Of Kings, Of Pawns, and Of Men

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**Of Kings, Of Pawns, and Of Men**

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**Summary**

A new body. A new prophecy. And worst of all: a new war with an old enemy. As the Dark Lord, the Order, and the ministry form an unlikely alliance to protect Britain, Harry wonders at the difference between Voldemort and Tom Riddle, and why it is that the latter seems infinitely more dangerous than the former. (Body switch fic, fifth year, power dynamics, m/m)

**NOTE:** Basically on HIATUS until I finish this other fic, sry guys <3
“Where’s your mum?”

Harry sat silently on the swing.

“Where’s your mum, Potter?” The boys around Dudley began laughing hysterically. Piers Polkiss’s high-pitched cackle rang sharply.

*Where’s your mum, Potter? Your mum, Potter, where is she—*

“Is she dead?”

Harry froze, jaw tightening in acute restraint.

“Is she dead?” Dudley jeered once more. “Is mummy dead—”

Harry didn’t even remember pulling out his wand. The next second, he had crossed the yards between them, and his wand was poised at his cousin’s throat. Dudley immediately froze, Adam’s apple bobbing under the blunt edge of Harry’s wand. His friends quieted, the jeering laughs dying out abruptly in the abandoned playground.

“What the hell is he doing with that stick?” Harry heard someone mutter.

The still moving swing creaked behind them.

“Y-you can’t do this stuff outside of school,” Dudley muttered nervously. His pasty skin paled even further as he darted frightened looks at his cousin’s face.

“I’m not allowed to,” Harry agreed. “But you know…everyone has a breaking point. And I guess this just happens to be mine.”

He moved his wand and prepared to transfigure his only cousin into…well, ideally something small and without the capabilities of defending itself, when the air around them abruptly turned frigid.

“P-Potter!” Dudley yelled hoarsely as his friends fled, abandoning him in an attempt to escape something they knew instinctively to fear. “Stop it! Stop doing this—GET THAT THING AWAY FROM ME!”

“It’s not me,” Harry hissed, pulling his wand away from Dudley immediately.

“Stop it, Potter!” Dudley whimpered, batting away at invisible hands, “It’s so cold…I can't…I can't feel…”

Harry’s eyes widened with realization, because the chilled numbness sweeping through his body was undeniably familiar now.

“Come on, Dudley,” Harry encouraged, all previous ill feelings forgotten. “We need to run. Now.”

And for some elusive reason—as he had never done so in the past—Dudley listened to Harry.

Dudley began flat out sprinting, Harry himself following closely behind. They turned into a dark alley decorated with colorful graffiti, both realizing too late that it was a dead end.
“P-Potter.” Dudley shuddered as he crumpled in on himself.

Harry watched with an incredulous expression as his cousin passed out. His mind struggled to catch up to what had happened so quickly, to comprehend what was happening. Although torturous and mind-numbingly boring—not to mention having to deal with the Dursleys—summer was supposed to be safe.

The first dementor appeared.


The dementor was beginning to suck at Dudley’s face.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!” Harry screamed. He repeated the words over and over, a mantra, as the dementor neared.

He couldn’t see anymore, because a terrible green light had flooded his vision.

Happy thoughts, Harry reminded himself desperately as the dementor approached him. Gritting his teeth, he forced images of Hermione and Ron into his head. But even as he continued whispering the saving words, no shining stag flew from his wand. All he could hear was Lily Potter screaming.


“Expecto Patronum,” Harry gasped, forcing himself to cling to those few words.

At last, the stag burst forth, boldly and triumphantly. Harry felt the pulsations of his magic as it galloped along the dank alley.

But Harry only had one, short moment to celebrate his belated victory. Because the next thing he knew was incredible agony. Back bent violently with pain, he found his body contorting. Hands—his hands—clenched tightly to the sides of his head in an effort to rid himself of the pain.

Then his eyes rolled back into his head and he passed out.

Consciousness hit him with the same violence and abruptness unconsciousness had.

Harry cursed and then groaned in pain. He pushed himself up slowly and turned bleary eyes to his surroundings. Seemingly infinitely tall shelves towered around him. It didn’t exactly help narrow down his location.

Harry raised his hand to rub his eyes. And then stopped. Because for some reason, the sensation of his hand against his face—such a simple, mindless gesture he had made a thousand times—felt inexplicably strange.

Pulling his hand away from his face, he examined it with unnerved eyes. Instead of the calloused, scarred hand he had grown used to seeing over so many years, the hand before him was different: still pale, but the fingers were…longer?

Springing up from the floor with energy fueled by panic, he hastily combed trembling alien hands through foreign robes, found a wand—a wand, but not his, but he didn’t have time to think about
that now—and conjured a mirror.

And then he looked at his reflection.

Dark almost black hair fell over a pale forehead, shadowing an angular, aristocratic face with high cheekbones and piercing amber eyes. Harry noted that the mouth on his face appeared to have a perpetual curve to it, as though mocking even when relaxed. He had seen this face only once before, but it had left a lasting impression,

Pushing back from the mirror, he ignored his slipping robes and staggered out of the library. Looking blindly around him, he tried to see if he recognized the place—anything about it at all. He didn’t.

*How? How had this happened? This face…*

Tom Riddle’s face.

Harry used the foreign wand without much thought and blasted a hole in the wall opposite him. He climbed precariously through the makeshift exit, his dark robes getting caught slightly in the debris, until he was outside in a very large, elaborate garden.

Where was he? How was he going to get back to Privet Drive? There wasn’t exactly a broomstick in sight and even then he didn’t even know where he was.

Minding working frantically, he tried to recall conversations with people at Hogwarts. He’d heard George and Fred mention something about an easier way of travelling. Something about closing your eyes and envisioning the place…but…but there was no way he would be able to figure out how to do that now!

When he blinked again, Harry found himself on his knees unabashedly hyperventilating.

*Calm down,* Harry told himself. Unsurprisingly, the command didn’t quite work. But slowly, after several deep intakes and releases of breath, he did achieve a state of relative calm in which he could think again. A temporary calm, at least. Harry knew that he had only postponed his break down until later.

“So think,” Harry whispered to himself, the rain in the dirt beneath his knees sinking into his skin through the robes. Hermione liked to talk to herself; she said it helped her analyze difficult problems. “The last time I left…the last time—”

And, stunningly, that was all it took.

He resolved to use the talking method more often.

Harry hiked up his robes and walked along a mulch path that seemed to lead to the edge of the property. Squinting through the light drizzle, the pale moon highlighted from there what seemed to be the main road: a coppery, dirt path that stretched on for miles.

Running towards it—and tripping over his own feet and robes in his haste—Harry raised his wand. Dimly, while it occurred to him that this was *not* the time for such feelings (he once again blamed this on the hysteria), he was strangely grateful for the fact that he now did not need glasses. It made running through the rain a hell of a lot easier.

So much easier, in fact, that he reached the wide dirt path just in time for an inconceivably narrow, towering blue bus to screech to a halt right in front of him.
A familiar bright light shined down on Harry as the door to the bus opened.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard,” a nasal voice announced.

The acne-scarred pale face of Stan Shunpike stared down at him, suspicion on his face.

“Tell me, what does a nice-looking fellow like you have business at Malfoy Manor for?”

With one last wave, the terribly nostalgic image of Stan Shunpike faded to a haze as the Knight Bus zoomed away. Gritting his teeth, Harry greeted the cool air of Privet Drive with a wary expression.

After a moment of trepidation, he made his way to the fourth house on the street.

“Alohomora,” Harry whispered, unlocking the front door with frightening ease. Shutting the door behind him, he silently moved through the house and crept up the stairs.

When he reached the top of the staircase, he approached the door at the end of the hall with slow, silent footsteps. Then, mustering the courage to turn the handle, he pushed it open swiftly.

For a moment, Harry joyfully considered the possibility that he was the only living being in that room. That, yes, he was in Voldemort’s—Tom Riddle’s—body, but the real Voldemort’s soul—or mind, or consciousness, or whatever you wanted to call it—had been cast into the deepest pits of hell, leaving the Wizarding World mercifully You-Know-Who-Free. It was possible, wasn’t it?

But then, a voice entreated him from the darkness. A rough, youthful voice that—and it was Harry’s voice—managed to drip with terribly familiar coldness.

“So the boy-who-lived has deigned to drop by at last.”

“Lumos,” Harry whispered, and light filled the room. Dark green eyes, far more deadly looking than they had been in the past, looked out at Harry from under tousled black hair. A familiar face.

And yet, somehow, this was also different from Harry’s face. Indeed, the features were all his, but suddenly everything seemed to take on a different cast—a warmly colored painting suddenly portrayed in gothic tones. It seemed somehow that Harry’s face was all hard angles and sharp lines, his mouth the only exception—a slight, softer protrusion.

Getting up, the man that was undoubtedly Tom Marvolo Riddle and the Dark Lord Voldemort surveyed him like a predator determining whether or not his prey was worthy of being consumed. In silence, the two gazed at each other.

“Did you do this?” Harry demanded, fear and anger lending him a lack of patience. If this was to be some sort of messed up final showdown that Voldemort had orchestrated, he wanted to know now.

“What is it that you have done to my body?” Riddle murmured, his tone delicate.

“If you did…you don’t have an army anymore.” Harry responded roughly.

Riddle circled him, his gaze roving across Harry.
“I didn’t do anything.” Harry growled. “When I woke up, it was different…like this.”

When only silence met his words, Harry continued darkly: “Why…why would you do this? Do the death eaters know? If they don’t, they’re going to be gunning for you now, aren’t they?”

Riddle’s expression revealed nothing but a terrifying sense of egotism. “Do you really think that a few subordinates could kill me?”

And once again, they stood and looked at each other.

“I’m going to kill you,” Harry burst out suddenly. The abrupt passion that shook through him was violent and all consuming, as startling and soul wrenching as a confession of love. And this, Harry realized, was his new method of breaking down: issuing ill-timed death threats to persons whom he currently had no chance of defeating.

“I’m going to kill you,” Harry nevertheless found himself repeating. And then, because Harry didn't know what else to say, his speech ended as abruptly and violently as it had started.

Riddle’s mouth curved.

Then, a loud crash sounded from below them.

Harry jerked away from Riddle, head turning towards the door. He tried to quiet his breathing as footsteps climbed up the stairs. Voices echoed carelessly off the walls as the trespassers neared.

Harry watched with trepidation as the lock to the door unclicked and the knob slowly began to turn.

Riddle pulled out his wand—Harry’s wand, he noted with silent rage—in a lightning quick motion. Harry followed suit quickly, pulling the foreign wand that felt oddly comfortable in his own hold from the folds of his robe.

The door opened.

“Lower your wands, boys, before you take someone’s eye out,” said a low, growling voice.

Light from the mysterious figure’s wand lit up the room, revealing the grizzled, mismatched form of Alastor Moody.

“Mad-Eye,” a female voice called from behind. The woman stepped to the fore, revealing a young witch with vivid hair, “there are two of them. Aren’t we supposed to pick up only one?”

“Who is this, Harry?” a tall, ragged looking man asked Riddle. With shock, Harry realized that it was Lupin.

“Oh, he looks just like I thought he would!” the violet-haired witch chimed in.

“Harry—” Lupin began again.

“—Are you quite sure it’s him, Remus?” the auror growled, “It’d be a nice lookout if we bring back some Death Eater impersonating him.”

Harry gaze snapped to Mad Eye, wishing to communicate silently how dreadfully true that statement was about to become. He wanted to yell the truth out loud and would have except for something, perhaps pure gut instinct, kept him silent. Because Voldemort managing to defeat even some of the most renowned aurors singlehandedly was not as absurd of a thought to Harry as he might have wished. And Harry could not let more innocent people die for him.
“What form does your Patronus take?” asked Lupin.

Harry watched as Riddle’s face transformed. Sharp edges blurred skillfully into something softer, warmer, and seemingly more compliant. It looked more like Harry’s face now, except that Harry knew better.

“A stag.” the Dark Lord answered, his face so remarkably earnest. Harry leaned back, shocked.

So unlike himself, the Dark Lord must not have passed out—or at least, he must have returned to consciousness much sooner than Harry had.

“That’s him, Mad-Eye,” Lupin affirmed.

“Who’s the other one, boy?” the auror interrogated, his magical eye spinning in its socket.

“He was the one who saved me from the dementor attack,” Riddle lied smoothly.

“The ministry has sent the commands for a hearing to Dumbledore for the use of underage magic,” Lupin stated quietly, “On your wand.”

“I dropped it and he picked it up and cast the spell.” Riddle explained, and even Harry had to admit with difficulty that the earnest expression on his face would have made it hard not to believe him.

“Facing dementors takes great bravery,” Lupin commented seriously, looking at Harry for the first time.

“And great power,” Moody added suspiciously, “Who are you, boy?”

“Tom Gaunt,” Riddle replied for him, flawlessly taking control of the situation again. Harry watched on with adrenaline pulsing through his palms and a sinking feeling in his chest. “He told me he was homeschooled because his mother was too poor to pay for Hogwarts. But she passed away recently, and he’s homeless now. It’s why he’s staying with me. It was the least I could do in return for saving my life.”

“There are those who get left behind,” Moody grunted, “unfortunate truth of the matter. No matter now, you’ll be coming with us.”

“Thank you,” Harry returned, his smile pained.

“Well, now, no more dilly-dallying,” the auror snapped, “pack your things and come downstairs. We don’t have all day for this.”

The purple-haired witch rolled her eyes as he stormed down the stairs, followed by the rest. “Name’s Tonks,” she offered with a wink, “I’ll help you pack your things up.”

“No need,” Riddle replied calmly, “my trunk is already packed.” It was. Harry had packed his trunk even earlier this summer because he had been even more eager to get back to Hogwarts after a summer of little to no contact from both Ron and Hermione.

“Oh,” the witch blinked. She opened her mouth to say something else, but then caught her reflection in the mirror. Her mouth twisted in disapproval.

“Is something the matter?” Riddle asked, his tone unfailingly polite. Tonks seemed to become even more enthusiastic with this attention.

“I just don’t think purple’s the right color for me,” she replied with great concern. She closed her
eyes with fierce concentration. After a couple of seconds, the violent shade of purple because a
violent shade of bubblegum pink. She examined herself once more. “Much better. What d’you
think?”

“I think they’re waiting for us,” Riddle intoned smoothly, “we should probably go down.”

“Right,” the auror replied with a bright smile. “Let’s go.” She led them down the stairs, and
together, they exited the house and joined the others at the front lawn.

“ Heard you liked flying by broom, Potter,” Mad-Eye called to Riddle, “we’ll be flying to our
destination.”

The grizzled auror handed them each a broom, and signaled for them to get into position. Silently,
he raised his wand to the air, and let off two sparks.

After a short pause and a pointed look, he released the third spark. And they took off.
Harry was the first to land, followed shortly by Riddle, and then the others. He rubbed his hands fervently together, trying to generate some heat between his numb fingers.

“Here,” Moody grunted, handing him a note, “read it and memorize it.”

Riddle and Harry looked down at the piece of parchment.

\textit{THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX MAY BE FOUND AT NUMBER TWELVE GRIMMAULD PLACE, LONDON.}

Harry shot a burning glare at what he knew to be Riddle’s triumphant gaze.

Moody burned the piece of parchment and led them all across the street. The auror tapped confidently on a brick in the pavement and, before their eyes, another complex appeared between the former two with a brass plaque on it: Grimmauld Place, House of Black.

Moody rang the doorbell, and the door was opened shortly by a short middle-aged woman with red hair. The moment Mrs. Weasley saw Riddle with Harry’s face, he was engulfed in a suffocating hug. The sight of the warm-hearted Weasley matriarch hugging the young Dark Lord made something awful twist in Harry’s stomach.

“Oh, Harry dear!” she cried, her calloused hand tousling Riddle’s hair affectionately. “You have no idea how wonderful it is to have you here! Ron and Hermione will be overjoyed!”

“Thank you for having me,” Riddle said, seeming warmth in his cheeks. Harry watched on in horror at the masterful act occurring before him.

“No at all. You are always welcome.” Mrs. Weasley said sternly. Then she looked behind Riddle to look at Harry. “And who is this?”

“A friend,” Lupin supplied from behind Harry, placing a supportive hand on his shoulder. “He’ll be staying with us.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Weasley blinked, before offering him a warm smile as well. “Well, let me call down the others. And come in! Come in—” she turned behind her to yell up the stairs, “Ron! Hermione! Come down. Harry’s here!”

Harry watched with wide eyes as two figures came running down the stairs. Immediately, Hermione and Ron launched themselves at Riddle. Harry’s palms tightened painfully into fists.

“Harry! Oh, how are you? Are you all right? Have you been furious with us? I bet you have! I know our letters were useless—but we, we’ve got so much to tell you, and you’ve got things to tell us—the Dementors! When we heard—and that Ministry hearing—it’s just outrageous. I’ve looked it all up. They can’t expel you. They just can’t. You see, there’s a provision in the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery for the use of magic in life-threatening situations—”

“Let him breathe, Hermione,” the Ron said, sending a easy grin towards Riddle. “Good to see you, mate.”

“Oh,” Hermione exhaled. She had finally seen Harry. “Who is that?”
Harry’s muscles tensed as Hermione’s and Ron’s eyes landed on him. In that moment, he could not help but reflect bitterly on the irony of his circumstances. Here he was, being forced to reintroduce himself to the first, true friends he had made in his life.

“Mate?” he heard Ron ask.

Harry’s gaze darted up immediately, meeting two pairs of painfully familiar eyes. Curiously, however, the feeling of hopelessness that had been slowly sinking into him seemed to dissipate as their gazes met. All he could fixate on was how badly he wanted to talk to them again—how badly he wanted to return to their easy intimacy—and how, despite how far he was from being able to do that, wonderfully tangible they were in front of him now.

A sharp exhalation broke the peace of the moment. Harry looked away and found Riddle burning gaze on them.

Harry ignored him and smiled awkwardly at Hermione. “My name is Tom Gaunt.”

Hermione smiled warmly back at him. She placed a slim, authoritative hand on his shoulder. “I’m Hermione. If you want, I can show you around later.”

“I would like that,” Harry responded, his voice slightly hoarse.

“Harry, dear,” Mrs. Weasley spoke. “Have you had dinner yet? No? Excellent. The meeting is just finishing up, so we’ll all head straight there and eat together.”

Riddle exited the room after Mrs. Weasley, setting a calm pace that forced Harry to go just as slowly down the dimly lit hall. As they neared the dining room, Harry was able to smell the recently made food. His stomach grumbled loudly, and he tried to recall the last time he had eaten. He couldn’t remember.

“Harry!” Sirius cried as they entered, standing up to embrace Riddle.

All summer, he had wanted—needed—to see his godfather…

If there had been any chance that it wasn’t entirely true before, Harry was confident now that he hated the Dark Lord with every iota of his being.

“That’s right, everyone’s here now,” Mrs. Weasley said with a wide smile, and with a wave of her wand, the food appeared on the table.

While George and Fred wrestled over who would get to the mashed potatoes first, Riddle calmly took a seat on the right side of Sirius, directly opposite Harry himself. Harry glared at the pudding.

“Sirius, what is this? What is the Order of the Phoenix?” Riddle asked, shifting towards the other.

“Sirius…” Mrs. Weasely intoned sharply, a distinctly uncomfortable look on her face.

Remus shook his head. “Molly, I think they should know.”

Sirius met Mrs. Weasley’s gaze for one tense second. Then he leaned back in his chair, a serious expression on his face. “The Order of the Phoenix was an organization established by Dumbledore during the first war to fight Voldemort and his followers. It was a dark time, Harry, the ministry was in shambles, almost on the brink of falling apart—it was chaos, no one knew who to trust, who to follow—but with the Order, we had a semblance of a resistance. Your parents…James and Lily…were members.”
Harry swallowed the rice harshly, his amber eyes focused raptly on Sirius.

“So it’s been activated again because Voldemort’s back,” Riddle responded softly, but his green eyes were razor sharp, almost burning.

“Exactly,” Sirius nodded.

“And what is the Order planning?” Harry instantly became tense. Sirius had to stop, he couldn’t reveal—

“Sirius,” Mrs. Weasley warned, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “They are far too young for this conversation.”

Sirius hesitated, looking at Riddle carefully as though to size him up. Riddle looked back unflinchingly, and whatever hesitation Sirius may have had appeared to vanish.

“Harry,” Sirius began slowly, “Voldemort…he’s searching for something, something he didn’t have the first time around…”

“Sirius!” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed.

“A weapon?” Hermione asked, hands stilling from their methodical dissection of some beef. Harry’s grip tightened painfully on his fork.

“Of sorts,” Remus responded vaguely, giving Sirius a cautionary look.

“A powerful one, if placed in his hands,” Sirius said passionately, ignoring Remus, “one with which, he could—"

“ENOUGH!”

Shocked, everyone turned and looked at the panting matriarch of the Weasley family. The room was utterly silent as Mrs. Weasley glared furiously at Sirius.

“They aren’t even of age yet, Sirius! They’re children—"

“They should know the truth, Molly,” Sirius growled, “these ‘children’ have faced more than most grown wizards do in their entire life times! And while we may make a distinction between child and adult, war does not. Voldemort does not. War doesn’t spare children and Harry happens to be right in the middle of this! He should know what’s going on!”

A strange expression came over Mrs. Weasley’s face then, and she appeared to choose her following words with care.

“Sirius…Harry is not James.”

Harry watched as Sirius froze, before something dangerous glinted in his eyes. “What?”

“Sirius,” Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips, as though repeating his name again would force sense into him. “What you’ve been through is…terrible. But Harry cannot fill the void left behind by…by James. He’s not an adult. He isn’t your best friend, and he most certainly is not a fellow soldier. He’s a child. And what he needs isn’t a reckless adult goading him into foolish risk-taking, but a responsible adult who looks after him!”

“How…dare…you…” Sirius hissed, but that seemed to be all he could manage in his rage.
Tension reigned in the room. Harry’s gaze shot to Riddle instantly and found that his face conveyed the pretense of a worried expression, but he had not bothered to veil the look in his eyes. Riddle’s eyes revealed the sadistic amusement he held for the events occurring around him.

And suddenly, Harry was mindless with rage: mindless with the terrifying hypocrisy of the moment—the fact that Voldemort was going to take everything he loved away from him and pretend to care for them while doing it.

It was strange—Harry thought—that he found himself lunging across the dining table, knocking over the bowl of soup and glasses of punch.

He landed heavily on Riddle. Their combined weight tipped Riddle’s chair and they landed with a thump on the floor.

It was also strange and rather unfortunate—Harry reflected dazedly, as awareness slowly began to seep into him—that this seemed to be his new method of breaking down: executing ill-timed assassination attempts on persons whom he currently had no chance of defeating.

Indeed, the Dark Lord was holding up against Harry—who had learned to run and dodge rather quickly thanks to Dudley—even without magic with moderate success. It was hard to keep from being pushed off, but Harry tightened his legs around the other’s waist, his fingers twitching hungrily to grasp and squeeze Riddle’s neck. And then Riddle thrust upward in a manner he had only seen done by boys used to brawling on the streets and suddenly, Harry found himself looking up into blazing green eyes.

Riddle’s grip on him was vicious. Harry was pulled forcefully into him, a hand entwined roughly in his hair bringing his head forward until his chin rested on Riddle’s neck.

Harry struggled violently against this forced muzzling, snarling. He could pull free, and he could do it even faster if he could reach the wand in his boot—

“Move,” Riddle whispered into his ear, too quietly for the others to hear, “and I kill the mudblood.”

Harry froze immediately, his body reluctantly still in the other’s violent hold.

That was when Harry finally became aware of the audience watching them.

“Harry? Tom?” Remus asked in a carefully measured tone.

Riddle finally moved off of Harry and stood up.

“I apologize for the scene we just made,” he said, head tilted down in seeming embarrassment, “Tom and I had an argument earlier and I am afraid that everything has been so stressful that it simply boiled over. I assure you that such a scene will not occur again.”

“An argument,” Sirius repeated blankly. His gaze fell pointedly on a displaced salad bowl that now decorated the wall.

“I should have made sure we had settled this earlier, before our anger escalated to this point,” Riddle added, bowing his head.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” Mrs. Weasley huffed, drawing herself up. “The poor boys are tired out of their minds! It’s been a stressful night for us all, and the two look dead on their feet! Harry, Tom, off to bed with the both of you. It’s the first door on the right, up the stairs. Your lights better be
“Of course, Mrs. Weasley,” Riddle smiled. With a nod to the others, he gently led Harry down the hall until they were out of sight then dragged him up the stairs and into their room.

Harry was shoved none too gently in, the door slamming behind the both of them. In one swift continuous movement, Harry pulled his wand from his boot and whipped around to face the other. But before he could raise his wand high enough, he found his old wand already poised directly in front of his face.

Riddle blinked at him slowly, shifting his half-hooded gaze from the wand that had yet to lift past Harry’s midriff.

Suddenly, Harry felt intense, scorching pain centered behind his navel. He gasped in surprised agony and dug unthinking nails into the flesh of his stomach in an instinctual effort to distract himself from greater pain. When it did not work and all he could do was breathe painfully through the spell to keep himself from screaming, he turned blazing eyes on his attacker.

Riddle tilted his head like a disinterested bird, examining Harry’s pain with only clinical interest. But there was a vicious, sadistic curve to his mouth that made his face—Harry’s face—look ugly.

It was silent; it was brutal. It was how a human reminded a wild animal—through action and nothing else—who was in control.

That night, Harry fell asleep on the ground to the sound of mocking laughter ringing in his ears, even though there had been no audible laughter.
Weeks had passed since they had arrived at Grimmauld Place. The rather uneventful period of time had been spent assisting in the cleaning of the ancient house, polishing all the heirlooms and clearing out the boggarts and dust that had made it uninhabitable. Harry had seen Riddle surprisingly infrequently in that time—except for when they ate and when they slept—though each time, Harry was remarkably aware of the sense that he was being evaluated.

Harry clutched the bottle in his hand and sprayed, instantly immobilizing a pair of unlucky doxies.

“Tom?” Mrs. Weasley called from the hallway. Putting down the bottle, Harry wiped some of the sweat off his forehead and moved to the door, sticking his head out.

“Yes, Mrs. Weasley?” Harry asked, trying to give his best friend’s mother a smile in return. He tried not to let it get to him, but sometimes the polite, distant, smile on Mrs. Weasley’s face—from the one person who had used to mother him—caused his chest to tighten painfully.

That and the suspicious, guarded looks he had been receiving from Hermione and Ron ever since the unfortunate dinner table incident. In the past weeks, his contact with them had been limited, isolated as they were in cleaning separate parts of the house.

“Have you seen Harry?” Mrs. Weasley asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Harry’s lips twisted as he thought about Riddle. “No. What d’you need him for?”

“Honestly, that boy!” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, planting her arms on her hips. “The hearing is at noon! And you! Not even dressed properly!”

Harry looked at the floor in horror and shock. How could he have forgotten? He could be expelled from Hogwarts if this hearing didn’t go well. He couldn’t—

“Did I hear my name?” a voice spoke from behind them. Both turned, to see Riddle leaning casually against one of the doors in the hallway, his clothing formal and all black for the occasion.

Harry’s eye twitched at the color typically only seen on purebloods. He had seen the articles in the Daily Prophet—*The Boy-Who-Lied* had become his new moniker—and he knew that journalists like Rita Skeeter were by no means above criticizing his clothing choices for evidence of his purported ‘secret loyalty to the Dark.’

“Harry,” Mrs. Weasley exhaled, sending a sharp look at his clothing, but opting to say nothing aloud about it, “Tom, you should get dressed too, something a little more formal than that t-shirt and those ripped jeans, please. There’s no time to eat, but I’ve packed some sandwiches to take with the both of you and given them to Arthur.”

Harry ran upstairs to change, hastily throwing on a button down white shirt and an ancient pair of dress pants he found in the room’s wardrobe before heading back down.

“Well?” Mrs. Weasley prompted, “Off with the both of you!”

“R-right,” Harry replied swiftly. He shot a glance at Riddle with a blank face, observing the rapid calculations occurring behind the other’s eyes.

As they climbed down the stairs silently, however, Harry almost walked into Sirius, who was
sitting on one of the steps seemingly waiting for them.

Sirius stood up, an uncharacteristically grim expression on his face as he looked at Tom. “You’ll be fine today, okay?” he said gruffly, grasping his shoulders. “The law’s on your side—even wizards who are underage can use magic in life-threatening situations. If anything happens, I’ll set Amelia Bones straight.”

Harry looked up with envious eyes at the taller man, watching as Tom hugged him tightly. He breathed in the oddly pleasant scent of cigarette smoke and motorcycles even from a distance and felt his eyes sting.

“Thanks,” Riddle responded before pulling back. “I’ll see you later, Sirius.”

Riddle moved to continue down the staircase, the dress shoes that had no doubt been borrowed from one of the immense closets of prior Blacks clacking loudly despite the carpeted steps, when Sirius spoke again.

“And Harry…no matter what, no matter what they say, do not lose your temper.”

Harry froze, muscles unconsciously tightening.

Because Sirius was looking at Riddle right now and there was a look of wariness in his eyes, and Harry could tell that his smart, brilliant godfather had seen something in the Dark Lord’s disguised eyes that the others had not. Some hidden darkness that had escaped everyone else.

Riddle’s arm moved slowly towards his right pocket—where he kept his wand—and Harry’s pulse tripled in rate and he immediately moved forward to step in front of his—

“The two of you ready, then?” Mr. Weasley called from the bottom of the staircase.

“Yes,” Riddle answered slowly, hand retreating. Something hidden but malicious moved behind Riddle’s eyes and Mr. Weasley moved out of sight. Alarm flashed through Harry and he kept a steady hand on his wand.

“Boys! Hurry up!” Mr. Weasley called, “You don’t want to be late!”

Both moved to join the entrance, nodding to Mr. Weasley, and put on their coats to keep them dry from the rain outside. Just as they were about to exit Grimmauld Place through the door, however, Harry heard soft footsteps from the opposite direction.

Turning, Harry’s eyes widened in surprise.

Almost as tall as him, Ginny only had to lean on her toes a little to wrap her arms around Riddle. Harry wanted to clutch her Holyhead Harpies jersey and yank her back.

Letting go, Ginny looked up at Tom with fierce, brown eyes, smelling sharply of cinnamon from the dining room. “I just wanted to wish you luck before the hearing, Harry.”

“Thank you, Ginny.”

Ginny smiled at Riddle, before her warm eyes shifted sharply to Harry. “You too, Gaunt.”

Harry was alarmed by the subtle hostility in Ginny’s challenging gaze. He could not imagine what he had done to alienate her…though, he had tried to strangle Riddle a month ago…and she did think Riddle was Harry…
“Tom, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said sternly, “we need to leave now.”

Riddle didn’t glance at Ginny again. Mr. Weasley turned back and looked at them.

“We’ll be using the non-magic way to get there. I think that’ll be best…leave a better impression…given the situation…” Mr. Weasley muttered, leading them out and to the nearby underground station.

They took the train—after much confusion on Mr. Weasley’s part with the convoluted inner-workings of London’s underground network—and got off at a station among the swarm of thousands of commuting workers in the center of London.

Referring to the map, and with several mutterings of—“Oh yes, just right this way…It should be right around here…Just to the left, there…”—Mr. Weasley led them to an abandoned dilapidated red telephone booth with an ancient “Out Of Service” sign on the front, nearly walking into several busy looking people with hefty brief cases on the way.

“Aafter you,” Mr. Weasley gestured grandly, opening the door to the telephone box. Harry scowled as Riddle pulled him inside, and watched as Mr. Weasley entered as well and immediately began working the dial on the phone.

Something clicked after five or six turns and the entire booth jolted before moving downwards into the ground.

A polished, female voice flooded the booth: “Welcome to the Ministry of Magic, the governing structure of the United Kingdom’s wizarding population since 1192. Please state your name and business.”

Mr. Weasley hastily picked up the receiver and answered, “Arthur Weasley, member of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, and Harry Potter and Riddle Gaunt, both here attending a disciplinary hearing.”

Three badges emerged from a brass chute, and Mr. Weasley pinned his own on to his vest, before handing Riddle and Harry theirs, who in turn, pinned theirs on to their coats. They stepped outside and entered the Ministry of Magic.

As he followed Mr. Weasley, Harry gaped at the sheer splendor of the Ministry, gazing at the glistening black marble and the high arched ceilings in awe. Hearing the sound of water among the cracks and pops of apparition, Harry turned and found himself looking at a huge, towering golden fountain depicting an arrogant looking wizard with his wand thrust triumphantly into the air, a stunned, heavily jeweled witch draped over his arm, surrounded by a bowing centaur, a kneeling goblin, and a prostrate house elf. His gaze then caught onto a huge banner of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, looking with an expression of deep introspection into the distance.

“Tom, don’t fall behind,” Mr. Weasley cautioned Harry, leading them into a lift packed with numerous other yawning witches and wizards.

The compartment moved downwards before opening again and several more wizards and witches entered the lift—one of whom, Harry realized with shock, was Kingsley Shacklebolt.

The dark-skinned wizard looked unaffected on the outside, but whispered something in Mr. Weasley’s ear with undeniable urgency. Then, he left as quickly as he had entered at the next opening of the lift.

Mr. Weasley let out a yelp and looked at his watch with worry. He leapt forward to press another
button on the lift.

“What is it, Mr. Weasley?” Harry asked, his stomach tightening.

“Why is it even down there?” Mr. Weasley muttered, before looking up distractedly, “Oh, yes. Boys, I’ve just been informed that they’ve changed the time and venue of the hearing.”

“What?” Harry replied, shocked.

“It’s now in five minutes,” Mr. Weasley answered, frowning anxiously, “and in courtroom ten at the Department of Mysteries.”

Riddle looked up sharply at that. “The Department of Mysteries?”

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Weasley exclaimed, racing out of the lift and down the maze of halls. Harry and Riddle had to run to keep up with him.

At last, Mr. Weasley stopped at a desk in front of the hall leading to two large brass doors. At the desk was a bored looking wizard dressed in grey robes, a sign saying SECURITY suspended in mid-air above his head.

“Well,” Mr. Weasley exhaled, “This is where I leave you, boys. I wish you both the best of luck. Have faith in, as the muggles say, that ‘the truth will out’!”

If only. Harry nodded, his stomach sinking as Mr. Weasley disappeared back into the maze of halls, leaving him alone with Riddle and the security guard.

“Wands, please,” the wizard said lazily, his gaze still on the day’s issue of the Daily Prophet.

Hesitating slightly, Harry slowly handed him his wand, watching as the guard placed it onto a brass instrument and a quill recorded its properties.

“Thirteen and a half inches, yew, phoenix-feather core, been in use sixty years. Is that right?”

He gave a hum of agreement, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his black trousers.

Without looking up from the parchment, the wizard opened his hand expectantly for Riddle’s wand.

Riddle gazed at the wizard blankly, his hand flexing around the wand, before finally placing it on the brass instrument himself. The guard shot him an irritated look, as the quill scratched busily on the parchment.

“Eleven inches, holly, phoenix-feather core, and been used four years. Is that correct?” the wizard asked, his expression unchanging.

“That is correct,” Riddle intoned; his head tilted at the mention of “phoenix-feather” once more. The guard handed them back both their wands, and allowed them past him towards the brass doors.

As they neared the brass doors, they heard quiet voices conversing from a perpendicular corridor.

“…And I am confident, minister, that you will do the right thing.”

“Yes, but we must be discreet—”

Harry gazed with incredulity at Lucius Malfoy and Fudge conversing as though they were old
friends just minutes before the trial. Both wizards stopped speaking abruptly as they neared, turning to look at them: Fudge, with a scandalized expression, Lucius Malfoy, with a sneer.

“Please, Cornelius,” Malfoy said graciously, “Why don’t you head on to the courtroom?”

Clearly ruffled, Fudge gave a jerky nod and exited down the hall, disappearing into one of the twisting, winding corridors.

Malfoy turned to look at them, a malicious expression on his face. “Potter.”

Without a further glance, Harry pushed open a brass door and entered the courtroom with Riddle behind him.

The lighting in the courtroom was considerably brighter than the dark space of halls leading to it. Harry blinked, his eyes suffering under the light. When he blinked past the black spots, he was met with the vision of rows and rows of important, official looking wizards and witches in dark crimson robes.

He was gestured carelessly to a seat at the corner of the room while Riddle was led to stand behind a podium at the center.

“Disciplinary hearing on the twelfth of August,” Fudge announced, not deigning to ask Harry or Riddle if they were ready to start the hearing, “concerning offenses committed by a Mr. Harry James Potter under the Decree of the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery and the International Statute of Secrecy at Little Whinging, Surrey. Interrogators of today’s trial: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister of Magic; Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; and Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Witnesses for the Defense: Mr. Harry James Potter and Mr. Riddle Gaunt. Court scribe: Percy Ignatius Weasley. Let the trial commence.”

Fudge knocked the gavel, signifying the beginning of the hearing.

“I will now read the charges at hand today,” Fudge continued, picking up a long strip of parchment and adjusting the glasses on his nose. “The court finds itself today contemplating these issues: that Mr. Harry James Potter did knowingly, deliberately, and in full awareness of the illegality of his actions, having received a prior warning from the Ministry of Magic concerning a similar charge, produce a Patronus Charm in the presence of a muggle, on August the second at twenty three minutes past nine, thus constituting an offense both under paragraph C of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, as well as under Section XIII of the International Confederation of Wizards’ Statute of Secrecy.”

Fudge looked up. “Will the accused take the stand?”

Riddle stepped forward to mount the platform.

“Please state your name and age for the record,” Fudge thundered, looking as though it hurt him physically to say the word ‘please.’ Percy scribbled furiously beside him, not even looking up.

“My name is Harry James Potter. I am fifteen years old,” Riddle answered smoothly.

“Do you understand why you are in court today, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes.”

“And why is that?”
“Because I used magic while underage against—”

“Mr. Potter, you received a warning concerning similar charges to the ones you face today three years ago, isn’t that right?”

Harry gasped in rage. Riddle’s face didn’t even twitch at the interruption. “...yes, I did.” As if he knew.

“You understood what those charges meant, correct?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And you also understood, Mr. Potter, the consequences if you were to commit similar actions again. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

Lies, so convincingly delivered.

“And yet,” Fudge trumpeted, “Mr. Potter, three years after that incident, we find ourselves again contemplating similar charges, isn’t that correct?”

“That is correct,” Riddle answered calmly. Harry twitched angrily.

“Because on August 2\textsuperscript{nd}, at nine twenty three, in Little Whinging, Surrey, you conjured a Patronus Charm, in front of a muggle. Isn’t that right, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes. However—”

“Mr. Potter,” Fudge said loudly, talking over him, “you knew that you were prohibited from using magic outside of school, didn’t you?”

And this time, Riddle looked up sharply and the slight tensing of his jaw—whether intentional or not—seemed to give everyone pause. In that one moment, though perhaps it was his imagination, Harry felt as though it was entirely possible that everyone in the room instinctually recognized the threat of the Dark Lord before them. But then, as quickly as he had thought it, the moment passed.

“I apologize, minister,” Riddle proffered with a polite smile, “but isn’t it rather rude of you to interrupt me? Not to mention its questionable legality.”

A stern looking witch with severe features spoke up from beside the minister, looking at him sharply. “Indeed, Minister, this is your first and final warning. Please allow the witness to complete his answers before continuing on to your next question.”

Fudge sniffed, “Very well, Madam Bones. Mr. Potter, please complete your answer.”

“To which question?” Riddle asked with an impassive expression. Fudge reddened.

“Mr. Potter,” the minister of magic snapped, “on August 2\textsuperscript{nd}, at nine twenty three, in Little Whinging, Surrey, you conjured a Patronus Charm, in front of a muggle. Isn’t that correct?”

“Yes,” Riddle acknowledged, “but only because there were dementors.”

Fudge paused, clearly not expecting this answer.

“Dementors?” Madam Bones, the stern looking witch, inquired. “Describe the incident.”
“I was out in the park with my cousin—who is the muggle who saw me performing the charm,” Riddle said slowly, “and when we turned into an alleyway returning home, there were two dementors. That is why I conjured the Patronus charm.”

“Dementors,” Madam Bones repeated with surprise, her eyebrows lifted, “in Surrey.”

“Ah, that’s very clever, boy,” Fudge sneered, recovering himself, “creating a story for why you used the Patronus charm. Muggles can’t see dementors, can they? Highly convenient…highly convenient…”

“Minister, I believe there is a witness who may or may not be able to corroborate Mr. Potter’s testimony.” Madam Bones stated rather pointedly.

“Now, Amelia,” Fudge said, placating, “we really haven’t got the time to listen to more of this nonsense. I want this dealt with quickly.”

“With all due respect, Minister,” Madam Bones returned sharply, “under the Wizengamot Charter of Rights, all accused individuals have the unalienable right to present witnesses defending their cases. Mr. Tom Gaunt, please take the stand. Mr. Potter, you may be seated.”

Riddle descended from the platform as Harry got up. The two crossed paths as Harry moved to take the stand.

“Please state your name and age for the record,” Fudge began loftily.

“My name is Tom Gaunt,” Harry answered, shifting in his seat as, “I’m fifteen years old.”

Madame Bones spoke up. “We have no record of a Tom Gaunt, age fifteen, in the Hogwarts records.”

“I didn’t go to Hogwarts,” Harry answered, throat uncomfortably dry as he repeated Riddle’s lies, “My family was poor.”

“Describe the day of the incident,” Fudge intoned.

“I was in Little Whinging. And when I was walking around, I started to…to feel a chill.”

“Please describe the chill that you felt,” Madam Bones questioned, leaning forward.

Harry inhaled sharply, his body reliving the experience. “The, uh…I guess I started to feel cold. And then the cold began to seep under my skin, until I could feel it in my bones and it was all I could feel.”

Madam Bones’ eyes widened, and leaned forward even further, her voice quiet. “Did you recognize the cause of this chill?”

“Yes,” Harry said, “I…I heard someone yelling and when I ran towards the sound, I…I saw the dementors.”

“Could you describe what you saw in more detail?” Madam Bones asked, riveted.

“I saw two boys, and two large creatures, hooded and cloaked in black with skeletal fingers. The boys were about to be Kissed, when one of them raised his wand and cast the Patronus charm, sending them away.”

“Dementors! Wandering into a muggle suburb!” Fudge sputtered, “I have never heard a more
preposterous story!”

“It’s not a story!” Harry cried furiously, unable to keep himself quiet any longer.

Fudge’s expression became icy, his voice deadly. “And... what... exactly are you suggesting, Mr. Gaunt?”

“Nothing against the ministry, of course,” Riddle spoke from the corner of the courtroom. Every eye darted to him in surprise. “The dementors are supposed to stay at Azkaban, and I am sure that the Ministry of Magic would never authorize an attack upon an innocent individual.”

An obnoxious clearing of the throat then directed all attention to a small, toad-like woman sitting to the other side of Fudge.

“The court recognizes Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister,” Fudge proclaimed.

The small, toad-woman stood up, and cleared her throat obnoxiously once more, before speaking. “Pardon me, Mr. Potter, and I do sincerely apologize if I have somehow misunderstood you, but it sounded—dear me—for just an instant, as though you were perhaps possibly implying that something else—other than the Ministry, that is—has power over the dementors and possibly ordered this attack.”

“Am I?” Riddle asked innocuously.

“And who exactly would this third party be?” Fudge asked thunderously, standing up.

“Perhaps,” Madame Bones said softly, her hawkish eyes appearing sharper than ever over her pair of spectacles, “one person of rising prevalence in the news comes to mind.”

And Harry froze, because... how... how could he have not guessed it?

Fudge trembled with rage, body visibly shaking as he stated, “I would like to remind the court that the purported divided affiliations of the dementors is not of concern in today’s trial. We are here to examine Mr. Harry James Potter’s offenses under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery!”

“Nevertheless,” Madam Bones returned neutrally, “you must agree that the possible presence of dementors is highly relevant in today’s case. Clause XII of the Decree statute states that the use of underage magic in the presence of a muggle is permissible under exceptional circumstances of life-threatening danger.”

“Y-yes,” Fudge said at last, deflating. “The testimony... shall remain in the record.”

“Fellow members of the court,” Madam Bones proclaimed, standing up to address the rest of Wizengamot, “having heard today’s trial with an unbiased mind, review that which you have heard and announce your verdict when I prompt you to do so.”

She allowed the wizards and witches to converse for several minutes, before declaring, “Those in favor of conviction, raise your hand.”

Many hands went up, about a dozen, Harry estimated, among whom were the Minister himself and the toad-looking woman who had cleared her throat so obnoxiously.

“And those in favor of clearing the accused of all charges, please raise your hand.”
More than fifty hands, by far the majority, raise their hands in response to this verdict, and Harry felt his heart soar.

Fudge had a pinched expression on his face. “Very well. The court finds Mr. Harry James Potter on the twelfth of August cleared of all charges.”

The sound of the gavel marked the end of the trial. Everyone left the courtroom.

Harry leaned against the wall at the exit of the courtroom, eyes closed as his head pounded painfully.

He heard footsteps approach him and felt another presence come to a stop at his right. They stood for a minute in silence, before Harry finally spoke.

“You—you…” Harry hissed, unable to find a word that was terrible enough.

Riddle merely looked at him with a disinterested expression. The striking sharpness of his features was back—the full force of the alien nature of his inhabitation in Harry’s body visible for all to guess.

And it—all of it—set every nerve in Harry on fire. He burned, trembled, writhed with the full force of it, that rage, that senseless, mindless entity of—

He painfully forced a modicum of control over himself.

“Do you think that you’ve beaten me, Riddle?” Harry whispered furiously, “Do you think that you’ve already won this war—that the only reason I’m alive is because you’re indulging me? I don’t serve your whims. If you didn’t threaten my friends and the people I love, I wouldn’t give a damn about you—”

His wrist broke, a small, sickening crack echoing down the hallway, and Harry cried out in agony, panting as the pain registered in his system. Harry found, with a strange sense of betrayal—though if it were due to his own naivety or Riddle’s actions (and wasn’t that ludicrous, to feel betrayed by the Dark Lord) he didn’t know—that he was surprised by the violence.

Through his pain, Harry felt it thrumming in the air. The Dark Lord’s suffocating, forceful magic.

Riddle swept a hand through Harry’s hair, cradling his head as Harry panted in agony, panting as the pain registered in his system. Harry found, with a strange sense of betrayal—though if it were due to his own naivety or Riddle’s actions (and wasn’t that ludicrous, to feel betrayed by the Dark Lord) he didn’t know—that he was surprised by the violence.

“Fuck. You.” Harry hissed, the poisonous words tasting delightfully sour and yet so sweet.

Harry glared up at the other, fully expecting another broken limb.

“Tom? Harry?” he heard a voice call from further down the hall. “I heard the good news, and—is everything alright?”

It did not come.

Slowly, Riddle let Harry go, wandlessly healing the visible break in his wrist. Harry refused to look at the other.
“Yes, Mr. Weasley,” Riddle replied, his tone artificially care free, “Everything is fine.”

Mr. Weasley reached them and engulfed Riddle in a hug. “Congratulations, Harry. You will be returning to Hogwarts this fall, just as you should.”

He then patted Harry on the arm. “You too. You helped Harry today, and for that, our family owes you a debt. I hope you will allow us to pay for your school supplies this year.”

“That’s fine, Mr. Weasley,” Harry said, forcing himself into a light-hearted demeanor, but his head pounded terribly and his eyes were dark. “Harry already promised me that, and I reckon he has a much bigger debt to pay off than you do.”

Mr. Weasley hesitated. “Yes, I suppose he does…Now, Molly wants the both of you home in time for supper, so we should be heading off now.”

They proceeded to leave the ministry.
The brazen August sun beat down on them unforgivingly as the loud bustling of eager school children and exasperated parents culminated into a near deafening cacophony. Through the chaos, the Weasleys, Hermione, Riddle, and Harry pushed their way through Diagon Alley.

“Harry, Hermione, Tom, you can get your shopping done together,” Mrs. Weasley shouted to them over the din, “I’ll take the rest. We’ll never get anywhere if we all move together like this. We’ll meet at Fortescue’s in three hours.”

“Mum,” Ron protested, “why can’t I go with them?”

Mrs. Weasley glared Ron into silence. “Not this year, Ronald. This time, I’m going to make sure you spend your money on school supplies and not some ridiculous Quidditch posters again.”

Riddle, the closest to her, responded on behalf of the others. “That sounds good, Mrs. Weasley.”

Waving at them, Mrs. Weasley led the rest of the Weasleys in the direction opposite them, and was soon swallowed by the masses of witches and wizards.

Which left Harry standing next to a rather rumpled looking Hermione and Riddle.

“Where would you like to go first, Tom?” Hermione asked Harry.

She looked at him with that same curious expression she had directed at him when she had met him at Grimmauld Place, her dark brown eyes assessing.

Harry responded with the first thing that came to his mind. “Madame Malkin’s.”

Hermione’s eyebrows went up. “That’s right, you don’t have any robes!”—then, directing her gaze towards Riddle with a wry smile—“You should get some new robes too, Harry. You grew quite a bit over the summer.”

Riddle smiled back at her, the expression polished and refined, vastly different from Harry’s typical wild grin. Something flashed in Hermione’s eyes before it quickly disappeared.

The three teenagers slowly but steadily made their way to Madame Malkin’s, approaching the towering establishment where the crowd seemed to thin into fewer shoppers.

For whatever reason, it was only at his second visit of the store (Harry had shopped with the Weasleys in the summers in between) that Harry noticed the chandeliers, the random array of marble busts, and the incredibly polished-looking employees—as though they themselves were of a higher caliber than the common witch or wizard—as they entered Madame Malkin’s.

Harry suddenly felt very uncomfortable as he remembered how Hagrid had chosen to remain outside the first time, and how the Weasleys, each year, shopped for their robes elsewhere.

“You want to get anything?” Harry whispered to her, glaring at the witches who sneered at him and Hermione.

Hermione looked at Harry, ignoring the witches, and replied calmly, “Not particularly, no. If I bought something here, I wouldn’t have enough money for the rest of my school supplies.”

“Harry could get it for you,” Harry said, not looking at Riddle.
“Of course,” Riddle replied smoothly, “consider it an early birthday present.”

Harry, aware of how fiercely independent Hermione was, was surprised when she merely raised an eyebrow at that and offered no protest.

“Mr. Potter,” a slim, brunette witch proclaimed, walking towards Riddle hastily and ignoring the other two entirely, “what can I do for you today?”

“Five sets of school robes for me and my friends,” Riddle smiled.

Waving her wand, she conjured a strip of measuring tape and measured them, a floating quill taking note of the numbers.

“Would you like leisure clothes as well? Sweaters? Scarves?” the brunette asked.

“Might as well.”

“For all three?”

“Yes.”

The witch flicked her wand again, conjuring the necessary garments and wrapping them altogether with the robes in packages that she then handed to each person.

Riddle handed over a small fortune of money, more than Harry had ever handled, to the witch. Then they walked out of the store, once again entering the hustle and bustle of school shoppers.

“Flourish and Blotts next?” Hermione suggested as they neared the packed store.

Harry nodded, and they entered the bookstore. They were almost immediately separated due to the large influx of pushy witches and wizards.

Stumbling to avoid what appeared to be a trio of over-excited first years, Harry went careening into a person behind him.

“What the hell—” a voice seethed from behind him. Harry froze, immediately recognizing that voice.

Turning his head slowly, Harry met the eyes of Draco Malfoy.

“It was an accident,” Harry blurted out, “some kids…in front of me…”

“Who the hell are you?” Malfoy asked, his pale face pinched as he evaluated him.

“Tom,” Harry replied after a small pause, “Gaunt.”

“Gaunt?” Malfoy jolted, his eyes widening. “Gaunt?”

“Y-yes?” It came out sounding like a question.

“You’re all supposed to have died out,” Malfoy muttered, an uncharacteristically serious expression appearing on his face.

“I’m alive, actually,” Harry muttered. Malfoy seemed to ignore that.

“You’re one of Slytherin’s line,” Malfoy murmured, his face leaning uncomfortably close to
“Can you speak it? Parseltongue?”

“Parseltongue?” Harry repeated, eyes darting.

“Yes,” Malfoy returned impatiently, “You’re related to him, aren’t you? Of course, Potter can also do it, but he —”

“He what?” Riddle’s voice sounded from behind the both of them. Harry turned, meeting Riddle’s cool gaze.

“Potter,” Malfoy growled.

Riddle merely raised any eyebrow, his only acknowledgement of the other’s presence. Malfoy drew back in surprise, clearly at a loss in the face of ‘Potter’s’ atypical lack of response.

“Hey, Potter!” Malfoy called from behind them, a desperate look on his face, “How’s that crackpot fool Dumbledore doing?”

Harry froze, before turning quickly. “What are you talking about?”

Malfoy let out a self-satisfied grin, content, apparently, that one of them had responded.

“It’s been all over the news.” Malfoy goaded, “Dumbledore’s been detained elsewhere due to some ‘personal affairs,’ so someone else is going to be heading Hogwarts in his absence. Wondering how soon it’ll be before you’re expelled, Potter?”

Harry stopped breathing, realization hitting him like a punch to the stomach. That was why he hadn’t seen Dumbledore?

And…was that why Riddle was so unconcerned about being recognized when he arrived at Hogwarts?

Harry’s stomach turned. Had…had Riddle somehow…was it possible?…had Riddle managed to—

Harry grabbed Riddle’s arm and dragged him outside of the store. Pulling him into the nearest abandoned alley, Harry turned to Riddle, his amber eyes narrowed.

He couldn’t... have. If Dumbledore was dead, then the war...

Then the war was already over.

“Where is he?” Harry asked softly.

“And what will you give me in return, Potter, for that information?” Riddle asked, voice distant.

Harry gritted his teeth, biting his tongue to prevent himself from saying the only thing he could. What do you want? He could not say it…or…or he would find himself saying it every time he—

“Honestly, Potter, you play this game so poorly.” Riddle murmured, as though reading his thoughts.

“Fuck you,” Harry growled, a feeling of impotency suffocating him. He did not know what else to say—what he could say.

Riddle glanced at Harry. And there was a quality to his callous glance that made Harry feel that this moment—seemingly arbitrary—had marked something irreversible.
“I must admit, Boy-Who-Lived, it is truly underwhelming to find that you are merely another tragically inadequate teenager in the end, after all these years. I thought once that, perhaps, Dumbledore had watched over you so carefully because he intended to make you something more —his successor. I see now that you have always been a pawn.”

Riddle gazed at him for on long moment, before tilting his head dismissively. “Until you become useless, then.”

It was an executioner’s promise. Riddle turned and disappeared from sight.

Harry stared silently at the place he had stood, his face a study in inexpression. It began, rather climactically, to rain, the chilling wetness sinking into Harry’s pale skin. He shivered. Then, with the weariness of one who had lived far too long, Harry allowed his knees to bend and folded in on himself.

And it was as though, that in that singular moment—if one were inclined to imagine such fantastical things—the world were mourning what had occurred. As though the world realized that the awkward, lonely boy who had entered the Wizarding World longing only ever for a friend would now learn of the world of kings, of pawns, and of men.
Aware of the stares directed at him, Harry stiffly made his way up the hill and into the forest. He arrived at a line of dark carriages. One of the horse-like creature tied to a carriage snorted at him impatiently, smooth muscles shifting under velvety skin, as though telling him to get a move on. After a moment of quiet consideration, Harry simply slid his way into the first carriage quietly. He found himself sitting across from a group of third year girls.

Before he could reconsider his choice in company, the carriage began moving. The sudden jolt sent Harry slightly forward. The girl in front of him flinched.

Forcing his thoughts elsewhere, Harry looked down at his trembling pale hands. He tightened them into fists, forcing the shaking to stop.

In the last week, he had barely seen Riddle except for when they shared the room at night. It seemed that the other’s limited interest in him had vanished—good, Harry thought to himself—and Harry too had done his utmost to avoid the other.

In the meantime, Harry had holed himself up in the Black library, trying frantically to learn everything and anything he could. The time spent in the library had yielded nothing. The words he had read had not made sense, the spells he had tried to learn had failed to escape his wand, and his morale had only fallen further.

Harry knew—he knew—that he was hopelessly not up to the task, and yet he also knew that every one he held dear to him expected it of him. Expected him to defeat Voldemort.

The carriage lurched to a slow stop. Harry was the first to get off, pushing past the legions of first years to enter the castle. As he moved past the giant brass doors, the familiar smell of smoky fire and musky wood filled his senses, and his head tilted back as he reveled in the smell.

Eyes opening with the slowness of the intoxicated, Harry made his way to the Great Hall, entering without much aplomb to join the end of the line of first years (he had received a letter a week before detailing how exactly he would be sorted as a ‘transfer student’). Everyone was too excited at the prospect of the coming of year to pay attention to him. Harry enjoyed the brief sense of anonymity.

He saw a bright-eyed Hermione enter with Ron seconds later with Riddle behind him. A thought occurred to him. Had Voldemort gone to Hogwarts? Riddle seemed to inhale shortly, his cool green eyes surveying the vast, warm atmosphere around him with something very much like familiarity in his eyes.

Soon, a hush fell over the hall, signifying beginning of the sorting. Wearily, Harry raised his head.

―Anthony Ackles.―

―Gryffindor!‖

―Susan Abitwetter.‖

―Ravenclaw!‖

―Cassiopeia Avery.‖
“Slytherin!”

The line began to shorten, until, at last, it was simply Harry left.

Professor McGonagall paused and looked at Harry oddly as though he were a curious specimen she had seen before but couldn’t quite remember the name of.

After a moment of this strange introspection, she cleared her throat and announced to the student body, “This year, Hogwarts will be accepting a transfer student into its fifth year. Tom Gaunt.”

Harry looked frantically around the hall as he walked towards the rickety stool, wondering if anyone would recognize his face. If anyone could associate Riddle’s face with Lord Voldemort; but the professors’ expressions ranged only from distant, polite interest to poorly veiled boredom.

As Professor McGonagall moved to place the hat on his head, another violent hope sprung in Harry’s chest. The sorting hat could read Harry’s mind, couldn’t it? Then…couldn’t it figure out that Voldemort was there? Couldn’t it tell somebody?

The hat was placed on his head. Harry waited eagerly, the sweetness of salvation already gracing his tongue. He could taste it now and—

“SLYTHERIN!”

It did not speak a word to him.

Harry felt as though the air had been punched out of him. As Professor McGonagall guided him off the stool, he turned to look back at the hat with a sense of betrayal. The sorting hat had saved him in his second year. Why did it turn against him now? Why didn’t it speak to him? And perhaps, equally concerning: why did it sort him into Slytherin?

Harry reached the Slytherin table, his ears ringing. He half-collapsed onto the bench.

“Watch it,” Malfoy hissed, imperiously forking a piece of potato into his mouth.

“Pleasure to meet you again too,” Harry responded dully, looking sullenly into his pumpkin juice.

“Who you are you?” a sallow-looking boy asked Harry. Theodore Nott, his mind dimly recalled.

“Tom Gaunt,” another boy—Italian and dark-haired with hawk-like eyes—responded for him before he could. “Professor McGonagall announced it.”

“It’s cute, Zabini,” Pansy Parkinson sneered, sweeping back a stray curl, “that you call the old hag professor.”

Hawk-like eyes looked at her indifferently, despite the insulting tone.

A loud girlish clearing of throat suddenly pierced through the din of socializing students, and Harry jerked his head to the front of the room. A familiar short, toad-like woman bedecked head to toe in magenta pink stood at the headmaster’s podium, a short, stubby wand poised at her throat.

When people continued to talk, she cleared her throat once more, the sound innocuous and yet oddly menacing. Immediately, the hall became quiet.

“Students of Hogwarts,” the woman spoke—Harry now recognized her as the unpleasant woman from the hearing—“my name is Dolores Umbridge. The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. As such, we have recognized
that the rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by
careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down the
generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our
ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished by those who have been called to the noble
profession of teaching. Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something
new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without
progress there will be stagnation and decay. Then again, progress for progress's sake must be
discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between
old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation because some
changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as
errors of judgment. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others,
outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of
openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved,
perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be
prohibited."

Umbridge paused, before leaning forward once more, a small smile dancing across her pink lips. “I
hope you will welcome me as your interim headmistress with the utmost warmth in the absence of
Headmaster Dumbledore.”

Harry blinked. All that he had gathered was that Dumbledore was gone and a ministry lackey—a
Fudge lackey, to be more precise—was taking his place. Sighing, he rubbed his eyes before darting
a glance at Riddle.

The image was a painful one. Riddle was surrounded on all sides by Harry’s friends—achingly
familiar, achingly affectionate. And the Dark Lord was planning to take everything away from
most, if not all, of them. Harry looked away, teeth gritted.

Thankfully, he did not have to bear it for very long. In less than ten minutes, everyone at the table
had finished up their dinners. Harry almost forgot that he wasn’t supposed to know the way to the
Slytherin dorms, but quickly remembered to wait when Parkinson sent him a strange look when he
moved to get up first.

The Slytherins walked down the labyrinth of halls in complete silence; they didn’t make playful
jibes at each other or gossip as Gryffindors did. Just as he had during dinner, Harry found himself
missing the simple characteristics of his house that he had never taken the time to appreciate.

Malfoy, his prefect badge glinting slightly in the dim lighting, swept imperiously in front of them
when they arrived at the painting of Salazar Slytherin’s snakes.

“Serpensortia.”

The painting swung open in a familiar fashion to the Gryffindor dormitories’ own entrance and
revealed a gothic common room colored in forest green, framed by sleek grey stone. They were the
first of the Slytherins to enter.

Harry had never ventured further than this into the Slytherin’s dorms, and thus his dependence was
real as he now followed Malfoy and the other Slytherin boys when they split from the girls.

Opening a dark, metal door, Malfoy led them up five flights of stairs to a long, dark hall lit warmly
by glowing torches. Lined along the hall were more doors, each decorated with a plaque that
revealed two embossed names in elegant calligraphy. The Slytherins had notably more luxurious
living space than the Gryffindors, who often shared a room among eight or more.
“You and me again, Draco,” Nott told Malfoy, indicating the plaque on the first door.

Harry watched the other Slytherins split off. Strangely, there were many more male Slytherins in their year than he had ever realized. He supposed it was because he had only ever paid attention to Malfoy’s group.

Walking down the hall, Harry eventually found a door with the name ‘Tom Gaunt’ inscribed under ‘Blaise Zabini.’ Turning, Harry saw that the Italian boy from earlier was behind him.

Zabini examined him with a blank expression. “Are you going to go in or do I have to open the door for you?”

The words themselves possessed bite, and yet, they were delivered in such a bland monotone that Harry felt that Zabini did not hold any especial animosity towards him.

As he opened the door and allowed Zabini to enter before him, Harry tried to remember if he had had any significant encounters with the boy in the past.

All he could remember of Zabini, however, was a silent, dark figure watching on as Malfoy and Harry argued. Zabini had always been there on the fringes of Malfoy’s entourage—a silent surveyor, nothing more, nothing less, as the other Slytherins jeered and actively participated.

That was good, Harry decided. At least he knew that Zabini lacked the predilection his fellow Slytherins had towards actively bullying others. But then...maybe there was something to be said, nevertheless, for someone who could watch it happen—for years—without blinking.

Zabini had settled at the bed closest to the door, so Harry made his way to the door furthest into the room. Their trunks had already been situated under their beds. The room was furnished with two desks, each next to a bed, and two dark, wooden wardrobes that were backed against the wall opposite to the beds. As Harry approached the wardrobe nearest his bed, he found that the clothes he had purchased from Madame Malkin’s had already been placed in them. House elves, Harry remembered.

Picking out a pair of cotton pajamas, Harry considered asking Zabini where the communal bathrooms were when his gaze fell on another door next to the door they had entered through. Opening it, he found with surprise a spacious, personal bathroom with two sinks lined along a large mirror and a circular tub built into the floor.

Opening the faucets, Harry watched as the marble tub filled with water and soap within the span of seconds, before the knobs rotated with a low creak autonomously to a closed position. Stripping himself, he moved to settle into the tub, when he suddenly stopped. His gaze was fixed to his reflection.

Thanks to the massive, wall to wall mirror in front of him—and the fact that the bathroom Harry had used at Grimmauld place had had only a small, clouded mirror—this was the first time Harry had seen himself entirely in Riddle’s body. And he saw now that there were long scars on Riddle’s back. Long, precise, thin scars that he had never felt when laying on his back to sleep.

They looked, Harry processed, very much like whip marks.

With a flood of complicated emotions overwhelming him, Harry wondered what kind of being it was that had managed to whip the Dark Lord—to make a being such as the Dark Lord sit still and take this.

And then—because he could not help it—a vicious, grating pleasure coiled within him and
thrummed violently. Because these marks showed that, for all his incredible power and seeming invincibility, Riddle was still a man. Someone had beaten him, once. Riddle had been forced to kneel, once. Riddle had been forced to submit, if only once. But once was enough, because it had been done. And with this knowledge, Harry knew that no matter what, he must do it too. He could do it too.

Harry settled into the bath, dipping fully once, before resurfacing. Tilting his head back against the edge of the tub, he wondered what Riddle could have learned from Harry’s own body this evening. Harry smiled bitterly. Though the Dursleys (with the significant exception of Dudley) had never raised a hand against him, he had his own collection of scars. The worst of them, however— he thought with satisfaction—could not be seen.
Harry woke up slowly the next morning, his body stiff and uncomfortable from a foreign bed. Opening his eyes, he gazed blearily at the stone ceiling and turned into his pillow, before sitting up suddenly. Zabini’s bed beside him was empty.

Glancing at the timepiece affixed to the wall, Harry read the time, groaned, before springing into action. He hopped into his trousers while brushing his teeth, pulled on his shirt while stepping into his shoes, and fixed his tie hastily in place while reading his timetable.

This caused another groan, because he had determined that the class he was now ten minutes late to was potions with Snape.

Exiting the Slytherin dormitories, Harry found that the potions classroom was incredibly close to the dorms, and he really would have reached there sooner if he had not gotten lost in the maze of dungeon stone.

When he arrived, he tried to open the door to the classroom as quietly as possible and flinched when the traitorous wooden door let out a resounding creak. His gaze immediately went to the front of the room, meeting familiar, distasteful black ones.

But then, Snape turned away without a word and went back to pointing out—Harry squinted to read the board—the particularly volatile ingredients they would be using to brew the Draught of Peace. Harry paused at the door in shock, before he realized with a jolt that he was no longer ‘Harry Potter.’ He was not even a Gryffindor. Snape had never taken points away from a Slytherin, at least that he could recall.

Harry hurried to an empty seat, realizing too late that he had chosen the seat beside Pansy Parkinson, the girl who used to always hang around Malfoy. Parkinson shot him a disparaging look —“Slytherins do not show up late to class; it’s disgraceful”—before returning her attention to Snape.

“Before we begin,” Snape announced in his typical silken tones, “I think it appropriate to remind you that next June you will be taking an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about the composition and use of magical potions.”

Snape moved to stand behind his desk, arms resting on either side of its surface. “If you should find yourself messing up this potion, you should find that sufficient notice of how your examinations will proceed.”

And with that uplifting note, he signaled the class to begin. As the first wave of students rushed to the main table for ingredients, Harry looked around him. On the Gryffindor side of the room, Riddle had paired up with Hermione, leaving a puzzled Ron with Neville as his partner. Harry then glanced at his own side of the room, noting that Malfoy had paired up with Zabini. Harry found that strange—he had been sure that Malfoy was closest to Nott of the Slytherin boys.

As the crowd around the main table began to die down, and when Parkinson made no motion to stand, Harry got up to pick up the ingredients listed for the potion. Grabbing a handful of everything he saw—he generally found this to be a good strategy, as he ended up in excess more often than not—he brought the ingredients back to the table.

When he began to follow the instructions listed on the board, however, a small, pale hand darted
out with surprising strength and halted his motions.

Looking up, Harry met Parkinson’s heavy brown eyes with surprise.

She raised a brow. “Are you any good at potions, Gaunt?”

“No,” Harry admitted after a short pause.

“I can tell,” Parkinson said with a sneer. She gestured towards the haphazardly placed ingredients. “I will brew the potion. You just sit there and look pretty.”

He raised an eyebrow at that.

“Excuse me?” she responded, thin lips pursing.

Parkinson glared at him and seemed to want to argue, but was rushed into action when a chime rang and signaled that a significant amount of their brewing time had already passed. Without another word, Harry picked up his knife and began dicing some beetles.

In the end, mostly because Harry forcibly elbowed his way in there, they brewed together. And they managed, more or less, without much conflict except for the occasional biting remark—“You idiot, it’s quicker with the flat of the blade,” “Don’t *chop* it, crush it,” “It says evenly, not randomly, Gaunt!”

Forty minutes later, Harry gazed at the first perfect potion he had ever brewed in his life. He had looked at the instructions three times, rubbing his eyes for good measure, and found that the liquid did in fact possess a ‘glistening indigo’ quality to it.

Feeling Parkinson’s gaze on him, he turned to evaluate the Slytherin beside him.

“I suppose you’re not terrible,” she allowed with a sneer, “You follow orders well enough. At the very least, I know you won’t lower my grade for the rest of this year.”

Harry rolled his eyes, then paused at the genial nature of the motion. A familiar laugh sounded in the room and his gaze snapped to its source.

Hermione looked down triumphantly at her own indigo potion, sending Riddle a pleasantly surprised smile as she clapped him on the back. Harry’s jaw clenched, the reminder of the Dark Lord and his potential plans weighing heavily on his mind with his presence in the room. And yet, he knew he was not ready to intervene. All Harry could do for now—though it pained him and frustrated him to no end—was watch.

Riddle returned Hermione’s friendly touch with a pretense of a smile, before his head tilted, as though sensing Harry’s gaze on him. When Riddle’s head began to turn, Harry twisted his head away immediately, his eyes landing instead on Malfoy and Zabini instead.

“Why are Zabini and Malfoy partners?” Harry found himself blurting. When Parkinson shot him a look, he clarified, “I mean, I thought Malfoy and Nott were better friends.”

Parkinson brushed back her coal black hair with a disparaging sigh. “First of all, terminology. *Slytherins* do not use the word ‘friends’--not the self-respecting ones, at least. Our relationships are defined roughly in three categories: close acquaintances, distant acquaintances, and enemies. To your main question: why Zabini and not Nott? If you had been paying attention at all last night you would know the answer to that question.”
When he simply looked at her blankly, she sneered violently. “Merlin’s beard, you’re going to make me a bloody Samaritan by the end of this. Zabini’s the smartest, Gaunt.”

“He is?” Harry said with surprise.

Parkinson settled into her seat, crossing her leg delicately. “You will learn that those who garner the most attention are often not the most dangerous. To hide in plain sight is one of the skills valued most in our house.”

And then, without any prompting, she shot him a violent glare again. “That’s the end of my benevolence.”

To his surprise and Parkinson’s scandalized sensibilities, Harry found himself laughing hoarsely.

And yet, despite Parkinson’s threat and seeming reluctance, the rest of the day passed similarly. Whether it was Parkinson, Nott, or, in one painful double Defense Against the Dark Arts class, Malfoy—but strangely, never Zabini—Harry was instructed through the medium of insults how to behave in a way that ‘befitted the great house of Salazar Slytherin,’ apparently for the sake of the house’s continued welfare and esteem in others’ eyes.

After a week of classes, he had learned from these instructional lessons within his daily classes and his own observations that, no, Slytherins did not smile at each other in the hallways, they nodded in acknowledgement, and that talking back at most professors was fine as long as it was not Snape (Harry found this pointless, as he had no desire to talk back to any teacher other than Snape), and that above all else, the most important thing to keep track of in Slytherin—even above assignments, grades, and others’ tempers—was the relationships of its members.

Nott had informed him gravely that, for example, there was a fourth year known as Laurent Dolohov who sometimes would be seen hanging around Malfoy. If Malfoy nodded his head in such a circumstance, then it was permissible to associate with Dolohov. However, if Malfoy ignored Dolohov’s presence, then one should not be seen conversing with Dolohov at all costs during that period.

Parkinson had rolled her eyes on his other side, and told him that beyond the personal whims of Draco Malfoy, it was ‘primarily vital to observe these relationships for pursuing one’s own advancement.’ She offered her own example—a risqué story of two amorous sixth years, a suit of armor, and a snitch—that had yielded her ‘through the fine art of blackmailing’ an audience with Rafael Rundroff, apparently a world-renowned expert in sigils.

Most surprising of all, however, Harry found, were his grades. After four years of barely passable marks—with the sole exception of Defense Against the Dark Arts—his grades were better than ever. He had received, for the most part, Exceeds Expectations and Acceptables with one Outstanding in Charms. (Possibly, also, it was because he didn't have friends anymore.) He had worsened in Defense Against the Arts, however; but Harry blamed that on the fact that Umbridge conducted all their assessments as quizzes regarding information from their ‘Ministry approved textbook’: the single-most boring and dry textbook he had ever had the misfortune of reading.

It was this textbook that Harry now attempted to plough through, sitting at the desk in his room on his first Saturday at Hogwarts since arriving. The sound of a door opening ultimately provided sufficient interruption to distract.

He watched as Zabini exited the bathroom dressed in a black dress shirt and black slacks. It was the first time he could recall the two of them being in the room at the same time when it was not as they were about to sleep. Unlike the others, Harry noted that he had not spoken to Zabini—about
whom he had even heard a rather romantic title of ‘prodigy’ thrown around—since the first night.

“Where are you going?” Harry asked casually, shutting the Defense Against the Dark Arts textbook. The grandfatherly Wilbert Slinkhard pouted underneath a large purple banner proclaiming “Defensive Magical Theory.”

Zabini glanced at him, his gaze starkly indifferent. “Every Saturday third years and above are allowed to visit the nearby Wizarding village, Hogsmeade.”

Harry, naturally, had completely forgotten this fact. The idea of drinking some butterbeer and escaping just for a few hours seemed now terribly enticing.

“I’ll come with,” Harry spoke, getting up hastily and pulling on a sweater. It was still September, but the crisp chill of fall had already begun to set in.

Zabini’s mouth twisted for a moment—the first genuine expression Harry had seen on the other’s face—but he seemed, if the twisting of the mouth did in fact indicate protest, to not care enough to verbalize it.

And so, Harry tailed Zabini as they both made their way down the dungeon halls. They approached and then climbed the set of staircases that led up to the main level in silence, the only noise around them at all a bunch of Slytherin third years coming up from behind. The third years, Harry thought, were uncharacteristically rowdy for Slytherins. Perhaps due to the coming visit being their first.

Harry examined the paintings around him, having not taken this path much in the past, with great interest. Behind them, the third years were working themselves into a frenzy, one of the Slytherins even whooping.

“So,” Harry spoke, compelled to break their silence as they climbed the staircase, “wh—”

Several things happened at once.

First, just as they approached the top of the staircase, the staircase itself jerked suddenly and without warning away from the landing into open space and displaced Zabini. Second, one of the overexcited third years—apparently having been dared by one of his ‘close acquaintances’ to begin a charge up the staircase—had just reached the top. And thus, essentially, Zabini had been jerked from his place near the railing due to the movement of the staircase and sent directly into the path of the third year.

“Harry,” he suddenly remembered Hermione telling him once; it had been during preparation for the dragon challenge, “It is of vital importance that you do not fall off your broom. If you fall…well, it is quite near impossible for a wizard or witch to levitate him or herself. To be honest, I’m still trying to understand why—I believe it has to do with the complexity of the magical channels in your own body, their natural flow, and the attempt to direct magic right back into those same channels. The implications of fluid dynamics research is quite interesting in this—yes, well, you get the point. Of course, if you fell, I and many others would try to levitate you. But, well, you would be accelerating quite fast, roughly ten meters per second squared, and we’d have to hit you right in the center, and Harry, it’s notoriously hard to direct a spell at a falling object without years of practice. So…just don’t’ fall.”

Harry watched as the two bodies collided, sending Zabini into the open space with wide eyes and a rapidly paling face.

And then, Zabini was falling.
Before his mind had even processed the motion, Harry lunged forward, both hands outstretched. His left hand missed, brushing an arm. But then his right hand somehow latched onto Zabini’s shirt. Zabini’s heavier weight and momentum, however, began pulling Harry forward. Thankfully, he felt the panicking third year behind them gain enough presence of mind to latch onto Harry’s ankle, anchoring him.

The three of them slid a frightening half a foot, leaving half of Harry’s upper body off the staircase and over the edge, before they stilled.

Harry looked down and dark, outraged eyes met his from an unnaturally pale, olive toned face. Grunting, Harry ignored Zabini entirely and began instead trying to pull him up. The third year and his friends worked in tandem with him and pulled at Harry’s legs so that they moved as one continuous unit. Once they had achieved a certain height, Zabini placed both hands on the edge of the staircase and heaved himself up in an impressive showcase of arm strength.

Zabini settled against the side of the stairs, a safe distance from the edge should it move again immediately. He laid a hand over his face.

The third year was hysterical.

“I—this staircase never moves! I remember—a-a fifth year told me when I came, that it moves every ten years! I—I never asked when the last occasion was, b-but, naturally I—”

“And yet,” Zabini hissed, lowering his hand from his face and revealing violent dark eyes and cheeks flushed with color, “today, it moved. And today, you were the one who decided to run up the stairs like a simple-minded pubescent whose whore of a mother could not be convinced to better educate, whose spineless weakling of a father could not be bothered to properly discipline. If I should ever see your face again, you invertebrate worm, indeed if I should ever meet you again, be assured that that will be the last occasion anyone will have seen you. Get out of my sight. All of you.”

The third years, the three of them all frightfully pale, seemed to forget any aspirations of visiting Hogsmeade and vanished down the staircase back to the dungeons.

And so Harry and Zabini stood alone at the top of the staircase. Once again, in silence.

Zabini looked up at him with inexplicably hateful eyes. It seemed that in the last two minutes, for reasons still elusive to Harry, he had somehow persuaded Zabini to lose his neutrality and assume instead active malice towards him.

“I will get rid of this debt as soon as possible,” Zabini informed him coldly, standing up so that his gaze met Harry’s from slightly above.

Harry paused, allowing the forced geniality on his face to dissipate into something sharper.

“Debt?”

Zabini’s jaw tensed. His eyes seemed to widen momentarily in rage before he regained control of himself. The words came out haltingly and with great difficulty.

“A life debt, Gaunt. You...just saved my life.”
A life debt, he guessed, probably required Zabini to save his life in turn. Anything beyond that, however, was unknown to Harry. And so, after Zabini had vanished from sight (the staircase had reattached to the landing only a minute later), Harry decided to forgo his Hogsmeade trip.

Instead, he made his way to the library.

It had felt odd to sit there and turn pages without Ron or Hermione reading over his shoulder. In the end, however, Harry learned several important facts, including that the magical bonds imposed by life debts had a compulsive influence on the person who owed the debt--meaning if Harry made an explicit request that would save his life, Zabini was magically compelled to comply and could not in the meantime act knowingly to endanger Harry in anyway until the debt had been fulfilled.

...If Zabini indeed was so extraordinary, even if he was not as powerful as Voldemort, Harry could take advantage of that fact.

So, the next morning, Harry confronted Zabini in front of the Grand Hall and asked to speak to him privately.

At first, it seemed that Zabini had regained his unflinching indifference. But then he watched, just near the end of his request, as Zabini's careful mask of nonchalance fractured a little, dark eyes flashing.

"If you know a place that is private…"

Zabini moved silently ahead of him and led Harry up many flights of stairs—without even a cringe, despite what had occurred the previous day—until they reached a large corridor that seemed to lead to a small broom closet.

Harry approached the broom closet with great skepticism, but Zabini opened the door without hesitation, shoved him inside, and followed shortly behind him.

Harry stumbled at the surprising forcefulness but quickly stilled as he took in the room before him. Despite the humble, wooden door at the front, the room itself was vast and magnificent: arched, gothic architecture reminiscent, indeed, of the Slytherin dormitories.

Harry quickly forgot his admiration for the architecture, however.

"To fulfill the life debt," he spoke slowly, "you need to save my life."

Zabini tilted his head, not gracing that obvious comment with an answer. It was fine. Let him think Harry was an idiot. He merely wanted to get certain fundamental facts out of the way before he approached the rockier part of their conversation.

"I've decided how you'll fulfill it," Harry continued, watching Zabini's reactions carefully.

Zabini's jaw tightened.

Harry hesitated for a moment. Because if Zabini somehow betrayed him, if the debt was not as binding as he thought, if… There were so many 'if's,' more than Harry could possibly conceive of.

But at his core, well, maybe Harry was a gambling sort of person.
"You're going to help me kill Voldemort," he said quietly. The request echoed hauntingly through the enclosed hall. Harry closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again.

He watched as several emotions chased each other across Zabini's face. Then, words were hissed just as softly as Harry's previous ones. "I don't think you quite understand the meaning of a life debt. I don't have to carry out your dirty work."

"Normally, that would be true," Harry sighed, "but I am in a…unique situation. Let's just say that I have it on good notice that if I don't kill him, he's definitely going to kill me."

Zabini head snapped towards him, black eyes burning into Harry. "Who are you?"

Harry looked at the other with mild concern. "I think we, um, covered this already. Tom Gaunt."

Zabini's head tilted with the tightly controlled fury of a large predator. "No. No, I don't think so."

The mild concern dissipated rather rapidly. Harry bit his lips and wondered with trepidation what exactly had given him away. Was the situation salvageable? Unlikely. Something told him trying to persuade the Slytherin otherwise was a lost cause.

"You're right," Harry found himself admitting, "I'm not."

The following question was obvious to the both of them. And, after a moment, Harry decided he would answer it. First, because he imagined that knowing his true identity was necessary for Zabini to understand the monumentality of what opposed them. And second, well, because Harry just needed to tell someone.

After a blink, he breathed out in little more than a whisper. "I'm Harry Potter."

For a moment, the two simply stared at each other. Harry waited for the inevitable laughter, the incredulity, and the scorn. It did not come.

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry repeated, uncomfortably and a little louder. Maybe Zabini had not heard him the first time.

Zabini looked at him, his cheeks flushed with tightly restrained fury. "And you… want me to prepare you for the war against the Dark Lord."

Harry's eyes widened, surprised that the other had taken his words at face value. "Yes. You could put it like that."

There was a moment of silence. Then:

"You want me to betray," Zabini hissed, his mouth taut, "years of my family's carefully maintained neutrality to tutor a boy who has demonstrated nothing more than mediocrity and the occasional stroke of good luck in pursuit of a life-long hopeless cause. To defeat a man who has been defeated by none."

"I do know that. I guess that's more motivation for you to teach me well."

"Even I could not defeat the Dark Lord," Zabini snarled at him, color high in his cheeks, "Perhaps not even in fifty years and if he were to remain just as he is today. What makes you think that you could ever succeed?"

He shouldn't have been, but Harry was sorely amused. It was absurdly like having the worst of his
subconscious personified, posing to him all the questions he asked himself in the dead of the night.

"I'm afraid I don't have a good answer for that one. But if it helps," Harry offered, "they do call me the Chosen One now."

"You think this is a joke," Zabini stated, eyes blazing as he stalked forward. And then he grabbed Harry by his collar and shoved him into the wall.

At first, Harry withstood this abuse rather gracefully, if he said so himself. It was, he reasoned, what one could expect when cornering a person unaccustomed to be cornered. But then Zabini's words began to process in his head…and Harry became royally pissed. Because he could be accused of a lot of things—negligence, brashness, lack of tact and/or sufficient strength—but he could not be accused of willfully treating his circumstances like a joke.

"It's hard," Harry murmured into Zabini's ear, "you know—" he huffed out a grating bark of a laugh, "—it's kind of fucking hard to treat this all like a joke when the person who wants to kill you killed your parents and now inhabits your body, a daily reminder of the violence that began your life and threatens to end it."

"Who knew the boy-who-lived could wax poetry," Zabini bit out savagely, processing the information that Voldemort was in Harry Potter's body without a blink. At any other time, Harry would have been mildly impressed.

"Look," Harry snapped back, "He's watching my friends and professors all the time. He has no reason to suspect that anyone in Slytherin would ever help me. Without these, well, extenuating circumstances…well, I don't think this is something even he could have planned for."

"If you're trying to convince me that you can succeed," Zabini responded bitterly, "You might start with showing me that you can occlude."

"What?"

Zabini's face was dark but unsurprised. "You are also unaware, therefore, that the Dark Lord is notorious for his ability to read others' minds?"

Harry's stomach plummeted and shook his head mutely. Because of course wizards could read each other's minds, and he had not even known it was possible. Why did he never know the things he needed to know?

Zabini rolled up his sleeves as though preparing for a boxing match.

"You can do it," Harry guessed, watching Zabini with suspicious eyes. "Read other people's minds." That would certainly explain why Zabini had believed him so quickly.

"Yes," he answered through a tight jaw. "Professor Snape as well. As a teacher, however, he is prohibited from doing so at Hogwarts unless the headmaster permits him to."

That information did little to make Harry feel better.

"Close your eyes," Zabini instructed him coldly, "try to clear your mind. We are not leaving this room until you learn to put up a screen and to resist me during a brute force Legimency attack. That is, unless you would prefer being killed by the Dark Lord at your next encounter."
Harry arrived at breakfast the next morning with a pounding headache that made him want to crumple in on himself. As Zabini had threatened, he had left the broom closet room only in the early hours of the morning and only after he had passed muster.

He served himself some warm porridge, mentally cringing as he recalled the previous night. Zabini…well, he had not been gentle; though, that had perhaps been the point. Harry had been forced to relive not only occasions of childhood bullying—some embarrassingly recent and many of which featured Harry himself being portrayed at his most impotent—but also Cedric's death, over and over and over again. After several hours of this personalized torture, his mind had finally figured out how to grasp and deflect the mental invasions by forcing the invader into insignificant memories (nonsensical images of him swirling his fingers in a bathtub or frying bacon on a pan, for example)—a method known as misdirection, a particular type of occlusion that Harry had then taken to like a fish to water. Then, he had been dismissed.

Harry realized, of course, that Zabini had seen him at his weakest now. For any other Slytherin, he imagined, this would have been an unbearable position to be in. But Harry wasn't really a Slytherin; at least, not like the others were.

"Gaunt." A heavily perfumed figure slipped into the seat beside him.

Harry tilted his head slightly, amber eyes darting up.

"You look ill," Parkinson told him as though informing him of the weather. She reached across the table for a bread roll. "It's repulsive."

An overwhelming scent wafted in his direction with the motion. "Are you trying to kill my nose?" Harry grunted and leaned away from the cloying concoction of rose and something else his nose couldn't quite pick out.

"I should like to see your face when you get a sniff of Greengrass." Parkinson gave him a haughty raised brow. "Until then, consider this endurance training. Holiday season's coming up. Time for us female heirs to attract those holiday ball invitations through calculated demonstrations of intelligence, power, and womanly charms. Unfortunately, the latter works far more effectively. Men are so simple at our age."

"Hm," Harry muttered, scooping up some porridge into his mouth.

"Oh, did I not tell you? It's not just a seasonal female affliction," she smirked mildly threateningly, "If you wish to establish yourself in this house, you get those invitations."

Harry shot Parkinson an indifferent look. He didn't need—and certainly did not want—to be popular in Slytherin. In fact, it would be stupid to gather attention. Mediocrity, he had decided recently, was exactly what Riddle was expecting of him and what he would, for all appearances, continue to provide; anything else and he would have a Dark Lord's attention and interference in his tentatively developing plans.

Parkinson, apparently, did not agree with his sentiments. She leaned uncomfortably close to him, all pretense of humor gone as she snarled, "You better get those invitations, Gaunt. I haven't put up with you this long to see you flop during the holiday season."

"And why have you been so generous with your advice so far, Parkinson?" Harry retorted swiftly, withstanding the alarmingly close proximity with a cold expression he had discovered he could make only in the past couple of weeks.
"You've drawn me in with your stunning looks, of course." In the blink of an eye, she had abandoned her façade of deadliness, her face now drawn in a mocking caricature of bashfulness.

Tilting his head, Harry watched her carefully.

Parkinson was different from other Slytherins. She could sneer, jeer, and spit with the best of the Gryffindors, so unlike the cold, calculated indifference most Slytherins seemed to adopt. But maybe, in a place like this, it had made her easy to underestimate. Maybe, she wasn't used to the same being returned to her.

Harry smiled genially at that thought and then leaned forward without flinching into Parkinson's personal space.

Parkinson's eyes caught on Harry's smile with narrowing eyes.

Harry winced internally but leaned even closer—dangerously closer—until their faces were only an inch apart. It was the kind of distance that could only be interpreted by others to lead to one thing. She froze.

Despite what she might have thought, Harry did listen vaguely when she lectured. He, of course, possessed absolutely no romantic feelings for her. But he knew—as she had informed him while mocking some unfortunate classmate—that if he was seen at a seeming 'intimate' distance from her with his low standing in the house, especially in public, her authority and reputation among the Slytherins would be ruined.

Because Slytherins cared about things like 'reputation.'

Having lived with the Dursleys, he knew how to use that to his advantage.

Her face was painted in an ugly snarl. "You try it and my wand will rip out your throat before you can."

"I don't think so," Harry interrupted bluntly, "I'd definitely move faster than you could pull out your wand."

Parkinson's face suddenly became coy. "Gaunt, don't be imbecilic. You won't even know if I'm telling the truth. I could tell you anything. Be a dear, now, and move an inch or two back."

It was delivered in a terribly saccharine, sarcastic tone, but it rang sweetly in Harry's ears because he knew enough now to recognize it for what it was: Parkinson was giving ground to him.

And Harry lunged for the jugular with a pleasant smile. "Oh, I think I'll be able to tell. I've good instincts when it comes to these things, you know. If I don't believe you, I'll just follow through. So, well—if you do want to take the chance and lie—please try to make it really convincing."

It was a bluff. Harry was not a lie detector by any means of the term (though, perhaps, he could have co-opted Zabini's legimency skills for this particular mission). But he had the sense that Parkinson had too much to give up on the very slight off chance he was telling the truth.

Parkinson's eyes were slitted under dark brows before she tossed her hair back with a flash of teeth. "Very well, then, the truth. As you may have ascertained, I'm intelligent—not prodigiously, maybe—but bright enough. But I've always had, if I do say so myself, an extraordinary sense of intuition."
Parkinson eyes narrowed, eyeing the status-ruining distance between them with something very much like reluctant admiration. "There is something more to you, Gaunt. I think it's so well hidden, that you haven't even realized it yet. Me? Oh, I'm only helping you along your way. And of course, I expect that my gracious generosity will be compensated sometime in the future. At the...appropriate moment, naturally."

It was preposterous, Harry thought. Something 'more'? Hidden? Intuition? It was so ridiculous that it might have even been true.

"Of course," Parkinson changed subjects casually, "only male heirs give invitations to the holiday balls, so perfume will help you with only, well, I'd say an eighth of them. As I think about it, though, if you stopped slouching, cut your hair, and projected more authority, perhaps you could get that figure up to a quarter."

Harry looked at her, a slightly disarmed expression on his face.

"The rest, of course," Parkinson told him with a smirk, "will require a demonstration of your power."

She tilted her head towards Zabini, who was sat silently at the end of the table eating a piece of toast at the fringes of Malfoy's group. "No one in the other houses has any idea who controls the rest of us in this house. They think it's Malfoy, but he's merely the decoy. The people who lend Zabini is social power here are us—the Slytherins. To be powerful here, Gaunt, you have to make us know how dangerous you are first."

Harry grimaced, feeling the beginnings of a migraine.

Just when he thought she had finished and would leave him alone with his newfound headache, however, Parkinson paused again and tilted her head in a stage-worthy depiction of deep contemplation. Slowly, a saucy, vicious smile spread across her red lips.

"Threatening me with inappropriate intimacy, Gaunt," Parkinson smirked, "how positively rakish. I confess, you surprised me. I didn't exactly think I was your-" she shot him a look laden with meaning, pronouncing the word delicately-"type."

Harry returned her heavy stare with a raised eyebrow.

"In any case," Parkinson continued, her voice a mocking sing-song, "good luck with those invites."

And indeed, Harry closed his eyes and hoped the fates would provide him with some more sheer, dumb luck—preferably in the form of relieving him of one nagging, Pansy Parkinson. The means to kill Voldemort would also be acceptable.
"Defeating the Dark Lord," Zabini informed him coolly, "will require a combination of both exceptional magical ability and battle strategy."

They both stood in the same extravagant room Zabini had led him to a few days ago. Turning his head, he noted that while the space basically looked the same, a few, dramatic changes had been made. Where before there had been giant stained glass windows illuminated by an unknown source of light, there were now massive, staggering floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Additionally, the ballroom-like marble flooring had been replaced by rough, uneven stone, lending the room an even bleaker air.

"What do you consider to be your strengths?"

Harry ignored the condescending tone. "I guess I'm pretty good at the disarming charm. I've definitely used it a lot. Stunning spell too."

Zabini looked terribly unimpressed. "Show me."

"Which one?"

"Disarming charm first."

Harry responded shortly. "Alright."

Concentrating, he recalled the exact motion that had been drilled into him. He waved his hand in a tight, circular motion as he had been taught and shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

It should be noted that Harry was used to this spell working. With the exception of the fiasco with Voldemort at the end of the previous year (when the priori incantatem had been enacted instead), the disarming charm had worked for him as well as summoning a broomstick into his hand. As in, it had almost never failed to disarm his opponent. But then, in a terrible imitation of what had occurred only a few months past in the middle of graveyard, the wand only lurched forward in Zabini's hand. The Slytherin's seeming tight grip allowed it to remain in his hold. Harry looked on in silent shock.

Harry's gaze darted up and evaluated Zabini. "It didn't work."

Zabini's face had darkened. "Clearly. Again."

He grimaced. "Expelliarmus!"

"Again!"

"Expelliarmus!"

But the wand did not leave Zabini's hand.

"Fuck this," the Slytherin snarled suddenly as he lost control of his temper, "You're going to kill the both of us, Potter. Defeat the Dark Lord? You wouldn't even be able to beat the mudblood—"

As soon as the word escaped Zabini's mouth, Harry's right hand abandoned everything it had been taught about 'elegant wandwork.' Instead he lunged forward in a primitive, instinctual stabbing motion. "EXPPELLIARMUS!"
And the wand soared from Zabini's hand and past Harry, hitting the wall behind him.

Harry was too distracted, however, to rejoice in his success. He panted with rage. "Don't you _ever_—"

"Potter," Zabini demanded with slightly wild eyes, "the stunning charm."

And, well, Harry decided that if he was so eager to be knocked out, he could find it in himself to indulge him.

"_Stupefy!_"

The spell sent Zabini staggering back a few meters, but he remained conscious. Harry hissed out an enraged breath through his gritted teeth.

"_Potter—_"

"_STUPEFY!_" Harry roared.

And this time, he _felt_ it with unnerving clarity—felt the magic pull from his center, violent and pulsating and _powerful_, and streamline through his arm, out his wand. A giant wave of scarlet light crackled thunderously through the air and he only had the pleasure of seeing Zabini's dark eyes widen before the Slytherin lunged to the side, in time to evade the spell.

The spell crashed into the giant mirror, shattering it into pieces. There was a short period of silence.

Then, Zabini let out a short, disbelieving bark of laughter. He examined the broken mirror when he finally spoke. "The disarming spell ultimately tests the willpower and magical strength of both the attacker and the person being attacked. Until you mustered the necessary willpower to draw out enough magic, it was impossible for you to disarm me."

Zabini paused, before continuing, "It _seems_ that what you lack in skill, you make up for in brute magical strength. When you bother to call it forward."

"So we're back to the argument that I haven't been _trying_ until now, are we?" Harry reflected coldly.

"I think you've been trying incorrectly," Zabini allowed, "focusing too much on the form—the movement, the positioning—over the years. They teach it to us like that because most people need a framework in which to focus their power. For people who are akin to powerhouse, however, the form becomes a hindrance—much like attempting to force a tidal wave through a narrow opening. I imagine you've found it difficult and often 'put through' too little."

Harry raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "What do you mean 'powerhouses'? I thought…"—he paused, choosing his words with care—"I thought that everyone had the same amount of magic and that smarter people just happen to do, I guess, more impressive things with theirs."

Zabini raised a disparaging brow in turn, adopting an exaggeratedly slow cadence in his speech. "Magical strength is much like a muscle. Some are born with a greater inherent amount; for any individual, it increases with diligence and practice. For any individual, there is a natural maximum capacity. Naturally, more intelligent people can use the amount they have more creatively—" his expression became unreadable now—"Few, however, possess the amount of raw magic you have just demonstrated."
He directed a cutting glance Harry's way. "How you have kept this hidden this long, I have no idea. It speaks of preternatural control when I know you have laughable sense of any."

Harry dryly imagined that the Dursleys might have had something to do with it. They certainly had never liked any displays of magic.

"Right," he said, clearing his face of any expression, "So, what do I work on now, reluctant teacher of mine?"

The other boy sneered. "Control. For the next week, you are going to relearn all the spells we have covered in Defense Against the Dark Arts until now. Properly. Then we can move onto the more…elaborate material."

The rest of the week passed by quickly. By early evening that Friday, he had completed a significant portion of his homework, something that he once would have perceived as becoming a disturbing trend.

As he sat a desk in the library, he rubbed his eyes and tried to rub away a headache, with little success. Opening his eyes, he saw that his essay had gotten smudged again. He spelled it clear and took up his quill, though it took an enormous amount of willpower, and continued. Last sentence, it's the last sentence…almost there…just finish it...

There. Harry snapped the book shut, put away his ink pot and quill, and pulled his bag over his shoulder. He released a groan as he stretched, his back cracking as he did so.

He was incredibly sore—a consequence of his meetings with Zabini in the past several weeks. Unsurprisingly, the other Slytherin had decided that the best way to test Harry's knowledge of older spells was in the heat of battle. Harry, as of this morning, was restricted to fourth year spells; Zabini could use anything he wanted. Despite this, Harry was perhaps doing better than either of them had expected. Zabini, with great condescension, accredited it largely to his ‘abnormal reflexes.’ Harry was just grateful that hours of quidditch practice had paid off.

"Finished?" Madame Pince asked, a pinched look on her face. She eyed the tome in Harry's hands as though she suspected he were planning to run away with it.

Harry looked down at the item in question—a thirty-part account of the goblin wars—with frank repulsion, before shoving it forward to the older woman. Sniffing, she received it from him much like one would accept a newborn and dismissed him from her attention.

As he walked through the halls of the castle back to the Slytherin dorms, the sky was already darkening into night. The moon peeked out between the arched windows and cast the stone inside in an ethereal light.

In this solace, in the limited time between day and night, Harry's face relaxed from its amiable if tired cast to something much grimmer.

He had made progress in some ways—but at the expense of researching and figuring out how Riddle and he had switched in the first place. The trade-off had seemed obvious at the beginning—what with the threat of Riddle so near and seemingly all-encompassing. Now, however, he wondered if he had made the wrong choice.

There were so many questions to answer. Had Riddle orchestrated this? If not, who had? Why did Riddle seem so unconcerned—was he hiding his true feelings about the switch or had he already figured everything out?
He slowed to a stop at one of the archways. The side of his fist planted into the pillar. The abrasive surface of the stone burned against the skin of his hand, but he held it there. For one long moment, his breathing was the only sound that filled the hallway.

Then he heard a familiar voice cry his 'name' behind him.

Spinning, he found Hermione looking at him from the opposite end of the hall with a shocked but happy smile on her face. To her left was Ron—tall but no longer as gangly as he had been during the summer.

To her right, with a polite smile on his face, was the Dark Lord.

"Hermione," Harry responded, painfully dragging his gaze away from him. His fist left the pillar slowly. "Um, how can I help you?"

"I've actually been looking all over for you!" Hermione informed him, closing the distance between them. She spoke in a hushed tone as she continued. "You see, Harry, Ron, and I—well, you know how Defense Against the Dark Arts has been terribly useless this year?"

"Well," Harry blinked, taken aback. "Yes. What about it?"

Hermione's gaze darted around them a little shiftily, before she leaned in to whisper. "Some of us have decided to get together to form a sort of defense club. Harry's going to be heading it because he has the most real-life experience, what with, well, Voldemort being constantly after him."

"So," Ron interrupted somewhat impatiently, "are you in or out?"

Harry fought hard to control the expression on his face. Ron and Hermione were unknowingly trusting the Dark Lord to teach them all how to defend themselves...from the Dark Lord. Would Riddle actually do it? A few months ago, he would have said 'no' without hesitation.

And yet, Harry remembered what the Dark Lord had told him in Diagon Alley. He had called the war...a game—to Riddle, it was a game. Would Riddle actually teach them? Would he see it as adding a little more 'flavor' to the game, a little more challenge to the victory he clearly thought was inevitably his? Would he see it as a twisted recruitment opportunity, a chance to pick out the most talented ones and brainwash them to his side?

Or would he lead his friends like pigs to the slaughter?

He fought against the temptation to look at Riddle, keeping his attention with militant discipline on his friends. He had already decided that he would join. Now, however, he hesitated as to how to respond.

Play the fool, new instincts told him. Give him exactly what he wants to see.

And so, Harry allowed a relieved, giddy smile to light up his face, ostensibly at the excuse to spend time with his best friends again. Let Riddle think that he was lonely in Slytherin, fitting in only because he had not managed to stand out.

"Of course," he responded, his voice breaking a little on the words, "I would love to join. When are you meeting?"

"Great!" Hermione beamed. "Actually, we're meeting in about ten minutes from now, we can head up together—but before we head up there we, uh, need you to sign this—" She reached into her bag and pulled out a seemingly normal scroll of parchment with a list of names already scratched
onto it along with a quill and pot of ink.

He raised his brow, wondering at the extent of Hermione's record keeping. Nevertheless, awkwardly and with some juggling of objects between the two of them, Harry managed to ink the quill and position the parchment against the wall, adding his name.

Green eyes gave him an altogether disinterested glance. "Hermione," Riddle cut in with an amiable smile, "We've got about five minutes or we're going to be late for the very first meeting. We should probably get a move on."

"Right!" Hermione responded, looking a little flustered as she shoved things back into her satchel. "This way then."

They made slow but steady progress down the dark halls, now difficult to navigate as night had fallen and the moon had become shadowed by clouds. With increasing discomfort, Harry began to realize that she was leading him down a very familiar path.

"It's called the room of requirement," Hermione informed him as they approached the broom closet, the very one in which he and Zabini regularly met.

The metallic taste of blood rested cloyingly on Harry's tongue as he became hyperaware of Riddle's presence beside him. Did the Riddle know about his meetings with Zabini—had he chosen this meeting spot, orchestrated all of this now, to let him know that he had been found out?

"It's bloody amazing," Ron grunted behind him, "turns into whatever you need."

"How did you even find it?" Harry asked as casually as possible.

"Well, it's a bit of funny story, really," Hermione answered distractedly, "from a house-elf we know who works at Hogwarts. Harry? Would you mind doing the honors?"

Harry relaxed minutely, certain now that it was at least highly improbable that Riddle knew about his meetings with Zabini; there would have been some reaction, he was certain, if he had. Dimly, he felt the Dark Lord sweep past him with a cool rush of air to open the door.

When the wooden door creaked to a close behind them, thirty or so faces looked back at the room's new guests.

Eyes moving frantically to take in everything, Harry saw that the room looked eerily reminiscent of the one he was familiar with. But, it was also distinct—this room bore no resemblance to a ballroom, but had fully pursued the stone, gothic sentiment of the rest of the castle. Ancient, floor to ceiling mirrors covered the entire back wall as the other room had; the other walls contained dark, grimy stained glass windows between the sporadic positioning of protruding mirrors and stone. While beautiful, the windows managed to let very little actual light through.

"I'm so glad to see you all here," Hermione announced, clearing her throat. "Before we begin, is there anyone who has not yet received a galleon? I've managed to charm them to announce when and where we're holding meetings each week."

A few hands, including Harry's, went up. After Hermione sent a pointed glance his way, Ron reached into Hermione's bag and handed each person what looked to be a regular galleon. Harry palmed it and stuffed it into his pocket.

And then began the travesty Harry had been dreading since the past ten minutes he had been aware of this club's existence.
Riddle stepped forward. There was an arresting expression on his face, an artful combination of resolution, austerity, and challenge that, ironically, made him seem a better 'Boy-Who-Lived' than Harry ever had. *This*, clearly, was a figure that could instill in people confidence. But—

Greedy fingers reached without thought to his back to trace the bottom of one of the long, pale scars there.

Riddle's infallibility—that too was a pretense, Harry thought viciously.

"I'm sure you've all heard the stories by now," the Dark Lord began in a low, persuasive tone, face boyishly handsome in a way Harry had certainly never managed himself, "The Prophet hasn't exactly been shy—maybe you believe them, maybe you don't. But either way, someday, you *will* need to know how to fight and defend yourself. We're...coddled in school. Here, if you make a mistake, you can just try again tomorrow. But out there, you only have your head and your wand; they're the only things you can trust. What we can promise you here is to teach you more than whatever you are learning in your current DADA class. A class like that where you can't even learn to use the magic you have, to bend it to your will—well, it's useless. And it certainly isn't going to keep you alive."

There were murmurs of agreement around the room. The Weasley twins whooped to show their support. Harry watched it all through narrowed eyes, observing the skill with which Riddle enthralled his audience.

"So," Riddle continued authoritatively, "I was thinking we could start with something I've... personally used many times—" Harry stiffened—"the disarming charm. Everyone pair up; a few of us will walk around and check each person."

Harry noticed that immediately at this announcement, the other students moved swiftly away from him to pair up with the others. He was the only Slytherin in the room.

Fortunately, Neville had been a little too slow in backing away from Harry and ended up being the only other unpaired person. The slightly taller boy sent him a nervous smile which Harry attempted to return as innocuously as possible. For some reason, however—mainly Neville's nervous gulping—he felt that Riddle's angular face gave the expression an unrequested edge.

"R-right," Neville said shakily, "Do you want to go first or do you want me to?"

"Go ahead," Harry responded. In his peripheral, he tracked the steady movement of Riddle and Hermione in the far back corners of the room.

"*E-expelliarmus*," Neville stuttered. A thin wisp exited his wand, not nearly enough to make Harry's wand even jerk in his hand.

"That was a good start," he encouraged quietly, eyes sharp on Riddle—he was moving quicker than Hermione after stopping and adjusting wands, and he was moving in their direction—"Just a little more conviction, and I'm sure you'll manage it."

Neville took a deep breath, as though to fortify himself. Harry forcibly relaxed his muscles, using the control that had drilled into him recently to put up as little fight as possible against the oncoming spell.

"*Expelliarmus!*" The wand sailed from his hand to a little ways behind Neville.

A tanned, callused hand reached down with unnatural grace to pick it up.
For a long moment, Harry's gaze remained glued to that hand and the familiar, possessive way it caressed the fallen wand. Unbidden, a burst of possessiveness flooded Harry's chest too. He hadn't even thought about it, but that—he had become used to that wand being in his hand, even though it really wasn't his.

"Good job, Neville," Riddle murmured, gaze lazily sweeping over him, "Make sure to keep focused when casting spells and that will help with their strength."

Neville nodded, a tentative smile on his face.

Green eyes met his without warning. "Your turn?"

Harry allowed himself to stiffen, allowed himself to grow visibly tense. Vulnerability was no longer a weakness to him, because it was now a conscious choice. The challenge here was to pretend that he was exactly the same person he had been this summer.

"I think I'd need my wand for that first?" he responded, slipping a little too much confrontation into his tone to make it anything but non-defensive. That—that's exactly how he would have sounded.

Riddle smiled chillingly, returning the wand without a word. But his steadily darkening gaze never left it.

Grating, ugly vindictiveness made Harry drag his hand slowly down his wand before he began. He could swear that the temperature in the room dropped a few degrees.

"Expelliarmus!" he barked, in the same exact manner he had done with Zabini the first time—the jet of light that left was a fraction of its potential force. Nevertheless, the wand left Neville's hand; the Gryffindor probably had not been concentrating on keeping it in his hand.

"Wow," Neville complimented in good humor, "Got it on the first try!"

Harry gave him a small smile. But the smile tightened when he realized that he had lost track of Riddle.

The strained smile dropped when he felt a form step flush with him from behind.

"Almost," Riddle murmured against the side of his neck. Harry froze, eyes flashing as the tanned hand reached out—"But if you're aiming for textbook perfection—" callused fingers tightened viciously around his wrist, nails digging in, to jerk it to a position 45 degrees below the horizontal —"this is the right position."

Fingers hungrily clenched the wand in Harry's hand before vanishing. Riddle pulled away and smiled at him charmingly as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened, before walking away.

Titling his head with a calm expression, Harry recalled Riddle's words from the Ministry. Do not think that because I need you alive, I will not punish you like a dog when you misbehave.

His lips twisted slightly. Even if I am a dog, I can still tear your fucking throat out.

"I didn't know you and Harry were that close," Neville said tentatively, interrupting his thoughts. "Actually, I don't think we've even met yet. I-I'm Neville Longbottom. What's your name again?"

Harry immediately plastered a smile on his face and reached out a hand.
"Nice to meet you, Neville. I'm Tom Gaunt," he sent one last lingering glance Riddle's way, before his gaze snapped firmly back to Neville's. "Please, call me Tom."

Author's Note

Please, please, please comment! I swear: nice, long comments are exactly what have made me return to this story :D

Yes, I am shameless <3
Chapter 9

He palmed the letter in his robes, an uncomfortable weight more imagined than real. Reluctantly, Harry had made his way back to the dungeons as instructed. Now, in front of a tall wooden door, he knocked.

"Mr. Gaunt," Snape greeted him. The potions professor's expression was entirely indifferent.

Harry's gaze darted around the room as he followed him in.

"Take a seat."

He dropped into the seat, landing harder than he had intended to. "Am I in trouble?" Harry finally asked. He belatedly tacked on "sir" at the end.

Snape looked bored. "Certain professors have informed me that there is a policy regarding transfer students that requires me to…check in with you."

In potions class until now, Harry had managed to pretend the man simply didn't exist, and Snape had made the job easy by largely ignoring him as well (apparently, that's what it felt like to be unremarkable in Slytherin). Now, however…he would be lying if he said old sentiments of resentment weren't resurfacing.

"Right," he said tightly. "It's been fantastic."

"Has it." Snape drawled.

"Brilliant," he said forcefully.

"Excellent," the taller man responded, uninterested. His eyes then, however, seemed to sharpen. "I've seen that you get along rather well with Ms. Parkinson."

Harry stiffened slightly. Quickly, however, he affixed a smile to his face. "Yes, I think we've become decent friends."

"Friends," Snape echoed, raising a brow.

As it tended to around the potions professor, his mouth acted before his brain did. "I know everyone here acts like their allergic to the term, but just because you avoid public displays of affection and openly advertise the fact that you would willingly betray each other given the right circumstances, doesn't mean you're not friends…in a sense. I think."

A second later, he wished he could recall back the words, especially as Snape's eyes seemed to hone in on him like a hawk detecting something suspicious. But…he wasn't lying. He didn't think he and Zabini were friends, but he and Parkinson—

"Later this term, you will be asked what occupations you are considering pursuing," Snape continued, swiftly switching topics. "Have you give any thought to the matter?"

His mind went completely blank.

"...Excuse me?"

"Career, Gaunt," he summarized with a sneer, "Cared to have given it a thought?"
"Oh," Harry choked out. *Career?* Why plan for a future that was likely to be nonexistent? It's not like if he managed to defeat Riddle, he expected to survive the encounter.

"You know, uh," he managed to get out finally, mind latching onto the first job that occurred to him, "that job in the ministry where you deal with muggle artifacts that have gotten messed with by magic? Something like that."

"The Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office," the potions professor murmured at last, "is what the… grand total of your ambitions amount to?"

This entire situation was...lucicrous. Not just calmly discussing career options with Snape like the man hadn't wished for his convenient disappearance from existence every second he had been at Hogwarts, but also, of course, being in Tom Riddle's body and in Slytherin, Riddle being in *his* body and pretending to be best friends with *his* best friends, Dumbledore's absence.

Sometimes, Harry felt that he was rather good at handling bizarre, unexpected situations. He had acclimated to life at the Dursleys, after all, and adjusted quite quickly during his first years to life at Hogwarts.

And then, at other times, he was equally confident of the polar opposite. This was one of those times.

"Yes, sir. I can only hope that all my housemates aim for something comparable to my upcoming career."

Enough sense remained in him to leave before Snape could answer.

A week later, about half an hour late for breakfast and panting from his running, Harry entered the Great Hall. Except, it didn't feel quite at all like the Great Hall when he entered it.

Eyeing long rows of silent students with some trepidation, he made his way to the opposite end of the hall where the Slytherins sat. There was a strange look on the normally sneering faces—strange because, in a rare occasion of solidarity, their expressions were exactly the same as the rest of the school's.

Harry slid between Zabini and Parkinson and reached over slowly to butter a piece of toast. Malfoy wordlessly shoved the Daily Prophet at him.

**NURMENGARD BREAK-OUT COMES TO LIGHT – WHEREABOUTS OF GRINDELWALD UNKNOWN**

*Early this morning, Minister Adalbert Dietrich called for an international meeting among the highest political officials of the European Wizarding Union and its allies. At this meeting, Dietrich revealed that the German Ministry of Magic has been dealing with a national security fiasco since the summer that has now escalated to international proportions.*

*My dear readers, you will shudder to hear what I learned: not only have numerous prisoners of the towering fortress Nurmengard broken out, but its highest security threat has managed to escape as well.*

*Dietrich reported that Gellert Grindelwald has not been inside the wizarding prison since June of this year. He informed the counsel of political leaders that his experts have recently been forced to conclude that Grindelwald is no longer in Germany and is believed now to be somewhere in France.*
Our very own Albus Dumbledore, absent from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this term (check out '57 Ways Dolores Umbridge Has Brought Hogwarts Back to Its Former Glory’ on pg. 9 for more information), was present at Dietrich's side. Latest reports confirm that he has been in Germany since June at the minister's request.

I leave you with these final thoughts: Is Grindelwald planning to conquer the United Kingdom once again? Will Dumbledore return to defend us all? Will he accept, instead, the 10 million galleon salary Durmstrang is reported to have offered him to become their headmaster instead? Is it, in fact, the end, my dear readers?

Reporting as Earnestly as Ever,

Rita Skeeter

He pushed the newspaper back to Malfoy, a dull, ringing sound in his ears. Bullet points of information flashed rapidly through his mind: Dumbledore was not dead; he had not been secretly murdered by Riddle; he had been in Germany because of…Grindelwald?

From Professor Binn's long lectures in third year—most of which he had admittedly slept through—Harry knew that Grindelwald had once been the Dark Lord until Dumbledore had defeated him. Somehow, he had assumed (and this had probably been the part where he dozed off) that Grindelwald was dead, not sequestered in a prison in Germany.

Who was Gellert Grindelwald?

"Isn't he ancient now?" someone noted quietly.

"Same age as Dumbledore," Malfoy pointed out through barely moving lips. That nobody was eager to fight directly against Albus Dumbledore either, no matter their own age, was left unsaid.

"Bloody Germans," Greengrass burst out, "Just when our Dark Lord—"

"Daphne," Nott snapped suddenly, "Shut up."

"Please," she returned with vitriol, spearing him with her gaze, "do you honestly believe that anyone here doesn't already know about him being back?"

Harry's gaze narrowed. Despite discussion of blood supremacy being fairly common among the Slytherins, this was the first time they had ever discussed, ever hinted, that they knew about Voldemort's return.

Zabini voice rose above the surrounding whispers in an emotionless monotone. "Greengrass isn't incorrect. If Grindelwald wants what he wanted back then, he's not going to wait for Britain last like last time. He's going to come here first."

Harry heard the words, but his gaze slid to the opposite end of the hall.

"Drink some water." He dodged the thin stream of water on instinct before his brain kicked into action and he leaned in to sip from it. Thankfully, he had long-recovered from his mental breakdown in Snape's office. Now, if those lapses in judgment could only come to a permanent stop before they killed him one day.

Zabini looked at him with thinly veiled disgust when he was finished. "You have sweat dripping from you everywhere. If you stopped jumping around so much and just—"
"Cast more spells?" He rolled his eyes as he wiped his lips. "Well, my way works just as effectively. And it's not like I don't know how to construct 'complex defensive shields' now when I need to. I just don't see the need."

"Use your imagination, then," the Slytherin snapped. "How will you conduct your spastic body motions if you're in a space scarcely bigger than a closet—"

"Why would Riddle and I ever be together in a closer?"

"—or if he sets fiendfyre on you," Zabini continued, as though he hadn't heard him. "You think you're going to outrun that, Potter?"

"No," Harry responded easily. "And when you get around to using fiendfyre in one of these duels, I guess we'll find out. Until then, though—"

A firm, unrelenting hand on his arm stopped him before he could take more than a step.

"We need to talk about the repercussions of Grindelwald's escape," Zabini said grimly.

Harry turned around slowly. "I heard you this morning. You think he's coming to Britain first."

"Yes."

Harry exhaled, eyes narrowing in consideration. "I know most of the Slytherins listen to you like you're their messiah, if Voldemort's God, of course, but—who's to say he is? Or that he even can? He's been in a wizarding prison for forty years now."

"That's…precisely the point. I know with considerable certainty that he is not incapacitated and that he does want something."

Harry's face cooled abruptly. "And how exactly would you know that?"

Zabini scoffed. "Oh, don't worry, Potter. I'm not an aficionado. But my mother's current husband is. His family served him at the height of his power."

"And?"

"And his estate is in France," he informed him, looking entirely unbothered now that he had Harry's attention. "He returned from a visit there last night, according to my mother, looking strange, and she…elucidated some information from him. I received her letter early this morning."

"And what did it say?" Harry asked impatiently.

Zabini's face was unreadable. "A young man visited his family a month ago. Their family first, and then the rest of their social circle—all old supporters of Grindelwald's cause. He was eloquent, courted them with the same rhetoric that had first persuaded them to join."

Air hissed through Harry's teeth. Great. That was exactly what they all needed: more 'inspired' pureblood supremacists running around.

"My mother conveyed to me that the man was not perceived to look at all like Gellert Grindelwald," Zabini continued, gaze caught on something in the distance, "but that he knew… private facts about the families that only the Dark Lord had known and was unlikely to share. And that he called himself Gellert Grindelwald."

Harry's head snapped to him so quickly that he felt something crack in his neck. "What are you
"It's not what I'm saying, per se, Potter," Zabini answered coolly, "I've merely been informed that someone who calls himself Grindelwald has already gathered forces in France and likely several other countries as well and is certainly not ailing from a multi-decade stay in prison. As I am... compelled by the life debt to caution you, I will reiterate that Grindelwald's plans are ostensibly to conquer Britain first. The man's rhetoric was reportedly geared to that end."

"Why are you compelled?" Harry asked sharply after a moment. "There's only one Dark Lord after me."

"Grindelwald changes your situation with the Dark Lord."

Harry's lips pressed tightly together. "You're talking about this morning—the fact that Voldemort's lot doesn't want Grindelwald here."

"Yes," Zabini answered, dark eyes widening slightly in—surprise? His face swiftly regained its composure. "Neither the Dark Lord, Dumbledore, nor the ministry want Grindelwald in Britain. All these factions will inadvertently work for the same end. To be frank, the Dark Lord is not going to be overly concerned with killing you until that end is accomplished. Nor should you, unlikely as the possibility still is, kill him before then."

"What?"

"Grindelwald has an unimaginable number of forces—original supporters and their descendants—all throughout Europe that have been stewing in anger since his defeat," the dark-haired boy explained in a pedantic tone. "Dumbledore beat him the first time because he agreed to a Wizard's Duel. There's no certainty that such a convenient circumstance will arise again. Or that, if my mother's information is true, Dumbledore will be able to defeat him by himself now. The Dark Lord will be vital."

Inexplicable frustration flooded Harry, even though he knew that defeating Voldemort was still far off from becoming reality. "So Riddle must have known all along about the escape and the reason for Dumbledore being gone—or he wouldn't have come to Hogwarts with me."

Zabini's gaze pierced him. "Undoubtedly. It's clear the Dark Lord's been managing the death eaters from afar and gathering information through them or Malfoy would have let something slip about a disappearance by now. However, I do doubt the Dark Lord knows some of the...specifics that I have mentioned: pointedly, who visited the families and what form he came in. Riddle, as you call him, has only ever been interested in Britain, and I doubt he has cultivated connections through his death eaters in the necessary circles abroad."

"Right," Harry muttered, half-listening to Zabini's words. "We'll have to talk about this later."

"Fiendfyre tomorrow, Potter," Zabini sneered at him.

Harry tossed him a careless wave as he left hurriedly, his mind working as furiously as his legs. So: either someone had taken advantage of Grindelwald's escape and stolen his name to gain support for their own cause; or, the man who had visited the families was merely a figurehead for Grindelwald and was acting under his orders; or, the young man, somehow, actually was Grindelwald.

The third option, for obvious reasons, begged suspension of disbelief. And yet, keeping in mind all the impossible things Harry had witnessed over the years, who was to say that that wasn't
possible…?

He collided without warning with another body. On pure reflex, his wand was already in his hand, shining a bright light on the individual. Squinting, he managed to make out a squat, pink figure through the brightness. He dimmed the light slightly to reveal an equally squat toad-like face beneath plucked, arched brows.

"Mr. Gaunt," Umbridge chirped with sickening sweetness. "Late night trysts and escapades are decidedly against the rules of this school. Detention. Tomorrow afternoon."

Harry released a rather unpleasant expletive. The headmistress heard him and, with a cloying magenta smile, granted him another hour of punishment. His hand lingered on his wand for longer than it should have before he slid it back into his robes and headed to the Slytherin dormitories.

When he finally got into his bed that night—despite all the events of the day—he fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

At first, it was bliss.

Then, his dreams became vivid.

"He has always been this way?"

A plump, matronly woman nodded fearfully; a background unfurled behind her, sketching details in grey and monotone colors. "Yes, since birth. He was such an unusual baby. Never even cried…It was so unnatural…And now—oh, those children will never be the same after what he did to them!"

She led the priest down a dank, rickety staircase—and Harry could feel—to a basement that was too cold to be inhabitable. Under the dim, barely there lighting, there was a young boy chained with thin rope to one of the lamp holders, still, despite the chill in the air.

"This is the boy?" the priest questioned, his eyes lighting upon the boy appraisingly.

"Y-yes, this is Tom."

"Look at me, boy."

The boy did not look up; he merely continued to survey the granite below him with cold, haughty eyes.

Without warning, the priest stormed forward, and violently shoved Tom’s head against the rough wall. His jaw tightened dangerously, but the boy did not release a sound. He did not look up.

"You are right, Mrs. Cole," the priest said calmly, his voice frighteningly unaffected despite his prior actions, "There is a definite and undeniable predilection towards evil in this boy. He is possessed by the devil, Satan himself."

Mrs. Cole gasped in horror.

The priest slowly reached within his voluminous robes, pulling out a long, black whip. "I applaud you for not being complacent. Many would have been fooled, but you have been vigilant and read the scriptures and heeded its warnings: 'For even the devil, until the very last hour before he fell, was thought beautiful in heaven by God.'"

"Yes, Father," Mrs. Cole breathed, bosom heaving.
"I shall remove the devil from this boy, now." the priest said quietly, his voice still unfailingly calm, even as he drew the whip back. With a lash, he hit Tom on his side. The boy let out a small hiss, his amber eyes narrowing as he finally looked up.

The priest released the whip again, his face unchanging. "In order to draw the Devil out,"—Tom hissed and Harry hissed with him—"we must lessen his hold on the boy. We must teach the boy the glory of suffering, and through suffering, humility. To reach his soul, we must punish the external shell. Fear not, Mrs. Cole, the Devil shall not win today."

There was triumphant look on the priest's face as he released the whip again and again. But he failed to recognize the increasing danger he was putting himself in, as Tom's face darkened, amber eyes glowing as his magic flooded the room.

"His injuries are healing," the priest muttered, "the work of the Devil, right in front of our eyes. Never have I seen such…this boy…"

He began whipping Tom with renewed vigor, panting lightly with the exertion. Harry panted, in agony himself.

"Not…yet…enough…"

For the first time since the priest and Mrs. Cole had entered the basement of the orphanage, Tom looked at the priest, hooded, blazing amber eyes meeting the indifferent ones of the older man.

Despite himself, the priest drew back. "Wha—"

The priest wasn't even able to finish the word. Suddenly, he fell to his knees, clutching his chest as blood poured out of his mouth.

Tom watched with hungry, vengeful eyes as the priest collapsed in front of him, oblivious to Mrs. Cole's screams. Tilting his head back, he smiled beatifically.

Within a couple of seconds, the priest had stilled. He lay flat on the floor, his black robes soaked in the blood he had vomited, which now fanned around him in bizarre resemblance to wings.

The matron of the orphanage was sobbing uncontrollably, curled up in the corner of the basement. Mid-wail, her eyes met theirs—Tom's and Harry's, now—and she screamed, her voice echoing piercingly in the dark room.

"FREAK!"

Harry launched forward in his bed, sweat streaming down his face and back. Heartbeat thudding thunderously in his ears, he shoved his sheets away from his body and left the room.

Author's Note

Please read and review! More comments and I update faster ;) <3
Harry tugged at the black bowtie around his neck, uncomfortably warm despite the fact that he had not moved an inch in the last half hour. Although the Notts' extravagant ballroom had started slightly chilled, the movement now of hundreds of witches and wizards in their best finery as they danced had brought an unpleasant humidity to the room.

He felt more than heard a figure join him on the right, the heavy brush of skirt scraping against his side.

"One might wonder why a person would find himself within a Yule gathering of well-established families—a boy, it should be noted, without any significant social standing—and neglect entirely to socialize and take advantage of that fact. Idiot, I think, would be too kind a word."

The impressively prepared face of Pansy Parkinson looked back at him archly, her heavy brown eyes winged by dark lining to match the drama of her unusual robes.

Harry gave her a dry look. "What, you want me to dance? I'm not exaggerating when I say that the last time I tried, all parties involved deeply regretted it."

"Don't dance, then," she retorted nonchalantly. "But those pretty lips you have were made for more than being looked at, you know." With intentional irony, the gaze she used with those words—a slow up-and-down—was simultaneously salacious and condescending.

It was impossible to escape the fact, especially this evening, that Tom Marvolo Riddle's face was objectively one of the most attractive many people had ever encountered—even with Harry assuming the form in rumpled clothing and messy hair. Thankfully, though, he knew with Parkinson the 'interest' was almost entirely feigned.

The wry, distant smile he had been wearing eventually slipped from his face, leaving in its place a seriousness that hadn't truly surfaced before in their conversations. He admitted rather straightforwardly, "I have different priorities."

Parkinson arched a dark eyebrow in response. "I'm sure you think so. But most people find that the aid of rich people has this convenient ability of making their 'priorities' considerably more achievable."

"Right. Well, I don't think the crowd here is...inclined to help with what I have in mind."

"Oh, I don't know about that," a new voice slipped in smoothly. "What anyone requires ultimately is just an especially compelling incentive."

Both he and Parkinson turned with belated surprise to view the person who had joined them in the far back corner of the ballroom. Zabini gazed back placidly, before turning his head to survey the masses of dancing people in front of them.

"Speaking from personal experience?" Harry prompted humorlessly after a moment, a quirk in his lips.

Zabini returned with admirable restraint, if not a fully acid-free glance: "Something like that."

The broader Slytherin wore sharply cut burgundy robes over stark black shirt and trousers, a strange combination of luxurious material and austere form. Parkinson eyed it carefully and
straightened on the other side of Harry, showcasing the expertly tailored fitting of her own gown-like robes.

"Your skin's darker, Zabini. Spending your holidays somewhere warm?" She smiled beatifically.

"One of my mother's properties in Italy," Zabini answered uninterestedly, his gaze still affixed to the swirling robes of those dancing.

"It must be beautiful," she responded, the cadence of her speech unperturbed by his obvious inattention. "I'm sure I would be enraptured if I ever saw it."

"I doubt the occasion will ever arise," he returned apathetically. He didn't bother looking at her.

"It's hard to predict the future," she said at first, gracefully. Then, her red lips curved. "But don't be too hasty. You haven't felt me give it to you yet."

Zabini's eyes at last snapped to her exactly as she made a helpful thrusting motion with her fingers to make explicitly clear what she meant by 'giving'—she wasn't the one on the 'receiving' end.

Even though he had been half-expecting something of this sort, it didn't stop Harry from choking on his drink. Beside him, Zabini froze entirely, looking at Parkinson as though he hadn't truly ever met her before. When he did recover, the Slytherin's demeanor was markedly different. A slight, amused smirk played across his lips.

Before Parkinson could begin swiveling her hips demonstratively and expounding some specifically wondrous uses of magic, Harry coughed loudly and purposefully into his hand.

Parkinson caught sight of the bandage on his right hand immediately. Her eyebrow arched high as she was effectively distracted from her previous discourse. "What the hell did you do to yourself, Gaunt?"

"Had to serve a detention with Umbridge during break," he admitted, seeing no real reason to hide the truth. "She couldn't make the original date and thought that Christmas Eve would be the perfect time instead."

It had been a difficult choice—deciding whether or not to put his name on the list to stay during the holidays. Especially when the Weasleys had kindly sent him a letter insisting that he was more than welcome. But at Hogwarts, he could use magic and train. And so, he had stayed. And served a horrific detention. And flooed here through a strangely understanding professor's office when the date of the ball arrived (Harry himself had been heavily hoping that he would be turned away).

"What did she use?" Zabini demanded, viewing the bandage with a cool gaze. No doubt, he considered the injury a contemptible hindrance to Harry's training. Harry hadn't let it stop him, though. He had spent hours conjuring dozens of enchanted automatons at a time in the Room of Requirement—which had probably been a stupid decision, in retrospect, because the wounds had opened several times as a result.

"A quill. It carved what I wrote into the back of my hand."

"Rather illegal," Zabini reflected, his expression unreadable.

"Rather," Parkinson echoed. She turned back to Harry then, eyes narrowed. "Has Umbridge used it on anyone else in our house?"

"Not that I know of." But then, as he considered it, he added in a low voice, "Probably."
"Check," Zabini commanded coldly. Harry hadn't expected that.

His face must have given away his thoughts, because Parkinson met him with a dark expression, her voice equally harsh. "We look after our own."

There was a subtle viciousness underlying the words and something else that struck Harry poignantly and uncomfortably. When he looked up again, both Zabini's and Parkinson's gazes had slipped from him to gaze at the dancers. Given little else as recourse, his eyes absentmindedly traced the same path.

For a long moment, the three of them stared at the long rows of dancing individuals, a grim contrast to the revelry. A strange, unexpected trio, they must have presented in that moment. He could already feel the burn of gazes on them.

"I should floo back," Harry declared abruptly, not waiting for a response. "See you in a few days."

He settled his drink on one of the banquet tables and left.

Two weeks later, though Harry would never have predicted it—and he had been having some strange dreams lately—he found himself confoundingly returned to the situation he had consciously abandoned.

Not, in the sense, that he had prolonged his holiday celebrations or revisited the Notts' manor or was anywhere near Theodore Nott, really. But he did, somehow, find himself in the same, puzzling combination of company.

He didn't know how it had happened.

Well, he did know how it had happened. He had been there to witness its inexplicable development. But that didn't help in the least to explain why.

Wrapping his scarf more firmly around his neck, Harry darted quick, suspicious glances to the figures accompanying him to Hogsmeade on either side of him. Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini.

Harry had, of course, seen Parkinson and Zabini talk to each other before Nott's ball. They were classmates in the same house; interaction—peripheral, superficial—was inevitable. It had been exactly that—peripheral and superficial—every time he had been around them. Before.

The first day of full classes, granted, had been almost deceivingly normal. But by the end of the week, he had found himself suffering meals subject to two acerbic Slytherins instead of the typical zero. They weren't even interested in the same things, Harry thought a little desperately.

"Where are we heading first?" Parkinson demanded. She looked thoroughly miserable, even after abandoning the pleated skirt she usually wore for sturdier black trousers and a fur-trimmed cloak.

Zabini contemplated the still far-off village through watering eyes, an inevitable reaction to the wind. "Three Broomsticks. We're going to need something warm in us if we're not going to freeze out here walking around."

Both he and Parkinson grunted in agreement with the sentiment. Zabini started to trudge through the knee-high snow a little ahead of them.

"So," she muttered bitterly to Harry under her breath, "what is his deal?"
"I have no idea and I couldn't care less," Harry answered bluntly, rubbing his hands together to generate warmth in the freezing weather. He would have been in the Room of Requirement right now—warm, at the very least, even if straining already aching muscles—if not for the fact that he had run out of ink and broken his last good quill that morning.

"Frigid," Parkinson decided savagely, brushing some of the heavily falling snow off her shoulders. "He's got to be...he doesn't even look twice at you." Her initially aggressive courtship, thankfully, had subsided to effectively nothing in the past week. Mostly because Zabini had merely smirked at all her attempts and shown absolutely no further interest.

Harry's pace quickened to match Zabini as they approached the arched entryway into Hogsmeade. The Three Broomsticks, fortunately, was one of the first crooked, snow-topped structures nearest to the entryway, so they didn't have to walk much further.

Zabini reached the heavy wooden door first, pushing it open to reveal the tempting warmth contained within. Harry and Parkinson followed hurriedly behind him and slid onto a wooden bench, Zabini sitting down opposite them. Although the pub was overcrowded with students seeking shelter from the harsh weather, Madam Rosmerta reached their table less than a minute later.

She gave them an attractive smile (it was a well-known fact that the Three Broomsticks' appeal to Hogwarts students was both the stellar butterbeer and Madam Rosmerta), deep set blue eyes curving slightly under pronounced brows as she leaned her hip against the table. They were undoubtedly the newest addition of a very long line of customers she already had to attend to, but if she was overwhelmed by the massive influx, there was no sign of it on her face.

"Bit chilly outside," she greeted in a throaty voice, "what can I get you this afternoon?"

"Three butterbeers," Parkinson ordered, pulling off her gloves.

Madam Rosmerta nodded and had almost fully turned away when she paused again. With raised eyebrows, the pub owner leaned forward to survey Harry.

"I don't think I've seen you before," she noted, cocking her head to the side.

"He's a transfer student," Zabini stated boredly, before Harry could word the answer himself. As expected, Madam Rosmerta looked at him with some incredulity. When no one offered any further explanation, however, she pursed her lips and left with a turn of her skirt. A large, thick-bearded man eventually returned with the drinks, clunking them noisily down on the table.

The door opened behind them just as they finished, letting in a cold blast of air along with the pub's newest occupants. Harry turned and was confronted with the sight of his best friends. It was a painfully familiar sight: Ron was laughing loudly, brushing snow from his red hair as he stumbled in, Hermione at his side with a reprimanding look on her face but a slight curve to her mouth.

"Stop gaping," he heard Zabini mutter to him. But Harry had already caught side of the third member of their group, and the smile abruptly vanished from his face.

Riddle wore the very same Madame Malkin's cloak that Harry wore, his face slightly reddened with cold as he laughed very convincingly with Harry's best friends. In the time since he had last seen him, Harry's spello-taped round-rimmed glasses had been replaced with something visibly more refined.

Parkinson shoved Harry a little back, craning her neck to observe the latest newcomers. When she
looked back at him and Zabini, it was with a deeply disturbed look. "Is it just me or does Potter actually look put together these days?"

Zabini sneered. "You're imagining it."

Harry rolled his eyes, but watched through his peripheral as Ron, Hermione, and Riddle settled near the front of the pub.

"Alright," Parkinson cajoled, "one more minute inside here and then we make our way to the shops."

"No. We're leaving right now."

She looked at Harry through deadly, narrowed eyes. "You'll have to drag my dead body out—"

She didn't get to finish. The ground began to rock violently beneath their feet and the metal chandelier positioned in the dead center of the room came crashing down. Individual torches hit the floor, and fire spread rapidly, causing those nearest to scream.

Someone sensible shouted an Aguamenti Charm and immediately put out the fire. The shaking stopped.

"What the fuck was that—" someone started, but broke off abruptly.

Because the screaming had not stopped. Students and regular visitors alike looked at each other in confusion, at first, before understanding that the screaming wasn't coming from inside. It was from outside.

A green flash of light caught Harry's eye through the densely-frosted window.

"GET DOWN!" he roared, shoving Parkinson underneath the table, and not a second too soon. The next moment, the heavy wooden door was blasted off its hinges.

Two tall men stood at the entrance, silhouetted by the blinding white snow.

The first stepped forward slowly. He had a severe face and pale hair; a golden badge with an odd, geometric design gleamed on his chest. The man behind him was similarly pale-haired, equally large, and wore the same badge, but his hair fell elegantly to his shoulders. With a quick flick of his wand, one of the men levitated the door back into place, blocking their view of the outside once again.

"Schau, was wir hier gefunden haben," the first said, baring his teeth as he surveyed the room. "How should I say? Looks like mother and father let the children play outside a little too late."

"Silence, Eljse," the second commanded with a pleasant smile, shaking blood from his sleeve. "We wouldn't want to...frighten them."

He stopped before a short third-year near the front. The boy trembled as he came under the weight of the man's gaze, flinching when the man smirked and bent down to meet his eyes.

"Do you know who we are?" the man asked softly.

The boy shook his head in the negative, silently. But the girl next to him spoke up, her voice too loud in the otherwise deadly silence. "You're d-death eaters."

No, Harry realized suddenly, meeting Zabini's knowing gaze. They weren't.
The first man, Eljse, roared with laughter, his head nearly knocking back into one of the beams holding up the ceiling. When his laughter stopped, he looked back at the girl with livid rage. She flinched in fear.

"No, we aren't, mädchen," the second man confirmed, the smile on his face having only grown brighter. He straightened and walked further into the room, his gaze locating with frightening accuracy—Harry observed with trepidation—bodies under the tables that only someone in Harry's position should have been able to see.

"You see," the man continued, addressing the room as a whole, "my comrades and I do not care to hide behind fragile, metal masks in service of our leader. We do not wear black cloaks and silver visages to disguise who we are. We have no shame, no fear. The people of this country have long forgotten what it means to be burdened by glorious purpose. I now offer to share this burden with you."

His words were met with silence. "Unconvinced?" He raised a pale brow at them. His eyes widened with put-on shock. "Of course! You require details. Entirely reasonable. Eljse, why don't you tell them precisely what our purpose is."

When the first man spoke, it was with militant fervor, clearly repeating words he had feasted on for years. "We serve the vision of our leader, Gellert Grindelwald, to purge the world and create the Eternal Reich."

"The Eternal Reich," the second man repeated genially. "And this is your chance, my friends, to ensure your place in it. Any volunteers?"

At first, there was silence. Then, a loud, abrasive: "Fuck off!" Other voices joined the cry.

The man's expression did not change. He tilted his head to the ceiling, the amiable smile still affixed to his face. "I confess, I am slightly disappointed by this outcome. But your pain will serve a purpose, my friends. A glorious one."

With a savage grin, Eljse whipped out his wand. A crackling beam of electric green bursting forth from the tip. Its target was the person closest to him: a person sitting at a table in the front right corner of the pub.

The Dark Lord looked at the killing curse much like a normal person would look at an errant fly, to say the least. He leaned back with remarkable swiftness and watched unconcerned as the spell shattered the window. And then, in the same breath, his wand hand snapped out and he sent the giant, lumbering man into the very back of the pub, straight into the long rows of alcoholic drinks with a thunderous crash.

Harry watched as the second man's eyes darkened, narrowing at the person who had put his companion out of commission so easily. Contradictorily, however, his face was a study in delight. "Thank you for that. I wasn't quite finished yet. I must admit, Eljse is one of my more...uncivilized comrades, though he has served faithfully through the years. He really does have a particular talent for senseless destruction that can possibly be matched only by young children."

Harry took the opportunity to scoot closer to Zabini and Parkinson. When he was sure that the man was still preoccupied with Riddle, he whispered, "We need to try sneaking people out the back."

"Should we go out?" Parkinson hissed back, "I'm pretty sure whatever's happening in here, it's much, much worse out there." True to her words, the screaming and flashes of light still persisted outside.
"We stay here," Harry whispered calmly, "and we're only waiting patiently for more of them to stumble on us. We need to get back to Hogwarts."

Zabini nodded stiffly. "He's right. The castle has enough fortification to withstand attack, even if the whole school is outnumbered."

At the sound of footsteps, Harry immediately refocused his attention. Looking up, he saw that the man had made his way across the room to stand in front of the Dark Lord. Riddle stood up and met the man's gaze head-on, a romantic picture of heroism—the underdog against the monster, David against Goliath. An ironic and wholly deceiving picture.

"What is your name, boy?" the pale-haired man asked, smiling pleasantly still. "My leader would have use for one with talents such as yours."

Riddle smiled back, baring his teeth with disturbing ease. Harry couldn't believe, in this moment, how no one else realized that this person couldn't possibly be 'Harry Potter.' Harry Potter didn't smile like he was accustomed to being the most feared predator in the room.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to pass."

"You didn't mention your name."

"Harry Potter. Yours?"

The man's eyes flashed with recognition. "You are the one they call the Boy-Who-Lived. Talented, but—no offense to you—if your Dark Lord has not yet managed to put a child down, I must advise he search for another occupation."

Harry fully expected the man's head to be off his shoulders the very next second. But Riddle maintained perfect control of himself, an implacable calm on his face. "I'll be sure to let him know the next time I run into him."

For the first time, the man frowned, showcasing a pretense of sorrow. "Unfortunately, I regret that I do have to kill you now. I hope you understand. Your dead body will present a remarkable symbol in this country for my leader's prowess. And I live only to serve."

His 'regret' didn't stop him, indeed, from lifting his wand before he had even finished speaking and firing a series of curses, including the same spell his companion had used a few minutes previous. It was clear that this man was a more talented duelist than the first one, his movements short and quick—never stretching too much, never expending more energy than necessary.

But he was no match for the Dark Lord. Riddle blocked them all with fearsome efficiency, sidestepping the killing curse once again like it was mere child's play. The man, in turn, managed to avoid the first two spells Riddle sent his way, but succumbed a few seconds later to the simple stunner Riddle aimed directly at his chest.

The large man slid a few meters and landed on his back with a heavy thump, facing the ceiling. It was an altogether anticlimactic end to the dramatic buildup that had transpired. It was also an oddly benign ending, considering the identity and proclivities of one of the duel's participants.

The room gaped at Riddle in silent awe. Hermione and Ron, however, also looked slightly disconcerted.

Hermione quickly broke the silence, the odd expression on her face vanishing as though it had never existed. "Is everyone okay? No one's hurt, right?" They all nodded.
"What do you think we should do, Harry?" Colin Creevey called out, helping his friend out from underneath the table. Harry watched as everyone else turned immediately to the one who had 'saved' them.

Riddle's eyes glinted slightly under the desperate attention, before he adopted the appropriately grim demeanor. "We need to get back to Hogwarts. I think our best chance is to split up into smaller groups. If we go out all together, we might be an easy target for them to surround us."

"Raise your hand if you're below fifth year." Dozens of hands shot up. Riddle's green eyes swept with lightning quickness over the room. "If your hand's raised, you should join up with four to five upper years. Try to make sure that each group has at least two sixth or seventh years."

"We needed to exit the building through different spots, or they'll notice us immediately," Ron added.

Hermione nodded and began walking through the room to make sure that people were grouping up quickly. Harry, Parkinson, and Zabini stood in the corner of the room, surveying the hasty formation of small units.

"We're the only Slytherins in here," Parkinson realized after a moment, her voice deadly. "How is that possible."

Zabini's face was tight. "Most of them opted to stay back for Malfoy's impromptu firewhiskey party in the common room."

"Suck ups," she muttered viciously. Suddenly, her face was too close to theirs, heavy brown eyes the most piercing Harry had ever seen them. "We need to get out of here. Zabini, you can apparate, right?"

Harry's teeth clenched, and he interrupted before the broader Slytherin could answer. "We're not doing that."

Parkinson heaved a scathing laugh at the concerned look he gave the people in the room. "They look after each other. We're on our own here. You want to help them? Frankly, they're not going to return the courtesy."

"It doesn't matter, either way," Zabini cut in coldly, fingers grasping his wand firmly. "They have anti-apparation wards in place. No one can apparate in or out. We're going to have to get to Hogwarts like everyone else."

They turned back to face the room. Students and adults alike had parted through the middle, forming groups that lined on either side of the pub. At the front, stood Riddle, Hermione, and Ron. Hermione immediately spotted them. "Are you a group of just three, Tom?"

Parkinson's gaze snapped to Harry with ill-hidden shock. Dimly, he remembered that she didn't know that he and Ron, Hermione, and 'Harry' knew each other. He nodded.

"You can join us, then," Ron declared gruffly, though he didn't look too pleased about it.

He felt the burn of Parkinson's suspicion on him, but ignored it in favor of making his way to the front of the room. She followed behind him reluctantly; Zabini moved more readily.

A warning cry suddenly sounded through the pub, and they all spun in response. With a prolonged creak, he watched as one of the giant beams in the back of the room gave way. It landed precisely
on top of the skull of the second man, crushing it. Gagging noises filled the room; others nervously eyed the rest of the beams above them.

"Unerring accuracy, don't you think?" Zabini muttered into his ear, eyeing Riddle with an unreadable expression.

With rigid discipline, Harry cleared his face and offered a weak smile to Hermione and Ron.

Groups began blasting holes in different parts of the pub's walls and making their way outside. At the first blast of bitter wind as he stepped outside, Harry felt adrift from his surroundings. When his senses cleared, he processed the sheer loudness of the sounds around him—as though he were in the middle of world quidditch cup stadium once again—before he realized he was looking upon ten times more witches and wizards than he had ever seen in Hogsmeade Village.

Shopkeepers struggled valiantly all around them against Grindelwald's forces, trying to protect their shops. Others lay unconscious and bloodied in the snow. Although the plan had been to split up, Harry watched as fear immediately took hold of the groups; they unthinkingly gravitated back to each other. Students exiting other shops in hordes immediately caught sight of them and ran to join them.

By the time anyone realized what was happening, it was too late. They were blocked in on both sides by Grindelwald's followers.

Twenty or so individuals stepped out from the mass of attackers, forming a disciplined line at each end of the collection of students. They wore varying thick fur cloaks, but each was marked by the same gleaming badge on their chest—a strange geometric symbol Harry had only seen before on the two men who had entered the pub.

A man with leonine features and golden hair spoke, his voice thundering over the crowd with the aid of magic. "People of Hogsmeade, we are the second lieutenants of Gellert Grindelwald's army. Today, with only a fraction of our true strength, we take Hogsmeade Village—two miles from the fortress that is Hogwarts—in the name of our leader."

A great roar rose from Grindelwald's followers.

The man turned now to them, his language simple and unimaginative, but clad, somehow, with a strangely gripping quality. "For forty years, we have been subjugated and imprisoned under the misguided actions of our political leaders. Today, my comrades, the cry of our suppression is heard around the world. Today, we break our chains."

As the exclamation of jubilation continued, a tall woman walked up from behind the man to whisper something in his ear. She scanned the crowd of students and pointed—with unerring accuracy—in Harry's direction.

The man lifted his head, gaze narrowing contemplatively.

Harry stiffened instinctively, before he realized that the man wasn't looking at him. Directly in front of him was Riddle in his body. Hermione and Ron drew protectively closer to the Dark Lord.

The leonine man whispered to the man on his left and the woman on his right and each passed what he had said to them down their respective direction. Finally, the man looked to the line of lieutenants standing near the opposite end of the village. For them, his message was brief and public.

"Kill the rest."
Chaos ensued the moment the words left his mouth. The regiment of lieutenants they were closest to—all twenty or so of them—immediately opened fire on Riddle. His classmates screamed around him, scrambling to get away and successfully pulling back ten or so meters. Against his will, Harry felt himself pulled back too.

Turning sharply to either side of him, he saw that Parkinson and Zabini were the ones who had grabbed his arms. A horrible thought then occurred to him and his head whipped back in Riddle's direction.

His stomach sank. His friends—his unflinching, unfailing loyal friends. Ron and Hermione alone remained by Riddle, their faces pale and their lips tight, but there with him under the barrage of deadly curses.

They were going to die.

"No," Harry bit out, struggling against their hold, "No. LET ME GO!"

"What the fuck, Gaunt—" Parkinson's hand slipped, and she was momentarily displaced by another body in the mad rush to escape.

"Stop it," Zabini snarled, "Use that moronic brain in your head!"

"I swear if you don't LET ME—"

"You'd have to kill me," Zabini snarled slowly and with malice.

Harry lunged forward so that he was practically butting heads with the other Slytherin, the rage on his face probably monstrous. "I would," Harry threatened viciously, "I would, before I let one of them die."

A second later, he realized that Zabini had meant his words quite literally. The Slytherin physically could not let go of him because of the debt.

Before he could examine where that left him, Harry found himself once more under a barrage of spells, now from the line of lieutenants who had been instructed to 'kill the rest.' Cursing, he projected a shield charm above him alongside Zabini's. A familiar talon-like hand latched without warning onto his arm, and Harry yanked Parkinson forward from the mob of bodies until she was under the shield charm as well.

"Stop panicking!" Harry roared at the people near him, "Put up shield charms!" Belatedly, he realized that he could have extended his own charm farther. He didn't know how far—he hadn't actually ever tested it.

But the point soon became moot. Enough people had heard him to spark a series of shield charms within seconds; more students quickly caught on thereafter, and eventually the entire mass of students and the odd adult were protected by a bubble of shield charms that had merged together.

"Fianto duri. Repello inimicum," he heard Zabini chant beside him, adding layers of protection to the protego charm.

Realizing that they could no longer use the curses and jinxes they had been utilizing until now, the lieutenants' attack on them slowly subsided to a standstill.

Harry took the lull in battle as an immediate opportunity to face the opposite direction again. As soon as he did, he felt it—writhing, dynamic, electrifying. It permeated the air, so thick that he
couldn't perceive his own lungs inhaling and exhaling anymore.

His gaze quickly arrived at the source, lips tightening at the sight he found.

The way Riddle used magic… it was with a sheer temerity that could not possibly be human. As one spell left the Dark Lord's wand, another curse had begun, wordlessly, wandlessly-undetectable, he knew, to everyone but its target. Somehow, inexplicably, Harry could sense it. Somehow, he could feel each and every spell of Riddle's thrumming in the air. He didn't pause to think why. It wasn't the time.

His heartbeat slowed from its dangerous pace only when he located his best friends. It took a few seconds, but he saw them now—far off to the side, gaping, but entirely uninjured. Harry breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

An ungentle hand on his shoulder impatiently demanded his attention and, distracted, he turned back to see what Zabini wanted from him.

He followed Parkinson's line of sight and saw the reason for the tapping. Twenty wands were pointed in the air in front of them and from each spilled forth a torrent of unnaturally red fire, curving in the form of fiery serpents through the air.

"The shields… they won't..." the person behind him gasped. Harry's mouth slackened in horror. The protego charm, even with Zabini's added protective charms, couldn't hold up against fiendfyre. Harry had discovered that himself three weeks ago when Zabini had set the fire on him.

The air around them grew uncomfortably warm as the cursed fire began writhing its way through buildings leading up to them, incinerating everything in its path like sentient beasts with insatiable hunger.

"Is it true that only the caster's counter curse can stop it?" Parkinson demanded, sweat beginning to pour down her face.

Zabini looked enraged by the fact that anyone had the gall to legitimately threaten his life. "We have to break through the anti-apparation wards. We don't have any other option."

"You're the only one here who has anything near the necessary expertise, and we both know that's impossible without proper training," she snapped.

"It wouldn't be enough. Most of us here don't know how to apparate," Harry snapped back, looking at the younger students surrounding them.

They abruptly went silent as the fiendfyre neared dangerously close.

"HARRY!" he heard Hermione scream. And even though she was meters and meters away and the people around him were screaming too, Harry's head whipped back reflexively. Even in the distance, he could see her eyes wide with terror as she caught sight of the fire and the impending fate of her classmates. Riddle blasted six of the lieutenants dueling him back into the air behind them with terrifying ease, and tilted his head slightly backwards in response to the cry. Only slightly. Minutely. But enough for Harry to see blazing green eyes.

And, just like that, a truly insane idea occurred to Harry.

Gripping the wand in his hand, he sent a half-hearted prayer to the sky in case there really was a divine figure up there that deigned to care occasionally about what happened below. Then, he whispered the incantation he had heard Zabini use weeks ago.
Zabini noticed immediately, a wild look on his face. "Pot—What the fuck are you doing? You've never cast it before—"

For one terrifying moment of impotence, nothing happened. And then, his wand sparked and lit. Gritting his teeth, he contained the fire spilling from his wand with fierce concentration to a small flame. He was controlling it now, somehow, impossibly, keeping it small but, he needed to—he needed more time. Harry didn't know if he could trust himself to leash something bigger.

The crackling noise of burning became deafening. When his gaze darted up momentarily, he saw that the lieutenants' fiendfyre had finished consuming the buildings right next to them. The fiery beasts now circled to where they stood.

With grim inevitability, Harry knew he that had no time left, and there was no way he was getting more.

For one last second, he held the flame in its hand-sized spherical form—insignificant, unnoticeable, harmless. And then, praying that he did not kill them all, he removed the blockades he had imposed on himself, and he let go.

There was blinding light. Then, an ear-splitting roar rang through his ears as something soared—straight up—into the air above him. A thing emerged, a monstrous thing (and his skin blazed—was he melting?), taking on a grotesque shape in the snow-spotted air, several stories higher than any other fiendfyre entity before it.

For a moment, it seemed only to inhale, as though it were a real creature, as though it required oxygen and sustenance like any other living being above ground. And perhaps, it did. The beast released an unimaginable scream like nothing Harry had ever heard before, before lunging forward.

Its jaw was deceivingly slack as it moved toward the first serpent. Heart racing, Harry knew that this was the moment of truth—he didn't know for sure, what would happen, he had hoped desperately, but—

In one long swallow, his beast devoured the writhing serpent alive. And it did not stop there. Without pause, it moved onto the next serpent, and then to the next, each one consumed by the same, ravenous hunger.

Magic flooded through his arm, an invisible reign that followed the beast more than led it—but the fiendfyre followed Harry's bidding nevertheless. If he lost focus for one moment, he knew, the cursed fire would succumb to its own nihilistic nature. Blood flooded his mouth from where his teeth dug into his tongue, his breath hitched at odd intervals (suppressing hysteria, some part of him understood), but he controlled every movement of the fiendfyre miraculously unerringly.

At the end, when its task was finished, the beast turned to him and beheld its maker, glowing eyes indifferent. With numb fingers, Harry cast the counter curse and the fiendfyre vanished.

"He's looking at you right now," Zabini warned him urgently in his ear, "He's been looking at you ever since you cast the—"

He barely heard it. The strength in his legs was quickly disappearing, and almost immediately, he felt them buckle beneath him. His vision darkened equally promptly. Just before consciousness was stolen from him, he felt a pair of arms—ungentle, his body complained—catch him.

Then, unconsciousness hit and everything went black.
But before it went black, he saw green eyes looking down at him from directly above him.

Author's Note:

So. This was a mammoth of a chapter to write. 6000+ words! And things happened.

Tell me what you think!

Please, please, please review!

Long reviews and the more promptly I supply ;}
A Brief Summary of What Has Happened Until Now:

After the dementor attack, Harry wakes up to find himself in the Malfoy Manor in Tom Riddle’s body. When he returns to 4 Privet Drive, he also finds—to his great horror—that Voldemort is in his body. Both are taken by the Order to Grimmauld Place and head to Hogwarts when the summer ends. There, Harry is sorted into Slytherin under the name ‘Tom Gaunt’ (Dumbledore has taken temporary leave from Hogwarts and is replaced by Umbridge) and comes to incur a life debt from Zabini. Shortly after, news is released that Grindelwald has escaped Nurmengard. In that last chapter, Hogsmeade is attacked by Grindelwald’s forces, and Harry is forced to reveal some of what he has learned from Zabini in front of Riddle and the rest of his classmates.

(If you don’t remember anything though, the best thing to do is probably reread)

HI! It's been a while... :( College, engineering specifically, is crazy...that's basically all I can say. BUT: in this off-time I have managed to write something hopefully half-way decent!

White robes. White walls. White curtains.

Harry jolted up.

"Had enough sleep?"

"Why am I here?" he rasped, rubbing his eyes.

"That's what I'm asking you." Madame Pomfrey raised an inquisitive brow. "There's nothing physically wrong with you. If it's trauma care you need, this isn't the place."

Harry stumbled off the bed. His gaze rapidly catalogued the rest of the ward, freezing when he caught sight of the rows of injured students cordoned off at the opposite end.

"Well, hurry on, will you," the older woman compelled. "Your friends—"

"Are they still attacking Hogsmeade?" Harry finally found his voice and gripped the nurse with urgency.

"They've retreated, for now," she responded after a moment. Something about the way she said it made it clear that the nurse had no idea why.

Harry made his way as quickly as he could to the front.

Hermione stood to the right of the infirmary's entrance, with Ron flanking her to her left. Harry's gaze snapped to the third figure standing in his peripheral. His heart slowed slightly when he recognized that it was Parkinson. Her expression was slightly amused and slightly bored as she
gazed at his best friends, looking for all the world like she hadn't just been in a battle-zone.

"So, you are alive," Parkinson greeted, smirking. "I guess Pomfrey wasn't lying after all."

"Right," Harry told her quickly. "Look—I really need to head get out of here right now."

Hermione spoke up, leaving her place beside the door to stand in front of it as well. "You saved a lot of people, Tom."

Harry tried to maneuver his way around her, an excuse for his hasty departure poised on his lips.

"—I'm just wondering if you can explain why you used highly illegal magic to do it."

He stopped trying to push past her.

"Cursed fire," Ron continued uncomfortably, his eyes piercing blue. "That's dark magic there, Gaunt."

"And it's dangerous," Hermione said strongly. She crossed her arms and looked at him with transparent suspicion. Ron's expression wasn't much better. A sense of frustration gripped Harry because he wanted to explain to them—but even if he could, this was not the time.

"Where's Harry?" he asked instead, lips tightening.

His gaze narrowed more when they didn't immediately answer, instead sharing secretive glances with each other. Lips tightening, he wondered now how the hell Riddle had explained away his ability to smite Grindelwald's followers like they were mere insects.

What in him had inspired this unfailing loyalty?

"There was an announcement," Ron revealed finally, pulling his gaze from Hermione's. "Dumbledore's coming back. He was waiting with us before that—"

Harry didn't hear the rest. A buzzing sound filled his ears as he stumbled back.

Dumbledore…back?

He ignored anything else that might have been said and sprinted out of the infirmary. He barely dodged students as he ran, knocking into bags and shoulders without a second glance or one iota of concern.

Nails dug sharply into the meat of his shoulder just as he neared the Great Hall, yanking him back with brutish strength. Eyes flying wide open, he gripped his wand and pointed it at his assaulter as he collided with a wall. Brown, heavy eyes framed by an unimpressed expression gazed back at him.

"Where you running to, Gaunt?"

"How did you even—" Harry panted, eyeing Parkinson's heeled shoes and how fast he thought he had been moving, then cut himself off as a horrid thought occurred to him. "Please don't tell me you owe me a life debt too."

…he regretted the words just about as soon as they left his mouth.

"Excuse me?" Parkinson snapped. "You saved your own life when you saved mine, so it doesn't count. And also just—what do you mean by too?"
Harry's face was abruptly expressionless as he searched for the best way to back track. "I'm on bit of a time crunch here. What did you want?"

A terrifying grin formed on her face. "Wait a second...does Zabini owe you a life debt?"

...why did Parkinson have to be so sharp?

Ignoring the racing of his pulse, Harry straightened so that he was looming over her and forced humor into his expression and tone. "Well, there's a laugh during dire times: me being in any sort of position to save the life of your Slytherin messiah."

Except Parkinson was having none of it. "Oh, but I think you are, especially in light of recent events. You don't have to agree with me, darling. Intuition, remember? It also happens to explain, well, almost everything. Why you've been so close of late, for one."

Harry tried his best to look like a man desperately in love. "You were right, okay? He likes men. Me, specifically. Speaking of which—can you back off? I'm the jealous type."

"Sorry, Gaunt. Just not convinced." She tilted her head, gaze somewhere above his shoulder. "Maybe you can try something a little better?"

He turned to find Zabini with a none-too-pleased expression on his face.

"You couldn't have arrived thirty seconds earlier?" Harry muttered to the person he had been searching for. The Slytherin ignored him.

"Well," Parkinson smirked, "I hope you at least realize that denial is futile?"

Zabini's eyes narrowed—as though in consideration.

"No," Harry said immediately, effectively distracted from the original source of his urgency. "No way."

"Why not?" he murmured, unconcerned, "She's learned Occlumency well, given how effectively she's blocking me out right now. Not to mention: it would be much easier than the clean-up required from obliviating, given the wards placed in the castle after Lockhart."

Parkinson's shifted into something cheerfully threatening at the mention of the memory charm. She shook her arm to dislodge her wand from her sleeve and held it delicately in her hand.

"I don't care about that; if he found out—oh, put that away," Harry snapped. He waved a placating hand her direction to subdue any preemptive spells. "Parkinson, all of this. Trust me. You don't want to know more."

Zabini laughed loudly and incredulously, causing both of them to jolt. "Don't tell me you're actually worried about her?"

"Why endanger more people than necessary?" he hissed back.

"Merlin," Zabini breathed, looking actually stunned. "You are."

"Excuse me?" Harry snapped viciously. "Can you explain to me why one day you care enough to make sure first year Slytherins don't spend detention with a psychotic toad and the very next day you're all too ready to serve your own classmate to a psychotic snake man?"

"Psychotic snake man?" Parkinson cut in helpfully. "Would that be the Dark Lord?"
"Shut up."

Zabini looked at him nonchalantly. "Considering the first-rate job you've done, it's either tell her or kill her."

Parkinson's eyes darted between the two of them like she was watching a riveting quidditch match.

Harry glared at them both.

"Now, now," Parkinson said sweetly, "cut the melodrama and tell me what the top-secret story is, gentlemen."

In the end, it took the Room of Requirement, a mild truth spell, and forty minutes of their time.

And the fact that the past terrible months of his life could be distilled into those three, simple components struck Harry both as ludicrous and horrifying and rendered him suitably numb.

The conversation ended with an unbreakable vow of secrecy.

"Just to clarify," Parkinson announced at the end, looking a little sick, "everything I did yesterday— that was before I knew you were…Harry Potter, alright?"

He wasn't amused.

"Voldemort could kill you now because of this," Harry warned, the numbness fading away and anger setting in. "Because of what you know."

"It's done," Zabini inserted smoothly. Harry's gaze swung to him suspiciously, wondering at his motives in all this; he had been inexplicably in favor of Parkinson knowing from the beginning. "How much do you remember before passing out, Potter?"

"What are you getting at?"

"When you fell," Zabini added shortly, "the Dark Lord caught you."

Yes. That. The memory, despite his diminishing consciousness then, was crystal clear now it was called forth. The slow, terrible sense of gravity overcoming him, the rush of wind in his ears. And then hands— A reckoning was coming, he knew. He pushed the thought aside while he still could.

"So, whose side are you on, Parkinson?" Harry managed with some difficulty, turning his attention on her.

The Slytherin heiress blinked back unconcernedly.

Zabini tilted his head to examine her with a strange smile. "I think he means to ask whether or not you want him dead on behalf of the Dark Lord."

She smiled back just as coolly. "Well, I would hardly admit it if I did. You would kill me then, wouldn't you?"

A brush against his neck. Slight, electric pain. Harry jerked in his seat, head twisting.

"If I thought you did," Zabini retorted slowly, lips curving, "you would already be at the other end of my wand."
"Is that an innuendo?" she jeered, baring her teeth. "Or are you just—"

"What's wrong with you?" Zabini snapped, eyes falling on Harry.

Harry was sitting ramrod straight in his seat, eyes slitted.

"Potter?" Parkinson prompted lowly.

Reckoning. As though his thoughts had conjured it.

Zabini must have read something in his expression, because he stiffened immediately. "Potter—is he in your head?"

"He?" she repeated sharply, eyes darting.

Just as it had been in Hogsmeade, Riddle's magic was thrumming, thick in the air—almost suffocating. Harry inhaled and felt the magic fluctuate around him as he did. It should have felt awful, if magic reflected its owner. But it didn't. And then—it curled around him, electric, stinging, warning, making it clear: this was a summoning and it was for him.

Harry twitched slightly, a feral expression taking control of his face. He stood and began walking to the door.

Zabini lunged to his feet immediately. "You're not ready."

Except, it did not matter what Zabini or Harry or anyone else thought. He had known this was coming as soon as he had woken up and remembered that Riddle had caught him. Harry stood in front of the Room of Requirement for a moment and glanced down both sides of the corridor. Then, he followed the path where the magic grew stronger.

It was later at night and well past curfew. The halls were entirely deserted, lit only by the barely glowing torches and the sliver of the moon that hung outside. When he reached his destination, the tall, majestic doors of the Great Hall towered above him, bold and brass, glinting dully in the dim lighting of corridor leading to it. Harry had never actually been to the Great Hall at this time, not even during the Yule Ball.

Lifting his wand, he forced the doors open.

The torches that normally lit the hall were undiscernible in the darkness. Instead, the moon beyond the castle's walls was reproduced perfectly above, sending weak but sharp lines of light downwards; they collided with the droplets of the chandeliers and fragmented into smaller lines, which in turn reflected again upon colliding with more diamond from the next chandelier, so that the whole hall seemed a demonstration of geometric complexity.

His gaze, however, did not dwell on his surroundings for very long. Because standing on the steps leading to the head table, his back to the entrance, was the person who had brought him there.

The angular design of the light cut through the darkness of his hair and his robes, tattooing the Dark Lord's form. Even from the opposite end of the hall, Harry could see him breathing. His magic, curling along the lines of light in fractal designs, expanded and contracted with each inhalation and exhalation. It was a terrifying display of raw and yet artfully controlled power. This display—Harry knew exactly that its purpose was to instill fear him, to make him more readily manipulated.

His jaw tightened. "Tom."
The Dark Lord cocked his head to the side. The rhythmic pulsation of the fractals, for only a second, was disrupted, flaring. Anger.

The name, strangely, had emerged instinctually. Belatedly, he remembered what Tom Riddle had told him in the Chamber of Secrets—apparently, some subconscious part of him had never forgotten.

"You don't like that name, do you?" Harry continued, the tremors in his voice—he hoped—unnoticeable. He lowered his head, grounding himself in the familiar stone beneath his feet. "Funny that the name of your body now isn't all too different. Just as common."

Riddle paused. Then, a sharp, charismatic smile distorted his lips. The voice that echoed in the hall was lower, smoother than Harry's natural one.

"Is that how you feel, Harry? Do you dislike your name?"

He descended the steps with remarkable swiftness, almost gliding, until he was only a few feet in front of Harry. They had not been this close since the end of the summer, with the exception of the one D.A. meeting.

"Actually," Harry declared, hands curving tightly around the wand he had stuffed in his jeans, "I rather like Harry. Couldn't imagine being a Harold or anything like that. You?"

Riddle's expression was shadowed, unreadable—eyes watched him like a viper preparing to strike. "I suppose Harry is better than 'Boy,' isn't it?"

Harry's muscles locked before he was even conscious of it. He fought hard to control his reaction beyond that, allowing only his fist to spasm slightly around his wand. So, Riddle had been kicking around his memories too, then, had he? And he was trying to figure out if Harry had seen anything in return. Hide the truth? Or show some of his hand, so that Riddle could think he'd seen all of it? He shifted, remembering the nightmare of Tom, the priest, and Mrs. Cole.

"I suppose Tom is also better than freak."

A moment of silence. Then, the laughable expression of sympathy melted from Riddle's face like oil paint from canvas. What was left behind was cold and domineering.

"You've been hiding from me, Harry." A hand shot out to grip his chin with punishing force.

Harry forced himself to endure this with placid cool, leaning into the hold instead of pulling precisely because it made it easier for him to talk back. "I can't say you've been very upfront either, to be honest."

Riddle's lips curved. "Shall we share then? One fact of yours for one fact of mine."

"And what would stop either one of us from lying?"

The Dark Lord did not respond, eyes glinting. Harry only felt the cool breath from the other boy whisper silently against his face.

"Dark Lords first, then," Harry murmured, "You start."

"Very well," Riddle indulged—a cat toying with a mouse. His lips curled slightly. "I did not orchestrate the switching of our bodies."
Harry’s expression did not change. "I know you're the one who killed Myrtle."

When he felt the Dark Lord tense against, he distantly wondered if that was something he should have kept to himself. Before Harry could consider it, Riddle shifted closer still to him, eyes locking onto his and swallowing his vision. After a long pause, he said—his voice deathly quiet, almost a whisper—

"I know that Grindelwald's forces have been gathering in Britain for the past month."

Harry’s conversations with Zabini raced through his mind, and with careful deliberation, he returned almost soundlessly: "I know that Grindelwald's also been walking around in a body that's not his own."

The Dark Lord's eyes flashed, and he tilted Harry's head with his hand. "And how would you know that?"

Harry fought the instinctive wince at the sensation of nails digging into his skin. "That's not how the rules of your game work, Tom."

When the hand on his jaw tightened painfully, Harry abandoned any pretense of placidity. At the resulting sharp, electric surge, Riddle's grip instinctively loosened and Harry snapped his chin to the side, eyes darting to the Dark Lord as he did so. The other boy had not moved a single inch back, despite the electric shock. His face now revealed, however, a sort of monstrous insatiability.

Every hair on Harry's arm was intensely aware of how Riddle's magic gathered around them suddenly, clawed, intangible hands vibrating in their visible thirst to enclose him. Whether to tear him apart or something else, Harry did not know. In response to the potential threat, he felt his own magic stir within him, impatient to be let loose. With barely-there control, he held it back. It was… unimaginably hard, like choosing to stand still in the face of an impending tsunami he could spot in the horizon.

As a tendril of Riddle's magic brushed against him, he found himself leaning into the other boy, curling in on himself just with the effort to keep his magic contained.

Riddle’s magic, Harry thought, disturbed, it felt…

With immense difficulty, he ripped himself away from that line of thought and forced himself to focus. There had been a game—the game had been leading somewhere. He would not abandon it now.

"You can't touch me now, Tom," he rasped, pulling away. He used the hated name purposefully, greedily drinking in the way the Dark Lord's eyes tightened, like he could not help the reaction.

Despite the declaration, the Dark Lord's magic did not retreat an inch. Rather, as though to contradict his words, strong, rough fingers gripped Harry's arms and pressed.

Harry smiled humorlessly. "War is coming to Britain, and I've been well-informed that you can't possibly beat Grindelwald's forces with just your own. He's got too many."

"A convenient way of stating that Britain will need me to push Grindelwald out."

"Semantics," Harry summarized coolly. "Whichever way you spin it, driving Grindelwald out will require you, Dumbledore, and the Ministry to work together. That would be a tall order…if you killed me."
"Oh, I'm not going to kill you yet, Harry Potter," Riddle said silkily. He delivered the next words into his ear: "I imagine, after your earlier display, you'll prove greatly handy in upcoming events if utilized properly."

"You obviously haven't seen Dumbledore in a while," Harry sneered, ire making his expression tight, "if you're beginning to think a fifteen-year-old boy with middling success in his studies is a legitimate weapon of war,"

Riddle's lips curved, darkly amused. "And yet, it is exactly what your precious headmaster has thought of you all along. He has understandably been privy to more information about your capabilities than I have been and has endeavored to keep them a secret. You admittedly carried the guise well, until Hogsmeade."

Well, yes, Harry thought ironically: if by capabilities, he meant Dumbledore's faith in Harry's power to love, a power the Dark Lord knew not. If only that could have been enough to save Cedric at the end of last year.

(Love, Harry had, and friends—but those alone would never be enough to bring down Voldemort, not if he also wanted everyone he cared about to survive.)

Harry tilted his head and performed a smirk. "Are you afraid, Tom? About what Dumbledore has taught me, what else I've kept secret—what else you don't know about?"

Riddle smiled at him, gaze slitted. Then, with lightning speed, a hand lashed out and drove punishingly across Harry's face. Harry's head swung to the side with the blow, and he staggered a step back.

"I could kill you now, if I desired it, Harry Potter," the Dark Lord breathed softly. Verdant eyes veritably glowed with far more intensity than the words belayed. "Make no mistake—you have yet to acquire anything near what is needed to survive me."

Harry's first instinct was to rage, but he curtailed it almost immediately. Instead, he blinked patiently through the pain, and then, despite the copper taste of blood in his mouth, grinned.

"I wonder what it means," he rasped, straightening as he wiped the blood from his mouth, "that it was your first instinct to hit me. Do you think that came from the muggles too? Can't fully wash them out, can you?"—he paused, head tilting, gaze riveted on the boy in front of him—"Do you punish all your death eaters like that or am I…special?"

By the end of his words, the green irises of Riddle's eyes were almost indiscernible from the pitch black of his pupil. The Dark Lord's magic suddenly disappeared from the air, called back with fearsome, iron control. Though he had wanted it before, the abrupt transition between extremes left the room feeling like a void, rendering Harry with the pressing need to escape or risk suffocation.

With a quality of almost-possessiveness, calloused hands reached up to clasp Harry's face.

But when Riddle opened his mouth, whatever he intended to say was interrupted. A loud, accusatory bang echoed around them as the door to the Great Hall opened without warning.

When they turned, a tall, narrow silhouette topped by a pointed hat met them stonily.

"I cannot imagine how it managed to escape your attention, given the rather giant clock erected just above your heads," the shadow began in a deadly tone, "but it is well past curfew."

Harry pushed away from Riddle, turning to face McGonagall with what he hoped was an
Riddle wore a seemingly earnest expression of consternation as he turned as well. "I apologize, Professor McGonagall. We lost track of time."

"Clearly," Professor McGonagall sniffed. "I will schedule your detentions tomorrow after class. Potter, I would have a word with you. Gaunt, head back to your dorm."

It took Harry a moment to process the words. And when he did, something instinctually resistant—and panicked—rose within him at the mere thought of separating from the other boy and leaving him alone with Transfigurations professor.

Seeing he had little choice in the matter, however, he sent Riddle one final look. Then, Harry descended the steps at the front of the hall, swept past the rows of seats lining the long tables in the Great Hall, and disappeared from sight.

When Harry woke the next morning, it was with preternatural calm and careful suppression of the night before. In absolute silence, he rose from his bed to an empty room and proceeded to the bathroom. After preparing his bag, he made his way to the Great Hall in total, blissful isolation.

The peace ended as soon as he sat down at the table.

"So," Parkinson hissed from beside him, inhaling her porridge. "What happened?"

Harry didn't respond immediately—he was currently being made to face what losing his anonymity with Riddle exactly meant. It was impossible to ignore now the burning gaze fixated solely on him from all the away from across the room. It was almost enough to make Harry throw the long-term plan out the window and just trying strangling the Dark Lord to get the job done.

Strangling the Dark Lord. The last time he'd tried that (at Grimmauld Place), he had somehow ended up underneath the other boy instead. His lips twisted at the thought of being killed that way. (The Dark Lord kneeling with Harry's body between his legs, pressing down with all his weight on two hands to strangle the life out of him. It was a strangely intimate way to be killed; a strangely intimate way to kill someone.)

"He's not looking this way now thanks to Granger," Zabini spoke quickly, "Get it out as fast as you can."

Harry swallowed the bread heavily, before explaining as vaguely as he could what had transpired the previous night. By the end, Parkinson's perpetually smug expression looked a little strained and Zabini's mouth had tightened.

"We're fucked," Zabini muttered.

"I wouldn't go that far," Parkinson noted sharply, "Maybe he wasn't obvious about it, but there's no way he was paying absolutely no attention to the kid he couldn't kill as a baby even before. Maybe it won't actually be that big of a change."

"That's the fool's optimistic thinking," Zabini snapped, "Did you see him just a minute ago? Under that kind of surveillance, there's no way I'm going to be able to train Potter."

Harry grunted.

Parkinson's brow furrowed. "So, what are you planning? Sunday lessons with Dumbledore as soon
as he gets back?"

Harry slumped in his seat, letting his head fall into his clasped hands. "Right—most fundamentally, I doubt he'll have time for that with Grindelwald in Britain and Riddle being in the castle. What a fucking mess."

The silence that followed seemed to heartily echo this sentiment.

"We've got double potions first period," Parkinson commented randomly under her breath. She took a large swig of whatever was in her goblet.

In many ways, that was the final blow. Harry shut his eyes, determined to pretend he was no longer at this table, no longer at even Hogwarts. Instead, he was sitting under the large apple tree in the Weasleys' backyard, just a yard from the front door of the Burrow, with the sun beating down on him, the juiciness of the ripe apple dripping down his chin—

Parkinson's hand, nails and all, abruptly dug into his shoulder, for the second time in less than twenty four hours.

"Fuck off," Harry hissed.

"Seriously, Potter," Zabini breathed against him, as though paranoid of being heard even in the thunderous chatter of students all around him. "Get up."

But Harry didn't actually get up until he felt a hand slide over his shoulders with a strange sense of intimacy before settling behind his neck. Goosebumps sprouted all along his arms and Harry's upper body snapped straight as he swiveled in his seat to look behind him.

"I've noticed you've been with him all this while," the Dark Lord said, expression flawlessly charismatic. His features sharpened. Then, he swung one long leg over the bench and slid into place right at Harry's side. Nonchalantly, he picked up the fork from Harry's plate to stab a piece of sausage from the main plate and brought it to his mouth.

"Let me see," Riddle pondered with a cruel smile, "Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini, was it?"

_________________________________________________________

Author's Note:

Hope you enjoyed! Please leave reviews! They are quite literally my only sustenance as a pseudo-writer. They're what keep me coming back! ;)

_________________________________________________________
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

It's been a long time! If you don't remember the plot (totally understandable), I would suggest rereading the previous chapter, which begins with a brief summary up until that point.

Surprisingly—or, maybe, not surprisingly at all—Parkinson recovered immediately.

"Little known fact perhaps but I am violently allergic to Gryffindors," she drawled. "So unless you want my death on your do-gooder conscience, Potter, I suggest you leave."

"Allergic?" Riddle echoed; his gaze slid lazily over to Harry. "Oh…I doubt that."

"Why are you here?" Harry demanded in a low tone.

The Dark Lord smiled and leaned toward him. "You said it yourself yesterday—you're special."

Harry kept his expression flat. "And you've finally seen the light."

"I've been awfully remiss toward you, haven't I?" he murmured, hand tightening on the nape of Harry's neck. "But you have my full attention now."

Harry's glare darted up immediately at those words and caught onto Riddle's gaze. Green, half-lidded eyes looked back at him.

"Your presence is about to cause a scene here, Potter," Zabini interrupted, words cloaked with characteristic indifference. He bit into another piece of toast and then look unconcernedly the other way, as though he really had no idea the boy in front of him was the Dark Lord.

Riddle smiled genially. "They'll acclimate."

Harry swallowed back a burst of inappropriate humor. Acclimate? He was asking the wrong group of people. As though summoned, a familiar, nasally voice huffed behind them, "What the hell is happening here?"

They turned to find Malfoy flanked by Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle.

"Get out, Potter," Malfoy bit out, straightening to his full height. "Or I'll force you out. Your choice."

"He would just have to bring the matter to Professor McGonagall's attention, then." Hermione stared down her nose at him, coming to stand at the edge of the table. Ron wore a disgruntled look beside her.

"Listen, mudblood—" Malfoy seethed. Harry's eyes widened with visceral rage.

"I think interhouse unity is a wonderful thing," Hermione interrupted staunchly, as though he had not spoken. "He has every right to be here, to sit with…Tom." Belying her words, however, she
shot Harry himself a disapproving glance. Apparently, she still had her qualms about him.

"I'm sure you don't want to be an obstacle to interhouse unity," Ron echoed blandly. He shifted to look at Harry, features easing into something minutely more amiable. "How you doing, mate?"

"Good," Harry blinked, immediately disarmed. He stiffened when he felt Riddle's hand slide until his whole arm was resting over his shoulder.

He stood up abruptly in response, removing himself from the touch.

Riddle raised an eyebrow.

"We need to talk," Harry said, his tone as monotonous as he could make it.

The Dark Lord tilted his head to examine him. Then his hand snapped out and grabbed Harry's collar to pull back him in. Mocking eyes danced below him.

"Oh?" he murmured. "What about?" The words were too close, too quiet for others to hear.

Harry forced a polite smile onto his face. "Many things. For example," he smiled wider and forced himself closer to the Dark Lord, understanding that—like it had been with Parkinson—this too was a power play, "Dumbledore coming back. You think this sham is going to hold up then? I don't think so. And you're going to stay the fuck away from Ron and Hermione."

Riddle smirked. "When the time comes, I will allow you to choose the manner of your death, Harry Potter," he whispered. He palmed Harry's face. "Whether it's the killing curse or strangulation—whatever you choose, I will provide. And I will wrest...equal satisfaction from both. I promise you that."

The bell rang. Dimly, he became aware of other gazes on him, but he didn't care to deconstruct what they contained.

Harry's gaze flicked away from the Dark Lord as he swung his bag over his shoulder and left the hall.

Strangulation.

(Before, he never could have imagined the Dark Lord kneeling, with a body between his legs, pressing down with all his weight on two hands to strangle the life out of someone. It was a strangely intimate way to be killed. A strangely intimate way to kill. For Riddle to bear the snarling and spittle and clawing of his victim as his victim sought to break free, a victim who would mark him as he exited the world—)

"You lost your temper."

Harry's face twitched as he returned to the present.

"You know the consequences—"

"Oh, lay off," Parkinson snapped from his other side. She cast muffliato as Professor Binns continued to drone on in the Slytherin and Ravenclaw populated classroom. "You know what that was, Zabini, and even if he had remained calm, nothing would have changed. It was already too late."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked bluntly.
The brown-eyed girl shared a brief look with Zabini. "It's clear the Dark Lord's fixated on you," she announced finally.

"Really," Harry retorted sardonically. "What gave that away? When he killed my parents?"

"Except you're 'wearing' his face, now," Zabini spoke up suddenly, twisting his quill in his fingers as he gazed somewhere past them. His gaze wasn't focused. "It's natural to expect some abnormalities because of that. And yet…other behavior and facts…fail to add up."

"You're a mediwizard mind specialist now?" Parkinson rolled her eyes.

"You think your 'intuition' is better?" he sneered back. He paused, then leaned back. "Very well. Let's see whose reasoning makes more sense."

"Hm, a game?" She straightened slowly and flicked her hair back. "Well. I don't think it's Potter's new face. I think it's Potter himself. This morning? The Dark Lord didn't look at Potter like he's supposed to. Like—"

"Like what?" Harry interjected impatiently.

"Like someone he's spent decades trying to kill." Parkinson snapped. She paused, however. "No, that's not quite right. It's as if…he doesn't want to kill you, per se—he wants something else more instead."

"What else?" Zabini pressed.

"I don't know," Parkinson admitted. She released a trill and leaned back into her chair, smirking. "Your turn, genius."

"Well, if that's all you can 'intuit,' I'm going to begin by asking some questions," he prefaced calmly. She twisted her face mockingly in response.

Zabini turned his attention to Harry. "Does the Dark Lord, by any chance, strike you as…different? From your past interactions with him?"

Harry was taken aback by the question. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just answer the question."

"It's difficult to explain," Harry said curtly. He wasn't sure how much to reveal, even though both were essentially bound to secrecy—Zabini, because of the debt, and Parkinson because the former had actually made her perform a vow. With some hesitance, however, he eventually voiced something that had been brewing in him for some time now: "Ever since we switched, I guess he's seemed like…a much younger version of himself I…once met?"

"Excuse me?" Parkinson said incredulously, "A version—"

Zabini's gaze was wide as he waved her away. "I'm not concerned with how right now. Tell me more. When did you meet this…younger version?"

"Second year," Harry muttered, "I met the…'older version,' for the first time at the end of first year."

Zabini's attention was rapt on him. "And? How would you describe him? The one from first year."

"He was desperate…erratic. Which was maybe expected, given that he was attached to the back of
"Was it the 'older' version you encountered at the end of fourth year as well?"

"Yes." Harry paused. "He was...less desperate then."

But Zabini didn't seem to put much weight on this distinction. "Understandable. You were easily within his means to kill. He had just regained a body. But would you say he was less erratic?"

His first instinct was to say yes. The Voldemort in the graveyard had seemed considerably calmer than the one in front of the Mirror of Erised. But then...Voldemort had killed Cedric within seconds. And after that—Harry had had a definitive sense that Voldemort was one step away from murdering his own death eaters due to his anger at them.

"I'm not sure," he said finally.

"What about this younger version you met," Zabini questioned intently. "How would you describe him?"

"He was desperate too," Harry said softly, thinking back. "But...in a different way. He was...charming. Manipulative. He—at the beginning, I thought he was my friend."

Silence met those words. Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat, somewhat angry now. "Don't look at me like that."

"Was he erratic?" Parkinson asked. She shot a challenging look at Zabini. "That was your next question, wasn't it?"

The other Slytherin rolled his eyes.

"No," Harry gritted out, eager for this conversation to end now. "He was—"

"Calculating," Zabini filled in, "Charismatic. Like he is now."

"...Yes," Harry finished, eyebrows raised questioning. "It's why I call him Riddle, you know, when I talk about him. That was what he went by...when he was younger."

Parkinson glanced at him, then Zabini, then back at Harry. Finally, she released a huge sigh and pointed an accusing finger Zabini's way. "Okay. Explain. What the hell does that mean?"

But there was an uncharacteristic look of frustration on Zabini's face. He put aside his quill and locked his fingers together.

"Get on with it," Harry grunted, nausea rolling through his stomach in sick anticipation.

Zabini straightened in his chair, nostrils flaring. "Almost sixteen years ago, the Dark Lord tried to kill a baby because he thought it was a threat to him. He wasn't concerned with formal politics and public favor. By all appearances, he lacked any propensity toward subtle manipulation or mimicking 'charming' behavior to pursue his ends, and sought instead other, more drastic methods of gathering power."

He paused, face twisting. "But now, suddenly, that seems to have changed?"

Parkinson scowled. "So th—"

"I agree with you about this morning," Zabini cut her off. "It didn't seem...the person who looked
at you was not someone who would feel pressured to kill a baby out of paranoia. He was too confident; too self-assured."

"Like he was playing a game," Harry summarized, stiffening as Zabini's words seemed to align with his own impressions.

"Yes," Zabini agreed vehemently, eyes widening with slight surprise. "Exactly. Which seems, inexplicably, more like how you described this... 'younger' version you met."

"That doesn't make sense," Parkinson said hoarsely. "How can a person's personality change so drastically like that? And are you saying he regressed?"

"As you aptly put before, I am not a mediwizard," he answered coldly. "The Dark Lord has clearly remained a malignant narcissist throughout, but—and here we reach the eternal question—was he born that way or made that way?"

"He's a psychopath," Parkinson scoffed. "Or a sociopath. One of those. Both."

"Those are muggle, aren't they," Harry recognized immediately, having specifically heard Uncle Vernon use the words to explain why he was at St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys.

"The human mind is a common area of study; terms have been borrowed," Zabini dismissed shortly. He returned to his original preoccupation immediately thereafter, "Psychopath, sociopath—those words are manifestly useless because no one seems to agree on their difference. It's more... efficient to realize, merely, that Voldemort and this 'Riddle' personality seem to have the markings of extraordinarily distinct... pathologies."

Silence reigned for a moment. "How do you know so much about this?" Harry asked bluntly, gaze narrowed.

A mean smile curled along Zabini's face as his gaze turned to the window.

Parkinson cocked her head to the side, suddenly bird-like. Her brown eyes looked too sharply at him. "Tell me, Zabini—can sociopaths and psychopaths... love?"

Harry would have thought him entirely unaffected by the question, if not for the way Zabini's eyebrow twitched.

"Planning on marrying one, Parkinson?" Zabini remarked dryly. "As it happens, there is in fact an existing theory that the ability to form emotional bonds distinguishes sociopaths from psychopaths; the same asserts that sociopaths alone ascribe to erratic, volatile behavior while psychopaths are more... fastidious in their planning. But, then, by those metrics, Riddle would be a psychopath and Voldemort would be a sociopath who could form emotional attachments. Which I hope we are all hardly inclined to accept."

His answer was remarkably indifferent—almost too didactic.

"Neatly concluded," Parkinson said peaceably. "Also: can sociopaths and psychopaths cry—"

"Enough," Harry butted in. She stopped immediately, eyes flying to his. He gazed back at her, unflinching.

For a moment, she looked like she would argue. But then, lips twisting, she pulled back. "So what?"
"Well, that part's simple, isn't it?" Harry answered shortly, bouncing his leg absentmindedly. "There's a difference between how you deal with a person struggling for survival and a person who's—doing something else."

Parkinson smiled slowly. "I see. So you have to make the Dark Lord fixate more on the game than necessarily his own safety."

None of them asked the more important question. How far was Harry willing to go to do just that?

The wind whistled through the leaves, a sibilant hiss through the otherwise quiet evening air. Harry leaned back against the knotted trunk and gazed blankly at the Great Lake. The surface was unperturbed, disguising with remarkable ease all that inhabited it.

He had a sense, from what he'd seen, of what Riddle's childhood had been. Harry had watched him—had felt the agony of it along with him, of being whipped when the Dark Lord couldn't have been more than a child. Riddle had killed the priest for it; and in that moment, when he had been forced to feel everything the other boy was feeling...

Did that mean that Harry, in the same situation, would have done the same?

No, some part of him answered strongly. Not like that.

Can sociopaths and psychopaths...love? Cry?

It was the final thread.

Harry blinked, abruptly incredulous at the line of his own thinking. Could Riddle cry or love? How had Riddle become what he was now? How was any of that important? He had killed Harry's parents and countless others. Both 'Riddle' and 'Voldemort'—if they truly were distinct as Zabini suggested—had nevertheless both murdered people. He didn't need to be preoccupied with hypotheticals; he wasn't interested in redeeming Riddle's soul—

"There you are," a low voice reached his ears, a few feet behind him.

Harry scoffed to himself. He stood up, dusting off his robes. He turned and found the Dark Lord leaning against the opposite tree, decked in Harry's quidditch gear.

"How's that going for you, Tom," Harry said coldly. "Flying to team standards?"

"I don't need a broom to fly, Harry," Riddle responded conversationally. "Didn't you know?"

"I didn't," Harry admitted freely. The Dark Lord abandoned the tree and moved toward him. "I guess I'll just have to settle with the other things I've learned while I'm in your body."

"Hm," Riddle hummed. He stepped forward until Harry was backed against the tree. Harry fought to keep his face clear of emotion. "And what will you do about what I have learned from yours?"

The Dark Lord's gaze was dark, almost pitch black despite the light from castle and the moonlight. Harry watched stoically as he lifted his hand and twisted it in the strands of hair just above Harry's neck.

Narcissist. Harry tilted his head back with a smirk. "Do you really find yourself that pretty?"

Then, the strangest thing happened.
The Dark Lord shifted forward, until they were quite literally chest-to-chest, and he wrapped his arms around Harry—so tightly he could barely breathe. The hold was vice-like, imprisoning.

"What—" Harry hissed out, eyes wide.

The warmth of his hands burned through Harry's robes and into the small of his back.

"Poor, little Harry," Riddle whispered, holding him, "Only ever wishing to be wanted; so touch-starved, so eager for the smallest morsel of pity. You were a whore for this, and you still are, aren't you?"

Harry exhaled sharply, as though he had been punched.

And then he clenched his fist and actually did punch Tom Riddle, right in his smug face. The Dark Lord's head snapped to the side, a thin line of blood dripping down from the corner of his lip. But a second later, with raw, brutal power, it was Harry doubling over, gasping for breath.

Harry panted for a moment and then straightened, ignoring the piercing pain at his sternum.

He paused, however, when he felt his cheek begin to echo with a dull pain as well. For a long moment, he simply blinked, unable to connect the dots. When realization struck, his head snapped to Riddle.

The Dark Lord's gaze was slitted—and his hand positioned over his abdomen. Exactly where Harry had been punched.

"What the fuck," Harry muttered, staggering back.

Riddle's features were pale, his lips trembling with seeming rage. And for the first time, Harry actually felt he could buy into the Dark Lord's claim that he had had nothing to do with the switching of their bodies; there was no earthly way he would have allowed this.

The rage lingered only for a moment more, before it was quickly masked. Riddle cocked his head to the side, expression cool. Harry figured out why when his mind processed the sound of crunching leaves—footsteps.

To his left, behind them and just out of his peripheral vision, a figure appeared.

"My lord...D-Dumbledore has arrived."

Harry's eyes landed on a pale head of hair atop a paler face. Grey eyes determinedly did not look at him.

The Dark Lord's lips curved.

Harry's lips tightened, and he yanked his eyes away. Fucking Malfoy. Bastard had known all along.

In the end, they went together.

Silently.

Not a word passed between them, indeed.

But Harry could sense Riddle's persisting anger, though hidden from his expression, the entire way.
They found the gargoyle, when they reached it, displaced to the left, leaving the stone staircase completely exposed. The taste of blood flooded Harry's mouth, an unsettling omen, as they made their way up the steps and opened the large brass door at the top.

The door swung open with an impressive clang to reveal Dumbledore behind his desk.

Riddle immediately sauntered into the room and slid onto a cushioned bench. Dumbledore gazed at the figure in front of him with slightly raised eyebrows. When his attention found its way to the remaining figure at the doorway, however, his entire demeanor changed.

The headmaster stood, back straightened to his full impressive height, and looked more ferocious than he had ever seen him.

"Good evening, Tom," Dumbledore said to Harry softly. "We have some matters to discuss, don't we?"

A full breath air gusted out of Harry's lungs. "Professor," Harry began, "This isn't—"

"He's not Tom," Riddle interrupted silkily, a slow smile spreading across his lips. "I am."

Dumbledore's attention returned to Riddle now. Harry saw the moment of realization pass over the older man's features. Then Dumbledore's gaze snapped again to Harry.

"Harry? How—"

Harry's heart lurched in his chest as he somehow made his way further into the room on numb feet. "Professor. I—"

"Come here, Harry," Riddle cut him off, a sudden, intense look on his face. He pointed to the small open space on the bench imperiously.

Harry stilled at that command, an incredulous laugh bursting from his lips. He swung his head to the Dark Lord. "And what are you going to do if I don't? Hurt me?"

Yes. That latest development.

Riddle's eyes glinted dangerously.

"This matter concerns only you and me," the headmaster argued firmly, ostensibly suppressing his confusion for later analysis. "Let him leave. This is not his fight."

But Riddle's wasn't paying him any attention. Harry surveyed the other boy coolly. A game, he remembered. Riddle was determined to prove to him that he had other ways of making him 'obey.'

Harry moved passed the Pensieve and the Sorting Hat and the towers of seeming, odd knick knacks to sit down on the bench. "Please," he told Riddle sardonically, "feel free to begin whenever you feel comfortable."

The Dark Lord stretched out his arm, slowly, knowingly, mockingly—it landed just behind Harry.

Dumbledore examined the both of them closely, blue eyes rapidly processing the scene before him. Eventually, the older man lowered himself into the large armchair behind the desk, gaze cryptic. "Grindelwald is in Britain."

Riddle inclined his head carelessly. Dumbledore's mouth thinned.
"In its current state, even in the most unlikely of circumstances that the ministry does not succumb to Grindelwald's forces, Britain emerges ruined with its population greatly depleted." He exhaled sharply, voice lowering. "If you are as you have professed yourself to be, even you must see this as an undesirable outcome—the 'unnecessary spilling' of magical blood."

"Don't try to disguise what is transpiring here, Dumbledore," Riddle said slowly, smirking. "You made a mess years ago, and now you are unable to fix it yourself."

Harry's hands tightened into fists at his sides. Dumbledore's face remained steely, but Harry could read the sadness in his gaze—he looked like he was in…What had happened during that war? (And why the hell did Binns teach History of Magic?)

"What are your conditions," Dumbledore asked stonily, "to comply with an alliance?"

Riddle leaned back into the bench, by all appearances a mere deviant student uncaring of rebuke. "Merely two items, headmaster. First, my death eaters will provide aid under my command so long as no attempts are made to unmask them at any point."

"Granted," Dumbledore responded, unblinking.

"Second," Riddle continued nonchalantly, "I have equal weight as the ministry and yourself in any decision making, with the right to veto any decision as well."

"I cannot grant that," the headmaster responded almost immediately.

The Dark Lord sighed with mocking disappointment. "Why, headmaster, I think it's only fair once you ask for my 'help,' that I be able to choose how that 'help' is provided. Don't you think?"

"You know very well that the Ministry—with its current leadership—would never allow you that, even at its own expense," Dumbledore's words were cold, "Once again, Britain's ruin serves neither you nor anyone else, in the end. I would ask that you…reconsider."

"Very well. I am a merciful lord. I suppose I can generously amend my terms, in this one instance," Riddle said lightly. His expression was undeniably charming. "I will have equal decision-making power. And—"

Riddle's green eyes rolled lazily to rest on Harry. "And I will have him."

Harry abruptly felt the taste of blood he had sensed on the staircase return to his mouth. Dumbledore froze. "No."

Riddle leaned forward, green eyes bright with the threat of violence. "Either you accept and save Britain; or, its demise can rest on your conscience."

"And in fact," Riddle added after a short pause, gaze sliding slyly to Harry, "I believe the ultimate decision is not yours at all."

Harry strove to meet his gaze with implacable indifference.

"Harry—" Dumbledore protested strongly.

Riddle interrupted him uncaringly. "For the duration of the alliance, you will be at my side at all times, unless I allow you to be somewhere else. You will—"

"I accept," Harry said, "if that's the only thing."
When the Dark Lord raised an eyebrow in response, Harry did not allow himself to waver. Dumbledore wasn't quite in a position to strong arm him but—Riddle didn't *really* know what kind of person Harry was, didn't know that he *was* willing to offer himself over fully to protect innocent people like any decent, respectable human being would be, because the Dark Lord was so fucking far from it.

"Very well," Riddle said after a short silence, green eyes narrowed.

Dumbledore was not satisfied. "You will swear that no harm will come to him."

Something in him ached sharply at the headmaster's tormented expression. "You don't have to worry about that, professor," Harry said softly, eyes locked onto Riddle's. "He won't hurt me. Will you, Tom?"

In retribution, Riddle's palm brushed slowly through Harry's hair, lips trembling only slightly with repressed rage.

"Of course not," he breathed, face a farce of tenderness. "I would sooner hurt myself."

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**Author's Note:** HI! Thank you so, so, so much for reading! Please take a moment to review, because I really do read and appreciate every single one. They're exactly what keep me coming back to this story! Hope you enjoyed this chapter :)

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

IT'S BEEN SO LONG. I'M SO SORRY. Please reread if you can't remember. This is just a bullet point list of key facts in this story (but certainly not all encompassing).

1) Harry and Tom find themselves in each other's bodies
2) Grindelwald escapes Nurmengard
3) His followers attack Hogsmeade
4) Dumbledore returns to Hogwarts; he, the ministry, and Tom agree to a temporary alliance to fend off Grindelwald
5) In exchange for Tom's agreement, Harry agrees to give up much of his freedom
6) Tom and Harry have recently discovered some problematic side effects to their condition (re: the previous chapter)

Harry burst through the portrait entrance behind a first year. Ignoring the Fat Lady’s shrieks behind him, he stalked toward the two figures seated on the couch. Both heads turned at the sound of his approach.

“Tom?” Ron asked, a bewildered expression on his face.

“How did you get in here?” Hermione asked.

“Now isn’t this charming?” the Dark Lord said, hand braced against the side of the portrait.

“Harry,” one of his best friends said.

No. Not Harry.

A calloused hand, one that had been his own—and wasn’t that a strange thought, that it now felt alien—curled behind his neck, nails pressing in just lightly.

“I suppose the time for deception has passed.” The Dark Lord turned to face Ron and Hermione with a lazy smile. “Hasn’t it?”

Not like this.

It could only be cruel, to be told so carelessly the person they had laughed with and cared for these past few months had been—

“Well, yes,” Hermione said patiently. “Who the hell are you?”

And Harry’s throat dried, until the point of pain—in less than a second.
“You knew?” he croaked what felt like a lifetime later. A dull ringing sound thrummed in his head.

“You think we wouldn’t find out?” Hermione snapped, lifting her wand. She turned to Tom, mouth pinched. “You’re nothing like him.”

“The way you talk isn’t at all how Harry does,” Ron said matter-of-factly.

“At first, we thought you were using Polyjuice,” Hermione muttered, looking frustrated. “But you weren’t drinking it as frequently as you should have been. And I checked your drinks every meal.”

“Then we thought it really was Harry’s body,” Ron joined in, waving his hands demonstratively, “some imperius curse kind of thing. So we kept close to find out more. To protect the body, you know.”

Harry felt like his organs were liable to rupture under the duress of his shock. But also: warmth burst from his chest to his extremities, sweet honey sliding through his limbs.

“Who are you?” Hermione repeated, flicking her wand to punctuate the question. Her head jerked to Harry now. “And you—the accomplice?”

Tom did not seem, Harry observed, overly concerned by their suspicions. Maybe, the Dark Lord had been aware of every, precise development in Hermione and Ron’s doubts. Maybe, he hadn’t cared.

But Tom didn’t understand—or was it ‘couldn’t’?—that the two people who had been by his side the past few months were the only reasons he had survived until now.

“Why don’t you tell them, Harry?” Tom asked, his voice painfully clear and audible to all four individuals in the room.

Hermione gasped, brown eyes widening.

“Harry?” Ron was pale.

“Yeah,” he said weakly. Simply. He gave them a painful, burning sort of smile.

“Prove it,” Ron demanded, his voice a whisper.

In a low, almost silent, voice, he told them something only they had ever told each other—that no one else in the world could possibly know.

Their hostile expressions melted like ice exposed to a sudden, blazing flame.

“Harry, thank god,” Hermione breathed.

Ron’s brows furrowed. “But…who is he?”

“An agent of You-Know-Who?”

“Come on, you know the kind of luck I have,” Harry grinned humorlessly. “Agent?”

It took a moment before understanding washed over both of their faces.

“No,” Ron burst out with a bark of laughter, “No way. You have bad luck, but not that bad… Right?”
But Hermione muttered under her breath, “Who else could fight Grindelwald’s soldiers like that? We should have guessed.”

Her shoulders snapped back as she straightened, directing a fierce glare at Tom. “So you’re Voldemort.”

“Why are you telling us now?” Ron asked, brows furrowed.

The Dark Lord didn’t pay them the slightest attention.

Ron’s gaze flicked rapidly between Harry and Tom, looking pale but firm. “It has to do with the breakout,” he guessed. “And what happened at Hogsmeade.”

“Grindelwald,” Harry explained briefly. “He’s coming to Britain.”

“And?”

“For the next few months…we’re all going to have to work together to stop Grindelwald,” Harry said reluctantly.

Utter silence greeted that remark.


“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

“Time’s up,” Tom drawled, pushing off from the wall. He grabbed the collar of Harry’s robes and steered him toward the staircase to the boys’ dormitory.

“Hey!” Hermione cried, hands outstretched as she moved toward him, “Harry, we didn’t even get to—”

She only just grazed his arm. The next second, the Dark Lord’s hand was outstretched, and Hermione was struggling for breath against the wall, held above the ground by an invisible force.

“HEY!” Ron roared, scrambling for his wand.

“Stop.”

Tom’s eyes slid lazily to Harry. And then narrowed.

“Put her down,” Harry sneered, thrusting his wand into his own neck. “You think she would have hurt me? Hurt you? I can do it way more easily.”

The Dark Lord smiled benignly. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?” Harry asked with a small, humorless smile. “You already took my mum. You already took my dad. Honestly, I don’t see much harm in going over to the other side.”

“Harry,” Ron groaned in horror. “Don’t—”

“Shut up,” Harry snapped. Of course, he didn’t actually want to die, but it would help greatly right now if Tom believed that. His attention returned to the Dark Lord quickly, as though it had never left. “Do you want to test it? Want to see what happens?”

“Try it,” Tom said. He looked unbothered.
But Harry knew it was a lie. He knew it was a lie because he could feel how Tom’s magic had reacted, as soon as he had seen the wand at Harry’s neck.

“I’m sure you think you’re infallible. Mostly,” Harry continued. “But you have doubts too, don’t you? Punching me shouldn’t have hurt you. What if killing me does something to you? Something you can’t fix. What if you have to feel my death—forever? Or worse. What if you die too?”

The Dark Lord stared at him for a second more, unreadable.

Harry’s lips twitched, moving to shape an ‘Ah’ sound.

Hermione dropped to the ground, greedily gulping breaths of air.

In the next second, a hand knotted in Harry’s hair—viciously. And Harry knew Tom must have felt the pain, must have felt exactly what Harry was feeling as he was yanked down to the ground like a dog brought to heel. He still did it.

Harry’s knees hit the carpeted floor with dull thuds, pain vibrating up.

Tom looked steadily down at him—his face had contorted into something ugly. Harry felt a tugging at somewhere behind his navel.

“You look tired, Harry,” the Dark Lord murmured. His hand whipped out, and Harry felt the stunning spell hit him a second later.

At some point in his state of unconsciousness, Harry came to believe that he was chasing something.

His eyes were tearing from his speed and the wind, his surroundings a blur. The air felt crisp and chill—midwinter weather. But he couldn’t breathe properly, he noticed; he felt like he’d inhaled granular particles that were now stuck in his throat—burning.

What was he chasing? Why was he running?

Belatedly, he realized the better question to consider was: what was he running from?

Something exploded behind him and knocked him off his feet.

He landed arms first, the rubble below breaking skin. With a dull ringing in his ears, he saw his hand reach down to his pocket, searching for something. A wand, he guessed. It was a familiar hand—the hand he had been calling his own for the last several months.

But he hadn’t decided to move it. Someone else had.

Abruptly, Harry realized he had been made an occupant of this body, no longer its agent. An alien thought sounded through his own mind at the absence of wand in his pocket.

When I get back, I will kill Cole.

The thought rang out coldly and with unflinching conviction—with the intent of completion.

Cole, Harry remembered. The woman in the basement with the priest and Tom. The priest who had died, after whipping Tom.
Tom was once again the agent of this body.

Shoving himself off the ground, he took off in a dead sprint again. Dust and smoke from the explosion made visibility nonexistent.

It was little surprise, therefore, when he soon collided with someone else. The figure clutched at him with surprising strength, nails digging into sore wounds.

“Get off,” Harry—no, Tom—said coldly, eyes already scanning the air above her.

“Our father in heaven, hallowed be thy name,” the woman shuddered, eyes round and wide as she peered up at him. “Forgive us for our sins. Forgive us, please, Lord. Protect us from thy heavenly wrath—”

Harry wished he could have told the woman to run and to run as fast as she could; if only she too could feel the murderous wrath that burst in this body’s chest at her words, could feel the magic growing steadily in the air with terrifying strength.

“There is no God, muggle,” Tom told her, ignoring her horrified gasp as he shoved her away.

Despite her terror, she flinched away from him, disgust on her face. “Heretic,” she spat. She backed away. “You’re why this is happening—your kind. We’re being punished because of you!”

A odd, thrumming vibration tickled his ears again. Harry didn’t know yet what it meant, but it was clear the Tom did.

A split second later, he erected a barrier around himself—wordlessly, wandlessly. The explosion was deafeningly loud as the bomb landed.

The woman died with the look of repulsion still on her face.

“Stupid woman,” Tom said calmly. “If God—” Another explosion cut him off, making the rest of the words incomprehensible.

—and Harry woke up, gasping.

It was dark. Night, still. Belatedly, he realized he was clutching something in between clammy hands. An arm; it felt, for a brief moment, like a life line.

Green eyes bore down at him from a bed.

Harry jolted back with incredible speed. He realized too late that there were chains tying him to the bed post from where he was on the floor. The metal dug unforgivingly into the flesh of his wrists.

The Dark Lord’s face didn’t flinch. Harry’s breath caught. Was Tom impervious to pain? Or…was it possible, that he hadn’t felt that?

“You were screaming.”

The image of the woman’s body exploding passed through his mind. His stomach turned.

“You put up silencing charms.” Harry looked around and saw that no one else had woken up. A disillusionment charm too, he guessed.

Tom inclined his head, smiling. “What did you see?”
Harry shoved the palms of his hands deep into his eyes.

“A nightmare. Fuck off.”

“You may have picked up a handy talent with occlumency in the time I’ve left you to your own devices,” Tom drawled, idly rotating his wand in his hand. “But that doesn’t change the fact that you are a…terrible liar, Harry.”

Tom’s gaze narrowed slightly. Harry ignored him and stared out the dorm window onto the castle grounds.

It hit him, suddenly, that this was what it was going to be like until Grindelwald was defeated. Harry couldn’t even try to leave now, couldn’t even try to remove the chains, because that would be breaking the deal.

He wondered now if he had made the wrong decision. Who knew how long this war would last. Would Tom keep him chained, even as everyone he cared for stood on the front lines? He knew who they were—he knew they would be there. What if they died, and he was chained to a fucking bed just like this, right as it happened—

Tom looked down at him, expression placid.

Harry wanted to break it.

“You want to know something? You were right. It wasn’t just any ordinary nightmare—it was a memory.”

The wand rotating in his hand stilled.

“You were my age, a boy. You were terrified. And I saw it.”

The Dark Lord’s eyes glowed.

“You’re still as terrified of the same thing, aren’t you? Just like that boy was,” he murmured. “Dying.”

Tom slowly stepped out of the bed to stand, towering over Harry’s position on the floor.

“Was that what you wanted? Mind games?” he pressed.

For a second, he thought the Dark Lord might try to curse him. Instead, unexpectedly, he crouched until he was level with Harry.

“Would you like me to return the gift, Harry?” Tom asked lightly.

“Why not,” Harry said, waving his chained hands mockingly. “I’m a captive audience.”

“That’s because you’ve proven you cannot be trusted with yourself.”

Tom’s hand reached out, landing a claiming hand on his head. In an unnervingly gentle gesture, he brushed Harry’s hair back. He tried to move away instantly, but the chains had adjusted their maximum length suddenly to his exact position.

“I saw you watch your aunt do this to your cousin,” Tom murmured, stroking his hair once more. Heat lanced across his scalp where his fingers grazed. “You wanted that too. You wanted to call her mother, in the beginning. Just like he did.”
He felt like his heart had been submerged in ice.

“Something as simple, stupid as this holds…an incomprehensible amount of power over you.”

“The bombs,” Harry cut in coolly. “That was during the blitz, wasn’t it? Hitler—a muggle—did that to you.”

“Hitler, according to the muggles. Grindelwald as well, of course,” Tom allowed easily, “Which reminds me: I do owe my predecessor for that.”

Harry’s mood plummeted further at his seeming ease.

“Predecessor? You know with company like that, Tom, if there is a hell, you are definitely going to it.”

That did the job, if to a certain subtle, infinitesimal extent. The temperature dropped ever so slightly.

“Good night, Harry Potter,” the Dark Lord returned, a sharp smile on his lips. It was a warning. Needless to say, dawn could not have risen soon enough.

“I half-expected to hear news of your murder this morning,” Zabini stated bluntly, forking some potato onto his plate.

“Just be glad I managed to get away for even this long.”

Harry packed more bacon onto his plate, eternally grateful that McGonagall had called ‘Mr. Potter’ away for something or another that morning, and that ‘no, it really wouldn’t be appropriate for Mr. Gaunt to come along.’

“How was it?” Parkinson demanded.

“How was what? Bartering my freedom to the psycho who wants to kill me?” Harry muttered. He shoved some more bacon into his mouth.

“Your night in the Dark Lord’s lair, obviously,” Parkinson snapped. Her face shifted into a smirk less than a second later. “Well. That sounds like the title of an erotic novel that ought to be written.”

“Shut up,” Zabini said, just as Harry was about to do the same. He looked strangely pale, which was concerning given his darker complexion.

Harry paused, lips thinning.

“So,” he said after a moment, looking up at the ceiling of the Great Hall. “I think I—well, I owe you both an apology.”

“I,” Harry started. He paused, then tried again, lowering his voice. “When I told both of you…I thought the chances of Tom putting me under, well, this kind of scrutiny were extremely low. Nonexistent, actually.”

“Because you weren’t worth scrutiny, then,” Zabini pointed out idly. “In reality, you were just an
idiot who’d been casting spells poorly the entire time.”

“Right,” Harry said through gritted teeth. “Well, you’re both extremely bizarre people, and if I’m honest, between the two of you, I’m not sure who’s more likely to become the next Dark Lord, but even with all that—”

“Get to the point, Potter,” Parkinson urged, rolling her eyes.

“The point is,” Harry managed finally. “I’m sorry for the danger I’ve placed you in. I would never have told you if I—if I’d known.”

Total silence met his words.

“A life debt,” Zabini said eventually. “I think you’ve failed to understand the actual amount of agency I had in any of this—”

“We should get a mediwizard to study him,” Parkinson cut him off without blinking. “Has anyone ever mentioned you have a complex, Potter? It’s sickening. It’s atrocious and, honestly, horrifically rude.”

“You’re barking,” Harry announced to no one in particular. “You are barking mad.”

A snide smile curled across Parkinson’s lips, and she relaxed into her regular state of nonchalant disparagement. “I’m used to playing the odds, dear. Part of playing is being prepared for when the near-impossible happens. I’ve made my peace with that. You ought to do the same. Oh, but don’t forget that I do intend to collect in the future.”

Harry, as it happened, still had no idea what on earth she meant by that. “Er, sure. Whatever.”

“I didn’t get to choose,” Zabini considered after a short pause. “Honestly, a poorly constructed ‘apology’ without the backing of any blood or coin can hardly measure up.”

Harry stared hard at the ceiling, striving for patience. “Fine. Won’t make the mistake of saving your life again—”

He spotted two incoming figures, just meters away from the table.

“Listen,” Harry whispered quickly through barely moving lips. “They know who I am now. But they don’t know you know. As long as they don’t, Tom doesn’t know either. Not for certain.”

“They don’t know occlumency,” Zabini summarized, face emotionless.

“I think we need a sign,” Parkinson murmured. “The ‘Slytherin table’ is called as such because it’s for Slytherins, not—”

“Hey,” Ron greeted amiably. He took the open seat next to Harry. Hermione dropped into the seat on the other side of him, the heavy tome in her hand making a loud thump as it landed on the table.

“Ron. Hermione.” Harry tried not to look to overwhelmed by their presence.

Parkinson groaned, dropping her head onto the table.

Harry smirked. “I should introduce you to my friends.”

“Gaunt,” Parkinson bit out. “We’re not friends—”
“This is Pansy Parkinson,” he continued as though he hadn’t heard. “And that’s Blaise Zabini. They’ve really been really kind to me these past few months.”

“Sure,” Ron said somewhat suspiciously. The red-haired boy grabbed a piece of bacon too and began chewing on it.

“Oh, Pansy and I are fairly well-acquainted,” Hermione said, looking studiously at the tome in her hands.

Harry’s eyebrow climbed its way to the top of his forehead. “You are?”

“Certainly.” Hermione continued, mouth a little pinched. “She’s come up with some creative names for me in the past.”

He stiffened.

“Not that,” Parkinson snapped. “Just, you know—”


“So,” Ron said blithely, clearly aiming to keep the peace for however long it took him to finish breakfast. “Chudley Cannons are doing well this season, aren’t they?”

“Certainly,” Zabini said boredly in reply. “If one considers a predicted season of entirely losses ‘doing well.’”

“Kill me now,” Parkinson muttered under breath. “Please.”

Harry leaned back with a fleeting sense of contentment.

The contentment didn’t last long, of course. Two hours later, in front of the whole class, Snape slammed down a piece of parchment onto their workstation.

“Mr. Gaunt.”

Harry paused his rhythmic tapping of quill against wooden table. He had just sat down.

“…and Mr. Potter,” the sneering man finished, moving to the figure that had silently settled right beside him.

Tom looked up with a charming smile. “Yes, professor?”

Harry looked down at the parchment in question. Tom didn’t bother.

“Why,” Snape said, deathly quiet (his voice projected thunderously somehow nevertheless), “would the headmaster find it within his esteemed self to instruct the faculty of this institution that you two are to attend every class together and be paired together for any and all groupwork, unquestioningly?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed.
How far did Tom intend to go to keep an eye on him? It was almost as though he didn’t want Harry
talking to his classmates at all, as though he feared what could come from those conversations—
but no, that was unlikely, considering Tom’s arrogance.

More likely the Dark Lord was just trying to look after his own skin much more literally. Yes,
considering how disastrous it had been when Hermione had barely touched him, god forbid Neville
put a full hand on his shoulder—

Harry frowned. Dumbledore had probably been forced to oblige, could hardly say no when an
admittedly…tenuous ‘alliance’ was on the line.

“Look at me, Potter,” Snape hissed—Harry’s head moved before he remembered he was no longer
‘Potter’—“I don’t care about what ever celebrity affair your hopeless, infantile self chooses to
participate in. I will not let your bigheaded delusions survive in this classroom.”

Snape’s face was pinched with rage.

“Move, Gaunt,” he commanded.

“He’ll stay,” Tom responded with a polite smile. His hand curled once again around Harry’s neck.
“As detailed in the note.”

“Then the both of you can get out.”

Next period, for better or worse, seemed to get off to a better start—even with the strange look on
McGonagall’s face.

She wasn’t obvious about it. But then, within ten minutes of learning the Vanishing Spell, Harry
managed to catch her staring at the pair of them over her glasses.

“Mr. Gaunt,” she said sharply after realizing she had been discovered. She left the chalkboard to
step in front of him. “Any reason why you haven’t attempted the spell yet?”

Harry grabbed his wand from the table hastily and muttered, “Evanesco.”

The goblet vanished. Somehow, McGonagall looked like he’d done something utterly bizarre.

“Is there something wrong, professor?” he asked.

“No,” she said slowly, looking at him carefully. And then, bizarrely, Tom—who, yes, remained
seated right beside him as always.

He heard hissing behind him but tried his best to ignore it.

McGonagall still hadn’t moved.

“Your wand,” he heard Hermione whisper loudly.

His wand?

Harry looked slowly down at the wand in his hand. It was the same as it had always been. Smooth
and straight, handle-less, eleven inches—

“Just a careless mistake, professor,” Tom said evenly. His hand darted out and snatched the wand back, sliding it into the folds of his robes.

Oh. Oh.

Harry clenched his fist, holding back the visceral need to reclaim his wand. Reluctantly, he shifted backwards, retrieving the wand that was ‘his’ from the opposite side of the table.

“Ah,” the professor remarked a bit belatedly.

“There’s a question over here,” he heard Lavender call out, giggling.

“Yes?” McGonagall blinked, looking like she had emerged from a deep slumber.

Parvati gave a broad smile that looked vaguely dangerous. “I heard only lovers can trade wands easily like that. Is that true, professor?”

Somewhere, he could hear Parkinson’s distinct high-pitched laughter.

“This is a transfiguration class,” the professor snapped. “If you have questions about wand lore, I suggest you consult a maker of wands or the library for independent study.”

That might have been the end of it in class, but sadly, McGonagall’s ire was little threat outside of the classroom.

If Harry had to sit next to Tom in one more class, he would go mad.

Lunch passed by. Then History of Magic. Then Charms. All without much mishap, thankfully.

But if Harry had been smart—certainly, if he had learned anything from the years he had been at Hogwarts—he would have abandoned Divination altogether.

Normally, the Slytherins had Divination with the Hufflepuffs. Thanks to Dumbledore’s note, it was now a class he attended with the Dark Lord who had stolen his identity.

If he had remembered what it meant when ‘Harry Potter’ was in this room, Harry would have faked a seizure.

“You,” she announced. She waved her arms, looking remarkably more bat-like than Snape ever achieved. “You two.”

She approached, and the smell of incense, sherry, and possibly illicit herbal substances wafted to Harry’s nose.

“One of you will die,” she pronounced solemnly, peering down at them through large, round glasses.

Gasps echoed around the room. Harry’s mood plunged even lower than it had already been.
“I can see it now,” the woman moaned. “Yes—the you will have a horrible falling out! Terrible! And it will end in death…”

Lavender shrieked. Neville looked like he was about to faint.

Ron gave muffled groan on the other side of Harry. “It’s been so good all year, I swear. She didn’t say anything beyond the normal pet stuff…”

Tom’s cool gaze shifted slowly from Trelawney to Harry’s.

“That does seem oddly on point,” Harry said calmly. “You think I do the deed or you?”

“Harry, what the hell are you doing?” Hermione whispered behind him.

He always had hated Divination.

“Unfortunate,” Tom returned softly—too softly for anyone beyond their circular table to hear. “And I thought we’d grown closer.”

“Well, I guess we have traded nightmares, and we do spend all our time together now, and I do want so badly to kill you—Oh wait, one of those things isn’t quite like the rest.”

“Mate,” Ron warned, his attention focused warily on Tom.

Ron didn’t even know the full extent of it. No doubt, he could now see the predatory stillness, the danger, the cold mockery that those oblivious—those who didn’t know this was the Dark Lord—could easily miss.

But he didn’t see what Harry did: the pulsating tendrils of magic that now latticed the room. They formed a network of such oppressive, raw power, Harry’s pulse had quickly become a violent thrum. And, underpinning it all: Tom’s attention, rapt, intense, on him.

And this was—he realized, eyes widening—

*This* was it.

On Tom, boredom took on characteristics as distorted from the norm as his morals were. Even when he had seen Harry as nothing, he had nevertheless made it clear that he was as likely to live the next day as he was to be killed like an errant fly.

Because indifference on Tom exactly that: how regular people treated household pests. And he punished challenges—even weak challenges—always.

But…

*But.*

Harry had known for some time that he what he faced now was another beast entirely. Because with interest had come many things he never could have predicted. Not just scrutiny, not just attention, but…
It was something ineffably like that. There was clearly some added, unexpected dimension when Tom saw something he recognized as ‘power’—he was...fascinated by the prospect of testing his own strength against it. It was like he was transfixed. Like the Dark Lord couldn’t quite look away. Hatred was too simple, too naïve.

What the Dark Lord wanted to see most right now was not Harry’s death.

It was a hand on his neck: a leash. The mockery and the petting. Tom \textit{wanted} to fight, wanted to make him a glorified pet: a once threat being brought to heel.

Classmates chatted on, bantered and sniped, oblivious to the sheer power yawning in the room, merely flexing and capable of crushing them. And Harry’s lips curled, because he \textit{understood} now.

He knew now somehow—instinctively—that the key to destroying Voldemort would never be, had never been, an ancient spell or powerful curse. It was understanding him: what made him tick, what steely foundation the rest was built upon.

“Closer,” Harry repeated softly.

Tom’s green gaze zeroed in on his mouth shaping the words dazedly.

“We—”

And then Sybill Trelawny had to go and open \textit{her} mouth.

Normally, Harry would have been able to tune her out—he had been tuning her out for years, really. But the voice that emerged was not its normal, misty self. It was a ghastly, croaking sing-song moan he had only ever heard during his third year. Right before Peter Pettigrew had escaped.

It was the kind of voice that made any sane person pay attention, for the sheer uncomfortable chaos contained within.

Slowly, the chatter in the room stuttered to silence.

“Professor?” Lavender Brown asked uncertainly.

The frizzy strands of the professor’s hair looked like they had been electrocuted.

\textit{“When rules are broken, payment is due….The one whose name is feared has begun his payment with his death, for neither can live while the other survives…The survivor resurrects a ghost…In the hands of the kings of men…the world burns…And the war to end all wars looms….“}

Trelawney made a choked, gasping noise before slumping over.

“P-professor?”

Not even a full second later, her head snapped back and she stood ram rod straight.

“Parvati, dear,” the woman said primly, “Did I tell you a tall, dark, and handsome stranger awaits
you in your near future? Wear fuchsia, girl. That’s how he’ll find you. Class dismissed!”

Humming, she glided away.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuck—

Harry lunged for the door. Tom, with equal lighting speed, caught onto the back of his robes and yanked him back.

The momentum of the pull didn’t just restore Harry to his former location. It sent him careening backwards until his body collided with the front of one behind him.

The body behind him vibrated, trembling with the terrible force of something—fear? rage?—translated to his own body from chest to back.

“She’s no one. A fraud. Nothing she says ever comes true,” Harry spat out.

The body behind him tensed further, threatening violence. “I know when you lie, Harry Potter.”

Harry bared his teeth and twisted valiantly. Tom wouldn’t let him move an inch. Snarling, he craned his head backward, stopping only when he encountered the obstacle of the Dark Lord’s shoulder.

Harry’s eyes raked over familiar suntanned, sharp features.

Stolen.

“Well, maybe you should tell me what rule you broke, Tom. Because clearly, that’s what got us into this mess in the first place.”

Author’s Note: I knowww, it's been so long. Please show me love nevertheless <3 Your comments have always motivated me to come back to this story and always will. You honestly have no idea what power you hold over me :D Hope you enjoyed!!
Chapter 14

Trelawney had scarcely shut the door behind him, when it happened. He was unprepared.

Between one breath and the next. In a fraction of a second, Harry’s face went bloodless. And then, the pain was too great for him to muster even any sound, let alone a scream. He was under the siege of what felt like a thousand butter knives—blunt and cold—trying to saw their way into his mind with incomprehensible force, one jagged slice at a time.

Zabini had never been gentle, but even his example of brute force paled in comparison to this. This—this was a pain Harry had never before imagined, worse even than the Cruciatius. It was both the physical agony and the agonizing sense of violation…

Worse, as Harry squinted blearily up, barely maintaining consciousness—he could see that he wasn’t the only one affected. Green eyes almost black—slitted—blazed down at him, jaw clenched to the point of fracturing. Tom felt it too. He had done this knowing he would; and it galled Harry to see his enemy withstand this with far more grace that he himself was.

(Some part of him snarled in seething wonderance.)

Air hissed through Harry’s teeth as he realized he was fighting a losing battle. He was either going to pass out—or worse, his mental shields would break. Neither outcome was acceptable.

With the small amount of control he had left, he brought his most recent nightmare to the fore of his mind, voluntarily allowing Tom to view it. At the playback of his own memory, Tom’s eyes widened briefly.

It was the moment of distraction Harry needed. He wasn’t quite sure what he was doing, but with all his willpower, he thrust the entire force of his mind against the invader.

And Harry had a brief vision of—

*Tom standing before a tall, stately manor, knocking on a door, a kind, matronly face revealed to greet him, a mirror image of Tom’s face, later, gazing back at him, and then*—

Before he was cast out.

He panted against the table behind him, enjoying the bliss of having his mind as his own again, free from attack. Then, his gaze darted up and his breath caught.

Tom was staring back at him, but he didn’t see him. His face was drawn tight.

And Harry—well, such moments of distractions so rarely came about. It would have been a shame to waste it.

His fist landed solidly on the Dark Lord’s jaw, whose head jerked to the side like a ragdoll’s. Harry could feel the resounding pain on his own face, but he breathed through it, following the punch with a knee to the stomach.

And it was good. So good. It felt like cold water sliding down a parched throat. Harry watched Tom buckle with dark satisfaction, before he was scrabbling on top of him.

“We always seem to end up back here, don’t we?” he observed under his breath, grunting as Tom
landed a few well-placed blows, but still managed to maintain his position.

It was like they had forgotten they had wands. Nails, he registered belatedly, were digging into his hip where the Dark Lord gripped him with ferocious strength.

“You were somewhere else,” Harry noted coldly. “See me now?”

Tom’s green eyes bore into him from below with laser focus. “Feeling neglected, were you?”

He ignored that. “In the manor,” he began, then paused. “That man was your father.”

The Dark Lord’s features flexed into a practiced smile. The punishing hand on Harry’s hip released its hold and slid its way up to clasp his neck, pulling him closer.

“Well-observed, Harry.” The words brushed warmly against his face.

Harry tried to pull away, but the hand at his neck prevented him, pulling him even closer. Lips brushed against his face, and Harry’s eyes were wide with alarm, his pulse racing like he was on the verge of falling off the Astronomy Tower.

“He was also the first person I killed.” The words were dragged against the surface of Harry’s cheek. It was a mockery of a kiss, a perversion—just as Tom intended.

But rather than enraging him, as it would have at almost any other time, the words returned Harry’s focus.

“That’s not true,” he returned immediately. “Myrtle was before that. And also the priest.”

The hand on Harry’s throat tightened.

“I didn’t plan them,” Tom explained genially, drawing back. “Those were—accidents, really. In the heat of the moment.”

“Accidents.”

“My father. He, I planned.”

Harry inhaled sharply, gaze roving over the brazen and yet somehow unreadable expression of the Dark Lord.

Closer.

“Why would you kill your family?” he pressed.

“I think a better question to ask,” Tom drawled, pushing Harry by the throat off of him—surprised, Harry’s hold slipped away and he was knocked backward—“is why you haven’t killed yours?”

“Because—”

“Don’t bother with moral platitudes.”

Harry’s lips tightened. “You seriously think you or I have the right to decide who lives and dies, just like that?”

“Don’t we?” Tom returned equally sharply, green eyes glowing. “Why not? If not those with the power, who else?”
“What has it ever done for you, killing someone?” Harry said, trying a different tack. “Forget the priest, but—Myrtle and your father?”

The Dark Lord bared his teeth in a savage smile, and it was like looking on the face of death itself. “It’s served a purpose greater than you could ever imagine.”

There was something there, deeply embedded in those words, that he did not know. But this sentiment of confusion was almost immediately subsumed by Harry’s anger.

“Trying to kill me as a baby didn’t work out very well,” he observed lowly. “Remember?”

Tom’s grin grew even more sinister.

“That seems almost an age ago, now—merely one anomaly. I’ll hardly make the same mistake again,” he murmured, straightening into a standing position. “Don’t even recall what your mother looked like.”

Harry’s chest felt wrenched open, bleeding even though there was no wound. He breathed shakily, trying to hide his vulnerability.

Something, however, struck him as odd about Tom’s words. The cavalier attitude. Could five years really change Tom from that seething, pathetic figure seeking revenge desperately on the back of another wizard’s head to—this?

He couldn’t remember it?

“And one might ask, Harry—how do you reconcile your morals with your desire to kill me?” Tom challenged, half his face obscured by shadow.

“You haven’t given me a choice,” Harry corrected icily. His fists tightened at his sides. “You—you’ve had a choice. Maybe the priest was self-defense, but with the others? You chose.”

Before the Dark Lord could respond to that charge, they were both interrupted by a winged creature sweeping through the classroom door, silver and shimmering in its majesty.

The phoenix opened its beak, and Dumbledore’s voice emerged.

“The minister is here.”

Every step toward the Great Hall felt like a step toward the guillotine. He didn’t care much about the ministry officials, but—Harry’s professors and the Order. Would he see Sirius too?

“Will your death eaters be there?” Harry asked distantly.

“I don’t need an army to protect me, unlike the minister.”

“Really. So who’s going to protect you from Dumbledore?”

His lip curled. “Dumbledore is no threat to me.” They stopped in the front of the double doors.

“Right,” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

The Dark Lord truly did look remarkably unconcerned. “No one can fight a war on two fronts. And
I rather think this war is more important to him.”

Harry drew up short. “And...why?”

“I’m hardly competition for his paramour.”

Harry blinked.


“If I had known that this would lead you to crucify him like the muggles did Turing,” The Dark Lord’s gaze passed over him boredly, “I would have mentioned it much, much sooner.”

“I’m not crucifying anyone,” Harry said hastily. “I just didn’t know.”

Tom pushed the doors open, and Harry quickly schooled his expression, putting aside his shock.

The Great Hall looked just as it ever did, only its occupants were much older than usual. The center table—usually taken by the Hufflepuffs—was populated on one side by ministry officials and the other by Hogwarts professors and members of the Order.

On one end, sat Cornelius Fudge, looking rather sweaty and nervous. Beside him was Kingsley Shacklebolt, and on the other side, a stern looking woman with skin the warm, rich color of clay and unwrinkled, though her harsh gaze spoke of wisdom gathered from many hard decades.

On the opposite end, Dumbledore surveyed the minister calmly, flanked by Professor McGonagall and Snape. McGonagall looked as stiff and disapproving as ever; the potions master seemed ostensibly bored by the whole affair.

“Tom, Harry,” Dumbledore greeted gravely.

“Albus,” the head of Gryffindor frowned, “what on earth are Potter and Gaunt doing here?”

Dumbledore smiled sadly. “I see you haven’t yet realized why Mr. Gaunt looks so familiar.”

McGonagall looked confused. “A parent or grandparent, no doubt.”

“How the hell has Snape carried on earlier today as he had, if he had known exactly who ‘Harry Potter’ was? Harry’s eyebrow twitched. First, Malfoy. Now, Snape. Who was next, Millicent Bulstrode?”

Professor McGonagall’s hazel eyes bulged along with the professors’ around her. “I beg your pardon?”

“What nonsense,” Fudge coughed furiously, “The Dark Lord? Utter—hogwash—I will not be hoodwinked like this, Albus. I came here in good faith, despite the advice of the best of my counsel, and yet—”
“Quiet, Cornelius,” the woman to his left said calmly, waving a silencing hand in his general direction. The minister’s mouth snapped shut.

“Is it true, boy?” the woman demanded, dark eyes flashing beneath her elaborate head scarf.

Tom paid her no attention. Instead, his cold attention was focused on the potions master, and all semblance of the innocuous student persona fled. Men and women in the room tensed in visceral response, suddenly instinctively aware of the presence of a predator in their midst.

The hair on Harry’s arms rose—for this was the Dark Lord, now, truly as himself.

He no longer disguised himself as he had even at Hogsmeade, and even in the Great Hall the night after to some extent. He was abruptly terrible, abruptly imperious, his magic a sudden oppressive force in the room.

“Severus.”

Snape’s eyes widened for an instant with something like alarm.

Harry stiffened, gaze darting from Tom to Dumbledore.

Snape reached them and waited stoically for his next command.

“Your arm.”

After a moment—of hesitation?—the dark sleeve rose slowly and steadily.

With the artistry of one conducting an orchestra, Tom’s—Harry’s, he corrected himself angrily—wand traced its way to the exposed mark on Snape’s arm.

A second later, the entire room was circled by dark, masked figures cloaked head to toe in black. Apparently, the wards had been modified for the time to allow apparation.

“Don’t need an army, was it?” Harry muttered under his breath.

“Of course,” Tom returned softly, coolly. “This, merely, is a performance.”

In one, eerie synchronized motion, every death eater bent into a deep bow. There was something intensely unnerving about the act to Harry. In the graveyard, the death eaters had been fearful, desperate—they had known they were in the presence of a madman. Their demeanor was markedly different now.

They were—worshipful.

“No,” Fudge gasped, looking like he might pass out. He shoved himself backward in his chair, making the legs screech against the stone floor.

“Compose yourself, minister,” the woman beside him snapped, barely blinking. “I see why you called us now, Albus.”

“Your company is always a pleasure, Aminatu, but—yes.”

“How is this possible?” Professor McGonagall demanded.

“That is an issue for another time,” the headmaster said gravely. He looked…tired, Harry observed with discomfort. If this—this Grindelwald figure was truly Dumbledore’s former lover, then—
Well, this could hardly be an easy time for him, could it?

(But how? How could someone like Dumbledore fall in love with someone like Grindelwald?)

“We are here, I assume, to discuss Grindelwald primarily,” Kingsley spoke for the first time, the deep bass of his voice easily projecting though he spoke quietly.

“Y-yes,” McGonagall answered, though her gaze seemed stuck on Harry and Tom. With visible effort, she turned her attention toward the Head of the Aurors. “Yes.”

“By all means,” Tom said nonchalantly.

He waved his hand, and the table lengthened just enough for a third perpendicular section to begin to grow from the middle, forming a T. The new section was just long enough to seat all the death eaters. At the head of this third end of the table were two seats.

The death eaters took their seats. Harry remained standing.

“Take a seat, Harry,” Tom said lightly, a dangerous smile on his lips.

He wondered what would happen if he flat out ignored the request. Rolling his eyes, he stalked to the chair and slumped into it.

“Happy, Tom?”

The death eaters around him all tensed at his irreverent tone.

“Filthy half-blood,” a woman seated perpendicular to the both of them seethed, the riotous curls sprouting from her head trembling with her rage. “I will twist your insides into knots so painful that your whore of a mudblood mother will turn over in her grave.”

“Well that’s ironic,” Harry sneered, ignoring her entirely in favor of goading Tom. “Shouldn’t you tell this nice lady the truth about your f—”

“Not now, Harry,” Dumbledore requested quietly, and the smile abruptly fell from Harry’s face.

He straightened in his chair and looked toward the headmaster, eyes wide. “I—sorry.”

The headmaster bowed his head in acknowledgement. “Thank you.”

But something in Tom’s demeanor had changed with this transaction, like a switch had been flicked. Without warning, Harry found his chin in the grip of a quidditch-calloused hand, and his head forced painfully to face the Dark Lord’s. Cries of outrage sounded distantly in the background.

“You’re not his dog,” Tom said coldly, so close that only Harry could possibly hear. “If I hear something like that out of your mouth again, I will cut out your tongue.”

Tom looked away, but his gaze was dark now. Harry’s eyes narrowed at this unexpected behavior.

The Dark Lord looked around the table and gave a chilling smile. “Kingsley Shacklebolt—I don’t remember you from the previous war. But Aminatu Sukhera; now that’s a name one remembers. Head of the department of intelligence and former wartime hero, isn’t that right?”

“Voldemort,” the woman returned equally casually. “Haven’t had the pleasure of making your acquaintance before.”
“And I hear my predecessor got a house visit,” Tom said with a curl to his lips.

“Never did manage to get your address,” Aminatu returned calmly. “By all means, feel free to send an owl.”

“No need,” the Dark Lord said pleasantly. “Hogwarts is now my place of residence. Feel free to visit whenever—especially now that we will all be working for the same end for the foreseeable future.”

Fudge gave a loud, miserable groan. Aminatu’s eyebrow twitched, like she wanted dearly to force the man into silence but was much too collected to actually go through with it.

“Dolores,” the minister muttered. “Where is Dolores, shouldn’t she—”

“This is an emergency war council,” Kingsley interrupted firmly.

“But Albus—”

“Has aided the ministry in past war efforts,” Aminatu said brusquely. “Pointedly, with an opponent we face now once again.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said grimly. “What information have you gathered so far?”

Aminatu snapped her hand at a mousy looking man seated a bit further down the table. He jolted straight. “We have a picture of his…face.”

Harry’s stomach twisted in dread and anticipation.

“Well, go on, lad,” McGonagall said with a bit ire.

The man slid a hand into his robes pocket and procured a massive envelope. Delicately untwisting the tie at the top, he slipped out a photograph. It had clearly been taken through a window—a lucky shot, capturing just the profile of the figure in the photo.

The moving photograph only lasted a few seconds, at the end of which, the figure made sudden eye contact with the viewer. Then the photograph looped back to the beginning.

“The photographer?” Dumbledore asked gently.

“Dead,” Aminatu finished curtly. “He managed to get it to us in his last moments.”

“Is it him, Albus?” Fudge asked impatiently. “All records from his youth have been destroyed; there’s no way of verifying it. But you knew him. Do you recognize him?”

The headmaster looked at it for a long moment, his blue eyes curiously absent of their normal glint. “It is not a face I recognize,” he said at last.

The minister slumped into his seat with relief.

“But,” Dumbledore continued with an unreadable expression, “there are elements there that…are familiar.”

“What does that mean?” Kingsley asked delicately.

The professor paused a long time before answering. “It was only an idea back then—a theory far from reality, of transferring one’s consciousness into another’s body. He theorized the most
suitable candidate would be a relative—a descendant, ideally, for the agenda of prolonging one’s life span.”

Something about these words made Tom abruptly, eerily still. Harry watched him sharply, aware of the…similarity between what had transpired between them and the current topic of discussion.

And the fact that Dumbledore used the word ‘consciousness,’ somehow, like he was hiding another one.

“A quest for immortality,” someone summarized beneath their breath.

“Yes,” Dumbledore allowed somberly, blue eyes piercing above his half-moon spectacles. “There were…rumors that he had a child, smuggled out before the full onset of the war. It is plausible that this body belongs to a child of that child.”

All around the table, witches and wizards looked horrified.

“If it truly is possible, then we must assume the worst. That this is a Grindewald in the body of a man in his prime,” Fudge groaned. “And how do our numbers compare?”

Aminatu frowned. “The men and women who fought for him have spawned families by now.”

“And having been in a period of peace for more than a decade now, our auror ranks are a fraction of what they were then,” Kingsley finished.

Silence reigned for a brief moment.

“I suppose this is where I come in?” Tom asked lazily.

Aminatu’s hawk-like gaze snapped to him, then to Dumbledore. “I’m guessing he wants something in return.”

“We have reached an agreement,” the headmaster responded slowly.

When he offered no further detail, she looked at him with suspicion.

“I will unite the pureblood houses under me,” the Dark Lord stated, eyes glinting. “Those that do not fall in line are no doubt Dumbledore’s. But even so—our numbers will not be enough.”

“So what do you propose?” Professor McGonagall asked stiffly.

Tom leaned back into his chair, looking very much like an uncaring tyrant confronted by a court he perceived as inferior.

“A school is a place of…opportunity, is it not?” Tom said lightly. “And as an instructor yourself, there is no possibility you could have missed the talent thriving under your very own thumb.”

The older woman’s face went pale with outrage. “You can’t possibly be suggesting that—”

“Children have no place in war,” Dumbledore finished for her, with steel in his voice.

Tom’s eyebrows climbed high on his face, but his eyes were mocking. “Don’t they? Children have been victims of war since time in memoriam, headmaster. Why, you’ve placed some in the very line of fire yourself, haven’t you?”

Dumbledore’s expression did not change, but Harry saw the subtle twitch in his mouth, showing
that he had been affected by these words.

“I think that’s a bit generous,” Harry muttered coolly, just for Tom’s ears. “Because, you know, you could have easily fixed that if you’d stopped trying to kill me.”

Tom smiled.

“I think we are done here today,” the minister said hastily, rubbing his hands together.

“Agreed,” Dumbledore said quietly. The words thundered in the otherwise silent hall.

Aminatu gave a short, humorless bark of laughter.

“Until next time,” Kingsley said softly, tilting his head.

“Until next time,” Tom concluded pleasantly.

Five days of hell went by. They felt like an eternity. But on the sixth, Harry found reprieve—if only temporary.

“Tom,” Harry announced with relish, “is on a business trip.”

That morning, wonder of all wonders, he had woken alone. And when Flitwick had whispered to him at breakfast that he hoped “Potter recovered from the mumblemumps soon,” he had known.

Mumblemumps required a minimum of three days’ bed rest. For at least that long, Tom planned to be gone. He could only thank the stars that his trip had clearly been of a secretive nature—that Harry hadn’t been made to come along.

Finally, Harry had some freedom again.

And, true, he had noticed a few unwelcome charms placed on his person that had taken him six hours and some covert signing to Zabini to break. And then he’d had to lose Malfoy, who had been tailing him the entire while (hence the covert signing). The platinum blonde hair, unsurprisingly, didn’t aid in his effort of being an inconspicuous spy.

(Fortunately for them all, Tom hadn’t seen fit to expose their body switch to the whole world and bring his death eaters into Hogwarts.)

But still, it was indeed a state of relative freedom that Harry currently operated in.

“Evidently,” Zabini said boredly, but his voice was a fraction too cool. “So now that you’ve dragged us all here to the Room of Requirement, give us your updates, Potter.”

Harry’s mouth went sour.

“Trelawney made a prophecy in Divination. About Tom and me,” he said stoically.

“Everyone knows that woman is a fraud,” followed Parkinson primly.

“I’m not sure if all her prophecies come true,”—Harry wasn’t dead yet, was he?—“but the ones she doesn’t remember making, those are true.”

“You mean you’ve seen what she said come true?” asked Zabini intently.
“She predicted Voldemort coming back.”

They let that sit in silence for a moment.

“Given her flair for the tragic, this bodes well for us all,” Parkinson muttered, flipping her dark hair behind her shoulder. “So, what did she say?”

Harry paused. Then frowned.

Zabini stared at him expressionlessly. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“So I don’t remember the exact wording, but I remember being very sure after hearing all of it that all of this is definitely Tom’s fault.”

“How many times have you been knocked around the head? If there was anything to remember exactly in your entire life, it was that—”

He was interrupted by the high-pitched noise of a door to their supposed-to-be-secret room suddenly swinging open.

Three surprised gazes pivoted to meet two, equally surprised ones looking back.

“Oh,” Hermione said quietly, as though she hadn’t expected them there. Ron’s triumphant look behind her, though, made it very clear that at least one of them had.

“I told you. We’re the ones who showed him the Room of Requirement for DADA. If we couldn’t find him anywhere else, where else could he be?”

Hermione shook herself out of the apparent stupor. “Our search was hardly exhaustive,” she defended, “there were hundreds of places he could have been other than this one. This was just… luck.”

“Or brilliance,” Ron corrected.

“What did you ask the room to become?” Zabini accused.

“I asked it to hide us from Malfoy,” Harry whispered back.

“So anyone else could just ask for the room with you in it, and the Room of Requirement would readily hand you over. I’m glad I’m backing such an intellect,” the boy sneered.

Harry would have rolled his eyes if he hadn’t still been in a state of general shock.

“You,” Hermione said irately, storming towards them where they were all seated. “I thought everything was finally out in the open. No more secrets. No more worrying. But just when Voldemort’s finally gone, just when I think you’ll finally reach out to us, where are you?”

“It’s not that we begrudge you your new…acquaintances, mate,” Ron said slowly—but the cheery affability he’d been wearing for the past few days seemed to have diminished, revealing something a little harder, a little more suspicious, that maybe he wasn’t quite as accepting of Harry’s new ‘acquaintances’ as he’d demonstrated until now—“but we thought we’d made it clear to you a long time ago.”

Ron’s eyes were bluer than ever and piercing, somehow. “We’re with you to the end.”

Harry didn’t quite manage swallowing past the sudden thickness in his throat in time.
“Look, Granger, Weasley,” Zabini said indifferently. “As hard as it may to believe, Potter has nobly been striving to keep Parkinson and me a secret from you for the sake of our continued status among the living. The point is moot now, sadly, so I suppose our only course of action is to teach you occlumency and hope for the best. I suppose I will have to do this.”

Both Hermione and Ron’s frames tensed with realization.

“Of course,” Hermione raged under her breath, “why didn’t I think of that? That’s how he knew what we suspected.”

“Is that normal?” Parkinson wondered casually, cupping her chin in one, long-nailed hand. “Being able to learn occlumency in that short of a time? It took me months.”

Harry’s eyebrows arched with shock. Months? “Apparently Zabini is an excellent teacher,” he muttered. Or provided compelling incentives to learn quickly.

“In the meantime,” Zabini said sharply, “you two can contribute by sharing what you remember of the prophecy Trelawney delivered; otherwise I’ll have to dig through Potter’s mind for it. I understand that you must have been there?”

“When rules are broken, payment is due. The one whose name is feared has begun his payment with his death, for neither can live while the other survives. The survivor resurrects a ghost. In the hands of the kings of men, the world burns. The war to end all wars looms,” Hermione recited without pause, as though reading from a textbook.

Zabini blinked. Then, he cleared his throat. “You’re certain that’s entirely accurate.”

“Entirely,” Hermione said, unamused. “Guess now I finally have a reason to be thankful for being forced to take Divination again.”

“No one forced you,” Ron said wryly. “You just wanted the extra O.W.L.”

Hermione coughed, looking a little flustered.

Standing up, Zabini waved his wand and the words appeared as a spidery scrawl over the wall.

“The one whose name is feared is clearly the Dark Lord,” Parkinson announced, toeing off her heels and swinging her feet into the place Zabini had been sitting.

“Sure. But why does he need to pay,” Ron considered out loud, blue eyes narrowed as he took a seat on another couch, “What rule did he break?”

“Voldemort ‘has begun his payment,’” Hermione clarified, highlighting the words with her wand. She stood near the wall with Zabini. “So maybe we should examine how he’s been paying—maybe that will tell us why he is.”

“The body-switch, ostensibly,” Zabini spoke up, eyes unreadable. “The question is: to what end? How is that payment?”

They struggled with that in silence.

“Let’s move on,” Ron said decisively. “The survivor is definitely Harry, right? The ghost—”

“Tom Marvolo Riddle,” Parkinson hissed, bolting straight.

Zabini stiffened. “The Dark Lord from before the switch,” he muttered.
“What are you talking about?” Hermione demanded.

“Don’t worry, Granger,” Parkinson said distractedly, “I’m sure Zabini will catch you up between his occlumency lessons—more importantly, if Tom Marvolo Riddle from the past is the ghost, is he then ‘the one’ who survives?”

“In that case,” Zabini muttered, “the Dark Lord who tried to kill Potter as a baby is the one who dies.”

“What’s the difference between them?” asked Ron, gaze darting between the two Slytherins.

Zabini looked even more displeased. “The pressing question.”

Harry, who had not spoken yet, listened to all this with an increasingly troubled expression. There were so many disparate pieces, ones they did not know how to fit. But he had a sense that someone else…and did.

He stood abruptly.

Zabini caught the moment immediately, eyes widening. “What is it, Potter? Is he calling you again? Is he already back?”

“No,” Harry said quietly. “I just have…something I need to do. I’ll be back.”

Hermione and Ron gave him meaningful looks, promising that he would be questioned later. Parkinson merely waving him off.

Giving a jerky nod, he spun on his heel and exited the room.

His feet took him to his destination even as his mind worked rapidly, struggling to decide how to begin a conversation he knew needed to happen. Knowing its necessity, however, did not make the task any easier.

The contorted face of the gargoyle peered down at him ten minutes later.

“I don’t know the password,” Harry informed it softly. “But tell him I need to see him.”

His request was met with utter silence. For the next minute, then the next two minutes, nothing happened. Then, the gargoyle twisted almost reluctantly, revealing a set of stairs.

Harry climbed them slowly. When he reached the top, he saw the blue brocade of Dumbledore’s back, as he leaned against his pensieve.

“Professor.”

The back straightened. After a brief pause, Dumbledore turned and blinked at Harry.

“Apologies, Harry,” he said gently. “I lost track of time.”

“No worries,” he said awkwardly. “Sir, I was wondering—”

Dumbledore left the pensieve abruptly, his heavy robes sliding against the floor with a sibilant noise. “Are you well?” he requested urgently. The lines in his face deepened. “I owe you another apology, indeed, for this situation I have placed you in.”

“Please don’t apologize for that,” Harry said, put off by the look on the older man’s face. He tried
to shake it off with a laugh. “That—I put myself there, didn’t I?”

“No, Harry. Worse men than you are responsible for this.”

The words drew something else from Harry’s mind. Before he knew it, the words were out: coarse and inelegant. “Sir, is it true? About—about you and…?”

The words died in his throat. A second later, mortification took their place.

“Don’t answer that,” Harry said stiffly. “I shouldn’t have asked—”

“Grindelwald,” Dumbledore said softly, expression solemn and unabashed, “was once someone I held very dear to myself. I cannot say, however, that he held the same regard for me. We parted ways a very long time ago.”

“I’m sorry,” he managed to get out, but he knew his face revealed too much.

“How is it possible, you wonder,” the headmaster chuckled wryly. “I ask myself the same more often than I would like to admit as well. Perhaps, we might allow that I was blind—blinded by what I felt for him and by his companionship.”

Harry nodded, silent.

But he watched Dumbledore’s expression shift, the usual lightness in his face burdened by a heavy weight. “But more stringently, Harry,” he said quietly, “I feel that there were parts of myself that he merely managed to bring out—dark, unsavory parts that had been there all the while. And in his presence, I allowed them to rule me…for too long.”

For a long silence, Harry debated how to respond. He settled with, haltingly, “I don’t know exactly what happened. But I know you’re a good person, sir.”

Dumbledore smiled, but Harry could see it was merely to reassure him. “You are too kind to an old man who has made too many mistakes.”

The headmaster sat behind his desk. “You give those like me some measure of peace with our existence in the world, that there are people like you to mitigate the damage we cause.”

“That’s not true,” Harry said bluntly.

Dumbledore paused, tilting his head up from his consideration.

“I’m not perfect, professor,” he said, “you shouldn’t talk about me like I am.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore said with infinite gentleness.

“I have had thoughts,” Harry explained relentlessly, “that sometimes make me sick after. And then, thoughts that should but still, somehow, don’t.”

“That is only to be human,” the headmaster responded slowly, kindly. “We are born with power, each and every one of us—wizard and muggle. It only matters what we choose to do with that power.”

“You think Grindelwald’s a monster, and you think that loving him means you’re a monster too,” Harry summarized, undeterred. “But professor, if this all pans out the way we need it to, I’m going to have to kill Tom. And what does that make me? Even if Tom is a monster?”
And one might ask, Harry—how do you reconcile your morals with your desire to kill me?

“Harry—”

“It doesn’t matter, what you say,” Harry said abruptly, face pale. “I’ll do it anyway. I’d do it a thousand times over to protect everyone who’s been putting themselves at risk just by being near me or kind to me.”

Dumbledore looked troubled. “Harry,” he said with difficulty, “that you cannot see the good in yourself is testament to the very fact that you are already a better man than I was at your age; I deluded myself of the opposite.”

The man stood again and approached him, grasping his shoulders. “But know this: if I could do this for you—if there were any way—I would. To ask this of you is grossly unfair; it is a debt the rest of us will never be able to repay.”

Harry couldn’t manage to meet the headmaster’s gaze. But the words struck him peculiarly, reminding him, in fact, of his purpose in coming here in the first place.

“Professor, I don’t think you owe me all that, but…I do think you owe me the truth,” he said softly.

Dumbledore abruptly froze.

“You’ve been hiding something from me,” Harry pressed, “And I need to know. You need to tell me.”

He never could have imagined it—part of him believed, truly, that he hallucinated it in the moment—but then he blinked, and still, it was true. The headmaster had recoiled from him.

“Professor,” Harry prompted, harder now.

“Harry,” was all Dumbledore could say, his expression—somehow it was possible—even more grave.

“It’s terrible, isn’t it,” he smiled humorlessly. “It’s okay. It doesn’t change the fact that I still need to know. Or that…you probably should have told me a long time ago.”

The headmaster left him to sit in his chair once again, as though he needed the support.

“Grindelwald is in someone else’s body now,” Harry started, “and Tom and I switched bodies. You said this had all to do with consciousness, but it sounded like—”

“It has to do with souls,” Dumbledore finished, sounding for all the world like he had confessed murder.

It was Harry’s turn to freeze. His eyes widened. “Souls? Those—those are real?”

“It’s a word that has been used in many different contexts,” Dumbledore explained tiredly, “often religious or spiritual. Every context, of course—including the secular, wizarding one—argues for a different definition. But what remains constant, perhaps, is a shared understanding that we will never have...complete understanding.”

“But,” Harry said, with some frustration now, “if we were to make this all a bit more concrete—what does that have to do with Tom and me?”

Now, Dumbledore seemed truly to struggle, unable to look at Harry any longer above his half-
moon spectacles.

“I believe that Tom Riddle made horcruxes.”

“What are horcruxes?”

Dumbledore stood again and began walking with frenetic energy. Then, he stopped, his back to Harry.

“Horcruxes are objects that house part of a human soul,” the headmaster said, almost inaudible.

There was a rushing sound in Harry’s ears, so loud that he could barely hear his own voice. “And Tom did this? He put parts of his soul into these…objects?”

“I believe so.”


“Only the darkest act can cause the soul to split,” Dumbledore answered. “Cold-blooded, remorseless murder.”

*It’s served a purpose greater than you could ever imagine.*

“Why—why would he do that?”

“There is so much about the soul that is unknown,” the older man admitted, “but I suspect that it is the final tether to what we might consider appreciable life. The body is but the vessel. The dementor removes the soul, the ability to live is therein robbed as well. To split one’s soul into separate parts is to ensure that all parts cannot be destroyed at once.”

“Immortality,” Harry identified, voice flat.

“Indeed.”

Harry paused. “The diary was a horcrux, wasn’t it? But we destroyed that. Does that mean he can be killed now?”

Dumbledore’s head snapped up, surprise coloring his features briefly. “You are correct. The diary was one. I suspect that he made multiple, however.”

Harry’s stomach dropped. “Multiple? What would that—you mean—” He couldn’t complete it. What had Tom been walking around with? One third of a soul? One fifth?

“Yes,” Dumbledore said quietly. “However, I also suspect that point is quite moot now.”

There was something unnerving about the gaze directed at him, too bright and too intent.

Harry hesitated over voicing the question, finally uncertain about whether he did, indeed, want to know the entire truth.

“Harry, shortly after returning to Hogwarts and seeing for myself what had happened between the two of you…I searched for the diary.”

“Alright,” Harry rasped, swallowing. “And?”

Dumbledore’s hand slowly reached to the side of the desk, where he slid open a small sliver of a
drawer Harry had failed entirely to notice before. Reaching in, he pulled out a terribly familiar black book.

He held it up, silently. Harry looked at, equally silent. For a long moment, he failed entirely to see what was unusual about it.

Then, he saw it.

“The hole,” Harry said, “where I punctured the diary with the basilisk’s tooth—it’s gone. It looks like it was never damaged. Did you fix it, professor?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then—” he stammered. “How is that possible?”

“It’s as if there never was a horcrux,” the spectacled man observed almost clinically. He flipped the pages in demonstration. “Just a normal diary.”

Harry watched dumbly as Dumbledore slowly slipped the diary back into its former location. He closed the drawer and directed his full attention to Harry once again.

“Horcrux users are hardly the sort to advertise themselves,” the headmaster said lowly. “An ancient Greek wizard who went by the name Herpo is the first and last confirmed example recorded today. There is a tome that contains what survives of his notes (consolidated by another practitioner of Dark Magic)…as well as many theories, largely invalidated. But among them—”

Dumbledore broke off, his eyes exceedingly bright.

“Among them,” he continued, softer, “is a theory that it is possible to rejoin parts of the soul after splitting them.”

Harry waited, sensing that he was not finished.

Dumbledore leaned forward. “Harry, I believe that in the past few months this is exactly what has been happening.”

He took a step back in response to these words, brows furrowing. “But why? I don’t think after going through all the trouble to become immortal, he would suddenly change his mind.”

“I don’t think Tom intended for it to happen,” the headmaster clarified slowly. “I don’t believe he has any idea at all. This theorized process requires one exceedingly simple and yet impossible to purchase ingredient: remorse. I doubt that Tom Marvolo Riddle—certainly on the other end of the number of horcruxes he has created—had anywhere near the capacity of regret required to initiate this. Nor, would I think—as you have keenly pointed out—would he have had any desire to.”

“Why are you so sure that that happened, then? Aren’t there other explanations for the diary?”

“This would seem the most unlikely,” Dumbledore agreed. “But even you must have noticed, how different he seems now compared to what you have known in your lifetime. Splitting your soul multiple times comes with severe consequences—fractured sanity, decreased stability, physical disfigurement. And yet, he walked into my office with you that night seemingly nearly restored; and yourself in his body: a body no longer visibly inhuman.”

The room spun slightly around Harry. He gritted his teeth to push past it. “Even if this is all true… the basilisk tooth. Didn’t that destroy the diary—the horcrux? How could that horcrux have been
rejoined, making the diary look like that?”

Dumbledore hesitated. “This is where we get into the true speculation, where no literature exists. If I may, though...I believe that if any other person had used the basilisk’s tooth, the horcrux within would have been truly and surely destroyed—not merely weakened to the point of near-death. My own investigation of the diary following the events of your second year revealed nothing unusual in those pages. Still, I believe now that a horcrux in fact survived.”

“If any other person…” Harry repeated stonily, “you mean not me. What are you trying not to say, professor?”

The headmaster’s long-fingered hands left the flat surface of the desk to intertwine with each other, as though steeling himself—but there was a fervor in his eyes that spoke of certainty.

“I think the laws of nature break down, or cease to remain what we typically understand them to be, in the face of certain profound violations,” Dumbledore said faintly, “such as: a mother standing in the path of a killing curse meant for her son. Or: one part of a soul conspiring to destroy its sibling part.”

Harry’s brows furrowed as he attempted to dissect this remark. It was hard, however, to concentrate with the sudden thudding of his heart—as though some, ineffable part of him already understood, though he knew not how.

“Does the meaning make the act or the act make the meaning?” the older man considered, a sort of hasty, distracted quality to his words, as though he too wanted to prevent Harry’s realization. “My experience leads me to believe the first. When the killing curse is not the killing curse, when a basilisk tooth is not a basilisk tooth, all comes down to context. Though it defies the human mind—which seeks instinctively to organize—I believe—”

It clicked within Harry’s mind. “Me,” he said tonelessly, “I’m a horcrux.”

Dumbledore went silent.

“Oh, Harry,” he whispered finally, his blue eyes intensely mournful. “I suspected, but I truly wished to protect this from you for as long as I could.”

“No matter,” Harry said numbly, the taste of blood in his mouth. “Finish it, professor. Explain the last of it to me.”

After a moment, Dumbledore inclined his head in acceptance, though his gaze never lost their agonized quality.

“I don’t believe he meant to make you a horcrux. To this day, I am certain that he has no idea it happened. But I imagine his soul was so unstable when he killed your mother, his panic so strong in the aftermath, that it happened through his sheer will for survival. No ritual was necessary to coax the splitting.”

God, they had thought he was related to Salazar Slytherin, to Voldemort, when they’d found out he could speak parseltongue. Little did they know he was actually part Voldemort. Harry felt an uncomfortable tightness in his chest; he lifted his hand there, dug in with his nails, as though to claw the sliver of foreign soul out.

“There’s a part of him,” he said distantly, “in me.”

“A tiny, fractional part, hardly enough to affect you substantially,” Dumbledore conjectured. “But
enough to save the diary. And enough to do something he never could have imagined to him.”

Harry’s head jerked up, like a ragged puppet commanded to straighten.

“Tom—or we might call him Voldemort, as he wished, that man who existed with a fraction of a soul—did not possess the substance to call upon that sort of remorse,” the headmaster said gently, “but you, you, Harry do. You housed his soul within you, when no one has ever contemplated that humans could be horcruxes. In fact, I feel the term might be entirely useless with regard to your case, given how unpredictable the result has proven. You are not an object. Your soul did something to that fraction; the force of your soul, I think, created a foothold into Tom’s own soul. And everything that you are, Harry, everything you feel—in the face of this power, his split soul could not survive forever.”

Words escaped Harry, for a long while. Some time later, however, he managed to prompt hoarsely, “And the body switching?”

Dumbledore gave a sigh. “Once again, I suspect true understanding is beyond us. If I were to make a guess, however, I would imagine that the switch was somehow prompted by your soul initiating this process for his.”

“So we’ll switch back when the rejoining ends,” Harry completed.

“That would be my guess,” he agreed, eyes glinting. “And if I were to make one more: by all appearances—soon.”

Harry didn’t allow a fraction of himself to shift (if it did, he feared he would stagger and fall).

“Did Grindelwald also make horcruxes?” he asked weakly.

He watched as Dumbledore sank further into his chair, face tight. “No, no—I am certain he did something with souls as well, but not that. Something else; something we will not be able to find in tomes or history.”

Great, Harry thought to himself. This was all great.

And then, as determinedly as he tried to maintain eye contact with Dumbledore until the very end, he passed out.

Author’s Note:

hi there

So: I wrote this in a rush and all in one stretch because I didn’t want you guys to wait too long again--sorry if there are any grammatical mistakes (or other kinds of mistakes)! also, this is a whopping 7,800 word chapter (which is long for me, at least), and there's a lot of information packed in here. so clearly, I guess you guys finally deserved *some* answers :)

Please let me know how you felt while reading this chapter, your insights, and more! Honestly, I cannot stress how much joy reading your comments brings to me. Some of you have professed apologies for your comments being too long--nonsense! The longer the better ;)

Wow, I didn't actually mean to make an innuendo...but now that it's there...

In any case, thank you for sticking with this story and for sticking with me! Hope you enjoyed :D
- madstoryteller999
Chapter 15

There was a slight buzzing, Harry registered distantly. He frowned and turned onto his side. The buzzing continued, growing louder.

God—what was that? An alarm? His hand slowly emerged from the nest of his bedsheets, searching for something to hit. Did he even have an alarm clock at Hogwarts? No. Just at the Dursleys. Why was he at the Dursleys?

He stilled, hand outstretched. The buzzing crystalized into something clearer, more discernible to his ears. A voice, but not real: tinny, almost muffled…

"Let them eat cake, she says, just like Marie Antoinette, a built-in remedy, for Kruschev and Kennedy!"

Harry's eyes snapped open. His gaze landed almost immediately on a familiar looking vinyl record player. Hermione's. She always left it playing so that he wouldn't have to deal with the silence whenever he was in the hospital wing.

Which he was now, he realized. Again.

Harry released a silent groan; his limbs ached like they hadn't been used in years. He shifted the upper half of his body to the other side, trying to crack his back, and while twisting found the unconscious face of the Dark Lord inches from his.

Harry stifled his instinctive exclamation of shock.

Unconscious, Tom looked like any other teenage boy, face slack, brow smooth—like he had little to truly worry about in the world. Maybe it was true. Maybe, Tom didn't worry, because what did he have to worry about when—

My father. He, I planned.

Harry's face paled rapidly.

He remembered now, how he had ended up here.

"She's a Killer Que-en, gunpowder, gelatin, dynamite with a laser beam, guaranteed to blow your mi-ind…."

His heartbeat thudded loudly in his ears, and he knew he was on the verge of something very much like a panic attack. And why shouldn't he panic, when he— When he had—?

Harry knew two things to be irrevocably true. First, that he had, unknowingly—or his soul had—made Tom both easier and harder to kill. And second, that…

Harry housed a part of Tom's soul within himself, and Tom could never, ever know this.

"Well!" a stern voice announced. Harry's head snapped up. "Finally awake, are you?"

Unfortunately, the other occupant of Harry's hospital bed—though only his head rested on the sheets, and it did look quite uncomfortable, seated in the chair like that and contorted—woke up with this declaration as well. For all that Tom looked normal while sleeping, he certainly didn't wake up normally. Instead of a slow progression into consciousness, the Dark Lord's eyes snapped
open, razor sharp, like he hadn't been unconscious at all (though Harry was quite sure he had).

"I told you, lad," Madame Pomfrey said, frowning. "You're healthy as a horse, but something's not right if you keep fainting."

Harry stared at her, his mouth a little slack.

"It wasn't," he began, then paused.

"And you've got your poor friend here waiting on you all night," she tutted, "Couldn't get him to leave, this one. Drink this. Get a little more energy in you."

She shoved a vial of vibrant magenta liquid in front of his face. Blinking, Harry reached up to grasp the vial.

Before he could, Tom snatched the vial and held it up to his nose. "A modified pepper up potion."
His gaze narrowed. "You added fluxweed and powdered moonstone."

"Mr. Pott—"

"Are you certain about your diagnosis?" Tom continued, his expression strangely blank of the usual amiability he wore when speaking with professors.

"I just forgot to eat a few meals. Honestly, it's no surprise I started to feel unwell."

Tom's gaze burned into him suddenly. "Your word can hardly be trusted," he said, voice deathly soft.

Harry's face grew stony. "What exactly are you accusing me of?"

Tom leaned forward. "The tracking spells are gone," he murmured, "You knew Draco Malfoy was following you. You took the chance, as soon as you knew I wasn't watching, didn't you?"

"The chance to what?" Harry griped. Inside, however, he was alarmed. Did Tom know that he had met with Dumbledore?

"Mr. Potter," Madame Pomfrey said irately behind the both of them, far enough that she couldn't quite hear their words, but could see their responses. "I strongly advise you to stop antagonizing my patient, or I will have to forcibly remove you from this ward!"

They both ignored her.

"Well, speak up, Tom. Or I'll start thinking you've become shy."

"I could keep you under lock and key every second of every day," Tom said darkly, hand curling around Harry's chin and yanking his head upward, "until you forgot what the sun looked like, until you could hardly remember the feeling of a breeze or your own name—"

Somewhere, between all those words, Harry made sense of the sudden emergence of these threats.

"I didn't do this to myself!" His incredulity must have been enough to give Tom pause, because the Dark Lord's green eyes surveyed him coolly.

"I didn't," Harry repeated shortly.

After a long pause, Tom leaned back. "Get up," he commanded, eyes glinting. Harry tried to read
his expression, but found it to be a futile endeavor.

"Now look here, young man," Madame Pomfrey said furiously, "I will be the one to permit Mr. Gaunt's dismissal from my infirmary."

Tom straightened his ruffled shirt, standing up; he did not bother to look in her direction, even as he spoke. "As you might recall that we are both fifth years, for the both of us the O.W.L.s. are scheduled to start in—" he darted an unconcerned look at the large clock ticking above them —"quarter of an hour."

And that was like a bolt of lightning to the chest. Harry's eyes bugged out. "What?"

Madame Pomfrey heaved a heavy sigh, with an air of pity. "Did I not mention? You've been unconscious for about a week, boy."

"I messed everything up," Hermione scream-whispered in front of him eight hours later. "I completely blanked on the name of the wizard who instigated the eleventh goblin rebellion —"

"Hermione? Shut up." Ron bounced on the balls of his feet, trying to peer over the riotous mountain of her hair to the slowly opening door in front of them.

He wasn't the only one. Impatient bodies shuffled all around them, tired of the rigors of examination. Harry's gaze drifted to the Dark Lord, who had been caught up in a crowd of students a few meters behind them. They made eye contact for one, breathless moment, before Harry scowled and jerked his head away.

He watched glumly as the doors fully parted, revealing a freshly decorated Great Hall for the end of O.W.L.s. banquet. Examiners, along with professors, lined the head table. Harry recognized one in particular with a bout of unease as they all spilled into the hall. She was a small, unassuming woman with pale, translucent skin and black hair cut bluntly at her ears. Now, she held a glass of sherry in her hand and conversed disinterestedly with her colleagues, but before—well.

It hadn't helped that when he had entered the room for his Defense Against the Dark Arts practical, he had been convinced that he had encountered Snape in female form. His discomfort had only increased when he had realized that—though there was no especial malice in her gaze—she viewed him very coldly and scientifically, as though he were a lab specimen she might pull out a scalpel any second to dissect.

She had a quiet voice, almost hard to hear, which had caused him to strain to hear each calm request for the demonstration of another spell. But her last request had made Harry determine his initial trepidation as very well-earned.

"Excuse me?"

"A patronus charm. I heard from an old acquaintance, Tiberius Ogden, that a few of the students are able to perform a considerably close one."

Harry understood very little how this had anything do with him now and his O.W.L. exam. "And?"

"For the sake of a bonus point, let's say," she said, for the first time something like real interest flashing through her gaze. This really was beginning to sound quite under the table.

He wasn't quite sure why he did it, in the end. Probably curiosity. Everything that had been most important to him five years ago, at the end of his first year here, had still remained just as
important to him—though Zabini and Parkinson acted sometimes like they had engineered some fantastical change in him. His patronus would surely be the exact same.

The more he had pondered it, the more pressing it had become to know.

It had taken the usual memories: the sight of his mother and father in the Mirror of Erised, the pain and euphoria of Hermione crushing him with his first hug, the sound of Ron's laughter late at night, unruly and unrestrained, Sirius asking him to come live with him, and that had tipped it over the edge, because that had always been what he had wanted, someone to want him—

When the familiar stag had burst from his wand, his vision had swum with relief. He had watched it silently, as it had tilted its noble head and then bowed, much like Buckbeak once had: with the greatest dignity, never to be mistaken for a symbol of submission.

"Amazing."

Harry didn't know how long he and his patronus had been like that, surveying each other, but she had broken the spell—quite literally. Disrupted, he let the stag dissipate, abruptly eager to leave the room.

Harry felt a fresh wave of discomfort as her attention settled on him once more, her conversation with stout wizard halting for a brief moment. He gave her a quick nod and headed in the direction of the food.

"Walking rather rapidly there, Potter," he heard dulcet tones chime into his ear. "Did someone forget to feed you this morning?"

"Funny," Harry grunted, latching onto a croissant that he began biting into.

Parkinson watched him with something like fascinated horror. "It's a real testament to the Dark Lord's visage that it somehow manages to maintain some level of appeal with you in it."

"Well, he's the one who traded in for the snake face."

"Traded?" she echoed, eyes widening. Then, her mouth curved. "I see. You've learned something while you've been out."

"Do share," Zabini said, appearing from seemingly nowhere. "I was beginning to think you had taken an extended vacation."

"I was unconscious," Harry snapped.

"Yes, we heard from Granger and Weasley," Parkinson said, nodding toward where the two had been detained by Professor McGonagall. "They were quite indignant about the whole affair."

Harry latched onto this topic, in part because he wasn't so eager to share that a part of Tom's soul was attached to him. More strongly, because he knew sharing this information—certainly here—would be especially dangerous.

"Yes, well, Madame Pomfrey thinks I need to see a therapist."

"What is a the-ra-pist?"

"A muggle mind healer," Zabini explained. His gaze was determinedly on them, but he looked a bit strained now. "I believe the Dark Lord's paying attention right now."
Parkinson made a great show of sweeping her hair up, taking the opportunity to survey the room. "So? We're hardly doing anything suspicious, and he knows we've become...acquaintances."

"He's suspicious of all my friends," Harry said bluntly. "He thinks you might hurt me, or enable me hurting myself—to hurt him."

Hermione and Ron arrived just to catch this remark, matching grim expressions on their faces.

"Oh, he's going to be doubly nervous now," Harry added, grinning, "Four of you surrounding me? His head might just explode off."

Indeed, Tom looked like he might just blast the chatty examiner cornering him at the opposite end of the hall at that moment in favor of stalking towards them. His green eyes sparked with ire each time his gaze landed on them, which—as of the last half-minute—had been quite frequently.

"Everything's going to change now. isn't it," Ron said, lips tight. "When we go back for the summer, everyone in the Order will have to know about the body switch."

Harry swallowed thickly, wondering how he would face Sirius.

"You should also keep in mind, Potter, that you won't be able to contact me when you fuck up," Zabini said grimly.

"Actually, about that." Hermione rustled discreetly in her satchel, pulling out five galleons. "I've modified them with the Protean Charm, so they can only transmit messages between the five of us. We'll still have to be...discreet, of course."

"Ingenious," Zabini remarked, then blinked, as though he hadn't realized the comment had come from him.

"Yes, I thought, rather," she sniffed in response. She dropped a coin in each of their palms, finishing with a sharp remark for Ron. "And if you lose this one, I am not going to be filling you in for the rest of the summer, Ron."

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled, aiming a pointed look in Harry's direction.

They stood in silence for a little, having not much else they could discuss in the moment. He didn't think Ron and Hermione would ever really like Parkinson or Zabini. Which was probably fair. More often than not, Harry himself wanted to bludgeon one of them (usually Parkinson) with his notebook, and there was decidedly more insult than warmth in their conversations.

Mouth pursing, Harry's gaze attention settled on the Dark Lord again. Recently freed of his conversation with the O.W.L. examiner, his smile had flattened into its usual mocking curve. Any moment, Harry expected to feel the weight of that cruel glance on him once again.

But Tom's attention unexpectedly snapped to his left.

A figure was moving toward him, a girl in their year—a Ravenclaw based on her uniform with large, dark eyes and curly black hair—and she approached with dogged determination.

"Romilda Vane," Zabini identified, though Harry had already determined this.

"Oh dear, that certainly isn't going to end well," Parkinson said. There was biting amusement in her voice.
Hermione looked deep in thought, however. Harry studied her closely and concluded that her face was slightly pale—as though she were troubled. Not unreasonable, he supposed. Anyone approaching Tom not knowing his identity was in danger.

He turned again and resolved himself to vigilance. At the slightest indication of trouble—

"What's that in her hands?" Ron asked sharply, pointing.

Indeed, Romilda was carrying something, a box matching the precise shade of her pink nails. As she peered up at Tom, she lifted the lid with a flourish and a blush in her cheeks.

Ron made a bizarre, choked noise beside him. Harry didn't know what quite to make of it either.

Romilda Vane was a short girl, so she had to rise onto her toes as she proffered one of her chocolates to him. When Tom finally deigned to glance at her, eyes sliding lazily to his left, her mouth firmed and she raised her hand with more conviction, shoving the delicacy right in his face.

His head shifted sharply, as one might expect from anyone having any object thrust so unexpectedly in their face. She stood like that for a long while, arm suspended in mid-air, while Tom's face remained unfailingly blank, unfailingly bored, really.

"Oh thank god," Hermione said quietly beside them. "I thought I'd confiscated all—"

She cut off with a gasp as the Dark Lord's features contorted, becoming suddenly animalistic. It was, in effect, the sight of a mask of civility abruptly being torn off. Harry took an unthinking step forward.

As they watched on, Tom's nostrils flared, pupils dilating like he had been genuinely drugged. For a long moment, he stood exceptionally still—as though he had become a statue. Every muscle in Harry's body tightened. And like a magnet unerringly locating its opposite end, the Dark Lord's eyes, so dark that they were almost black—nostrils flaring again, like he had caught his scent on the wind—locked onto his.

Every inch of Harry was so stiff, he didn't think he could breathe even if he tried. At first, Tom seemed to be in a daze, unaware of what or whom he was staring at. But then he blinked: once, slowly, then again. His pupils contracted.

And then, for all that the entire hall seemed unaware, it was like Harry was the only one watching. Or, perhaps, he was the only one capable of seeing it.

Every edge of Tom's face sharpened, hardened, until a killer's face stared back out at him, from the one that Harry had been born with. And with a killer's smile, he leaned down to meet Romilda's bashful gaze—who must have been blind, greeting her would-be killer with a dreamy expression of anticipation—and whispered something in her ear.

Words that Harry could not hear. But an instant later, she placed her hand in Tom's and followed him out of the hall.

"Harry," Ron said hastily, reading the mulish expression on his face. "If you—"

He had no choice but to follow them out.

Hermione and Ron had managed to sneak him his marauder's map a while ago; it had, thankfully, remained hidden in an unexceptional compartment of his trunk the entire school year. It didn't take
him long to track where Tom had led Romilda.

The corridor itself was terribly lit; one or two lamps disseminated sparse light for the entire twenty or so meters. Even though there was still daylight shining into other regions of the castle, one would never know it here. It took his eyes some time to adjust.

It wasn't that Harry was unaware of what some of his classmates sometimes got up to. He masturbated too, if not as frequently and with as much gusto as some of his peers (not his fault, it would be hard for anyone if people were constantly trying to kill them). So, yes, in abstraction, he knew exactly went on, even if he hadn't exactly have the chance to peruse those magazine during summers at the Dursleys like some of the other boys (and girls) did.

Still, it was another thing altogether to see it in front of him. And because it was Tom, both mortification and horror warred within him.

They were pressed against the wall, so tightly that it was hard to tell the two bodies part. Romilda's dark, spidery hair splayed against the stone like black ink as her body twisted sinuously. Harry's narrowing gaze moved upward, locating the way wrists were held together above her head by one hand. Its partner curled around her neck, calloused fingers forming an intimate necklace.

This was not the Voldemort who had dueled him in the graveyard. Never before had this fact been so concrete to him as now.

A soft, breathy sigh emerged from her mouth, jarring in the otherwise stark silence. Harry blinked and finally found words.

"Get away from her."

Romilda jumped like she'd been electrocuted. "Who's there?"

"I know you heard me," Harry said to the Dark Lord, voice darkening. "I said step away."

Tom's hand rose to sweep an errant curl behind Romilda's ear. The skin he touched blushed pink. "You're a beautiful girl, Romilda," the Dark Lord said softly. "It doesn't surprise me that you have many admirers. That I might have competition."

The girl's entire body shivered; Harry could see now, with the motion, that her shoulders were bare, the top of her shirt unbuttoned and slipping. "Oh," she exhaled, eye lashes fluttering.

Harry averted his eyes hastily.

"But you've been single-minded, haven't you?" the Dark Lord whispered. "And it's only fitting to reward you, when you ask so…prettily—" he thumbed her lips—"You want my hands on you?"

Romilda's eyes sharpened, something like victory flashing in them. "Yes," she hissed, lids sliding to half-mast.

Tom moved with preternatural quickness, and Harry reacted in time only because he had been watching.

The Dark Lord's hand tightened with savage strength only for a fraction of a second, before Harry's hand slid from his robes with lightning quickness. The Dark Lord's gaze snapped to him, slitted and predatory, as he was thrown back to the opposite end of the corridor.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Romilda shrieked, scrabbling for her own wand. Apparently, she
hadn't even noticed the cause for the slowly purpling marks around her neck. She gaped when she saw Harry's face, cheeks flushing slightly (belatedly, Harry remembered that he looked like Tom Riddle). "Oh, er, Gaunt?"—she reached up to smooth her hair—"That's your name, isn't it?"

Against all fairness, Tom stood at the opposite end of the hall looking hardly ruffled by the spell. Harry glared at him.

"Why the righteous fury?" Tom said, voice unfailingly amiable. "After all, Romilda has behaved quite badly, and she knows it."

The Ravenclaw student's dark eyes flew to him.

"Those weren't just chocolates," Harry guessed. "But—even so. It doesn't—" What exactly had she put in them?

"Move, Potter," the Dark Lord said, a terrible, vicious smile spreading across his face. "Or I will move you."

"Why are you calling him Potter?" Romilda asked sharply, fear beginning to show on her face.

"Get out of the way—!" Harry didn't have time to finish. Shouting wordlessly, he thrust out his hand and sent her flying through the air to somewhere behind him. He twisted just in time to avoid the jet of red light.

"Curses now?" Harry rasped out. "I'm hurt. As I remember it, you promised me the strangling."

Tom stalked forward, slow and steady, like he was hunting Harry, and he was liable to dart. As he walked, he tilted his neck to both sides, examining him.

A slow smile curved across his lips. "Are you jealous, Harry? Is that why your face is so red?"

Mortification burned more strongly before he wrestled it down. No. This was—it was completely inappropriate. So what if he was wondering now what Tom Riddle had been doing in his body all this time? It didn't matter.

"Stupefy!" Harry hissed, feeling his wrist crack with the force with which he delivered the spell.

Tom batted it off with a sneer. "Don't be boring, Harry. I know you can do better than that."

He stood with the utmost arrogance, so much so that the nest of hair on his head could have been a crown. As a teenager, Harry had grown tall without the musculature to save him from lankiness; this still remained true—the past year had not changed that—but now, before him, the Dark Lord made his body look oddly elegant in its imperiousness.

And Harry hated it.

Brow darkening, he inhaled deeply. Then, he spanned the narrow corridor with his outstretched arms and pulled. Sweat dripped down his forehead and the stacked stones grinded in protest. The resistance lasted for a few, painful seconds. But when it happened—exhaling sharply, Harry's eyes flew wide open the moment he felt the walls give—he could have roared with triumph. Slowly at first, then more quickly, they began curling in, closing viciously in on the open space that composed the corridor.

He watched Tom's eyebrow arch, before his body was hidden from him by the surge of stones—brown-grey and white and black.
Rage burned steadily within Harry, pleased by the sight. Unfortunately, the sadistic pleasure didn't survive for long. With a high pitched noise, the stones that had gathered around the Dark Lord whistled through the air in his direction, sharpening into pointed projectiles. Harry's lashes flicked down reflexively as his wand hand swept out, breaking them down into harmless rubble and dust.

He was ill-prepared for the nasty curse that followed, grunting as his shield charm beveled, his feet sliding on the carpeted stone as he struggled to hold his place.

Tom was strong—unimaginably strong. If he were honest with himself, each time Harry saw his wand flick out with devastating precision, he couldn't help the lightning of fear that lanced through him briefly. He was no stranger to fear, however, had learned to keep it as his companion.

Still, beyond even that, if he really were truthful—Harry couldn't deny the strange burst of almost…electrification that swept through him with each new spell as well. As though, inexplicably, unconscionably, he were having—

"Better," Tom allowed insouciantly, and his face was alive and intense in a way it hadn't been before. There was a disarming, almost youthful exhilaration about him, like any moment he might laugh.

Hand twisting with deadly grace, his eyes bore into Harry hungrily, roving over him—every minute twitch or shift he made. Harry was so distracted that it took him a second to realize what was happening as a result of Tom's magic.

It was like he had created a vacuum. Everything around him blurred into whispers of the real, the walls becoming wisps and streaks, unreal and intangible, the light fading until it was only a memory. Harry's hands lunged for something to hold onto but found nothing. Inevitably, his body was hurtling towards Tom, and there was nothing he could do stop it.

Like a moth drawn to a flame, his gaze found the Dark Lord's the instant before they collided. Then, he felt their bodies crash into each other, the force of the impact rattling his bones in way that felt more than physical.

Pain—immense, beyond what he had expected—rolled through him in waves, progressing with each surge. Harry's nostrils flared with instinctual panic, as he realized something was definitely, irreversibly wrong. The world split in front of him…only, no, it wasn't the world, it was his head.

Anything else that might have existed vanished, replaced by unadulterated hatred. What had Tom done? No, no, no, he thought senselessly. He couldn't even make a sound. Fire burned him inside out, and he screamed without noise, his throat scraped raw by invisible shards of glass. If he had had the awareness, he would have noticed the hands twisting into his hair in return. (He didn't).

It seemed to last forever, until suddenly, it receded—leaving behind only a faint echo: but even this was terrible, worse than the worst migraine he had ever had.

Groaning, he pushed himself onto his elbows, blinking blearily. He was on top of something, he realized. He repositioned his hand and froze when he felt the steady, repetitive thudding of a heartbeat.

Not something, he corrected. Someone.

Tom to be precise, only not as he had known him these many months. No, the person that slowly opened its eyes below him was devastatingly beautiful, intricately molded by hands that had sought to produce perfection and nothing less. Harry found his fingers gliding over those features,
entranced by the out-of-body experience he was undergoing. That had been his face, his nose, his mouth, his hair…

"No," he hissed out loud. And it was like a bucket of ice cold water had been dumped on him. Not his body. Never his. Only temporary.

Ripping his hands away, Harry's palms went to his own face, tracing with haste at first and then slowing. The lower cheekbones, softer jawline, the…His fingers passed over his eyeline, and he paused, distracted. No longer quite so pale, his skin, but deeper, warmer. Familiar. His.

He was back in his body. And Tom—

Foreign hands joined his, curling around his cheeks, pulling him down. Something unrecognizable curled in his stomach at the sight of the face that look up at him, demanding his full attention.

"Harry."

Oh. Oh.

It was terrible to hear that voice like this. When it had been his own, it had been unextraordinary, entirely unnotable. Now, it was the voice from the Chamber, the voice that had drawn Ginny Weasley into painting blood on the walls, had coaxed him into trusting her would-be murderer: low, decadent, imposing.

Footsteps sounded behind them, and Harry yanked himself away. There, with rubble in his black hair and dust painting her cheeks ash grey, Romilda Vane stared dumbly at the both of them.

Author's Note:

yep. FINALLY an update. I'm sorrryyyyy 3

As always: please let me know how you felt while reading this chapter, your insights, etc. Your comments/kudos are legitimately what keep bringing me back to this story, so show me the looOooOove!

Thank you again for sticking with this story and for sticking with me! Until next time!

- madstoryteller999

Works inspired by this one

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