Push and Pull

by Vespairty

Summary

He thought he was moving on at the end of his life, the war was over, he had lived long enough, but being cursed by fate and the past machinations of a man he trusted most has left him stuck until beyond worlds end. Having nothing left Death takes on the task of unraveling time to send him back and fix the mistakes that have been wrought and save not only himself, but his nemesis, and even Death in the process.

Notes

Dear all,

I do not own the works of one J.K. Rowling and do not make any coin off anything I fiction up in my brain for it. I do deeply admire her though and love her work.

This Fic was inspired by MayMarlow and her work The Train to Nowhere. You should give it a read.
Intro: For Who the Bell Tolls

Chapter Notes

So this one has finally broken down and upon request opened a Tumblr to post updates and general things. The Tumblr is named Vespairty to keep things simple.

Push and Pull

Intro: For Who the Bell Tolls

“For who the bell tolls, time marches on.”

Before was the void, behind was the void, All around infinite void and naught else. He recalls there used to be more, more of everything. He thinks that maybe there had once been a time where more was here, a voice to his left and lights reflected as afterimages of people moving ever onward. There were so many at some points and vaguely if he could care anymore he could recall some of those lights beckoning to him. Loved ones that once upon a time he felt within his heart before all had been consumed with the numbness that sometimes buzzed in its place.

Before, when there had been more, he knows that the void above had been filled with breeze that whistled through leaves of green things long since gone. He knows because he used to hold the vision to him jealously, afraid that if he left go but an instant that he could never retrieve it again. Eventually, he let it go and it never came back. He knows that once upon a time there was a world here, one he sorely missed in times when the numbness receded, but the numbness had not lifted in so long now.

Sometimes he can almost believe that the void around and the one inside reflect all his despair left for a world that no longer existed. Be it him that believes such to be the ego, and in the nothing he knows no more tears. He has no more to shed at the bitterness that coats the thoughts when they come. Not enough emotions remain to feel for the tears.

*Once there had been more, Once he had been more.*

When he first realized he was stuck in the place he had been so young. He tried to walk through to the other side but never could cross into it. He was always harshly tugged back to this space just beyond the reach of all others. For years he tried, and for years he failed. He raged, and cried out, beat his fists on pavement that used to exist before the station itself crumbled. It didn't make any sense, he wasn't the one cursed, he didn't commit the evil the other had so why... WHY?!

His anger simmered for decades as he'd watch his sons each leave the world after years of life and yet he could not follow them. He was powerless to do anything but to watch the mortal world erupt into apocalyptic wars, chasing souls into the afterlife and to him. They always knew him but eventually he could no longer recognize any of them.
Time and blood washed away the lives of the world, time smoothed him out and emptied him of all. His rage, despair, love... it all became faint traces until the numbness set it. Gripping him in tendrils that held him in place. He knew, subconsciously, that the numbness muted all of it and saved him from the eternal insanity he was sure would have consumed him. As the world crumbled and fell away he knew no more sadness or anything else, just The Numbness.

The Numbness felt achingly familiar, as if a friend's hand in his. It left him lukewarm in the frozen exppanse. It comforted him in a way he vaguely could have recalled had he been a child again and locked beneath the stairs on cold...cold nights. If he could love he would have fancied it was The Numbness that earned it. He somehow figured that it knew that and felt pride in it.

Now though, it had become muted. He knew nothing else since the last of the stones crumbled from King's Cross Station. That had been ages ago, watching mute as the last soul fled the void. Now, a thousand years into The Nothing he recalled that there had once been something. Now, a thousand years into The Nothing, he heard a voice speaking to him from within. A voice he knew once upon a time and so long... so long ago. It crooned his name. He wept. So beautiful was the idea of someone else. To not be alone anymore, to hear another voice besides his own dead one.

“Harry Potter...”

The Numbness lifted itself from his heart but he couldn't will himself to fight it to stay. He could only feel himself crumbling under the voice inside him, all around him. It echoed through the chasms of The Nothing and he screamed. He wailed and gave sound to the void. His fingernails raked at his face where blood should be dripping but couldn't be anylonger.

It was so beautiful, he felt so full so suddenly and it was so much. Too much! Without the Numbness holding the void at bay, all came rushing in. He could not bear it on his own, drowning in so much of everything. His knees buckled and he fell upon the ground. A ground that shouldn't be there but now was. He pounded it with fists until flesh and pain were all that existed upon it. Pain he could feel again for the first time in eons. Dead things that had been gone for so long now. So long now. So long now!

His wails fractured into joy, joy so immense it burst forth from him so wild was it. He opened his eyes and light burst forth from within him, echoing into The Nothing and painting it with all that he was and had ever been. He felt the ground soften and witnessed it turn green and lush like the garden in Aunt Petunia's yard. So Perfect that he fell upon it and rolled into its green, smelling the earth he so missed.

He felt genuine warmth as arms encircled him, lifting him into them. Hands soothed his back, pressing them as tightly as they could be. Needing, wanting. Safe. He clutched to the body before him, enraptured. He pressed his lips to anywhere they could find purchase in between his laughing sobs. Rough skin did little to deter him as he felt and clutched to the vision. Heart pounding, blood warming. Enfolded as he was in this man he knew... knew somehow that this was over, this void filled existence of nothing was ending! He felt love so suddenly and so sharply that it twisted within him as the knives used to do in the kitchen on days when he had been freakish. He was free, oh Merlin he was free!

“I tried to get to you for so long. I watched you ache and despair. Yet I could not reach you. What hell is that?! To know you are here but so far from me. That I could not save you.”

He looked upon The Numbness that had become, worshiped him silently, loving him in a way he couldn't have before. This last remaining sliver of a soul stuck in the void with him. His nemesis now his savior. The being that he had fought against in life, and lost, and left here. The soul piece that had been with him on his first death and now waited with him in this void now filling with life and light.
He stared in wonder upon the face of another, that knew him when he was something. His gaze traced the wrinkled skin so stuck to bone as to be emaciated, darkened as if burned, eyes so red and old that the color itself rusted. So many emotions long dead returned to him and with it, magic. Wonder, Excitement, Desire, Magic. He scoured the man's face with his fingertips. He could feel the softness and warmth of something living and real in the harsh plains under the pads. He quivered with energy, breathing long and steady to take in the scent of his companion. Cold water over earth. This was real, Tom was real!

His voice tore from his throat. He squealed in delight! Feverish in his love that he kissed him time and time again unable to stop, his arms holding Tom to him in desperation, and his heart screaming at him to make sure Tom could never leave. His mouth forming long dead words of 'I love you,' 'please,' don't leave me, and 'Stay with me,' I missed you, and 'I will be good just,'...stay.

“He says you are to begin again. I am not. He says this me as I am, cannot.”

A voice that to any other could be horrid seems so musical now. Gentle words, wispy, scratchy. For him, and only him.

No! no, no, no, please NO! NO MORE! Please, please...I can't, I can't.

He says as much, begs and pleads and cries. He grips the man tighter in hopes he shan't be parted from him. He has nothing left but him, his last and his only. His always. He struggles against it, crumbling within. He sinks into the grass in despair. Pulls his Tom with him as if somehow the ground is enough to hold him there. It doesn't stop the pain. Fury and sorrow film the insides of his mind and dread sinks heavy into his stomach. He wails and tears at the man before him, not understanding how it has become this way. His face contorts into grief. He is afraid of the loss and cannot remember any time that sorrow has hit him harder. What had he done to deserve such an accursed existence?!

He stares into Tom's eyes and sees only the truth. He knows nothing he says or does will change this. Whatever is to come is set in stone, the finality of it clear enough. It still doesn't comfort his heart. It doesn't silence his pain. There is nothing he can offer, no fight he can win against fate as such. Hands coax his face to raise and feel the sun and to see. Warmth and light and the solemn face of his savior. Lips touch his eyelids and he is wretched in his grief, inside something is dying and the withered remains sprout anew, it makes him empty and he... he just can't. He cannot endure this. Maybe Tom understands because he soothes the wretchedness away with his cracked lips. He presses them together and breathes deep.

“We do not end here and this is not the last of me or you. We do not end here! Do not ever think that.”

Arms around him tighten, so skinny like bones, and clutch him. A face nestled itself into his hair and he heard the grinding of teeth and felt the tension as if just as desperate as he to stay together. Wetness hit his forehead and he knows his sorrow has ravaged them both. They both tremble feeling the void start to constrict. They both know their time is ending and it isn't nearly enough. He needs more of it, he needs more time. More of this before nothing again, he needs to begin to learn to feel and to think again but Death was never kind. Or maybe fate is the unkind one. The edges of the void come fast upon them. Death encircling them. Listlessly, carelessly...

Master Mine.

Cold tendrils, no not tendrils, talons. No not talons... Fingers carve into them and in between them. It
pries them apart viciously with no remorse for what is to come. The beast pulls and once separated, it throws the spare into the edges of the void. Harry is helpless, can only scream as Tom is unmade. His Tom... destroyed completely. Death does not care however, nor will it wait any longer, not for anything. It rounds upon Harry, leering over him and around him, possessing him. There is no grand struggle, nothing left to struggle for. Death is pleased. It stares into the face of its Master and grins.

He smelted of the end of all things both bitter and sweet and the beginning of life both crisp and fresh. He felt neither cold nor hot, his touch that of worn stones from a river bed and rough from work. He stood immensely tall in the cloak of void or maybe it is all of him that is the void. Yet he feels as small as a sweet infant behind it. On his shoulders there sat the grief of all things. The weight needed to bare it bent his back. In his eyes was the past and all that would be, could be, or should have been through the ages. It was a gaze that burned through to all that one was and yet only saw the surface of the skin. His mouth was a thin line and his cheeks were harsh, his face was a map of every man and woman. His voice was a wisp of the last breath one could have, his words the passing time and the breaking open of worlds.

You shall return now, I have opened the way and unraveled it for you to remake anew. Master Mine you should know that this life I never intended for you. His suffering I never sought to plant within you. Live this time Master Mine as never you had before. Eternity is all I can offer you and there is no comfort in it. It never should have been, but it is now. My condolences.

He could not gaze upon death longer, for all him was chilled and his other was gone, there was little to do or say and he hung his head. For all that he had once burned bright he now was blackness and there was no pride left in him. He turned away from Death only to stare again at him as if he never turned away. This being held no emotion upon him but it flashed beneath his skin as if a face was transparent upon another, upon another, and in each was etched a permanent countenance. All of them shuffling atop one another underneath the blank slate that was Death's first face. The one most prevalent was that of a lost woman weeping.

You can fix him. All things. Master Mine.

The finality of the words was shockingly hollow but there was no time for questions and the Void cracked from one end to the other and floated out in tendrils. It rippled and then pulled taunt, ripped and ripped and ripped until the light of suns broke through and one could see every soul that passed burning in the deep expanse of everything.

The souls, one by one, unraveled, their cries that echoed through time and space a cacophony of pains and pleasures. Emotions of all raged against their unmaking as time and its occurrences became undone. They faded, the void faded, Death faded, and somewhere in the expanse the last shards of Tom were unmaking, winking out like dying stars. He reached his hands through the space, his screams deafening to his own ears until there was no sound anymore. Yet he couldn't save a single one. The last one burned low and then out. He closed his eyes and fell into the emptiness below. Then... nothing.

When he opened his eyes again there was light, warmth, and a river where Death placed in his hands a Stick. The Stick was a surprising comfort to him and he clutched it to him. Magic hummed inside of him, through him. It read him, and settled about him as a mantle. The smell of lilac invaded his senses and for an instant he could see obsidian eyes looking out a dingy window. Black wavy hair, and a cherubic face washed clean of childish wonder... Riddle. He visibly jumped when a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder and he looked over to see a man. Cadmus, his... brother.

He knew then what was needed of him, and felt for the first time in so long hope and the weight of
his heart beating in his chest. Death's smile cracked his face in two, the face of joy overriding the first face into the second that was shuffled into the mass of other faces beneath his first one. Hadrian felt his insides warm and his heart fluttered. He smiled then at Death, nearly thanked him. Instead he turned away and left with his brothers to take on his greatest adventure yet. Behind him Death stood straight for the first time in centuries as the weight eased from his shoulders just a little.

Chapter End Notes

Tis an introduction! The real story will picked up with some minor events happening with Tom and such.
Chapter 1: You want blood? (You got it)

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~ Nurmengard December 14th 1936 ~

They call it Nurmengard and it lords over the ice fields of the north. It is imperial and impenetrable; It is a lonely place that stands singular and isolated far from all else. As far as castles go it is neither modest nor fair. It is rather, a massive construct of towering proportions and just as dismal as it is large.

The stones are a combination of gray granite and frozen teeth from the ever-winter of the north. Sleet gray with little to lend it anything remotely pleasant. Legend states that it took one hundred years to build and required no less than a thousand souls to imbue it with its malice. Built upon blood and bone and magic.

A marvel they call it. The last great structure of magic after Merlin. It is told that Nurmengard was a crown made for titans but, as with all legends some things are too great to be true. Even still, there are few places within the realms of magic more protected than this lone keep. It was for this reason that he chose it among others. For it is everlasting.

For all its windows very few show life. All are cased in darkness save a few and all those ones tainted by snow and ice, looking to anyone else as dirty opaque sea-glass. Spires carry the windows high into the clouds where they reach jagged teeth into the sky and scrape the heavens. The great maws of Nurmengard eating the sky day after day, after day.

In the highest reaches of the castle's crown there is a light through a window high above the world. It flickers occasionally but never goes out. A beacon in the darkness that could never fade, not even in the storm now wrapped about the fortress. Within that ever lit room a fire cracks and spits casting shadows over rough stone. It traces silhouettes over edges to a dance of wicked delight.

Outside the high framed windows the storm outside rages and tries to douse the light on the other side of the glass. It plasters itself to its surface and leaves spiderwebs of frost in its wake. The fire
laughs at it, taunting it to try harder. Laughs louder still when Ice could not breach the confines of the
tower. Beyond the fire and ice is a great man. He is a great man who is said to no longer sleep. Too
obsessed they say for such mortal things. That great man is paces.

Gellert Grindelwald was many things, a man, a wizard, a lover, a practitioner of the arcane arts, and
a Dark Lord. The one thing he was not, was immortal. It had been his intention to remedy that ever
since he started fighting for the freedom of magic.

He had witnessed the dangers of muggles first hand at a young age. How they took pleasure in
violence when the being afflicted was different then they. He witnessed time and time again how the
magical world punished its own kind whereas it protected the muggles who wronged them. He
watched with growing dread as each new law prohibited the magic inherent in powerful families in
because it made those of tainted blood uncomfortable.

He raged against such injustice and felt true fear of the path the magical world would spiral towards.
Magic was being lost! Muggles were being protected! Wizards were being constrained by laws that
oppressed them!

He swore never to allow the muggles to take another magical life if he could so prevent it. He swore
to never bow before any who would strip from him his rights to magic. He would not allow those
monsters to touch him or his magic. He would not allow muggle kowtowing ministries to destroy his
customs or those of any other magical just because it offended outsider, mudblooded, sensibilities
and their muggle non-magic religions.

He would not stand for such injustice! So he had set himself on the path of fixing the problems but
that required time and power. More time than a mortal could possess. More than was enough to
control the threat of the muggles and their mixed breed influences.

His solution was simple enough, to become immortal. It just so happened that there were ways to
stave off death. The catch being that the obvious ways to do so involved rituals that were each more
demanding than the last. They took too much and gave not enough, for none of those could stave off
death completely. He dismissed each one as none were perfect, merely shortcuts with dire
consequences and little in the way of permanency.

Gellert was a man who valued perfection in all things and would not stoop to temporary immortality
or the risk of flawing his perfect control by means of incomplete modes to get there. No. He desired
permanence! Immortality without sacrifice, without the risk of reversal. He wanted to defeat death for
eternity. He needed to. Long had he searched for the perfect method and it was by chance or maybe
providence that he came across just such a way. He only needed to find the right pieces.

They were called the Deathly Hallows. Instruments of great magical prowess created by death
himself and used as a control for him. They came in a set of three: The Elder Wand of Antioch said
to be the unbeatable wand, The Resurrection Stone of Cadmus said to raise any spirit from the dead
including oneself, and the Invisibility Cloak of Ignotius which would hide the wearer completely
from all things, even death.

At first it had seemed such a simple task. How hard could finding legendary objects be, especially
when one could trace a lineage stemming from the first holders of such objects? Surely if some rare
and powerful artifact was found there would be talk of it as well and that would be easy enough to
track.

It should have been simple. Yet, it had proved more trying than he predicted. Each lead became
something of a dead end before any others cropped up to follow. That, or they slipped through his
grip by other means. So he resorted to tracing the ancestry of the artifacts' original owners back
centuries to the Peverells and the three brothers, and that is where the real trouble began.

What should have been a simple look into ancient lines became a convoluted manhunt and while he had deduced the Peverells to be distinctive and oddly fitting for the Hallows, all three legendary necromancers, finding the descendants of the line and likewise where exactly the artifacts of Death lived presently continued to be illusive information.

Purebloods were jealous creatures by nature and exceedingly protective of their heirlooms. More than items, the information on their family heritages were guarded with almost fanatic fervor. Unless notable or in someway relevant to current political stances and trends this information was always locked deep in grimoires or the vaults of the Goblin Nation. Unattainable if not the owner of said items or vaults.

As far as he could find with his limited sources in Britain, the Peverell lines had mostly melded long ago into what could possibly be any of the Twenty Eight Ancient and Most Noble Houses. That was not even taking into consideration the lines that could have left British soil for more remote holdings without the island nation.

Had he not been familiar with the lore and the symbols of the Hallows he wouldn't have found any of them as quickly as he had. It was indeed fortunate then that he recalled seeing the symbols, when in his formative years, as a marker upon the graves of the Potter family. While he hated to reflect on a time when weakness ruled him, he could not deny the usefulness of the years he spent in the company of his beloved Albus.

As far as he knew, the Cloak could have passed to any descendant of any of the Potters for they were the most direct line to Ignotius. The problem then was to which Potter? Did it leave the family line to any house a son or daughter was married into? Was it male or female heirs that received it? Was it gifted away? This was information he lacked and thus he had limited success in finding the whereabouts of Death's Cloak.

He had more luck with The Death Stick of Antioch or as sometimes referred to as 'The Elder Wand'. Antioch had no known heirs but the wand could be traced painstakingly through the centuries to one Mycov Gregorovich, a wandmaker in Wizarding Austria. In an hour he had convinced the man that the best option for him was to hand it over to him when he would come for it and Gregorovich agreed wholeheartedly.

As for the Resurrection stone of Cadmus, his line disappeared into the sands of time and for the life of him, Gellert could not uncover any trace of the line itself beyond a small tie to Salazar Slytherin which all the Peverell brothers had in common, and an affinity for empathic magic which could be any number of magically sensitive families on record nowadays. Grudgingly, he had to surmise that Cadmus' line was dead and gone and therefore the Resurrection Stone could be anywhere and with anyone.

For this reason alone he had his men keeping tabs of every black market artifacts dealer across Europe and specifically any in Britain. In the hope that some sign of its existence would show. So far the search appeared fruitless. He decided he would need to find another way to search if need be but until then he had another problem when it came to the Hallows and the Peverells. It was a more direct problem that really shouldn't have been a problem at all and one he hadn't seen coming, Lord Hadrian Peverell.

Gellert had been so sure that any line from the brothers had already been swallowed by more modern ones that he hadn't bothered to check if any holder of the original name remained. So it was with almost liquid luck that he had stumbled upon one. It had been a pleasant surprise to find in his research that a small, almost indistinct split in the line of Ignotius existed before the Potter line
swallowed it whole. He was a fool for thinking the name had changed so he had not been looking for it.

After finding the lead he dove into centuries of ministry records. Years of research had unearthed signs of smaller Peverell Lords living through the ages but all accounts were scarce and sometimes even so absurd in nature that Gellert refused to believe they happened. It was only after he had recognized a name in recent records that he believed he found something solid. Had he not met Hadrian Peverell himself, he would almost believe that the link was a waste of time and would have focused solely other names and events. But he knew this name and the description of him. He could have smacked himself with the obviousness of it all.

He had first encountered Hadrian Peverell in his youth, and he had been so certain that it was a bastard Potter at the time that he had dismissed him completely. They had even been close friends and Hadrian had been his confidant in recent years. They slept together just a year ago! How had he not noticed?! How had he not seen the correlations between his cryptic warnings and easy dismissal of the Halloys.

That is when he had made his first mistake in regards to Hadrian Peverell. He tried to force him without heeding his warnings. He had confronted Hadrian, accused him of sabotaging their plans, and demanded that Hadrian hand over any information he had on them. He had not realized the gravity that such a mistake had cost him until his friend and one time lover had fled. Gellert was back to square one.

What was worse, finding the man now proved almost impossible and his forces were spread too thin for him to have a group focused upon this one wizard, powerful as he may be. Maybe that was why Peverell kept slipping from his grasp, or perhaps it was that Gellert knew he was underestimating the other wizard every time he sent a mere follower after the man. It was humiliating.

Just the thought was enough to make Gellert's blood boil every time. He often wondered if he was somehow being played by Hadrian. That all of this was fated for no plot could be this cruel. Reading his little notes after every fled sighting; Dreaming of that immense power that roiled in the man's skin. Missing the friend that laughed so charmingly and spoke so well. His grounding force was gone and it had been more devastating than he could have imagined. Almost as bad as Albus.

"You let me go so easily, as if I don't know what it is I do. You'll regret it."

The flash of green; so very green eyes, glowing eerie. A twisted grin that was hollow but generous lips; The taste of Ozone; The smell of Sea; The feeling of Flashfire. Gellert paced, too restless to do much else. Not while he was remembering that man. He wanted to go after him. Not wishing to wait another second, but having little other option, and no leads he was stuck doing just that. Heine would be here soon. He would know then if the chase this time was even worth it.

The room was silent except for the cracking of fire, the howling of ice, and pacing. So still was the silence that the opening of the tower door sounded to the ears as the slamming of ten doors and Heine flinched as he intruded upon Gellert's sanctum.

The silence following was so stifling that it made the hairs upon the arms stand on end. The news Heine was bringing was not all good and his Lord was always quick to dole out any punishment he saw fit to those he considered unworthy. Imperfect. He wondered how good his chances were and falling into the low numbers. Not ideal.

He tried and failed to suppress the nervous tick in his cheek. His stomach was clenched in a knot of nerves that made him tremble minutely in his skin and he would have worried his lip into bloody flesh if he thought he would not be harshly reprimanded for it. Instead, he repressed his fears as well
as he could and kept his hands clenched behind his back. He hoped beyond hope that the shaking would stop soon. His lord was a force all on his own and even just slightly irritated the magic was palpable.

He felt he always fought to stay upright against this being, as even existing within the same room could make a man bow low. One could feel the raging energy fill every available space as it twisted and turned in agitation. Growing evermore with each moment passing. He was lucky he was upright at all such was the oppressive force exuding from Lord Gellert Grindelwald.

Once, Heine Weiss had been an Auror known for infiltrating the most impressive wards for the ministries defense task force. Now he was Gellert's attack dog. He stood no higher than a common woman and postured as straight as a board. His hair was cropped as short to his head as possible and his face was soft save for a jagged scar that cut his right cheek in half. His eyes were sharp and assessing at the best of times. The color of honey.

He would be handsome if his skin weren't so thin from stress and his demeanor warmer. He had spent most of his career chasing wizards the like of Gellert and it showed in the weary lines at the edges of his eyes. How many years had he fought for the ministries ideals? How much had he given for them before following Lord Grindelwald? Sometimes, like now, he wondered why he ever left at all.

He was once confident in the world and his place in it but now he wasn't quite sure what was the right thing anymore or where he fit. Now he was pathetic, shaking in his boots. He was nothing more than a pawn. A minion who stood rigid and pale in the dimness. So very afraid and diminished before his ever roving Lord.

'For good reason,' Heine told himself. Peverell was still out there and not here. Not where Gellert had ordered him to be brought and Heine had failed to apprehend him, yet again. He had tried. He had tried to follow and to grab and to take him away as he knew he should but each time he had tried to close the distance, the figure before him would be just that much farther away. Heine had little allusions that he could ever capture such a man. He doubted that anyone less than his lord could.

No matter what they planned, Lord Peverell was always just that much more ahead of them in the game. It was as if Peverell knew when any of Grindelwald’s followers were nearby and merely toyed with them. As impossible a sense as that seemed, and so oddly specific, Heine was not fool enough to doubt that such magic was possible and had been applied. If there was a counter to it, he did not know it.

It seemed a game that only their Lord and Peverell seemed privy to. Where Peverell would be as infuriatingly obvious with where he was just to rile Lord Grindelwald up and Lord Grindelwald would send resources better suited to the plotting of war out to search.

The wizard would appear and disappear at will from any place he lived for any number of years, months before even Grindelwald could give chase. All the evidence they ever found of any dwelling from the elusive man were simple, cryptic notes addressed only to Gellert himself.

It wasn't even that the notes were that incendiary. It was that they even existed and were found. That Peverell was still out there and not here where he should be. That was what made their Lord shake the keep in his anger. The force would be so immense that the keep would be empty for weeks after. The fear to tread within so great that many chose to simply stay away.

Each time Peverell escaped, his Lord became that much closer to killing any within reach. Heine could only hope that today he lived to see tomorrow, whole. Each step Gellert took before him was cause for him to quiver within and pray. Wondering if he should have just run when he had the
chance. Now it was too late for that and all he could do was watch in trepidation as his Lord paced to
and fro. To and Fro.

A look of something close to fascination but closer still to anger painted over his lord's handsome
features with each pass, more pronounced each go around. Back and forth he went with lips pursed
in thought, fair brows furrowed in confusion, and eyes darting to the map table as if it had answers.
Stunning, handsome, so very dangerous. It was almost unfair and terrified as he was Heine liked to
think his Lord magnificent at all times.

Now was no exception. Even if the robes worn had creases from sleepless nights, and long flaxen
hair tumbled unattended down the folds of Red and Gold, always red and gold, he was still beautiful.
Just the man's magic alone was enough for many to fall at his feet in worship but his looks held merit
all their own. Even twisted in anger or warped in Malice, the man was breathtaking.

Heine always fancied that it was Gellert’s actions that drew him in from the Aurors to his side but he
would be a fool to think that this magic enveloping him and those striking features were not the
source of his loyalty. Power and Lust. The promise for freedom.

Every pass of his Lord's pacing only served to remind him of that power. The power grew and grew
in responsiveness until Gellert stopped abruptly and marched to the map table. He took a green pin
and placed it over Gregorovitch’s shop almost in reverence. Heine could only watch as his Lord
traced the many red and green pins stabbed into the papers.

“You are certain it was him?” Heine flinched at the low rasp in his Lord’s voice and wondered if
Gellert had forgotten just how sweet that voice used to be. Now tainted, dark, and ragged. The
intensity of the gaze upon him made Heine whimper lowly, drop his head for the fear. The presence
of such a man reduced him to little else but that. Fear. Somewhere in him a piece of him sunk further
into self loathing for it.

Between his Dark Lord and the Lord of Peverell he was nothing. This he knew to be certain.
Accepted it as truth but it didn't make his wounded pride any better. Sometimes he wondered what
would happen when inevitably these two forces clashed. The very idea was tantalizing for surely he
would be stuck between them and die gloriously. End this meaningless, pointless, existence.

All the while, Gellert watched the map with a feeling of almost anticipation itching at his fingertips.
How many years had he searched for this one wizard now? How long had it been since that wicked
smile flashed before him in the wake of Green? Black hair sliding through his fingertips in the grass
of Mohr?

His need to see him grew ever more with each passing year. His need to set things back on their right
course. To have him. His eyes flashed with longing for but an instant then became frozen over as
chips of arctic winter. Albus, Peverell, want curled low in his gut. He felt heat suffuse his limbs but
pushed it all away. Too late now, all too late. Some things could be broken too badly to be repaired.
Some betrayals weren't forgivable.

“Tell me you are certain,” he demanded in low tones never removing his gaze from that newest
green pin. Needing to hear it. Knowing that Heine was incapable of lying about this, of lying to him.

“I-...I am certain my Lord. There can be no mistake, the magic itself…” Heine shivered and
shamefully cast his gaze to the floor again. Gellert could understand, Peverell had that effect on
others. The wizard filled the spaces with a sentence of magic that felt of nothing and everything at
once, so immense and everlasting. A tempest of emotion and memory filling everything to the brim
with magic and so, so. So. Much. Power.
Gellert knew he was powerful, more than most but not powerful like Peverell. It was as if Peverell's magic was not released with the intent of purpose, just that it could not be contained any longer. As if he housed so much already that the rest wouldn't fit, only bubble over and out in an endless miasma that shrouded the man like a veil. Gellert burned for power such as that. He tore his gaze from the table.

“And the artifact? I take it Peverell took it from the wandmaker?” His words were gravel scrapping stone. The feeling behind them reflecting the sudden charge of agitation within himself. His own magic lashed about the room in whipping coils. Had he lost the one Hallow he knew be within his grasp?! After so long searching?! He would have screamed if he felt it would do anything but that was undignified. He would have cursed Peverell to hell if he felt it would make any difference.

“That is just it my Lord. Peverell did not so much as ask Gregorovich about it. Merely got a new wand, a rather regular one. Willow and unicorn hair about twelve inches, supple. When Gregorovich offered to find him the perfect one instead of just another temporary one Peverell laughed in his face. Told him that such a thing was not yet ready for him. That a normal one would last him a year and that was fine.

“The wandmaker was cross after that but the wards around the artifact that you placed have been undisturbed. I am sure Peverell knew it was there, knew what it is but it was as if he did not care enough… When I made to catch him he did that thing he does. Mikov cannot make out the brand of magic it is. He says it is not charm work as we originally suspected. As far as he is certain the magic works no differently than expansion. Mikov believes he is neither here nor there at those moments. Folding space or something. ‘Flickering’ he calls it. He could explain it better than I my Lord.” If Gellert was relieved he did not show it.

Hadrian, didn't take the wand? Blue eyes widened minutely as his brain tried to work out the reasons that such a thing would happen. They had fought over such a thing before. It was why Hadrian left in the first place and surely he must have felt Grindelwald's magic. There would be no possible reason he would miss something like this, so why... Why would he leave something like the Death Stick in favor of a normal wand... a wand that would break again before the year ends. Also yet another temporary wand? Why temporary?

Why would a wand break? Was the core incompatible, but then why buy it at all?! Now that he thought of it, he could not recall any moment he ever witnessed Hadrian Peverell using a wand, not when they first met or after they made love or even in a mock duel. He was certain he witnessed Peverell cast magic, certain! It would make sense someone like himself and Peverell could cast wandlessly but even masters of the art used wands for most things.

The sound of Heine's shuffling made Gellert once again aware of the man's presence. He raised his hand imperiously and waved him away, he needed to think about this. Needed to reevaluate just how much of a threat the last Peverell could be if he truly ended up an enemy.

“What do you know that I do not my dear.” He whispered in tandem with the closing tower door. That night he did not sleep. He saw instead the flash of pale skin bathed in the light of nothing, a void, and a figure with far too many faces grinning.

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~ Wool's Orphanage and London, 1936~

Tom Riddle was always an extraordinary boy. He always did extraordinary things. He knew ever since he was two that he was different. Special. He could tell you that the others were not special like
he was. He knew they could not move things just by willing them to and he knew they could not talk to snakes. He also knew that they were selfish and cruel and that if he didn't teach them time after time that hurting him was bad, then they would one day kill him.

He was so certain of this that he made sure to mentally track each and every child who wronged him. He spent hours fitting the crime to the punishments and then reinforcing the lessons in each person on the receiving end. He was only seven and yet he knew how to reach inside another and crush their breath. He knew how to break bones like the ones in Anthony's arm, and how to make Amy Benson go sleepless for weeks. He had drilled into the children that:

1. Hurting him is bad.
2. Touching his things is bad.
3. Telling lies regarding his person is bad.

All these things were rules that many of the other children had learned to abide by the time Tom turned seven. Some still needed encouragement to follow them now and again but the incidences in which punishment was deemed necessary had drastically decreased ever since Tom started making it a point to be a teacher. He knew somewhere that maybe what he was doing was cruel, but then he would remember all the insults and punches and nights being locked away because of lies, and the guilt that should have been there vanished and he was justified.

He knew that nobody would understand because nobody had ever tried and by then he didn't find any reason to care if they did. Chances were they too, would be lying. He knew now that nobody was made inherently good unless they had want of something; that nobody would believe him because he wasn't like the other children.

He wasn't disgusting like they were. Inside every person at Wool’s lived a monster and he was the only one who could control his. They were all meaningless people undeserving of his talents, except for the snakes. They were different.

Tom had only ever made one friend in the whole world and it was a snake. He called her Nissa, and she was long and green, and so very pretty. He liked the color green the best because his Nissa was green. He believed that nothing in this world was more beautiful than when the sun hit her scales just so.

She became his best friend and when she speaks he listened wholeheartedly. Nissa would regale him of her travels and of the things she had hunted and of this silly other snake who wanted to make hatchlings with her. She would say she wanted to eat him one day and that one day when she gets big and strong, she would.. He laughed because she was so very small then and he so very big. Days like this with Nissa made Tom feel happy, and he knew that if he ever loved anything that he loved her.

He spent hours with her in his lap just stroking her smooth scales and wishing they could be so very far away. He dreamed child dreams that maybe one day she would become so big that she could swallow Billy, knew it to be silly but did it anyway. They both found humor in that.

Nissa said only certain types of snakes can become that big and that if he ever met one to treat them with respect. Snakes like that were the kings of snakes, she would say and hissed in contentment. In turn he would teach her about maths he completed, and the stars high above them that she could not see or understand.

He would describe how perfect he thought the universe was in all its chaos. He would go on and on to her about the constellations and how maths explained their distances. The very passions of the mind that he valued so highly, he instilled in her.
Days like these were good and Tom loved her so much then. This was perfect and he thought maybe the world could be okay if this is what was in it, his Nissa. When the sun set that particular evening he had to leave but promised to bring her one of his only wool mittens for when the nights would get colder.

That night he dreamed of the green of Nissa’s scales as she grew so big and strong that the world couldn't come between them. He dreamed of her green in the eyes of a man floating in a space of nothing. Surrounded by stars and chaos and universes they floated together, and he loved. In his sleep he smiled, and when the dawn broke the sky he awoke without knowing his fragile childhood would go with it.

When he returned that day to fulfill his promise of a wool mitt he found her head crushed by a stone. He watched as her blood dried in the sun and felt his insides grow cold. The chill sunk deep and jagged and quick. His knees numbed and he knelt on the ground before her broken body. He hissed to her desperately but there was no response.

He knew there shouldn’t be, she had no more head. Yet he couldn't bare there not to be. Her blood coated the ground around her and he could not see anything save for her. His vision blurred around the edges and his eyes burned in a way they hadn't in a long, long time. Not since he learned tears wouldn't stop injustice or fill an empty stomach. The world tunneled into a long narrow space wherein blackness crept on the edges. All he could do was stare at the red, red, red of his only friend's life blood. Where it dried deep into the earth.

There was a warped ringing in his ears like when cotton was stuffed within after trips to the ocean. The all at once sound returned in a heinous cacophony of sick amusement. Billy was laughing and Dennis was laughing and Tom couldn't comprehend why! He couldn't fathom why the two would laugh when Nissa, Nissa could laugh no longer. Ask about stars, and numbers, and hatchlings no longer.

The burning of his eyes became worse and Tom found his throat thick with the affliction. He heard the sounds of loss, and grief, and pain, yet could not think they came from himself. He felt ice on his cheeks and a single tear turned to two, then more. A thing within him groaned beneath a weight he could not understand and then snapped. Years spent hardening his emotions washed away under the tide of dismay.

He found himself weeping over the loss of her. A swelling ball of everything he ever found painful rising higher up within. It joined with the broken damn of his soul and raged as a beast without purpose or direction. He was wretched and wounded and in that moment honed to a fine edge.

Tom lifted his trembling hands before himself, quivering as she did when the chill of night set in. The torrent of emotion burned into rage and fury so powerful that he became nothing more than that. He saw nothing but black and red, red, red. He raised his empty eyes and swore then a vow to Nissa that he would make them regret ever seeing her. They would pay in blood for her blood.

He vowed upon all he was to make them hurt as much as she must have hurt. His thoughts sharpened into startlingly clarity and that wild thing inside him become smooth and precise. Thickened and engorged by his loss, and his pain, and his righteousness. He rose up with grace and watched vacantly the boys Billy and Dennis laugh. Their monstrous faces contorted into a visage of all things ugly and sick. The evils of the world before him.

He had always hated them both but never enough to destroy them as he planned to do now. They had never transgressed or wronged him enough to act outside of his normal punishments. Now though, now they had given him ample reason enough to more than hurt their beings. It was only a faint voice in his head that reminded him why it was a bad idea to act upon that in totality. Fearing
that murder would snap something irreparable in himself, as Nissa warned.

He would not kill them, they did not deserve the pleasure nor the mercy. Instead, he gave fuel to his sharp clarity, thickening it further and willed it with absolute rule to do as he bid. It moved, long and smooth, poised itself about him as a constrictor might. It was primed and ready to rend asunder his enemies but controlled absolutely, harnessed strictly. His power, all danger, direction, and discipline.

The two children noticed Tom seriously for the first time and silence spread about where laughter had existed before. The scent of their growing fear wafted in the morning breeze leaving both to contemplate what may come to them now with Tom looking like that. Never had Tom looked like that. They did not see tears though they streamed unrelenting. How could they when the eyes that focused upon them held the intent to kill.

Dennis froze first and looked to Billy, but Billy was not looking back but at Tom. The face he knew so well was empty save for the depth of obsidian eyes and the vow reflected in his to them. Blood for blood, pain for pain. All things equal. The promise that he saw in those black voids jolted his system into flight and he attempted to run.

The wild thing in and about Tom lashed forward and drug him slowly back. Not allowing for mercy or delicacy. Unseen it sank itself into the boy straining muscles and tendons as it pulled him back. It made sure to scrape the boy over sharp stones and twigs until Billy was bleeding and begging. It called for retribution. For Nissa, and with countenance devoid of all feeling or remorse he bid the tendril of his wild thing to snap Billy’s leg in thirds.

The resounding set of three snaps was satisfying but not enough. The crime was not yet paid in full. Pain for pain, blood for blood. He would not allow for anything else but absolute penance and regret for their crime. He would cripple the boy permanently, let his bones ache every storm and every chill so as to follow him unto death. Let him hobble as a beggar and never be fit to work enough to keep himself content.

He willed the wild thing to pull out the middle segment of the broken fibula, to crack the knee, he forced it to obey with clinical precision. The piece of bone slid wetly and expertly out of the skin, soaked in red, and the deeper pop of the boy's unattached kneecap followed. His revenge complete.

Billy's screamed but it didn't last for longer than a moment, cut off abruptly as Tom willed for his silence and forced that silence to be. Weak, he thought. Pathetic, he thought. His Nissa wouldn't have screamed. His Nissa would have had more pride than that. She would have taken it and laughed in the face of her aggressor. This sniveling little boy had not deserved to be her end. She had deserved better.

The bone dropped into the snow, painted and splotched in life essence. The larger bully was reduced to little more than a quivering mass of wretched sobs and disgusting gagging coughs. The stench of piss and vomit marked the end to his torment but only the beginning of his sentence. Then when Billy was nothing more than that he resolved upon Dennis.

When Tom’s black eyes found him he was petrified in fear. He trembled and fell to his knees unable to rise or to run. It was as if he was tethered to that spot by an unseen set of ropes. He could feel them moving on his skin like the serpent they had smashed. He tried to beg for forgiveness unsure as to what he had done to warrant this, but found no voice within him. His tongue would not move. He had no more time to panic as Tom was over him like a carrion shadow.

Those dark eyes bore into his own and felt something creep within him and bury down deep. It was as if there were fingers at him temples squeezing until they cracked through and into his head and he knew only pain. It broke into his skull and ricocheted down his spine. His hands scratched
desperately at his skin, as if hoping to scratch the pain out. But it did not work; it only slithered further and further, deeper and deeper.

His nails still tried to chase it, he couldn't stop himself as his skin ripped off in shreds. He bled and bled but it wasn't enough! He writhed much like the snake did when it tried to escape. His back snapped up with convulsive fits until he feared it would break. He would scream if he had a voice but as it was he could only bite down upon his tongue hard enough that his teeth tore into the muscle, nearly severing it.

The blood seeped from his lips, into his throat. He choked and thrashed and scratched but it would not stop. Black eyes watched mercilessly and he wondered what they had done... God what had he done?!

Hours passed and finally, as the sun set that day, Billy and Dennis were left in the cold of the falling night aching and bloody and terrified. By the dawn they were recovered. They did not recall much of what happened and Billy claimed they must have fallen from the ledges above the yard but Dennis didn't think so. He never made mention of it but in the nights following he couldn't forget Riddle's dark eyes, phantom pain at his temples, and a simple warning.

"Don't touch my things."

Dennis was never the same again and Billy had a useless leg. Billy retreated from any room Tom was in and Dennis feared snakes. They never did bother Tom again and they stayed far away from the back of the yard.

As for Tom, he returned only once more to the place where Nissa was murdered. He wrapped her body in the mitten and buried her under their tree. He couldn't say a word because if he did, he'd give into the hollow sadness heavy in his chest. The loss of her ached more than he could possibly comprehend. She had been his only friend and now... now suddenly she was no more. Tom never returned to that place again, unable to bare the thought of her. Instead, he locked himself in his room and delved ever harder into whatever he could find to keep his mind from the loss.

By the time school came in the fall Tom was even more ahead than he had already been. The teachers noticed something was different about him but assumed it was simply because Tom Riddle was a genius and beyond the scope of his peers.

Tom already knew maths above primary school levels. He could read and speak a fair share of Latin and French. He knew his etiquette and could name every major battle since the twelve hundreds. The idea of him moving into higher levels was already up for consideration but his teachers still worried about his isolation from the rest of the children. Tom never spoke to any of them unless it was to answer a direct question, and at break times he preferred to sit in solitude with a book than interact with any other child.

When asked about it Tom just smiled handsomely and explained that none of the other children could challenge him enough. He didn't want to play childish games and his peers couldn't hold discussions with him. He liked them well enough but just felt that he could no longer relate to any of them. He would rather have more work, he said. "It keeps my mind sharp enough to forget I am lonely." His teachers never asked about it again, choosing to supply him with harder class material to keep him busy.

Tom soon learned that teachers were gullible and easily manipulated. He hated them. All it ever took was a smile and a polite compliment and Tom got whatever he wished for at the school. He supposed that as long as they were useful then they were a little better than the rest of the monsters in the world.
As long as Tom played nice, they would have no reason to believe the rumors any other orphan rats told them. To them, he was perfect. They would never suspect he anything less than that.

Chapter End Notes

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If you like this story let me know what you think, this one appreciates it. :)

Chapter 2: Sweet Child of Mine

Barcelona, Spain 1937

The sun hung bright in an ever blue sky. It was a blue so rich that one could fall into it if one looked too long. There was not a cloud in sight, and the beaming warmth of the sun sunk into the very earth and made everything lazy and content.

A gentle breeze disheveled the hair of anyone it touched as if a gentle parent that took joy in just being there. It brought with it a semblance of memories fondly made, a phantom echo of a barking laugh. It reminded him of home and loves lost in time. The crackling of the hearth midwinter, and the taste of sweet cinnamon. Sirius would have loved it. No snow, no cold, no darkness. Yes, Sirius would have loved it here indeed.

He is not truly gone. Just far away in time. A different him who would have a better and more pleasant life, he reminded himself wistfully. He turned his face up into the sun, his verdant gaze pointed heavenward. A full smile cut his lips to reveal teeth all straight and pearl white, like military headstones lined neatly and kindly.

His bone white skin was soaking in the rays of the star far above, enjoying the coy breeze that wafted against him. He felt at ease, lighter than air, free. This, this here was everything. The sky, the breeze, the sun, the crashing of waves on the shore far below his balcony, an endless ocean that went forever reflected in the sky. This was life. He was living. Maybe he would fall back into the void one day, but today… Today was a day for living and laughing, and well…

A bit of red painted his cheeks and his eyes drooped lazily under soft black lashes. He brought his lip between his teeth and nibbled on it in thought, wanting and aching. He raised a glass of cool wine to his mouth and drunk from it longingly, drought deeply. The taste of cherries bloomed on his tongue and the warmth of Dionysus filled him but he remained empty in a more primal and personal way. He was aware that part of him was gone. No not gone, lost in time. Red eyes flashed in the back of
his mind and he burned. Damn it all though he wanted! Oh Merlin he wanted.

At the beginning he might have raged over the absence of one. He had suffered immeasurably, shredded and torn. Now he could only be whimsically lovesick as he stopped counting the days and years that stood between them. If he had learned anything at all it was patience. Patience to last the centuries between them and the centuries yet they would live. At least Death saw fit to not start him from the Founder's themselves, that would have been unbearable. He doubted he could have done it. Seeing the features so prominent of his man in the face of others not him.

Not that there is much to this either... Just empty want. Bitter, that thought. He did not dwell on it. That road led to madness. Instead he opted to lean back further into the sunlight and enjoy his warm winter. His magic stretched from him in contentment, much like a cat over a favored rug. It hummed and roiled lazily much as he himself felt. Like this they relaxed under the heat of day and lived.

It was only when the presence of other magic came close that the sentence of himself chose to rise up and alert him. Hadrian took a quick notice to owners of the said magics and smiled once more for it was Bastion and Celeste, Alexander Mortimer's two hellion twins. He sighed and stretched, prepared himself for the forces of the battle wizard's spawn. Of his most recent pupils.

Magic closed about him as a lover's embrace and he blurred and then became unnoticeable to the eyes. Hidden within the shroud he was safe. With ageless grace he pulled himself away from his seat to stand as an observer to the oncoming chaos. He watched and felt warm within for how wondrous peace was that children could be so inherently good.

A screech of joy pierced the natural serenity of the balcony, despite himself he felt himself grinning in delight. Around alabaster pillars came two small children nearly identical in all ways. Sweet and precious beasts in their own right and so full of energy. Lights of a darkening world.

They tussled with one another, laughing and rolling in the grass of the hill. “I’m going to give it to him!”'s and “No I am!”'s were tossed to and fro as the boy and girl played chase. A parchment was clutched between the pair, it was sealed. The children looked around fervently for him, argued and fought over the page between them with renewed vigor.

At this rate it will be torn asunder. Yet he found that he wouldn't have been terribly upset if it was. Lately news was not the best sort to have. War upon the horizon in most instances, cases of the dehumanization of peoples and places. The hate was nigh unbearable.

He chuckled gently and motioned with his finger. The paper flew from the small ones and to himself. It shook itself out and almost seemed to preen itself before settling upon the small drink table beside the wizard. Vain things letters such as these. Outright pesky in most cases and terribly spoiled things.

Instead of giving the paper anymore attention, he slid his thoughts back to the two children. They both were currently squinting at the area about his person in confusion and suspicion in equal measures. They seemed unsure of themselves, looking to each other and frowning briefly. Sometimes he wondered if they read each other's thoughts but knew from experience they were no legilimens. They lacked such talent.

“Papa said he would be out here,” Whispered the boy taking a thumb into his mouth as he wondered toward the paper. The object was tapping its edge and crossing the other two as if impatient or offended. Which would be what the Lord of Santiago would do in its place if he had been so ignored by Hadrian. Shame it was not the man himself it would have been entertaining.

“He must be Bastion! Papers don't fly without magic! Well... not unless papa already charmed it or maybe it was already charmed. I don't think papa would let those in though. So it must be him.
Hadrian always says that even faraway intent can do things like this. He says its simple.” Always a smart one that Celeste. She was still observing the chair next to the paper critically as if she noticed something was off. The two started to approach when Hadrian decided to reveal himself and spare the two any further puzzlement.

As his form started to come into focus, their identical brown eyes widened comically. They squealed in delight and ran to their mentor, climbing upon him as monkeys do to trees. All the while Hadrian laughed, his voice the clear ringing of bells.

“Do more magic!” They demanded but Hadrian shook his head minutely and gathered them to his chest. He took in their grass stained clothes and mussed hair. He breathed them in and wondered upon their naive innocence, their exuberance. He wondered if he ever had felt as happy as these children. He wondered if he could have ever been so dazzled as this.

No. No he hadn't. Flying had been as close to this level of childish joy as he could get. Even it was not close. He wondered if Tom ever had such bright eyes as these to, who had never before been subject to pain or hunger... Or fear. They would never need the screams of their mother to fuel their patroni when the time came. Would never need to know what a cold cupboard felt like.

“You know I shouldn't do such a thing.” Saying such and yet he conjured a wreath of white flowers for them both anyways. He fitted them to each child, raking his fingers through blond locks almost equal in length. Celeste buried herself into his neck and laughed prettily.

“That would be highly irresponsible of me,” His magic raised itself around them and brushed upon the cheeks of each child to make them giggle. Bastion squirmed and bounced upon Hadrian's knee, watching him with fascination. He too often recalled a familiar child there two decades or so ago.

“And as I am an adult and, therefore bound by that logic, I am expected to be responsible.” He levitated the glass of wine. Turning the liquid to butterflies of all colors that flitted about and then out to the sea. The three of them gazed out where the insects journeyed far away over roiling waves of azure blue.

“We wouldn't want to accuse me of being irresponsible right? Now, what is it that Alexander saw fit to show me since he sent his two hellions out to harass me. He knows I hate it when he uses children against me. Not fair at all!” He sniffed and acted offended, turning his nose up from his charges and focusing upon the impatient paper beside him. It raised its corner with malice and shook it at him.

Glad I didn't make it capable of speech this time. No doubt it has much to yell of and so little to say. Perhaps it heard his thoughts because the parchment vibrated intensely for a moment and turned away from him with a stomping of corners.

“Now now, lets not get snippy,” He chided it. He felt small hands grip his long hair and pull. Hard. A hiss of pain passed his lips and Hadrian refocused on the faces of two pouting and obviously angry seven year olds. They tugged again and Hadrian couldn't help himself but the laugh riotously at their display. He raised his hands in mock surrender and felt the air knocked out of him as both chose a side to elbow into until they were each tucked tightly into it.

“We are not hellions and Papa said that you should be nicer to us seeing as you will be leaving soon. You may never see us again and then how would you feel?” Celeste was cross with him and Bastion leveled him a look that was melting into insecurity. He hid himself under Hadrian's arm and wished that the man would stay. What could he tell them that would make it easier for them to understand that it was more a decision of that he had to and not that he wanted to? What could he tell them that would soothe them of their abandonment? They would still be angry, children are like that... Hadrian knew the two children would be sore about his decision to leave. They hadn't spoken to him for a
week after he told their father that he could not stay longer. No matter what the press said, there was a war and it was not safe. The longer he stayed the closer Gellert's men would get to finding his trail and consequently finding them. Children didn't understand the nature of war, such cruelty was yet unseen by them. Loss and grief weren't something little ones would be capable of understanding logically.

They couldn't comprehend the nature of ruthless men. They could not know of the extent that desperate men would go to seize power. Gellert wouldn't spare any who he thought would hinder him. The last thing he wanted was the blood of Alex and his brood on his hands. The last thing he wanted was for him to place them in harm's way.

“That's right! I still don't know why you even need to leave! Papa said it was because a friend of yours would come if you stayed, but are not friends supposed to come over? We play with the Gabrielle and Fabio all the time and they come over too! Why do you have to leave?! Are you mad at Papa?” Celeste tugged again at the soft hair in her small fist, not willing to let go of it, not wanting her favorite teacher to leave her. Hadrian matched her gaze and she thought perhaps he was sad. Sometimes, she thought, he seemed like father when mommy went away.

Hadrian soothed Celeste's hands from his hair, wrapping both children in his embrace. He wondered just how he could explain the danger he was to them. How could they understand that just because he was a friend to Gellert once, that he was a friend no longer. Children were so quick to simplify things in their lives. Concepts like betrayal and morality were difficult for them to understand. Not for Tom. Tom wouldn't have let it be simple. Then again he was not able to be a child for long.

“It is... not so simple. My friend is not nice like Gabrielle. He is not gentle like Fabio. He is a powerful wizard who can't understand that hurting others is bad, even if the cause is just. If he came here, he would hurt your father. He would hurt you both. I don't want either of you hurt and so I need to leave. Besides I have spent the last three years here, it is time I move on. The world is too large to stay in one place. One day, you will understand the importance of knowing when to leave something behind or someones in this case. Sometimes it is better to lead danger away than to stay and fight.”

The two children looked at him, their eyes glittering. Celeste huffed and laid her head on on side of his chest, Bastion on the other and for a moment Hadrian saw their father in them. Alex had been this small once too, and just as bright. They sat in silence, minus the occasional sniffle, until the sun began to fall past the horizon.

As the first stars dotted the sky, Alexander came for them. Where Alex was tall Hadrian was small; Where Alex had light hair cut short, Hadrian had hair blacker that night that fell over his shoulders and down his spine; Where Alex had hazel eyes, Hadrian had eyes of glowing green. To anyone looking Alex would seem the elder and Hadrian the younger.

So opposed were they to one another that it may seem odd. The wizard stood over Hadrian with a small and very sad smile. He was hiding it but the pain trembled at the corners. For a moment they stared at each other. Calculating the right moment to break the silence. They had fought last night. Alex had lost their row. Not wishing to let Hadrian go and not able to make him stay. Fearing for Hadrian and fearing for his children. Wanting to protect them all.

The man took Celeste gently from Hadrian without her waking. He placed her on his shoulder and kissed her hair. It was a sweet thing, and there was no doubt that Alexander loved his children dearly. They were all he had left of his wife Angelina. All he could hold to in the world.

“I remember when you were that small.” Hadrian snorted and gently shook Bastion awake, but the boy just nestled himself deeper into Hadrian's side. Not willing to part. He gently disentangled
himself from the boy and set the young one on his lap instead running a gentle hand through the child's golden hair.

“And I remember you teaching me my numbers and letters. Mother favored you a great man. I didn't believe her when she said you were just as young when she was my age as you were then. Now... I can't say she was wrong.” Alexander offered his hand to his son who slid from Hadrian's hip and took it reluctantly, but did not step further away from Hadrian than necessary. Not wishing to leave him for an instant. Alex knew the feeling and felt something in him ache.

“I am older than I look young man.” A fond smile and a wag of a finger erased the tension between them. They laughed and Hadrian felt Bastion nestle into him for the sound. Bastion pretended he was too tired to listen in. Hadrian wondered how such smart children came to be and gently ran his fingers through the child's hair.

“I know, though even I forget sometimes with how you act. That letter arrived for you today from Elliot. There can be no mistake, it is one of his men. He was asking after a young wizard, your height, with green eyes and long black hair. The Santiago matriarch doesn't know how to shut up about you obviously. I doubt it will take them long to get through the wards if they send who I think it they will. This house isn't like it used to be and I was never a very capable wizard when it came to wards. I doubt they could bust through your magic seals on the doors and windows but knowing them...”

Alex's hazel eyes shifted uncertainly aside, in thought, in worry. It made Hadrian ache to see the stress lining the proud man's face. He remembered a time when Alexander knew nothing of grief and strife, better days, days before Gellert started his obsession with the Hallows.

“It would be him Gellert would send. Heine Weiss is his most capable, no doubt nearly peerless in Ward breaking. The boy has been following my trails for years. No doubt he would jump at any lead now that Grindelwald has taken the German ministry. The man was never known to be patient with his underlings and there is no denying that Weiss has failed him far too often lately. I almost feel bad for him to be honest.” The face of a young man with half his face bloody reminded Hadrian of the price Weiss had paid for his loyalty to the German Ministry.

“I was hoping Gellert would take a hint, leave me be.” They both didn't say that Hadrian would have left even if there hadn't been a threat. It was just how he was, too restless to stay in one place. The need to fill some uncharted place within too great. Either way, he would be leaving tonight.

“He wouldn't have garnered your affections if he hadn't been persistent. Neither would I have. It would be foolish to believe he would leave you be, especially with who you are.” An excellent point. Alex motioned his head for them to go inside as the dark was falling and the two children and wizards left the balcony behind them. Their boots clicked on marble as they entered. They stood apart from one another, as if strangers again. Two house elves taking the children to their rooms. For a moment there was only the wind whistling through the windows.

“I wish you wouldn't go, I know why you must but...” Again only space between them. It was much too unbearable and the Lord of Mortimer wrapped his arms around himself and hunched in sorrow. Three years without Angelina, and now he would suffer again without Hadrian to ground him. A gentle caress upon his cheek lifted his face to green eyes, pulled him into soft lips and warm arms.

Their kiss spoke of love and care, but even Alex could tell that is was still missing parts. Alex knew no one could replace the piece Angelina had taken with her. He sometimes wondered who Hadrian had lost to be missing his piece. Then remembered how old his mentor must be. How many must have died on him. How many he must have buried.
“My friend... This is not the end. We do not end here.” Somehow though, Alex knew that this was the end. This would be the last time he would ever see his friend, the last time he would ever know this endless and aching love. In the morning, Hadrian was gone. All signs he had ever been were gone. The house felt empty and the days outside less bright.

Celeste cried more and played less. It felt as if a hole had been cut from each of them. Sometimes, Bastion thought he heard that familiar laugh and would run out to the balcony only to end up sitting in that lone chair for hours if only to pretend Hadrian was there instead. In his mind he played over the last conversation he had heard between his father and Hadrian. He did this endlessly, not understanding why Hadrian had left but knowing that someday he would see him again. Maybe even love him like father did.

**Wool's Orphanage December 31st 1937**

Wind beat at the windows, desperate to get in. The storm raged outside, the snow blocking out the stars and leaving no light. For the children huddled within the drab decaying walls of Wool's Orphanage, there was always little light anyways. This was different though.

The winters seemed to get progressively worse, as if to match the uneasy mood that was slowly over taking London. Fear and unease permeated into the people. Running mouths spoke of the aggression of Germany. The apprehension seeped into every house like an unwelcome pest. People whispered in hushed tones of unbridled worries for food was becoming expensive, and some knew very well just how bad things were to become. Those wise in the ways of wars having fought in the Great War. Decades prior.

Because company attracts like company and because Wool's was not a pleasant place, the mood easily soaked into the walls of the drab Orphanage. It draped itself about the rafters, and into walls, and into the children and matrons like a blanket of misery. Every child and matron felt the looming darkness and shivered except for Tom who was as Tom was, cold already. Tom took in the news with stride, calculating and trying to connect the dots where facts were still missing. The papers and radio often left things unsaid. Tom however was a perceptive boy and often understood the words not said, reading between lines and contemplating the future.

Many an evening the unaffected boy spent next to the radio trying to piece together the state of the world. He wondered just how much he would have to face in the coming years and feeling dread sink into him night after night. It wove deep into a black ball within him, ever tightening, ever expanding. For he did not want to die like this! Not like some orphaned rat! This night however, was different than the rest but Tom wouldn't be able to say just how it was that way. He just knew it would be.

This night, something great would happen. It sang in his bones, echoed in every pump of blood through his veins. His focus drifted idly to the storm outside, his thoughts muddled, ignoring the his of the radio long since silenced for the evening. Sometimes he got this odd sense, as if something were about to happen. He would feel twitchy, giddy almost, like something within him was coiled tight and ready. It was like his life was about to be irrevocably changed.

His Power was oddly tame as it slithered through his body this time. Where it was usually buzzing, tonight it was lethargic and sated. It was so very odd for him to feel this way that it made him suspicious. He was used to feeling ready, sharp, and *perfect*. He was not the kind to be jumpy or nervous, or lazy, at least not for the past three years.

His finger tapped a gentle rhythm on the chair as he glared at the window. Whatever would happen would happen from there, he just knew it would. Sometimes he just knew these things and they were
always right. His instincts were always right.

*Tap, tap. Tap tap.*

It would be any minute now, any second. Obsidian eyes glanced quickly to the grandfather clock as it read 6:57pm. It was dinner time and Tom should be eating now but his eyes went back to the window and jolted minutely. His lips twitched at the sight of a snow laden owl beyond the glass, only distinguishable by the white snow marring its black feathers.

It perched a dark silhouette with the back drop of the setting sun to add dramatic effect to its already dread appearance. Two bright gray eyes stared luminescent even in the darkness of its face, like beacons for all lost in the night. The creature hooted, but the sound was silent over the raging wind starting up outside.

His heart began to hammer and that extra sense of his told him that this was it. This was what he was waiting for. *Let it in,* commanded his inner voice. Dark eyes scanned the creature with fascination taken with it in a way he had only known once before. Nissa. His dark pupils blew wide making his dark gaze darker still. Tom wanted it, wanted it more than anything. Would have it. Make it his, somehow.

With quick steps he hastened to the window and threw wide the locks. Cold wrapped itself about him bringing with it the snow but Tom didn't care because this was far more important. His Power flared in excitement, reaching out and encasing the magnificent creature that would be his. It coiled about the owl possessively and Tom could almost believe that the unyielding creature was enjoying it. Preening at the attention.

For an instant it just stared into him before spreading its wings as a cloak of dusk and darted gracefully into the warmer room. With it came a stream of night that was reflected in its feathers. It circled once about the room before taking residence upon the fireplace mantle. It shook off the snow and settled, looking for all the world as if that is where it belonged. Tom shut the window as an afterthought almost too eager to approach this beast that had come to him this night.

The brief thought of how very odd this should have all been flashed through his analytical mind. You just didn't see something like this here in London outside of a zoo and even then not so at a residence. Never an orphanage. Homes got cats and dogs and songbirds, not a creature such as this. It was enchanting if not severely improbable. Still, some part within him told him this was natural.

Tom took a moment to really observe it. He cataloged its size and its features racking his memories for the exact book that he read so very long ago. Where within his mind's eye he saw the words and phrasing as if it were yesterday. He saw the very paragraph that described this thing and felt giddy. His brain should have been questioning this situation more and more as he drew a definitive name for the type of beast before him. For this! This, was an American Great Horned Owl and a fully grown one by the size. Not in the least bit native to London.

An agile creature that would eat almost anything smaller than itself including other birds or owls if the opportunity presented itself. With a wing span recorded up to nine feet and more it was one of the largest birds of prey in existence. It just shouldn't be here, shouldn't even have been able to have been tamed enough to just fly into a home. It was native only to the Americas so for it to be here for any reason was just absurd. Still that part of him told him this was natural.

So Tom dismissed the strange because he knew very well how the strange happened to him all the time. It would be hypocritical for him to consider this strange when he had done far worse than just be a continent away from his homeland. For instance, he could speak to snakes and they would speak back. He could make things fly just because he wanted it.
He broke the laws of physics all the time! So what was one owl in comparison to some of the things he had done. Maybe this would have been strange for mundane people like Amy or Dennis, but not for Tom. That was why he knew above all else that this creature belonged here and belong with him.

They watched each other for a moment, each taking in the other with an intensity that Tom could hardly believe a beast or himself to have been capable. He took one step to it, then another, and another until he reached the beast poised just above him. He reached for it without a trace of fear. His fingertips stroked through its feathers longingly, and in return the bird nipped affectionately at them.

It cooed, rotated its horned head all the way round, and then lifted its leg expectantly. Thereupon which, was rolled an odd sort of paper tied with a white ribbon and bearing the inscription: “To one Tom Marvolo Riddle of the Big chair near the fireplace in the common space, Room 21, Wool’s Orphanage, London.

Tom took but a second to process the newly added strange to this situation. Once he did, understanding dawned on him and felt cheated in some deep space that he would not acknowledge. Instead, he allowed rage to simmer low his being. Someone owned this beast and allocated its magnificence into a glorified carrier pigeon! He almost trembled in envy and disgust!

He took the letter gingerly and unraveled it all the while feeling a hollow pit consuming him. His previous excitement dimmed as he forced himself to read the strange message instead of just burning it. Yet, as he read he found himself spiraling further and further into confusion. He had to reread the elegantly written letter thrice before he was able to make his mind process the letters as words that meant something rather than strange alien squiggles. Then admitted that maybe he had been outstranged this time and that maybe this was the most surreal he had ever felt.

It was a rather important letter albeit a short one. More a warning with no name given of the sender, no ramble, and no reason as to why he should not do what it advised against. He felt it would have made more sense if he had the context of why it would behoove him to heed it. He was smart enough to understand that it was referring to the future and that maybe he might meet one Albus Percival Wulfrick Brian Dumbledore, and would be placed into some situation that would make this make sense. For now it meant so very little as to be almost useless. The letter read,

\[ \text{Dearest Tom,} \]
\[ \text{Do not tell Albus Percival Wulfrick Brian Dumbledore that you can talk to snakes.} \]
\[ \text{With all my love,} \]
\[ \text{Your Friend.} \]
\[ \text{P.S. This great horned owl is named Mors. He is yours now. A gift for your birthday.} \]

“Mors”. He tested the name and the sound of it struck a chord deep within him. Death in latin

. Fitting, very much so, for such a creature as this. Tom raised his gaze to the massive beast in a form almost worship. The beast preened for him, hooting softly and tucking his head down to organize his black feathers.

Something foreign to him stirred as he watched his Mors. The feeling coursed through his blood like cold fire. He felt his eyes burn and his chest constrict. A gift, this was a gift. For him. His. His first gift. He lifted the letter to his face, read it over a thousand times, enough times to memorize the way the L’s slanted and the E’s had slight upward tilts. Suddenly, the letter was worth more than gold.

He was shaking, the parchment crinkled in his tightening fists. The first tear fell upon it and then
He couldn't find it in himself to stem them, he let them fall unabated. With care he folded the letter and put it in his pocket. His first letter. His first gift. His first celebrated Birthday.

He would have pinched himself for as much of a fool as he was being. He was crying over some useless, beautiful letter. He didn't even know this person! They could be dangerous or worse than that, worthless. He refused to be weak. Just because a stranger just happened to get him some stupid, giant, magnificently beautiful owl that may or may not eat other birds, didn't mean he should just throw away years of carefully constructed emotional barriers.

He told himself that it wasn't significant enough for that but then he looked up and saw that intelligent gaze. It really was worth it. He shouldn't be grateful for this but it wasn't just any owl, it was Mors. His Mors and so, not just any owl. So he was grateful and that was a problem. He considered the brief possibility that this person was using a manipulation tactic to make Tom indebted to him but quickly dismissed it as he had nothing of value to be had. What was his 'friend's' motive? What could he want with an orphan?

"You can hunt for yourself I assume?" His words came out suspiciously heavy and inwardly he cursed. Mors just gave him a look as if raising an eyebrow at him for his stupidity. Of course he understood. This was an apex predator. He was perfect and so would know how to hunt. After all, apparently this bird found him despite everything saying he shouldn't.

Tom wiped his eyes on his sleeve needing to collect himself. He felt he should be determined not to let the letter affect him because he understood how manipulation worked but that didn't stop him from already cherishing the invisible hand responsible for it. He found that maybe it might be best to just sleep on all of it.

"Lets get you to my room for now. I will need to hide you from the matron until I can work on her. When the storm dies down I will let you out to hunt. I will keep the window open for you always otherwise. Come my darling Mors." He turned from his new companion and swiftly took to the staircase and up to the third floor as if he hadn't just expected a bird to understand what he was saying and then act upon it.

The stairs creaked and some of the railing was rotting and it wouldn't last another ten years he was sure. He reached his door, brittle wood with a squeaky knob and winced. He almost felt ashamed for having to leave Mors to live here with him. His Mors was a king of owls, to be reduced to this hovel with Tom... Mentally, Tom added another reason that he would one day burn this place to the ground. One day but for now he just wanted this day to be over somehow he felt it wasn't as simple as that. This was not over yet.

When he opened the room he swore and then composed himself shortly thereafter. Another owl was perched outside his window. It was smaller, brown, and carrying a ridiculously large envelope for its size. It was a pathetic thing, not even close in comparison to his Mors. It was with a touch of apprehension that he went to the window and opened it enough to let the small thing in.

It darted into the room and was there all of twenty seconds before Mors struck it down. The little thing never stood a chance. The grace in which his owl killed the other was awe inspiring. A single strike to the head shattered the smaller owls skull leaving a splash of blood upon the floor. Its body was broken beneath the behemoth and Mors began to feast. Tom found himself falling more in love with his new pet. Nissa would have feared Mors. Tom couldn't be more proud.

The more he watched his pet the more he found himself fascinated. For the next hour and a half he watched his new beast eat. It left only feathers in its wake and some odd meats it found it didn't prefer and Tom memorized them for the future so as best to please his pet. Only after the clock struck nine thirty, the curfew, was he able to pick up his letter.
It was plainly addressed to him, at Wool's room number twenty one. There was no mention of his chair which was... insignificant and a dumb thing to be disappointed over but was just that, disappointing. In comparison to his first letter, this one was anticlimactic. If he had been keeping points for style and mysteriousness, his friend would be ahead by a large margin.

“IT is all well and good to eat my darling, but at least let me get the missive before devouring the unfortunate messengers.” It was said with such depth of fondness that it shocked him. One look upon the stripped remains of the deceased and Tom found he could live with that. He opened the new letter with a withered sigh expecting to find something just as dull as the address.

“Dear Mr. Riddle,

We are pleased to inform you that you have a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. A member of the teaching staff will visit your place of residence in the coming weeks to answer any questions you may have.

Term begins on September 1st.

The Hogwarts express leaves promptly at 11am from Platforms 9 and 3/4

Yours Sincerely,

Albus Percival Wulfrick Brian Dumbledore Deputy Headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry”

His world started to crumble. His hands shook, he reread the letter. He was a wizard. He... was a wizard. He was a wizard so of course it all made sense now! He could do magic. All his abilities were explained because magic was real and he could do it. The owl, and the snake, and it all made sense now. The world clicked into place, as if the last piece of his puzzle had been found. His brain was going to explode and he was going to wake up and find that this was all some psychotic break and that he really was messed up.

He should have panicked. Should have screamed but the instinctual side of him that had warned him something would happen today, and the one that had always been right, forced his mind into clarity. He started to organize himself. He took a deep breath and let it out. He knew he could do the impossible and now he had a name for what he was and what he could do. Furthermore, there were others like him. Others out there just like him. He wasn't alone.

Excitement began to course through his veins. His heart was about to burst from his chest it was beating so hard. He wasn't alone. He was just as special as he claimed. Once this sent teacher answered his questions they would take him from this place and into the place he truly belonged in. He would be free from this place. Mors would have a home befitting him. He wouldn't be alone anymore!

His thoughts reminded him of the warning given prior to this letter and he reminded himself that it still wasn't safe. That didn't stop him from hoping and so for the first time that is what he did. Hoped.
So I thought it would be fitting for Tom to have this specific owl. Also I wanted to tweak a few things that have happened. I do promise all will be explained but I don't want to spoil any of the fun.

Edited 6/20/2017
Chapter 3: Sharp Dressed Man

Diagon Alley, London. January 2nd 1938

The air was crisp and sharp, bitter some might say. This striking cold cloaked everything and soaked into the few bodies that meandered about the magical shopping district that was Diagon Alley. It was a surprisingly small place, known for everything and actually not much of anything at all. Gringotts was perhaps the only daunting building that stood out among the scale tiled rooftops.

With spires cutting the air in sharp spiracles of crystals and glass; With grand domed ceilings held aloft by gargantuan marble columns; With halls illuminated brightly by powerful and most secret Goblin magic; It was easily the single most revered structure to be seen, gleaming bright in the white winter, making all else pale in comparison. Gringotts stood as a testament to the might of the Goblin nation. Defeated? Hardly, though history may have said different. Below, the wizarding community looked to be mere mounds of primitive rubbish. Hardly much to look at when in the shadow of such a marvel and yet the smaller structures had their own simplistic charms.

Just a hair's breath away the shops began. Some bigger and some strikingly small, one the size of a kitchen window even, with varying degrees of colors. The district looked bright and chaotic, ordered and yet not. Quaint and tilted buildings ranging all heights and dimensions made the alley a sort of strange zigzag of architectural regurgitation. Showing layered years, upon years of magical influence. One shop was a tower and another built sideways that ran straight through the center of its neighbor.

Signs hung haphazardly displaying wands, cauldrons, and various other prized wizarding goods. Windows were brightly decorated in slanted writings advertising special wears available ranging anywhere from the appetizing to the downright odd. Glasses that made you temporarily smarter, a potion to cure the feeling of itching below the skin that really wasn't there but was felt anyways, a broomstick capable of flying faster than a muggle bicycle, and thousands of other desires. These and more than these made up the selections that speckled the displays in bright cheery fashions.

Each and every window featured a 'Sale' sign over various nick-knacks that would really only become popular once a year at varying times. Each and every shop passed witnessed an eager peddler of the strange or weird, desperate for the final sales of the old year and beckoning in the new one. Yet despite so many enchanting shops and things to buy, not many were about today for such things. All the shops were relatively quiet in the aftershocks of the season.

It was almost unnerving how calm it could be just a day or two after the holidays. Boxing day had ended just a day ago and many had fled the remaining cold for shelter in homes. Doorways and arches still held minor decorations of the season but now all that remained were remnants, ghosts of
feelings. It left the streets very nearly empty, littered with phantom signs of civilization etched into gray snow. Warm smoke rose from the chimneys of shops and back alley houses. People, as few as they were about the shopping district were friendly and at ease. Not a care in the world, and on such a lazy and bitingly cold day.

A few days ago had been a madhouse, with any white on the streets covered in dirt, slush, floo powder, and other more questionable things. There had been masses all huddled and jostling for the last minute treats and desires of the season, fighting over the prices of supplies before the restart of schooling. The calling out of shopkeepers to bring in all sorts for business before the slow seasons hit. Dark and Light wizards glaring at one another from the intersections of alleyways, and yet somehow coexisting enough to get their last minute agendas checked off before New Years. All in all, as enchanting and charming as Diagon seemed, Hadrian had still seen greater magical districts than this with veritable markets, and all more pleasant than here.

Hadrian hadn't necessarily desired to be in Britain for new years eve but it had been rather urgent, and he had not appreciated being in such a crowded space regardless of circumstances and his past dealings in England. It hadn't helped his mood that Britain was so very cold, and that Spain was so far away now. Untouchable with Grindelwald focusing upon the country. Hadrian's only consolation in being back in Britain was the year, and the date. He had almost lost track of the years and owed Gellert for reminding him. New Years Eve had been... exciting to say the least and even now his insides were filled with giddy nerves twitching in anticipation. It was what brought him out to London again today, his new game.

His boots sunk in slightly crunchy slush unveiling the dirty blacker snow from days ago. London was a dirty place these days, the industrial boom doing more harm than anything else. The soot from factories, coal, and trains, muggle and magical, did little to help keep things clean. Noted, the Alley that Hadrian walked seemed much cleaner than the muggle ones just outside the wards, but a glance behind him at the black traces of himself reminded him that the distinction between both worlds was still alarmingly thin. It was troubling, the length wizards in Britain were willing to go in order to ignore the degradation in their midst. All because it was muggle and seemingly nonthreatening.

Hadrian knew better than most the coming dangers the non-magical had created. He had lived it once upon a life, and was wary of any influence now that he was far older and wiser. It seemed to him like the magic in the world was slowly leeching away as more and more witches and wizards pulled away from pure magic casting and relied more heavily on easier modes to cast such as wands. He knew that it wasn't true. Magic wasn't leaving the world for that was impossible but it seemed that way.

It wasn't that magic itself was growing weaker but rather a mixture of things. Ministries banning whole branches of magic due to their inability to control the witches and wizards behind them, The lost teachings of proper magic control and theory, Family lines not upholding the continuation of spell crafts, and the overall laziness of the common witch or wizard, were some factors that had diminished his beloved magical world with Britain being the main offender.

It was almost unbearably sad and utterly heartbreaking to see the potential of magic reduced to foolish wand waving because of lack of knowledge or legal ramifications. Then again, it was their own fault if they wished to elect and follow a ministry so set on making them all lambs to the slaughter. To rely on wands and not magic. To shun those who could transcend the limitations that people placed upon them. He would not aid people who took magic and crippled it for control over others. He could not help those who did not desire to help themselves.

He shook his head minutely, facing the wind as he continued on through the alley. The bitter cold nipped at him, reddened his pale skin, made his bones ache unpleasantly, ran through long hair,
black as pitch and so very full. His brow pinched in distaste, lips pulled into a grimace. *Blood and Hell it was cold!* It was no wonder he was one of the only people about.

It would be safe to assume that the masses were all huddled at home near fires, basking in what little time they had left before their children were whisked away for another year of learning and magic. He could imagine it clearly and with a wistfulness that suggested he longed for such occasions. That life was far behind him, a different life where he had been a very different and naive man.

The tale stretched before his mind of a bright room with the window curtains thrown wide to let in white light from the gray skies. The scent of cinnamon and apples would prevail over all pines and nuts, lingering over the pies and cookies on a low table. There would be laughter and warmth, children playing with their things, and the parents gazing upon them with pride. 'Look I made it float!'. The fire would cackle merrily, the lingering magic of Yuletide fueling its exuberance. Such a happy play it was, such a wonderful time to just be.

Hadrian had witnessed such scenes before for he was once upon a time a father and further still a mentor. He cherished each memory in some special place within that he reserved for a time long from now. He could always replace faceless people with those he had once taught or families he had over the centuries trusted to keep him and his secret safe. It was always with fondness that he could recall them. Watching each life flourish and grow before being reborn into the eyes of their sons and daughters. It was with genuine and unbridled love that he raised these witches and wizards. He could never say he regretted any of them, regretted loving them. He had these memories to hold them in his heart forever, immortilizing them even if their bodies and souls moved into the beyond.

There was always a moment when he would find himself missing each and every life that he walked away from. He would long to hear them speak once more but for an instant, even if it meant pulling them back from the beyond and into the now. Not an impossible task for one who knew such magics yet Hadrian had never once dared to do it. The task of ripping the dead from beyond was as simple as retrieving an item, not even a hard one to obtain really but still Hadrian had refused.

Ever since his acquisition of the Stick early in this life he felt the pull of the other two hallows keenly. He suspected that the beast of beyond wished for him to obtain them all in this existence as he had in his last one. For what purpose he could only speculate. Hadrian mostly assumed it was either because Death could not physically exist in this realm without the three together or because it was some other worldly trap. So far Hadrian had Nine-Hundred and Eighty-Six different theories for why he shouldn't obtain the hallows once more and only two on why he should.

To be fair he hadn't put much thought into them when he had been so busy living for the first time out of two lives. He had found that his rebirth allowed him a great many boons. A new body devoid abusive histories, a deeper appreciation for the magic that he had always taken for granted as latent luck, and the ability to form ties to people he could genuinely care for. His experiences of love and loss were completely his own. These memories and emotions were his alone, no influence of manipulation to mark any of them.

This would have been him had he been raised away from the muggles; this would have been him the first time around had he not been pushed onto a pedestal; This would have been the him he could have loved and depended on; This would be the him that would do what should be done and not what needs to be done. No longer the many for the few but the few for the many. This him was a person he could be proud of. This was a him that was suitable for Tom's equal.

Maybe at one time, he would have disagreed with himself. Maybe he would have hated the man he was today, so far from the brainless Gryffindor he had been. Perhaps that was so, but he was happier with himself now than he had ever been in any life he had lived. He fit in his skin now, and wouldn't
allow anyone to ever make him into someone he was not. Not ever again. Not Albus, not Gellert, and not even Tom himself could make him get back into that Boy-Who-Lived life that he found to be so miserable. He was free. It only took a few centuries to get there.

A serenity filled him and he smiled at nothing and everything. A whistled tune flit passed his lips and he nearly skipped into the warmth of open doors. The cold was instantly driven away from him as he intruded upon the establishment. It was a bright place filled with easy colors like green and pastel orange and just so full of magic. There was a drying charm on the mat, a warming charm every ten feet attached to a series of hidden runes within the wards of the ceiling, and some minor anti-theft charms set into the counters and the entrances. Nothing permanent and certainly not ace work, but the place was certainly well maintained if nothing else.

Green eyes scanned the almost empty tearoom taking particular interest in the paintings above booths and scenery that floated around open floor tables. Each area was made to be individualized including the open air patio seating. Hadrian at once started to gravitate to the larger window seats near the back of the tea shop, lingering his fingertips over the latent magic surrounding it. An image came to the fore of his mind ready to be implemented, a memory long past. Vindictive of him to let that determine the backdrop of this meeting but fitting for many more reasons than spite. Sometimes, a man had to be a certain amount of Slytherin.

The picture began to form, devoid of smells or touch but equally as stimulating to someone familiar with its scene. As he settled in the high backed pastel green chair, he took in his creation. It was a meadow. Innocent enough if one were not familiar with the tragedy behind it or the blood that had fed it. Lilac grew rabid here if he recalled, and if he focused he could recall what it smelled like there on that knoll. Sweet, sharp, and earthen.

Soft breeze wafted over the grass heavily burden with heather and while he could not feel the breeze he knew this memory well enough to pretend he could. In the distance was a plain magical village. Just like the meadow on the hill it seemed so peaceful. Beside his chair was a twisted tree, its leaves like falling vines, a willow. At its base and beside his armrest there was a black slab of obsidian marble. It was devoid of a name, and vines overgrew it in many places, aconite blooms reaching over it. A grave, lonely but well loved.

Fitting, he thought lightly pulling himself back to the present. Satisfied with his work he relaxed further into his nook and since he was still partially chilled from the weather outside, and tea sounded particularly heavenly, he went about searching for a server. Who he found was a young thing, not far out of Hogwarts age. Mousy hair, plain, not much of anything, but still magic. A good charms practitioner but not good enough to make a name for themselves.

When prompted Hadrian requested a pot of earl gray, with sugars and cream on the side, and a set of lemon scones for his soon to be companion. Once his server had scurried away he resigned himself to waiting. He didn't have to wait long it turned out, the man hadn't kept him waiting. He was ever eager for even the chance to meet. Then again it had been years, and they had not parted amicably. The hurt and anger from one life hadn't ever dissolved completely no matter how hard he had tried to crush it.

When he had first reacquainted with one Albus Dumbledore in this life, he had been elated. Then, disillusioned when he recalled that the Albus he had once known a life ago had been made from his many regrets and mistakes. He had been a man worthy of admiration who was not afraid to face his mistakes. The grandfatherly man he had clung to had been heaped in sorrows but still forged ahead in the face of adversity.

In his wake he had left more despair than anything else but still tried to do right by those affected by
his actions. Always seeking the greater good and doing what had to be done despite the sacrifices. Seeing his good intentions that paved a road to evil and seeing the man that made Albus into had caused Hadrian to respect and forgive him every time.

This Albus, was nothing like the man of his past life. This Albus was so young and wild. He had so many adventures ahead of him. He was passionate and reckless with none of the control. He was powerful and capable, with curiosity enough to explore and be great but without any follow through. He just lacked the experiences the old version of him had and so lacked the traits that made his pastlife's self so much of an icon to Hadrian.

This Albus had become his friend and not his mentor. Many a days the two of them caused mischief, laughed, and explored magic. Good days, wholesome days. Then Gellert came and Albus turned his back on magic for love. Turned his back on love and magic later than that. It was his cowardice and indecisiveness played a critical role in the events happening in the world today.

He wished that Albus were a stronger person, able to take on the demons that needed facing but knowing that the man wouldn't. In truth, he was always bitterly disappointed for hoping that Albus would have more of a backbone. He wished desperately that Albus could have done what was right instead of running away. Wished he, himself, could have turned away from the injustice done instead of the two of them rowing as they had. It was never so simple as that.

Ariana's death and Gellert had been the breaking point between the two of them. It should have been obvious to anyone that things could not be left as they had. Albus should have been stronger, more responsible. He should have not turned away when Gellert so obviously needed his aid. If Albus claimed to love him he should have done all he could to deter Gellert from the current path. Instead, he had run away, betraying his relationship with Gellert and then refusing his own magic and betraying himself.

Maybe Hadrian shouldn't have put such high hopes on his friend but maybe Albus shouldn't have gotten involved with Gellert if he didn't intend to follow through. Honestly, Hadrian was simply tired now. He was tired of being angry and disappointed at a man who was weak in conviction and will. He couldn't, in good conscience, hold this grudge seeing as even the past-life Albus did the same as this one in regards to Gellert, and if forgiving Albus gave him a way to aid Tom then that was an added bonus.

It had only been twenty years but even so, it was concerning to see how different Albus looked with just a number of decades. Gone was the youth in his face and the carefree smile that Hadrian used to adore. This man before him looked spread thin, wiry, with his red hair long and trailing down a slightly hunched back. A beard nearly as long trailed down his front. Blue eyes looked upon Hadrian with a mixture of things that seemed contradictory. Hope and Loss in equal measures. Yet, that spark from years ago was still ignited despite the physical evidence contrary of appearances.

"Godric's Hallow." Merlin, how many years had it been since he had heard this voice. Soothing and low and just so inviting of trust. It looked as if Albus would cry for a moment, secretly Hadrian wished he would. They all made mistakes that day but what Albus had done needed consequences. He should feel guilt. The trouble he has caused. Then again there was still a greater chance this would have all happened even without Albus' betrayals. Still, Hadrian had enough of paying for the mistakes done that day. As much as that was true he still was a fool for wanting to greet his old friend warmly. To hug him and laugh with him once more, rid them of this solemn greeting.

"You haven't aged a day my old friend. Though the long hair is new, I thought you hated it that way." It was half joking, half remorse. A wave of silence distanced them before Hadrian could stem the sharp ache in his heart. He looked upon Albus and his eyes saw not the older man before him but
the young thing he so longed to reclaim. He could see a taller body than his own, wild laughing blue eyes, and a smile that lit up the sun and moon with the influences of magic. Powerful. Red, and blue, and so very much alive. He wanted his friend well and whole and not this shade of what he once was.

His fingers shook with the need to touch. To make real his once friend, but he restrained himself. It was not alright as of yet. Words still had to be said, wounds soothed, promises kept, and time spent before they could reconcile.

“Yet time hasn't been kind to you, even Gellert looks better off. I am sure you have heard,” his voice never wavered not yet trusting himself to be open with this man before him. Not now, not yet. To keep himself composed he raised his tea to his lips and allowed the scent, and the taste to wash away the ghosts of the past. Hoping it would be enough to keep the tremors from his fingertips.

To distract himself further he allowed his eyes to wonder the scenes around them, stabilizing them here and now and reminding them of their shared history. Shared folleys. Albus flinched when he followed those impossibly green eyes. He went pale and pursing his lips together whether in sadness or guilt it mattered not.

“I didn't ask you here to joke, and I apologize for the short notice. I understand you had to send another on your tasks for today, but this cannot wait. I needed... I need.” He didn't need anything, not from this man but pride be damned he would ask if it meant that his plans would work; that they could be okay again; that all the harm could become undone. Tom would be safe from this man another few months if he could just put his pride aside and chose mercy.

“I thought you could help him, and when you didn’t I resented you. I still do but it is too late now. You have heard the whispers overseas, I know you have. I also know you receive pleas of aid to those he has wronged but knowing you, you won't do anything until he comes here. You’ll continue to run, or pass your consequences onto others.” The unspoken ‘Like me’, made Albus wilt even more before him, eyes lowering to hands that he folded upon the table. There was tension in him, but resignation as well.

“You were always better at handling him Hadrian. He trusts you more, listens to you more, what could I do in the face of you. Who is it he seeks so readily but you?” Shifting responsibility then, Hadrian filed it away for later use. He would use it, but for now he wanted to make one thing clear. Gellert was not his enemy and he would not take responsibility for the actions of another so long as fate willed it.

“No. If it is in my power I will not face down Gellert. Whatever you think you know, you don't. Yes we had sex but it was never as you say Albus. Compared to you I am but a distraction. At least before I could say he saw me as a friend, now... I know not what he calls me. I'd rather not know. I will not be the divide between the two of you. You are his rival Albus, his love. If there is one person meant to stop him it is you and unless there are no other options I refuse to intercede. On your head be the consequences for your cowardice thus far in the face of your responsibility.” Another sip of tea to calm his raging ire.

“But Surely yo--" A gentle fingertip pressed against Albus' lips and Hadrian witnessed the light color rising on those older cheeks. The depth of his blue eyes bore into green ones, so full of hope it made Hadrian nauseous. Albus found steel in that penetrating gaze but also the flicker of something that made the older wizard feel warmer than he had all winter. He was forgiven. In Hadrian's eyes was forgiveness and a minor chance fix this god awful thing between them.

“No. It is not so simple as that. I didn't come here to talk of Gellert anyway. I called you here for me. I just needed to see you again. I-, I just needed to know you were doing fine today, right now, right
here, at this exact time. Now eat your scones and drink your tea before it gets cold. I haven't much
more time I can spend here and I'd rather just... just not think of him for awhile if that is alright
Albus. Its not like I have forgotten but I can forgive... If you will have me back old friend.”

For an instant Hadrian was sure Albus would die if his expression was anything to go on, but then
Hadrian found himself crushed in fabric so bright it almost hurt to gaze upon. Albus' red hair
attacked his nose but he could only sigh and pat his friend on the back while the older wizard half
laughed and half sobbed in relief. Years of agonizing, and missing, and needing this washed over
them both.

The rest of their afternoon went by affably, even enjoyable. Albus going on energetically about
alchemy and his transfiguration lectures and Hadrian sipping his tea, occasionally nodding at some
point or another. If Hadrian checked the time one too many times it wasn't mentioned and if Albus
didn't more than once wonder why it wasn't mentioned.

When Dumbledore later met with Horace Slughorn about the children visited for Hogwarts he found
he didn't even care that he used his one good favor to skip work for teatime with Hadrian. He found
he wouldn't mind doing it more often.

Wool's Orphanage, London January 2nd 1938

He found himself as he was wont to do since “The Gift”, pacing. The floorboards beneath his
heavily woolen socks creaked, begged for less abuse with each pass. What little he had been focused
on before the revelations of New Years laid long abandoned on a small desk. The papers on
engineering marvels and arithmetic equations left forgotten, irrelevant. In light of magic, all mundane
things became mere dalliances. Books remained unopened, rare to be neglected so, and even the
matrons took notice of Tom’s absence from his fireside chair in the evenings. They eyed him warily
on the few occasions he strayed from his room, wondering.

It wasn’t that these things lost meaning or worth but right now a new, more urgent, problem had
surfaced. The questions rattling about his skull left little time for sleep and it showed in the darkness
coating his eyes and mood. They ranged from the simple to the more astoundingly complex, each
more pressing or confounding than the last. It was at some point that a lone bound journal was
implemented and since its creation it laid open. Ever growing fuller with an ever expanding list of
quandaries.

It still did little to ease his ongoing mania, though he had taken some hours to organize which
questions seemed to be easily answered and which would require deeper knowledge. It was simple
to ask the big questions, but smaller more intricate details were lacking. Things that should have been
common knowledge he found or suspected. Each new question had been dissected into specific
categories and from there each was treated with the utmost seriousness despite how simple some
seemed.

Neat writing curved below each question with half answers or full depending. It was taking all he
had in him to go through each new problem and it was grating upon him, stealing sleep and patience.
His hands ached from switching to and fro with how much effort in his writing he went through.
Never could he appreciate his ambidextrous nature more. It struck even him just how much there was
for him to analyze. It was daunting the mere thought that most of his queries already had answers and
those were just out of his grasp because he was here and the wizarding world was there.

It was frustrating and exciting. He finally had a serious problem to work through, something worthy
of him, magic. More than all this however was the other information he was desperately taking apart
piece by piece. Once he had filled the journal with the smaller queries he had moved on to the more
present ones, physical in letter form. It had been less than forty-eight hours since his life made sense, and yet his attention was split between the two letters he had received.

One being the short and sweet accompaniment to his precious Mors. The gently sloped L’s and upward curving E’s never failed to tug at some secret place inside him. He would call it gratefulness if he weren’t consciously aware of how obsessed he had become over the insignificant letter. His first letter. It was held gently in one hand more often than not, always being analyzed for some new information that he could not find from it. Whatever the case, this attachment was concerning. More so, the timing of his precious correspondence.

The correlation to ‘The Letter’ and the arrival of his Hogwarts letter was no coincidence. Someone had planned on Mors getting to him first; someone who knew Albus Wulfric Brian Dumbledore and obviously distrusted the man to some degree; Someone who knew about Tom’s ability to speak and interact with Nissa; Someone who hinted that this deputy headmaster wouldn’t like it, as if it were something sinister.

Tom fancied it was his own paranoia to insinuate that his gift was abnormal. He had yet to find his paranoia unwarranted if the years of matrons not believing him were anything to go by. Adults just didn’t want to believe what was true when faced with solely that. Tom had been blamed for every minor discomfort this place had seen in the last six years without any benefit of a doubt. He had spent days locked in dark rooms, afraid that he would starve and die there. No, his mistrust of people was well placed, they wouldn’t even try to understand and this Albus seemed the same if his friend was indeed truthful in his own distrust.

For now Tom weighted his first letter as truth until he could gauge the situation himself. He knew well that it could be quite possible his friend had ulterior motives or plans with making sure Mors and thus his words got to him first, but Tom for now set aside those suspicions and merely wrote their plausibilities in the Journal. Among the many other an inquiry listed they remained unsettled with only minute notes to them. It was all just so much and any small notation was enough for now. After all, there were more issues that needed addressing besides just the letters and senders.

Some of these matters included side notions he scribbled hastily, some he marked with just the word ‘Magic’ followed by a question mark. One question had been how the owls had found him in the first place, a simple thing and easily deduced but worrisome just the same. It could be that Mors and all owls belonging to this magical world and could find anyone anywhere, and it was also likely that finding where one lived wasn’t terribly difficult. Not only could Mors find him. Mors even felt like magic, his own magic, a familiar?

Maybe not just owls, his Hogwarts letter had his address down to the room number itself. An eerily maddening set of thoughts and consequences tied to this conundrum alone. Did the school know all this time and have left him here to rot or was it more a simple trick to magic like how he could sometimes know truths from lies? While it could be that this was specific to only the school of witchcraft and wizardry, it did not seem to Tom like a thing that was solely for the School either.

Tom would go so far as to say Owl’s were postmen and thus worked for someone. Their inherent knack for locating people was common enough that it wasn’t a secret so too should be the ability to do so without them if that be the case. It seemed likely that the ability to track people was a simple matter even, easily found with the right research and implemented with slight practice. Moreover, this meant that surely there were ways to hide from such magic albeit Tom was certain it wouldn’t be found in any of the books listed in the list sent to him.

The books mentioned seemed to be introductory more or less and not nearly in depth enough to cover such magic. They were only year one books which led to another even bigger insecurity. His
own lack of knowledge. Yes they were only year one but even this seemed like a slight miscalculation, surely those like him out there were not all in orphanages and surely they already knew such things, like the magic behind owls or the Hogwarts letter, which meant Tom was behind and nobody informed him sooner despite having the ability to find him anytime and anywhere.

Someone like a friend perhaps, Tom told himself with only a slight bitterness, much to his own surprise. Shouldn’t he be more angry at this so called friend for leaving him in the dark? Shouldn’t he feel slighted in some way? Perhaps, but was not this so called friend the one who contacted him first? Did not his so called friend warn him of something very specific pertaining to Albus Wulfric Brian Dumbledore? The same man that was his Deputy Headmaster? There are no such things as coincidences. Tom reminded himself with a crease in his brow.

His friend, loosely implied, that revealing his ability to the man would have consequences of varying degrees. Obviously, this could mean many things. It could mean that either Dumbledore had something against the talent to be so alarmed because of it or it could mean in general that the man was familiar enough with the talent to know if some other more questionable abilities could be used or had been used already.

Whatever the case Tom shouldn’t play with the chance that his friend was wrong and this Dumbledore was in anyway worthy of such knowledge. Somehow, he doubted the man would appreciate his methods or the games he would play using such methods. He certainly wouldn’t condone Tom’s willingness to use what he had to the detriment of others if it appeased the Rules. Few would and most certainly not a man co-operating a children’s school. He doubted the man could fully appreciate his grasp on how to play others… Such as, Speaking snake to rekindle fear in a person and to keep them away.

Speaking to snakes was often a way for Tom to scare the other children, especially Dennis and Billy who had so wronged him. He also thought that the deputy headmaster wouldn’t understand that the means he used was a form of justice. He doubted it could been seen by normal people as that. What would have been justice to Tom’s eyes would not be to the deputy headmaster. Tom was betting that Dumbledore was like all other adults. He felt this Albus Dumbledore wouldn’t even understand why Tom had so utterly crushed the children here. He would probably see it as a grave set of evils, like Pastors from the local church.

Not that Tom couldn’t understand why that was. He was perfectly reasonable in that regard as Tom knew he, slightly, overdid things on occasion, but only just minimally. Not to those who did not deserve it, but breaking Tom’s rules deserved punishment fitting those who broke them. No, Dumbledore would be as all of them were and so would be wrong. He would simply need to act misunderstood, afraid, and maybe even play the part of self loathing for what he was. Being underestimated was better than being under scrutiny.

Unless Dumbledore could see the truth as he could but Tom was confident he could pull it off. It would be inconvenient at worst. Tom wondered not for the first time if his magic to see through deception was common. He was so very certain it couldn’t be in a way that he just knew things sometimes. He could always tell when someone was hiding something just by looking them in the eye. However that did not mean that everyone could do it but there was always the possibility that he was wrong. To ignore that possibility could lead to errors. It could uncover his lies and ran the chance that his secrets would be forfeited. This was not an option.

The idea of knowing the truth of others had also been a point he had written about frequently, among other speculations. His friend did not mention the ability in his First Letter, but maybe that was because his friend knew Tom would understand the implications. If he needed to hide one thing he should hide all things. Maybe this person knew Tom would cover up all his abilities just in case they
too were dangerous to reveal. It could also be that his friend only knew of the one ability and that Tom was putting too much stock in someone he hadn’t seen.

Regardless, he would listen to said advice. The question was still why? Why hide power? Why hide his magic? It didn’t seem as if revealing these gifts were anything but an advantage so why would anyone want to hide their abilities, especially if it set… if it set them apart.

Like a bullet, Tom understood. His feet halted and left him in the large shadow of Mors. Obsidian eyes snapped up to the window watching the swirling gray of the January sky. A shiver started from his toes to the tips of his black hair always carefully combed, and he understood. His abilities set him apart, specifically his ability to speak with snakes. Unease settled within him as he quickly ran through every memory he had of the strange or weird that he had accomplished.

When he was three he found he could recall anything he read or saw perfectly. When he was four he found that he could make himself unnoticeable even when he stood right in front of the kids hunting him for sport. He could speak to Nissa. He could make people and animals choke, hurt, and burn. He could riddle them with terrors to keep them from sleep. Make them forget he ever did it. He knew when someone was lying or telling the truth. He could move things like the large books at the library that he couldn’t readily reach. With each new revelation of his magic his eyes flickered to the larger letter on his desk.

Quickly, terrorized with his newfound predicament he looked for the thousandth time over the classes, the book lists, and supplies… Searching for an answer but getting little to none. There was no class or book upon the list that described any of his abilities which meant they were not introductory, which meant he wouldn’t be able to find more on them until he could access a more formidable set of books, which meant that he had no idea whether or not he could even speak of them. With shaking fingers he lifted the carefully worn letter so lovingly held in his hand reading over words long since memorized. ‘Do not tell…’

Shaking with a newfound excitement that he couldn’t place and a despair he refused to acknowledge Tom straightened himself. It began as a small chuckle and then as a loud and gleeful laugh. He was special, more special than these new courses on the pages of a letter, and he hadn’t needed any help from anyone else. These abilities of his were just that, his. Honed and sharp from years in this shitty, filthy, place. If he had been saved from here he would have never been free to use them but he had been left here.

When he found out who his friend was, they would have words. For now though he would need to focus on a course of action regarding his first encounter with this man Friend so distrusted. For now all he could do was organize and observe. Calmed and focused, he felt his magic spike into needle point clarity, his gaze turning to his Mors, pondering. Could Mors correspond with his friend if he needed him to? Tom had some answers that he needed and the first would be about books. Lots and lots of books.

“Mors, my dear one.” His voice was low and soft as it always was to his Mors. The tone would never fail to garner what Tom could imagine was a look of curiosity. Tom had spoken with Mors long and often, about everything ever since he woke to find that his great companion wasn’t simply in his head. The owl had been privy to Tom’s soft mutterings and frustrated growls. Seeing through Tom with his storm lighted eyes as the little human paced. Tom even fancied him intelligent enough to understand the words spoken to him. He often told Mors as much and did so now, gesturing for him to come down from atop his perch.

The horned own puffed up in response, raising great wings and gliding down from his nest to his little human. He was much too large to fit on the boys shoulder so the great beast settled onto the
back of a lone chair. His talons splintered the frail wood below them leaving deep gauges. He
opened his beak and let out a wailing hoot, twisting his head to and fro before settling.

Tom didn’t even seem to mind the damage to his chair. He just caressed his familiar’s chest feathers
as if the chunks missing from something of his, the chair, were nonexistent. He adored his pet, and
made to show Mors as often as he could, in his own ways, just how much he cared for the beast.
Simple little things like giving the great bird his wardrobe in the daytime and playing hunting games
with him. Tom didn’t do things like these usually but he had to admit it was mesmerizing to watch
Mors chasing after the multitudes of scared mammals Tom afflicted into the chase. He showed he
cared by ignoring the damage to his only chair.

“Somebody sent you to me, no doubt you could find them for me? I will write a small letter,” A low
whir noise from Mors stopped Tom minutely and he smiled just a little bit. “Alright so maybe a not
so small letter, but you are strong enough to handle anything I might send you off with. You are not
like that little puffball they sent me two days ago. Yes, Why you! You are mighty enough to send off
all sorts of things.”

Tom feigned overbearing adoration, Shakespearean in nature. It tickled him to play with Mors, but
he knew his manipulations were seen through and he knew that Mors couldn’t help but preen at the
praises to his strength. Mors was indeed mighty and while Tom knew he could simply ask it of his
companion, he found Mors responded best to being treated as if he had a choice in things. He did,
and was stubborn, so Tom subtly had found ways in the past two days to get his owl to grant him
small favors. Like flattery, and the assurance that they could play Hunt. Mors’ favorite game. Maybe
Tom’s too.

When Mors dipped his head in a subtle acquiescence it felt like victory. It made a smile stretch
painfully across Tom’s face and his eyes light up like miniature universes. Tom glowed, felt giddy
and maybe even happy as opposed to content. He couldn’t stop himself from eagerly stroking Mors’
forehead, mussing up the proud crown of dark feathers. With so much newfound information to
gather and with his companion so eager to appease him, Tom set about to composing a letter.

It proved harder than he anticipated and as time and consequently piles of trashed letters filled the
area around his desk, Tom felt the setting in of annoyance. His hair was mussed from how much he
had run his fingers through it making him even more sour. The feelings permeated about him in
undulating waves of ever growing energy. Even Mors had distanced himself to the open
windowpane rather than subject himself to the moody child.

His eighteenth letter was before him. The first one he smudged his name slightly; The second
sounded too eager and that was unacceptable, he would not seem childish to someone able to handle
his Mors; the third and the forth were so confusing in all the questions stated that even Tom found it
exasperating to read and chucked them; The fifth, six, seventh, and so on all had their flaws and any
flaw was enough to be subjected to the bin. It wasn’t until this letter that Tom felt overwhelmed.
Why was this so hard?! He had never had trouble with words or with anything! So why now?!

A growl rent the air as he crumbled the eighteenth letter and he hung his head in his hands trying to
think. It shouldn’t be this hard. His friend had only written him a small and seemingly insignificant
letter so why would he have a problem with this?! Because he sent you Mors and Mors is perfect
and so you should be no less than perfect to deserve him. You are special, you are one of a kind and
you want to impress this person? No you want this person to take you more seriously, to send you
letters like you would send now. Pages not, not… He would have vehemently denied it, raged
against himself if he didn’t also want that so desperately. He wanted to remain special to this person.
Worthy enough for an actual letter and not notes. It was so bloody ridiculous.
His body slumped over the desk. He would deny he ever did something so common but now, now he just needed a short reprieve from everything. If only he could convey what he needed without needing to expand on what exactly he was asking for. Would Friend even respond? His eyes traced the letters again on his First Letter and mused on how simple the note seemed… Tom began writing.

Friend,

I need books. All of them.

Tom.

P.S. Mors ate another magical owl. That is on you and not me.

More than satisfied and more than a little vindictive in his succinct response, Tom rolled up the letter. He used an old shoestring to secure it to Mors and nearly fawned over his pet when the owl easily allowed it of him.

“See a little letter, this time… We shall see in the future about that novel I had planned to get in today. Be careful, I know you can handle anything but… Come home safe, to me. Home to me.” The words ‘You will be coming back?’ were left unasked. Instead, he watched his beast swoop out the window like a dark avenger and into the daylight heading North over the gates. He had so many more questions and started his new list of Owl related inquiries and one or two under his Time entries. He really ought to have just made separate notebooks for each but he doubted the orphanage could manage more than the two school notebooks Tom owned.

It was as he was scribbling down his speculations of the variances distance would make on letter delivery that Mrs. Cole knocked.

“Tom you have a visitor, this is Mr. Sluphern. He is a professor and here to talk to you about his school.” If Tom sat more rigidly it went unnoticed. He had not prepared for this so soon. This was not Albus Dumbledore but Tom would not take chances… Innocent act it was.

Wool's Orphanage January 2nd 1938

It had been odd, he had thought. Albus had approached him a week ago asking him for a favor. Usually he might have instantly wondered why, had the man not looked so tousled. It had been a simple thing really and Horace was not a man to deny his friends a favor now and again. Doing something for someone else meant he got something of equivalent value in exchange so he was never so very fussy about lending a helping hand when the opportunities arose.

You see, Horace Slughorn was what you would call an opportunist and a master at getting tit for tat. When the Sorting Hat made him a Slytherin he knew why. He was a smart man and cunning in his own way, and he worked to find the brightest and best of those about him. To do so and then aid them in attaining all they could need for success meant that he could cash in on all the gratitude due to him when the time was ripe. Horace was a socialite. He made connections and then used such connections to get what he wanted for a happy and easy life. That was his brand of ambition.

Naturally when Albus asked of him a small favor in exchange for one in return, who was he to deny him. They were friends after all. What kind of a friend would he be to turn his back on a friend in need. He did not think however that the favor would be this. This, being the dirty streets of muggle London and standing before what had to be a prison. That was the only way he could see this structure for all its rigid gray nothings.

Around him cars honked at the intersection toward downtown and the dirty and slushy muggle world
moved about in ignorance to the greatness of the man that stood before this horrid work of blah! If he had known this would be the place of the unfortunate muggle-born student it may have changed things. As it was, Albus had told him the address without mentioning that this was a place where it seemed hopes and dreams went to die. Where the parent-less or unwanted were placed in this cruel world. Horace had not been prepared to be faced with this possibility.

He had thought he would be visiting one of those rather plain houses with a set of rather dimwitted parents. He had prepared a speech to assure them their child was not some horrible devil but it seemed that it was for naught. This wasn't a place where two dim parents would gush over how special their little one was. No, this was a place where magic would be feared. This wouldn't be the first child who came through Hogwarts from the muggle world and specifically an orphanage. Horace knew how she had turned out and it hadn't been a pretty sight.

He pinched the bridge of his nose wearily feeling a wave of pity for whoever lived beyond those rusted iron gates. No wonder Albus had run from this, Horace would make sure he got double from this. Emotionally it wouldn't due to get attached. The poor lad will most likely turn out like all the rest. It was a dismal thought and a frown marred his round face when he raised his hand to the knocker. It rapped harshly on the old wooden doors. Not pleasant at all, mentally the potion master of Hogwarts prepared himself to find the worst case scenario.

It took a few moments before the doors were pulled open by a small thing, rake thin, and terribly homely. She looked upon Horace for only a second, taking in his expensive suit before ushering him inside with enthusiasm. It was dreadfully cold even inside and the dark snow was tracked through the halls making the insides almost as dirty as the world outside.

“Welcome to Wool's! I am Marie. Are you here to adopt a child or perhaps sponsor one of them?” He couldn't stop the indignant sputtering at the suggestion that he, Horace Slughorn, would possibly want a muggle. He schooled his outrage and took a handkerchief from his breast pocket to dab his face with. He felt dirty being so near to the woman and her kind. He didn't hate her but one couldn't help having useless blood.

“Ah no, I am afraid not. I came on behalf of my university. I am a professor there and I came to speak with T--” Before he could finish what he was saying the woman went cold to him and she interrupted him.

“Tom. You came for Tom.” The name came out softly with derision, so much so that it surprised him. His beady eyes reevaluated this woman before him. Shrewdly he took in the way her hands suddenly clasped tightly together. He got a horrible feeling and tried to remember if Albus told him anything. Sadly, he got nothing.

“Ah. Yes, but you do not seem surprised or all that happy about it.” This time he took a small step toward the woman, his round form not nearly as intimidating as he wished. He hoped that whatever ill will this woman harbored it wasn't enough to harm. Muggles were not suitable for taking care of young wizards and this Tom seemed much too plain and too young to be victim to such atrocities as he knew muggles capable of.

“You are a professor, from a university. Tom is an excellent student, freakishly so. He is top of his school. You will want to speak with Mrs. Cole, Follow me sir.” It should have been praise, and subliminally he was building a picture in his mind of a Ravenclaw. Something wasn't right about it though. Horace followed her as he brought him up a flight of stairs. They were in disrepair and the walls were so very dull. It was all suffocating and without color.

“You don't seem happy about his achievements, is there something I should know Marie?” He caught her shoulder and tried on his best smile hoping to warm her to him. She paused a moment to
appraise him before shifting nervously but nodding minutely. She wrung her hands and looked up and down the current corridor. When she did speak it was shaky, scared.

“He... He isn’t normal. He does things. Strange things. The children won't go near him and Mrs. Cole has him to a room all his own for a reason. I know it won't matter to the boffins at your fancy school but he is dangerous. Nobody speaks of it, but I just know he did something to Dennis.” The more she spoke the more she shook. Her eyes darted everywhere but at him, hoping nobody overheard them.

It sounded like she was afraid of Tom, of the accidental magic he created when he was threatened. *The poor lad. Shame he is a muggle-born, his accidental magic may be all he has going for him now. To be stuck here.* He was starting to hate this favor more and more. The grim picture he had was of a particularly smart boy whose misfortune was that he was stuck with those who couldn't understand what he needed.

When he arrived at what must have been an office, Marie scuttled away. He brought his knuckles to the door and wrapped upon it twice before a voice bade him enter. The first impression he had of Mrs. Cole was the gods awful smell of bourbon. His second was that she was repulsive. She was a haggard woman, older in her middle ages, and obviously very much in the middle of drowning in drink. She eyed him critically with shrewd glassy eyes and took in his expensive clothes. An inconvenience sharp woman.

“Not adopting?”

“Ah. No I am not, I was hoping to talk to you about Tom Riddle. I was sent from my school you see where he has been listed to attend since before he was born. I am Horace Slughorn, a professor at Hogwarts.” He made a point to settle himself amicably in the small chair before him, smiled and smiled, and smiled. Perhaps he could know a bit more about Tom if he could coerce the lady to be open.

“You knew Tom's parents? I have never heard of such a name for a school. Where is it located? Is it private or public? Was it his father that put him in it? It couldn't be the mother. She was a wretched thing.” The questions were sharper than Horace had hoped and for a moment he felt the kindling of anger at Albus for asking him to come in his stead. Surely, he would have been better at handling something so common as a muggle matron. His wand twitched on his hip under the heavy jacket and he was so willing to just fire a memory charm but stopped himself. No. That was not the way.

“I beg your pardon madam. I am more than willing to answer your questions. I am afraid it is not clear which of Mr. Riddle's family put him down for the school and I happen to know nothing of the line in general. Hogwarts is a school for the gifted you see and the privileged. A fine establishment that rewards those fortunate enough to have roots there. It is an open school for any who qualify a--”

For a second time that day. The lady before him snorted and filled her glass.

“Gifted is one word for Tom, but I have no doubt that he would be a handful for you. Then again it isn't like anyone here wouldn't be glad to see him gone. Still, no child under my care will go anywhere that I cannot personally evaluate. They are mine to keep safe, even from themselves. You may not take Tom anywhere.” Her tone brooked no argument and Horace was almost eager to cast the spell that changed her mind. He was enraged at how terribly mere muggles treated him. It was with great pleasure that he worked his magic on the lady before him. She deserved worse than memory modifications but that was not his place.

“What? Oh right Mr. Sludgehem you wished to know about Tom.” It took everything in Slughorn not to turn back then and drag Albus from whatever errand sent him away from this duty. To not even respect his name. *Must have botched the spell somehow. Never was terribly great at memory
charms. He willed himself to stay calm and take advantage of the unique opportunity to get to know this child now that Mrs. Cole wouldn't fight him. He took a shot in the dark and started with the basics.

"His mother, I heard she had passed." His sorrow could have been real as far as the woman was concerned. She didn't know any better.

"Don't know how you heard. She was a wretched thing. Tom was born here you know. That's right I remember it clear as anything, because I'd just started here myself. New Year's Eve and bitter cold, snowing, you know. Nasty night. And this girl, not much older than I was myself at the time, came staggering up the front steps. Well, she wasn't the first. We took her in, and she had the baby within the hour. And she was dead in another hour. She made us promise to name the child Tom after his father, Marvolo after her father, and Riddle after his father's father hoping he looked like his sire. She was right to hope because she wasn't anything to look at and Tom takes nothing from her but the darkness of his hair and her eyes. He was such a darling baby but strange... Never cried, always watched. You said you were taking him away to school? So he will be leaving here yes?"

Horace had thought his feelings couldn't be afflicted anymore than he had prepared for. He was so very wrong. This child's mother passed in such a way, and to be spoken of so horribly. In his mind his image of this magical child seemed all the more tragic. He loathed to continue with this, would beg Albus if it meant he didn't have to see the product of such a loathsome environment. Yet he continued anyway, his curiosity too great now that he had some picture of who this Tom Riddle could be.

"I see, yes he will be leaving for school but he must return every summer unless he gets adopted. But I--" Again interrupted.

"Well that's better than a rusty poker to the nose. I suppose you'll be wanting to meet him then?" Already the matron was rising from her chair, no evidence in her step that the drinks about her affected her. Horace seethed but grudgingly followed wishing that he could teach this madame some proper respect. Instead he followed her up a second flight of stairs and to the room at the end of the hall. She spoke briefly with whoever was within and then left without so much as a spare glance.

It puzzled him that Tom would be here and not out and about but then he thought of a lone wizard trapped among muggles and understood why the boy would be more prone to being alone. At first he didn't notice the boy when he entered the room, all he saw were piles of books. The room was almost blindingly neat except a desk covered with various crumpled papers and it was there he first laid eyes on Tom Marvolo Riddle.

The boy was lithe and tall, his posture was exceedingly perfect but it was his face that drew Horace in. The boy was angelic. Soft high cheeks and a playful nose and eyes, dark eyes. Darker than night matching gently curling black hair. If he hadn't known better he would say that Tom was pure-blood with his sheer beauty. He sat poised and pristine despite the disarray of his hair, no less perfect for it, no doubt over whatever project he had been consumed with. A Ravenclaw if he'd ever seen one.

"Hello Tom I am Horace Slughorn, not Sluphern, and I am a professor. I am here to talk about your future schooling." He felt himself smiling brightly and settled himself easily upon the only available place. The bed. It creaked dangerously under his weight and felt terribly uncomfortable. Another thing added to his list of many complaints. The boy slept on this. He almost fell over when he heard Tom speak. The sound was sweet and smooth, educated and hadn't someone told him Tom was well taught?

"Are you one of those doctors they send to crazy people? I know the matrons want me tested. You are one of them aren't you? You will lock me away won't you? I'm not crazy! I don't need help! I
don't know what they told you but I didn't do any of it.” Horace could not believe what he was hearing and every terrible little feeling he had when he ended up here magnified. How dare these muggles think of locking away a wizard! He quickly made to calm the boys concerns. Desperate to make things right and not quite knowing how best to do it. He made to stand but that only made Tom back slowly to the far side of the room.

“I am not a doctor child. Just a professor. I suppose I should start again. I am Horace Slughorn, the potions master of Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry and you Tom Marvolo Riddle are to attend come September. Did you not receive your letter?” He watched as his words sunk into the child so far from him. He watched that small face go from fear to falling despair and finally confusion. The child's eyebrows scrunched together and his nose twitched with thought. It was so very endearing and suddenly Horace thanked Merlin that he was here today to see it.

“I-” The boyish voice cracked. “I thought it was a joke. I thought Billy was making fun of me again like when he pushed me off the stairs or when he got everyone to call me Freak for a day.” That small body shivered and curled in on itself. The boy looked so shaken and so small just then. His heart rent in two as he listened to what the boy thought, what he had been through.

“No child, no. You are no freak. Never think that! You are a wizard! You can do things that the others here would never suspect possible. You are magical child. Haven't you ever done something unexplained, wonderful? Don't be shy all children do magic from time to time. It is natural for one your age.” The boy gazed upon him for long seconds, wide black eyes assessing uncertainly and the he nodded shyly. It was such a small thing Tom did and suddenly the image in his head of the Ravenclaw became the Ravenclaw who would be in his club. Tom could already do intentional magic.

A small gesture had a book take to the air and float there. Wandless, wordless, intentional. Without aid, without instruction he knew how to do the Wingardium Leviosa. The boy's eyes widened in such innocent wonder. His face flushed and his mouth trembled into a smile so brittle and sweet that it seemed it would break with just a touch. So perfectly harmless when he performed something many would find difficult.

“Once, when Amy locked me in the hallway, I made the room light up so I wouldn't be afraid. I also can do what I just showed you, and I can make cats jump and play if I want. You said it was normal for children with magic? So I am not a freak? I am normal?” The boy was beaming and Horace puffed out his chest in pride. Such control and no instruction? He would be formidable and he could not pass up making his mark on the boy. This kid was going to be great one day, Horace would not let this opportunity go.

“We call that accidental magic because you are still a child under magical law but when you attend Hogwarts you will learn deliberate magic. You are no freak child, you are a gift. Tell you what, if you wish we can go get your school things today. I know you don't have any money but the school has a fund for students in tough places. If we happen to get more than the amount well it wouldn't be a problem to receive some overdue presents for your birthday, from your favorite professor of course. New Years Eve yes?” When Tom nodded his perfectly messy head of perfect dark hair, it felt like victory.

“Well, let me show you the magical world of London then. Get on a coat, I will wait for you at the gate so hurry! We have so much to do Mr. Riddle. There is so much to show you.” Giddy with the thought of a new acquisition to his web, the man left his new charge to get ready. He didn't see the wicked grin or the dark satisfaction taint the boy he left behind. Maybe if he had, he would have reevaluated his Ravenclaw as a Slytherin. Maybe, he would be more wary. Really, for Tom, things couldn't have gone better.
Chapter End Notes

I made Slughorn's part in this chapter more short and sweet. I don't think he is as observant as Hadrian, Albus, or Tom. So therefore his writing will focus more on things he perceives as Slug-Club material and not. Maybe I will flashback sometime to Tom's take on their meeting but it would probably be in snippets. Also, Slughorn, he isn't a pedophile, he talks about all people in terms of beauty and not beauty, perfect and not perfect. I mean... Its Slughorn and I doubt I will have him as a starring main character.

Edited 6/20/2017
Chapter Summary

So the game begins. Hadrian meets with the Verus'. A black owl causes chaos. Grindelwald gains control of Germany. Tragedy strikes the Mortimer household.

Chapter Notes

I had originally planned to do a bit on Tom but this took so much time so I split this chapter into two. The next will feature the answer to some events and the Attack on Mortimer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: 3 Libras

Verus Estates, Rome Italy January 2nd 1938

The act of the travel was never, in any manner or form, pleasant. At least not of the wizarding kinds of travel; Not in the stretching sensation; Not in the falling sensation; Not in ashes that got into eyes and into hair and into teeth. Nothing about the Floo systems had ever been what one would call ‘pleasant’.

Frankly, according to one disgruntled and woozy wizard, wizards needed to figure out better ways to go here and there without folding time and space. Or without trying so very, very hard to make one as miserable as possible in the aftermath.

At the very least making it a smooth transition as opposed to a slingshot of nausea and regret should take precedence. The discomfort of normal wizarding travel always left him sick to his core. It served mostly to turn all his insides into little knots to be tossed all about his internal walls. Merrily bouncing about in a not-so-merry way. You would think after so long with magic and the time to explore it that wizard-kind, blood and hell even himself, would have solved such issues.

So traveling as such? No. Not his favorite thing. Even after so long he could not repel the instantaneous vertigo that afflicted him on arrival. Always a slight wobble in his form rather than a strict and aloof nature that many mastered. A face with greasy hair and a hook nose reminded him bitterly of grace he couldn’t ever hope to emulate even after so long to practice.

That man had been glorious, skilled, and loyal to a fault. That man wouldn’t have let something so common as a Floo system falter his carefully constructed facade of ice and severity. So had been the likes of one Severus Snape. Would be one Severus Snape, but maybe more happy and much less tortured. A Snape that even still wouldn’t so much as blink when faced with landing properly from a Floo.

It would have been so much better if he could simply tie a location spell that he wanted into a frame
of sorts and pass undaunted to his destinations, perhaps make it so that the scrunching of the here to the there was lined with a nice even straight line one could tread as opposed to zigzags and ups and downs. As long as he eliminated the spinning!

He had always resolved to do such work but it would always slip his mind. It wasn’t as if he did not have the time. It certainly wasn’t as such, it was just he kept getting distracted. If not by some crisis to avert with subtlety, than by the need to invent a spell more urgent than something that could easily be remedied by a small bit of theory and a powerhouse of magic. Both things he contained in spades.

Life for him had always been a rush of trials and near deaths. It had comprised of stopping major wizarding catastrophes even before his rebirth. After it became much more detailed turning into the responsibility of reinventing certain spells or potions direly needed in this year or that. Even this new chance at a life had him constantly embroiled in some plot or scheme or new world order. New discoveries that he had let slip from prior knowledge had marked him as some otherworldly genius, albeit hard to find and harder to recognize. Not for lack of those who tried.

It wasn’t even his intention to get involved with some older generations of wizards but he hadn’t resolved himself to a life of solitary either. He just couldn’t sit back and bite his tongue when needed. He couldn’t remain inactive when the potential for magical perfection laid before him. That would be irresponsible of him as a powerful wizard. After all, was it not the job of the wizard to hone their magic in the correct way? To make use of the gifts granted by Magic? To improve upon modes of travel?! What had he been doing not fixing magical travel?!

He had tried in the beginning to live normally in this new life but it had been harder than he imagined. Being neutral and apathetic were not traits he possessed naturally. It wasn’t as if he had been Gryffindor for nothing. He was an emphatic and compassionate soul. He felt more than he thought and that rang more true in his first years since the void than ever before. The loneliness, and emptiness, and gut crushing despair had only served to make him more susceptible to wanting the opposites of such. He needed touch and company, still wanted it near constantly.

In this new life he had received that instantaneously and clung to it, to hands soothing upon his shoulders and laughs in his ears. He took to wildness and zealously in his passions the first decades. For he was liberated and nubile and thriving in a place that had an abundance of things. There was not a single hole in this world that carried with it tepid nothingness. There existed here not a limitless void but rather there existed here limitless ideas and possibilities! Dreams and experiences to be had and discovered. A world rife with opportunities denied to him on all accounts in the void and before it.

Here there was life! Every sensation reconstructed anew with vigor and fire. Never could he have imagined wanting so much for sunlight or the softness of fertile earth. The nothingness and lukewarm expanse that had been his dwindling existence had held none of these things. After the last brick crumbled away, to wherever things went when they ceased to be, there had truly been nothing. There had not even been stars to die there.

Within that damnable void of nothing he had been so starved for sunlight and grass that he hadn’t even realized it until this world’s reconstruction. Where what that placed lad lacked had become again. He had not known just how much had been forgotten, not until he could openly weep and hear the sound. He cried tears hot and heavy and felt them! Only then did he know what he so missed. He had not realized he lacked such simplicity until it hadn’t been at all. So of course he was more than a little overcome when even the simplest of things were once again things. He took delight in those moments then.

He felt then, and even now, overwhelming joy at such trivial things. If he were honest he missed the
shifts of days the most, the rising of day and especially the falling of night. Every evening since his rebirth he watched them, the stars, and felt grounded and real underneath. All he needed was the image of them dotted and stretched the vast void of space. He fancied that he could hear them chiming in songs of primordial creation. Births and deaths in cycles of never ending light calling across distances to one another. It was breathing without lungs like magic pounding under the skin.

To look up and see the milky way stretch over the sky and not a vast endless nothing was comforting. It was as comforting as it was humbling for the galaxies beyond were minuscule in their forms yet gargantuan to him. Feeling small beneath the weight of a universe above and yet feeling so big in comparison to nothing gave him a center to stand and deal with the revival of his inner self. Simultaneously it was a balm to soothe his madness for the days before where he was empty. It gave him direction in the place of insanity for too in love with all of this was he that it was easy to spiral outside of himself. Feeling too much and too soon after having nothing at all. The nights could give him perspective and the modes in which to reel himself back to himself.

His passion and struggle had not gone unnoticed.

For months his brothers, and he had brothers now! Could only watch with ever-growing concern as Antioch, normally sullen and serious, became a ball of life and light. So much more that he was with days of joy, excitement, and even sorrow! They would watch him marvel at magic he would have found useless. They heard his laugh like the striking of copper bells and warm like spring and it was refreshing. Their brother would laugh over simplest things where once he would have scoffed. He took delight in the mundane like a thrown garden gnome. His whole demeanor became more and his presence immense, outshining the dark corners that he used to be, lighting up a life that had lacked the presence of it.

They often would share synonymous looks and wondered if not for the first time if Death had done something other than grant them each one boon but rather granted a fourth. For Antioch had been filled with a darkness that they could not match and his work had been alarming in nature. For him to become something so very right, even childish in enthusiasm, must have been the doing of Death, or in this case a rebirth.

As for Antioch, he had showered the two others with such devotion and love as to become smothering but they took to it anyways. That his love was so very desperate was something they did not speak of. Nonetheless, he grew achingly close to Cadmus and Ignatius. He loved having a family that was his, blood and bone and flesh and… Alive with him. Because he had been so starved for anything in the void and to have anything at all was bliss, to have brothers of his own more than that, he put all he was into them. Gifted with this second life it was far more than he could have hoped or dreamed to have. It was euphoric and more than a little depressing.

To the end of their days he had showered them with so much of himself that he knew they were exasperated and yet he could not stop it and when they passed he immortalized their memory in his heart; Carrying them with him from each new life left and onward still. They remained with him in spirit even as he cast from himself the name of Antioch and became Hadrian and then Harrison and then Harry and so on and so forth. Recycling the old hims for the new ones.

His love and devotion never ceased and passed on to the next in their lines. For years and years and then decades he watched as the Peverell’s became other names. From Peverell to Mortimer and Gaunt; From Peverell to Potter and Verus. Even minor lines felt his adoration be they even remotely assailed by the passion of a Peverell.

For decades he extended his names and alias’ to these distant relatives making them competent and in turn learning from them secrets of lines joined now with his. All the years spent with them and for
them. Growing to love them each enough to carry their names beside those of Cadmus or Ignatius.
Some things however, like fate, could not be swayed. Some tragedies could not be tempered and it
was with grief that he cut loose the last main line of Cadmus, The Gaunts, although he swore one
day to reconcile.

The Gaunts were what became of his brother’s blood and bone. They had always been powerful and
close with their magic and more than unusually obsessed with anything Hadrian related. With sharp
perception and uncanny intelligence they drew the favor of many a noble family. The blood of
Salazar before Cadmus ran through the line strongly. It also carried with it Salazar’s insane form of
passion. Cadmus had become lost to that very insanity, his love for his wife so very great as to
destroy him when he lost her to death, despite all Hadrian had tried to prevent it.

This passion often ruled the members of Cadmus’ line for better or worse. A passion for knowledge,
or love, or vengeance. Always intense and striking, ruling in its various forms. The drive of Salazar
led to greatness or ruin. It had only become a matter of time until the worst was all that remained and
ruin dominated the line in the form of the Gaunts.

Hadrian had tried to stop it, Harrison as he had been called then, begged for them to get aid but to
little avail when faced with that type of all encompassing insanity that so plagued his family. Looking
back now it was with bittersweet satisfaction that the line fell, because if it hadn’t Tom wouldn’t
have become. Maybe he would have still been but it would not be his Tom. It would be some other
without his face and that was more than Hadrian could bear to think of.

A world without Tom or the potential of Tom was simply not worth being in. A world where Tom
would suffer was better than one without him at all. Was it not Tom he was waiting endlessly for
anyway? Was it not his red eyed void companion that he was living so fully for? Did he not also
carry Salazar’s passion but directed at this man not yet born here? Was it not decades since he had
seen him last and loved him so completely? Overcome with passion enough, Peverell indeed...

Yet, for the life of him, with all the time he had and the experiences, he hadn’t made time for
something as simple as creating a better modus of travel. He had crafted marvels that made all others
pale in comparison. Created spells so complex and delicate that they required ironclad mastery of the
self. Yet still, somehow with all the spells and grand curios he had brought forth into the world. A
smoother way of getting from A to B had never occurred. A simple travel spell!

_Shame on me, Tom would be disappointed._ He huffed and shook himself out of nostalgia. He was
not at all presentable like this and no doubt the master of Villa Degli Verus was well aware he had
arrived. _Lucien would be cross with me if he saw me now._ Smirking at the idea of a man more
obsessed with image than the Malfoys ever were.

He was tempted to leave his dishevelment be for a glimpse at the scandalized look he would receive
yet he grudgingly vanished the ashes and wrinkles that littered his person. Against magic they stood
little chance, and much to his pleasure he found his long coat robes without a wrinkle. Pressed to
perfection upon his vessel. He often had to remind himself that it would not do to come across as
shabby when one payed a visit to an ancestral home. No matter how he wished to cast away
pretense. Even if it was with someone he practically raised, Lucien simply would not have it and
there were never exemptions when it came to that man.

His stomach twisted when he stood to his full height, a daunting 6’1”’. His hands deftly tied his long
hair up proper. The black cascaded down his back to tickle the base of his belt, soft waves already
tangling with the upper folds of his travel cloak. Green eyes scanned the vastness before him
watching the reflections of torches on polished marble.

The greeting parlor was still much too big for his liking and he had yet to convince his ex-student of
such. The grandiose windows were a myriad of stained glass and so finely done that when light passed through the fractured pieces it created art upon the polish white of the marble walls or floor. Reducing the expensive stone to little more than canvas.

Tall pillars of etched stone towered up into the high a pantheon of carved frescos that swirled in a never ending mass of ever more intricate mythological tales. Each tale leading in specific directions to guide the eyes back to the open spaces between lined archways leading each to an outside pavilion to either side.

Grand gardens could be seen just beyond the pavilion doorways, ivy weaving about tall pillars. Further still long rectangular pools guarded by granite satyrs. Each one was a spectrum of human emotions, one rage and then the next misery. All embossed in gold and white gold enough to intimidate, and yet lively enough to inspire awe.

If one was a person worthy of note or of particular concern to such a powerful family as this, they need only spend an hour waiting in one of those many pavilions to find their place. Such power plays were not uncommon for wealthy families but few could execute such a flawless execution of psychological manipulation as the Verus line.

He sighed in exhausted affection knowing well just how much the current head of this particular family enjoyed teasing guests this way. Excelling at the art of meddling with the mind, able to effortlessly intimidating guests without ever needing to show his face, even making the most wealthy of families uncomfortable in this luxury of delights. A true devil when it came to the art of messing with people.

Every detail was placed to perfection as to unsettle and the walls in between archways and windows, he noted, were lined with overtly sexual statues and depictions of ever increasing debauchery. Truly a masterwork of psychological warfare. No doubt even the unflappable Malfoys would have dropped cold in the face of such exorbitant finery and obvious Dionysian influences.

If it were up to him he would have preferred the Mortimer estate. Even with so much space manipulated, this did not feel like a home. It felt so much more empty and lonely. Not that he would ever tell either of the Lords this. They quarreled enough as it was without him picking favorites. He was lucky if this visit didn’t reopen old wounds.

A series of small pops alerted him to the presence of not one, but two house elves and if he recalled correctly were only there to open the double doors leading into the main foyer of the actual ancestral home. As it was now he was still only in the first garden area and just within the main gate.

“Well, Uno and Due are here to welcome the master Peverell home.” The first bowed low. “Due and Uno are to be opening the main door but are not to be inside with the master Peverell.” The second bowed low. Idly, Hadrian wondered just how long it would take him to remind all one hundred and six house elves that he was not a master of this house and therefore could be called Hadrian.

No doubt Lucien had undone all his hard work from years of reconditioning and to be honest he did not have it in him to try and fight the man on this. He wouldn’t be surprised if his arrival did not already herald a feast. Whatever the case there was nothing for it and he followed the two house elves as they skipped, no... more like hopped, to the large doors leading him to the main foyer.

It was with perplexing enthusiasm that the two servants pushed the doors open and twirled into sweeping bows. Yes, the Malfoys would never have made it into the Villa before fainting. Another series of pops sounded the arrival of Tre and Quattro. Once again, the only purpose to be had was that of accompaniment to the next set of rooms.
So it was that Hadrian was passed from set to set until he came to a pair of grand doors made of dark, almost blackened wood and polished to a mirror gleam. Carved elegantly into the set were runes of various arrangements and all faintly aglow with the essence of unbridled magic.

The crest of gold and white gold hung above this set of doors with the monarchical shield of Verus. The image of two thestrals wreathed with laurel sprigs a familiar one. The Potters had a similar crest and even the motto of the Verus family alluded to ties to the Peverell family. ‘De morte et vita aeterna Death and Life Eternal’.

It was a constant reminder of the power and history this family had with its ties to Dark Magics. Then again this was the Lord of Verus’ main office and a place where he conducted all matters big and small for the family. So intimidation was to be expected. What was not expected was the wait Hadrian found himself faced with nor the lone elf that was nervously wringing its long hands.

“Centro is being sorry to the master Peverell. Wizards being from the ministry is speaking with Lord Master Verus and Centro was being told not to interfere no matter what. ‘Even if I ask one hundred times. No! One thousand times! Do not allow me to set them aside again.’ That is what master had been sayings to Centro. Centro will be abiding this for Master. But Centro is not knowing what to do because you is Master Peverell and Master always is telling all us elves that if you coming home to send yous to Master at once. At once! Master bes saying.” The elf truly looked distraught upon the door, its big eyes tearing up with unwavering sympathy for what its lord must be going through. Confusion for its conflicting orders almost enough to warrant punishment but in between enough to not be implemented yet.

“Allows me to guess, he has been using any means of excuse to keep from his paperwork so the ministry has sent an agent or two to supervise him... again.” When the elf nodded emphatically it was almost too funny to bear and Hadrian couldn’t suppress the laughter that echoed unbound through the too large hall. It was relieving to be reminded that behind that door was the same boy who hated writing anything. Would rather do everything else not related to the quill as it were.

He could recall finding the Lord when he was but a boy degnoming the garden in order to get out of formal letter lessons. His father had been furious to say the least and it did not end well for the poor house elves that had been ordered by the youngest master to be allowed menial tasks. It had taken much coaxing on Hadrian’s part to get the Lord of the time to forgive the poor wretched creatures and instead properly punish Lucien. Lucien was writing lines for a week.

Considering the pressure Grindelwald was trying to put on any family with considerable power to join his cause, it was refreshing to know that his Lucien was still as he remembered. Grindelwald would be hard pressed to get a foothold in Italy with Lucien as his obstacle. Each head of the Verus family had always been formidable in their own rights. To this Lord Verus was no exception.

Ever since the Lord was a lad he had potential for perfect magic manipulation. The boy had shown remarkable skill and conscious awareness of magic that had to have come from Ignatius’ line. It was both a delight and a misery to try and teach the wild boy how to handle such raw energy. The lessons could sometimes be explosive and he could recall many a time when he feared the magic would control Lucien rather than Lucien controlling it, a rather valid concern.

The boy had never had an easy time controlling the wildness of his magic. It was stubborn much as he was and was conflicted by all the turmoil that the little boy had been facing. With his family so spread out and with his father loosely involved with him, as he was the third and illegitimate child, Lucien suffered from extreme emotional and magical tantrums. It hadn’t been until Hadrian had arrived that the boy had even received a proper person to talk to.

It had taken years to refine the magic, and years more to quell the storm that was Lucien Verus, but
when it clicked into place Lucien became a force to be reckoned with and the aging and ailing former lord Verus was finally convinced that he could be officially inundated into the family. It was little wonder that he inherited the Lordship title after his father passed with the skill and precision he had come to be known for in magic. Winning a duel over his elder brother only icing on the cake.

When Hadrian left the Verus family shortly before Lucien was granted the title of Lord, he couldn’t have anticipated what would have happened. He had not been there for the duel between Lucien and his brother Mercutio, and he had not known that Valentina, second eldest Verus sibling, would elope with a member of the Coletti family. So it had been a surprise when he had attended the late Lord Verus’ funeral to be greeted by Lucien as the new Lord of Verus.

He had not forgotten the look of chaos in those eyes or the weakness of himself in those nights that followed. Their parting had been explosive and Lucien had all but destroyed this manor in his fits of rage. While Lucien had eventually understood why it was his mentor left. He still could not get over that he had left, nor did he have to be happy with it.

He had let him know with a vengeance. Hadrian received a total of six hundred letters since. Endearing considering how Lucien hated the quill yet each letter was utter nonsense and what little information could be of use had to do with the socialites of Italy.

Politics were dry and dull yet Hadrian found the letters helpful in studying the changing climate of Italy’s wizarding people. While he abhorred the idea of the game, he knew it was necessary for one to know as much about any game played where one was. It was one’s responsibility to be informed and to make informed decisions. To do otherwise would lead to ruin and consequences. A ripple, no matter how small, is still capable of destruction when not done with purpose and skill.

“How long has he been at it thus far?” The simple question was enough to startle the elf from his tortured befuddlement. It looked to the buckles of Hadrian’s dragon hide boots. Seeming to calculate the exact amount of time. His little bony fingers ticked off some invisible number before raising watery eyes upon the Lord Peverell.

“Since early yesterday master Peverell. The Master was most insistent that it was being done by today. Right nows should be beings the time the Master was to be dones. But Th---” With a hiss the large doors flashed with bright magic. Then with little more than whispered creak, the doors were cast open with enough force to crack the ancient stones on either side of the entryway.

The elf named Centro squeaked before rushing to start fixing the old stones. It kept muttering worriedly about needing the Goblins again. Chances were the Goblins were called here more often than not as it was costly to fix such ancient manors such as this.

It was an impressive bit of magic and if Hadrian was correct when it came to this particular strain of magic, it held more bark than bite. Dramatic in execution, appearance, and atmosphere. It served only to give presence to the maker, a wizard currently ensconced within behind three stacks of ceiling high papers. Looking the most disheveled that he could recall seeing him since the man’s childhood.

Beside him were two familiar figures, a wizard named Leonardo Medicci and another by the name Mercutio Verus. Their countenances were drawn and weary as if they stayed with the Lord throughout the twenty-four hour ordeal. Knowing Mercutio, they had and had also endured the just lovely company of an irritable Lucien without resorting to murder as a result.

Not that it would hinder the eldest Verus in the least. The man was more stubborn and less giving than a mule. Known to be quick, concise, and stern Mercutio was a man of steel nerves and a no nonsense attitude. Perfect to keep Lucien in line.
What surprised Hadrian was not the presence of Mercutio but the emblem adorned upon his robes. While it was mildly a pleasant find that he was here at all, as Hadrian recalled the last the two brothers had gotten along was a decade ago just before the duel, he had to concede that it would not be beyond a reckless Lucien to bombard his elder brother with ordered invites home and it would not be below Mercutio to accept.

Still, it was the insignia upon the breast of the eldest Verus that surprised Hadrian the most. The crossed wands and protego depicted was the brand of the International Auror Division. Mercutio had never been one to show interest in such a branch of the ministry, more suited to the political handling and machinations of the system. He was more a thinker than a fighter.

He would have thought him more suitable to be a grand inquisitor or something else with a position over the guilty and not guilty rather than an agent. The I.A.D. were known to be more along the lines of hit wizards and left the investigations to the I.B.I., International Bureau of Investigations. They relied heavily on offensive magics, though the Italian division was also martial and trained in weaponry. Often they carried enchanted blades or crossbows.

Not what he would have thought Mercutio to become but it was not necessarily unsuited for the man. Mercutio’s greatest asset was his control and his sharp intellect. Useful in battle and deadly if mastered. He, like Lucien had been trained by Hadrian to release that potential.

They too had been close but Mercutio had been much too old and stretched too thin as it was to devote himself so fully to Hadrian’s lessons. At the time he had been training to take on the family name. So many of their lessons were impromptu lessons. It did enough to make the eldest Verus a force to be recognized but as it was, not enough to stand up to the raw power of his younger sibling. That did not lessen him however, but showed Mercutio the weaknesses he needed to fortify.

Hadrian knew that no matter where Mercutio would be, he would be great. He needed little guidance to understand magical theory and already had control enough to learn the proper ways magic was wielded to the have fullest effect. He learned quickly and mastered quickly. It made him an excellent student and a more valuable conversationalist. The quintessential scholar, and one of the few people in the world of this day and age that Hadrian truly respected on a mental level.

What his student lacked, was connection. The lack of contact with his core when it was prominent in childhood made Mercutio’s wandless magic non-existent. It was not something one could fix at the age he had been at seventeen. As wandless magic was dependent on the conscious guidance of the core through a manual means over a modus of Foci.

It required practice from a young age when the core was more easily felt and more volatile as it started to grow in children. It required an awareness of one's own magic and the extensive practice of channeling it by will and clarity. It also required a mastery over one’s self, a surprisingly difficult task the older one became. With worries and responsibilities; With regrets and limitations, mastering the chaos of the self was improbable. Not impossible but exceedingly difficult the older a wizard was when they had more things pulling their attentions from their magic but, it had not stopped Mercutio from learning the theory anyway and trying for years after.

It also had not stopped the man from endlessly forcing Hadrian into meditations with him at the worst times possible or into experiments he would much rather have avoided, or friendship when their scattered lessons dissolved into meaningful banter.

Now, he was with the IAD and edging upon the age of fifty three. Still young for a wizard but much too old to just be accepted into the IAD unless there was talent. Talent that Hadrian would attest to in spades so it could be the former. What he didn’t readily understand was why Mercutio, controlled and mind over matter Mercutio, had joined a group so volatile as the IAD.
For now he filed the inquiries away for a later discussion and shot the man in question a look that told him everything. In return, much to his secret delight, the stern looking wizard mouthed the words ‘Later,’ and if there was a spark of mischief to be found in those murky eyes it was a only an added bonus.

A subtle gesture led Hadrian’s attention to the lump of ruffled robes sprawled over the wide desk. A muffled groan could be distinguished from underneath a particular stack of important looking papers and what Hadrian assumed was the beginnings of a hand peaked out from a mess of ribbons usually used to secure letters to owls. He could only guess that Lucien was somewhere underneath it all.

The sheer amount of owls that would be needed for this task, he could only approximately guess at. Surely the amount would be staggering for the said amount of owls already within the room was almost overwhelming now that Hadrian focused on them. No doubt there had to be flocks more without the perimeter of the manor.

Having flooed in he must have missed their presence and the silencing wards up around the property would prevent such a ruckus as many owls as this would create. The very idea that there would even be this many avian messengers at a time in any manor would have been seemingly odd. The only other institutions capable of working up this many letters would have been a magical school. Even those only annually needed a hundred or so owls a year depending

A smile stretched over his lips and he couldn't suppress a quirked an eyebrow at the flock, easily seventy strong in the expansive office. The late Verus would have turned in his grave if he knew the disarray of this office now. Elegant as all the house, it was supposed to be intimidating in wealth as well but the effect was now lost in this bustling chaos of ink spills and owls. It was just... so very odd. It tickled him silly and he could not help the almost childish snort that escaped him.

He laced his fingers behind his back feeling more comfortable than he had felt since his arrival. Knowing well he looked much too comfortable to be polite now, he approached with a sway in his step and an obscene clicking from his boots. He took delight in the incredulous look it got him from Medicci and the almost smirk from Mercutio deciding that it would not do to take any of this situation seriously. Not when it was already so very strange.

The lump upon the covered desk did not move to greet him so he saw no reason to await acknowledgment. He felt, with each step, an invisible weight lift from his shoulders. The air in the room, the clutter, the way ink splotched on seemingly very important letters. It all assuage his fears and showed him the child he had known years ago. The home he had left.

He did not hold back the stinging hex once he drew close, nor the dark chuckle when the current Lord of Verus cried out in response. The form behind the desk visibly jumped knocking into one of the tall stacks beside him. It teetered threateningly and began to fall forward. It seemed that only the elder Verus had the sense to move as the stack became an avalanche that buried Leonardo Medicci.

Perhaps it was the owls or the overwhelmingly ridiculousness of the situation, but it was just too much, for both Mercutio and Hadrian dissolved into howls of laughter and all felt right. The laughter echoed and poured from within him in such force that Hadrian fell to the floor holding his stomach. If he was tickled before it was just too much now and so much enough for this moment. He had needed this perhaps more than he thought. In his absence he had forgotten the liveliness of this household and severely underestimated the extent Lucien's procrastination could stretch to.

He had been so afraid that his student had changed in the ten years he had left. So afraid that each formal letter was a testament to a cold man his Lucien had become; So afraid that this manor would feel devoid the affection he had left; So afraid that he would come back to nothing. During the years of formal letters he had somehow built Lucien more and more as a figure of his father and less as
what he actually was.

“I hope he drowns in it.” The sulking tone of the aforementioned lump, towards one Leonardo Medicci, elicited another fit of laughter and Hadrian could hardly breathe as he met the face of one very unhappy Lucien Verus. It was relieving to see him so undone. Messy brown hair replaced its pristine yet casual waves. Ink was smeared under his left eye. Yet for his seemingly put upon act, his lips were pulled over his teeth in a grin that went from ear to ear. He was handsome like this. Much more appealing than any formal image could ever be.

“Please tell me you have come to save me dear Hadrian. I cannot bear another moment in this room. Please Mi Amor, take me far from here. Let us ride off into the sunset where none could pursue us! Mi Cuerido, save me!” The hazel eyes were pleading and warm and he could not help but find solace in them as he nodded his assent to all accounts.

The laughter in him bubbled and cooled leaving behind a pleasant hum in his veins and a satisfaction in his heart. For a small moment the room grew silent. Or as silent as could be expected with the owls and the curses of the third occupant still buried beneath papers he feared would be ruined if he moved too fast. Not willing to harm the documents in fear it would take another year and a half to get once more.

“Ah. I did arrive in time to play your gallant knight? I suppose I will have to save you from all of this then. I take it the paperwork is \textit{all} completed? Signature and title signed, the correct way mind you? structured and edited?” He was met with an enthusiastic nod. Eyes of his former pupil growing ever more full of energy. How could he deny him when he looked so very eager for assistance?

“And are these all of your owls? I remember there being more.” It was Mercutio, sensible man he was, who answered. With a gesture to the open window into the courtyard beyond Hadrian spied more and more owls. So there were as many as parcels then, his former observations correct. Simply incredible to fit so many here.

“All two hundred but we did need to file for a massive amount of outside delivery owls. My dear Lord and brother has been holding up his work for a year and a half. Ignoring all advice to the contrary being necessary. Better than his previous record but with so much happening right now with the negotiations of foreign affairs it has been… Well you have eyes and ears.”

It was no wonder there were literal towers of papers. It was a wonder that these even got done in one day although somehow Mercutio must have been preparing each one to only need few things as the year and a half stagnation continued. It could only be that which allowed this miracle to happen. If Lucien was the might then it was Mercutio who was the thought.

“So… enough then for each form and letter and correspondence?” A vigorous nod from Lucien was all the answer needed. Hadrian sighed decided that only magic could aid them now. He pulled his magic to the surface and for an instant the entire room felt the push of it heavily against them until it could conform itself right to the space about them.

It felt like the tingle of a storm and the firmness of solid stone and just so very, very much of it. The taste of nitrogen lingered in the mouths, the smell of ozone in the nose. When it moved, the world stopped to kneel, when it stopped the world then could move on. This was power. This was command. This was only a very minuscule amount of what Hadrian could bring forth

They all knew the instant his work took hold. Mercutio’s eyes widened marginally but lacking in the awe Medicci openly displayed. Lucien squealed openly in a rather undignified manner, and somewhere out the open window the cries of thousands of owls silenced.
The magic itself wrapped about the first stack in a sense of sentience that only came with a full mastery of itself. Letters and ribbons flew into the air with speed and purpose. Rolling themselves and tying themselves to the respective owls. The noise alone was almost deafening and the shear amount of magic being absorbed into such a task was staggering to behold.

Batch after batch of letters became tied and more and more owls surged in to replace the ones that hastily fled to deliver newly tied parcels. It took less than five minutes for the stacks of paper to diminish to little more than mounds and fifteen minutes total for the room to look bereft of birds. As the amount of pages dwindled, the noise teetered to a soft rustling rather than the cacophony that previously dominated the room.

The last owl departed just after the fifteen minute mark. All that remained of the hoard were the many feathers that continued to still float down from high shelves and makeshift perches. As if in afterthought the tangible magic vanished them before they could hit the ground.

With satisfaction it settled heavy about the room and began to right the wrong it found. It fixed inkwells that were cracked and discarded. Loose parchment it stashed. Stains vanished from carpet and marble and wood. Chairs walked themselves gracefully to their respective places. Drawers shut and locked where needed. All became as it would have otherwise been. Neat, polished, and rightly elegant in all ways.

Careful assessment of the room proved enough for Hadrian’s approval and he began to pull back the loose magic. Its absence was as a vacuum and left in its wake an emptiness. Yet, it lingered about Hadrian’s shoulders like a shroud. It tickled along his skin in contentment, and the smell of lightning remained heavy in the air. Slowly diminishing back into him as much as it was able. Always hovering without him for lack of room within.

“I suppose this will do for now. You really must learn to get your work done sooner Lord Verus. I cannot always swoop in to save you.” Arms circled his waist from behind and a face buried its way into his neck through thick black hair. Warm breath tickled at the high edge of his robes and Hadrian found himself pressed tightly to the familiar form that was Lucien Verus. Arms squeezed him, almost desperately to the very beginnings of pain. Yet he could only feel comfort and the niggling sense that he was home.

The embrace ended too soon for comfort but the smile that greeted him was worth it. Lucien was older looking than he could recall but then again, for one stuck as he was now, everyone aged to him. Mercutio even looked to have gray hairs, no doubt the work of his little brother.

“Ah. But if I did that then you wouldn’t come to my rescue and would never visit, or come home. Instead you would gallivant about with people like Alexander Mortimer and cause all sorts of mischief like teasing dark wizards. So I procrastinate for you, because at least then you can take a break from all that… well… That.”

Lucien's hands swirled in a vague gesture of an encompassing circle.

There was something confident and easy in the way those words were spoken. As if this child knew the hardships he was facing and the depth of misery he stayed just out of reach of. Needing to ease his troubled mind without offense or pushing too hard. His careful way of worrying was endearing, appreciated. Serious concerns masked in jests, his questions veiled behind wide arm gestures and theatrical representation.

A Mortimer would soothe your hurts through silent vigil; A Verus would face you dead on and soothe your hurts through laughter. The contrast was enough to be unnerving, almost, if he hadn't been expecting it from the get go. There could be no doubt as to why Hadrian was here now, at this
time. No masking the risks involved with sheltering him.

He would not pretend that he, as he was now, was not vulnerable. Chaotic and unbalanced had been the norm for him for the past ten years since he and Gellert separated. The schism so vast so suddenly that it threw Hadrian dangerously close to the chaos he had felt in the void. Too much, too soon, and not nearly enough to reach stability.

The hurt of Gellert and bitterness over Albus was still raw even over a decade since. The anger still rampant in his heart though he buried it deep, not ready yet to face down that demon. He was always telling himself that it was not time, though he knew that was quickly running out. Things would only get worse from here. War would come quickly. Dark days were upon them and if he wished to achieve his goals he could not be fighting within himself. He had to absolve what pieces of the past he could.

Maybe fate decided things could not be changed. Maybe the stars aligned that night on the eve of the Schism. If he wanted to get through the coming years whole enough to still remain in this world, he needed to be just that, whole. To be whole he must be at peace; To be at peace he must reach agreement; To be at a full agreement he needed to have a consensus and then fully take it on in its entirety. If that was to hate, than it was to hate wholly; If that was to forgive, it was to forgive wholly. The process of bringing himself into balance was much too exhausting for those who knew him well not to notice the heavy toll it had upon him. He was simply... so very tired. Years dragging down his shoulders.

“Yes, yes. Use me as your excuse if you must. Now though, I do believe a nap is in order. I have had a couple days of proactive meddling and am knackered. It looks as if everyone is in agreement of that. So allow poor senior Medicci his leave and give your dearest brother some peace for a few hours. Then do be a good and proper Lord and feed your poor old mentor would you. I am old and feeble and need tender care."

When Lucien’s bright laugh suffused the air, everything felt as it should be. The chaos within dispersed and the world was for a little while longer, warm and full and just so right. Balanced and whole even if that was not a truth but a poor mask over the wounds in himself.

“Well then you poor, decrepit wizard lets be getting you off to bed then. We mustn't deprive you of your rest.” Yes, all was as it should be. The rest of the day was spent playing catch up with the two brothers and settling back into the villa. It was not in the least bit a relaxing day and a nap did not come to be. In fact, the strange continued well into the evening for it was midnight when a couple of distraught house elves and the two brothers came rushing through his chamber door looking harried.

The poor elves were beside themselves wailing over the corpse of a small southern owl. Lucien and his brother stood together as mirrors of one another in their grimness. Tall fellows of dark hair and murky eyes. Night robes covered their forms but did little to hide the scratches that decorated their hands and forearms.

“I take it there is trouble in the owlery?” it appeared that Lucien was about to disagree but his elder brother shot him a withering glare which ended any fight in him. “A large black owl has arrived at the manor. I suppose it decided that it was hungry and ate one of the smaller owls and the mate did not like that overly much. The beast hasn't let elf or man near but we assume it is for you since one of the elves informed us it fled to the roost after it could not enter your quarters.”

A Black owl, large enough to strike down other owls... Surely the boy hadn't figured it out so quickly to tame Mors, but then again it was Tom. Tom was always sharp and if anything would have instantly loved the creature without restraint. Especially, if what he thought of the child was accurate.
They were not so dissimilar and as a child Hadrian could recall the need for something of his own. Hedwig.

Hadrian couldn’t help the thundering that began rushing through his veins nor the pleasant tingle beneath his skin. It was all so very exciting. He could imagine a thousand questions that would be asked of him, a thousand demands. He could already feel himself itching to respond to the no doubt large requests of his little one. The need to help him reach his potential as quickly as possible. The need to be equals. The need to challenge that magic he so missed.

He could however help himself to not look a fool. Though he wished to race to the rookery now, he restrained his impulses. He made a concentrated inner effort at reeling himself in. He conducted himself with a grace he did not feel, layered over his growing anticipation. He was giddy and his head felt empty of all the work he had been losing himself in just moments before. A travel spell could wait when this being demanded his attention.

“Well, is he still...” The pause was met with the heavy stare of the pair before him. Could they sense his eagerness?

“There? Yes but,” That was all he needed to hear. He took a moment to gather his materials and laid them neatly away for further scrutiny later. Halting all his plans in preparation for this letter. Then with all the haste he could muster without seeming suspicious he followed the two brothers and two elves to the high towered rookery. The first elf opened the doorway to a now evacuated roost. Wherein was a lone beast of an owl over the body of its kill, a not so small southern owl. It took up much of the window roost, such was its largeness.

His heart was raging against his chest. Many decades and years he waited to meet Tom again, to see his familiar writing. Millenia he had spent waltzing through life awaiting the day his other would be once again. There was never a more glorious day as that which his counterpart was born. He had waited so long and yet more years would have to follow before he could reunite with his dearest Tom.

‘What was a few more years?’ He had thought in the evenings when he was almost driven to madness in his need to see Tom. Just knowing that Tom lived and breathed was torture. Knowing that he could not just take from him the pains of the world was a torment unlike any he could have fathomed. That orphanage would rue the day it let hunger and fear touch his child. Yet he could not save Tom...not now. Not yet.

One day soon, if Hadrian had his way, he would take Tom from that horrid place, burn it to ashes. He would give Tom the place in this world he belonged, needing to fill that life with more than cold nights and empty stomachs. To give him all he could to become all he could. However, as long as the Gaunts still lived and as long as Gellert was pursuing the hallows, he could not remove Tom to the wizarding world fully.

As it stood, that orphanage was all that was keeping Tom from ministry and thus the Gaunts. In Merope's final act of life, with all that was left of her, she wove into those walls of Wool's a powerful magic. That last act of magic sheltered Tom from the eyes of any who would call for his death. It was all she could give her son besides a name. This kept Tom safe from the ministry and those of who, would see Tom placed with blood kin... The Gaunts or worse, the Riddle's.

Pureblood elitists to a frighteningly mad degree to the point of homicidal, The Gaunts would kill Tom without delay should they learn of his existence. Since Merope was disowned by Marvolo after her marriage to Tom Riddle Jr., the current existence of Tom would be concealed from him until such a time as there were no other options for succession. So long as nothing warranted an investigation from the ministry, or Morfin Gaunt perished prematurely, Marvolo would be none the
wiser.
Should he vie for custody now without the Gaunts removed from the picture there would questions
raised about the boy. As a lord from a noble and most ancient house and one without an heir, his
interest would spark the interest of the public. The ministry would wonder what the relation was, and
services would check before approving the adoption.

If they found kin closer related to his child than himself, they would be notified so a fair custody
could be claimed. Marvolo was closer as a relation, they were magical, and being the last male heir to
that line, they would win custody on the principal of succession alone. While there was a chance he
would come out of the custody battle with Tom, it was comparatively small.

It was a risk Hadrian could not take without knowing that he would win the battle one hundred
percent. So until the Gaunts could be neutralized, Hadrian could not actively adopt Tom. That was
not the sole reason that he could not take his child from that place, a more dangerous one existed in
the form of one Gellert Grindelwald.

Gellert was at this moment hunting for any sign of the Peverell family. That being primarily Hadrian.
Gellert was a sharp man and difficult to out maneuver when he was committed and currently the man
was well beyond committed, he was obsessed. It was risky to be anywhere for long and no doubt
Gellert would get desperate the more time elapsed without hide or hair of his prey.

When that happened it would be much too dangerous for anyone associated with Hadrian to harbor
him. If Gellert somehow got Tom, if he thought for an instant that hurting or even killing Tom would
be effective in capturing Hadrian. He wouldn't hesitate. Worse, if he discovered the connection of
Tom to his ancestors... No. Until Gellert could be taken out of the picture, it would not be safe for
Tom to be near him.

The very thought of placing Tom in any form of danger was enough to strengthen his resolve. Those
reasons were the only barrier that pushed him back from just taking Tom away. His safety was at this
point in time more important than his happiness. It did not mean he would be left without guidance or
the love that he could be given as far as could be given over a distance.

It did mean that he would have to be careful how he went about doing such things. So long as Tom
stayed out of the ministries hands and so long as Hadrian didn't make his connection to the boy
obvious. Tom would be safe and he could be with him in spirit at the very least. Make his days a
little better than the past life that Tom had growing up without anyone or anything he cherished.
Mors was only the beginning. He would do everything in his power to ensure Tom's happiness.

Upon seeing Hadrian, said owl reared its wings in magnificence and once again the wizard was
reminded of just why he took to this beast. It felt like Tom, like his precise disregard for things
unworthy. If Tom were an owl this would be him. No doubt they were made for each other. Besides
an ordinary owl would have never suited his darling child. A king of one would have to suffice.

When he beckoned the owl to his person it came without fuss. It perched beside him regally and
deigned the wizard with the honor of scratching at his crown. Hands so very gentle, took the letter
from it and were appreciated in turn with gentle nibbling at his robe's sleeve. A beast so unlike what
the brothers had seen before.

"I would suggest keeping live rats and an Elf in charge of Mors when he visits. I doubt this will be
the last you see of him. He will not stand for not having food ready to be hunted when he arrives. I
would suggest putting up a space in my quarters for him and adding him immediately into the wards.
It should cut down on the casualties but unfortunately I cannot convince him to not strike at other
owls if he is hungry or even if he is present with them. He is a familiar and not an ordinary owl you
see. The best we can do is keep him from them. We were lucky so few owls finished with their work
today.” Lucien snorted and shied forward but hesitated when caught in the stormlight gaze of such a grand beast.

“Do you mean to tell me someone is connected to this—” “Wonderfully majestic king among owls, yes. It would seem so Luc.” Mercutio finished for him as if in sudden understanding. It would not do to insult a beast such as this. Something closer to the pride of griffons than of ordinary birds. No normal wizard would be able to be its familiar and if Hadrian noted its status that meant the wizard behind it was formidable. Enough at least to catch the attention of their mentor if his eagerness were any clue.

“I would say dear brother that he deserves a perch of his own in our fine estate, it is an honor to be in Hadrian’s acquaintance and we should not deny him the pleasant company. Him or his wizard. Perhaps it will find the hare in the gardens beneath Hadrian's wing more suitable for prey.”

One could only hope that would be the case. If Hadrian’s cryptic laughter were anything to go by, this was the proper solution. That week a total of four owls went missing. One started nesting. Lucien was furious. Hadrian, well... he was much too pleased. His laughter could be heard well into the hours of dawn.

**Nurmengard, Germany June 30th 1938**

There remained no news in regards to the man. He was once again a phantom that ever haunted the sleep and ensnared the mind. What little that was gleaned was soon enough proved false. Sightings of him proved many but never fruitful. It should have been so effortless to bring him back, yet this as with all his endeavors of late proved most challenging.

It was his own folly that their separation happened but he could not bring his pride to accept it. Gellert was not a man who apologized. Never a man who could be said to feel remorse for his actions, no matter how deplorable or morally corrupt. Yet this, this haunted him. The feeling of isolation now, was not as comforting as he once believed.

He felt himself slipping in the wee hours and like a man obsessed couldn't find it in himself to pull away. The instances of his weaknesses were few at first. His confidence that he could bring his friend back to heel had been great but time proved to him that just chasing would get him nothing. As the days turned to weeks his instances of weakness grew largely into the waking hours of morning.

His eyes would focus on a minion and all he would see was that face staring back at him. It would be varying in its countenance. Sometimes it was happy, and sometimes those perfect lips would pull tight in displeasure or worse, disappointment. Those verdant eyes would be back lit with the life and fire that defined him, tearing into Gellert relentlessly in their softness or at worse the chips of green ice they could become.

The illusions lasted microseconds but each would dig deep into him and upset the balance within. His magic would spark and sizzle around him for minutes lasting after and once, in a fit of rage, he even killed one of his own. So mad was he at this curse that assaulted him in his vulnerable moments. The nights were worse.

In the dead of night he could recall in clarity that body. Its smell, temperature, texture, movements, sounds... All of it perfectly replicated in dreams that fringed upon night terrors. Driving him even more slowly to a sickness he could not fight. Unwilling to bow in the face of something as demeaning as simple desire.

Yet, he could see the indent of a naked back, pale and soft. He knew the feeling of it arching,
pressing perfect into him. Made to be touched and coveted. The slickness that coated it when they
moved in tandem, just as perfect this way as when casting the magics that raised this fortress.

He could recall the smell of him perfect. Enough to know him among a crowd blinded. Pine forest
and crisp air of storms so very fresh and later in the heat of passion the musk of man. His tongue
tingled with the taste of his salted skin, his lips, his magic, his very essence. Food now seemed so
bland and if he ate less and less as the days progressed, no one mentioned a word. For all he could
taste was that man, and lightning tinged sorcery that assailed him in the darkest nights.

Green eyes and long weighted hair were visions that tracked his gaze whenever possible, ever more
in the crowds he blended into at ministries and most notably in those that had either traits. The words
in his head would repeat over and over. Their final fight that night too long ago.

If he were a less prideful beast he would admit that he was concerned just as much as his lost friend.
He would have fallen to his knees for forgiveness and admit every wrong that could have or should
have been made. He was not that kind of man. Instead he had locked up the notions of petty remorse
and tried his damnedest to proceed as planned.

It was when he was within the same room as the Elder Wand that the visions became exasperated.
The being before him was just so real and that expression of rage so fresh in his mind as to be
happening then and there.

“Why won't you listen?! Are there not better ways! Can you not seek another avenue? Can I not aid
you in the making of a Stone? You know me capable. Please, I beg you don't do this. Do not do this
thing. It will not grant you what you seek, focus on anything else. This shortcut is not worth the risks,
and you don't even know the current masters of the Hallows or even where they are.”

That voice... had it always been so full? Had it always been that soothing as to hold him back? It had
always given council to him, ideas, and so many lessons on power but for the life of him he could
not recall the second emotion running through it. Was it resignation or regret? It was painful that he
recalled his responses. Short and cutting and dismissing.

Had he really diminished this masterwork of a man in his mind to something as weak as to be
unheeded?

“If that is truly what you think then there is nothing for it. I hope you realize before it is too late.”

That night had been the last time he had seen him. The morning had spirited him away, and that is
when he could remember the itching of his mind to have begun. His magic had been chaotic then,
unsettled, but he could feel it now beyond what normal meditation could help. When he took the
wand from Gregorovitch it seemed to settle but now... now he was not so sure.

It only seemed to be... worse in its slickness. It was not unmanageable now and it seemed the
damage was minor. He could still rule like this but he refused to touch the Wand, and limited his
interactions around it. He would not admit that Hadrian was right or that he missed him but he could
accept that the man's words had merit. He would need to find him if he were to end this madness, of
that Gellert was certain.

His eyes traveled to the map upon the far table, where a pin was pressed tentatively in the coast of
Spain. It was a new earmark and one could not be certain if the lead was even viable but Heine had
assured him it would be investigated. He somehow knew it would be a fruitless endeavor. The heat
of his ire raised as he stared harder at the map.

He could feel the room heat more and more until the frost without the glass steamed and flew away.
It was outrageous that he! The Dark Lord Gellert Grindelwald would be led on some fool's chase when there were more important things to be had. Just that January he had managed to take control of the muggle German chancellor fully.

He had the man sign a contract with Britain for a non-violence clause. It would allow Germany the ability to militarize and make moves in Europe so long as it did not attack any allied estates or Britain. Maintaining the peace of two nations albeit a falsehood on the side of his beloved country. He would not sit back when he could put his plans to motion. He need not have Hadrian for that.

No, he need not have Hadrian at all, he told himself. Behind him in the glass he saw the stretching figure of said man gazing at him with such adoration. No, he would not need Hadrian... but the man would come back to him, even if he had to turn all of Europe to rubble to make him. He would not escape him, not like Albus had.

He would not be left again. Could not be left again if he took command over this world. He was a man of action and would not be held back by his self loathing. He would make them see that he was where they belonged.

Idly, somewhere deep in him, a piece of his sanity crumbled. The reflection in his eye told of a whisper of his madness and his magic purred in delight. That night Gellert began making austere plans a reality. Things that Hadrian had always kept him from achieving and he could not remember why he had let that happen.

In the morning he scraped the plans in a panic, but the next night they were continued. For the first time, Gellert feared what he himself was capable of. Yet the times he feared became less and less. The visions became more and more. His magic wilder and wilder. It soon became clear to many within his hold that something wasn't quite right.

When the first order to attack a magical household was unleashed, it spelled the end for many of the more lucid minded in Grindelwald's company. Leaving him with a darker side of his company that lacked magical control and proper usage of. The more mastered of the arts fled long before the plans came to fruition but the damage was done. Those left were those tainted by dark addictions or insanity much like the powerhouse that was Gellert Grindelwald.

There were many deserters but the first casualty of defection was none other than Heine Weiss, his lieutenant. It came after September 24th 1938 when the Mortimer family estate in Barcelona Spain was attacked and destroyed. Heine Weiss fled that night and was marked for death on sight. The body of Celeste Mortimer was discovered the beside the mutilated remains of the late Lord Alexander Mortimer.

Chapter End Notes

Edited July 5th 2017

I know there are some loose ends here but stay patient until after the next chapter and I will surely address those. Also I have taken to beginning to compile extra content for this fic which includes some artwork and some minor details about some characters.
Chapter Notes

There will be some chapters coming faster once the season ends. We move into the events that trigger this alternate WWII and some of them will happen on dates and times that will conflict with our actual real world events. As Hadrian affects the speed which certain influential people respond or initiate plans. I am estimating that certain events may happen months before they actually did but that will come later.

Also note that everyone deals with loss in their own ways and I hope to start capturing the different ways in which loss affects people as well as the modes which different people use to heal.

Also, super excited about new chapters posted by MayMarlow in Train to Nowhere and If Them be the Rules. So... go check that out its nice.

Without further to do with anything here is the unedited chapter Running with The Devil.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five: Running with the Devil

Wool’s Orphanage London, August 8th 1938

The room was much changed since the same time last year. Ever since that first letter from his friend, the room had entered an ever descending spiral into organized chaos. Meticulous cleanliness was changed into disorderly placed stacks of teetering books all carefully arranged and known by subject and purpose only to the one.

Pieces of stray paper littered the floors. Crumpled bits and pieces of them overflowed from the bin next to an overworked singular desk. Inkwells overtook the left half accompanied by writing implements upon their side. Some wells were empty, some were knocked astray, and some were full with dabs of ink spilling over the side and staining the old wood. Whereas the opposing side was a composition of broken quills, fountain pen tips, and strange handmade combinations of the two.

The center of it all featured the fruits of their combined labors. The scribbling of the alphabet, a b c d, which had been done over, and over, and over again until each letter became a pinnacle of perfected calligraphy. The only signs of struggle with the written art evidenced from the stack of helter-skelter note pages depicting the evolution of artfully mastered control.

All pages were kept in pristine condition as if to showcase the procession of progress. The works a testament to the many trials the child would undertake before September the first and all kept in great company by a stack of parchment twelve inches high, at the least, of just notes on various things. All later to be recorded properly for future research.

A quill separated from the rest laid next to the stack but was no longer in use and blunted beyond
repair. It had summarily been abandoned when a new quill and a new project overtook the practical necessity of learning penmanship for more difficult but just as necessary practices. Having served its purpose well enough.

Once Tom had been assured of the perfection of his penmanship, or rather quillmanship, he had instantly moved on to other matters. His was not the type to linger on a project deemed completed in the wake of so very much to do but also not one to underestimate the importance of neatness and image. Even at eleven he understood the need for projecting oneself best self forward.

Image was everything for it lead to advantageous opportunities. A sentiment he and his newly acquired fool of a professor, Slughorn, agreed upon wholeheartedly. It would not do for his image to be damaged by messy writing, inkblots, or mars. If he was to show the others how special he was then image was key. It was the dot of every ‘i’ and the cross of every ‘t’. It was the stance in which he held himself constantly.

It meant watching his every action and observing which were proper and which were not. It would dictate his future for many years to come, the things that he cemented into the malleable minds of the now. It would set the stage for how the world spoke of him, and to him, and to how he spoke of and to the world. It was the difference in gaining an upper hand or losing it. Being respected or being dismissed and he would be respected.

Words and writing were integral parts of that image. What sort of wizard would he be if his handwriting did not reflect the level of standard he held himself to, dressed himself to? If he was to be taken seriously, and he intended to be taken seriously, then he must reflect that which divided him from children. Once he was assured of success in the basics of his image he moved on to more practical lessons.

Among perfecting this art of writing with feathers, much more difficult than a pen and far more archaic, he had worked tirelessly on his inquiry journals. Solidifying what he knew and what he would need to figure out. Many questions among the pages had been answered since his trip to Diagon alley with the aid of Professor Slughorn, yet for every question answered new quandaries replaced the old.

For every truth he found another that needed to be sought. It would not do for him to be ignorant when it came to the wizarding world and while his dumb act had fooled Slughorn and endeared him to the man, he would not stand for such a stigma and the pity that accompanied it to be permissible in the future.

No, Tom would be great, greater than any student under Horace Slughorn. Greater than any who could threaten him. His trip to Diagon had been enlightening on so many levels. Not the least of which being the outlook on blood status. Something which direly affected his chances of success and something that had he not had forewarning of, would have hounded him ever onward.

Doors of opportunities wasted and closed, tactics useless. Tom imagined that had he not known sooner, it would have led a great deal of people to have to be taught a lesson. Ruling through fear was not above him, yet he could not find the same satisfaction in it as he once did. He idolized the idea of beating the wizarding world at its own great game. Alas, he was according to the professor, a lower rung citizen. It had been a shame that he, Tom Riddle, must be a muggleborn. A wasted talent.

According to the professor, it meant his blood was what some, the most important somes, would call dirty; that he would not be treated the same as those who came from two wizards; that he would not be as magically adept as those with such blood. Tom had listened intently to the apologetic nature in such an explanation and internally scoffed. Rejected it entirely. He listened, and weighed its worth, and found it lacking.
Internally he raged against it. Who were they to tell him he was not more adept at magic when, according to the professor he had abilities rare?! Who were they to him who was already more adept than they, if his wandless magic was anything to attest to?! Still it had highlighted a severe obstacle for him within the wizarding world. One he could not allow to hold him back, so ignorance was out of the question and if that meant mastering all his coursework and beyond for that year before his term even started… So smote it be. He would do that and more.

So the descent from clinical order began. The room had been in this mad state ever since, just as he. He, who was currently reworking yet another theory, in yet another journal, for yet another task that should become perfected. His research materials consisted of a large stack of deceptively ordinary muggle math books. Beneath their paper covers were books of all nature titled pretty and each hand written with love and care. Books far more interesting and useful than the course books he had already read through thrice.

The very first one came days after Tom had requested books back in early January. It was an inconspicuous thing of black leather that felt smooth and soft. The bottom corner of the tome was notched and inscribed with the lettering H.J.P. in faded silver leaf. A bookmark was built into the binding made from red silk ribbon and each page was thick and yellowed. Their edges were trimmed in gold filigree labeling page after page of love worn words. It smelled of age and ink and Tom loved.

The sloping ‘L’s and upward delicate ‘E’s gave it a more significant meaning and value beyond any other possession. For he knew that handwriting well. It meant more to him than even his wand, though it was close in contention. This one book proved to be his favorite of anything he had received in his short life. This one gift was beyond a doubt made for him no matter the age of it for on the back of the front leather cover was a small faded note for him and him alone in that beautiful script.

‘My Precious Tom,

All the books, as requested. Let this be your first installment on that promise. Further than that I just wanted to let you know that you are more than your name. You are special. You are a child that is a beloved of magic. Act like it. Let them realize they are inferior as you outsmart and outclass them regardless of their beliefs. Let the delusional flounder as you rise up, far beyond them.

With love and my full faith in you,
Yours,
H.J.P.

The tome was the first of many sent but still remained his favorite despite others following. These tomes had become part of his obsessive collection from this mysterious friend and had always been placed close to his bedside. All things that came from his benefactor remained within reach at nearly all times in this room, including the latest letter sitting pretty in his trouser pocket.

Every so often he would pause from his journal and slip his hand inside to feel the edges. It was becoming a habit that he didn’t notice at first which concerned him, but the idea that someone… anyone cared for him was more than he could fathom. It was more than he could bare to hope for as one who was used to disappointment.

After so many years spent in despair among the muggles the very idea that anyone could be this way for him raged against all he believed to be true. Of adults and the general populace, Tom cared little. Liked even less. This care he had been receiving filled him with anger for he had seen what betrayal looked like and this screamed of it. Still the fact that he was fool enough to want it even knowing that
it could be false made him ache someplace deep inside him. A place where his dreams went to die.

Care such as this was never meant to be something he had ever experienced. So he wanted it more and more because he was so starved for it. So while he felt darkly upon the matters of it, all the while, warmth swelled within him. Filling that inner place of decay. Too much for words or actions to say how moved he was by each new correspondence. Too much to describe the inner turmoil it awoke within his dark perceptions.

Of course he denied his new and obsessive attachment with vehemence. Often he would push the strange impulses away but more often than not, his fingers trailed over the parchment within his pocket. He would visualize the words and shapes and felt… cherished. He felt protected and strong and irrevocably calm and he didn’t know what to do in those instances. What was he supposed to do?!

He was conflicted and he hated it, loved it, was afraid of it. Despite all of that, he would wait up eagerly night after night for his black harbinger to return to him, bearing with it small snippets of things and adventures and magics from far away. With each new letter there would be pictures of those far off places and sometimes something extraordinary from his H.J.P.

‘Did you know that crushing instead of chopping certain ingredients makes them more potent?’, ‘The weather today is wet, so wet, and it smells horrid because of bats…’, ‘No Tom you cannot use wingardium leviosa as a viable way to fly although with enough force and, I imagine, enough will one could levitate items much bigger than themselves, but surely there are better ways. More efficient means by which to do these things…’, ‘I do love treacle tart but they don’t send well. Maybe one day, when it is safe, we can have some together.’, ‘I never thought the pyramids were actually this big but I suppose I could be wrong, just this once mind you. Never know why I haven’t visited Egypt sooner.’

Safe to say he took each new adventure or letter and filed it away into an ever growing image of his friend. He imagined, as only a child without a shred of happiness to be had could, of a pair of laughing eyes and a quick, sharp, smile. Just for him. Habits and motions idle in long wizened fingers. A voice soothing and effervescent in its delight. He took the good and bad loving even the more annoyingly human aspects of his imagined benefactor.

Personality traits such as a twitching rounded nose that would have revolted him became tolerable if only because deep within he appreciated them in this one person and this one alone that existed solely within his mind. This one person who he hated to feel the need to be wanted by yet tolerated anyway.

Despite his denial of the obsession forming he diligently spent each evening picking the words and their information apart. He hoped that by doing so, and cataloging his found details, that he would stumble upon any small thing that would give him a hint as to who this H.J.P. person could be. Anything to help build that mysterious figure within him into something tenable.

He thought ceaselessly into the long hours of night if he could track him down somehow and demand... Then he would stop himself. His mind halting everything. A scowl would crawl across his lips and he would turn to face away from the opened windows leading to the outside world. His mind would spiral ever darker and it was in those moments he felt doubts that he had thought he had defeated long, long ago. Childish aspirations and wishes that he had killed to survive the truths of this horrid world.

This was one of those times except this time he curled into his chair so as to make himself smaller. For hours he had sat by the fire in the commonplace of Wool’s feeling ever the more foolish and vulnerable, wondering how he had gotten to this. Tonight he held in his lap a well worn tome filled
with instructions on how to identify the routes of magic in the casting of simpler defensive spells. Clear guidance but still feeling… lost.

He asked himself things that tore into the weaker recesses of himself which still existed, longed to belong. What would he demand should he ever get the chance to face him and why would it even matter? What would he do if he found his ‘friend’ and why should he do anything? Things that cut deeply into him and dragged him into childlike mires of self loathing.

A frown pulled down at the corners of his lips. Dark eyes rose to stare far off into the distance, unobstructed by the peeling wallpaper made sinister by firelight. Seeing beyond mere concrete and plaster. Seeing but unseeing.

He felt a creeping coolness sink into his bones that had little to do with his inner darkness. It was akin to fear but close enough to be anticipation. His body trembled even as he slumped back into his chair. He felt weight upon his breast as his dark mind descended again into that black abyss within himself. A chasm of all things weak that he had locked away and never allowed himself to look into.

The Tome laid long forgotten in lieu to his current mental descent into himself. His eyes tracked the ever growing speck of black against the gray sky of London just beyond the window and beyond the plaster. He watched it without comprehension for his brain was clouded and murky. Uncertainty was not a trait he allowed himself much of and in the times when he did, he struggled with it. Now was one such time as he had little clue as to just what he would do or what he even could do if he succeeded in finding his benefactor.

He knew such small intimate things of this man and yet this man seemed to know him better than anyone he had ever met. And they hadn’t even met! His friend treated him unlike an adult treats a child but more of how a professor treats a prized student in university. He did not care for dumbing down his vocabulary and treated no question without the utmost care for knowledge and that sake only. A seeker of truth and giver of it, a Ravenclaw if ever there could have been one.

No line of questions went unanswered regardless of the appropriateness for a child to know them. In fact, when Tom asked him about war and if it could be possible that Germany was militarizing for an invasion, H.J.P. did not deny him the truth or sugarcoat the answer. He had answered in, if words could show feeling and tone, a solemnity that made the truth all the more real.

H.J.P. had confirmed that Germany was certainly lying about their anti-war policies and that war would come. The only question remaining was the when and where it would grip and hold. He had hinted that the events would be uncertain but the trends were all still the same. He had been very clear that Tom should prepare for it in anyway he could. It didn’t make a whole lot of sense some of the other things he had mentioned in that letter. Tom wasn’t even entirely sure that he could reach the level of pessimism and paranoia that H.J.P. had asked for.

When Tom asked of magical theories and past wizards of note, he was answered with complete answers and fine details. Guides on what had gone wrong with each wizard and the accomplishments often buried with their tragic demises. The details were too fine to have been fabricated, Tom had checked. He spent hours in Flourish and Blotts when he could weasel away from the orphanage, just so he could confirm or deny these allegations.

The point was that there was never a question that his friend didn’t answer with the whole truth. Which made Tom even more suspicious because people just were not that way. People lied, even to spare hurt feelings. People misled because it was the right thing to do if a child asked of dangerous things. People did that because in some way they were fitting into a society that said it was unnatural to be honest, that protecting ignorance was fine. Tom wasn’t honest because what was the point but he did not think even he could tell the truth. All. The. Time.
So how would Tom treat with him if ever he could meet him, a person who had not lied? Would they just get on as well as they did in their writings? Would it be socially acceptable to be such a duo that there would be nothing but truths between them? He had never, ever hesitated in demanding anything before but now… Now was different, books were different than asking for understanding.

There was no guarantee that H.J.P. would even be affable once they met in person. Maybe he wouldn’t like Tom at all or the man could be someone else entirely from the image Tom had constructed. He could very well be a pervert, or scum like the rest of society. What was worse was that he could be the manipulative type of liar. That was just as bad as anything else, ever.

A groan pushed passed his lips and he pushed his palms into his eyes to ease a building anxiety. He had often thought that he would know what to do it ever he met a person. Often times he did. Smile just so, pretend to fit, let them not see below the surface. Yet, no matter how he saw it play ahead in his mind, he had no illusions that his perfected mask of innocence could fool H.J.P. The man was undoubtedly wise and powerful. His knowledge was a testament to that fact and he was far from the habit of lying.

No, this man would be special, able to see him truly, if anyone could. He would understand him and listen to him as he did in his letters. Truly listen as one would if they spoke to an equal. This man would know him and if that wasn’t terrifying… Than Tom was unsure what he should feel otherwise. Excitement, joy… What did joy even feel like?

Had he ever felt joy? He could not recall it. Shit! And what if he wasn’t reciprocated in it even if he knew. Could he handle that sort of rejection? From this person? Should he try to be someone else? Even if he did, was it worth it to be a liar onto himself? The answer came forward in his brain in letters with delicate ‘e’s and sloping ‘l’s. No. He would not stoop to that. He was Tom Riddle and this was him and this was all he would be and it would be enough because who would deny him. He was already great.

Still… Should he prepare to be abandoned once this one knew him? He had been left alone before for less than that. Should he even feel this vulnerable? Why was he? Was he not above such things? Was this normal for him to already be accepting such defeat?

On one hand he felt unfettered excitement at the prospect that for once he had someone that could possibly dig out the true face behind all else and know him and the situations that made him this way; On the other hand he was equal parts horrified of the idea that he could be rejected for what would be found there. He was not a ‘nice’ boy, not a ‘good’ person. He knew this because that was how he had made himself to survive.

He was the monster that made the other children cry at night and fear the dark. He was the type of person that an ideal and perfect world could not have in it. To be rejected was a natural conclusion and yet, he could not bring himself to comprehend the thought of being rejected by someone such as this instrumental man. His assimilation into the magical world would have been a disaster had he not been guided by him. This man meant something more than Tom had a name for.

“It is the nature of humanity to hope and then fall broken when disillusioned… I know this truth to be self evident. Disappointment would not be new to me.” He whispered it into the nothing around him and all the the cold that had suffused his body, and ensnared his mind eased in resignation. The jaded side of him painted for him the pictures of each adult he had ever met and their faces when they judged him. When they betrayed him. The matron, his nursemaid, each caretaker, the store clerks… Disappointment, distrust, fear, hate… All of them disappointments.

A small piece of him argued that these people were not wizards and supplied him the evidence of Slughorn. A second, even smaller piece, told him with certainty that his friend was nothing like
Slughorn and that to compare the two would be an insult to his friend’s intelligence. A third smallest piece asked him what he had to lose in wanting this friendship, that it may even be better to let himself be vulnerable for once. This piece he immediately destroyed. Regardless of all else, he would not be beaten by this.

He would not be bowed down by defeat. Ever since he found that hurt feelings wouldn’t fix the problems when he was four, he knew that the world would not be fair. Tears wouldn’t sate your hunger. They wouldn’t guarantee you a safe place to hide. They didn’t mend broken ribs. Sometimes you had to lose to win. Sometimes you had to become more and do more than that. Sometimes you had to get revenge and break bones of your own.

If he was to be rejected let it be so. Facing the truth would not make it worse. It would however allow him the mental capacity to plot his vengeance instead of fretting about his wounded pride. If he wasn’t rejected then all the better, but at least he would be prepared for the worst.

It was a gust of fresh wind that snapped him from his blind watching and inner turmoil. He felt himself come back from within himself to realize that he was shaking, his limbs stiff. His heart was pounding within his chest like a fierce drum and a light sheen of sweat coated his forehead. He fought himself to bring it all back into balance. He needed to be focused if he wished to gather as much information as he could from this newest letter.

The black shape from before was waiting before him with a parcel at least three books wide. Eager bright eyes watched him and the beast hooted softly for him. Tom shook his head lightly to show he was fine. He willed himself to be present and accepted his beautiful Mors back from his latest delivery.

Hands still trembled as he made short work of the wrappings about the package but not a bad as when he first snapped back from his thoughts. Mors was always a grounding presence and eased his panic in mere moments. He supposed if he had even felt joy than maybe it was when Mors came to him that night seemingly so long ago. If he had ever felt comfort it was when the beast perched over his bed on nights filled with terrors.

Under the wrappings were two books and a letter so long that it encased almost a small book’s worth of writing. The first book was called, “Legilimency and The Pathways To Enter The Inner Mind”. The second book was titled, “Occlumency: a Lost Art of Defense”. Both were heavily bound and when flipped open the pages within were easily twice that of what the book appeared to have.

Tom recalled seeing such space altering spells in some of H.J.P’s sent journals. He had listed useful spells that added extra pages to things or expanded the insides of things whilst retaining the outer dimensions of the original object i.e. A Mokeskin Pouch. The spells were highly advanced and required runic sequences most of the time, in which Tom was not at all familiar with yet made a point of familiarizing himself with soon and told H.J.P. as much.

He was assured that such arts were available as courses at Hogwarts, but that learning these sorts of arts took years for the average wizard. The next week he received a beginners guide to both Arithmancy, which Tom found to be outrageously easy trigonometry, and Ancient Runes which so far he had yet to even look at.

The letter that had come with that journal stated that he should treat the sciences behind combining the two practices with extreme caution lest he explode himself or worse. Even, warned H.J.P with written amusement, if Tom was a magical prodigy and most likely could master them in as little as a few years. So he had determined that perhaps it was best to hold off until he could be in a more professional setting and in a place where a proper professor could safely tell him whether combining certain magics would, indeed, blow up either himself, the orphanage, or both.
This time, the letter he received did not caution him to wait on these magics. In fact, it urged him to read them and learn them in all haste. It intrigued him as H.J.P. was adamant that magic treated without caution led to core damage in the self. A detriment and ailment that caught up with many a foolish wizard later after ignoring the proper trade-offs of magic for so long. It led, in other words, to an imbalance with the magic and the mind, or in simpler terms, insanity. The longer and more severely you cheated magic the harder it struck back.

The letter read,

_my dearest tom,

I have made a severe miscalculation. In all my letters it seems I have not mentioned much since the first one so many months back about one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Which is, as I stated, a severe miscalculation on my part and a disservice to you.

While I would not call him an enemy, know that I would also not call him a suitable ally. He, as all with a long life of power and the misuse of, fear the mistakes of the past and their repetitions. He would therefore, see in you what he failed to prevent so many years ago in one Gellert Grindelwald.

I have no doubt he would try desperately to stunt your growth as a wizard if I allowed you to go onto his game board without proper instruction and the necessary tools to fight back. That is not to say that there are not things to be learned from him, as he is an accomplished transfiguration master and alchemist of the highest order, but he is to be taken with the highest level of caution.

He is one of the most powerful wizards of this age Tom. Despite this, I am afraid that his ability to be unbiased is nonexistent and... Well you will see for yourself soon enough. I do not jest when I say he will make things difficult if he thinks even for a moment that you are not a light wizard which he will. Your actions and movements within Hogwarts need to be careful and precise. Surgical.

Not that I wish you to get into any mischief making as that would be as irresponsible as me telling you that it is possible, with the right sets of spells and charms, to make a self updating map of all of Hogwarts that shows where every person is within the castle by connecting it to the wards of the castle itself. That would be truly remiss of me wouldn’t it?

I digress. Life has not been easy for him, though not as harsh as our lives, my dearest Tom. With power comes responsibility they say, or that it corrupts, or that those with power come to regret it. Dumbledore is the latter of all of those. The mistakes and regrets that he made haunt him, so much that he had stopped seeing what was truly important. So instead he repeats his mistakes over, and ever onward.

Along with his self flagellation, his inaction in the face of adversities, self made, lead him to fear power and any who possess too much of it. In himself and in others. He is afraid to do what must be done and so refuses to even think of the problems just as he hinders those capable of solving them. As you and I know well, not thinking about a problem does not make it not a problem. Just because you don’t look at something does not mean it is not there. Admitting the truth will not make things worse.

You, my dearest Tom, are born from power like him and Gellert. Your life or rather
your fate, if you believe in such things, stretches before you as a gauntlet of trials and tribulations designed for your failure in mind. Or so he would have you believe. I know that life is not easy, never has been. I know it is not easy to be the target of fate, or an instrument of destiny. I know you and I have seen worse than a dead sibling.

More times than not the bad outweighs the good in this world. I tell you this in the hopes that it will ease the wounds to come. That you will be prepared for the future at hand. More times than counted I have suffered at the hands of fate as you may suffer in days to come though by Merlin I wish it won’t be so.

Your brilliance and capacity for greatness will bring the envy and ire of the many. It will set you apart and mark you as a target as it did to me, and I fear you will find yourself unfairly judged or worse, isolated beyond all others. To be idolized is a lonely existence and not an easy one to walk for the length of life. I hope you never have to do such a thing alone.

You, as Dumbledore, as Gellert, and as Myself have been placed on a path that will be so much harder than those of the mundane. The only thing setting us all apart are the choices we make and whether we act upon them or not. Inaction or action, regret and forgiveness. To take the path and cast magic right or abuse it and suffer. I wish you have all in balance so as to best face the face of magical, backwater, Britain in this future to come.

Had I any way to alter the fates without compromising your existence, I would. Had I any way to be more present for you and the teach you myself, I would be beside you in a heartbeat. Had I any way to spare you the destiny of power, I would not. Maybe it would be happier for you, but when has happiness made for great people Tom? When has the easy life ever created a strong leader or a capable warrior?

What disservice would I be doing if I hindered you or sheltered you? What love is that to give you if you would resent it or become weakened from it?! I would never aim to make you less. Not as Dumbledore would for I, unlike him, do not fear power, but rather strive to bring all things to balance so as to be best equipped to do what is necessary and right for my soul and others.

Sometimes I wish I could be a disservice to you. You see Tom, I fight with myself every waking moment knowing you are there and I have no power to come and take you away from that accursed place. At least, not yet. I curse the heavens for placing me in the way of Gellert that I must stray from your side to keep him at bay. I curse Albus for not doing what was just and right and leaving Gellert for me to deal with while he gallivanted off to teach. Shirking his duty.

Perhaps most of all I curse the blood wards placed upon your orphanage. Should you wish to know more you may ask but the story is… not a happy one and maybe for now focusing on the books I sent should be your priority. Let me just say that you are safe there, safer than any wards I could provide currently.

With the blood wards there you are hidden from all scrying including that of family magics, such as ancient house tapestries, and the ministry detection magics. They are so powerful that had I not known you existed, I would have never found you. So neither can Gellert so long as he doesn’t know of you, which is for the best. Really.

As it stands now, I might not be able to save you from that place for some time, or at least not until Gellert is dealt with. A crafty man, a powerful wizard, and driven by
desperation, I cannot allow him to know of you. Nor can I risk that you would not be found should I meet with you. It is unfair, it is cruel, and I hate it more than you can know. It is a torment that I cannot teach you of the magics I send to you in person. That I cannot see you. But…

Your life is more precious than my wants.

You are more precious than my wants, and if it keeps you safe for me to stay away for now. So smote it be. I have debated writing of this for some time now, as you deserve all the truths I can offer. You have so much to do now and no doubt you have started to practice your spells or have already mastered them. Still I thought it best that you know of wizards such as they or I. Maybe then you may prepare.

I had hoped that by now things would have played out differently. I am pleased to know that my faith in your inevitable sorting to Slytherin was well founded. To guilt the good Horace Slughorn into paying for your entire trip and then giving you the actual trip money, Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. I suppose I am proud enough to ignore the ache that it is not I that took you instead. I certainly wouldn’t have fallen for such charms. So while I am pleased that Horace has taken it upon himself to fund you, I resent that it is not I.

As it stands however, the task of Gellert comes down to my actions and right now I am keeping him solidly away from Britain and likewise as far from you. I doubt I will be able to hold him off from the shores of our country for much longer. I had believed that if I could just keep certain plots from advancing that it would all be alright. Ideally, I was a fool to believe that logic could rule those lacking it.

Fate for all that we shape it ourselves, must come to pass in either its original state or one very similar to it. I fear I have done all I can to steer war from its darker paths. I have no illusion that I can hold it off forever but I can buy time, buy you precious time. Time to prepare all you can to protect yourself should I fail.

I should let you know that Poland will be invaded by Germany soon and the only solace in that is that you will be safely away at Hogwarts. I can hold it off no longer than perhaps January of the coming year. I urge you to learn all you can as well as you can while you are safe in the wall of Hogwarts. I urge you to take these two books seriously and work on them at every possible chance, even if you must use them on the familiars of other students and maybe even students should you deem it safe to do so.

Do it only if you are sure that they and you are VERY FAR AWAY FROM ALBUS DUMBLEDORE and only if you are sure you can cover your tracks accordingly. Albus is a Legilimens and an accomplished one at that. More importantly keep all I give you a secret, especially from him. While he is not an enemy, I do not trust your well being in his care.

On another note it is of the utmost importance that our correspondence, you and me, stays a secret. Gellert has spies everywhere especially among darker families and politically active witches and wizards. Knowing me puts you in danger and Dumbledore having such information is just as dangerous as if Gellert had it himself.

I should also mention that both of the mind arts are borderline restricted by the ministry of magic and that it is illegal for you to use legilimency on anyone while not in the employ of the Ministry Aurors or Unspeakables, or the minister himself. So do be careful, not that you won’t be of course. Just… please, for me, stay safe. There are many Tom’s in this world but it only one of them that is you. You cannot be replaced.
I want the universe for you. I wish for your happiness and your health. I wish for your life to be what you deserve it to be. I wish I could aid you more now than I am, but unfortunately for both of us... We are powerful and that means our lives will not be easy, nor happy, nor particularly healthy.

For all that it is worth know that I am with you. That I will do everything in my power to see to it that you stay out of this war and away from those who would wish you the most harm. That you stay able to grow and nurture not only your magic but your soul as well.

I just wanted you to know why I am not beside you now as I should be. You deserve the truth in all things. I will continue to send you the written lessons I have on magic and its uses and maybe when this is over and it is safe I may teach you myself. For now the basics of Occlumency and Legilimency are yours to explore.

The art of Legilimency will be easy for you. You already have the capabilities to tell whether a person is lying or telling you the truth simply by ‘seeing’ it in your mind from within their eyes, the surface of their thoughts and sincerity. This is a hard art to perfect but for you, a natural in mind arts, it will come like child’s play.

The art of Occlumency will be easy at first for you but hard to hide that you have it, which is the point. An okay Occlumens can hold barriers, a perfect Occlumens can make you believe that they have none while showing you the person they want you to see. It is a complex system of memory handling and organization. Imagination doesn’t hurt either.

You will need to work hard upon your Mindscape, organizing and shaping your inner thoughts before understanding the ways to deflect and ever superimpose false memories to misguide your offender. I wish I could teach you it myself for one cannot perfect it without having hands on experience in fighting it. Until such a time as I or someone you implicitly trust will help you... I recommend not meeting the eyes of anyone you suspect may have ill intent.

The art of the mind will aid you in many aspects of your life. It has too many uses to count and mastering it is worth the effort. With the mastery of these arts, and yourself, you may better defend from all threats to you that involve the bending of your will. The Imperius Curse will be little more than a suggestion at that point and any potion that would attempt to alter your thoughts or will, will become far less effective.

I cannot stress enough the importance of you and your mind. I have no doubt that you will find Hogwarts hard to handle at first. You will be looked down upon for your blood by those of the Slytherin house and even beyond. I want you to know that our power has little to do with blood and that while they can judge you, it is their funeral. You will be better than them. Jealousy will drive them to do awful things.

I have no doubt you have thought of this, but know that it will not do to make unnecessary enemies. You are better than them. You are a halfblood. You are Tom Riddle and they, they will learn not to mess with you. With this in mind, bind those in your house to secrecy. Do not stoop to their level and if you have to, do it in a way that they don’t even realize it happened. Make it not you. I reiterate that it is imperative that Dumbledore not suspect you of power ill used. Be perfect but keep your raw power secret. This, and your ability to speak to the serpents of the world.

By now you have some inkling as to why but the journey for this information is for you...
to find. Those who cannot at least find the powerful magics under the interdict of Merlin and figure out just how they work, cannot know of them. All I can say is that speaking the tongue of serpents leads to many of these magics. It is a special gift and only very few possess it.

Speaking it to any not of dark backgrounds will create fear and make many wary of you. It is not worth instant gratification from dark families, at least, not until you have made yourself a paragon of ‘goodness’. Enough that nobody can suspect ill of you. I have attached to this letter a series of exercises for privacy charms and locking charms so you may keep your study materials with you and avoid the aforementioned Dumbledore and situations following.

I may or may not have also taken the liberty of ordering you a proper trunk and placed within it some extra study materials that may aid you. Know that my teachings are of materials far above the regular understandings of young witches and wizards and that they would be considered ‘a master’s teaching material’ if I were so inclined to teach regular wizards them. So, do be discreet. Some of these methods of proper magic usage are specific only to myself and the few students in this world that I teach them to. Not that anyone but Albus could break my anti-peeping charms or theft preventatives upon them but still... better safe than sorry.

Above all else my dear Tom, Have fun. Enjoy it.

Hogwarts is unlike anyplace in the world and being there is like coming home after a long time away.

With the utmost care and love, Yours,

H.J.P.

He was precious.

Tom gripped the parchment in tight fists. Cheeks reddened with some strange heat in his chest. He read it through eight times before deciding to do something other than stare at it. Because Tom Riddle was not flustered over some written, unfeeling, significant words, and he would be damned if he allowed something so petty as that to stop him from gleaning the information so readily given. That is what he told himself as he crammed the odd warm weight deep inside himself.

He delved into his desk for a special sort of journal that he had begun. At first it was to organize minor information but now it was far more important than idle notes. For inside this journal, he had created dossiers on any of the people ever mentioned by anyone he knew to be magical. Where now he started to jot new information on one Albus Percival Wulfrick Brian Dumbledore and added a new section for the name, ‘Gellert Grindelwald’.

In a way, it was a Spy Master's tactic but useful nonetheless. Knowing the enemy was important, and knowing whether someone was harmless or not was more important. Secrets held power. One never knew when knowledge like that would become relevant. For blackmail or for defense. So he had upheld the secret book with the utmost care. As of now, both Dumbledore and Grindelwald were marked as dangerous and he assumed since H.J.P. was so adamant in Dumbledore knowing the mind arts it was also clear that both he-H.J.P.- and Gellert also knew them. He marked each with the talent and decided he too should learn them thoroughly. He would not be outdone by someone not considered an ally nor would he be vulnerable to an enemy. He tapped his quill underneath the names. His brain was once again delving into everything he had just processed and all that he knew.
But Damn. It was so much, too much! He needed to break down what he had just been given into snippets and so on a separate page he started with the names he had. He needed to identify the correlations between the wizards he knew. Slughorn had bragged about knowing everyone of interest that was in Britain and in Hogwarts but when Tom had asked about the initials H.J.P. his professor had not known them.

But H.J.P. knew of Slughorn, addressed him by casual name even. It was suspect enough to trigger a faint flag of confusion, enough that he knew something was off about that, but he just couldn’t know what it was with how little he actually knew now. So he would just have to start with what he did know.

H.J.P. was obviously powerful and his knowledge was expansive if rare to come by. Only taught to a rare and select few. He was not evil, yet he didn’t seem as constrained by immoral actions as most would be. Especially when there was a solid, logical, reason behind those improper acts. He seemed sentimental and even compassionate, poetic. He was neither good nor bad just powerful. Better yet he understood how best to use that power and where it went. It made him dangerous.

Tom added his name to a diagram a few pages in where upon the page, H.J.P. was written carefully into the center. Gellert fell to the right and Dumbledore to the left. All of them tied together by either a dotted line for a weak connection or a solid line for a strong one.

Obviously Gellert was evil or bad or just morally crooked as far as society would mark him. So Tom marked his name with a filled in black circle below it. He had debated writing Light or Dark but resorted to this tactic after recalling how H.J.P. once mentioned the system as flawed and incorrect, and a “Gross misunderstanding of magic on all levels as to be contemptible”.

Politicians and lesser peoples separated magic into either Dark, Light, or Gray. Obviously Tom had figured that there would be a stigma for Dark Magics and tried to see where his friend stood on the issue but H.J.P. quickly assured him that the ideas of light and dark were nonexistent. There was only magic and the intent behind it. Power and those too weak to seek it.

It was the true villainy or darkness of people that thought otherwise. Those that would try and control people instead of furthering the potential for magical greatness. Magic was magic and therefore it should never be banned for any reason by one unable to understand that simple rule. It shouldn’t be banned at all. If one did, then magic was lost and therefore all of magic kind suffered and became weaker for it.

Tom figured that by that logic H.J.P. must also be against that idiotic idea of blood purity and likewise the conformity of traditions to suit muggle religions. He was most likely against the current wizard restrictions on Dark arts and creatures, the ‘muggle-born’ proofing of wizarding traditions, and the general ministry of magic altogether, for to be so against so many things controlled by the government meant that one could not follow it without being in direct juxtaposition of it. It also meant that those contemptible politicians would see him as ‘Gray’ or worse. Tom wrote a triangle under H.J.P.’s name with a solid line to Gellert Grindelwald and a marker atop it of an ‘X’ to mark the connection as opponents.

Gellert also happened to have some hand in the oncoming war for the two to be in opposition which meant that perhaps the politicians would have labeled him Dark if for nothing else than a convenient way to make him the enemy to the masses rather than a revolutionary leader of the persecuted. Because of course they would. Seeing as much of what H.J.P. opposed, by Tom’s logic, Grindelwald would fall into something he would fight against. Not because one didn’t agree with his ideals but the methods being used to achieve them.

Morally and not politically, the two were enemies. H.J.P. would not balk at the idea of the dark arts
and something told him that H.J.P. probably was just as efficient in those banned arts as those he taught about in any other arts. Which meant he mastered them. Dark, Light, and Neutral. He would be offended by the threat on magical life and magical free will, and would be opposed to forms that would threaten either of those ideals. As such, War wouldn't be his means of achieving magical freedom or take over, and as such he would not approve of any using such methods either. He would be morally obligated to prevent such methods or end them if things got that far.

Tom briefly wondered if they had been friends once, as it seemed the only reason that his benefactor hadn't shut Gellert down. It was a curious thing to thing and he scribbled the theory under the name. Then he moved on.

This left Dumbledore as an ally, and Slughorn was placed idly at the bottom right corner because there was something there but nothing as close as Dumbledore. Dumbledore must have been the opposite of Gellert. He was afraid of power and magic and so would not be upset about controlled regulations of it. He would be Light, most definitely. This meant that H.J.P. would also be wary of him, if not angered by his rejection of his gift. This meant that the man was not a threat per say, not to H.J.P., and if things got too far and war came, he could be a tentative ally. Should he not hide from it first.

The Light seemed to be where all those afraid of power went. People who believed in ideological pipe dreams within a world that just didn't work like that and wouldn't work like that. Not. Ever. Tom drew another solid line from Dumbledore to H.J.P. and marked over top of that line an exclamation mark to show cautious friendship. If not outright distrust. A same marking he placed over Grindelwald. So he had their connections to his friend, but what of the two to each other.

H.J.P. had said he cursed the fact that Dumbledore had left him to deal with Gellert. It was possible that Dumbledore and Gellert fought before and it led to Dumbledore’s fear of power. Was he bested or was there something else? He didn't know near enough to place the men. It was not comforting that he knew so little of such a threat. How powerful was Gellert Grindelwald exactly?

Obviously the man was powerful enough that holding him back meant holding back a war, but what was he? A general? A strategist? The Leader? If so what goal was Grindelwald trying to reach by open warfare? Obviously if he was Dark it was something to do with magical supremacy, but Tom was of the firm belief that H.J.P. was right in that war would only eliminate those of capable magical ability more than aid them. So what then was the purpose? Tom marked a bullet with those questions. His eyes went back to the initials centered in the page.

What sort of danger was H.J.P. really in? What was it that drove him to elude and further than that, thwart the war efforts of Grindelwald? More than one letter had stated that it was not safe for Tom and his friend to meet. More than once he could recall in perfect clarity the allusion to keeping away from something or now, someone. Furthermore, Grindelwald was actively searching for signs of H.J.P. if his spies had ears out for him. He was the danger that made it unsafe. What was his goal in the search? If Tom were him he would have just... killed... No, Gellert Grindelwald wouldn’t because...

What if they were friends once? Or research partners...

Gellert wanted H.J.P. alive; Was willing to use any sort of leverage; Had history with H.J.P.; Was powerful enough to be one of three mentioned by H.J.P., and therefore probably a master of magic, most likely the Dark Arts. Was probably one of the few that knew of H.J.P.’s teachings then, if that were the case; And further than that knew a valuable asset when he saw it. It was all conjecture but the very implications were enough to send chills down the young boy’s spine. His eyes widened and his brows furrowed in consternation.
Just how much danger was H.J.P. really in? All of it. That was what. All of the danger. If his logic was correct and it almost always was, then Grindelwald was affecting more than just the wizarding community, the name itself gave it away. It was German. Germany had been stirring up trouble for well over a year now and Tom wouldn't be surprised if the war coming was controlled by this Dark Wizard.

Tom slammed the notebook shut after scribbling the last bits into it. He tried desperately to grasp the ideas floating about in his head but as he connected small pieces of the puzzle he found he was still missing too much of it. Moreover he was panicking, his breaths were coming in deep waves and in his mind he saw before him a ledge hanging over an understanding of something that he would just rather not know. Was not ready to know.

One thing was clear, H.J.P. was the epicenter of a pivotal moment in history, and Tom had always been a remote part of this dangerous web by association. He decided with a dark look of frustration that maybe he should worry of these things after he could sleep on them, and instead placed the letter, and his journal on people, away in favor of the book titled, “Occlumency: A Lost Art of Defense”.

If H.J.P. wished for him to prepare for this unspeakable, dangerous, future then he would. He would learn as if the devil were on his heels. After that, it only took him three days to finish the book and if he liked H.J.P. More and more for giving it to him, worried over him more and more, he would take it to his grave.

**The Mortimer Estate: Barcelona Spain, September 24th 1938**

The day was clear but the wind was strong. It whistled through the intricate iron bars on a lone pavilion that sat high above a raging sea. The waters were crystals refracting the sun that beat down on the expansive manor estate of the Mortimer family. It used to be a lively place filled with well over twenty members of the illustrious family there at a time. Its halls and libraries had been filled with a plethora of those seeking knowledge.

Its ballrooms had once been filled with noise and laughter but that had faded and died slowly over time. As more of the family died without with minimal to no heirs behind to take the mantles of those before, the voices in the halls had fallen onto the last three. The balcony that overlooked the sea used to have many tables and chairs all filled. Where once there had been a great many people lounging, there was now only one.

The lone child watched the horizon before him. He held no regard for staying clear of the delicate iron that separated him from a plummet far below. If he dove right he would survive, probably. Hadrian had told him once that wizards were more resilient than regular humans to situations that would have been fatal. So he was not afraid, Hadrian had never been.

With the sun like this, and the wind like this, and the sea like this, he missed him. The years without him had been and it was most prominent on days like this. Hadrian loved days like this, so much so that he would while it all away underneath the sun. For awhile after his departure, Bastion could pretend that the man was here with him, just out of sight.

He would visualize him reading a heavy book on obscure magic. The likes of which were far too difficult for Bastion to follow. His black hair would be falling over his shoulders and a small content smile would make his face friendly. Bastion didn’t pretend that much anymore but on days like today, he allowed it.

At first when Hadrian left, Bastion had been upset but unlike his sister, he took up the lesson plans
that Hadrian had left with their father. He felt that he could at least be ready for when Hadrian would come back. He had even asked his father for a special pouch so he could carry the books with him everywhere. Celeste had done the opposite of this and turned away from her lessons in favor of playing more often with the neighbors, or anything really, so long as it wasn’t magic. Magic reminded his sister of Hadrian and that made her cry even three years later.

Sometimes he felt he didn’t recognize his twin anymore. They were aliens to one another now having grown so far apart from one another. It happened more often lately that he would find himself without her. He knew she hated to be reminded of their wayward mentor but he had hoped that she would have the mind to think about someone else’s feelings for once.

His sister was always rash and stubborn so he couldn’t stay angry but the distance between them hurt. So he had come out here to think and he watched the waves, and he sat in isolation on the rails high over the sea just hoping to lose himself in magic.

He took out his current lesson book and flipped it open to see familiar writing. It comforted him in a way that nothing else could. This was his solace. While Celeste ran away, he would follow the path laid before him. He would become an adept wizard of note and win the affections of his mentor as his father did before him and his grandmother before that.

It was the least he could do to prove that he had been worth Hadrian’s time. It also helped to prove that his absence didn’t hurt as much as he thought it did. This was a way to be close with him, no matter when or how far away it would be until they met again. Besides, father was in an odd mood and Bastion felt he was out of his depth in understanding what it was that bothered his sire so.

So instead of worrying over father or crying over Celeste, he dove into his work. Currently he was trying to spread his magic outside of his body without instrumentation. The key word being ‘trying’. It was something that was hard enough in theory and even harder in practice. If it wasn’t practiced early on, it would become nearly impossible later in life. Without mastering the practice, wandless magic would become significantly harder to perform. Extending his core outside of his body would become impossible.

His lessons had described the art as transcending the limits of one's flesh to afflict the world outside of it. Unlike wandless magic, which was still directed by the hand as if that was a wand, transcendental magic expanded the core outside the limits of one’s body and into the environment around it. It used mental force of will to shape spells and then execute them without a need for a focus such as a wand, hand, or body. It was soundless, motionless, and happened instantaneously without any delay. Needless to say it was near impossible to master on the level his mentor had.

It was such a magic that the limits of skin and bone ceased to exist. It was as limited in only how much you limited it yourself, but the fact was that few could do it. Things just got in the way, thoughts, fears, emotions, morals. Little things clouded the clarity needed to perform magics of such a nature. Transcendental magic needed direction of thought and perfect mental discipline. A true mastery over the self. It could not be completed, even at minor intervals, without that. It was all or nothing.

To be able to control such a thing was a feat most grand wizards never accomplished but as Hadrian would attest to, they never bothered to really understand it or learn what it demanded, moreover wizards were lazy and unrefined in their physical and mental disciplines.

Wizards never bothered with mastering their innermost desires and thoughts, they never wanted to. To the majority of powerful wizards, those little things that got in the way were just never squashed down or tamed because it required effort. So for them, such magic was beyond their capabilities.
Most spells of notable power and feats of majesty were considered almost impossible because of the constraints and distractions of the self. Whereas that was all wrong, one merely needed to put in the effort to understand what the magic really demanded and put in the work necessary for it.

Moreover, nobody really took the time to figure out how their magic truly worked. They didn’t care about the exact way magic flows through the body, or what affects it, or why. They didn’t care about inner harmony or peace of the mind. They just willed their core all willy nilly without thought to how best magic should flow or how best to actually ask it to do what you want.

“The flaw with magic,” Hadrian had once said, “Is that no one bothers to figure out the why of it. Why it does this and how it does this. They learn the bare minimum and take the first theory as the true mechanics behind it all. Even great wizards who could accomplish wandless magic in droves, have a hard time of transcending the limitations on their own forms because they never ask the right questions and never do the hard work to find the answers. They just expect things to be as they want without really seeing how best to actually reach that point.”

“Salazar was one of few who actually dared to try, and he did great things. Terrible yes, but great. The first lesson is that no two cores are the same and they all work differently, so if you never bother to learn how your own is best directed then you are doomed to a life unable to ask it to do everything you want it too. You become limited. Worse than that, you can do irreparable damage to it if you ask it to do something that works against its flow or rhythm. Before any great feat of magic or any spells can be learned one must be able to tell what is right and wrong with their casting. So today I teach you how children...”

Bastion would not be a man who didn’t ask the questions and wouldn’t work for the true answers. He would be one of those very few who could look at his mentor one day and know that they were as close to equal as one could get. He would be a Salazar, or a Merlin, or a Hadrian. Not lesser, never lesser. He would not allow himself to be lazy. He would not allow himself or his core to be hurt by generic, cookie cutter, magical practices.

Hadrian had schooled Celeste and himself for hours and hours after that speech. It had been exhausting and more than once he and his twin fell asleep upon their desks. The main lesson they took away from it was that Magic was hard. True magic was demanding, and difficult, and any magic that came easy on the first try- if you weren’t well over a century old- was cheating, and lazy, and you weren’t doing it right.

They had both learned the proper extent of people that existed believing otherwise and their capacity to be lazy. He had drilled into each of them the rules behind finding what was the actual cause of something and what was just the obvious choice. Ensuring that they would never become like that.

The fact was that sometimes, what you knew and believed was wrong. In order to seek the truth of nature, you had to be willing to sacrifice all you knew and accept loss. Sometimes you had to find out what was really going on as opposed to scratching surfaces and saying it was done.

Mastering yourself meant you had to understand that everything is subject to question but that there is truth no matter how wrong something seemed. Transcending your fears and morals for the sake of the right way to do things was hard. Throwing away beliefs was hard. Denying the truth wouldn’t make you powerful. It was hard.

Many wizards wouldn’t get very far with their true potentials because they just didn’t find the right answers to the big questions and gave up soon after. In fact, almost all of them failed in transcendental magics because they just never bothered to really look into their beliefs and question them as to why their way wasn’t working.
They denied the studies that could help them without even looking to see if maybe, just maybe their opposite beliefs could be right. For example many ignored branches of the so called ‘Dark Arts’ because society and ministries labeled them dangerous and therefore banned in some places.

People would overlook such resources to find the right way for themselves because they refused to look into something that would make them uncomfortable or Merlin forbid, wrong. They failed to find the parallels necessary to understand how a person’s core worked and their own in turn. So they couldn’t understand it well enough to command it. They limited themselves and never sacrificed belief for truth.

Bastion was determined to not end up like that. He would show everyone what a great wizard he was. So he had sat and quelled the fears and emotions and constraints in his mind. He imagined that all the buzzing thoughts within were pink elephants and organized their priorities based on this. Anything he could not effect, anything he could not control, were seen and then let go. Things that hurt him, or things he worried he had done were confronted, accepted, and let go.

When the turmoil in his mind was clear, he began to search for the lines in himself that would lead him home to his core. They were warm pulses within him, tingles that sat beneath his skin. He felt himself sink inside of them, falling into that rhythm of power that felt akin to his own mind. Waves crashing on a shore far below, The pale breaking of dawn and the fall of dusk. Once he sank too deep for light or darkness he knew he had made it. Far below the crashing sea.

For a moment he felt odd, disconnected almost. He tried to think of how it all worked, tried to understand why he felt the way he did and was faced with a pink elephant. He felt himself slip upwards and knew with certainty that he had made a mistake.

He desperately tried to find that sense of harmony he just had, disconnect or no. Just not allow the thought in but he only continued to rise faster back to his surface as his turmoil continued. The more he struggled to get back the more he surfaced. He slammed back into the physical realm harshly. His eyes flew open and the sun struck him mercilessly and pierced him through with its light.

He coughed and sputtered as if he were just taking his first breath. Sweat beaded over his brow and soaked into his clothes. He found his heart was racing and it made him sick to his stomach. He was dizzy and spent and lucky that when the vertigo soon hit him, that it was the balcony on which he landed and not the waves crashing far below.

It was a harsh landing and he should have tried to get up but he was so very tired. Every inch of him felt much too heavy and his magic sucked at his veins, depleted and hungry. He knew it would be a fool’s errand to tempt another try. One did not tempt the fates after being so fortunate as to escape them once.

Despite it all, even as he laid there on the marble, sun heavy in his eyes and on his face; huffing and gasping and alive; He knew he did something remarkable for his age. The feeling of victory clashed with the reality that he didn’t succeed in his goal. He still failed. The bitterness of it stung at him more than magical exhaustion ever could. His mind was in chaos. He knew what he needed to succeed, but knowing it didn’t make it easier. Knowing didn’t help him when it came to facing off with himself. He knew what he did wrong but knowing it wouldn’t solve the issue. He needed mental discipline, iron clad control.

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He had become distracted and that small slip was all that needed to happen in order to overwhelm him. He knew that he was only twelve but it also seemed so unfair that the only headway he had made in three years on the subject was getting into his core. How long must he practice to then explore it? Three years, ten? How did Hadrian master such an art that he could always be surrounded
by it without batting an eye? How did he use it so consistently?

His mind supplied the image of his mentor, back straight, eyes ahead, magic like a visible mantle as it shimmered under the vastness of the heavens. He could see the magic floating wide from the man’s body, unable to fit within it anymore or maybe just not wanting to. It was alive yet it was all one entity. Where his teacher began and the magic ended was blurred so much that they were in complete sync.

He imagined the serenity, the harmony, the all inclusiveness that was Hadrian and his magic. The stable sanity and completeness of it and wondered it he could ever master such an art. After just a minute he felt his head begin to pound and knew that today would not be the day he got any further.

His hand rose heavy to his neck where a small amulet laid over his beating skin. He had swiped it from his father’s desk a couple of years ago. It was barren save for a set of intricate runes and a green smooth gem. Whenever he stroked over the gem he felt a tingle and imagined a vast heaven of infinite stars.

It seemed fitting that he have it instead of his Lord Father, seeing as he seemed to be the only one who wanted to do anything anymore! All Father did was sulk and worry. Besides, if his father had wanted to keep it, he shouldn’t have locked it away. That morning Bastion fell asleep with the tingle of familiar magic under his thumb.

He woke up to the darkest of nights alighted with fire. A shrill scream and the smell of his burning home permeated the air. Before he could even get up a pair of hands gripped onto him and he was faced with a severe looking man with a scar marring his face. A wand jabbed itself at the amulet on his chest, it was a short thing of ashwood and gnarled almost the the point of being all knots.

Eyes alight with desperation and pain locked onto his. A spell shot from the tip of that wand and Bastion could no longer move. He tried to scream but another spell quickly silenced him. The man proceeded to mumble spell after spell in a language Bastion could not recognize, weaving patterns in seemingly no order. Panic began to sink into him and tears gathered in his eyes. He was powerless, only twelve, and could not hope to break the bonds holding him steady.

The amulet on his neck began to pulse wildly, a piercing whistle emitted from it and the green gem cracked down the middle. A golden light shot from within it and into the wand held upon it. The skin on the man’s hand began to crackle and peel away, skin down to bone, but the man didn’t flinch even though the pain was reflecting in the man’s eyes. He didn’t pause in his weaving though he was shaking, his gaze was intent upon his work.

When the skin and bone had peeled back to the man’s elbow he finally pulled away. His other hand brought from the man’s hip a sharpened dagger. Bastion tried harder to move, to scream, to cry, to do anything, be anywhere safe, but it was as if his magic was gone. He could only watch as the dagger descended into the man’s upper arm and began to saw. Blood rained hot upon his face as he stared in abject horror at the sight before him.

The limb fell to the ground with the wand, a set of dead things. Shaking fingers tugged at the amulet around the child’s neck and pulled, hard. It snapped and fell to the earth.

“It won’t make sense now child,” Rapsed the man with the scar. His accent was heavy, his words thin from pain. “I will protect you, on my life, even should you hate me for it.” A light surrounded them, flashing brief and intense. It washed over Bastion, sinking deep within him, and he felt… safe.

Bloody fingers grasped at the lapels of his shirt and just like that. Bastion was gone, and the fire was gone. Everything pushed through the narrow tube of apparition until all that was left was he, the
bleeding man, and a field with a hut residing far away. That was the day Bastion Mortimer metaphorically died with his father and sister.

The Mortimer Estate Remains, Barcelona Spain September 25th 1938

There were only bones of the manor left when Grindelwald was done. What had once been an expansive work of magical architecture was little more than ash and dust. The front gateway was torn from its hinges and the walkway which had once held impressive hedges, now resembled a wasteland of bramble without a shred of magic. The work of fiendfyre. A complete desolation.

He had passed the bodies displayed at the front steps feeling numb, he had passed the foyers without walls or roofing, he had passed a library that had held impressive works of the Peverell line dating back to Cadmus, but what he hadn’t found was one body that should have been with the others. Hope was a faint glimmer in him that drove him forward through echoes of what had been. He relentlessly searched through collapsed corridors and secret basements, honing onto any remnant of magic still trying to live in the wake of annihilation.

With each passing minute his haste worsened and his magic shook all that surrounded him more and more violently. It sunk into walls now devoid of any protections, stripped away by the spell. As was the nature of the fiendfyre to eat such things. He searched but found nothing, that was until they hit the balcony and like a beacon Hadrian was led to its crumbled remains. Eaten by the sea below.

Thereupon the ashen marble was a broken amulet, a wand, and an arm holding it that had been stripped down to the bone. His first response was to wail in sickened grief but centuries of loss and more than one war reminded him to look deeper. So his numbness remained.

His magic swarmed about the scene as his own eyes searched for anything of value that could tell him what he desperately needed to know. What had happened and where his Bastion was. If he was still yet living, or…

The first thing of note was his own handiwork. Meant originally for Alex as a fail safe should the blood wards be felled. It did not feel of Alex and obviously the man had not possessed it in the most critical time of its purpose. Instead, the amulet felt of Bastion, his magic, as insignificant as it was at twelve, soaked lovingly into it.

He had been wearing it for years by the feel of it. He must have also been wearing it when the attack happened which would mean he had been further protected by the wards of the Peverell estates and not those of the Mortimer’s. The idea had been that if Alex had worn it, that even if the wards of the Mortimer estate became compromised, the Peverell ones would override and reinforce the whole manor. Like it was now it worked for little more than a defensive token.

Originally, he had thought Alex had activated it when it had resonated last night but the feel of it had not alerted Hadrian to anything more than some modifications to the protection charms and he had not worried that Alex would be fool enough to trip the anti-tampering enchantments in place. He had not come then.

Now it had been debased to its secondary task, defense. The Amulet itself wouldn’t have cracked like this unless a direct threat had been recognized. Upon recognition it would have released the latent magic in the gem that Hadrian had placed there to enable its power to activate a very specific spell. The excess magic would have been put towards further protection spells on the wearer.

The offensive spell used would have killed the attacker while the rest would protect the wearer from any life endangering forces. Obviously only the first phase had been recognized, enough to coax the soul gem to fragment. The second phase had been ignored, either by fast counter work or because
the threat was no longer recognized.

He had to guess it was the latter as the magic here did not feel malicious. Hadrian could detect the use of seventeen obscuring charms, six ward spells, two anti-tracking charms, and one life debt.

Whoever had done this, and Hadrian could guess who by the lingering wand, had been a master ward breaker. Enough of one anyway, that he could break through the Mortimer Blood Wards, Lord wards, and weeks of extra protection spells in place upon the estate. In fact, he had no doubt that Heine Weiss had spent just that amount of time in some edge of the manor limits and worked around the clock, carefully tearing down the wards just enough to get through.

The man was diligent, controlled, and patient. He had probably waited for a family outing, followed, and nicked the blood from one of the members, either Alex or Celeste, and then tore into the blood wards. That was how Heine Weiss of Gellert’s minions worked.

Had it not been Heine Weiss, Gellert would not have succeeded in breaching the estate. Only someone of that caliber could have undone his own spell work and Gellert had no talent for ward breaking. The Weiss family had that talent in the blood. Before Hadrian’s eyes a story had formed.

The Ward Breaker was sent with the task to break the wards to allow the rest entrance. Which he succeeded. The Master and Others had entered and proceeded to set fire to the grounds. For some reason the Ward Breaker must have disliked the action Weiss was many things but he would never condone the torture of children- and decided to save what he could. The boy.

He then proceeded to the balcony, perhaps under the pretense of breaking the wards further in search of any sign of others. The Master wouldn’t have suspected anything. Too pleased with his current success. The Ward Breaker then found the boy and when hit with the first phase of the amulet, sacrificed his arm to ensure that he lived.

The Ward Breaker then proceeded to use his own protection wards to overwrite the ones he was breaking so as to bypass the second phase of the amulet and be able to apparate the target outside of the manor and Peverell Blood wards only active upon The Boy. Knowing his time was short he apparated away with his target, becoming a Defected. That was how it happened according to the residual pieces of magic hanging heavy in the environment surrounding the scene.

His magic further revealed that the wand in the dead hand held a resonance familiar to Hadrian as that of a magical guardian. Heine had claimed responsibility for the boy’s safety, creating a life debt from Bastion in exchange for protection and guidance. To betray that would be the end of Weiss. Wherever Heine had fled with Bastion he was as safe as he could be, for now. For no wizard could beat the ability of such an infiltrator not even Hadrian.

Besides even if he had left some sign of where they had fled it was not traceable now, not after the fiendfyre. It was clear that wherever that was wouldn’t be a dangerous place for his pupil. The nature of the bond Heine had initiated would not allow him to place Bastion in danger and that was Hadrian’s only solace. It was the only light on this day.

Black brows furrowed and supple lips thinned in malcontent. This was more than he had expected of Gellert. The man was a great many things but this was not even close to his usual tactics. He had never murdered a noble family, nor had he ever resorted to such despicable things such as destruction of magical sources of learning or blood.

Whatever game was being played by Gellert, Hadrian was not pleased but at least he knew Bastion was safe, somewhere. Now he was left free to pursue his vengeance and he would pursue it. He felt a hand touch his shoulder lightly.
“He is alive. Any other details? Anything left?” He told the man. His voice sounded smooth, a visage of control. His heart though was bleeding through with emotions. His shock was fading, replacing nothing with rage and sorrow, and regret. He felt chaotic, all of him in accordance with it as evidenced from the ambient magic raging ever faster about them. He was shredding the last of the balcony into the sea. Should Gellert return, he would find nothing of value here.

When he turned his eyes to the man behind him, Mercutio shook his head. His countenance was grave and when he went to speak at first he had to shake his head and make an effort to try again. He handed his friend the note he had found in Celeste’s gaping mouth.

“Nothing but this… This was all there was.” He croaked leveling Hadrian with his attention. Those eyes were darkened with fatigue. He was drawn and pale, so much older now than Hadrian had ever seen him. Whatever the note had to say… would not make any of the pain found here today any less. He didn’t want to know what it said, but… This was his own fault in many ways.

Had he not pushed Alex to wear the amulet always, to be more cautious, to fidelus the manor regardless of his feelings on it, this would have been harder to pull off if not impossible. This wouldn’t, couldn’t have happened. Had he not left Gellert’s side in the first place in the hopes of keeping him from the madness of the hollows… Than he wouldn’t have been so affected by the Elder Wand, he wouldn’t have laid hands on it in the first place.

So many ‘had he nots’ and each with a reason as to why he had done them and not anything else. Things he had not known that he should have…. Things Gellert could have seen coming if he hadn’t been such a fool and so obsessed. Had he looked into the actual signs!

This was his doing and so he must face the repercussions of his actions with dignity. He owed it to Alex. With shaking hands he grasped the parchment. Dread filled him as he felt the void heavy upon it, the influence of Death’s madness and testament to Gellert’s grand punishment. His eyes traced over the spider scrawl that dictated so many of Gellert’s words these days.

‘Come home Darling.’ Written in the blood of his Alexander and his Celeste Mortimer. His knees gave out and he sunk to the earth, a heat rising in his throat as he touched the words to his forehead. Everything came rushing in directed by his rage and sadness. His precious Alex was dead, Celeste was dead… The Mortimer household was crushed the ever increasing hole in his heart grew. More to mourn, more lost to him.

When he turned his gaze up to Mercutio he spied the cloaked form just behind him. Faces layered to infinity, one countenance, under another, under another. Mercutio wouldn’t know it to be there and he wouldn’t want to hear what it had to say. Frankly, neither did he but hear it he did. Without words or sound he knew what it wanted, what it always wanted. Regardless of should haves and could haves, death had to be appeased.

The price for Gellert’s transgression against Death wouldn’t end in the many left dead in his wake. It could not be paid in blood alone. It wasn’t in the madness overtaking his sanity, or the loss of control to his beloved magic. It was getting what he wanted, the hollows, the audience to gain his dreams. Suddenly it all seemed so much more unbearable because he knew that no matter what happened now it was all his responsibility.

Justice for this laid with him. He could not ask Albus to do this thing that must be done.

Knowing the fates never made them better only harder to bare. It wouldn’t stop his heart from grieving, and he hated that he had to add more names to the ever growing tome of those that passed. His loves and the lost. It never got easier, the weight only grew and hollowed him out bit by bit.
He wondered when he would be allowed to end. He wondered how long it would be now until he could rest. Red eyes rusted from age. How long until he could lay his burdens down. When was it his turn to be saved?

It was clear that anyone near him would be in danger. They were fair game. He need only look to the carnage of his ex-lover Alexander to see it. “I--” Something must have showed in his face because Mercutio enveloped him in his arms.

“You will not leave us. We have never let danger scare us away. Do you take us for cowards? Do you think us inept? Besides what right have you to run when Lucien is beyond council. You know how much Alex meant to him. If for nothing else stay to ease his grieving heart. We are not so adept at losing those we loved, not as you are.” Bitter came the thought to Hadrian that it was unfair to think he was used to it either, but duty and promise allowed him to be taken to the Lord Verus and the bodies of the late Mortimer family.

“I will get in contact with the minister and Gringotts, I have no doubt that it is best the world thinks the boy followed in the footsteps of his family. For his safety, and the Goblins must be told of the contingency plans for the Mortimer estates and seats so that they remain in good shape for when the young lad takes his place back. When it becomes safe to do so.” They were words of logic and he would never be able to say just how grateful he was that he would not have to take care of the odds and ends this time. He merely squeezed Mercutio’s hand in silent gratitude.

Lucien however, did not respond at all. The man remained as he had been since they arrived, hunched beside Alex with their hands entwined, and begging. Begging for him to wake up. He mumbled apologies for stupid things that they had said in petty arguments. Promised that it would change, that he would be better controlled and less promiscuous. If only Alex would just wake up… *Wake up, please. Mi Amor. Per Favore, Per mi... Per mi.*

Chapter End Notes

I have started going through early chapters and have begun the process of fine tooth editing so that I need not go back in the future. I predict this to be done sometime at the end of January. As well as launching the side notes to this project under the name: The Diary of Tom Riddle

This will include letters, Dossiers on witches and wizards Tom becomes aware of, and art (Should I figure out how to put that in chapters...)

Edited: July 19th 2017
Chapter Summary

Tom makes a friend and Abraxas finds that he made a mistake.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 6: Here Comes the Sun

Platforms Nine and Three Quarters, August 31st 1938

It was by all accounts an ordinary, mundane, and all around utterly boring wall. Just a wall like so many others before it. The brick was rusted to brackish brown with dirt, soot, and age. It cracked in some places and was as rough and as rectangular as all brick walls were. So it should have been just as dull as every other one of its kind.

It would have been, save for one very importantly significant function embedded deep into the fabric of its being. The only thing setting it apart from anything else equally as dull it, and that was... that it rested between platforms nine and ten at King’s Cross Station, London. It served to be as unassuming as possible and in this it succeeded, therefore hiding the pure chaos that erupted behind it every year on the day of August the thirty-first.

Tom was aware of walls such as this. He had been to Diagon Alley and had appropriately marveled at how magic could make something like a wall, amazingly extraordinary. It was mind boggling the first time but now that he knew it shouldn’t have continued to be so. No, mind-boggling was not apt enough to describe the separation of the mundane and the extraordinary. Yet, it had sufficed then. Still, then and now were different and ‘apt’ was no longer enough.

Just because he had seen proof that walls like this could be more than walls, it did not do very much to convince the pathways of his brain to accept that. It did exceedingly little to impress upon him that if he went up to this wall and walked through it, that he would indeed get to the other side without threat of pain or embarrassment.

It wasn’t the same as Diagon at all. It felt not at all like the magic of the infamous Alley. It felt like nothing and his eyes saw nothing. Nothing more than brick and dirt. Maybe that was the point and if it was it worked, well. Well enough that it left even he, uncomfortable in its simplicity. For it was just a wall.

Knowing that something would be beyond it, expecting something beyond it would have been insanity if Tom hadn’t first seen magic akin to its nature. Despite knowing that, and that the platform nine and three quarters rested just beyond the stones, it did nothing to alleviate his skepticism. For knowing something and seeing something contrary to what you knew was hard to force a mind to accept.

This he understood and had trained himself to overcome with some small degree of success. It was enough that it shouldn’t have been so difficult to grasp that what he was seeing wasn't real. It should
not have been so hard to overcome with all the effort he had gone through just for situations such as this. But. It. Was.

His eyes were telling him one thing and his mind was saying another and he should have been able to reconcile them as he always could. He couldn't. It did not work this time and knowing did not make it any less of a challenge for him despite the fact that he knew, knew that something must be beyond this wall. It was beyond frustrating.

He had accepted that magic existed, knew that, had practiced his books front to back, talked with serpents, sowed vengeance, but still could not immediately get over that he was about to go through a wall, through it. Not around, not in some magical doorway that would just appear. Through it. At least Diagon Alley’s entrance wall had been a door, he could reconcile seeing what was awaiting him beyond it because it was a door. This was. Just. A. Wall. Something solid that by all scientific governing laws shouldn’t have any exceptions.

Yet, magic. That was all he could get out of Horace. It wasn't an answer at all. Not in the least. It did not explain why any of this was possible! It was just some vague thing that had a name that nobody understood or tried to! It was all just Magic to these people and they just left it at that. That answer was not nearly a suitable response or accurate way to justify breaking the laws of the universe.

There should have been some sort of penalty to his sanity points for actually believing that any of the last year was anything more than a clever day dream from a desperate child. He wouldn't be surprised if he was just hallucinating all of this. It would have at least had a definite cause and explainable basis. He should expect to be waking up in a white walled room, too sterile, and laced up to the bed. In fact, it would be fitting that he was about to break through an impossible thing and that would be the end of all this.

He could be just dreaming out his entire life in the mental ward for the undeniably insane. Nissa, Mors, H.J.P., all of it tied to some sort of event in the real world of that hypothetical situation. He should have been more afraid of such being the case, but he found himself far too calm. A part of him screamed that this was real and the rest of him was too comfortable considering he was about to be destroying age old laws of physics.

*That*, he thought not for the first time, *would be astounding*. It was an exhilarating thought, that. To be breaking such mundane boundaries. If he was insane then what the bloody hell anyways at least he was insane in the best way.

Still, A Wall of all things and he was supposed to just run through like some common, nervous, plebeian. If Horace Slughorn was to be believed. It was degrading in all aspects for him to childishly gallivant on through. That was a child's thinking, children did that, and he was no child.

Tom was ultimately frustrated with himself, no not frustrated, concerned. It would not due to be anything more than that. He was not going to be blocked from the world beyond it if he didn’t run through it and instead walked through it because either way the idea that he believed he would pass through it was tangible enough for the magic to work, in theory. Besides H.J.P. had assured him of the validity for that particular theory but...There was yet another problem.

And his dark gaze slowly slid to take in his sole chaperon, one lauded potions master and Hogwarts professor Horace Slughorn. Would a child who never knew better, so saw Slughorn, know what he knew? Would an eleven year old orphan know that sort of explanation even having weeks to seek out the theoretical knowledge?

Further than his genius, would anything he said be taken with any degree of seriousness? A child is still seen as a child, regardless of the age of ones intelligence. It wouldn’t matter how valid his
arguments or even if they were right or not. They would still be the words spewed from the mouth of an eleven year old, orphan, half-blooded wizard, who oughtn’t of known magic until just eight months prior. Any expertise, no matter how valid, would be disregarded.

Once again he had to remind himself that being an adult did not mean one was on the level of one. Sanity was often cast aside to feed into roles that were expected rather than true. Tom could demonstrate his higher intellect and act adult all he liked but a grown human would still only equate his genius as a child being cute. A child was to be silent and clever, but never right.

A child would not understand that magic worked that way, a child would openly be excited and run headlong into any situation that showed the promise of warmth, fun, and safety. A child was everything Tom considered himself not to be and while he knew that magic was based more on will than anything else, he doubted his knowledge would be heard or acknowledged. It was doubtful that Slughorn would understand that Tom knew that much. Worse that it could be credible.

No. He would expect Tom to be more focused on the excitement before him. He expected to see a child nervous and full of worries that he would be refused by this drab slab of brick. Which was a ridiculous notion! Tom would never be rejected by magic, how absurd. Still...

Slughorn wanted to see a child. That was the role in which he was expected to play. That was what the man expected to see and Tom should, if he was being cunning about it, accept that and play on the emotional positives that it would cause Slughorn to be the pseudo-parent of such a brilliant wizarding child. For to be the benefactor of such childish enthusiasm would provide the man great joy and convince the man that Tom was no threat, easily able to be molded into a fly in the man’s collection of things to be benefited from. An asset to be gained, kept, and enhanced.

He should use that positive manipulation of Slughorn’s assurance that Tom was falling into line of his agenda to further gain favors and privileges. By all accounts Tom should take advantage of this situation and act accordingly.

Even knowing this he could not abide being another pathetic urchin entering this world the way urchins were won’t to do. His pride would not take it lying down. If he was to go through a wall and break all the laws of everything he ever believed to be true, he would do it on his terms and with all of the class which defined him. He was no child, had not been for years. He would not debase himself so.

Dark eyes traced from the wall and back again to the aforementioned professor in silent contemplation. Horace would be disappointed with the lack of usual spirit and wonder. It was Tom’s childish exuberance in the face of real wizard goods that had allowed for the boy to so easily maneuver the man into providing so much for him originally.

His careful remarks and delighted reactions granted him the favor of Horace’s deep pockets. His current fine wizard robes and fresh new pea-coat were a testament to Tom’s success in the art of getting what he pleased with the most beneficial results.

In this case his entire school list had been paid for in full and he gained a collection of books which had taken up the original scholarship galleons. All this he had rightfully earned with cunning and guile, and to mar such an outstanding record now would be shameful. A disgrace to his intellect if ever there would be one.

It was obvious from the get go that Horace Slughorn would wish to live vicariously through him, and more so for Tom to feel indebted to the man for his warm generosity. Tom was his protege and so the man wanted the childlike adulation and joy most would have found beyond this wall. To be needed and relied on so as to take later when his investments profited. To help the poor orphan
wizard who happened to be uncannily adept at magic.

This would require delicate handling if he was to maintain Horace’s favor. For the man’s favor would open a great many doors in his future. In order to do this he needed to hold the air of innocence that would ensure his safety and the affection of this man. He would be loved by this man if nothing else because Horace was just so easy and so useful.

He would have to approach this in a unique way. A way that wouldn’t seem all that different from what the professor had already seen of him. A modus of operandi that would allow him his freedom and slowly integrate his preferred persona so as to be the least suspect of falsity. A gradual slipping into the real truth of himself.

He so hated this sort of thing but so be it. If Horace wished an impressionable child, something his, he would have it. Let the fool believe. No way though, would Tom degrade himself to some mundane Muggleborn act such as bowling through what had to be a foot of solid brick, for he was better than that. To run, of all things, when he could present a better image to all those watching beyond was as inexcusable as ink blotches or improperly marked ‘t’s on his research. The very thought caused his nose to twitch unpleasantly. Running was for the weak. Those who didn’t know how to properly fight.

It was at this point in his machinations he recalled, with perfect clarity, their very first conversation, and the look of abject horror on his professor’s face. Tom had asked the man if he was there to institutionalize him. The anguish Slughorn showed at the idea that muggles, muggles of all things! Would lock away a magical child, had flashed through the forefront of the man’s mind along with a flash of fear. Easy enough to read for someone so naturally inclined to the mind arts. Looking back, Tom now understood how rare his own prowess was. How valuable he was.

The sympathy and outrage in response to Tom’s maltreatment, a boy so talented as he, made it oh so very easy for Tom to wiggle his way into a prime spot within the man’s life. His ignorance but adeptness with magic had fueled them to go to Diagon Alley that very day. His enthusiasm earned Tom the entirety of his school supplies at no cost to himself. For Horace, it was the least one could do to rectify the tragedy that was Tom’s life.

Emotions were an easy road to controlling a man. Slughorn was no stronger than any other in this. He could use that. It would do him well to support Slughorn’s vision of him as boy who needed protecting and soft nurturing. He was the abandoned wizard orphan. He was a boy that believed he was to be locked away because he could do things no others could. He was the underdog and as such he should use that to the utmost advantage. At least in the beginning. It was better than whatever vision of a child the man had envisioned him as now.

Maybe after a few months he could slip away from that facade and really begin to dig into taking over things. It would need to be natural, clean, and quick. When he had a free moment he would work on it more. Once he had a better idea of the sorts of oppression he would be faced with he could then work on it. For now it was Horace, a bland hunk of wall, and himself. As it was, the abused act would have to do he supposed.

A gentle tug upon Horace’s sleeve should do to gain the professor’s attention at first, and if his hand tremble a little it would no doubt be most effective in evoking the proper holding of said attention. Adults liked to be dominant. They liked to protect and nurture the young as it made them important and significant. It soothed a place in their instincts that hid deep within their minds. This would be the pinnacle of either success or failure with Slughorn and Tom would not stand for failure.

So when his professor responded to his gentle coaxing he was met a countenance of poorly hidden anxiety behind a stalwart mask of pride. The man unconsciously bent down to meet Tom’s eye level.
Smiling benignly at his little prince, for what else could Tom be but royalty, and he bent low for him subconsciously in parental reverence. Horace was reminded then of just how beautiful a child Tom was and how tragic his tale, for his past was laid out in his very being.

It was accentuated by squared shoulders and a straightened spine; It was a phantom behind wide abyssal eyes that went onward toward forever; It was the proud arch of a child’s brows that were thin and pinched in restrained worry; It was in the barely forming cheekbones that had yet to lose the softness of innocence pulled tense; and in the red of lips nibbled to almost injury from subdued fear through years of weathered neglect.

All this wrapped up in a demeanor of one who hoped for more but was used to less. This was a child well used to hunger and pain and ostracization; A child told he was an aberration to be always feared and never loved. He, who hath never known love of neither mother nor father; He, a travesty and a marvel held tightly in check with dignity and self respect in the face of all adversities. What could have so easily become and Oscural but defied even that. He took the fear and the hatred of magic with a lifted chin in stubborn pride of his abilities, and paid for it.

“Professor,” the child bespoke, and it was with a voice of smooth timber and sweet as warm springs. Cold and aloof from breaking winter to those who did not know to look for budding flowers. For deeper in that voice was where the vulnerability showed beneath a cover of indifference. It was a testament to Horace’s worth in this child’s eyes that he offered forth such trust to show him spring and not winter.

“I apologize. I just... Were we not going to go together?” Eyes trying to hide resignation for oncoming disappointment, knowing from experience that one was alone and had to learn to accept such solitude. Stand tall or be destroyed. That moment of beseeching was the downfall of Horace Slughorn that day on August the thirty first, at ten till ten, in the year of Nineteen thirty-eight.

Tom had known even before he spoke that he had accomplished what he wanted. Slughorn took his bait with his usual dramatic flair. In that mind so open, images of romanticism and delusions spoke of Tom’s victory. Slughorn would never deny any request he made so long as he phrased it just so and with just the right sort of stubborn guarded intensity as to evoke these images again.

Whatever the man thought otherwise, he belonged to Tom now. So it was little surprise when the man took one of his tiny hands and led them both forward through the wall of King’s Cross Station and into the bright throng of people beyond. Like a proud father leading his son to his first day.

The wall washed over them and passed leaving ghostly traces of what had been into the present of what was the now. The world rotated upon its axis, and this version was more than Tom could have dreamed. The change was so abrupt that it sent his head reeling in sensory shock.

Unlike Diagon which was so boldly displayed once the wall had made way for a door, this was just too abrupt for his brain and eyes to reconcile the time between what had been and what was now. The colors alone were a dizzying array in their proportions and gamuts. The air, sounds, and sights all swam before him and he swayed minutely. Overcome wholly by the moving mass of people and things all touched by magic and clean, so very clean. Clean of industrialization and greed. So very, very perfect.

It was all simple and subtle. It affected Tom more than anything else could have, sans the death of beloved Nissa, sans the gifting of Mors, and sans the advent of H.J.P.. The scent of the air was sweet and fresh, and just so clean and so much of it existed, and it was everything that London was not! Just that small change alone, so much air to breathe, was more than enough to bring Tom to the edge of tears.
The colors were starkly contrasted in bright yellows, deep reds, verdant greens, colors of all natures under an ornate glass ceiling filled with sun and clouds. A sky so clear and deep that Tom had never seen before. So vast one could fall into it forever. A sky that could not ever exist in the muggle world of black skies and blacker snow. The warmth of sunlight permeated around him as a real thing, swirling masses of atmospheric colors and rightness. Was this what they felt everyday! Such warmth as this?! Despite it being a charm the feeling was real, real enough for it to matter.

*It does exist,* he mused. *A better world.* A place in kinship as Diagon Alley where the world of dreary, dark, London could not permeate. His rightful world. The one he should have been born into but had not been. In that moment Wool’s had never seemed so far away. For in this magical world there could be only wholeness, completeness, and a chance for happiness. For here, in this space beyond the wall, there was no soot or rancid decay. No black rivers of wasted human misery, or starved skeletons hidden away from public sight. Waste and death could not touch this place. It was whole, and clean, and untouched by muggle hands.

There was just too much to process at one time, nothing could have prepared him for something like this. The magnitude of details to take in was unbearable. To know that his life truly was beginning anew, here, where he could be whatever he wished so long as he strive hard enough for it!

So moving in its enormity was it that he unconsciously linked it to letters well cherished and books well loved. A creased parchment in his trouser pocket that spoke of towering spires that held warmth throughout the year, and dungeons below a lake of black water. Just in knowing that the world left behind was not what defined him but rather this monstrosity of wellness before him. That he was magical. The there was somewhere he belonged.

His whole life he had been a part of this world, a perfect world, and yet he had been left in squalor and neglect. It was… enraging... No, it was more than that, it was appalling! damaging! To know he had been missing this for so long! To think of how much he had been made to endure, and to know that no one had come for him. All his life… Now though, that was behind him. No longer would he be lost, ignored, or neglected.

It was time he get his due. The greatness and fortune that was his. To take his rightful place in this world.

It was an idealistic thought, and perfect like all things in this space. It was only was disrupted by a soft tug on his hand. A wide knowing smile grew ever more steady upon Horace Slughorn’s round face as the man led him towards a towering red steam engine. He was so proud of the boy he held beside him even as they became scant beings beneath the behemoth that was the Hogwart’s Express.

The train itself was a massive construct of garish brightness and mangled masses of pipes and pulleys and gears. Steam and multicolored clouds bursting from open vents which made strange noises given each new release of said hazy clouds. A giant of such magical significance that would bring him to his new life, a safe place he could call home.

Unconsciously he tightened his hold on the hand enveloping his and older eyes gazed upon him in unabashed delight in his poorly hidden wonderment. He was brought from his daze by an insistent cough from a rather smug looking potions master.

“Well Tom? What do you think of it. I remember when I was a lad like yourself, this was all I had ever dreamed of.” It took Tom a moment to even try and find words again. It was all so much. Finally he decided on,

“I don’t think there are adequate words to describe this. There is just... so much, and I have always seen so little. How could I be without this for so long? I just… What if I am too far behind?” His free
hand clenched into a fist and he focused on the glass ceiling, feeling true warmth from a sun that couldn’t really be shining but enchanted to seem so nonetheless. Real enough.

“Yes quite. I think young witches and wizards these days don’t appreciate magic like they used to. For you this is all new and exciting and so you appreciate all of it. This though, is nothing Tom. Hogwarts awaits you and I know that you will love her and she you. I know you are overwhelmed but you listen here. No matter what house you become sorted, though I wish it were mine, I am always available for you.” Slughorn shifted and took a knee, a big hand grasping the supple shoulder before him.

“If you need anything at all you come to me. I will ensure that you are prepared for all things my dear Mr. Riddle. Fear not about falling behind but rather fear being too advanced. Fear not. Knowing you, Ravenclaw won’t stand a chance.” The man took a moment to stare intensely at his young charge before straightening. He would remember forever abyssal eyes sparkling with emotions rampant and a childish face trying so hard to seem unyielding.

“Oh alright Tom?” Tom nodded minutely and covered his disinterest in the man’s offer with a look of appreciation. In his mind, he saw the words he truly wanted to see. Words safe in his pocket assuring him of his right to magic and knowledge and sent with all the care and love that could be conveyed through a letter. A letter telling him that he was a shoe-in for Slytherin. His obsession.

“I will professor, I still don’t think I can ever repay you for… well… All of this. Before you I- I was certain they would have…” The unsaid words and the threat of what could have been hung heavy between them. For Tom the option of any more meddling from Mrs. Cole or her associates would have been met with extreme violence and repercussions the likes of which that place had yet to see, but Slughorn needn’t know that. If he thought institutionalization was the worst of it, then that was fine.

“Will you be with me on the train sir? I do not know anyone, no one but you, and the shopkeepers of Diagon. If it is as you said sir that I am muggleborn will I not then be targeted?” His dark eyes focused upon Horace and internally he hoped the man would decline. Go wherever he had to go so that Tom could just be. Him and this world, without the spare.

“I fear not Tom. I must away to prepare at Hogwarts for the many students about to arrive. However a young fourth year by the name of Abraxas Malfoy should be on board already. You cannot miss him, quite striking. Long blonde hair and dressed in Slytherin green and silver. You can’t miss him. Give him this note from me and I am sure he will be more than happy to accompany you during the train ride.” The man beside Tom, reluctantly pulled away to retrieve a sealed envelope. The sight of which made Tom bristle in interest.

It seemed that his Professor had planned ahead for this occasion and it made his mind start whirling over the possible implications. The Malfoy’s as he had come to understand, were a very old and exceedingly powerful wizard family. Their fortune rivaled only by the house of Black. They were blood purists and heavily involved in the politics surrounding a great many laws that favored the idea of muggleborn restrictions and education.

A monarchy cannot rule if there are not those to lord over. Tom mused. The idea that Slughorn was so sure that one of their ilk would aid Tom made the boy reevaluate just how very useful Slughorn could be now, more than ever. He accepted the ornate letter with innocent trust reflecting through a child’s eyes. He congratulated his instincts internally on a job well done in regards to the good professor.

Still, just because he made one victory did not mean he could afford carelessness to any degree. Not so early in his game. Not while he still had incomplete pieces to play with. The potential he had here
was massive but needed a delicate touch backed with a rather large stick. Persuasion solidified behind power. It would behoove him to have a Malfoy under his thumb. Even if that meant temporarily being seen as subservient. Besides, surely a Malfoy could be blinded to his status so long as he had enough other talents to back it up.

The first step to this would be making a lasting positive impression. Enough of one to make this Abraxas boy overlook his common name and see worth behind Tom Marvolo Riddle. Much like Slughorn people could be manipulated easiest when they believed they were the ones doing the manipulating. So perhaps he should show his prowess and allow Malfoy his plots for now.

Mentally he went over proper guidelines on wizarding etiquette and prepared himself to face his first giant obstacle of his school life. This meeting would set the precedent for all others and he would need to once again work to be thorough in his movements. He would need to gauge just how receptive to this letter the Malfoy boy would be. Then he would go from there and if he had to use force, then so be it. He had broken people before.

“Thank you professor, I will. Thank you again for everything.” The smile he shot at Slughorn nearly killed the man in its sweetness. There was a moment when Tom believed he would keel over then and there before he straightened and handed Tom a small trunk that was shrunk down enough to fit in one’s palm.

Tom’s whole life was lying within. Somewhere within that trunk was a second trunk unknown to any. His real one, initialed with care, love, and magic that tasted of lightning and smelled of sweet ozone. Like power. Without another look back, Tom Riddle boarded the train and set off in search of his newest pet project. Abraxas Malfoy.

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Tom found Abraxas with relative ease. The stream of bodies among the train had been outrageous for how small the compartments and walkways were. One would had thought that it would have been magically enhanced enough to at least fit the significant amount of students all packed into one large vessel comfortably. There were spells for that sort of thing and it was strange that they were not applied. Inefficient.

Despite the clutter and press of bodies both blank and colored in house regalia, it had not been hard to find the aforementioned boy. You see Tom had only ever truly been lost once in his life when he had been at the tender age of five. It involved the addressing of a grievance against him. The priest in question had been found but had been unable to say what really happened that day physically and mentally. It was assumed he had been attacked by an animal.

It had been just the sort of cheery sort of trip with the local parish that hid the brainwashing of many into the religion of the church at a young age. Under the guise to teach the young and unfortunate orphans the meaning of Faith in a fun and positive way that would sink its claws into them. Like giant meat hooks. That is to say that it was meant to be a positive and fun trip with absolutely no negative going ons.

Tom rather felt it was deception hidden behind genial smiles. It was denial and lies because Faith and the Word could not wash away the feeling of Father Joseph’s hands from the bodies of the young and the helpless. It did not chase away the lingering night terrors, or haphephobia that was so rampant in the youth of Wool’s.

So often the smaller boys of the orphanage would come back after extra prayer sullen and silent, their eyes a blackened mass of fears and pain. All of it to be good for Him, because that is what the adults said they should be, good... or else. So they do as they were bid. They became weak because that
was how the Father wished for them to be, and silent because what good were their voices if nobody came when they screamed.

So as they all trekked further into the wilds dotting the English countryside. It was then that it became Tom’s turn for the eyes of the lecherous Father. An angelic boy among the dirtied lot, he stood resplendent. He had known it would not have been long or unlikely that he too would be given into the care of the good father. So far he had been kept far out of reach.

Unlike the rest of the sheep, Tom had refused the givings and respite of the church. He had decided early on that it could not cure his hunger or pains, only give him an excuse to be fine with them. It only offered the excuse that his suffering was just, which it was not in anyway. It made Mrs. Cole angry but she could never find reason enough to make him go. More so because he was by that time already a pariah among the children. No that is incorrect rather he was above them. So it was only among the camping trip into the country that Joseph had the great honor of meeting him.

Tom, with the large unending gaze; Tom, who never deigned to speak unless it was he who commanded others; Tom, who reached into souls like the devil himself and wrenched forth the evils of man only to crush them upon the walls of the vessels. A child such as this, a boon to be had and purged. There could be no greater conquest of man. Nothing sweeter than a name one had stolen from the soft lips of a child. Joseph had seen him, gazed into the face of the devil, and laughed.

Tom knew what the man intended for it was not so very hidden. He vowed that when it happened, It would be the last time the Father would touch anyone again. Not because the boy cared for any of the other children or their plight. If they were so weak as to allow others to command them, to use them, and to throw them away, and all in the name of faith, then it was their own faults.

These victims followed blindly, trusted wholly, never questioned, and paid for it in the flesh and tears and their innocence. They only secured its continued practice through their silence. Every child that followed in their wake was in part their own sin to pay for. They were guilty for the crimes committed by their apathy. For they never spoke and they never warned, so more and more victims were made beyond themselves.

It was not their justice he would take, one does not deserve it lest they seek the vengeance themselves, but it was rather because the Father was a disgusting piece of human filth the likes of which Tom was incapable of leaving alone. Out of every human he had met till now, it was this liar and abuser that was by far the most foul. To spread his filth in such a vulgar and barbaric way and then to have the gall to touch him. Tom, who could command animals and induce nightmares. He, who was so much more than some dog of broken promises to a silent, apathetic god.

He, who knew no other love than Nissa, saw no beauty in the flesh of humanity, raged against the idea that a Father of the church dare to think he had right to the flesh of him. The audacity alone was enough that Tom would teach him the values the others had so learned by now. He would take vengeance and he would do it for no other reason than because he could, and because Joseph deserved it. He always spoke of retribution for one's sins, at least Tom assumed all preachers did, and so shall it come onto him. He preached of the punishments paid to sinners and so he too should have to pay its penalty.

When Joseph led him away the third day of the trip it was with growing anticipation that Tom followed. Maybe it had been a fanciful thought that Tom saw his own need for Joseph’s penance reflected in the eyes of those boys and girls taken before him. He felt he could see their pleading for this man to suffer as they had suffered, an end, for justice. For once, they acknowledged that his strangeness was a force of good.

Destroying the preacher's hands and castrating him had been the least Tom could do for them, and
when it was done Tom found himself to be far from any others. The prone form of Joseph curled into a tree's roots in terror. Curses passed from the man’s lips. Speak of devil children and heathens to which Tom merely smiled and responded,

‘Did you think your God would not take vengeance on the behalf of them. Did you really believe you ever had any right to touch me? Let it be known I hold no love for them, you, or this god of yours. Let it be known I did this because filth like you need to learn their place. Now, your tongue sir. We can’t have you speaking of this to anyone. Let you be silent as you commanded them to be. Let’s see how well you preach your lies then Father.’

He had left the father, unscathed himself, and wandered until he had a distinct feeling that he should head a certain way. Never one to ignore his innate abilities or instincts he found his way back. The story had been that they encountered wild wolves. The father stayed behind to protect Tom when he left. The popular rendition was that he had been rendered by those wolves albeit sadly survived the ordeal.

Mrs. Cole never believed him and refused from then on to take him on any church related activities which was all well and good for Tom, who had better spent the time with maths. The rest of the children remained ignorant save those who had felt the good father’s past affections. They, for awhile, treated Tom well enough. That had been the only time Tom was ever lost. It was a fond memory.

Now he had a name for his instinctual sense of direction, the Point-Me spell. With it he easily navigated around various hustling bodies and toward the back of the train itself. Every now and again he would feel tingles in his skin when passing certain doors or when a spell would wizz out of an open compartment to the echoes of raucous laughter.

It was this way that he found the second to last train car in which held the form of one Abraxas Malfoy. Abraxas was just as Horace had described, a stunning young man with a mane of silvery and fine looking hair pulled back into a neat ponytail. He was slender but filled out in the way all awkward teenagers tended to be at such an age. However, the way he held himself was regal and bespoke of the elegance only an heir to a powerful family could attain.

The boy’s gray eyes sparkled with mirth and affability but the effect seemed contrived and calculated. He was a boy who knew how to look and speak to convince people he genuinely cared for them, at least any who lacked the grace of legilimency. A person adept at making friends and avoiding making enemies.

With a smile that was half warm and soft at its corners one could say he was a vision of beauty. A person charming enough that the same charm was reflected within the adoring eyes of a madame sitting beside him. A lover perhaps, or just a dalliance, it did not matter more than what that information could offer him should he need to use it.

For a moment Tom pondered over how best to proceed until a dark shape made itself apparent outside of the window to the mostly empty compartment. The appearance of the large animal caused the girl to let out a shrill yelp before she realized it was an owl of great stature, and black as all night.

“Oh my! Abraxas. I had no idea you got a new owl.” Her voice was almost grating in its honeyed sweetness, enough that Tom inwardly had to revisit the possibility of taking his time in a leisurely way far away from her. He was about to make himself known when Abraxas turned his head to gaze upon the creature slowly trying to enter the too small window of the Hogwarts Express’ half open glass.

“I did not, although it is magnificent indeed. I wonder if perhaps young Orion was gifted it. He was
saying how he needed a better breed after his cousin cursed his old one but, surely it wouldn’t be lost...” Abraxas made to move nearer the window but the darkened form screeched and snapped. Safe to say the wizard was wise enough to back away as the large harbinger squeezed successfully into the compartment. The elegant beast perched opposite of the couple and took the following time to rearrange his mussed feathers.

It was great fortune that Mors joined him at such a time, a powerful familiar could only aid him in making his image respectable enough to be recognized. It was the perfect reason for entrance and Tom eagerly went to his familiar, disregarding the eyes that fell upon him. It went without saying that he felt infinitely more confident with his bird king at his shoulder. Moonlight eyes gazed upon its master and a dangerously large beak nibbled with noticeable affection at Tom’s fingertips. Perfection.

“Pardon my intrusion but Mors does not like being handled by any but myself. It would be foolish to pursue such an endeavor. I would dissuade you from trying, he has been known to be temperamental. It would not be the first flesh he tasted. It seems however he knew I was coming to meet with you. I do hope you do not mind his company.” He tore his gaze from his dark companion and turned to the two others silently assessing him.

Cold eyes critically tore into him, trying to pick apart his exact stance and features as if trying to find some hidden flaw. They would find nothing for he had drilled etiquette four out of seven days of the week ever since his first trip to Diagon. Like his penmanship, like his magic, he would be seen as flawless.

Any other may have been nervous or felt belittled by their treatment but as it stood they had never seen him before or at least Abraxas had never seen him, judging by the underlying thoughts on his surface. Tom however only drilled his own gaze straight into a set of gray and idly flipped through what stray information floated on the surface. There was no telling what sort of mental barriers that a Malfoy may have been taught though it was odd that such thoughts flowed so freely.

“I see. Who are you that you are given the honor of meeting with me? I have never seen you in the society before and I have been schooled to know everyone who is anyone child. Judging by your clothes and stance I would say you were a pureblood, maybe from some outlying family but obviously one with money. So... I am waiting.” Oh. Abraxas was good.

Internally, Tom felt a course of excitement at the prospect of having a challenge for once. Yes he obviously looked the part of an heir of some sort but only a fool would look skin deep when it came to status. Tom could posture all he liked and the boy was sure that the Scion of Malfoy would still know that something was amiss. Only, Abraxas wouldn’t out him immediately for what benefit could come of that. No, this was a person who calculated the greatest gain and then pursued it. A dangerous enemy to have.

To one such as him, gains meant money and power and if there was one thing a Malfoy knew above all else, it was that sometimes power could override money. Abraxas was no fool, he understood the bond that was demonstrated by such a beast in deference to a first year. The fact was that familiars weren’t often around those of younger years. The intimacy in magic was just not enough in young children usually. A familiar at a young age was impressive and it was also telling as familiars reflected the attitudes of their masters.

“I am Tom. The good professor sent me to you. He bids you salutations and has requested that I pass this onto you. I would assume he is overly concerned for my well being with good reason. Regardless of all else he is an inherently good man. Seeing as he sent me to you, I would venture to say that you are one as well, if not more shrewd.” He was gifted with what could have been an
accepting twitch of lips. Their banter was very well placed for it being from one as young as Tom. Maybe it was also his blunt assessments. It was a small show of approval.

The letter switched hands and long tapered fingers broke the seal. Gray eyes roved over the words and Tom watched as a brief flicker of rage entered Abraxas’ eyes before a calculation replaced it. Shame. Abraxas’ facial mask was so undeniably perfected but his eyes gave him away. Or maybe it is just that I have a knack for finding hidden things. Whatever may be, the boy before him seemed more and more invested in the letter itself. He was eager to know what the contents entailed yet knew that it was far too early in the game to force the issue. His curiosity could wait until he and the Malfoy boy were better acquainted.

It was while her beau was focused on the correspondence that the witch turned her attention upon him. She looked as a painted doll that Tom had once seen in a window shop long ago. Hair of rivulet gold and bows of soft blues.

“Such dark eyes you have my dear. I have never seen the like but such a hue can only speak of a well rooted magical family. I myself am from the Rosier family.” She reached out her hand and Tom understood the purpose, a test. He lifted her knuckles to his lips but passed them to kiss the back of her hand. Inside he decided he disliked her. Satisfied though she tittered about newest fashions and what Tom thought of certain wizard gossip.

She was clever and he would give her some credit but ultimately she was just as disappointing as any other person in the world. Somewhere inside he felt just a little jilted. She was trying so hard to oust him with some slip of misinformation or lack of knowledge and to be fair it was effective. Tom was not adept at keeping up with half of the useless rabble she blathered on about.

Tom knew of politics, fashion, etiquette, and magic. He did not care to learn what some famous quidditch star did in his free time or what beauty potions were on sale or what she ate last night. He didn’t care but he felt that her attitude was why Abraxas kept her around. She easily distracted people from the boy who calculated beside her. So much that she would have, if Tom had not been looking for it, overshadowed the instant that Abraxas looked upon Tom with a new light in those eyes.

“Waverly, I forgot to mention that Walburga was searching for you earlier. Why don’t you go see her while Tom and I discuss what he should expect from Hogwarts.” Abraxas smoothly soothed whatever coming storm was on the way with a quick yet sharp smile. The girl, Waverly Rosier, flushed before bidding Tom a rather warm farewell. The instant she was gone Abraxas made to take out his wand.

“A locking charm and anti-listening spell, nothing more Riddle.” Abraxas never got to it because the doors latched itself and the window tinted an oily overpass. The gaze of the Malfoy turned minutely in surprise but only for a brief instant. His wand moved in a spiral pattern before his brows furrowed. Hunger was painted in the Heir’s stance when he rounded back upon Tom. Gray eyes were blown wide, the depth of power he could gain from Tom would be astronomical if this was the child at eleven. Such control and mastery over wandless magic and the feel of it! Black currant upon the tongue, thick like oil and so smooth. To be the hand guiding it, behind it.

“I see… He was not lying. You are rather skilled for one so young. A familiar and control such as this. That is a very advanced anti-scrying spell. The likes of which shouldn’t be possible for one so young. He, however, only believes you such levels of magic with great strain but in some ways Horace is more a fool. So Tom Marvolo Riddle… What is it then that you need from me? Certainly not a mentor ship in magic. No doubt you will be more than capable on your own. So what then? Connections? Money? Protection” Handsome lips curled at the edged around the purring words so
different from their previous colder tones.

For a moment there was silence before the lean form of Abraxas settled on Tom’s right, away from the bird, and his hand gently stroked over the soft skin of Tom’s cheek. He took delight in the dark gaze that penetrated his own. Challenging in its nature, a void hiding so much strength. For an instant a smile was gifted over soft childish lips. Much too sweet to be of good intent. Not the Abraxas cared of the intent, the image was beautiful enough.

“Before anything else, an oath Heir Malfoy. I have a great many secrets. If you want all you can reap from our acquaintance, and it should be a grand amount, you must agree to an oath. I need protection until the time is right, support, and knowledge of society. You are just the man to provide it. Who would go against the Scion of House Malfoy? Who better to teach me the ways of the pureblood arena?”

Abraxas could think of a few but all could be neutralized in some way if he chose to truly apply himself. He was surprised that he even was considering the notion. It seemed his mind was already decided, his course of action clear if he was so willing to plot so soon. Ideas formed in nice linear sequence of how best to satiate the Hogwarts rumor mill, wagging tongues, and sharp looks of the Heirs Black. Besides surely he could find a way to turn this further to his own favor. He was born for such trivial challenges as this. As for societal teachings, well.. There was nobody more capable than he.

“Just say, ‘I Abraxas Malfoy Heir of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Malfoy do hereby swear on my magic to protect the secrets of one Tom Marvolo Riddle, until such a time that specific secrets may be revealed so s’mote it be.’ It would have been insulting, should have been insulting, but that magic wove over and around Abraxas like tendrils of dark promise. It stroked him in gentle rhythms deep into his core. He felt compelled to keep it there, as it was within him. He shivered in pleasure, his heart thumping heavy in his ribcage. The boy was dangerous... He liked it.

He repeated the oath. Instantly his mind cleared as if a heavy fog had been lifted. He found fault in his actions on the spot and both regretted and rejoiced in equal measures because Tom Riddle smiled at him so prettily. So sweetly with dark malice tinting the seams of his lips, and then the boy opened them and out came sounds obscene. It should have been a disgusting sound to hear, the hissing as one might find of a serpent, A sound so chilling that hairs stood on end, but from that mouth it was heaven. He knew then what this boy was, beyond dangerous and sharp, he was powerful.

The snake upon Abraxas’ robes rose to the call and responded in kind but not nearly as pleasant on the ears. Dark eyes locked with his own, a gleam of victory in their depths. Abraxas breathed in slowly, shakily. Tom Marvolo Riddle could speak to serpents and all the fourth year could do was gaze upon Tom in tempered awe and adoration. A Malfoy does not become sycophantic but he wanted so much to wrap the boy to himself and keep him forever. That was before he realized he couldn’t share this with anyone else.

He had not given this child credit enough and had thought perhaps the letter and child an easy win for himself. He did not count on being compelled by magic of an eleven year old to take a binding oath or for the secret to be so grand as this. He would never live it down if any found out about this sort of slip. Furthermore, upon reflection of his current state and conversation, he should have made the boy swear his own oath first. A dire mistake if ever one was made. The boy beside him knew it too with how feral his smile became. Magic seeped from him, heavy and rich.

The Heir of Slytherin dominated the space beside him, unabashed in the oppressive power that lashed about his person, as if the tail of many kneazles. He oozed presence and Abraxas wondered how he had missed it before. Surely a child could not be so adept at masking magic of this
magnitude. Someone was bound to notice, Horace for all his talent for ferreting out potential was unable to feel magic, probably had no idea the true nature of the boy he so handed to the Malfoy family.

Then again... it would be folly at this point to underestimate him any more than he already had. This child was a magical powerhouse, and he couldn’t repeat such a claim to anyone! Not a single person would understand why the Heir of Malfoy was consorting with someone socially below him. What most would assume upon greeting was a mudblood! His father... No, his father would understand but he could not even tell him! Not without express permission. He would have groaned at how easily he had been baited but the reward was so very worth it for the prestige he could possibly gain. If he wasn’t disowned for his silence first.

Maybe there was a way? Of course there was. There was always a way to spin something to his advantage, he would just need to word this the proper way and he could at least avoid disaster with his father. Surely the man would understand for the sake of power and value. His father could appreciate that much at the very least. He ran a hand over his face in thought. Plans formed in instances and in his mind he simulated the situations he would need to quell. He would he able to use this.

“You do know that you think too loudly. While your oath to me protects these secrets it will not do in the long run for such a weakness to be present. I want you to learn Occlumency or at least refine what you have learned. If you have need I could teach you how best to do that. For now your immediate concern is a reason to be my benefactor. As you and I both know, I will be sorted into Slytherin and when I do you may use that letter from Slughorn to explain that he has taken a liking to the poor orphaned Tom Riddle.”

If he thought the first secret was bad it soon got worse the boy’s next revelation was just as damaging. As if there was no end already to the conundrum that was Tom Marvolo Riddle.

“You are a Legilimens.” It was stated as a fact but it was enough for him to slam up mental barricades that he had not bothered with. Waverly was no mind reader, she had no knack for such an ancient art or desire to learn it. He had not anticipated this, and now... He knew he should have. The instant that Riddle began staring him down, the fogginess in his mind when he spoke aloud the oath as if compelled. Not only was he legilimized, but Riddle could do more than that as well. He did not wish to know how the boy learned. There were certain things one did not need to know and this was one of them. He just had a feeling.

Tom just smiled at him toothily and Abraxas quickly broke eye contact. The boy just laughed and tapped the letter between them.

“He worries so much. So much so that he would ask for your assistance in acclimating me to the wizarding world. Due to circumstances from my tragic past you are to school me in social activities and teach me to make friends and trust people and my magic. As I proceed to take the top places in all classes you get the reap the benefits of saying you tutored me and as I become more successful so too do you, and when the time is right and my status is revealed, you get to claim that you knew this entire time and have been the most beneficial to me thus more important than everyone else. For now let us begin with this cover and you teaching me very quickly how to mask this magic I have and go from there. It has been tiresome keeping it locked up.”

“In exchange, I can teach you how to silence that noisy mind of yours. Even now I hear you. Yes, I am what one would call a natural Legilimens but even if I can still hear you, lets make sure others cannot. Refrain also, from touching me so personally again. Much like my beloved Mors here, I have maimed people for less.” Abraxas readily agreed. That was how Tom Riddle gained his first ‘friend’
on the Hogwarts Express.

Later, when he was sorted into Slytherin, Slughorn stood in a solid show of support for the bashful looking child with abyssal eyes and a beaming smile. It was a smile that shined with so much light and love that Albus almost wondered if the sorting hat were broken and he missed out on a Gryffindor.

All the while Abraxas Malfoy felt a distinct chill settle in his bones and wondered just how big of a monster had been set upon Hogwarts. Tom settled snugly next to him and gazed at him with what he now knew to be a false admiration. A damn good false admiration if he found himself warmed by it. The boy only continued to smile. Abraxas only felt a deeper level of impending doom. He loved it.

Chapter End Notes

I peg Slughorn as being very dramatic and I find Abraxas to be very shrewd. I had originally planned for this chapter to include a portion I am working on but I will just make that the start of the next chapter.

As for the lag in getting this up, I apologize. Between actively protesting against our current new regime under the Trump Administration I have found myself quite busy. Add that to some personal issues that one is dealing with and I have only have a bit of time to get this chapter together despite the long months of its progress. Fear not the next one will be up faster and I do still have a project I am working on called the Diary of Tom Marvolo Riddle which will have dossiers of characters he meets as well as letters not mentioned that were sent between he and Hadrian.

Anyways until next time my friends.
Vespairy

Edited 7/24/2017
Up On Melancholy Hill

Chapter Summary

A memory lost, A memory grieved, and family found.

Chapter Notes

I did not expect this chapter to get so long. Originally there was a third part but I will pick that back up for the next chapter. Yes I am aware this is moving slowly as it should be. We have a lot of character development in play and I would hate to rush it and end up forgetting some vital detail that I needed to address or some such rot.

I do have the next chapter in the works so hopefully I can have it out soon.

Thanks to all of you who reviewed and who commented. It is nice to know that there are people who have ideas or theories on where I am going with this. It makes it worth it for me.

A big thanks also to other writers on the site. I get my drive to continue this whenever I read an interesting fiction and am reminded that, "Oh yeah I have to finish a chapter of my own."

~ Vespairty~

Edited 8/02/2017

Chapter Six - Up On Melancholy Hill

“You are my medicine when you’re close to me.”

Germany, October 15th 1938

All the world was gilded with gold. Light giving weight to the high verdant grasses and the ragged wild mir flowers that dotted fields both near and far. As far as the eyes could see, and farther still beyond. Within the falling of day all the world was full and bright. Rolling life, easy summer heat, green and gold, and home.

He remembered this place with sweet fondness, a place as close to safe as he could imagine. He knew it intimately once upon a year long ago when life and ambitions were so much simpler. When all the world then was vast and open, every dream within reach and all desires chased in blue twinkling eyes. In the darkness this place he would often recall.

His heart was whole then, love a pulsing thing in him and so hot, and the world was all of magic and for magic. Days of setting laziness and easy smiles on the lips of men with red and black hair.
Evenings spent lost in swirling stars far above with Albus at his side and mornings spent idle in the fields with parchment and research in the company of Hadrian. Simpler, easier days, without cold and darkness.

So he knew this place well, this Godic’s Hollow. He knew that the meadow would crest up on the hill to overlook that sleepy town where the people slumbered early in the day, like they would as of now. At such a time as this when the sun lit the blue sky into the golds of between high noon and the falling dusk. Where the grass gently brushed the ankles as the children ran wild through the expanse of meadow. Without worries or cares.

This place was for him a beginning and an end for many things. It was his sacred ground that held to him all his hopes for a brighter world and all his disillusionment. It stood as his last Bastion in darkened days and muddled visions of grandeur. A place nothing of ill could touch. A final resistance.

Despite his fondness and his safety here he found that his chest echoed hollow save for his heart. That thing which beat to bursting as he hurried up the crest to meet the silhouette before him. He felt off about it and seeing him felt wrong somehow. Even still he was compelled forward by a pull in his navel. Into the world of bathed gold, where onyx hair was haloed in woven gilded yellows and shimmering light. The lengths that ran like rivers down to his waist ever teasing.

There he stood before him, a vision. A man so clever and sharp with a smile yet sharper at times when the mood struck him. Green eyes turned into molten metal with the sun, pale skin yellowed by the light, softened lines where sharp ones held before. He loved this man, no that isn’t quite right. No justice is served by pretending now, when in rest it is safe to dare it. He loves this man even still. With him here the world was completed and yet hauntingly ephemeral. Like something had been erased from this place forever.

He felt something hollowed out and missing from the scene. Perhaps it was just his own nostalgia, seeing Hadrian so clearly after seeing him not for years. He had never known how much he had relied on him, needed him, until he has seen his form as a void at his side. Never known how far he’d fallen to this, this thing within until there was no bastion of resilience to aid him in its containment. He had never known what he had lost, what he had forgotten.

A warm place with warm light and his warm hearted friend who loved magic nearly as much as himself. He felt as if he had let such sentiments and humanity fall to the wayside. Now looking at his wayward friend he felt as if he was overlooking something critical. The world felt tilted as if it was all slipping away and he couldn’t remember why this should feel important, but the dread sinking deep within was eerily familiar.

The scene before him. It felt a lot like loss and even more like goodbye. As if this memory would slip from him the instant he looked away and never ever returned. Like this one moment was all he had left to fight for in the world, though he was certain… certain there must be other things. Had been others things. Looking now, he couldn’t recall what those were.

The man before him was smaller than he could ever recall and his form looked hunched. The slight sloping of shoulders that carried all the world. All grief and sorrow and duty. Eyes of emerald embossed with the softness of fading day were strangely distant, cast westward and entangled with things so far beyond what any man ought to have known. Secrets that he could never guess. He had always wondered just what could make such a man less than one.

Inside himself that beast was screaming but he couldn’t be bothered with it now. Some place within him was telling him that he didn’t want to hear what came next. Some part of him knew this was his own memory and that it was not nearly as pleasant as it all appeared, but of what he found he could
not recall just now.

What would come he did not know. Like a vision uttered from the seer’s mouth, never recalled but rather left as a space where thought once resided. Pressures released into the waking world and left bereft of sight. Living this moment as it was, was all he could want, all he could ask for. Premonition notwithstanding.

This now, with the sunlight turned gold, the field and hair flowing with the gentle breezes. This ever frozen peace for this moment alone was yet a good thing. A whole thing. A calm before a storm. The vision would shatter soon he knew instinctively something would be off. His gaze wandered as if trying to find what could have titled this memory so. Then his eyes saw it. The grave, and foul feelings curled low within him. Something here, with this thing.

The marble slab etched with runes and just so, so much magic. Vines covered its dark expanse where magical flowers,aconite blooms, took in the gentle spring. Ivy curled upon its surface to collect the heat of daylight. Dying in the eve. There was no name upon it, no indication of family or friend. Just an empty slab upon a golden hill graced with the presence of Him and the golden light of fading day.

He had once known whose resting place this belonged to but now he could only wonder at its owner. Who was this person to be deemed worthy enough to be so protected? So very loved by magic and by Him. Even knowing that he should know who, he recalled not at this moment and did not wish to know now. Well loved he must have been, well loved indeed. More so than any, even himself.

For all that he came to stand beside his Hadrian, and all years he had striven to become more to be able to do so. His long time friend would not stop looking onward. Lost into some time that he was not privy too and never would be, right? Beholden to this grave. Which belonged to someone. Someone he did not know, but no... That wasn’t it at all. He knew...

They had spoken this day, before this moment so why, he pondered, did his dream begin here? He reached for comprehension and found only nothingness. His eyes took in the world about him once more and while nothing looked wrong everything felt and seemed so... not quite right? Like everything was shifted just a bit too much to the left, or the colors were just a tad too much or too little. Was that possible? Was there something imperfect in this memory? What was missing?

“I can tell you wish to know and it is alright. You can ask. I think it has been long enough now that it doesn’t hurt as much.” His voice was soft as ever it was, understanding, encouraging, and yet he knew that Hadrian would prefer the silence. Begged for it in his silence. You could just tell what Hadrian wished sometimes even if he looked contrary.

It was in his tone of voice, the slightest trembles or fatigue you could hear if you looked for it. He did not really wish to speak of whatever took him so far away and if he had been Albus he would have respected such things. He however, could not abide by it himself and so broke the peace with all the social grace he possessed at the time, that, which was to say, very little.

“A friend? Lover? Family?” For the first time in what felt like centuries, green turned onto him and in their depths was a bitterness unparalleled by any he had ever seen. Intensity of galaxies that he had heard of in tales. A passing of fear as if he had just missed death by millimeters and only just managed to be right where it could not reach. It was enough to make a frown twist at the lips, darkness stain the sky in smaller amounts to make an attempt and overtake the gold.

The scene dimmed and darkened and almost seemed to bleach out into a nightmarish pitch of nothing gray. Within, a beast chortled and tried to echo out into that flawed scenery, The Void. To grow it and help along the fading of it. He ignored that thing within but the edges of this memory still settled
out in faded hues. It seemed so normal for it to be so. He did not question it anymore.

“All of the above my friend. He was my other, my forever, my dearest, my ---.” Words moved but the name, the name was silenced and foggy and the shape of his love’s, no wasn’t there another with that title first?, seemed blurry. He was certain he had known the name before but now, now it was all silenced. Muted and taboo. Noise resumed immediately after and he snapped into concerned attention, his feeling of dread evil rising within.

“Ironic how in the end it was he who saved me, more Gryffindor than ever even I could be. For all that he was Slytherin. For a short time in the space of the end of all things we were one. Just instantly, and then forever more were we pulled away. This is the him that I knew, loved, and lost forever. Maybe one day I can see him again but, it can never be the exact same one that I left that fateful time so long ago. So I mourn this one for now. As I shall the rest of my days.”

Like a bell, quick and clear, he knew it all. It came rushing in unhindered and much to much of it. He remembered now. This was the day he realized that Hadrian could never love him. While giving with his affections, would never be able to love anyone with his whole self. Magic was as close as it could get because a piece of him was already dead and buried in this wretched slab on the hill that belonged to, well... to someone that was not him.

Stuck in this place that he knew not of, and where he could neither reach nor follow. This was Hadrian’s truth. The wretched thing that dashed his own hopes. Despite the scenery, despite the company, this had not been a happy day.

In essence he had never stood a chance. He could never have been the one who held all of this man. Albus had warned him, begged him to reconsider them and not run off to this thing with Hadrian. He had known it too, somewhere far too deep down, that leaving Albus had been a mistake. Yet his pride hadn’t believed that what they were could be nothing more that companions. So prideful he had been. So arrogant. Yet he had returned into Albus’ embrace with grief in his heart and things had never been the same.

He recalled now how very empty he felt. Still, looking back now it was clear that everything had always been alright because only he had ever seen this side of his Hadrian. Only he had ever seen this side of his pain, it was as much his as it could ever be. So, despite his inner pain, everything was fine. He held more of Hadrian than any this way. This at least he could hold to, and besides he also had Albus to run to. So why did it feel as if that was wrong?

“Was he powerful? Did he love magic?” He felt his own words inadequate on his tongue, edged with budding resentment. Not the questions he had wanted to ask and he felt them strange, as if he had not asked them at all. He hoped to all that was that he did not sound as hollowed out as he felt. His chest resembled the seizing of a spider in its last throws of life. It was not over, this memory was not yet over.

“More than anyone I have ever met. If ever magic loved anyone more, I would not know of it. I tremble when I remember. Sometimes I feel him, see him so real to me still, even after so long. Always. Yet I know that he is gone now. Fate is cruel like that. You would have hated him Gellert. He would have pinned you down in seconds. He would have laughed at your weakness, delighted in dominating you. That was how he was, cruel. Unyielding and cruel. I loved him, love him still.”

There was humor but that too was stained in sadness. Mourning, Gellert realized. Wounds within that could never heal. No matter how one tugged the stitches.

He had never thought Hadrian one to fall into despair, never suspected that it could be so but now, seeing that reflection of death within his eyes, he knew that this was not the first time that his friend wandered so far from himself. His mind was constantly on this dead man no matter what he did or
who he was actually speaking to. He was always stuck wherever that man had been before. Recollections perhaps, memories of long nights, a past that he was constantly fighting in the present.

Somehow it felt like Hadrian was speaking of times turned back ages, but that would have been impossible. For his friend was not much older than he or at least he didn’t look it. He knew though that circumstances could age a man and whatever Hadrian had been before coming to Godric’s Hollow, neither he nor Albus knew. This dead man made him this way. He hated it. Not actively but now, looking back, he hated it. Wished he, Gellert, had been the thoughts that haunted his friend.

For a precious few moments there was peace and then green eyes once again became focused and in the now. A gentle hand, capable of so much, rested upon Gellert’s bicep. It was warm and inviting and though his heart probably couldn’t handle the strain, he still accepted Hadrian into his waiting embrace. If only to offer solace to the grieving, to try and be the piece that Hadrian was really thinking of. To claim him in the now, whilst he could before it all slipped away.

“You cannot linger there with him… It is…” Not with me, “Not healthy.” The words should have come out in reprimand and they should have reflected the betrayal he felt but with such a warm body against him and with his own face burrowing into soft, dark hair smelling of mir and rainstorms, he couldn’t quite make it as much of a rebuke as he wished. This was just too good, precious, to ruin with a sharp tongue to a dead man.

“I should linger elsewhere then? Where would I linger if not there, where all things end? With you? Albus?” He knew the words should hurt him and they did but Hadrian was laughing softly, maybe it was a ruse to hide his crying. So he didn’t let the hurt sink in too far. This was alone was what made this so damned unbearable. Having to shelter himself from this pain. Anyone else would have paid for hurting him so.

Hadrian however was special, they were friends. He loved him and so he was willing to be lenient. It didn’t change that he was right here! He was alive! Shouldn’t he be enough?! Why wasn’t he enough?! What brought Hadrian so outside of that?! Why could he not just see what was before him? That he loved him, would be for him what this cold useless slab of black slate could not be? Present.

“Yes… with us! Me! Don’t you understand? We live…” I live and I am here, is what he had wanted to say. Be with me, he had meant. Surely it was just so obvious! They belonged together. He clutched tighter to Hadrian, desperation lining his actions although he had tried to keep it suppressed. He had to keep him here, had to make him understand. Or else, or else…

Something was slipping, farther still away from here. Something was off, the disquieting feeling that his psyche was screaming at him saying that this was not what happened!, was very much present. He still couldn’t find the reason why this was not as it had been. What exactly was wrong?

What could be so powerful that it could alter his memories as protected as they were? Only he, himself, could have changed them if anything could have. Briefly his vision split and he saw as if in two places at once. Like a crack in space had opened on one half of his face revealing a scene just beyond.

Cold wind was howling outside, beating upon thickened glass where heat laughed at it from within. The Keep flickered in and out with light, as dim and as low, as always and so very haunting. The bed should have been filled, a sound of heavy oak slamming shut. Pressing in of darkness and betrayal, of so much rage. Abandoned again. Then it was gone and the world stitched together haphazardly. Slapped together in haste.

Something. Was. Slipping. His mind was screaming it, but all he knew was the hill, the slab, and
Hadrian. All swayed with gentle warm wind. That final flash of dark stone fading, falling away into the warmth of summer’s past, but how could this now be the past? His nose buried deeper into heated black locks. Sunlight woven into darkest night. He was not alone, here Hadrian was. So this must be the present.

This was his now right? Hadrian was his. His Master. But no, that wasn’t right either. His brows furrowed in consternation and he tried to recall why it was so wrong, this dream. They had never been subservient to one another, was that it? Was it because he had no master but that didn’t feel right. Did not Hadrian own him in some way? Was he not Hadrian’s?

Somewhere deep a thing beat along his insides. In his confusion it dug itself in hoping to score its release. The thing within rallied with more force, trying ever more to surge up and out into the memory. To stain it further in nothing hues of colors and wash it out. It wanted to dominate it. Take it as its own. To be as he was, with his Hadrian, his master. That was it. The tainting thing that was so wrong.

With a sinking realization he understood what was happening. The evil that had transpired and why he was so sure that things were not as they should be. This memory was being broken, warped, and taken by whatever force his subconscious was trying to keep at bay. A last defense mechanism from years of study under Hadrian’s careful guidance.

How many memories had he relived in the world between the land of dreaming and waking? How many had he had to fight for and how many had he lost to this. How much had this thing taken from him and twisted beyond the repair of any sort of mind healing? How much of himself had it molded so as best to fit it?

Magic like this didn’t just destroy, it integrated. It made a thing into a separate thing and then made that real in the actual mind. Once something of that nature was done, it was done. There was no fixing it. Not unless one were to erase all of it. To do so would leave the afflicted as little more than a husk.

This was the epitome of mind offensive magics. An ultimate mastery. Hadrian had once warned him that such things were not only possible but the most important to recognize early and fight. Any legilimens worth anything would try and master such arts. Any Occlumens worth anything would learn to fight against such things.

If one could not then, there was no fixing the damage wrought. You either were made into someone else or you were broken. It all depended on the level of malicious intent your opponent was projecting and what they wished of you. To be able to have done this to him meant his opponent was a master of the craft and sneaky enough to get to him unnoticed.

To that note, looking around him. He found the scene beyond recognition. Where grass should be golden it was sickly and if he looked at it with enough scrutiny he could see the translucent background that should have been his mindscape. What should have been his neatly placed shelves in Durmstrang library, was a vast emptiness beyond wherein sometimes specters of his broken and unintegrated pieces floated listlessly by.

The more he recognized the signs of mental instability in his own self the more this memory began to shudder and peel back into the graying monstrosity of what had been his mindscape. A foul taste coated his throat as the implications made themselves known. He had lost this memory.

This was just one of many memories that he had to fight for, one of many that he was currently trying with all that was left to hold close. To stay sane, to stay himself. It, this thing inside him, was eating each one in a war he was steadily, horribly, losing. Pieces of him taken and turned and just
couldn’t be reversed.

What was taken could never be returned; What done can never be undone.

Disorientation, dark and curling dread, malady, all pooled within. It knotted deep as he watched swaying tall grass fray into something unearthly and still. Craven undertones eating away the fields of molten righteousness. Everything shifting and slipping away until all that was before him was odorless and colorless and just, nothing.

It was with this fell and unholy truth that he watched in dawning horror his love’s open lips, turned to the colors of blue stone and spoke with words enforced by faulty remembrance. Like strikes of force to the shriveling of his chest and he recalled his folly this day more clearly than ever and yet wondered if it was even real. The nature of this pain making him so vulnerable. Was it even real?

“Oh, Gellert. I doubt I could live up to Albus. You love him don’t you?” Don’t I? “You have him and it is enough isn’t it.” Yes… no, No that isn’t—“I mustn't burden you any further.” And he, Oh Merlin what had he said?! Had he said that he did, Love Albus that is? Did he not say that he loved him like this piece that Hadrian so wept for because that had been the truth? It was still the truth… Wasn’t it?

This had been a time before their fracture, his abandonment, the greatest betrayal. It had mattered then in a way that he could not properly remember now. The nature of fell magics wrecking what little trust laid to this reality. Yet this nightmare was not yet complete. It was not yet done with him. Victory over this memory not yet claimed. It still wished for more.

His Hadrian had then smiled, a heavy thing of burden and loss. Sweet, soft, resigned. Just existing. Now in retrospect, he raged at the idea that Hadrian had not understood him! He had not seen the love that could have been so easily his. He had just assumed that Albus and he would become one and never, never part. Naive or Wise, which had it been? They had belonged together!

No! That line of thinking was a distraction to the true cause of his upset. Yes, he treasured Hadrian, loved him even but never had he loved him as he had loved Albus. That he knew to be true. Never had he bowed to any man. Never this, dear Merlin never this. Hadrian… he had known. He had known that if he, Gellert, followed the path and secured the hollows that he would be afflicted with this.

It was why Hadrian had been so upset with him, why they fought over it, why… Why Hadrian had left him. The wand, the wand, the wand. This wasn’t a legilimens affecting him, it was that! Hadrian had known… He, he had not listened.

The memory peeled back further and stretched. Cracked wide and burst into something that he knew he had seen before but could not know now. It must have been the same conclusion with each lost vision and memory. Ever empty a place that had been dulled to a ghastly transparency. Ever slipping sanity and vibrancy replaced with a hollow void that went forever. The memories smoothed into granite walls. Sickeningly reflective.

Horizons of distant winking stars and haunting slate blues became his prison. Wherein he was trapped fighting for what little of himself was left. A place where fragments of himself floated out, fractured and distant. This was what became of his mindscape and of his lucid mind. Lost in a void of such infinity he had seen and yet not seen before. His sanity overtaken by this sickness and he wondered where his actual body was now. What the wand had made it do now.

For each unexplained gap in his waking memory, he knew there had been action. His body controlled by this thing of dread power. He would lose it again, he knew, but now he had to figure
out where he was. His war for his mind was spiraling into impending loss but he could prepare for one last rally, oh yes... he could prepare for a final coup.

So he searched for it. Himself, within himself, his own magic. He followed it and his vision split into two halves wherein one remained in that void gathering fragments of his broken self to himself, and the other without itself into reality. In his waking eyes he could half recognize a raised hand bearing that foul stick of power.

For his body was not his own, not anymore. Despair echoed in him, harder and harder. His heart pounded louder and louder. His resolve tightening into iron clad will. Mastery. He would scream if he had voice. He would fight if he thought he could. If he knew that it would be victorious but no, he had to bide his time for now.

No matter his pain, for he recognized this place and the people before his person. He knew the man they were connected too and he didn’t understand why he was here but he could guess. Yet, step after step his body went. Second by second his being trembled in waves of misery unable to act on one half and steeling itself on the other.

His legs were leading him forward over the prone form of Freidna and Faust Weiss. Brother and Sister to Heine Weiss, his lieutenant. A smart man, loyal enough to know when his master was no longer himself. He must had defected and much to his own surprise he was proud of the decision.

Split attentions one half in void and one half in reality watched as the Fiend Fire flew from his oppressor, that wand. They watched as it overtook the room and the two, blood of traitors whispered the Death Stick, and watched as they perished in agony underneath its strain. They swore vengeance.

Then his body holstered that thing of evil and proceeded to leave with only one mission. The only want, Master. Hadrian. His realm of sleep reached far into this mental state and his body walked with newer, baser command. For in his shock and sorrow, his grand scheme for one last push, it gained strength from him and now it followed only the will as magic often did.

What he had become was nothing more than an instrument for it. His body wished for nothing of sleep, nor food, nor water. It knew only to seek him out, that man. It needed to find him. To reunite with him. So much of himself was based upon that man as the wand willed it. Gellert shrieked in agonized revelation of just what he had lost, what his coup would cost him. It was not only his memories the thing possessed now, but his own body.

The only figure remaining of any memory that he could safely touch was, his love, his obsession, his master, Hadrian. Some small and seemingly so insignificant part of him wondered why this sounded so wrong and surely he was owned by none. He tried to grasp back to what he had just recalled, a hill? A slab? A man?

A flash of red hair and azure eyes; of quick and easy smiles; of half moon glass that twinkled when the sunlight came through a window; of the smell of mir and sage; A tall man. Unimportant but then, then why was he so disquiet? What even was his name again? Did it matter now? He gathered the shattered image tight to himself and stared out into the mindscape with grim resolve.

The small fragments of lucidity raged within and told him he should know. He should know?! All of this and more than this was filtering into less and less of himself and more and more of... The wand and its demands. No, that wasn’t right. It could not be. It was too cruel. Had he not known that earlier though? Was that not why he was fortifying this last ground? He would gather what he could regardless of what he knew or not. Still...

He tried again in vain to remember what was real and ever reaching for the flashes of memories but
to no avail. Names eluded him and voices rang as unrecognizable wisps on the edges of his psyche. The days of summer. Red hair, but whose? A hill, but where? Safety and warmth in nights of foul heat.

Nights and days and voices but none were of import. Why though? Power was the most obvious answer. At what cost though? What price had he paid? He knew not and knew no more of it in the next dawn’s light for he had lost what he needed, traded for a vision of what he wished for. Power his undoing, compulsion his unmaker.

His ambitions became hollow. His dreams became a pinnacle of madness as all came down to the edge of sharp focus. Finding his master who fled from him for too long. Ebony hair, the shine of midnight in its wild tresses. Eyes of deepest green and brightest new leaves. Bright and full laughter, hollow and empty wishes from bleeding lips. Body tightly decorated in battle runes and the flesh of dangerous beasts. Master, master, master! Love, love, love!

And Gellert forgot the hill, and the tomb and the name Tom Marvolo Riddle, Albus Dumbledore, Heine Weiss, and all else that was not his wielder. For Death’s gifts could not be ignored, and never forgotten. It would no longer sit idly by while his master wielded others of less value than it. It would not come second. It would be his only wand, never parted. The line of Peverell unbroken.

So it began his search in earnest. If that meant drawing out his master by any means necessary, it would do so.

Germany invaded Poland in the months that followed and World War II began for the muggle world. Meanwhile, deep within, the remnants of a once great man gathered itself and waited. Waited for the right moment to strike back.

**The Verus Estate Rome, Italy December 31st 1938**

There was something noticeably changed with the Verus brothers. It was in the unnerving silence that so often pervaded the once raucous halls of the estate; It was in the absence of seasonal balls that had been never been planned or even held. All the official work usually pursued with great exasperation by the Gringotts branch of Magical Rome all being done with a promptness that was eerie in nature. It was in the severity and strictness that had come to hold the estate in a firm, unyielding grasp.

Where once many a young man and women had been invited through the grand archways of the Verus Estate gates, now none were welcomed. Letters sent were signed with a message by the second heir Mercutio with the deepest of sincerity, but that at the present time he and his brother were in mourning. A slighter note, yet hidden further down the parchments asked that any fool hardy enough to dismiss this request would learn the true meaning of remorse.

Mercutio had not approved but Lucien had become nothing short of unbearable in the weeks following the loss of Alex Mortimer. At first the eldest Verus had believed that in his grief he would sequester himself away. In part that had been true, no sooner had they arrived back to Rome in heartache than Lucien had locked down the wards to the estate.

He had, with dramatic flourish, banished the house elves to the lower halls with the only reprieve being to clean nightly when all the world was asleep. Dinners were served with lackluster fervor and often with one or more of the estates three most prominent figures absent. The master almost always absent. This lasted for weeks.

It had been a severe adjustment period for some, and so very abrupt as to draw the eyes of all magical Italy. Inquiries into the nature of the lock-down of the Ancient House of Verus were
launched from a great many sources. Once or twice a day there would be failed floo attempts by ‘close’ and ‘concerned’ friends. The frequency only growing as the council terms began their steady approach into the open season.

The Verus family held an extraordinary sway over the laws and regulations of Magical Italy and were only ever rivaled by one other family. A family which was more than delighted to let the Verus brothers know that should they need more time, oh say permanently, they would be more than happy to pick up any slack or empty seats left in the wake of such ‘tragedy’.

Needless to say they had received a rebuke, so firm and so violent in nature, that they had not attempted to suggest it again and were also reminded that should they continue such behavior against the most Ancient House of Verus that there would be repercussions. Until such a time as the house proved that it could not handle its duties than they were to, ‘Kindly,’ Go fuck themselves, No dear brother we cannot say that, ‘stop their unscrupulous prodding of a grieving family’.

Mercutio had made certain that every paper knew of this sent insult as well as allowed each major and some minor papers to receive interviews with himself and his brother. Lucien had been so driven to work that he spoke little at these interviews but the redness of his eyes and the severity of his twisted countenance were enough for the papers to understand that it was truly loss which they felt.

When asked, it was explained that Alex Mortimer was one of two closest live relatives to the Verus family and that while they had been competitive and while rivals they may have been, that Lucien had held the late lord to a higher degree of affection than he had let show. A mistake that he regretted now that he could not tell Alex himself.

His distress only mounted when the interviews asked of his involvement with Bastion and Celeste of which Lucien had made little effort to see or know while they had been alive. It went without saying that the stories circulated were rife with sensation as headlines such as: ‘Loss of Star Crossed Lover Mortimer Leaves Verus in Misery,’ and ‘Secret Third Heir to Verus Power Family Murdered, Are the Capucci’s Next??’ and ‘Grief in Major Family Rocks Nation into Vigil for Spanish Lord.’

Lucien had taken one look at the headlines and for the first time in weeks laughed, albeit bitterly. His gaze was filled with longing and ache. Both Mercutio and Hadrian could only share a look of understanding for they knew loss well enough to know how hollow it left Lucien. What it felt like to dwell upon what would have been if…

“He would be secretly delighted in my suffering although he would act offended. A Banshee would have come by now or at least a letter of reproach.” It had been one of the better mornings and Lucien had at least eaten on this day, reminded that Alex would not tolerate a weak opponent. By the next day however he was once again locked at his desk and filing the same papers already finished and awaiting more work to keep him busy.

“Alex always claimed I was much too lazy. I should at least make an effort to prove him wrong. At least this once. Just once…” And so once had turned into nearly every single day. It would have made Mercutio happy to see his brother so productive if it had been in any way healthy. This sort of plunge into excessive work were the signs of deep bereavement. Grief that Mercutio had no way of combating for his brother.

It had taken Hadrian storming in on the fifth day after Alex’s death to even get the man to come to any meals. It had taken Hadrian at every turn to pull his little brother back from the edge of despair that had started to eat him alive. It was still festering deep within, Mercutio could see it at every lowered glance or deep sigh. It was there, but it was healing.

It could take years and even longer than that to mend the shape of Alex Mortimer within his brother’s
gentle heart. As for himself, he felt shame that he could not be the one to aid his brother in that healing. Lucien would barely speak to him, only listening when Mercutio mentioned Alex’s wishes.

To be honest it wasn’t even his brother that carried his own woes. He was more worried about his friend who was ‘Fine Mercutio dear. Do not fret over it.’ It had been in confidence that Mercutio knew that Alex’s son was alive somewhere. A secret Lucien did not know and probably shouldn’t at this point in time.

Who could say what the man would do if he knew. ‘He would rip apart Europe to find him’. From what could be gleaned from the skeleton of the Mortimer Estate, the boy had been taken and by someone hell bent on protecting him. If the life debt was anything to go by and the measures taken to cover the traces of apparition.

Hadrian had further confirmed his suspicions, and assuage his fears, that if the boy didn’t wish to be found he couldn’t be. Not even blood would get through whatever place he had been placed in. If Hadrian couldn’t find the boy, there were none that could. That in itself was comforting if little else could be.

Bastion was safe although, it had been with weight and no small amount of anger that Mercutio learned of Heine Weiss. Brilliant wardsmaster and curse breaker, unparalleled in skill, enough so to be able to give Hadrian a run for his money and then some. A man who had been fed up with never getting results in the Auror divisions and turned to a visionary and even more impressive wizard, Gellert Grindelwald.

He was as of yet unsure if he could ever forgive the man that robbed them of Alexander and Celeste. He could appreciate he was trying to redeem his folly but he doubted it meant much about his person. Too little too late. That had been contested vehemently by his friend and mentor, for Hadrian knew Heine just as much as he or Lucien.

What had been done was horrendous and it could have been prevented. Even so, Hadrian had asked that the blame be his own, for he had not calculated Gellert losing himself so. To say that the eldest Verus didn’t understand would be an understatement. While it was true that he was privy to many secrets held in his friend’s brain, he did not know the extent of some of the man’s connections or the motivations behind some of his associations.

More than vengeance could price, or curiosity could sate, he was perhaps more than anything worried for Hadrian at present. Setting all else aside, the man had been shouldering all of Lucien’s grief and his own. Hadrian always took on responsibility for each of his students, their work, their prosperity.

So much so, that Mercutio feared him weathering without release. He felt that maybe Hadrian was giving so much that he failed to take care of himself. He had never cared to look before now or to ask, because always it seemed as if his mentor was something untouchable, at least in part. Now, with the weight of Alex’s passing, he saw differently.

Always Hadrian had watched over them, guided them, cared for them, and never had they ever asked if he was happy or well. Never had they needed to bother with it. Never had they needed to comfort him. He had always been the giver, and they… well. Now Mercutio could see clearly how much Hadrian was really affected. How many millennium had he cared and given and never taken? How ungrateful had they been?

To see the subtle slump that had taken hold when the man thought no one was looking; To see the grim hardening of a once open gaze. Ache and fatigue. Not for the first time he wanted to ask his dear friend what he needed. To, for once, ask what he could be given to feel whole again. This man
before him was deserving of at least that if not all the world. This grimness… Mercutio would rather die than let it remain.

This level of seriousness was unsettling. It spoke of war and the anticipation of violence in extreme and swift degrees. If Mercutio thought otherwise he would say that the man was indeed preparing for war. Maybe he was but if that were the case then would they not be warned? Would not Hadrian trust them to aid him in whatever endeavor he saw fit?

Not if he thought to protect us as he is wont to do. He lost Alexander and Celeste, almost Bastion. It would be just like him to keep us at arms length if he thought it would spare us from pain or death. It was not a thought that was pleasant while it was one that touched him on some baser level. Hadrian loved them and wanted to keep them safe. It was understandable but not right or fair.

They, his brother and himself, had worked years to be able to stand beside Hadrian as something akin to equals. They had striven to become masters of their respective affinities in magic. It was their choice and their right to be able to decide to stand beside Hadrian and join a war with him. It was their duty to aid him! After all he had given them. Yet never once had they asked what the man may have needed. The thought devastated him. It wound its way deep within and wrenched his heart.

It felt a lot like loss, and more like failure. They had been taking Hadrian for granted. So the eldest brother of Verus waited outside the grand doors to the man’s chamber that foggy morning and awaited the man to take to rise for the day. It had been little after ten that morning when the lithe form met him atop the stairs. Ancient eyes regarded him with, was that resignation or fondness?

“Hadr---” A warm finger pressed against his lips and for a moment he wondered when it had been that he had become taller than his friend. Looking down into that face he found himself at a loss for words. Nerves choking his mind and ensnaring his senses. The grand oak doors creaked open and he was gestured within. He eagerly obeyed if only to give himself time to work up his resolve.

His dark eyes took in every movement of a man that was ages beyond him in years. He watched the gentle sway of his body as he moved with a fluidity that spoke of hardened battle prowess far beyond any possible match. He took in how long waves of obsidian hair rocked from side to side brushing the top of his hips. He took in the slender appeal that was wrapped in tight runic weave. Battle armor never removed save in the dead of night or the heat of a love’s embrace.

He could recall once when he was still small. He would climb upon Hadrian’s knee as if he were a mountain and sit in the throne of his lap to hear of tales far flung into the reaches of the odd and strange. He recalled the smell of lightning and leather, soft lavender in his hair. He remembered a man called ‘Mad-eye’ who had a very many grand battles and each more outlandish than the last.

‘It isn’t paranoia if they really are out to get you. Constant Vigilance.’ For months even years into his early childhood he had taken great delight in tormenting Lucien. He would jump out of hedges in the gardens and yell the phrase so ingrained into the character that was Mad-Eye. Now he felt as if there had been some deeper level to such tales. A time before all that was untouchable and in that space of the past the real Mad-eye had been real.

As for the now, it seemed so odd that Hadrian looked so small. Years of lap sitting and naps under the main veranda seemed so far away now. Yet it was all peanuts to the span of time that his mentor had lived. His life was so very long and his own so very short. Sometimes he had to wonder if their lives meant enough in the span of all things to impact his mentor at all. He wondered if their losses were felt as acutely to him as they felt to their own.

The calm solemnity that had taken his friend spoke of just how nonplussed with death he was. He had seen so much of it; Lived through much more of it; Lived through to the point where he become
inured to all of it. It seemed the only upsetting thing about Alex and Celeste’s demises was in how they died and not that they had died.

Hadrian knew that such a time would come for all of them as it did not for him. That was a truth to the nature of the world. So it was a fair question to ponder, if they mattered in the scheme of things at all sometimes. He didn’t wish to think like that though because some questions held no pleasant answers.

So it was with a sense of urgency that Mercutio had come to see Hadrian, and that they had entered the room beyond without words. The space they entered was a wondrous thing, filled with widgets and whatsis of all natures. A Sneakoscope in the corner was misty and filled with black dots far away, a pensieve, an Upper box, a rotating spinster-wicket, and a wide variety of other things were allocated to shelves and high tables, stuffed between books upon shelves, and hanging from rafters.

The lights that illuminated the space were spheres of luminescent colors ranking through all the light spectrum of fire. Oranges and reds and whites and even the violets that based the bottoms of flames. All of them danced slowly on orbits unseen and unknown, shifting as stars did, as the world did, as they all did.

The floor was smooth and soft, moving like water to reflect moods and pieces of time, tickling the ankles with nonexistent grasses or ferns, shifting to sand or dirt or rock depending on some abstract rules that only its owner could know. Visions of places laced the walls which every now and then would shift to what it was needed to be at the time. Rotating or pulling up into the ceiling. Shuffling like cards.

Right now the room was required to be a study and so a study it became. Sliding about until the right attributes fit to suit the occasion. The walls became alabaster with a portrait upon the right side playing the looping image of a large black lake in the dead of night, lit ablaze by many small boats guided by many small lanterns. In each boat were four figures in pointed hats and robes of blackest night.

Along its surface reflected auxiliary lights in the thousands from a grand castle in the distance. A towering thing to which boats crossed the lake en masse to reach. Every once in awhile a large tentacle of some beast would breach the surface only to be swallowed back in the darkened depths. A place of wonder and something that may or may not be real. Mercutio would not know.

Along the left side of the room was a lone balcony overlooking the crashing of cerulean waves far below. It stood upon a mountain side over such a steep and familiar drop. It was with pain in his heart he knew it as the Pavillion De Mar. Mortimer’s pavilion where his children often played. Once he recognized it, he tore his gaze away unable to handle the ache that taunted him. The idea of its skeleton after friend fyre stripped all its character away.

The rest of the study room showcased sets of floor to ceiling windows in various stained glass portrayals of crows in flight. The world beyond them shown through in a kaleidoscope of colors and fascinations making the atmosphere within the study ephemeral and highly fantastical. It was to these windows that Hadrian went first. Disregarding all else, The castle, The Pavillon De Mar, and the set of too large comfortable chairs about the stone fireplace burning to a crisp.

He made short work of unlatching the large windows facing to the North, casting them open wide. A stream of white light from the clouded day pierced the dimness turning all the floating fires into stars of white fire. Satisfied, Hadrian retreated back into the room and perched in an overlarge chair the color of aged blue. Almost a gray really but somehow it, suited him. Like all strange things within the room it fit him.
For a stint of time all the world was silent. The room still as if a muggle picture that never moved. It wasn’t until the first morning breezes ruffled their collars that anything seemed to animate at all. Hadrian sank in his chair, the lights continued rotating, the floor continued shifting. Mercutio wondered just how to break such a strange atmosphere. Fortunately, it seemed his mentor knew what needed to be said and broke it for him.

“I know what you will ask of me. No my darling, I need nothing of you but I appreciate your concern. Your heart has always ever been a warm and genuine thing, and I am certain there is a lucky witch out there who will give it the love it so deserves. All I could ever wish from either of you is your happiness and prosperity. To know that you have taken all I can give you and have flourished. This alone is what I desire of you. That alone is what I require.”

Hadrian’s small figure seemed to sink further into the depths of the chair in a weariness that Mercutio had never seen the likes of on him before. A fine brow creased in between a pert nose and supple lips thinned with stress, or maybe it was strife. He could never before recall a time that his mentor ever seemed so strained. Never before had he worried that a chair could drown someone.

Mercutio brought to mind the burden Lucien had become, how much grief had transformed his wild little sibling into something unrecognizable. How much it had hardened himself. And Again he saw age in his mentor that he had never seen before the Mortimer tragedy. Grief, he thought, was a thing of malice. It stripped the light from people, their motivations, or their vices. It took and maimed and reshaped all it touched into something that was other.

Was Hadrian not hurting as much if not more so over this? Had grief stripped him of something that his own eyes could not determine. Was there something that could be done to ease this strain? This fatigue had no place on his friend and he only wished he could bear it away from him. Hadrian always bore too much. Could he not take some of it away, could he not give for once, instead of his mentor?

“Surely that is not all you need. Hadrian please if you would only allow me…” A hand silenced him, held aloft as if it were much too heavy in this moment. There was just so little energy in the movement and for an instant the two of them just took the other in. For that brief moment in time Mercutio thought he would be dismissed even if he had no reason to believe such a thing.

Then again, never had his friend seemed so distant as he did in this instant. Elsewhere, he realized, when green eyes turned again to look north. A place that could not be reached. It was a few moments more until his friend came back to himself and straightened with some invisible poise that had not existed before. Rising from the cushions reborn.

Hands garbed in gloves of dragon hide reached into a pouch at his mentor’s side and with a voice laced with nothing, asked with all the energy of nothing, “The Memoriam.” They came back burdened. In their grip they held a bound book of immense proportions.

It was a midnight blue in color with gray edges that appeared well worn. Pages were lined in silver filigree and upon its cover there was listed nothing but an array of symbols, a Triangle, a Circle, and a Line. Somehow it seemed a solemn thing. Not as adventurous as a book should be. If he knew nothing he would have assumed it to be a grimoire.

This was something different, more. Surrounding it, saturating it, being it, were cacophonous emotions ranging from joy to despair. Loudly and softly it spoke of ages. He had yet to ever lay eyes on a book of such magical bindings as this. He could not distinguish the arithmetic circles and patterns that laid in its spellcraft.

Where grimoires were protected and even heavily warded depending on the family owning such, this
was just so much more. Thin fine spells layered in sequences he had never witnessed used before. Whatever this tome was, it was one the likes of which Mercutio had never yet seen in all his years under the tutelage of Lord Peverell. He knew instinctively that such magics had never before been seen by anyone else either. Such were the many arcane secrets Hadrian possessed.

“This, my dear, is what I call The Memoriam. It holds within it the lives of those who have come before you and Lucien. Your father and mother, their siblings and so on and so forth. Every line of blood unending to the very first. Ignatius, Cadmus, and myself… You know of my condition and my circumstances, you know many of my secrets but none living of the now know of this. It acts as a sort of Pensieve to which events are recorded very much like memories.”

“All your accomplishments, your loves, your masteries, I record each and every one. When you eventually pass, I write your final name into its index. I celebrate your life this way, keep you with me. For we die twice, the first when our bodies are left empty in this world, and the second when the last living person who knew of you speaks your name for the final time when they pass.”

“Within this book are the lives of hundreds. Loves, Lords, students. People I watched grow old and some grow young and die young… It was the one thing I could do to stem the pain I felt. To keep them living in some small way so that I may never need say that last goodbye. I have laid pieces of my mind deep into this thing so as not to grow mad with despair and the weight of their passings.”

“My life is not something that many could handle. Time leads to madness and sorrow to madness and all roads lead to madness, to one who has nothing to hold to. In the beginning, I too had been lost to it. I could feel little and thought less. I floated aimlessly in a void far removed from everything. The only way I could have returned as I did in tact had cost me something irreplaceable.”

“The first name and the last one that shall ever be in this book is the reason I continue without insanity. He ceased to be so that I could be. This is the grim price of my immortality, this constant battle through years and the loss that comes with it. This book acts as a checkpoint, a safeguard for the years I have had to bear and the years I will bear beyond counting without him. Without all of you. To this end I owe each and every one of you a place in its bindings.”

“I wrote Alex’s name over three months ago; I wrote Celeste’s name over three months ago. I took a quill and I consigned their names to this book. In all my years I have fought for my children, my students, to live long and prosperous lives. I have fought off brigands and poisoners. I have stemmed the tides of wars for those I love. More, so much more and all of it for love.”

“Never, never have I had to stem the tides of a war caused by so close a friend. Never have I had to bury one of my children and feel I had failed them. Never… never have I had so hard a time closing a chapter in this Memoriam. Consigning the end to this. The only thing that has eased the pain I feel now, is my responsibility. My fault in this holds me. I could have tried harder for Gellert but I did not. I could have pushed for more from Alex but I did not.”

“It is a road I do not like to follow for I find that if I took all the regrets I have, and if I were to list them out, there would be no use in feeling love or much of anything because it would not be worth the pain and trouble of avoiding such conflicts. Regardless there was not much more I could have done, despite what I could tell myself contrary.”

“The full truth is that I had to bury two names. Two lives that I loved and two lives that could have become so much more. In this way I failed them. That pain I understand too well. Honestly, knowing that doesn’t make it any easier… I buried two lives. More will soon follow and so I must make my peace with it. War is coming and with it the end of names.”

“The only way any of that could possibly become better is if you were to flourish in their place. If
you took all the chances for happiness and the risks. Your happiness is all I can ask for, your gentle heart remaining as it is and growing full. You just being here is enough. While you may not think that it is fair or enough, know that I am not unfulfilled. I have hope that my actions have averted many more deaths.”

“Somewhere out there Bastion yet lives; Somewhere out there fate has laid a plan for him; Somewhere out there his destiny has only just begun. Somewhere out there is a boy of amazing magical prowess. He lives and learns and breathes and that alone keeps me going. I live for you, all of you. Give me that and I will be contented. Give me the hope that my actions are not for nothing. Live well and love well and so shall I.”

A silence hung between them and all words. They looked into each other and something eased off the Verus Lord’s shoulders as a true smile tugged on the lips of Hadrian Peverell. The air seemed cleaner somehow more right. Whatever would be would be but at least now the heavy burden of worry could be shaken off.

His friend looked upon the north once more and Mercutio was at a loss as of what to do now with the silence and the newfound peace of mind that he had. Hadrian was once again far away to wherever his mind wandered over the world. So he watched the north as well, hoping that he could fathom where his mentor’s thoughts ran.

He wondered if Hadrian already knew where Bastion dwelt. He thought for a moment that was where those thoughts were but something in his mind told him that he was not thinking of Bastion in particular. Something just didn’t fit the image of it. What it could be he did not yet know. It was just off. That was when he noticed the small speck of black in the all too white sky.

Green vineyards sprawled into the distance where if he looked closely a dark beast winged its way ever onward to them. The same black owl that came to them so often and always with parcels of letters for their Hadrian. It was the very same beast that had replenished their owlery with a veritable amount of young and depleted their smaller population of owls. Almost all of their owls now bore some resemblance to the black beast.

Hadrian lovingly called it Mors and just the sight of the beast could perk the man’s interest. Hadrian was the only one in the house besides Mercutio that the bird allowed near. It was such a regal thing. Mercutio had always had half a mind to ask to whom such a bird belonged but understood well enough that some questions would never get answers.

He had formed a great many theories on who owned such a thing. He watched as his friend approached sill and caressed its plume. He watched as Hadrian took a rather large letter from it and replaced it with a small box. Dawning recognition told him of the item the box would guard. It would be a small thing but oh so valuable.

A small crystal bead on a silken black lace. Made to tie around one’s neck as a bow tie or in the hair or on the wrist. It mattered not where it was worn only that it was. It was curious indeed that Hadrian would entrust an owl with such a prize. Alexander had one of these things, he had one of these things, his brother had one. Every member of the family of age had one of these. All of them were customized to suit them.

The lace was always woven from acromantula silk and dyed in the black ichor of a dragon’s heart blood. The crystal in question was usually an amber embossed with runes so fine and small, spells so intricate, that it required lines finer that a child’s hair and careful infusion for hours on end to set the spells. In the center of the amber casing was usually a green gem which was carved into the form of Sowilo, the runic symbol of protection. Like it’s gem insinuated, that was the purpose of such a talisman.
Hadrian worked years on every one, charged each gem with stores of his own magic, and painstakingly carved each etching into the hardened stone. The warding that each talisman provided was unmatched and if Alex had only had his…

Mercutio pulled his gaze away as he tried to stem the thoughts from his mind. It didn’t much matter now because Bastion had the necklace at the time. Bastion lived, Alex did not. They knew not even where he was. So who was it that came of age to get such a prize. Not the Potters. The oldest, Charlus, and the youngest, Fleamont, were still too young to need such things. Then again if there was to be war it would not be remiss of Hadrian to send them out early.

“I take it that one isn’t for Bastion. I was unaware there were any new additions to the tree.” Green eyes turned to him with a slight twinkling within them. A coy smile lit his face and made the world narrow into just the two of them. A secret that they alone could share.

“You would be right, this one is for a child. Unusual I know, he is still young. Only a first year, but his accomplishments are already many in the making. He has no protectors at present so I made him some things that were useful. I fear he will need all the aid he can get and to be honest I am more than a little smitten with his genius and attention to proper magic. I felt it only proper to keep him safe.”

His fingers twisted the box upon the talons of the bird king almost lovingly. The great owl gave a deep hoot nibbling at black hair before taking into the room to settle upon a high shelf to rest itself. Its eyes shone in glowing white spheres before it settled to rest itself from the bright daylight.

Hadrian pulled the grand windows closed so that the magical lights turned again into orbs of dying suns and the crows from glass windows littered the floor.

The room again became a place of dreamlike qualities. Its master settled again in the overlarge chair but this time perched himself on its edge. His eyes regarded his pupil and Mercutio felt as if he was being sized up for a task of great import.

“A first year? On the continent or…? Surely not the Potters, Henry would never allow Charlus or Fleamont to be in such dangers or without any allies. Especially with the political climate of Britain at present. After his argument with you over Charlus’ education I doubt he would willingly accept your aid.” The tone of incredulity was enough to made that small smile break into a much larger one upon Hadrian’s lips. The sight made Mercutio’s heart flutter, beat heavier in his chest.

“Again you would be correct. It is not a Potter and indeed you would not notice that a name is missing from the tree if I have not updated it, which I haven’t. This child is special in a way that will rock the foundations of our magical world. The less that know of him the better his chances of staying out of Grindelwald’s path.” Again a silence pervaded that room, it sunk heavy into the corners so as to hush the air to keep a dear secret. Green eyes filled with doubt and then hardened.

“He is Merope’s son.” The silence imploded into white noise. Mercutio’s vision fogged and in his mind he saw her. Obsidian eye visible beneath half of a swollen face. Too many nights beaten, teeth missing and broken. Her body was bent in an odd shape from years of fitting into small and tight spaces, hiding from the rest. Her magic trembling feebly and with weariness from too much time spent healing lasting damage.

He recalled the smell of dust and decay, potion oils stuck to her hair, he remembered when she was too small and gentle. He remembered her vividly as her brother shoved her away from them hissing in some language he could not comprehend and he remembered her tears as she screamed at them to help her when she was dragged away. She had been small then and beautiful and he had loved her instantly.
The last time he saw her was as his earlier vision, a woman bloodied and broken. God, he had never wished to harm family before that day. He had never wished so much to rip the Gaunts to shreds then that day. To see her begging Hadrian... To see her reduced to something broken, her beauty wiped away from years of abuse.

He had watched as she spoke to Hadrian of something in that odd language as he set her spine straight in a series of brutal snaps and cracks. Mercutio had wondered why he hadn’t healed her fully then but, if she had been pregnant. If she had been with child, then he wouldn’t have been able to fully heal her.

His magic would have in single minded command chose to terminate the child to save her. Had she been with child and her magic was protecting it and not healing her... Hadrian’s magic would have rectified that. Hadrian was no healer, he had always said that his talent for it only extended to the mending of bones and that of the mind. Anything else was not exactly gentle.

Mercutio never had the talent for it either but Lucien did. Lucien had not been there that week when Merope sought them out in desperation and half dead. He had not seen the anger that had taken Hadrian over seeing her in such a state. Lucien didn’t see the way that their mentor had begged her to stay nor the despair when in the morning she had been gone.

“She is alive?...” Relief pulsed through him. The idea that such a woman was alive...

“No. She died in childbirth. I am sorry Mercutio, I know how much she meant to you.” Like that his world darkened and he sagged, a taste like acid burnt his throat and his insides. The sensation of extreme loss filled more than he had ever expected. More than Alex or Celeste. He had known, deep down, that the strong woman that came and went from his life in that fateful day, was dead.

Some part of him had hoped that it wasn’t true. It was as if he lost something great that day that she disappeared. An opportunity that he missed and could not get back. It had been a feeling of his one chance of adventure having come and gone that day. The love of his life had come and gone. Now, eleven years later and eleven years after the denial began, he had closure.

His mysteriously strong woman, was dead and... She had a son. A small part of him started to fight the despair weighing him down but he knew that it would take time for him to get over her enough to focus on the fact that some piece of her still existed. That something of hers was still in this world.

“She lived long enough to name him, and then gave the last of herself to hide him. Without magic to aid her, she perished. It took me eleven years to find him, to get past her blood wards.”

The obvious questions came to his mind. Why hadn’t she come to them to try and protect the boy. Lucien could have healed her, Hadrian and Mercutio would have protected her. Nothing could have gotten to them. Except he knew why. Wizard laws and rights to heirships would have taken the boy and...

“It took me eleven years Mercutio and he did not know what he was. He did not know of her. He thought that she was weak. His mother, who gave all of herself for him, weak. He... He is so magically powerful. His ability to control his core is more solid than any I have met before. He...”

“He is alive. Her son is alive...That owl is his. Why didn’t you tell me?!” Dark eyes fell to the bird king in a new kind of affection. As burdened in sorrow as he was he could see in that familiar the strength that had been inherent in her and must be inherent in her son as well. Pride. Merlin he wanted to know everything about him. Needed to.

“I apologize, it never occurred to me while dealing with Gellert to tell you and then it just didn’t
really come up. That owl is his though, and today is his birthday. Are you going to write to him?”

Was he? Idly he looked up to his mentor feeling lost and unsure and… raw. He had come to Hadrian expecting to find some solace but he could not have expected this.

“Just start writing darling, I am sure it will come to you.” And so Mercutio did, it started tentatively. His letters came in light touches and then into deeper ones and he just kept going. He spoke of magics known to only he and Lucien. He asked of the boy and what he liked and disliked. Idle things and serious things and in the end his letter was much too long so he started a much simpler one.

It spoke of magic and himself, of Hadrian who was so happy whenever Mors brought a letter, of the new owls in the owlery thanks to said owl, and finally that they were family and if the boy ever should need, all he had to do was ask and the Verus family would be there for him. Mercutio was only a letter away. They were after all, family and now that he knew of the boy’s existence… The boy would never be alone in this world again.

“His name is Tom Marvolo Riddle,” The name rolled from Hadrian’s lips and Mercutio found himself crying as he had never allowed himself to do whilst in silent grievance for Alex, Celeste, and his dearest Merope. The boy had a name. The weight of a beast settled on his shoulder, talons eased into his flesh but left no pain.

The loss felt lighter with the weight of the great owl and he felt a resolve in him that he had never known before. For the first time in his life Mercutio had a purpose and it was in the boy that could have been his son in some life in some other time. The only piece of his Love left in this world.

Hadrian watched and waited and inside himself he felt a wrong that had become righted. Some tangle in the world that became smooth. When the time came he sent Mors off with love, two letters, one photograph from Mercutio, and a box with a bow.
Help I'm Alive

Chapter Summary

Secrets revealed a name mostly found and Tom learns the hard way what friendship feels like.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Somewhere in Scotland, December 20th 1938

It was a place unlike anything on heaven or on earth. The stones sang of ages past and of warm memories fondly recounted in years of old. It spoke to the earth and sky and to all things, reaching its maternal arms in welcome. It was a mother to those who had none and a teacher to all who entered her halls. Beloved was she who ever watched and stood grounded upon foundations of far depths into places forgotten and farther still below.

It was built of blood, and bone, and sweat. It was relationships come and gone, ages past and present. All things and more importantly it was home for those who were in dire need of one. No matter what was needed of it or what was asked she provided. Be it the sprawling forests encompassing her borders as far as the eye could see, or the depths of its vast lake to touch her heart where creatures of all walks dwelt deep within.

Such a place more than its outsides and with spaces yet to be explored in this life or any other. An adventure for the bold, an opportunity for the ambitious, a family for the loyal, and a library for the learned.

Hogwarts was…There simply existed no words created for the magnitude, majesty, and omnipotent mysticism that Hogwarts was. There could be no time in the history of human language in which a word was made to grant the level of warmth and love she inspired its due justice. The castle reached into the soul of a man and healed it in ways that could not be seen nor repeated.

The conscious presence of safety and familiarity stuck out at the hearts of all and her light transcended barriers within all who passed unnoticed under her awnings. So potent and free that even in a life far away an evil man who was little more than a shell still found it in himself to love her. Once far away and ever so long ago another sort of Tom Riddle loved her as this one did now. Smitten.

For to look upon her was to adore her, and to adore her was as close to a home as he could have ever known. It was almost too much of a concept to bear. That he, after years of stormy weather, could have finally found a place to lay his head, and rest his burdens, to the abyssal sleep of night. To have the hope that upon the rise of the morrow there would be freedom and infinite possibilities stretching before him.

Looking upon her then, he could believe that he had found his bay, so to speak, and he knew he could indeed adore her more and more with the passing of time. For his sweet lady was a thing of
radiance, and somehow he could think it no more fitting that she held his heart. He could no more
move his gaze from her than any of the rest, fingers clenching crinkled parchment in a hidden pocket.
Night eyes riveted upon her ever growing form as his boat had docked that dark evening seeming
only a short while ago to the day. Her image burned forever within him and ever onward.

He could see her towering spires of grandeur extending high above clouds and on odd numbered
days he was told they delved deep below the earth. Restlessly moving ambient arms and always in
motion. Flowing and writhing like magic in the veins of all things magical.

He could feel her as the very stones exuded purity of self. Assured in the magic of one's blood. They
were things of rich history in ways that no wizard could yet understand of this lifetime. They sang of
all things if one knew how to listen but which very few learned.

He took delight in trespassing her inner workings and lounging in the shadows of crystalline glass
windows. Noting often of all the various shapes and sizes dotting his lady's body in an array of
scenes and colors. Refractions of light and life within and out to color her fields in shades of stained
portraiture or her rugs with the heat of day.

Sometimes he just observed her insides constantly change with the days and hours and minutes much
like her spires. He would gaze down as staircases would shift, getting bored and needing to converse
with that particular landing or some such.

He would watch as portraits gallivanted about without heed or care into rooms that would come and
go; Spirits and ghostly figures would tarry sometimes when it suited them; Landings would be where
no landings should be and maybe she was a mite mischievous because often students would be lead
to where they wanted to be and never where they needed. Many a times gryffindors arrived tardy to
lessons because they were simply misplaced.

Places in high towers held their own share of rules by which they followed. Students who had
lessons in the astronomy tower on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings were cautioned to
instead head to the lower dungeons in order to reach the proper altitude and those on even days were
warned that if they began to see snow and fir trees on the landings that they had traversed much too
far up and to refrain from moving until a professor or prefect came to get them.

The students were advised in those instances to not, in anyway, go down and not to ask a portrait for
help if they were that high up, as that would only lead to them being more lost. A popular story was
often told that there were still first years from the early sixteen hundreds trapped up in the eves of the
towers and despite all attempts from search parties to recover them. They remained to this day just as
lost as they began.

There were many legends that surrounded the stone corridors of the castle Hogwarts and each more
delightful or exciting than the last. They ranged from the lost students of Hogwarts' Lofty Heights to
the deepest, blackest recesses of the lake where merfolk, grindylows, and of course the giant squid
dwelt. Not even to mention the vast grounds of the forbidden forest. The likes of which housed such
creatures as both the terrible and the just.

It was all quite laughable to any who knew nothing of magic to hear such tales, such as
muggleborns, those of which took everything about the magical world with grains of salt. He,
however had watched and observed and explored and knew better. For one Tom Riddle, who loved
this world with everything he had and with the extremism of which he felt for anything, he took the
lessons to heart and treated them with care.

He took joy in their collections and soon had his own personal notebook filled with tales. Such
things like the Lost Ones of the Lofty Heights were recorded and added to the many others that
cropped up here and there. All in all, it had taken him little to no time to settle into his new home. So enamored with her that he could not possibly think to ignore her. People were another matter.

Immediately after settling in from the welcoming feast, he went to his newfound minion from the train, one Abraxas Malfoy, and inserted himself into the boy’s space. Tom had learned from Abraxas the easiest ways to travel about the castle. Coupled with his passion and knack for critical detail he had easily learned the most important quirks to her being.

He spent his first weeks wandering her halls with a grace that shocked many in his company. He knew by now which hallways were really there and which ones just pretended to be there, albeit he had a feeling that the trick was simply to want them to be there in the end. As with all magic, there was the intent and the will, or so H.J.P. had explained to him.

The theory came to him when he discovered his penchant for uncovering hidden ways of travel from here and there. Hogwarts just seemed to like popping new hallways up for Tom’s enjoyment and ease but they all looked frighteningly familiar. The castle was rather helpful when the need for aid existed or so he hypothesized.

Tom at first didn’t connect The Intent and The Will but after his third or fourth new but familiar looking hallway he thought he understood. He willed the paths into being where he needed them to be and the castle moved them for him to where he wanted to go. All magic was will and intent so it made sense the more he actually thought about it. It troubled him that it took him so long to understand that.

Then again he had never had to understand his magic before, it naturally did what he wished without the need for push and shove that he started seeing in many of his classmates. They fought their magic, bullied it into doing what they wanted. All it needed was unimpeded direction and the want to carry it through.

He supposed that was why it had taken him so long to understand the hallways. He was actively thinking about it whereas he usually just let it happen at the subconscious level. He never needed to force magic and so never thought more of its inner mechanisms. Now though, it thrilled him that he could take a more direct role, that he understood one more thing about Hogwarts.

He shut the inquiry of the hallways after classes officially began and decided he would pick it back up some week if and when he had the time to really test the theory actively instead of just having the castle respond to his disciplined subconscious. For the present there was simply too much to do and learn.

Research on time sensitive materials took precedence and needed to be completed. Practice with magic had to be fit into his days as well and suddenly there was less and less time to apply his inquiries. So it was that his Journals became ever fuller and less fulfilled. Everything fell to the wayside inside of a new journal devoted only to those things in favor of the now. Some days he wondered just how long it would take him to fill the trunk H.J.P. had sent him at the rate he was going.

Abraxas did not understand his sudden lack of enthusiasm after only the first week when he had seemingly discovered more of the castle than many knew existed. He did not question it but that hadn’t stopped him from noting down places where Tom manifested hallways upon a long parchment that seemed to only grow longer as one month turned into two and so on and so forth.

Not that Abraxas had luck in summoning them. It occurred to Tom that many wizards and witches lacked what he had. The instinctual discipline and understanding of how to wield their magic without the need to focus it through the wand. To want something so badly that it became. It was… sad and
yet the edge it gave him wasn’t anything he would sacrifice by telling such a secret.

Tom imagined that it would have been simpler to make a map to carry about instead of the everlong parchment but refrained from offering said advice. To his knowledge not one person had ever done such a thing as simple as making a map. To his knowledge none existed. That would make far too much sense, he told himself and left it at that. If people couldn’t think enough to even get the idea then he wasn’t going to waste breath on it. He had magic to do.

Besides how would one ever keep track of all of the appearing and disappearing corridors on said map. Make it sentient like the sorting hat? Self updating? If so why hadn’t it been done? Perhaps it hadn’t been thought of? It wasn't as if the magic did not exist. There was a way, he was certain of that. Magic could do anything but then again... There was not a map of Hogwarts made currently so perhaps it was a tad bit more difficult than regular magic. Maybe he should make one, try it out and see. Enchant it to be self updating. It was a grand idea, ambitious for a first year surely. He had ever confidence he could do it. He could at least be the only sane person with such common sense style thoughts.

Except that wasn’t true. He was not the only one who thought of such things, had he? He was not the only sane person in the magical world. H.J.P. had hinted none too subtly that such a thing was possible. Certain charms existed in which one could create a self updating map. It lead Tom to think on it some more and he suspected that his H.J.P. had already made said map and was just giving Tom a bit of a challenge.

Maybe his mentor was hoping he would create one on his own. Maybe, it was a test and if he failed H.J.P. would stop mentoring him. That had been all the encouragement he needed and so his research had begun the instant he could scurry off to the infamous Hogwarts Library. He spent another week buried in a whirlwind of yet another challenge. First the halls and now the map. So he became a familiar face in the masses of shelves, enough so that the librarian mistook him for a Ravenclaw once or twice, or three times.

To that effect Tom found his favorite part of Hogwarts was in fact the Library. It was here that he found his home the most. It pained him to admit that anyplace could make him feel as safe as Hogwarts but the castle managed it. Among the many rotating shelves and towering spirals of never ending books it was little wonder that such a place quickly became his favorite one.

It smelled of old parchment, magics ancient and infant, and leather. Images splayed across floors in arrays of glass colors from light refracted through large windows that towered floor to ceiling. In the crook of the windows were small cushioned ledges that soaked in the warmth from sunlight, in which Tom laid claim to since day one of classes.

Here, beneath the colossal glass works he soaked in the warmth of blue skies, the world became bright and open and free. The potential of his life went on into infinity among tomes and books of all shapes and sizes. In his mind an eager smile and the smell of storms lived here. So too did he. In this space the dreary blackened snow of London was ever so far away and the stacked chimneys that spewed smog and death were but a nightmare that only ever reoccurred in dreams.

In the ancient castle with rotating corridors, never ending spires, and sentience, it was here among the books that he could be found on this very fine day and many another, and over the course of months in the company of three other students. Elias Cartwright, Marigold Filigreen, and Aiden Avery.

All had very little to do with each other before the school year had started and even less in common for they all hailed from separate houses, with separate worldviews, and separate study habits. In essence they were as unalike as possible and Tom found he preferred it that way.
Elias Cartwright was a Ravenclaw, so much of one in fact that his own house had become estranged from him. Such was his love of all things of inanimate knowledge and less things that talked. The only exception seemed to be Tom Riddle, who had quickly gained his interest and his patience enough to listen when the boy opened his mouth. For he valued anything of intelligence and hated anything built upon ignorance.

He was a tall boy for his age with spectacles of silver edges that made his tawny eyes sharper than his razor edged tongue. He always looked half unkempt with auburn hair that fell in untamed waves down his back, never a day had it seen a brush or scissors in which to cut it. The same neglect could not be said of his clothes which were impeccable. Each button was inlaid with care to be pin straight and his tie would never see a speck of dust if he could help it.

He was the type to never volunteer to answer questions in class and never was one to do anything more than the bare minimum on assignments due. He did not care for 'Outstandings' or silly, childish things like house points. He believed in learning new things, and his belief was that wasting time on things he did know took away from time spent on things that he didn’t yet know.

This meant his class grades were a steady acceptable in all fields and naturally his professors held him in low regard. His practicals were quite the opposite, they were perfect. His ability to cast and the no-nonsensical way he did cast were almost unrivaled. There was very little he struggled with when it came to proving himself and this was to the ever growing frustration of his house and professors. Points could be earned or 'Outstandings' on work but to him there was only ever better things to spend time on.

That wasn’t to say that if a class proved interesting that he wouldn’t participate and earn some points or write an essay worth publishing but such occasions were turning out to be scarce and he would more often than not look up from his other books and then deem the lesson unworthy and then go back to reading more suitable things. To waste anymore breath on such things was wasteful. Wasteful was for the weak minded and he had much to do and learn.

To this degree he made few friends and more rivals than any known student to date. The sad part was that the only one he acknowledged as anything of worth was Tom Marvolo Riddle. It had been an accident on his part, not intending on being friendly with anyone but his love of knowledge was rivaled by the kid who on the first day of classes asked him if he knew the best method in which to organize a rather hefty set of personal lessons. Needless to say he made his friend and, according to him, his only friend.

They met everyday and studied together since. Tom, it turned out had quite the collection of magical theories that were fascinating and even more exciting to put to practice and Elias would give anything to get a glimpse at some of the tomes the boy sometimes pulled from a chest he carried with him everywhere. The two of them were forces of intellectual power when they came together and it shocked the charms professor when Elias willingly started a conversation with Tom on a regular basis.

Sometimes, Elias thought that this was what friendship should be. Learning together in respectful silence. When Tom was around he felt clear and calm and centered. When Tom was late which was rare Elias would feel an uncomfortable pull in his chest and the world was more irritating. He felt perhaps this nice lukewarm feeling was what people meant by friendship and he was okay with that.

Except that he wasn’t because when Tom was away the rest of the world could burn and he felt empty. Like an arm had been cut off and that wasn’t what friendships were described as. That was what people said losing a loved one felt like. Idly on days without Tom, Elias felt that was an accurate description of what love was rather than what like was. Then he would recognize that
Perhaps he cared more for Tom than just simple tolerance so that must mean that he loved him. Regardless of the fact that they were much too young for intimate feelings and thus it must just be like.

He wondered if he should tell Tom they were in a romance rather than a friendship but then he would soon after the thought, find a book to read and forget about it until the next time Tom left him after a study session. Maybe he was over analyzing their situation but he did not have the energy to deal with such things as emotions so he decided that love it must be. He was okay with that.

Marigold Filigreen was the complete opposite of Elias and a Hufflepuff. She was a talkative and bright minded individual and stood as a true homage to her house. She gave aid to all who asked it of her and respected any who did the same without prejudice. She earned them massive amounts of points for her willingness to address wrongs and to end fights peacefully.

She was a boisterous young lady and a very social creature. One could always spot her with her gilded curling locks and bright green eyes which crinkled whenever she smiled or laughed. She was a bit soft and rounded for a young lady but carried herself in such a way that she exuded a beauty beyond her years. She hailed from a well to do pureblood family specializing in medi-magic so her knowledge of the healing arts was extensive for her age.

Tom Riddle had been quick to gain her admiration for his helpfulness. What did it matter that his tie was green and silver? It made all the more sense for him to break away from stigma and he a true prince in shining armor. Needless to say she always delighted to drag around her new companion, when she could tear him away from the library, to aid in solving problems between houses. Where her bright smile failed his charm would succeed and between the two of them they built a reputation as peacekeepers among the first years. She did feel awfully lonely though when he was away. As well liked as she was, she didn’t have anyone to rely on herself. At least not until Tom Riddle.

Tom always spoke to her with courtesy and was a perfect gentleman often pulling out a seat for the ladies and holding open doors for them. He was just so helpful and kind and he would laugh at her bad jokes even though she knew he didn’t really find them funny. To her her that was a good step in becoming good friends. So when Tom extended his invitation to study with him and a fellow first year she felt special, accepted. He had asked her and no one else and that was nice.

Tom had found her smart enough to allow her to study with him and she was ecstatic. So long as she actually studied instead of cracking jokes, he had said with a playful glint in his eye, then she was welcome. Needless to say she agreed readily and took on her school work with an energy that had her older sister Chrysanthemum worried. Her grades were better than she could have hoped for and while they were far from perfect, she was proud of how good it felt to improve with hard work.

She was happier than ever and when Tom asked her to help him with his preliminary studies into medi-magic, or at least the basics. Because they were only in first year after all and he did have so very much to learn. In any case, she was eager to assist. She soon found a new delight and challenge when meeting Elias Cartwright in the flesh.

Her first impression of him was sad because she knew him and had seen how distant he was from people. At first he would just ignore her and only talk with Tom but she soon understood that maybe he was just unsure how to be a human, maybe his mother was a book?, and that became her new mission in life. To get Elias to be a person instead of a walking book.

She had made a game of getting Elias angry by purposefully mispronouncing spells or spouting obviously wrong information. Safe to say she was skilled in knowing how best to rile her new and
dearest friend. Tom would smirk ever so slightly whenever Elias snapped his sharp eyes on her. She too found it exhilarating and maybe that was bad of her. Maybe she was going bad for picking on him so but it was for a good reason she thought. So she continued and she found she rather thought the Ravenclaw boy simply adorable.

Aiden Avery was of a completely different lot in life than either of the study group. He hailed from a dark family based on traditional magics and raised to value poise and overall, ‘The Great Game’. He was skilled in deceptions or at least he had thought so until he had been cornered by Tom Riddle. Riddle should have been an easy target as a mudblood in a den of snakes but somehow Riddle had gained the two biggest allies of Slytherin house and Avery was determined to figure out how.

He was a small boy for his age, with a cherubic face and blue almost gray eyes. He always seemed taller due to perfected posture and his way of holding himself in conversation. His honey golden hair was combed to look soft in its short boyish manner. His sweet face however was lost on his brutal wandwork. Already he was known to hex gryffindors in passing. Tom felt he lacked creativity. He also thought Aiden lacked tact.

It had been a rather normal day when Aiden found himself surrounded by older gryffindors and while he had been prepared to fight them off he knew he was at a grand disadvantage. Within minutes he had been disarmed and slammed into the wall by a rather powerful spell. To say it was humiliating to be saved was an understatement. One second the older Gryffindors were about to release a particular nasty spell and the next they were thrown back themselves and Tom Marvolo Riddle, the Mudblood stood before him.

That was when Aiden felt it, the sheer power radiating off him and around him and into the older assailants. It was like warm oil, so thick, and it was dark… so very dark. He found his breath short as it twisted and pulsed and the boys were screaming, screaming but somehow he had known they wouldn’t be heard. Then there was a sickening crack and the mudblood, Riddle, was rounding upon him and with eyes darker than black asking him in a sibilant voice of almighty power... if he was alright. Just that. No insult, no pressing for favors in the future. Just if he was alright. And he... And he Aiden, spat in his face and ran. Ran for all he was and just kept running. Later, when he entered his dorms he shrank into his bed and shivered because there was no way a mudblood had magic like that. There was… no… wa-- Abraxas’ face and Slughorn’s speech at the beginning of the year on house unity and on the unfortunate amount of old lines that fell through the cracks of the world came to mind and he… He went to Tom right away and apologized.

Tom it turned out was a shark, he was a monster because he simply smirked and asked Aiden to look him in the eyes and swear to never tell a soul what he saw Tom do or what he felt then and in the future unless granted permission and he had agreed. Without asking anything in return he agreed. Then Tom spoke to Aiden's tie and it hissed back, and that was the beginning of Aiden giving Tom lessons in pureblood etiquette and heirship law in the privacy of a classroom. It also was the beginning of a study group in a library most days of the week which included two others. It was... bearable most days. Sometimes, just sometimes, he was glad for it. Regardless of the odd company, he seemed to fit.

Aiden was sure that Marigold didn’t know the darker side of Tom and was probably pulled in by his charm, but Elias was certainly a surprise. Then again if it were anyone else than Elias it wouldn’t make sense. Aiden often looked over everything he knew of Tom and what he, and many others had disregarded concerning him. The amount of house points and outstandings in all of his classes, was enough for Aiden to know that whatever Tom would do in the future, it would be grand.

He was willing to bet that Tom would change the world and so Aiden put up with a hufflepuff and a
ravenclaw. You never knew when you would need one after all. They were tolerable most days and if being friendly to them meant he was in Tom’s good graces then that was what he would do. If a time came when he could be rid of them, he would see when it happened.

By the time Christmas rolled around it occurred to Aiden that he had made three friends and that friendship was a terrifying beast when it was with Tom Riddle, Elias Cartwright, and Marigold Filigreen.

**Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Witchery somewhere in Scotland,**
**December 31st 1938**

The holiday season came and with it the desertion of his great Lady. Where once life teemed it now echoed hollowly down corridors of illuminated white. Phantoms wandered ceaselessly, portraits gallivanting off wildly, and staircases still got bored and moved to speak to other landings but the whole of her felt emptied. The buzzing magical atmosphere tamed and subdued with lack of exuberant youngsters to fuel it.

Despite the absence of many of her students, the castle still held all the warmth and wonder as it always had. The halls remained toasty except in the dungeons, the windows still filtered in the daylight albeit gray and heavy with the reflection of snow. The library was still just as cavernous as always. Even still, he felt the solitude.

A large part of himself appreciated it though a smaller part, eyes flicking to see the empty place beside him and two other empty spaces around their study table, felt something missing. He knew it was foolish, this thing he was letting root within him. Sooner or later the other shoe would drop and they like all others would betray him. They would turn around and label him a freak, a mudblood, dirty. They would overlook the meaningful hours shared and become like every other monster in the world. It was foolish to begin to like them. It was weak to trust. He didn’t need them but he looked out into the world, saw their friendships and humanity and wanted it too. He wanted to belong, so much did he wish for that. So long had that dream been repressed and stamped out by the eyes of ire and fear. So he turned his back on that too, locked away the things that made him even remotely like them. So no, he did not need them and when it happened and they turned upon him, he was not obligated to give them leeway. He was better than they. He did not need them still the suspicion was exhausting. The longing was... hard to overcome sometimes.

His eyes tried to focus on the text before him. He found he did not like thinking of such things. He didn’t want to give them power over himself. They were not worthy to judge him and regardless of how harmless they seemed he would not fall for it.

He didn’t like thinking of such things.

He needed to focus on more productive things while the crowds were away. He needed to grow the distance between his peers and himself. He needed to transcend them. His eyes flickered again to the empty chairs and a hollowness settled in his stomach albeit a small and almost unnoticed one.

He huffed a sigh, blowing black hair from his forehead in annoyance. The absence of his allies was troubling him enough that he concluded his work ended. It was clear he had reached the potential for study on this day. He closed the copy of Arithmancy for the Young Mind with more force than necessary, as if that would make the irritation go away. It didn't.

If he had felt off before then it was more so now. Then again he had never liked his birthdays in the past. His last one had been the only decent one, and even still the apprehension was hard to shake off. Years of torment, of neglect, of abuse at the hands of matrons or children had left him cold and
calculated. Most times he could handle that but times like the present made him realize that he was vulnerable still. He was... human.

He hated it, despised, and adored it in equal measures. He didn’t want to be a weak and empathetic fool, but more and more often he would find himself just that. It had only been a year since his life had begun its chaotic spiral into the fascinating world of magic. One year since he found a place he belonged in with people like himself… enough like himself anyways to matter.

It wasn’t perfect, there were still problems. His status as a mudblood in the eyes of many a Slytherin, his ever growing popularity, his work on the other houses and magic. So many things that took his time and energy. A crippling amount some days. Being liked was… difficult and new. It was frightening. Dealing with people was exhausting. Without the people constantly surrounding him he could admit that he was working himself much too hard in such a short time. He was working so hard to become something to them worth anything!

He felt the heat rising to his cheeks as his fingers toyed with the edges of the borrowed book before him. He lowered his head wearily letting his dark curls fall before his eyes. He didn't even like them so why did he still feel as if he had to fit with them? At least they were gone now for better or worse. Loneliness he was used to, solitude his companion. There needn't be any falsities here, no smiles that hurt his cheeks or enduring hands on his arms. He was alone now.

He felt as if some great weight had lifted from him, as if he had been exerting strength to the task of keeping everything strictly professional. Pretending to be as they were was taking its toll. His ambition was fueling him to study harder and faster but he hadn't taken the time to even adapt to new changes. Everything was shifting and it was going fast, faster than he should have been okay with and yet, he was anxious to see what would come next. Excited even. He had never felt this driven before, this… alive. All days ending in blissful weariness.

To think it had taken a year to get to this point. A year of preparing for this and now he was here and the things to do were infinite. His letters to H.J.P. had been becoming books in their own rights, his responses just the same. Conversations so full of ideas and things and experiences that every one of them was eagerly awaited. His daily ritual had become a great chunk of time recording his newest discoveries and sending them away. He had tried to be discreet about the correspondence but somehow he felt he failed miserably. As days delivered ever growing parcels.

At least now he could receive his mail in peace. He always felt uneasy at breakfasts, like all eyes watched him. His skin would prickle and hairs stand on end, he would see Mors and his great shadow lording over the flocks of beasts. His heart would race, his breathing hitch. His excitement would be matched by his private nature. It made him feel splintered and off center. Then Mors would be upon him and he forgot all of it and only processed the need to read and know. To be with his owl and immerse himself in parchments carefully tended.

He had no word for it but it was pleasant, losing himself in H.J.P. His lips would stretch and while that usually was tiresome, they came so naturally then. His owl and his Friend, his smiles were for these things alone. Then the unnerving stares would chase it all away and he would hoard the letters away to the dungeons. It was private, these letters and his emotions. His vulnerability only his and no one was meant to see them. The only ones privy to these things by right were Mors and the inanimate parchments that would be delivered in response. The rest of the world was more or less unworthy.

So he started taking further self disciplines in patience. Taking such treasures he received and stashing them away until he could steal away to read them in the sanctity of his four poster bed. The more he did it the more possessive he became. He didn’t feel that eyes other than his own should see
the words meant for himself. He didn’t want others knowing his benefactor. He couldn’t bear the thought of their hands even so much as touching one of his letters from them. These things were special.

They were his and so he had every right to keep them from others. H.J.P. was his secret someone that was only meant for him. He was the first one to listen to him. The first being that lauded his abilities and told him he had worth in this life. He was honest with him, as honest as a secret keeper could be. He had someone and that made him feel, he wasn’t sure, cherished? Whatever the case it felt, good. It was terrifying as much as it was soothing.

This entire year had so far stretched him further than he could have imagined. Emotionally, he was exhausted most days, not used to the sheer amount of front he had to put forward and hold constant. Intellectually, he was overwhelmed, too much and not enough time in a day. Physically, he was for once not starving at all hours, able to breath and not worry that at any moment a matron would pull him to the basement for something he had not done.

He was aware that something in him was shifting, that he was changing, but as much as it was unnerving he counted it as a win if it lessened his foes. He felt stronger, more capable. He wasn’t trapped anymore on the contrary he was the trapper. There was now a world before him to explore and unravel. A place to optimize into his own. He was independent, and it was... nice. Some nights he feared it was all a dream. He wondered when he would awake to the rotting ceiling of Wool's. Speaking of sleep, the lights in the library had dimmed considerably.

His eyes rose to the air before him as idly flicked a Tempus spell into being. A simple and useful spell that could be done without much know how. The time wrote itself elegantly into the air telling him it was just reaching the brink of seven. It was nearly dinner so it would be best if he headed there forthwith. He rose from his chair with a grace he did not feel. His body was stiff from countless hours spent hidden away in the stacks of the library. He reached his hands to the dark recesses of the ceiling and pulled all he was upwards.

The feeling of tension was slipping from him steadily, his muscles overjoyed to be moving again. His stomach grumbled and the pangs of hunger returned to him. He had been within the library all day like some hermit and while he could have stayed longer, he had missed lunch and breakfast already. To waste away in some dark corner was fitting on this day. For so long he had spent avoiding the other orphans. So much so that he had refined the art of going unnoticed. He wondered if not for the first time if it was some spell he was unwittingly casting much like the corridors he conjured. It would explain some of the easier times he had getting away from the newer and less trained orphans. It was something he would ponder another day for now he had other needs. With a deep breath to center himself he rose from his usual place and quickly gathered his things.

His trip to the great hall was a swift one. It lacked the throngs of students that typically pranced about doing childish things. He valued the silence of their absences as it felt he had his castle to himself. His fingers glided over her stones whilst he walked, feeling the buzz of what could only ever be magic on his fingertips. A place in himself sang back in response and his worries faded into the crystal clear focus he was so used to having.

Today of all days the emptiness of Hogwarts was a balm. Too much time spent keeping appearances, smiles, allies, and not enough time to just think. Not enough space to breath and right now, space was what he required. It was almost with dejection that he steeled himself before entering the hall. The tables were much changed as they had been since the beginning of the winter break. What once was four lined tables was now one, and the teacher’s table was perpendicular to it to form a ‘T’ within the hall. With the yule decorations having been removed it felt sparser and in an odd way
darker. Tom preferred it to the nonsensical way that the deputy headmaster had it before. All flare and cheeriness for festivities he had always been robbed of.

Dinner was a casual affair with little to no deviation save for strange poppers placed before the twelve students deigning to remain at the school. It was New Year’s Eve, of course they would celebrate the coming of the new year but to him. To him it was complicated. Always complicated. To him there had always been little to celebrate but that was not the now. He wondered if this year could be different. It was such a silly thing to hope for though and he should know better.

He was just finishing up his final bites when a familiar shadow dove from the rafters. His wings spread far in a mantle that blocked out the ceiling of night. His lovely familiar descended with regality and poise to land beside him before offering his first talon. It took Tom a split second to realize that both legs were laden with things. On one side a familiar large parcel with his name written in familiar letters and a small box, on his other was a smaller letter with writing the likes of which he had never seen.

His heart started to beat faster under his skin and he felt heat rising in his cheeks unbidden. Anticipation and eagerness battled as he hastily untied H.J.P.’s parcel with haste, not caring now about voyeurs. Then he took the second letter from unknown. He could feel eyes upon him and when he glanced up he met his professor’s gaze. Slughorn, more than any was getting over curious about the letters his ace student had been receiving. It wasn't as if Tom should know anyone to correspond with, so of course it looked strange.

Tom knew he was getting restless, that he would need to let the man know soon the nature of the correspondence, preferably sooner rather than later. His eyes darted quickly over to Albus Dumbledore who was in a deep conversation with the runes professor over something ridiculous. When he glanced back Slughorn was gone and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

He felt the heavy hand long before it landed upon his shoulder. He steeled himself to keep a handle on his impulses to rip, tear, and kill.

“Ah, you seem popular Tom. A letter from a friend perhaps? Such a regal owl, must be from an important family. Mr. Avery perhaps?” Tom only had an instant to decide what he would say. He could say it was Avery’s but something in him spit and hissed at the thought of Mors being anyone else’s. Besides, both he and Slughorn knew it couldn't be Avery, for all the letters that arrive outside the yule break.

“No Professor, Mors is mine. He was a gift for my birthday last year.” The owl in question puffed up, doubling his already impressive size. Tom couldn’t help himself but reach a hand to scratch just above the bird’s generous maw. Mor’s let out a warbling sound that echoed loudky before straightening and fluffing himself into a dark ball. He settled himself in the empty chair opposite his master. His long talons bit deep into the wood and he began to doze.

“He came from a dear friend who I met just after our first visit to Diagon Alley.” A lie but plausible enough. “He recognized me but… I do not want to say in public sir. Perhaps later tonight we could speak of it? I have been meaning to ask for your help in this matter for some time. I-...I did not mean to keep secrets sir.” It was inconvenient having to bow his head, insulting that he should have to discuss H.J.P. with anyone at all but Horace Slughorn had proven to be an ally worth effort.

It was his unsaid protection that had kept the Lestrange family and Black family from whatever sinister attacks they had been planning the instant Tom was sorted. More than once he had punished severely those who he had even suspected had hurt Tom. To say Tom sometimes used this advantage to get things he wished for was an understatement. However, as time went by and as Tom gained their house a significant lead in the house cup race, he had been left to his own devices. He
was ignored but safe.

The isolation from his peers but the acceptance of Avery and Malfoy, for reasons they could not say, had sparked interest in many and added an air of mystery to Tom that had shifted the scales of the inner Slytherin house political system. To say he was delighted in the chaos it created was one thing but his ambition to organize it was too tedious the best of times.

The house became divided in regards to himself. It was either split into cool indifference bordering on frustrated ignorance, or cautious attempts to solidify him as an ally. Blacks versus Malfoy. It was a strange game to explore and Tom had a knack for manipulation but not no mastery of politics. It took Avery's lessons to understand just how much power Tom was getting out of the turmoil. How best to harness it.

Slughorn was his indispensable pawn, the piece that had started it all. Malfoy was his queen piece, Avery his bishop. Three allies with varying degrees of sway and power and all of them bending down to hear what Tom wished and do his bidding. They all had their reasons of course but that didn’t mean Tom would find fault in that. Ambition was the trait of his house and favors remained the currency.

He needed to keep his pieces for now, while he was still young and vulnerable. He had to play the game smart in order to get the highest advantage. He was a half-blood in a pureblood world and he needed to prove himself better, even if he was better then them all anyways. It was an idiotic notion and more than offensive but he understood it. For now he could not afford to lose pieces to pride.

He would play the game and win it. He would show them all that he was their superior and prove that he was somebody. He would not let anyone tell him he was less again, at least not without solidifying a plan to destroy them completely later. He would hold himself royal, make them come to him, keep them guessing, destroy his opposition by giving the options of choice, have friends but hold enemies closer. He would be powerful. He would be more, he just needed to bear with the inconveniences of the game first.

It was with this in mind that he bit his lip and looked up at Slughorn, the heat of anticipation on his boyish face. He looked uncertain and weak and frail. Bounds away from the bright boy in potions class who openly showed Slughorn his genius. His professor looked upon him and smiled, his hand moved to Tom’s head and he ruffled the dark hair fondly.

"Of course Tom. We can speak tonight after dinner but I have to wonder why some stranger is sending you gifts young man.” His sharp eyes locked onto the box and Tom immediately reached for it. His fingers closed around the small box possessively and he instantly felt the jolt of magic. It was not just magic it was a tremendous amount of it! It took all he had in himself not to gasp or react as the familiar magic purred under his fingers and wrapped about him contentedly.

"Please don’t take it away! Its… They always took my gifts away.” At the orphanage went unsaid. Let the man work it out how he like. His voice lowered softly, shyly. His hands clasped the box tightly to himself as he hunched his shoulders inwards to protect it. All of him surrounding this precious thing. This magic meant for his own. His dark eyes looked up at his professor beseeching in their nature.

"It’s my birthday! Please it’s mine.” Whatever conclusion the old man came to, it was what Tom was looking for. He looked as if someone punched him, his eyes staring down in disgusting pity. It was an ugly look but Tom would damn well use it. His own gaze bore into Slughorn’s and he understood what the man was worried about. Tom’s safety, someone besides himself sending Tom things that could be harmful. Images of cursed objects sent to muggleborn students by dark families in eerily similar circumstances.
“I promise it isn’t dangerous. He wouldn’t hurt me.” Some little voice asked him how he knew that. What really did he understand and how did he understand it. He crushed it under the solid evidence of how his magic and this other magic wove together. The argument to him was won based on this but he knew it wouldn’t be enough for his professor.

“I won’t open it until tonight. You can be there, and see it, and make sure it is safe but please… it’s mine.” Slughorn relented and later than night, when Mors returned to the Owlery lofts and when the stars took over the sky, they reconvened in the man’s personal office. Tom found himself sinking into a too large chair that made him feel undignified and overshadowed by a surprise cake made by house elves.

A place inside himself, small and deep within, loved it. The ugly cake with twelve candles. He loved the color changing icing and the Slytherin snake candy that slithered all about it. Adored it. A bigger place within was worried about his current predicament. It was outraged that he need share this at all. Other students didn’t have to justify their presents as safe but then again... An image from Slughorn’s mind of a third year muggleborn girl with her hands burned to ash because of a pureblood prank appeared before his inner eye. He understood why. Not that it was fair, but he could understand.

He was about to address the potions master but was cut off as a long small box was dropped into his lap. For a moment he forgot himself and blinked at it owlishly before schooling himself. Cautiously he ran a hand over it, hesitantly accepting the observation that he was receiving a gift. He had not expected it seeing as Horace tried very hard to keep his favoritism from affecting Tom outside of whatever strange dynamic they had. Now however, the man's eyes burned with mirth and something else unsettling.

“Sir--” “Happy Birthday Tom. I know it is late and maybe the mood is too serious now but I saw it and thought of you. I hope it will come in handy. Also, let's not tell anyone where the second thing in that box came from alright?” Horace winked, actually winked and it was supposed to be charming. Tom found it the opposite of that. He was for lack of a better word rendered speechless temporarily.

Under Slughorn’s insistent gaze he resigned himself to opening whatever it was that Horace thought represented his star pupil. He carefully undid the wrappings of his present and for a moment stared before eagerly picking up the revealed wand holster.

It was a beautiful thing of tan leather with magic wrapping about it in a strange way that he never yet encountered purposefully. He couldn’t understand the nature of the magic but he felt it as if it were a series of blocks and impenetrable. His mind began to spiral off into the possibilities before he reigned himself in tight. Later, there would be time later for distractions.

He took a quick glance at his professor’s pleased face before placing the holster back and picking up a small crystal phial. The phial was filled with a light gold potion that seemed to swirl with some incandescent shimmer. He swirled it once and tried to remember all he read on potions thus far. No gold ones came to mind. He placed it back with the holster in the box. He plastered a shy smile on his face hoping it hid his discomfort. Knowing it did when Slughorn’s proud grin stretched much too far across his face.

“Felix Felicius, I figured you could save it for a day you needed it. Liquid luck and that wand holster I had made for you by a dear ex-student of mine. Once you put it on it will be bound to your magical signature, I don’t need to tell you what that is, and can only be removed by you. That includes your wand. It has anti-summoning charms on it. This world is dangerous Tom and while I hate that you must endure the brutality of your unfortunate blood status. I hope this will even some odds for you. Now, about your package. May I?”
He wanted to rage and tell the man no but that little piece in him that adored the birthday cake and the larger piece that appreciated the gifts was pulling for him to do it. He needed this alliance. Maybe he could distract himself while his professor pawed at his things. Maybe it would lessen the level of violation he was feeling. It was his personal life… His box…

He gently set aside his gifts from Slughorn to pull out the box. Touching it again pulled at him, soothed the beast clawing to get at the professor. It was a Cerberus’ lullaby. He really did not want to part with it but gently and gingerly handed it over to Horace. His reluctance only growing the longer he held to it.

The instant the elder touched the box there was a zap and Horace dropped it to cradle his hand. It took less than a second for the professor to have his wand drawn upon it. He wove intricately and furiously. Spells that Tom didn’t know, spells he probably shouldn’t by the ministry laws. Anxiety clutched at Tom’s chest. He didn’t want it destroyed, he made to grab for it but it came to him instead. No sooner than that did Slughorn lower his wand and cast his pupil a concerned yet intrigued look.

Tom pressed the treasure to himself and relished in the warm magic and the smell of ozone. Safety and home and obsession. His, no one else’s. He would never allow another to touch it again. He felt his own power surge forward into the box and connect with that questing familiar magic, and all calmed. The world became peaceful and his shaking shoulders began to ease. It was safe, he was safe. Nothing would hurt him now.

When next he raised his head, aware fully of how distraught he must seem he was met with greedy eyes and a man that he had only seen glimpses of when he dealt with influential students. Whatever Slughorn had been looking for on the present box he found it and his look was a gleam that could only mean that it benefited him. Whatever he had found. They sat in silence for awhile until Tom was assured that Slughorn had placed away his wand.

“Protective wards, meant for family. I daresay powerful ones. Who is this person you have been writing to Tom?” Tom wanted to tear him apart but quelled the surging magic before he released it. Despite the violation he felt when Slughorn tried to touch the box, he needed this alliance. He needed to know what this man knew.

“H.J.P. He says it is not safe for me to know more. That it could endanger me if certain people knew. People he is convinced are within the castle or connected to the gentry. He fears for my safety… Wants me safe. He believes that Grindelwald will make his major moves soon. As a target of his, I would be as well should anyone know who wasn’t trusted. I should have told you sooner but I- I know you already do so much for me. I did not want to burden you.” Tom forced himself to relax further, make himself innocent, look to the man who so dared invade his secrets.

Dark eyes begged for understanding and his apprehension was palpable. A deep sigh signified the boy’s victory. It was another few moments of contemplation before his professor made any response, this time with a new edge of worry to his words. A paleness at the thoughts that Tom would not snoop into this time.

“Very well I shall refrain from asking too much but it all sounds suspicious. If I did not know as much of family magics as I do I would confiscate that from you. It is obviously yours which means this H.J.P. is related to you in some way. I would say we track him down but if he is a target then that would explain why he hasn’t come for you yet. Grindelwald is not a man to cross lightly. If he is in his cross hairs then I would prefer you not even write to him, but he is obviously very special to you. Go on and open it. I am curious to see what it is he so heavily guarded.”

The box popped open easily, sliding apart in intricate pieces like some puzzle. Within the confines
sat a perfectly round sphere of amber. It was… breathtaking in its intricacy. The care in its making a level above mastery. His fingers trembled over its surface, brushing against the magic, eager, willing. He pulled it out and cradled it within his palms. Taking in its every detail.

Its outsides were encased in a silver web of what at first glance appeared to be vines but upon closer inspection were snakes. They wove about it in careful paths that Tom could recognize as runes but he knew not the language well enough to tell what they meant. Each small eye was a jewel the size of a tiny bead, green and if one looked long enough glowing and not glittering. Green, like her scales when the sunlight hit them just so...

The orb of amber was a solid weight within the cage of woven silver but within the center was a dark sort of stone the shape of the lightning bolt rune, Sowilo. It would be green like the eyes if not obscured and shaded by the yellow of the amber. Attached to the top of the web and its orb was a fine ribbon of considerable length.

The smoothness rivaled silk, and the color seemed almost black. He wondered just what the color was as it seemed like something he should have remembered seeing. Nissa. Rock. Blood. His hands trembled, and his chest felt too full. A place in his chest ached sharply and he shook with the force of the emotions overtaking him.

A parchment fell from the box to be ignored as the boy pulled the item to him and drew himself around it as if it was his entire world. Magic smoothed across his skin like a blanket of all that was good. It was so perfect. He could feel his eyes burning, waterslicking his cheeks, blood in his mouth from biting his tongue. How ugly must he look like this, crying over a bauble that reminded him of his long lost friend. A thing that smelled of him, tasted of him, felt like his magic.

Safe. Loved. Warm sunlight through trees reflecting off scales. Light breezes and the brushing of black feathered wings. The taste of chocolate, of storms, of coffee. The silence of high book stacks. Things he cherished and all of it in this one tiny thing. He was broken from his trance as the Professor’s voice lanced through the tranquility.

“My dearest Tom,

Happy Birthday and congratulations on turning twelve. If you are reading this it means you have received my gift to you. All members of the Peverell family still in allegiance with the main line have an amulet much like this one. All of them are customized for their specific master and created by the Lord of the house. This one is special however, for this one is yours.

I cannot tell you the exact number of times I began it over again, thinking of you and finding it lacking. It needed to be whole, perfect, and strong enough to keep you safe in the darkest of times. I would have preferred to have gifted it to you in person but war takes from all of us.

While Grindelwald walks you are not safe. So I grant to you Tom Marvolo Riddle, this. May it give you comfort and safety while I cannot.

Yours,
H.J.P.”

Tom’s dark eyes snapped up, red and open. He reached for the parchment and took it with a softness he had not known he possessed. His professor had gone pale, his gaze just as wide and watching Tom with a newfound appreciation. The child before him was all sweetness and goodness and he belonged to a family of power believed to be dead. Now proven to be very much alive. Necromancers of the highest order.
“Peverell. H.J. Peverell.” The words were soft and thick. Tom nearly choked on them, trembling as he set the parchment upon his lap. Fingers deftly wrapped the ribbon of the pendant about his small neck, pulling the ends about to the front so that the item was proudly bared before finishing the bow and neatly letting the ends rest so as to present the pendent in the bow tie’s knot.

“A powerful family of necromancers and hunted by Gellert Grindelwald, believed to be dead. I see now why they would have hidden an heir away. The matron told me some things but—” “No. My mother really did die giving birth to me in that place. H.J.P--- Peverell believes it was to protect me. That she sacrificed all she had left to place blood wards on that place, so that I may stay hidden. I would not be happy but I would be safe. I tried to look up the types of wards those were but I could not find any mentions of them anywhere…”

Slughorn nodded solemnly his hand touching Tom’s knee in understanding. If it was true, and it certainly was true if the family magic he felt accepted Tom Riddle, then the boy was more special than he had originally realized. The older man must feel so justified now, Tom thought bitterly. His fingertips brushed over the protective amulet again. The warmth flowing to him in gentle ebbs and flows. A heartbeat, a spell… Perfection in magic.

“I will grant you permission to study those wards from the restricted section once you get a little older. For now let me tell you that they are dangerous things and not to be underestimated. A woman’s capacity for love is not to be scorned. You do have some other letters but I will let you rest for this evening. There is much to think about and much we simply must discuss. For now goodnight Mr. Riddle and do not forget your presents or cake! A boy needs cake on his birthday!”

Slughorn ushered him out of his office, the cake afloat beside him, one box, two letters. Alone in the common room Tom vowed he would come up with a terrible demise for the man. For now though…Peverell. He had a name. A glint sparked in his obsidian eyes as he ascended to his empty dorm room. Three other beds stood empty and places where trunks would be were barren and… one bed with four boxes of varying sizes sat closest to the lakes window.

For the umpteenth time that day Tom was blinking owlishly at something. The cake floating beside his head made its way to his nightstand and settled with a disturbing cheeriness. Slowly Tom followed suit. It was with careful deliberation that he examined each box which held a letter a piece, and each one signed by those he called friends. Internally he wondered how much he would need to endure before this day was over.

He decided to get it over with and picked up the box closes to him which came from Abraxas Malfoy. His very first minion. Abraxas sent him a flat box that when opened revealed a black cloak made of fine velvet and a pair of warm black leather gloves. The hood of the cloak was covered in some sort of ridiculously soft fur and the clasps were some sort of light metal and elegant. His note was short and sweet. Almost impersonal if not for his signature handwritten at the bottom.

The next box was from Avery and within was a complete set of etiquette rule books and a bag of chocolate sweets that he found Tom liked. His note was far more personal wishing him a happy birthday and speaking of idle things he had to do while away from them. It was all chatter and yet he felt… He didn’t dwell on it and quickly moved to the next box. Trying to ignore the swelling in his chest. Too much more and he swore he would die from whatever this emotion was.

Elias sent him a box that was expanded. Within was an arsenal of black journals to one side, quills, quill tips, and inkwells in the center protected in their own case, and several books of all natures to the right side. His letter was far longer, analytical, and strangely genuine. He hid nothing from Tom, admitting he wasn’t sure what one got friends but that this would have to do and that he hoped they could discuss the books on potion theories together when he returned to him. As if he was away on a
long journey. He signed it,

‘Love Always, Eli, (Is it too soon for nicknames? Marigold says it isn’t. Not that she is right about anything at anytime.) Elias Cartwright’.

Again he tried to stifle the unbearable fullness in his chest but it was getting much harder. He decided that today would be the death of him. His hands shook as he opened the final box from Marigold. It was garishly bright, yellows and oranges, and flowers in the bow on top. He tore it open viciously and froze at the sight within. No presents or items of value. There was just a cake.

It was a cake much like Slughorn’s only this one was hand made. It had no changing colors to its icing, no moving snakes, nothing of note save that it was hideous. Horrendous and lopsided and… and she didn’t have room to write his full name because she got distracted on trying to make flowers and ran out of space to put it. The layers weren’t all the way frosted and it was chocolate. Dark Chocolate, his favorite, and garish...

Next to it there was a picture of her standing in front of a fountain in Barcelona Spain with a sign saying, ‘Happy Birthday. Miss you Tom, wish you were here’. It was also hideous, her dress was too bright… His knees felt weak and he sank onto his bed with the picture tightly clenched in his hands and wept. The feeling in his chest was too much to ignore now and he didn’t even understand why he was crying. He hadn’t cried since… not since… Mors, and before him, Nissa. A first gift of many. Was this friendship?! Why did it hurt?! It wasn’t supposed to hurt!

Ages seemed to pass till he finally felt the weight in his chest clearing enough that he could even look at the abomination that was his favorite birthday cake. The ache of it leaving him exhausted and raw in a way he hated, or well he thought he hated he would have to think about it more, and yet he was thankful for it. He was grateful for the cloak and gloves, the chocolates and books, the writing stuff, Elias’ dumb letter, the stupid cake and stupider picture. He wondered if friendship always hurt like this. This terribly full pain.

His gaze fell to the large parcel resting next to Slughorn’s cake and the smaller letter atop it. For the first time, he wasn’t sure if he could give the attention to H.J.P… Peverell, that he so wanted to. He would read it tomorrow, when the strange swelling of his chest receded. When he could focus again and the world made sense. His fingers instead reached for the small, unassuming letter not from his mentor? Family member? Friend? Peverell.

The parchment was fine and the seal on the envelope was a coat of arms he was unfamiliar with. When he unfolded the paper the words were foreign for a moment until a blur overtook them and they rearranged into English. An old photograph of a girl landed in his lap. He was too exhausted to take stock in the warning flags in his head so he studied it.

She was a small thing, looking at the camera with a blank look tilting her head down slightly as if unsure. Her eyes were dark, pits of night, and her hair the same and long, near to messy in the way it fell over her too small shoulders. She looked pale and haunted, a ghost more than girl. She stayed like that for a moment before her head snapped to the right and she ran from the photo frame like a rabbit fleeing a beast. He turned over the black and white photograph. The name Merope was written in careful script on the back. The date was illegible with time.

This time he took stock in the dread feeling telling him that his night was far from over. He wondered if it really would kill him. He sat the photograph down on top of Peverell’s parcel and set upon reading the small letter with newfound apprehension. His eyes ate up the words, the knowledge. It pounded around his skull relentlessly. More than once his eyes darted to the photo of the girl looking and then fleeing. He had family. He…
Minutes that felt like hours passed by. Hours that felt like years. His mind turning numb, his heart beating wildly, his hands cold and pale becoming translucent. Gaunt. Merope Gaunt, his mother. His mother who sacrificed herself to hide him from his family, even Hadrian. She gave everything to hide him from even the only family she trusted enough to seek aid from, Hadrian J. Peverell and the Verus brothers Lucien and Mercutio.

By the time he could make anymore thought beyond internal screaming the dawn was already breaking through the surface of the lake, penetrating the deep waters of the lake to filter through his dorm window. Reflections of water coated the walls. The sight and silence eased him upon the bed of cluttered boxes and one uneaten hideously perfect cake.

The world around him suddenly seemed far too big and he too small. Again he was thankful for the silence and emptiness of his castle. He didn’t know if he could bare it if he had to pretend he was well. He was far from that but in a strangely good way. He felt more complete somehow, like his chest of filled instead of empty.

His eyes drifted shut and his left hand gripped at his pendant automatically. He drew sanity from it as much as sanctuary for his weary soul. Magic hummed beneath his fingers warming him within. Today, despite everything else, had been the best day he had never asked for. For all the gut wrenching revelations and emotional backlash and, yuck! friendship, he felt light and happy. He felt like pieces were coming together in the tapestry of his history and now he had a name to call his mysterious friend by. Hadrian.

He fell asleep the morning of January the 1st, 1939 with the smell of ozone and the thrum of magic about his neck. That day he dreamed of a girl with eyes darker than night humming as she stirred a cauldron, her belly was rounded and while she wasn’t a beauty she was beautiful to him. She touched her rounded stomach in reverence and so much love. He dreamed of wild black hair and a quick smile. Eyes sparkling green like the color of her scales when the sun hit them just right. He dreamed of crackling lightning storms on the horizon and a hill bathed in gold where a figure stood next to a black grave.

He fell asleep January the 1st of 1939, the same day Germany invaded Poland and the same day as the beginning of World War II. Yet he slept better than he had ever slept before, for he had a past now beyond that spouted off by a drunk Matron.

Chapter End Notes

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So to head off some questions and answer some. This arc is about to hit its climax and speed up from there.

1. Incest:
It is true that Hadrian does end up in relationships with various people. Some include the figures of the late Alexander Mortimer and Lucien Verus. To note, these relations are by this point heavily removed from the Peverell line. Enough to have established massive power on their own rights with their own names and their own coats of arms etc. So lets get that out of the way seeing as most pureblood society is already related to each other. If this truly bothered you, you wouldn’t be reading a Tom/Harry Fanfiction.

2. Why hasn’t Hadrian stopped world war II or even world war I?
The fact of the matter is because he didn't know enough about that history to see the signs and head it off. Harry Potter before he even got into Hogwarts had minimal to no history taught to him especially muggle. He was eleven when he stopped learning muggle sciences and histories and instead enveloped himself in the magical one. Even that was limited because of Binn's and the fact he didn't put much effort into learning it. Even in his later years his knowledge of that subject was sorely lacking. The only knowledge he did have solid info on was the past of Voldemort, enough to know that the Blitz was happening when he was a boy.

The only way he knows so much now on it is because he is paying attention to trends that he has seen before and working off of gut instinct in his attempts to minimize the casualties of the coming conflicts. Who is to say if he is successful.

3. Why leave the wand with Gellert?
He also has a minimal understanding still of his true potential as MOD. He doesn't understand its malevolence because it is never aimed at him. He figures that it can be harmless because Gellert isn't its master, at least at first. As he starts to understand more he regrets it more. He also has other priorities more important than a wand to deal with. Families to protect, magic to teach to the willing, life to live. He has allowed the hollows to stay hidden for a reason as he does not want or need them. He hopes they fade into history rather than curse another.

He also understands that somethings are meant to happen. Things like Gellert getting the wand, the war happening, Tom Riddle ending up in Slytherin. The best he can do is minimize the impact but certain events play out regardless, as fate and time intends them too. What this can mean for the future, who can say.

4. Why not deal with earlier Gellert?
Certain things play out in fate. Hadrian believes Albus must face Gellert. He also believes it is the man's duty to face his ex-lover and the man he betrayed if only to feel some consequence for turning his back to magic. That isn't to say that he will not step in if need be. Also, Gellert is his friend. A love of his. Someone who he bonded with and trusted and in a way still loves. To harm him... well after the Mortimer tragedy it has become much more serious.

5. Hadrian is a HUMAN being with thoughts and emotions and dreams:
He makes human mistakes, loves rashly, makes bad decisions. He is not infallible or all powerful or all seeing. He understands magic and it works for him, he sees and he acts. He still makes mistakes, overlooks dangers. Sometimes he does not completely understand a threat. He is bound to make mistakes and stumble and grieve and have to deal with the messes he leaves behind. The wars he fails to stop, the people he has to consign to the memoriam. He is human and he does err. He is not a God. He is just a guy with a wand and he never asked for any of this.

6. Tom is emotional?
I have always believed that Tom wasn't born evil but rather evil was thrust upon him. Since day one the orphanage found his odd, never understood him, came to fear him, left him neglected, and suddenly he can make things happen and he is a freak. An outsider. Then suddenly he learns a place of magic exists only for the wizard to distrust him instantly, treat him like so many other adults who fear him. Again he is an outsider. He finds he is considered lesser. His world is crushed and so he rises above it, pushes down the pain and eventually becomes the cold and calculated adult who rules with an iron fist because he has always been a freak, an outsider to them. Enough that when
they bow he sees them now as other.

His enemies become not human to him.
Thanks. Vespairy

Edited 8/21/2017
The Sordid Slytherin Love Triangle, Charlus the Fair, and a day where everyone gets love, even Tom.

February 6th 1939 Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Somewhere in Scotland.

If there was one truth in the expanse of the starlit universe, it was that Charlus Potter loved Dorea Black. He had loved her ever since they were children, with little care for things like rules and expectations. He thought her stunning and had so for years. He thought that the way her eyes glinted when humored was worth the embarrassment, and oftentimes humility, needed to drag it to the surface. He fancied the way she huffed softly when troubled over things beyond her comprehension as if offended, flushing red high up on her soft cheeks.

He liked to watch her hand idly fiddling with the turning of her quill in dexterous, delicate, fingers when deep in thought over arithmancy problems. He found her coldness as refreshing as it was punishing, and relished in the rare moments when the sun would break through that icy heart and she would shine radiant. Her smile at those moments soothed a greater hurt deep within him, made all his patience and pain worth that one instant.

He admired her skill and the pesky way she could double cast while dueling her opponents; He admired her ruthlessness and merciless ways as her opponents fell before her; He liked the way she scolded them, nose slightly turned up, lips a slight twitch into a smug smile. Gentle and cutting. He delighted in her soft giggles from across a crowded hall, his flowers well thought out and inviting.

Most of all he adored her. The her he knew under that thick Slytherin facade she paraded about. The mask of a noble lady, ramrod straight, and all striding elegance overlaid upon the wickedly adventurous girl he knew. If there was nothing truer than his love for her, he would hadn't yet known it. Dorea Potter was to him, his Danae.

Ever did he give chase after her sidelong glances the likes of which pierced him through. Under thick curling lashes her eyes shimmered darkly. Ever did he strive for even the smallest appreciation. Ever had it been this way for him, loving her and she pulling ever farther away.

When they were small and his father less of the war hound he had become now, he would spend long afternoons in her company when his old tutor took him to the fields near her residence. He recalled meeting her as she studied the meadow flowers. Bright blues and violets surrounded her for miles to either side. He recalled the way a white girlish dress tangled and dirtied in the hemlock and mir. A speck of pure light in the world of harsh colors under the sun.

He remembered long nights when he could make her squeal with joy at the sight of Hadrian’s special blue bell fires, of their starlight, and small conjurations of long winged butterflies. He recalled fondly
the way her hair would tangle in the leaves of trees that she insisted she would climb regardless of whether it was ladylike, because he was up there and she could be too. Most of all he recalled her broken face when he had to tell her he was no longer allowed to come around. His childhood he left behind.

That time of indulgence had ended when his father changed, when Grindelwald began seeking power and his ‘uncle’ had gone to join him. He could still hear his father threatening the man, his curses, his defamation. Charlus had not understood it then, young as he was and interested only in learning to delight his young lady and devising ways to sneak away to her, but now older and wiser to his father’s manipulations he resented him.

He resented that he was taken from Dorea’s side in favor of isolation into lighter natured families; He resented the destruction of his school things from his former tutor; He resented the forced hand of his father against him when he refused to stop casting blue bells; He resented and it burned in him. Years of harshness taught him to reject outright rebellion and instead to work diligently from the shadows. To be more tactful and clever.

The excitement of doing wrong, being bad was exhilarating but it could not stop the bitterness which marked him. Still his resentment festered in him like a raw wound, for it was but his father's nearsighted prejudice that stole her from him. It swept her her far from him and the things he loved farther still.

The resentment fueled him further, to learn more of the things forbidden. To unearth from hidden places the works his father so desperately tried to do away with. He practiced in secret the magics that so delighted Dorea. Years he spent honing skills he favored so as best to use them to win her favor should they meet again.

Years later when he reunited with her, he had not stopped. In the dead of night when all the world lay sleeping he would slip away deep into the castle to cast, and work, and focus as only it could ever be taught from tomes banned from his household. Lessons from a man kept beyond the Potter Manor were exhumed during summers and with them the fondness he had of him.

In his mind he saw his mentor, the young man who smiled so brightly and guided him patiently in the ways to feel and do and will magic to happen. He could see him wreathed in the glow of stars and universes and loved. He thought then that Dorea would have liked him too. Those were calmer days and his childish devotion was only ever a thing to be encouraged then. A love that was unyielding and without end.

That was before the chaos that seeped into his family line, dividing and ordering anew in perverted images of what magic was not. Looking back and comparing it to now. He knew better, understood what he had so lost. The goodness that had been ripped away too soon. He wished for guidance most days but found it not in people but in magic.

When he cast he felt calmer, more centered, and capable of things that in the daylight he would have hidden otherwise. He felt as if the world were less of a titan and he more than a man whenever his fingertips tingled with a well placed hex. He was always left after a private session mellower. It gave him an inner peace that kept him level headed and at ease when all things turned to snarls of intrigue and courtly deceptions. So much so that he gained a reputation for his calm temperament.

He was known as a man of restraint, kindness, and patience. He stood as an example of honesty and integrity in the house of Lions. A lover, not a fighter some said, and others called him a pacifist. He was the one they called upon when lower years needed a soft voice or a shoulder when home was far away for them. He was dependable, not in anyway threatening or dominant. A calm and tranquil person of an easy nature.
Rivals were nonexistent to him for disputes were quelled instantly in the shadow of his gentleness. Hurts that prompted others to lash out, touched him not and fell away as nothing from his shoulders. Magic had no place for struggle, no allotment for chaos, and so his own nature reflected that as consistently as humanly possible. He allowed all things that hurt, frightened, and strained him to be faced and summarily let go. He acknowledged wrongs against him but released them in favor of peace and balance. This was his rebellion, absolute devotion of his self to magic so as to emulate it.

Many found his presence soothing, Dorea among the masses that sought him out in times of distress. Always in the evening, always alone, and always careful for wandering eyes.

Sometimes, in rare instances when expectations upon her grew heavy, and she needed a place to rest her head without judgment, his lady fair would join him. She would always come to him void of her finery. A robe hastily cast over her silken slip, where beneath there was nothing save the sweetness of her skin. Her black hair would be tousled in a way that she would never let anyone dare see but him. Wild, free.

She would pause only the barest of moments within the entrance of their space before closing the gap to be with him. She would settle behind him, curl herself against his back, shield herself in the expanse of his broad shoulders and airy magic. It would be the whole of her against the whole of him, and they would be complete.

For hours she would sit there just listening to the rhythm of his heart beating so close to hers, and he fancied that it brought her comfort and soothed her wounds. He liked to think it brought the same clarity to her as it did to him. Like this, it was as if they had never spent a day apart. Their comfort and familiarity natural like an easy ebb and flow between them as ever it would be.

Time and circumstances had cast them far apart but magic and history would always bring them together. She had asked him once why he defied his father so, would it not lead to his disownment? He told her he did not care what he father did onto him, he was free to make his own choices be damned the consequences, and if all his father could do was strip money from him and a title than it was petty.

Freedom and choice were more valuable than galleons. There was only one of himself, he said. He could only be what he was, and that meant being everything his father despised. He could either lie to himself and allow himself to be erased, or he could stand and fight against it. He was a Gryffindor, he was a Potter, and he was Dorea’s friend. That meant he could not back down now. Not ever.

He would not cower and smother that which was himself. His tutor had instilled in him that self pride and that oneness with magic. He would never give it up, just as he would never stop casting star-fire and conjuring butterflies. It was his magic and regardless of what his father may feel it was right.

It was as right and as natural as Dorea leaning against him, being beside him. It was a thing that he was unwilling to cast from himself, and while he could only go so far as to introspectively repeat old childhood lessons it was good to get it out. It was the right thing. He would fight for it even if all the world was against him. Besides twas not he that had begun this war within the house of Potter.

Had his father not already declared war with Charlus when he kept him from Dorea? Had he not done it when he cast his tutor from the manor all those years past? Had he not started the war when he struck him for spell casting? For burning the family grimoires, or at least trying to? It was his patriarch that brought this upon their halls. Charlus was not alone in his rebellion either. It was not just the eldest son who shied from familial decree.

If his father thought he could cut out the family magics, and stamp out wandless casting from his eldest, he was hopeless on his youngest. His younger brother Fleamont was a natural at wandless
casting, even being as young as he was. It was through him that his younger brother learned some of
the Potter Families darker spells, and through him that he learned the way one should see magic. See
it as he had learned from Mr. Peverell, to love all forms of it and handle it with care and focus
deserving of it. To know oneself and be true to that self.

For years they kept eachother's secrets. They rebelled together even now, each in their own ways.
They learned what they could from Hogwarts tomes they could sometimes ferret out in disguise of
projects. They would then record it for each the other to later learn. Where Henry aimed to destroy,
only creation came. Where Henry sought to smother the ‘dark’ from his sons, they only pulled harder
into the secret arts. The more Henry tried to pull him from Dorea, the harder he fought him. Fleamont
was just the same as Charlus. Hopelessly devoted to their craft and each a pinnacle of successes.

Together they were, in unison, a force against their patriarch. To someone like Dorea it did not make
sense, was near blasphemy, and she would be right from the perspective of one who valued titles and
money. Pureblood heirs did not fight against their lords as it meant damaging their status. To fight
them was to lose but in this case fighting was the brothers’ only course of action. This was not the
socially acceptable path by many but for them it was the only one worth taking. Magic, Fleamont,
and Dorea were the only paths worth risking everything for.

For this he was sorted Gryffindor. Other houses had been offered; Hufflepuff for his outstanding
stubbornness in the face of adversity and working through his limits; Ravenclaw for his unyielding
need to be true to himself; Slytherin for his cunning and wit with how he raised his younger sibling
to be his ally; but ultimately he was placed in the house of the brave for his courage to fight for what
mattered regardless of societal pressures. To do the right thing even if all the world thought it wrong.
Maybe his lady admired that more than she let on.

She was a noble daughter and she had duties to her family. She had perfection to attain, and
marriageability to keep in mind. She was expected to marry and bear sons. She was expected to be
good and do as told, to be quiet. She would be expected to obey her husband and to silence thoughts
of rebellion and relinquish the freedoms of men. Frankly, it was insulting.

She was more than just a vessel for rearing children. His dear girl was sharp and clever, more so than
many an aspiring lordling. She had dreams and aspirations far grander than the life of a kept woman.
She could work curses far superior to any suitor and she needed no white knight. She could hold her
own in dueling, a sport for which she was already looked down upon for participating in, without the
barest of sweats.

She was a warrior, an inventor of dreams. She was his girl who climbed trees regardless that she
shouldn’t, because it hadn’t been fair that he could and she could not. He told her all this once and
she had slapped him harshly across his cheek in rebuke. The fury in her gaze had been riveting and
she rose her voice without remorse for the unseemly nature of screaming.

She would not be some disinherited harlot without prestige. She was a Black and would not be
disgraced! She valued titles over truth. He saw it though, the pleased gleam in her eyes behind the lit
fury. He saw her adoration for his honesty. He saw her warrior spirit rising within chained by the
force of her families conviction to keep her a proper lady. As if she wasn’t more a lady than any he
had ever met! Dorea like this, in her anger, was a beacon that drew the eye. Spirit such as hers could
not be tamed by mere traditions and it was breathtaking. A raging sea.

Sometimes though, like now, with her curled against his back and his magic stroking her softly, He
felt she knew he was right. Sometimes he wondered where she went, that girl behind the mask. He
wondered what happened to the adventurous one he had met when he was so very young. For Dorea
was now a woman and he had been forced to miss the trip she took to get there. The coldness of
family expectations, lessons of etiquette. Nights being told she was only a woman, nothing of import save her ability to breed...

He missed her spirit the most, that girl in the trees, among the flowers, weaving through long grass. He longed for evenings chasing and casting magic lights just to delight her. In a way he knew that she too missed it, but decorum would decree that they refrain from such frivolities. A woman as she was now was above the conjuration of butterflies yet below the right to speak.

Years without his fire and heart left her to endure the cold realities of noble life. It had molded her into a tougher thing, but at the same time he wished that sometimes she would listen to herself more, and renounce those who would make her lesser than themselves when she deserved to be their better. When she was obviously their better. When her voice was worth more then theirs.

He loved her and felt the years that had divided them as a keen ache in his ribs. Some days he wished he didn’t love her so. It would be easier that way for she was mean when she meant to be, and had little patience for men. Little patience for him. Sometimes he could only watch on in silent agony as she burned the flowers which the day before had brought her to smile. Every time she ignored him in hallways between classes, killed him just a little inside.

As the years wore on, he wondered what any of it was of any worth. He thought these things and then she would look at him, as she did now, and he could wish for nothing more than time to fall further in love with her. Against him as she was now, primed and perfected, with petals in her hair, and warmth in her glow, he would forswear ever feeling regret over this beautiful thing he harbored in his chest.

Even knowing that she was using him as solace, even knowing that after he summoned bluebells at her behest that she would leave him lonely, he felt the worth of all of it. The worth of his love for her, more than gold, more than title. Utter devotion. Times like this were the best of times among years of worse ones.

“Charlus?” Her voice reverberated up his spine. It was a soft thing, smooth, and like warm smoke. He could listen to it forever.

“What is it?” His soft blue eyes turned upon her as much as he was able with her in his shadow. Strands of her dark hair were layered upon his shoulder where his lighter chestnut hair entwined with hers. He could feel her shift against him, her chest pressing hard against the undersides of his shoulder blades, her heart pounding soundly.

Her head raised and he was met with her gaze, all steel in the daylight but molten silver in the night. Her fair face was all the more stunning with the heat that was rising in her skin. Her lips were soft and small slivers of red, delicate and beautiful, her chin was raised in defiance but of what he did not know. Then she opened her mouth, words cracking open his reality and shifting all the stars within his sky.

“Marry me.” It was a demand. Her eyes hardened into resolve and he could feel her press harder against him. His own heart crashed upon his rib cage, pumping his blood hotly through his veins. He must have heard it wrong but that would be impossible for always had he listened carefully to every word she spoke to him, around him, about him. The good and the bad for always. So he hadn’t misheard. There was a beat of silence, she glared, he smiled, she glared, he smiled wider.

“Do you think I jest! You should be honored!” He could sense the moment she went to pull away and quicker than she, he pulled her to him. His back twisted, her face pulled into his neck as he smiled wide against her own. His lips pressed down on her pulse point wantonly.
“You! Jest? Never. I will my lady, marry you. Marry and cherish you; Elevate and respect you; Defend and honor you. Forever and onto death, beyond it even.” He whispered softly, smiling lips traveling further to her cheeks, red like those apples she so enjoyed. He couldn’t stop himself anymore than he could help the wide smile. He pressed her lips to his with vigor. Once, twice, and thrice.

Her smile, when he pulled away just enough so he could rest his forehead to hers, was everything. That bright smile was the Sun of his universe, the moon and stars and galaxies in his expanse of life. Elation had him high, his heart the rhythmic thundering of a thousand drums as it swelled heavy in his breast, fit to bursting. The room swelled with his ambient magic, bluebell fires and stars shimmering into existence and illuminating the room in their radiance.

“You don’t need to make me silly promises. I don’t need grand gestures of affection, I just… need you to be you. I only need you, no titles or galleons. I can’t imagine a life without you in it. I don’t want to wake up one day as some trophy to some man who only thinks less of me. I don’t want to just be a tool… I want to be somebody! I want to work! I want to cast spells with you and chase butterflies and… and climb trees again!” Her soft fingers traced his face, silver eyes bright upon him like they had once been when she was far younger. She took her lip between her teeth. Her face resolved and stubborn. It was endearing, resplendent.

“I told my mother I wouldn’t marry the Nott boy. Oh she was furious! You would have found it funny because her face turned purple. She wanted to disown me and I told her… I told her to go right ahead because I was going to marry you and that if she had a problem with that I would be gone by morning. She screamed that you would never have me because you were a light wizard and your father… Then, you wouldn’t believe it Charlus, Father came in and heard it and began to laugh! He was in fits! He took me by the hand and looked me dead in the eye, and you know what he told me? He told me to do what I damn well pleased because if he didn’t let me marry you then you would go and skin him alive, or kill the Nott boy in a duel to the death being the Gryffindor you are.”

He found himself chuckling and her giggle joined his, near hysterical as they shifted to be more comfortable. She buried herself into him and he covered her as a blanket and they both relished it. Starlight fires making tinkling sounds in the cosmic light of the room.

“He said that you told him when you were five that you were going to marry me with or without his permission, or your father’s. He said you told him I was too good for some snobby man who couldn’t see my worth or potential. He told me he was proud that I had backbone enough to fight and a good taste in reckless young men, unlike my sister. Honestly, it was just… I was scared! All these years for nothing! So Father says you have to come next holiday because as family you need to know what is what and possibly to threaten you if you hurt his favorite daughter. Or to warn you of me. One of those two things.”

Her head lifted away to stare him down. Together they shared a secret smile.

“You do know that this is a for keeps. Now that you have me you won’t be rid of me. Not that you haven’t always had me. I solemnly swear. Well maybe not ‘solemnly’, enthusiastically, with much feeling.”

And things could not have been better. They sat in their embrace late into the night under the magical light of Peverell fires and magic. Together again, as they always belonged. Green and Red, silver and gold.

The following Wednesday found Charlus with his wand at Thadeus Nott’s throat and Dorea at his side looking on dispassionately. It had been expected that the Nott’s would respond unkindly to the
betrothal of Dorea to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter rather than their own. It was however, foolish to try and contest it as the Potter’s were by far much better off than the Nott’s, and held more political sway. Despite their family being labeled as Light by many of the darker wizarding families, it was not such an upset to marry a daughter into such an esteemed and ancient house.

What was an upset was the fact that a betrothal contract was nullified and that it was by the Black Lord personally. The idea that the Black patriarch supported the union was what had angered the Nott family, enough that when breakfast ended and the news had been delivered, Thaddeus had risen with a cruel vengeance from his place at the green and silver table.

His countenance was that of a black cloud, rage obscured his usual indifference. A line became of his lips pulled far too tight over his teeth in the wake of his upset. Normally handsome and approachable, his form now was a pillar of wrath. He was tall and broad, more than Charlus by far, and he moved with an efficiency not often seen off a dueling platform. Like a servant of death or a warrior of old, and all of that was heading towards them.

Dorea, who had not left his side for the four days since her request stood with elegance at a table not her own. Her gaze hardened into chips of ice as she watched his approach but he didn’t so much as glance at her, he was set upon her beau beside her for she was inconsequential. She was only a token to be won. A woman and nothing else. The heat and weight of his gaze was a tangible thing against him, making his heart pound in anticipation.

As Thaddeus drew closer, cloak a dramatic flair in his wake, Charlus huffed in resignation. His breath caught at his wild light brown hair and his blue eyes snapped up to meet his opponents dark brown, before they slid languidly to his fiance. How radiant she was when wreathed in fury. His dearest lady. She turned to him and he shook his head minutely. He closed the distance to her and took her hand in his own, their fingers locked together in perfect alignment. Small to his large. He brought them to his lips gently brushing against her skin in reverence.

“Allow me to defend your honor. I know well he is no match for you but allow me the satisfaction just the once.” He whispered it against her skin and looked to her for her permission. His eyes matched hers and he saw the moment she gave into him. A terse nod and she slipped behind him. It was a sign of her trust in him that he was allowed this, to allow a man to take the forefront for her in this battle. Her battle.

Maybe she understood that this was his battle as well, that his stance beside her would be cemented in this instant. Thaddeus was no pushover, he was top of the dueling circuit in Hogwarts while Charlus never once stepped on a stage in his life. Where Charlus was cool water, Thaddeus was a raging fire; Where Thaddeus was a seasoned veteran of dueling, Charlus was a novice all self taught and instinctual.

The man storming to them was formidable in every way an opponent could be and maybe it was wrong for Charlus to be so excited but he was, his magic singing in his blood for the challenge. The need to prod at the man approaching. Fire to water, A tsunami to an inferno.

“How dare you! How dare you steal what is mine!” The Slytherin’s voice was not soft, booming and husky in his fury, eyes followed the seventh year as he approached. His words echoed into the din of the morning, bringing about the sudden silence in its wake. Even the first years, unknowing of the drama occurring, were strangely mute. It was as if the entire hall had lulled to a stop for this one moment in time. Where two forces were to clash.

“Dorea is not a ‘what’. Dorea is a woman with ideas and ambitions and dreams, she is not just some trophy to be had Nott. Do not insult her in such a way, it will end badly for you.” Charlus never
pulled his eyes from the other who had come to a halt before him, vibrating tension and hatred. He could almost taste the thickness of it coming from the taller man, and a tiny bit of something else that he could not name. His wand was within his hand, but so was Charlus’. The two of them were forces opposed, tension heady between them.

“The lady has chosen and it was me that she chose. I suggest you slither on back to your seat lest you make a spectacle of yourself.” He heard the soft giggle at his back, felt her hand press upon the hollow between his shoulder blades, and his own lips twitched a shadow of a smile. With her at his back he could do anything.

The man before him stiffened, seething until a strange sort of calm overcame him. It was as if someone built an impenetrable box about his person to which nothing escaped. It was perfect control and enviable in its mastery. His dark eyes grew sharper, deeper, it was almost eerie the change that overcame him, fascinating. A serene smile pulled on full lips and it would have seemed benevolent had Charlus not known a threat when he saw one. Thaddeus raised a poised hand, long fingers ran through his dark blonde locks with a calm grace that did not reflect the beast beneath the skin.

“You jest Potter. She is but a woman, that is all she is worth and you are a fool if you believe otherwise. You, being the savage that you are would not know better, I hear you disobey even your own father. So be it then, I will have to put you in your place. I, Thaddeus Theodore Nott of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Nott, challenge one, Charlus Henry Potter of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter, to an official duel for the hand of Dorea Black of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black in matrimony.” There was for a moment total silence and then the booming voices of outrage, in equal measures with excitement, erupted into a great cacophony that filled the hall and beyond.

Charlus saw many of the professors try to rise from the corner of his eye but Armando Dippet, the headmaster, quelled them with a gnarled hand. His face looked tumultuous and solemn. He knew his traditions, as any great wizard should and respected those that called on magic such as this.

“The terms are as follows, we will duel until one of us is incapable of continuing, be it from disarming the other, incapacitating the other, or upon death. The place of the duel is to be the shores of the Black lake at sundown. As this is an official and legally binding matter regarding the future of our lines, ministry decree states that so long as we duel outside of the walls it is permitted that we do so without the interruption of teaching staff and without threat of repercussion save from the terms of the duel specified and agreed to by both parties. Do you accept them Heir Potter? The terms which I have set.”

More shouts of outrage swelled around them but Charlus understood what this game was. Thaddeus did not wish him defeated, he wanted him dead, this was a legal way to get the opportunity. Should he perish it would not only prove that the Nott family was more desirable than the Potter’s but also would place the House of Black and Potter under scrutiny for allowing a noble daughter to be placed with said weaker house.

Not to mention it would leave Fleamont Potter the successor of the Potter family, a much less politically inclined mind and easier to out maneuver in that field. The Nott family would be given recompense and status and its enemies would be weaker for it. Dorea’s wants and wishes be damned. Sadly, that was the way of pureblood society.

He did not hesitate to step forward to match Thaddeus, their chests inches from each the other. The heat of the man before him warped about him along with his scent, rosemary, mint, and pine. Their eyes were the blackest pits, blown wide in anticipation. He fancied they could each hear the thunder of excitement each from the other, their hearts straining for the challenge. So willing to fight, needing
to test the other and know them as only battle could know a man.

Fight they would. There was no second thought in his mind that this was not worth the fight for he had scrapped for less. Thaddeus made it so easy to want it though. The way he spoke and that tugging smirk at plump lips ate away at his insides, making his magic boil with anger and emotions he had little names for. It would be so easy to get pulled into a rivalry such as this. To fall under the sway of such an imposing man.

He opened his mouth, dark eyes focused on his lips as they moved, was about to accept the terms but shut his mouth and took a moment to think through the haze of battle lust and ire. An idea was shadowing in and out of his addled mind. A set of manipulations unwound that he struggled to understand in the now. He remembered long ago that his mentor told him to never agree to something without gaining something more than what you began with. A Slytherin way to think but often the best way. He also said to think about a legally binding magic before blindly being goaded into it.

Dorea had already chosen him, she was no object, and so he was at net zero on gain from this duel. Less so if his father had a say in it, which he didn’t as he had gained his majority early in January. It wouldn’t stop his father from stripping him of the family fortune and that was no way for them to live after they were wed. Nott was gaining status if he won, a grand amount of it and more.

Such an arrangement was not beneficial to him or Dorea, and if the worst should come and his father disown him for his decision regarding her. He needed something to keep them afloat. To be worthy of taking care of her. If this was high risk anyway well… The Potters had strange luck, either very good or very bad but never a little of either. Always extremes.

He could possibly gain much more from this and crush the worm who dared to think his beloved as just a thing to be had. This man who dared to rile him this way and unbalance his peace. That was worth it he decided, that was indeed very much worth it. His own smile tugged at his lips viciously. He could swear he hear Thaddeus hiss in something like lust or want. His stomach clenched in sin at the sound.

“I, Charlus Henry Potter of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter do accept the terms of the duel upon reprisal. I move that a boon be added. Should you win Thaddeus and I live, you may ask of me one thing but should I win and you lose, I get to ask one thing of you. There will be no limitations to it and any normally binding laws regulating such a request shall be null for the purposes of fulfilling this term of agreement. Do you accept Heir Nott?” His opponent grinned a grin that matched his own and his head tilted just so when he laughed.

The sound was full and sinister, it was the sound of a man who was cruel and merciless, and by Merlin he was thrilled by it. Any other may have shrunk back from it but he was no coward. He had never bent in the face of danger or adversity. He would not start now. He relished the challenge, the fight, the burning embers that were Thaddeus’ magic lapping at his own.

“I, Thaddeus of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Nott, do agree to the amendment of terms. So smote it be.” Warm light wrapped about Nott’s wrist, a soft color becoming of him if not for the devilish smile upon his face. It twisted the pure light and made the benevolence turn to malevolence. He too raised his hand, feeling the light escape him from the tips of his fingers. He felt the power twist in him, binding him to oath.

“So smote it be.” The golden light radiated about him, it wove deep into brown hair and burnished it in gold. Unlike his opponent, Charlus brought out its brilliance wholesomely. The oath faded leaving only the tension in the hall. The tautness about his insides.
“Tonight then Potter. It's a date.” Thaddeus did not spare Dorea a single glance as he turned from them. He stalked back to the table, gathered his things, and left. A quick survey of the hall showed to him the mix of emotions prevalent. Awe in the younger years, rage in the older years, and utter shock from the professors. Duels in Hogwarts were only ever matches organized by a club, and he had to wonder when last a proper duel had been held. Such private things they usually were.

A gentle hand slipped into his and he felt her solid against his side, her lips brushed over his cheek in a ghost of a kiss. His temper melted, his skin quivered at the presence of her. Maybe it was the adrenaline, maybe it was Thaddeus' wicked smirk, but he did not hesitate when he kissed her fully before the entire hall. His hand lifted to run through her orderly locks, heat suffused in his breath and skin.

“I shall never fail you.” He didn’t have to say it, and he knew she knew, he would be true to his words.

“I know, you just wanted to fight. To have a rival at last. Trouble follows you. Make him regret every word Charlus. Enjoy the battle.” A quick smile shared between them. His expression softened into a lovesick smile and she pretended to be offended by it.

“Of course my love. Anything you wish.” As it should be, and that was how he found himself by the Black lake that evening with his wand raised in a sharp defensive stance. Magic battering at his expert shields.

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The Black Lake was something of a marvel. It was suspiciously small in comparison to the looming castle that lorded high over it. The surface of the water was clear by day, a beautiful sparkling mirror with which dreams were cast. By night the surface provided the namesake for its body as the surface became a dark miasma of never ending blackness. The creatures below would stir and move, the grass ripe with grindylows and other strange and unknowable things.

It looked to be only about a mile but below it was rumored to be much deeper than that. More of a trench than a lake at that point, where within the great bowels, the Giant Squid lurked and treasures were forgotten. Most first impressions of the lake were from the gentle swaying of a magical boat slicing through the blackness. It was the many reflections of lanterns like fiery stars over the surface to the many pinpoints of stars that were the heavens and Hogwarts herself.

It was on the shore of said lake that Charlus stood without his customary Hogwarts robes. He owned no dueling clothes and so opted to wear the loosest things he owned to aid in movement. There was no Hogwarts tie, no markings of house or status, just him standing tall against the fading sunlight over the lake. In the days that would follow he would be described as Kingly, with hair wafting in the breeze and red in the setting sun. A heroic white knight standing tall and defiant.

For now however, it was only Dorea and himself.

The gaggle of onlookers had not yet shown themselves and earlier in the day he had overheard the prefects speaking of banning all years under third from watching the dramatic finale of what the rumors called the “‘Slytherin Gryffindor Love Triangle”. It had not taken very long for said rumors to crop out of the woodwork in the Hogwarts’ rumor mill. Less to become emblazoned with details of a late night tete-a-tete between if not one or two, all three of the people involved.
It had not helped that the Slytherin House had been oddly silent on the matter. Some of the other houses however claimed to have seen sordid encounters, and described with enthusiasm 'The Bewitchment of Fair Charlus'. It was a favorite idea that the kind and gentle Gryffindor had been dosed with amorantia and that he was actually supposed to be madly in love with Thaddeus, but Dorea wanted him for herself. Other tales told of how one Hufflepuff third year came across the peaceful lion completely besotted, wantonly pinned to a desk and begging heatedly for more from his impressive Slytherin master and mistress. A tag team event.

The fact that Charlus Potter was dueling, being violent, was enough for the mill to turn effortlessly with stories each more dramatic than the next. It seemed that only the highest years saw the dire situation for what it was and made an effort to silence wagging tongues. Now, in the fading light, all tongues were silenced instead they watched on through windows near and far.

It was only a few moments later that his opponent came. The man was swathed in tight fabric, attractive and expensive, no doubt somewhat spell resistant considering the nature of this duel. It was clear that Thaddeus had planned well ahead for this move in the game. Charlus was by far at a disadvantage already and they had not even begun.

He strode towards them in a sort of elegance that came from firm hands and years of practice. His blonde hair looked to be rimmed in fire, and dark eyes sparkled with a cockiness that set Charlus’ teeth on edge. His heart beat fiercely as his rival approached. Boots came to just inches of his own, rosemary-mint-pine, heat overcame him. He knew he must look much too eager as he craned his head to look up at Thaddeus’ superior smirk. A power play if ever he knew of one.

"Has anyone ever told you how short you are darling?" Dark eyes looked down to him and he couldn’t help that his mouth and brain weren’t keen to connect at the same time because he found himself saying the following.

"Has anyone ever told you how your condescending demeanor ruins your good looks? Allow me to be the first then darling." What? Why did he day that?! Those eyes narrowed at him with an emotion he could not name and the smirk stretched a bit more into a threatening grimace. The flush of anger made the normally pale cheeks fetchingly red. It was... such a rush. His adrenaline started to pump harder and he wanted to bait his opponent. Wanted the fight. He wanted.

Thaddeus must have seen through him though and chuckled low. The hum of it made his fingers twitch. Thaddeus’ grin spread sharply against his cheeks. He was trying to be menacing and seductive all at once, looming over the Potter heir like some great vulture. It only made Charlus’ blood race more, the need to insult Thaddeus growing stronger by the second.

He wanted to antagonize him more. He wanted the coolness in him to break apart, he wanted the fire of the man underneath the facade to bear down upon him and burn him. He wanted to pit his magic against the burning inferno under the other’s skin. Take him apart. He needed it.

"Cute Potter. Real cu--" The words were cut off abruptly as Charlus took a step forward, forcing Thaddeus that much further back. The air between them was blistering.

"If I were being cute I would call you a prick," He let his voice over pronounce the ‘k’. His tongue clicking against the roof of his mouth.

"Or an arse,” Fire crackling beneath his rival, rising just that much higher to the surface but it was not enough. His own was a crackling of energy, sparking just that much more in the oncoming storm.

"I might even call you challenged but.. I’m not being cute today. Just polite. So get your wand out of your arse and let’s get this over with before I fall madly in love with your horrid mug. I rather like
how red it gets when your jimmies are rustled and I can’t say I can stop myself if we dance around much longer. I might even let you put me on a desk if we keep flirting like this.” What did he just say? Why did he say it? His blood was in his ears and he found himself taking a millisecond to try and find himself. Something was wrong with him.

When did he get this... Gah! Why did he say that as well?! He wanted to open his mouth, say something to make this okay. To end whatever they were doing but the feeling of vicious satisfaction when Thaddeus started to breathe heavily in rage just did things to him. His blood felt on fire and he needed to break this man more and more and… That was alarming!

He was never one to want chaos. He did not advocate violence. He always tried for calm, to tame the storm that was his wild magic, constantly. To want so badly to break all of that and headlong sprint into a fight like this one was against all he had built upon himself. His calm, tranquil attitude was little more than tatters before Thaddeus Theodore Nott. The man did things to him just by breathing next to him, looking at him.

Maybe it was the magic of his opponent calling. Maybe it was that it was so well controlled and just as wild, like fire burning higher and higher to compliment his own. Maybe it was that he had never had a justified reason to lash out until now but… He had never wanted to break someone so badly and it felt good. The man before him hissed, red and shaking, so fucking perfect. His heart beat with the need to bring him out of control even more. He wanted to see him a writhing mess of magic and fury and he wanted to fight it. Gryffindor indeed.

His anger was so beautiful and just as suddenly as it was breaking open it clamped shut and he despaired. The red remained, he shivered still, but it was as if his opponent was a doll again. Cool and collected and inside, Charlus felt something scream. He felt a piece of himself hurt for being cut off from the fire he had felt against him. A piece of him that had slipped out of place. Thaddeus stepped away in concession and it was only more upsetting, despite the idea that Thaddeus failed his own power play. The victory felt hollow.

“Very well, as you wish Charlus.” It was a monotonous voice with little inflection or emotion. It was sickening and it only made him more unsettled and he wanted his rival back! His opponent was backing away that smirk of confidence back against his lips. Yet, he was not there. Ten steps away, ten steps too far away from their previous battle of wills. Cold replaced the heat and Charlus reminded himself of what he was battling for again.

Dorea’s smile, her scent of lilacs and honey and books, her touch against his skin… If there was one truth it was that he loved Dorea. That was enough to settle himself, find the distractions in his magic, in Thaddeus’ odd affect over him, and expel that which he faced leaving only calm. The gentle ebb and flow of magic, strict directions for himself. He too turned and stepped his ten away.

His eyes scanned the windows of the castle, the faces of many looking on upon the battle to be. He locked gazes with Dorea and felt himself settle more firmly. He nodded and she turned to head back to the castle all grace and poise. All his. Then, as if some unseen agreement between them, Thaddeus and himself turned to face each other. Their wands flicked up to separate their faces and then they bowed low.

He wasn’t sure who fired first but they began their dance, the flick of wands grazed the air. Charlus felt magic leap from his fingertips and he sent it forth. Crackling of lightning and waves roaring in his ears from his insides, a storm raging under his control and direction. The ground shifted in a flurry of casting as they dodged and attacked in equal measures.

“Prismatus,” He whispered in time to stop what must have been a silent bombarda. The shield raised itself blindingly high, rainbow and spherical. Then he spun and it winked outwards in a way that was
unintended in its use. It slammed sickeningly into Thaddeus like a battering ram. A moment later he
heard a pop and swerved to miss a cutting hex from the man, those dark eyes were wide looking
intrigued and a little of something else. There was a bruise starting to form under his eye, his lips
were parted to breath. It was a second before the spells resumed, furious in nature.

He dodged and fell back as spell after spell hurtled at him, hitting his shields in a succession so quick
it was alarming. He sacrificed step after step, his veins humming with force and will. Absolute was
his intent to cast but the battle was shifting faster and faster and he was unused to demanding so
quick the changes needed in his directions to properly fight back. Thaddeus was a menace. He
needed time, a plan, even if for a few seconds. He needed to breathe.

“Avis,” He whispered. The birds took shape and Charlus morphed with them feeling his arms shift
and his body soar high. His magic produced a magnificent horde. So numerous were they that it
would be a moment until his opponent could banish all of them. He flew until he was far enough
away to think. Then he landed, shifted swiftly, and cast, a spell and then two. A ward and a trigger,
everth had time to take.

A cutting hex slipped over his cheek and he cried out in surprise. Instinct took over and he cast his
own catching that caught his rival’s arm. The two of them began again their dance, a furious
whirlwind of magic that ripped the ground from its bed, froze the water of the lake into spikes,
twisted roots into trapping tendrils.

The battle pulsed between them, their eyes flashing, wand movements between them furious as they
leaped from space to space. They apparated onto whatever they could, their battle reaching far
beyond the lake. Nothing had ever felt so free or amazing as this. His energy beat against another
equally as stubborn. He had known of course, that he loved battle. That was why he had never
joined the dueling circuit, his need for fighting was an addiction he could not escape. His soul called
for the wildness in it, the savagery, as much as he knew he needed stern direction to temper it.

He had always feared his battle lust. He had right to.

Thaddeus, casting and alight with magical fury, was the most beautiful thing in the current moment.
His golden hair was disheveled and layered in blood and sweat and dirt. His dueling robes had not
withstood half of Charlus’ spells which transfigured the environment. He looked alive and ragged
and god damned beautiful! The man swirled in easy orbits, all skill and practiced cunning. The spells
they leveled the field with were powerful, unrefined, perfect to demonstrate the power behind their
families. Whatever come from now on, there could never be a doubt that the Nott’s were powerful.
Powerful and fucking perfect!

Minutes that felt as hours passed and Charlus was pushed back into a spire of rock that was his own
invention. A wall to let him breath for a moment. His vision was pulsing along the edges, his heart
hammering. He couldn’t locate Thaddeus for now but the wards he had cast about himself would
hold him at bay long enough for retaliation.

He took a breath, his lungs burning. His head dipped but for a moment before a force speared
through his shields and dug deep into his person. He was slammed back into his spire, pinned to it as
the gravity around him shifted and became a heavy weight on his chest. He could feel the edges of
his work digging into his sides and he wheezed as it became more demanding.

The pressure was frighteningly steady, and his wand arm was useless to move under its influence.
His chest prickled in the place the spell hit him. His magic was rapidly running lower as the weight
increased. His chest creaked under it as if a body were holding him there. Heavy and hot? The spell
was burning low and warm, its tendrils seeping into him and easing down his own magic.
Warmth was pounding through him, tingling under his skin as if it belonged there. Fire embers licked
at him from the outside in. It pulsed against his inner lightning, soothing and demanding, not to be
ignored, his to belong too if he willed it. It was so... good. His fatigue grew the more that magic
rested against his own. His will wavering in the face of its promise. He would have moaned if he
could breath more than in heated breaths.

Thaddeus was stumbling over, a nasty twist in his right leg where a curse had reversed the bones in
that leg only. He too was breathing heavily, dark eyes lit bright by the craze of the fight and his
hands shaking from fatigue. There was triumph on his face, his tongue peaked out to lick at his lips.
Blood seeped from the corner where he had failed to evade a battering hex. He stepped closer over
the borders of the stone circle of spires.

His wand lifted in a trembling hand and he made a defined slashing motion downward, only the spell
never left his wand. He huffed and tried a second time but the only thing it produces was a small
gauge in the ground beside them. It was obvious now how drained their fight had left them. Charlus
felt it in the emptiness of his diaphragm, his muscles, his bones aching. The carnage they left in their
wake had taken its toll upon them. If Thaddeus could not manage a cutting hex he wondered how he
could break this spell upon himself, what was fueling it if his opponent was so drained...

Warmth assaulted his insides and a keening whine left his lips, his eyes fluttering closed. It was
obscene, his body fighting to arch into the pressure upon him. His mind was turning hazy, his core
easing under the influence of a dominant one. The magic of another touched his own so tastefully,
they belonged entwined like this.

“Shit... Charlus...” The voice was raspy and Thaddeus made to take a stumbling step forward only to
collapse on his bad leg. The man was smiling victoriously.

“Even if I lose today... She will know what I have done, what you allowed. What you wanted. I
had... intended for it to be... painful. Who knew... darling.” Magic burned brighter in him and the
pleasure surged up in his spine. It singed his nerves, quickened him to the very base of his being. He
was moaning and his body shook in desperation. He wanted, needed, Merlin! Fuck.

He tried to make out what Thaddeus meant. The man again was rising from the ground, approaching
and all of it haloed in a victorious smile. His brain was trying hard to function, pleasure sparking in
him with every word, every movement closer. The need...

Oh, oh. Dread curled low in him just as surely as the pleasure had him moaning louder as it assaulted
him. His eyes were blown wide with lust, blue burning the edges of the black pupils. His cheeks
were flushed in desire or maybe shame.

This was one of those spells. Once cast, it was fueled by the affected and the effects could vary
depending on the feelings the victims had toward the caster. This one was meant to control, to hurt
an enemy. It was intended to be painful because Thaddeus thought that Charlus hated him, wanted to
hurt him or worse. If that had been the case he would have been writhing in unbearable agony now
but he was not. He was writhing in undeniable pleasure.

The worst of it wasn't even that, it was that it was only so strong because Charlus wanted it to be. It
was reacting to his battle lust. It was holding him steady because control was what Charlus wanted. It
relied on his need to cage the magic that was his own. It siphoned on his need for discipline and
calm. It gave him what his inner self wanted most, domination. The pleasure of Thaddeus onto
himself.

Shame rose tight in him as he understood the implications. His throat worked as he tried to
comprehend the truth to it. He, wanted this. Merlin he wanted it! Thaddeus was standing over him
now, the night rising behind him making his shadow large and foreboding. He was breathing hard, his hair mussed, so fucking good. That smirk was pulling at his lips his dark eyes dancing and Charlus, couldn’t take it!

A hand stroked his cheek and he was done for, stars erupted behind his vision. His core burned, fire trying to soothe it in desperation but the spell was too much, the desire fed far too far. His back snapped up in singular focus, pleasure striking him so hard that all his world was reduced to Thaddeus’ name screamed from his lips in completion. He came.

His magic surged forth through the ember binds that tried to hold it, in a wrath that would not be soothed or bound. It came out of him in a second animalistic scream which blew back his opponent in a haze of spherical electricity. It left him able to breathe but weaker than he had ever felt before. He trembled from the strain feeling empty, and desperate, and not wanting to acknowledge what he had just learned of himself. He wouldn’t think of it yet, he would get up end this. Then when he had the time to meditate on this, he would face it.

He pushed himself up only to fall back again. He tried again and shakily managed to stand his eyes going to his opponent who laid unconscious and sprawled over the ground in a heap of robes and blood. A wet choking sob broke free from him and he felt wetness over his cheeks. His stomach heaved but he had no strength to vomit.

He slowly made his way over and plopped heavily down beside Thaddeus’ prone form, taking from the man his wand so as to toss it as far from them as possible, which was admittedly not far by this point. He panted heavily and placed a hand on his rival’s head of hair, ran his fingers through it. Tears streamed from his cheeks and he could smell he scent of his own release. His body was winding down now and there was a dread feeling in his heart.

Coldness was settling into his bones and his veins ached from his strenuous use of magic, the emptiness a dull ache that throbbed now and again. There was a pit in his stomach that was eating away at him and a burning in his throat that spoke of the amount of noise he had made. He had been so sure that he was untouchable by the vices of men… so very sure that only Dorea had that power over him and now it felt as if Thaddeus stole a piece of him. No it was worse than that he had let him have it…

A bell sounded too far off signaling that one of them had been defeated.

That was it, he had won. The victory felt hollow and sick.

Footsteps approached and he lifted his hand away and into his lap, no one need know. No one needed to know what he had lost this day. How bitter it was for him to admit it. His blue eyes wearily lifted to see her, dress long and billowing. Her eyes were gentle storms and he knew she understood. Her smile though, it was her smile that made him choke as she knelt to gather him to her. His head buried into her bosom as he shook from magical exhaustion and grief. If there was one truth in this world it was that Dorea cherished Charlus Potter; Charlus Potter loved Dorea; and Thaddeus Nott stole the heart of one of them.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Somewhere in Scotland.
February 13th 1939

It was within the high shelves of the library that one could find the young Elias Cartwright with a book hovering open at his left side, another before him, and a long parchment to his right which only grew longer the more his quill moved in exercised motions. Diagrams and formulas dotted the paper occasionally and if one were looking they would notice his eyes never left the books about his
person despite the neatness and precision of the writings being produced.

His auburn hair was wild and tumbling over the back of his chair where a flower rested unnoticed in the tangles. If one knew the boy at all they would know a certain Hufflepuff had made it a game to see how long the boy would go while wearing one before noticing and burning the flowers to cinders. Some days he left them in purposefully, because sometimes the flowers were lilies and Tom mentioned he rather liked lilies, and when one was in a romance they took those sorts of things into account. Today was not a lily day. Elias was distracted.

Tawny eyes darted to his neighboring chair wherein a thin rake of a boy lounged peacefully. As peaceful as a Tom Riddle could get anyways. Tom liked to care about appearances too much to ever truly be relaxed. He was always the picture of royalty and unknowing to any but Elias, he worked hard to look and act as such. It showed in the way he moved and spoke and even in the way he was now with his back straight against the back of the chair and his legs extended to cross at his ankles. He held himself always with the air of one above the rest of the world, or rather unaffected by it as if he were some long forgotten prince. It reminded Elias of a book his father had once made him read when he had been a more amenable child. The forty-eight laws of power.

Sometimes like now, he found himself recalling the forty eight laws that governed power and couldn’t help but see parallels in the way Tom acted or reacted in regards to himself and others in the world. It didn’t bother Elias any, not much did, but sometimes he wondered just what the future held for his Mr. Riddle and himself. He pondered over if there were ever times where Tom slouched as Elias did and not just over a book. Times such as these he usually just went back to researching as he was wont to do, but today he spent a little longer observing his beau, contemplating as it were.

A picture of a prince indeed. His obsidian hair was tamed but it was hard to miss how it curled softly at the tips, and around his forehead an eyes, black as the void of night. Those same eyes kept focus on a large tome that he had pulled from a package earlier that day. It was an old thing, but the bindings were well preserved and the pages seemed ornate and rimmed in what seemed to be silver. Every so often fingers would come up to soft lips and a tongue would flick briefly upon the skin of his index finger so as better to turn a delicate page. It was enchanting the care he showed the books he received from that man.

Peverell, Tom had told him. They spent many an hour since yule researching that name and its line. Spellcrafters, potioneers, wardmasters, wandmakers, and many other famous members and talents existed within the lineage but mostly they were famous for their necromancers and the Three brothers Peverell and their mystical Deathly Hallows.

He had never seen Tom so absorbed before, or as excited. He had secretly been putting together notes of anything he found that would be of use on the subject for his dear Tom. It wasn't as if it was not interesting enough to research for himself but, and he looked to his partner, he liked it when Tom forgot to be a prince sometimes.

A few times that penetrating gaze caught his own, and for a instant there were questions passed between them in their strange but companionable silence. Tom’s head tilted to the right almost imperceptibly, the light glinted on a jewel that hung in the knot of his tie. It had been a gift for the yule holidays. The rune sowilo glowed, embossed in an amber like material. It had been a rather extravagant gift and Tom guarded it jealously.

“You keep staring, is there something on your mind today Eli?” Something… no not particularly, nothing so organized as that. He just... He was just bored with Arithmancy despite the subject material supposedly being far above his age bracket. He was in no way nervous about... what was it he was nervous about again?
“I was just musing. I was trying to recall if there was something I was supposed to be doing. It feels as if I forgot something. Something important…” Elias turned away and looked to the ceiling. His hand never stopped recording the problems and diagrams from the texts. It scrawled heedless of the internal split of attentions. Such was the eerie power of Elias, to be able to be in two mind frames at once. A prodigy, all brain and no heart some might say. So Ravenclaw that many others of the house thought he should get out more, whatever that meant.

They were of course, wrong. He got out plenty, the library was ‘out’ as it were. He was social, he studied often with Tom on their dates. He had emotions but they were reserved. It would not do to have emotions for anyone other than the man he was in a romance with as that was improper. Besides logic was more valuable than whatever Marigold was half the time. He much rather preferred reason and cold logic, he preferred intelligence and Tom was all of that. It was natural that they ended up in a romance.

That is what they were doing, dating or whatever the older ones called it. They met four times a week at least to study and work on separate projects, they walked to classes together, they worked in classes together ‘exclusively’ when they were in the same ones. Tom and he had meaningful conversations. As far as societal norms were concerned that was dating, he had looked it up in a great many books about the subject and that was what they were doing. That meant some days were supposed to be extra special and he had…

Well he had remembered that he should remember such things like specific holidays but it had been so uninteresting compared to other research. In the end he had just asked Marigold about it. She hadn’t been helpful, as usual, but had instead became more intolerable than usual. She even went so far as to change colors and start giggling in that horrendous shrill way of hers. She was happy to tell him that Valentine’s day was almost here and she would be waiting, whatever that meant. He could recall it was sometime this week… Today? Yes that must have been it otherwise he wouldn’t have let it get in the way of his search for truth.

“Ah. I remember now, one moment.” He turned from his books which lowered to the desk with loud thumps. His quill dropped from small fingers as he pulled to himself a rather meek looking bag where from within he drew a glass lily embossed on a hinged box. This he presented to Tom without fanfare or coquettish flourish. It would have been cold to anyone else but Tom understood him better than anyone and… He thought he saw shoulders fall just minutely in a more relaxed way. Was that victory then?

It was a victory so why did Tom look like that? Like he had not been expecting it or that he was confused? The a sound broke their silence, soft at first and then louder. It was a nice sound and a good one. Usually laughter was annoying but Tom's was special, and he was hunched over like a common man which was better than a king. Still, he wondered why it was funny. Tom straightened after a moment and smiled, a wide thing of teeth.

Elias felt a strange sliding pain in his stomach. His chest pricked with an uncomfortably pleasant feeling. He blamed it a bad breakfast and not on the way Tom’s eyes were alight with mirth, or on the way his cheeks were flushed from being too human.

“Valentine’s day is not until tomorrow Eli.” Tawny eyes blinked a few times and he hummed thoughtfully. He supposed he could wait until tomorrow then. He went to retract the gift but slender fingers rested atop his own for a fraction of a second. They were warm and if it were anyone else he would have hated it, but he and Tom were a team so he would put up with it. As long as it was just this.

“You are supposed to give gifts to people you care for Eli. Like a girl you care for.” Tom took the
box to himself and looked at it curiously. It was such an elementary thing and Eli knew that better enchantment work existed. Tom wore a grand example of such feats on his neck, but Elias had worked all year on this since he decided the two of them were friends or rather when they became lovers. It had been complicated enough, a challenge, and a first year shouldn’t have been able to do it. Elias however was no mere child and Tom deserved the best he could give.

“I suppose that is what most people would say.” He sniffed and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“They are all useless. Besides, I don’t care about them. If you do not want it then throw it away. I made it only because I thought of you.” The books began again to hover, as Elias began again on his interrupted work. He could feel the weight of eyes upon him and for some strange reason he felt sick inside, like his stomach wasn’t quite well. His face felt unbearably hot and he wondered if he was falling ill. Maybe Marigold had given him something through her stupidity.

Whatever, it wasn’t important because it was distracting him from Tom and his work.

“You made this... For me?” The words in his book were looking worryingly the same, if he were to look at his note taking he would see the same lines written over and over, like the words he kept rereading over and over.

“Yes, was that not obvious? It is an enchanted box, you put your letter in and it appears in mine. In essence it is a smaller version of the outdated vanishing cabinets. It is however, only able, right now anyway, of sending small things, most notably letters. It may not be as impressive as some of the strange gifts you have been given by your mysterious Lord Peverell but it is functional and it should be of use to you. Right now it’s sister is mine so you can only really use it with me but in time I could expand upon it and make it branch out to others. That is if I make more or you do. The theory is sound but it needs refinement and... “

Now that he really took even two seconds to think on the implications... He supposed that it wasn’t such a small gift after all. With enough fine tuning it would be possible to entirely turn the wizarding world on its heel. To be able to be the titan of the wizarding world’s main communications network...

It could be useful but the work that was needed to be put into its maintenance, and what have you, was not worth it. It would get in the way of research, time needed to be spent on other pursuits, Tom. Just put royalties on it then? That seemed much simpler. Let others do the rest of the leg work and he could reap the benefits without the need to sacrifice time or energy into something that was merely a trinket to his companion for some silly, emotional, holiday.

“Oh I suppose I should at some point patent it. It could very much revolutionize our owl post systems and make such a system obsolete. I should take a moment to do that, eventually… Make it interconnected like the Floo systems? No... then it wouldn’t be as selective, no demand....” The more he spoke, the more he was aware of a shifting at his right. The weight of a shoulder upon his, and a hand stilling his own as it scribbled the same things over and over.

“I like it Eli.” He felt a brief pressure upon his cheek, a nose releasing breath too close to his ear. It occurred to him that kisses on cheeks not only came from mother’s but he had not been prepared for ones from other sources. His skin prickled and he felt that knot in his stomach tighten even more. His face felt overly warm now and he was certain that there must be something wrong with him. Yes he hated physical contact, and he had the instincts to react badly, but it was Tom and that meant this was okay because that's what one did when dating. The gave and got kisses. It was Tom so... so he would bear it despite the goosebumps that raised the hair on his arms and neck and the pounding of his heart.
“It is a most practical gift. Let us test it out tomorrow then. We should pick a few places to keep them as far apart as possible.” Tom suggested it with a wistful look, miles away. Most likely thinking of other things or the research they could do. Elias hoped he wasn’t becoming like those other over emotional beasts in their year. Then again, even if he was. His heart pounded once, twice, thrice… It was okay if it was Tom and as long as it was because Eli put it there.

The rest of their time in the library they sat far too close for comfort. The heat of it was sweltering and Elias decided maybe being in a romance was much harder than he first anticipated. Maybe it was so hot because he was sick? The upside was that they talked of more interesting things and made plans to spend their time tomorrow as far away from others as possible. A date on Valentine’s day.

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That evening found Tom in a refined cushioned chair nearest the fireplace of the Slytherin common room. He would usually settle beside Abraxas if only to show that he was supported by the powerful Malfoy family but today he needed the space. Often he used the position to his advantage to display his advanced knowledge of his years curriculum and to fish for the intricacies of the society and its great game. The older Slytherin was usually surrounded by the influential members of other houses and while that was usually well and good tonight it was grating on his last nerves. Tonight there was no other bodies of influence, just of idiocy.

Abraxas was currently on the love seat with two witches on either side. They spoke with a fluttering in their lashes and subtle touches of their fingertips. It was as if Abraxas were some easily tricked fool though right now he was proving them right. It was as if all cunning had been sapped out of him in favor of wooing as many cretins as possible. This had not just pertained the females either.

He had made a point of handing Tom a red card made of magically combusting hearts earlier in the day and the only thing that had saved the man from immediate doom was the magical notebook it was accompanied by. Tom added the card to the growing pile he would be systematically destroying later, the notebook he kept begrudgingly.

It should have been amusing but the behaviors of Hogwarts in the past few weeks leading up to tonight and tomorrow were unbearable. The level of human stupidity was off the charts, the sheer amount of hormone induced idiocy enough to make him wretch. All week he had been subjected to the idle and inane chatter of people trying to plan workable strategies for courtship. He had been interrogated no less than five times by women over half his age about if they looked pretty, because Marigold said Tom had such a great grasp of fashion. After all, he likes lilies so he can’t be so bad, she had said.

It also didn’t help him that girls his age had warmed to the idea that he was some misunderstood prince, no doubt Marigold’s influence, and had approached him at all hours of the day to ask him to spend lunch with them, or breakfast, or go by the lake! He was sick of forcing a kind smile to his face; Sick of looking at them like they meant something; Sick of them thinking that they could touch his arms or hands. He had explained to them many times he preferred space but they did not listen and so… He had gone to the library.

He had gone to the Library where the only sane person in Hogwarts resided on a daily basis and hoped that Elias wouldn’t bother him. It had been a relief that the boy had given him an out. No lakes, no dates, no chances of poisoning with love potions, he was twelve for Merlin’s sake! All Elias had done was give him a gift and chances were he did it because of some misconstrued idea
that Valentine’s day wasn’t romantic.

It was hard to imagine being cared about in the way that Elias cared. It was unobtrusive, distant, but meaningful. The gift had not been small either. Elias was proving everyday no matter how inadvertently, that he was a magical genius. His understanding of arithmancy and runes were far enough above the skill sets of third years. So far that he could create magically enchanted devices that had the potential to revolutionize the world. Yet he didn’t care any of that?! He didn’t care about money or rising to power, only learning, and having a weird semblance of friendship with Tom... He severely lacked ambition.

Instead he had created potentially devastating things because he thought that Tom would find it useful, and it was a holiday, and Tom was his friend, ergo he needed to make a present for him. He just did things that showed deep thought and concern but couldn’t fathom how to project those emotions… emotionally. He was like a block of logical ice. Like some walking machine without complications.

Tom found it most pleasing and useful. He did not have to pretend to smile, or worry about being touched. He did not have to hide his darker tendencies because to Elias, it did not matter so long as their research was meaningful. So he had made tomorrow a day with him instead of anyone else and yet still… Even still he was approached by no less that two more girls, ravenclaws, and asked to be their dates. Regardless of having a so called engagement already, regardless that he made it clear he just wasn’t ready for such things, regardless of his wishes they just kept coming.

He scowled into the pages of his current book. His fingers toyed at his tie, closing about the amber sphere, and for a moment he forgot he was in the common room. Electricity tickled his fingertips, the smell of ozone and oncoming storms filled his nose, and his heart beat in time with the pulses of soothing albeit chaotic magic. In his mind’s eye he thought of a girl with dark hair and dark eyes akin to his own and the name Peverell. It soothed him marginally.

“Is everything alright Tom?” His eyes snapped open and pinned gray ones in a sharp glare. The man almost flinched and internally Tom was glad Abraxas had some backbone. It made him slightly more useful than other people. To be fair he was usually extremely useful, exacting in his plots and victorious in alleviating the ire of the majority of Slytherin house. He had smoothly quelled a great deal of the powerful hierarchy into either ignoring or sometimes aiding Tom on his road to greatness. It did not hurt that Waverly Rosier had taken a particular interest in doting upon the residential pet mudblood.

Speaking of Waverly, she would not be happy with Abraxas’ popularity today. The least Tom could do was chase them off he supposed then again, maybe he would let the man dig his own grave today. The two women, neither of which were Waverly, were curiously intent upon Tom now that the focus had shifted to him. Perhaps they thought that if they seemed fond of Abraxas' pet, then they would look better as a prospect for marriage.

He wondered how far they were willing to go to impress. Perhaps he would test them for Abraxas. Maybe even prove how worthless they were. He could even make them cry! It would serve to alleviate some of his bad mood. He would also be serving the public as he would be culling two idiots from the worthless crowds eating up his follower’s time. Time meant for Tom. He was terribly bad at sharing.

Seeing as he was in such a terrible mood he decided he might as well make it a point to teach such a lesson. It was inconceivable that Abraxas should be content this evening when he, his master, was not. It would not do at all. The man should be blessed to even be considered ‘above’ Tom in station. He should be grateful that his limbs weren’t dust, or his blood wasn’t boiling. For every slight, every
piece of this arrangement that was demeaning, Tom would get back at him for tenfold its transgression.

Maybe the elder understood the plans of torment unfolding within the boy’s psyche because his throat bobbed as he swallowed. Grey eyes widened into black pits for the fear, as if death was missing him by inches, and then desire because that black magic curled from Tom so leisurely in such quantity. It lapped at his own in anticipation, oily and thick in its allure. It reached deep and wrapped about his own like a great hand and stroked in an obscene way, a way that no child should know of.

It was absurd because Tom was just a twelve year old little boy.

Sometimes he forgot that he was anything but a child, so great Riddle was at the game of deception. He was a twelve year old child. A child that had for the better part of his first year, proved that creativity was a beast when paired with the magnitude of his raw magical force. The discipline of it became a painful, awful thing for those that attempted to cross him. Likewise, a delicious thing to those he allowed to bask in it.

Those that had the misfortune of meeting it in the former of the two extremes, left the encounters marked down to the soul by the experience. Scars and maiming were not uncommon for the types of accidents that Slytherin house became prone to finding. It was the mind however that Tom enjoyed and specialized in destroying the most. It was never a readily seen damage nor was it life threatening. The occurrences were never something so extreme as to cause investigations, but enough to get the message through.

Nights of silencing charms required to keep screams at bay, for the nightmares that haunted, the invisible hands that clenched, and teeth that bit.

It was never proven that Tom had anything to do with the ‘accidents’ that plagued the house of snakes. He was never seen anywhere near the scenes and those that dreamt of terrible awful things never said it, but more than once Abraxas bore witness to the gleam of satisfaction when examining eyes rimmed in sleeplessness.

More than once he caught a sinister smile twist behind a book page in the aftermaths. When asked Tom could dissect things that must have happened, as they surely had or as if he had been there, and then he would laugh. Laugh because he knew of spells that did such damages, and it was unspoken that he knew how to cast them.

To be certain he did not want to be on the receiving end of such a temper and unfortunately he had to play a precarious stance in his dealings with the young Tom Riddle. With his aid the house of snakes warmed to him quickly to the child, seeing as he had attached himself faithfully to Abraxas' side in the evenings. They could, at the very least, respect the wishes of himself and their good head of house.

It did not mean that all accepted it. His own inner circle was not too keen on a mudblood among them. It was hard to sell the worth of a child to higher years that were set in their ways. He was still, after months of effort, working to improve Tom's standing in the house of snakes. He worked around the clock and stretched his information skills wide so as to aid the boy from pranks and the occasional extreme blood purists.

It had gotten to the point that he had to put down Walburga Black with magical force in the defense classes. He had to harshly remind her that while their wealth was even, their standings were not. He was a Malfoy and he was above her. It had been a day of lessons all around as he reestablished his position at the top of the food chain.
As for Tom, he sought to calm the situations where status differences between them were mentioned. He made sure that his young protege had the proper school materials. So much that he had spent a fortune of his own allowance to ensure that Tom never wanted for robes or goods. The world saw it as doting on a prized pet, he saw it as tribute for his continued well being. He viewed it as a solid investment and a keen eye.

He had a feeling though that he had done wrong today for he had seen the terrible glint in the eyes of that dark child, and today it was aimed towards him. He thought on it and resigned himself to an evening soothing the temper of a child, one who could not respect the finer arts of the sensual world as of yet. He resolved himself to a night with a cold bed. It was a small price to pay and if he were to be honest, he was ever eager to be near Tom when that magic was so close to the surface.

As for Tom, he briefly wondered if Abraxas could feel his malcontent. The man before him shifted minutely in nerves, needing to please or alleviate the rage directed to him. Sometimes it was hard to tell what was what with Abraxas as he was ever shifting in his feelings and whims. It made it difficult to relate to him, and clueless instances on the part of his minion were to be expected. Pride though, pride one could understand.

Abraxas prided himself in carefully handling Tom as he should. He should feel obligated to ensuring his master’s happiness and it was pleasing to feel that submission come through, elating to see the slightest of tremors in the long fingers that rested over each ladies’ shoulder. He wondered if Abraxas knew that he should be here at his side. Did he know he should love Tom more than some quick bed mate? Should he not adore him more than useless women?

He wondered how far he could go to make Abraxas his, as it should be. Women could always be obtained but Tom wanted his attention now. He wanted him here and he did not like waiting, if it wasn’t for something direly important. His fingers twitched idly over a page in his book but his eyes remained upon the trio before him. Searing in their intensity.

“No I am not. It's been crazy all day. I couldn’t get any work done.” A sigh and he faced away to the fire, letting his thoughts stew. Warmth beat against his skin, cozy and elegant. He could hear the crackle of embers and to his right the shuffling his elder one attempting to extract himself. Harsh whispers about him sounded as he was successful.

“Surely it couldn’t be so bad Tom? It is the night before Valentine’s day. I even gave you a card today and a present.” The arm of the chair dipped and he felt a hand settle in his hair. Abraxas was ever in need to touch him when they were near one another. It should have been comforting, but Tom found he hated it. It felt like something that he shouldn’t ought to be doing. Comfort was not something he had ever received and he was not about to get complacent. Abraxas be damned.

He wanted to snap and growl, raise his hackles and bite down hard. His magic was ever eager to serve him and keeping it at bay was harder than it needed to be right now. It was so used to doing as he wished when he subconsciously wished was it was more difficult than ever. It was only sheer force of will that he didn’t send Abraxas to the floor in torment. Doing anything but playing the innocent, prepubescent would ruin the facade he worked so hard to keep. It was too early to rule by force.

So grudgingly he allowed the long fingers to comb through his soft curls. He would let him get a sense of security then he would bite. On some day far from now, when it counted, the man would recall what he had said to him on a train before the beginning of term and pay for every trespass of his being. A sweet smile pulled at Tom’s lips and he closed his precious tome with a loud bang. The book was bigger than his lap, and he knew he must look very young. His head angled into long fingers and he glared without heat at the sinuous form of the Malfoy heir.
“Girls keep crowding me and asking me strange questions, and looking at me with the oddest expressions. Some even touched me and I don’t know why! Some sixth year Hufflepuff even asked me if I thought her hair was pretty enough to impress some guy I have never even met... I don’t get it, it is like the world has gone crazy. Even you have forsaken me to ally with girls! It is just a holiday, I don’t understand. People act like this is for the rest of their lives. That they will marry tomorrow or something. I don't understand.”

He huffed sending a curl of dark hair up and out of the way from his face. His lips set themselves into a petulant pout and he turned his nose up from them all in the guise of a clueless child. He could hear giggling and again he had the urge to set everything on fire. The world could burn. A huff of amusement and a soft tug on his hair only aided the thoughts of arson currently worming their way into his inner psyche.

Let the world of idiots burn.

“I apologize for abandoning you. Are you upset because they hurt you?” It was a serious question but it did little to quell the temper ever rising within him. Long fingers pulled away from him and he wanted to snap at them to go back to where they belonged, rubbing away the stress in his scalp. He really needed to decide if he liked the proximity of Abraxas or hated it. Later, when he wasn't so grumpy.

“My pride perhaps. Why must I be kind to everyone? Especially when they are being insane! You aren’t insane like that are you Abraxas? Surely you wouldn’t let strange women touch you?” There it was the catch, dark eyes peered up innocently at the regal face of the Malfoy heir, the Anger in their abyssal depths glinted harshly. You are mine, if you leave me right now I will end you. That was what he had wanted to say. What he actually said was,

“You like me more then them don't you? Am I not better company?” He allowed his eyes to say what he truly wanted.

The regal face hovering over him winced in a mockery of being wounded. It made him feel just a bit better, but only by a minuscule amount mind you. Perhaps, he sighed as long fingers took back up to stroking back through his locks, Abraxas wasn’t so intolerable. Maybe he could allow the poor man a day to be an idiot like all the rest if it meant he wouldn’t slip up again the rest of the year. He was after all just a wizard.

“Of course you are wonderful company Tom. I like you best.” He felt lips touch his temple. They were warm and soft, firm in their affection. For an instant he tensed, unsure what to do or even if he enjoyed it or not. Before he could decide a voice sliced through the air, sharp and shrill with the heat anger.

“Abraxas you utter fool! How dare you stand me up for-- Oh, Hello Tom! I have heard just the best things about you! You have become the catch of the younger years! Abraxas how dare you?! I waited two hours for you!” Waverly Rosier stormed over in righteous fury, her voice and posture kind only when her focus had briefly turned to Tom. She was a fourth year and daughter to the Rosier family. A particularly nasty sort of mean for a woman.

Tom remembered his estimation of her from the train and found that her uselessness was a very well executed mask of deception. Her specialty was intelligence in Hogwarts. More specifically she was a kep component in the wheel of the Hogwarts rumor mill. She was responsible for the making and breaking of many social lives. In fact, the two woman on the couch were now nowhere to be found, no doubt noticing her arrival and unwilling to make targets of themselves.

It was well known she sought to be a next Mrs. Malfoy. According to sources, she had staked that
claim before their first year even begun and had since then, destroyed the reputation of eleven rivals. For this talent, Tom had grudgingly come to respect her as some form of asset. Insofar as he used her favor for favor. Other than her mean talent with the swaying of social gossip, she was intolerable. Her rumors the worst of the worst, especially when they involved himself in them.

Her love for building some grand image of the poor orphan in Slytherin had progressed into so many versions it made the head spin. Her excuse was that too many stories could hide what the real truth was and while that was cunning, it held more flaws than he could count. So Tom became everything from a pauper, to a murderer, to a lost prince, to a rich heir to a long dead family, and so on and so forth.

He dreaded what her influence had been in the events of today. She had to have done something. Now that he saw her and took two seconds to think on it, this fiasco had her sharp manicured nails all over it. Relief eased some of his tension, at least he knew now Marigold had nothing to do with the insanity he had faced today. He did not like to think unkindly of her, as much as it pained him to admit it.

“I hear you let each lady down so gently they never realized you would rather spit in their food. Talent dear. Talent. You will be something when you get older, tall I bet and more regal than even Abraxas with your cheeks. Yes, a real looker. Have you decided how best to start using such talents? Girls start younger than you on building their public image, we should trim up the back of your hair, show off your neck. That necklace will have to go of course—” Absolutely not!

Ice flooded under his veins and the fire beside him sputtered, the very logs crackling with oncoming frost. Anxiety and fear clouded him instantaneously and he clutched at it in automatic possession. No one would touch it, not his hair so like his mothers, and not his pendant. If anyone dared he would destroy them completely. To insinuate either were sub par was so insulting he had no words. The wave of rage that accompanied the sudden onslaught of emotions tore all goodness from the fingers running through his hair. He suddenly wanted her to hurt. To hurt, and scream, and beg for forgiveness.

The only thing that held him back was the scent of ozone that got stronger the more his magic roiled under his skin. Clarity in a small amount, enough that he knew he couldn’t strike her down, not yet.

“No.” Short and concise, flat and without tone. Anyone who knew him would hear the underlying anger. He leaned into the cushions of the chair, his fingers brushing over the free hand of Abraxas, claiming him. His now, if only to hurt her.

“Pardon you?!” Her shriek was accompanied by a look of complete shock and disgust. He could feel his companion grow tenser and tenser.

“I attempt to help you and yo-” “I do. This pendant is a gift, amber and silver, enchanted by a master of the craft, unrivaled and proof of the lost family lines I have. Only members of specific lines are even gifted one, usually upon the coming of age and all are specialized to suit. Consider it on par with an heir ring if you must, but don’t you dare to insult it, and its creator, by even suggesting it is a mere trinket. If you doubt me, try and take it from my person, I can guarantee the Lord who crafted this did not hold back on anti-theft charms. As for my hair, I quite like it like this, my mother's hair looked like it. If you must make me up like a doll, pick something else. These I keep as is.”

His chest rose on its own in pride. His chin lifted defiantly. He felt a buzzing in his system, petulance in his rigid posture. He challenged to any to doubt him, as if they even had the right! He displayed his pride with certainty, and he felt the weight of eyes on the perfectly rounded stone snuggled at his throat and loose in his fingers.
He knew they traced the paths of snakes engraved so fine as to appear akin to vines, grasping and holding the orb in reverence just as he did. Their gazes roved over emeralds glittering in eyes of the many. They saw the Sowilo displayed in the center precise and nearly invisible rune markings, as light and translucent as smoke over the amber's surface. They examined the Acromantula silk bathed in blood of mythic creatures. All of it was a testament of devotion to him from his protector. His Hadrian Peverell.

She despaired and he, Abraxas, rejoiced.

“I- Well this is great news then?! Why haven’t you told me! You were parading around with this old fashioned amulet so I let all the girls think you were a romantic! I never thought of it. Whose line?! Who was your mother and who was your father?!” The insufferable waif of a woman pressed close, mirroring Abraxas and boxing him into the chair by sitting on the left. She ignored the danger in the air daring to press too far into his space.

His magic roiled in anger, still very real. She still dared?! Such courage to be broken or arrogance to be paid for. Tom glared at her, all he had of hate and disgust he drove into his eyes. His gaze bore into her with the dark promise of torments and pain. Hell reflected in the pits of his iris’. He could see it as she visibly recoiled, the fear gauging deep into her center and seeping deeper still until he knew she felt his ire in her veins.

She knew she had crossed the line. She knew she would pay. The fire died from the ice that consumed it.

In the end he needn’t even speak. Maybe it was that Abraxas cared even a fraction for her safety because it was his cold and cutting voice that silenced her then. Perhaps he knew that Tom was already on a short leash of patience or maybe he felt the thrashing need to rip, and to tear, and to kill for the insults and violations.

For that was the magnitude of the transgressions. Not to himself… no the need for penance due was greater for she, cur that she was, insulted his beloved. A man worth so much more than she in every aspect. Maybe Abraxas was just sensitive enough to head off the inevitable doom she would face if she continued as she was. Tom could not afford to make powerful enemies as he was now and while utterly stupid she was just that, a powerful enemy to have.

“That is enough Waverly.” The atmosphere brooked for no argument, the sudden dark from the dead fire punctuated the mood falling around them. It was enchanted to ever burn but now it was broken. The ice had overcome it in totality, the magic thick and oily in its dominion. A second later and he would have tangled it about her like a noose. She would have suffered for her arrogance and would have known no better either.

She could not sense magic as acutely as the Malfoy family, despite her wickedness in curses and quick hexes. Like many she lacked that skill along with the most important traits of a capable witch or wizard when it came to the casting of magic. She lacked communion to it, survival instincts, and the knowledge of when to lose.

What use did that leave her when her social abilities fell short as they did now? What use was she without tact or wit. A pretty face, even if the flush in her cheeks currently transformed it into the grotesque hurt of a woman scorned.

“Abraxas…” She whimpered but a stern hand cut her off. It laid across Tom’s chest, protective and absolute. Her visage crumbled further before them, abashed and red. *Disgusting*, he mused. Her usually pristine lips thinned into a harsh red line and her skin was blotchy.
“Have some tact. Think of the implications. Think for a moment of what you were about to do and say. Do you not care what emotionally this is like for our dearest young one?! I apologize Tom on her behalf and on mine own, while I am glad you have found some semblance of family and while I am grateful it is a Lord who has acknowledged you… It shames me that it was so late. I am abhorred by the price you have paid thus far. Waverly is incapable of rational thought right now. I apologize deeply on behalf of her and myself. If you do not mind me asking, why did you not tell me?”

That was… actually a good question and he would have to ruminate carefully on the words he chose to respond with. He could not afford to alienate his main pieces so early in his game. The apology would suffice for now, he supposed. It had been made well enough for him to rethink Waverly’s punishment and the consequences of acting upon them so soon. If Abraxas was asking for her pardon, he could allow it to slide just once, so long as her wagging tongue was in check. He could not stand to have her smear Hadrian’s abilities and tastes again.

To be honest he was not sure if he could let her live should she do it again. He took a moment to assess the new situation and his choices. His inner Slytherin recognized this as an ample opportunity to gain favors, influence, and respect. The setting was perfect and both figures owed him their own assortment of attention.

Their abilities would be highly prized in the future. If he could solidify their loyalties he could those abilities properly. Implementation of secrets without telling said secrets would be handy to have as his beck and call. It was a prime. He wouldn’t even need to do much for this grand manipulation so long as Abraxas took it with the seriousness he was renown for when it came to Tom. He would be perfect to hold the reigns on Waverly.

Waverly was another matter entirely. She needed to be guided to become useful. He would need to give her reason to feel special and to want to be sympathetic towards him. He hated her but he could still use her. He recalled a lesson he learned when he was younger. A way of easily making people do as he wanted them to do. He just needed to give her a secret to hold, an important one beyond the scope of regular gossip.

It went like this.

People when entrusted with things that were insinuated to be personally exclusive secrets or lucrative ones, tended to keep those things close so as to use it best in the future. It made them feel obligated to share ones of their own in trade, feeling the need to divulge things and be closer with their secret keeper. A true Slytherin would recognize the art and appreciate the effort. It was elementary level. A level one move on a game board of level sevens and higher. So they should see it for what it is. At least, a proper cunning mind would.

Waverly, for all her faults knew the value of information and at what cost to sell it, or be bribed, to keep it. She would know this gambit better than masters. She used it all the time. A personal secret for a personal secret in order to make nice. It made people feel special, included, and valued to be trusted with such pieces of the self. There was little chance of such privacies being released to the populace because a trade had been made. Tit for tat. The players might tease others with it, ‘I know something you don’t’ but ultimately, those were the secrets kept secret the longest.

Waverly would think she had a true secret to keep. She would feel as if there was a favor owed to her or a debt absolved. Abraxas would feel included, special, and the favorite as it were. A win-win situation. Especially for Tom who could use Abraxas for his expertise in the world of politics and the families.

He would be able to aid him in research, and more than that to temper Waverly’s wild tongue. He would protect the information by using her attraction to him, his status as single and hers as a
potential future Mrs. Malfoy as collateral. They would both think themselves so special to Tom, to have his trust. They would think they alone were privy to it and that made them think it had power over Tom. That they had power over him.

He wondered how far he could take it. This strange, exhausting, game.

“Abraxas, a privacy charm or three please. Ideally forty, for this is truly important business, but tonight three will do. Everyone is too distracted to be lurking right now and if they are, well lets make sure they are repaid thrice fold.” Once the motions had been met Tom was pleased to note ten security charms and five more he did not recognize. More that felt wandless were layered on those and he appreciated his pawn ever the more for it. True use indeed.

The fire started back up again, in the accompaniment of visible breaths. Warmth slowly returned to fingertips and the room settled in for a story to be told. Like some grandiose play, a scene was expected to play out and the players were all present.

“He told me to me to be silent about it. That was the reason I did. The information is dangerous. I was unwilling to let even a smidgen of it slip until I knew for certain that the persons involved would be the right sort. Let me reiterate that the sensitivity of this information is the sort that one could be tortured for, killed for. Now ask me why I never told you Abraxas. Think about if you wish to know that sort of secret now that the price has been laid out so to speak.” Two sets of eyes widened one more subtely than the other. Neither hesitated or made to leave, Tom took that as a positive that they wished for more.

He could see the gears turning in the mind of the lady and open thoughts floating in the mind of the other. No doubt trying to work out the different scenarios and insinuations over the nature of such information. It would not be some simple thing like a bastard, or a scandalous marriage. It would be something one would kill for and it all tied into the child before them. At least that was their primary thoughts and they were both right and wrong.

Waverly was of the opinion that it would be as simplistic as bastards, but was unwilling to speak again for fear of offense. Families who were threatened in their power by rightful heirs born out of wedlock had a nasty habit of killing, quietly, those challenging them. She was right now thinking over how to tactfully put the idea of bastards and infidelity into the current atmosphere. Weighing how angry she could afford to make Abraxas and finding no excuse worth the ire of the Malfoy heir. She was both right and wrong.

“What is it illicit?” That was what she decided to go with? Well it was something, at least it was tame.

“arwaay it must have been, for the live head of my direct blood house would have me killed if he knew I lived and breathed. It was the main reason my mother left me to the orphanage as she did, and a small reason why Hadrian has not come for me yet. Before you say anything, she did not abandon me. I have no doubt that she loved me. She used drastic measures to keep me safe, enough to prove to me that I was more precious to her than her own life.”

He paused allowing the silence to stretch for a moment. He brought her forth in his mind, and remembered her in dreams. A maiden in love with her unborn child. Enough to carry him through to term, to give all her magic to him, her blood for his protection. Her life for his.

“You say drastic measures…” Dread, sinking pits in stomachs, the gnawing of bones.

“Of what are you speaking?” This time it was the smooth voice of his minion that broke the silence. He knew what the elder was thinking, could see the dark intrigue behind his eyes and the hope that his thoughts were not justified. There were magics one just did not do. Gates and rituals meant to be
forgotten. Dangers untold in legends for a reason, shadows in the spaces of men meant to be left as they lie.

“A ritual of old magic as you are thinking Abraxas. One requiring a life in return for protection, her life for mine own. She knew she would not last. She was sick and I was killing her. She was constantly feeding me all the magic she had. She abstained from healings, giving all she could for me. She put me first, until there were no other options to be had and time had run out. It was too late at that point for alternatives and she was drained of magic for I was voracious.”

“She had little choice but to turn to the muggle world. She could not return to her family with me and have me live, nor could she bear to live in a world with me dead. It was happenstance that she came upon the orphanage when she did. I would not wait longer than the last day of the year. So she begged them to take me in. She named me Tom after my father, Marvolo after her father, and Riddle after my father's grandfather. She did this and used all that remained of herself to enact the ritual that would hide me from all who would dare try and harm me. Or find me.” A mother’s love. A selfless, unconditional love.

“She used all she had to cast that powerful blood ritual. She used her lifeblood, my birth blood, and the water from her womb to pay the debt owed. She called on all figures gone from her line, and wove into the walls of that place a haven for me from a cruel world. The ritual has kept me off of the ministries books and the family tapestry of my grandfather and uncle. It even has hidden me from those wishing to aid me as ironic as that is.” The fire spit and the wood splintered.

“I wonder if that is what one would call love. Her name was Merope Gaunt.” He shifted in the chair, lost in his recollections. The stories Mrs. Cole had told him. All of the lies about his whore of a mother. His hatred for the matron had never been higher than when he knew the truth. When he learned his mother gave as she did he raged against her. Merope was farther from any negative image that had ever been painted of her. A strong woman of worth. He could not even be mad at his blood anymore, it was half hers. Halfblood, like Hadrian was. Perfect.

“Was it true? I only ask because,” Tom nodded the firelight gleaming in the abyssal eyes, highlighting raven curls.

“I am certain. Much of the story coincides with what the matron told me of her. I also received a picture of her from an acquaintance. The creator of this pendant has a close friend who knew her. I have her eyes and hair. You were right about my eyes Mrs. Rosier. They are hereditary, according to sources, all of her line have such dark eyes. There is no doubt that I am her son.” He watched shrewdly for any sign of note either from the lord or the lady. He could see again the wheels of thought ever turning. Connections were being made, a story etched in history most tragic.

“I do not mean to sound doubtful but who was this acquaintance and could they be trusted. You are no fool but this is a matter close to the heart. I do not need to tell you how vulnerable that makes oneself.” It was a valid point and he made sure that his blonde companion knew he did not judge him poorly for it. He had thought it himself often enough. His blind faith in Hadrian’s trusted was disturbing on some level. It was enough that he remained cautious in regards to Mercutio. His lips thinned in thought, perhaps now was a good time to test the mettle of a name.

“Mercutio Verus. Tell me Abraxas is he trustworthy?” It took a moment of silence as the name sunk in. It was in the subtle changes that the truth was wrought. A widening of pupils dictating want, a slight twitch to show surprise.

“A powerful man for a powerful name. He is the eldest of the Verus family but not the head of it. His younger brother Lucien is a magical powerhouse and beat him in a duel for the title. That is not to say that the elder is lesser. Every member of that family holds prestige and renown for feats in
enchanting, spell creation, and more. If I recall the daughter married into a rival family and ended a blood feud.

“He secretly runs the family which his brother acts as head. They are significantly wealthy, the top power of the Italian government. Mercutio Verus is known for being fair and notoriously unavailable to the idea of marriage. I cannot say he is a bad friend to have. In fact, many would kill to have his favor. I would say in confidence that he is trustworthy. Loyal to a fault even.”

That was good to know. Something in him loosened marginally. A resolution to a problem taken care of.

“He knew her in life. We are distant cousins he says. He holds loyalty to the main Peverell line. Which is where the real danger of this tale comes into play. Those letters and parcels I receive are from Lord Hadrian J. Peverell, the current Lord of the Ancient and Most Noble house of Peverell. This necklace was handmade by him in the hopes that if the worst should come I would be safe.” His fingers caressed the stone, lovingly. Lightning flowed through him, ozone in his nose, nitrogen on his tongue. Safe. Beloved.

There was a sharp intake of breath to his right and he glanced over to see a pallor take over the face of the scion of Malfoy. Likewise, Waverly froze in place. No doubt they instantly understood the implications of such information. All dark families knew of the current Dark Lord Grindelwald. Some in Hogwarts supported him, idolized him even. So they would know of the importance this information held.

“You know of them obviously, tell me of them. I fear Hadrian does not let me know too much. He dotes on me, wants my absolute safety. He can be overbearing in his vagueness. It is foolish and… endearing.”

Abraxas clenched his fists into his lap, struggled for a moment and then something in him snapped ramrod straight and he turned to Tom full on. It was a dark satisfaction to see possessiveness in those eyes. The need to protect on the forefront of that unshielded mind.

“The Peverell family is legendary. It is no wonder there is such secrecy involved. The Dark Lord Grindelwald is obsessed with all things related to the Deathly Hollows, creations of that family, and more so with necromancy. The Peverell family branches are the most renown in their field for such affinities. They are naturals at the arts of the spirit and masters of the natural states of magic. If I am not mistaken the Potter’s are likewise related to the line through Ignatius Peverell but it is far removed. It would explain Charlus Potter’s ability to overtake Thaddeus Nott without practice in the dueling circuits. It explains the ease that magic comes to the family itself.”

“I am not familiar overly much of the other two brothers but I am certain that Antioch was proven to have lineage and it was a huge discovery. As for the other Cadmus, it is said he died of heartache… It could be that he is the ancestor of the Gaunt line? No, I am certain he is. I know little more than that on him and his descendants. Only that a daughter married into the Slytherin line thus giving the Gaunts the ability of Parseltongue.”

“Most of the knowledge regarding the brothers three has been lost to legend, and the members of the lines have all splintered into their own powerful families. The Potters of Britain, The Verus’ of Italy, The late Mortimers of Spain, even the Gaunt line was a line to be reckoned with before their spiral into insanity although it seems that line is not yet dead as you uphold it. There yet remain smaller families that are proxies to these families.”

The chair dipped as Abraxas sank into the empty space beside Tom. All elegance and airs. He made movement seem liquid in a way Tom was desperate to master. The action forced the two of them
together. Normally he would have instantly responded, maybe even violently but he did not. The information given was more than he could have hoped to fish out.

The heat was strange and personal and the side of Abraxas was firm in its softness. Tom nestled into it, making himself at home as he ought to. If he were to ask himself later about it he would say it was because the information given was valuable and he had every right to take advantage of the comfort offered.

“I will have to do some research, pull some strings, explore it as no lines from the Malfoy’s extend into such a renown family. If what you say is true, then your situation is as dire as you say. We must do everything we can to keep such things undercover and you safe. You will swear an oath of silence before you leave Waverly. This is non-negotiable. If you refuse… well let's not explore those consequences.”

Tom nodded solemnly in agreement, his fingers caressed the amber pendant in contemplation and careful calculation. He artfully chose his words, filing away important bits that he got from his companion. It was yet another set of problems that he needed to investigate. It killed him to think that he hadn’t done as much yet? There just had not been time.

There were things that needed study and spells that needed mastering; There were places that needed exploring and people who needed appeasing. Plots upon plots were unraveled so as best to circumvent inconvenient mishaps or harm; Chess move after chess move were implemented so as best to see the preconceived patterns needed to take the board in one fell swoop. He should have at least gotten to his aces quicker, Abraxas or Horace. He should have even written and insisted on knowing it of Hadrian, knowing if he pushed hard enough he might have been told sooner, but had refrained from the latter for reasons similar to the former.

He wanted to find the answers himself as much as he just wished to be told. He felt that if he asked his dearest mentor then he would be diminishing his worth in those eyes somehow. This was his journey, Hadrian had once told him that. Discovering his familial lines and his personal history was his fight, and so he hadn’t looked into it as much as need be through that modus of operandi.

As for Horace, he recalled the greediness of the man’s gaze and his now obsessive habits in regards to his person. He was quicker to try and please, eager to rise Tom up further and further. It was yet another reason he had little free time for self reflection and thought. His popularity was skyrocketing at such a pace that it was staggering. Handling it was becoming bothersome.

It took an exorbitant effort to keep himself calm and collected in the face of the social masses. He would have preferred it if they could just worship him and he just ignore them. Instead, he had to be pleasant, nice even, to sniveling idiots who couldn’t tell the difference between the head of their wands and its base. Which brought him back to now, playing nice with people. Albeit better stock than usual, he had to admit.

It also brought him to the sobering part of the secrets. The real crux of the problems at large. Gellert Grindelwald.

“He fears Grindelwald would hunt me if he knew I existed. If only to draw him out, at worst because of what? I do not wish to know as of yet. Mercutio has promised me that he would do what he could but he and his brother are busy stonewalling Grindelwald on the continent. Not that it matters. War is imminent. It will take root through the muggle world first to act as a smokescreen to the political dealings of the magical one. A shadow over the grand scheme.” His response was somewhat distracted as he put into perspective what he wanted to get across. He had to chose his words even more deliberately. Not sure what would solidify aid and what would not.
The two purebloods about his person would not understand the danger the muggle war could bring. They were unfamiliar with just how devastating science could be. They did not know what a Thompson sub-machine gun could do to a mortal. The magical world was depressingly unprepared for the march of progress that the non-magical world was currently moving quickly through. They stood little chance against the war machines that had been and were still being developed.

Every time he heard a muggle called harmless, it made him sneer. Memories of broken things, of Nissa, or guns and brutes, moral reasons that he was tormented for the great good... All of that was peanuts to World War I. It was peanuts compared to the bombs that he knew would fall soon on landscapes to fell cities, and trenches to be filled with the young going to die. Tanks, electricity, chemical warfare, they had no clue the dangers muggles were capable of. They did not know how deeply fear motivated the non-magical populace.

He was unsure he could ever make them understand. He did not think it worth the effort to try at the moment.

“Hadrian believes that Gellert will not bother with Italy but rather use Poland as a stepping stone to escalate his anti secrecy agenda. He has already lead the German army through its muggle chancellor to invade the country. It will lead to open warfare. It already has I should say. Magically we haven’t seen movement on Grindelwald’s side. No more than he had been doing already anyways. Maybe that is because he is mainly moving in the muggle world?”

“The muggle war is much different. Already tensions and invasions have come and gone. Poland has been seized since January and the German muggle army is moving quickly through it and implementing harsh changes to the populace. Propaganda is rampant. Hadrian fears it will reach Britain soon despite his efforts to stem the tide.”

“To you, it makes no difference if muggle war comes to Britain but I do not like what I will go back to in the summer. No doubt the drafts have already begun, young men twenty and over, nineteen and over, eighteen and over. Food rationing will become commonplace and the orphanage will starve under the strain of new influxes in numbers. It will not be a pleasant summer.” He could see it, with ever growing dread, the future in his mind’s eye. An arm pulled him tighter into the warmth at his side, comforting and good. He eagerly sank into it.

It was a good hour later that Waverly was sworn to secrecy and dismissed. The fire crackled and popped pleasantly to a dance eternal. It remained warm despite the lingering chill and heaviness of magic that had permeated into the two remaining figures sharing one chair. A small form tucked into a leaner, longer one. Safe and cozy in the dungeons below the magical Black Lake. Safe from the tides of war.

There was peace for a long while, then it ended with the timber voice of Abraxas.

“I could always pull some strings with my father.” His fingers petted at his scalp.

It was a tempting offer but it would not due to be indebted so soon in the game. Besides, it did not feel right to abandon that place now. With all he knew, it seemed a sacrilege. His mother's blood was in the walls.

“No, though I appreciate the thought. I can not ignore the sacrifice my mother made by abandoning that awful place, at least not yet. Not now that I know she is woven into that building. I have hated it so long but I owe her at least that much. I just… It is terrifying isn’t it? The prospect of war? I just don’t wish to think on it much more. If you wish to console me then distract me.” His eyes watched the fire with greater interest, its performance mirrored in pools of obsidian. Sometimes it was hard to tell he was just a child.
“As you wish my Lordling. Why don’t I tell you of Charlus Henry Potter?”

Yes that would do nicely.

“That is agreeable. Regale me again on how he so thoroughly crushed our resident dueling champion. I hear he was a gallant white knight.” And so they spoke, of things of intrigue and import in equal measures. For a brief while it could be forgotten that there was yet another day of idiocy to be had; It could be forgotten that war was not looming above their heads like some phantom of unspeakable doom. The future was left to just that and they enjoyed each other truly for the first time as something akin to ‘friends’.

Tom thought that maybe it was okay. To have friends that is.

Chapter End Notes

This was such a long chapter! Editing it was rough and getting it just right was difficult. I found that I loved a great many staring characters and found it hard to make ones I disliked.

The next chapter should come far sooner than this one did, then again I was also editing and reposting past chapters so... yeah.
Count Bodies Like Sheep

Chapter Summary

A taste of war and the decline of great men.

Oh and Tom continues to grow his following, discretely mind you.

Chapter Notes

So it occurs to me that people do not understand what perspective reality is. Which is fine except that my story favors it. Many times we may see different descriptions of Tom's character as contradictory to what we actually know him to be. This is because the story is told through the eyes of another character. Slughorn sees Tom as a tragic angel and so to Slughorn that is the truth. Abraxas sees Tom as a Lord to be and so sees him in a light that favors his actions as such, regardless if are or not. Elias sees Tom as... well Elias is weird so Tom is a prince? As for Charlus well he sees him as an older sibling sees a younger sibling. And all these things are true, because they are the accepted reality of the person telling the story. This means that as the reader we get an inside look into what makes people, people.

So is he really OOC or is it that the person telling the story at the moment is believing this is how he is? We can only know the real Tom when Tom is the telling the story of what he sees and getting a look into how he feels. Does he have his own Perceptional reality? Yes. Do we see that? Yes, in his idolization of Hadrian who he has never met.

So please, no more... "Ew no. Tom is all huggy and stuff eeeehhhhhhh." Chances are he most likely grudgingly likes hugs, like a finicky... prickly cat. Who knows? Only Tom.

He is a child who was starved for love but no longer! All the hugs I say! Just kidding but seriously unlike Elias I think Tom secretly likes physical attention that isn't on the painful side.

Also this is really dark so if you are worried about that... I warned you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Ten: Count Bodies Like Sheep

To the Rhythm of the war drums.

Nurmengard Germany, March 9th 1939

"Don't fret precious I'm here. Step away from the window."
In a high tower, frozen over with jagged teeth scratching the sky, a fire burned lackluster. A room reflected in the glass. It was weakly lit giving little substance to anything beyond its skeleton. A thing that was sparser than ever it had been. It was a lonely place and the cracking bones of the low kindling echoed in the silence of the spaces between what had once been and what was now.

The air was the wake of a dead man, a dirge hid in the absence of all sound. No shadows stood to send off the past, no being offered roses on the coffin the fort had become. Devastation marred the spaces where once life prevailed. There were hints where his hands had brought motion and energy to such a blank space but they were fading as all mortal things did.

Magic that had once bound the stones had been broken and wards crumbled bit by bit in his absence. It was a dying world caged within the dying fortress of Nurmengard. Once regal and supreme it now rotted from the inside. It was infested you see, taken by a parasite that ate at it. As brother it was to the larvae of wasps eating the insides of their living host before emerging from the corpse left behind. Such was the fate of Nurmengard, and such was the fate of that room.

There was no more pacing and never no more to come. No great man was left to weave between bookshelves. Now barren and dusty. No great mind remained to forge new footsteps at their worn shelving bases. Their book denizens had pages still stuck in a time before, when things had been different. Where once understanding and learning had bloomed there remained only the seeds for the obsessed.

Where once magics of great natures were forged and spells were cast, there was now nothing but a table and map, and a shell of a once great man. The howling of winds and the waging of wars was now all that the room contained.

That once great man required neither sleep nor nourishment. Hair of gold crowned him dimly without shine or elegance, fading as had he. Cheeks once full and eyes once alive were sunken and gaunt. Their spark was gone, the magic had died. Gone with it were his worldly cares. It showed in his boots that had worn down to the soles, his heels that had worn to the bone, and further still the wear and tear went. Robes once ornate and exuberant, prideful, draped over him in swathes of brackish stained hues. They reeked of decay and of blood copper.

He had been a great man once, a visionary they had called him. He had been beautiful, graceful, and sharp witted, just as sharp as his tongue. He had the power to capture the spirit of man. Charisma had made his glow like a beacon. He had been the lure of the fight for glory, for freedom! Freedom of magic! Freedom of Wizards and Witches alike!

He had been the star that would have guided the wizarding race to an era of would be greatness. A time where magic need not be oppressed by ministries and secrets. He could have done great and wonderful things. He could have been so much more.

But he had not listened. His hubris had been his downfall for one did not meddle in magics they were not yet ready for. One did not mess with gods.

Now, he cared little for the cause and he dreamed no dreams of grandeur any longer. His aspirations were ashes in the fire, his spirit a broken and shattered thing that was beyond the repair of mortals. His men comprised no longer of the spirited and loyal. Those smart had fled at the first sign of weakness. Those more faithful learned in painful lessons that they could either break or change to suit.

They had been a band made of wit and cunning, of dreams and of desires. At present they were but the blunted edges of a rusted sword. They were lost to time and belonging. Beings of an age before where things were good and whole and righteous. Like storybook heroes they faded into the
withered forms of villainous dim things. Wraiths for rings and crowns. The fanatic and deranged.

They worshiped and bled at his feet as cultists were wont to do. They had no direction, no names, no faces, just bodies of bones and viscera. Wretched creatures that held no place in a world such as this. A shame for the congregations had been men of greater things once. Like master like servant.

Ideals of freedom and revolution had been traded in for subjugation and tyranny. Laughter was but the crying of madness in the walls. It was the breath of zealous ideology to a man who existed no longer. The passing of the year was harrowed with the disintegration of all their beloved work. It was the twisting of dark and thorny vines that spoke of all things terrible.

The months leading to this moment were filled with the destruction of cities and the dastardly plottings of mortal men. The march of the newly minted Third Reich thrived in the great nation of his birth, and the magical world of Germany cowered under him as he crushed out opposition with an unsettling apathy, and with a ruthlessness unknown to man until that moment.

The months that came since, had promised a greater nation to those fearful and uncertain masses. A dawn of the good for the many and the purging of the undesired was better than truth. Blind mortals asking to make Germany great again as it once had been. To this he acquiesced and granted them an image of refound safety and warmth. This he promised but his tongue was black behind his smile. His words were but the lies of all those who strove to climb higher at any means necessary. They were the images of man standing on his brother, crushing him, and then ascending upon his blood and bone to reach glory.

He was named a devil incarnate, but that would have been too generous. That would have been less eerie by far. A devil could at least feel things like wrath or lust. A devil was more than compulsion or function. For the wand was not a human and was incapable of being one for all that it may try. For all that it looked the part. It showed constantly in his coldness and emptiness that was present in all things. It was in vacant smiles and cataract eyes. He might as well be dead.

The only thing that made him close to a man rather than a corpse was the obsession and need that preceded him. His need to find and conquer, and to be reunited with his master once more drove him. He... it, marched on and laid before the world a war, a famine, a plague, and a great many deaths without remorse. He... it, derived no pleasure in the acts for it knew not of lust or greed, only utility. He was but a command made into semi sentience, to do as he was bid and be what he truly was. That is to say, a wand for the master of death.

This alone separated him from the dead and likewise the living. All emotions that had once made him Gellert had been destroyed or chiseled away into small, niggling, fragments of the man this body had once been. Only his determination remained untouched and unrelenting in its resolution. This was by far more dangerous than any change to date. You see, without moral scruples to hold him, without desires to distract him, and without worries and fears to divide him, he became an insurmountable force.

His power became absolute, his magic became mechanic and perfect in its execution. It was impossible to see an end in sight when he was on the move for he never truly rested. Likewise he never stopped. His influence and authority stormed the magical world over. It left behind him a trail of woe for mortals to witness. To show them he was a foe that they could not temper or slow. Even this being the unerring truth of the days, there were many that yet that defied his will.

Defiance was a useless thing and while many understood such, it seemed others did not grasp its futility. His enemies built their armies and lifted high their walls, as if it would keep them safer somehow. They told their children tales of his weaknesses and faults as if such things existed. Leaders rallied rebellion with honeyed words and visions of freedom! So akin to the Gellert of the
past and yet these same ones conceived intricate plots to overcome him.

In the end it was no matter, they like his quelled host were much too late to stop him. In the end there could be only his imminent victory and the might of the Elder one. Maybe because it was inevitable or maybe because he was made by a being that was prideful, he allowed their walls to be built, and their tales to be told, and their leaders to scheme in the dark of the night. He did not care for challenge but even he was a curious thing and mortals had surprised him before.

Still though it did not look like a promising game and he was growing curiously impatient? Annoyed? Concerned? Such a human concept and yet he was, growing concerned, With these acts of rebellion. His enemies were far too weak to be of consequence to him and their minuscule defenses would not, could not, save them. He was nothing but what he was and that meant nothing would stem the oncoming tide of dearly devoted deathly hallow. The course was set, and the hoard would pour forth and devour from the snowy north. The longer it took the more he would destroy and the more souls he would gather. Feed on.

Still, more and more he felt concerned if that was what it was. He needed to hear the desolation of the masses before him who has so struggled against him; He needed to taste their blood and ash in his mouth; He needed to smell the fear, and touch the flesh of his enemy before tearing them asunder like he had never needed before. Most of all he felt the need to eat for he was always hungry now, gluttonous.

The hunger would not abate. He would gorge himself on the souls of the lost and disparaged. He would eat and eat and eat until even bones didn’t remain, but he would never be sated with just anything. This was a hunger that was not for food or drink or flesh in particular. It was larger than that. It was the need to feast on the world at large. He was made to conquer and devour, to destroy and to punish. That was the will. That was his purpose, to be an instrument to end all things. He was made to serve and so would never be satisfied. He wondered if having a body was affecting that particular facet in his design.

Even now he suffered the gnawing within as he stood vigil over the frozen tundra. The sprawling expanse of white went on further than mortal eyes could see. A beast of which no man could tame. The frosted window pane was a tapestry of icy fingers, and in its reflection dead eyes looked out, glassy and half blind already.

He saw and did not through the semi milky film over his vision. It clouded all things dimming the light and showing what hubris had wrought, the spirits of things in place of faces. This one staring back at him was near enough to empty, the first in a long series of faces of nothing that he would see leading the final face. To death. To home.

It was troubling. He was running out of time. He had to achieve his goal before this body gave out. He doubted he would find another wizard powerful enough to house him if it did. The longer he tarried the more this body decayed. The faster it died, the harder and faster he pushed in return. Each assault he commanded was to higher and higher levels of extremes.

It mattered not what it was that occurred, only that it did. He created infernos in the place of hearth fires, tsunamis in lieu of tides. Raids became battles; Battles became intricate plans of espionage; Intricate plans of espionage became War. Muggle states spiraled into propaganda and fear. Their men drafted or volunteered to die on imaginary lines for glory or love. The lies of the state to guide them onward to their graves, unmarked.

Camps, for the unworthy and the just alike, were raised from the nothing beneath them and were just as soon filled with the desperation of masses. The despair of the pitiful dug deep into the foundations. They clawed on concrete walls, and containers, and in bellies of ovens, until the nails wore to the
bones and they could claw no longer. Their mass graves were ash plumes in the sky, and their
eulogies came forth in the screams of hundreds of thousands of mouths.

The stench of burning flesh replaced the odor of belladonnas. Much like gunpowder and sulfur
replaced the scent of roses in the cities in the wake of battles. Bombs fell from the embracing arms of
large war vessels. Muggle weapons that could take out cities in the blink of an eye were formed in
secret while their lesser counterparts were unleashed. Fire from the skies; Fire from the ovens and
chambers of gas; Fire from hundreds of thousands of guns. War. A beautiful, terrible thing.

Once, a great man would have mourned it. Now there was only the dead stare from a dead thing, and
a crooked twitch at the corners of a once generous mouth. It’s left hand raised and war went forth,
it’s right hand raised and took the souls so arduously reaped. Leave it to an instrument created from
Death to wage the most devastating war the world had ever seen. It had accomplished so much and
yet it had not been enough and it was still running out of time.

A year in possession of a flesh and blood body, months and it had yet to find its master. Fire burned
in its wake, but no place had hide or hair of his Lord Peverell, his home. He dug out names long lost,
and places long hidden, only to find he could not enter or to find them empty. Ancient stones barred
his entry, fortified with blood and bound by oaths long forgotten to any but his clever master. Old
magics, ancient whispers. Tongues of civilizations past.

One by one the blood of kin were taken far beyond his grasp. The laws of his creation forbade him
and magic bound him henceforth from striking those of the blood. Mortimer had been his first
mistake, the severity evident in the protections not placed in his way. It showed in the chains placed
on his feasting. His failures. If master did not wish it, He could not harm them. Even before, he had
needed another to open his way forward.

He could not harm them, that was not say he had to be the one to do the hurting in the first place. He
had an army, a nation, a continent to do his bidding. They would do it for him. He did not wish to
resort to such tactics. The blood of the master in any capacity was still his blood no matter the form
or mixture. However, he was running out of time. He and likewise they, could not overcome the
restrictions closing in around him.

It became clearer each hour that he needed to be more forceful. He needed to enhance his reach
farther if he were to make any progress in bringing his owner to heel. He would take the world if
need be, if that was what it took to pull his master to his side and finally be home. If it was force he
need, it was force he would use.

The muggle war had become useful in that sense. Muggles were easy to prey upon. Promises and the
depths of fear swayed them for they were unworthy things with simple minds. He had little problems
in gaining control of the non magical. Poland fell with an alarming ease to the might of his army.
Even at the start his victory over Germany was much too simple. It was the magical world that was
the challenge and even that was an enemy easily overcome once he had the right strategies and
people in place.

It would be alarming, and maybe even sobering, if the magical world understood the implications of
his movements but they did not. They had made no effort to do so. He was an enemy they never saw
coming. Every. Single. Time. He was an invisible hand that crushed their throats while they slept in
ignorance. Their determination to ignore all things non-magical made it too easy to take their
freedom.

And whilst they struggle and thrash, and though the magical world may resist better than the muggle
one, they stood no chance. Numbers would always prevail. The muggle world surrounded each
government as if they were islands in a vast ocean. Where one muggle community fell to his
command the magical community it surrounded caved under its greater weight. Magical Germany fought, but it could not outlast him. Allies to the German muggle cause came in droves. Their numbers were overwhelming and his host’s homeland fell before him.

It was not as if they had no warning should they have chosen to look, to see. It was rather that they shut their eyes, hid behind denial and disbelief. The magical world had long since ceased to see the danger outside their islands, be it from fear or ignorance. They did not know or invest time to learn of the technologies of man, and thus could not prepare for the assaults he launched. So he had taken and conquered but it was not enough. All of this, for all of his advantages, he was still just as far from his goal as before.

Stuck in a wretched mortal coil. Hungry… so hungry. Desperate.

What he needed was answers and access to the far flung corners he had yet to breach. He required admittance to the communities his minions could not search for whatever reason his mortals gave. He wanted into the alcoves they could not scour. If the non-magical had the means to get in, he would have used them to the fullest. Somehow he would prevail. He would break open the world if need be. Had he not already?

As the months progressed further, the non-magical leader of Germany had waged war on Britain, France, Russia and many others. The world became embroiled, and in the chaos that ensued he had hoped his Hadrian would rise to stop it, as always he had done before when calamity struck. He had not. Fires burned on, people died. Nothing changed. A constant silence that spoke of failure. A year of terror and there was only that mourning silence.

He felt no oncoming storm, no energy from sparking lighting, no presence of pressure. He was doing so much but his master was still refusing him. He was showing him his prowess, his capabilities, doing as he was created to do, but Hadrian was either not impressed or stubborn. Could his master not see his worth? Could he not see that they belonged together? Could he seriously value the wands that lasted but a day, a month, a year in place of his everlasting greatness?! Did his master see him as lacking? He, The Elder One? That made to little sense.

It must be stubbornness. Maybe he needed to prove his capabilities more, to show his master that he was supreme. Maybe his master wished for the world at his feet, perhaps that was why he had not come for him as of yet. He had not yet conquered enough. The sacrifices were too small at the altar. Maybe he was not looking in the right direction? That must be the case.

Unseeing eyes turned to a worn out table whereupon it there was a familiar map. Careful markers blotted out countries as thousands of blackened dots. They took up spaces in intervals of miles invading the lands of the continent, save for a small bits to the east and south. There was one area at the bottom in particular that held his interest most assuredly as of late. Italia.

Italy had fallen into the modern age without grace. It should have been a nation of significance in the this world of war machines and industrial growth, but in the end its people held it back more than they pushed it forward. The advancements they had achieved centuries earlier had burned low to the present day nation. It lagged behind the industrial revolutions that rocked the continent and it struggled to fit in a rapidly progressing world.

The land itself was rich, and it was abundant in resources and trade. The mindset of the people was not that of fierce determination but rather of luxury. They took their time, lived simple and rich lives, and died simple lavish deaths. They prospered but did not advance. Whatever potential the land had became overshadowed by the vices of its people.

The muggle armies that had once been lauded were no longer behemoths and their ranks were no
longer disciplined. War was a threat that came in night terrors, it was a far off tale in a bygone age where they had all lived before enlightenment. What could they not gain through business and trade? And so politics took center stage in the modern era leaving the military in shambles. It was a land that ran off favors. Unassuming and underwhelming as a world power.

When Hitler had reported on the possibility of an alliance with said nation he had been unimpressed. It was a useless endeavor making alliances with the non-magical parts of Italy. They held little significance to him if it they could not guarantee him a victory over their counterparts. The muggle nation could not give him close to what many others had and was of little worth in the grand scheme of his vast web.

He had been ready to dismiss such alliances entirely but he could not deny that it was not without its uses as all things had purpose. For all that Italy had fallen and grew fat, it was graced with a minuscule albeit creative magical community. If Italy thrived in wealth, its magical community drowned in it. It took what its counterparts had and revised it, grew it, and perfected it. It was easy to see that where the muggle community waned, the magical one took and invented.

The two worlds easily meshed together through hazy boundaries in the northwest and south, in ebbs and flows between them. The magical people were comfortable wandering within and without the non-magical world as evidenced in their integration of muggle technologies such as picture shows, cars, and radios. Such that they were aware enough to know how to handle the integration from one science to the next easily. It was a seamless transition and a dangerous bargain that paid off in spades. Not only was their magical culture a booming success, they had taken and learned how to conceal their world more effectively than any other against the waging wars outside of their boundaries.

The spells created in the back workshops and expert emporiums were not potent like those which traveled outside of India, and not as fanciful as those modified to suit the needs of France, but they were leagues above the rest when it came to functionality. For security and warding one went to the Italian witches and wizards of the age. There could be no locking charm quite like those that guarded the ancient catacombs of powerful families. There existed no ward better than that which encompassed their shops and obscured their homes from muggle eyes and cameras. Which halted bombs.

Admittedly, that made it nye impossible to crush them with the weight of their non-magical counterparts, for they were cautious and unyielding. The leverage that worked on other communities could not touch them. Resourceful beings that they were, they understood how to counteract non-magical weapons and had further developed their own deadly twists on them. Just in case.

It was there in those few protected communities of vast magical prowess which he could not get to. It was one of the few place that necromancers still dwelt, that the blood of Peverell still existed strongly. Of all the sacrifices he could make to bait his Lord. They, he knew, would be precious enough. Were they not the next of blood? Bound in the talents of the dead? Familiars of his master? If the world and war could not draw him from the hidey-holes of the world then surely this.

He could see it play out. He could go himself. He could rip through the shielding wards that separated the worlds and march in with calamity at his heels. He could feed the power of the veil. It mattered not what they called themselves, these necromancers, or where they hid. He would find a way to them. They would give him their secrets, one by one. He would prepare them to ascend through the lands of the dead in priceless magics. He could wrap them in delicate silks, piece by piece and hang them lovingly from belfries for the world to see. He could take them, bend them, present them as proof of his worth, that he would be denied no longer.
His master would come to him then, as he was getting ill for the waiting. He was sick of proving his power time and time again. His limbs were becoming sluggish with the weeks he wasted on amassing control. The game was getting old. It was time to end this and bring his stubborn master back to his side.

Doing so would cost him but he was getting desperate. This body while magnificent, was withering. It was mortal and thus unable to hold the glory that was him. Already he felt it giving, its movements slowed by the week. He would go to Rome, he would sack it. He would have his minions drag each wizard and witch out one by one, slaughter them like pigs, and paint their blood on the Colosseum for Hadrian’s grand pleasure. Such a nice image.

Mortal lips twisted wrongly forming a sharp grin that tore the dried skin of his lips. Blood welled red, iron filled his mouth. Such a mockery of a smile pulled at the skin of his cheeks making the muscles quiver and burn from strain. So foreign to him now was the action and so wide that if he could feel it, it would have been painful in its intensity.

Yes a nice image indeed. He would go forth soon and bring with him his discord, chaos, and what was it humans called it? His love in abundance. If it so proved his worth, he would burn thousands of Rome’s to ashes. If it closed the awful distance of him and his beloved then he would readily go. He would start forthwith and if Hadrian still found him lacking, he would take it to their homeland. He would go to Britain. For now he had an invasion to plan and a magical government to destroy. Let the mortal men handle the rest of the world. Magical Italy was waiting.

**Northern France, The Trenches, March 31st 1939**

"Go back to sleep."

He wasn’t sure what to think anymore. It was as if every decent part of him was shriveling and dying with every shot he took. Before him was a scene unlike any he could have conjured in dreams or in nightmares. The sky lit gray over a field that used to house trees in abundance now only their skeletons remained. The air exploded into the dark ash overhead, screams that were far too high up to hear featured in his restless hours. The afternoon this day was dreary, it was hopeless, all of it sucked the life out of you and replaced it by fear. As had everyday of the war.

On either side of him was a well dug wall, wooden beams supporting the weight and narrow pathways just big enough for a person to fit through. Huddled masses lined the corridors of mud brick, and mini-guns were set up every twenty feet with handlers so as to leave no one area of the field beyond open for invasion.

The sound of gunfire, a steady cracking against the skull, became constants day and night. it was never ending in both the days and long nights. It echoed sharply into every corner, even those places where men thought silence would exist. He wondered if it would ever stop. He thought about the future and heard only the ratatatting of the guns. The phantom sounds followed him everywhere and seeped into his dreams until the nightmares became waking ones. He was not the only one affected.

They were clever and tenacious things, the phantoms of war, never ceasing the haunt. The thudding of bodies, the igniting of heavy guns, screaming faces without mouths, like the dying men falling to earth from high overhead. When he closed his eyes it was to the sound of crack cracking and the unbearable screams of pilots raining like water from the sky. Their blood painted the earth, sunk in, and corpses rose in their place in the garb of the enemy.

He dreamed of empty and festering pits where eyes should be and where souls once lived. Somedays he didn’t know them, the faces, but it was worse on the nights he did. He dreamed of the brothers he
had lost and those he had yet to lose. He saw the twist of the dying as they convulsed among the broken trench walls. He could see the last breaths rattle from their chests and the stillness that followed built the foundation for more bodies to pile higher still. Like pyramids that would turn to bones one day.

This was war. This was supposed to be glory. But God! There was no glory in this.

It was an endless nightmare, where everything was cold and the smell of mud was better than the scent of gunpowder, blood, and the shit from those dead and those dying. Meals were called MRE’s and meager ones at that. Tasteless, and not enough to end the emptiness in one's stomach. He could no longer recall what a home cooked meal tasted like, what spices taste like. Despair clung to each and every man like some horrendous leach on their necks. They slouched under the unbearable weight and some didn’t last through it.

Sometimes it wasn’t a bullet or bomb from an enemy that killed. Sometimes it was the fear, some other times the loathing. Most times it was the Haunt. The bodies of allies were just as regularly found in tents as on the field. Those were the lucky ones, he thought bitterly. They could move on while the rest festered and saw their faces in dreams on the piles.

On the bad nights he tried to picture days when it was better, when he was just like the rest of the naive privates under his command. He tried to remember every reason he had condoned the war, because surely it needed repeating if it had been so important. As his time in the trenches continued his reasons became less and less viable, his dreams and hopes and fears were washed away in the booming of artillery fire and blood. So much blood and fear so much fear.

This was war, he told himself. This was the reality of the rich sending the poor to die, because in the end it was so easy wasn’t it? It was easy to convince the desperate and downtrodden that they mattered. It was simple to instill in the, unfortunately not wealthy, masses to have pride in their work, and likewise their country. God! It was too easy to line them up to die like common animals under the illusion of making history or becoming heroes.

It was so easy, and he had been one of those. He had believed that he could make a difference and that he had mattered. He had felt like that once! But now, now he couldn’t help but see the veil lifted from pretty lies and what a fool he had been. His country men were sitting in parlors and sipping tea with milk, while idiots like himself volunteered to fight and die for this. Starving and drowning.

This, the Screams and Cracking and the Dead, was what he had been signed up for. His country had needed him he had once said, but that argument was getting weaker and weaker. His patriotism was failing as all of the rest were failing. His bright eyed optimism and heroic ideal of staving off the great enemy had been replaced with apathy and cynicism. To the newer and fresher blood he was but another coldhearted soldier, his heroic ideal washed away in the tide of men who laid dead beneath his feet. Where they washed up and became a mountain of the fallen, friends and enemies alike.

He could remember every face, every promise, and every curse thrown at him. He recalled the way youthful german lips opened in a final rattling breath before falling limp into the mud to be forgotten forevermore. Names of men he never knew and never would were imprinted into his skull. He could at least have the decency to remember them, he had said. He was a murderer now after all, because how could he be a hero and commit the sins that he did.

Most times he tried to forget, he really did. He tried every moment to keep his eyes away from crows and carrion birds who feasted on the deceased in the night. He pretended he didn’t know most of them. It was a fruitless endeavor because he saw the beasts devour them anyway. He couldn’t make himself look away. He only prayed their spirits rested even if their corpses did not. A circle of decay.
He hoped a cycle of reincarnation existed. The idea of them never being again was too much to bear. Because he had ended them. Because his friends were part of it. Because there had to be something in the light of a human’s eyes that couldn’t be all bad. Because something needed to be to redeem this hell of human cruelty. He hoped that they could be reborn again, do things differently. Do things right.

He had taken from them their lives in the name of Britain as if he had any right. It should have been sweeter but it was no victory. It was a sick and twisted joke without a punchline. It was only survival. He told himself in the dead of night, as if that could fix it. Make it not happen. A circle of life he told himself. They would be trees one day, something beautiful and good. He could say that all he wished, but the trees he imagined them becoming wore bark that resembled the faces of the dead, the color of it would be the red of their blood soaked through the roots. Yew for those who’d been moved from the bloody puddles to hasty burials and burned to ash, or Holly for those who were not. A circle indeed.

Sometimes when he cleaned his rifle, he wondered what was left of him now but that which he became. Sometimes he wanted to take the barrel into his mouth, the taste of gunpowder and blood was already so prevalent so why not, and pull that trigger. Fill it more with sulfur and iron until he could drown in it. Until it all could stop.

He imagined a death that way would be too quick for pain to process. A kindness and a mercy. He imagined that he would lay with all those he killed in a heap beneath the feet of crows. He imagined it would be fitting that his mind would lay in so many tiny fragments. That the remains of himself would become a tree, that his soul a carrion bird. At least that way his outsides would match his insides, because like so many here he was slipping into madness and it wasn’t as if he hadn’t known. The sickness came upon them all in the end. The Haunt.

He couldn’t say when he started seeing the dead behind his eyes, maybe after the second or third skirmish, but he knew when he started seeing them in the living. He had been promoted again but it wasn’t for anything heroic or just. He hadn’t saved anyone, he just kept shooting and in the end he was the only one left standing. He was alive and the real brave ones were dead so he was all they had left. They had to have someone and he was what they got.

It had been his second week on the field, not even a year long veteran. He was just as green as those that came in on the marches. The only difference between him and them was that he had learned that glory, pride, and honour, had no place here. He had learned to sleep at the back of another, his rifle primed, and not wake at every bullet that grazed over his head.

It had been then that he looked at those under his command and saw only corpses that walked. Their laughter was the gurgling of blood escaping out of paling lips, and their bright eyes were the bulging remains of a man desperate to see the next day before all the light left them. That was when he started seeing the dead because they were all dead, they just didn’t know it yet.

He was forced from his musings. His rifle shinier than ever it had been. His ears tuned into the a whistling that came from overhead. It was a dread sound that rent the silence asunder. It was the only noise he heard as bodies rushed passed him desperate to live. They were fools, foolish to think they could escape. They were all dead anyway so what difference would it make now. If anything, this was better than a bullet that may or may not kill you.

He reached his hand into the pocket of his fatigues and drew from it a photograph. The edges were worn and it was crinkled beyond saving. In another time, another life, he might have discarded it in favor of a new, more current picture. As it was now, this was all he had left. His eyes gazed down at the face of a woman.
She was a slender thing with wide doe eyes. He recalled the way they crinkled when she laughed or when she shouted, more often the latter leading up to the draft. He remembered how her wild hair was softer than it seemed, the curls easily bouncing whenever she took a step. He remembered the sound of her whispers in the night so as not the wake the babe. He remembered the freckles on her nose, arms, back, breasts.

Most of all, he remembered her lips as they pulled back into a smile when he bent his knee to her. Marjorie Maven Granger nee Greengrass. It had been the most beautiful moment of his life. The world had been endless. Their perspective future had been so perfect.

They would have a child, get a home near the sea, get a dog. There would have been headaches at Christmas because of the in-laws, and they would sit out their back door as the years passed. He would watch the crinkles of her eyes deepen and her hair gray but always he saw that same smile from that same perfect day. He would love her forever and she him and they would be happy. Their babe would grown and have kids of their own far from pain and fear and they too would be happy.

He no longer saw that future. Even had he survived he wouldn’t have been the same and neither would they. All he could do as the end neared was clasp the photo to his heart and lower his head to await the end. He had thought they had forever. He had promised her that, but then he ran off to fight a war. He left her in the doorway, their son on her hip, as he stormed off to the drafting station. She had been crying in that silent and strong way, as if the tears were not real and her chin not trembling.

There was no time now to apologize. The whistling came louder, its cry rose in a sharp crescendo preluding the oncoming destruction. Those around him were fleeing, not a soul turned to pull him with them. His mouth opened and he whispered words of love and devotion but the blast ate them. Them and all other things. It took milliseconds.

The screams surrounding him were consumed by the sound of impact, a wave of pressure followed behind it. His eardrums burst, agony coursed through him as blood poured from the sides of his head. Sound began with the ringing in his brain. The crushing of a world against him. His tongue swelled and smoke clogged the inside of his mouth. His body was already against the trench wall so the blast did not throw him, but the others were not so fortunate.

Then came the fire. It flooded into the dug out earth with fervor. Beautiful like a raging wave. He didn’t even have time to process the pain of burning before Walter George Granger ceased to be. His name was listed later in the paper as one of the many lost to the tide of Germany. His last words lost to the fire from the sky.

His story was not uncommon. By the ides of April, the ladies of Britain were swathed in black by the thousands, tens of thousands, and more each day.

Up until then they had not known first hand the horror that took their brothers, fathers, and sons. Then, subtle at first, the sky echoed with the engines of planes. They were wide, large things and from far below they looked to be like a mother holding a babe. They forged overhead in great arrows and the sound of engines became replaced with a shrill whistle. It grated upon the ears below and drowned out all else.

Black dots scurried below it, but the whistles came from all sides and there was nowhere safe to go. Those lucky enough to reach or already have been in buildings huddled together. They sought out refuge under desks or tables, or in basements. Mothers covered daughters and infants like funeral shrouds. Children covered their ears and shrieked in terror.

Walls trembled under the impacts of explosions near and far. Windows shattered from the secondary blast waves. Smoke filled the sky and fires rampaged around the unfortunate souls of London. Then
the whistles were gone, the formations of planes moved off. In their wake was devastation and the sounds of despair that echoed into the heavens.

They came the next day…

And the next.

The Germans called it Blitz Kreig. The British called it calamity.

Yet the days continued despite it all. The Milkmen still delivered milk, and the shopkeepers still sold papers, and tea was still good tea. Maybe it had been pride or maybe the people of London were made of sterner things but they kept calm and carried on in the face of war at their doorsteps.

The planes still came, and despair still followed, but life moved on. It had to.

In a townhouse on the edges of downtown London, neighboring the skeletons of others, a woman wrote in a book. A babe cried, but she wasn’t listening. Marjorie Granger wrote and wrote. Her dark eyes were rimmed in perpetual red. She cried nightly, but still she wrote about the passing days. She prayed that the end would come soon.

**Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Somewhere in Scotland, April 24th 1939**

"Safe from pain. And truth. And Choice. And other poison devils. See they don't give a fuck about you like I do."

He had to tell himself that this was worth the risk even though he knew already that it was. There had never been any room for doubt in him because that was a weakness that upper echelons of society could not broker. You either were confident in your place and held it or you weren’t and the rest would eat you alive without remorse. He was of the former, as his father had been and his father before him. Therefore, he could not question himself now. Not when he was a Malfoy.

Even so, his hand was stalled outside of the door, poised to knock but not quite doing so. His mind was turning over and over the twisted paths this manipulation would take and how best this game needed to be played to win. If any time was best to woo Thaddeus Nott, it would be now. The man had just lost his betrothed to a duel against Potter. To salt the wounds he had lost to a man who was not trained in the least at the art of battle magic.

It was a testament to the man’s ingenuity and strength that such a thing had not negatively affected him. It should have been the talk of the common room. It should have dethroned Thaddeus from his position on the social hierarchy but instead it had done the opposite and chaos had followed. The house had divided into two. Those that foolishly thought they stood a chance of usurping the titan and those that followed him still, knowing well the consequences of betrayal.

The divide had not phased the heir of Nott one iota. He had, if anything, proved to be more ruthless and cunning in the months following his disgrace than ever he had been. He showed true to his previous prowess and put down all that stood before him. He laughed openly in the faces of those who would scorn him, his tongue was a sharpened blade that cut into the insecurities of others with brutal efficiency.

Where once his eyes ignored those deemed unsuited to his company they now roved eagerly to see who, if any, had the gall and wherewithal to be *interesting* enough to be played with. These he took great delight in crushing under his magical weight. At first it had only been the usurpers but lately
had extended to include all persons not in play. It effectively was pulling talent from the shadows of the house.

Those who would have been overlooked were tugged into the spotlight. More than a few had taken ranks among the inner circles they would have otherwise been victimized by. Even many of those involved the greater games beyond Hogwarts could not help but notice latent potentials being brought to light. It was not long before all eyes had turned to his little Tom and himself.

Riddle was sweet, intelligent, and kind. Outreaching to other houses as proven by his attache of companions. He exuded talent and easily topped his classes. He went above the necessary work, charmed professors, ended feuds. He walked with all the grace of pureblood. It was no wonder that many contemplated him with shrewd eyes nowadays. They wondered how best to use him. They wondered more why he, a Malfoy, was involved with Mr. Riddle.

He was but a beautiful and naive pawn to them but they did not know him like he knew him. They had not felt what he had felt when they first met. They simply did not know. They instead thought it cute that he, Abraxas Malfoy, was playing good host to the poor orphaned mudblood that Horace Slughorn adored. They thought it was a project of sorts or sometimes a slight to the house itself.

Nonetheless, the boy had proven his worth in knowledge and skill continuously, as he far outshined his year mates. He had single handedly gained their house an astounding amount of points. The culmination of all these factors were cause for him to be recognized by even the staunches of blood purists.

Even so, without proof of a solid lineage the boy was as good as a target especially when times of turmoil caused such heady power struggles. With the house in such chaos and with tensions surmounting on the highest they had been in decades, he was not willing to risk not using every advantage possible to keep young Mr. Riddle from exacting penitence from the fools who thought it safe to harm him. Only a fool would not use what they were given to get ahead.

Now especially the pair of them drew attention most unwanted. Tom was growing more irate with it everyday. They had both agreed that something must be done. Abraxas had been the one to suggest it, using Thaddeus to shield him, and only after he had found three third years screaming in a locked room and a smug Tom reading by the common room fire.

Abraxas feared that more would have followed if the house of snakes did not learn soon that Mr. Riddle was not all stunning smiles and weak. At this rate the infirmary would start to question the sheer amount of injuries coming from their house. It was this and this alone that had forced his hand. This, and because if all went well he could give Tom something he direly needed. Standing and structure. It did help that there was much in it for himself as well. Tom’s favor was well worth the effort. So that was how he found himself standing before the door of Thaddeus Nott well after curfew.

He was secure in himself, he would not doubt himself. So he knocked. Wrapped upon the heavy oak once, twice, and thrice. The sound resonated heavily into the narrow stone hallway then the silence stretched on. It was not until he was about to knock again that the door opened smoothly and the shadow of the Slytherin head boy loomed over him like some dark creature of legend. It would have intimidated a lesser man and swooned any lady.

Even Abraxas had to admit he was a sight, highlighted in darkness and obscene. The man stood over him by at least two heads, scantily clad with only a set of loose comfortable pants to keep his dignity. Years of dueling and activity had chiseled the man into a work of moving art.

The faint light from the wall sconces only emphasized the amount of work this man had done to
perfect his form. Battle was akin to art, perfection was demanded for victory. His father had always
said as much. Looking up to the head boy now he knew, knew that to be true. This man embodied
physical power just as his Tom radiated the magical, how Potter had managed to win was beyond his
comprehension.

For a moment Thaddeus merely gazed down upon him. Recognition caused his eyes to darken
exquisitely into glinting indigo. He took him in with newfound, calculating intensity. His face was of
marble countenance all seriousness and high cut features in the flickering lights from wall sconces.

He was a fourth year and had no reason beyond networking or scheming to have anything much to
do with the family of Nott, at least not at the present moment. Perhaps if he were older then this late
night call would not be as suspect as it was. It would be seen as an invitation. He doubted Nott
would ever refuse such but as it stood he was too young by house and societal standards to be here
for such. Admittedly had he any inclination for men Nott would be a perfect conquest. He would
have buckled under such a gaze as this.

He did not. He was a Malfoy and one did not turn their eyes away from such a powerful name or an
enemy. Potential or otherwise. For a moment in time they took each other in, sized themselves up,
end the tension broke with smooth baritone of Thaddeus’ voice.

“To what do I owe the pleasure Abraxas?” The voice was cold, neutral. Safe. It was only fair, he
supposed. He would have responded with an equal if not deeper coldness, such was his untrusting
nature.

“I realize it is late and that you and I have not ever… seen eye to eye on things.” A scoff followed
and he had to marvel again at the effect Potter had on what had been such a straightlaced Slytherin.
“There is something I must discuss with you and I could think of no better time than now to do so.
Invite me in heir Nott?” It was not a question and they both knew it. It was if anything a formality to
be appeased.

Months ago Nott would have stiffly let him in, dressed himself to be presentable and tried to win his
favor. That was then and this was now. Instead, the looming figure stepped aside arrogantly. He
waved in the heir of house Malfoy as if the boy were but an afterthought and nothing more. Such
was his blaiseness and Abraxas should have been insulted, but instead he found humor in it. It made
the tension between them melt into something almost, but not quite, affable. Something in him eased
and if not for the first time he told himself that this could be done.

He stepped in regally, brushing just passed the other’s nakedness. The door clicked shut behind him
where spellwork wove over its entirety for the sake of discretion. The gossamer flickering of heat
and fire marked the magics weave. Embers sparked in ways that embodied the spirit of its host. Small
was its presence albeit at one time it could have been called impressive in such an amount.

That was before Tom Riddle covered an entire room with just his presence, before tendrils had
twisted and writhed against his own magic as monstrous and eldritch as a small child’s eyes. Had he
never met the boy he may have been intimidated by such a small display of wandless power. As it
stood, he thought it cute. He doubted anything could shake him now. Not when Tom could bring
third years to heal with just his voice alone. One day, that magic would make the world tremble. One
day a room like this would be his court, then a ministers desk, and so on and so forth.

The room was of decent size as compared to the split rooms that most Slytherin’s shared. The walls,
as all dungeon walls, were of hard and hewn stone and white as Salazar had bade them to be. The
floor was of lush carpet, deep and green. It matched the silver lined fireplace on the far wall where
two great serpents opened jaws to create the hearth’s body. Fire highlighted engraved scales and
glimmered in dead metallic eyes.
A window looked out into the black waters of the lake where without seaweed swayed. Curtains to 
either side were softer toned greens trimmed with white. There were two chairs before the mantle 
looking out at the window. A wide desk sat to the far side of the chairs, with personalized shelving to 
the side walls, and two doors split to either side. A bathroom and a bedroom respectively. It was 
enviable, for Hogwarts that is.

He made himself at home in one of the two high backed chairs nearest to where the fire hissed and 
spit. His spine was ramrod straight with his head held level. His grey eyes locked upon Thaddeus 
with cold purpose. He thought of his father and mimicked him as naturally as if he were him. Molds 
from one to another down a line unending. If he was nervous, it did not show readily. In his mind he 
steeled himself, willed all his authority into this moment. He could not fail, would not fail his Tom. 
He would be as imperious as any Lord of olde and hopefully, no not hopefully, assuredly he would 
be victorious.

He would either leave with an ally, or make himself a powerful enemy. He was honestly fine with 
either outcome, though he preferred the former. He waited until his opponent settled opposite of him. 
Larger hands than his own steepled before the man’s taunting lips. He seemed aloof but his eyes said 
otherwise for they were perceptive if not calculating. It was time for them to play the great game now 
that pleasantries had been left behind.

His father always said that it was those that braved the first move who had the best chances of 
winning.

“I have a proposition, one I doubt you can refuse.” He did not think he or anyone else had ever seen 
such a bemused look cross such a severe face. Lips turned up in before him in a coy smirk and it 
should have been… endearing or at least enticing but instead, it came off as predatory. The tilt in it 
was just a shade too dangerous to be well meaning.

The nature of it struck him straight through. Never had he been the subject of such a thing and every 
instinct screamed at him to run. He wanted then to bolt from the room and forget such games but alas 
he was a Malfoy and he would not flee at the first hint of difficulty.

“Oh?” Never had a question sounded so lewd.

“Do tell me, my lovely, heir Malfoy what it is you think I would be interested in. What could you 
offer me besides the obvious.” Eyes carefully raked over his proud form. Heat threatened to rise in 
his cheeks and he felt hotter than he could ever recall being. Even in private. The weight of the room 
shifted when its owner did, affable into tense.

Thaddeus stood with unsurpassed grace, that damnable smile still dangerous and sharp upon his 
countenance. He crossed the spaces between them as a great roving shadow until he towered 
imperiously before Abraxas. His hip leaned slowly into the hand rest making what should have been 
a large chair suddenly, impossibly small and Abraxas more so under him.

Light and shadows played around broad and bare shoulders reminding the just how little it would 
take to crush him bodily with or without a wand. The sheer brutal strength that crooned from behind 
his physical brilliance never ceased to amaze. Merlin, he could hold him down so easily.

‘It would only take one hand’, he thought absently a shiver pricking underneath the skin of his spine. 
He had to force himself to breathe regularly even though his heart had begun to race and his chest 
was so heavy. He had to force himself into focus, to not seem affected. He would show this man that 
he was not one to be so easily cowed by a handsome face.

Languidly and as if he had no care that Thaddeus was so very near, he slid his gaze up. It was a dirty
move to use knowing well how innocent it would seem with how long his own eyelashes were. Then again Nott wasn’t playing fair either and this was, after all, just a game. He took his time in parting his lips and tipping up his chin demurely, as if begging, for the threat Thaddeus offered on the edge of his teeth.

“Something precious to you Thaddeus. Something only I can get you right now and seeing as how time is running short for you to act on it, would it not be best to listen? You can do that can’t you? Listen?”

Hands came to rest on either side of the chair top, boxing him in. A growl made his insides curl in excitement and adrenaline coursed through him. He had never had so much fun before. He had no idea how wonderful baiting someone could feel when they were supposed to be a threat to you. He now understood why it was that his father so eagerly taunted the Black patriarch because this… this was exhilarating.

He reclined back and almost rudely into the cushion of the chair back, out of the heat he felt coming off the other. He could hear the wood cracking under the pressure of such big and capable hands where anger dominated their direction. He could envision them around his throat, the pressure, he mused, would be amazing.

“I have a way for you to gain Charlus’ favor.” Blue eyes narrowed under heavy lids, the pupils blew wide and there was just the slightest tick in such a strong jaw. Hook.

“You want him, I know you. We are not so different though age separates our perspectives. Maybe I am yet too young for I have never understood your… eccentric tastes… but I am not so naive as to not know the ways of desire.” The air between them was stale, it tasted of advantage.

“I am not without empathy my friend. I too become obsessed just the same as you. I am not nearly as reckless but maybe that is superior breeding.” The man before him turned rigid as if all of him was pulled taunt and readying to strike. Muscles roiled like serpents as Thaddeus began to shake in rage. His fingers that gripped so tightly, splintered the crown of the chair. Abraxas wondered briefly if the other had ever crushed bones with such hands, it would have been a beautiful thought.

Then all was contained, siphoned in and bottled up. Malfoy knew victory when he saw it and it was delicious.

“How do I get through to Charlus and how is it that you know such things before myself?” The man was leaning ever more forward into their negative space, icy eyes trying to stab him through. Equal parts frustration and hope. Such was the nature of his desire, the need that was reflected in the pits of his soul from beneath behind his eyes. His breath fanned out over him.

“I am a Malfoy Thaddeus. It would be a mockery if I did not know the most pertinent and useful information in Hogwarts with or without our house. As for the closest way to Charlus’ heart… Is he not a Gryffindor? Family is everything to him. Ergo the answer to your conundrum is Tom Riddle.”

A moment and the shadow retreated.

Thaddeus blinked one and then twice and then laughed. His voice echoed throughout the room it was such a full and open sound, and he grabbed at his abdomen as if Abraxas had told just the most amusing joke. The heir of malfoy straightened himself and smiled an indulging thing, as if it were Nott who were a child. Internally, he reveled in the sound and imagined how Tom’s lips would have thinned in such a giving way. Line.

“Tom Riddle? Are you serious? A mudblood like that? I admit you had me going.” Eyes took in his face. Abraxas raised his wand, whispered three more privacy charms. The last a contract charm that would ensure secrecy of any within the space affected. With or without consent. That alone made the
laughs die for one did not discuss important matter unless at least three privacy charms were in place and especially not without the later of them.

“Well yes most would think so, but they do not know what I know.” He sniffed and placed away his wand looking for all the world like this conversation was below him.

“Just between you and I, I doubt Arlow, Eugene, and Bradley would agree with what is supposed to be common knowledge about Mr. Riddle. Such a kind child to most professors and so gentlemanly. Did you know I found them clawing their arm skin off, disgusting. Tom found it… well I am not sure but he was certainly pleased. Apparently they insulted his mother and he took exception to that. I had to have a talk with him about the use of mind magics while under the wards of Hogwarts.

“Also between you and I, I happen to know that he and Charlus Potter are related. I also know that Charlus doesn’t know this, and I may or may not also know that the relation is through Charlus’ favorite uncle. The exact one that caused Charlus to first start rebelling against his patriarch. The same one he has been desperately if not discretely trying to contact for years now. I dare say he would be so very ecstatic, grateful even, to the one who introduced such an important person to him.”

For a long stretch there was a heavy silence. Eyes searched him for deceptions but found only a smug smile. The older slytherin retreated then, sunk into his chair. His earlier arrogance had left, his legs crossed regally. Sinker.

“I see you are finally ready to take me seriously. My proposition is as follows: I allow you to introduce Charlus to this missing link in his family instead of myself. You gain his favor and leverage over him by being in command of how he meets with Tom. As for me, I want you to declare Tom one of yours for the time being as well as myself. I also request that you support me for the candidate of next head boy and give me unrestricted access to your family library. Do we have an accord?”

There was not a second of hesitation, no questions asked. Thaddeus did not look for loopholes or deceptions. That alone spoke volumes of his desperation. In fact, he only asked for one small thing in return. It was disheartening in a way. Anticlimactic.

“I want your support if ever I am asked of an endeavor by Charlus. If you agree to that we have an accord Abraxas Malfoy.” The two of them sat for a moment in silence, each staring down the other.

“Then it is so. I look forward to working with you heir Nott.”

“And I you heir Malfoy. You can see your way out. Oh and my dear Abraxas, you will of course introduce me to Tom tomorrow morning. Without hesitation. As you said, time is of the essence.” Abraxas left without looking back, victory upon his tongue. He traversed down the hardened stone steps careful not to let his pleasure show until he settled into the common room. His gaze locked with that of the room’s only occupant. Then, he smiled smugly.

Abyssal eyes pulled him in, the light glinted off void black hair, cherry lips pulled into a shark like maw of perfect teeth.

“He agreed did he not?” The voice was smooth, the magic radiating around them as thick and oily as currant and chocolate. It felt like thick wine and tasted so similar. It was all he could do not to melt under its influence. Such was the power and draw behind it. How others had not noticed was beyond him for it always seemed as if it was too much to fit into the tiny body that was one Tom Marvolo Riddle.

“He didn’t even kick up a fuss. He demanded that I present you to him first thing tomorrow morning.
No doubt you will be introduced to Charlus by the end of first break if he had his way. Such is the nature of men who love and who do so as he does.” Had he not known better he would swear the angelically sweet smile awarded to him was benevolent but he did know better.

He knew that one day this boy would be greater than anyone ever was. One day this boy would be his lord. One day but not just yet. Right now even behind his dark vengeance, powerful displays, deceptions, and prickly nature was a child in need of care as all children need. A starved thing looking for acceptance and guidance. Abraxas was only too happy to be part of that.

“Breathe Tom, he is your family. He won’t turn you away. You could walk up to him now and he would no doubt love you as wholeheartedly as I. I am however, so proud of you for deciding to use this as the great opportunity it is to gain not one but two powerful allies. Congratulations on entering the great game and do not fret, Thaddeus can only repeat what you wish him too. I did make sure of that. Get some sleep, you have a long day ahead of you.

It took only two days for Thaddeus to confront Charlus. The halls had held its breath waiting for the oncoming explosion between the two. ever since the end of ‘The Duel of Two’, as the students came to call it, the tensions between the house of Lions and Snakes had only festered into a great wound. Since then, the two had become forces that rebounded from each other time and time again. Thaddeus’ openly lewd antagonizations of Charlus Potter and Charlus’ deviation from the tranquil calm he was known for, had reshaped the social norms.

They fought, much like dogs. So it was no surprise that Charlus was tense.

He had been prepared for a fight and as such he had not noticed it at first, and he should have. He damn well should have noticed it right away and yet he had missed it because he had been too busy readying a curse behind closed lips. He blamed his inattention on that and true, he also blamed it also on a variety of other things, most notably the attention he had to expend on dodging Nott between classes but mostly on the social rigmarole that he was now having to navigate with all the care he possessed.

He was exhausted from it so maybe that was why, when Thaddeus had cornered him near the transfiguration classroom, that he had not looked at the boy trailing unsure behind his nemesis. He was much too focused on Thaddeus’ soft smile and the brightness of his eyes. He awaited the shoe to drop, a quick spell to take his breath from him. He was anticipating war. His heart was already racing for it.

“Charlus, so nice to see you. You are looking… ravishing today. Have you met Tom? Tom this is Charlus Potter, a cousin of yours. Charlus, this is Tom Riddle. He is quite the pride of his year, just a little darling much like yourself.”

Wait… what? His eyes shot to this proclaimed family of his and searched for truth in the statement. The boy was half hiding behind Thaddeus as if afraid of him but he saw it clear as anything, felt it even. The small orb was clenched tightly in a tiny hand as if it was the most important thing in the world and maybe… Maybe it was.

He was a small waifish thing in slytherin green. Much too thin and small for one his age which was concerning. Much too thin indeed, he thought and his heart lurched in sympathy. Hair of darkest black curled almost haphazardly around an aristocratic face. Large black eyes were watching him warily but with unabashed hope. Most noticeably was the way the boy was trying to stand, tall and confident, but failing as he curled defensively towards his keeper.

His world narrowed and he found himself taking a step forward only for the child to flinch. He heard Thaddeus reassure him, telling him that Charlus wouldn’t hurt him. Then the older boy pushed the
little one forward.

“He is mostly harmless. Not a mean bone in his perfect body. Now be polite and say hello. We don’t have long before Abraxas notices you are missing and comes for you. It was hard enough to separate him from you and I won’t have my hard work wasted because you have suddenly gotten cold feet.” He said but Charlus could not find a single hint of malice in it, not that he was searching for it now. All his focus was on the boy and on the amulet that felt like Hadrian. That was made by Hadrian.

Slowly he knelt and held out his hand. Dorea used to say he looked like a white knight this way. A good man. He hoped that the child saw the same. At first the boy, Tom, did not move but after a moment he reached back. It was a hesitance that he knew well as it was the very same trepidation covered in stubborn pride that Fleamont wore when meeting another lad he desperately wished to befriend.

That was what this was he realized, a child’s desperation. The boy feared he would be rejected. Well… there was only one way to cure such doubt. So when he finally held that small hand in his he did not hesitate to pull the boy, Tom, his cousin, to himself and wrap him tightly in his arms. He buried his face in black curls and sighed in contentment.

He pushed from himself all his affection to the surface of his magic and fancied that the child could feel him. Them, he corrected, with their heart beats together. He was relieved when he felt Tom melt little by little into the safety of his arms. It was only when they were both much calmer that he pulled back to look into the stubborn set of a child trying to be strong. So very much like Fleamont indeed.

“Hello Tom. I am Charlus.” For an instant he could see the beginnings of a bright smile threaten to show. “Where have you been little one?”

Then the light in that secret smile died.

“The muggle orphanage. Nobody wanted me for a long time.”

Hook, line, sinker.

Chapter End Notes

So this got dark, really dark. Its only gonna get darker until the Grindelwald plot arch reaches its end which should be in one to two chapters from now. I know that there is not a significant movement in terms of character or events in this chapter and that is because everything up to this point has been the build up for the coming next arc and the ending of this one. I promise it gets lighter after that. Also, it has taken me a good bit to get this chapter and its sister up and ready to go. I estimate Goodbye Blue Sky should be up in a few weeks uh but no guarantees. I was thinking of making this into a series rather than a continuous thing as it is getting very long. So year one is the Grindelwald arc and then year two and so on and so forth. Let me know what you think.

If you have anythings you want clarified or ideas or theories you think you have busted about this fic then by all means visit me on my tumblr: Vespairty

Or you know, just comment. I reply to all of them.
Chapter Summary

Set up for the war taking a turn. A brief look into the happenings of a lost boy, and what a year can do.

Chapter Notes

I promised an update. Usually I have chapters in three parts. This can make chapters unruly at times and far too long for comfort. As I have no official editor or Beta that leaves me to edit these long things. With so much on the horizon lately, projects I have begun have been somewhat limited in their production. I decided that I would split chapters up further. This allows me to be more happy with the content that I provide to you and means I may be able to update more frequently at large.

I do not own the Harry Potter series and I do not make money off it for any reason. This is a fan-based work that is not cannon in any way shape or form.
Next Chapter: Goodbye Blue Sky Pt2.

Chapter 11: Goodbye Blue Sky

“Look mummy there’s an aeroplane in the sky…”

Somewhere in Northwest France, The Family’s Cottage, May 21st 1939

D-did you see the frightened ones. D-did you see the falling bombs.

The weather never changed at the cottage. The sun shone every day the same way, the wind always blew with the same gentleness, and the sky was always a slate of unreal blue with interspersed fluffy white clouds. There was never rain, or heat storms, or snow. Just unyielding blue in the day. The days came and went and so too did the nights. The moon waxed and waned and the stars shifted with the seasons but the seasons never came. Just stars, and blue skies.

It hadn’t been obvious to him before, but as the months had passed into years he had noticed. Flowers bloomed all year, the stream always ran with the same fish, and there never seemed to be any new beasts than what had always been there. It had never bothered him per say, he had always been more concerned with other matters, but it was still so very odd. He had never asked why the cottage was this way and he doubted he ever would. He preferred sometimes not to know. He could pretend for even a little longer that his life was fine like this. He could remain blissfully ignorant if he
so wanted. It was easier to pretend that this field of eternal summer was home.

Here he could have a new name and face, and he didn’t have to remember anything else. He didn’t have to be Bastion Alexander Mortimer if he didn’t want to. He could just be some kid that lived with his overprotective uncle. All he had to do was stay inside the property lines and study magic. Like any other regular child he was free to do as he pleased, so long as he did as he was told. It was easier to imagine things could be forever good. Like this he didn’t have to think about the world beyond the garden wall. Anything beyond that wall was naught but a distant nightmare and far off days. A wretched place where tongues of green fire licked at his heels. Here he could just be and forget the rest. He didn’t have to bear the burden of that boy or of remembering.

He did not have to but that wouldn’t make it didn’t happen. It would not change that his father and twin sister were dead and it would not change that the man responsible was the very man that kept him. Nothing could change that. Nothing could change that Heine Weiss was a murderer, and nothing could change that Bastion couldn’t forgive him for it. Even after a year of schooling and domesticity, the two had never built a bond of trust. Their days were spent constantly watching each the other and wondering when the other shoe would drop. If one day a wand would be at each the other’s throat then that was just expected now. Their strained relationship was not aided by the strict regime that Mr. Weiss incorporated in his schooling lessons. For the man was a perfectionist.

It was a flaw that came from years honing the skills that only a master could have perfected. First a chief Auror, then an ace wardbreaker, and then a slave to a madman. He did not tolerate failure in any capacity because failure was but the laziness of man. From day one he had never given Bastion any satisfaction in his progress but only kept expecting more and more. Always pushing, always breaking into weaknesses and gouging them out. He was likewise not a man for the frivolous or dramatic. He was one to cut to the quick and so too did his lessons mirror such sentiments. When he taught a spell, Bastion would learn it by nightfall or else they would not sleep. They would drill it till morning if need be, such was Heine’s desperation. A mastered spell was quickly forgotten but expected to be upheld and they would quickly move onto the next lesson. He acted as if sleepless nights had never passed and that the fatigue of it was never felt.

Wand angles were sharp and precise under his shrewd gaze; Posture and motion were slight and conservative; Grand sweeping gestures from charms were cut into short and utilitarian slashes; Quickness and precision were valued where beauty and artistry when casting became scorned and shameful. Such was his nature. When the pair ‘duelled’ it was more like fighting to the death. Heine had never once allowed a victory or a praise to pass his thin veneer of displeasure. He struck like lightning and remained unforgiving.

It had been a year of gruelling and painful lessons guided by a strict and unyielding teacher. Bastion had broken more bones than he cared to admit. There was hardly ever a reprieve and in the down time it took to heal the damage done from their ‘duels’, he was still given no quarter. He was drilled ruthlessly on etiquette, language, history, and law. His back would be straight, his chin would be held perfectly level, and he would answer in confidence. Among his lessons were also subtler arts. The ‘Goodman’s Art,’ and quickness of the hand against the eye. He had to strive to master these arts of deception, regardless of his loathing for it. If he failed a negotiation with a ‘guest’ heine summoned, he was severely punished. His stinging hands and the lashing of Heine’s cutting words would remind him for days after of his failures.

He had in the span of a year, forgotten what it was like to play. He had forgotten what it felt like to be truly safe. He had forgotten so many things, especially his sorrows if he could. He did not need one more weakness to give Heine’s searching eye. In the dark of nights he renounced the want and need for another as companionship. He denied the thoughts of his other, his sister, and their breathes. Over time, her absence felt less and less extreme until he felt it not at all. In time he stopped crying.
senselessly over nightmares because no one would soothe the aches.

In the beginning he would have sworn that outside the doorway his mentor would stand sentinel, but there had never been words of encouragement or softness. Energy was best spent on learning and magic, than tears or empty words. It was not in the man to feed useless actions such as comforting a crying boy. It was safe to say that the days of Bastion’s childhood died with everything he had loved. He was now Heine’s apprentice and that meant, “There could be no room for error.” “Childish whimsys have no place here,” Heine had said. The words were cold as always and inflectionless.

“Humanity, morals, right and wrong. All these things are but pretty words and lead to mistakes. There can only be survival and what benefits you, or aids you, in living another day. To do otherwise is certain death.”

In some ways Bastion understood but then he would recall the strong line of his father’s shoulders and the softness of his smiles. Most of all he remembered his father’s gentle eyes when he looked upon him, how proud he had been of him. All over stupid small acts of magic. That was goodness and it had existed. Looking at his mentor he saw none of that goodness, just strife. Heine stood tall and straight just like his father, but there was a tenseness to his posture. It was as if a heavy weight pushed the man down enough for him to fight it always. His eyes were always hard in the sunken sockets of his face. Not enough sleep. Never enough. He was always severe to the pinnacle of being cruel. It was as if everything human had been scooped out of him and what was left behind was a hard iron shell of a man he had once been. A goodness that was snuffed out.

Bastion pitied him, loved him, and hated him in equal measures for it.

Safe to say a year in this eternal summer had been hell more than it had been restful. There had been little time for such niceties. There were times though when, on the rarest of days, Heine would leave the cottage and journey out for supplies. These days were long awaited and he could breathe. Today, was one of those days. A day where he did not have to constantly watch his six or speak as an heir. He was allowed to be an eleven year old boy again, no matter how briefly. He could be Bastion again, who loved magic still and who cried at night because he missed his sister. Today was special and he absolutely refused to waste it on thoughts of that horrible tyrant of a man.

He instead gazed at the blue sky above, aware now that it was just an enchantment, and thought of better times. He had planned to stay that way all day, to just be what was left of himself under the mask he had carefully constructed under Weiss. He raised his left hand to the sky hoping to feel something besides bitter loneliness or maybe just hoping for the true warmth of sunshine. It was in these rare moments and only in the light of day that he really observed himself.

They were in little things. His hand being pale where once it had been golden. A wand callous under pads of fingers. Most of all tiny silver scars where smooth skin once resided. He knew each intimately. He could count slipped knife strikes or instances of slicing the skin open on Heine’s infamous, jagged, protego shield. He had loathed them at first. Every single one felt akin to a new level of separation from himself but after a year he had come to love them in time. They were proof of his efforts. A new Bastion. He could accept that he was not helpless as he had once been. He could never be again. He was something else though, and that, he decided was okay enough. It was better than imagining the old him being broken.

No longer was he that little boy who would curl into the warmth of other beings without cherishing that time. No more would he be weak enough to not be able to call forth the protective magics so granted to him by fate. He was new Bastion how and though he missed that boy he was, it was but the passing of ignorance. That like so much else could remain lost to fire. All except one thing that
didn’t. He missed Hadrian. Anyone other than Heine would be a welcomed change for sure but none could replace the man’s expertise that he knew of, but Hadrian.

He wanted to see him again, show him what he could do now. See praise again for the first time since that fateful night. He just wanted a normal lesson! That was hardly possible at present for war takes from everyone. Maybe one day though, not now but one day. Heine made it adamantly clear he was not to send owls or any form of communication. Any correspondence could endanger not only himself but that of Heine and anyone on the receiving end. It had been a point of contention for a long while among all other things but Bastion took such things quite seriously. Nightmares of his home in green flames, of equally green eyes burning like father, made him take such warnings to heart.

How could he get strong enough to live otherwise? He had to become smarter and more careful. He had to learn a patience he did not possess and a consideration into taken actions that he had never learned previously. If he was to be of use, if he was to get strong enough to protect others than he needed to think, and he needed to back up his aspirations of heroism with the power necessary to put down any opposition. He would have to to be decisive and ready to make hard decisions or self sacrifices. He needed to take heed in security and know that his actions were a minimal risk to those he sought to keep in his heart. So he had not sent owls, and he had never dared venture to the edges of the garden walls.

He opted instead in his more desperate moments to practice pausing, breathing, and letting go of festering things inside. He remembered Hadrian’s gentle lessons and they helped ease the loneliness, hurts, and the odd numbness that followed in the wake of Heine’s daily abuses. He took time in his rare chances to dig inside himself and into his magic. He took long forgotten and ill suited lessons of spiritual guidance, and he had begun to use them. He chose to face himself and his changes, his easy options of forgetting or remembering, and come to terms to the present. Face the past, face the present, and deal with it. It was always the hardest part, it was always worth it.

The magic would follow. That is always what his ex-mentor would say. Lead the spirit and the magic will follow. He was right, it turned out magic was the easy part. All he had to do was contact it like he had tried to do so long ago and just exist in it. If his soul was steady, or steadier, it listened. It was still so distant most times and it was still not something he could rely on enough to spurn a wand, but his magic was always just a little closer. A little more like breathing.

It was the crashing of waves and the pulling of tides. It soothed the sharper edges of his hostilities into weathered beach stones. He indulged in it fully. He called forth from his hazy childhood memories, old lessons from a smiling and gentle man. The lines of his father’s shoulders. His sister’s chirping voice. He took them in and out, crashed his past, present, and future on a shore and let it go into a tide. Sometimes on good days, it almost felt like a blanket around him. His efforts did not go unrewarded.

His magic was not easily tamed of course, it came and went but he knew it better now. He could read it and it him just a little better, and this aided him in lessons. Transfiguration in particular was an art he excelled in. Especially that which involved the transformation of water. These changes he could do many times as wandless transfigurations. He could turn the small brook around the cottage to ice if he tried as hard as he could and sometimes he could even make sculptures of small animals depending on the lunar cycles. He wondered if it had to do with affinity but he could not recall seeing such lessons before. Hadrian would have been able to tell him why in a heartbeat but all he had was Heine and he was reluctant to let him know more about his inherent talents than he already did.

Such magic was a strain on him and Heine would expect him to be able to use it at will. Worse yet in
battle. He still could not summon such magics at anything less than an hours time and while it was significant progress to before he doubted that he would excel at it under the pressure his mentor demanded. Skill the likes of which Heine demanded did not come so readily, and unless Hadrian taught him he was at an impasse with how to conduct such magics. More than that, it felt wrong to rush this. It felt sick and unnatural when he had tried it. His magic was not battle magic material in the least. Still, he worked with it as he could so as not to say he did not try.

When they met again and they would, he would be someone Hadrian could be proud of, a man worthy enough to call himself Lord Mortimer. He would one day be great enough to fill the shoes of his father and then some. Until that day came, he would bide his time, endure Weiss’ sharp tongue, and learn. Learn as much as he could and keep this sacred magic to himself.

So it was that he fell into meditation by the brook, for long hours he stayed still beneath the summer sun. He would have stayed all day but a crack rent the air. The sound of apparition was rare enough that it forced him from his communion. He rose hastily and reached for his thigh where his wand rested. He knew Heine by now and the man would not dare to try and bypass his safeguards to apparate here, not unless it was of the utmost importance. Such magic would destabilize some of the more intricate wardwork, the man had told him that once.

If someone could apparate here then they were either dangerous enough to be able to circumvent Heine, or something was amiss and severely so. Movement on the wall alerted him to the form approaching, small and compact. It had a limp, and a sagging robe sleeve that fluttered with movement and false wind. Relief flooded Bastion’s veins and tampered his adrenaline as recognition revealed to him who it was. It was just Heine, but relief was something short lived for the man was making a beeline straight toward him and his face… Bastion had never seen such a look of, was it panic or fear?, on his usually stoic face. Something in Bastion quivered under the urgency in it. The look in those dark eyes shook him more than he could admit. It took his mentor no time to cross the distance to him. A firm, calloused hand wrapped tightly about his own tiny wrist. It hurt how hard it was grasping him and he would have complained had not one look from that gaze froze the words in his throat.

Heine was… afraid. Heine did not get afraid.

“No questions. We must go. Now. Don’t bother with anything else.” Before he could open his mouth to retort, maybe do exactly what Heine forbade him a great trembling rocked the earth above their heads and the blue sky cracked from one side of the garden wall to the other. The sun became displaced and the rupturing of earth could be heard among a strange whistling sound, then the sky shattered further. Red split through the blue in shards of ragged fury. Heat descended from the breaches overhead and in his head he saw the fire above as green.

“Heine--” He croaked out, curling desperately into the form before him to avoid the sudden heat. A firm arm held him buried into robes which he noticed belatedly, smelled foul. Like ash and soot almost but there was some other smell to it that he did not recognize. Something metallic and acrid and wet. It reminded him again of crumbling stones and charred gardens, he quaked. Then they were squeezing into space and time, his lungs burned as all of him ached and screamed. He was stretched too far and too fast to be comfortable. The world was lurching and his stomach churned in nausea. Then, just as suddenly, the world righted. The ground was hard beneath him and his insides protested. They arrived wherever it was Heine had taken them. Heine said nothing as he held tight, until the trembling subsided and the nightmarish ghouls of fire passed from him enough that he pulled away a little at a time.

The first thing he noticed was a hill below him and a series of aspen woods. The trees should have been green and lush but they were almost all alight. Some were cracked or shattered enough that they
were just barely staying upright. Many more were fallen as if torn from their roots or battered by
great fists. It was chaos but more than that something else drew his gaze. It should have been a town,
there should have been buildings in the spaces where crumbling stones took residence. There should
have been something! Whatever it had been before was now little more than ash plumes and rubble
and a great crater where a market had once existed.

On the horizon great booms rocked the world, flashes of light followed by villainous clouds of dust
and fire in the distance. In between their cacophonous presence he could hear the rest. He heard one
by one voices joining in on the desolation. Screams of mothers and the crying of daughters. Pain,
death, and despair.

He had only an instant to really see what was before him, to realize that the puddles were the
remnants of men, before Heine cursed beside him and they were squeezed through space yet again.

This time when it ended Heine did not let him pull away and he did not fight him. They were
stationed just without a grandiose set of gilded gates where beyond towered an immaculate castle, for
it was large enough and grand enough to be such. Large rearing horses with frothing mouths
decorated the entrance way. Just beyond that a silhouette he once thought he imagined came ever
closer. A ward, it had to be, obscured the moving man until now.

The figure approached and became clearer after passing the horses where the ward lines must have
ended. He was a lithe and tall man with curls of gold and eyes wide behind overly large spectacles.
His countenance was severe and lips were pencil thin in anger, all of him was pallid. The man did
not spare him a glance, he only seemed to have eyes for his mentor. Heine gripped him ever harder
and he was certain he would bear marks from it. He realized then that Heine was bleeding, the
breaths in the man’s chest were popping and raspy.

“How dare you come here after--” The man’s voice was lilting and full. Too much softness to be
expressing so much fury.

“I accept your position as professor of defense at Beauxbatons school of witchcraft and wizardry and
my ward accepts his position as a student. We will speak later Arcaceus but please… please… I beg
you let us in now. He comes. I beg you for sanctuary. If not me, take the boy. At least take Bastion.
He must live.” Bastion only clutched to Heine tighter, a feeling of panic knotting up in the space
behind his heart… Because he knew then, that Heine cared for him over the man's own survival.

“What are you… Heine?! Is that Blood?” There was the sound of another crack down the way. The
man before them turned whiter, his eyes widened looking over Heine as if he suddenly no longer
existed. Then there was a flurry of action and the headmaster known as Arcaceus flung open the
gates of his school and dragged the pair within just before a spell struck the edge of the ward they
had just been pulled across. The wall rattled with such force that one could hear layers upon layers of
magic snapping in succession at the sheer brute force battering it. There was the hissing of great
beasts as a sick magic tried to worm its way into the cracks. Then it faded and when Bastion chanced
a look behind he saw a devil of a figure. He saw the beast formerly called Grindelwald. He saw the
wraith of a darklord, half rotted and bloating, rear back and howl at the sky. He saw the gate swing
closed and like that all images from outside ceased, just like beyond his old garden wall.

He stumbled as a weight collapsed on top of him and he buckled under it as he caught Heine's
wilting form. The man collapsed into a rasping fit of bloody coughs, the metallic red splattering
against the ground and soaking the boy through. There was too much of it and something inside of
him snapped open. He did not think when he felt his magic ebb up from within him like a great
storm, and he did not think when he used that same magic to freeze the front of his mentor to stem
his bleeding.
He did not think about how right that felt to him, to save a life, regardless that it had taken so much of his own away.

That day marked the end of eternal summers and the beginning of his unconventional schooling at Beauxbatons as Sebastian Weiss.

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