felt. “You may have finally cracked, Cassius.”

“Perhaps,” Cassius shrugged. “But you’ll never stop thinking about it now.” And he wandered out of the library, whistling softly.

Tom wrestled down his urge to curse him.

Monday morning dawned, and all Harry could think of was the Quidditch list finally being up at the end of the day. It was the only thing on his mind right through Potions, Herbology and lunch. Orion was almost as excited as Harry, which didn’t exactly help Harry to calm down or focus. He was a bag of nerves.

“You’ve definitely got it,” Orion said, his voice loud enough that Harry tried to shush him as they walked into the Defence classroom.

“Maybe,” Harry said slowly.

“‘Maybe’? Chloe would be crazy not to pick you.”

Harry hoped so. He’d tried to catch Chloe’s eye during Potion and maybe see if he could tell who she’d picked, but then he’d remembered that distracting Chloe during Potions was a terrible idea, and would end in a Hospital Wing visit for the whole class.

“Matthew McKinnon was pretty good,” Harry pointed out.

“Matthew McKinnon caught one snitch and then forgot about the others.”

“But he caught it very quickly-”

“Is this a conversation that we all need to be privy to, boys?” Professor Merrythought asked sternly. Harry and Orion grinned at each other, but obediently shut up and sat down. “I thought not.”

Merrythought’s voice wasn’t as sharp as it usually was, and as Harry inspected her carefully he thought she looked wearier than usual. Age hadn’t seem to touch her before, but now it was draped over every line and shadow of her face. She looked tired; slumped against the edge of her desk where before she would have stood tall.

Orion probably saw the concern playing over Harry’s face, and leaned over to murmur to him. “Her wife died in the summer.”


“Yes,” Orion replied, like it was obvious. “I mentioned it last year.”

“You said she couldn’t get a husband, not that she was married to a woman.”
“Oh,” Orion looked a little taken aback. “Isn’t it the same thing?”

Product of the times, Harry reminded himself, product of the times. “No, it’s not. Think of Druella and Walburga.” Harry immediately regretted his words, as there was a flash of sorrow across Orion’s face, but he seemed determined to soldier on.

“Well, that’s different,” Orion justified. “That’s Walburga and Druella.”

Harry decided that a DADA lesson probably wasn’t the place to educate Orion on generalisations, but he added it to his mental checklist. Maybe he’d throw him into a room with Druella later and have him repeat what he’d just said. Harry got back on track. “How did her wife die?”

“They were holidaying in France, and there was some kind of attack. Merrythought fought her way out. Her wife wasn’t as lucky.”

Harry thought that Merrythought might have heard- she twitched as she finished writing on the board, but she didn’t even glance at Orion or Harry as she turned back to the class and gestured to the words scrawled across the board: ‘Defence Against the Dark Arts’.

“The more observant of you may have noticed something different about your schedule,” Merrythought said, crossing her arms and surveying the class with a steely eye. “I’d like to clear that up. It wasn’t a misprint, it wasn’t a mistake. The name of the course has changed this year, from ‘Defence’ to what you seen written before you. This is part of Hogwarts’ new scheme to protect its students against the rise of Dark Magic and those it would harm. Of course, you could also call it excessive and intrusive censorship, but then I’d be fired, so let’s not.”

There was a rumble of aggrieved mutterings from the gathered Slytherins, and Harry glanced around to see them all looking mutinous once more.

Merrythought ignored them. “Now normally I’d use the first lesson of seventh year to demonstrate the Unforgiveables for you.”

The aggrieved mutterings turned into loud chatter, and Orion turned to Harry with wide eyes. “I thought that was just a rumour,” he breathed. Harry stiffened- the last lesson he’d had on the Unforgiveables hadn’t exactly been a resounding success, especially not the ‘teacher demonstration’ bit.

“Shut it!” Merrythought shouted, and the noise died down. “If you’d bothered to keep listening, you’d have heard the addendum: ‘on rats’. Despite what people may say about me, the first years are quite safe. But I’ll admit that I’m… perturbed by this alteration to the course. In my opinion, students often have to see the spells for themselves to truly understand. Unfortunately, there are those- whom I think this is unnecessary. So we’ll simply be discussing the spells today. Can anyone tell me what the Unforgiveables are?”

A Gryffindor that Harry didn’t recognise stuck up his hand and reeled off the three spells with a look of intense concentration.

“Very good,” Merrythought nodded approvingly. “That textbook must almost be digested by now.”

The Gryffindor looked confused, and Harry heard a distinct exhale of amusement from Tom, who had sat behind Harry today.

“But what about the things a textbook can’t tell you?” Merrythought said with increasing urgency, prowling across the front of her classroom. “Like how the Cruciatius curse feels. How the Imperius curse is remembered. How the Killing curse looks.”
“Like someone being killed,” a girl at the back piped up.

Merrythought barely deigned that worthy of her interest. “Don’t be an idiot, Masters.”

“A flash of green light,” Tom suggested, and Merrythought snorted.

“First page, Evanson’s History of Death.”

“Painless.”

“Second page.”

“Quick.”

“Third page.”

Finally, Harry spoke up, his voice barely rising above a murmur as, before his eyes, a woman floated to the ground, her red hair flashing through the air. “It looks like a breath.”

Despite the low volume, his voice sounded like a yell. The class- perhaps the whole world- held its breath. All eyes focused on Harry. Merrythought raised an eyebrow.

“It looks like a breath,” Harry continued, hands clenched into fists where they rested on his desk. “Like they took a breath, and forgot to ever take one again.”

“And how is the Imperius curse remembered?” Merrythought asked, equally as quiet, holding very, very still.

“It’s like… wanting to do something so badly that every moment you’re not doing it feels like dying.”

“And how does the Cruciatus curse feel?”

“Like tearing your ribcage apart, one sliver of skin at a time. It’s…” Harry paused, searching for the words. “It’s your spine, bending into your body and up through your neck. It’s the world on fire. It’s thinking the pain will never stop, because there’s never been anything but pain.”

“That’s it,” Merrythought murmured. “That’s what we’re missing. Personal experience.” She turned back to the class and the moment broke, but Harry felt Tom’s eyes burning into the back of his neck and Orion’s fingers curled around his tightly. As Harry’s breathing slowed, he realised that his hands were shaking. The world itself felt shaky.

The rest of the lesson felt like it passed in a blur. Merrythought explained a little of the history behind the curses and then read out some personal accounts, which Harry found chillingly tame, even as the students around him regarded their teacher with obvious horror.

It was as the bell rang and people began to hang pack away that Merrythought dismissed the class and said, “Peters, stay behind.”

Harry exchanged a look with Orion, who shook his head minutely and remained exactly where he was, even as everyone filed out.

“Black, you can go,” Merrythought said pointedly, but Orion stood his ground.

“I’m not leaving Harry here,” he said firmly.
“For Merlin’s sake, I’m not going to murder him,” she said exasperatedly. “There’d be no point unless the rest of the class was here to make notes. Get out before I curse you.”

Orion didn’t move.

She sighed. “You can wait outside the door. Go on.”

Harry lightly pushed Orion’s shoulder, who looked at him a little like a wounded puppy.

“Get out,” Harry said gently. “I’ll be fine.”

Orion slipped uncertainly from the room, but not before giving Harry one last glance. Professor Merrythought leaned back against her desk and exhaled slowly, watching Harry like a hawk. Her gaze was kind, though.

“That was quite the poetry back there, Peters,” she said gently. “Personal experience, eh?”

Harry shrugged stiffly. “I’ve seen things.”

Merrythought hummed. “Want to be more specific?”

“I think I’m good.”

Merrythought considered Harry carefully, her lips tightly pursed. He hovered awkwardly, and wondered whether he should sit down or whether he could leave yet. When Merrythought was done with her perusal, she knitted her fingers together and took a deep breath.

“My wife died this summer.”

“Professor, I-”

“I know the news doesn’t come as much of a surprise-“ Her gaze was knowing, and Harry’s ears pinked. “—but the staff ‘sensitivity’ meetings were all about empathy, so I’m trying something new. I’m afraid it might get... personal.” Merrythought's face twisted at the word.

Harry nodded, because what else was he supposed to do? He sat.

Merrythought began slowly. “This summer… *Merlin*. I was an auror for 20 years and I’ve been a teacher for what feels like decades. You see some terrible things on the job, but I’ve never experienced anything like that attack… It was raw, staining, even their laughs crawled on your skin— it was humanity at its worst. The *hatred-* her breath caught. “And then there was Di, lost in the midst of it. The bodies, and the screaming— those poor children— and then she’s lying on the floor like she’s just fallen asleep.” She coughed uncomfortably. “So I’ve ‘seen things’ too.”

Harry wasn’t sure what to do as his teacher’s eyes glistened, so he reached forwards and gingerly patted her arm. “I— it’s okay,” he mumbled.

“No, it isn’t,” Merrythought told him, her voice gaining some strength. “But that’s not a bad thing. It’s not weak to feel, Peters. Or to suffer. But you can’t let it stop you.” Her jaw tensed. “You make it push you on. Forwards. It’s not always easy,” she admitted. “God knows, there are days when I want to lie in bed and never face the world again. But I do. I’ve learnt that you can miss someone and live on without them. People do it every day.” She smiled sadly. “I’ve read your file, Harrison. I know what happened to your family, and I’m deeply sorry. Missing is the hardest thing you can do.”

Merrythought conjured a tissue, and instead of patting her face like he’d thought, she held it out to
Harry. That was when he realised he was crying.

Harry missed them. He missed Hermione, and Ron, and Luna and Neville and Ginny. He missed his parents. He missed Hagrid. He missed Sirius. They could be dead in a ditch, struck down by that fatal flash of green light, or held under agonising pain, or forced to murder their loved ones, and he wouldn’t know. The lesson had shaken him.

“You let them push you on,” Merrythought repeated, like the words were foreign to her own ears. “That’s what you do. And I want you to know, Peters, that you can talk to me. Or someone else, God knows I’m not the most empathetic of people. I hear Albus is good at that kind of thing, uses his beard as a tissue or some other bullshit. But I am always here. And technically so is your head of house, of course, but Horace is useless at anything not involving fame or chocolate.”

Harry nodded his thanks, but didn’t think he could say anything without his voice breaking.

Merrythought sighed heavily. “Merlin, I’m good at traumatising children.”

Privately, Harry agreed.

“So what do you want to do with yourself eventually, eh?” Merrythought asked, clearing her nose and sweeping to her feet; the model of detached professionalism. “An auror? You’re not bad at duelling.”

“I-I want to be an Unspeakable,” Harry said, the quiver in his voice nearly under control.

Merrythought did a little double-take, looking Harry up and down. “Are you sure?”

Harry nodded.

“You know how theoretical their work is, don’t you, Peters? That’s really not your strength, your practical work is where your real talent lies—”

“No,” Harry said, more firmly. “I need to be an Unspeakable.”

“Well, you’re going to have to work your balls off then.” Merrythought marched towards her diary and flipped it open, writing something down in very small, very neat handwriting that seemed entirely opposed to her personality. “There. Two sessions a week: Fridays and Sundays, two hours of theory work. I’ll find out from your teachers what you need to work on, and we can make sure you get the grades you need. The TOADS application needs to be in after your NEWTS—”

“-Professor, what are you doing?” Harry asked, his head spinning with all this new information.

“I’m pushing you on,” Merrythought said briskly. “Did you get that? Friday and Sunday- that shouldn’t interfere with your Quidditch practises.”

“Quidditch practise?” Harry echoed. “I don’t even know if I got in yet.”

Merrythought rolled her eyes. “Oh, you got in.”

That evening, Harry stood in front of the common room noticeboard for ten minutes straight, a stupid smile fixed firmly to his face.

**QUIDDITCH TEAM**

*Thank you to everyone who tried out and if you weren’t successful, remember there’s always next year!* - C.B
Well, what did you know? Merrythought, as per usual, had been right.

Evening couldn’t come soon enough for Tom. His day had been long, painful and dull, and he just wanted to sleep.

Orion greeted him from an armchair beside the fireplace. “Good evening! How’s your day been?”

“Fine,” Tom said shortly.

Orion wasn’t fazed, and pointed excitedly at the noticeboard. “Look at the Quidditch team list!”

Tom couldn’t stop a little smile from slipping onto his face as he wandered over and read Harrison’s name. No matter how much Tom loathed the sport, he had to admit that Harrison was a talented flyer. He’d looked free, dangerous (and yet strangely beautiful). Like a bird of prey: an eagle perhaps, or a falcon. Tom hadn’t been able to keep his eyes off of him.

Cassius’ self-satisfied smirk slid to the front of his mind, and Tom’s smile dropped. What was he doing? He felt like a teenage girl: mooning over someone sitting on a bloody plank of wood.

Tom climbed up to the dormitories in a distinctly grumpier mood, pushing open the door with a bad-tempered huff. Which was why it took him a second to notice Harrison sat on Tom’s bed, holding a thick, black-bound book and reading intensely. Tom immediately recognised the book, and his mind began racing. How had Harrison found it? He’d left it on his bed with deterrent charms and no one went near Tom’s bed, not since he ‘educated’ them all in first year… Oh. But Harrison hadn’t been there. Tom had forgotten.

Tom moved slowly towards the bed, anticipating Harrison’s reaction. As Tom came to a stop just in front of the boy’s bent figure, Harrison’s gaze shot up from the page and they linked eyes.

It was then that Harrison tipped forwards and threw up onto Tom’s robes.

“What are you doing?” Tom stumbled back in alarm, his upper lip curling in disgust. “Have you been poisoned?”

“Horcruxes?” Harrison said, his throat scratched and his voice raspy, but not raspy enough to disguise the snarl. “Horcruxes, Riddle?”
“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Tom said, shuddering at the feeling of the vomit soaking into his pores. “It’s just some light reading.”

“The page was bookmarked.”

Tom hesitated, searching for an explanation. “It’s not illegal to research.”

“I don’t see why you’d need to research this. It’s horrific,” Harrison spat.

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business what I’m reading—“

“This involves murder, Riddle. I’ve just made it my business.”

“How did you find it? It was on my bed—“

“That’s not really the issue here, is it?” Harrison’s jaw clenched. “I was looking for a quill. Apparently you were looking for a prison sentence.”

“It was simply curiosity—“

“Don’t lie to me!” Harrison’s voice rose suddenly, raw and unrestrained. “I am not in the mood.”

The air around him crackled, and Tom took an uncertain step back. He wasn’t sure what to say.

“Don’t you understand, Tom? This is disgusting. Physically repulsive.” Harrison lowered his voice, like he could barely stand to speak the words. “It’s eating someone.”

Tom didn’t have an answer to that.

Harrison ran a hand unsteadily through his hair, looking vaguely deranged. “I know you’re scared of dying, Tom. I get it. Apparently you want to fucking cling onto life so desperately that you’re thinking of fucking cannibalism! But you’re not going to do it.”

Tom bristled. “I don’t think you have any say in that.”

Harrison wasn’t having any of it. “I can forgive you for Lestrange, because he was going to kill me and I’m grateful for being alive. I can forgive you for Myrtle, because every day I see her smiling with her friends, solid and alive. I can forgive you for a lot of things, most of which you haven’t even done yet.” Harrison’s face flickered, and it was so open and coarse and hurting. Then he snarled. “But not this. Never this.” Harrison grasped the front of Tom’s robes and pulled him very close, mindless of the slick vomit. “Do you understand?!” he hissed, furiously. “I will never speak to you again! You will never see me again! Promise me.”

“I won’t give up my goals,” Tom said, but the certainty wasn’t there and he didn’t fully understand the stabbing pain in his chest at the idea of Harrison gone.

“It will go wrong,” Harrison seethed. “Listen to me: I’ve seen it, it will go wrong. You’ll end up a pathetic wraith- it won’t be worth living. And you will die in the end, I guarantee it.”

There was something in Harrison’s voice that betrayed truth, and Tom felt a chill of fear at his warnings. Whether it was cigarettes or horcruxes- Tom didn’t want to die. His world fell apart and swiftly reassembled as he snapped to a decision. “I understand.”

“See, I don’t believe you.” Harrison stepped away, regarding Tom with immeasurable sadness. “I want to, but I just don’t.”
“I promise I won’t use them,” Tom repeated, and he didn’t know why, but he reached out and lightly brushed his fingers against Harrison’s face. “I’d rather avoid that potential scenario.”

Harrison nodded tightly, his eyes flickering down. The energy drained out of him, and he seemed lesser.

“I’ll take the book back,” Tom promised, to himself and Harrison. “I’ll find another way.”

“Another way? You don’t need to live forever, Tom. Can’t you just deal with what you have?” Harrison shook his head, and it was so clear that he just didn’t understand.

“I won’t be insignificant,” Tom said. “I’m going to be someone. Remembered.”

“That isn’t the only way.” Harrison rubbed his eyes, sighing. “We live on through memories. People who love us.”

And what happens, Tom wondered grimly, when you don’t have one of those? But Tom didn’t say that. He said: “So what about when they die? Who remembers you then?”

Harrison flung his arms up. “Why do you need to be ‘remembered’ or ‘important’ if everyone you care about is dead? Who cares?”

Tom couldn’t answer. Harrison just didn’t understand. Tom refused to feel insignificant: a guttersnipe who could die unnoticed. And he wasn’t going to depend on anyone else for recognition, or anything as fleeting and flighty as love. Tom would rewrite the history books.

“Just no horcruxes,” Harrison sighed.

Tom’s eyes flickered down and his lip twisted. “No horcruxes.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been pretty distracted by general loneliness and sadness this past month or so, so this chapter is pretty damn late XD Sorry about that.

But my exam results went well! (They were my GCSEs, which- for all you non Brits- are the big exams you take at 16, which you use on your CV and for applications to A-level courses and sixth forms, which are the final stage of examinations before uni.) And I’m totally boasting and very proud when I say that I got all A*s XD

I’ve reached a point in my life where I’ve printed off some of the fanart for this story and hung it up in my room. I’m there, right now. That’s the low I’ve reached. (So if you do art, maybe you’ll end up on my bookshelf. There’s some quality motivation, right there.) (I’m only kidding, there is no motivation, I deserve none of this))

Btw, shout-out to Angel_of_Mysteries, with whom I had a conversation that literally had me rolling on the floor I was so happy and flattered. And she also writes great fanfic so, y’know, that too.
Chapter Summary

Harry meets his team mates, Orion is busy, and Tom reluctantly takes up the challenge.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: Harry tried out for the Quidditch team, and his parents (Orion and Tom) came along to support him. He ran into Druella, discovering that she'd been offered a position as an Assistant Quidditch Instructor, and learnt that Chloe Babbage was now the Captain of Slytherin, taking over from the legendary Christina Day. Chloe was a little disorganised, and Harry met Rachel Maddens (Chloe's solemn best friend), Peter Rowling (an enthusiastic fan), and Rachel Beastone/Bea (a vicious little doll). Harry proved himself on the pitch, and became Slytherin's new seeker. Meanwhile, Tom flirted his way into the restricted section and found a book on horcruxes, despite warnings from Cassius. The first 'DADA' lesson was on Unforgiveables, and Harry produced accurate descriptions of their effects (wonder why), earning the curiosity of Professor Merrythought. Merrythought revealed the death of her wife, and offered to give Harry tutoring to help him become an Unspeakable. Harry discovered Tom's book on horcruxes and the revelation that cannibalism is the key, and talked Tom into looking for other methods. For now...

TRIGGER WARNING: Attempted sexual assault. Nothing actually happens and its not successful, but please keep yourself safe. It’s just after Harry and Tom hear a war cry if you want to avoid it x

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first Quidditch meeting had Harry’s stomach rolling in equal parts terror and excitement. He already knew most of the team (although he wouldn’t say he ‘knew’ Rachel Maddens. Feared her, perhaps), but there were still two teammates left to meet. They were both male, too, and- call Harry biased- but he’d had a lot more luck with the females of Slytherin than the males. The girls tended to be less openly prejudiced- though Merlin only knew if that statement still stood for Walburga. He was trying not to think about it.

Despite the nerves, Harry made his way down to the Quidditch pitch bright and early on a Sunday with cautious optimism. Orion hadn’t been allowed to accompany him (the phrase “not my mother” had been thrown out there), so Harry felt significantly more vulnerable than usual. It was like missing an arm. It was actually a little concerning that he’d become so co-dependent- after all, he couldn’t bring Orion when he went back home.

“Harrison!” Chloe squealed. She looked more put-together than she had at try-outs, and her complexion was considerably less blotchy. Her hair was tucked away into a scarf, which Harry found amazing when he remembered quite how much hair Chloe had.
“Chloe!” Harry said cheerfully, hiding his nervousness with a smile. “Everyone here yet?”

“Oh yes, you’re the last,” Chloe said, not seeming to notice the stone of anxiety that dropped in Harry’s stomach. “Come and meet everyone!”

Harry followed obediently. You could only really understand after meeting Chloe, but it was very difficult to argue with her. She had such a confused earnestness that it felt rather like kicking a puppy. She and Orion combined would be an unstoppable force.

In the middle of the pitch the rest of the team was waiting. (Peter gave Harry an enthusiastic wave.)

“No now that everyone’s here, we can introduce ourselves properly!” Chloe declared. “Wait a moment, I wrote it down…” Chloe fished around in her bag, reaching her entire arm up to her elbow into the little leather clutch. She brought out a roll of parchment and scanned over it, letting out a little triumphant ‘ah ha!’ as she found what she wanted. “So how about we go around, and everyone says their name, position and an interesting fact about themselves?”

Everyone groaned simultaneously. At least they all shared a hatred of icebreaking activities.

“I’ll go first! My name is Chloe Babbage. I’m a beater! And my puppy, Sky, just turned a year old.” She turned to her right. “Rachel?”

Rachel inclined her head solemnly. “Rachel Maddens, chaser. And both of my feet are webbed.”

Harry blinked in slight surprise. As he glanced around the circle, no one else seemed to have reacted.

“She’s very good at swimming,” Chloe agreed. “Matthew?”

Harry had to admit that he found ‘Matthew’ slightly intimidating: tall, wide-set, with a very Crabbe-esque bump to his nose. But then he smiled warmly, the sunlight warmed his hair to a honey-gold and the resemblance melted away. “Hello everyone. I’m Matthew Stein. I’m a beater, and I’m a fan of J.R. Juniper.”

Rachel’s dark frown suggested that she may have disagreed. “He’s a disgrace to literature,” she grumbled. “No imagination.”

Matthew raised an eyebrow. “He’s romantic—“

“It’s not romantic, it’s insipid. Chloe, you agree with me.”

Chloe shrugged. “I’ve only read one so I can’t judge. It was really long. And boring.”

Bea decided to add her two knuts. “His books are a load of hippogriff crap.”

“Exactly!” Rachel said triumphantly, brandishing a finger.

Chloe frowned. “I feel like you’re both taking this very personally.”

Bea sneered. “His books are just pathetic wish-fulfilment for people who want to pretend that they’ll be loved one day.”

“That’s why they’re good,” Matthew protested.

“Maybe we should move onto Leo!” Chloe’s smile was very pointed.

Attention turned to the quietest member of the group. He was built like a beanpole: a long neck and a
thin face with sharp cheekbones. His hair was combed into a neat partition, and he studied the group like assessing for weakness.

“My name is Leo Piper,” he said, choosing his words very carefully. “I’m a chaser. And I enjoy chocolate frogs more than anything else in the world.”

Harry thought that Leo might have been one of the oddest people he had ever met.

Chloe nodded acceptingly. “And now for our new members! Peter.”

Peter shrank under the weight of all eyes on him, but he gathered his courage. “Um, I’m Peter Rowling. I’m a chaser, apparently, and I, uh.” Peter paused, his brow furrowing. He seemed to consider something. “…I moved from Japan when I was five.”

Harry saw Matthew glance sharply at Peter, but apparently decided to keep his mouth shut.

“And I write for the school magazine!” Peter declared, and grinned proudly.

“I didn’t know the school had a magazine,” Chloe said thoughtfully, and unnoticed to her, Peter’s smile dropped from his face. “Bea’s turn!”

“I didn’t agree to that bullshit,” Bea growled. “My name’s Rachel, Rachel Beastone. And I’m a keeper.”

There was a long pause.

“And an interesting fact?” Chloe prompted.

“I have nothing to say to any of you.”

“Fun!” Chloe said brightly, and turned her gaze onto Harry.

“Oh. Me now. Right. Merlin.”

“I take it that’s not your name,” Rachel said flatly.


Their answers had all been pretty rubbish, but everyone seemed too glad to have it over with to care. Chloe made one last effort to rally the troops.

“Well, I’m glad to have such a strong team with me this year. We’re going to do our very best,” Chloe declared with determination.

“And we’re going to win,” Bea said, crossing her arms aggressively.

“Perhaps,” Chloe agreed. Her gaze became distant, and she looked a little lost. “Though I do wish Christina were still here… Oh! What were…?”

Chloe turned around to consult Rachel, muttering something about dates.

Harry must have looked a bit worried, because Matthew Stein leaned in close and lowered his voice.
“Chloe’s a bit organisationally-challenged, bless her.”

“And she’s captain?” Harry said doubtfully.

“She’s got the spirit, and she always gets there in the end. It’s just that the things happening in her head don’t always come out the right way. She explained it once. There’s a lot going on in there that you can’t see.”

“Huh,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Well, anyway, this was just a meeting to get to know everyone briefly,” Chloe said, turning back to the group. “Our first proper practise will be Wednesday—"

“-Thursday,”

“Yes: Thursday, thank you, Rachel. Thursday evening. There is, however, a party tonight!”

*This* news got the team excited.

“It’s the annual Quidditch teams’ soiree. This year it’s down by the lake- 6 ‘til 11. It’s going to be a total bash.”

“But curfew’s at 10,” Peter pointed out, wide-eyed at the prospect of going to a *party*.

“Special dispensation!” Chloe practically *sang*, her hands flapping with excitement. “Don’t bring more than one plus-one though, okay? We only have so much Firewhiskey. And remember- if the teachers ask, it’s pumpkin juice. Meeting adjourned!”

A plus-one, huh? Harry knew exactly who he was going to ask.

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“Sorry, I’m busy tonight.”

“You’re busy?” Harry repeated, not quite able to believe it. Orion was never *busy*.

“I’m tutoring a third year in Runes. Professor Babbling says she’ll get me a placement with a Runes master if I can get them up to an EE.”

“So what am I supposed to do then?” Harry said, definitely *not* pouting a little bit.

“Ask someone else. You have plenty of friends,” Orion smiled widely, not seeming to recognise how ridiculous his statement was.

Harry slumped back in his chair and glanced around the Slytherin common room. The universe would end before he voluntarily spent time with Cassius, he’d actually murder Avery, and Rupert would insult everyone they… ah hah.

“Tom!” Harry called out, rising slightly and waving over at the Slytherin prefect, who was only just walking in through the portrait hole.

Tom glanced around in surprise, but wandered over towards the pair.

“Yes, Harrison?”
“Why do you keep calling him that?” Orion asked. “He’s called Harry.”

“Harrison is his full name,” Tom said evenly. “Who am I to diminish that?”

“Does it matter?” Harry asked, with more than a hint of impatience. He shifted around in his chair so he was facing Tom and said with utmost seriousness: “Will you go with me to the Quidditch party tonight?”

“Go with you?” Tom asked, a suggestive little glint in his eye.

“Not as a date or anything,” Harry said quickly. “Just as company. Friends.”

“I assume Orion’s busy then.”

“Well, yes. But that’s not why I invited you. I mean, I suppose it is- actually that’s the entire reason-but even if- I-”

“Relax,” Tom said, smirking. “I understand. I’ve come to terms with the idea that I’ll never live up to Orion’s magnificence.”

They both glanced over towards the afore-mentioned boy. It was just unfortunate that, in the moment, Orion was shaking his wand and holding it up to his ear, muttering; all in all looking rather deranged.

Orion caught their glance and said defensively: “I’m seeing if the charms have an echo!”

Harry raised a (judgemental) eyebrow.

“It’s for a theory!”

“What kind of theory?” Tom asked, but Harry severely doubted that he was in any way interested.

“If charm residue is ever stored in the wand core. And if it has a sound. Which is why I was… never mind,” Orion mumbled, and placed his wand back onto his lap. “So are you going, then?” He directed his question towards Tom.

“It’s just to help me know who people are,” Harry added.

“Well then, I can’t see any reason to object,” Tom said dryly. “I could never say no to a good party.”

“A party?!” And as if summoned, Rupert appeared, bearing a wide, eager grin. “Where?”

Harry exchanged a look with Tom. “It’s just for the Quidditch players. Besides you’d hate it-Druella’s going.”

Harry had no idea if Druella was going (probably not- he didn’t think many teachers went to those kind of things), but the suggestion seemed to do the job.

“Oh, that bitch,” Rupert grumbled. “I can’t believe I thought I was free this year. And Mariana was just coming ‘round too. Hang on- why’s Tom going if it’s for Quidditch players? No offense, mate, but you broke your arm to get out of Quidditch first year.”

“We get a plus one.”

“And you’re inviting Tom?” Rupert asked disbelievingly. “He hates parties. Only goes if there are at least three foreign diplomats and a member of the Wizengamot. Even Sluggy’s shindigs barely make
Harry shrugged. “I didn’t have anyone else to invite. Orion’s busy.”

“You could have asked Atticus,” Rupert said, very sadly. “You two are so close.” His expression of despair lasted for around ten seconds before he burst into hysterical laughter, practically sinking behind the sofa.

“I don’t understand how some people got into Hogwarts. You’d think they’d have an entrance exam,” Tom drawled with loud, pointed distaste.

“Sorry, Tommy-boy, do I not make the-” Rupert rose from behind the sofa and froze at something in Tom’s eyes. The room seemed to drop ten degrees, and Harry saw Rupert visibly gulp.

“I could have sworn that I just said something about proper names,” Tom said very pleasantly.

Rupert nodded, grinning awkwardly. “Right you are. I- I have to find Atty. See if he wants to crash the party.”

And Rupert fled as quickly as he had arrived.

“So what time does it start?” Tom asked breezily, turning his attention back to Harry, all signs of any threat vanished.

Harry wasn’t quite sure how to react. It wasn’t completely awful to see Rupert a little shaken though, so he merely quirked a quick smile. “6, I think? Down by the lake.”

“I’ll see you tonight then. By the portrait.”

And Tom swept from the common room.

“Well, I think that went well,” Orion said brightly, bringing his wand up to his ear again.

Harry hummed and gazed down at the fireplace. He supposed he’d find out.

——

Tom, of course, looked bloody gorgeous. Harry had exclaimed with low disgust when he’d seen him, wondering how a simple jumper and tighter trousers could make him look even better- his cheekbones were sharper than a slicing charm, and his hair was just the right balance between messy and well-groomed. It was frankly distasteful.

“You look nice,” Tom said pleasantly, looking Harry up and down with a faint smile.

Of course he’d say that, Harry thought very bitterly. Harry was a mess: wearing an odd amalgamation of Orion’s overly-formal cast-offs and his grubby trainers. No to mention that he’d run his hands through his hair so often it had stopped obeying the rules of gravity, and his nose bore an impressive dent from wearing glasses that Harry had never bloody noticed before.

“Thanks,” Harry said unconvincingly. “Shall we head down?”

Harry was tempted to offer his arm, but he thought that might be taking the piss a little. So he stuck his hands into his pockets and jerked his chin towards the portrait hole.

“Where are your manners?” Tom tutted, a wordless flick sending the portrait swinging open. A
smirk. “I only venture down to the lake with gentlemen.”

“You’re not as funny as you think you are,” Harry grumbled.

“I’m hilarious.”

“You have lots of talents, Riddle. None of them are comedy.”

“What are my talents?”

Harry had to glance away from Tom to hide his blush. No one should be able to say anything with so much relish.

“Being an arsehole,” Harry muttered, and loosely shoved Tom towards the exit. He tried not to find amusement in the way Tom stumbled as his shins caught the edge. It was hard.

“And to think,” Tom began, long-sufferingly, “I’m accompanying you to this evening of my own free will-“

“All right,” Harry said rolling his eyes, a reluctant smile playing on his lips. “You can cut that out. Let’s go.”

The air was nippy, biting sharply at Harry’s fingers as he buried them in his pockets, and he squinted in the yellow light, the sky already pink-tinged. The sun was low, the clouds weak and wispy, and Harry noticed deep midnight blue gradually appearing at the top of the horizon. It would be dark in the next few hours.

“Are you cold?” Tom asked.

Harry eyed the scarf around Tom’s neck, but stubbornly declared that he wasn’t. The chattering teeth might have made it less convincing.

Tom rolled his eyes and before Harry could protest, a warm woollen weight wound around his neck.

“I can sustain a warming charm,” Tom said haughtily.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Because Merlin forbid you should be nice.” But he gave Tom a small nod of gratitude and hugged the scarf tighter.

The party was already in full swing by the time they wandered down. The main event was actually a little way away from the lake, in a kind of field, and there was a line of trees partially obscuring the lakeside where Harry could see smaller groups of people gathering. The party-goers spread as far as the edge of the Forbidden forest. Fairy lights (Harry thought they might be actual fairies in little lanterns) were strung up and entangled in the tree branches, and Harry thought he saw little broomsticks, swooping and diving languorously over people’s shoulders. He spotted a table laden with suspiciously-coloured drinks and decorated with sparklers which occasionally wafted into the air to spell out rude words. (Harry noticed Tom watching with a particularly unimpressed expression. Harry, personally, found it rather hilarious.)

It was at moments like these that Harry was struck by how old-fashioned it all was. At least in school uniform the only thing that really set a 1940’s student apart was their hair: the boys’ usually short and neat (unless you were Harry), and the girls’ curled or tied back. But this evening, everyone was dressed up. The girls looked especially exotic: velvet, cotton and long skirts wherever you looked, bold lipstick and elaborate hairstyles. It felt rather like stepping into an old film.
“Harrison!” His name was mangled by a slurred shriek as Chloe appeared from the crowds, waving her arms in the sky and clutching a jug.

“Call me Harry,” Harry yelled over the music (live, of course- there was a bloody band performing on a hovering platform over the lake). He laughed as Chloe grabbed his hand and attempted to twirl, whining when she spilled liquid on her dress. Harry nodded towards the jug. “What’s in there, then?”

“Pinnock’s Giggle Water,” Chloe said gleefully. “Al’s father brought some back from America and it’s fantastic. Try some!”

“I’m good, thanks,” Harry said, warding her off with a gentle hand. “I should keep a clear head.”

“Pffft,” Chloe exhaled fiercely. “Boring.” Not one to be disappointed for long, Chloe immediately noticed someone over Harry’s shoulder and shrieked “Al!” very close to his ear, waving. Before she left, she put her face very close to Harry’s, said “you should find Artemis. She has your nose” and then she stumbled away.

“It’s no wonder she can’t keep control of a cauldron,” Tom said archly. “She can barely control her own limbs.”

They watched together as Chloe tripped over a chair and fell into a Hufflepuff boy’s chest, her hands ‘accidentally’ landing on his upper biceps and turning him a very interesting shade of embarrassed puce.

“I think she can control herself just fine,” Harry noted. “Do you know an Artemis?”

“I believe I do.” Tom scanned the crowd, his lip curling slightly and Harry thought he might have spotted the rather unsubtle couples in the shadow of the trees. At last, Tom pointed towards the lakeshore, where the crowds thinned out and people were standing and sitting in groups of two or three. “There. With the ginger boy.”

Harry shrugged helpless.

“Dark blonde hair with the appalling acne and that hideous curtain-dress.”

“Tom!” Harry hit Tom’s arm as he scanned the crowds, and finally spotted her. She wasn’t as ugly as Tom had suggestion: in fact, she was really quite pretty; the type of girl that Ron might have mentioned to Mrs Weasley in order to distract her from fussing over his clothes. “The one sitting down?”

“Mmm,” Tom agreed. “Any particular reason?”

“Chloe said I should talk to her.”

“And you always do what Miss Babbage says.”

“Well, she’s my coach now,” Harry grinned.

“I have no idea who decided she was fit for that.”

“Don’t be cruel.”

“I can’t help it,” Tom said innocently.

Harry scowled. Tom didn’t seem overly affected, and told him that whilst Harry was chatting to ‘it’
(“she’s a human being, Tom!”) Tom would be putting the fear of Merlin into some midnight lovers.

“They’re not hurting anyone.”

“They’re an affront to my eyes,” Tom said loftily, and swept off towards the trees.

Which left Harry to go and talk to Artemis.

Alone.

*Fun.*

Harry approached the pair casually, but as he got closer he noticed that they definitely weren’t having a cheerful conversation. Artemis had her arms wrapped around her knees as she shook quietly, her face drawn and pale with silent tears running down her face. The ginger boy was consoling her, and Harry thought he might have been trying a joke to lighten the situation. It didn’t appear to be working.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked, crouching down in front of the pair.

The boy glanced up and, for reasons unknown, his eyes went very wide upon contact with Harry. “Sh-she’s fine,” he stuttered, shuffling slightly in front of Artemis.

“Really?”

“We’re all fine here. Ha ha. Music. Dancing. Fun. It really is a lovely night- have you seen the moon? I feel like it’s coming out a little early tonight- not that I usually track moon positions, that would be rather pathetic, huh? Unless I took Astrology, which is a perfectly valid NEWT option no matter what anyone says-”

Artemis let out a little distressed whimper, and Harry had to stop himself from reaching out to stop her rocking. “She doesn’t *look* fine.”

The boy looked panicked, his eyes darting back and forth. “Well, she is.”

Harry shrugged, a little sliver of Slytherin deviousness emerging. “If you say so.”

As he turned to leave, the boy yelled, “No, you don’t need to go!”

Harry turned back.

“I mean, er, stay!” the boy said sheepishly. “This is where the party’s at.” He gave a little shimmy and Artemis gave a shuddering little gasp.

“Are you sure she’s alright?” Harry asked. “She looks like she’s having a fit.”

The boy’s shoulders slumped, and he gestured helplessly towards her. “She doesn’t like parties. It’s all the people. I never know what to do.”

“Make them go away,” Artemis muttered, closing her eyes.

“Have you tried a quietening charm?” Harry suggested. Ginny said that she’d tried that in her second year, when the noise around her grew too much and she heard Tom’s whispers over her shoulder.
“A quietening charm,” the boy repeated with awe, as if the pieces of a puzzle had just fallen into place and the world was right again. He got out his wand and pointed it towards Artemis. “Quietus.”

Artemis took a deep breath and her eyes shot open. She lifted a hand to her head and stopped shaking. Harry watched with curiosity.

“Oh,” Artemis said, quietly. “That’s better.”

“Oh. Good,” the boy said heavily, his body collapsing with relief. “Good.”

Artemis’ eyes shot to meet Harry’s and she seemed to shrink inwards, noticing him for the first time. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m er-“

“Are you crazy?” the boy exploded, looking immediately consolatory as she flinched. “Sorry,” he muttered. “But that’s Harrison Peters!”

“Yeah,” Harry said reluctantly. “I’m-“

“-the Saviour of Hogwarts!” the boy exploded. “I- I…” He paused, something flashing across his face. He murmured almost like a guilty admission. “I’m Septimus. Weasley.”

The name rang familiar to Harry, and he frowned, trying to remember where he’d heard it; beyond the familiar surname. “Ah.” His face cleared.

Now that Harry looked for it, he did notice a slight grey tinge to Septimus’ complexion. Hermione had experienced the same thing after she was petrified: a stone-like complexion that had lingered throughout third year. Hermione had put it down to stress and lack of sleep, but sometimes Harry had caught her staring at her hand: just curling her fingers back and forth, checking that she still could.

“You were the boy in the lake,” Harry said.

Septimus glanced down at his hands, lacing his fingers together. “Yes,” he said. “That was me.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to, er, bring up any memories-“

“It’s fine. I hadn’t forgotten anything,” Septimus huffed uncomfortably, not quite a laugh but not quite a sigh. He shrugged. “I can’t.”

“It must have been cold.”

“I couldn’t breathe. I was drowning and I couldn’t move, and then there was this light… My breathing… I could feel the water in my breath.” His voice grew raspier as he spoke, until it was barely a murmur. “I drowned,” he murmured.

Septimus stared out across the lake with an odd expression: something like longing.

“People say it’s peaceful,” he continued. “But there’s nothing peaceful about being swallowed alive. I could hear whispers, towards the end. I still don’t know what they said.” There was a long pause, and then he turned back to Harry and said with a strong heave: “thank you.”

Harry raised a surprised eyebrow. “For what?”

“For stopping it.”
“I didn’t-“

“I know you said that you didn’t do anything, but I don’t believe you. And I’d like to thank you, for stopping that monster or wizard or whatever it was. You saved people.” Septimus look uncomfortably earnest, and Harry was suddenly reminded of Charlie Weasley. Septimus had the same short, stocky build and warm, open face, despite his awkwardness. And, of course, the signature red hair.

“It’s nothing,” Harry said gruffly. “Seriously, nothing. I did nothing.”

Septimus simply laughed (more of a snort, actually), and Harry realised that there would be very little convincing him otherwise.

“You’re sort of amazing,” Septimus said with passion, waving his hands emphatically. “Really.”

Harry searched around for a different topic, his cheeks turning redder the longer they lingered on his ‘brilliance’.

“You know, I’m surprised,” he said, glancing behind him and towards Chloe, who was still in the midst of the party, chugging firewhiskey and hanging from a taller girl’s arm. “I would’ve thought there’d be more objections. You know, to the whole ‘female captain thing’. Especially in Slytherin.”

“Well, Chrissie kind of revolutionised the Slytherin Quidditch team,” Septimus said, tongue eagerly tripping over his words. “Before her, I don’t even think females were allowed on the team. There certainly weren’t any. And then Chrissie decided there should be. She had this state of mind she’d get into mission mode, or something. She forced them to let her on the team. And before you knew it, she was running the whole thing. Of course, a few people left in protest once Christina joined. Rob? Was it Rob? And Damien Grey flew off the rails in the Great Hall. Arty, you remember. It was mostly settled by the time Druella joined. At least within the team. Druella was the second to join, wasn’t she?” Septimus turned to confer with Artemis, who nodded shakily.

She looked like she’d partially recovered, but there was an ‘unaware’ quality to her voice, as if sound was still rattling around in her skull. “They had a thing, didn’t they? Their fifth year?”

“Oh yes, so they did.”

Harry’s jaw dropped a little. “Druella and Christina went out?”

In his mind, it had always just been ‘Druella and Walburga’. To hear that Druella had other interests was quite a shock.

“I think it was quite casual,” Septimus frowned reflectively. “No one really knew how serious it was, and no one dared ask them. They’re quite terrifying, you know. And then one morning they’d broken up- it seemed mutual. Of course, they both knew it could never last. Girls might dabble when they’re younger, but they always end up with a husband eventually.”

Artemis shrugged. “Professor Merrythought didn’t.”

“Professor Merrythought’s a force of nature. It’s not fair, of course, but whilst people might turn their backs to a pair of wizards taking up together-” here, Septimus’ gaze slid to Harry and he felt a prickle run up his spine- “but they won’t do the same for a witch.”

“Witches ‘have a duty’,” Artemis said, with a bitterness that seemed strange in such a meek witch.

“It’ll get better,” Harry said with an odd grin. “Pretty soon, it’ll just be blood status keeping people
chained to the lowest rungs of society.”

They all shared a hum of dark amusement, and Harry reflected upon how free it felt to be around Gryffindors: where at least if people had prejudices they felt pressure to hide them. There were no Atticus Averys in Gryffindor- it wasn’t allowed.

Speaking of that:

“So what positions do you play?” Harry asked curiously. “I haven’t heard much about the Gryffindor team.”

“Oh, we’re both chasers,” Septimus said.

Artemis frowned minutely, narrowing her eyes at Harry. “How did you know? That we were Gryffindors?”

“Because of you, silly,” Septimus answered before Harry had a chance, chuckling as if the question was ridiculous. “Everyone knows that all Potters go into Gryffindor.”

It was like Harry’s world had been put on ‘pause’. The party, the rush of the water- even the wind- they all stopped. There were just those two syllables, echoing over and over: suspended in a cautious breath.

“What?” Harry barely managed to force out the word, sure his face must be the colour of parchment.

“Potter,” Septimus repeated, his grin fading. “Artemis Potter. They’re this family.”

“I know,” Harry said shortly. “I know.”

He studied Artemis more closely than before, noticing that- yes, just like Chloe said- they had the same nose. And they were both small- perhaps, even, there was something about the jawline. But other than that, Harry really saw very little resemblance.

But this girl was his relative. Perhaps some kind of great-aunt, or cousin. Harry had never met a member of the Potter family before. It was like waving some tantalising glimpse of family in front of him- a snapshot of a life he could have had. Maybe he would have seen Artemis every Christmas, gathered around the fire and opened presents; laughing as his dad told inappropriate jokes, and hugging his mum when she got nostalgic. This girl could have been a part of Harry- an integral, irreplaceable piece.

But she wasn’t. She was just a stranger.

And Harry was just another weirdo at a party.

“You okay?” Septimus said, placing a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“I’m good. Bit too much giggle water. It’s just- I knew a Potter when I was younger. He was a dick,” Harry said, and although the joke was weak, Septimus laughed obligingly. “The sun’s setting,” Harry gestured across the lake and towards the horizon, where a pretty wash of yellows and pinks fading and darkened into night sky. “I should find my friend.”

“Of course,” Septimus agreed and, for some reason, reached across to shake Harry’s hand.

“Thank you,” Artemis said, not uncurling herself from her protective huddle, but offering Harry a wry little smile. “For helping. I hope my surname wasn’t too offensive.”
“My delicate sensibilities can take it,” Harry said, shoving his hands into his pockets to shield them from the cold and pulling Tom’s scarf closer to his neck.

“I’ll see you on the pitch,” Septimus said eagerly. “And maybe even… off?”

“Maybe,” Harry agreed, and with a nod he excused himself.

Tom couldn’t contain his chuckles as he watched a sixth year girl shriek at her helpless boyfriend, even as she furiously vanished the bird excrement from her hat.

“I didn’t mean to laugh,” the boy begged. “Please. You were the one who wanted to have it off in the forest—”

“You’re an asshole, Al,” she snarled. “And I know you’ve been cheating on me with that bitch.”

“That’s not true—“

“-Save it!” she hissed, and stormed away.

“I see you’ve been spreading harmony.”

Tom looked over his shoulder, unsurprised to find Harrison standing behind him with his arms crossed disapprovingly, surveying the scene.

“I don’t see how you could possibly think this is my fault,” Tom said, glancing back as the frustrated (ex?) boyfriend growled and kicked a tree.

“That owl decided to shit on them coincidentally, did it?”

“It’s an owl. I hardly think it ‘decided’ anything.”

“No, you did.”

“What nonsense. Owls are notoriously unpredictable.”

Harrison snorted. “You’re such a bastard.”

Tom turned slowly and stepped close to the other boy, long, languid steps. “Oh, really?”

“Mmm. I barely know why I invited you.”

“You can go back to the party if you want. Find ‘Chloe’. She was all over you.”

“Jealous, Riddle?” The challenging set to Harrison’s jaw simmered hotter than a flame.

“And what would you do if I was?”

“Careful.” Harrison grinned. “An owl might take a liking to us.”

Tom felt a tremendous tug somewhere in his chest, and he took a tight breath almost involuntarily. “They were being indecent,” he half-admitted.

A laugh. “And you aren’t?”
“Oh, I’m barely scratching the surface.”

“Oh, really?”

There was dark heat in the other boy’s eyes, and Tom knew that Harrison was intensely attracted to him. It caused both a tremendous satisfaction (power, Tom had power), and something unrecognisable, foreign, to stir in the depth of Tom’s soul. He couldn’t name it.

Before he could even begin to figure it out, there was a distant war cry from the general distance of the party. Tom barely had time to glance at Harrison before he was charging off towards the disturbance. Tom let out a heavy sigh—honestly, a Slytherin, for heaven’s sake—and followed.

As the pair drew close to the crowd, they found them gathered in a circle around a small girl; blonde and delicate-looking, wrestling with a boy that must have been a few years older. The boy was physically huge, and would have been handsome if his face hadn’t been twisted with hatred. The girl was screaming abuse: the origin of the war cry they’d heard; and sported a black eye. The boy bore a nasty-looking red scratch across his cheek, and from his bow-legged limp Tom could tell exactly where else the boy had been hit. His progress hadn’t been halted, however, and he had the advantage. To give the girl credit, she was putting up a fair fight, and Tom could see from her jabs: carefully placed and swift, that she would be a sight to behold if she only had her wand.

Which she didn’t. Because it was lying on the floor, just inches from Tom’s foot.

The crowd wasn’t much use: hollering and jeering on the fight. Tom saw a few trying to prevent it; but they were far and few and largely outnumbered.

"That's Bea," Harrison said, with a tone of realisation that meant very little to Tom. "But where are the rest of the team?"

"It's 11 o'clock," Tom replied. "They've probably gone to bed." Indeed, half of the party had cleared out, leaving the drunken masses to rally around the punch-up.

"We need to stop it."

As the girl took a nasty hit to her stomach and her barrage of curses was replaced with vicious coughing, Harrison raised his wand to intervene. Instead, Tom put up a hand and shot Harrison a pointed look. That wasn’t the answer. Reluctantly, Harrison’s wand was lowered.

Tom cast an amplifying charm and stepped forwards. “That’s enough. Be quiet,” he said, with calm authority. “Quiet!”

The noise died away and the crowd stilled: the sight of Tom enough to draw interest. Everyone knew Tom Riddle, Head Boy, and everyone knew his power (Tom took a short moment to revel in it.)

Unfortunately, the wrestling pair weren’t as wise as the crowd. The girl continued her vicious screams and the boy grabbed her hair, tugging her towards him as she clawed at his wrists. She aimed a kick at his shin and he swore loudly.

Tom sighed and waved his wand. Ropes wound around the pair, pulling them away from each other, at least a few feet. They struggled, but Tom’s binds held tight. The girl refocused her abuse at Tom, but he silenced her easily.

“Is that it?” he asked, tying the question up neatly with a lace of boredom.
It would have been so simply to let the fight end; to give them both a detention and be done with it. But whilst Tom had been talking, Harrison had weaved his way over to the girl and begun murmuring to her, even if she couldn’t reply. Tom suspected that things were about to get inconveniently emotional.

He was right.

Harrison put his arm around the girl protectively, and frowned at Tom. “She’s scared,” he said. “Let her go.”

“She didn’t sound scared,” Tom pointed out. “More like a harpy.”

“Well, people don’t always show what they’re feeling, do they?” Harrison said, and Tom suspected there was a message for him hidden somewhere in there.

Tom waited for a moment, but it was mostly for the pretence. He’d never hear the end of it if he didn’t give in. And so, sighing a little, Tom released her bonds and the silencing spell. She was Harrison’s problem now.

“Bea,” Harrison said, bending so he was eye to eye with her. “What happened?”

“That’s not my name.” the girl spat, “and that fucker tried to rape me.”

The crowd gasped at the accusation, and Tom saw students (mostly girls, it had to be said) exchanging looks and whispers of guilt and outrage.

The boy fought against the ropes and howled in outrage. “I didn’t go anywhere near you, you tight-!”

“No, you didn’t quite get the chance,” the girl snarled. She laughed, the sound too high and too cruel. “Because you couldn’t fuck a girl if she laid herself in front of you and passed out.”

The boy snarled with fury, but it had little effect. He looked rather pathetic now: wet with alcohol and clumsy.

“It’s actually sad that the only way you can get a girl is by forcing your-“ The girl turned sheet-white as the boy managed to stagger forwards a few steps, and she stumbled back. Harrison caught her, and unwound the scarf (Tom’s scarf) from around his neck, wrapping it instead around the girl’s.

“It’s freezing out here.”

The girl batted away his hand and grumbled something about not patronising her. Despite her words, Tom could see a faint compulsive tremor running through her frame, and she clutched tightly at Harrison’s arm when he bent to comfort her.

“You’re fine,” Harrison murmured. “You dealt with him.”

“She didn’t ‘deal with me’,“ the boy said leeringly, and Tom sent a silencing spell his way.

“I suggest you take a look at who’s currently incapacitated and who’s not,” Tom drawled. “Spoiler: you’re not winning.” He addressed his next words to the whole gathering. “Is there anyone who can corroborate the girl’s story?”

“Her name’s Bea,” Harrison said.

“My name’s Rachel,” the girl hissed. “And it's not a ‘story’.”
The Babbage girl, the one who’d been draping herself over Harrison earlier, stepped forwards. Her eyes were very wide, but she glared at the boy regardless. “I think that’s Leon Smith,” she declared. “He’s in Gryffindor- he was- he was- oh god, I can’t remember her name. Maxime. That was it. He was her date. She mentioned that he’d disappeared, but he was— her voice broke. “Creepy, I think she said. She went back to the dormitories- she didn’t feel like staying out. I think he- he-”

Tom noticed that there were tears glistening in the corner of Babbage’s eyes. Why? She wasn’t the one that had been attacked.

“It was probably just a bit of fun,” a boy from the back of the crowds yelled, putting in his two knuts. Tom didn’t know his name and didn’t really care to.

“Fun?” The Bea girl laughed again. “Oh yeah.” She grinned savagely. “It was so much fucking ‘fun’ when he slipped a potion into my drink. When he tried to lead me into the forest like I can’t see a murder when it’s coming. When he gripped my skirt and lifted it towards my knees and whispered crap about how much fun we’d have if I only stop being such a prude. He slapped me when I told him to fuck off, and said he’d have fun even if I didn’t.”

The crowd was very silent.

“There,” she said with morbid satisfaction. “All the gory details. Tell your friends. Spread it around. I’m supposed to be a psycho after all.”

“You’re going to take him to Dippet, right?” a girl called out, hidden in the masses. Her question prompted a wave of loud, insistent questions about what would be done and how it would be stopped, as the students surged forwards. Tom erected a temporary barrier- the girl wasn’t in any fit state to receive curious questions.

Amidst the noise, a stunner hurtled past Tom, striking ‘Leon Smith’ dead in the chest. He slumped to the ground, the ropes sliding from his body and dissipating. Tom didn’t need to look around to know who had cast the spell.

“Well, you weren’t going to do it,” Harrison said.

Tom sighed, but didn’t revive the boy. It was no less than he deserved, after all. Instead, Tom summoned the fallen wand from earlier and brought it back to the girl, presenting it with a flourish. She snatched it back and clutched it to her chest like a lifeline.

“Tom Riddle, huh?” Harrison asked, and there was something hopeful in his eyes. A confirmation. “Champion of the oppressed.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tom said crisply. “It was simply getting out of hand.” He turned back to the other students. “Alright!” Tom shouted. “This isn’t a spectator sport. The party, I’m sorry to say, is over.”

The crowd dispersed slowly, despite a general morbid desire to stay and see what happened next. But the events of the evening had thoroughly destroyed any party atmosphere, so slowly but surely the students disappeared into the castle. Babbage remained behind, but she was comforting the ‘Bea’ girl, so Tom didn’t oppose it.

“We need to take Smith to the headmaster,” Tom said, indicated to the body. “And you’ll need to explain the story, I’m afraid.”

“Not a story,” the girl muttered once more, but she nodded slightly. “I just need a moment.” Tom noticed that her breathing did seem quicker than normal.
“The lakeside has fresher air,” Babbage suggested, eager to be helpful. “And there are blankets.”

So the four wandered down the hill towards the lakeside and settled on a blanket, Tom levitating the body behind them. He made sure that it hit any branches it encountered. Harrison gave him a strange look the first time it happened, almost like he’d glimpsed a ghost, but he appeared to be over it by the time that they settled down on a blanket. Tom amused himself by rotating the levitating body, angled so that it hung only from its shoulder. Smith would feel it when he woke.

“You impressed me tonight,” Harrison admitted quietly to Tom. “You were a good authority figure. Mature- oh, make him do a somersault.”

Tom acquiesced, and they watched the lifeless body dance in the air.

“You know, I thought you’d have some kind of moral objection to this,” Tom mused.

“Meh,” Harrison shrugged. “He deserves it.” A pause. “The horcruxes,” Harrison said suddenly, lowering his voice so that the other two didn’t hear. “You’re not…?”

“No,” Tom agreed.

“Oh,” Harrison said, leaning back on his hands. He exhaled. “Good.”

Just as he did, there was a tiny, feminine gasp behind them. They looked over at the girl- Bea?- and found her gazing in awe at a glistening, pure white unicorn. It emerged from the treeline to stand only a few feet away, its eyes focused purely on Bea, stamping a front hoof with enthusiasm and tossing its head back.

Beside him, Tom heard Harrison mutter bitterly, “not this dick again.”

“Again?” Tom asked.

“We have history,” Harrison said, but he raised his voice to call out: “pat it, Bea! It wants your attention.”

“Still not my name,” Bea called back automatically. Tom saw her shoulders tense, and she hesitated. “I don’t think it wants me. I’m not a- I’ve… I’ve ‘done’ things.”

Harrison’s arm muscles tightened against Tom’s. “Did that piece of shit-“

“Not him,” Bea admitted. “I was… it was someone else. I wanted it. I wanted to.”

Oh, for heaven’s sake. Couldn’t they speed it up? Who really cared? Apparently not the unicorn, as it let out a whinny and stepped closer to Bea, lowering its forehead.

Harrison snorted. “I really don’t think it matters.”

“Couldn’t you do it?” Bea still looked cautious and admittedly Tom didn’t blame her. He got a horrible, sick kind of feeling in his stomach when he looked at the beast.

Harrison laughed again, but this time it was darker. Tom wondered curiously what could have caused that. “Trust me,” Harrison said. “You don’t want me anywhere near it. Go on- don’t be scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Bea scoffed, but her hand shook a little as she clambered to her feet, shuffled forwards, and touched her fingers to the unicorn’s neck. The beast shifted, seeming to enjoy her caresses. Although she had her back to them, Tom suspected that she had smiled.
When Tom glanced over at Harrison, he saw a similar expression.

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Babbage breathed.

They let the girl pamper and fuss over the unicorn for a few more minutes, after which Tom checked his watch. “It’s late.”

“Bea!” Harrison said. “We need to go.”

“Okay,” she agreed. As she turned away from the unicorn and began to walk back towards them, her face was calmer; more serene. It had lost its hard angles and lines. (The next stage of shock? Tom wondered.)

“That looks uncomfortable,” she remarked, seeing her attacker’s body hung in the air. But she kept on walking past them, and before Tom and Harrison could react, she was marching towards the castle with little more than a “keep up, idiots!”.

Tom raised a single eyebrow. “Well, you heard her.”

“And we should probably move fast if the forest is coming out to play,” Harrison said grimly, peering at the spilled inky depths of the trees. “The last time I was in there, I really pissed off some centaurs.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was a chapter filled with very few beloved characters! But it was introductory for some important(-ish) players this year, so there kind of had to be some kind of social event. Hopefully it wasn’t too bamboozling XD And Tom and Harry almost went on a date!

Thank you for all your kind words and wishes last chapter. It’s been a bit tough (slightly explaining the lengthy break between this chapter and the last), but I’m genuinely a lot better now. I’ve sort of fallen out with one of my oldest/closest friends since we last spoke (lol, life is fun), but I’ve found some people and I’m keeping myself busy. And thanks for your surprise over my age XD I’ve never had so many disbelieving compliments in my life! (It’s a good thing)

Also.... LOOK AT IT LOOK AT IT! http://blopoooo.tumblr.com/post/166372852304
Tom Isn't Best Pleased But That's Not Uncommon

Chapter Summary

Orion makes bad decisions, only Bea has sense, Harry and Tom have a quiet night in

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: Harry had his first Quidditch meeting, where we met the other members of the Quidditch team: Leo Piper and Matthew Stein. The meeting was awkward, but Harry got invited to his first big party! After attempting to ask Orion to be his plus one, Harry was left to ask his second choice: (poor) Tom. Tom lent Harry has scarf (very important point) as they headed down to the lake together. Chloe sent Harry to meet Septimus Weasley (a big fan of Harry) and Artemis Potter, who Harry helped out of a panic attack and then realised she was related to him, prompting a 'moment'. Harry bumped into Tom tormenting a couple, and then they rushed in the directions of Bea's screams, who was handling herself fine but appreciated the help. We learnt that she was sexually assaulted by Leon Smith, and Tom takes control of the situation, as the group took Smith back to the castle and surrendered him to the authority of the school.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Halloween rushed towards Harry and his housemates and, before they knew it, they were gathered around the fire in the common room, the aftermaths of the Halloween feast resting warmly in their stomachs.

If only the atmosphere had sat as comfortably.

The flickering fire beat shadows into the creases of Orion’s frown, and everyone- even Rupert- seemed to remember how much Orion’s life had changed since Halloween last year. It was… dispiriting.

Rupert cleared his throat and- trying for some light-heartedness- turned his attention to Atticus. “So how come you aren’t slinking off home for Halloween? Daddy not in the mood for entertaining?”

“Just because your mother’s all about ‘entertainment’,” Atticus said loftily, “doesn’t mean you should cast aspersions on my family. And if you must know, my father’s in Sweden, visiting the minister. And they don’t follow rituals in Sweden, thus…” Atticus gestured, “My present company.”


“Yes. What’s wrong with that?”

“Not very impressive, is it? The Swedish minister? When was the last time Sweden made any kind of important contribution to the magical community?”
Harry’s immediate thought was ‘IKEA’, but he didn’t think that would be appreciated. Did they even have IKEA now? Was there a magical IKEA? He imagined it: IKEA, but with moving passageways and expansion spells.

“What does your father actually do, Atticus?” Harry asked curiously.

“Political advisor,” Atticus sniffed.

“Only he’s a pretty shit one,” Rupert added cheerily. “And after he lost Spencer-Moon the Quidditch bill, they couldn’t kick him out of the British ministry fast enough.”

“He just made a mistake,” Atticus hissed.

“Quidditch bill?” Harry said.

Rupert stretched back in his chair, yawning. “The Minister wanted to limit the length of a Quidditch match. Said they’re a waste of resources. But Atticus’ daddy dearest didn’t ‘pitch’ it well.” Rupert chortled, egged on by the anger stealing over Atticus’ features.

“Do you think she’s doing a Dead Man’s Fire?” Orion murmured quietly, but there wasn’t a person amongst their little gathering that didn’t hear. Atticus and Rupert’s little tiff was forgotten. “Without me.”

“Yes, she is,” Cassius agreed. “With your family actually. And her mother.”

“Oh,” fell from Orion’s lips like a little puff of air. “Oh. She probably wants to talk to Apus.”

“Yes.”

“Is she… is she happy?”

“Is anyone?” Cassius asked, a little smirk twisting his lip.

Tom snorted condescendingly, but Orion ignored him. “What’s she doing?”

Cassius leaned back, closing his eyes in some kind of farcical ‘preparation’ but Harry was perfectly aware that Cassius had his answer prepared, probably twisted to hurt Orion the most he possibly could. Harry wanted to step in, but he didn’t think Orion would like it. Letting Cassius speak, however, felt rather like letting a rabid dog off his leash.

Nevertheless, Cassius spoke. “They’re sitting around the fire now. It’s burning already, flickering hot and cold interchangeably; burns soothed with ice. She’s started the ritual; the Mullein’s burning. She breathes in deep; and as the smoke presses against the walls of her lungs, a hand comes to rest on her shoulder. He’s here, draping himself over her shoulder, and the fire swells and dies away with every heave of her chest. A distant scream tugs her eyes open and in the fire she sees the future she could have had; soft curves and floral scents intermingled, and the wild hair of a lioness. Her nails dig into the floorboard, catching on a balanced etching. The flames surge and break through the silence: one final bright explosion of light and hope before it dwindles and sinks into ashes. Wide eyes and quick breathing, but the Black queen just cries. Cries and cries and—”

“Quite an imagination you have there,” Tom said evenly.

Harry glanced to his right, having completely forgotten that anything existed other than Cassius and the picture he was painting. He felt slow and out of place, like he’d been awakened quickly from a deep dream. His eyelids were so heavy.
Tom looked unaffected. Orion looked heart-broken.

And that was when Caspar Grahams decided to pop in. “Hello everyone,” he said, jumping onto a sofa with a grin. “You all look rather glum.”

Cassius rose to his feet. “How silly of me. I completely forgot I was meant to be meeting with Druella. I’m late.” He slinked towards the portrait hole and glanced back with a funny little smile. “Goodnight.”

And he was gone.

“Freak,” Rupert chuckled uneasily, all traces of drowsy superiority vanished.

“Cassius enjoys unsettling people,” Tom said logically, and Harry suddenly noticed how close together they were pressed. “It’s probably a little Halloween prank.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “Cassius is a right nutter.”

“We should have some confectionaries,” Tom decided. “It is Halloween, after all.”

He looked pointedly at Atticus, who obediently reached under his armchair and withdrew a pouch of Honeyduke’s finest. Rupert and Atticus dived in eagerly and Tom took a toffee, but Orion was unmoving.

“I think I’d better take Orion up to the dormitory,” Harry said. “We have plans early tomorrow.”

“What kind of plans?” Tom asked.

“Well, it’s my first Quidditch match,” Harry said, feeling a little stone of anxiety drop in his stomach even as he said the words. “I want to warm up.”

“What time?”

“You’ll come?” Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Of course,” Tom said. “I have to be there for the Slytherin win, after all.”


“I’ll see you there.”

Harry bid them goodnight and took Orion’s arm to lead him up the stairs, just hearing Graham’s faint complaint: “I feel like I’ve missed something,” as he went. Orion was absent, barely blinking as if he could see Walburga even from miles away. Once they reached the dormitories, Harry had to manipulate Orion so he was sitting on the bed, where he took off Orion’s shoes and his jumper. He reckoned Orion could deal with sleeping in his trousers and shirt.

Just as Harry patted Orion on the knee and went to get up, Orion’s hand shot out and grabbed Harry’s wrist. Harry’s gaze flickered to his captured limb and then Orion’s face, frowning in concern. “Do you need-?”

And then Orion’s mouth was over his. Harry’s mind shut down at the sudden assault, his eyes flying open in shock and then automatically fluttering closed. The contact was kind of nice-it had been so long since he’d had any kind of intimacy past a brief friendly hug. It wouldn’t hurt to just let go.

Harry leaned into the kiss, wrapping his arms around Orion and for a moment they breathed as one.
That was when the door opened. The pair broke apart, but they weren’t quick enough to hide their actions from Grahams, who promptly turned a very strong shade of red and rushed out of the room.

“Wait, no-!” Harry yelled out and he charged after Grahams. Luckily, the boy had barely gotten down the stairs when Harry grabbed hold of his shoulders and slammed him back against the wall.

“You were kissing Orion,” Grahams squeaked.

“Look, Orion’s going through something right now,” Harry said intensely. “I won’t explain, but it’s not what it looks like. So keep quiet, alright?”


Grahams nodded and, reluctantly, Harry let him go. He watched Grahams scurry down the stairs with a pensive frown, and then went back into the dormitories. Orion sat in the same spot- Harry didn’t think he’d moved at all- and now that Harry was a little more put together (and with a healthy dose of embarrassment), he could see the distant glaze to Orion’s eyes and the desperation in every tremble of his body.

“Oh, Orion,” Harry said and sat back on the bed: a healthy distance away.

“No-“ Orion said, moving to follow him, but Harry put up a hand.

“You don’t want me,” Harry said firmly. “You don’t. So don’t do this. You two said you’d sort it out, remember?”

Orion laughed bitterly. “We’re children. We can’t sort out anything.”

“You’ll have help.”

“But she doesn’t want me. No one wants me.”

“I want you- but not like this,” Harry said quickly, seeing Orion start to approach again. “And Rigel wants you. He loves you.”

“Rigel’s going to die. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Harry said firmly. “Just- just go to bed, okay? It’ll look better in the morning.”

Orion snorted, but he shuffled back and buried beneath his duvet. With his black hair spilling onto the cream of the pillow and his skin almost as white, he looked just like a painting that Aunt Petunia had inherited from some great-aunt: a cherubic boy lying sleeping (or dead, Harry had thought when he was younger) in a field, white scraps of clothing scattered around his body. Petunia had declared it ‘obscene’ and hidden it away in the attic.

Harry hesitated, leant over Orion and memorised every line of his face, committing it to memory. And then he pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. “So many people would love you,” he promised. “So many.”

Harry walked back over to his bed and stood still for a moment, his fist tightening, before he sighed and started to get ready for bed.

The next morning, it was almost like Orion had forgotten that anything had happened at all. They
went and flew around the Quidditch pitch for a little while, Harry trying desperately to calm the nervous flutter in his stomach, a little about the match, but mostly about Orion. If you looked at him in the light of the early morning sunrise: giggling and swooping around a hoop for some reason (‘pretending to be a quaffle’, apparently), you’d have hardly known that he had any worries at all. Harry knew that wasn’t true.

His worry for Orion carried him through breakfast and down towards the changing rooms. Harry would admit that it was still very odd to be changing into a Slytherin uniform; but it was also almost natural. He supposed he didn’t really think of himself fully as a Gryffindor anymore.

“We’re hopefully going to do really well,” Chloe told the team, in possibly the least convincing ‘big speech’ Harry had ever heard. She looked terrified: face bleached of all colour. The team also looked less than buoyed.

“No, we’re going to kick their arses,” Bea asserted, and that was much better received. They walked onto the pitch with Bea’s words echoing through their heads: “We’re better than all of them. Peters is good, Babbage is good, the rest of you are adequate, and I’m fucking fantastic. No one can beat us.”

And she was right.

They flew an almost perfect game if Harry did say so himself. Chloe proved her worth on the pitch even if she wasn’t a shining beacon of leadership. Her tactics worked almost perfectly, using all array of sneaky Slytherin cuuning to distract chasers with bludgers and meanwhile pass the quaffle towards the hoops. And apparently there were no rules against aiming bludgers at keepers, which Chloe used to her advantage excellently: as the Hufflepuff keeper went automatically to catch it and was sent crashing backwards into the side of a hoop. The Hufflepuffs brought in their reserve: a timid little third year who flinched whenever the crowd made a loud noise. Bea was predictably excellent: only letting through a quaffle once, and then using the rage from her failure to make three saves in quick succession.

And Harry did his job, finally catching the snitch after 20 minutes.

The Slytherin stands went wild. Harry thought he might have seen Slughorn jump into Dumbledore’s arms in his triumph.

“Quickest game in years,” Chloe told Harry excitedly, punching the air to more cheers and whoops. Harry was a little surprised- 20 minutes was a pretty normal time in the future, but perhaps Quidditch had gotten better over the years. He thought Hermione had said something about sports doing that.

As the teams began to trail towards the exit, students flooded onto the pitch; mostly friends of the teammates, but a few excited little first years were caught up in the flow. Harry rolled his eyes and began to push through, but he was stopped by another hand on his wrist (‘second time in 24 hours’, he mused) and turned around with Orion’s name already on his tongue.

But it wasn’t Orion.

“Oh,” Harry blinked. “Septimus.”

“Hello,” Septimus Weasley said eagerly. “You were amazing. I know you’d be good but- wow. Wow.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed. “Shouldn’t you be consoling the Hufflepuffs? Apparently the Slytherins get Ravenclaw and you lot get Hufflepuff.”

“Why would I do that?” Septimus frowned. “They played poorly and they lost. Rightfully so.”
“Oh.” Harry shifted back, letting a younger girl push past him. “Right. Okay then.”

“All this ‘houses united against one another’ thing is just nonsense. We’re all people, aren’t we?”

“Right. Yeah. I agree,” Harry said, gazing at Septimus with slight wonderment. Septimus Weasley might be genuinely good. That was a rare thing to see these days.

“Anyway, I was just wondering—bit silly, I know, but I thought I’d try—would you, maybe… there’s a Hogsmeade weekend coming up.”

“There is.”

“…Do you want to go?”

Harry shrugged. “Well yeah, I was planning on it.”

“I meant… do you want to go with someone?”

“I wouldn’t object,” Harry said thoughtfully, for some reason, dark hair and green robes coming into mind.

“Do you want to go with me?”

Ah. It suddenly occurred to Harry that he’d been a little obtuse. “With… you?”

“On a date sort of thing, yes.”

Honestly, what was it about Harry recently? Did someone spill a love potion on him or something?

“Right.” Harry inspected Septimus carefully. There was something comforting about his complete Gryffindorishness, and he was good and kind and he seemed to like Harry with no ulterior motives involved. There were no games. They wouldn’t be getting married or anything, but it might be nice. “Okay,” he agreed.

“That’s okay, I didn’t think you’d—oh.” Septimus perked up. “Really? You said yes?”


“Oh.” Septimus agreed eagerly, and he reached out as if to touch Harry, but thought better of it.

“I’ll see you then.”

He hurried back to Artemis with a spring in his step, and the pair disappeared towards the castle. Harry glanced around the pitch, seeing that all the other Slytherins had headed back to the changing rooms. He reached down to unbutton his gloves, a seam itching irritatingly at his hand.

“Harrison,” a voice from behind Harry had him jumping and spinning, his heart pounding.

“Fucking hell, Tom,” he panted, putting a hand up to his chest. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“Surely not,” Tom said. “How would the Slytherin team cope?”

“You always sneak up on me.”

“So you should probably be used to it by now.”

“Bastard,” Harry said fondly.
“I’m not sure I entirely appreciate that increasingly frequent nickname—“

“Tough, it’s stuck now. So…” Harry’s breath suddenly felt very tight. “What did you think? Of the match?”

“You were very good,” Tom allowed. “I still can’t say I particularly enjoy the game, but you were good. Excellent, in fact.”

“Thanks.” Harry grinned, warmth prickling up his spine.

“So what did the Septimus boy want?”

Harry took an uncertain step back, spotting something suddenly dark and— not dangerous, exactly, but close- in Tom’s eyes. “Oh. He, er, invited me to Hogsmeade.”

“You two are getting awfully friendly. A getting-to-know-one-another outing?”

“I think it’s a date.”

“You don’t sound very sure.” Tom smiled thinly.

“Well, it was a bit unexpected. I didn’t think he— er, liked me.” And then Harry’s mouth was running away with him. “I mean, I knew he liked me, just… not like that. I’m not sure anyone’s ever really liked me like that. Not for me, at least, there was this thing, back home- where I’m from, I mean- that meant that maybe some people liked me, but it wasn’t real—“

“I’m sure it was,” Tom said, very quietly. “You’re not unattractive and you are, objectively, a good person.”

“Thanks,” Harry snorted. “Piling on the compliments.”

“You can certainly do better than Weasley,” Tom said. He seemed casual on the surface, but the way he watched Harry from the corner of his eye was anything but.

“Septimus is nice,” Harry said defensively. “He’s… nice.”

“Is that the only thing you can say about him? ‘Nice’?”

“Well, he is.” Harry felt indignant, yes- Septimus was a perfectly lovely person, from what he could tell- but there was also an odd, satisfied spark in his chest every time Tom insulted Septimus. It was kind of awful.

“He’s blander than white rice. And he nearly ejaculates every time you so much as look his way—“

“Tom!”

“It’s true,” Tom shrugged. “I don’t think you should go to Hogsmeade.”

“What, just not turn up or something?” Harry crossed his arms; the image of incredulousness.

“It’s not like he’ll object, is it? He’ll probably curtsy and thank you for your time.”

“Tom.” Harry chucked a glove. It hit Tom in the chest, but he didn’t even falter, just kept his funny little smirk.

“You’re not denying it,” he said smugly.
“I’m not abandoning Septimus. What else am I supposed to do next weekend? Sit in the library and stew in loneliness?”

“You could-“ Tom paused, evidently rethinking what he was going to say. “You could…” He sighed heavily. “Septimus Weasley,” Tom said, finally. “Really.”

“He likes me,” Harry said with a loose shrug, and tilted his head curiously as Tom raised his wand and pointed it at Harry, doing a complicated twirling sort of motion. “What’s that for?”

Tom shook his head slowly, repeating the action again with concentration. “No kind of mind influencers or love potions- or a confundus…”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Oh, piss off. He’s nice.”

“You said. Repeatedly.”

Harry threw his other glove at Tom, but this one was deftly caught. Tom looked faintly amused.

“Feeling violent?”

Harry shivered and rubbed his hands together. He wanted to get inside. “Put the gloves on my bed, would you? I’m going to get changed.”

“Try not to pick up anymore suitors on the way.”

“Honestly, Riddle, anyone would think you’re jealous.”

“And they’d be wrong,” Tom said breezily.

Harry suddenly found it a little difficult to conjure a genuine smile, but he didn’t know why (yes, he was attracted to Tom, he could acknowledge that, but he didn’t want to date him.) And so he backed away, offering a quick wave, and fled back to the changing rooms.

Harry showered quickly, a sort of odd buzzing underneath his skin. Everyone else had already gotten ready, and he peered around the empty space curiously. First time alone in the Slytherin changing room. It was more luxurious than the Gryffindor one, he thought, wrapping a towel around his waist and wiping the steam from his glasses as he set them back onto his nose. The shower units were proper private cubicles and everything, with long sweeping dividers and cold white marble.

The tiles on the ceiling were nice, he noticed. Green, of course, with little specs of sparkling black and silver. And before he could call for help, a familiar sensation was grasping at his lungs, sending little tongues of icy fire licking along his veins. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t look away, and he’d forgotten how awful this felt and it was awful- he felt like he was dying. And he was on his knees, the stone cold on his knees, but he couldn’t move or stand up why couldn’t he stand up, there was earth packed around him and now sheets, soft and warm-

“Harrison?”

And then a hand on his shoulder, and Harry was taking deep, shuddering breaths, gulping in air like it was- well, like it was oxygen. He pressed his sweaty forehead to the ground, the chill like a balm for his pacing heartbeat. He glanced up and caught a glimpse of wide eyes and soft curls. “Bea,” he managed to gasp.
“Don’t talk, idiot,” she said sharply. “Take a minute, or whatever. You’re lucky I came back to look for you. Chloe’s already drunk.”

“Drunk?” Harry muttered.

“Party. Dolohov’s doing, I think. You two are friends, aren’t you? Don’t talk.” Bea’s face twisted, as if she couldn’t understand why anyone would choose to associate with Rupert.

Harry snorted, but heeded Bea’s advice. They sat in silence for what Harry reckoned was about ten minutes, though he really couldn’t tell. It was quiet and seemed to stretch out into eternity, but by the end he could at least talk without feeling like his lungs were filled with water.

“Don’t think I’m helping you because I’m nice, or something,” Bea said suddenly. “It’s just because you helped me. Nothing else.”

“How are you?” Harry asked delicately. He hadn’t seen much of Bea outside practice since the incident. “Recovering?”

“I’m not fragile,” Bea sniffed. “Smith was expelled and facing possible charges. The situation was handled.”

Harry had been pretty surprised when Dumbledore and Dippet believed Bea’s account without question. Harry had thought his shaky standing with the Transfigurations Professor might cause doubt, but if anything, Dumbledore seemed to completely ignore Harry’s presence. And once Bea provided memory evidence, Leon Smith was as good as doomed. It had been… not nice, exactly, but satisfying.

“You’re not a ‘situation’,;” Harry said strongly. “You’re a human being. You went through something traumatic-”

“I won.”

Harry pursed his lips, but kept quiet. He did the same thing: never mind that he burnt a man’s face off, they saved the Philosopher’s stone! Yes, he died for a minute, but Dobby was happy! His godfather was free, even if Harry wasn’t. Cedric died, but… no, that had been a pretty bleak year.

“You know you can talk to me if you need anything,” Harry told her.

“I won’t,” she said shortly. She gestured to Harry’s shaking hands. “Does this happen often?”

“That’s… that was the worst it’s ever been.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Harry shrugged. “Been happening since the attack. On my village. But it passes quickly. See?” He raised his hands, now steady. “All better.”

“Good,” Bea frowned, inspecting Harry. “You can walk to the hospital wing then.”

Harry’s gaze shot up quickly, and he shook his head. “That’s not happening.”

Bea grunted in faint disgust. “Don’t be a fucking nitwit. It’s what the hospital wing’s for.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“You can tell that to Madam Hallpepper. Unless you’re a fully qualified medic and you just never
mentioned it.”

“Surprise,” Harry said weakly, but he didn’t really have the energy to fight. And he probably should see if there was something wrong with him. He slumped under Bea’s scrutiny, and nodded in silent agreement.

“Come on then, get up. No time to lose. Up!”

Harry struggled to his feet, and as he did, he felt a strong breeze around areas not often exposed to breeze. He froze. “…Bea, am I still wearing a towel?”

“No.”

“Have I been wearing it for any of the time you’ve been here?”

“No.”

“Great. Just great.”

“I’ll allow time to put on some clothes.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re completely fine.”

Harry grinned triumphantly, and Bea rolled her eyes.

Hallpepper peered at the two curiously. “Is there any reason why you wanted a check-up, Peters? From what I can tell you’re perfectly healthy: normal blood sugar levels, fit, good heartbeat.”

“He had a fucking fit,” Bea said.

Hallpepper frowned. “You did? Well, that shouldn’t have happened. What kind of fit?”

“He went grey and sort of shaky. It’s like he was burning up.”

“It’s just a breathing thing,” Harry said dismissively. “It’s fine.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Hallpepper said firmly, and scowled down at him. “What did it feel like?”

“Like I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t move… it was like I was frozen,” Harry muttered.

Hallpepper planted a hand on her hip and squinted. “It’s likely just stress. Have you been sleeping well?”

Harry stayed strategically silent. He didn’t think he’d ever had a good night’s sleep in his life.

“I’ll keep you overnight so you can have some peace and quiet, and you can go tomorrow if you promise to tell me if something like this happens again. Deal?”

Harry nodded.

“Good,” Hallpepper nodded briskly. “I’ll get you some pyjamas.”
Bea watched with a sneer as the matron left. “Old bat,” she muttered. “That wasn’t stress. You’re not *stressed*.”

Harry shrugged. “I am. Pretty constantly, actually.”

Bea let out a loud exhale of frustration and growled something that sounded an awful lot like ‘fuckers’. She glared. “If you won’t listen, don’t blame me when you drop dead. I don’t even care!” And she stormed out.

Harry sighed and settled down for a long night. Which was when a tall figure fell through the door of the hospital wing.

“Oh dear!” Hallpepper tutted, appearing from nowhere. “What _have_ you done this time?”

“Oh, er,” the figure muttered, and Harry recognised with shock the undisguisable voice of Rubeus Hagrid. “I got mesself bit again.”

“What was it this time? Grindylow? Pixie?”

“Spider.” Hagrid held out his arm and Hallpepper stepped closer, letting out a little hiss.

“Spider?” she asked, and Harry could hear the doubt from across the room.

“A big spider,” Hagrid said helpfully.

Hallpepper sighed. “I’ll fetch the anti-venom.”

As she moved away, Harry let out a sympathetic wince. Right in the middle of Hagrid’s forearm were two puncture marks: large and deep, that Harry recognised from his own leg after the Triwizard Tournament.

“Your acromantula…” Harry said quietly. Of course. Without Tom’s interference, Aragog was still secreted away within the castle.

Hagrid’s eyes snapped to him immediately. “Yeh’ve seen ‘im?”

Harry remembered how very rubbish Hagrid was at keeping secrets.

“I mean, er,” Hagrid backtracked. “What’s an acromantula?”

It was possibly the worst cover-up Harry had ever heard.

“I recognise the bite,” Harry said, nodding towards Hagrid’s arm. “I’ve got an interest.”

“Yeh like acromantualas?” Hagrid asked uncertainly.

Harry paused- what was a very Hagrid thing to say? “Of course. Beautiful, aren’t they?”

Hagrid took a nearby seat in excitement, his arm apparently forgotten. “Oh, _gorgeous_. Aragog, why, he’s only a little thing but he’s magnificen’. Bes’ thin’ I ever had.”

Hagrid’s eyes had lit up. It was odd: the kindness was still there, but they were young and bright and so very unfamiliar. Seeing them felt rather like somebody had died. Harry supposed that also meant someone had been born; someone new and fresh and untainted by the prejudices of the wizarding world. If he could only preserve it…
“You know, most people don’t see it like that. They don’t like the unordinary or the different,” Harry began.

“I know,” Hagrid said. “’s cruel, tha’s what it is.”

“And so perhaps- if you have a friend as magnificent as Aragog, it might be a better idea for him to go into the forest. Where you can visit, but he’s less likely to be found.”

“But nothin’s gonna happen to ‘im here,” Hagrid said, frowning. “I keep ‘im safe.”

“But what if he escaped?” Harry suggested carefully. “Just to explore. It’s natural, but he could be in danger.”

“I ‘spose…”

“And he could have a family in the forest.”

“Tha’d be nice,” Hagrid agreed, his eyes glistening.

Harry recognised the signs of incoming tears, and said quickly, “Just something to think about.”

Hagrid nodded, and the two sat in silence for a moment.

“So why’re yeh in here?”

“Oh, I’m dying,” Harry said very seriously.

And Hagrid began sobbing.

“I’m joking!” Harry flapped his hands in a bit of panic. “It’s just a stress thing- no, don’t do that-”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut as Hagrid blew his nose on a nearby doily.

“S jus’ such a sad thought,” Hagrid said mournfully. “And yeh’ve bin so nice-“

“It was a joke,” Harry said weakly. “Promise.”

Hagrid clapped a large hand on Harry’s shoulder, and Harry nearly collapsed under the weight. Hagrid may have been smaller than Harry remembered, but he was still twice Harry’s size.

“Yeh can come an’ see ‘im, if you wan,” Hagrid suggested.

“Him?”

“Aragog.”

“Oh.” Time to backtrack. “Er, I have more of an aesthetic appreciation? I’m, um, pretty scared of spiders, actually.” Harry internally punched himself. What the hell was that?

Hagrid seemed to buy it. “Yeah, there’s a lotta people who find ‘em a mite scary. But he’s a real softie, promise. He can’t see properly, yeh know- they can’t till they’re at leas’ five. Tha’s why he bit me arm. He didn’ know better.”

“It looks bad,” Harry said, trying to be tactful. He had never quite shared in Hagrid’s belief that every vicious animal was just misunderstood.

“’S nothin’,” Hagrid shrugged, howled with pain at the movement, and then grinned. ““Sides,
Millie’ll fix me up good and proper.”

“Millie?”

“That’s Madam Hallpepper to you two,” the Matron said, sternly placing a vial on the side table. “Rubeus, knock that back. Try not to taste it.”

Hagrid reached out a huge hand and picked up the vial. It disappeared into the folds of his palm, and he raised his hand to his mouth. Hagrid swallowed, then rolled his shoulder.

“Oo, lovely,” Hagrid mumbled. “Tha’ll sort it out. Thanks Millie.”

“Madam Hallpepper,” she reminded him, and flapped her hands dismissively. “Oh, get out. It’ll be sorted out in the morning. And for heaven’s sake, stop playing around with beasts- danger classifications are there for a reason!”

“They’re a suggestion, aren’t they?” Hagrid said cheekily.

Hallpepper rolled her eyes, and Hagrid scampered out obediently.

“Utter nightmare,” Hallpepper mumbled fondly. “That heart of his will get him into trouble one of these days.”

“I think he’ll be alright,” Harry said, and tightened his fists hopefully.

“Right, Peters, into your pyjamas.”

“It’s 2 o’clock! In the afternoon!”

“And?”

Sigh. “Yes, Madam Hallpepper.”

Harry rather enjoyed his night in the hospital wing. He did some homework, took a Dreamless Sleep Potion, and woke up satisfyingly well-rested. And so all-in-all, he was feeling pretty well-prepared and clear-headed when Tom strode in, just as Harry was getting ready to leave.

“Yeah?” Harry asked, pausing in pulling on his shirt.

Tom paused abruptly. He didn’t say anything, and the oddest expression slid onto his face.

“Tom?” Harry frowned, and began doing up his buttons.

Tom’s head moved- it might have been a miniscule shake- and he cleared his throat. “I heard you fainted.”

“It was a fit. A manly fit.”

Tom smirked. “Swooned like sleeping beauty.”

“Shut up.”

Tom gestured towards Harry’s chest, and he glanced down. “Oh yeah,” Harry said. “Buttons.” And he did up the rest.
“Was this the same ‘manly fit’ as in the summer? When we met outside the or- house.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “It was a bit worse this time- nothing I couldn’t handle, though.”

“Very brave.”

“Shut up. Again.”

“What did Madam Hallpepper say it was caused by?”

“Stress.”

“Stress?” Tom looked unconvinced.

“Yeah, Bea didn’t much believe that either.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“I’m supposed to come back if it gets worse.”

“That’s the least she can do.”

Harry shrugged and began tugging on his socks.

Tom crossed his arms. “Has Weasley been by yet? Crying over your prone body? Kissing you awake-“

“Look, can we stop with the sleeping beauty thing?”

“Certainly.” Pause. “So where’s Prince Charming then?”

“He’s not-“ Harry sighed. “We haven’t even gone to Hogsmeade yet.”

“But who am I to stand in the way of true love’s kiss?”

“You do realise you’re not twelve, Tom.” Harry scowled up at the Head Boy. He didn’t know why Tom was being so weird about all of this. He inspected Tom closer, taking in his tense body language and blank expression, but that unfamiliar something in the set of his eyebrows. Vulnerability, maybe.

Perhaps- and it seemed ridiculous as Harry suggested it even to himself- Tom was feeling insecure. Tom didn’t have that many… friends (or whatever he and Tom were; somewhere between closeness and rivalry), and perhaps he was afraid Harry would like Septimus better, or something ridiculous like that.

“Did you, er,” Harry slipped on a shoe, “want to go and see something with me? I mean, you might already know about it, but I think you’d like it.”

“By all means,” Tom said, inclining his head.

“Right. Good.” Harry stood. “Let’s go then.”

“…Do you maybe want to put on your other shoe first?”

“Yeah, good idea.”
As Harrison led him up to the seventh-floor and a familiar corridor, it didn’t take long for Tom to remember searching for the Come and Go Room last year to no avail. He was suddenly gripped with certainty that Harrison was going to lead him right to the same spot and the wall would slide open effortlessly.

He was right.

“This is the Room of Requirement,” Harrison said, beaming. “You pace back and forwards three times and think of whatever you want, and the room will provide.”

Half of Tom wanted to complain—why had the room worked for Harrison and not Tom all those months ago? What did Tom do wrong?—but a louder part of Tom couldn’t forget Harrison, trusting and half-dressed, and now showing Tom all these secrets: no one else.

“So how does it work?” Tom asked curiously, glancing around. Harrison appeared to have chosen something cozy for the two of them; furnished with tattered sofas and armchairs draped with soft crimson furnishings, and a crackling fire (which Tom swore he kept seeing the outline of a face in). “Does the room have a fixed mass which changes its shape, in which case what happens to items left in here, or does it summon the needed items from other locations? Or are there a million variations of different rooms stored somewhere? Are they all in the same dimension—?”

“I don’t really know,” Harrison said thoughtfully. “It just sort of works.”

“Honestly,” Tom rolled his eyes, fonder than he’d allowed for anyone else. “No imagination.”

“I have imagination!” Harrison protested. “Just… not about rooms.”

“It’s fascinating magic. I’d love to investigate it,” Tom said, his fingers just itching to cast some diagnostics.

Harrison watched Tom with something like wonder. “Why do you only want to be a teacher, Tom? You could change the world. In a good way.”

“Teachers are powerful,” Tom argued. “Change the children, change the world.”

“I just don’t think you’d like it. You’re good at teaching people you like, Tom,” Harrison said. “You can’t stand helping Avery with his homework. Sure, you might be good— and believe me, you’re really good— at helping me, but can you honestly say that you could bear to teach a class full of Caspar Grahams day in and day out?”

Tom kept stubbornly silent, but it did set his mind whirring. It was true: he loathed most people. Time for a change of subject. “How did you find this place?”

“Oh, a house elf showed me.” Harrison smiled distantly. Tom’s lip curled; he couldn’t imagine how an interaction with a house elf could cause so much nostalgia.

“What did you use it for?”

“Escape. No offence, but you and the others were… quite intense, near the start. I wasn’t totally stable, either.”

Tom kept his doubts about Harrison’s currently stability to himself: remembering how he’d retched and shook outside Wool’s in the summer heat.
“And how did you get the room to work?” Tom hesitated, and then admitted reluctantly: “I tried sometime last year.”

“Oh, I was probably in it that time,” Harrison admitted sheepishly. “The room doesn’t work if someone’s already in it.”

“Of course.” Tom should have thought of that. “I’ll admit it’s a relief. I thought I’d failed somehow.”

“Would it really be that bad if you had?”

The pair drifted gradually towards the armchairs and took seats opposite one another.

“I don’t like failure,” Tom said quietly. “It’s weakness. Like… admitting you don’t-“

“-Belong?” Harrison suggested, quirking a smirk.

“I suppose.”

“Look,” Harrison ran a hand through his hair. “This is possibly the soppiest thing I’ve ever said, but... it only matters if the people who you care about think you belong. Everyone else can fuck off. And if people care about you- as sugary as it sounds- they won’t care if you fail.”

“That’s very idealistic,” Tom said.

“It’s true, though.”

“It matters what people think of you,” Tom insisted. “Power and weakness; the unspoken language we use every day and never realise it. The invisible dogs at our heels.”

Harrison turned his head away. Tom wondered what he was thinking- could he see something?

“So have you been looking at methods, you know, other than Horcruxes?” Harrison asked faux-casually, but Tom could hear the intensity. This was a test, he realised.

Tom nodded in agreement, and Harrison relaxed. Tom had apparently passed.

“Like what?”

“Have you heard of the Deathly Hallows?”

“No.”

“I thought they were a myth- I rather still think that, actually- but there are clues throughout history. Footnotes. Suggestions that they might exist.”

“But what are they?”

Tom leaned in conspiratorially. “They originate from The Tale of the Three Brothers. It describes three siblings- Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignatius- who, whilst travelling together, came across a river where many had perished before. And as they were skilled in magic, they made a bridge-“

“‘Skilled in magic’? Really? It’s a bridge.”

“It’s a metaphor,” Tom said sharply.

“Right. Sorry.”
“Anyway, as they crossed the bridge and escaped Death’s grasp, he appeared to them—“

“What, the actual Death?”

“Yes, the actual Death, are you going to let me finish or not?”

“Sorry.”

“As a reward, he granted them each a wish—“

“—I can’t believe Death’s a fairy godmother—“

“And so to each brother he gave, respectively, an unbeatable wand, a stone which could resurrect the dead, and an invisibility cloak so perfect it could hide the user from even Death.” Here, Tom paused (for effect).

Harrison lasted barely ten seconds before he asked impatiently, “Well? What happened to them?”

Tom smiled in satisfaction. “The oldest was slain in his sleep and the wand stolen, the second took his own life to join the shades that could never truly be brought back, and the last lived a long life, finally giving himself up to Death’s loving arms.” Tom sneered slightly.

“And how does any of this mean immortality?”

“It’s said that if one person were to unite all three Deathly Hallows- the objects in the story- they would be named the Master of Death. And how could Death kill its own master?”

“Well, I like the lack of cannibalism. How are you supposed to recognise the objects? There are a million wands and cloaks and we’re not short on stones, either.”

“According to the myth, the wand usually ends up in the possession of the most powerful wizard of any time, its history dripping with blood. It’s probably the least difficult to track down- theoretically, of course. The resurrection stone could look incredibly ordinary, but I imagine the main clue would come from picking it up and chatting with your dead grandmother. And the cloak… well, it’s eternal. Most invisibility cloaks fade and tear and fall apart with time, they barely last 100 years, but this one- the original- would be perfect until the end of time.”

“I had an invisibility cloak in my family,” Harrison said softly. “Passed down.”

“And by the time it got to you, it was hardly more than a tattered travelling cloak, yes?”

Harrison nodded wordlessly.

“Invisibility cloaks make terrible family heirlooms. No offence.”

“But it’s a myth, right? The Deathly Hallows aren’t real?”

“There’s no proof. But that’s neither here nor there.” Tom studied Harrison’s face thoughtfully, and out of nowhere, the thought ‘there can only be one Master of Death’ popped into his head. He dismissed it- it was hardly relevant.

They sat together in quiet contemplation. Harrison staring at nothing, but it was a musing stare, more of a slow realisation. It was peaceful. Nice.

Now if only Septimus Weasley could fall from a tall building. For a very long time. Never losing consciousness, finally hitting the ground feet first so his neck didn’t snap and he could feel every
bone of his body splintering and crushing under the pressure, until he was little more than a smear on
the grass. *Then* he could die.

Yes, Tom mused, settling back into the cushioned armchair. That would be perfect.

Chapter End Notes

It's finally here! Well, doesn't Harry just jump from romantic encounter to romantic
encounter? And this is probably the most shippy chapter yet. Aw, Tom's possessive and
Harry is slightly cruel in his acceptance of Septimus. What emotionally unaware nitwits.

Check out my tumblr (https://vivypotter.tumblr.com/)
Harry stared up at the door, his hand frozen in a knock. A sign hung at a jaunty angle read ‘STUDENTS KEEP OUT. SILENCE IN THE CORRIDOR’.

“She really likes people,” Orion said cheerfully. “You’ll be fine.”

Harry gripped the letter tighter. ‘Come and see me if you don’t want to fail in life’ was the main message, and so understandably he’d gone straight to Merrythought once he finished his toast. His first Sunday theory session. He wondered why he’d agreed to this in the first place.

“Go on, then.” Orion gestured supportively. “Knock.”

Harry took a deep breath and rapped quickly on the wood, flinching back like he’d been struck. The door opened almost immediately.

“Peters,” Merrythought said, sipping on a cup of tea. Her gaze travelled to Orion. “And boyfriend.”

“Oh no-“

“I’m engaged-“

“Calm down,” Merrythought snorted. “Don’t young people joke anymore? Go on then, get out of here, Black.”

Orion obviously saw Harry’s uncertainty. “You know,” he tried. “I could use improvement in theory
I'm not running a club here. Go on, Peters will do without his twin for an hour or so.”

Orion hesitated.

Merrythought sighed. “Neither of you will die. Honestly, every time I separate you I feel like I’m tearing apart mother and child.” Merrythought waved Harry in, and slammed the door shut before Orion could follow.

Harry glanced around the office. It was quite minimalist, very barebone. A desk, two chairs, cabinet and a painting of a stormy landscape, the faint sound of waves crashing against the shore.

Merrythought guided Harry towards the chair, and took a seat behind her desk.

Merrythought set the teacup down on her desk and gave Harry a very intimidating look. “So you want to be an Unspeakable, huh?”

Harry nodded.

“Well, I can tell you now, you’re not going to make it,” she said sternly, pursing her lips. “At least not if you carry on as you are.”

“Hey!” Harry protested, but Merrythought was already raising her hand.

“How many hours of independent study do you do, Peters?”

“The normal amount—”

“Outside of homework?”

Harry sat back in his chair, considering how he spent his time: Quidditch, Orion, Tom- even a bit of chess if he was bored. “Not much,” he admitted.

“And what kind of marks do you get?”

“A and EEs? Mostly.”

“That won’t cut it. Unspeakables get Os. All Os. And that requires independent study, I’m afraid.”

Harry sat up defiantly. “Tom doesn’t study.”

“Riddle’s a fucking genius, and of course he does. Knowledge doesn’t just appear in his head—although sometimes I do wonder,” she added thoughtfully. “Be assured, Riddle does still have to study, even if it is just a little bit less than the rest of us mortals.”

“I don’t think I could get all Os,” Harry admitted. He never found school hard, exactly- the As and EEs were easy enough, but he wasn’t exceptional. He was no Hermione.

“You can and you will. You just need to get your arse in gear.”

“It’s not possible,” Harry said slowly, slumping. He could feel a sort of hopeless numbness creeping over him. “I can’t.”

Merrythought narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. “You won’t tell anyone else this if I reveal to you, understand?”
Harry nodded.

“...I failed my TOADS twice.” Merrythought got up from her chair quickly, looking embarrassed as she dusted off her trousers and moved towards the window. “I was a rather terrible student, to be frank, but I always had a knack for Defence, so I decided I should go into that. I got through my OWLs, scraped through NEWTs, but TOADS were a reach too far. I decided that I couldn’t do it, and I was probably too lazy or scared to actually try. And then, third time around, I met Diana. And she was bloody good motivation, let me tell you that.” His teacher smiled distantly, and Harry really didn’t want to ask. “So, yes, it’s been a long ride. But trust me, if you decide you want to do something and you decide you’re capable, you can do it.”

“I don’t think I have the same kind of ‘motivation’ as you did.”

This brought a smirk from Merrythought. “Oh, I think you’d be surprised.”

“I’m not going to ask what that meant.”

“Wise.” Merrythought moved back to her desk. “Do you know what TOADS you want to do?”

“I have to do, er, a Magical Theory one, don’t I? And something else.” Harry turned deep red. “I haven’t really looked.”

Merrythought raised an eyebrow. “Luckily for you, I have. Now I reckon your best bet is a Applied Defence. Perhaps you could get away with a Study in Defence, but that’s quite theoretical; maybe Charms, but I think you’d tear your hair out. I did Applied Defence and Magical Theory. They’re a good combination.”

Harry nodded, the words swimming before through his mind. “Right…”

“Peters? Are you listening?”

Harry took a deep breath, and at last a faint sort of calm washed over him: the feeling he’d get before a Quidditch match, or some other kind of life-threatening stunt. “I came here because you said you’d help me become an Unspeakable.”

“And I will. If you let me.”

“I can do it, right?”

“I certainly hope so.”

“So what do I need to work on now?” Harry said, clenching his fists with determination. If he had to work hard to get back home, to see Ron and Hermione and Neville and Luna- well, he was going to do it. He’d been lazy. That had to stop.

Merrythought bent down and picked up a thick wad of paper, heaving it onto the desk with a definite bang. She selected a sheet from the top. “Well, your defence marks are about the only adequate part of your record…”

And thus they ploughed through Harry’s results: analysing every little quiz or last-minute essay. Harry had never heard the phrases ‘lazy’ or ‘could do better’ so many times in thirty minutes, and he’d lived with the Dursleys.

When it was all done, Merrythought sat back, and sighed. “You’re an intelligent student, Peters, and you do fine as it is. Average. But you need to be exceptional.”
Harry, his head still slightly spinning with numbers and goals, just nodded.

“I can help you make a timetable, if you’d like. Just a few more hours sprinkled in here and three-using your weekends usefully, for example- could make a hell of a difference.” Merrythought must have taken in Harry’s wide-eyed panic, because she added a sympathetic “perhaps later, though.”

Harry checked his watch and swore. “Shit, I’ve got a date.”

“A date?” Merrythought’s eyebrows shot up. “The boy moves faster than I thought.”

“The boy? You know Septimus Weasley?” Harry repeated in confusion.


Harry thought that left quite a few avenues pretty open to him, but he hurried obediently away, nonetheless.

Harry arrived at the entrance hall wearing a jumper and baggy jeans, Septimus arrived in full formal robes.

Harry thought that set the tone for their date rather well.

"You look lovely," Septimus said very eagerly, reaching out a hand.

Hesitantly, Harry shook it. "Thanks, I, er, feel a bit under-dressed."

"No, it's perfect," Septimus assured him. "Perfect. I- I'm just really glad you agreed to this. Honestly, I was watching that match the other day, just sitting there thinking: Merlin, he's really beautiful, isn't he? And here you are. Standing here. It's almost unreal."

"Don't faint," Harry said helpfully. He glanced around at the other students, wrapping scarves around their necks and scurrying into the chill of the cold autumn day. "Shall we set off then?"

"Of course." Septimus frowned at something over Harry's shoulder. "Is Tom coming with us?"

"Huh?" Harry said, raising his eyebrows. "No, I shouldn't think so."

"He's just, er, watching, over there. And frowning. Why is he frowning?"

But when Harry glanced behind him, Tom was striding towards Orion and Atticus, looking as composed as ever. Orion gave Harry a thumbs up. "He probably had something in his eye."

"Yes," Septimus agreed. "You're probably right. Are you, er, absolutely sure-?" Septimus shook his head, chuckling slightly. "No, never mind. I'm being silly."

Harry punched Septimus in the arm jokingly (he immediately regretted it), and then Harry and Septimus set off towards Hogsmeade.

"So, what are your family like?" Harry asked curiously. That was what people did on dates, wasn't it? Got to know one another? He didn't have much practise.

"Oh, they're all very lovely," Septimus said, a faint, fond blush stealing over his cheeks. "I live with
my mum and my dad- he works with in the Creatures department at the Ministry. I get my hair from my dad- we're all ginger, bless him, it's like a disease. Then there are my two sisters: Meg and Caroline. Meg's three years older than me and Caroline's- six years older? Maybe seven."

"Are they all 'married with kids' then?" Harry asked.

"No kids. Caroline got married last year to a really nice bloke, and they live over in Kent. Meg works in a bookshop, but I think she's seeing someone."

"You get on well?"

"Pretty much. Caroline's a bit of a nightmare, but she means well. She's too old for us to really fight. And me and Meg were always close. She's very quiet, but a sweetheart really. What about you?"

"Well, my parents are- they're- well, they're-"

"Oh, yes, sorry," Septimus said, turning very pale. His freckles stood out magnificently. "I forgot."

"No, it's fine," Harry said. "They were lovely. My mum was- she was kind. And my dad... he was a bit of a prankster." Harry fell abruptly quiet, realising with slight nausea that was all he knew about his parents. Niceness and pranking. That was all he'd heard about them, from the people they loved. That was what they amounted to. The nice one and the funny one. They must have been real people- with flaws and ticks and-

"Are you okay?" Septimus asked with concern. "I mean, obviously you're not, but..."

"I'm fine," Harry smiled tightly, and pulled himself together. "It's a bit nippy, isn't it?"

"D'you want my scarf?" Septimus asked.

"Nah. I'm alright." Harry felt like they'd been walking forever. Hogsmeade wasn't this far away, was it? "So what do you like to do?"

"I'm a bit of a gardener," Septimus admitted. "It's not very glamorous, but I love it. The feeling of soil beneath your fingernails, you know? It grounds you- hey," he sniggered. "Grounds you. Get it?"

It was at that point that Harry realised, with slight horror, that he was on a date with Neville Longbottom.

They got into Hogsmeade in record time, according to Septimus.

"I can't believe you walked that fast," he huffed. "You're so athletic!"

Yeah, Harry thought grimly. That was his motivation. Athleticism.

"So where d'you want to go first?" Septimus glanced around the village with interest. "Katie Cash-Lewis was telling me the other day about this really nice date spot. It's this little sandwich place with-" Septimus blushed hotly. "-enclosed booths."

"Let's not," Harry said strongly. Backtracking: "I'm not really a sandwich kind of person."

"Oh, me neither!" Septimus chuckled uncomfortably. "Not that I'm not a sandwich person, I just..."
yeah, I agree. Not sandwiches. Three Broomsticks then?"

"Three Broomsticks," Harry nodded in agreement, and they set off.

"Hogsmeade is such a nice little place," Septimus said cheerily. "Meg always described it to me in her letters, but she made it sound a bit of a horror show. Loud students everywhere, pushing and shoving. This is all very idyllic."

It was a lot quieter than usual, Harry noted. A lot of the shops were boarded up, magical lettering suspended behind windows reading 'closed temporarily'. "What's going on, do you think?"

"Grindelwald," Septimus frowned. "A lot of people are spending time with their families. He's supposed to be heading over here, you know. The attacks are getting worse."

There was a kind of horrific suspense in the air, Harry noticed. Like everyone had taken a breath and forgotten to let it go. "Do you believe that?" he asked.

"I suppose I almost want to," Septimus shrugged. "It'll end quicker if he gets here, won't it? Someone will have to do something."

Harry couldn't argue with that, and he stepped through the door that Septimus held open.

Harry really did love the Three Broomsticks. It was unmistakably magical, everything from the moving taxidermy heads (also disturbing) to the butterbeers floating through the air and distributing themselves to their wizarding patrons. The Three Broomsticks embodied that kind of wholesome ‘fantasy magical realm’ everyone wished for as they grew up, Harry most of all. The Hog's Head was more like the grimy reality.

Septimus led them to a table, ordered them both a drink, and then Harry sat through an excruciating thirty minutes as Septimus- who evidently felt he'd let their date wander off into slightly depressing territory- led a very intense, one-sided discussion about plant potting. Harry wondered if this was what hell might be like.

Since when were nice people so boring?

It was with desperate relief- a drowning man grasping onto a float- that he noticed Tom's entry into the pub.

"Tom!" Harry called out, waving an arm. Septimus paused mid-sentence. "Tom, we're over here!"

Tom, who appeared to have abandoned any friends he'd set off with- glanced over at their table. There was a brief moment between them: where Harry widened his eyes and didn't know what Tom was thinking. And then Tom strode over and sat down at their table with a definite thump. "Hello, Weasley," he said, a slight hiss to his voice. "I don't think we've met."

"You're Harry's friend, right?" Septimus said cheerily. "It's so nice to meet you." He shuffled closer to Harry so he could reach across the table and shake Tom's hand. Harry suffered in silence.

"That's right," Tom agreed. "Harry's friend. How's your little... tête-à-tête going?"

"We're on a date," Septimus said cheerily.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, who was beginning to feel like perhaps this idea had been less of a fun way to pass a Sunday and more of a terrible mistake. "A date."
"What have you done so far?" Tom asked.

"We've been here for an hour," Harry said dully.

"But Septimus has barely touched his butterbeer."

"He hasn't had a chance," Harry said, who was just polishing off his second and considering Firewhiskey. "He's barely stopped to breathe."

"I've been telling Harry all about plant repotting," Septimus said with an eager grin. "It's all about the roots, you know. Why, I was lucky enough to work on a mandrake-"

"Fascinating," Tom said shortly. Harry could have kissed him. "I've been meaning to go to Honeyduke's. Perhaps we should all head there?"

Harry felt a leap of excitement at the idea of all those shelves— he could definitely lose Septimus in there. It was then that Harry noticed the glimmer of satisfaction in Tom's eyes, and something inside of him balked. Harry's jaw set. He was proving Tom right about Septimus, and that couldn't do.

"No, actually," Harry said airily. "I think we're good. In fact," and he very deliberately took Septimus' hand (Septimus looked delighted), "why don't we go find somewhere together, Septimus?" Harry lowered his voice suggestively. "Alone."

"Really?" Septimus squeaked, but Harry barely glanced at him. "Okay."

"I should hardly think you'll find anything like that in Hogsmeade," Tom said faux-casually. "It's crawling with people."

"I should think we'll find an alley," Harry shrugged. "Somewhere private. Or perhaps we should head back to Hogwarts..."

"And waste this lovely day?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "It's October."

Tom smiled, but it looked like more of a snarl. "But it would be such a shame to miss out on all the socialising. Whatever will you do with just the two of you?"

"I'm sure we'll find something."

Septimus grinned cheerfully at the both of them, clearly unaware of any undertones to the conversation. "We could head over to Hogsmeade and then go back to the castle."

"Great," Harry said, sagging in his chair. Honestly: between tolerating Septimus for a moment longer or vindicating Tom: there was no right answer. No, that wasn't fair. Septimus was a nice person. He just had different interests to Harry. Really different.

During the walk to Honeyduke's, Harry found himself exchanging snipes with Tom and— he realised guiltily— perhaps slightly ignoring Septimus. Tom was just so much more dynamic: he parried and slashed and snarked at lightning speed. Harry felt breathless trying to keep up.

"So you like Defence, right?" Septimus asked Tom. "I heard about your duel with Harry."

"Yes," Tom agreed, fixing Septimus with a stare that definitely read 'you are beneath me'. Harry tried to subtly kick him. "I'd say there's certainly a bond that comes from duelling. Trust. It’s... intimate." Tom's tongue rolled over the world as if he was trying to savour every last syllable.
Harry blushed uncomfortably. “Shut up, Riddle.”

“But I’m sure you know that too, Septimus.” Tom asked very pointedly: “Have you been in a relationship before?”

“Oh, no,” Septimus chuckled. “There was this girl in fourth year, but no. Not really.”

“Mm,” Tom hummed. “What a surprise.”

Harry ignored the amused look Tom shot him. “That’s stupid,” Harry said. “You’re sweet and kind and you know a lot about plants—like a lot.”

“Thanks,” Septimus grinned.

It was true: Septimus was all those things and more. Harry just didn’t think they were what he needed. Or wanted. Or could tolerate for more than half an hour, if he was being truly honest.

Honeyduke’s was loud and crowded- Harry relished the relief from the strained tension. He peered around, seeing if he could spot Orion, or just someone to rescue him from this situation he’d somehow gotten himself into.

But no. He suspected Orion had dragged Avery off to get a refill of quills and gotten distracted along the way. Orion really did love quills.

On the positive side (kind of), if Harry’d had any doubts about Tom’s feelings towards Septimus, they were now completely and utterly vanished. It became apparent that Tom totally and fully, ultimately and unequivocally loathed Septimus Weasley. Harry didn’t know why: honestly, whilst Tom had shown disdain for Septimus before, it was obvious that his feelings had very swiftly spiralled towards hatred so blatant Tom couldn’t even be bothered to hide it.

As their mismatched group wandered around the store, Harry found himself playing a difficult game between defending Septimus from Tom’s cruelty and using Tom to distract Septimus. He was feeling quite exhausted by the time they reached the hardboiled sweets, and he could have sworn that Tom was getting sharper and sharper.

All of a sudden, Septimus slipped his hand into Harry’s and began to tug him towards the popcorn selection (‘Pops in 9 Different Flavours!’). “We really have to try the latest range,” Septimus was chattering away, “Tom, you should—”

“I’m going to find something,” Tom said very abruptly and without waiting for a reply, he turned away to wade into the masses. Harry and Septimus froze, watching as Tom strode off. His stride was much sharper than usual.

“What’s up with him?” Harry said, shaking his head.

Septimus sighed. “I think I should… Let’s go outside.”

Harry, feeling rather bemused about the whole affair, let himself be led out of the shop. Outside the sun was finally starting to peek through the clouds and despite his confusion, Harry felt a glimmer of positivity. Perhaps it would be a good day.

Harry saw Septimus’ shoulders heave as he took a heavy breath and then finally: “you could have
said no, you know.”

Harry blinked. “To what?”

“To this… whatever it is. It’s certainly not a date.” Septimus smiled ruefully.

Harry had fucked up. “I- I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-“

“It’s okay,” Septimus shrugged. “I’m not upset. I just wanted a chance, you know? But I can see now that I never really had one.”

“…Why?”

“You and Tom, of course.”

“What about us?”

“You…” Septimus looked thrown off. “You do know, don’t you?”

“What?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t have known it before-“

“Known what?”

“But after spending a day with you-“

“I don’t understand.”

Septimus’ face flushed. “Maybe it’s not my place.”

“Tell me.”

“It wouldn’t be kind.”

“Screw kindness.”

It was then that Harry heard the screams. Sudden, piercing and filled with genuine terror that froze Harry’s blood solid; it came from everywhere: the sound of hundreds of screaming children. Harry tensed, ready to charge off blindly into the chaos, find the source of the screaming and stop it, but he hesitated. Perhaps he should see what he was dealing with first.

Harry pushed Septimus back towards Honeyduke’s and told him very firmly to gather as many students as he could, barricade the door, hide, and wait for help. And then Harry cast a disillusionment charm over himself and began to steal towards the centre of Hogsmeade.

It didn’t take him long to find the source of the hubbub.

Harry didn’t recognise the strange wizards launching their attack: all dressed in cultish, scarlet robes, but he did recognise the red and purple spells ricocheting off walls and shattering windows left, right and centre. He took a sharp breath. Harry didn’t think any students had been hit yet; the sixth and seventh years sustained shield charms to protect the younger children, and occasionally hurried the children towards shops where they could hide. They huddled in terrified clusters: spilled bags by their feet like some kind of sick mockery of blood. No one seemed to be doing anything though, and whilst the wizards seemed content to just cause terror, Harry suspected they would start tearing the students down once their shield charms weakened.
From nowhere, Harry spotted Bea, dazed and clutching her arm, stumble out of range of the shield charms. And then Harry spotted the exact moment that one of the wizards noticed her.

He didn’t have time to think.

“Stupefy!” The spell surged across the square and thudded into the wizard’s chest. But as he crumpled to the ground, all attention immediately shot to Harry’s direction and, soon enough, Harry himself. A disillusionment didn’t tend to hold up under scrutiny, so he dissolved it.

And suddenly, Harry was fighting. It was almost thrillingly familiar, the thud of his heartbeat in his ears and the methodical calm into which Harry sank. Target, plan, execute, target, plan, execute.

Harry’s advantage came from the element of surprise; the wizards had no idea of his level. Even so, the underestimation couldn’t last long, and it was almost inevitable that Harry would have been overwhelmed by superior numbers had his efforts not incited a tentative courage in the other students. One person sent a stunner, another sent a tripping curse, and soon enough, Harry wasn’t the only Hogwarts student fighting back; the courtyard turned into a battlefield.

Harry spotted Orion from a distance, defiantly protecting a group of 3rd years, engaged in a furious duel. Harry’s attention was torn away as strong white flame caught a nearby wizard and set him alight; the wizard screamed as he desperately tried to extinguish the fire.

Harry felt a prickle of warmth. Tom was here. And then from out of nowhere, Tom appeared at Harry’s elbow, shooting him a quick, savage smile.

“Stopped sulking then?” Harry quipped.

Tom sent a bone-shatterer over his shoulder, the answering scream sharpening his smirk. “Surely not the priority right now.”

“But you don’t launch yourself into danger. What are you doing?”

“Harrison, you could die.” Tom rolled his eyes. “Stop talking.”

Harry and Tom fought together like a dream. It was like being back at that snowball match from so long ago; they matched and complimented each other’s temperaments perfectly; as Harry surged forwards, Tom sent a vicious cutting curse backwards, and their enemies crumbled.

It soon became apparent that the red-robed wizards were barely capable- clearly their leader hadn’t expected much resistance.

“Who are they?” Harry yelled over the crackle and explosion of spells.

“Grindelwald!” Tom called back.

Fear ran down Harry’s spine like icy fingers. So he had finally arrived, just like everyone had said he would. And he had come for Hogwarts. Frozen in horror, Harry let his guard down slightly, and that was enough. He felt a blinding pain in his hand and screamed, stumbling back and barely raising a shield in time to avoid the cutting spell to his throat.

Tom wasn’t so lucky. He’d glanced around upon Harry’s scream- Harry could only guess why he’d be such an idiot- and in doing so, hadn’t seen the block of rock from above. Tom crumpled to the ground, blood leaking from a cut above his eyebrow and pooling on the cobblestones.

Suddenly Harry was on the defensive, pushed back as he desperately blocked and dodged and
ducked. The pain in his hand throbbed and he swore, not sure how much of the wet dripping from his elbow was blood or sweat.

Shouldn’t there be some kind of support here already? Where were the teachers? Perhaps they didn’t know. Harry clenched his jaw and made a decision. It would both attract definitely attention and leave him wide open. But it had to be done.

“Expecto Patronum!” A familiar silver stag burst from his wand. “Find Merrythought. Tell her the village is under attack.” His patronus inclined its head and faded away.

And suddenly Harry was pushed to the ground, a repulso narrowly skimming over his head, and shaking hands dragged him behind a fountain to safety. He glanced up, ready to thank Orion, or Bea, or maybe even Rupert at a pinch- but no. His jaw dropped open slightly. “Grahams.”

Caspar Grahams smiled weakly, pale and sick looking. “Hello Harrison. Nice weather we’re having.”

“But you- you-“

“I’m going to see if I can grab Tom. Wait here.”

As soon as Grahams crawled away, Harry became aware of the burning sensation in his hand. He glanced down and- wow, that was a lot of blood. And no finger.

“Fucking Pettigrew,” he hissed, a stub where his little finger used to be. He gritted his teeth against the scream of pain, and shakily conjured some bandages. They were thin in places, but it would have to do.

Harry blinked fiercely to stop the tears of pain. Now was not the time. He lunged forward as Grahams dragged Tom’s body around the corner, checking his unconscious pulse. With his heart in his throat, Harry felt a steady thrum beneath his fingertips.

“Thank fuck,” Harry breathed. “I have to go back out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Grahams snapped, and looked surprised by his own anger.

But before Harry could throw himself towards certain death, there was the crack of apparition and Dippet’s projected voice boomed through the village, ordering the students to retreat and find cover. It sent great waves of relief rolling over Harry, sinking deep into his pores. Safe. They were safe. The attackers must have disapparated soon after the teachers arrived, because it felt like barely five minutes before everyone was emerging from various shops and hiding places as Dippet assured them of their safety.

It seemed like the whole staff had answered the call: everyone from Dippet to Madam Longstock. They all looked grim.

“What happened?” Merrythought demanded, picking on a little third year who was shaking like a leaf. Harry thought it was rather cruel.

“We-we… I-...“

“They appeared out of nowhere,” Matthew Stein, the Slytherin beater, cut in. Harry thought the third year might have been his brother. “We put up shields but we couldn’t really think of what else to do. It all happened so fast, and, well, we were barely holding up.” He looked ashamed. “And then Peters came out of nowhere and started fighting back.”
Harry took a step back as the weight of a few hundred eyes fell upon his face. “It was everyone,” he objected. “Everyone fought back. I just got help.”

“The patronus was yours?” Merrythought asked, gentler this time.

Harry nodded wordlessly.

“A corporeal patronus,” Dumbledore said, the first time he had spoken. He regarded Harry thoughtfully, as if his student had been born anew. “Impressive.”

“Not really,” Harry said, his jaw hardening as he met Dumbledore’s gaze. “I just did something.”

“Sometimes that’s half the battle.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, looking the Conqueror of Grindelwald straight in the eye. “Yeah, it is.” And for a moment, it felt like the world held its breath.

Harry sat slumping in a hospital wing chair as Madam Hallpepper fussed over his hand. “Dark magic,” she fussed, frowning deeply. “I can heal it over, but it won’t ever grow back, I’m afraid.”

“At least it wasn’t my wand hand,” Harry said glumly. His finger- or lack thereof- had been numbed by now, but it was utterly strange to look down and see it missing. He felt like it was still there.

“I’ve at least healed it over,” Hallpepper said. “But I can’t predict how dark magic will act. Do let me know if anything untoward happens.”

“My whole life is ‘untoward’, ” Harry muttered.

“What?”

Harry blushed with embarrassment. “Nothing. Er, how’s Tom?”

“He’ll be fine,” she said, smiling kindly. “The injury looked much worse than it was. He should wake up any minute.”

Harry released tension he hadn’t even realised he’d been holding. He glanced around the wing. “And everyone else?”

“No fatalities, thank Morgana,” Hallpepper said, rubbing a hand over her face. “But a fair few injuries. I’ve already had to send three to St Mungo’s, and at this rate it may be four. We’re just lucky that Mungo’s sent in a few to help here.” She pursed her lips. “You poor dears- if I could get my hands on those bastards- oh, good evening, Professor.”

Harry glanced up and was only half-surprised to see Dumbledore standing over them, a jovial smile fixed firmly in place. He’d suspected that he’d be receiving a visit after the curious look Dumbledore had sent him only a few hours ago.

“Hello Millicent, dear,” Dumbledore said. “I was just wondering if I could borrow Mr Peters?”

“Take him,” she said, waving her hands. “I’ve got more than enough to keep me busy.”

“Excellent.” Dumbledore set a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Shall we take a stroll?”
Harry clambered to his feet, shaking off his teacher’s grasp. “Of course, Professor. Lead the way.”

As they wandered down the corridor towards Dumbledore’s office—funny, Harry didn’t have fond memories of his last visit there either—Harry remained stubbornly silent. He wasn’t going to be the one to break the tension.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” But before Dumbledore could continue the small talk, Harry rushed on. “Are they coming back? Grindelwald’s men? Is he coming here?”

“I believe this was a… scare tactic. Intimidation.” Dumbledore held the door open for Harry. “Gellert has been rather tactical in his movements so far. I highly doubt he’ll frequent our shores himself. There’s no need to panic.”

Harry looked at the man who he knew could end this terror. But why wasn’t he doing it? “We’re all scared, sir. Someone needs to stop him.”

“He can’t keep going forever, my boy. Good people will triumph.”

“Until they don’t.”

“There’s always hope.”

A sharp interruption from the wall: “Oh, don’t preach at the boy, Albus.”

Harry glanced over to his left, recognising the same portrait he’d talked to all those months ago (maybe it was even a year), when Orion had used Dumbledore’s floo to visit home. The bitchy portrait.

“Hello again.” The portrait raised her eyebrows at Harry. ‘Domineering’ once again sprung to mind. “I see you’ve become sulkier.”

“Harrison here has been quite a hero today,” Dumbledore said, gifting Harry an approving smile. It was almost like he’d never suspected Harry of being a murderous maniac at all.

The portrait chuckled. “That boy just gave you one of the dirtiest looks I’ve ever seen, Albus. What did you do?”

“I made a grave error in judgement.”

“You have changed much then,” the portrait sniffed. “You always were a stupid baby.”

“Wait, you’re his mother?” Harry spluttered, finally catching on.

“Unfortunately,” the portrait agreed, and gestured to herself sarcastically. “Kendra Dumbledore, forced to watch the error of my womb stumble through life forever more.”

“Mother,” Dumbledore rolled his eyes, and it was the oddest thing in the world to imagine Dumbledore as a child. This was why she’d known so much about him, Harry realised. She’d literally raised him.

“So what heroism have you been up to today then?” Kendra turned her attention back to Harry. “Saved a kitten? Invented a new potion? Comforted a Hufflepuff?”

Dumbledore didn’t share in her amused smirk. “Gellert sent some of his men to Hogsmeade today.
Harrison led the charge against them.”

“Gellert? Grindelwald?” Kendra set her jaw. “I told you about that boy, Albus. I warned you he was no good.”

“You can hardly claim to have known-“

“A mother always knows. And now look what’s happened.”

“Mother!” Dumbledore snapped. Harry flinched- he had never seen Dumbledore quite so angry. Dumbledore sighed, tension melted out of his frame. “You didn’t see him like I did. He was a visionary. He was so bright.”

“You’re too sentimental.”

“Yes, well,” Dumbledore said, a sharp look in his eye, “perhaps if you’d been more sentimental, she’d still be here.”

“How dare you-!”

Harry felt like he was intruding on something private and wondered if Dumbledore had perhaps forgotten he was there. Involuntarily, his breathing quickened. No, not now. It couldn’t happen now.

Kendra must have caught sight of Harry as his face drained of colour. “What’s the matter with him?”

“I-I’m fine,” Harry said. He felt the attack recede and thanked whatever deity that was looking out for him. “I get these- attacks, I suppose, but I’ve talked to Madam Hallpepper about it. She says it’s stress.”

Kendra hummed and narrowed her eyes at him. “Perhaps I’ll go and have a chat with Millicent.”

“It’s really not that big of a deal-“

“Don’t talk back to me,” she snapped. “Albus, we’ll discuss this later.”

“I look forward to it.”

Kendra swept out of her frame, and for a few minutes Harry and Dumbledore just studied the background of the painting in silence: a dramatic set of red curtains and a large glass of wine set on a side table.

Dumbledore sighed and moved back towards his desk, straightening a quill. “She was a magnificent woman.”

“I’m sure. She’s hanging in your office, after all.”

Dumbledore shook his head ruefully. “She would accept no other place.”

“How are Mr Riddle?”

“She has one in the hospital wing, and she refuses to tell me where the other is.” Dumbledore smiled fondly. “I think she enjoys the mystery.” He perched on the edge of his desk. “So, ah, how is Mr Riddle?”

“He’s okay. It looked worse than it was. They reckon he should be up any minute now.”
Dumbledore paused, and perhaps with a grain of guilt, he said, “You’ve both done this school a great service.”

It was like a bucket of icy water had been emptied over Harry’s head.

“I mean, thought I was an attention-seeking liar,” Harry said coolly. “But each to their own, I suppose.”

“I think I ought to apologise, Harrison,” Dumbledore said. “I’m afraid I made a terrible error in my treatment of you following the petrification incident last year. You came to me for help and I, being a stubborn old fool, refused you. Although, I am glad to see that you and Mr Riddle worked it out with no permanent casualties, so I’m content to have no idea what went on.” His eyes twinkled in that mischievous way but it seemed darker, somehow. Harry didn’t feel nearly as charmed as he once had. “I would also like to thank you for your brave efforts in the village earlier. You- and indeed, Mr Riddle- helped a lot of people, and I daresay saved a lot of lives. I have never been so grateful to be prove wrong.”

“I just did the decent thing,” Harry said flatly. “What anyone would do.”

He watched as Dumbledore twiddled with the edge of his beard and crossed to consider his shelves, passing a hand thoughtfully over a familiar silver instrument. Finally, Dumbledore turned back to Harry with a morose sort of smile. “You’re a good boy, Harrison.”

Harry stood very straight, trying not to bristle. “I hardly think I’m a boy, professor.”

“Ah yes, of course. I suppose you aren’t, are you?” Dumbledore shook his head. “It gets rather confusing, you understand, trying to make a decision about when to start calling you all men and women. I often find it sounds very much like an order.”

“I would say we’re adults by now, sir.” Harry had felt quite like an adult since he was fourteen.

“We force our youth to grow up younger and younger. Childhood is so precious.”

“Didn’t your mother say something about preaching, Professor?”

“Yes, I suppose she did,” Dumbledore allowed. “I suppose she did. Professor Merrythought speaks very fondly of you, you know.”

“Really?” Harry’s cheeks darkened. “That’s nice of her.”

“Quite the talent, she says. Perhaps we’ll see you come back to Hogwarts in a few years, hm?” He lowered his voice secretively. “Galatea was suggesting that retirement may be in her near future. She says that she’s been rejuvenated for the moment, but after that… who knows?”

“I think I’d make a rubbish teacher,” Harry said, but he couldn’t stop thinking of all the work he’d done in the DA and the pure buzz he’d gotten from it. There was something quite… dare he say it: ‘magical’ about helping people to become better.

“We can always surprise ourselves. And from what I’ve seen, you do seem like a natural leader.”

Harry let that linger in the air for a moment, unsure how to answer. He finally said: “I should probably go and see if Tom’s awake now.”

Besides, Harry couldn’t help but question why Tom had fought with him in the first place. He doubted Tom had done it on pure principle. There was something in the way that Tom had said ‘you
could die’ that gave Harry the slightest suspicion that perhaps… just maybe, Tom had fought for Harry. And that gave him all kind of odd feelings.

Voldemort, Harry reminded himself. Tom was Voldemort. But the name barely seemed to hold any meaning anymore, and certainly not in connection to Tom: snarky, intelligent Tom, who only seemed to compromise when Harry was involved and looked at him with such intense focus Harry was sure he could see right through to his soul.

Plus, Tom had a nose.

A really nice nose.

“Certainly. Do let me know how you do. And pass on my well wishes to Mr Riddle.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

Harry nodded politely and left the office. As he closed the door behind him, he heard a rustling of fabric and the quick click of heels on the stone, and when he glanced down the corridor, he spotted the tail end of a robe disappear around the corner.

He had a sinking feeling that it might have been Tom. Who’d heard them talking about the attack, and Kendra, and… the chamber of secrets. Tom’s chamber.

“Shit.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed :) Shout out to the reader who apparently met one of my irl friends XD
If you want to follow me, go to my tumblr https://vivypotter.tumblr.com/ I would hugely appreciate it xx
Tom Acts Like A Murder Toddler

Chapter Summary

Tom is a lil bitch, meets with an old friend, and learns a new skill.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: Harry goes for a meeting with Merrythought to help him with his Unspeakable ambitions. She tells him to buck up his ideas, because he's been cruising. He then rushes out to get to his ill-advised date with Septimus Weasley, which Tom is clearly not happy about. They take a walk into the village together, during which Harry notices that Septimus Weasley and he are definitely not a good fit. At all. They wander into the Three Broomsticks, where Tom swoops in to join the party. Septimus takes Harry outside to admit that he knows he's not the one Harry's interested in, but they are interrupted by an attack on the village. Harry rushes towards the scene and launches himself into battle mode to defend the students and is joined, surprisingly, by Tom. Harry is hit by a curse that removes a little finger, and Tom is distracted by his injury, leaving him open to attack. Harry and Tom are dragged to safety by Caspar Grahams in the surprise of the century. The teachers arrive to shut down the attack. Back at the Hospital Wing, Harry finds out his little finger cannot be reattached due to dark magic and Dumbledore guided Harry back to his office to thank him for his actions and apologise for not believing that Tom was the Heir of Slytherin. We also get an insight into the fractious relationship between Albus and the portrait of his mother, Kendra, who Harry met in earlier chapters. When Harry leaves the office, he finds out that Tom was listening in, and now knows that Harry betrayed him, all those weeks ago.

TRIGGER WARNING: Temporary loss of a leg.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tom may have felt like a child, but the silent treatment worked. It was rather odd: that his scorching fury should translate so ice cold, but Peters appeared to be feeling the burn nonetheless. And Tom was glad.

He was fucking furious. Tom had changed his plan- he’d changed - for Peters. And the whole time, Peters had been going behind his back- telling Dumbledore about Tom’s chamber, his hopes, his heritage. No wonder the old bastard hated Tom so much. He knew everything.

This was what happened when you trusted someone. He would never do it again.

Peters noticed straightaway. He tried to pretend that he hadn’t- like there was nothing wrong- but he noticed. Everyone did. All throughout breakfast, Orion tried to break the awkward silence with a pun or two, but he quickly realised it was futile. Tom simply glared at those who tried to speak, and Peters stared down at the table stubbornly. It was difficult for anyone to hold a conversation, and Tom revelled in it.
He hoped Peters was stewing his guilt. He hoped it tasted bitter and bloody and he couldn’t sleep at night. He hoped he never felt warm again.

Defence was understandably awkward. Merrythought definitely picked up on it.

“So who gets what in the divorce?” she asked, crossing her arms.

There were uncomfortable giggles from the class.

“Harry gets me!” Orion said loyally, and then clapped a hand to his mouth. Apparently, he’d forgotten the ‘we’re not talking about it’ rule.

“I hardly think this is appropriate discussion for a classroom,” Tom said coolly.

“Oh, Riddle,” Merrythought sighed. “So much talent in such a bad-tempered little body.”

Tom bristled. He was by no means ‘little’- he was one of the tallest boys in their year, as a matter of fact.

“But by all means, we’ll move on.” She glanced at Peters, and Tom would almost say concern crossed over her face. “And I’ll pretend nothing happened. But I won’t have this immaturity in my classroom- you will speak to one another.”

Tom tensed his jaw. They would, would they?

Well, he’d see about that.

Merrythought moved her attention on to the rest of the class. “Today we’ll be reviewing non-verbal spells, because- no matter how much you might not like to think about it- you will need to take NEWTs at the end of this year.”

“Not if I blow up the school!” Rupert called out with an easy grin.

Merrythought ignored him.

“So pair up- not with a member of your own house, for Merlin’s sake. The segregation within this castle is ridiculous- yes, Andrews, go with Lewis. I promise she won’t bite you. Not unless you ask her to.”

A red-headed Slytherin girl blushed the same colour as her hair. Her reluctant Gryffindor partner looked equally as embarrassed.

As chairs screeched and students panicked over the idea of pairing with someone of a differently coloured tie, Tom chose a Gryffindor at random. He performed a brief wordless disarming charm, and then sat back and waited as his partner struggled to make Tom’s wand as much as twitch. It was exhausting being the best.

He glanced across the classroom in his boredom and saw Peters, paired with yet another panicking Gryffindor. Peters appeared to be taking the ‘learn together’ route, as he patiently talked his partner through the theory whilst bouquet after bouquet of flowers sprouted from his wand. Tom’s fists clenched. Peters was so fucking nice, wasn’t he?

Tom pointed his wand resentful, and silently sent a spark flying across the classroom. Peters yelled as his robe caught fire, and his partner mindlessly flapped his arms over the flames. The fire didn’t last long; Peters was irritatingly competent at *augumenti*, but Tom enjoyed his distress whilst it lasted.
Merrythought eyed Tom with suspicion, but it was hardly that first time that a teacher had given Tom a look that said: ‘I feel like you might be responsible for all the evils of the world, and I’m not sure why’. Tom simply answered with a serene smile.

Peters finished patting off his robes, and Orion said something to him in a low voice. Orion had, of course, appeared by Peters’s side at the faintest sign of any danger. Orion met Tom’s eyes over the heads of the students, and Tom saw him take a step forwards as a storm of slow anger stole over his features. But Peters’s hand on his arm held him back, and as Peters muttered a few words into his ear, Orion’s shoulders slumped.

Merrythought sighed. “The burns aren’t be serious but- Black, why don’t you take Peters to the Hospital Wing?”

“I’ll take care of him,” Orion said with great determination.

Merrythought muttered something along the lines of “you’re supposed to be teenage boys not Austen characters”, but she waved the two out of the door impatiently.

Merrythought turned back to class with a savage grin. “Right. Shall we try some curses and shield charms? Silent, of course.”

Tom turned back to his partner who, in Tom’s absence, appeared to have turned one of his toes into a goldfish.

“I… I don’t know how to- mphp!” the boy spluttered, hopping as he waved his wand at his foot desperately.

Tom raised his eyes to the heavens and pleaded for strength.

The next few weeks felt like slipping into a favourite pair of robes. It was familiar and comforting, and with every second that passed it felt more and more natural and like less and less of a statement. He’d made Grahams cry (admittedly, it had been more difficult than before, but he got there eventually); he’d utterly trumped everyone in the NEWTs mocks (Harrison had done irritatingly well); and one of his articles had been accepted by *The Defence Review*. Life was good.

Even if he had to meet with Abraxas Malfoy.

Abraxas was nervous during their meeting; nervous enough that he could barely bring himself to touch the three-course meal he’d ordered. Tom quite happily cleaned the bottom of his bowl with a thick slice of garlic bread.

“This is a very exclusive restaurant,” Abraxas said, fiddling with a napkin. “Almost impossible to get into.”

“It’s in Hogsmeade,” Tom replied dubiously.

Malfoy had no reply to that.

“Do you have what I asked for?” Tom asked expectantly.

“Oh, right. Yes.” Abraxas nodded in answer, but didn’t move.

“…Well?”
“What I meant to say- yes, I have your answer. But the report you wanted doesn’t exist.”

“But they have to have made a report. It’s literally written in the law.”

“Well, I can’t find anything. By all accounts, Harrison Peters was never at the attack on Bideford. At least not in paperwork.”

“Well,” Tom said, sitting back in his chair.

Harrison Peters was getting more and more suspicious, and the Hogsmeade battle had dredged it all up. Peters had been magnificent; leaping from opponent to opponent with effortless efficiency. Efficiency that a boy who’d supposedly only ever been to duelling clubs shouldn’t have. Tom had hoped the report on the Bideford attack might have helped.

Only, apparently, it didn’t exist.

That was something to consider.

“So what have you been doing since you left Hogwarts?” Tom asked with a heavy sigh. He supposed he should show some interest in Abraxas’s life.

“I’ve been working with the International Magical Office of Law. Advising them and such.”

Abraxas definitely wasn’t qualified for anything of the sort, but it served Tom’s purposes just fine.

“…Have you had any thoughts about what you’ll do after you leave Hogwarts, Tom?”

“The Defence teacher,” Tom answered easily. There was almost no question, it had been his dream ever since he entered this brave new world. He would cement his place in Hogwarts, his home, and he would become an integral, essential part. Inseparable from its very structure.

“Really?” Abraxas raised an eyebrow.

Tom’s hand itched towards his wand. “Is there something wrong with my ambition?”

“No, nothing!” Abraxas rushed to assure him, his eyes wide. “It’s just… you’re very talented. Despite your heritage.”

“Despite my heritage?” Tom said very slowly.

“I just think you could be something great. It’s looking like the Undersecretary position might open soon, you know. You could be truly influential. Like me.”

“Becoming like you. That’s the dream, right there.”

“I could recommend you, you know.” Abraxas looked eager.

“I want to shape children’s minds. Not do paperwork.”

“You could become Minister! Or…” Abraxas hesitated, and it was clearly a calculated pause, but-sue him- Tom was curious.

“Or what?”

Abraxas picked his words carefully. “Many of the old ‘traditionals’ are restless. As Grindelwald grows in power so do they, but… Grindelwald’s a foreigner. A German, of all things. But they are
pushing for change. If a figure was to rise, give them something to rally behind—“

“Malfoy, I’m 17. And widely regarded as a mudblood,” Tom said reluctantly.

“And fully capable of reinventing yourself. You’re powerful, charismatic…”

An unspoken ‘dark’ hung in the air between them.

“The time is right,” Abraxas finished.

“I think I’ll be the one to decide that,” Tom said sharply.

“But listen, you have followers already—”

“-Acquaintances. And barely that at the moment,” he muttered bitterly.

“They follow and obey you. It’s almost effortless.” Abraxas’s spine straightened. Tom hadn’t thought he had it in him. “We need you, Tom. The world is changing. We should too.”

“That’s enough on the subject.”

Abraxas’s passion died away with Tom’s final word on the subject, but the conversation remained simmering at the back of Tom’s mind.

“So how is the boy?”

“He’s a despicable little worm.”

Abraxas gained a smug little smirk. “Oo, someone’s lost favour.”

“And yet you’ve gained none. It’s almost like my ‘favour’ doesn’t depend on some ridiculous abstract seesaw where Peters’s failures benefit you.” Tom got to his feet, dropping his napkin onto the table. “Goodbye Abraxas. I would say it was nice to see you, but it’s best to have honesty amongst friends, isn’t it?”

He left, barely catching Abraxas’s hopeful and pathetic “we’re friends…?”

Tom withheld a scoff and stepped out into the sunlight.

Hogsmeade was just as bright and bustling as Tom remembered: you’d barely guess that it had been on fire a matter of weeks ago. The wizarding world was excellent at moving on, at pretending things didn’t happen. Not moving forwards… just on.

It sickened him. Maybe it did need some shaking up.

He decided to cut past the stalls and down a back-alley. It was dark and unpleasant, but Tom was fairly sure he could handle whatever might lurk. Besides, he wasn’t in a mood to deal with people.

He seethed as he marched on and when he finally passed the last twist in the alley, he came out into a small courtyard. He wasn’t alone: there was a large chested woman, taller even than Tom, dressed provocatively and leaning against a wall. She was quite obviously some kind of sex worker. Tom really wasn’t in the mood for this.

“’Ello love,” she said, grinning a scarlet smile. “Interested in a good time?”
“I don’t think you’d enjoy my idea of a good time,” Tom said flatly. At the moment, he mostly wanted to kill someone.

“I’m sure we can find something to grab ya fancy,” she said boldly, slinking closer.

“I’m sure you really can’t.”

“I can be anything you want,” she crooned. “Lover… enemy…”

And before Tom’s eyes, her features shifted into something else. Her hair lengthened and darkened until it curled around her ears, her eyes gained a green tint, her features sharpened and her skin smoothened, years of age dropping away.

“Get out of my head,” Tom bit out, taking a step back despite himself.

“Isn’t this what you want?” The puppet shell of Peters tilted its head. “You can hurt me if you want. I won’t fight back.”

Tom really had to learn Occlumency.

“Stop it,” he said, stronger this time.

“I’m special to you, aren’t I?” The Peters puppet smiled, a mockery of the real thing. “The real me will never know.”

“Stop. It!” Tom snarled, and as he waved his wand, the prostitute was sent flying back into a small stall. She let out a loud shriek of pain as it crashed into pieces, sending jewellery spilling onto the cobblestones and spikes of wood piercing into her back.

She coughed and groaned as Tom’s shoulders heaved.

She was still wearing Harrison’s skin.

Tom grabbed her by the neck and she choked, hands shooting up to desperately claw at his arm. “Get out of his skin,” Tom said quietly, “or I’ll reach into your ribs and pull you out.”

Harrison’s face melted away until it was just the woman who was staring up at Tom, frightened and bruised. “You’re a monster,” she whispered.

“We’re all monsters,” Tom said, dusting his robes off. “Some of us just hide it better.”

“Whoever he is,” she said, clutching her cloak close to herself. “I hope he runs far away.”

“So do I,” Tom muttered, and left the courtyard with nary a backwards glance.

“So are you ready for this evening?” Atticus asked eagerly, running up to Tom as he made his way to Ancient Runes a few days later.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, and I’m fairly sure you don’t take this class,” Tom drawled. “Unless you sit at the back and I’ve never noticed you. It’s not implausible- you’re fairly unremarkable.”

Atticus’s step faltered, and something within Tom purred. This felt like coming home: he’d been so
recently.

Atticus opened his mouth and closed it again. Tom rolled his eyes. “If you have something to say, say it.”

“Why are you so angry?”

“I’m not angry,” Tom said, finally stopping his long stride and turning to face his companion. “I’ve been freed.”

“…From what?”

“From the weight of expectation.” Tom smiled, and he knew it was an ugly, vicious thing. “Now, what’s happening this evening?”

“Apparition lessons. Didn’t you know? The posters have been up for weeks.”

Tom wondered when he’d become so unobservant, so unconnected. Never mind: it was over now. Tom was back.

“I assume you’ll be there.”

“Oh yeah,” Atticus agreed. “Well, everyone gets their parents to teach them over the summer but- y’know,” he sniggered. “Have to do it the ‘legal way’ too.”

“Mmm,” Tom hummed, familiar resentment rising to the back of his throat like phlegm. Funny. He hadn’t properly felt that for weeks.

Atticus waited, the air heavy with expectation. Tom raised an eyebrow.

“Well? Taking your seat at the back of the class?”

Atticus looked at the door to Ancient Runes like he’d never seen it before, his eyes widening in shock. “I…” His cheeks darkened. “Goodbye, Tom.”

“Atticus.”

Tom watched Atticus scuttle away down the corridor, something cold settling at the pit of his stomach. As he turned to walk into the classroom, he nearly bumped into Orion.

“Tom,” Orion said coldly, his posture tense. “Nice to know that you’re being courteous to everyone today.”

“Orion,” Tom replied, sweeping past him. “That was almost an insult. Well done.”

As Tom moved towards his seat, a rather tame hair-remover flew past his head, nearly skimming his ear. When Tom glanced around, Orion was staring down at his brandished wand like he’d never seen it before.

“Trying to curse me with my back turned?” Tom asked, a soft smirk playing along his lips. “Your friendship with Harrison makes perfect sense.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Have you ever had a chat with Harrison about loyalty? I think it would be quite illuminating.”
“Harrison’s loyal,” Orion said strongly, crossing his arms.

“Your naivety is insufferable.”

“I think you should apologise.”

“You can think that all you want, but I shall remain comfortable in the knowledge that Harrison Peters is a traitorous worm and will receive as much respect as deserved. Which is approximately none.”

Orion frowned, and despite himself, Tom shivered.

“There’s something festering in you, isn’t there?” Orion said softly. “It might help to talk about it.”

“Oh, we’re bosom friends now, are we?”

“Not to me. To Harrison.”

“I’ve done enough talking,” Tom said very coldly. “He’s done enough talking. I’m done.”

“You need to talk to him, please.” Orion hesitated. “He’s upset.”

“I should hope so.”

The conversation was over.

Sitting in the library alone was a magical, magical thing. No irritating parasites to talk to, no distractions, no ‘homework help’ or unpaid tutoring. Tom could just sit and read and learn. Alone.

Of course, he didn’t have to be alone if he didn’t want to.

He could call Rupert or Atticus- or even Grahams if he was really desperate. He just didn’t want to. He was perfectly happy alone. Perfectly alone.

“Mr Riddle!”

Perfectly alone.

“Mr Riddle!”

Tom sighed and dragged his eyes away from the page, looking up at the blushing librarian.

“What can I do for you, Madam Longstock?”

“The books you asked for have arrived,” she said, presenting her gifts.

“Ah. I had forgotten I ordered them.” Tom took the books and examined the covers: The Deathly Hallows, Behind The Myth and Unlocking the Trifecta. “Wonderful.”

When he looked up, Madam Longstock was still waiting, watching him expectantly.

“Can I help you?”
She blushed deeper scarlet. “No… I… just- never mind. Enjoy your books.” And she scurried back to her desk.

Tom turned his attention back to the books in his lap and tapped a finger on the covers. He could recall when he’d ordered them now. It had been to please Peters.

Well, he didn’t have to please Peters any more. (His fingernails dug further into the material, leaving harsh ‘c-shaped’ imprints when he moved his hand away.) Still, he should read the books anyway. It was a fascinating topic.

He opened *The Deathly Hallows, Behind The Myth* to somewhere in the middle of the book.

*But where is the Elder Wand now?*

*The Elder Wand has without doubt the highest profile of all the Deathly Hallows. People are desperate for power above all else: it drives us to succeed and pushes us to forge connections- we strive for power over one another. Tracing the Elder Wand through history has therefore become a common pastime. The pastime becomes more pathetic based upon whether you believe the Elder Wand is real or not (I’ve been told so by my mother).*

*The Elder Wand has a fascinating history. It is said to leave behind it a trail of blood, murder and treachery in its wake, as it passes from hand to hand with more frequency than an ‘unbeatable wand’ really should. If the Elder Wand is truly unbeatable, it stands to reason that it rests within the hands of the most powerful wizard of the time. For example- and I don’t want to date myself- but Hal the Magnificent is a really big deal right now. It is entirely possible, however, that someone simply left the Elder Wand at a bar, an unsuspecting muggle picked it up, and it’s now resting on someone’s mantelpiece so that they can say to visitors: ‘yes, would you look at the crazy things people leave at bars!’ And they wouldn’t be wrong. I have two grandchildren because I found them hidden under a table in my local tavern. But perhaps we’ve gone off topic. I suppose the point of this chapter is: no one knows where the Elder Wand is, or even if it’s real (not, according to my mother.).*

*So that’s all good then.*

Tom put the book down. What a confusing narrative. He wondered if the author had sold many copies.

Still, there was something of substance in it. And Tom couldn’t deny that an unbeatable wand would be a nice bonus to immortality.

‘The most powerful wizard of the time’… Well, there was only really one answer to that. It was almost too easy.

He wondered if Gellert Grindelwald found a new wand during his rise to power.

Only one way to find out.

(Actually, there were probably several, but Tom was in a library, so he just picked the most obvious.)

Tom walked over to the librarian’s desk. “Hello,” he said pleasantly, slipping on a charming smile. “I’m doing a bit of a research project for History of Magic on dictators and the like. You wouldn’t mind getting out all the articles you can find on Gellert Grindelwald, would you? As early on in his career as possible.”

“I’ll certainly see what I can do,” Madam Longstock nodded eagerly, beaming up at him.
“Thank you,” Tom inclined his head. "It not often that women are as competent as they are beautiful."

“So inappropriate,” she laughed.

Tom tried not to throw up.

Madam Longstock picked up her wand and pointed it towards a filing cabinet. She gave it a swift flick, opening the drawers and summoning newspaper filings and cuttings. They floated towards the pair and Madam Longstock plucked them out of the air, neatening the pile with a quick tap on the desk, and then handed them over to Tom.

“You can make copies, but do bring the originals back to me.”

“Of course.” Tom nodded his agreement and went back to his desk.

There must have been over a hundred articles at his disposal, but Tom made quick work of sorting them from oldest to most recent. The oldest article he could find was one detailing ‘STUDENT EXPelled’. Apparently Grindelwald had been expelled from Durmstrang for practising dark magic (honestly: getting caught- what an amateur) and sent to live somewhere in England.

The boy in the photo stared directly at the camera challengingly, wearing a heavy fur lining cloak and twirling a wand between his quick fingers.

“Aha,” Tom said softly, and set the article to one side.

He searched the rest chronologically, searching for glimpses of the dark lord’s wand. And there: at some point in the mid-1940s…

“It changed.”

The wand that Grindelwald held now in the photos was longer and beaded, of a dark gleaming wood that certainly looked like elder. It looked more. More powerful, more dynamic, more.

“The Elder Wand,” Tom said thoughtfully, and as the words crept from his tongue and shivered under the cold daylight, the whole idea suddenly seemed a lot more plausible. It would require a little research to match it up to previous description of the wand, but it was a start.

All of a sudden, a phrase in the article caught his attention. ‘Grindelwald seems immortal and unstoppable. One might think he had sold his soul’. Soul. Horcruxes. He didn’t have to deal with Harrison’s disapproval anymore, did he?

He was torn from his trail of thought by familiar voices on the other side of the bookshelves.

“They’re getting worse. And more frequent.”

Of course, who could fail to recognise the dulcet tones of Orion Black? Which meant that his logical companion must be…

“I’m fine, Orion.”

“You’re definitely not fine, Harrison.”

Did the fates truly loathe Tom? He supposed they must.

“I’ve dealt with this for over a year. I’m hardly going to die now.”
“You don’t know that!”
“I think I do.”
“Please, Harrison. I need you.”
“I don’t know what you want me to do. I went to Hallpepper—“
“She told you to come back if it happened again.”
“She told me to come back if it got worse.”
“And you don’t count this as worse? You missed Charms this morning. I found you in a broom cupboard—“
“They’re getting shorter.”
“I’m not sure that’s a good thing.”
“Orion, please. I. Am. Fine.”
“I don’t know why you refuse to admit that you need help.”
“There are people suffering worse than me right now. People under the rule of Grindelwald, being tortured—“
“Why does other people hurting mean that you can’t?”
“I’m not making a fuss over nothing.”
“It’s not nothing.”
“I’ll decide that.”
Trouble in paradise. Harrison sounded like he was in a spot of bother.
Well, then, Tom thought, turning a page serenely. That was his problem.

The apparition lesson was conducted by a very sweet old lady who had a bag of Bubbling Bonbons on hand for whoever was the first to successfully Apparate.

“Apparition is mostly about making up your mind,” she explained in a quavery voice. “You must decide that you wish to travel to your chosen destination, see it in your mind, and then go there.”

Halfbloods and muggleborns erupted into excited whispers, and most of the purebloods nodded smugly. Tom sighed.

“There is a popular myth,” she continued, “that suggests one can only travel to a destination one has already been to. This is false. It is, however, markedly easier to Apparate to a familiar place. Since Apparition is based almost entirely upon willpower and belief, most find it entirely impossible to imagine themselves in a location that they have never seen or visited. Though with enough conviction—” she shrugged, “—anything is possible.”

Tom had conviction. He had conviction by the bucket load.
Anything was possible.

“The movement for apparition is simple: a sharp turn, as precise as you can make it, mostly to stop wild stumbling on the other end. There are very few other conditions: some locations have anti-apparition wards on them, like Hogwarts, but the headmaster has kindly lifted those wards for us tonight. Just within this room, mind you.”

Rupert shook his head disappointedly.

The instructor pretended not to see him. “Most wizards also require a wand for apparition. Only those of great power have enough magical reserves to attempt a journey without one- Albus Dumbledore, I believe, is capable of it. But we can’t all be Dumbledore.” She winked slyly.

Unnoticed at the back of the room, Tom deliberately placed his wand to the side, and clenched his hands into determined fists. Not everyone could be Dumbledore, huh?

“Before we attempt apparition, we should discuss the… dangers.” She pursed her wrinkly old lady lips. It was adorable. “Splinching is what happens when one doesn’t have enough willpower. It can be caused by distractions, faltering self-belief, and the such. Your body starts to travel, but your magic tries to return you to where you began. As one part of you moves forwards, the other moves back… The result can be rather nasty.”

“How nasty?” a Hufflepuff boy asked, his cheeks white as parchment.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to frighten a strong young man like yourself, but I once saw a young lady attempt to apparate when suddenly she was-‘‘ the instructor coughed pointedly, -‘‘ distracted. ’’

There were snickers around the room, the loudest coming from- surprise, surprise- Rupert.

The instructor shook her head grimly. “They found organs in four different location. Her heart ended up in her childhood bedroom. An awful shock for the owners at the time.”

There were no snickers this time.

“Well!” the instructor said brightly. “Shall we give it a go?”

Enthusiasm had been considerably dimmed.

“Oh, don’t be babies. It’s all good fun. Most limbs can be reattached with no pain whatsoever.”

“What about the actual loss of those limbs?” the Hufflepuff boy asked.

“It’s all a learning process!” she beamed. “Now, I want you all to try apparating about a foot in front of you. Don’t be overly ambitious- and don’t worry if you don’t get it today. Many grown wizards struggle to apparate successfully.”

Tom focused on a spot of floor in front of him. He imagined himself there; he imagined the texture of the stone beneath his feet and the rustle of the wind through his hair from the window, and then he turned on his heel and held his breath.

When he opened his eyes, he was still in the same spot.

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again!” the instructor sang, hobbling towards a Ravenclaw girl who was sobbing her eyes out as her friend comforted her.

Tom repeated the motions, he visualised, he believed, but this time he couldn’t stop himself from
glancing over at his abandoned wand, and he knew before he spun that he wasn’t going to make it. And sure enough, he remained stuck in the same place. His jaw tightened with frustration.

When he next blinked, the instructor appeared in front of him, her eyes magnified by her glasses. “Can you do this?” she asked very seriously, staring up at him.

“Yes,” he replied automatically. When he repeated it, his voice was confident and strong. “Yes.”

“Jolly good then,” she said. “Might want to get on with it.”

When Tom next closed his eyes, he was filled with an absolute certainty that he could do this. He would prove her wrong. He would prove them all wrong. He wouldn’t be Dumbledore, he would be Tom Riddle.

He opened his eyes and he was on the other side of the classroom, his wand resting on the floor far, far away. He glanced down to see if he was still in one piece, and only his hand caught his attention. He was missing half a fingernail.

Tom’s smirk almost overtook his entire face.

(In proof of the universe’s unfairness, Atticus had apparated about half a metre thirty minutes ago, and was now chewing contentedly on a bonbon.)

When Tom looked around to see how everyone else what handling it, he spotted Peters doing little hops of about a metre from spot to spot, cheered on by Orion and Rupert. Peters reappeared suddenly behind Orion and the boy jumped in surprise, before whirling around and playfully slapping his shoulder. Rupert crowed something that made the both of them blush, and they all burst into raucous laughter.

It made Tom feel sick.

He apparated back to his wand and picked it up, feeling its comfortable weight in his hand. Then he discretely aimed it at the laughing trio. He watched as a bee appeared— as if by magic, really— and flew straight into Peters’s ear as he spun on his heel.

The pained yell was music to Tom’s ears (although he hadn’t meant for the result to be quite so bloody.)

Peters appeared to have left a leg behind, and blood soaked into his robes as he lay, gasping, on the floor. The instructor rushed over and ushered the crowd away.

“Give the boy some room.”

“I’m fine,” Peters said through gritted teeth, but roared as she peeled the fabric away from the wound.

“We can fix this in a jiffy,” the instructor said very calmly. “No fuss needed.”

She levitated Peters’s leg across the room, dripping blood and gore all the way. Peters swore when he saw it.

“It’s just a leg, dear, calm down. A simple reattachment.” She crowed triumphantly as Peters’s leg returned to its proper place and handed him a blood replenishing potion.

Tom was rather disappointed. He’d hoped it might take longer.
“All done! Although, I think you’d better sit out of the rest of the lesson,” she told Peters.

Peters nodded obediently, and Orion helped him limp past Tom towards the door. As Tom’s eyes met Peters’s, the other boy’s gaze hardened.

Peters knew exactly where that bee had come from. He knew exactly who’d practically torn his leg off.

Good.

Tom barely felt the hand on his shoulder before he was shoved hard against the wall. Peters’s snarling face appeared close to his.

“What’s your problem?”

“You.”

“What the hell are you playing at?” Peters hissed. “Are you trying to kill me now?”

Tom raised an eyebrow, maintaining a calm exterior despite the painful grip. “Well, I can’t have you spilling all my worldly secrets, can I?”

Peters looked briefly guilty, but it didn’t last long. “Don’t be fucking ridiculous. That was before I knew you.”

“Well that makes it all better.”

“I had to do something.”

“Oh you did, did you?”

“You were going to kill someone!”

“Shut up!” Tom gritted his teeth and Peters went flying across the corridor, the breath flying from his lungs as he hit the wall opposite. “You didn’t have a problem with me killing when it was Lestrange.”

“Yes, I did!” Peters spat as he struggled to his feet. “But Lestrange was already a killer. Myrtle’s an innocent.”

“Oh, she’s just so innocent, so perfect. Your stand-in little sister.”

Peters flinched, and Tom stepped closer as he dug the knife in.

“Except she’s not your sister at all, is she? Because she doesn’t remember you, and you’re all alone.” Tom smiled sharply. “Just. Like. Me.”

“I AM NOT ALONE!” Peters roared. Tom stumbled and swore as the ground shook beneath them.

“I’m not alone,” Peters repeated, quieter. “Because I choose not to be. Because I don’t act like other people are less than me. Something to be conquered and controlled.”

Tom let out a high laugh, and it made Peters’s face drain of colour. “You pretend so well, don’t you?
It’s not a surprise: we’re snakes, we’re liars. You’re just as broken as me, Harrison Peters. You’ve just gotten so good at lying that you even fool yourself.”

“You have no idea who I am.”

“Really? No, I suppose it might be true.” Tom felt rather like a shark as he circled Peters, his steps slow and even. “Everything around you is wrong.”

“Stop it.”

“Why didn’t you know Grindelwald’s men on sight?”

“What?”

“I didn’t notice it before, I was too-“ scared, excited, desperate “-distracted, but you should have recognised the Grindelwald uniform from the attack on your village.”

Peters’s eyes betrayed his shock. “I-“

“-forgot?” Tom shook his head a little. “Try again.”

“I blocked it out, okay? It’s not a fun memory. And I was panicking in Hogsmeade-“

“You don’t block something like that out. You wouldn’t. I’m not a fool, Peters, don’t treat me like one.”

“Maybe you are a fool, Tom Riddle,” Peters said lowly, his voice crackling with fury as he prowled closer.

“I trusted you, so I suppose you might be right.”

Tom’s magic surged and crackled, crawling towards Peters slowly. He wanted to tear him apart; to see straight through his skin and into the lies and mysteries within. Tom’s magic danced across Peters’s body, flicking viciously at the scars over his arms. Peters’s eyes widened, and he froze.

“Who are you, Harrison Peters? What are you hiding?” Tom tilted his head and paused for a moment, as if Peters might answer, but the other boy was unresponsive. Possibilities flickered through Tom’s head faster than he could keep up with. “Why did you come here? Are you even a Seer? Did your parents even-?”

It was then that Peters slumped to the ground.

Tom’s world stopped spinning. And then everything went crashing into motion and he dove towards the motionless figure, the deafening buzz in his ears focused on this one person and this one moment. Peters was moving. Why wasn’t he moving?

No, Tom took that back. Peters was moving. His chest was heaving almost inhumanly fast and little breaths were catching in his throat, escaping his lips as whimpers. His eyes flickered beneath his eyelids.

Something was very wrong.

“Peters,” Tom said, his voice suddenly very loud. “Peters.”

Peters didn’t reply.
Tom dragged himself closer, but when he went to feel for a pulse, Peters’s skin was like fire, the skin around his scars angry and raw. “Shit,” Tom swore, and tore his hand away from Peters’s neck, but his fingertips were already burned red.

“Fuck,” Tom hissed, wrapping his robe around his hand so he could turn Peters onto his back. Peters’s breathing was still frighteningly fast, but it appeared to be slowing.

For some reason, that didn’t fill Tom with hope.

“Wake up, Harrison.”

Harrison convulsed a little and his chest sounded awfully hollow- the phrase ‘death rattles’ wouldn’t leave Tom’s mind. Tom’s face felt hot and sweaty and his heart wouldn’t stop racing- he couldn’t understand what was happening to him, but he did know one thing. He had to save Harrison. He gritted his teeth and shot sparks out of a nearby window. They flew high into the end and exploded in a huge flash of light, letting off a loud wailing alarm. The lights kept flashing and the alarm kept wailing, and Tom gritted his teeth as he hoped desperately for help.

It was then that Harrison stopped breathing.

The sound from Tom’s mouth was more animal than anything human, and he curled over the body as if he could protect Harrison from death by pure will. He must have screamed for help. His throat felt raw.

As Tom heard footsteps coming closer, he clutched the body tighter and prayed they wouldn’t be too late.

Chapter End Notes

This has taken a long fucking time, but March has been real busy for me. I took part in two musicals, took my Grade 6 voice exam, etc. Shit happened. Good shit, but a lot of shit.

Also! Check me out on tumblr.
https://vivypotter.tumblr.com/
Harry Does Very Little

Chapter Summary

Harry gets a nap, Orion and Tom bond, and an old friend comes to visit.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME ON GLEE: Tom was not happy with Harry having told Dumbledore about Tom's status as Heir of Slytherin, all those months ago. He decided that the silent treatment was the answer, which made a DADA lesson very uncomfortable. A lesson on non-verbal spells saw Tom set Harry's robes on fire in a really mature display. Tom met with Abraxas Malfoy, who told Tom that Harry was never at the Bideford attack, and that there may be an opening for a more family-friendly Dark Lord soon. On the way home, Tom ran into the pedlar in the back streets, who attempted to seduce Tom by wearing Harry's face. Kinky. Tom threw a temper tantrum and scared her off. Abraxas told Tom that apparition lessons were started, and Orion confronted Tom about his treatment of Harry, to no avail. Tom took a break in the library, where the librarian brought him the books he'd ordered on The Deathly Hallows. Tom worked out that Grindelwald was probably the bearer of the Elder Wand, and a bit of detective work worthy of Sherlock Holmes himself. He also overheard Orion telling Harrison to go to the hospital wing, as his attacks were getting worse. The apparition lesson saw Tom successfully apparate, and then sabotage the equally successful Harrison. Harry was splinched and lost a leg, although it was swiftly reattached. Harry confronted Tom about his actions, and Tom accused Harry of hypocrisy and told him of his suspicions about Harry's story. Suddenly, Harry collapsed and had a fit of some kind. Then he stopped breathing, leaving Tom to scream for help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ron, Harry and Hermione sit in the Common Room, the fire smouldering beside them. The heat licks at Harry’s shoulder, but it is a pleasant warmth that sinks through his robes and presses soft kisses to his skin. It’s at great contrast with the deep, overwhelming coldness inside of him.

“What’s he doing?” Harry mutters desperately, glancing down at his hands. Unnoticed to him, he has started anxiously picking at his cuticles, and his pinkie has begun to bleed.

Hermione and Ron glance at one another, and Hermione clears her throat.

“Well, he’s staying low, isn’t he? Letting you and Professor Dumbledore destroy yourselves. Which I must admit you’re doing quite a good job of-“

A roar of fury surges within him, hotter than the fire. “Well, what am I supposed to do, Hermione?”

“Well, you could try not attacking Seamus, mate.”

Ron turns red as Harry glares at him.
“Just a suggestion,” he mumbles.

Hermione takes a deep breath. “Look, I know what you think you saw, but are you sure?”

“He was there in the Great Hall, I swear to Merlin—“

“But, Harry,” Hermione says, a look of great surprise on her face. “I thought it was the graveyard?”

The fire shoots to immense heights, filling the entire room with a flash of blinding white, singeing his skin and setting his blood alight—

He was so small, staring up at the hat like it would change everything about him. This hat was every cruel word the Dursleys had ever said but ten times more important, ten times more damning.

His nerves crawled along the slick surface of his arms.

*Step, step, step* and a brim placed atop his ears.

“Very ambitious, eh, boy?” the voice was smug. “Befriend Tom Riddle? Quite the move. Takes balls too.”

A lion stroked its raw tongue across his cheek, and the snake tightened its grip on his ribs.

“They’re going to eat me,” Harry muttered.

“Well, that’s not my fault, lad. You set that snake on your cousin, after all.”

The hat was lifted from his head, but as Harry blinked at the sudden onslaught of light, the lion let out a fierce growl and fastened its teeth into the delicate expanse of his neck. Even as Harry screamed he felt deadly jaws fasten into the expanse over his heart, tearing apart his ribcage and exposing the soft flesh within him—

“Your kind die young,” Aunt Petunia had once said with an odd look in her eyes. Harry had asked her why he only had a cupboard and Dudley got two bedrooms.

“Best not to waste the space.”

And then she’d struck him, her hand like a poker across his cheekbone—

Everyone’s eyes are fastened on him as he shivers on the side of the lake. He’s never felt so goddamn exposed, a twelve year old lying next to him and her unconscious weight like a phantom in his arms. He panics as someone picks the girl up and lifts her away—Harry grabs onto an ankle and tries to say something—anything.

“Harry,” a voice in his ear. “Harry, that’s Fleur. Harry, that’s her sister.”

*J’étais terrifiée— Gabi, Gabi, je suis désolée. S’il te plaît, parles moi. Dis quelque chose!*”

“No, give her back— give her back—“

“Harry, stop!”

“Pourquoi elle ne respire pas?”

A high scream like a forest fire—
“I’m sorry you were left with those monsters.”

“They weren’t that bad.”

“I saw you that summer, working outside. You had to drink from the garden tap.”

Harry flinched at the memory of sweat dripping through cotton, fabric sticking so close that peeling off a t-shirt felt like being skinned alive. He snapped. “So maybe you should have done something other than watch.”

Sirius barely breathed.

“I’m sorry,” Harry slumped. “That wasn’t fair.”

“It was fair enough.”

“You were on the run from Dementors.”

“You’re my godson.”

But Sirius is dead now, dead and gone and his memory blackened with ash-

There’s a letter in his head and the future seems hopeful.

His world burned on.

“What’s wrong with him?” Tom asked, but no one listened.

The Hospital Wing was abuzz with panic. Hallpepper performed diagnostic charm after diagnostic charm with barely room to breathe between. She would scan the results, shake her head sharply and cast another.

She’d cast a spell that made Harrison’s heartbeat audible. It was slow.

It had been Dumbledore who’d managed to start Harrison’s heart again in that corridor, and Tom might never be able to hate the man again. There had been that horrifying moment where Dippet, Merrythought, Dumbledore and Hallpepper had all looked at one another when Tom told them for how long Harrison had been breathless, and Tom had been sure it was all over.

But Dumbledore had done something- Tom didn’t know what, but he would make it his mission to find out- and Harrison’s lung had stuttered back into shallow, shaky breaths. He still wouldn’t wake up though, and every half hour his heart would skip a vital beat and the world would stop spinning for just a second.

“What’s wrong with him?!” Tom repeated with a touch more hysteria and wished desperately that he had taken a healing course.

“Mr Riddle, I need full concentration, please-“

“Just tell me what’s wrong-“

“ Mr Riddle!”
Tom flinched and fell silent, but his fists were clenched. *How dare she speak to him that way, he would burn the flesh from her bones but - oh.*

Harrison looked so small. He’d never looked defenceless before, in all the time that Tom knew him, but now he did. Still and weak and cold. Tom didn’t like it.


“I don’t know- I-“

“We need to know if you did something-“

“I didn’t do anything! We were arguing- I might have grabbed him, I was angry- but I didn’t do anything! This has happened before. He *said* .”

“Very well,” Dumbledore said softly. “I just had to ask.”

Tom bared his teeth and nearly snarled.

Behind him, Harrison whined. Tom’s attention was caught.

“What’s she doing to him-?”

“Let Madam Hallpepper work, Tom.” Dumbledore’s hand landed on Tom’s shoulder, and he took back what he said about never hating the man again. “Perhaps it would be best if we left her-“

“No.”

“I merely meant to suggest-“

“I’m not leaving.”

“Tom-“

“I’ll curse you if you make me.” To Tom’s own ears he sounded horribly childish, but the hand disappeared from his shoulder and Dumbledore took a step back.

“I wouldn’t dream of separating you two,” Dumbledore said softly.

“Good,” Tom replied, clearly unconvinced. Just to hammer in the point, Tom conjured a chair (silently, mind you) and took a seat.

Hallpepper lowered her wand and turned away, hissing with frustration. “I have no idea what’s wrong with the boy.”

Dumbledore remained calm. “There has to be something we can do.”

“I can call St Mungo’s, but there’s no guarantee they’ll be able to diagnose him in time and I don’t want to speed up his deterioration by moving him.” Hallpepper gestured at the unmoving body. “He has at least another few hours left at this pace. A Floo might turn that into ten minutes.”

“You can’t just let him die ,” Tom said, his voice small and his body shrinking to match.

In the centre of the room, Harrison let out a shuddering rattle and grew still. Dumbledore moved forwards to work his magic, and this time it took precious seconds more for Harrison’s heartbeat to restart, unsteady and tentative.
“For Morgana’s sake,” Tom snarled. “Do something.”

“His skin is still burning,” Hallpepper shook her head. “I can barely touch him.”

“I can see why that would be a problem. After all, it’s not like you’re a witch.”

Hallpepper’s face darkened, and she opened her mouth to reply.

“This looks mighty familiar, doesn’t it, Albus?”

The voice was unfamiliar, and everyone turned to glance at a portrait on the back wall. A stern-looking woman glowered down at the room, but her gaze softened when it landed on the bed.

“Mother, this isn’t the time.”

The woman who bore Albus Dumbledore. Tom had always imagined her with more… horns. And perhaps a tail.

“Don’t you ‘this isn’t the time’ me, young man,” the portrait snapped. “Dizziness, fits, unsteady heart palpitations. Fever. Hallucinations. The symptoms are familiar.”

Dumbledore slid the glasses from his nose and used the corner of his robes to polish them. “Not completely. Mr Peters has exhibited no signs of uncontrollable magical outbursts—”

“Because he’s full grown and trained. But look at him and remember.”

Dumbledore shrunk into himself, and Tom longed desperately to know what could affect the Deputy Headmaster so (to use it against him, obviously.)

At last, Dumbledore visibly steeled himself and turned to Hallpepper. “Check his channels.”

“…His channels?”

“Yes.”

“But we don’t ever check a child’s magical channels past… well, past infancy.”

“And more fool you,” the portrait said.

“Do it, Millicent,” Dumbledore said, and Tom’s spine prickled at his unusually hard tone.

“Alright,” Hallpepper allowed, rolling up her sleeves. “But this is going to hurt. A lot.”

She waved her wand over Harrison’s body, furrowing her brow in obvious concentration and then lifted.

Harrison might not have been able to breathe, but he could scream.

He writhed in obvious agony as light rose from his skin and coalesced above him, forming a hovering network of veins that perfectly mapped the form of the body below. Harrison’s magic, Tom realised. As the light settled, Harrison’s screams quietened, turning into soft, pained whimpers.

“The channels,” Hallpepper said thoughtfully. “Look at the colour.”

Tom focused on blinking past the brightness of the lights and seeing the colour beyond, and noticed what he guessed Hallpepper was talking about: streaks of gold leaking from the veins and spreading
like ink blots on a page. The veins they touched were faint, and Tom thought he saw them vanish
and reappear.

“It’s like an infection.”


He wasn’t wrong. The gold was moving slowly towards the centre of the network—Harrison’s heart,
Tom realised with an icy shiver—and it seemed to be fizzing more and more, leaking and twisting like
tree roots.

“It’s speeding up,” Hallpepper said grimly. “But why?”

As they examined the infection, Harrison’s whimpers rose and he started to twist and thrash.
Dumbledore flicked his wand absently, and Harrison’s wrists were secured to his sides.

The gold flashed again and buzzed like an angered swarm.

“What-?”

“It’s the magic,” Hallpepper said suddenly. “Bloody hell, it’s the magic.”

She broke her spell immediately and the veins faded away to nothing, and as Dumbledore lowered
his wand, Harrison thrashed again for a moment and then stilled. There was no heartbeat sound now,
and Tom panicked.

“Where did the heartbeat go—has he stopped breathing-?”

“Calm down, Riddle,” Hallpepper said sharply. “I broke the spell. Son of a bitch, it’s the magic.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just let me think.” Hallpepper rubbed a hand over her face. “Yes, that might work. Fetch me some
gabbro—physically, please.”

She addressed this to Dumbledore, who nodded and hurried to a cabinet in the corner Hospital Wing,
throwing open a drawer and taking out a handful of stones. Hallpepper took the stones and passed
her wand over the surface of each, gritting her teeth as Harrison whined in response. She cupped her
hands and blew into the hollow, and when she opened her palms, the stones flew through the air and
positioned themselves around Harrison’s bed.

“Magic-nullifying ward,” Hallpepper said, and Tom realised with a start that it was for his benefit.
“The same as in Azkaban.” She watched the bed with intense focus, and took a deep breath. “He
seems stable.”

“Wonderful,” Tom said sarcastically. “Now will someone explain to me what’s going on?”

Hallpepper raised an eyebrow. “Whilst I don’t appreciate your tone, I understand your worry for
your friend. Sit down, Mr Riddle.”

“I’d really rather—“

“Sit down.”

Tom sat.
Hallpepper took a seat next to him. “Now, from what I can understand, Mr Peters has an infection of sorts in his magical channels, that reacts- Unfortunately enough- to magic. Whilst one might hope an infection to clear up on its own, Mr Peters has presumably been constantly exposed to magic since the infection began, and his body has had very little time to recover.”

“He’s rather like a cracked mirror,” Dumbledore added. “And without repair, the fractures lines have spread.”

Hallpepper nodded. “I don’t know what triggered this attack-“

Unseen, Tom’s fists clenched.

“But I hope that the magic-nullifying ward will slow or even halt it. However, we can’t remove Mr Peters from the wards until we’re sure that the source of the infection has been tackled. And I have frankly no idea what that may be.”

The three of them sat in silence, and Tom let his eyes rest distantly on the white expanse of the wall as he remembered the unique shade of that infection. It was strange that something so beautiful could be so deadly.

And so gold.

Gold.

“His scars,” Tom said suddenly. “He’s never said how he got them, but they’re the same colour.”

Hallpepper and Dumbledore exchanged a look.

“It could be,” Dumbledore mused.

“It seems obvious now,” Hallpepper admitted.

They glanced towards Harrison, and the golden lines running over his skin seemed to pulsate mockingly.

“We have to know what it is,” Hallpepper said. “But I can’t use magic inside the ward, so I won’t be able to heal him.”

The scalpel that she summoned to her hand was less than comforting.

“You’re not going to cut him open,” Tom said firmly, and Hallpepper snorted.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mr Riddle. I’m just going to see if there’s anything beneath the scars.”

That sounded like the same thing to Tom.

Hallpepper sighed. “And I suppose we’ll just have to do things the muggle way.”

A roll of bandages soared through the air towards her, and she caught it deftly. Tom followed doubtfully as she moved to Harrison’s bed and passed through the ward, her hair falling out of its tight bun.

“What?” she said defensively. “I don’t have time to do my hair in the morning.” She pressed a hand to Harrison’s neck and her shoulders relaxed somewhat. “It’s steady.”

Efficiently and detachedly, Hallpepper stripped the shirt from Harrison. Tom realised that he’d never
seen Harrison so obviously unclothed— he tended to get changed behind the curtains of his bed— and he couldn’t help taking advantage of the moment to carefully examine the other boy.

Tom had known that Harrison would have scars. He’d survived an attack by Grindelwald, he’d clearly been duelling for a while— Tom had known that. But it was quite a different thing to actually see them.

There were the relatively normal spell scars, like fireworks across his skin, and the expected missing finger. There was a vicious claw mark across his forearm that might have come from a bird, a disc burnt onto his chest, an odd lightning bolt scar under his fringe, but oddest of all was the back of his hand.

*I must not tell lies*.

There: scrawled in Harrison’s own handwriting: once bloody and inflamed, now a stark white reminder. Tom wanted desperately to know about it.

Tom winced as Hallpepper pressed her scalpel to Harrison’s arm and lightly dragged it across one of the golden lines. The scar parted like butter beneath the blade, and Tom squeezed his own arm in sympathy. Harrison was unresponsive.

“There’s something under here,” Hallpepper murmured. She set the scalpel on the side and leaned in, using her two forefingers to squeeze the wound. “Oh!” she gasped, and Tom took another step closer. “It’s sand.”

“That can’t be right.” Dumbledore stepped forward to join them.

But she was. Before their very eyes, tiny grains of golden sand poured from the open wound on Harrison’s arm. Hallpepper reached out her hand to catch them.

“*Sand*,” she repeated, rolling a grain between her forefinger and thumb. “Actual sand.”

“How did it get there?” Tom asked, looking down at his… his friend. His friend.

“If I knew that, Mr Peters would probably be awake and here with us now. I suspect that the sand is more than it seems, though. For something to infect someone’s very channels… I’ve never seen anything like it. It was tearing him apart.” Hallpepper frowned. “I think we can assume that the… ‘sand’ is the cause, at least. And now I know how to proceed.”

“How?”

“I plan to drain the scars.”

“But we don’t even know what’s wrong with him. That sand could be the only thing keeping him alive—“

“Or it could be the thing killing him,” she said sharply. “We just have to take a chance. Hopefully as long as Mr Peters is isolated from magic, his body- and his channels- will be allowed to heal.”

“Will he be able to tolerate magic again?” Tom asked, his heart in his throat. If Harrison couldn’t use magic again- if he was cast from their world… Tom would never see him again.

“I should hope so,” Hallpepper said. “With good luck, he might even be able to take his NEWTs on time. There’s no guarantee though- this is foreign territory. Anything could happen. If we hadn’t spotted how he was reacting to magic…” She clapped her hands together. “Well, there’s no point
reflecting on what’s passed.”

But they all knew perfectly well what she’d been unwilling to say. Harrison Peters would have been dead.

Aunt Petunia sneers down at him, her hands clenched tight in front of her.

“We’re going to give you some chores, boy. To keep you busy.”

Harry shrinks, trying for a hopeful smile. “Is it like playing?”

“Almost, I suppose.”

“Will Dudley play too?”

“Dudley will most certainly not,” she snaps, and flaps a towel in his direction. Harry wonders what she’s trying to do. As he frowns up at her quizzically, her skin drains of all colour. “And stop looking at me like that.”

“Okay, Auntie.”

She turns to leave but as she does, she spits out: “It’s Aunt to you.”

The redress feels like a blow across the chest, and Harry gasps at the hot pain-

“Why didn’t you tell me, mate?”

Ron’s voice was quiet in the dormitory, almost drowned out by Neville’s snores.

“About what?” Harry muttered, half-asleep.

“About you being a parseltongue.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“You know I’d only care for a bit, right? And then common sense and my own embarrassment would have me traipsing back.”

The snake around Harry’s snake hissed in his ear, the little tongue tickling his earlobe. He stifled a giggle.

“Is that a snake? Mate, I don’t think that’s a good idea. What if it makes you loyal to You Know Who, huh?”

“That’s not really how it works, Ron.”

Seamus’s voice was distinctly grumpy. “Right now I couldn’t care less if Potter’s evil or Voldemort’s back. I’m trying to get some sleep.”

Harry and Ron murmured an apology. Harry sank back under his duvet but it was hot and suffocating, and the wide jaws of the conjured snake haunted him. The fangs of the basilisk were wide and sharp and they pierced his arm like butter and sent burning poison racing up his arm, prickling at his tongue and tugging at his eyes ‘til they dropped shut-
Tom should have known that it would take less than an hour for Orion to turn up. Hallpepper had barely finished bandaging Harrison’s arms when Harrison’s other limb barged into the Hospital Wing, tears glistening in his eyes.

“Where is he?”

“Merlin, Black, this isn’t a romance novel,” Tom said flatly, but Orion ignored him.

“Is he okay?” Orion rushed towards Harrison, but stopped dead as he crossed the ward, clearly feeling the unpleasant sensation of his magic suddenly becoming null and void. “What is that?”

“Magic-nullifying ward. Harrison had a bit of a reaction to, well, magic.”

“But that’s not—” Orion’s eyes were wide and panicked. “Is he okay? Was it bad?”

“His heart stopped.”

“His heart did what?” Orion looked horrified. Tom remembered perhaps a little too late that Orion had a terminally ill sibling. Orion’s jaw snapped shut. “Did you do this, Riddle?” he hissed, angrier than Tom had ever seen him.

Why did everyone keep thinking that?

“You’ve had it out for him all week,” Orion spat. “He lost a leg.”

Tom gave him that. He took a deep breath. “I… regret how I behaved towards Harrison in that week. It was hasty of me.”

Orion hesitated, clearly thrown off. “I swear to Morgana if you hurt him, I will kill you.”

“It was an accident.”

“Bullshit.”

“I didn’t know you knew how to swear, Orion.”

“Harrison taught me.” Orion’s bottom lip trembled and he took a heavy seat beside Harrison’s bed. Tom appeared to drop in his list of priorities as he took Harrison’s hand. “He’s so quiet.”

“Being unconscious tends to do that.”

Orion ignored him. “We were going to do homework together. He needed help with Charms.”

Tom wanted to argue that helping Harrison with homework was his job, but- no. He supposed that hadn’t been true for the past week.

“He’s so quiet,” Orion murmured again, his voice tight, and examined the hand in his own. He glanced up at Tom. “Why are there so many bandages on him?”

“Part of the treatment.”

“I-I… What happened, Tom?” Orion looked pleading and, despite himself, Tom crumbled.

“He collapsed. Had one of his fits- fever, practically burning. He hasn’t woken up since.”
“But he said he’d get help if he had another one.” Orion shook his head, stroking a finger over the back of Harrison’s hand.

“Another one?”

“Last year, Harrison bought this pendant from a pedlar down one of the back alleys in Hogsmeade—‘want, metamorphmagus, Harrison’s body in his arms, yes, Tom remembered, ‘-and it turned out to be just a song pendant—barely worth a sickle, really—but Harrison reacted badly. Burning, unconsciousness, I thought he was going to die.’”

“…A song pendant?” Tom asked, hating his ignorance but hating Harrison’s stillness more.

“It’s a toy, really, for children. It plays you the sound of your own magic, but a spell can do it more easily.”

“And how does it do that?”

“Well, I- I-” Orion blinked. “I suppose it plays you the sound of the magic moving through your magical channels. Taps into it, or something. I’ve never really thought about it before. The rhythm of magic can be very different from person to person, you know. My mother actually—“

“Orion.”

“Yes. Okay.” The pair sat in silence, nothing more to say. Suddenly, Orion exclaimed in surprise and picked up a nearby vial. “Who broke a time turner?” he asked, tilting the vial back and forwards, watching the sand pour.

Tom frowned. “What’s a time turner?”

Orion turned very red. “I mean- I have no idea- what’s a time turner, huh? Crazy name. Time… turner…”

Tom raised an eyebrow and waited.

It didn’t take long for Orion to give in.

“My father works in the Department of Mysteries and he brought home this glass thing. They’re experimenting with time travel. But I’m not supposed to know or read his notes or even go inside his study, so you can’t say anything,” Orion explained, all very quickly. “You have to promise—”

“And this glass had sand in it?”

“Mm. I hadn’t thought they got it to work yet,” Orion mused, his face falling as a moment of silence draped upon the two and reminded them both of who’s bedside they sat at.

Harrison just became more and more of a mystery. Together, Orion and Tom stared down at the unmoving body.

“He has so many secrets,” Tom said thoughtfully, desperately, almost greedily.

“He’s so quiet,” Orion choked out, his shoulders tense. Tom pretended not to see the tears glistening on his cheeks.

The dress robes Harry had put on for the trial sent sweat dripping down his back. Members of the Wizengamot seemed to be experiencing the same problem, glistening beads gathering on their
foreheads, and Harry could see quite a few handkerchiefs around the stands.

He leaned forwards as Fudge said something about arrogance, wincing as the fabric peeled away from his slick back. The flesh on his legs crawled, and he wondered if a different position might be more forgiving.

“Are we bothering you, Mr Potter?”

He glanced up. A sickly sweet woman with a sickly sweet voice simpered down at him. He didn’t know her yet but he hated her, hated her with every fibre of his being and all the searing pain of his right hand.

“Yes,” he said, and the jury gasped, all those sweaty, red faces rendered gormless by shock, and the room was even hotter, hotter with anger, hotter with shame, hotter with guilt-

Harry has never fought a man with two-faces before, but he thinks he’s getting better at it minute by minute. He has a technique, see, of alternating a kick and a push, and it’s getting him up the stairs towards the fiery gateway quite well.

He is wrong.

A hand fastens around his ankle and he’s tugged back and somewhere along the way his hand lands on a handsome, angular face and it is burning beneath his touch. He pulls away in horror but it continues to scorch, the flesh bubbling even as he screams apologies, begs it to stop. Dark eyes roll back in pain-

Flying on the back of a hippogriff was the freest he had ever felt. There were no expectations, no watching eyes. He sat and let the world rush by him. He wasn’t even steering.

Just the pleasant burn of wind against his face-

Harry is dying. He is lying on a wet floor and he is dying.

“Harry Potter,” Tom Riddle smiles down at him, transparent and handsome. “My greatest enemy. So weak .”

But no. That isn’t right. There are so many things wrong with that image that Harry is suddenly flushed with icy cold dread. He struggles to his feet, stumbling across the room to grasp Tom, to look close at his face and see the recognition dawn across his features, a flash of a smirk and a touch on the waist. This is not his Tom .

With each day that passed and with each day that Harrison remained unconscious, Tom became more and more on edge. He’d expected Harrison to wake up at the end of the first day, a little confused and angry, but alive. But no. Harrison slumbered on like sleeping bloody beauty.

It took little time at all for news of the incident to spread around the school. And so Orion and Tom entertained a steady stream of visitors: from a sniffling Rubeus Hagrid who kept moaning about how ‘he knew , poor, poor ‘Arrison’ (Tom eventually worked out that Hagrid and Harrison had only ever spoken once); to Atticus, who sat in silence for a few minutes until Tom told him he could leave. Rupert brought inappropriate haikus which got him thrown out by Halpepper, but Cassius stayed the longest. He’d hovered just outside the ward for over an hour, silent and thoughtful. When the clock struck 6, he’d stood and cleared his throat, telling Tom with gravitas that ‘he was glad things were
finally moving along’. Tom had cursed him.

The third day saw an unexpected guest.

“…Is Harrison Peters here?”

“The legend himself,” Tom said, keeping his eyes on his Transfigurations textbook.

“I just wanted to see him.”

Tom glanced towards the doorway, raising his eyebrows as he saw Myrtle Warren’s timid face. The last time he’d paid any attention to the girl had been when he’d wiped weeks of memory from her mind. So that was fun.

“Miss Warren,” Orion said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. His nap had done nothing to help the bags under his eyes. “What a pleasure.”

“I don’t really know why I’m here,” Warren said uncertainly. (Tom resisted the temptation to say: ‘then leave’.) “I know Harrison only saved me that time, but… for some reason I’ve always felt we were closer than that. Some kind of imprinting effect, I imagine.”

Perhaps Tom hadn’t been as successful as he’d thought. He sat up in interest.

“Oh, wow,” Warren said, moving closer. “What are all the bandages for?”

“Healing,” Tom replied, and rolled his eyes as Orion elaborated kindly.

“Harrison’s undergoing quite an experimental treatment, see.” His voice grew thick and stilted. “We’re all very hopeful.”

“Oh. Right. Well, I brought flowers.” She held out a bouquet to prove that she had, indeed, brought flowers. At least she wasn’t irksome and a liar. Warren bit her lip. “They’re not very manly, are they? Flowers. Maybe I should have brought chocolate instead.”

“He isn’t around to see either,” Tom said flatly. “I don’t think he cares.”

“Yes. Of course. I’ll just…” She shuffled forwards. Tom considered warning her, but ultimately couldn’t be bothered. She let out a shrill shriek as she crossed the ward.

“An odd sensation, isn’t it?” Tom smiled.

She nodded wordlessly, an expression on her face like she’d just eaten a lemon. Tom only wished he could enjoy it more. She set down the flowers on Harrison’s bedside and hovered, gaze flicking uncertainly between Harrison and his two companions.

“You can sit down,” Orion offered gently. Tom was pointedly silent, but she took a seat anyway, and started wringing her hands in a way that made Tom want to break them.

“He’s very brave, isn’t he?” she said suddenly, her eyes wide. “Very heroic, for a Slytherin.” She took a moment to realise her audience, and coughed. “I mean, he’s like a hero from the stories. He could almost have a sword.”

“Please don’t give Harrison a sword,” Tom said dryly. “He’d only cut himself.”

Warren let out a hysterical giggle that died away almost instantly. “A sword and a phoenix like the heroes of old.”
Nauseatingly, Tom could imagine Harrison with both. He wondered how he managed to become friends with such a sickeningly wholesome person.

“I hope he gets better,” she said, very small.

Orion sniffed, gifting her a soft smile. “Me too.”

She left soon after that, saying something about needing to get to Ancient Runes. Tom wasn’t distraught by the news.

Orion wore a funny expression after she left, a half smile, half grimace; and it was so unbearable that Tom finally asked him what on earth the look was for.

“Harrison helped so many people,” Orion said. “So he has to get better. He has to.”

Oh, Tom thought dully. More crying.

“He is getting better,” Tom said, in an awkward attempt at encouragement. “Madam Hallpepper said so. She thinks it’s working.”

“I-I hope so,” Orion sniffed. Orion hadn’t been sleeping, and his appearance said as much.

“He looks less pale already. And the scars have started healing.”

Orion snorted. “Can ‘scars’ heal? That’s sort of the point of them, isn’t it?”

“They can when they’ve been cut open.”

Orion ducked his head and nodded. His hair hung stringy around his cheeky.

“Hallpepper says she thinks she’s removed all the sand,” Tom said. “She thinks the scars will still be gold, apparently. When they heal. She thinks it’s stained the skin. In my opinion, she uses the phrase ‘I think’ a worrying amount for a trained medical professional.”

“I like uncertainty,” Orion murmured. “It means people don’t get careless.”

Tom inclined his head in acknowledgement.

Orion directed his anxious eyes to the wall. “Are you going to tell her about the sand? What I said?”

“I don’t think so. As you mentioned, it’s an experimental product. It wouldn’t help her with the diagnosis or the treatment. Besides, she’d just call in the DOM, and things would get… messy. I want to ask Harrison about it myself when he wakes up.”

Orion followed Tom’s gaze down to the bed again.

“Yes,” he said softly. “Me too.”

Harry fought.

Harry fights.

It was on the sixth day that Dumbledore told Tom very firmly to return to lessons. Tom attempted to
argue- Atticus was bringing him the work, and Tom had never really need to attend lessons anyway- but the Deputy Headmaster insisted. It would do him good, Dumbledore insisted, to return to normality.

There was no normality whilst Harrison was in the Hospital wing, but the old hippogriff didn’t see that.

Orion didn’t have to return to lessons, he tried to argue, but Dumbledore told him that Orion was clearly in no fit state to be amongst the other students. Tom, on the other hand, had a stronger constitution. And so Tom was reluctantly forced back into the real world. He suffered nearly half an hour of a stuffy Divinations classroom before he excused himself and left, not quite sure where he was going, but just knowing that he had to get out.

He wandered down to the dungeons, perhaps subconsciously heading towards the Common room. He would never know, because his attention was caught on the way by an open door. Open doors in the dungeons were uncommon- most people tried to keep the inhabitants in. Or rather: not let them out.

Tom took a curious step, and then another, and then before he knew it he was walking through the door.

“Hello?” he called out. “Is someone in here? We try to keep these doors closed, you- are you alright?”

Someone was lying on the floor very still; their outline just visible in the dim half-light. Perhaps a lost first year, or a fifth year who’d received terrible news from home. They got more and more of them these days. Tom moved closer.

“Can I help you?”

But there was no reply. Tom moved closer still, but he was reluctant to offer his comfort without knowing the situation. If the last few days had taught him anything, it was that he didn’t handle people crying well.

“It would really help if you talked to me.”

Tom sighed. This was ridiculous. With a huff of exasperation, he fished out his wand and aimed at the ceiling, casting a globe that lit up the room with a cold white light. Tom looked back down.

His heart stopped.

“…Harrison?”

Somehow, Harrison had found his way down to the dungeons. His body was sprawled across the floor like he’d been reaching up for something but had never quite made it, and his eyes were open: staring wide at the ceiling. And- Morgana- that was red trickling from the corner of his mouth.

Tom rushed forwards, the whole thing feeling like horrible déjà vu.

Harrison’s skin was cold when Tom grabbed him, and his hands came away sticky. Blood, he realised, and he saw it: blood leaking from the scars on Harrison’s arms, blood leaking through the fabric of Harrison’s shirt- when had he gotten dressed?- and it was, Merlin, it was everywhere.

His skin was cold.
“Harrison, wake up.”

Tom pressed a shaking hand to Harrison’s neck and gritted his teeth. There was nothing beneath his fingers, no heartbeat, no nothing.

Harrison was dead.

“Harrison, for god’s sake, please,” Tom said, and barely recognised his own voice. It was all raw and hoarse. “I’ll kill you. I’ll bloody kill you-”

He squeezed Harrison against his chest, breathing in the scent that was already turning cold and damp, and then gathered the body up in his arms- maybe if he got to the Hospital Wing, Hallpepper could do something. At last, he saw the open wardrobe in the corner.

The body fell from his arms. Of course.

“Oh,” Tom breathed. “Riddikulus.”

The body dissolved into silver mist, hovering in the air for a moment before being pulled back into the cupboard, which shut with a bang.

Tom sat back on his heels, his hands shaking beyond his control. The image of Harrison’s corpse wouldn’t leave his mind: so quiet and empty and completely unlike the irritatingly righteous boy that Tom knew. The boggart had done a rather terrible job at imitating him, really. There was only one Harrison Peters.

Tom knew exactly where he needed to be.

The journey from the dungeons to the Hospital Wing seemed to pass in the blink of an eye, but his legs were burning when he finally crashed through the doors.

“Mr Riddle!” Hallpepper cried in outrage, but it didn’t matter because Harrison was awake. Sitting up in bed and looking distinctly grumpy about the whole affair, peering down at a ‘get well soon’ card with suspicion.

He was almost perfect.

Harrison’s head shot around at the bang of the doors, and his eyes widened. “Tom? They said you were in lessons.” And then with disbelief: “Have you been crying-?”

Tom ignored him easily, striding across the room with sure, steady strides. He had no idea what he was going to do, but, when he finally reached the bed and Harrison blinked up at him in confusion, there seemed only one logical choice.

Tom kissed him.

Harrison gasped against his mouth and for a moment Tom thought he might be rejected; then Harrison relaxed against his body, bringing a hand up to grasp the back of Tom’s neck.

Harrison’s lips were dry and rough and tasted vaguely of six-day-old morning breath, but Tom barely cared. The kiss wasn’t magical or world-changing, but Harrison was awake and as insolently oblivious as always. It was everything Tom had hoped for.

Harrison pulled away. Their panting was the only sound in the room.

“Well, I never,” Hallpepper said, and continued sorting the potions.
Tom couldn’t bring himself to look away from Harrison. The other boy looked like he was still trying to work out where he was, and Tom had seen that expression numerous times, usually before he was shouted at. At last, Harrison met Tom’s eyes.

He grinned.

“Hello, Tom Riddle.”

Tom smiled back.

“Hello.”

Chapter End Notes

and y’all who think the two have forgiven each other too hastily, be patient. wait another chapter.

Finally a kiss. :)}
Harry Struggles To Make Up His Mind

Chapter Summary

Tom puts on his best moves, Harry isn't fooled, and there's just a lot of talking.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME ON SHADOWHUNTERS: Harry, under the effects of his mysterious illness, experiences dreams that chronologically distort his life, but all end in flames. In the hospital wing, Tom, Dumbledore and Hallpepper attempt to work out what's wrong with Harry, as his heartbeat slows and his temperature rises. Admittedly, Tom is more distraught than helpful. Hallpepper casts a spell that allows the group to see Harry's magical channels, which have been infected with something. She then realises that Harry's infection is being exacerbated by magic. She sets up a magic nullifying ward, and Tom realises the source of the infection: Harry's scars. Hallpepper opens them up the muggle way, and within them, they find sand. Hallpepper resolves to drain the scars, but Harry must be kept away from magic until his body can heal. Orion comes to visit (still furious at Tom), and recognises the sand due to his father's position within the DOM: time turner sand. Tom and Orion are left with a lot of questions. Orion and Tom become Harry's bodyguards and nurses, and Myrtle stops in. The week drags on, and Dumbledore tells Tom he must return to class. Tom only manages half a divination lesson before he wanders down into the dungeon, and is distracted by a door half open. Within it, he find Harry's corpse and is really quite perturbed- until he notices that it is a boggart. He rushes up towards the hospital wing and finds Harry just woken up. And then he kisses him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry didn’t realise he’d been kissed until it was all over. It felt like a second passed, and suddenly he was pressing a shaky hand to his lips and Tom was a metre away, panting.

“You kissed me,” Harry said.

“Yes,” Tom replied. He appeared frozen, eyes wide and panicked. He stretched out his fingers minutely, but he didn’t seem to know quite what he was reaching for. Harry reached out to gingerly touch a misplaced strand of hair. Almost perfect.

Huh. So apparently, Harry was definitely bisexual. Septimus had made him wonder for a while there. Good to know. What was more alarming was his attraction towards Tom. But Tom was good-looking and ambitious and funny, and Harry felt more himself than ever when he was around him. Special and chosen for reasons other than his parents’ deaths.

“You could do it again.” Harry suggested.

Tom wordlessly leaned in again, and this time, the kiss was gentle. It was cautious and tentative, full of teenage fear and uncertainty.
When they pulled back, Tom’s expression was unreadable. “I… was that okay?”

“Yes,” Harry said, definitively. “It was.” His brief moment of confidence evaporated, and he felt himself shrink back. “So, do you… ‘like’ me?”

Harry had gotten that vibe, since he didn’t think Tom went around snogging people he disliked, but you could never tell. It might be some kind of devious revenge.

“The evidence would suggest so.”

“And are we… ‘something’, now?”

“If you’d be agreeable.”

Harry sat back, his head spinning a little. None of this felt real. He’d been awake barely half an hour and now he was up close and personal with Tom Riddle. And before that he’d been… wait.

It came flooding back.

“You bastard!”

“What?” Tom looked so shocked that Harry might almost have felt sorry for him, if he hadn’t been completely fucking furious.

“You cut off my leg!”

“That was an accident-”

“Don’t give me that bullshit. You splinched me!”

“I was angry-”

“Not an excuse,” Harry said harshly. “Is that how this ‘something’ will go?” He adopted a high voice. “‘Harry, you’re really pissing me off! Oops! Now you’re missing a leg.’”

“I wouldn’t-”

“Really? Wouldn’t you?” Harry snarled. There was a long silence.

“I didn’t realise you could die,” Tom admitted faintly. “You were in pain and I- I was utterly useless.”

Harry sneered. “That was almost heartfelt. Well done.”

“Harrison, I’m sorry.”

“And that makes it all okay?”

Tom stood, and Harry wondered if he would make a run for it. “Look, I’m not going to pretend that I didn’t have cruel intentions, but I merely distracted you. I didn’t know what would happen when you were splinched. I just… reacted.”

“That’s weak and you know it,” Harry spat.

Tom looked away.

Harry clenched his fists, and before he could stop himself, the words were erupting from his mouth.
“Why did you kiss me?”

Tom blinked, and although his mouth opened, he was silent.

“Come on? If a few days ago you were literally tearing me to pieces, what brought on the snog? A new, fucked-up way of torturing me? I swear to Merlin-”

“You were dead.”

Harry’s heart leapt up into his mouth. “What?”

“I held your body in my arms and you were dead,” Tom said, and his face was very pale.

Harry still felt very much alive, if achy, and so this news was understandably distressing. He slapped a hand to his pulse and slumped with relief when he felt the answering throb. “Well, I’m still breathing, so I’m not sure which corpse you fondled, but it definitely wasn’t mine.”

Tom drew a pained breath. “It wasn’t real, exactly.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It was my boggart.”

Harry’s world spun on its axis and resettled. His boggart. That meant Tom’s greatest fear was… oh.

“It changed, huh?” he asked, the levelness of his voice disguising the rapid and uncontrollable thumping in his chest.

“Somewhat. Yes,” Tom admitted. He glanced down at his lap and, for the first time in Harry’s memory, he fidgeted. “It did.”

“That’s. Wow. Yes.”

Harry’s anger melted away. Oh, it was definitely still there (Tom had splinched his leg), but this was fairly monumental. The future Dark Lord feared Harry’s death most of all. Baby Voldemort feared Harry’s death most of all.

Tom feared Harry’s death most of all.

“So,” Harry’s lip twitched, “you care about me, huh?”

Tom flushed. “If you wish to be… explicit about it then, yes, I ‘care about you’. If one can truly ‘care about’ anything, really. I-”

“It was sweet until you kept talking.”

“That’s fair.” They sat in silence for a moment, and Tom watched Harry like he thought he might disappear any moment. “I just can’t believe you’re awake. When your heart stopped beating-”

Harry’s attention zeroed in. “Hang on- I did almost die?! Like, for real?”

Tom blinked. “You didn’t know?”

“Fuck, no! Do they know what was wrong with me?”

“You really weren’t told?”
“Hallpepper told me I should be kept away from stress. Or death.”

“Ignorance is bliss.”

“Yeah, well, that’s bullshit,” Harry snorted. “So am I dying? Again?” The addendum slipped out before Harry could censor himself, and he saw Tom’s interest pique. He rushed on. “Well?”

Tom hesitated, but allowed Harry to push past the slip. “It was your scars.”

“What about them?”

A voice from the doorway: “They were filled with sand.”

The silhouetted figure of Orion Black filled Harry with intense fondness. “Orion.”

“You’re awake,” Orion breathed, looking like he didn’t quite believe it.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Really? I hadn’t-”

Harry’s sarcasm turned into a muffled ‘oof!’ as Orion threw his arms around him. Harry managed to squeak out an “injured, remember?” but Orion only slightly loosened his grip.

“I thought you were dead,” he said fiercely. “They cut you open.”

“Okay,” Harry said, extricating himself from the hug. “Someone’s going to have to tell me what’s actually been going on, because now there’s sand and surgery and this is all sounding very dire.”

“You were burning up,” Tom said, and when Harry glanced over, the other boy’s face barely seemed to twitch. “And hallucinating.”

“You seem inconsolable,” Harry said drily.

Tom drew a haughty breath. “I kept my composure.”

“He cried,” Orion said gleefully.

“I can see that.” Harry peered at the silver tear tracks on Tom’s cheeks. They only made him look more irritatingly and tragically beautiful.

“I didn’t cry,” Tom spluttered. “I- I- Orion Black, I will skin you.” He bared his teeth at a sniggering Orion, but Harry was mostly reminded of an infuriated cat.

“No, you won’t,” Harry said.

“No,” Tom agreed, seeing Harry’s expression. “I won’t.”

“So there was sand in my skin?” Harry asked, glancing down at himself.

“Well, after you collapsed and nearly died, we discovered that your attacks were exacerbated by magic but there was another, root cause. The infection, Hallpepper called it. And that’s when we discovered the sand within your scars. Hallpepper—” Tom winced, “—drained them, and put you on a kind of ‘magic ban’. That’s what the ward is for.”

So that was that reason for the empty feeling within him. He had no access to his magic. And, Harry mused, the reason for the bandages that encased him, and twinged whenever he shifted.
“But there’s this thing about the sand,” Orion said very delicately.

“Yeah?” Harry raised an eyebrow. Why did Orion look so shifty?

“So, you know my father works in the Department of Mysteries? Well, I’ve seen some of his work. Specifically, the time turner.”

Oh no. Harry could see where this was going.

“I recognised the sand. It’s the same as in the time turner.”

“Ah,” Harry said. He couldn’t manage anything else. Tom and Orion were both looking at him expectantly and he was replaying that last image of golden sand raining down upon him and broken glass beneath his back and thinking *they can’t know the truth*. “The time turner,” he said slowly, stalling. “What would it look like?”

Orion frowned. “A normal hourglass, I suppose. About so tall,” he held his hands about 20 centimetres apart, “and with a wooden frame.”

Harry’s palms began to sweat and he drew a hand across his forehead. This could be it.

It was then that he was hit with a burst of inspiration. It was rather brilliant, if he did say so himself.

“That’s what the death eater was holding,” Harry murmured, and committed himself to an even more elaborate backstory.

“What?” Orion asked, with a confused shake of his head that made Harry feel even worse about the pyramid of lies he was about to construct.

“During the attack on Bideford, I saw one of the men holding an hourglass thing, like you said. A time turner, I suppose. I tried to stun him, but my spell hit the glass and it exploded. The last thing I remember is golden light and burning. When I woke up, I was here. In the same village after the same attack, but it was all… different. My bedroom wasn’t there, the streets weren’t even called the same thing. Everyone was dead, but no one seemed to be looking for me. I tried to contact my grandparents and aunts and uncles, but they don’t know who I am. It’s like I never existed.” Harry drew a deep, shaky breath and focussed on the stabbing pain in his calf to conjure tears. “And then I noticed other things. Where I come from, Grindelwald had different followers. The death eaters. That’s why I didn’t recognise them at Hogsmeade. There are different authors, and spells— even Quidditch brooms aren’t the same.”

“An alternate dimension,” Tom breathed.

“I’m don’t belong here,” Harry shrugged. “And I suppose this was just my body telling me the same thing.” He smiled bitterly and realised with surprise that some of the tears prickling at the corner of his eyes were real.

He grunted as a body impacted with his, and Orion murmured into his ear: “You do, you absolutely do.”

Harry squeaked. “Injured. Ow.”

“Oh, sorry!” Orion coloured and jumped off the bed. “I forgot.”

“Your mind is a mystery,” Tom said with bemusement, and turned his stare upon Harry. “You never said anything about this.”
Harry laughed uncomfortably. He couldn’t tell what Tom was thinking. “How could I have told you? Or anyone? ‘Hey, by the way, I don’t technically come from around here.’ ‘This country?’ ‘No, this universe.’ That sounds like a fun, normal conversation.”

“At least you’re telling the truth now,” Tom allowed. “You are telling the truth, aren’t you?”

Harry met Tom’s gaze and knew he was doing something irreversible when he inclined his head and said “yes”.

“I’m glad you’re here now,” Tom said. “At any rate.”

“I miss my friends,” Harry admitted. “The worst bit is the not knowing. I don’t know how they’re doing, what they’re doing. I don’t even know if they’re still alive.”

“They’re fine,” Orion said gently. “I know they are. And I’m sure they miss you too.”

“No one survived here,” Harry said, and even though he knew this was just a story, he felt his chest tighten. “They could all be dead.”

“They’re not dead as long as you believe they’re alive,” Tom said. “Schrödinger’s cat.”

“I’m not sure Schrödinger’s cat works on a literal level.”

Orion sat up suddenly and began patting his pockets. “Darn it.”

“What is it?”

“I have to send Rigel and Meissa a letter. They wanted to know when you woke up. I think Meissa has a little crush on you.” Orion beamed, and triumphantly produced a quill. “I’ll be back in a bit!”

And then he scrambled out the door, leave Harry and Tom alone.

“How do you feel?” Tom asked carefully, and the question seemed especially crucial in the silence of the hospital wing.

“Well, I’m not on fire, so that’s something.”

“No, I meant… about us.”

Harry took a slow and steady breath. That was the question, wasn’t it? He studied Tom’s face carefully, and he could see the stress in the way his lip twitched slightly, and the dark circles beneath his eyes. He hadn’t slept for days. Harry had never seen Tom look anything less than perfect before.

“You will never physically harm me again,” Harry said, very carefully, and even as he said it, he could see Hermione waving a big book of ‘Red Flags in Any Relationship’ at him. However, Harry truly believed Tom had never before really grasped the finality of his actions or the seriousness of consequence, and now he did. He just hoped he wasn’t proved wrong.

“This is a test run,” Harry continued. “I’m not weak, Tom. I’m not easily intimidated like one of your sycophants. I am your equal, and unless you can accept that, there’s nothing between us.”

He looked at Tom, who was gazing at Harry with such an odd mix of hope and surprise that Harry suddenly felt sorry for him. Everything Tom knew about Harry was built on a lie. Everything Harry had ever told him was twisted and manipulated to keep the truth hidden, and Harry was suddenly gripped by the chilling premonition that this was three thousand times worse than anything Tom could ever do to Harry. This would be the end of it all: the day Tom realise he was… ‘something’
with a figment of his imagination. A fairy tale.

With ice in his heart, Harry drew Tom’s hand into his own.

“I can work with that,” Tom smiled, and it was almost soft. And then he frowned, and it wasn’t harsh, but thoughtful. “Was I there, in this other world of yours?”

*Slit nose, red eyes, and sharpened nails pressed against his forehead.*

“No,” Harry lied. “Or at least, I don’t know. I never went to Hogwarts.”

“Oh. I felt like you knew me before we met. I suppose that comes from the seer thing.”

“Mmm,” Harry hummed non-commitally.

“We’re the same, after all. Alone.”

“Not so alone anymore.”

“Insufferably sappy,” Tom said, but he smiled nonetheless.

“I mean, I was talking about Orion, but take it how you want.”

Tom rolled his eyes. “As I said: ‘insufferable.’” And although Tom chuckled, Harry could see a shadow behind his eyes.

“You don’t truly know if you’re alone though, do you? Your family could be out there,” Tom had once recounted how Mrs Cole had told him about the women that had given him up and died soon after and how she had talking longingly of Tom’s father, who was still out there somewhere. “Your father.”

“I killed my father.”

“I’m sorry? You did what?” Harry’s eyebrows shot up.

“I killed my father,” Tom said expressionlessly.

“You killed who now?”

“My father. I tracked him down last year. He told me he didn’t want me. He’d told my grandparents that my mother and I died together. And so I killed him.”

Harry was deeply disturbed by the blankness that settled over Tom’s features. He’d much preferred the fury. “Tom- you can’t just kill people. It’s wrong.”

“He called me a freak.”

Harry sighed, but he couldn’t deny that if he hadn’t been desensitised to the idea of family by growing up with the Dursleys; if he’d thought his family dead, realised he was wrong, and then been greeted by Vernon Dursley’s purple face… he might have done something drastic too.

“Tom,” he said, trying anyway. “You can’t just… you just can’t.”

“Why? He would have killed me! He left me to die. He practically murdered my mother.”

“If bad acts lead to bad acts, the world gets nowhere. Passing on hurt just creates more hurt.”
“I let my grandparents live,” Tom offered. “I thought of you.”

Harry didn’t know if it was sweet that Tom had thought of him when he considered murdering his grandparents, but it was something.

“You understand, don’t you? Why I wished you hadn’t killed him?”

“I’m not a child, Harrison.” Tom clenched his jaw. “I don’t need to be talked down to. I understand perfectly why you dislike what I did.”

“But you can’t feel it,” Harry realised. There was something missing in Tom. “Did you feel sad after you killed him?”

“I did what I needed to.”

“Have you ever felt regret? Or guilt?” Harry shifted closer to Tom on the bed and brought a hand up to touch his face. He stroked a thumb over the skin in front of Tom’s ear. Tom looked shocked at the contact, but didn’t object.

“I feel guilty that I hurt you. And I regret that I… complicated our association.”

“Merlin, Tom, speak English.”

“If you can’t comprehend a more complicated lexicon-”

“Tom.”

“-Then fine. The answer to your question is yes, I’ve felt both regret and guilt. But only, really, in relation to you.”

It was rather sweet, actually.

“That was almost romantic. Well done.”

“Still not a child.” Pause. “Slughorn says hello, by the way. He said he’s not very good with blood.”

Harry snorted. “Tosser.”

Hallpepper forced Tom out in order to give Harry ‘space to rest’, so the pair shared an awkward glance and Harry was left alone. He heaved a deep sigh. Without the intensity of Tom’s presence, his crimes (limb-removal, patricide and general dark lordiness) suddenly seemed a lot more, well… criminal.


“That didn’t look like a relationship to me.”

Where did that voice come from? Harry glanced around. Bloody-! “Mrs Dumbledore!”

“Kendra, please.” She scowled down at him, but he didn’t think he mistook the kind glint in her eyes.

Harry wasn’t sure he wanted relationship advice from the portrait of his teacher’s mother, but he’d
take what he could get. “…You don’t think it’s a relationship?”

“Well, to be frank, you looked torn between calling the Aurors on Riddle and killing him yourself. A relationship can’t be so one-sided. You both have to trust each other equally, and he’s clearly put more in than you have.”

Harry didn’t think he’d ever be labelled less emotionally open than Tom Riddle, but apparently that day had arrived. Hang on- if she’d be listening…

“You can’t tell anyone what he said,” Harry said urgently. If she told Dumbledore that Tom had killed his dad, he could only imagine what would happen. Azkaban, to say the least. Maybe even the dementors.

“I’m not a gossip,” Kendra said haughtily. She smirked. “Besides, I’m always an advocate for young love.”

“Right…” Harry agreed uncertainly. He wasn’t sure murder counted as gossip, but he wasn’t going to argue. “So you won’t tell anyone about this?”

“Who would I tell? My son?” Kendra pursed her lips. “It could do Albus some good to not know everyone’s private business.”

That seemed like a healthy family dynamic. But Harry did want to talk about his problems, so he’d take it.

“Right. So, er, in the future, Tom is going to do some really bad stuff. Or was. Or might still, but I don’t really know- point is, Tom’s got the potential to do some really bad things. How am I supposed to trust someone like that?”

Kendra crossed her arms. “And you think you don’t?”

“Don’t what?”

“Have the potential for bad?”

“No, I didn’t-” Harry spluttered. “I’m sure I do but-”

“Don’t you think I have that potential?”

“I barely know you, it hardly seems fair-”

“Don’t you think Albus has that potential? Or Millicent? Or that excitable boy with the pretentious name?”

Harry bristled at the insult to Orion. “You called your son Albus Percival Wulfic Brian.”

“That was Percival’s doing,” Kendra waved it away. She sighed. “Let me tell you a story. You cannot tell anyone about this, you understand?” She fixed Harry with a stern glower, and he nodded quickly.

Kendra settled herself into her chair. “After I died, Albus got himself into some… questionable politics. He found himself friends with a young lad called Gellert Grindelwald.” Harry started at the familiar name, “-and starting talking poppycock about ‘the greater good’ and wizards ruling over muggles. As if he didn’t go ‘round to papa and nan’s house every Christmas for a nice muggle lunch. And there was something else between those two. Longing. I’m fairly sure Albus had potential to do
bad. A lot of potential. He always was a brilliant boy.” And she said this no small amount of bitterness.

Harry was enraptured. “But he didn’t go bad.”

“Whilst I object to your rather simplistic definition of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, no, I suppose he didn’t. He fell in with the ‘right people’. He was guided away from that path. But if you think that Albus, at least for one, singular second, couldn’t have become just as bad as Grindelwald, then you’re wrong.”

“But I know what Tom will become.” Harry ran a hand through his hair, green light flashing in his mind. “It’s…it’s pretty bad. Infamously bad.”

“Do you truly believe that, in the time you’ve been here, he hasn’t changed?”

Tom had, hadn’t he? Harry had seen that change, when Tom supported him against blood prejudice, publicly, at least. And Harry wondered if the Riddle at the beginning of sixth year would have admitted feelings for anyone. No. No, he wouldn’t. Never mind let his boggart be transformed. Still…

“But…I can’t have made that much of a difference. No one can.”

“My dear boy, you have to let people change. Nobody is born evil and stays that way. We make decisions and have experiences, and they transform us. I’m not saying everyone should be absolved of guilt if they stroke a puppy- there are some real arseholes out there and I wish Morgana upon them- but there is something to be said for rehabilitation. Riddle has expressed remorse. Seemingly, genuine remorse. That’s more than what 50% of the population manages.”

Harry glanced down at his hands.

Kendra snorted. “For god’s sake, snog the boy and if he murders anyone else, you can dump him. You’re not getting married. You’re not eternally bound if you go on a date.”

“That’s true,” Harry said, and the reminder was like a shock of icy water. For some reason, he’d been thinking of this as a ‘forever or never’ kind of deal.

“That’s what I’m here for, apparently,” Kendra muttered. “Once you die, you get to be a therapist for all the idiots who still have heartbeats.”

“Yeah, well, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“Oh, were you waiting for me to leave?”

“Kind of.”

“I didn’t realise-”

“Well, I have to sleep here, so…”
“No, that’s fine. I’ll just go… tut at Albus.”

“Have fun.”

Harry had to admit that his pleasure at seeing Tom the next morning was dampened by the huge pile of books in his arms.

“You do realise that we know what’s wrong with me now,” Harry said uncertainly. (He had been privileged enough last night to receive a detailed explanation from Hallpepper about the elaborate journey she had embarked upon to heal him, once she realised Tom had spilled the beans about Harry’s near-death escape.) “No more research necessary.”

Tom smiled, but as he set the books down at the foot of Harry’s bed, he was all business. “I was informed by Madam Hallpepper this morning that your magic ban will be lifted by the end of April.”

“I feel like I should be the one told about these kind of things,” Harry grumbled.

“But you’re weakened and delicate,” Tom said, and from his grin Harry knew they were both remembering the other day, where Harry had proved the exact opposite.

“Anyway,” Tom continued, pulling yards of parchment out of his bag. “That means- wait for it, contain your excitement…”

“I’m buzzing,” Harry said drily.

“You’ll be able to take your NEWTs!”

“Oh. Yay.”

“And so you’ve got catching up to do.” Triumphanty, Tom set a handful of quills down on the bed. “And I’m going to help.”

“Oh, so hot,” Harry said flatly. “Seduce me with ink, Tom.”

“I can seduce you if you want,” Tom smirked, sliding across the bed. And suddenly he was leaning over Harry and he had never seemed taller or more all-consuming. His arms braced on each side of Harry’s head, encaging him. A hot shiver ran up Harry’s back.

And then he remembered Kendra’s words.

“No,” Harry said firmly, and pushed Tom aside.

“Harrison, I-” Tom furrowed his brow, and it was blatantly clear he had never been rejected before in his life- at least not in that way.

Harry took a breath and finally made up his mind. “We’re not in a relationship, Tom. We’re not ‘experimenting’ or ‘casual’. We can’t be.”

“Why not?” Tom pressed closer again. “Yesterday, you were quite eager.”

“I had a think, and a talk, and I realised that… that I can’t trust you, Tom. I don’t trust that you won’t hurt me.” Harry put a hand up to stop Tom’s interruption. “I don’t trust that you won’t hurt other people. Time after time: Lestrange, Myrtle, me- your father even, you hurt people. I’ve given more
chances than I can count.”

“But you *can* trust me,” Tom scoffed. “Because I… ‘care’ about you. I would protect you.”

“A few weeks ago, you deliberately sent me into a void where you knew I could lose anything from a kneecap to a torso.” Harry shook his head. “I don’t believe anyone can change that much.”

“You’re wrong.” Tom tried.

“Then I’ll be wrong. But I’ll be wrong and safe.”

Tom let out a growl of frustration and sprang to his feet. He prowled across the hospital wing for a few paces and shot a sudden blasting spell at the window. He contemplated the broken pane for a moment, tattered curtains swaying mournfully, and then fixed the window with a frustrated jab.

“You hurt people,” Harry murmured.

“I wouldn’t hurt you,” Tom said, turning with something like desperation. “Not again.”

“Stop it, Tom.” Harry turned on his side. “Stop.” As he did, his foot brushed against something. He glanced down. “A newspaper. But… why did you bring me that?”

“The wizarding world is at a turning point,” Tom said. “Grindelwald was spotted by a community down in Devon. There were no casualties, but the newspapers are going driving themselves mad trying to work out what he’s planning.”

“In Devon? But… what even goes on in Devon?”

“Dark lord invasions, apparently. Look, it hardly matters- Harrison. Give me a chance. I know what I want now. I’ve thought about it too, and I *know*. I want you.” Tom reached out his hand and it would have been so easy to take it.

But Harry couldn’t. He wouldn’t let himself.

“You’re an island, Tom Riddle,” Harry clutched his bedsheets tight. “And you don’t build bridges.”

“You stupid boy,” Tom snarled. “That’s what I’m doing.” He hesitated, and for a precious second, anything could have happened. Then he turned on his heel and stormed away.

He didn’t come back.

Harry lay down in bed and stared up at the ceiling. His mind seemed perfectly blank and the ceiling incredibly interesting. He felt a tear roll down his cheek. Oh. So this was sadness.

He turned on his side and wept for loss.

Harry’s moroseness lasted through the morning into lunchtime, and Orion noticed fairly quickly.

“Harry!” he gasped, dropping a bunch of flowers to the floor. “What’s wrong?!” He crossed the hospital wing and drew Harry into a hug.

“Still injured,” Harry said, but even that was half-hearted.
“What happened?” Orion scanned Harry’s face and felt his forehead for a temperature. “Are you sick again?”

“No. Just tired.” Harry smiled slightly. “You know, you don’t have to bring flowers every time you visit. I’m overrun.”

“It’s tradition,” Orion said strongly. “But don’t distract me. You’re sad. Is it…” Orion lowered his voice. “*Your other home?*

“No,” Harry smiled fondly. “It’s not. It’s… it’s Tom.”

Orion’s jaw clenched. “Did he hurt you again?”

“No! No, not really. It’s-it’s emotional.”

“Did he break your heart? That’s just as bad, Harrison, you don’t have to pretend- this sort of thing can really hurt. I ought to know-”

“No,” Harry said, sinking a little from shame. “No, he didn’t break my heart. You see, I think I might have, sort of, b-broken his.”

“Harry,” Orion said quietly. “You’re crying.”

“Y-yeah,” Harry agreed, laughing shakily. He wiped his eyes. “I can’t seem to s-stop doing that.”

Orion rested a hand over Harry’s, a comforting anchor. “What did you do?”

“He- he kissed me. And wanted a relationship, I suppose. And I said no, that I couldn’t trust him. I mean, I basically said he was a sociopath- it wasn’t my most sensitive moment, and there is stiff competition for that, let me tell you-”

“Harrison,” Orion said, stopping Harry’s rambling tirade in its path. “Why don’t you trust him?”

“He *hurts* people, Orion. You know that. You’ve lived in a dormitory with him for seven years.”

“Yes, I have. And I won’t say Tom is… morally sound, but he has been different since you’ve got here. He did a terrible thing with the splinching, yes. And I was very vexed, don’t worry.” Orion wrinkled his nose, and even his anger was adorable. “But…” Orion reached out to touch Harry’s cheek and his finger came away wet. “You’re *letting* him hurt you like this. I know what it’s like to… force self-punishment on yourself because you don’t think you deserve love. You have the power now. Take it. Be happy.” Orion shrugged. “One of us has to be.”

This time, it was Harry who pulled Orion in for a sideways hug. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. I wish you’d let yourself live.”

Orion choked with laughter. “Take your own advice, idiot.”

Harry clutched his chest in mock outrage. “An idiot? From Orion Black? Well, now I know it must be true.”

Orion snorted. “Shut up. Idiot.”

The two lingered, clutching tight to one another. Harry had never felt safer.

“I was so scared you were going to die, Harry,” Orion muttered suddenly. “You can’t die. Why does everyone die?”
“Hey,” Harry soothed. “No one died. I’m not going to, they know what’s wrong now. And you said Rigel was on the mend, remember?”

“I have a feeling,” Orion said, and he pulled back to look Harry directly in the face. The emotion behind his eyes was haunting. “We’re on a precipice, Harry. I know it.”

“That’s… not ominous at all,” Harry chuckled. “Have you and Cassius been exchanging notes?”

“Don’t laugh. I just… I have this feeling, okay? The precipice.”

“Everything’s going to be fine.” Harry didn’t know how he ended up the comforter in this conversation. “This is just a rough patch.”

“Tom cares, Harry,” Orion said urgently, like it was the most important thing in the world for Harry to understand. “He can’t show it, but he does. Or he’s starting to, at least”

“I believe you,” Harry said. He didn’t even know if he was lying anymore.

They sat there for silence for a few minutes, listening to the clock tick. And suddenly Orion said: “I have a runes convention next week. Sorry.”

“…What?” A surprised laugh erupted from Harry. And then another. And then another. And then he was roaring with mirth and Orion was joining in, and Harry was so delirious that he just couldn’t stop. “That’s fine,” he gasped. “That’s fine.”

On the morning that Harry’s final bandages were removed, his bed was opened up to group visits.

“HARRISON!”

There were only two people who could put that much excitement into their voice, and one of them was at a runes convention.

“Chloe,” Harry said, sitting up in bed. “And… the whole team. Hi.”

“We brought vegetation,” Rachel said flatly, and set a small plant down on the bedside cabinet, sparing a dubious glance at the veritable forest that had sprung up thanks to Orion.

“Er, thanks, I guess,” Harry said, and poked a leaf curiously. It fell off.

“I forgot to water it,” Chloe admitted. “I was worried about you.”

“Hey, arsehole!”

Ah. He’d been wondering where Bea got to.

“Hello Bea,” Harry said, and smiled at the furious girl. He had missed her.

“Guess what?” she spat. “Whilst you were swooning, we lost the match.”

For the past few weeks, Quidditch had been the last thing on Harry’s mind. Still, hearing that they had lost… a little stone dropped in his stomach. “Oh.”

“Yes: ‘oh’.” Bea’s expression was acidic. “We had to use Smythe. She threw up. Again.”
“What happened to Hughes?” Harry asked. Out of all the people at that try-out, the girl who hadn’t been able to get on her broomstick wouldn’t have been his first choice.

“He had an exam,” Chloe said brightly.

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “He was sulking. Apparently, some people don’t like being second choice.”

“I wish you wouldn’t put it like that.” Chloe frowned. “He was simply a… another option… should the first… not be- yes, okay, Hughes was a second choice. We’re all second choices sometimes.” She lowered her voice to a bitter mutter. “Al chose Carol, after all.”

“Yes,” Rachel soothed, putting an arm around Chloe. “Yes, we know.” She aimed a hard glare at Bea. “Do not start this again.”

Harry wondered what drama had been going down in his absence.

“There are more important things happening right now,” Bea said sneeringly. “Grindelwald launched an attack in London. But no, let’s all worry about Babbage’s personal drama.”

Harry frowned. “Grindelwald did what?”

“I suppose you didn’t hear,” Matthew Stein said. “There were only eight casualties, but it’s been big news. It’s escalating: first Devon, now blood spilt in London…”

“Something will stop him soon,” Harry reassured the room. “I promise.”

Bea crossed her arms. “They said for a while that Dumbledore would do something. He’s supposed to be the best wizard around.”

Knowing now what Harry knew about Dumbledore and Grindelwald in their adolescence, Harry wondered how Dumbledore would muster up the strength to face his childhood sweetheart. Or even fight against a cause that he still, somewhere, believed in.

Harry’s certainty that this would all be resolved, slipped.

“But enough talk,” Matthew said. “We can’t do anything about it. How have you been?” And he took a seat in the chair by Harry’s bed.

“Uh, dying, mostly.”

Harry regretted his words when the entire team (including Leo Piper, who’d been staring thoughtfully out of a window) turned to him with a horrified expression.

“I thought that was just a rumour!” Chloe gasped. “I know Warren said- but no one believed her- still!”

“I meant… really bad hay fever, y’know?” Harry laughed nervously. “Snot everywhere.”

Maddens curled a lip. “Ew.”

“Harrison, you have a terrible sense of humour,” Chloe giggled. “Dying! Imagine. Well, I’m glad you’re better anyway. I’m sure Tom is, too.”

“Tom?” Harry asked, perking up at the name. “What about him?”
“Oh, he was miserable while you were gone. You’d have thought you were dying, from the way he was carrying on. We barely saw him, but when he did come out, he looked like he hadn’t slept for days, didn’t he?”

The Quidditch team nodded in agreement.

“It was pathetic!” Bea piped up.

Harry’s lips twitched. “So he was… upset?”

“Upset?” Bea snorted. “Sure. That’s one word for it. ‘Cuckoo’ is another. And this last week… Merlin’s balls, I’ve wanted to slap him.”

“He wasn’t looking his best,” Matthew said diplomatically.

Tom, Harry realised, had allowed other people to see weakness. Perhaps not knowingly, but he had. Harry felt an overwhelming something rise within him. He didn’t know what it was.

It was like a message from Merlin when Tom walked through the door, followed by Atticus.

“But if you’d only give me your notes, I promise I’ll-” Atticus stopped in his tracks when he noticed the room full of people. “Oh. Hello Peters. I heard you were up.”

“Keep working on that empathy,” Harry said absently, but he had eyes only for Tom. Tom who looked nervous. Tom who had lost sleep. Tom who had sat by his bedside. Tom who must have heard that his bandages were off. Tom who had cared.

And then Harry was rising out of the bed, crossing the room with unsteady, painful steps, grabbing onto Tom by the shoulder, and pulling him into a kiss. And for a moment, there was only Tom and Harry, alone in the vast universe, until the kiss ended.

“I take it I’m off probation?” Tom asked, but despite the irreverence, his smile was the biggest Harry had ever seen.

“No,” Harry said firmly. “I haven’t forgotten, Tom. I’m just… temporarily forgiving. This isn’t a forever kind of deal- it can all end.”

“I know,” Tom said, and his expression made Harry suspect he was seeing his boggart all over again. “But for now?”

“For now, we’ll see.” Harry smiled, and clasped Tom’s hands in his own.

“What is going on?” Atticus’ screech drew their attention. Harry was reminded that there were most definitely other people in the universe- the room, even. And they were all watching him with shock-Atticus most of all. “Are you two fucking?”

“Not currently,” Tom shrugged.

Harry shoved him. “Shut up. We’re trying something,” he addressed the room. “Emotional.”

“That is so cute!” Chloe squealed, clapping her hands together. “We all had a bet that Tom was that way inclined, but we never guessed about you, Harrison.”

“‘We’?” Harry asked suspiciously.

“Just a few girls,” Chloe dismissed. Harry suspected the news would be around the entire school
before the hour was out.

The rest of the team got used to it fairly quickly, and there was a rumble of “suspected something was happening”, “far too many lingering glances”, and even though Bea seemed bizarrely disappointed, she still managed to tell Harry that he hadn’t made a “too terrible” decision. Atticus, however, was another story.

“This is wrong,” Atticus spat.

“I thought you said wizards were mostly fine with male homosexual relationships?” Harry muttered to Tom.

Tom hummed. “Well, there are those with little hang ups…”

“Great.”


Ah. So it was less a problem with the penis, and more a problem with who it belonged to. Great.

“Yes, me,” Harry said.

“I know he’s powerful, but really? Him?”

“What, Atticus? Did you think it would be you?” Tom asked, rather cruelly. Harry didn’t stop him.

Atticus flushed hot red. “I- I. This isn’t you, Tom. Last year-”

“Last year, I could still stand the sight of you. Things change.” Tom smiled beatifically, and Harry watched with uncertainty as Atticus’s face fell. And then he remembered how Atticus had honestly endorsed the subjugation of muggles, and his sympathy dwindled somewhat.

“This is wrong,” Atticus repeated futilely, and with one final glance around for support (he found none), Atticus marched out of the Hospital Wing.

It was then that Harry noticed the suspicious downstairs breeze.

“…Am I only wearing a hospital robe?”

“Yes,” Tom said, smirking at him. “Yes, you are.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so yes, this was a very 'let's all sit down and talk our feelings out' chapter. But you need that sometimes! Don't worry, big stuff coming soon :) Check out my tumblr!

EDIT: Anyone reading as of 16/10/18: I promise this isn't abandoned! I just have uni application stuff at the moment. I should be uploading a new chapter when that horror is over. Bear with me xx
Chapter Summary

Harry studies hard, snogs Tom (a lot), and doesn't want to leave home.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME (LIKE 4 MONTHS AGO, SORRY): Harry and Tom deal with the aftermath of The Kiss. Harry is initially pleased and flattered by the revelation that Harry's death is Tom's boggart, but also remembers that Tom splinched his leg off. Orion enters and questions Harry about the time sand, which Harry answers by making up a story about him being from a different dimension. Good job, Harry. Just to finish it off, Tom reveals how he has killed his father. A strong foundation for a relationship. Harry decides against a relationship with Tom for obvious reasons (general dark lordyness), and Tom is not pleased. When Orion comes to visit, he tells Harry that he honestly thinks Tom has changed and Harry should offer him a chance. The Quidditch team also come to visit (Harry is popular), and reveal that Grindelwald is getting bolder, and Tom has been worried sick. Harry, struck by Tom allowing others to see his weakness, promptly plants one on Tom and agrees to date him. Atticus is not pleased.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There really was very little difference in dating Tom and not dating him.

Neither Harry nor Tom were particularly tactile. Tom had grown up in an orphanage, and the closest thing to intimacy Harry had experienced during childhood was his head under Dudley’s armpit, so you could understand his distaste. Besides, Harry had Orion to provide all the suffocating affection he needed. What Harry and Tom were rather fond of, however, was snogging and arguing. And there was plenty of both now that NEWTs were upon them.

Tom took great pleasure in pressing books into Harry’s arms and then raising a mysterious eyebrow when he questioned whether this was in the curriculum. Harry suspected that only about 50% of the material actually was, but he could hardly fact-check whilst he was trapped in a hospital bed.

When Harry finally got out of the hospital wing, it was the day before NEWTs began. Honestly, the preparation for NEWTs may have been the most stressful few weeks of Harry’s life, and he’d faced the Dark Lord practically every year since he was into double digits. (And now he was smushing lips with him - Merlin, Harry needed to look at his life choices.)

Merrythought had been merciless in her support, and had increased their sessions to once, sometimes twice a day, so that when Harry walked into his first Charms exam it was with a sense of relief. Whatever and however he did in the exams, at least it would be over. And the stress of Charms was much reduced on the grounds that Tom didn’t take it, and therefore couldn’t regale Harry with the correct answers immediately after, as he did for Potions and Transfiguration.

Harry pretty much wrote off the Potions exam as soon as it happened. Half way through the allotted
four hours, his scars had started phantom-prickling, and he’d dropped in three more drops of Sopophorous bean juice than necessary. Nothing had exploded, but his Draught of Living Death had still been lilac when he handed it in. If anything saved his Potions grade it would be the written section, which was a thought Harry had never before had in his entire life. Tom, of course, had finished ten minutes early.

Transfiguration actually went rather well. Harry could safely say that McGonagall would be proud of him - she might even have smiled. He’d successfully turned a table into an aardvark and his vanishment of said aardvark was nearly perfect. Harry was fairly sure he’d aced it.

Herbology was easy. Harry felt bad thinking it and he sent up a little apology to Neville, but he’d barely studied and he already knew he had an O. Maybe it was all that gardening Aunt Petunia made him do - Merlin knew, most wizards could barely hold a spade.

It was three weeks later, and then came his last exam. Defence. Harry had honestly never had so much fun in his life. A full hour of nothing but jinxes, curses and manoeuvres. Harry wasn’t in danger, there were no beams of bright green light hurtling towards him, but Harry trusted that he’d know what to do if they did. And he was good at it, satisfyingly, marvellously good- so much so that he’d been able to correct one of Tom’s answers when they came out of the Defence written exams. If Harry didn’t get an O for that alone, he’d revolt.

It was after his final Defence exam, walking down the corridor with Orion, that Harry saw Septimus. His (ex-boyfriend? Ex-fan? Ex-one-time-date?) friend was standing in the courtyard, hanging on a pillar and leaning in to laugh with a girl. She had her back to Harry, but it was probably Artemis. Harry paused to watch him, something funny and sour in the pit of his stomach, and then Septimus’ head popped up and like he had a sixth sense of some kind, his gaze directly met Harry’s.

His face lit up.

“Harry!” Septimus called out, and now Harry couldn’t pretend that he hadn’t been staring creepily so he smiled, waved and meandered over as if he’d been planning to all along. Orion was caught up in conversation with a fifth year.

“Septimus.”

Artemis gave Harry a small sort of nod and wandered off, placing a parting hand on Septimus’ shoulder. Harry dug his hands into his pockets.

“How are you feeling?” Septimus’ face was just as kind as he remembered. “I heard you were in the hospital for a while.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, I’m out now.” Harry chuckled half-heartedly. He glanced down at his hands. The scars had finally healed up and they still held their golden gleam, so he looked barely different at all. He felt different though. Less heavy. There was an ease to every spell and every step that he hadn’t realised he was missing.

“What was it?”

“Hay fever. Bad… hay fever.”

“Oh.” Septimus raised an eyebrow. “Myrtle told everyone you were dying.”

“That explains some of the well-wishers I’ve had,” Harry chuckled. The members of the ‘Saviour of Hogwarts’ fanclub had made their concern known. Loudly and frequently.
“She seemed very concerned.”

“She’s dramatic, bless her.”

Septimus snorted. “How are exams? I’m not looking forward to next year.”

“Oh, I just finished. It was my last one.”

“Did it go well?” Septimus perked up with excitement.

Harry smirked. “Yeah.”

“I love your modesty.”

Harry squinted. He could never work out whether Septimus was serious or not. All that damn earnestness. He winced. “Look, Septimus, I just wanted to apologise-”

“It’s fine. I heard about you and Tom. I was right, huh?” Septimus shrugged, and his grin was sort of sad.

“I realise that I didn’t speak to you properly after that whole Hogsmeade thing - a lot of stuff was going on, Tom wasn’t speaking to me - but that’s not an excuse. I’m sorry.”

“I understand.” Septimus’ smile gained a mischievous quality. “Besides, I’d have never gotten to know Cedrella if you hadn’t run off to save the school.”

“You rogue!” Harry felt a cool wash of relief and playfully slapped Septimus’ shoulder. “Did you protect her from the Dark Lord?”

“No, we hid behind a case of Cauldron Cakes until the fighting stopped.”

Harry considered that for a moment. He didn’t understand how you could just hide away when the people around you were in danger, but he supposed this was that self-preservation instinct everyone was always going on about.

“Anyway, Cedrella’s a Black, so her family would have killed me if I’d let her wander out into danger. We thought best to stay out of it.”

“She’s a Black?” Merlin, how many of them were there? It was a bloody infestation.

“Mm,” Septimus scratched his chin self-consciously. “And a Slytherin, so my blood traitor family will be delighted. I’ve never cared much for house divides though,” and he looked pointedly at Harry’s own green badge. “I don’t think her family will agree.”

“It’ll work out if you like each other enough. It’s not as if she murdered your parents,” Harry chuckled faux-lightly.

“…That’s very specific.”

“Just considering the possibilities.”

———

“NEWTS and OWLS are over, and Hogwarts is officially lifted from its dark curse!”
Rupert’s dramatic declaration sent a ripple of excitement through the Slytherin common room. A first year started clapping, and suddenly the entire room was applauding, the other seventh and fifth years whooping and hollering. Rupert caught a thrown bouquet and took a deep bow.

“Thank you, thank you! I take full responsibility for the end of exams; May they never darken our doorstep again!” He sniffed the bouquet appreciatively. “And great conjuration, Beastone. It’ll be a travesty if you don’t get an O.”

Bea grinned viciously. “Too damn right!”

“Can you conjure me up a date?” A fifth year boy with a shock of black hair sent a lecherous wink across the room, and Bea gestured rudely.

“Fuck you, Michaels!”

Her insult provoked an even louder cheer and the party properly began. His acceptance speech over, Rupert collapsed onto one of the sofas, a self-satisfied smirk plastered firmly onto his face.

“Done holding court?” Harry asked drily.

“I can’t help it if they worship me,” Rupert shrugged carefully. “Besides, if you want to talk about holding court, look at you and lover-boy there.”

Harry had to admit he had a point. The seating arrangement, which had become fixed throughout the year, was centred around Tom, who sat in the comfiest and largest armchair by the fire. The rest of the group had situated themselves on the surrounded sofas - except for Harry who, due to his new relationship status, was perched on the arm of Tom’s chair.

“There’s no need to be jealous, Rupert,” Tom said calmly, moving his hand to rest on Harry’s knee. “Just because Mariana Wheelan found studying for her OWLs more interesting than your penis.”

Rupert’s cheeks gained a light flush of colour and he sank back into the sofa, his movement almost disguising his faint muttering of “iron”. Tom’s hand squeezed Harry’s knee lightly. A seventh year leaned over Rupert’s shoulder to offer a congratulatory drink which he accepted and as he brought it up to his lips, Harry saw Tom’s wrist flick subtly. Moments later, Rupert spectacularly spat his drink into Atticus’ face.

“Morgana, that’s grim!” he spluttered, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Must have had dirigible juice or something.” He turned around to try and catch the boy who’d given it to him, but soon returned his attention to the group, evidently giving up. “I can still taste it,” Rupert complained. “Fucking dirigible juice. Here, Atty; you’re weird. I bet you like it.” He offered the glass to Atticus who looked offended.

“I’m not ‘weird’. And I don’t like dirigible juice.”

Orion frowned. “You were drinking it at breakfast this morning.”

A pause. Atticus accepted the drink bad-temperedly and mumbled, “Whatever.”

Harry peered down at Tom and saw a tiny smirk tugging at the edge of his mouth. He rolled his eyes and flicked Tom’s ear.

Tom jumped minutely and glanced up. “What did I do?”

“You know what you did.”
Tom’s eyes sparkled with warmth and he sent Harry a sly smile. Harry tried to react purely with exasperation, but he couldn’t contain his amusement. They grinned at one another.

“You two are so sweet,” Orion cooed. “Look at you, doing all that secret couples communication.”

“I’m telling him he has three days to live,” Harry said very seriously, and Tom nodded.

“I suggested he make it two.”

Orion sighed. “Adorable.”

The events of earlier that day crawled uncomfortably under Harry’s skin and he leaned in closer to Tom. “Did you know Septimus Weasley has a girlfriend?”

“That awkward ginger boy you went to Hogsmeade with? No, I didn’t know. Or care.”

“They’re keeping it quiet, I imagine. It’s Cedrella Black.”

“Orion’s cousin?” Tom’s eyebrows shot up. “How peculiar. I imagine the Blacks won’t be best pleased with that.”

“No, probably not.” Harry frowned and considered it. The silence lingered for too long.

“Why do you care so much about the Sepsis boy?” Tom asked, watching Harry carefully. “Jealous he has a new obsession?”

“No, of course not. Maybe. I don’t know.” Harry focused intently on tracing patterns into the pattern of the armchair fabric. “Maybe I’m worried about him. Or guilty about how I treated him. Or maybe I just… liked being liked. I’m allowed to do that, right? I can like some attention. It doesn’t make me Malfoy just to like a bit of attention.”

Tom grasped Harry’s chin and directed his gaze up to meet his. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I do know you have something infinitely better than Weasel.”

“What?”

“Me.”

Harry considered. “I like to think of you as a consolation pri- mph!”

But Tom had already pressed his lips to Harry’s and Harry relaxed into the kiss, surrendering to the pressure of Tom’s mouth against his. He pressed closer, falling into the seat of the armchair until he was half-sat on Tom. He brought his hand up to tangle his fingers in Tom’s hair, tugging lighting and eliciting a light hiss from his boyfriend. Harry drew back slightly and mumbling teasingly: “If only it was ginger.” When Tom re-initiated the kiss, it was bruising.

Atticus’ petulant whine interrupted them. “Some of us are trying to eat nibbles. I think I just threw up a little in my mouth.”

Rupert’s response was more jeering. “Well, I was enjoying the show.”

Harry rolled his eyes and finally pulled away from Tom. “I know watching us is the only action you get, Atticus, put you can look away,” he said, perhaps a little cruelly.

“Shut up, muggle-lover,” Atticus snarled, and there was deep, deep hatred in his glare.
One of the passing prefects tapped Tom on the shoulder: “Tom, I’ve seen the new rota and I can’t do Tuesdays.”

Harry moved away to sit next to Orion. Tom was insufferable when he started talking schedules.

“That was mean,” Orion reproached.

“What?” Harry lowered his voice. “Atticus has been unbearable ever since Tom and I started- you know.”

“It’s hard for him. He’s always liked Tom, you know.”

“What- ‘liked’?” For some reason, Harry hadn’t thought Atticus was capable of feeling anything beyond disgust or muggle-hating.

“For years.”

“But why-”

“His parents would never have tolerated it - and Tom certainly wouldn’t have - but he’s never been able to get over it,” Orion hesitated. “I’m not saying he’s a good person or even vaguely pleasant.”

“Orion!” Harry crowed delightedly. “That was almost snide!”

“But there’s a lot more going on. It’s hard for him to see something coming true that he… that he thought was impossible, but it’s just not happening to him.” And if Orion’s smile was a little pained, Harry didn’t say anything.

Harry considered Atticus thoughtfully. He was conversing with Rupert, but every now and again his gaze would flicker towards Tom, constantly checking whether he was looking at him, noticing him. Harry felt a tiny pang of sympathy. He knew what that was like: to have Tom become the centre of your world, against everything you’d ever thought you knew.

Atticus was attractive, he noticed, probably more so than Harry, but there was something underconfident and insecure that shrunk him, reduced every fine symmetrical feature until they seemed deceptive and false. And for the first time, Harry wondered when that had come about. Had it been in third year, when he started noticing Tom’s smooth gait? Had it been first year, when he’d first met Tom’s eyes? Or had it been sixth year, when Tom introduced them to Harry and Atticus fell another rung in the ladder?

“He’s still a wanker,” Harry said thoughtfully.

Orion hugged a pillow to his chest. “That’s fair.”

“Who’s a wanker?” Rupert interrupted eagerly, catching the tail-end of their conversation.

Harry thought quickly. “Ringo Starr.”

“Who’s that?”

“He’s a muggle thing.”

Harry saw Atticus’ nose wrinkle with disgust and decided, yes, he was certainly a wanker.

“So how did Defence go for everyone?” Orion asked loudly, a very obvious attempt at distraction that the group simultaneously decided to allow.
“Absolute disaster,” Rupert admitted easily, shifting on the sofa so that he lay on his back, his head dangling over the front of the seat and his feet hung over the back cushion. “That examiner bitch asked me to non-verbally *reducto* this statue, and I could barely get his dick to fall off.”

“I don’t think you should call someone a bitch for asking you to do something that’s on the curriculum,” Orion said mildly.

“Whatever. She enjoyed watching me fail.”

“Atticus?”

“Fine. It was fine.”

Rupert hooted with laughter. “Batty-Atty here forgot the incantation for the Stickfast Hex.”

Atticus bared his teeth. “You said you wouldn’t tell!” And his arm slashed down and suddenly Rupert was reeling back, clutching his pus-swollen eyes.

“Children!” Tom said sharply. “This is a celebration.”

All of a sudden, the door to the common room swung open and Peter Rowling charged in. His eyes were bright and feverish and his face switched wildly, as if he wasn’t sure which emotions he was supposed to be feeling. Tom stood, and a hush descended. All eyes turned to Peter.

“I-it’s Grindelwald,” Peter panted, his voice shrill and high. “He’s dead. Dumbledore killed him.”

Harry felt an obscene joy rise within him and a smile brighter than any before spread across his face. Dumbledore had finally done it.

“What happened?” Tom asked quietly, and as Harry glanced around the common room, he realised not everyone seemed as delighted as him. There was an odd sort of tension: it wasn’t mourning, but it certainly wasn’t the joy that Harry was sure was going on in the Gryffindor common room.

“There was a duel in Bulgaria. They say it lasted for hours. *But Dumbledore won,*” Peter breathed, and it felt like the entire common room looked to Tom for their response.

Tom was very still for a moment. “Well, then,” he said carefully, and not without a touch of irony. “Long live Dumbledore.”

The students returned to the party, but there was something different in the air now. An uncertainty and a suspicion. Over the next half hour around half of the students filtered out of the room, probably to OWL their parents or talk more privately. Atticus and Rupert were among them.

Tom disappeared to talk politics and probably to confirm that the news wasn’t just the delusion of a third year. Harry and Orion stayed seated, even if it felt like they should be celebrating. Harry had the odd feeling that if he moved, the spell would be broken and it would all go back to how it was before.

This was the state that Cassius found him in.

“Harrison,” Cassius said mildly, and turned his attention to Harry’s seat-mate. “Orion. Would you mind going?”

“Oh.” Orion blinked at the rather abrupt dismissal. But it was Cassius, after all, so the surprise didn’t last for long. “I suppose I’ll go and find Stubbs. See what he thinks of this whole business.”
And Orion wandered into the crowd, leaving Harry and Cassius alone.

“Cassius,” Harry greeted. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I’ve been having excruciating headaches.” Cassius’ expression barely flickered from its default, emotionless state. “I’ve spent half my time bedresting. Your almost-dying was very loud. Lots of shifting. It’s been agony.”

“Well, I’m glad I wasn’t the only one.”

“Yes. At least we both suffered.” And even though Cassius’ tone barely shifted, Harry still felt an irritating pang of guilt. That had been harsh.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

A lock of hair fell into Cassius’ eye. “Shouldn’t you be celebrating?”

Harry sank further into the sofa. “Probably.”

“You’re not, though.”

“It’s difficult to celebrate when half the House skulked off to sob over their Grindelwald shrine.”

Cassius tilted his head curiously. “They’re only bigots.”

“Yes. Well. That’s enough for me.” Harry sighed with resignation. “I should be happy though. Things are finally moving in the right direction.”

“They’re certainly moving,” Cassius allowed. “I’ll give you that.”

Harry narrowed his eyes and his spine stiffened. “What are you getting at?”

“It’s incredibly broad to classify anything as the ‘right direction’. When a mirror cracks, it splinters in all directions, right or wrong.” Cassius smiled slightly. “When someone makes an impact, there are bound to be casualties.”

Harry tracked Cassius’ gaze as it moved steadily over everyone in the room and, despite himself, he felt a cold prickling on the back of his neck. “What do you mean?”

“Just that actions have consequences. The universe is a scale. Sometimes, you might not like how it tips.”

Gritted teeth. “Could you give me a straight answer for once in your fucking life?”

Harry met Cassius’ eyes, and Bellatrix Lestrange’s eyes stared back.

“Carnage is subjective,” Cassius said softly. “Get ready.”

He left, as he usually did, leaving Harry with more questions than answers.

When the clock struck midnight, Harry and Tom were swaying to the up-and-coming Celestina Warbeck (whom Orion had declared would never last). It still amazed Harry how easily they’d fallen into a relationship. There were no stilted dates or long pauses. But he supposed they’d been kind of
dating for a while, and there was nothing like near-death experiences to alleviate awkwardness.

As the saxophone rang out with ‘hot, strong love’, Harry tentatively tightened his grip on Tom’s waist. They hadn’t discussed Grindelwald’s defeat since Peter Rowling ran in with the news, and Harry’s heart pounded at the response he might receive.

“So,” he said, gritting his teeth with frustration as his voice cracked. “Grindelwald is dead.”

“So Rowling says.”

“What do you think?”

Tom studied Harry carefully, and Harry tried desperately to look like he wasn’t imagining Tom victoriously scooping up Grindelwald’s fallen wand and declaring himself the new Dark Lord.

“I think,” Tom said, very deliberately, and the expression he offered Harry was warm, “that before, I had very little care for what Grindelwald did. He could have razed this country to the ground and - as long as I wasn’t in the way - I would have gone on living quite happily.” Harry’s stomach dropped.

“But I have something to value now. Protect, I suppose.”

“I don’t need protection-”

“I’m aware,” Tom drawled, and Harry knew they were both remembering their rather violent duels. “But if I protect you, you protect me, yes? I think that’s the deal.”

“I dunno if I’d necessarily ‘protect’ you, Riddle. If I threw you behind me, it’d probably slow Grindelwald’s men down.”

Tom took Harry’s hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. “You lost a finger for me,” he said softly, greedily.

“That wasn’t for you. Total coincidence.”

“I will protect you, Harrison Peters, for the rest of your days. You’re mine, now.”

“You’re so creepy,” Harry said fondly. He moved closer, resting his head on Tom’s shoulder. “Atticus wanted Grindelwald to win, didn’t he?” The words felt taboo saying them aloud.

“Yes, I believe he did.”

“I don’t understand how he could do that. People were dying.”

Tom didn’t respond, and Harry knew Tom didn’t feel the same as he did. Tom couldn’t care less how many people died. Still, it meant something that he hadn’t rushed off to conspire as soon as he heard the news; he wasn’t launching his ministry spies or contacting dark creatures. He was here, with Harry.

And Harry couldn’t stop himself from saying, “Don’t do it, Tom,” in a choked, small voice.

“Don’t do what?”

“You have so much potential for good. Or at least benevolent neutrality. You could be Minister.” And Harry’s mind was filled with visions of Tom in luxurious, formal robes, exchanging niceties with diplomats and signing bills with a confident smirk.

Riddle chuckled, his chest vibrating against Harry’s cheek. “Although I may not know what I’m
“But you could.” Harry pulled back and fixed his gaze intensely on Tom’s. “You and I both know how backwards the Wizarding World is. You could be a force for change, for good.”

Tom laughed. “I want power, not good will.” And as Tom’s eyes meandered over the purebloods of Slytherin, it was clear where he thought that power lay.

“And you could have it. The world inevitably moves towards progression, new ideas. Look at Dumbledore. He’s one of the most powerful wizards in the world. For Merlin’s sake, his defeat of Grindelwald is a fucking metaphor! Progression beats tradition. You could be that progression.”

“Dumbledore hasn’t actually achieved anything.”

“But you could. You have the perfect story: muggleborn—”

“-halfblood—”

“-orphan, incredibly talented. You’re an unbelievable success story.”

“It’s true, I am.”

“This isn’t meant to be an ego trip for you.”

“How could it not be, when you’re saying such nice things?” It was clear Tom was trying his very best not to take Harry seriously.

“Listen to me,” Harry said firmly. "You can convert people to believing that muggleborns are decent people. Look at Orion. Look at what interacting with a few muggles did for him. But you can’t make people who already know the truth believe a lie—”

“Maybe it’s not a lie.”

“Tom, you know as well as I do that muggleborns are just as talented as purebloods. And muggles aren’t the devil incarnate.”

Tom’s face was unreadable. “Not all of them.”

“Not all of them. You could have power,” Harry offered. “But people would give it to you. Capitalise on all of—” he gestured around them “-this.”

Tom’s eyes were set, glazed over Harry’s head and Harry realised he was no longer in the room. He was somewhere else, thinking on something else. He hoped it wasn’t about becoming a Dark Lord.

“Tom?” Harry asked, and he didn’t realise how vulnerable his voice was until Tom looked down at him with an expression so soft and comforting. This was the Tom Riddle no one else got to see. Harry wondered if this was the Tom Riddle who died when Voldemort was born.

“Shut up, Peters,” Tom said fondly. “I’ve got a cauldron full of hot, strong love, it’s a recipe so rare—”

They swayed to the deep hum of Tom’s voice in Harry’s ear.
Dumbledore’s defeat of Grindelwald was understandably the most popular gossip in Hogwarts, Mary Walgreen’s pregnancy scare coming a close second. Just to fuel the rumours, Dumbledore hadn’t returned to school and his classes were taken over by Dippet. There were whispers of him either on the cusp of death or planning a campaign for minister of magic. Harry assured everyone that he’d be back teaching Transfiguration next year, but no one other than Tom or Orion believed him.

The accounts of the legendary duel only grew in drama. It began as a respectable fifteen minute wizard duel where Grindelwald slipped for a moment and Dumbledore incapacitated him, but grew into an epic tale: Dumbledore rode into battle on the back of a dragon, trampling the Dark Lord in his path; Dumbledore had been disarmed and injured but decimated Grindelwald with the pure strength of his wandless magic; Dumbledore summoned mysterious creatures of great power from the depths of a great lake to overwhelm the dark forces and then put on a pantomime for the local children. Dumbledore might as well have been Merlin by the time the game of Chinese whispers was done. The best part of it all was how progressively irritated Tom got (although he’d been weirdly distracted; Harry had expected more fuming and less contemplation.)

Harry had to admit the defeat had lifted a weight from his shoulders. For the first time since he had been aware of magic, there was no Dark Lord to defeat, no villain to overcome. Except the one he was dating.

Still, Harry had more important things to focus on. Applications for TOADS had opened up only a week after NEWTs ended and he had a short three week-long window to get his in. He and Tom had returned to their regular library sessions together, so Harry was using it as an opportunity to get the application done without distraction.

It was a terrible idea.

Harry stared mindlessly ahead, avoiding the mind-numbingly boring application (‘list three scenarios where you exhibited due diligence’) and let himself get lost in the sharp lines of Tom’s jaw, the gentle curve of his ear. Could you be attracted to someone’s ear?

“Ogling hardly seems conducive to your application,” Tom said mildly, although his eyes never left the parchment in front of him. How had he known? “You’re quite obvious.”

Great, now he was reading minds as well. “Yeah, well, you’re an obvious arsehole,” Harry muttered half-heartedly, and let his forehead fall to rest on the table. “This is so boring.”

“That may be, but you want to be an Unspeakable, don’t you?”

“Less so by the minute.”

“Well, you might not even make the NEWT requirements, so no harm applying.”

“Wow. Your support is overwhelming.”

Tom smirked. “I’m very supportive.” And suddenly his lips were on Harry’s neck, peppering kisses from his neck to his ear and biting teasingly at the lobe. Harry blushed hotly and pushed Tom away.

“That’s not fucking conducive to my application,” he stuttered, and instinctively glanced around to check if anyone had seen.

“Conducive, dear,” Tom said smugly, and with a careless shrug, returned to his studies.

Harry watched Tom, suspicion that he would let it go just like that and half-hoping he wouldn’t.
When it finally became clear that Tom was once again immersed in his work, Harry let out a deep sigh and went back to doodling a broomstick on the table. When he was done he’d clear it away with a quick scouring spell and start over again. The word ‘diligence’ loomed out at him from the form.

Finally bored with his illustrated Quidditch match (he’d never forgive himself for missing that match and losing Slytherin the cup) Harry shuffled over to the edge of his seat so that he could peek at Tom’s work. When he saw the word ‘APPLICATION’ printed across the top, he tried to grab at it to take a closer look, but Tom quickly slid it underneath a book on the evolution of the modern unicorn.

“What are you applying for?” Harry asked curiously, trying to get a glimpse of Tom’s neat notes. Tom placed an obscuring arm over them and rolled his eyes.

“Nothing relevant to you.”

“Are you applying to do TOADS too? I’ve always wondered why you’re not- I mean, you’re a million times cleverer than me-”

“Because I don’t need to, we’ve had this conversation. Everything I want to do only needs practical knowledge and besides, I can always do TOADS later if I want. They’re not going anywhere.”

“Then what are you applying for?”

“None of your business.”

“Tom…” Harry wheedled, running a gentle hand over his shoulder.

“I’m not telling you, Harrison.”

“Please?”

“Just give me some trust,” Tom snapped, and Harry flinched back in shock. “I feel like I’m constantly under suspicion.”

“You’re not-” Harry began to say, and paused. He kind of was.

“Precisely.” Tom slid his parchment out from under the book and began to scribble again, angling his body to disguise it from Harry.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said softly. He turned his attention back to his own form, staring at the words. They began to swim before his eyes. “Hey, Tom.”

“Mmm?”

“What does diligence mean?”

“Oh, for Morgana’s sake-”

“So I just need you to write my reference and then I can send the application off.”

“Yes, I understand that,” Merrythought said, still raising a quizzical brow.

“I just thought you would be the best teacher to ask.”
“I agree.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, leaning forward in his chair. “But why do you look so confused?”

“…Why is Black here?”

Orion perked up in the seat next to Harry. “Oh, I’m applying to do TOADS too. And I need a reference from my Defence teacher.”

Merrythought considered the pair of them doubtfully. “I feel like I’m ordaining your wedding.”

Orion laughed. “Don’t be silly. Besides, it’s not me that Harry would be marrying.”

Merrythought rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “I’m not so sure. Riddle’s never struck me as the marrying type.”

This was not a conversation Harry wanted to be having with a teacher. He fixed his eyes on the painting on the wall. “You know about that?”

“Despite what my old age may suggest, I do still retain the ability to spot two of my students furiously snogging at the back of my classroom.”

Harry turned a fetching maroon.

“And in the middle of a lesson too. If you drop a mark in Banishment, we’ll know why.”

“I- I didn’t- I-”

“Oh, can it, Peters. I’ve seen worse.” Her expression became reflective. “I remember my first year of teaching, I made the error of not casting a *Homenum Revelio* before I opened a broom cupboard. Amy McIntyre could never make eye contact with me again.”

Oh God, Harry wanted the conversation to end.

“I’ll treasure the memory of her traumatised excuses. ‘I dropped my quill and I was looking for it. Collin has a bad back, that’s why he was stood up, I swear.’ It was like she didn’t realise I was 30 and had already experienced every-”

“I don’t need to know,” Harry said very quickly and loudly.

Orion hadn’t caught on. “But I wanted to know if she found her quill.”

Merrythought squinted. “Sometimes I worry about you, Black.”

Orion shrugged.

“But very well, I’ll let Peters go back to a normal colour.”

Harry sighed with relief and sank into his chair.

“I’ll miss tormenting teenagers when I retire.”

Harry shot back up. “When you- what?!?”

“When I retire, Peters. It’s what happens when you get to my age and your bones start creaking and groaning. They never used to do that,” she said mournfully. “I reckon they could do their own sound
effects.”

“But you can’t retire.”

“And yet I am. Don’t be so surprised, Peters, I was all set to retire at the end of last year. I only stuck around because of you.”

“Because of me?”

“You and your ridiculous plan to become an Unspeakable based on sub-par NEWTS.”

“I wasn’t predicted anything below an A!”

“But now I can leave, safe in the knowledge that if you don’t achieve your dream, it will be you - and not your education system - which has failed.”

“What a comforting idea.”

“I thought so too,” Merrythought said bracingly. “Buck up, Peters. You’re leaving too so it’ll hardly affect you.”

It was strange to consider. Harry had never had a Defence teacher for longer than a year, so she had become a kind of staple. There was a moment of silence as Harry considered this, before Orion piped up timidly.

“So, er… could you write our references?”

“Oh, yes, of course-”

“I’m sorry, it’s just they need to be in this week.”

“So was it just a general character reference-?”

Harry sat back and contemplated a Hogwarts without Merrythought.

Exactly one week before the end of term, and thus Harry’s time at Hogwarts, he was taking in the morning sunshine by Great Lake. Tom was deep into explaining some complex Transfiguration theory that Harry was doing his best to tune out, when he noticed two owls winging their way towards the pair.

Harry clambered to his feet and pointed, interrupting Tom mid-flow. “Look!”

“Oh,” Tom remarked, standing up and following Harry’s gesture. “Offers are out today.”

“Shit.” Harry could feel his heart hammering in his chest. Offers. TOADS offers. This was the moment that could define whether he managed to get home. Ron. Hermione. Bloody hell, he really hadn’t put enough effort into his application. He’d gotten complacent, and he was fairly sure he’d misspelt ‘diligence’.

As the owls grew closer and closer, Harry’s heart pounded faster and faster. He must have been cutting off Tom’s circulation with how hard he was squeezing his arm. To his credit, Tom hardly complained, watching the owls progress with a steady, calm eye.
Two owls, Harry realised. One for each of them. Just what *had* Tom been applying for?

And although it seemed like it would never happen, the owls reached them at long last, perching on a low hanging branch and waving their legs in what Harry thought was a rather taunting manner.

“I can’t look,” Harry said faintly. “I actually can’t look.”

Tom rolled his eyes and patted Harry’s head (Harry was too nervous to find it insulting). “I’ll do it then.”

Harry wanted to call out and stop him - if he never knew, surely he’d never failed? - but he appeared to be frozen. He was powerless as Tom reached out and took the envelope labelled ‘HARRISON PETERS’, sliced open one side, and unfolded the content. Tom read, his eyebrows raising slightly in surprise. With each silent minute that ticked by, Harry felt his heart rise further and further into his throat.

At least, he managed to gasp out, “Well?”

“You got an offer. Three O’s, an EE and an A to qualify.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Harry gasped, falling onto his knees. He ran a shaking hand through the grass, letting it ground and soothe him. Maybe this was what a heart attack felt like. His head rose again. “Hang on- Three O’s, an EE and an A?”

“Mm. An O in Defence required, but the other marks can come from anywhere. Isn’t that generous?”

“That’s one higher than the typical offer!”

“I suppose they want you to prove yourself.”

“Fuuuck,” Harry groaned, and he slumped onto his back. Perhaps he could lie here forever. No one would notice. He hadn’t gotten an EE in that Potions exam, he knew he hadn’t. Defence should be fine; Transfiguration should be fine; he’d nailed Herbology; but Charms…. He might have missed it with Charms. Shit.

“I got an offer.” Tom’s voice was soft and disbelieving.

Harry raised his head. “To where?”

“It’s two years, but that’s a start. It’s a taste, at least.”

“What is?”

Tom offered Harry a smile. “I got a ministry placement.”

Harry lost his tongue.

“I applied late, but Professor Slughorn sent his personal letter of recommendation so they offered me a place. It’s a rotating position through each department, with the ultimate goal of a senior position. It’s how Minister Spencer-Moon got into the ministry.” Tom raised an eyebrow. “Well? Are you going to say anything?”

Harry swallowed, his throat very dry all of a sudden. “But I thought you didn’t want to work in the ministry.”

“Well, I considered what you had to say. Very quickly,” Tom said drily, “because the applications
were supposed to be in before NEWTS. And I realised you may have had a point. I’ve always wanted power. Might as well try the easy way first.”

“But- defence teacher-”

“A few years of training at the ministry can hardly hurt, can it? Besides, Hogwarts would never hire anyone under 30. Perhaps I’ll get some experience in the auror department.”

Harry stared at Tom, trying to process what he was saying, trying to hammer it through his skull.

“I thought you’d be happy,” Tom said flatly. “I didn’t do this for you, mind, but you were a factor. Address some of that suspicion.”

And as Harry looked at Tom and Tom looked back, Harry realised that he knew. Knew what Harry had seen, what Tom might one day become. Harry hadn’t exactly been subtle after all, and Tom thought he was a seer. Knew he knew the future. He knew.

“You have literally never been hotter,” and the words fell from Harry’s mouth before he could stop himself.

Tom smirked. “Now I know that’s not true. I’ve seen your face after I get out of the shower.”

“You’ve never been hotter with your clothes on,” Harry amended.

“What a compliment.” Tom chuckled, but it wasn’t genuine. And then he hesitated, and it was so unlike him - this entire conversation was so unlike him - that Harry did something equally out-of-character.

He prodded. “What is it?”

Tom’s face barely twitched. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Tom.”

Harry watched his boyfriend consider the parchment as if searching for some hidden text or answer.

Harry began to get worried. “What is it? Just tell me, please.”

“The placement,” Tom didn’t meet Harry’s eye. “It comes with accommodation. A flat on Intern Alley. So I’ll be living there.”

“…Are you breaking up with me? Already?”

“What? No,” Tom dismissed, shooting Harry one of his patented ‘I can’t believe you’d be so stupid’ looks. “I’m asking you to move in with me. After Hogwarts.”

“We’ve only been together for three months.”

“I know.”

“Tom, that’s crazy. Actually, clinically, insane.”

“It’s free. Think of it as flat-sharing with a friend.”

“But I happen to snog that friend on the side.”
Tom smirked. “I hardly think you’re complaining about *that.*”

And Harry could see how Tom was reaching out; he could see how much effort this must be costing him. He’d been trapped in an orphanage his whole life, never a moment to himself, no peace or quiet. To have his own space and then offer to share it - no matter how he might feel about Harry - was fairly monumental. Tom was giving a lot to this thing they were trying. Maybe Harry should reach back.

Plus, he really needed somewhere to stay when he left Hogwarts.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Sure. This isn’t commitment though. I stand by what I said: trial period. This is just the most convenient arrangement.”

"Very well."

"And you’re not kicking me out if we break up.”

“I’ll kick you out whenever I like,” Tom said tartly. But no matter what he said, Harry knew he wouldn’t. And that was how they worked: half-meanings and insults, but Harry liked it. It was exciting, it was dynamic. And there was an odd kind of comfort in it.

And as Harry pulled Tom down next to him, to roll in the grass and breathe in the June air, to feel his strong, safe flesh against his own and to convince himself this was all so very real, he revelled in the fact that he’d changed something. For once, there were no thoughts of the future or the struggle ahead of him or the goals that seemed so far away. Tom was going to work in the ministry. Tom had thoughts other than immortality in his head. Tom was listening to him.

Tom might be okay.

Harry woke up the night before he left Hogwarts in a chill of terror. His breath was shallow and his sheets felt tight around him. He thought perhaps he was having a relapse, that the time turner had come back to haunt him and any minute his veins were going to set on fire- but no. It was just panic.

“Shit,” he hissed, pressing a shaky hand to his chest and focusing on slowing down his heart. He’d grown depressingly accustomed to that. Harry stared out into the darkness, but he could make out nothing beyond the inky outline of a wardrobe. This wasn’t the Gryffindor common room. He wasn’t home. Or maybe he was; he couldn’t think, and the panic rose up again-

There was a shuffling sound from across the room and Harry held his breath. He froze as a warm body climbed into bed beside him.

“H-hello?” he choked out.

“For Morgana’s sake, Harrison, if I were a murderer you’d be dead by now.”

“Tom?”

“You didn’t even reach for your wand.”
“What are you doing?”

“I could hardly lie in bed and just listen to your pathetic wheezing, could I?” But the way he sidled closer until they were shoulder to shoulder betrayed the harshness of his words. “Now tell me what’s rampaging around in that ridiculous head of yours so I can go to sleep.”

“I-I-”

“Come on, hurry up. I have an Ancient Runes class tomorrow and I may magically implode Scotland if I don’t have enough sleep.”

Harry stared down at what he could make out of his hands. “It’s stupid.”


Harry laughed brokenly, wetly. Fuck, was he crying? “I don’t want to leave.”

“…Well, of course you don’t. But you have to.”

“I can’t.” Harry brought his hand up to clutch at the silk of Tom’s pyjamas. “I can’t do the bit that comes next.”

“You can and you will.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Yes, you do. You’re moving in with me, you’re studying and then you’re becoming an Unspeakable.”

“No, you don’t understand. I have some much to do and I can’t.”

“You have an offer.”

“What if I can’t do it? I’m not clever, I’m nothing. I’m leaving, Tom.”

Tom’s voice flattened. “And so am I. You think Hogwarts isn’t my home?”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“I have nothing.”

“And I do?” Tom’s mocking laugh was more unnerving in the pitch black.

Harry shuffled away. “I didn’t.”

Tom’s grip on his shoulder was firm - not bruising, or painful, but very definitely there. “Everything I have, I’m sharing with you. Because I know. I understand.”

“I’m not strong enough.” Harry ran a desperate hand over his face. “I need this place. I need the walls, they’re- they’re solid.”

“So am I.” Tom took Harry’s hand in his own and laid it over his heart. The steady pulse was almost audible in the hush of the night. “And so are you.”

“What?” Harry snorted. “We can be each other’s castles?”
“Why not?”

“You don’t know me, you don’t-” Except Tom did, didn’t he? He might not know Harry’s past, but he knew his favourite dessert. He knew his Quidditch position. He knew he was shit at Charms. And he knew Harry would be up tonight - or maybe he’d been up himself. Either way.

“I’ve known you for two years, Harrison-”

“Call me Harry. Just for tonight.”

“Harry.”

And somehow whilst they were talking, Tom had manoeuvred Harry down onto his side, so they lay in Harry’s bed, close enough to feel the other’s breath on their face. There was a pause. It could have been ten seconds. It could have been ten minutes. Time was meaningless in the dark.

“I’m scared.” Harry didn’t think he had ever admitted that before. He wasn’t supposed to be scared, not when he faced a troll, not when he fought a basilisk, not when he duelled the Dark Lord. But leaving Hogwarts seemed somehow worse than all of that.

“So am I. The world is vast and unkind to people like us. So we make them be kind.”

“I’ve never done this before. Living alone. I’m so alone-” Harry choked – “What if I fail? There’s no one to catch me, but there’s never been anyone to catch me, but why is it suddenly so much more real?”

“I’m here.” And Tom barely needed to say anymore. Or perhaps he couldn’t.

They lay side by side until morning.

The final day of Hogwarts seemed like an out-of-body experience. The seventh-years had packed their bags the night before and they’d been moved to the train in the night, so when they woke up the dorm was startlingly empty. It felt disturbingly like every mark Harry had ever made on the castle was wiped away. He mentioned that to Tom, who told him he was ridiculous and pointed to at least three permanent scorch marks courtesy of Harry on the way down to breakfast alone.

Their morning classes were honestly, barely worth going to. Merrythought merely briskly informed them all of her retirement and let them have a free-for-all duel (“no maiming or murdering, please. Not this late in the term.”) Despite her ominous words, the ‘duel’ turned into a competition on who could cast the most ridiculous spell; a previously-quiet Gryffindor won with a hex that had everyone speaking in limericks for thirty minutes (and with a Scottish accent, bizarrely).

Charms was also a doss. Professor Johnson spent much of the double lesson trying to wrestle back control of the class from Rupert, who’d decided that he should recount every answer he put down for the NEWTS, accompanied by sound effects and re-enactments. It made for amusing (and slightly depressing) listening. You knew it was really something when “when explaining the development of the levitation charm, it all started when this geezer in Ancient Greece couldn’t get it up” was one of the more intelligent answers.

Harry wondered how Rupert planned to get a job, and promptly remembered that he had rich parents.
Herbology remained the most boring lesson possibly ever and seemed a fitting end to Harry’s education. He spent much of it laughing with Orion over Professor Beery’s blocked nose (“yeb de Biblefib ib bery ripe”) and cared little when he rounded on them in fury. There was nothing less intimidating than a 5’7 Herbology teacher with hay fever.

Harry spent his final two frees curled up with Orion in the common room, soaking in this room which had once been so strange and now seemed so familiar. It could never be the Gryffindor tower, but it was close.

The entire day seemed to be dragging its feet reluctantly, limping towards dinner.

It was the oddest leaving feast Harry had ever experienced at Hogwarts. The house barriers seemed to have been torn down and although Ravenclaw had won the house cup, no one seemed to much care. It was a tradition during the leaving feast, Orion explained, for those in the years below to express their thanks to any seventh years who’d made an impact, and this usually meant the tables got all mixed up.

If there was one thing you could say about Harry’s two years at 1940’s Hogwarts, it was that he’d made an impact; so he was hardly surprised when Myrtle Warren slid into a seat next to him, stealing a carrot from his plate.

“Harrison,” she said, and her eyes shone with that uncomfortable hero-worship which had never been there before the Chamber of Secrets incident.

“Myrtle,” Harry said politely.

(Orion tried to introduce himself with a “Hello, Miss Warren”, but she promptly ignored him and turned her attention back to Harry.)

“I’m glad you’re better.”

“Thank you. It was just a flu though.”

Myrtle’s jaw was set with fierce, familiar stubbornness. “You keep saying that, but I know better. Now everyone thinks I’m a liar. They keep coming up and telling me, you know; I was just trying to make sure everyone was worried for you-”

Her voice slipped back into its natural whine, and Harry felt a stab of guilt. Whilst he stood by his right to decide who knew about his health and how, he hadn’t meant to discredit Myrtle along the way. And she didn’t even know why her disappointment hurt him so much.

“Myrtle,” he said, trying to remain detached. “I really do appreciate how much you cared when I was ill. But I’m quite a private person, see? I’d rather no one at all knew what was going on with me unless they’re my friend, like you.”

“Don’t patronise me,” Myrtle sniffed. “…I’m your friend?”

“Of course. You cared enough to come and see me in the hospital wing. That makes us friends in my book.”

“Oh. Okay, then.” The way Myrtle considered him now was more calculating, but overall far more normal, and it swelled Harry’s heart. “Can I write to you?” she asked suddenly.

“Er, sure.”
And before he knew it, two small arms were wrapped around his chest and he was encaged by a tight hug. “Thank you for saving me,” Myrtle murmured. “I hope you’re happy.”

“I am.”

And Myrtle scurried away back to the Ravenclaw table to be greeted by her friends with teasing and excited whispers. It was such a change from the first time that Harry had met her, and he felt his face soften. At least he’d done something good in this school.

“She’s a strange little thing,” Orion commented.

Harry watched Myrtle shriek with outrage and push a taller girl off the bench. “She’s the kind of person to haunt a girls’ bathroom.”

And there was nothing more to be said on that.

Orion’s smile grew as he looked over towards the Hufflepuff table and waved someone over. “Chloe! Over here!”

“Hello boys,” Chloe Babbage wandered over cheerfully, leaning casually against the side of the table. Honestly, it was starting to feel like an airport: all this coming and going. She patted Harry on the shoulder. “Hullo, Peters. How were NEWTS?”

“Alright, I reckon.” Harry remembered a kerfuffle halfway through an exam with which Chloe was involved somehow. He hadn’t thought much of it at the time - there was usually some kind of kerfuffle with Chloe. “What was going on in that Potions exam?”

“Oh, I blew up a cauldron,” Chloe said casually. “So I reckon that’s a T.”

“…Like, ‘blew it up’ blew it up?”

“Boom,” she agreed. “Thank god for the individual silencing spells, else it might have mucked it up for the rest of you.”

“How did you manage that?”

“Too much asphodel, I think. Or sloth brain, I don’t really remember - I think I blacked out.”

Harry took a moment to mourn her NEWT results - all that brain with so little attention span.

“So what were you doing at the Hufflepuff table?” Orion asked curiously.

“I was just saying goodbye to my brother. He has a little Hufflepuff girlfriend - they’re so sweet. Although Merlin knows what he sees in the girl; her nailbeds are a disaster.”

Harry directed a doubtful look at Chloe, whose nails were often ripped clean off. In fact, there was a bandage covering her index finger even then, which Harry was fairly sure was covering shiny, newly-healed skin.

Chloe noticed the direction of his gaze. “That’s different. That’s a battle wound. She’s a first year, she’s not battling anyone.”

“It was just a bludger,” Harry chuckled. “You weren’t fighting Grindelwald.”

Chloe grinned. “We don’t need to anymore though, do we?”
Harry watched Chloe carefully - you had to watch people in Slytherin after Grindelwald’s downfall, watch and judge their reaction - but she seemed genuinely happy. He relaxed. “Not that you’d know that from your nails.”

“What are we all talking about then?”

Just to complete the Quidditch reunion, Druella abandoned a brief word with her brother to slide into the conversation. Harry hadn’t seen her in ages; just glimpses of first year classes or match refereeing.

“Chloe’s Quidditch-related wounds,” Orion volunteered.

“It’s a dangerous sport. I thought you did rather well this year, though.”

“We didn’t win,” Chloe said, perhaps a little gloomily.

“You had some good matches,” Druella said kindly. “Christina would have been proud. It was a shame about the Quidditch cup, but you can’t win them all.”

Chloe shrugged. “Yes, well. We had a good run.”

“It’s just Quidditch,” Tom said mildly, flicking through a Defence journal with a sprout impaled on his fork.

Chloe regarded him with a deep frown, and looked at Harry accusingly. “You sure know how to pick them, Harrison.”

“Don’t blame me for his lack of Quidditch appreciation.”

Druella snorted. “Tom’s never liked Quidditch. It’s the one thing he can’t do.”

Tom sniffed haughtily. “I’ve never tried.”

“Sure.” Druella turned to Chloe. “So who’s taking over as captain next year?”

“I’ve asked Rachel Maddens.”

Druella elbowed her conspiratorially. “Continuing the streak, eh?”

“She’s the best person for the job, it wasn’t anything to do with gender. I would hardly give it to Bea if Rachel weren’t around - she’d give someone a breakdown. Or,” Chloe considered, “perhaps have one herself. No one can quite follow Christina though. It’s just a shame you were in the same year. You’d have been an amazing captain.”

“I would,” Druella admitted. “But this job is half like it. All the organisation with none of the fun.”

“You’ve seemed busy.”

“Oh, I have been. Madam Erkings has basically been retired for the last five months, and she’s making it official today. I’m taking over.”

“Congratulations!” Orion enthused.

“I don’t know about that.” Druella twisted her face in thought. “No, it’s alright. It’s not what I wanted, but I’m working and it’s Quidditch. If I needed to, I could support…” She glanced involuntarily at Orion, expression pained, and everyone saw it. Orion looked away. “It’s alright.”
There was an awkward pause.

“So,” Druella said bracingly. “The end of the year. How are you all feeling?”

Orion pushed the peas around his plate. “It feels like leaving home. And moving back into home, which is almost worse.” Orion was moving back into Grimmauld Place to look after Rigel and Meissa while he did his TOADS. Harry couldn’t say the idea sat well with him. “It’s okay for Harry,” Orion said faux-enviously. “He and Tom have a place together.”

Druella’s eyebrows shot up. “Isn’t this—” She gestured between the two of them “—a relatively new thing? Not that we couldn’t all see it coming a mile off. But it’s a bit soon to be moving in, isn’t it?”

“And what experience would you have with new relationships?” Tom asked, his beatific smile doing little to hide the bite behind his words. Druella flinched.

“Tom gets a free flat with his new job,” Harry rushed on. “It seemed logical.”

“Good for him.” Druella eyed Tom coldly.

The ring of a spoon against was the signal for hush; Druella hurried back up the aisle towards the staff table and Chloe returned to her friends. Dippet rose to his feet.

“I think we can all agree that this has been a very eventful year.” As his voice echoed around the hall and the tone of the speech hit, the students grew more solemn. “We have had unspeakable tragedies and unbelievable victories, but…” Dippet drew a deep breath and his hands visibly trembled where they rested on the plinth. “I urge you not to forgot what we have lost while we celebrate. Honour and support each other, be a comforting shoulder or a friendly face. We must draw together in the aftermath of chaos.” Dippet’s face was uncommonly grave and Harry saw where Dumbledore got his penchant for dramatic speeches from. “To those of you who are returning next year, I also ask that you do not harass certain members of our staff.”


Harry didn’t know why he bothered. “I did tell you.”

Dippet drew to his full height. “I think we can all agree that they have done more than enough to earn our respect and our discrepancy. And now to address those who are leaving us. First, to Professor Merrythought and Madam Erkings, on their way to a well-deserved retirement.”

An obedient round of applause followed.

“To our seventh-years, who have formed a crucial part of Hogwarts for seven years. You will be dearly missed, and, in my humble opinion, you are…” Dippet smiled and his eyes glimmered wetly. What a softie. “…a rather incredible year. I have high hopes for the future. It is in your hands.”

Hogwarts erupted into cheers and Harry found himself rising to his feet along with the rest of his cohort. There was a kind of rising feeling in his stomach too, a mixture of joy and terrible, terrible devastation. Hogwarts had been his home through thick and thin, through a literal upheaval of everything he had ever known. It felt wrong to leave it. Like cutting out a part of himself. Still, it was a soppy thought, but, as he took in the people around him - Orion clapping his heart out and crying, Tom applauding with ridiculous ceremony - he knew he wouldn’t be leaving empty-handed.

“What now?” Harry yelled over the roar. This was all very different to how it was in the future, but he thought seventh-years leaving in the evening gave it more drama: the Hogwarts train speeding across the countryside in the dead of night. He also thought he might have jetlag tomorrow, though.
Orion replied gleefully. “The boats!”

As the seventh years arrived at the port the boats in the harbour were waiting, bobbing on the star-studded lake.

Avery shuffled to the edge and peered down. “We had six of us in one of these when we came across in first year. They’re so small.”

Rupert sniggered. “Can’t believe you squeezed your head in.”

“We return how we came,” Cassius said softly.

“Not all of us,” Orion pointed out. “Harry wasn’t here then.”

“Just imagine,” Tom mused. Harry shoved him for that one. “Well, I suppose we’d best divide ourselves. Harrison, Cassius, you can come with me-”

“Wait!” Orion held up a hand and began rummaging through his satchel with the other. “I just thought- one sec- we can’t… I need to- I know I put it in here- aha!” He withdrew a camera and brandished it triumphantly. “We can’t leave without a photo.”

Tom looked unimpressed, but gave in rather easily when pleaded to. Harry suspected he hadn’t been that against it in the first place.

Orion nodded obediently at Tom’s firm “just one” (and then grinned when Harry told Tom not to be miserable), shepherding the seventh-year boys into some approximation of a formation: Harry, Cassius and Rupert on the front row, the others standing behind. The lake formed a glistening, rather magnificent backdrop.

“And smile,” Orion reminded them. “Or we’ll have to take another.”

Orion waved his wand and the camera went floating about six feet away, facing the boys. Magical numbers formed above it out of what looked like looped film reel, counting down from ten. Harry fixed his face into a grin and stared into the lens.

Something was bound to go wrong.

When the countdown reached ‘one’, there was a colossal splash behind them. Harry turned, expecting to perhaps see the Giant Squid out to play or a mermaid having a bit of a laugh. Instead, Atticus and Rupert were treading water, one looking distinctly happier than the other.

Orion charged over towards the camera and took the picture it spat out. “It’s ruined,” he said with dismay.

When Harry saw it, he couldn’t contain his laughter. There were Tom, Harry, Orion and Cassius, all obediently smiling into the camera (or the closest Cassius could get to a smile, anyhow). And there was Atticus, arms like a windmill and clearly being shoved into the lake by Rupert, but managing to grab onto the bottom of Rupert’s robe as he fell. It was a move that would end in disaster for both of them.

Orion shot Harry a wounded look.

“Sorry mate,” he said, still snorting. “It’s funny, you have to admit.”
“Right,” Tom said authoritatively, levitating the pair out of the lake and confiscating their wands. “We’ll take another one. One more. No tomfoolery or hijinks.” He glared specifically at Rupert. “Do you understand?”

Rupert managed to agree through his snickers. (“Ha! ‘Tom’foolery!”), whereas Atticus tried a different approach. “But can’t we have our wands to dry-”

“No.”

And so the group fell into formation again, this time with Atticus’ teeth chattering audibly. The resultant picture, Harry would later reflect, probably summed up the year fairly well: Orion’s disappointment badly hidden by a cheesy grin; Harry’s wince as Rupert brazenly slung a soaking-wet arm around his shoulder; Cassius’ subtle glee at Atticus’ miserable shivering; and Tom smiling pleasantly amidst it all.

The picture done, Tom snapped back into action. “Right, Harrison, you’re with me. Atticus and Rupert can go together because at least if Rupert capsizes the boat you’re both already wet-”

“I don’t want to go with him-”

“-I didn’t even think of capsizing the boat until now!”

“-and Cassius and Orion, I suppose that leaves you two together.”

They clambered into the boats, which rocked much more dramatically than what Harry remembered from when he was eleven.

“This doesn’t feel very safe,” Orion said.

Cassius efficiently assuaged his concerns. “That’s because it’s not.”

As the boys settled and the boats finally stopped swinging, Tom whispered, “Off we go”. The boats set off as if pushed by an unseen force, and the group were floating away, across the sparkling surface of the Great Lake.

If you had asked Harry at the end of fifth year how he thought he would end his time at Hogwarts, it would not have been in a boat with Tom Riddle. He might have truthfully answered ‘in a body bag’.

But there he was, sailing into the horizon.

THREE LETTERS RECEIVED BY HARRISON PETERS

The first letter read:
  Harrison Peters  
  42b Intern Alley  
  London  
  England  
  16th August 1945

NASTILY EXHAUSTING WIZARDING TESTS
  Pass grades:
  Outstanding (O)  
  Exceeds Expectation (EE)
HARRISON PETERS HAS ACHIEVED:
Charms: EE
Defence: O
Herbology: EE
Potions: A
Transfiguration: O

Professor Marcus Ward
Governor. Wizarding Examinations Authority

The second letter read:

Harrison Peters
42b Intern Alley
London
England
20th August 1945

Peters,

I got them to send me your results, hope you don’t mind. Anyway, that Herbology grade was bullshit. Anyone can get an O in Herbology- it’s just gardening. I made them remark it and congratulations, you’re going to be an Unspeakable (although god knows why you want to.)

Yours marginally fondly,

Galatea Merrythought

The third letter read:

Harrison Peters
42b Intern Alley
London
England
25th August 1945

NASTILY EXHAUSTING WIZARDING TESTS (REMARK)
Pass grades:
Outstanding (O)
Exceeds Expectation (EE)
Acceptable (A)
Fail grades:
HARRISON PETERS HAS ACHIEVED:
Herbology: O

We apologise for the error.

Professor Marcus Ward
Governor, Wizarding Examinations Authority

Chapter End Notes

THIS IS NOT THE END OF THE STORY. Just the arc :)
So Harry and Tom leave Hogwarts and venture out into the wide world! What could possibly go wrong?

I'm back! Uni stuff isn't done yet, but I had my first weekend where I could procrastinate, so this is the result. I hope you enjoy? Lots covered in a relatively short length of time, but we'll get more Harry and Tom when they're living together. Crazy kids. They grow up so fast.
Harry and Tom Get Domestic

Chapter Summary

Tom's not a happy worker, Harry meets an unfamiliar face and our couple go to a party.

Chapter Notes

(Had to reupload, sorry if notifications went weird)
LAST TIME: Harry and Tom had NEWTs, which Harry got through mainly with the motto 'well, at least that's over'. As exams came to a close, he ran into Septimus, who revealed that he had a new girlfriend. Slytherin threw an end-of-exams party at Rupert's prompting, whilst Harry and Tom expressed their new relationship publicly. Atticus objected, and Harry discovered that it was mostly due to jealousy. As the party was in full swing, Peter Rowling crashed in with the news that Dumbledore had killed Grindelwald (yes: killed), and there was a divide in Slytherin reactions. Cassius had a chat with Harry, where he warned Harry that his actions would have consequences both bad and good, as ominously as ever. Harry and Tom shared a romantic dance and Harry encouraged Tom not to become a dark lord. Harry then met with Merrythought and discovered she was retiring. Harry received an offer to take his TOADs, and Tom revealed that he had successfully applied to a ministry placement program at Harry's urging and, after revealing that the placement came with a flat, he offered to share it with Harry, who agreed. To continue of relationship bonding, on the night before leaving Hogwarts Harry had a bit of a panic and Tom comforted him with (drolly-phrased) promises of security and support. The final day arrived and the end of year feast saw Harry approached by Myrtle, Chloe Babbage, and Druella. Our Hogwarts gang had a little photo session by the Great Lake, before they embarked onto the boats to cross the lake one final time. In a series of letters at the end of the chapter, we learned that Harry had narrowly made his offer, thanks to Merrythought ensuring a remark of his Herbology exam.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tom would begrudgingly admit that inviting Harrison to live with him may have been a little hasty. It wasn’t that they weren’t getting on exactly, it was just that they perhaps hadn't been quite prepared. Tom and Harrison were used to negotiating their relationship under the gaze of others: they woke up in a room filled with their dorm-mates, they ate surrounded by others, their moments alone were stolen snatches of privacy. Living together was very different. They literally had no choice in spending time with one another, and sometimes there were moments, sitting together in silence, conversation exhausted, that Tom wondered whether their relationship would really last. Whether their morals were too different, or their tempers too easily ignited.

The flat had two bedrooms, luckily, because Merlin knew what would have happened had Harrison and Tom not had their own space. But sometimes Tom could feel the discomfort
sizzling in the air. What were they supposed to do? Neither of them had been privy to particularly functional relationships early on. Should they snog, talk, fight? It was especially apparent when they prepared their dinners separately: Tom was picky, and whilst it had gone unnoticed at the Hogwarts banquets, Harrison had soon gotten frustrated at preparing a meal only to be told there was ‘too much garlic’. They adopted a tricky choreography in the rather cramped kitchen, swapping use of the sideboard and the stove, but there were moments, squeezing past one another, that they would stop, exchange a look, and be instantly guiltily aware that this was something they should be doing as one. Tom wasn’t sure what could be done to mend the discomfort; if it would heal with time or needed to be addressed. He wasn’t even sure if Harrison had properly noticed.

They hadn’t even had sex, which Tom knew in his heart wasn’t a huge issue- they had barely been dating six months and some couples waited years, but they were two young men in a flat all of their own. Wasn’t that what they were supposed to be doing? They hardly lacked for passion, but it somehow felt like crossing an unbreachable line.

Tom’s placement both soothed and exacerbated the issue. Because the education centre was situated near the Ministry, Harrison would sometimes walk with Tom to his introductory sessions. They might stop off for coffee or wander through Hyde’s Park for a bit, and in those moments, everything was fine. Perfect, even. Tom would adjust Harrison’s tie and Harrison would bemoan that the blasted things were ever invented, before they parted with a fond kiss. But that was only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and sometimes they went days without seeing one another. Tom didn’t want to be clingy - indeed, he enjoyed his personal space as much as the next man - but he was left with the unsettling feeling that Harrison was regretting his choice. Tom disliked being a regret.

His placement itself also wasn’t living up to expectation. Tom hadn’t been sure what he’d be doing at the ministry: Slughorn and the job description had been very vague, but it turned out he was mostly fetching coffee and sending memos. He was assured on his first day that he’d get to do more and more ‘as his skills developed’ but he was fairly sure that he was capable of more than reminding Mary Lauper to book a hair appointment. He’d gotten all O’s in his NEWTs, for Mordred’s sake.

Tom had started in the Magical Department of Games and Sports, which also accounted for much of his (lack of) excitement. If there was anything Tom hated more than fetching coffee, it was Quidditch. He and Harrison had gotten into countless fights about how ridiculous the sport was. And he felt just as much excitement about the whole affair (read: none at all) when Mr Thomas rushed through the door, brandishing a letter.

“We’ve got ‘em, boys!”

Those in the office rose to their feet. Someone - Tom didn’t know who - called out, “What are you going on about, Curtis?”

“The Committee!” Mr Thomas dramatically opened the letter, clearing his throat. “In order to thank Britain for its part in ending the dreadful recent conflict, blah blah blah, Dumbledore, blah blah, very grateful, blah- listen here: The International Confederation of Wizards Quidditch Committee has taken the decision to allow Britain to host the 1948 Quidditch World Cup!”

“You mean-”

“Our bid got through. They fell for it!”
The department erupted into cheers. Streamers were sent hurtling into the air and sparkling balloons popped into existence. The cry went up to “get out the good stuff” and all work seemed forgotten. Tom leaned over to Mr Perkins, who he frequently found was the only other sensible person in the department.

“Surely we can’t afford this,” Tom said, hardly having to lower his voice for it to be covered by the noise of the party. “Constructing the stadium alone- and we’re coming out of a war-”

“Oh, it’ll pay back everything it costs and more,” Mr Perkins said wisely. “The tourism will be unbelievable. And we’ll flog the tickets for ten-times what they’re worth. Quidditch fans are nuts.”

Mr Perkins, Tom knew, was more of a Gobstones man.

He obviously wrongly interpreted Tom’s expression, because he gave him a friendly nudge. “Don’t worry. You’ll get your tickets at a considerable discount; they practically give them away to the department. Probably so we don’t go blabbing about the mark-up everyone else has to pay, eh?”

“Wonderful,” Tom said. He leaned back, his mind whirring. “Just what I was hoping for.”

Harry thought he might have taken on too much with this TOADS business. Harry knew he wasn’t meant for academia- he could be clever, on occasion, but he wasn’t good at focusing or organising his thoughts. He was more reactive, inventive. And he tended towards selective obsession, which didn’t lend itself to a curriculum.

Today was the day he was scheduled to meet with his supervisor, and Harry would admit he was a little nervous. Tom had assured him he would be fine - “you’re three-thousand times more intelligent than most of the nitwits who take up room on this planet”- but Harry struggled to take his words entirely to heart. He’d glanced through some of the prescribed textbooks in the past week and they were dense. Impossible to understand. Harry could barely define most of the words, even. He didn’t think his supervisor would be very impressed by him.

Harry shuffled down the grandiose corridor of the education centre, making his way towards reception. Merlin, his palms were sweaty.

“Er, hi,” he mumbled. “Harrison Peters? I’m meeting my supervisor.”

The witch flicked her wand and squinted down at the quill which scrawled out Harry’s fate.

“Room 32d,” she said, giving him an encouraging smile. “Are you alright, dear? You look pale.”

“I’m fine,” Harry lied, and stumbled away to meet his fate.

Room 32d was deceptively unobtrusive. It was located up a secretive stairwell, and the door was a warm cherry wood, engraved with pretty little flowers. It was almost welcoming. He knocked on the door, his hand trembling before his eyes.

“Come in!”

He pushed open the door, expecting some distortion of Merrythought to be sat behind the desk,
some titanic, intimidating figure who he’d always be slightly frightened of. But he was wrong. She was young, maybe in her late twenties, slightly chubby and with a round, kind face. Her dark hair fell in a cloud of frizz around her face, and under the candlelight it took on a rich glow. She was wearing possibly the most hideous cardigan Harry had ever seen: some lime green and knobbly mistake. She was effortlessly maternal, and as she turned a soft smile upon him, he felt utterly safe.

“Mr Peters,” she beamed. “You’re very punctual.”

“I-I-” Harry swallowed. “Yes.”

“Don’t look so scared! We’re just going to have a nice chat.” She stretched out a welcoming arm. “Come and sit down.”

Harry moved as if in a dream, padding towards an armchair that had no business looking that comfy. The room was nice too, full of soft furnishings and eclectic ornaments. It was, if he was honest, a little like Umbridge’s office, but much less sickly and psychopathic. His supervisor moved with him to the fireplace-side seating.

“I suppose I should start by introducing myself,” she said, settling herself into an armchair as well. “My name is Dorea Potter, but do call me Dorea. I don’t hold with any of this ‘Mrs. Potter’ nonsense.”

Harry barely heard the rest of what she said, his mind catching on that little word: Potter. His grandmother. His grandmother. He examined her anew with greedy fascination. The smile lines etched deeply into her face, the wand tucked absentmindedly behind her ear, the erratic way she tapped her foot, like she had too much energy for her body to contain; all took on deeper meaning. Here was a woman he shared blood with: proper, loving blood. Blood that had cared for him, nurtured him, he was sure of it. A woman who would love him unconditionally. A link to his past and assurance of the future. She would give birth to his father.

“I know you might be concerned by my young age and gender, but I assure you, I have years of experience supervising the TOADS courses. My wider work is focused around the Department of Magical Education, and especially the concerning isolation of muggleborn children-”

“I trust you,” Harry said.

“Oh.” Dorea looked surprised for a moment. She flushed with pleasure. “Well. That’s refreshing.”

“You used to be engaged to Orion, didn’t you?” Harry remembered.

“My cousin?”

“He’s my best friend.”

“Oh.” Dorea’s smile was thoughtful. “I always liked Orion. He’s a good sort. But far too young, of course. I used to babysit him when he was still in nappies.” She looked rueful. “Thank Morgana I escaped my family’s rather medieval customs. And met Charlus, of course. I heard Orion wasn’t so lucky,” Dorea tutted. “Engaged to Walburga Black. She’s a lovely girl,
but we all know what she gets up to. Not that I hold it against her, but hardly good tidings for their marriage, is it? Not to Orion, anyway.”

Harry startled.

“Teenagers think they’re so subtle,” Dorea said wryly.

“How did you meet your husband?” Harry asked suddenly.

“It was at work,” Dorea mused, settling back into her armchair. “I was petitioning the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for check-ups on muggleborn children prior to their Hogwarts admissions, and Charlus was head of the Administrative Registration Department at the time. The petition fell through, but Charlus and I had gotten talking about our political views and such, and soon enough the conversation turned to how much we both liked the James Sisters— you know their song: ‘Auror of the Skies’?— and then we were talking about our favourite restaurants and we had so much in common… and before you know it, I was telling Melania ‘no thanks’, and getting hitched.” Dorea shrugged slightly bashfully, but she had a quiet confidence about her.

His grandparents loved each other, Harry realised, and he hadn’t anticipated quite how much relief that would bring. He supposed it was quite the miracle considering current Pureblood culture. Dorea must have been strong, to turn her back on her family like that. Still, he had to wonder:

“Not to be offensive,” he began cautiously, “but the Black family isn’t exactly known for their… love and acceptance. How did you… I suppose what I want to say is—”

“I know what you mean,” Dorea said, and Harry blushed a little. “I happened to take Arithmancy during my time at Hogwarts and fell in with a group of Hufflepuff girls. They were nearly all muggleborn, and when they would talk to me about going home and never so much as seeing magic for weeks on end; the stress that their parents went through trying to control a baby who could walk through walls without understanding why… well, it opened my eyes. And my mind.”

She was wonderful, Harry decided. Everything he could have hoped for.

Dorea smiled sheepishly and summoned a paper file from her desk. “Pardon me, I do have a tendency to ramble. Back onto your TOADS, which is why we’re both here. You’re taking Defence and Magical Theory, correct?”

Harry nodded automatically.

“Well, in addition to your seminars and lectures, you’ll be undergoing a year long project for Magical Theory resulting in a dissertation of 6,000 words. Most students choose to undergo an examination of some kind of magical artefact or theory; it keeps the project focused. Do you have anything in mind?”

"Er, not really?"

"Nothing that you're interested in and want to explore further? Or even something you've seen that sparked your interest?"

Harry bit his tongue. The obvious thing to say would be 'time turner'. But he already knew the Unspeakers didn't have the technology to send him home- they didn't even have it in the future. Harry would have to invent it. And so it was probably a little ambitious to charge straight
in with the world-changing research. This was a research essay, after all.

A mysterious artefact he wanted to know more about.

*Sirius tumbled backwards through the veil, a roguish smile frozen on his lips. He looked gently shocked, like Harry had just revealed a surprisingly good mark in an essay or like he’d won ten galleons in the lottery. He looked like he’d hardly noticed that he’d been struck by a curse that was sending him hurtling backwards into oblivion and, as he fell, he stretched out a beckoning arm. He was calling Harry home.*

“I was reading about this veil the other day,” Harry began, and the lie spilled from his tongue easily. “It, um, whispered when you went close to it. Dead loved ones, I think. It struck a chord with me. Do you know it?”

“The Veil of Death,” Dorea said, raising an eyebrow. “The Unspeakables have only just started publishing research on it.”

“Ominous name.” Harry smiled uneasily. It sent a shiver down his spine, but perhaps if he learned more about it, he could learn what happened to Sirius. Perhaps Sirius wasn’t dead. Perhaps he was just… waiting.

“The Unspeakables are notoriously cagey about their research,” Dorea spoke slowly. “Are you sure you can’t think of anything else?”

Harry sat back, disappointment racing through him. He could think of nothing but Sirius’ face, covering by a hazy shadow. That absent grin fading away. But before Harry could be too disappointed, Dorea spoke again.

“However, if this is what you really want…”

“It is,” Harry said eagerly.

“I do believe I could do something about it. I have an in, you see.” Dorea tapped the side of her nose conspiratorially. “Of course, you’d have to swear an oath not to speak of what you saw, and they’d vet your paper…”

“That’s fine.”

“Very well. Give me some time, and I’ll get back to you.” Dorea positively glowed at the prospect of helping him, her cheeks rosy and plump. “Now onto your timetable, you have two to three lectures a week…”

“Tom!” Harry called out, throwing his bag onto a chair as he walked into the flat. He shucked off his coat too, dramatically flinging it over the back of the same chair. If there was one thing he loved about the 1940s, it was the dramatic coats. And Tom. “Tom, are you here?”

“You’re home.” Tom emerged from his bedroom, half-dressed in a t-shirt and trousers.

Harry grinned. “I like the look.”

“Do you?”

“Mmm,” Harry hummed. “So much *arm*. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.” He busied
himself with making two cups of tea, setting the kettle to boil with a jab of his wand. “I had my first meeting with my supervisor.”

“And?” Tom asked indulgently, leaning against the doorway. Harry tried to ignore what an attractive picture he painted.

“She’s wonderful. She’s helping me with this dissertation thing I have to do, and she’s said she has contacts in the Department of Ministry - I want to do it on this death veil thing - and she’s Dorea Potter!”

“The one Orion was engaged to?”

Harry dropped a tea bag into each mug, pouring in the water. “She married Charlus P-Potter.” His tongue slipped over the familiar surname. "It’s quite comforting, you know, to think that people can love that much. Enough to go against anyone that says they shouldn’t.”

“Perhaps you should push her in Orion’s direction. She could give him some tips.”

“Orion would never.” Harry stirred in milk and heaped sugar into his own tea. “He cares too much for his family. Not that she didn’t, I’m sure, but-”

“I know you worry about him,” Tom said, finally pushing away from the door frame and slinking into the kitchen. Harry’s breathing became just a little harder. “For some reason.”

“Of course I worry,” Harry said, shoving a mug into Tom’s hand. “He’s my friend. But he’s not a child and he can make his own decisions. Even if it’s the wrong one.”

“People sometimes need a little direction.”

“I’ve given Orion all the direction I can, short of tying him to a leash.”

“Now there’s an idea.”

Harry choked mid-sip, banging a fist against his chest. “I wish you’d warn me before you say stuff like that,” he wheezed, eyes watering.

“I was merely agreeing with you,” Tom said teasingly. “You get worked up over such petty things.”

“You haven’t seen me get worked up yet,” Harry warned, but the threat was probably lessened by the tea dribbling from his nose.

“I have an announcement of my own,” Tom said, abruptly turning back towards the sofa. “But I’ll let you finish your tea before you choke yourself to death.”

“You have news?” Harry abandoned his tea to the kitchen counter. “Tell me!”

He managed to refrain from repeating himself like an eager puppy, but the way he bounced onto the sofa must have been similar enough, because Tom took a sip of his drink and murmured, “Down, boy.”

“Tom, I will literally kill you if you don’t tell me right now,” Harry said, very seriously.

“I suppose if my life is in the balance…” Tom drawled faux-reluctantly, but he was clearly eager to share. He hid his obvious smile behind the rim of his mug. “I happened to learn today that a certain tournament may be visiting our shores, come 1948, and despite my own
ambivalence I think you’ll be quite excited.”

Harry racked his brain. “But you don’t mean.”

“I probably do.”

“The Quidditch world cup!”

“No, the Gobstones championship.”

“Oh.” Harry deflated. “I mean, Gobstones are fun-“

“Of course, I mean the Quidditch world cup. You’re so gullible.”

“Tom!” Harry protested, shoving him. “You’re such a bastard!” He took a moment to realise what he’d said. “Oh shit, Tom, I didn’t mean- I forgot-”

“It’s quite alright.”

It was usually at this moment that Rupert would jump in with a funny remark or Atticus would complain about muggles, but there was nothing but silence in the flat. Harry shifted uncomfortably on the sofa.

“No, it’s not.”

“It is. I know you were simply alluding to how deeply despicable I am. As you should.” Tom tapped a finger to Harry’s nose, and Harry knew he must have made the most ridiculous cross-eyed expression trying to follow it. His ridiculousness seemed to amuse Tom. “Besides, I’ve been informed that they sell tickets to members of the department piss-cheap to cover up the sticky fingers of corporate greed, so we’ll be going to see some of this pointless broomstick posturing in person.”

Harry laughed and threw himself onto Tom, enfolding him in a rare, tight hug. “But you don’t even like Quidditch.”

“I’ll bring a book.”

“You can’t bring a book to the Quidditch World Cup!”

“Watch me.”

Harry was about to launch into explaining the millions of reasons why Tom could not read during the Quidditch World Cup, when there was a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it.” Harry said, heaving himself off the sofa. As he did, Tom caught his sleeve and, although his grip was loose, Harry froze like it was binding.

“Leave it.” Tom said softly.

“There’s someone at the door-”

“They’ll go.”

Harry kept Tom’s gaze and there was something so suddenly vulnerable there. He just didn’t understand why.
“There’s someone at the door,” Harry repeated, and Tom’s hand fell away. His chin dipped in defeat. Harry didn’t understand, and he was caught, hesitating on a precipice.

“There’s someone at the door,” Tom reminded him dryly, and the spell was broken. Harry hurried away to answer the insistent knocks.

“Orion,” Harry exclaimed as he opened the door, seeing his friend standing in their doorway. It was strange: they had been talking about him only moments ago. “It’s late.”

“I know,” Orion fretted, fiddling with the brim of his hat. “It’s just- could I speak to Tom?”

“Tom?” Call Harry arrogant, but he had rather assumed his best friend was there to see him, not his boyfriend.

“I had my supervision today.”

Harry felt suddenly rather bad. He’d completely forgotten Orion had his too. “How did it go?”

“Fine, I think, but I need to do a dissertation for my Ancient Runes TOADS- like, can I just talk to Tom?”

“Yeah- er, yeah.” Harry stepped back and allowed Orion to push past him into the flat. He glanced around the landing, frowning at the loud music coming from 43b. Neighbours. And then he closed the door and went in to see what all the fuss was about.

Orion was mid-pitch to Tom.

“-and we have to do this dissertation, see?”

“Harrison was telling me.”

“-And my supervisor asked me what I wanted to do mine on, and all I could think about was your idea. About the phoenix as the seventh runic number? I can’t even remember when you came up with it-”

“I do.” Tom caught Harry’s eye. “Harrison’s nose was enlarged.”

“Atticus hexed me,” Harry said. “It wasn’t a personal style choice. Besides, you fixed it.”

“That I did.”

“-And the idea hasn’t stopped running through my head,” Orion continued, looking rather manic. “It’s inspired. And I mentioned it to my supervisor and he was unbelievably excited- I explained it was your idea, of course, and if I wrote my paper on it, I’d obviously credit you, but I could prove and test it- would you let me? Write my dissertation on your theory?”

To Orion’s eyes, it must have seemed like Tom was in deep contemplation as he sunk back into the sofa, his eyebrow drawn together and his lips pressed tight. But Harry could see the mischief twinkling in his eyes, could spy the slight uptick to the corner of his mouth.

“You’re playing with him,” Harry said disapprovingly. “Just put him out of his misery.”

“Please?” Orion added, his eyes wide and glistening with hope.

“Fine,” Tom sighed. “But I demand full credit. And you’re not getting a Christmas present.”
“Thank you!” Orion squealed, and for a moment it looked like he would try to hug Tom. Obviously deciding that was a bad idea (quite rightly, too), he instead flung himself upon Harry. “How did your supervision go, by the way. I forgot to ask,” Orion fussed, drawing back and straightening out the collar of Harry’s jumper.

“All right. I’m being supervised by Dorea Potter.”

“Dorea! She’s lovely. She’s let herself go a bit, but she’s lovely. I just sent her an invitation—oh! That reminds me. I am having a bit of a shindig this Saturday. Well, it’s more my mother’s shindig, but—” Orion sighed, putting his thoughts together. “It’s my engagement party.”

“Shouldn’t that have happened ages ago? You and Walburga have been engaged for over a year.”

“Officially, she’s been in a period of mourning. It’s only just been made official. Last week, actually, so…” Orion managed a weak grin. “Yay us. Anyway, practically my entire family is invited, and it would be a hundred times more bearable if you would come. Please. And Tom too,” he added, as if only just remembering that Harry and Tom came as a package deal now.

“I dunno, Orion,” Harry winced. “I’m not sure I belong in a room full of purebloods.” Truly, he couldn’t imagine anything worse.

“Nonsense.” Tom swept to his feet and wrapped an arm around Harry’s waist. “You can entertain Orion with whatever inane dribble you two usually come up with and I,” he breathed, bending his head so it drew close to Harry’s ear, “will network.”

“You just want to convince sometimes to sponsor you so that you can get out of the Magical Games Department,” Harry said accusingly, and Tom shrugged.

“The world doesn’t often offer opportunities.”

“The world isn’t offering anything: Orion is.”

“So you’ll both come?” Orion said cheerily, apparently ignoring everything he’d just heard. “Wonderful. I’ll send you an official invitation. Quick warning: the owls are a bit scary, but just offer them some raw meat and they should leave you alone.”

A bloodthirsty owl. That, Harry couldn’t help but feel, was an omen.

And Tom could at least try to look a little less smug.

Merlin, Harry hated Grimmauld Place. There was just something about it that marked it out as a place of misery. It had been true when he’d first seen it, and it was just as true in the 1940s. Harry didn’t know exactly what made it so completely awful. Perhaps it was the hatred with which Melania Black greeted her guests, or the painful-looking grip Walburga had on Orion’s arm, but Harry’s skin crawled. The engaged pair look deeply uncomfortable, and as he watched their dead eyes and forced smiles, Harry just wanted to take them away and sit them down in front of a milkshake.

Harry and Tom had decided that Tom would be introducing himself merely as ‘Orion’s friend’ and leaving out the ‘Harry’s boyfriend’ part. Although the wizarding world didn’t usually care, at least if it was men involved, they didn’t think the Black family would be the ideal test
subjects. And Tom wanted to remain as uncontroversial as possible, to aid whatever buttering-up and shoe-licking he had prepared for the evening. And so, as Harry and Tom entered the lavishly-decorated drawing room - which had been magically expanded and cleared away to form a kind of ballroom - they split apart. Tom set off to talk to Merlin knew who, and Orion swooped in to grab Harry’s arm.

“Thank Morgana you’re here,” he muttered. “Mother’s being unbearable and Lucretia’s in a mood.”

“When isn’t she?”

“Mother was dolling Meissa up and Lucretia- she objected, and they had an awful argument. They’re sequestered somewhere upstairs.”

“Joy abound in the Black household,” Harry said drily.

As he spoke, Lucretia descended the staircase. She looked beautiful, barely a hair out of place to suggest she’d ever argued with anyone, wearing a white, flimsy gown that made her look rather like a forest nymph. Her expression was stony, like she was just daring someone to try and talk to her. She was holding Meissa by the hand and, whilst Meissa’s dress was also quite lovely, her face was splotchy and red, traces of dark makeup lingering around her eyes.

Lucretia ignored the admiring glances and marched up to Orion and Harry, dragging Meissa alongside her.


“I know.” Lucretia barely spared Harry a glance. “Where’s Mother?”

“Greeting guests.”

“Of course she is. Did she say anything to you?”

“She’s barely said a word except to demand I arrange this whole thing.”

Lucretia’s gaze softened for a moment, and she placed a hand on Orion’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. You know if I could stop it…”

“I know.” Orion shrugged. “It’s not that bad. Do you really need to talk to Mother again? I’d rather there wasn’t another fight.”

“She’s trying to stop my sexualisation in its inevitable tracks,” Meissa said, and then she smiled sweetly at Harry. “Hello, Harrison.”

“Just keep it down,” Orion requested, and Lucretia inclined her head before sweeping off towards Melania.

Harry and Orion watched as Melania caught sight of Meissa and started gesturing pointedly. Lucretia didn’t appear to respond well to that. They definitely weren’t keeping it down.

“A well,” Orion sighed. “It was a distant hope.”

As Melania got more and more het up, Harry watched her lift her hand to pull at her choker and he thought he saw something odd on her neck. A scar.

“She insisted on this party, you know,” Orion said. “Father was happy to keep it more
understated, in respect for Apus, but Mother said an engagement party was absolutely necessary. This morning, I had to drag her out of bed and dress her myself.”

Harry knew Orion would never say anything bad about anyone, especially not his family, but Harry suspected he was on the verge.

“She’s depressed,” Harry said. He remembered days, especially in the summer, when he could barely stagger to his feet in order to open a window.

Orion didn’t respond, except to wince as Lucretia marched away and Melania stormed towards the kitchen, leaving Meissa to greet the guests. “Father’s started taking sleeping potions. She sobs through the night.”

“Is she seeing anyone? A mind healer?”

Orion drew back his shoulders and straightened up, and it was very clear that he was speaking someone else’s words. “Blacks don’t see mind healers. We don’t need it.”

“She’s crying in the kitchen.”

Orion didn’t appear to have an answer for that. Harry thought something ought to be done about Melania, she clearly wasn’t getting any better, but he could hardly just shove the Black matriarch into St Mungo’s psychiatric ward, could he? Still, he couldn’t see this ending well.

As an unfamiliar witch grabbed Orion to congratulate him on his engagement, this seemed to send out some kind of signal to the other partygoers, who had previously been focusing their well-wishes upon Walburga or watching the Lucretia-Melania conflict with fascination. Harry hovered uncomfortably at his side, painfully aware that some of these people must have been aware that Harry was wearing Orion’s second-hand robes, lent to him for the evening. He certainly didn’t match up to his best friend: who was clothed in only the best custom fit; Harry was hardly Tom, who could make anything look like it cost a thousand galleons. Harry and Orion must look like the prince and the pauper, and that was how he expected it would go until they both shuffled into their graves. And Harry would probably have Orion’s second-hand burial shroud, just to top it off.

At last, someone came along that he recognised.

“Dorea,” Harry said happily, waving her over.

“Harrison!” Dorea smiled back. She was in another terrible outfit: a bright blue dress with feathers all over it. “I’m glad to see you could make it.”

“I hope you’re enjoying yourself,” Orion said, the ‘someone needs to’ going unsaid.

“I am! But I can feel Arcturus growing more and more enraged with every second that I encroach on his noble house, so we’ll see how long that enjoyment lasts, eh?” Dorea beamed. “I’ve gotten to know Cedrella, here.”

She gestured to a girl who Harry hadn’t yet noticed, who was standing slightly behind her shoulder. She was pretty in an unassuming way: her clothing just loose enough to conceal her shape but not obviously hideous.

Cedrella smiled shyly. “Septimus told me about you, Harrison.”

“You’re the girlfriend!” Harry realised.
“We met whilst you were saving the school,” she laughed slightly.

“You’d be surprised at how many times I’ve been told that,” Harry muttered—slightly bitterly, it must be said.

“What’s this about you saving the school?” Dorea asked, and for some reason, Harry blushed. It felt a little like he’d always imagined it would feel if his parents had been around to question his Hogwarts antics. He scratched his leg with the toe of his shoe.

“Er, nothing. It was nothing.”

Orion, of course, wouldn’t let that stand.

“Grindelwald’s men attacked Hogsmeade,” he said eagerly, “and Harry started fighting back! He’s very powerful, you know. And then Tom joined in— and no one got hurt, not properly, thanks to them.”

“I lost a finger,” Harry pointed out.

Dorea cooed and grabbed Harry’s hand, fussing over his stump. “Oh, you poor thing. And such a hero too.”

Harry’s blush deepened, and he snatched his hand back. He mumbled something along the lines of “it was nothing” and “focus on Orion, he’s the engaged one”.

Harry backed away, leaving the three to their conversation, but the further he moved away from Orion, the more and more aware he became of how much he hated nearly everyone in the room. These people who were cheerily chatting away whilst Orion’s death sentence was sealed. His eyes automatically sought out Arcturus: chuckling at a no doubt humourless joke. It was Arcturus who Harry truly despised. Melania had at least put up a few token protests, and Harry struggled to properly hate a woman who was quite obviously coming apart at the seams. But Arcturus had ruined his son’s life with a smile and was now making eyes at some cousin or other whilst Orion silently drowned. Harry’s fingers twitched, and his magic hummed within him.

He couldn’t kill Orion’s father, he reminded himself. He certainly couldn’t kill Orion’s father in a crowded room at an engagement party.

Harry felt suddenly starved of oxygen and he stumbled back like a wounded animal. Escape. He had to escape. He flew out of the room, heading down an inconspicuous corridor that he knew led to the garden. His heart pounded in his chest and he was so unspeakably frustrated.

What was it with this family?

As Harry lurched into the gardens, he was so angry he could barely see. He let out a strangled roar to the skies and collapsed onto a bench. His head dropped into his hands and he contemplated how he could possibly be considering letting this affair go ahead. It was different from last summer. It was happening now.

“Harrison?”

Harry’s head shot up. Walburga peered down at him with a look of polite concern on her face, an emerald shawl pulled around her shoulders.

Harry froze. “Hello.”
“Hullo.”

“How much of that did you…?”

“Enough.” Walburga frowned. “Nice… yell. It was very dramatic.”

“Well, I was quite, er, emotional.”

“I could tell.”

There was a silence between them, and Harry realised it was his turn to continue the conversation. He opened his mouth, planning to ask her how her evening was going, but instead what slipped out was: “Have you spoken to Druella?”

Walburga's expression iced over. “Not recently, no.”

But Harry's tongue wouldn't stop moving. “She’s teaching Quidditch at Hogwarts now, you know.”

“Mm.”

“She was telling me that, part of the reason she’s taken on the job… it’s so she can have a salary that would support two people.”

“Well, I can’t imagine her husband will appreciate that.”

Harry gritted his teeth. The facade of this whole affair was getting to him. “People know, you know. I was speaking to Dorea Potter-“

“Don’t.”

“Why do you care about what people think? Druella doesn’t.”

Walburga turned away, her body taut. “You have no idea what Druella wants.”

“I know better than you.” Harry rose, following her down the garden path.

“You’re such a hypocrite,” she spat. “I ‘care about what people think?’ I heard Tom introduce himself to people, you know. ‘Orion’s friend’ my arse.”

“That’s different. That was Tom’s choice.”

Walburga spun on her heel, fire blazing in her eyes. “And this is my choice. This is how I choose to live my life, Harrison Peters. Don’t you dare judge that.” She slumped, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Haven’t we already had this argument?”

“The last time we argued, it was about your startlingly bigoted views on muggleborns.”

“And I stand by that. They’re dangerous.”

“We’re all dangerous.”

“You think I don't know that?” Walburga watched Harry closely. "You have an awful lot of influence over Orion, Harrison. Be careful how you use it.”

“I’m trying to be.”
She smiled humourlessly and turned away, trekking back up towards the house. “It’s a wonderful party!” Harry called after her. “It’s a funeral!” she called back. Well, at least she was self-aware.

Harry watched her walk back up to the house, striking a determined silhouette against the glow of Grimmauld Place. Harry wrapped his arms around himself. Fuck, it was cold.

“That was a fascinating conversation.”

Harry jumped, despite immediately recognising the timbre of the voice. “Jesus, Tom! Can no one initiate a conversation like a normal person?”

Tom wrapped his scarf around Harry’s neck and coupled it with a warming charm. “Perhaps you just have terrible awareness of your surroundings.”

“It would explain a lot.” Harry took a moment to calm himself down, and Tom seemed content to stand there with him. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I saw you leave. Glaring at everyone intently and storming out isn’t as subtle as you seem to think it is.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t everyone. Orion’s father, mostly.”

Tom hummed doubtfully. “Walburga seemed cheerful.”

“She’s on a self-destructive spiral.” Harry gestured helplessly. “I honestly want to know: is there a Black gene or something that demands you make the worst choices possible for your own happiness?”

“It’s called having familial expectations to live up to.”

“You’re such a misery guts.” Harry smiled reluctantly. “Did you get what you wanted?”

“I certainly did. Did you know that Arcturus Black is friends with the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister?”

“No, but it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Well, he is. He’s quite the unpleasant specimen, but I made my case to him and he seemed amenable. Part of the reason I’m stuck in Magical Sports for now is because my application was so late; most of the successful applicants got to pick their departments. But Mr Roberts told me he can do some tinkering. Within six months, I should be working within the Minister’s office. Perhaps even as an assistant.”

“That’s great news,” Harry said. He had difficulty conjuring up the appropriate level of enthusiasm considering the generally depressing atmosphere, but he took Tom’s hand and squeezed it tightly. “Can we go and say goodbye to Orion then? I think I’ve had enough.”

“Certainly. And we can even sneak out the back.”

Chapter End Notes
Boop, we get into unfamiliar territory that Vivy will have to start making up. A job? What is this? Higher education who? I don't know her. xD

Also, a reminder that I do know canonically Dorea isn't Harry's grandmother. We're just ignoring it.

Sometimes it just hits you that real people read this fanfiction, not just avatars. Actual people who could be reading real books that aren't written by a 17 year old. So thank you for reading. It means a lot xx
Harry Has A Number Of Encounters

Chapter Summary

Cassius risks tearing apart the known universe, Orion's going away, and the veil is a bitch.

Chapter Notes

LAST TIME: Three months after Hogwarts, Tom realised that maybe moving in with your boyfriend of three months straight after Hogwarts may cause a weird dynamic. He also revealed how he'd begun his Ministry placement in the Magical Department of Games and Sports which he was delighted about, because we all know how much Tom loves Quidditch (that was a joke). Harry had his first meeting with his TOADS supervisor and - surprise, surprise, it's Dorea Black, his grandmother! They had a nice chat, and then Harry proposed the topic for his dissertation: the Veil of Death, thinking that perhaps he could learn more about what might have happened that day at the Ministry. Dorea told him that she reckoned she could work something out. Harry and Tom had a domestic conversation, where Tom revealed he could get Harry tickets to the Quidditch World Cup and then Orion arrived to ask Tom if he could use his suggestion from a few chapters ago for his Runic dissertations. Orion also invited the pair to his engagement party, which Tom bullied Harry into going to. The party was awful, as expected; conflict between Lucretia and Melania; Harry noticed an odd scar on Melania's neck; and Dorea admitted that Arcturus rather dislikes her because she broke off the engagement between her and Orion. Harry left to get some air and ran into Walburga, whom he tried to talk sense into. He failed. Tom arrived, triumphant, to get him, having convinced one of Arcturus' friends to promote him, and they went home.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Harrison! Come in, come in.”

Harry sidled into Dorea’s office, watching as she hurriedly shoved papers to the side and heaved a huge file into a drawer.

“I can come back later…”

“No, don’t be silly,” Dorea’s voice echoed from below her desk. “I just lost track of the time. I have good news for you anyway. Sit down, sit down.”

And so Harry dropped into a chair, and Dorea resurfaced a moment later. She was a little rosy-cheeked and her hair had sprung free from her scarf, but she seemed in generally good spirits.

“So how have your studies been going?”

“Fine,” Harry said automatically. He considered. “No, actually. I mean, Defence is fine-”
“I’ve been hearing very good things from Professor Grayson.”

“...but we’ve started the spellcrafting topic in Magical Studies, and I really don’t understand it. I think everyone else took Ancient Runes - which I do regret not doing - but if it was a requirement for the course you think they’d say.”

Dorea frowned. “Your course should only require a basic grasp, but if you haven’t taken Runes even at OWL level…”

She hummed and got to her feet, marched over to her bookshelf, and began to rummage.

“That’s far too complicated… outdated – I don’t even know why I still have this – oh, I can’t stand him… but maybe… aha!”

Dorea dropped three huge books into Harry’s lap, and he wasn’t ashamed to say that he let out a faint “oof!”

“There you go,” she declared, returning to her chair. “Those should provide the basics. Laurenzoo is really more of an introduction, but it will give you an idea.”

Harry scanned over the titles: *Ancient Runes Made Easy* (he doubted it), *Spellman’s Syllabary*, and *A Boon of Runes Liberally Strewn*. Hermione would have been so upset she’d missed the chance to recommend books.

“Thanks. I think.”

“Think nothing of it.” Dorea frowned. “Well, maybe think a little of it, because you’ll have to read them and then I want them back- but you know what I mean.”

Harry’s eyes alighted upon a picture on the desk: Dorea, laughing in front of a waterfall and clutching a man who looked distinctly baffled by her glee. He looked kind, though, and even his bewilderment had a kind of fond patience to it.

“You don’t have any children?”

The words escaped Harry’s mouth before he could stop them. He realised that he had been expecting to see a little miniature version of his father, perhaps climbing up the barrier or posing proudly. But of course not. It was far too early. Besides, as Hermione had impressed upon him and Ron: “there’s nothing worse than people expecting women to have children as soon as they’re married. We have other things we can do, you know!”

But Dorea wasn’t offended.

Instead, she sighed wistfully. “No. Not yet, anyway. Charlus and I have hardly been married a year. But someday…”

And it would be quite someday, Harry thought guiltily. Sirius had told Harry how old his grandparents had been when they had James – “and spoiled him rotten for it, too” – and they had died of age-complicated Dragon Pox, if he remembered correctly.

Poor Dorea. Harry looked upon her with new eyes.

“But we’ll start trying soon, I think,” Dorea finished brightly. “And then we’ll have a whole house of wee ones running amok. I think Charlus is a little terrified at the thought.”
“What was that about good news?” Harry asked. He didn’t want to think about the hope in Dorea’s eyes dimming, this strange man in the photo squeezing her hand and telling her they’d keep trying…

“Ah yes. You have a way of distracting me, Harrison Peters,” she said mock-severely and rifling through her desk. “Here it is.”

She placed what looked like a contract on the desk, and Harry caught a few phrases: ‘certain doom’, ‘absolute silence’, ‘dire consequences’. All very cheery stuff.

“The Unspeakables have agreed to let you conduct research on the veil!” Dorea beamed. “I’m just sorry it’s taken so long. I do wish Arcturus didn’t hate me quite so much because he’d have been rather useful in fast-tracking the request, but someone who owes me a favour put me into contact with the Deputy Head of the department and that’s who I’ve been chatting with.”

“I could probably talk to Orion,” Harry offered. “It is his dad…”

Dorea shook her head. “Oh, there’s no point now, it’s all sorted out. We just have to hope he doesn’t spot some of the paperwork and take against you.”

Dorea must have noticed Harry’s wilting enthusiasm as she rushed to assure him that:

“Arcturus is a rather singularly focused man. He usually only deals with crises and his own experiments. The Deputy deals with the rest. I expect Arcturus is aware of the whole business, anyway, but I highly doubt he’s properly registered you, mm? So just don’t go causing any crises.”

“I’ll try,” Harry mumbled. That promise had never historically gone well for him.

“Oh, well,” Dorea flushed. “I’m not sure I’m allowed to tell you.”

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“How did you get them to agree to all this?” Harry’s head swum.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing like that. It was just a rather sensitive situation- anyway, moving on! If you’d just sign the contract…”

Harry, having no particular reason to object, obliged, and signed his name in a messy scrawl on the dotted line.

“Excellent.” Dorea shuffled the papers together in a distinctly self-congratulatory manner and with a wave of her wand they flew out of the window.

Harry watched the contract flap away and wondered aloud how the magical world had gone undetected.

“It’ll be fine,” Dorea said carelessly. “The Ministry is hardly a street away and the muggles never
“Muggles are more observant than you’d think,” Harry said, remembering Aunt Petunia, who’d perhaps been rather too observant for her own good.

“Well, we’d best hope not.” Dorea perked up. “But I forgot to mention the best news of all?”

“Oh?”

“You have an appointment with the veil tomorrow. They’ve agreed to let you visit.”

Harry was sure he’d misheard her.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, I realise it’s a little soon, but the quicker the better, eh? I expect you’ve done your own reading already, but the department sent some interesting extracts ahead…”

Dorea piled yet more paper onto her desk, but Harry’s attention was seized by a photo of the veil, drifting backwards and forwards beneath the arch. It sent a shiver down his spine, and he was suddenly confronted with the reality that he hadn’t been back to the ministry since that fateful explosion that sent him here, and he certainly hadn’t been to the Department of Mysteries. Psychologically, he expected it wouldn’t be a great reminder. It was full of ghosts, and he’d just requested to study the realest ghost of them all.

His palms began to sweat.

“Are you okay, Harrison? You look pale.”

Harry assured her distantly that he was fine, but his mind was whirling. He needed to talk to someone before he went. Tom? But Tom would hardly comfort him. Harry suspected Tom would think the whole idea was silly. Despite his own fear of death, Tom rarely tolerated weakness in others.

No. Harry needed to speak to Orion.

Harry waited impatiently for Dorea to finish and then swept the papers into his bag and gathered together his things. He was at the door when Dorea called out:

“Tomorrow, then?”

Harry hesitated. The word felt rather like a death knell. “Tomorrow.”

“I’ll have someone meet you at the department entrance.”

Harry fled.

Harry practically charged down the corridor, his mind raging- would he see Sirius? But what if he didn’t? Had others followed him here? Were they waiting there for him, all this time? What if no one was there-?

And then he collided into a solid body and fell onto his bum.
“Shit,” Harry muttered, rubbing at his backside. And then, registering who he’d bumped into: “Shit.”

If there was anyone Harry hadn’t expected (or wanted) to run into at the Educational Centre, it was Cassius Rosier.

“What are you doing here?”

Cassius smiled without amusement, holding out a hand. “Most people go for ‘hello’.”

Harry generally went by the notion that Cassius didn’t deserve a hello, but he was struggling to think of the reasons right that moment. “Oh, yeah, right. Hullo.” He took Cassius’ hand begrudgingly and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. “Still. What are you doing here?”

“My mother sent me to pick up a cousin. He’s had his license suspended for apparating into muggle women’s bathrooms.”

Had Harry expected anything else? “That is… deeply disturbing. I assume he didn’t have their permission.”

Worryingly enough, Cassius’ smile got more genuine. “He certainly didn’t, but Miss Abigail Wright will stab him one day in a frenzied panic, so it all works out in the end.”

Harry didn’t know what to say to that. “Great.”

They stood in silence for a moment and discomfort crawled down Harry’s spine, although Cassius seemed unaffected.

“Have you told him that?”

“Told him what?”

“That he’s going to be stabbed.”

“Well, no,” Cassius considered Harry dubiously. “I don’t think he’d take it very well.”

“Because I take everything you say just marvellously.”

“But you’re the exception, Harrison. You must be used to that by now. I can hardly tell everyone about my gifts, can I?”

“Can’t you? Only, Tom was questioning me about my supposed Seer powers the other day- I think he’s finally decided interrogation won’t scare me off- and I really think I might have made a mistake in going along with this whole thing.”

“What did you say?”

“I had to tell him my visions really prefer this one specific period of the 90s.” Harry recalled with slight disbelief his vivid description of how beloved butterfly clips were going to become.

“Lies built upon lies. They’re hardly sustainable.”

“Maybe I should’ve been more avoidant, looking back.” Harry scowled. “And Tom and Orion been asking about my whole ‘alternate dimension’ story, which I’ll admit I didn’t fully think through. Really, they’ve been incredibly accepting of it. Unbelievably so.”
“Almost like it’s a plot device.”

Harry squinted suspiciously. “I don’t know that means.”

“That’s probably a good thing for the stability of our universe.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever- listen, have you seen Orion?” Harry asked, regaining a measure of his urgency. “I need to talk to him about something-”

“I’m quite aware of what you want to speak to Orion about.”

Harry hesitated, but his need for comfort momentarily overwhelmed his distaste.

“Am I… Do I… Is it okay?” he asked unsteadily. “In the Death Chamber, I mean.”

“’Okay’ is very subjective.”

Harry opened his mouth to complain, but Cassius cut him off.

“But you do learn what you need to. And that, I think, is the most important thing. You might not agree.”

“Right,” Harry said, his heart thudding loudly. “Good. I think. Look, I’d still like to speak to Orion-”

Cassius slipped his hands into his pockets, and Harry had the sudden, mind-boggling suspicion that he might have been nervous.

“You can’t go to Orion with your problems forever, you know. He’s not a constant.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m sure he’ll explain,” Cassius said, looking over Harry’s shoulder. “I’ll be seeing you later.”

Harry turned and, sure enough, there was Orion, hurrying up the corridor and calling out for them to wait where they were. By the time he reached them, Cassius was gone.

“I really don’t know how he does that,” Harry muttered. “He didn’t apparate-”

Orion didn’t seem to care much for contemplating the intricacies of Cassius Rosier. Instead, he grasped Harry by the shoulders and announced: “I’m going to Brazil!”

The words took a moment to sink in, but Orion didn’t wait for Harry to catch up.

“My supervisor arranged it all - there’s an incredible runic program there, run by Karl Dirkwood, if you can believe it – I didn’t think I’d get in, really, it’s a bit of a miracle!”

“When do you leave?” Harry said. It all felt like a bit of an out-of-body experience.

“In a month.”

A month. A month, and Orion would be gone. Harry knew he wouldn’t be alone- he had Tom, after all- but he could talk to Orion like he couldn’t talk to Tom. Mostly about Tom, if he was honest.

Orion was practically his brother. As much as he loved Ron and Hermione - and he did love them, he hadn’t given up on his quest to return home – but he had never been quite so unfiltered with them. So emotionally honest. Ron and Hermione had been his only friends in an unfamiliar world, but Orion had been his only friend in a world that should be have been familiar but wasn’t.
Different kinds of friendship formed at eleven and at sixteen. Not worse. Just different.

Orion’s smile faltered. “I thought you’d be happy for me.”

“I am,” Harry said, mustering up his strength and smiling back. It was genuine, if hard to maintain. “I just don’t understand what prompted all this. You didn’t have to move to Brazil just to tell me you didn’t like my lasagne.”

“Don’t be silly. Your lasagne is excellent, I never knew you could add spinach.”

“Well, now you know,” Harry said dryly. The recipe was a remnant of the Dursleys’ health push, to save poor, poor Duddy from a heart attack. “But if it isn’t my lasagne…”

“I just need to get away for a bit.” Orion let his excitement fade away, and Harry noticed for the first time the dark circles underneath his eyes and his reddened, raw cuticles. Orion was not doing well.

Harry grasped Orion’s hands and examined them closely. They were dry and peeling; signs of hours of rubbing and fretting. “What have you done to yourself?” Harry said, his heart sinking. How had he missed this?

“The engagement party was too much,” Orion admitted quietly. “It all got very real. So I just need to get away- just for a few months. Live a bit.”

“I’m sorry I left the party so early. I hated it, but I could have dealt – for you.”

“You couldn’t have helped me,” Orion said, gifting Harry with a warm smile. “This is a bit of a trap of my own making, really.”

“Don’t talk such bullshit. It’s your father’s doing, that old hippogriff.”

“Perhaps.”

“I mean it, you know. Maybe he'll die before the wedding. He can't hold on forever.” Harry gleefully envisaged Arcturus’ funeral.

Orion didn’t say a word, he just tugged Harry into a close, tight hug. It felt like goodbye.

“I’ll be here when you come back,” Harry promised.

Orion rested his forehead on Harry’s, and for a moment, the two breathed as one. “I know.”

Harry realised rather late that he’d forgotten to bring up the veil, but the moment felt wrong now. He kept silent.

“So what brought on this despondency?” Tom asked.

The dimly flickering candles, that he’d insisted were ‘romantic’, cast dappled light along the line of his jaw as he rested his chin on his fist. His face was angled almost perfectly so that Harry could have leaned across the table and snogged him if he’d so chosen.

But Harry was not in the mood and kept his eyes firmly down and focused on his plate. The lasagne looked distinctly mushy, and far from the piping hot delight it had been on Saturday. Apparently, some food didn’t take kindly to warming charms three days later.
He pushed around a pea dubiously on his plate, but he could hardly complain. It was Harry’s fault they were still eating leftovers, after all. He hadn’t realised that what happily fed a Dursley dinner party might be a bit much for a normal group of four. And Walburga ate like a pigeon, anyway.

“Harrison?”

He sighed. “Dorea got me access to the Department of Ministries. I mentioned she might, remember? So I get to visit the veil. Tomorrow, actually.”

“The veil?”

“It allows you to hear the whispers of the dead,” Harry said dully, and a mouthful of lasagne tasted like ash on his tongue. “I have a lot of whispers to hear.”

“But it can’t be real,” Tom insisted. “Those who have truly passed on don’t come back. And they certainly don’t hang around a curtain hoping desperately that someone they knew will wander past.”

Harry smiled without much joy. “Such little faith in magic, Tom.”

“I have plenty of faith. I’m merely realistic.”

“Or scared,” Harry said lightly, but neither of them knew how to deal with that, so the conversation grew quiet.

It took Harry a minute to notice the flyer hidden slightly beneath Tom’s plate, headed by a strange curved symbol.

“What’s that?”

Tom slid the flyer further beneath his plate. “It’s nothing. A venture I’m considering. I wouldn’t want to tell you until it becomes something more… solid.”

“As long as it’s not some kind of nefarious scheme.” Harry eyed Tom with suspicion. It hadn’t looked like the Dark Mark…

“When have I ever been involved in nefarious schemes?”

“Every day of your life,” Harry muttered, chewing dubiously on a piece of spinach and narrowing his eyes at the barely-peeking out flyer. This could only go badly.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Oh, stop it. I promise you’ll approve.”

“Somehow that doesn’t make me trust you more.”

Tom’s little smirk didn’t help.

“So how is it at the department?”

“Dull.”

“That’ll teach you to try and sweet-talk Orion’s drunk relatives.”

“Mr Roberts is Arcturus’ friend, not a relative. Besides, I didn’t realise how prejudiced he would be without three shots of Firewhiskey.”

They glanced at the bin, which still emitted puffs of smoke weeks after the Howler had exploded.
“At least you were moved, though.”

“Mmm. The Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office certainly isn’t where I want to end up but it’s better than Quidditch. Even if he didn't intend for it to be a promotion.”

“You’re lucky I need you for this apartment, otherwise you would be well-past dumped,” Harry said severely, poked at Tom’s forearm with his fork.

“If you want me gone that badly, I’m sure we could arrange something…”

“Shut up.” Harry chuckled and his cheeks warmed. Tom’s eyes were so deep and dark- and his nose was so straight, irritatingly so, really-

“You know Orion told me about the veil,” Tom mused. “A long time ago.”

Harry couldn’t contain his flinch at Orion’s name, and he dropped his fork. The clatter of metal against porcelain seems to vibrate through the apartment.

“You're acting very strangely,” Tom said, half-triumphantly. ”What is it- really?”

Harry felt the urge brimming up within him for comfort, to reach out, to share. He’d never had that urge before he met Orion.

“Orion is going to Brazil.”

Tom blinked. “He’s allowed a holiday, isn’t he?”

“It’s not on holiday,” Harry snarled, leaping to his feet. “He’s going there to study. For months .”

“He will come back.”

“I know he will. But I’ll be-”

“You’ll be what?”

“Alone.”

This time, Tom rose to his feet and his face slipped into an expressionless mask. “You’re hardly alone. I thought we were a castle.”

“I was scared, you were just saying that.”

“I meant it. But if you’re so lonely, perhaps I made a mistake.”

Tom might have been a little hurt.

Harry sighed, running a hand over his face. “That’s not what I meant.”

He crossed the room to cradle Tom’s face in his hands. As he brushed a strand of hair away from his forehead, he felt Tom gradually relax. His boyfriend slumped forwards, resting his forehead on Harry’s shoulder, and they stood, Harry supporting Tom, for a minute or two.

“You know I didn’t mean it like that,” Harry murmured. “It’s you and me, remember? But… things have been weird between us, Tom. We’ve moved into this apartment like a bloody married couple but I hardly feel like I know you-”
“You know me,” Tom assured him. “You’ve seen me at my darkest—”

- A snake sealed away, a girl lying motionless between them, a glint of fury, anger -hurthurthurthurthurt-

“And at my brightest.”

- Two boys by a lake, letters scattered on the ground between them, a glint of sunlight, joy -hopehopehopehope-

“How could you not know me?”

And as Harry stood oh so close to Tom, enough that they could have melted into one another, he felt a deep warmth well up within his chest. No, it was deeper - almost like a tugging at his stomach, an intense, fond pull towards this boy who had offered Harry so much. Who might have changed the course of history for him.

Harry pulled Tom into a slow, long kiss. Tom responded eagerly, and Harry felt a deep pang of guilt at how distant he’d let them become.

Tom muttered, “Could Orion do this?” against Harry’s mouth, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“You’re such an idiot.”

They stumbled towards the sofa, a mess of flailing limbs and grasping hands. As they fell onto the cushions, Harry found himself braced over Tom, pressing kiss after kiss to his jaw. Tom’s hands wandered, squeezing and groping beneath Harry’s shirt. The pair drew back, panting and grinning at each other, as if only just realising that they were eighteen, god damnit.

“You’re beautiful,” Tom said breathlessly, and he looked at Harry like the most exquisite gem he’d ever seen.

Harry’s face warmed. “Shut up. You’re the most physically perfect person I know. It’s sickening.”

“You have such a way with words.”

Tom pulled them both further onto the sofa and, as he did, Harry became aware of exactly how close they were.

He wouldn’t mind being closer.

Harry tried for something casual, but his voice was giddy even to his own ears. “So now we’ve established that definitely we know each other… How about a bit more biblically?”

Tom flashed his teeth. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Despite the pleasant night he’d had, Harry awoke the next morning with a sense of impending doom. Today he’d have to enter the Department of Mysteries, the last place he’d seen his friends, where he’d watched the world dissolve into gold and heard the dead murmur at his ear.

And then he’d have to write an essay on it.

Harry was led through the Department of Mysteries by a man in a set of deep purple robes with his hood drawn up, casting his face in impenetrable shadow. The corridors were entirely empty - of
people or distinguishing factors. In fact, there were faded squares on the wall where posters had been stripped away, and Harry suspected it had all been done for him. Because of him. It all felt very Unspeakable-y.

Harry hated it. With every corner they turned, he was confronted by another memory- Ron throwing a blasting spell with a triumphant whoop, Luna dodging between shelves in some strange kind of dance, Harry leading his friends towards a prophecy hall where he was sure Sirius was here, just down this aisle, one more row-

But most of all, Harry was confronted by the fact that they were just that- a memory. Whilst it seemed like just yesterday that Hermione had been beckoning at the end of the corridor- “They’re coming, quick!” - she wasn’t there now. The corridors were quiet.

Harry dealt with his turmoil by talking.

“So do you like working here?” Harry said.

His companion was silent.

“Doesn’t seem like there’s much around. I like a place with a bit of personality.”

More silence.

“You should have seen Tom’s - my boyfriend – face after I brought him this lamp I found. Apparently, it was cursed to slowly turn melt your skin whilst you sleep. But how was I supposed to know that? The lady who gave it to me seemed nice enough.”

Even more silence.

“I suppose I should get used to all this, though,” Harry gestured around him, “if I want to come and work here.”

And finally, the Unspeakable beside Harry let out a deep chuckle and let his hood fall down, revealing a small dark-skinned man with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“I hope I’m around when Arcturus receives your application.”

“Why?”

“You’re the boy who turned his son to the muggles.”

“I didn’t turn his son- I just showed muggles weren’t bogeymen. Hardly a revolutionary concept…”

But as Harry continued to grumble under his breath, he couldn’t stop a nagging sense of familiarity arising when he glanced at his companion. Finally, the realisation struck. “Hey. I know who you are.”

“I don’t think you do.”

“No, I definitely recognise you.”

“You’re probably mistaken-”

“I read an article.”

“I just have one of those faces-”
“You travelled back in time.”

Gilderys Hawthorne slumped defeatedly, offering up a discomfited smile. “I see my reputation precedes me.” He laughed awkwardly, a hand darting up to pull at his ear in a nervous gesture. “We’re fairly sure that was a hallucination, anyway. I was really quite ridiculously high. But I certainly intended to time travel.”

Harry felt a trickle of disappointment. Gilderys had not travelled in time. Another avenue closed.

“That’s why you’re here actually,” Gilderys continued, oblivious to Harry’s crisis. “When I was brought to the department after the ’25 fiasco, they were about to wipe my mind and send me on my way. Dorea’s father convinced them to hire me. He was also quite high,” he added thoughtfully.

“And you owed him – her – a favour.”

“I did indeed,” Gilderys seemed to find the humour in the situation and offered Harry a wink. “I hope it’s worth it. Here we are then.”

They had arrived at the door to the Death Chamber without Harry noticing, and as he stared at the familiar door, a new sense of dread stole over him. Sirius could be waiting just beyond, for all Harry knew. Waiting for his godson to bring him home.

“I assume you were briefed on arrival?”

“Extensively.”

“Good luck then,” Gilderys said, pulling open the door. “Try not to do anything stupid.”

And with a hand placed firmly between Harry’s shoulder blades, Gilderys pushed the young wizard into the room and closed the door behind him.

Harry had stumbled a few feet into Death Chamber before he realised that he was not alone.

“Sir?” Harry said, his surprise sending the word slipping, unbidden, from his tongue.

Dumbledore turned. “There’s no need to call me ‘sir’, Harrison,” he said. “We’re hardly in school anymore.”

Harry had somehow thought he’d never see the man again. “You’re- But- What are you doing here?”

“I am fortunate enough to be rather good friends with one of the employees of this fine establishment, and he keeps me up to date on some of the most exciting happenings.” Dumbledore turned a thoughtful gaze behind him. “And the veil has always fascinated me.”

“Oh?”

“The veil between life and death is so tightly closed- as well it should be. But the possibilities were it to open…” Dumbledore sighed, and Harry saw his hand twitch.

But Harry suddenly found that he didn’t want to step closer, didn’t want to know what the veil would say to him. His feet felt glued to the ground where he stood, stuck still, next to the door.
Harry considered his professor—always so distant and unknowable—and was strongly reminded of standing in front of a mirror once upon a time and asking a similar question.

“Who do you hear, sir?”

Dumbledore half-smiled. “Lies are such a wonderfully easy thing. I could perhaps tell you my mother or my dear sister, and thus appear vulnerable enough to convince you. Certainly, their voices are whispers on the periphery; intangible, ghostly.” Dumbledore watched Harry closely, as if assessing his value. “But no. It is often best practise to be honest, and the truth, I fear, is far less noble or endearing. Embarrassing, perhaps, although I do try not to be embarrassed by love.” Dumbledore adjusted his glasses, and Harry realised that he was nervous. “I hear Gellert. Grindelwald.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose. “You were close?”

Dumbledore let out a startled chuckle. “Close? Why yes, you could call it that. We were certainly close in boyhood, but as men it became something rather more. I imagine you and Tom would understand.”

Harry could barely contain his shock. “You were in a relationship with Grindelwald?!” he yelped.

“No, my boy, nothing so… concrete. But the feelings were there.” Dumbledore smiled, and it was somehow worse than a frown. More terrible, more mournful. “They were very there.”

Harry surveyed this man, this icon of the wizarding world, who he realised no one had ever known well at all. He tried to imagine fighting Voldemort now, if Voldemort wore Tom’s face. He struggled. “But, sir… why did you kill him?”

Dumbledore gave Harry a very familiar look: one that he hadn’t seen in a very long time, and he realised that was because it was filled with fondness. “Do you know, you’re the first person to ask me that? The usual question seems to be ‘why didn’t you do it sooner?’”

“Well, why didn’t you?”

“I set off to face Gellert mostly due to pressures from my mother,” Dumbledore admitted. He chuckled, and as he did, he lowered himself heavily into one of the polished benches surrounding the room. “In my 60s and still facing my mother’s wrath. And funnily enough, she was pestering me mostly due to you.”

Harry couldn’t help but emit a soft sound of surprise.

“She was remarkably impressed by you— I believe the main complaint was that if a seventeen-year-old could face up to Grindelwald, I certainly could.” Dumbledore paused. “I do believe she missed the subtleties of my conundrum, but the basics were there. And every day another attack, another death…” Dumbledore shook his head. “It would have been the most complete cowardice to do nothing. I was in Gryffindor, you know.” He looked Harry up and down. “And I do believe you might have been. Often, I say we sort too early but, perhaps, in your case, it was too late.”

“I would have been in Gryffindor earlier.”

Dumbledore nodded knowingly. “It is quite something to witness the utter depravity that humanity is capable of; one can hardly emerge untouched. Untransfigured. I do wonder if the Sorting Hat might now say something different were it dropped onto my head.”

“Maybe you’d be in Hufflepuff,” Harry said lightly.
Dumbledore looked wry. “Oh, I could never be good enough for Hufflepuff. Hufflepuff, Harrison, is a remarkably underappreciated house. I daresay if I were allowed to choose my own… well.” He waved a wand, and his previously-charcoal robes took on a garish yellow hue.

Harry shook his head at the turn the conversation had taken. “Harry,” he said decisively. “You can call me Harry.”

“Marvellous,” Dumbledore beamed. He chuckled suddenly. “Whilst you may have a reason for the remarkably tight grip you have on that doorframe, I feel rather ridiculous talking to you as if we were on opposite ends of a Quidditch pitch. Don’t you?”

“A little,” Harry admitted. He inched nervously forward, his heart thudding with each step he took towards the quietly-rippling veil. When he couldn’t bring himself to move any further, he sat down abruptly on a nearby bench, still metres and metres away from the veil. Dumbledore rose to join him.

“Nervous of death, Harry?”

“More anxious of what knowing the truth will do to me,” Harry replied, eyeing the veil with increasing dread.

“Wise man. Impossible promises rarely end well.”

Harry took a moment to consider the pair of them: Harry and Dumbledore in the Death Chamber, chatting about dead loved ones. He could hardly imagine this happening even in the future.

“I’m sorry, sir, but why are you telling me this?”

Dumbledore let his gaze wander slowly over the room. “I have been very unfair in my dealings with you, Harry. We tend to become unaware of our prejudices over time, especially as age creeps steadily over us-” Dumbledore examined his hands with something like surprise “-and your time at Hogwarts brought to my attention my tendency to look twice at anyone wearing green.”

“Why?” Tom Riddle hadn’t even become a dark lord yet (at least, he hoped not). Dumbledore hardly had reason.

Dumbledore paused, seeming to properly consider the question.

“Over time,” he said at last, carefully. “I have become increasingly aware of Slytherin traits in myself that I dislike.”

“Sometimes, a bit of cunning is necessary,” Harry said quietly.

“Too true.” Dumbledore’s beard began to absently plait itself. “But I took a life mere months ago. I’d always sworn I wouldn’t, but in that moment… I suspect a lot of it came down to self-preservation, but when I consider the lives I saved- well, it seems selfish to regret it.”

But the look he gave the veil spoke volumes.

“You asked me, Harry, why I have been quite so open with you. I confess I hardly know, myself.” Dumbledore clambered to his feet, adjusting his robes. “Whilst we all need people to trust and you caught me in a rather emotional moment- frankly?” Dumbledore smiled apologetically. “I suspect it is because no one would believe any of this if you told them.”

He began to move towards the exit, and Harry was too taken aback to stop him. Dumbledore paused, looking back.
“Do consider taking up the Defence post in the future. I think you’ve got the knack.”

And then he was gone.

Without the headmaster’s overwhelming presence, the room felt suddenly colder. The tattered veil appeared to flutter more agitatedly, as if the person standing just behind it was shaking it violently, perhaps calling for help. Harry knew there was no one there, knew it was just some kind of cruel trick, but he called out “Sirius?” with a sick feeling of rising hope. He’d known as soon as he stepped into the room that Sirius had died; that the veil was a sick trap that wouldn’t return its victims, but-

“Sirius?”

And Harry thought he could perhaps hear Sirius’ voice, murmuring how proud he was of Harry, how he’d kept his friends safe, he’d done the right thing after all- light and dark, Harry, you did it- and before he knew it, he was stood barely an arms-length away from the veil, his fingers outstretched. He thought he could feel the intense chill of the veil prickling on his fingertips: so cold it practically burnt.

With a full-bodied flinch, Harry dragged himself away. He fell back on the floor, gripping to it so tightly that his knuckles whitened; his chest heaved beyond his control. That had been so close. So like the time fake-Moody held him under the Imperius charm… suspended in peace.

“Fuck,” he hissed, beating the ground in frustration. And the sting of his palm felt right, felt real, so he kept hitting and punching and roaring into the room.

“YOU TOOK HIM!” Harry screamed. “AND I DON’T EVEN KNOW-”

But as Harry took a deep, gasping breath, he noticed something. Nothing. The absence of anything. The veil was silent.

It was barely swaying, and the whispers were totally gone. Harry would hardly have known it was magical if he’d walked into the room that minute.

Harry clambered Shakily to his feet, stuffing his reddened hands into his pockets. He inched closer, expecting a resurge of murmurings, but nothing came. Nothing at all.

“Come on, then,” Harry muttered. “You were so talkative before.”

He circled the veil, but from every new angle, the veil looked more and more ordinary. Unassuming. It was mocking him.

“Say something,” he ordered. He waited. “Say something!”

He was begging now, and the realisation chipped at his pride. He was pleading with a veil.

“You think you’re so powerful but you’re not. Voldemort beat you, Nicolas Flamel beat you, I beat you! Stop it!” He might have been crying at this point. “Just bring them back.”

His chest felt tight and he hadn’t realised how it would properly feel to be back in this room, to be back where Sirius died. He shrugged his robe off and transfigured it into a proper cushioned blanket, settling in for the long haul. It had to speak at some point.

But the veil never made a sound.
Thanks go to my amazing beta Caty, without whom the comma inconsistency of this chapter would be a lot higher. I also wrote a lot of this chapter lying sick in bed so let's see if I regret it when I'm well!

Classic Vivy: it's been a while since this was updated, but a lot has been happening! You'll know if you're following me on tumblr, but I got an offer for English at Cambridge (I still have to reach certain grades at A-Level to get in, but even if I don't, the offer is still an actual dream come true. Seriously, it's been my dream since I was like eight), so it's all been a bit emotional. But here the chapter is, for better or for worse. Hope your 2019 is going well xx

UPDATE as of 26/05/19: this story is not abandoned I promise! This is just a very busy year oops. I have 3 more weeks of exams and then a vast summer stretching out before me where I promise I will do my best to finish this elaborately-plotted endeavour. And if I fail my exams and don't get into uni, maybe I'll have a whole year ;)