Love's Loathing

by The_Fictionist

Summary

Lord Voldemort is head of Magical Britain. Harry Potter is a rebel leader in charge of the last scraps of resistance against his regime. Things would be difficult enough even if they hadn't once been engaged.
Chapter 1

By all rights, Lord Voldemort should have been entirely satisfied with his life.

He had everything he'd once dreamed of; he was the head of a blooming empire, the Wizarding World of Great Britain prostrating itself at his feet. He was powerful, respected, admired and feared.

He only had the last vestiges of resistance to crush, and then no one would ever threaten his rule again. He'd have nothing to fear, no challenge or death to usurp his claim upon the world.

It should taste sweet on his tongue, rolling across his palette like the juiciest of summer fruits. He should have felt that old thrill as his people surrendered before him, and a bloody war slipped into something nearing a frigid peace.

He'd done it. Everything he'd once dreamed of, and the pathetic spectre of Tom Riddle had been wiped away, taking all memories of his father and all weak things with him.

But it still nagged at him. The resistance, and in particular the green eyed man who led it. The last link.

He supposed it was fitting, in a way, that the boy who had once made him happy should be the man to itch at his skin and contentment, churning loathing in his gut.

Harry Potter was a problem he should have dealt with a long time ago. He should have slit the other's throat the second he realized how dangerous he was, before he had the chance to grow, when they were still just school boys sitting laughing on the edge of the Black Lake.

He'd been weak. Sentimental, he supposed, if he could ever call himself such a thing. He'd assumed Harry would have stood by him, by his vision and grand plans for his utopia, after everything that they'd been through.

He was wrong.

He let his eyes close, taking a sip of his wine as he shifted through his reports.

The resistance were slowly evacuating muggleborns away from the country, to France, and that was just so typical of him wasn't it? His jaw clenched. He tried not to think about it.

Most of the enemy forces had given up by now, assimilated and crushed into their new places - taking what they could of this new world, because resistance was futile and would lead only to death or being at the bottom of the new order.

He suspected Harry wouldn't give up. He'd die before surrendering and there was really no reason for that thought to make him so livid. If Potter hadn't managed to grow a brain since he was sixteen, then it was hardly his fault. Harry was just another pathetic specimen who didn't understand the true glory of his vision, and its limitless scope.

This was just the beginning.

But he couldn't move on until the other was dealt with. By his own hand. The man had it coming, he didn't deserve to quietly die in battle.
These thoughts weren't helping. He had far more important things to think about and consider, then some rebel leader who thought he had a chance of turning the fate of the world around.

It was the last piece, then he would have everything he'd ever wanted, and nobody would have the power to make victory taste so sour again.

His eyes snapped open as one of his alarms started buzzing.

It is considered normal for friends to drift apart as they grew older, but even under such sage words Harry would never have anticipated this.

He hurtled down the rain-trodden street, the Aurors - if they could even claim the name nowadays - chasing after him. His heart hammerered in his chest. He could see his face emblazoned on Wanted Posters on the walls at every side, some peeling at the corners but still not hiding the obscenely rich bounty available for his capture, or even information on his whereabouts.

Maybe he should feel honoured, but the sight of them, and the acknowledgement of the man-monster behind them just left the most terrible ache in his chest. And it wasn't from the numerous wounds and bruises covering his body either.

He hoped the other members of the resistance got out okay; the Aurors would be focused on him most of all, so maybe they had a chance. Maybe they'd be okay.

There weren't many of them yet, and whilst he should feel happy that the bloody war was almost over, the stiff cruelty of the oncoming peace hardly seemed better.

They were losing, maybe they'd lost already. But Harry refused to go down without fighting to the bitter end. Not after everything. He just wished all the old memories would stop playing in his head.

Harry sprinted around another corner, trying to break away from the Anti-apparation that had sprung up the second their location was betrayed, firing a blasting spell behind him to try and keep them back. He had an emergency portkey, but he would have preferred not to use it until it was absolutely necessary, because it was getting harder and harder nowadays and such things were precious.

He skidded his way around another corner, already guessing that the main entrances to Diagon Alley would be blocked off by now.

Then he swore, eyes narrowing, wand clutched even more tightly in his hands.

His mouth dried out completely.

"Shouldn't you be running the country or something?" the words blurted out before he could help himself, and his chin jutted up in defiance.

Lord Voldemort - because he couldn't call the man 'Tom', not anymore, it just twisted his insides and left a bad taste in his mouth - stared with a pseudo-impassiveness back at him. However blank that unhealthily pale face was, those unnatural, scarlet eyes were burning.

"Two years, and that's the greeting you give to an old friend?" The Dark Lord returned, softly. "I heard you were in the area. Thought I'd come see if it was true or not, seeing as you escaping my team is the only time I'd have the opportunity to run into you again."

Harry's throat felt thick, but he squared his shoulders, jaw tight.
"I suppose I should feel flattered," he replied, carefully, already starting to try and edge his way around. He was skeptical if it would work or not, but he had to try. "But then you've already killed all your old friends and anyone who used to know you, so I suppose it's more ominous than anything else."

"I should kill you," the tyrant replied, in a dangerously conversational voice. "You've been causing a lot of trouble for me with your insistent little resistance. Last I heard you were in Birmingham blowing up my factories."

"Last I heard you were considering war on France," Harry spat back, "as if forcing Britain into your twisted playground wasn't bad enough. When is it going to be enough for you?"

The Muggles were all but gone, and Britain was now a First Class Magical Zone. Purebloods - Halfbloods - Muggleborns at the bottom of the heap. It sickened him.

Tom had...Tom had never liked his heritage, Harry knew that, and had made his early distaste for muggles and his convictions of superiority more than clear, but Harry still hadn't thought...

Maybe he'd convinced himself that, with everything between them, he could convince his former lover of another way, another path. One of less hatred.

He'd failed.

Looking at Lord Voldemort was like looking at a stranger, the half imprint of somebody he used to know but who had changed beyond repair to become almost unrecognizable.

Tom Riddle was an old photograph.

Whilst Lord Voldemort may have some similarities in appearance still - and everything would be so much easier if he didn't, and the same velvet undertone to his voice - a lot had changed.

Skin that had once been a healthy cream was now like bone, slender figure becoming skeletal and god - the eyes were the worst. It wasn't even just the colour, saturated with the blood of a thousand murders and dark arts rituals, but the ice in them.

Tom had never been the affectionate kind, at least not stereotypically, even when they were together - but now. Now he seemed hollowed out and sharper around the edges, and he'd never been nice either.

It made bile claw its way up Harry's throat to see the man he'd loved - who maybe he still loved in some way that he would never admit to - become this. Monster.

There was no mercy in that gaze as the Dark Lord took a step closer to him.

"When I have everything," the other replied, simply, with a certain unwavering intentness in his expression that made Harry feel like he was pinned under a microscope. It definitely left no doubt or certain things, but it changed nothing, couldn't make it better even if his head spun to see the other again after so long.

At least in person.

Lord Voldemort had headlined the papers often enough, and even more so now when as the ruler of Wizarding Britain.

There was something else there too, just for a flicker of a second, before Harry figured he must have
been mistaken.

He clutched his wand tighter, got ready to fight.

"When is it going to be enough for you, Harry?" the man questioned, eyes still fixed on him. "When everyone in your resistance is dead? It's over. I won. The sooner you surrender to that, the better off you'll be."

"Now, we both know I'll never surrender to you," Harry returned, forcing his lips into a smirk.

The other's eyes flashed.

"You could come home."

And all of a sudden he couldn't breathe.

He'd been underground for a very long time, fighting in the shadows, in battles, trying to avoid meeting this man in the fear that he would twist him up all over again. Twist him up and spit him out, because his best friend was gone.

That became clear that day. Wired into his brain. The argument.

He sucked in a sharp exhale, shook his head, as the other stepped closer to him again, hands held up in an almost placating gesture.

Voldemort's expression had slipped into something soft and reasonable, but those eyes hadn't changed.

"Your friends could have some level of immunity too. What few you have left. They don't have to die, Harry. We can still go back to the way we used to be…"

Harry's eyes were wide, and despite his prowess in battle and reputation for being near unbeatable, he felt like nothing so much as a deer in headlights at that precise moment.

He hated it. Caught a stirring of movement, and slammed his hand down on his portkey to see the other's eyes widen too, with rage.

Back to work it was.
Chapter 2

The first time Tom Riddle met Harry Potter, he wanted.

He wanted the easy camaraderie that the green eyed eleven year old already seemed to have with the other first years in his compartment.

He wanted the surname 'Potter', and the pureblood power that came with being even a much-loved bastard in such a line, rather than being Riddle and thus, nobody at all.

He wanted to claw at that the smile which suggested everything was fine even as the flicker in the other's eyes suggested that everything really wasn't.

He wanted to be the type of boy who was friends with Harry Potter.

He wasn't any of those things.

The first time Harry Potter met Tom Riddle, he had a vague sense of unease in his chest and the feeling that he'd seen him somewhere before.

He had nightmares of scarlet eyes, just as quickly dismissed for inviting the boy into his compartment because he didn't think anyone should have to make such important first journeys alone.

He had a sense of pity at how cold the boy was, how stiff his shoulders were in his second-hand uniform, and how he couldn't seem to relax into simply being friends with people.

Maybe he had too many expectations shoved onto his shoulders, since he'd been discovered as a Potter a few months ago, wandering Diagon Alley with no memory of how he'd got there, and Tom Riddle seemed like freedom.

Maybe he just wanted a friend.

Harry scrubbed his eyes, jolting awake on the chair he was sitting on, face white. He didn't know when he'd fallen asleep, but a quick tempus charm told him it was around five in the morning.

And his shoulder and neck felt stiff for falling asleep in such a bad position, his mind murky and clouded with old memories he hadn't been able to shake.

"You alright?" tendered a quiet voice behind him. Harry didn't jump out of his skin, finding Hermione behind him. She'd been in their year at school. He'd always got on well with her, though they'd never spent much time together.

Sometimes she'd just give him the oddest, saddest looks and he hated it.

He swallowed, forced a smile.

The headaches kept coming, in and out, before fading again.
"Always," he said, briskly, standing up. "Reports?"

She continued to stare at him for a moment longer, fists clenched at her sides, a smudge of dust on her cheek. He raised his brows, pointedly. "Hermione."

She cleared her throat, seeming to dismiss it. He knew she meant well looking out for him, he just sometimes wished she wouldn't.

"Voldemort has started rebuilding the factories we've destroyed, and he's had to channel money in rebuilding Diagon Alley after the mess the Aurors made chasing us." Her voice dropped a little then, subdued, and he grimaced.

They'd lost some good people there – friends, talented witches and wizards. Their numbers were pretty much down to nothing.

He tried not to sigh heavily, wondering if they even had a chance. He wondered if he should have taken Tom-Voldemort up on his offer of immunity for the rest of the resistance. It had probably just been a lie. The man had only been stalling so his Aurors could toss him into Azkaban or something.

But he still couldn't even think about it without something catching horrendously in his throat. And what recruits he did have certainly weren't happy with him.

Of course, there'd always been rumours. It was hardly a secret among the resistance that he used to bloody well date the enemy, but for a long time it had been squashed down as an uncomfortable thing that should never come up.

But everything seemed to become an issue when they were losing, especially when he'd come face to face with their notorious lord and master, and lived to tell the tale. Apparently that was rare enough that anyone who hadn't been close to them, back then (and most of the people in that category were dead or in Tom's inner circle) thought that was surprising enough despite his own reputation for them to at least consider foul play.

For years, he'd taken an alias simply because he couldn't stand the questions and the assumptions.

He'd once, in a weak moment with firewhiskey, joked to Hermione that it was like a stereotypical bad divorce but worse. Tom had taken his friends, his money in funding this bloody opposition, his hope in humanity and the country too just to rub salt in.

She hadn't been all that amused, but it was enough to stop Harry feeling like he was choking under the pressure.

He just didn't know how long they could keep this up. At least not in the sense of civil war and rebellion. They were too outnumbered. He was currently working on trying to get some support from the other countries, France perhaps, because Voldemort was going to end up turning on them too and it was so familiar to the bombs he half remembered.

A house on fire, his mother's voice pleading…it all buzzed to dust in the back of his mind. Unattainable memories he'd never quite got back.

And for crying out loud, Tom-Voldemort had even taken his life ambitions, because the bastard had finally ended up dragging him into national and world politics too.

The git always had been a leech. Such insults seemed even sourer now than they did back then.

There was a truce dinner coming up. It seemed absurd to him to go to a fine dinner in Paris, merging
with an international magical conference, but he needed help. He needed to dress up nice and make a good impression and fantastic arguments on why the world should step in and take Voldemort down and interfere, whilst his friends were dying around him and he lived in in a warded camp and set of tents in the middle of the forest.

It just seemed ridiculous. But he couldn't do this alone. Not anymore.

Some of the resistance had tentatively suggested that they just leave – flee England and start up a new life somewhere else, the battle lost.

Harry knew better.

If they stopped now, it was just a matter of waiting and hoping Voldemort didn't occupy whichever country they chose, whilst they still lived.

If he'd had any doubts that Voldemort would settle for Britain, they were gone.

He could feel a headache building, gave Hermione a reassuring smile.

"It will work out okay," he promised. "In the end."

Maybe he was an idealistic idiot despite it all and sort of hoped he'd still get through to Tom.

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When he was sorted into Slytherin, Harry had to admit that he was a little nervous and could feel something nagging at his mind. Maybe the Sorting Hat's chuckles ringing in his head and the relishing smirk when it asked 'are you sure? Not going to argue are you?'

It seemed a bit weird; even for a talking hat.

Still, there was nothing wrong with ambition and Lady Dorea Black-nee Potter had been a Slytherin, so it wasn't like he was going to get booted out of the Potter family for it.

He'd been lucky they'd accepted him in the first place, but apparently he was a Potter because Goblin-run blood tests didn't lie, and he shared a remarkable family resemblance certain details aside.

He'd sat down, been a bit disappointed when Charlus had swaggered his way over to the Gryffindor table because now he didn't know anyone, and whilst he may have been a Potter, apparently the Slytherins could be a bit picky on their blood purity.

Certainly, Walburga Black was giving him a disdainful look down the table, and looked about a split second from hissing 'filthy little bastard' in his direction.

He probably clapped the loudest when Tom became a Slytherin too.

It was nice to have a familiar face.

There'd never been any doubt as to which house he would end up, in of course. He could talk to snakes, and so the House of the Serpent simply had to be fitting for him.

He could see them in their expensive robes, and he kept a cold, blank face as he made his way over, taking a seat next to Harry. He didn't let himself smile at the other, or at any of them.

There was a muted, somewhat awkward clapping. He didn't understand it. Was it because he was
poor? He refused to be unnerved, tipping his chin up in defiance.

They made pleasant enough small talk to him. And he thought, for a second, that he'd imagined any sort of hostility.

Then, in the common room, he'd heard the word ‘mudblood' hissed at him.

He didn't know what a mudblood was, but he certainly vowed to prove himself better than that. He would gain power, and then he'd show them – because he'd seen that look of circling him before, like he was a startled deer stuck in a snare around wolves.

He squared his shoulders. No. He wouldn't allow himself to be picked on this time. He'd put a stop to it in the Orphanage, he wasn't going to tolerate it here. He opened his mouth to say something withering, but the second after that Potter had smashed his fist right into the pointed face of Abraxas Malfoy.

There was a ringing silence, and the boy gave a winning grin over his cracked knuckles.

"I don't like that word."

It was unfortunate that their Head of House walked in at the same moment.

Tom couldn't describe his home as anything other than elegantly indulgent.

His sheets were the finest Egyptian cotton, and he had art in the walls straight from the National Gallery.

It was everything he'd always deserved and never had.

If there was spare guest bedroom, never mentioned by the House Elves who kept it spotless, or anyone else, with fresh sheets and an emerald green duvet, books on the shelves and an old Cleansweep in the closet…it didn't bear thinking about it.

He'd just got out of a PR meeting with Abraxas regarding their presentations in the upcoming Truce Dinner.

He didn't know if Potter would show up, but considering the other nations had made it clear it was an open invite, and it was under a truce, he suspected the other would just to stab at him further and make things difficult.

Maybe the man's hatred of politics would keep him at bay, but he doubted it. Harry always had been infuriatingly stubborn and defiant, from the first moment he met him.

It would be…interesting, either way, or he refused to give any due consideration to the man further. The traitor had been haunting his thoughts for too long already, especially because of the previous week's incident.

He'd been so close to having him…and he wasn't examining himself too closely on that regard either. Harry Potter was a threat, one that needed to be neutralized by whatever means necessary.

He told himself he was merely acknowledging that if Harry worked with him, instead of against him, his utopia would be set up far more quickly. Not that he didn't have the time to spare, but nonetheless.

God, he hated Potter so much.
He felt he could be consumed by his hatred, if he allowed himself to feel it, burning beneath his skin.

No, he had more important things to talk about, like the meeting with the quarterly meeting with the Werewolves he now had to attend to, and pretending he gave a damn about the children his 'friends' were suddenly so disgustingly insistent over creating.

…Maybe he'd get Harry a cactus for next time he saw the man. He could stab it in his pretty eyes, and maybe that would stop old memories cluttering his sleep.

Either way, he had a lot to do before the dinner next week.

Being world leader was supposed to be more fun than this.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, a lot of people pointed out this is quite a similar premise to the Dumbledore/Grindelwald story...and yeah, you're right. I cannot deny that. But in my defense I do have a whole backstory thing planned, and it's such an interesting premise to play around with...*sheepish hopeful smile.*

Anyway, hope you guys are enjoying the stories, as always reviews are inspiration, generally loved and a great pick me up for reality, oh and for your note - big block of italics equals story bit is in the past, whilst normal is present and what's happening now. :)

PS: This chapter is (belatedly, sorry) dedicated to "Upon-a-Rainbow" for her birthday :) And I'd give you dedication for being a twin, but you lied to me :P Anyway, if you're reading this...um yeah. Have a chapter. Happy Birthday! Hope it was awesome.
Sometimes, Harry couldn’t help but irrationally think that maybe if their first time had been different, with more candles and god-forsaken rose petals, then maybe things wouldn’t have gone as wrong as they had.

Maybe he would have been enough for Tom, enough to prove that he didn’t have to strip his identity and become someone completely different just to be worth something. Maybe, if Harry had known what was coming, he would have cherished the moments, taken more care with his words and actions and not reeled furious when the truth of his former lover’s plans came out. Maybe he would have been better at showing that being Tom Riddle meant something and was worth it. Maybe it was his fault that Tom had turned into Voldemort, and maybe it was something that had always lurked in the man, but he felt guilty either way.

Homosexuality hadn’t exactly been...encouraged at Hogwarts, and so that night he’d ended up going to Slughorn’s Christmas Party with Charlotte Barton in a contrived but well meaning night of awkwardly brushing hands and blushes seared scarlet in the soft lighting.

It hadn’t actually been that bad or anything. He’d known she had a small crush on him, but they were good enough friends and the conversation was decent. He’d had a pleasant time, outside of the expected moments of discomfort that came hand in hand with such things, and the ever so polite kiss left on her cheek at the end of the night.

Tom had been seething all evening, and Harry sort of knew he would, but hadn’t expected anything to come of it because even if the boy had always had a possessive streak, he must know that reputation was everything and mattered even more in their house then others, when bloodlines and heirs were so paramount.

He’d dropped her off back at the Hufflepuff common room, and returned to Slytherin. He couldn’t remember, now, what he’d been thinking about but he’d barely entered the dungeons when Tom was on him, slamming him back hard into one of the abandoned potions classrooms. Lips had crashed down on his own a second later.

He’d ended up splayed and pinned against one of the desks, his shirt trapping his hands above his
head as Tom sucked and nibbled at his throat, teasing every inch of him half to insanity, a near manic gleam in his eyes, very obviously relishing every moan and gasp he could wring out; hands gripped tight on his hips, nails raking burning claims against his skin.

There’s been nothing romantic, sweet or tender about it. Just a clumsy, raw sort of want, quickly over, leaving them both in the ringing silence and harsh, panting breaths, boneless with lingering pleasure.

Tom had spent a lot of time refining his methods in the year after that, as they learned the best way to exquisitely torture each other with deceptively tender lips, grazing fingers and heat trapped flush between them, practising smiles that taunted and reassured at the same time.

It wasn’t entirely without affection, of course it wasn’t, but most people wouldn’t believe it to see the charming but aloof facade Riddle affected, and the way they only softened when no one else was around to easily witness it, and thoughts of ruin and undoing shifted to lazy sunlight on pillows and fingers tracing over and healing marks made in war.

He supposed Tom had even warned him one night, of what could and would come, breath hot against his throat, hips grinding against his own until he couldn’t even think straight, every line of tension in his body radiating need. He’d smirked up at the boy, a gleam in his eyes, asking him teasingly what he wanted, fingers raking through the other’s hair, down his back to a bruising grip at his waist.

You. Tom had said. I want you. I want everything you can give me, and then everything else too after that until there’s no part that I can’t call mine.

Sometimes, during the dark nights in hiding, as his body ached from bloody battles of a very different kind, and he knew people comforted each other and some had even offered such things to him with soft lips he didn’t know how to communicate with anymore, he wondered if that was still true.

Yeah, Harry didn’t see how he hadn’t seen that they were destined to end up on opposing sides of the battlefield all along. He supposed happiness had a nasty habit of blindsiding people.

He didn’t feel blindsided now, sitting in a stiff suit at a truce dinner, with Voldemort wearing an oh so familiar smirk on his face as he made easy small talk to various ambassadors.

He could admit Tom had always been more interested in politics now, and maybe it was normal for a Slytherin to build up networks early, but Harry had never quite expected it to lead into this despite Tom’s old habit to go into a rant about all the things he would change in the world.
Harry had listened, dutifully, argued his own points, but in the self-indulgence of youth had enjoyed watching the enthusiastic gleam in Tom’s eyes and the flowing gestures of his talented hands more than any real consideration of the other’s future plans when everyone was making them and he’d assumed he’d be putting up with a politician not a tyrant.

The bastard was straight across the table from him, and even as Voldemort discussed a point on the upcoming international duelling tournament the other caressed the tip of his obscenely expensive dragonhide boots along Harry’s calf.

It drove him absolutely mad. Especially when he knew the git was deliberately angling to frustrate him and make him childishly lash out, like he would have done at Hogwarts, interrupting the proceedings with a sweet smile and a barbed comment.

But he’d long since discovered the quickest way to piss Tom Riddle off, if not Voldemort, was to ignore him and frankly as much as he would love to lunge across the vol-au-vents and the small plates of caviar and various other things to wring the man’s neck, he also knew that would do nothing to help him right now. He had to be the professional politician, cold and composed, not everything else.

He was rewarded with the way Voldemort’s eyes flickered to him - not that he was paying attention - as he engaged Marja Lundgren, the Swedish ambassador, in a light conversation about the upcoming Fossegrimen Festival in November.

He tried not to just lunge at the food, eating politely around replies, despite being absolutely ravenous. He hardly had Hogwarts banquets when he was a fugitive, after all, though they made do. They weren’t...starving exactly, but it was hardly plentiful either. This was more food than he’d seen in quite some time.

If he was in a position to do so, he would have brought it home to share with his fellow rebels, but that would do nothing to help him from a political standpoint.

He still paused as Dufort, their French host, leaned over to place another platter of soft looking rolls in front of him with a smile, to replace an empty one. Harry blinked.

“Please,” the man waved a hand. “Eat up. It seems England starves its citizens.” Obviously, Harry had suspected the Frenchman would be on his side, considering France would be the first on Voldemort’s hit list should he aspire to extend his empire, and Harry resisted the urge to grin.
“Thank you, sir,” he said, playing up a little to his youth he would admit, whilst maintaining the image of knowing exactly what he was doing. The people here already knew he wasn’t without power. He’d been invited in the first place, after all.

And if they did think he was just some stupid child, despite Tom being the same age as him, then it would mean they’d slip up around him, because he was pretty sure everyone had their own ulterior motives on a global scale and weren’t just here for the sake of resolving the scraps of another English Civil War, whatever it’s impact on a worldwide scale.

If they helped him, they would damn well be wanting something in return.

Voldemort didn’t quite shoot him a foul look, but there was ice in the other’s eyes. He was glad they had the table between them.

“Oh, I feed my citizens,” the tyrant replied lightly, with a pleasant smile. “Poverty in the UK has reached an all time low under my regime with resources shared more equally around a lesser population. Mr Potter is merely not currently a citizen, he has not registered under the new acts and spends most of his time plotting acts of terrorism. If he broke the law less, I’m sure he’d come home to dinner just fine.”

Harry ignored the twist in his stomach, and the flash of something else in the other’s eyes for barely a second - wished he could ignore the call back to Voldemort’s suggestion that he just come home before too.

This was exactly the same. If he stopped fighting, he had no doubt he could lead a very comfortable life under Voldemort’s heavy hand, watched and doted on and smothered in some parody of what they used to have where his own autonomy and agency was limited in the parameters of what Voldemort wanted too.

There would be no freedom to it. It would be punishing in that suffocating way which he couldn’t lash out against because as a ‘traitor’ it was ‘far better than he deserved’ and he should instil a sense of gratitude instead.

“Maybe you should come up with better laws that don’t discriminate based on something as archaic and ridiculous as blood purity then,” Harry replied, sweetly, his own eyes hardening too. “Bit strange, really, considering you’re a halfblood yourself.”

There was a stiff silence, that bordered on the want to nervous laughter to break it on the behalf of some people.
After a moment, Lundgren leaned forwards to try and ease the tension, and Voldemort’s expression carefully softened away from the terrifying ferocity in his eyes and curving the edges of his magic.

Maybe that made the difference here, in the way the others were reacting - whilst none of them were weak wizards and witches, many were here due to intelligence rather than raw magical power, and then some were here as representative of those more powerful than themselves. A mix.

But Tom had always been powerful. More so than even normal standards.

Harry was nonetheless relieved when the next course was served, and, eventually, he could escape to his room.

He didn’t think he’d ever enjoy politics.

Of course, he’d expected Harry to be here, he just hadn’t expected the man to be any sort of threat to him on a political scale.

The Harry Potter he knew had always loathed politics and despite his status as a bastard Potter son, had always shied away from such things. He’d always refused to engage in even Slytherin politics, and he supposed it had been a mark of how...special Harry was that he had gotten away with it. Friends with all the houses alike, and not penalized for the lack of effort he put in.

He was more genuine than that. Of course, that wasn’t to say Harry was incapable of manipulation, he certainly wasn’t, and Harry knew the systems as well as he himself did...but this was different. Harry was an expert with Slytherin politics when he actually bothered, but he’d never cared to engage in them and build up in the same way. He’d never bothered with world politics, and...he’d somehow assumed he would be the same now. Knowing theory, but getting easily worked up and passionate and real over the cold masks dictated.

But he barely recognized the boy’s previous politics now. Harry was much more...honed and sharp around the edges where he used to be, the goofing off and playfulness stripped away for something incredibly dangerous.
It should have made him furious. It did - the man seemed to insist on ruining everything Tom worked for - but what infuriated him even more was that he liked it.

Not the ruining everything he worked for, but there was something incredibly...arousing to see Harry coming into his own and in control, playing in Tom’s fields. It was the same surge of heat he got on those occasions when Harry used to wear his shirt.

Want and violence had always been the best-worst combination when he came to the two of them.

He’d barged into the room Harry was staying in with ridiculous ease, smirking when he could hear the shower going.

And then sometimes the other was pleasantly routine.

It had always been something more than politics between them.

Harry knew the real politics would start tomorrow, at least in the official sense of meetings, rather than today’s quiet circling and picking and studying for any vulnerabilities exposed for exploitation.

That was what he didn’t like about politics. The cruel sliminess of it all. It was supposed to be about the good of the country, and if it was only that Harry may have been on board a long time ago, never one for idly sitting aside when he could do something about a situation.

Not when it really counted, at least.

Maybe he’d spent too much time around Tom Riddle as a teenager, but the bastard had effectively stomped out all possibility of apathy in everyone around him, and sucked it into his own black hole of uncaring.

Still, the hot spray of the amazing shower - and he mentioned that he missed reliable hot water not heated by his own magic? - was like heaven against his muscles, and did a great job relaxing him.

The wine served with dinner left a pleasant feeling too, though he wasn’t intoxicated. He wasn’t so stupid as to drop his guard like that. He wrapped one of the soft white towels around his waist, emerging from the steaming bathroom only to swear very loudly and nearly jump out of his skin. His
Voldemort merely took another lazy drag of his cigarette - and Harry found it rather ironic that the champion of blood purity was addicted to such a muggle product.

“I know it’s been a while,” Tom-Voldemort drawled, “but I’m pretty sure my presence on your bed is not so unusual an occurrence to warrant such a dramatic reaction.” The other’s gaze raked across his torso, head tilting, a vague, remote sort of appreciation flaring in those unnatural eyes for a second.

Harry huffed and crossed his arms defensively.

“Get out.”

All he got for that was another smirk, as the bastard exhaled smoke in his general direction. Though Harry did notice the git had at least had the courtesy to crack the window open.

“You’re room is better than mine. I think Monsieur Dufort likes you. And not in the way you want anyone but me to like you either,” the Dark Lord murmured, eyes cooling a little. “Feel free to get dressed by the way. Trust me, I don’t mind. Nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Harry scowled.

“And there was me thinking this was a matter of professionalism and not just your petty jealousy. Interesting that you’re still so possessive. What’s the matter, frustrated that nobody wants to sleep with you now that you look so inhuman?”

The other’s lips thinned at the comment, and Harry gave a sharp, rather nasty grin in response, turning his back to change without much bother to if the other was there or not.

He was hardly the shy teenager he’d once been, who was going to start blushing and stammering awkwardly. He heard a sharp intake of breath, and the grin broadened. However, when he glanced back over his shoulder, his expression was perfectly composed, eyebrows raised.

“Problem, Tom?”

“Don’t call me Tom.” The response was immediate, and the other snapped up, eyes suddenly dark, murderous, and alien to any teasing he might once have known. Harry didn’t blink, despite how his stomach still lurched at the change.
“Well, if I didn’t take to ‘my lord’ didn’t cut it when we were in bed,” he sneered mockingly, “it’s not going to appeal to me much now. I like Tom. I don’t like Voldemort.” He suspected they both knew he was talking about far more than names, and the other stood up, discarding the cigarette.

Harry wondered if he’d irritated the bastard into leaving before he broke the truce and shattered. Maybe he loved the vicious way he could prod at all of those buttons the man kept locked up under his armour. Maybe he loved that even if Voldemort could hide them from the rest of the world, Harry had raked his claws across all of them a long time ago already.

“What you seem to fail to realize is that Tom Riddle and Voldemort are in actual fact the same-”

“Yes, I know all about your smug little anagram,” Harry said lazily, yawning, despite the sudden raw ache in his chest. “Is there a particular reason in my room or are you just trying to temporarily pretend that you still have friends?”

The man took several steps closer to him, looming over his smaller physique, and Harry resisted the wary urge to take a step back.

“What do you hope to gain from this desperate clutching for allies, Harry?” Voldemort asked, voice too soft to really mean anything good. Oddly, Tom was prone to saying his nicest things in as cold and uncaring a way possible, and his cruelest with that honeyed sweetness in a twisted reverse of what one would reasonably expect. “Say you come here, get France onside with your little rebellion, maybe some other countries too...what good will it do you?”

Harry felt his expression freeze in place. Those bloody eyes remained fixed on him, and his own nearly flinched shut as pale fingers stroked down the side of his cheek, the first skin contact in...what had it been? Three of four years? He felt like every muscle in his body had locked on the spot, as Tom continued, in that same almost gentle tone.

“All you bring is more death onto the world, more suffering, and I know you don’t want that. I don’t want that either. It’s a waste of my time and magical blood. I know the last world war is as fresh in your memory as it is mine, do you really want to drag us into another one?”

“You’d do it anyway,” Harry said, voice mercifully not cracking, but raspier than before. “You said it yourself, you’re not going to stop until you have everything, and even then I doubt it would be enough for you. You don’t know what to do with peace.”

“Do you?” the other countered. “We’ve never known a day of peace in our lives, either of us. But with your help...we could do it. Together. If you stopped this infantile crusade of yours.”

Harry snapped himself out it and reared back, his heart hammering.

“Stop it!” he hissed.
“You know it’s true, and you know you’re no better than me, turning your friends into soldiers and watching them die for your hopeless cause.”

“Maybe I’ll settle for seeing you dead,” Harry spat, eyes wild, composure splintering.

“If that were true, you wouldn’t have spent the last four years avoiding seeing me so carefully,” Voldemort dismissed. “You’re still too in love with the pathetic teenager I used to be. Predictable, love. Don’t ever think I can’t see through your tells.”

Sometimes, awfully, he forgot that it was all so horribly mutual. He could smash his fingers across all of the other’s triggers all he wanted, but Tom had always been capable of doing the exact same damage back in a perpetual stalemate.

He swallowed, a ringing in his ears. The hand on which had hovered over his cheek tightened on his jaw, pulling it up, and those lips ghosted across his own. Harry’s own hand shot up, grabbing Tom’s-Voldemort’s wrist and squeezing tightly, warningly, mouth dry.

He didn’t think he could look away, even if he wanted to.

“Think about it,” the other murmured. “These meetings could be a lot more beneficial if we were on the same side. I’m sure you can remember the pros for the choice. The immunity deal I offered last time we met will remain open until the end of the summer. If you don’t take it, I will actively have you hunted down in your little set of caves, and see everyone you care about killed in front of you no matter how much you plead.”

He received a smile that was far too saccharine, and then the other was sweeping out.

“It was lovely to see you again, Harry. Feel free to come by for dinner whilst you’re here.”

The door slammed shut behind him.
Chapter 4

It was lunch time.

They’d been in meetings all morning and Harry was trying desperately to think when he’d thought this was a good idea.

He’d been up all night, playing Riddle’s words about the immunity over and over in his head. Everything certainly suggested that Voldemort could easily attack them at any time, the second he could get around their extensive wards.

He’d written Hermione and Minerva, to warn them, and...well, maybe Tom’s words about turning his friends into soldiers bugged him more than he cared to admit. He didn’t want to force people to fight. If they wanted to surrender, he wouldn’t hold it against them.

The resistance had been in a tail spin for years, and people were tired.

But Harry wasn’t going to stop fighting. But then again, maybe as much as he believed in the causes of the resistance - started by Dumbledore, and soon taken over by himself - and the awfulness of Voldemort’s regime, his real interest lay in the Dark Lord.

Maybe he just needed to see if the man he loved was still in there, somewhere. Though, if he was, Harry wasn’t sure that would be any better. Might just be more painful, clinging on some hope for redemption and change.

Minerva said he was an idiot.

She was probably right.

He concentrated on loading his plate up with food. Once again, there was an extravagant selection of sandwiches, finger foods, all delicately made up in chairs.

Maybe he was supposed to be refined and take a couple, but, well. He’d learnt to take what he could get.
He was also supposed to be making polite small talk again, but after being in meetings all day he
needed a break from politicians or he was going to scream.

It seemed luck wasn’t on his side.

Dufont settled next to him, holding his own platter of food.

“Mr Potter,” he greeted, politely. “Was the room comfortable?”

“Just Harry will do,” he said. “And yes, thank you.”

“And the food?”

“Everything is perfect, Mr Dufont.”

“Please, call me Ettienne.”

Harry forced a smile.

“Of course.”

“I was most impressed by your argument for the implementation of magical orphanages and
regulated surveillance of muggleborns and their guardians, as an alternative to the wizarding zone
state,” the man said. “You’ve clearly put a lot of thought into it.”

“Yes.” As opposed to walking into a political meeting blind with no ideas to contribute? The statute
of secrecy was in shreds after all that happened with the British Magical War, and everything.
Something had to be done. “I see no point fighting to end a regime if I cannot see what could lie
beyond it. That just leaves a vaccuum.”

“Indeed...indeed,” Dufont murmured, eyeing him with increasing interest. “But surely Britain seems
an...impractical focal point for you? All things considered.”

“All things considered meaning the Dark Lord.” Harry kept his voice carefully light.

“Yes. You clearly have a strong vision. It would be a shame to see it wasted in death. Britain is at
peace with itself, more or less. You must realize there is nobody left to support you.”

The words, and indeed the conversation was blunt, shockingly so - but Harry could appreciate it.
Could appreciate that Dufort, for whatever flaws he had, had obviously picked up on Harry’s distaste for beating around the bush and hiding weak arguments or politics in fancy prose.

Still, his throat tightened at the words.

“I believe that is why I came here. Everyone knows that, even if our topics are not so crude as world domination.”

Dufort stared at him, expression impassive.

“Come to France. Flee with your companions. Start a new life. Your cause will be met with far more welcoming arms elsewhere. Your ideas are solid, but…”

“But no one wants further war. What if further war is already on the cards and fear of fighting will not stop it?” Harry’s voice turned frigid.

Dufort’s jaw clenched.

“It is not a matter of fear, but practicality. Or is there some other reason you are so attached to Britain?”

He couldn’t miss the quiet challenge in the frenchman’s tone, and he looked up sharply. Started wondering, again, exactly why he’d been invited when they all seemed so very interested in him, but not in helping the resistance.

Couldn’t help but think he knew, with that question.

“My allegiance would not stop him raging war on your country.”

He could feel bile in his throat.

“That does not answer my question.” Dufort’s eyes flickered nonetheless, despite his words. Harry sighed, stood up. Étienne stood too, grasping his arm firmly. “Harry Potter. There’s all sorts of rumours going on about you. I don’t know if I believe even half of them.” Their gazes locked. The room was swimming slightly. “Harry-” Dufort started.

“Excuse me.” It was an entirely different voice, and Dufort’s grip tightened, before dropping. Harry didn’t even need to look around – could feel fingers pressing into his shoulder, could see the look in the Frenchman’s eyes, even though he tried not to show it.
Dufort’s chin jutted up after a few seconds.

“You should leave Britain whilst you have the chance, Mr Potter.”

The man walked away.

It didn’t take longer than a month of dating Tom, to know that the Slytherin Heir’s possessiveness stretched to all areas of his life. Of course, it was a pity Harry didn’t twig until too late, or didn’t think given the circumstances.

Not that first time, anyway.

The first time, it had been an innocent thing. Most of the population weren’t aware that anything had shifted between him and Tom after all, and Charlotte Barton had still been under the tentative impression he liked her as more than a friend since Slughorn’s party. He couldn’t blame her.

But apparently Tom could blame him well enough.

The look in the other’s eyes was of an insatiable darkness. Harry’s mouth immediately went dry. The wand his...boyfriend seemed to tame a word, and lover too pretentious...that Tom was twirling idly through his fingers hardly made him feel better either.

Tom was dangerous at the best of times. Tom with his wand out and that particular edge to his expression was deadly. Harry’s throat bobbed, shoulders squaring in preparation of a fight.

“Tell me,” the other murmured, voice like caramel. “What oversight did I make?”

“Oversight?” Harry questioned, warily.

“To make you feel I was remotely okay with sharing you?” The tone was still so almost conversational, that it was jarring. Harry’s hand slipped towards his own pocket, and in an instant
his wand was soaring into Tom’s fingers.

Harry folded his arms, eyes narrowed.

“You can’t be pissed off with me, when we never specified exclusivity. Also, you are seriously overreacting about this.”

Tom’s head tilted, something fluid and predatory in the movement.

“As I said, it was my oversight.” Riddle wetted his lips. “And one I fully intend to correct tonight. Strip.”

Harry’s eyes widened.

“What?”

“Don’t act obtuse.” Tom’s eyes gleamed. “I know you heard me.”

“What are you going to do if I don’t?” Harry growled, shoulders stiff.

“Oh, nothing,” Tom shrugged, elegantly. “We both know I don’t need to threaten you, when you’re not going to walk out that door anyway. Not over this. Especially not over this. One, because you’re curious over where this is going, and two because you fancy me more than you fancy Miss Barton.”

Harry blinked at that. Tom’s smile only broadened, sharp around the edges, as he sprawled against his armchair in a performance of nonchalance.

“Unless,” Tom added, “you do in fact fancy Miss Barton more. Because then I take it all back, and we might start having some problems here.”

Harry huffed; not sure if he should be aroused, amused or horrified. Maybe all three at once. But, despite everything, he didn’t feel particularly threatened. Tom was dangerous, yes, and there was a certain wired tension emanating from the other, but it wasn’t the type that was poised to attack or harm him. It was just there, a restless sort of projection of Tom himself.
The Slytherin Heir’s brows rose at his lack of response, expectantly.

Harry considered his options. Damn Riddle for being right about the curiosity.

He tossed his robe into Tom’s face and started unbuttoning his shirt.

“So satisfy my curiosity, what is it you have planned?”

“I wouldn’t wish to ruin the surprise,” Tom purred. “Boxers off. Everything off.”

Harry hesitated a second, noticing Tom was making absolutely no effort to undress himself. Still dressed impeccably in every layer of his uniform, buttoned up, tie tucked in, hair smooth. Everything seeming perfectly angelic and proper, except for the expression on his face.

Sometimes he could see why Tom had been mistaken as a devil child.

“Aren’t you planning to take any of that off?”

“No,” Tom was smiling again. “At least not yet. This is about your pleasure, not mine. I mean, I’ve clearly been…neglecting my proper duties.”

Yeah, that was slightly terrifying. As much as he could feel himself perking up with greater and greater interest on what exactly was going through Tom’s head. At least he was still pretty sure the other wasn’t intending to murder him.

“Yes,” Harry raised his brows, sarcastic, “and being fully clothed whilst the other person is completely exposed says nothing about power, and playing with power.”

The whole thing was a power fantasy!

Tom gave an innocent smile, and the wand twirled in his fingers again.

“I won’t start anything more without your permission.”

Now he was suspicious. Intrigued, but incredibly suspicious. Harry’s eyes narrowed slightly. The smile broadened to a rather shark like grin, and damn it if it didn’t make a hot burst of tension coil in his spine.
He supposed it was never as simple as submissive and dominant with them. Of course it wasn’t – they were both bloody dominant! He stared back, meeting the challenge in Tom’s eyes, suddenly glad he had no homework due tomorrow.

He stripped the rest of the way, clothes in a neat pile next to him.

Tom’s gaze raked appreciatively down, lingering on his already hard length with a small smirk, before up to his face once more. To be honest, Tom didn’t look entirely unaffected by the drawn battle lines either.

Harry suddenly couldn’t help but wonder if this had ever really been Charlotte Barton at all, or simply something that had been building for a while now, and Tom only now had a justification or excuse.

The Slytherin looked like he was concentrating on something for a moment, most likely the room. Harry couldn’t say he wasn’t anticipating some clues as to where the hell this night was supposed to be going. Though, in that sense, the permission thing was a relief as much as he was pretty sure there was a catch behind it all.

A pair of handcuffs appeared.

Nothing too unusual, though Harry did jolt. They’d never actually used a separate restraint, planned, instead of hands or ties and simply who pinned who down at any given time.

“Hands, please,” Tom said, almost tease in his voice. Harry sucked in a sharp breath, aware that a threshold – at least for this night – was going on here.

“You sure this is about my pleasure?” he returned, lightly, though a smirk did flitter across his lips. He stepped forward, and Tom reached out an unnervingly gentle hand to turn him, fingers sliding over his shoulder, to secure his hands firmly behind his back.

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“Of course,” Tom purred, lips grazing across his ear, deceptively soft before a hint of teeth and crueller things. “After all, if you’re restrained, you’re not required to do anything.”

He should not be getting off on this so quickly. But he had to admit it was…interesting, at the very least.
Harry twisted his head to study the other, not trusting the pretence of innocence as a second. It made him more uneasy than the lingering darkness ever could. Tom pressed a sharper kiss to his lips, but quickly pulled back, hands resting on his hips.

“See, that might be sweet if I wasn’t aware of your complete incapability to altruism,” Harry murmured. Tom laughed, before his face turned serious, and quick as a flash he’d grabbed Harry’s chin tightly, tilting his head up a little, lips against his throat.

“And yet you’re still going along with this. My beautiful idiot…I said I wasn’t going to up the level without your permission, I never said I wasn’t going to thoroughly ruin and pluck you to pieces beneath my hand until you’re so far gone that you’ve forgotten your own name and having nothing left but me.”

Harry swallowed. Shit.

Tom’s lips dragged up, slowly, all but nuzzling against his throat until he pressed a chaste kiss against his cheek. Harry could feel the material of Tom’s robes pressing flush against his back.

“High ambitions. You sure your self-control is up to it?” Harry managed. Whilst he was pretty sure he didn’t trust Tom in a lot of things, he was pretty confident that for all the man was a sadistic bastard he wasn’t about to step back from where Harry was currently leaning on him slightly, without some kind of warning. “I mean,” he continued, wetting his lips, “we both know that me being cuffed in front of you is doing more to you than it is to me.”

It was taunting, as much as anything, and Tom’s hand, still gripping his throat, abruptly tightened and pulled to force Harry up onto his toes, leaning back entirely onto Tom’s own body weight, breathing a little harsher and more strained than before.

It just made him laugh.

Oh, it had to drive Tom nuts to have him in cuffs but still not be in complete control.

“Yeah?” Tom returned, breath ghosting over his lips now with the way he had Harry twisted, and with the Slytherin Heir’s height advantage. “You’re not thinking of her right now, are you?”

“Oh I don’t know,” Harry’s eyes gleamed mischievously. “She’s very cute, can you do cute?”
“I’m a good actor, Harry. I can do anything.” A hand wound around his torso, keeping him pressed flush as Tom’s hips canted forward, fingers dragging down over his torso. “But we both know sweet won’t make your heart pound like…this.” Tom’s palm came to a stop, measuring each thud against Harry’s ribcage.

Harry did consider saying something flippant like ‘you’re adorable when you’re jealous’ — but, well…

“No,” he said, softly. “It doesn’t.”

He could tell he’d made the right choice in not actually making a complete mockery of whatever feelings of insecurity or possessiveness Tom might be feeling, when the other kissed him. With… surprising sweetness.

Then it vanished as he was spun dizzying and pushed back, knees hitting the sofa and buckling, so he tumbled backwards sprawled against the cushions. Tom was on him seconds after that, mouth far more ferocious and claiming this time. Teeth, and tongue and hunger.

Harry’s hands automatically jerked, where they were trapped behind his back — eager to run his fingers through the thick strands of Tom’s hair. To ruffle up that irritating neatness when he knew he himself must be starting to look dishevelled by now.

Then he remembered the cuffs again, growled in frustration, and bit Tom’s lips instead.

The other boy just laughed at him, sitting up after a moment, still straddling him, drinking in the sight of him, chest pushed forwards as his shoulders were pulled back by his arms.

“Gorgeous,” Tom declared.

“Yeah, aren’t you lucky,” Harry smirked. “And I suppose you’ll do.”

“Oh, I’ll do, will I?” Riddle growled.
“Just about. You scrape by,” Harry started to tease, before making a soft sound as Tom’s mouth latched onto his neck again, sucking and ravaging the skin. His head tipped back, throat bared, lips slightly parted in quiet pleasure – and didn’t that just have Tom all but purring with approval.

It actually was rather adorable.

It became less adorable as his frustration grew, want surging through him. He ground his hips forward, eagerly, only for Tom to roll his own back at the same time, denying him the friction.

“Fuck, you’re a bastard,” Harry groaned. Tom’s hand caressed his cheek, and he kissed him again, hard, leaving him dizzy and panting for air. Euphoric with each raw breath reminding him alive, and achingly hard.

“Just taking my time on you,” Tom murmured, though the wicked expression said otherwise. “We’re normally so rushed. It’s rather lovely watching you squirm for once.”

“I’m dating a madman.”

“You love it.”

But Tom did shift them, pushing Harry onto his back instead, as the sofa morphed just as quickly to a bed, fine linen and all, and then finally – finally that arrogant mouth closed around his length. He gave a moan of pleasure, nearly melting, and felt Tom grin.

He half wondered if he should be seriously worried to have Tom’s teeth there. Was still trying to wrap his head around the shock, because…yeah, Tom had shoved him down so that he wouldn’t be kneeling like he would be if Harry was still sitting on the sofa, but still.

Even in the intoxicating waves of pleasure, it was this, more than anything else, that made him actually snap to attention.

Tom was serious about this, whatever this was leading to. It was that, the hint of actual affection or…something, on top of whatever the hell else they had, that had him hurtling towards climax after all the teasing.
That, and the quick bob and thrust of Tom’s mouth.

He was raw sensations, legs splayed, breath harsh.

He felt the tension coil, muscles tightening and – and the bastard had pulled back, gripping him by the base, that bloody smirk on his lips as Harry cried out, eyes wet with frustration, writhing and bucking against the hand.

“Oh no – come on – you’re not – Tom – fuck – please.”

“Come now,” the smirk only broadened in Tom’s narcissistic amusement with his own word choices, “I thought you said I was the one who was going to have self-control issues here?”

Harry couldn’t think. His hips bucked up, magic crackling, lips and skin swollen and marked by kisses.

“Fuck.”

“Yes, we’re getting to that.”

Yeah, Tom was too amused. Harry all but bared his teeth, eyes flashing. It just made the twat raffle his head as Harry was yanked back away from the release he so desperately craved. He squeezed his eyes shut, tried to calm down quickly.

Tom straddled his hips again, keeping them firmly pressed against the sheets, and slid his tie undone around his neck. He let it hang over his shoulders, deftly unbuttoning his shirt as Harry watched him with glazed eyes.

The shirt was cast aside with a careless movement, leaving the green tie still stark against Tom’s pale shoulders, hanging over his chest.

“God, you’ve planned this all out, haven’t you?” Harry’s voice was hoarser than he would have liked to admit.
Harry didn’t move immediately, aware of the hand still hovering on his shoulder. Could remember all the times that had happened, in detail or otherwise.

His throat thickened.

*Or is there some other reason you are so attached to Britain?*

For god’s sake. Harry jerked his shoulder away.

*Come home. Just...come home.*

Everything rang in his head and he’d completely lost his appetite.

“I don’t like the way he looks at you,” Voldemort stated. Harry snorted, not even remotely surprised by the comment. He pulled away, turned around, folded his arms – more tired now than he had been last night. The Dark Lord observed him quietly. “You should let me take care of things. Take care of you.”

Harry looked at that unfamiliar face. Felt nausea rise in his throat.

“What do you want now? Aside from the obvious.”

“You don’t look well.”

“Your face tends to have that affect.” It was childish, but god, this day had sucked from the moment he woke up. This was not how he imagined his life to be. It was probably somewhat true anyway.

Voldemort’s lips thinned, but he seemed about to push that comment away. The second after that, Harry threw up on his shoes.
So, this is my first time really writing anything vaguely smutty - so I would very much appreciate your thoughts on how it went :)

Chapter 5

Harry's head was spinning.

Sound seemed disjointed and far away, the world swaying. His vision was blurred, and he wasn't aware of when he hit the floor - narrowly avoiding the puddle of vomit. The ground felt mercifully cool against his cheek.

He was vaguely aware of shouts of panic erupting around the room. Of a hand pressing against his shoulder, another sliding around down his waist.

The nausea continued to bubble in his throat.

In a remote part of his brain, he remembered he'd splashed upchuck on Tom's polished shoes, and wanted to giggle in a hysterical sort of way. The arms tightened around him, wrenching him away from the wonderful cold solidness beneath him.

The Dark Lord had probably already vanished it anyway.

It took him the moment after that to realize he must have, because the arms braced around his torso were painfully familiar. His head lolled back, leaden.

Tom looked so different now. He'd thought it before, and he'd think it again. It struck him every time he had to look at the man. He was recognizable as the handsome boy he used to be, but he looked even more like marble than ever. Pale as death, and those eyes - and god he'd loved those eyes - were now that bloody crimson. He was thinner, taller, skeletal and sharp around the edges. But Harry supposed he should be glad that Riddle was even humanoid. He smelled the same though. Like winter air and lightning, if such thing was possible within a man or a monster.

Harry's each breath sounded too loud in his mouth.

"What have you done?" he rasped. He raised bleary eyes, to see the room in a similar state of disarray to himself. Sick, clammy, ashen faces and humiliation and panic.

Fingers carded through his hair. Each soft press of the hand seemed to vibrate down the strands, settling in his nerves and sinking electric down his spine.

Bastard.

"Oh, nothing," Tom said. "The Truce Treaty wouldn't allow that, would it?"

"And yet you're the only one not affected," Harry spat, chest heaving.

"Lucky coincidence." The dark wizard sounded far too innocent for him to believe it. Harry squeezed his eyes shut, trying to get the world to tip back to normal. He wanted to shove Tom-Voldemort away from him, because this was mortifying enough already. The awful thing was that he had a feeling that if the git wasn't holding him up, that he'd be on the floor again.

He couldn't remember the last time he felt this ill and disorientated, and he'd been front-lining a war for years.

God, he felt like he was dying. Maybe he was. He was shaking violently, and felt devastatingly fragile. He despised it. With everything that had happened he'd learnt to loathe weakness, especially
when in the company of Tom. That decided it.

He shoved at Riddle's hands, to get the man off.

...It seemed utterly ineffectual as the man hauled him up to his feet instead, arm still clinched in a way that Harry wasn't sure was meant to be steadying, or possessive.

He couldn't think straight. Could barely concentrate on anything but how much he felt like he was going to throw up again.

He could feel each thud of his heart in his chest. Too loud in his ears, almost deafening.

What the hell was happening to him?

*He didn't want to die.*

Maybe he was overreacting. He'd survived worse than what was quite possibly just a bad bout of food poisoning.

But it was sudden, it was alarming – and though he didn't like to think it, *terrifying*.

He had no idea what to do. What was causing it. Who was causing it. Anything! That type of ignorance led to murder and the loss of everyone he loved.

But if he was pointing fingers, he was going to make a bet on Lord Bloody Voldemort. Which really didn't make him more comfortable with the fact that he was all but cradled in the other's grip.

"Ugh, you would poison your enemies," he scowled. "Scared to fight me? I always was the better fighter." Black spots danced in his vision. Voldemort's face swum above him, eyes bright with an odd shine. Feverish. Mad bastard.

"You're even more deluded than normal."

"You have an army and you still haven't caught me."

"Maybe you just weren't my number one priority anymore."

Harry gave another laugh at that, though he had a horrible feeling that it sounded a little choked. God, his head was pounding. Voldemort didn't make it any better.

"**I was never your number one priority, Tom.** That spot is reserved for what you love."

It was almost a blessing to feel his vision tunnel, and black out.

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It was always strange seeing Harry truly incapacitated - even after all these years.

Normally, injury only made his former lover more vicious. It made him fight back harder, lash out more strongly and with greater stubbornness. Spewing vitriol and any verbal defence he could think of.

But...sometimes, when it got *really* bad for him, and he was beyond the limit of exhaustion and physical endurance...this happened. His barriers dropped completely, all of his strength collapsed inwards to his core and everything else was left exposed. Seemingly defenseless. Defenseless in everything but that which mattered most.
He seemed to shrink into as small a target as possible.

He could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen Harry like this.

He scooped the unconscious man up, fingers sliding over his pulse, his own expressive impassive as Harry remained limp in his arms.

The word still rang in his head.

_I was never your number one priority, Tom. That spot is reserved for what you love._

He felt sick. It was whatever had been in the food. He hadn't eaten much - didn't need as much nowadays, with everything. He slept less too. He was too busy to sleep, anyway. A utopia didn't run nor establish itself.

The pale sickness just didn't show on him. He was as pale anyway, so there was no further pallor left to be struck. He could feel himself starting to sweat though. His head pounding.

Something was happening here. That much was obvious. He wished he could say he'd been the one to set it up. It was better than the alternative of being duped.

He knew Harry thought he was behind this. It was even a reasonable deduction, considering at that point to Harry's fevered eyes he probably had seemed unaffected.

It infuriated him still.

_I was never your number one priority, Tom. That spot is reserved for what you love._

With Harry unconscious in his arms, he scooped him up the rest of the way, as best as he could. Slung him inelegantly over his shoulder, like a sack of potatoes. He had no energy to spare for a more graceful position.

The world swayed rather alarmingly.

But he was _not_ collapsing here. He would not leave himself so vulnerable to whoever had planned this.

His eyes darted narrowed across the occupants, searching for someone unaffected. Or less affected. Faking it, somehow. There was nothing obvious.

He suppose he had expected it to be difficult. Anyone who could pull off poisoning a room full of world leaders was intelligent.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to concentrate. Tightened his grip, because leaving a head behind would probably not be the best thing and...no.

He couldn't apparate. Not like this.

It was taking all of his effort to stay upright for two people. Of course, he could just leave Potter to die from blood poison. Then he would only have to concentrate on transporting himself.

Certainly, Harry Potter was a threat that needed to be disposed of. He'd been saying that for years now. He could do it now. He should.

The second he was out of the truce zone, he should snap the man's neck.
Harry was a traitor. He’d betrayed him, turned his back on him - and such a crime would have been unforgivable even if they hadn’t spent the last four years leading opposing forces.

But the resistance was all but crushed already. Harry didn’t need to die.

Merlin, his head was splitting.

Harry didn’t need to live either. He was an inspiration to rebellion so long as he continued to breathe. Trouble. Too dangerous in his potential.

He staggered out of the building, and onto the streets of Wizarding Paris. Passers by had barely turned to look at them - in confusion, then quickly realization that bled to fear as they recognized him. He didn’t spare a glance back before slamming a hand down on his personal portkey.

"My Lord!" He heard the alarmed greeting immediately. The scatter of activity around him. His eyes moved around the room nearly blindly, and Harry tumbled out of his grip onto the table. He barely stopped himself from stumbling.

"What happened?"

"Are you alright?"

"Is that Potter?"

"What happened?"

"What happened?"

It was all too much.

The room was spinning. He clamped a hand over his mouth to stop himself from throwing up in front of his followers, hastily summoning what he thought the antidote might be.

"Don’t let him die."

Unconsciousness soared up to meet him.

Harry wasn’t sure where he was when he woke up - and that was enough to instantly have him on edge.

It felt like his insides had been scrambled. His eyelids felt heavy and glued shut, as he blinked up at the ceiling. There was something cool resting on his forehead, soothing his hammering head.

His tongue felt stuck to the roof of his mind. Sluggish all over. Fragile.

Where the hell was he? The last thing he remembered was - oh. His brow furrowed, fingers stroking along the edges of an emerald green duvet.

"Awake, I see."

His gaze swept over the blond sitting primly next to his bedside.

Abrasax Malfoy.

His shoulders stiffened. Whilst seeing Abraxas, or indeed any of his old group, was always going to
leave an ache in his chest, it wasn't as bad as seeing Tom. He'd grown desensitized to some of them. To the friends left that now hunted him down like a dog.

His lips pressed thin. If there was debate for who Lord Voldemort's Lieutenant was, Abraxas was high on the list as a candidate.

Harry opened his mouth to say something scathing, only for the blond to thrust a cup of water in his direction. He studied it suspiciously, and he could have sworn Malfoy's eye twitched.

"I assure you, it is not poisoned," the man said haughtily. "I merely have no desire to see you rasp at me."

Harry cast a few detection spells, even if the effort had him sagging back against his pillows again, exhausted. He took a few slow sips. It seemed safe enough.

He would ask where exactly he was, but unfortunately he could make a few educated guesses.

"Pretty nice for a prison cell. I can't imagine you're too thrilled to play jailor, though."

"You're number one most wanted for a reason. Better someone who knows what you're capable of. You have something of a track record for being slippery."

"Slippery," Harry echoed. His gaze raked over the man. The four years seemed to have hardly aged Malfoy. Then again, he supposed none of them were really that old. Barely out of a school, with murder and blood and war already on their hands and past. "That's rich, coming from you. How come Alphard isn't here then? Did you draw the short straw?"

He didn't think it would ever come to this.

He still remembered the days when he sat in the common room battling Malfoy in Gobstones, and cards, and wit - now it was another playing field entirely. With people as the pawns and pieces and it was never supposed to come to this.

Oh god, it was never supposed to come to this.

Malfoy's lips thinned.

"Alphard has a soft spot that is better not to indulge in this matter," Abraxas said coldly. Harry gave a faint laugh at that, mirthless.

"Right. Yes. And you, ever the professional backstabber, would happily see me thrown into Azkaban and executed for my beliefs."

"You're the one who turned traitor and ran, Harry."

The tone was even enough, but he knew the pureblood well enough to note how brittle it was. To see the mercurial flickers of his eyes. Harry gave a soft snort, running his hand over his face.

"I will not fight for something I don't believe in."

"Apparently you won't fight for the people you believe in either," Malfoy stated. Harry's eyes narrowed, fixing on the other man again. He shoved himself up into a more dignified position, despite the quiver of his exhausted muscles. It took everything to do so, then he sagged against the headboard.
It would have to do for this battle. And he could feel the battle in the air. He could always feel the battle in the air when it came to Abraxas Malfoy. The challenge, the disappointment; and most of all the screaming silent accusation of how Harry had left them all, abandoned them all.

He popped in another ice chip to avoid immediately responding, and Abraxas' eyes flared in triumph. And then something else entirely.

"You don't deserve him," Malfoy said, very quietly.

Harry swallowed, cold searing down his throat as he performed nonchalance.

"Where is our beloved tyrant anyway?" he asked. "Planning his victory party? The slaughter of thousands?"

"You don't care?" Abraxas raised his brows, jaw tightening. "And you say we're the cold ones."

"Care about what?" Harry snapped. For the first time, there was even a hint of expression on the purebloods face, which certainly said something for his surprise.

"...you don't know."

"What don't I know?"

"The Dark Lord is ill. Just like you. He's recovering from severe blood poisoning. He's not going to be planning much of a victory party when he's dying."

Harry's heart dropped out of his chest, eyes widening. He was immediately bolt upright in bed.

"He's dying?" He didn't recognize his own voice. It sounded hollow. "What the hell do you mean he's dying? Tom can't be dying. Where is he?" He forced the duvet away from his still slightly shivering form, feet swinging over the side of the bed.

When his feet pressed against the floor as he stood up - too quickly, really, considering he'd apparently just been poisoned himself - he immediately stumbled. Knees buckling under the weight.

Malfoy was pointing a wand at him immediately, even as he lunged to catch hold of his arm.

"Sit down," the man hissed. "Idiot."

"I'm not just going to lie in bed whilst he dies," Harry snapped. After all...he could guess who'd brought him here, and if Tom had been sick too at the time….

He should want the man dead. After everything that he'd done, and with everything he stood for…

He wanted Voldemort dead. Too much had happened between them for him to seriously wish that on Tom. Maybe he was just weak.

"Why do you even care?" Malfoy returned. "You're the one who left. Not him."

"Because, I-" he stopped himself. Squeezed his eyes shut. "You really think it's that simple?" His voice cracked. "Really?"

"No," came another voice. "But it never was simple between us." Riddle's tone was unbearably smug. Harry wanted to hit something; his gaze sliding over.

Voldemort came to lean on the door, eyes intent. Harry's teeth gritted.
"Let me guess, you're not really dying," he bit out.

"I was. But I have very good healers, so not for very long. I admit I'm touched to find such a vehement reaction in my defense though," the bastard purred.

All of the worry dissipated, the fear - leaving fury in its place all over again.

"I merely wouldn't wish to lose the opportunity to kill you myself."

"I'm sure that's true," Tom said. He was still damn well smiling, as he made his way over. "Thank you, Abraxas. I'll take it from here."

Malfoy nodded, standing up - utterly expressionless as always.

"As you wish, My Lord."

The pompous twat had probably been in on it too. He was such an idiot.

Harry didn't look away from Tom, even as he heard the door shut behind Abraxas. To look away felt like failure, a concession of sorts. Voldemort sank into the seat Malfoy had vacated.

"Going to kill me whilst I'm in no state to defend myself?" Harry spat. His cheeks felt hot, the back of his neck burning.

"That would rather defeat the purpose of saving your life in the first place. Do lie down before you hurt yourself, Harry. You're rather significantly smaller and more human than me. You've been unconscious and fevered for the last three days."

*Three days!* He needed to get back to his resistance. They were probably worried and hell knew what had happened his absence. The second he tried sitting up again, Riddle had darted forward, hand pressing against his throat.

"Oh no, no," the dark wizard continued. "Don't try and get up again on my account. As impressive as your duelling skills are, you are currently not in much of a state to break out of my home. I have very good wards."

Yes, but he'd always been uncannily good at getting around Tom's wards, hadn't he? It was the Parseltongue.

He was surprised he was in Voldemort's home rather than his prison though. Then again, this could be just as much of a prison as anywhere else, however gilded and well-wallpapered the bars were.

"Unless you intend to keep me on the brink of death for the rest of my life, you realize there's no way you can realistically hold me here?" Harry countered, chin jutting up. "Whilst you've been paper-pushing legislations behind a desk, and playing politics, I've been spending every day of the last four years fighting for my life. I swear I will tear this place apart if I have to."

"That's my boy."

Those words, more than anything, made Harry flinch. Then he wanted to growl in fury, because flinching visibly was never part of the plan.

"I'm not your anything anymore," he said, instead. "Haven't been for a long time now. Except maybe your enemy."

Voldemort merely hummed.
"Now we both know that's not quite true," the other murmured. Those eyes remained vicious, for all the soft-spokenness of his tone. "But regardless. I am here on another matter than your resistance. The only reason I bother about them at all is because of you. They're irrelevant-

"Oh, by all means, let me get back to them then. I mean, if they're not a threat to you, if we're not a threat to you-

"-Are you not interested in who poisoned us? Who poisoned every single member of a truce conference seemingly without detection?" Harry's mouth ran dry. Voldemort's grip tightened on his throat for a moment. "That's what I thought. So have another ice chip and hold your tongue, for now. This is bigger than us."

Harry's eyes narrowed, and he plucked the man's hand off his neck and set it to the side with steely fingers, but nonetheless stayed put.

Close up, he could see the effects of poison – now that his own mind was clearer. The exhaustion. The fact that Riddle had sat down by his bed and not moved all that much after that. Whilst Tom had never been as prone to manic energy levels as he himself, who had a bad habit of constantly moving and fidgeting, this was still even for him.

"You're suggesting an alliance," Harry said, skipping forward in the conversation. It wasn't like he needed to actually hear it. Four years and a million changes could never put him that out of touch. He knew how Tom worked. It was how, despite everything, that the resistance was still limping along.

Voldemort inclined his head.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend. It wouldn't be the first time we came to such a truce."

No, such a truce, to Tom, had been how all of this started. Two half-bloods in Slytherin, who came to rule it. A romantic would paint it as a fairy tale and cut off the ending at a kiss.

Sometimes, Harry wished real life would do that too.

"Then let's hope this one turns out better."

It was going to be interesting, at the very least.
"Is that really what you're wearing?"

Harry paused at the words, glancing up at Tom - hands stilling. He stared, for a moment, before looking down at his attire again. It wasn't shabby. It was what he would normally wear, to this kind of event.

Something soured in his mouth.

"You ashamed of me, Tom?" He kept his voice light.

If this had been the first time, he would have ignored it. Dismissed it as Tom simply wanting to make a good impression. Nerves, or something. He'd always known that his best friend was the ambitious sort after all.

But things had been changing for some time now, and Tom's silence spoke louder than anything else he could have said. Harry snorted, a mirthless smile twisting the corners of his lips. His chest ached.

"You could just change into something a bit less...muggle," his lover said finally.

"Heavens forbid Lestrange doesn't give me his stamp of approval," Harry muttered.

"It's not about Lestrange," Tom snapped.

"No?" Harry raised his brows at that. "Funny that. Your sudden interest in blood purism has nothing to do with your new pals either, right?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"You used to hate that crowd. Now you spend all your time with Lestrange and his band of bigots."

Tom gave a heavy sigh, turning to face him, eyes dark and unforgiving.

"Just change, will you? Just because you're a blood traitor, that doesn't mean you have to act and dress like one."

Harry sucked in a sharp breath at the cold comment, but suddenly it felt like there was a void of air in the room. His shoulders hunched, defensively.

"A blood traitor," he repeated. "Right. Tell me what you really think of me, then."

"Harry..." Tom scowled, tugging a hand through his hair. "Just change. It wouldn't kill you to support my beliefs and lifestyle for one night."

"I just don't see why you should go to such lengths to fit in with and impress a bunch of people you can't stand, and who can't stand you," Harry said. "Or is the fact they called you a mudblood and trash for the most of first year nothing?"

"You're so innocent." Unlike before when Tom had made such a comment, with a bit of exasperation, but a generally amused countenance, this time it was nothing but withering. Intended to insult.

Harry's fists clenched at his sides.
"Oh, by all means, explain it to me then," he growled. Tom was silent for a few beats, before turning to face him again, approaching fast.

"You have always had it easier, Harry. You're a Potter. I mean, you're the bastard son of Potter, but even that's better than being nobody at all. Except, I'm not nobody anymore. I'm the Heir of Slytherin...don't you see, this is our chance. We can get anything we wanted. Move up in the world. Rule it."

"You were never a nobody, Tom..." Harry's voice softened, and he reached forwards to kiss the man. "Christ. I've told you not to listen to them. They're all idiots, and blood purity is all a-"

"No." Tom pushed him away.

"No?"

"Blood Purity is everything."

Harry's blood ran cold, at that particular statement. The reverent tone which Tom said such an awful thing, the gleam of passion in his eyes. It all made him sick.

"We're not pureblood, Tom. We're never going to be."

"All the more reason why we have to be better."

"You think that will make a difference?" Harry's voice cracked. "Maybe if Blood Purity was anything but shit, then yes. But it's not. You can put on robes, and know your Wizarding etiquette backwards, and at the best all they will think is how good you are at pretending to be one of them. How well you can pass, despite your heritage. They're always going to hold it against-"

"If you say one more word, I'll curse you," Tom said seriously. Harry swallowed, and their gazes locked. The other boy took a step forward in turn, hand coming up to caress the side of his cheek, words murmured against his lips. "Please don't make me curse you, Harry. I'm not going to let you stop me from getting what I want. Now, change. For me. You love me, don't you?"

Harry's insides rolled.

He reached for his robes, and utterly hated himself for it.

Of course, the resistance hadn't taken his allegiance with Tom, well.

To be honest, Harry didn't take it well either – only with reluctant necessity. Being around the man for any significant length of time was painful. He'd find himself watching, looking for clues somehow. Ridiculous, small things, to show that the Tom Riddle who he had loved was still in there somewhere.

He didn't even know if he wanted to find something or not. If he did, and it meant nothing, changed nothing...that was worse than not finding anything at all.

"Do you really think this is a good idea?" Hermione hissed, in his ear. "It could be trap."

"He took an oath of immunity for everyone in the resistance," Harry muttered. "And, as I said, anyone who wants no part in a temporary truce doesn't have to take it."
They all stared at him sceptically, he didn't blame them. This would hardly have been the first time such a thing happened.

Nonetheless, he strode up to the gates to Voldemort's HQ with the members who had decided to go along with this, after hearing him out – which was about half of them, though considering their small numbers that hardly meant much.

They were all given rooms and spaces. Offered food and refreshment. Harry was personally convinced that Tom was taking the opportunity to lure an end to the resistance all together, whilst he was at it.

Harry wasn't sure if he could bear this. He would have to see everyone again…everyone still alive, anyway. It was going to be horrible.

There was a time when he swore he would never let himself get into Tom's circle of gravity again.

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Tom Riddle was nineteen year's old today, and honestly, he'd expected things to go differently at this point.

His campaign had started well – there were problems, of course, but it was hardly all out war yet. But he could feel the copper taste of blood starting to spread across his tongue. He could smell the battlefield, where it already lurked in the air. Feel the coldness of death in it, as crisp as the greying snow outside of his window.

He was poring over some papers, re-writing potential legislation. Hardly exciting. Later, he was supposed to be attending some event thrown in his honour by Malfoy.

It was funny how time's changed, in that way. He rubbed a hand over his eyes, and forced himself to concentrate.

It turned out to be a futile effort, when not even a minute later he was interrupted by a knock.

"Yes?"

"I got the files you requested, my Lord," Avery murmured. "...It includes the one on Potter."

"Put them on the desk."

"You don't want to read them now?"

His gaze shot up, and Avery visibly baulked and dropped the files on the desk, nearly tripping over himself in the haste to do so.

"That will be all," Tom said, eyes returning to his papers. He didn't so much as glance at the files.

"Yes, my Lord."

When the door shut, his eyes flicked up again, across the harmless looking manila folders at the edge of his desk. His lips pursed, and he looked down at his work again.

After a moment, however, he sighed. Got up to gather a glass, and poured a healthy amount of red wine for himself. Then, his fingers moved deftly across the files, before he pulled one towards him.

He took a deep sip of wine, settling back comfortably in his chair.
Familiar green eyes stared back up at him.

It was an old photograph, which was maybe why the picture didn't glare at him with a defiant accusation. He drank some more wine.

'Undesirable Number 7. Strong suspected connections to Albus Dumbledore, and the Order of the Phoenix. High level member of Underground Resistance. Dangerous Wizard, approach with extreme caution and alert the authorities on sight. To be heavily monitored.'

The photo looked like none of that, though he knew it was true. It was the man's yearbook photo. Smiling, happy, triumphant.

It mocked him.

Especially today.

Someone knocked on the door, and just as quickly he'd shut the folder and tossed it to the bottom of the file. Set the glass down, and snatched up his pen.

"What is it now?" his tone was one of thinly veiled patience.

"I…the Daily Prophet would like your comment on the St Mungos case."

He barely refrained from sighing, and shoved the files into his desk for later perusal.

The day's investigations had proved to be infuriatingly futile. Even with Harry's help – and if anyone was an expert at sabotaging an event, it was Harry Potter. The man had made a living out of ruining Tom's own happiness, certainly.

He'd requested the truce mostly because he honestly didn't have time to give the affair as much time as it deserved. If there was a new player on a global scale, he absolutely needed to know about it.

But life on the domestic scale had continued too: people to soothe, constant events to attend, an image to maintain, and foundations of society to stabilize.

He'd won, but things were far from as solid as he would have liked.

The second, far more personal reason was Harry. As things stood, he could put it off but eventually he would have to kill the man if he didn't stand down.

Things were far from solid, and he could not afford the mercy of leaving Potter unpunished for his crimes.

It would give entirely the wrong message. He could lose everything for the weakness, and he'd sacrificed too much to give up his throne now.

But if Harry…surrendered, there was a chance. He'd still require punishment, of course. But it could be more temporary than a death sentence.

The problem was that getting Harry Potter to surrender on anything was nigh impossible.

The closest the man came, was out of love. Harry had played along, for a while. Sat at the top with him, in Slytherin.
How different was that to the man doing so with the country?

He'd make sure Harry would be indulged, happy. All he needed to do was give up his ridiculous moral aversions, and let Tom give him everything.

"You better leave him alone."


Her expression was hard; bushy hair scraped up in a ponytail out of her face, and the word 'mudblood' cut into her arm. The word was bared to the open on tanned skin, like a claim of her defiance instead of a brand of her inferiority.

He'd never had all too much to do with her, though Malfoy always complained about her. She was the one behind the resistance's bomb designs. Behind their wards. If Harry was sword, then she and Miss McGonagall were the shield.

His fingers itched to reach for his wand, not that he would admit it. At least not, for it being in any other reason but fury for her audacity.

"I assume you're talking about your dearest leader," he drawled.

"Yes. Harry. You will leave him alone. You've hurt him enough already."

No. It wasn't enough. It would never be enough, not until the wretched ache in his chest had faded. Not until he could look at Harry, and not want and remember.

"You would do best to remember who you're-

"-I know perfectly well who I'm talking to. And you will leave him alone," she said, coolly. His head tilted, and he paused on his way back to his quarters.

"You're not his type." He gave a cruel smile. She snorted, scathing.

"Yes, because obviously a women's motivations must only be romance, and never friendship."

His eyes narrowed slightly, and he took a step forward.

"I granted immunity. Accidents can happen. Stay out of my business, Miss Granger."

She folded her arms, unintimidated.

"I have seen too much to see you win. Maybe you should have stayed out of my business. Just a warning, Riddle. You really have no idea what you're dealing with. With any of this. It's bigger than even you could imagine. You should be more careful."

There was something to her eyes – something puzzling, that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Something far older, then even the faces of the most hardened veteran.

She'd turned away, catching up with another one of the resistance before he could respond.

He refused to feel uneasy.

This was his time. He would make the rules.
And he'd sacrificed enough already for his crown.
A/N: Kind of a filler...but then not really? I forgot how much I liked writing this story. Hope you are enjoying reading it, even half as much.
PS: Reminder, italics means the past. Hope all the past bits aren't bothering y'all. :) And now back to my procrastinated work...
Chapter 7

Tom felt like he'd been punched in the throat.

For a moment, all he could do was watch - wide eyed - as Harry stuffed his belongings into a bag. Then his eyes turned cool, and he marched forward, grabbing hold of his fiancé's arm.

As if he could somehow keep him there.

"You're not leaving. I won't let you."

Harry's gaze turned to him, blazing. It speared him to the spot. In any other circumstances it would have had him grinning, melting beneath the heat only to be fired up more as he'd press Harry up against the wall. Kiss him hard. Kiss him harder still, as if he could leave a permanent claim on the man's mouth if only he tried hard enough.

"You can't stop me."

"You're being ridiculous," Tom hissed. "This is-"

"-Ridiculous?" Harry snatched the word viciously, a slight crack in his voice. "Right, yeah. No. Ridiculous is a half-blood championing blood purity. Ridiculous is Lord Voldemort. Ridiculous is you expecting me to just stand there and watch as you denounce me and people I care about for your own power. Because we both know that's what this is really about. That's what it's always about with you."

Of course it was. He didn't care about blood purity, he only cared about the position that the system could give him. Pureblood meant power, and so he would emulate pureblood and had. He passed now among the best of them, didn't Harry see?

"And I thought you got into this, knowing that," he said, jaw tight. "Don't act like I somehow duped you on the true nature of my personality. I never did that. And I thought that, when you loved someone, you stood by their views. That's what you said. That's what you told me love was. That we supported each other. No matter what. That's what we promised. What you promised. No matter what. Or were you lying when you said that?"

He could feel his voice picking up, faster and faster, more clipped with each word.

"And what about my views?" Harry asked, more quietly now, looking at him. Tom furrowed his brow.

"What do you mean?"

"Why should I be the one sacrificing everything for you? That's what you're asking for. What about my views? My dreams?"

"Of course you can still do whatever you want," he replied, confused. That was the point. With power, they could both do anything. "We talked about this. When I rule the world-"

"When you rule the world," Harry stated. There was a peculiar blankness to his normally expressive features now.

"Yes, when I-"
"When did we become I, Tom?"

He paused at that, cut off, eyes dull. Harry continued to stare at him, expression hard. Eyes cold and distant. Tom tried to think when that had happened, too. His mouth had gone strangely dry.

His fingers flexed around Harry's arm, trying to think.

"I'll be better. Stay. I-" his shoulders stiffened, squared. "I need you." It was barely audible, and he had to force the words past his teeth. But he meant them, sincerely.

If he didn't, saying it would be easy. Maybe he should lie. Lie and sweetly tell Harry everything that he wanted to hear. Put on the act of the boy he used to be, before everything happened. It wouldn't be the first time he'd charmed someone to his side.

Though Harry had never been so oblivious to his manipulations.

"No, you don't," Harry replied – in that same, awfully calm tone. Tom hated it. Harry was many things; uncommonly kind, brave, stubborn, hot-headed. But he wasn't calm. Not like this. "And you said that last time."

It sent a chill down his spine, and he hated that too. Hated the way that all Harry had to do was look at him, and it felt like everything he'd accomplished was reduced to nothing.

He felt he could kill Harry for that, sometimes.

"Harry-"

"Don't," Harry said, softly. "Just...don't. Just let me go."

"No." He didn't even have to think about it. "No, don't you dare even say that, after everything." His voice dropped low, deadly.

He could feel rage starting to overtake the churn of confusion in his gut, and he took a slow step even closer, until there was barely a breath between them. What gave the bastard the right to walk away as if they'd simply shared a carriage? To think that Tom could ever let him go so easily when for better or worse, despite his all of his best efforts, his lover had made a home in his head that he no longer knew how to shake.

Harry immediately had his wand against Tom's throat.

Tom didn't know when that had become Harry's instinctual response either. Things between them weren't so bad – he'd know if they were! He'd always done his best to ensure that Harry was happy. He could do that, now. Before, he'd lacked the power to give Harry everything that he wanted to, everything that his lover deserved...

But now? Now he could give him the whole world, and what could possibly be better than that? And now, to...

"If you really think I'd ever let you go, you're deluding yourself," he continued.

His own wand hit his palm too.

Harry sucked in a sharp breath.

"Voldemort goes, or I go, Tom. It's that simple."
How had this happened? He could admit, things hadn’t been great between them recently, but they’d argued plenty of times before. They argued all the time! They always got through it. This could hardly be the end of it all.

He shook his head, mutely, for a moment.

Harry turned and slammed his case shut on all his clothes, wrenching his arm free of Tom’s grip.

"Please." It was even quieter, than the words before, when he realized his silence to Harry’s ultimatum had stretched too long. Said too much.

"Are you going to stop this Voldemort shit?" Harry raised his brows.

Tom flared again, eyes flashing.

"You complain about making sacrifices for me, but you seem perfectly fine making the same demands of me. You hypocrite-"

Harry was already heading for the door. Heading for the door where Tom would never see him again, as if Harry could just leave him like this and remove himself from Tom’s life, still wearing the ring Tom had given him…

He lost it. Snapped.

Everything tunnelled and hazed bloody as he lunged forward. Harry turned, just in time, and they were both crashing into the corridor. His hands closed around his lover’s throat, as Harry’s eyes widened with shock, and then widened further still when Tom crushed their lips together.

This was just – just how they worked. Harry grumbled about Tom’s plans, but loved him anyway and…Tom didn’t know if he loved Harry, but he certainly never wanted to let him go. He couldn’t. He needed him.

They’d tussle, and Harry would kiss him back like he was doing now. All tongue, and teeth, and the heat of their hearts burning in all the spaces in between and-

And Harry shoved him away. Tom landed hard on his back, as they panted for breath. Harry’s eyes squeezed shut, for a moment, where he’d shoved himself up to sit. Gently rubbing his throat.

"I’m sorry," he said. "I just – I can’t do this. Not anymore. I tried. And I can’t and-"

"Give me my ring back then," Tom cut in coldly. Maybe he shouldn’t have been surprised. Maybe he should have expected Harry to leave him. People did that. Even when they promised they never would.

People couldn’t stand the force of his undiluted personality. Some lasted longer, but in the end he eroded them down like the ocean against even the most unyielding cliffs.

Harry froze, looking down at the sliver of gold on his finger blankly for a moment. He looked back up at Tom again. He wouldn’t do it. He’d see what a mistake he was making, surely? It didn’t have to be like this. Then the other man just slowly slid the ring off and threw it at him.

Tom didn’t catch it, merely watched it bounce off him and come to a deceptively innocuous halt by his left leg.

He’d actually done it. Harry had actually done it.
"Goodbye, Tom." His lover straightened up. "I'd prefer it if you didn't try and contact me. Please don't follow me either. That would probably be for the best."

He was going to be sick. He felt like something monstrous was clawing up his throat, and he didn't know why.

"You miserable traitor-" he was barely able to get the words out, and Harry just kept walking away. Maybe he'd never loved him at all. Tom surged to his feet, incandescent with fury. "If you come crawling back I won't forgive you. Not this time. Understood?"


Tom took several steps after him, fists clenched.

"I mean it, Harry," he continued, voice growing louder and louder in comparison to his partner's uncanny silence. "I'm never going to forgive you for this, if you leave."

The other man finally stopped, turning to face him, fractionally. His eyes were suspiciously red-rimmed. Tom should have felt delighted, vindicated. That's what he normally felt, when people were pathetic enough to cry in front of him.

He didn't.

He softened his tone.

"I love you. Come back."

Harry gave a mirthless laugh at that, a strange smile twisting his lips.

"You don't love me, Tom. You don't love anyone. Not anymore. Maybe you never did. I don't know."

Voldemort went cold. Ears ringing. Head swimming.

Maybe it was true. Maybe if Harry got so close to him, looked at him and saw nothing but a black pit devoid of such warm humanities, it must be true.

Certainly, he trusted that out of the two of them Harry would recognize love, not him.

"If you leave, next time we meet – I will kill you." He managed a harsh whisper that still seemed to scream across the chasm between them. He silently urged Harry to stay, to not be this stupid, to not put Tom in this position. To not leave him.

Nobody had the right to make him feel this helpless. Not anymore. Lord Voldemort was above helplessness. That was the whole point.

He saw Harry's throat bob.

And then he apparated.

It took a month for it to sink in that Harry really wasn't coming back this time. That he wasn't going to be coming back.

And he would have done anything to make it stop hurting.

"Are you feeling better?"
Harry looked up at the question. He immediately got a rather horrible flash of déjà vu, considering he was bent over the bed stuffing his meagre belongings into a bag.

By the way Voldemort stilled, bloody gaze moving over his stuff, it seemed he wasn't the only one making a connection.

Harry cleared his throat. Honestly though, he couldn't stay in this house. In this damn room. It was *his* room. He hadn't missed it, hadn't forgotten. Hadn't missed that Voldemort had kept his room in perfect condition as if waiting for him to return either.

It was choking. He couldn't go back – he just couldn't. It had been hard enough leaving the first time. Oh, not because he was scared, not really. It had never been a matter of fear. He knew Tom well enough to know that threats were the bastard's way of pleading. It wasn't remotely functional, but…

And Tom hadn't, despite his threats, killed him for leaving. Actually, as far as he somewhat kept track of in the war, Voldemort had even gone to some small effort to avoid attacking him.

It was funny. Both eventual leaders of their sides, refusing to face each other for the fear of old ghosts and promises. Laughable. And instead they pushed their soldiers at each other, and claimed their justifications for honour and idealizations.

"Yes," he said politely. "Fully recovered, thank you. I have people identifying how the poison could have got into the truce meeting. Weak points. Traitors."

"Yes, I imagine your lot are good at figuring out sabotage. Betrayal is practically your trade," Voldemort said, too softly for it not to bite. Harry stiffened a little. "Are you going somewhere? I told you, you and your resistance are perfectly welcome to stay here-"

"I'm staying with Alphard. The resistance are staying here, more or less. We appreciate your hospitality." His voice was carefully neutral, as if he was back in the political meetings again.

"Black? I'm afraid you'd prove a distraction to his duties."

"Oh, I'm sure that's it," Harry murmured, looking over his shoulder. "I can't stay here. It won't work. You know it won't."

"We've always managed to work as a good team-" Voldemort started.

"Yes." Harry didn't bother denying that. "But we're not exactly good at professional boundaries, are we? If you want a truce between us…"

"You're scared."

"I'm not scared."

"You're running scared." Voldemort moved closer to him. "Because you still have feelings for me. Even after all this time."

Harry's jaw clenched, and he swallowed.

"And you could have let me die," he countered, quietly. "You didn't. Even if it would help solve your rebellion problem."

"You trust me enough to leave your resistance in my care?"
"Is that a threat?"

"Merely an interesting note," Voldemort said. Harry turned to face him properly, folding his arms.

"I'm not staying in this room."

"It's your room."

"It hasn't been my room in years. Stop being a petty bastard."

He'd had a whole life here, once upon a time. It was a hub of memories, a snapshot of a different Harry Potter in its way.

"Stay in my room then," Tom smirked. His eyes, however, were serious. Harry sighed.

"You're already acting unprofessional," he pointed out. "Hardly fitting for the Dark Lord to have a dalliance with the half-blood leader of the Order of the Phoenix, is it? Hell, it was hardly fitting for you to be seen with me before I could be executed for treason, it's definitely not." Harry gave a sweet smile, just because he knew it would make the words jab harder. "You made your priorities clear to me a long time ago. We've already had this conversation. Hopefully this is the last time."

"So cold."

The man's hand came out, tracing along his cheek. Harry didn't flinch.

"I learnt from the best. So maybe you should remove your hand before I curse your fingers off."

Voldemort's hand dropped. Though he didn't step back, examining him.

"I suppose you have Miss Granger now."

"I'm not dating Hermione. We're just good friends. Some people still have those," Harry replied. "I'm not dating anyone, before you get the urge to arrange accidents. Not that it's your right to do so anyway, certainly not now. I highly doubt you've spent the last four years celibate."

Maybe they should just get this conversation out of the way. It was pretty bloody obvious that the awkward ex conversations needed to be cleared out of the way. Even if to call Lord Voldemort his 'ex' seemed too pale a description, though it was true.

But still. He hadn't allowed it that Tom made demands on exclusivity that the Slytherin Heir didn't reciprocate when they were still just Tom and Harry, let alone now.

"Abraxas told me – in more subtle terms – that I should get a wife. Apparently it would humanize me for PR."

Harry snorted, even as he wanted to bloody well throttle Malfoy for reasons he refused to examine. God, this was a mess.

"Poor girl. Though I imagine Walburga would jump on the chance."

Though that didn't really answer the question.

"I dare say plenty would. It's an instant status upgrade. Whoever I choose could have a lot of power."

"And a lot of fun as a trophy wife, too. I'd know." Harry laughed, without humour. Maybe just to break the tension.
"I didn't try and make you into a trophy wife."

"You did get a bit obsessed with buying me expensive robes and making sure I looked pretty for the prophet. And then all those charity events."

"You're a do gooder. You like charity events," Voldemort said. "And trophy wives are there to make the husband look better. Most of the time, you definitely didn't. I do believe that was the problem."

"Oh, right yeah," Harry flared. "I was the problem. That's why I said tried to make me into your trophy wife." He shook his head and turned away.

"You were dating a politician, I don't think being aware of your public image could have been too much of a surprise for you."

"You're completely missing the point," Harry bit out. "Who is she then? The new fiancé. Did you give her the same ring you gave me?"

Of course, he and Tom had never been legally engaged. Such a thing was not possible between two men, but…in everything but the legality of it by the end…

"I am still considering my options. I believe there are a number of candidates I'm supposed to meet."

And of course Voldemort, the miserable bastard, felt compelled to tell him all about this. Harry bloody well regretted asking.

"I'm sure you'll be very happy together until you're overthrown. And you will be overthrown. Men like you are always overthrown, in the end," Harry said.

"Do I detect a hint of jealousy?" Voldemort sounded infuriatingly smug now.

Harry gritted his teeth.

"Unprofessional. This is what I'm talking about. Fuck you, don't you dare reduce my beliefs and the resistance down to a question of whether I fancy you or not."

"There's no question if you fancy me or not. You do," Voldemort replied. Harry nearly slapped him. The truce really wasn't going to last long at this point. "But, regardless… I am not currently seeing anyone either."

"Well thank god we covered that," Harry said, sarcastically. He grabbed his bag. "Are you going to excuse me now?" His voice was stilted once more. "Did you come in for anything particular or merely to interrogate me on my history of lovers?"

"On the topic of PR," Voldemort said, voice measured. "And various charity events and politics that you are already aware of, despite running off to play Les Miserables as if you were a Gryffindor not a Slytherin."

"I would have made a fantastic Gryffindor." It was a stupid thing to pick up on, but it made him feel better right now. When he really wasn't sure he knew how to deal with Tom anymore. No. He knew how to deal with Tom – Voldemort was harder.

The dictator ignored him.

"There is a press conference tomorrow regarding the events at the truce dinner. I also have a meeting with France in the evening. Dufort has requested you attend. St Mungos are opening a new wing."
"Oh, no no no. I'm here to help you with the investigation of poisoning. Not with whatever social networking you have to do. Invite someone else. Druella, perhaps."

"You're better looking."

Harry wasn't sure if Voldemort was being serious or not with the last comment.

"Regardless."

"Regardless," Voldemort interrupted. "If you are serious about a truce, we need to present a united front to our enemies. You are not so naïve as to not realize that."

"Oh, I realize that," Harry snapped. "Hence, I'll come to the press conference, and the meeting with France and whoever else to do with the contents of our truce. I am not open to you using me as a propaganda tool to suggest that the resistance is no longer active because I'm spotted opening a hospital ward with you." Voldemort opened his mouth to argue, and Harry's eyes narrowed. "Don't even try it."

"Fine."

"Fine!"

"Though leaving to stay with Black hardly presents a united front. People might start speculating that the past is not so firmly in the past with your behaviour."

Merlin, the git really did spend the last four years in politics.

"What time is our first engagement?"

"The Press Conference is at 9. We should go over what we intend to say tonight. I'll have dinner brought to the office."

It was easy to remember why he left this mess in the first place, outside of hatred for Voldemort and his blood purity ideals.

…and far too easy to remember why he'd stayed as long as he did too.
Harry hadn't missed Press Conferences.

He hadn't missed the aggressive flash of cameras in his face, almost blinding him beneath them. Voldemort, the insufferable bastard, was utterly unfazed. Barely even blinked.

Harry still remembered their first proper planned press conference. Tom had been calm then too, as charming as he always was but he'd spent the whole of the night before going over what to say then too. Agitated.

It was pretty much Tom's way of showing nerves; to study and poke something to death in the details. Make sure he had every single possible avenue covered, and to keep going over it even when they both knew it was practiced perfect.

The press swirled around them like vultures, and Harry hated it even more now than he did back then. Before, the flashes of lights had been irritating, unnerving in their voracious demands for attention.

Now, they reminded him of things that he shouldn't be reminded of. Flares in the night, the flash of spells searing past his skin on the battlefield. He bit the inside of his mouth so hard that copper flooded his mouth.

He could feel Voldemort's eyes resting on him for a moment, as they sat down.

The interviewers leaned forward hungrily in their seats. Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort answering questions? It was front page.

All things considered – Harry hadn't had breakfast. He'd had an ache in his chest when he woke up to the smell of coffee and cinnamon.

It had been years since he'd had cinnamon in his coffee, though it had been his favourite at Hogwarts. Voldemort had sent the fresh cup over with his house elf at breakfast, because anyone who had seen him in the morning knew he was hardly going to manage any level of diplomacy before at least a cup.

It hurt that the man remembered all the small, stupid details like coffee preferences (Tom preferred tea) as well as he did. It was such a nice gesture that he wanted to slap the bastard Dark Lord.

Even worse, was that Voldemort had made no mention of it when he saw it; acted like it was their normal routine still. As if the years between had never happened.

Bastard. Absolute tosser.

The press packs had already been sent out to the journalists attending, and thankfully Voldemort was going first as the conference started.

"Good morning, thank you for taking the time to attend," he said. "As you know, Mr Potter and I are here to answer your questions regarding the recent crisis at the Paris Peace Meetings, and the intentions of our opposing factions within the truce that has been established."

Harry's eyes scanned the crowd, because for all he didn't like politics and wasn't as good at it as Tom, watching a room was second nature to him. He was a Slytherin too, for all of his Gryffindor
traits.

"Our team has been busy attempting to identify the source path of the poison – which we have established to be a peculiar chemical compound that mimics the structures of cyanide. We have yet to ascertain who is behind the attack, though due to the large number of victims we have concluded it to be one of terrorism as opposed to a more direct assassination attempt. Our next steps will include continuing to investigate how the poison found its way through the Parisian security checks, as we work in conjunction with their government to neutralize this threat as quickly as possible."

Harry continued to listen as Voldemort talked for a moment longer, beginning to reassure people of their safety and opening the floor up for questions.

"Mr Potter - Lecrutia Black, from the Daily Prophet." He knew her, of course. Dark haired girl in their year, a fellow Slytherin. She had taken quite the fancy to him, at one point. "How is it that we know that this terrorism is not the cause of your resistance? You have been strongly affiliated with anti-government action, the most recent being the destruction of Diagon Alley and damage to over 25 thousand galleons worth of civilian merchandise."

Harry barely refrained from grimacing, though Voldemort had already anticipated this question. They both had.

"The resistance's aims are not to cause terror, merely to protest the rhetoric of Blood Purity currently invading the structures of society. I would happily reimburse any civilians who came to harm through our actions. Unfortunately, I am currently frozen out of my Gringott's accounts."

He could practically feel Voldemort's desire to throttle him for that not entirely planned last comment, but continued undeterred.

"An attack on a peace treaty is not in line with our intentions, and manifesto, to put it frankly. It would do nothing to further the aims of the resistance."

His eyes flicked around the room again, noting a shift in the corner of the room. They returned to Black as she spoke once more.

"And what of assassination?"

"If I was to attempt assassination, I dare say I would have attacked my target already," Harry said, tone carefully controlled, a bit dry. "Poisoning a whole room of officials seems overly elaborate when I could merely throw a blasting curse across the conference table."

"I can assure you, Miss Black," Voldemort stated, before he could talk further about such a topic. "Mr Potter's resistance is not behind this attack. They would not have the means with which to successfully pull off the scale or complexity of the plan."

And now Harry was the one wanting to throttle him. It was payback for the comment about his Gringott's account, he knew. Bloody hell, they probably should stick to their planned scripts or this was going to implode quickly. His fists clenched under the water, and he took a sip of water to calm himself.

His eyes flicked to the shifting corner of the room again, drawn to it by some instinct.

"Robert Skeeter, Witch Weekly. To the Dark Lord; does your newfound truce have anything to do with the rumoured sexual relationship between the two of you during your school years? Letting a known terrorist involve himself within national affairs hardly seems to follow your usual procedure."
The air could have been cut with a knife. Had he said he wanted to throttle Voldemort? It was nothing compared to know. Of course, something of this angle was to be expected, but Skeeter still gave a self-satisfied sort of smile.

"No, it does not," Voldemort stated. "Though of course, it is known that Mr Potter and I used to be close friends, any further relationship between us only alleged, that has little bearing on either of our political activity which takes precedent over such sentiments. Moreover, the national affairs in question deal with a significant and potentially global level of threat and so-

Harry had been distracted by the crowd again. The shifting in the corner. It had been nagging at him. The next second, on that instinct alone as Voldemort continued to deal with the onslaught of sudden questions regarding the alleged relationship (of which most reporters had been wary, they'd counted and hoped on, to approach considering Voldemort was known as a dangerous, murder-capable Dark Lord and Harry himself as an armed and incredibly deadly militant) he'd lunged across the table and shoved them both to the floor.

The screen behind them exploded with the spell, sending people screaming and shards of shrapnel flying everywhere. Harry swore under his breath, but then immediately snapped into a familiar battle mode.

He kept an iron grip on the back of Voldemort's neck, forcing him down low against the floor because it was pretty obvious who that curse had been aimed for. Unfortunate timing outside.

He looked up through the lingering smoke to see that the conference room had been all but flooded with hooded figures – white robed, with black masks. It was like a parody of Voldemort's forces, an inversion on the design of the Death Eaters.

Harry could see Abraxas already looking around for his lord, trying not to look panicked though his immaculate hair was wildly dishevelled. Harry didn't hesitate to leap into action, wand already in his hand.

"Get out of here," he instructed, distractedly. Tom grabbed hold of his arm, and Harry manoeuvred them quickly so he had the idiot politician slammed up behind cover again. Through himself forward to brace them as another spell narrowly missed where the Dark Lord's head had just been.

"Go," Harry repeated, in a hiss. "You're a liability here. It's you they're after. Fuck you, you're putting civilians in danger if you stay and I am not negotiating with you on that. I'll deal with this."

There was absolutely no room for disobedience in his tone, and he shoved Tom at Alphard as he appeared with the security detail. "Get him out of here," he ordered again, to Black this time.

He trusted Alphard. And he trusted Tom to defend himself too – that had never been a problem. Voldemort was a lethal dueller; truly formidable, somewhat mesmerizing to watch.

But Harry was the soldier here. And the point remained that Voldemort's presence would not help the situation.

Tom had always been a politician and a visionary first, regardless of his skills on a battlefield.

"Harry-" Tom began. He had already thrown himself into battle with the white hooded figures instead, the words swallowed by the cacophony around them.

Harry slashed his wand down, knocking several of the reporters aside as he constructed a large shield charm. It was one Hermione had invented, to minimize the possibility of unnecessary damage in the resistance's attacks.
He looked for a way to get people out there, even as he felt the anti-apparation wards rise around him like prison bars. Evacuate and protect, that had to be his first priority.

And then to interrogate - by whatever means necessary.

When he glanced back behind him, Voldemort was gone.

If Harry had enamoured him all over again during the truce meeting, by throwing the cloak of Tom's own field of expertise upon his shoulders and wearing it well…

It failed to compare to watching Harry on a battlefield.

If war was theatre, and if Tom himself took the stage and the performance, then Harry took the operating theatre.

The grisly truth of it all, up close and ugly.

It took his breath away every time he saw it. The raw, radiated power. Harry's expression was dramatically different from the normal warmth and sense of good-natured easy goingness that he always projected.

He was beautiful. Exquisite. Never so perfect as he was whipping through the crowd of his enemies with a deadly grace.

Tom's angel of death.

Harry was just never supposed to turn his judgment on him, his condemnation. Damnation, perhaps.

It made him want him want to shove Harry up against the nearest surface and take him like nothing else did, really. Kiss him hard, and snatch up that ferocity and feel it in the pressure of Harry's hands as they gripped him tight. Feel it soften too, and melt away the jagged contours of the world like the first rays of morning.

But that could hardly be the point right now.

Voldemort would have been indignant to leave such a compelling sight, let alone when he was ordered to do so. He was the Dark Lord, he was in control of the entire country and most of its populace. Nobody should have been giving him orders, let alone the leader of the terrorist opposition.

Not to mention, it hardly benefited him to let Harry be seen defending his people, whilst he himself fled like a seeming coward. Regardless of the – admittedly sound strategy – behind Harry's commands on the matter.

**Harry could get hurt if he stayed to fight on his own.**

But that was hardly supposed to be his largest consideration either. It wasn't his largest consideration. How Harry would react to him disobeying or obeying the command was completely irrelevant too.

Salazar, he should have killed Harry when he had the chance. Or let him die at the peace treaty.

Alphard gave him an apologetic look, and shoved a portkey into his hand as they disappeared from the scene.
As Harry had suspected, the brunt of murder vanished with Voldemort's absence. The Dark Lord was definitely the target, to whatever was going on here.

But it wasn't his resistance. So who was this player? The same people who had attacked the Paris treaty meeting…or someone else entirely?

Harry couldn't decide which was a more ominous thought.

His breathing was heavy as he continued to fight back, determined to take at least one of them alive for his questioning. He couldn't let them slip through his fingers.

But it was very odd to be working alongside the forces and guards who had hunted him down not so long ago.

Harry snarled as he felt the anti-apparation wards fall, lunging forwards. He managed to grab hold of one of them, tearing the black mask off. Only to stare, wide-eyed.

It felt like he'd been hit with a sledgehammer, and he had no idea why.

Blue eyes stared back at him, with something frighteningly similar to the churning mess in side of him. Pale, freckled skin, and a flame of red hair.

Harry had never seen the man before in his life.

But he felt like he was going to be sick.

"Sorry, Harry. It's for the best – you'll see."

The man grabbed the mask from his suddenly slack fingers, and that snapped Harry out of whatever weird pit of inaction he'd fallen into. He started to curse, furious, making a grab for the man again as he disapparated with a crack right in front of him.

Harry's mouth felt dry. His mind spinning, heart hammering in his chest.

He could feel the battle winding down around him. Some civilians injured, one dead, but it was nowhere near as bad as it could have been.

But it wasn't great. The only evidence they had were corpses, and even as Harry stepped towards them in hopes of identification, the bodies started to burn.

It was a mess. A bloody mess.

"Harry!" He heard Hermione shout behind him, having apparently just arrived. "Voldemort informed us what was happening. We came straight here. What were you thinking trying to take the situation on alone!" She thumped him on the arm, ashen faced.

"Voldemort? He's supposed to be in his safe house by now." Harry's brow furrowed. His words sounded distant. He felt numb.

Maybe it was just the customary adrenaline crash.

Hermione caught his arm, expression softening.

"Are you hurt?" she asked. "Come on, we should get you checked over."

Harry shook his head.
"I'm fine."

"Harry-" she began, exasperatedly.

"No, I really am fine this time. Honest," Harry held his hands up in a placating gesture. "It was more of a scrape than a battle. It was Voldemort they were trying to kill, not me."

She was looking at him with an odd expression on her face, and Harry scowled. Took a step back.

"What happened?" she questioned instead. Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly. God, he wished more than anything that he knew the answer to that.

"Well," he replied. "I think we made the front page."
"You're no longer with Tom?"

Harry should have expected this, really, but he hadn't expected to be found so quickly. Perhaps he should have known better than to think he could sit in the pub and enjoy a drink.

Or, if not enjoy it, use it to drown out the frantic mull of his thoughts and the raw ache in his chest.

"I thought we were not supposed to call his royal highness under such a common name," he said, in order to avoid directly getting into that other conversation. His eyes flicked to the side, watching Abraxas as he hovered beside him.

Malfoy looked thoroughly disgusted to be in such a muggle place as this at all, so maybe it said something that he'd bothered to come. It did nothing to make Harry feel better right now though.

The blond sat down without being asked, mercury eyes fixed unforgivingly upon his face.

"Did he end it, or did you?" Abraxas demanded, with a careful sort of neutrality. Harry resisted the urge to sigh, and took another sip of his drink. He could feel a headache blooming.

"I did. No, I don't have any intentions of crawling back and begging for forgiveness."

"I wasn't going to suggest it – I know you well enough to know it would do no good. You're a very proud man, Harry Potter," Abraxas murmured.

Harry glanced over again at that, finger spinning the rim of his glass.

"Tom didn't send you to persuade me back?" he checked. Abraxas said nothing in response to that, studying him with hooded eyes.

"Do you have any intentions of not crawling back?" Harry ventured, instead, as the somewhat unnerving silence stretched. He phrased it lightly, flippantly. Turned his gaze back to his glass; but he didn't need to look to feel Abraxas stiffen fractionally next to him.

"Don't." The words were practically hissed out, through clenched teeth. "That's – just don't, Harry. I'm not you. Don't even talk about such things, and don't you dare ask Alphard. There'll come a time when you can have your life terminated for less."

The room was warm with chatter, so removed from Harry's own mood currently.

"You think it was easy for me to leave him?"

Abraxas sagged next to him, at that remark, ordering himself a drink.

"You still left. There are many among us who won't forgive you for it. He's-" Abraxas cut himself off, going silent for a moment. "There's a war coming, Harry," Abraxas continued, seemingly on a different track entirely. "You know that, don't you? You can feel it too. Is that why you left?"

"I can't fight for Blood Purity. I won't."

"He's better with you. At least, there are plenty who certainly think so." If Malfoy's tone was careful before, it was nothing compared to the way it was now. "I know Prince does. Lestrange does, however reluctantly he admires you."
Harry nearly threw the glass, hands clenching in his lap instead as he shot Abraxas a look that had the man’s posture straightening abruptly, though he remained blank-faced.

Of course he did. Abraxas Malfoy was a stoic bastard in his maturity.

"I take it I can include you among those who will never forgive me for leaving him?" Harry asked bitterly.

"As I said," Abraxas said, softly now. "You're a very proud man. Perhaps too proud."

"And dearest Tom is, of course, a god with no need for modesty, right? He can do no wrong."

There was a bad taste in his mouth – but he'd made his decision, and hadn't chosen nearly as lightly as he was sure many would assume.

"I cannot force you to stay." Malfoy's tone was more business-like now, as the blond turned to face him more squarely on the chair. "But you know who my loyalty belongs to. Who it must belong to." His expression was like frost, no apology or kindness left in his posture. "If you leave, don't ever come back, Potter. Don't you even dare do that to him. If you return to us, do so now. Because I will not let you do it later."

"You won't let me? My, I'd almost think you were in love with him yourself," Harry replied. A spot of furious colour appeared on Abraxas' cheeks.

The blond stood up, looking down at him haughtily.

Harry wanted to snarl, standing up too, shoulders squared, itching for his wand.

"You know perfectly well that I never…agreed with our lord in his relationship with you. The way the two of you carry on…" Abraxas looked like he'd smelt something foul. The ache in Harry's chest seemed to only spread. "But we are not school boys anymore, Potter. Things have changed."

"So I noticed," Harry replied curtly. Malfoy's eyes flicked over him once more.

"So, regardless of my personal feelings on the matter, make it a clean break. Or don't make it a break at all. However, I will not stand to see you half-heartedly toy with him. Do not make a spectacle of this mess, regardless of your private feelings. I like you, Harry, despite your…well." Malfoy smiled now, tightly, hands tucking behind his back. "And I say this because I like you. Don't make this war between us. You know I'm doing the PR for his campaign."

Harry's eyes narrowed and Malfoy paled, even as he drew himself up to a taller height to compensate.

"We're not schoolboys anymore, Malfoy," he countered, oh so softly. "Careful now. I'd so hate to think you were trying to threaten me. Especially when I'm already in so jovial a mood."

Malfoy's hand clenched around his wand, and Harry raised his brows, looking at him impassively.

"If you care about him, you will do as I ask."

The blond left without finishing his drink.

"I heard all about the attack, are you alright? Êtes-vous bien?"

Dufort was sickeningly transparent in his fawning, eyes fixed on Harry's face as if he was a sight of wondrous beauty, something to be cherished and protected.
Which, whilst it was true that Harry had grown up handsome, and he could understand wanting to capture the resistance leader before someone else did (in more ways than one) that was hardly the point. Harry was not some fragile little flower, to need the type of protection Dufort looked like he wanted to give him.

Harry would go mad on that type of life – and Dufort was not strong enough to be able to tame his former lover, if he wanted to give him that type of life anyway.

Still.

"We are fine, merci," He stated, stepping up behind Harry and spearing with Dufort with a cold glance. Dufort's gaze seemed to drag most reluctantly to meet his. He nearly placed and tightened a hand on Harry's shoulder in response, something hot coiled dangerously in his gut.

He hadn't said anything to Harry, upon his return from the 'battlefield.' There wasn't time, before their next engagement. Well, there was time. But he hadn't said anything. There were too many people around for either of them to speak openly, besides – and it was easy enough to ascertain that Harry was unharmed by the events of the morning.

So the silence brewed between them.

Dufort gestured for them to sit down, in the conference room where there meeting was to take place. They both sank into their seats, and for a moment, they both just surveyed the Frenchman.

He couldn't help but think Harry was going out of his way to avoid looking at him.

"I see the rumours of the truce between your forces is true," Dufort began "Certainly, the Parisian papers were full of the most intriguing photographs and stories of Lord Voldemort carrying an unconscious Harry Potter out of the truce meetings. Perhaps you were intuitive to remain in Britain, Mr Potter."

Voldemort's eyes flashed. He decided, for now, it was best not to consider what the English papers would be full of tomorrow morning. There was something in Dufort's expression, as he looked at Harry.

Maybe Harry was right about the unprofessionalism, because he really could not stop himself from rearing up at that comment, like a spitting cobra.

But that thought did nothing to ease his quickly growing-black mood.

"Currently, I find the fact that he was unconscious and poisoned during a peace treaty arranged to take place in your city to be far more interesting, Monsieur," he stated coldly, before Harry had the opportunity to speak. "And far more worthy of my time than idle gossip. Don't you agree?"

Dufort blinked, gave Harry a half-glance and hurriedly sorted out his papers, straightening in his seat.

Harry was, a little suspiciously, silent.

"We have been examining the source of the poison, the possible pathways for it to have entered the meetings," Dufort said stiffly. "We interrogated the kitchen staff, of course, along with conducting informal interviews with the other guests as suggested by Mr Potter."

"And?" Harry leaned forward. Tom watched Dufort's face carefully.

"The poison was contaminating the food, but by all our investigation we can conclude that this
contamination occurred only when the food was already in the meeting one. The kitchen staff were all unaware of it, and the food was tested before being used as an ingredient."

"So it would have had to be added manually, when the meetings were in process," Harry summarized. "Presumably by one of the guests, as I suspected."

The French themselves, seemed a likely suspect. Or at least, someone within Dufort's circle. They had motive to want him dead, if this was truly an attack on him, considering the possibility of his attacking their country in his expansion plan.

Really, if a certain rebel leader hadn't destroyed his Birmingham factories, this wouldn't have happened. So, really, it was all Potter's fault.

"Do you have a more specific suspect?" Voldemort questioned.

A truce treaty, the wards, and everything was however designed for assassination attempts to be impossible. If he had truly been the target (as he would have been, if the Parisian attack and the assassination of this morning were linked) why would someone choose such an elaborate method of murder? There were plenty of other opportunities.

Easier ones, even – as much as killing him would ever be easier. He prided himself on his meticulousness. All in all, it suggested that there was something specifically about the peace treaty, about everyone there, which had been targeted.

Unfortunately, that left him with two problems. A global one, and a more personal one of people actively trying to kill him. Again. It would have been far easier to fell two birds with one stone, but oh well. He was good at finding silver linings.

"I'm afraid not," Dufort replied. "Though, of course, it would depend too on the motives behind the attack. Which we concurred were terrorism, as you no doubt remember." The tone was cool, bristled like Dufort was aware of the dangerous possibility of being accused himself.

Harry frowned slightly.

"Obviously the culprit is somebody likely to suffer if the country goes to peace. Perhaps someone working in security, or some form of magical weapon trade," the green-eyed man reasoned. "In which case I believe I will look more closely to the American and Russian ambassadors, and their histories. I may try and contact the leading Russian resistance, as they'd been fairly active recently."

Fantastic. That was all he needed – Harry talking to more resistances and getting even more defiant. Whilst Harry's defiance was a thing of untamed beauty, like a stallion that had yet to be broken in, it was not something he could afford right now to indulge.

"Excellent," Dufort said.

"I maintain it is possible for seeming terrorist activity to mask deeper or more specific motivations," he interrupted. "We cannot rule out something more specific, regardless of what the press is told."

"Of course, my lord," Dufort responded. "But that seems unlikely. This does seem an inordinate amount of effort to go to. Our security would not have been easy to get through."

Clearly it was. He levelled the Frenchman with a look, not quite openly scathing but certainly a mild question as to how such great security was apparently so disasterously unsecure as to bring about this disaster.
Dufort flushed.

The meeting continued.

"Thank you for your time," Harry smiled, bright and deliberately innocent. He leant forward to shake Dufort's hand firmly.

He didn't think Dufort was behind this. That didn't mean he wasn't going to be useful, and the man's interest in him was more than evident.

Seeing as Voldemort—bastard—had seen fit to talk over him as if he was incapable, weak and in need of a mouthpiece, he would nonetheless use it to his advantage now.

It was even familiar in a way, to the small time he'd once spent at Tom's side on the political playing field before. People looked at Tom, admired and coveted and trembled beneath his power.

They looked at Harry and for some bloody annoying reason assumed he was the more harmless one out of the two of them. The weak link.

He'd learnt to utilize their ignorance. Even if it still annoyed him, especially now when he knew for a fact that his own reputation was hardly insignificant. Really, just because he didn't feel need to strut around aggressively like an overly proud peacock like some people didn't make him weaker.

Meeker. Merlin.

"By all means, thank you for being on board with the investigation," Dufort replied, watching him in that way of his. Harry tilted his head.

"I am sorry that our time together has been so riddled with misfortune. It would have been nice to meet under better circumstances," he said. "I shall no doubt be spending some time in Paris as the investigation proceeds…"

He left it hanging. Dufort's smile broadened.

"I would be delighted to entertain you, Harry. Should you find yourself with the time."

"I'll await your missive warmly." He bent low, in one quick sharp gesture, as was the custom among the higher levels of French wizarding society, brushing his lips against the man's hand, before straightening and turning away.

"You are utterly transparent, Potter," Voldemort said, as they were leaving, jaw tight.

"Oh, someone's transparent," he replied, in an entirely too cheerful tone, "but I don't think it's me."

So maybe, despite his mind being clouded and occupied by the redheaded stranger from the attack, he could still find some vindictive delight in tormenting Tom. But really, it wasn't his fault if the man was still so bloody possessive and easily jealous.

With a crack, they arrived back at Voldemort's headquarters, and Harry's mind had turned immediately away from Tom and onto his resistance, and the varying tasks he had set them. And, of course, to his own tasks of investigating Mr Michael Grayson, and Viktoria Alkaev. He'd have to see if he could set up a meeting. He'd talked to them a little at the truce dinner – though not together, obviously.

It was no secret that affairs between the Russians and the Americans were tense indeed. He was sure they were busy trying to ensure matters did not flare between their two countries, after the whole
poisoning affair.

He paused as Abraxas swept towards them across the hall. More, he paused at the woman at her side. She was small, and more pretty than she was beautiful. Soft-seeming, but dignified.

Harry immediately had a lurch in his gut.

"My lord," Abraxas smiled, "I'm glad I could catch you. There is someone I would like you to meet – this is Miss Evelyn Rowle. Miss Rowle, may I introduce you to Lord Voldemort, our esteemed leader."

Rowle. Pureblood family. Very strongly pureblood family. He recognized her, vaguely, from Hogwarts.

Tom's lips stretched in a mimic of his smile, as he inclined his head. It still had a hint of his old charm, but the face was different now. He was rather amazed that Miss Rowle simply gave a demure, lovely smile back.

"The pleasure's all mine," he murmured. Harry knew that tone all too well. Could imagine how electrified Miss Rowle felt.

Certainly, she was someone who would make a perfect trophy wife. Not that he was bitter. He caught Abraxas' eye briefly.

"This, Miss Rowle, is Harry Potter. You have heard of the recent truce between the rebel forces and our Lord, of course…" Abraxas waved a hand in his direction. She nodded her head at him, instead of curtsying like she'd done for the Dark Lord.

"I've heard a lot about you, Mr Potter," she murmured, offering her hand to him, obviously intending for him to politely kiss her knuckle. He caught her hand and shook instead, watching her eyes flicker, head tilt.

"All bad, I would imagine," he returned lightly. "Excuse me, I'm rather busy. It was nice to make your acquaintance." The old customs and manners fell easily enough off his tongue, even now.

He felt cold.

"Miss Rowle was just expressing her admiration for the gardens, my lord," Abraxas said, quickly. Managing not to sound like he was hurrying to speak before Tom or himself could say anything further. "I suggested that you might like, later if you are busy now, to accompany her for a stroll. The rose garden is beginning to bloom exquisitely for the season."

Tom and Miss Rowle walking among the roses in the evening. How perfectly charming.

He vanished to his far more important work before he had to listen to the reply.

"Have you ever heard of knocking?" He didn't need to look up to know who had entered his room, later than evening.

He was bent over 'his' desk, going over all the records he could get on his ambassadors of choice, before he met with them again. No point going in blind.

Of course, Hermione had researched everyone at the truce meeting for him the first time, but their conditions were hardly the easiest for an extensive search.
"Vaguely," Voldemort replied. He heard the door swing shut behind the Dark Lord. "I noticed you escaped Miss Rowle's company rather hastily this afternoon."

"The sooner this poisoning affair is solved, the sooner this farce of a truce can end. Have you managed to make any progress on the case?" Harry asked, instead.

In an instant, Harry was yanked up and pressed flush against the wall of his quarters. Tom slammed hands pinned above his head, and savage lips crushed against his own, warm in comparison to the cold stone at his back.

Harry hated how Tom seemed to fit just as well pressed against him now as he had done all those years ago, as if every line and inch of their bodies were perfectly moulded like two halves slipping together. At least, until sharp elbows and knees and teeth and nails got involved.

His eyes widened, and for a second he felt like he was going to liquify. He'd put it down to shock, a small moan of surprise escaping his mouth.

Then realization struck, and he snarled.

As if anticipating his next move, the Dark Lord's fingers curled in his hair, shoving him back more firmly against the wall, leaving him craning his head up, back arching involuntarily with the contortion of his neck. His hips pressed against Tom's, dizzyingly, as the Dark Lord ground him further against the wall.

And he was unable to turn his head away as planned.

His hands strained against the fingers trapping his wrists in place, nails clawing against Tom's hands as he made another sound somewhere between extreme disgruntlement and...something entirely on the other end of the spectrum of emotions.

His thoughts were racing, even as he could hardly think straight all - any noise they made was muffled in each other's mouths besides. There was nothing kind about the kiss. If it could be called a kiss and not a particularly talented assault on his mouth.

Harry parted his lips after a moment, and Tom immediately took the bait. The next second Harry had bit down warningly, hard, without mercy and the other man recoiled, leaving the taste of copper in Harry's mouth.

They were both panting, heavily. Tom's – Voldemort's – eyes were hooded, black devouring up that unnerving scarlet. He felt like they devoured him up a bit too.

Harry flattened himself against the wall, furiously jutting his chin up a little. He opened his mouth to speak.

The next second, Tom's mouth had claimed his again, utterly undeterred as he nipped Harry's lower lip between his teeth, drawing a hiss. Heat rose in his chest, despite himself.

The same urges as always, to fight and kiss and settle in stolen snatches of peace after. To claim and possess in turn.

Dangerous.

Harry didn't bother with further warnings; couldn't afford to do this longer, because each passing moment made it harder to pull himself out of the other man's centre of gravity.
Really, he should have known better than to think such a gesture as biting would work with Tom.

In a split second he'd swept Tom's ankles from beneath him, felt the other man grab his shirt to bring him lurching down with him, only for Harry to use the motion to spin them and slam the Dark Lord hard into the wall.

The former Slytherin groaned, and Harry shoved his forearm into Tom's windpipe before he could react further.

"No."

It was the word that made his once lover go still. At least that hadn't changed.

Considering they'd fought so often, and that the violence and power play had been imbued so deeply within their lovemaking, Harry had learnt very quickly at Hogwarts that struggling had absolutely no effect in making Tom stop. The bastard simply could not seem to differentiate with Harry tousling with him as part of their everyday, and genuinely fighting to get him off.

So he'd made bloody well sure Tom respected verbal commands when it came to this.

They stared at each other for a moment, chests heaving. Tom's eyes flicked hungrily over his lips, over his eyes – drinking up every part of him like fine wine.

"You were exquisite today," Tom said, just as he was about to speak again, to shout his rage at the situation. Red eyes were aflame with his fervour, so different to the ice it normally was, voice reverent in a way Harry had never expected to hear again.

Yet dark, too. Merciless and demanding.

It made his insides squeeze.

"I didn't do it for you. There were civilians in trouble." He hated that his voice was just a little hoarse. His heart was pounding in his chest, and he hated that too.

He removed his arm from Tom's throat, taking a step back, and rolling out his shoulders. The Dark Lord straightened and smoothed out his shirt in turn, still staring at him – unblinking.

"I know."

Most of all, Harry hated that now, with the distance between them, he felt cold all over and wanted nothing more than to close the space again.

"I'd prefer it, too, if you did not kiss me to show your appreciations." Harry forced his tone to be flat, as icy as the look on Voldemort's face. "You, presumably, have a fiancé and I am pretty sure that I have made it more than clear that I-"

"Oh, I dare you to finish that sentence," Tom murmured, viciously. "Please, do, Harry. Tell me how you want nothing to do with me as if your heart isn't about to burst out of your chest. As if you don't feel sick imagining me walking through the garden – our garden – with somebody who isn't you."

What the fucking hell was bringing this on? His eyes narrowed.

"Goodnight, Voldemort. It is late. I was just about to turn in. I would really prefer that you left now."

Just like on the battlefield, his tone brooked no argument. He was not, however, stupid enough to turn his back dismissively. However much he wanted to.
Voldemort advanced a few, slow steps towards him, and Harry's wand hit the palm of his hand.

"It would be so... so much easier for you, if you would just surrender, Harry."

"Surrender's not really in my forte, sorry." He watched the man warily, refusing to take a step back, his shoulders squaring. "Or did you expect that you could just kiss me, and all would be forgiven and forgot? This isn't a fairytale, Tom, and your mood swings are enough to give someone whiplash. Back off."

The Dark Lord twitched at the name, slightly, and a pale, spidery hand grabbed hold of his chin.

"Never."

Harry was cursing in a split second, and Voldemort had reacted just as quickly, other hand lashing out just as fast.

Harry didn't even feel the pain of his wrist snapping until a moment later, and he stared at Tom in utter disbelief. His wand, of course, clattered to the floor by proxy and lay between them. Voldemort placed a foot on it.

"Wow," Harry said flatly. "A minute ago you were telling me how exquisite I was. You sure escalate quickly. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Voldemort brought the injured hand up, fingers still clenched unforgivingly around the (dislocated) wrist, pressing a slow kiss to the knuckles. His eyes hadn't changed. Harry nonetheless felt a healing spell move through his bones with the press of lips, reverting the damage in forcing him to drop his wand.

"What do I have to do to get you back, Harry?"

"Seriously?" Harry repeated, lowly. "You have no sense of timing." He could only imagine how this scene would be coming across to someone not well versed in the nightmare that was Tom Riddle. "Oh, I don't know, some small level of human respect would be a wonderful start."

It was when he saw the honest flicker of confusion flash in Riddle's eyes that the true enormity of the mess sank in.

"I do respect you. Greatly," Tom said stiffly, thumb tracing into his hand. "And if I had you again I would worship--"

"Admiring and coveting something is not fucking respect," Harry snapped. "It's pretty obvious you don't anymore, when you consistently rank your desires to be of more importance than mine."

Tom stared at him.

"I'm not a submissive man, Harry. But--"

"It is not about submission," Harry growled. "It is not about control. For once, Tom, it may shock you... but it's not about power. I don't care if you can or can't make me do something, you twat. That doesn't give you the right to do it. My god, what next - you kiss me, I say no, and you decide that if I don't surrender you take what you want by force?"

Maybe it was a low blow, considering all he knew of Tom's past, but...

He couldn't believe all of this was bubbling out. He couldn't believe Tom needed to be told this after
so long.

"I would never rape." Tom began, drawing himself up haughtily.

"No. You wouldn't. At least I'd like to think you wouldn't. So why the hell is it any different on things when we're not in bed?"

The man looked stunned. Harry sighed, extracting his grip.

The bastard recovered quickly.

"You cannot expect me to give up trying to persuade you to-"

"-and when you find you cannot persuade me?"

Tom went very quiet. Looked down, before up at him again with a once again renewed fierceness. Harry's heart stopped at the expression on his face.

"If there is no chance for us, look me in the face, and tell me that you do not still love me."
Harry immediately went rigid at the question.

For a long moment, he simply stared, all possible words drying up in his mouth until he felt like hands were tightening around his throat.

He let out a sharp breath, mind racing, and squeezed his eyes shut to compose himself. Even when he was painfully aware that to do so was far too obvious a sign of weakness on his part.

"I-I-" for the love of everything, he really wished the Dark Lord would take a step back. He suddenly felt crowded, as if there wasn't enough air in the whole world, let alone this room.

This bloody room, suffocating with its memories good and bad. His gut had clenched with an anxiety that made him want to physically shiver, fraying at the edges. A lack of control he'd sworn not to let himself get into.

His stomach ached.

He refused to stand in front of Tom and tremble.

"Stop this." It was as much of plea as it could be, without actually being one.

"Tell me. Tell me that you don't love me."

"I don't love you."

Fingers traced, oh so tenderly, along his cheek and he could have flinched for it. He could feel the shakiness in Voldemort's normally steady hand too, and it made him feel sick.

"Open your eyes, Harry," Tom murmured. "And say it again to my face. Once more, like you really mean it."

He didn't want to. Would have dropped his head into the bastard's neck and shoulder right now, clutching onto his robes, just so that he could avoid looking him in the face. Seeing that expression again.

He opened his eyes, and Voldemort's gaze immediately ensnared him. Wouldn't let him go, holding him in place with the accuracy of shackles.

The pad of the other man's thumb slipped over his mouth, dragging his bottom lip parted for a moment as if to pry and coax the response out of him. His breath was stolen.


There were a million different things he could do with ruthless efficiency, and yet he was frozen.


"It's irrelevant," Harry managed, then. "Of course I-" he gritted his teeth, studied Voldemort closely
in turn, and straightened himself. "Of course I love you, Tom. But it changes nothing. I fucking well adore you. I also just honestly cannot stand to spend more than five minutes in your company without wanting to choke you to death with your own intestines. Love was never the issue here; you know that just as well as I do."

He reached out, placing his hand above Tom's heart, able to feel it hammering frantically in the man's chest through silken robes. Maybe that made him feel a little better. Calm, in a suspended sort of way.

The Dark Lord seemed to have frozen too, fingers stilling where they remained splayed against his cheek. Harry tilted his head slightly into the touch, just to watch Tom suppress a flinch in turn as the power swung between them.

With a man so well versed in lies as Voldemort, sometimes he thought the man didn't know what to do with the plain truth, untwisted and brutal.

"I want to kill you, Harry. I know I promised I would." The words were confessed like something very different; breathless, intimate. "I should do it now."

"You won't," Harry said, still holding the dark wizard's gaze. "You'll keep saving my life like you did in Paris."

The fingers moved against his cheek again, sliding to cup and examine. Touching him as if he were some priceless artefact in a museum.

"The heart is a useless thing," Voldemort murmured, dark eyes growing impossibly darker. "Cruel. Untamed."

Harry snorted and let his hand drop.

The Dark Lord let his fall too, though he didn't step back.

"So you understand how this changes nothing," Harry replied.

"So you'll understand why I'll never stop. You ruined me, Harry Potter. Now you just have it coming."

Harry's chest seized all over again.

"You say the sweetest things." He turned away, only for Voldemort to catch hold of his upper arm. It was all still so gentle, as if Tom's fingers were incapable of bruising and breaking. As if they had anything but promises of torment left.

He could have ripped away, so easily, from the grip. Maybe that was why the barest touch halted him.

"If you love me, why won't you fight for me?" For the tone, they may as well have been making small talk on the weather.

"If I ruin you, why won't you let me go?" Harry raised his brows before a pitiless smile twisted his lips. Equally soft as the fingers on his arm. "Or do I ruin you, because you cannot let me go? However much you desperately want to?"

Voldemort recoiled.
"You are poison."

Harry laughed at that, edged and without any real humour, shaking his head.

"And you're a monster," he said. "Oh, what a pair we make. It's almost funny. Now, I'm respectfully asking you to get out of my room."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. Harry stared back at him, refusing to drop his gaze. Locking back everything that mattered, because it couldn't matter at all.

Then, unnervingly, the bastard smiled.

"Quite the pair indeed. Goodnight, Harry."

Harry eyed the door long after it had shut again.

His hands were trembling.

"My lord," Abraxas tossed a copy of that morning's Daily Prophet, along with the Witch Weekly and various other titles on his desk, face pinched. "I believe we have a problem."

Voldemort glanced his gaze cursorily over the articles, though he'd already read the news over his breakfast.

His and Harry's faces stared up at him, the promotional photos from the conference yesterday. Potter appeared half-blinded by the flash of cameras, but on the whole they looked good together.

But that probably only exacerbated the problem.

The front page of the Prophet covered the attack and the assassination during the conference yesterday, the pages after that followed with a summary of the current progress of the investigation as they had reported it.

He'd known he'd been able to count, to some extent, on their contacts in the paper.

It was after the first couple of pages of the prophet, and in the entire of Witch Weekly's spread of the situation, that the issue arose. The issue being speculation of his and Harry's homosexual relations, past and present.

It hadn't been unexpected, after Skeeter's question, but...

He needed another cup of tea.

"I'd noticed. They're not being subtle in their interest in the matter."

"I am already arranging another press conference – more security this time, of course – to address this question, particularly as we would need to do so anyway as the last one was interrupted. I have also had small gifts sent in apology to all those present who may have been inconvenienced in anyway by the attack," Malfoy said, flipping through his files.

"Excellent," he muttered, resisting the urge to rub his temples.

"Regarding Potter, I can have a flat rented for him to stay in as an alternative to here by the end of the day. I have already began making-"

Voldemort looked up. Of course, he knew perfectly well where Malfoy was going with this and it
made his lips thin. Even if he understood, rather too well, the necessities.

"No."

Malfoy faltered, expression shuttering. It was something of a satisfaction to see the blond squirming before his scrutiny.

"My lord-" Abraxas started, with carefully concealed unease.

"No," he repeated, voice growing dangerously soft. Malfoy looked down at his files, and was quiet a long moment as he collected himself once more.

"What was your opinion of Miss Rowle, my lord? I believe she seems a suitable candidate. Strong bloodline. The family are eager to please-"

"Indeed."

Malfoy looked up again – evidently trying not to look too hopeful.

"You approved or her, my lord?"

"She is an adequate selection, for the purpose," he allowed.

Harry was many things, but even if he could have in some way compensated before for his position, for his gender, he certainly couldn't do so now. Carrying on with Harry, in anyway publicly would have been…foolish. He knew that.

Potter was head of the Order of the Phoenix, a terrorist organization. Punishment was demanded and any and all of their interactions would be picked for motive, for condemnation.

It was a scandal. It was utterly inappropriate, and more so for the filth of their both being male. Such things were not right for the proper society, and his reign was fragile enough already as all political kingdoms were and would forever be.

He could not afford mistakes. He had fought too hard for his throne to let it all slip out of his hands. Made too many sacrifices.

Moreover, Harry was wild. He'd seen his mistake now, from the years before.

Wild things always needed to be broken in and tamed before they could be used for domestic purposes. He'd put a tiger in a cage and expected it not to bite him.

Foolish.

But things were different now. They had to be.

"I will extend an invitation to Miss Rowle regarding the opening of the new Birmingham factories then," Malfoy said, jotting down a note. "And arrange some activities for the two of you. We will have to be careful, given the recent threats to your person, but we should begin letting the public see the two of you together."

"Arrange a duelling competition."

"My lord?" Malfoy's brow furrowed slightly.

"A festival. To take people's minds off current events," he clarified. "Including a duelling
Malfoy stared at him, thoughtfully.

"And you believe the culprits behind all of this will come."

Voldemort twirled his wand in hand, leaning back more comfortably in his chair.

"That will be all, Abraxas. Send Black in."

"Are you alright, Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked up, startled, and realized that he'd been staring at the same page for the last five minutes without reading a thing.

He forced a smile.

"I'm fine."

"You look like you haven't been sleeping," she worried.

"I'm fine," he repeated. Annoyingly, she didn't look convinced and he had no idea when or where she learnt to read him so well.

"Has something happened?"

He nearly sighed at her persistence, though it was touching. He'd always liked Hermione. She felt familiar to him, nice – which had been a great when his whole life had otherwise been turned upside down, and the majority of his closest friends were on the other side of the playing field.

He rubbed his eyes. Out of all the people left to him in the world, he probably trusted her and Minerva twice.

"The other day, at the conference, one of the assassins lost their mask." It seemed an easier topic, than Tom. Tom was not a topic he would bring up willingly with anyone, not even Lord bloody Voldemort himself. Hermione's eyes widened. Harry studied her, before looking down at his flexing fingers. "I…I felt like I recognized him."

Hermione set her pen down.

"What did he look like?" she asked. There was something in her tone that made Harry look up again, sharply.

"Do you know something about this?"

"Of course not," she replied. Harry continued to examine her for a moment. Something lurched, itching in the back of his mind.

He could feel a headache coming on.

"Red hair. Blue eyes. He looked a bit like Ignatius Prewett, but not," he said, perhaps poking for something. He didn't even know what.

"Maybe he's a relative," she suggested. "I'll look into it, for you?"
"Thanks."

They went back to their work.

He managed to organize a meeting with the Americans.

And yet…

It would have been easier to forget if not for that feeling; easier still, if it was the first time he got such a jarringly intense feeling of déjà vu.

"Harry, m'boy, may I have a word?"

Harry paused, surprised. He hadn't expected a man so high up and great as Albus Dumbledore to know his name, let alone to want to join him personally.

He hesitated, half suspicious and wishing he wasn't.

It was difficult enough, settling in and making new friends among the resistance when so many of them assumed him a spy, without having his guards up overly much.

Of course, he'd approached Dumbledore directly in regards to joining the resistance, simply because he didn't know who else to turn to. But, outside of that, he'd never really had any particular conversations with the man.

Oh, unlike a lot of the Slytherins against the wizened Transfiguration Professor, he'd always been in some way fond of the man. Not in any overt way – but he didn't dislike him. He seemed kindly, amusing. Though his bias towards Tom left much to be admired.

Certainly, he wasn't happy about going to Dumbledore, but nonetheless here it was…

He ducked into the side-room, posture stiff with injuries he'd sustained at a recent skirmish.

"Professor," he acknowledged, hesitantly.

"Please, there's no need for such formalities in such times." A hand was waved in his direction, as if to dismiss the title away. "Call me Albus."

"Albus," Harry repeated. He watched the man cautiously, waiting to find out what this was about. He was sure there was something. He could sort of guess, but he really hoped he was wrong.

"As you know, Lord Voldemort's forces are growing in number and power every passing day," the professor said gravely, with a gesture for him to sit down.

Harry felt oddly, distinctly, like a young boy summoned to the Headmaster's office.

Maybe, if he had been a Gryffindor, or in some way less naïve, maybe if he hadn't grown up with Tom Riddle… he would have been blind to where this conversation was leading. Innocent against battle tactics, able to follow with the comfort of a soldier.

"I can't," he interrupted, "I'm sorry."

Dumbledore's head tilted, fingers steepling beneath his chin. The normal twinkle was almost entirely absent.

Things had been getting worse.
"You don't know what I was going to say, surely?"

"We are lacking information," Harry murmured, blank-faced. "If you were looking for a double agent, by all accounts I would be the ideal person to turn to. I was friends with – with him."

Dumbledore was silent, which only convinced Harry that he was right about the cause behind this meeting.

"I am sorry that you feel that way. I understand that you are in a difficult position, and I apologize for the necessity of demanding further-"

"Do you?" Harry challenged, jaw clenching. "Do you understand? Really?"

Dumbledore gave a heavy sigh, the sound of a man aged far beyond his years.

"More than you realize, and more than I ever wanted to understand such betrayals," the man said quietly. Harry blinked, staring at him. Of course, he'd heard rumours, but…

"Is it true?" He was being indelicate. "You and…the Dark Lord."

Dumbledore's fingers pressed together more firmly, and the man fixed him with a look that made Harry want to shrink in shame for asking. Though maybe that said something, in itself.

"It's surprising how many times rumours are based in some element of truth," was all that his former Transfiguration Professor allowed. Harry swallowed.

"But you beat him," he said, softly.

"Victory is often more complicated than history would paint it," Dumbledore replied. "You will realize that with time. But, yes, I beat him."

Harry was sure his eyes were wide, childishly so – in a way not befitting a hardened soldier of his station, who'd killed already. Who'd done many things to be ashamed of.

"You'll often find, too," Dumbledore continued, looking kindly again, gentle. "That the most powerful weapons are those that require the greatest sacrifice. Those that are the hardest to bring ourselves to use, and wield."

And they were, cleverly, back to the beginning. Harry could admire his leader's conversation skills, certainly. He smiled, a little sadly.

"I still won't spy on him, sorry," he shrugged. "I would, if I could, but I can't. He knows me too well. He'd see through the deception in an instant."

Dumbledore's expression cleared, in some way – even as those blue eyes scrutinized him closely, with something odd. Undefined.

It all started from there.

"No. You can forget about it, I'm not doing that."

Abraxas Malfoy considered himself a patient, controlled man, by all accounts.

Harry Potter, however, was getting on his very last nerve. The whole situation was a mess, and not one he had any intention of letting himself be dragged down by.
He'd worked hard to establish his lord's new image, in aiding the campaign and informing a successful relationship between lord and his public.

In that regard – Harry Potter was the nightmare of everyone in his field.

Not in the least, because the rebel was refusing to do any PR work not pertaining directly to the Paris poisonings, which left him with rather significant problems regarding his upcoming conference.

He liked the other man, despite everything, but it was true. Professionally, they were incompatible and his once-friend was a liability and inconvenience. An enemy.

He'd told him, he'd warned him, and yet here everything he imagined going wrong was happening.

He could already imagine the empire crumbling around him.

"Potter, it is in your best interests if these rumours regarding you and the Dark Lord are add-"

"No," Harry interrupted him again, flatly, without consideration. Looked at him, with no expression on his face.

Of course, he would need to be careful. His lord was, infuriatingly, still as obsessed with Potter as he'd ever been.

A lesser man would have gritted his teeth.

Maybe that was the worst part: despite all of his own loyalty, and all that he had ever done for the man, he knew that if his Lord was asked to choose between him and that traitor, that he would choose Harry instantly and without hesitation. Every single time.

"You realize this could mean social and political ruin for him, don't you?" he hissed, harshly. Potter's brows simply raised at that.

"I'm the Head of the Order of the Phoenix, sabotaging Tom is hardly against my aims. Of course, people thinking I'm fucking the enemy is inconvenient, but it's going to damage him a lot more than it will him."

It was a sign of his excellent breeding that Abraxas didn't go for the bastard's throat.

"I'm asking you, nicely. Don't make this difficult, Harry. For old time's sake." He leaned forward a little, voice silken. "We were friends-"

Harry cut him off again, this time with laughter. Malfoy's eyes pinched slightly.

It was even worse when he knew Potter's stubbornness, far too well.
He considered his options, clinically.

Of course, he couldn't organize Harry leaving, his lord would punish him for enabling Potter to slip free of his webs, but...

"You left once. Why don't you just do it again? Do not tell me you are pining after him again."

"Don't be ridiculous," Potter snapped.

He had a bad feeling.

Something had to be done. It would be nothing personal.
Accidents happened, after all.

And Harry Potter had a lot of enemies.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the double/delayed post - A03 has recently not been allowing me to post new chapters, so there was a bit of backlog. I hope you enjoyed these two new chapters anyway, and I'd love to hear your opinion as always! :)
Chapter 11

It was the second day into the start of his first year at Hogwarts, so by all standards Harry didn't think he could have made too many enemies.

Okay, so Malfoy hated his guts considering he all but introduced himself by punching the bastard in the face... but he figured the snooty pureblood started it with his use of the word mudblood.

Still, though he hadn't lost any points, he'd managed to get himself a warning before the first night was over. Quite a record, really.

Charlus had been most impressed.

That would have explained why Malfoy, or Lestrange, would have cornered him for round two.

It didn't explain why he had an apparently furious Tom Riddle in front of him.

"I didn't need your help, you know," the other boy said haughtily. "I could have handled them fine on my own."

Harry blinked. Stared for a few moments.

"I didn't do it for you." Well, maybe a little bit, but saying so apparently wouldn't help much. "I just don't like people who use — use that word. It's foul."

"You made me look like I need protecting." Riddle took a step towards him, fists clenched at his sides, something cold in the air. "I don't need you to protect me, Potter."

"Okay. You're not weak," Harry shrugged. "You don't need protecting. See ya."

He turned away dismissively, not having applied any great significance to his defence in the first place, only for a hand to close around his shoulder.

"Is that it?" Riddle's carefully composed features slipped, just for a second, before the other boy looked icy and beyond his years again.

"What do you mean, is that it?" Harry asked, brow furrowing. "Did you have something else that you wanted to say?" All things considered in Riddle's stuffy behaviour, he hadn't been expecting a thank you.

The other first year floundered. Harry studied him for a moment, before smothering a smile. "Or you can come, you know, if you want." He gave another careless shrug, though suddenly his heart was pounding rather fast. "I was going to explore the castle. It would be nice to have someone to get lost with in case I get stuck in one of the suits of shining armour."

"What on earth are you planning to do that will get you stuck in a suit of shining armour?" Riddle sniffed. "You're an idiot, Potter."

And yet, he followed.

This time Harry didn't bother to smother smile.

Harry smoothed out his robes - of course, he'd once had the money to buy expensive robes without
problem. Unfortunately, his assets and bank account was still bloody frozen because Lord Voldemort was a bastard, and no doubt wanted to foster financial dependence, or...something.

Reasons to stay, anyway.

But Harry was trying really hard not to think about Tom in any capacity, though this whole building was a breeding ground for old scars and memories to resurface. And their conversation kept playing through his head too, damnably, despite his best efforts.

There was another bloody cup of cinnamon-coffee waiting for him when he woke up again. He wanted to punch something.

The worst part was that though he wanted Voldemort to just stop it, to let them move their separate directions and thus maybe spare them both the sheer torment of the situation...he also didn't want him to stop at all.

He didn't want to see Tom happy with somebody else, be it Miss Rowle or anybody. Maybe that made him cruel. But having seen the opening pictures in the Daily Prophet of Tom and Evelyn opening up that new branch of St Mungos together, made him sick.

The thought of Tom giving up on him made him feel cold, and maybe that made him a raging hypocrite too. But no matter his feelings, he couldn't let them get in the way of what he needed to do.

It was frightening how easily the Dark Lord could go from genocidal war general, to looking like he was quietly smitten with the woman. He stiffened as he heard the door to his quarters open, and swing shut.

"Last chance to come to the press conference and tell everyone how much you don't fancy me." Tom's voice rang out from behind him, as Harry leant over to fiddle with his tie, lips pinching thin.

"I think I'll pass, strangely enough. I have a meeting with the American Ambassador," he replied. His attention was carefully diverted, his tone measured. He watched Voldemort appear in the reflection of the mirror, impeccably dressed as always.

"Oh, so you're fine with everyone thinking we're in love? Interesting."

Harry's jaw clenched further, before he gave a sweet smile, eyes meeting Tom's in the reflection.

"Unlike you, I am not a coward terrified of everything authentic about my identity. Half Blood, Blood Purism. Homosexual, let's just get ourselves a pretty trophy wife to sweep it all under the rug. It's pathetic. If you really want, I could come and very loudly comment that back in the day just because we joked and called it friends with benefits, the use of the word friend didn't actually render you on your knees sucking me off as platonic."

The man's expression darkened. Harry broadened his smile viciously, and went back to the tie. To his surprise, or maybe not, after a moment Tom stepped forward nonetheless, arms sliding around his shoulders and batting his hands away.

The silken knot of the tie slid flawlessly, if a little tightly, to press against the hollow of his throat. The touch lingered for a moment longer than necessary. Harry's heart pounded furiously.

"And yet," the Dark Lord murmured, voice dangerously honeyed, head tilting and cool breath puffing over his cheek. "You were the one that ran first. And you always resort to your oh so trying to be witty comments when you're uncomfortable. Which one of us exactly is the coward scared to commit?"
The air could have been crackling, as they continued to keep their gazes locked via the mirror. It was easier, in some strange way, to look at Tom through a mirror. It distanced the whole affair.

"Oh, you were running a long time before the physical act," Harry snapped. "It's called living in denial. I can hope that one day you would get over that." He tore his eyes away, shifting away from Voldemort's hands.

"The thing is," Tom said, voice still deceptively mild, "that you only believe in authentic identities when it's an identity that you personally believe in. When it comes to murder, you're perfectly happy that people should repress their darker instincts and deny themselves."

Harry scowled.

"And you think that you can have your cake and eat it too. You're a hypocrite."

"I'm a politician," Voldemort replied.

"You don't get to use that as an excuse!" This was getting them nowhere. "Did you want something? And don't say me."

"Now who's advocating denial…"

He turned to glare at the bastard properly. Amusement gleamed in the Dark Lord's eyes for a moment, before his expression was entirely blank once more.

"There's a line between complete hedonism at the expense of everyone around you, and being true to yourself," he said. "And consequently different forms of denial in regards to that. I'm not getting into a bloody debate with you." It was too easy to fall back into old patterns, far too easy. "What did you want?"

"Am I not simply allowed to want to see you anymore?"

Harry didn't even bother sighing, before walking out.

Maybe Voldemort had something important to say, but he had that awful-squeezing feeling that, outside of a vague attempt to make him attend to conference, the man did just gravitate towards his company. Still, after so long.

They used to spend most of their time together, even if only in proximity without communication.

Git.

The Wizarding Branch at the London American Embassy was acting as a secure location for their meeting - they were renting out a private interview room.

Michael Grayson was a man who hovered on the lines between corpulent and robust. Glib-tongued and normally sporting a pleasant smile. Harry wasn't particularly looking forward to questioning him.

They shook hands firmly, as the man scrutinized him behind the mask of radiant geniality.

"Thank you for meeting me on such short notice," Harry murmured.

"The pleasure's all mine," Grayson returned. "I trust this is just a formality?"

Well, that remained to be seen.
"Merely a thorough investigation, I'm sure you have nothing to worry about." They both sat down. The room was sparse, the air heavy with wards that made Harry's skin itch with the weight of them.

It went better than he could have expected.

Of course, Grayson thought Alkaev and the Russian Party were behind the whole affair, and was happy enough to complain from having suffered the lingering effects of the poison himself.

"The Dark Lord does seem quite invested in the whole affair if he has you on the job," the ambassador noted. "But the Dark Lord seems invested in a lot of things, don't you think?" Grayson's head tilted.

Harry stayed still in his seat, calmly, expression not changing as he studied the man in turn.

"The Dark Lord was poisoned just like everyone else. From what I know of him, if he was behind the Paris poisonings he would be investing rather less into it, and would instead be working harder to hush it up." But the thought did occur to him - that Voldemort was behind all of this, and was simply trying to use this all to a) establish the truce to get Harry into his webs again and b) more significantly, to turn the global playing field against each other, instead of against him.

As if the whole damn world wasn't on the brink of another war anyway. The last one had been more than enough, in his opinion.

"You're the last person I would have expected to defend him. Interesting."

The meeting couldn't end sooner. Grayson was brash, and he made more than his share of mouthy comments for a politician, but Harry didn't think he was behind this. Or, at least, if the Americans had some involvement, than Grayson knew little to nothing of the whole affair.

He'd investigate the diplomat's group further, and question Alkaev. If both of those leads were a bust, he had no idea what he would look into next. Certainly, the thought of someone getting away with all of this galled him.

He left the embassy, considering his next move, and started. It was going to be far more difficult making any form of contact with the Russians.

He'd get absolutely no help from the Russian government, and Alkaev didn't seem all too communicative considering British-Russian relations were at what could almost be considered an all time low.

Still, he started to make his way to the embassy. Not because he thought he would get anywhere with them, but because news spread, people were always watching...and maybe the Russian rebels would consequently contact him instead.

It was the best option he could hope for.

He'd barely walked several streets before something caught his eye, and he went very still.

It was the redhead, from the attack. Watching him, just off down a quiet road. Harry's wand was immediately in his hand, but the man didn't attack. He was dressed in plain clothes, this time, rather than the white robes.

Harry could have mistook and looked past him entirely if his instincts were not so honed for combat...and maybe if he hadn't spent so long obsessing over the mysterious confrontation.
He probably should have walked away. He should have summoned his back up, something. He followed.

Evelyn Rowle knew what she wanted from life.

She wanted security, she wanted power. If a woman's place truly was to be in the home, then why on earth would she ever turn down the man who's home was the entire country?

She would have tremendous influence for her children. She would be the socialite, the one that absolutely everyone envied and wanted to be. She knew the Dark Lord was capable of dark things of course, but she was sure that she could make a good life with him.

She knew she was there for his image, but she hardly minded that. It did not seem so bad a thing at all to be the woman who tamed the monster and called him her own.

Being the Dark Lord's wife offered opportunity, position. It was the best she could hope for. She was capable. She would support him, and he would make sure that she got what she needed in turn.

A perfect arrangement. Only fools married for love, as much as she craved the freedom and thought of it.

The Dark Lord was currently at his press conference, express earnest. He wasn't handsome, not in the traditional voice. He was too deathly pale, too sharp around the edges. But she knew he had been gorgeous once, and something of it lingered.

And of course, the general aura around him was mesmerizing. And he was good conversationalist, charming.

Honestly, the only thing that gave her any concern was Harry Potter.

"Allegations have been made," Lucretia Black leaned forward, "that your rumoured previous sexual relations with Harry Potter are the reason behind your truce with the Order of the Phoenix. Can you shed any light upon these accusations?"

"Harry was my best friend throughout our Hogwarts years, and it is true that I grew platonically very close to him during that time. Indeed, there may even be some truth to the claim that I am perhaps more reluctant to see him dead than most." The Dark Lord leaned forward in turn. "However, neither of us would see our ideals compromised on old sentiments. As I stated previously."

"As for the reasons behind our truce, the explanation of which last time was interrupted," the man continued smoothly. "The investigation of the Paris poisonings is a globally significant event, that we both agreed took precedent over civil squabbles. Neither of us desires another world war, and would do everything in our power to prevent even the smallest possibility of such a thing. The truce is not a matter of lenience, it is a matter of united co-operation against much larger and more potent outside threats."

And so it continued.

She watched him quietly. Watched him bat away accusations of his sexuality, and knew that the need for an heir, and a distraction, grew only more paramount.

"Is there a reason Mr Potter is not here defending these accusations himself?" Skeeter demanded. "You hardly seem united in this case."
"Mr Potter is currently busy investigating leads, which we deemed more important than the addressing of these rumours." She knew he was trying to make it seem like the rumours were just that, rumours so trivial that they did not even require full attention.

"It is true that Mr Potter is staying at your home?"

"Yes, it is true. It seemed practical, considering the need for quick response," he replied.

"You seem very eager to have him close to you."

She was close enough to see his eyes darkening, even if his expression remained closed off and composed. He was quiet for a moment.

"Unity aside, it would be foolish to entirely trust a man who has dedicated his life to seeing myself and my policies removed from power," Voldemort said.

Pretty words weren't going to put this to rest so easily.

"What exactly is all this about?" Harry folded his arms. "Who are you? How is it that you knew me?" And what was for the best, for that matter.

The pub was not particularly crowded, but a few spells took care of the possibility of them being overheard either way.

Certainly, whilst he followed, he had no intention of following a strange assassin somewhere that wasn't public - at least, he would tell himself that, and ignore the stirrings of familiarity in his chest.

The redhead grimaced.

"I'm...uh...I'm not quite sure where to start. Some of the others didn't even think I should talk to you, all things considered."

"The others?" Harry prompted, resisting the urge to comment on how maddeningly unhelpful the initial response was. The redhead sighed.

"You're...uh...you're going to find this difficult to believe. Even for you."

"Even for me," Harry repeated, expression blank and stony. "You seem to know what is apparently difficult for me surprisingly well, considering we met once and I still don't know your name."

The redhead grimaced, before sticking out a hand.

"I'm Ron. I used to be one of your best friends. I'm the Strategic Lieutenant for the Order."

Harry stared, not entirely sure what he was expecting, but it wasn't that. He half wanted to laugh, for lack of any better response.

"I'm pretty sure I'd remember you if you used to be one of my best friends."

"You'd think so, yeah," the man muttered, running a hand through his hair. "But it's...complicated. I'm not sure where to start, but we need your help."

"Who's we?"

"I'm the Strategic Lieutenant for the Order."
"The Order?"

"The Order of the Phoenix."

There was a lurch in Harry's chest.

"Oh, did I forget when I appointed you as my Lieutenant too?" Harry bit out. Was this some kind of sick joke? A distraction of some sort? If he wasn't so bloody curious, he would have walked out right then.

Ron watched him for a moment, quietly, head tilted.

"Technically, yes. I told you that you were going to find it hard to believe. Drink?"

"No thanks. I'd prefer some answers."

Ron sighed, but nonetheless went and fetched two beers for them, as Harry watched him with narrowed eyes. He made no move to take the pint when it was set on the table.

"Trust me, mate," Ron said, "you're gonna want it later."

Harry's jaw clenched, fingers itching for his wand. The man had the audacity to roll his eyes, hands racing in a placating gesture as he took a sip of his own drink.

"Okay, where to start," Ron hummed. "What do you know about time travel?"

Harry nearly gaped.

Dinner with Miss Rowle was the last thing Tom wanted to be concerned with right now.

Black had the set up for the carnival well under way, and the press whilst not persuaded had been temporarily been assuaged. Soon enough, he was sure things would unravel and the truth of the situation would be revealed.

Harry was missing.

But on the whole, it was a good day.

Well, maybe late was a better word. But Tom had been sure he would have been back to report something by now, and of course he wasn't worried or anything, but…

The wine was excellent, and Miss Rowle an intelligent conversationalist. They had very quickly come to an agreement on the general premise of how their involvement would work, with only some of the finer details requiring further discussion. Harry, and Harry's position, was among that small print. Not that his former lover knew that yet, but nonetheless.

There were plenty of reasons why Potter, idiot that he was, would not have turned up yet. The man had always had a penchant for trouble, from the very day he met the fool.

"Is everything alright, my lord? You seem troubled."

And if it was that obvious, he really was going to slit the rebel leader's bastard throat.

"It's fine," he gave her his best smile.
"I suppose it's understandable that you would have a lot on your mind, given your position," she murmured. "We can talk about it, if you would like? I'd be happy to listen."

Tom studied her. She wasn't the bad sort, and really, perfect for the purpose so he could commend Abraxas for that one. She knew what she wanted, but was happy to rely on him to get it.

"Or," she continued, wetting her lips, "we could give you a distraction and the press something to talk about."

The dining room was softly lit, the ambience flawlessly designed to encourage this type of thing. Abraxas' doing, no doubt. It always continued to be surprising how many things the Malfoy Lord had a hand in. Especially when it came to everything that pertained to his public image.

He was indispensable really, which was thus one of the reasons his old friend was alive to remember Tom Riddle, when so few others were. He wanted little reminder of the specimen he used to be, and yet…

Miss Rowle reached across the table slowly, pressing a delicate hand on his, encouraging but not pushing the topic. Watching him, with shrewd eyes.

She would make a fine wife, he was sure. Getting started on the whole thing would be for the best, really. She was tolerant in ways most weren't. It was a fine offer, and she was fair enough of face too.

He pulled his hand away, and took another sip of his wine.

"I am organizing a ball for the start of a summer carnival," he said, instead. "Would you do me the honour of attending as my date?"

After a moment, she smiled.

Maybe Harry had come back whilst they were dining. He would check.

He no longer trusted the man to always find his way home like he should.

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_A/N: You will find out most of what's going on behind this mess next chapter. Or at least a significant amount, don't worry. Another note, in case you guys cared for reference, this story is about halfway through :) It's not going to be one of my epic-ly long ones, though I have a lot planned. But yes. I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter, anyway! :) Next chapter should be up soon!_
"We can't kill him, it would destroy the timeline."

Ron still looked mutinous at Hermione's impatient words. Harry didn't know what to think at all. He'd never expected this to happen – he still didn't know how it had.

One second, he had been battling Voldemort at Malfoy manor, after the Snatchers caught them and now…well, now had got a lot more complicated.

"We can make a better timeline without him," the redhead insisted. "Right, Harry?"

"No," Hermione's lips thinned. "Because we are here because of the existing timeline. If we kill him, or even change things, we risk creating a paradox. Awful things happen to people who meddle with time! I've told you that!"

And yet, how could they just quietly do nothing? Knowing everything that Voldemort would do? So many people could be happier if things were different. How could he just sit back? No.

"We changed it in Third Year," Harry said.

"Third year was small," Hermione snapped. "It was an hour. The further back you go, the less you can control it, honestly!"

"Well we can't just sit here!" Ron's face was turning puce.

Tom Riddle, when Harry watched him from across the street, looked deceptively sweet. He was sitting alone in London, despite the current climate, thin and shivering in grey clothes that reminded Harry horribly of how he must have appeared once himself.

Maybe that was the reason he hesitated.

Scarlet eyes and serpentine features was one thing, a very human little boy was rather more difficult to kill. He spent days on it, and Hermione contacted Professor Dumbledore for help. Because he would know what to do about their situation.

He couldn't do it. He tried, he tried to bring himself to raise a wand to the child but the more he watched the more he wondered about if things were different.

"We can still change him," he said softly. "He hasn't done anything yet." His hand tightened around the Elder Wand. "Maybe that's why we were sent back in the first place, to change it?"

"Well, I'm not doing it," Ron said, flatly. "He's not exactly a nice kid, is he?"

"Hermione, you do it. I can't even look at him!" Harry's nails bit into his skin. "You're clever."

But in the end it was still him. Of course it was. He, with his Parseltongue and the Prophecy.

He, with his body shrinking and shifting younger for unknown causes. Hermione theorized it was the toll of being the focal point that dragged them all back in time. Everything trying to compensate. Some old magic that none of them understood.

"You're sure about this?" Hermione asked.
“Yeah, we can still kill him, mate,” Ron added. Harry squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, but nodded nonetheless. Tried to figure out when this had become his life, as Dumbledore studied him with a strange expression on his face.

"Do it."

"I'll make sure you're okay," Hermione promised. Better her than Ron, too characteristic of his family and his blood. Logical. Harry's ears were ringing.

"Just do it."

"Obliviate."

It was overwhelming.

All the details of a past life, of the Boy Who Lived and Lord Voldemort. Of Hallows and Horcruxes, and theories as to how this could have all happened. Of Prophecies.

Harry couldn't breathe.

He didn't…remember, but when Ron showed him the snatches of memories, proof after proof of truth or some ridiculously elaborate deception…he didn't know.

"It never even occurred to me that I could love him, did it?" he asked numbly. "Not really."

Ron side-eyed him at that comment, but Harry could barely think straight. He felt like a marionette with all of its strings cut. He swallowed. "The Paris poisonings then…was that…?"

"We weren't the first people to time travel, you know," Ron said. "That's what the Order originally was. The Order, for the balance of time. Phoenix, for the rise and fall of new lives and time periods."

Well, that just raised more questions. Harry rubbed his temples, able to feel a headache blooming.

"So the Order was behind the Paris poisonings." Something lurched awful in his gut. The evasion was too much. Weasley – Ron – shook his head.

"Not all of us."

"Not all of you?" Harry growled. Ron looked at him, something fierce in his expression.

"If you had your memories, you would understand. You would have seen what the future was like, and you would see that it is happening all over again, despite everything." The other man's voice cracked. "It's almost bloody well worse than before, and he's not going to stop, is he? Voldemort."

Ron's lips twisted, staring at him in challenge. "We should have killed him when we had the chance."

"That would cause a paradox," Harry began.

"That depends on which version of time travel you believe in. It is much debated among the factions of the Order of the Phoenix. There are those who believe in order, and non-interference, and then there are the rest of us who aren't afraid to fight." Ron's chin jutted up. "This could be a parallel universe, for all that we really know. He's a monster!"

Harry couldn't believe this – and he stared at the redhead incredulously, recoiled at the words. Of course, he could imagine the suffering Weasley had seen, he could see it reflected in his eyes. Harry
had suffered too, even if he couldn't remember his last time, but this...surely this helped nothing?

But he could, awfully, understand. He felt that way himself sometimes, that it was just hopeless, and that nothing could ever go right again. He'd joined the resistance, after all. He was still fighting to change things, but...

"He was a man once. He can get better. I believe in him - I - I have to."

Ron looked at him like maybe they were strangers after all. There was an odd feeling in Harry's gut.

"You can't be serious," the redhead bit out. "We tried that, and it didn't work. You didn't change anything. It was like throwing a pebble in a stream, and all the water just converged back to the same path again around it."

Harry's expression began to harden in turn, his palms tingling.

It was a shock to realize he even believed in Tom at all, anymore. He'd thought he didn't, that war was the only option left. War, or running away to someone and somewhere else because he couldn't face looking at the monster the man had turned into. And Tom was a monster now.

And yet the hope wouldn't die. The quiet belief that maybe, just maybe, he could still somehow turn this around. Or, at least, that he wasn't ready to let Tom go yet. That there was more to him than what he had become. Maybe that made all the difference.

"Harry," Weasley pressed, leaning in, eyes ablaze. "Don't. Don't do this. Don't even think about it. You can't save him. You never could. There's nothing in him worth saving! And if you believe there is, that's just because he tricked you. He's using your feelings against you. If you could just remember -"

But Harry didn't want to remember. He didn't want to remember that life, when he knew he would never be able to look at Tom in the same way again. Didn't want to try, when sometimes in the early hours of the morning he could already hear a woman screaming in his head for mercy.

Maybe memory would make it easier to move on, but...

It was hard enough bearing the weight of his own life and staying standing, without carrying the trauma of somebody else's too. He'd go mad with the strain of it, he was sure.

Maybe that was what had broken Tom, made him what he was now. There had to be something. But the knowledge of Horcruxes nagged at his brain now. Did his Tom know about those too?

Harry had never heard of them before. Surely his Tom would never have been so stupid as to make Horcruxes? Or was that why he had changed? Growing paranoid.

"Did Voldemort get sent back too?" he asked, very quietly. "His soul was already here. It's not the same as it was with us. You said something about a wand?"

"The Deathly Hallows," Ron said, folding his arms, looking uncomfortable. "But that doesn't matter. That's just how we got here, we think. What matters is the Prophecy. We've had agents go to the Hall of Prophecy in the Ministry -"

Harry didn't want to hear about that either. He didn't want to hear about fate, or anything that involved the idea that things could never change.
"Tell me about the Deathly Hallows."

Ron eyed him, seeming increasingly mistrustful of him. Which, frankly, for the sake of information wasn't good. Harry tried to arrange his expression to something he imagined Ron's Harry would be like, as opposed to Tom's Harry – and merlin, since when did he begin living by other people's impressions anyway?

"Three objects created by death," the redhead said eventually. "A wand, a cloak, and a ring. You are currently technically in possession of all of them, which is one of the reasons we think things backfired and sent us here. You were hit by the killing curse, before. It….well, it took out most people around you too."

Harry had heard that story, that fairytale, and the very thought of it being true left his mouth dry. Because he certainly didn't have that wand currently – he had a Holly and Phoenix feather wand, that he loved dearly. And it seemed an even stranger thought that he could be the Master of Death.

"Obviously, there can only be one version of the wand in existence in any universe at any time," Ron said, as if reading his mind. "It was absorbed by, or maybe it absorbed I don't really know – Hermione would- the wand of this timeline or universe."

"But what about Voldemort?" Harry insisted again. "If that version of him was there…did he die?"

Ron stared at him for a long moment, before looking down at his drink.

"We don't know. But we need your help."

Harry had been in Slytherin long enough to read the silent whether you agree to give it or not.

Harry didn't know what he had been expecting here either, a search party, some sign of concern?

He'd been gone for two days, communicating with the Order, learning and trying to get a handle on the situation. When he got back…Tom was hosting a party. A party.

Of course, he'd known vaguely in the back of the mind that the man probably would- even now, he was near constantly networking and consolidating the connections that he already had, but…

Miss Rowle was rather publically at his arm.

Harry's insides dropped. He was standing at the corner of the room, exhausted by the events of the last day - drawn only by the crowd, and how obvious it was that something had happened.

Tom hadn't seen him yet. He could still slip away without further notice, get an early night, talk to Hermione and update his plans for dealing with this pigsty of a situation accordingly.

But he'd wanted to talk to Tom, needed to, to somehow reassure himself that he hadn't made the wrong choice after all. That choosing to fight still for a better option was worth it. To prove to himself that Weasley had been wrong.

"You left, you have no right stare after him like that now. Where have you been?" Abraxas' voice was clipped and cool near his right ear. Harry immediately wanted to punch something. Opened his mouth to reply-

"Oh shut it, Brax. For once, Salazar, just give it a rest." Someone else spoke before he could, and Harry's heart was abruptly hammering, his mouth dry and insides warm.
"Alphard…"

It had been a long time.

Outside of Tom, Alphard Black had probably been his best friend among the Slytherins, and that fact weighed with an uncomfortable heaviness on the back of his neck now. Abraxas looked between them for a second, before rather unnervingly smiling.

"Stay out of trouble, Black. Harry, it is good to see you returned safely to us."

Abraxas disappeared, leaving Alphard standing at his side. Harry's gaze darted over him, more worn than when he'd last seen him, before scanning the room again with a bit more attention than it required. Most people, knowing him as the leader of the rebels, kept a wary distance.

Tom would notice his presence within the next minute. Probably sooner.

"I'm going to-" he began. Alphard grabbed his arm, steering him out the room and to the corridor outside, before rounding on him. The Black Lord's face had turned a funny colour.

"It's been a long time," he said. Harry sighed, softly.

"Too long. Though I'm sure you understand the necessity," he replied.

"You didn't even say goodbye. You just disappeared."

"And what would you have done if I came to you to say goodbye?" Harry dared, very quietly. Alphard's fists clenched at his sides. "I wouldn't put you in that position."

"Maybe that wasn't your choice to make."

Harry looked away again, down at the floor - anywhere that wasn't Alphard's eyes, and the way they were drinking in the sight of him. Too raw. Revealing too much. He knew it wasn't a coincidence, after all, that he hadn't run into Alphard yet, despite his being here for a while now.

Tom had always been the jealous, possessive sort.

If he had gone to see Alphard, before he joined the order...well. There was far too strong a chance that the man might have come with him. Given up everything too. Got himself killed.

At that stage, anyone associated with Harry, who picked Harry over the Dark Lord, were in danger of an immediate death sentence. It was why he couldn't hold it against his former friends, both dead and alive, for not standing with him. He just couldn't forget that they didn't, either.

But Harry didn't want to think about any of that now. And he wanted to think about Alphard and the possibility of the other man following him even less. As if he didn't have enough problems. His chest felt tight, and somehow in light of all that he'd learned the fact that Tom was schmoozing with his new fiance on his arm seemed an even more unforgivable betrayal.

What had he thought? That because Harry had some stupid shift in resolve to see this through and make sure things got better, that Tom would miraculously mirror the sentiment and be any less of a bastard than he had been before?

"What's done is done," Harry muttered. "You don't seem to have done too badly for yourself out of the deal."

Alphard had always been good at playing the game, for all his facade of humour.
"I'd punch you, but you'd break my arm before I made contact," Alphard said, coldly. Harry glanced at him. Blood pounding through his head, throat thick.

"I'm sorry, for what it's worth-" he began.

"Don't." The sheer vehemence, the way Alphard's voice actually cracked, made Harry pause. The Black took a slow step closer to him, and then another. "Don't pretend. This will never not come down to Tom, will it? Even after you left him, it was always about him. You say you're doing this for me, but it's not me. You can't bear to give anyone else the chance of loving you."

Harry sucked in a sharp breath.

"He would kill you," he growled, gaze snapping up. "Do you really think that he wouldn't? He would kill you now, and he would have killed you back then if you ever picked me over him. So fine, I didn't give you the bloody choice You can hardly blame me for not wanting to have your blood on my-"

"-So you're going to be alone forever in fear of what he might do to people?"

He really didn't need this right now. His expression hardened.

"You're stepping out of line, Black," he hissed. "Do not take liberties with me that you no longer have. That you never had."

He knew it was cruel when Alphard looked like he'd been slapped, all of the colour draining from his face. Harry immediately wanted to apologize. Even if Alphard was head of Tom's security, and had frontlined the war.

"You deserve better. If you'd been mine, I would have never picked anything else over the risk of losing you."

Harry swore, glaring now. Feeling dangerously close to crumbling, to making it easy for himself. "Oh Merlin, Alphard-"

"No!" the man snapped, quivering, but not backing down now. "Shut up, Harry. You left, you don't owe him anything anymore. He made his choice. Let me make mine."

And Alphard's mouth crushed against his.

Tom had considered sending out a search party, but to do that suggested he wasn't in control. That he needed Harry back in some far too public capacity.

But at night he could barely breathe. He'd thought that he'd gotten used to not knowing where Harry was - but it was like the first time all over again. The month after Harry left, and absolutely everything served as a reminder of the absence.

So of course he needed a distraction. A proof. He needed to smooth everything over as their investigation was ongoing, and provide enough of himself publicly to act as a bait if it was truly the members of the conference being targeted. By someone. For some reason.

"He's back." Abraxas appeared as his side, murmuring the words into his ear. "Outside in the corridor. He refused to explain where he's been."
"We're about to give the speech," Miss Rowle reminded him, from his other side. Grip tightening on his arm.

He had already disentangled himself to stride through the crowd, murmuring a quick excuse and passing her another flute of champagne distractedly. Rage boiled in his chest. Incandescent, uncontrollable fury that Harry had the sheer audacity to do this. To make him...to make things inconvenience.

They were in the middle of an investigation! The man couldn't just leave for an extended period of time with no warning. It could have been anything! He could have been kidnapped by the opposition.

It wouldn't have been difficult to send a no-

The rage flooded with ice.

Harry moaned as the lips crashed against his, warm and demanding and - he shoved Alphard off after he got over his surprise. People really needed to stop thinking they could just kiss him without permission. Though at least when he was kissing he didn't have to think.

"Alphard-" his breathing was heavy, insides squirming between a strange, selfish want, and pity.

"I do hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Tom's voice was perfectly even, but Harry sprung back from Alphard as if he'd been scalded. Alphard didn't look like he regretted it one bit, eyes aflame, but Harry's heart was racing. He resisted the urge to wipe his mouth, squaring his shoulders.

"Tom-"

"That would be 'my lord', to you."

And then suddenly Harry was livid, rounding on the bastard. Because he knew what the sudden tone was about, he wasn't stupid!

"Oh fuck you," he snapped. "You have a fiance."

It was abruptly, all too much. All of this was too much.

The prevalence of Voldemort across time periods, and universes, and the fact that apparently the only way to stop any of this was for one of them to kill each other. And Alphard was still there, looking unbearably smug and right now Harry hated the lot of them.

And then Abraxas was there too, meeting Harry's gaze with a challenge and suddenly the specifics of what had happened seemed abundantly clear and Harry went from rage to murder. Malfoy's expression was as impassive as always as he looked to Tom.

"My lord, everyone is ready for your speech."

Harry's fists clenched at his sides.

"Go," his voice cracked. "You actually were interrupting."

Why did he say that? He didn't want to say that - but the sight of Rowle on Tom's arm had burst into his mind again with full force. And, maybe, if Voldemort was focused on that, he wouldn't notice
anything else.

Alphard's arm snaked around his waist, defiantly.

Something flickered in Voldemort's eyes.

"Something is wrong. What is it? What have you found out?"

Harry's heart crashed, his knees going weak. Fury deflating. Of course Tom would notice, even now. Some of the smugness left Alphard's face.

"We'll talk later."

"Potter."

"Tom. Please."

Voldemort's eyes widened, just slightly. He hesitated for a moment, before his expression was masked again.

He walked back into the ballroom without another word.

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_A/N: Not sure if it's my best chapter or not, I had writers block and it was all a bit plotty. But I hope you enjoyed the update. Next time, you should properly see the ramifications of what's happened, and all that Harry has learned._
Chapter 13

Hermione expected anger, the day Harry inevitably discovered the truth. She expected him to burst in, an explosion waiting to happen, as if he was still the fifteen-year-old boy she'd once known.

Harry came in quietly, shoulders stiff and squared as if he was on the frontline of a battlefield all over again.

"Harry…” she began, jolting to her feet.

"I could understand you not telling me at first," Harry said. "You were there to keep an eye on things, on me seeing as I couldn't even remember what my mission was..." He walked towards her, slow and dangerous, with a look on his face that he'd never directed at her before. "But after all these years, Granger? How could you not tell me?"

The surname stung, especially coming so coldly from his mouth.

"We thought knowing would distract you more," she said. "We were in the middle of the war." She drew herself up to full height, heart pounding. "You couldn't be the other Harry Potter yet."

Harry laughed, shaking his head.

"I wanted to tell you!" she reached for him, only to freeze as his wand appeared in his hand in an instant. "We weren't trying to make it worse for you."

"Except I know now. It's convenient for me to know now, right? Who the fuck cares about worse..."

She dropped her hand, and swallowed hard. "I gave you as much time as I could. Ron - many of the Order - wanted to tell you far sooner. He's not - oh, Harry, you can't save him anymore. I don't know if anyone ever could. He's past that, can't you see?"

The only reason Harry would be told, was if the man he'd become was no longer needed. If the mission failed, and Voldemort simply had to be killed for the good of everyone. If they needed the Boy Who Lived again.

The table shook under the force of his magic.

"Fuck you," he said.

Her eyes hardened. "It wasn't exactly easy on us, either, you know. Watching you with him, doing nothing. Knowing what he might do, knowing what he'd done already…all those memories, all those people that we left behind..."

Harry's nails dug into his palms. "He's not a monster."

But how many people had died, for that conviction? For Harry being unable to pull the most vicious of tactics, and use the most underhanded of methods, even in war. Maybe, if he'd been able to harden himself against Tom more, the resistance might not have lost.

Maybe all the doubts people had about him had been right, in the end - Tom Riddle's man, through and through.

She deflated, tugging a hand through her hair. "I'm sorry," she said. "I am. I...I tried, Harry. I tried to see what you could see in him, I tried to believe he could change for better. We all tried. This is for
the best, now. Maybe he's not a monster, but he's not going to stop enforcing blood purity for you, is he? He picked that, over you."

Even after all of these years, it stung.

"He's not going to stop unless I kill him."

Maybe, it really was time to give up on his own personal war against Voldemort.

Voldemort weaved his way through the crowded ball-room.

The sight of Harry and Black wrapped around each other refused to leave his head, as if he didn't have other matters to attend to.

Cold seeped through his body.

Even when they were enemies, Harry had been his. It had been obvious, in the fact that there'd never really been any risk of Harry going off with someone else. He was a remarkable man, of course he'd have offers, however…

Well, he'd never thought Harry would take anyone up on those offers in any serious capacity. Neither of them had been exactly ready to move on. Harry was in love with him, he'd said so!

But was Harry ready to move on now? Properly? To leave Tom behind?

He couldn't bear the thought.

Rowle took his arm, peering up at him. "Is everything alright, my lord?"

He shuttered. "Fine. Everything is fine." He offered her his most charming smile, and watch her wounded ego soothe. "If you'll join me…?"

They headed up onto the podium. Lord Voldemort and his partner - the perfect partner, by all accounts. Diplomatic, compromising, beautiful and devoted to him…

Black's fingers twisted in Harry's hair, and that low moan escaping Harry's mouth for someone else…

"Thank you all for your attendance tonight," he began. "And joining us for this fundraiser."

Polite applause filled the hall.

Abraxas gave him a supporting nod, eyes gleaming mercury in the light of the chandelier. He stood where Harry might have, once, in a direct line of vision.

"In these dark times, it is especially important to not allow external threat to divide our nation and leech us of our hope." His voice grew stronger. "Which is why I believe the festival we will create together can become an annual tradition and reminder of Britain's ability to thrive even under crisis."

He would give Harry one more chance to prove himself, and...if he failed...he'd kill him. He'd indulged this for too long. Indulged Harry for too long. They couldn't keep spinning, fishtailing around the same argument in stasis, destroying everything around them in the process.

This was no longer sustainable.
Of course, he could do no harm to him while the truce lasted, but the whole affair would be resolved soon enough and the truce would no longer stand.

He scanned the crowd carefully, as he elaborated on date and time. Ensured that no one attempting to kill him could resist turning up to the Carnival, when he provided so many ample opportunities for murder…

"The winner of the duelling competition will receive the opportunity to duel me personally, among other rewards..."

Of course the masked figures would show themselves. It was the closest they could get to assassinating him at an international peace conference.

One of Potter’s resistance members - a pale, silvery haired young man, with an uncanny resemblance to Abraxas - slipped out of the crowd and out of the hall.

He paused, surveying the room once more. All of them, staring up at him, bending to his power and his rule, proving his very right to be there.

"I look forward to seeing everyone at the festivities."

*One more chance.*

"Tell me everything," the Dark Lord demanded, bursting into the room.

Harry wanted to curl into bed and sleep forever - he'd barely had time to sit down in days.

It seemed an especially cruel thing, for fate to set him up to fall in love with the monster he was destined to kill. So why the bloody hell did the universe force him to talk to the bastard straight after coming to that conclusion?

He appraised Voldemort for a few seconds, taking a moment to steel himself. "How did your speech go?"

"Potter." Sharp. That easy rage still swelling beneath the surface of Tom's tongue, ready to erupt at any given circumstance.

It wouldn't take much to tip him over the edge.

"Did you think that I wasn't coming back?" Harry forced a smile, knowing exactly which buttons to press. "I'm not your prisoner, am I? I don't need to explain my absences to y-"

And there was the explosion.

Voldemort's fingers wrapped throttling around his throat, power and control and none of those things at all as scarlet eyes *burned*, more lost than angry.

Harry's heart slammed in his chest, the smile only more vicious than his question. "Oh, you *did.*"

Voldemort's hand flexed around his jugular.

Harry dug his fingers into a pressure point, and the Dark Lord recoiled.

The warmth of close proximity did nothing to aid the coherence of his thoughts or the conviction of his plan.
"Considering our common enemy," Voldemort said, after a moment, "it hardly seems unusual that I may wish to know if you have been taken, interrogated, and brutally killed. Your revealing my secrets would be a great inconvenience."

True, but Harry doubted it was just that. It would have been better, if it was just that, if he didn't see shards of Tom and what they had been, at every waking moment.

"You said we would talk later, and now you are stalling," the Dark Wizard continued. "Please, do not insult my intelligence and professional integrity-" Harry snorted at that "- by attempting to distract me with Black next."

Well, he couldn't say that the bastard didn't know him far too well.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed, studying him. "Start with where you were."

Easy questions. Focus points to guide his words and thoughts. Harry wanted to smile in some awful way. It felt like his insides were crawling with maggots.

"It's...the details are irrelevant," he allowed. This was his life now - memories forgotten meant absolutely nothing. The Boy Who Lived was irrelevant, a dream. Tom Riddle was more real. But Tom Riddle had chosen Voldemort.

"Then tell me, if it means nothing to do so," Voldemort said.

Harry spared him a filthy look.

Tom raised his brows.

For a moment, they just stared at each other, trying to puzzle out all the tangles of the situation.

No, he wouldn't kill Voldemort out of some prophecy and the destiny of another life. He'd do it because it was better than watching hatred consume Tom entirely, because he couldn't bear the thought of someone else killing him instead. Screw whatever the Order said about why he should do it.

Voldemort took a step forward again, a spidery hand brushing along Harry's cheek.

"Tell me," Tom insisted, again, softer. "We both know it's to do with me, or you would not be anywhere near so hesitant and defensive to discuss it."

But maybe he could give Tom just one more chance to prove himself capable of redemption.

"Do you..." Harry swallowed, jerking away from the caress. "Do you believe in alternate...parallel universes?"

Tom's eyes narrowed. "It is neither here nor there," he replied, after a few seconds. "I am far more concerned with the world and universe we live in. To focus on another universe is like focusing on regrets, and every single thing that one would do differently. I see no point dwelling on such a thing. What might have been is irrelevant. The importance lies in what is, and what can be in the future you work for. That we can work for."

Harry felt oddly reassured that there was at least one ideology that they could still agree on, even if everything else had gone to hell and ruin. Though even that similarity would no doubt sour before the end.
Voldemort's head tilted. "Why do you ask?"

"What of fate?"

"Harry, tell me what happened."
There was something in the Dark wizard's expression, something that Harry couldn't quite put his finger on. An urgency unparalleled even to the force of Tom's general concern.

Harry stepped back, as Voldemort reached for him again. "Do you ever think about our fate?"

Tom stopped - watching him as if Harry was the live grenade in this conversation. "I don't have to."

Harry's brow furrowed, not expecting that response. Thrown off course for a second.

"I know my fate," Tom said, stepping forward again, stalking after Harry until he just stopped bothering to walk backwards. "I know our fate. We will be together, and you will be on my side again."

It felt like someone had shot a blasting spell into his stomach.

The laugh came before Harry could contain it, his chest aching and the sound dragging ragged and raw over his lungs. Because, really, that was as far from a death prophecy as possible. As far from Harry's plans, as possible...and absolutely everything he could want. "Yeah?" he couldn't breathe. "How do you figure that?"

Tom didn't laugh. "Because you being by my side was the only thing that felt right, so if I believed in fate that would be the only fate to make any conceivable sense." That strange something only intensified, but maybe they really had lost what they had, because where once dual conversation would have been easy, Harry couldn't read what Tom was trying to say now.

His laughter cut, eyes wide. His throat seized tight. "That's funny," he said. "Considering you would still have me and my kind less at your side, and more on our knees or dead for having the audacity to not be born pureblood." His head spun.

"You're the one who left," Voldemort said, features cold now.

"Because of your obsession with blood purity." No, that was old ground. Harry sucked in deep breath, and prayed. "I'd have stayed...I would stay, if you'd let it go. We could leave, together."

He prayed for Tom to accept that compromise, to not make Harry kill him.

Voldemort's head tilted the other way. "Is that what you believe our fate is? To run and hide, for me to give up everything I have created? You seem to find the idea of our being together laughable."

Harry looked away. This had been a mistake, to work with Voldemort, to come back, to start this conversation. All of it. It would just make it worse, in the end. He rubbed a hand over his face, shoulders tensed.

He needed to be close enough though, trusted enough, to get the opportunity to kill Voldemort. Killing Lord Voldemort was no easy task, even if one took Tom Riddle out of the equation.

He looked back to Tom. - to Voldemort. If there'd been something flickering in his expression before, it was gone now. Closed off and as inscrutable as a stranger's.

The silence stretched, and each beat of it seemed to thicken the distance between them.
"I know who's behind the Paris poisonings," Harry said.

"I know how we're going to catch them," Tom said.

He wondered if Voldemort felt the stasis they'd been in break too.

A/N: Onto the final 5-10 chapters!
The tournament started tomorrow, and so did the end.

Harry had signed up for the duelling competition - figured if everything was sorted out by the finale, when he duelled Voldemort, that a duelling competition would be a fitting end.

One more worthy of Tom, and the man he loved, because despite how it would be easier to simply stab him in the back after a pretended reconciliation, he wasn't sure he could bear to do it.

But too many people had died for his weakness already when it came to Tom Riddle and the monster he'd become.

Harry tugged his fingers through his hair, closing his eyes. He let the heat and crackle of the fire soothe him. With his eyes closed, the familiar room with the familiar smell of parchment and burning wood and fucking coffee-with-cinnamon it was like the years fell away.

But even years ago, it hadn't been perfect. Not in these beautiful rooms that were supposed to be everything they both wanted out of life, proof of success.

Was it possible to travel back in time twice? Surely, in some universe, somewhere, things had to work out for him and Tom? Or maybe they were just fate's favourite chew toys and were damned to kill each other - the prophecy certainly suggested it.

He squeezed his eyes shut tighter, unable to focus on his plans, drawing his knees to his chest.

"I didn't imagine you'd be nervous about the tournament," Voldemort said.

Harry's eyes snapped open and he whipped around. "Do you ever knock?"

"I did knock," Tom said, quietly. "Several times, though you seem to have been too lost in your thoughts to hear me." The Dark Lord approached him, studying him.

Harry looked away first.

He didn't expect the Dark Lord to settle to sit next to him by the fire, close enough that it ached in Harry's chest. Because something so casual, so easy, was something Tom would have done - not Voldemort. Voldemort lounged on thrones like he'd been born on them.

Harry stilled, staring at the flames. Hyper-aware of the close proximity, the mere inches between them. The way the firelight flickered over bone-white skin and left it looking even more inhuman than normal. More beautiful, too, in a strange and terrible way. Like a carving of the finest alabaster.

Maybe he could see why people assumed Harry Potter was fragile in comparison to Lord Voldemort.

His nails bit into his palms, and, for once, he had nothing left to say. Or maybe he had everything to say, too much of it for any words to find a way out of his mouth.

Maybe Voldemort knew this was the last night too, because for once he didn't press or mock. He just stared, steadily, like he was committing every inch of Harry to memory.

Harry's throat thickened. "I would have assumed you and Miss Rowle had a lot of preparations to go over still, for the carnival tomorrow," he rasped.
"Yes," Voldemort said. He didn't offer any more than that though, even when the silence stretched. Nor did he make any move to go and do those very important preparations.

Harry turned to look at him, properly. And, for a moment, all he saw was everything they used to have. Beyond Voldemort, beyond blood and prophecy, beyond the years and right back to the start.

It changed nothing, of course, but... "Do you want to go for a walk?" he asked. "I've been working all day, I could use some air."

Voldemort's head tilted, but he simply stood and held out a hand.

Foolishly, Harry took it. Just for tonight.

They didn't end up walking among the rose bushes. They didn't end up anywhere on the extensive grounds of Voldemort's base at all.

Harry stared around the fields of wildflowers, the small and unassuming cottage. The lake that stretched black and still in the moonlight. "Where are we?" it came out closer to a whisper than he'd intended.

Maybe he should have been afraid to let Voldemort apparate them anywhere, but he hadn't even thought.

"I come here sometimes," Voldemort said. "When I want some privacy. Some peace."

It had often been rumoured that Voldemort had many safe houses, many bases he could flee to if his main one ever became compromised. But Harry hadn't expected to see any of them anymore, or anything like this.

"I like it," he said.

"I had it made for you." Tom's voice was quieter than he'd ever heard it. "Everything here is you."

Certainly, fields of untamed flowers and grass wasn't particularly along the lines of the splendour and richness of Voldemort's manor. This was simpler, freer, than those suffocating halls.

Harry turned to look at him, heartbeat drumming in his ears. Was he about to be made a prisoner? But no, there wasn't that sort of look on the Dark Lord's face. He swallowed. "And why are we here?"

"Because you wanted some peace and this is the only peace I would ever be able to give you," Voldemort said, simply. "That I will ever be able to give you."

Harry wished he'd made up some kind of lie, some kind of scheme, instead. Said something cruel, perhaps. This felt like a goodbye, of sorts. A confession, maybe. An acceptance. His head tilted as he released a steadying breath, waiting for more. Waiting for the right thing to say to pop into his brain but nothing came.

"It's...thank you."

Perhaps this was still a trick, something to make him change his mind. Honesty could be as cruel a weapon as deception.

"I wanted to see you here, once," Voldemort said. "Before I kill you...or before you try to kill me."
Harry didn't freeze this time, simply sticking his hands into his pockets. Because of course Tom would know - maybe not all the whys, but he'd know this. Slowly, a smile spread over his lips. Some of the tension left him.

Maybe, by the time it was done, at least there'd be no more secrets and bitterness between them. That would be nice.

"If you love me," he asked, very quietly. "Why won't you fight for me anyway?"

Tom didn't miss a beat. "If I ruin you, why are you still here?"

Harry laughed - because really, what other response could Voldemort have possibly given? "Maybe it's fate," he said.

"Fate? Are you trying to ruin the moment? You know my feelings on fate perfectly well, Harry…” Voldemort reached out again. "Come, I'll give you a tour."

It was the calmest he could remember them being around each other in years, the most amicable. He supposed murder was a lot easier than love.

They ended up at the edges of the lake, but maybe that was obvious too. For a moment, it felt like they were in sync again, sharing the same thoughts in glances as easy as breathing.

Harry flopped back to stare at the sky, unafraid even when Tom had confessed to plotting to murder him as much as Harry had made the decision to do it in turn. Neither of them would finish it tonight, and tonight wouldn't exist in any official textbooks or histories about how the war between them came to end.

He exhaled a breath. "When did you make this place?"

"Not long after I proposed to you," Tom said. "I intended it as a surprise, a gift."

The thought didn't hurt as much as Harry had expected too - it ached, but a good ache.

"I'm surprised you haven't destroyed it."

"Many times, I intended to." Tom looked down at him, and Harry shifted his gaze from the stairs. Pale fingers traced over his cheek.

Harry caught them in a flash.

This time, instead of moving away or shoving Voldemort away from him, he let the fingers curl around his own and brought the knuckles up to his lips.

Scarlet eyes widened.

"Why didn't you?" Harry asked, head tilting.

It seemed to take Tom a moment to gather himself enough to respond, as he shifted instead. Moving so his knees straddled either side of Harry's thighs, hovering above him - free hand braced on the ground next to Harry's ears.

Harry didn't move.

"It was not my place to," Tom said. "It's yours - it's always been yours."
Harry's throat tightened and he pressed another kiss to Tom's knuckles, before letting go of his hand. Tom's fingers carded through his hair, brushing the strands back from his forehead. Carefully, so carefully.

"Do you think you'll be happy with Rowle? If you survive?"

"You're asking a lot of questions tonight, Harry," Tom murmured. He dipped down, brushed their lips together. It wasn't quite a kiss, maybe it was supposed to be an answer.

"Maybe if you'd asked more, and listened, we wouldn't be here," Harry said.

Tom had an endless curiosity about the world, and once upon a time Tom had listened to what the world had to say too. Even if it was for the purposes of manipulation and weaponry, he'd listened. But somewhere along the line he'd stopped listening, to Harry at least.

Tom stopped, staring at him, unreadable. Then his head tilted. "Tell me you don't love me," he said.

Harry rolled his eyes and leaned up to kiss him instead.

The Black Lake glittered anything but black in the pale morning sunshine, shot through with specks of deep blue and a soft, rolling grey. The breeze drifted warm and lazy, carrying it with the scent of pine and soil from the Forbidden Forest.

"You're going to wrinkle your robes," Tom's voice drifted to his ears.

Harry grinned, not opening his eyes. "You'll fix them for me, I'm sure."

"And you're going to miss the graduation ceremony if you're not careful."

Harry cracked open on one eye to squint up at his boyfriend, only for his grin to falter at the intent look on Tom's face. Of course, Tom in general was prone to intentness, but Harry still sat up.

Tom's lips curled a little at the corners, and he leaned down to wind his fingers into Harry's hair, pressing their mouths together.

Harry arched up eagerly into the kiss, before he promptly yanked Tom down on top of him. Tangled up and panting in the grass, robes definitely wrinkled. "Don't worry," he said, innocently. "I'll fix them." He smoothed his hands down Tom's back.

Tom nipped his throat, before settling comfortably enough despite his apparent urgency earlier. "Will you marry me?"

The question came so out of nowhere that for a moment Harry disregarded it entirely. Then he blinked, pulling back a little, hands pausing in their idle exploration. His mouth drained dry. "What?"

Tom looked a bit too calm for it to be genuine, as he brushed Harry's ever-wild hair back from his forehead. "Will you marry me?"

Harry blinked.

Tom reached into his pocket and twirled a small box between his fingers, before sitting up, warm and heavy on Harry's legs as he opened it up. The Gaunt Ring sat inside - Tom's one connection to
his family and everything he held most dear in his heritage.

But Harry's breath had stolen out of his lungs a long time ago. "I'm still not sure I heard you right," he managed, voice a bit hoarse. "Aren't you supposed to be one knee?"

"Probably."

Tom's expression settled more guarded than Harry had ever seen it before, and looking closely, Tom barely breathed.

He was serious. Tom was actually asking him to marry him.

Of course, they'd talked about the future plenty, and breaking up never really entered the discussion, but...

"Even though I'm a halfblood?" he asked, very quietly.

Tom's hands faltered where they held out the ring, his jaw clenching. "If you don't want to-

"-Of course I want to. That was never the question now, was it?" Harry said, keeping his tone gentle.

Tom's gaze darted up to his. He wetted his lips, eyes bright and wanting and needing and so dark too. Burning.

Harry cupped his cheeks, leaning in to press another kiss to Tom's mouth. Feeling him melt under it, the maelstrom soothed rather than whipped up.

"Even then," Tom murmured against his lips. "Even if you were my greatest enemy. Even if everything, Harry. There's no world where I wouldn't want you by my side. That's why I'm asking."

Harry released a shaky breath, a stupid smile tugging at him. "Well, when you put it that way...ask me again. On one knee this time, you bast-

Tom's lips crushed against his. They stayed tangled up in the sunshine, robes smudging in the grass, for a long time before Tom found the breath to ask again.

They just about made graduation.

The kiss tingled down Tom's spine, far softer than he'd expected. Funny, he'd thought that if he ever kissed Harry knowingly for the last time, that it would be all heat and urgency and teeth. Desperation to cling on.

It wasn't.

It lingered warm between them, reverent and breathless as Harry's hands curled into his hair. Their hips ground together, slow and indulgent - as if they had all the time in the world and not just this one night that would never officially exist.

As if endless minutes of feather light kisses made up split knuckles and spilled blood, those that had fallen on both sides not just because of this stupid, hateful love, but maybe because of it a little.

But Harry was beautiful like this - flushed in the moonlight, eyes as bright and wild as they ever were. Searingly, defiantly, gorgeously alive and unbroken.
Funny, to think he'd ever let this slip from his fingers somewhere along the line.

"What?" Harry murmured. "Don't stop."

He mouthed along Harry's throat, unable to resist sucking blooming purple marks.

The second after that, they'd rolled and Harry kissed him again, warm and steady as he straddled him, trapping Tom's hands stretched above his head.

Here, away from cities and bombs and the spark of spells, the stars shone clearly above them. The world was quiet. No one demanding a comment or a solution, no camera flashes or need to look perfect in them. Just Harry.

He clutched hold of him tighter, nails raking down his back.

And the kiss turned hot and hungry, savage and claiming and full of teeth.

Clothes were discarded faster now, the glide of skin and the snatch of hands muffled in the grass and the lap of waves along the edge of the shore.

"There's a bed inside. Champagne."


He gave as good as he got. Spun them again when they reached the bed - kiss-drunk with reddened lips, all composure lost somewhere on the way - and bent Harry over the mattress. Pressing hot and hard against him, kisses smudging along his spine and mapping out scars that nobody had any right to leave.

Maybe he'd like to kill Harry like this, once the truce was broken. Kill him with kisses as he writhed beneath, panting and needy and all his.

Harry rocked back against him, teasing. Maddening.

He reached a hand around to stroke him, to wring out every gasp and moan denied to him in all the years they spent fighting. Ended up pounding him into the mattress, heat and need and pleasure which shot through like lightning, as Harry twisted his fingers into the sheets to ground himself. Ended up spent and boneless on the mattress, with Harry tucked warm and close and utterly delectable.

After ten minutes, Harry shifted on top of him again, raising a brow.

With the wicked smile on his face, one had to wonder which one of them was the Dark Lord. He recognized that look too, and wetted his lips. Heat plunging into his stomach like he'd never been ice for years.

"So," Harry said, coaxing him to spread his legs wider. "These preparations for the carnival tomorrow."

"I think I can heartlessly and irresponsibly abandon them."

Just for one night that would never officially exist. One night was all they had.

They were in love, and love didn't change a single thing.
Chapter 15

"Where have you been?" Alphard demanded.

Harry was getting bloody sick of people entering his rooms without permission.

Alphard surged to his feet off the sofa, a sullen expression sulking on his face. "Were you with him? You were, weren't you?"

Harry’s gaze moved over the half empty decanter of scotch, glinting amber in the struggling embers of light from the fireplace. The whole room smelled stale and sour. He flicked his wand to draw open the curtains.

"Miss Rowle was looking for you too," Alphard said.

Harry sighed. He could feel a headache tightening behind his temples. "You really want to do this?" he asked. "I didn't ask you to kiss me." He'd never encouraged Alphard's feelings, he didn't think, never led Alphard to think there was a chance that he'd ever pick him over Tom. "You know I didn't. We had this discussion."

"I love you." Alphard tossed it at him like it was supposed to mean something.

"So?" It was something Tom would say.

Alphard flinched like he'd been slapped. "What do you mean so?" Colour flooded to his cheeks. "I love you. You know I do, I always have."

Tom loved him too - it didn't change a bloody thing, did it?

"You love me," Harry said. "Sure. What do you want me to do about it? Do you want me to run away with you? What do you want me to say or do in response to that?"

Alphard's eyes narrowed, dark and edged with mania. He looked more like the rest of his family than ever. "You wouldn't leave with me even if asked you to."

"No, I wouldn't." They both knew that.

"You owe me more than that! A better explanation than that!" Alphard's chest heaved, body shuddering with his gasping breaths. "We kissed and nothing - you just walked away!"

For once, Harry felt calm in some odd, emotional way. He'd felt calm from the moment he woke up, knowing that today was the last day, with Tom's arms curled protectively around him as they watched dawn trickle across the surface of the lake. He felt, but it seemed muffled, distant from him. It didn't matter anymore.

"No," Harry said. He began to clear the room up, didn't want any traces of his existence still there when he left, no matter how things turned out. "I don't. You said I don't owe Tom, and I certainly don't owe you. I don't owe you an explanation, and I don't owe you anything for loving me." Harry's throat thickened. He'd learned that the hard way. "Your emotions have nothing to do with mine."

"Why won't you even give me a chance?" Alphard's voice cracked. "Maybe you love him, but you could be happy with me. We were good friends, you know it's true. Our lord has a fiance, you can't just - you're not-"
Some of Harry's anger deflated. Tiredness rushed over him in its place, as he turned to look at Alphard.

"Just...leave again," Alphard took a step forward. "Leave with me. You're planning something, I can tell. You're going to get yourself killed. Abraxas-"

"-Says the man who kissed me in front of Tom."

"Our Lord has a fiance, he has no reason or right to-"

Harry quelled him with a look, because when had reason or right ever mattered when it came to the relationship between him and Tom? Alphard wasn't stupid, he knew that.

He remembered Tom's kisses in the cottage - a million kisses, for every day they'd never have together.

Alphard stared down at his feet, cheeks flushed. "Will you let me help you with what you're planning, this time?"

"No," Harry said.

Alphard's jaw worked. "And I don't get a choice in that. Why the fuck not? You're as bad as him, why won't you let me choose you?"

Because this wasn't something Harry was going to walk away from when he was done - last night had proven that. Even if he by all standards won and Voldemort was finally defeated, the victory was hollow at best and rotten to the core at worst.

And if he lost, well. Voldemort couldn't afford to let him live even if he wanted to spare Harry. Especially because he wanted to. Harry had all but been a prisoner of war during their engagement, when the man he intended to marry was no longer the man he said yes to loving. Neither of them could do that again.

"Why the fuck not?" Alphard demanded again, taking a step forward. "You don't trust me?"

And the rage flared again, as he rounded on the Black. "Trust you? You were his war general, Alphard. If we were friends once we haven't been since you and Tom used everything you'd ever known about me to hurt me. To see the people I was fighting for dead."

"It wasn't personal!"

"Of course it was fucking personal. That's why I lost." It was a horrible, guilty thing - self absorbed and selfish and bitter. But it was true.

"And yet you're still in love with him!" Alphard stepped closer again, looking like he wanted to reach out and touch. To shake Harry hard enough to make his teeth rattle, or kiss him.

Harry silently dared him to even try it.

They stared at each other for a moment - Alphard glaring, wild, crumbling and Harry feeling colder than he'd felt in his life. But then, leaving Tom's arms that morning to finalize Voldemort's demise, he'd felt he'd never be warm again. He'd left something behind, as much of a cliche as that was. But he always should have left his heart behind on the bank of a lake if he wanted a chance at defeating Voldemort.
Alphard deflated, looking unsure for the first time.
"I can't lose you again-"

"You never had me. I told you not to take liberties."
Crueller still, than a confession spurned. But it would be easier for Alphard to move on this way, and he wished maybe Tom would have done this for him. Tom's love hurt far more than his loathing. Nothing hurt so bad as a love just out of reach. At least this was final.

He was sick of circling the same topics over and over again, of being stuck in a stasis with no clean break.

Alphard's jaw clicked shut.
He walked out without a word.

Harry swallowed hard and finished cleaning.

"It didn't work," Alphard said, bursting into his office with all the petulance of a young child.

Abraxas glanced up from his work, distractedly. With the carnival launching in only a few hours, he'd been rushing frantic all morning trying to ensure everything went perfectly. At the words, however, his eyes narrowed and he dismissed his team with another round of orders.

Then he focused on Alphard. The other man's' cheeks were flushed, his fists clenched in his lap. Alphard, rather like Harry, had always been rather more passionate than calculating. Difficult to control for the greater good, strong willed.

"It was always a rather long shot that it would," he replied, evenly enough.

"We can't kill him," Alphard said. "There must be another way, if he won't walk away and leave again."

"If he simply vanishes, our Lord will chase and the problem will escalate. You don't want Harry hurt more by this, do you? This is for the best, Alphard. A quick kill. You can't pretend he's happy with his life."

Alphard bit his lip, fingers flexing again. Even more sullen than before.

"He's not yours," Abraxas reminded, able to guess what Alphard was thinking. "I never promised you that. I said could."

"He could be, with time. I just need more time," Alphard began.

Abraxas bit back a cruel comment, because really it had never been more obvious that Harry Potter would always belong to Tom Riddle, and Tom Riddle would always belong to Harry Potter. For Voldemort thrive, he needed to go.

"We're not letting everything we've worked for, everything we've sacrificed for, go to waste, are we?" Abraxas asked when Alphard finished his rant. "Everything that Tom has sacrificed? He could be great. We could be great with him. People die in war, Alphard. What happens to Harry is a tragedy, but think of the world we're making. That Lord Voldemort will build." He rose to his feet, rounding the desk. "Think of how much we've done already. Harry was our friend, but think of how many of our people he betrayed. He's not our friend anymore. But we can still give him the mercy of finishing this, because we both know left to their own devices those two would never do it."

Alphard swallowed, giving a nod. Squared his shoulders. "You have a plan."

"The truce should end by the time the carnival is done," Abraxas said. "Harry will win the duelling competition, and he and our Lord will fight to the death. It will be messy." Tom could lose, where he was weak to no one else, he could lose to Harry. They couldn’t risk it.

"It needs to look accidental to our Lord," he continued. "Or at least he cannot link it to us. But enough that we can lead him to claim it as a planned assassination with the public. If Harry dies by an accident he'll be a martyr."

"An explosion would take him out."

"A hired mercenary might work better," Abraxas said. "He has plenty of enemies. Our Lord will chase one of them down, find some closure, and move on. It's the best way."

Alphard's head tilted. "You already had this planned. Who do you have in mind?"

Abraxas turned to his papers with a smile.

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When the Carnival started, it was truly spectacular. A beautiful place to die, Harry supposed, or some twisted funhouse version of bloodied battlefield.

He might have preferred to retreat quietly with Tom to the banks of the lake again, where they could take care of the matter privately but this had stopped being private when they picked two different sides of a war. It wasn’t about them, personally, except that it really was.

"You're sure this...order you mentioned will be here," Voldemort said, as they looked down at the scene.

Dozens of different stalls - the scent of cinnamon, and chocolate, and roast hazelnuts crackling; the flash and pop of colours and spells, of wizards and witches of every calibre filling the large grounds of Voldemort's public manorhouse all bustling to get a proper look. New inventions, fine cloths, all the best that Voldemort's new world had to offer.

In another time, it would have been everything Harry wanted. Pride in magic, except for the dreadful cost. The flickers of fear in anyone wasn't pureblood, the markers on their clothes displaying blood status.

"I'm sure." Harry forced himself to harden. The order were aware of the truce, of the need for the Paris Poisonings to be solved before the real battle they were interested in could start. It was all so sickeningly choreographed, on both of their sides wasn't it? A trap inside of a trap. "They'll try and kill you, as you thought. They're desperate." He swallowed. "It will be easy enough to apprehend them."

Tom thought they were on the same side with this, at least.

Harry's stomach clenched.

They stood a respectable distance apart.

He glanced to the side to find Voldemort studying him, a careful neutrality on his features.

"They'll likely attack me at the height of the festivities," Voldemort said. "It will give the greatest statement, garner the most attention." Voldemort paused. "I need you to throw the duelling match. We both know it would be you and I in the finals otherwise."
Harry froze, at that, and turned to face Voldemort properly. Tom had to know that was when he was planning to end it himself. He thought they had that sorted, even without words, what the hell sort of last minute change was this? "No."

"It would be the best time for their assassins to try and kill me and reveal themselves, without being overwhelmed by my security forces."

Did Tom somehow know Harry was collaborating with the very people they took a truce to fight against?

Voldemort continued to watch him evenly, expectant of reason and logic.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "You're scheming something."

"Obviously," Voldemort said. "The downfall of our enemies."

But it wasn't that, and they both bloody well knew it! "I imagined our truce would be over before then." His voice tightened. This couldn't go on, they both knew that. He thought they both knew that!

Voldemort didn't so much as blink, saying nothing.

"Had a sudden change of heart?" Harry snapped. His heart hammered. Of course, it didn't change when the order would attack in the slightest, yet...

Voldemort looked away. "Of course not," he murmured. The but hung heavy in the air between them, and Harry stopped breathing, waiting.

"No?" he pressed, when Tom didn't continue. Maybe Tom was messing with him, playing dirty, trying to give himself an advantage when it finally came down to their duel. Fear prickled down his spine, that the ending they'd geared up to wouldn't happen after all, that they would keep sinking in the quagmire of their relationship. "Tom." It almost sounded pleading.

"I need to go give a speech."

Voldemort turned away.

Harry lunged to grab his arm. With the Prophecy, all the Order cared about was setting it up so Harry could finish everything - no plans for a grand assassination at all. Just enough that the truce between them would finish.

They'd attack the second the speech began, when Voldemort was right up in front of everyone. It was the point of no return - but it should have been the point of no return already, they both knew that, so why the fuck would Tom go and say a thing like that?

A beat passed between them as Voldemort stared him down. Tom knew nothing of the prophecy.

He was being played...surely he was being played somehow?

"If you - if we -" he struggled to find the words. *Had a sudden change of heart? Of course not.*

"Do not ever presume to touch me again, Potter."

Harry let him leave that time, hand falling back to his side as if scalded. Brain whirling, reeling. He
felt utterly sick.

*If you love me, why won't you fight for me?*

*If I ruin you, why won't you let me go?*

They were done, they both knew they were done, that this was the day to end everything. It was the best way to go about it, they'd agreed! Voldemort couldn't change the game now it wasn't fair. They couldn't keep doing this. They'd broken past this point, past the hesitation to murder.

Hadn't they?

Voldemort vanished into a flash of lights, Rowle soon appearing picture perfect at his side. Another future.

Harry suddenly had the awful thought that Tom had decided to finish it, but not with blood and a proper ending. Just...dismissing him. No longer caring enough to kill him personally, simply moving on to his new life with his fiance and Lord Voldemort's empire.

Harry would prefer to be slowly murdered than the torture of watching that.

His ears buzzed.

"Ladies and Gentleman, thank you for joining me today at the first annual festival of British Magics." The Sonorous charm magnified Tom's voice until Voldemort could have been standing right next to him again.

Harry's knees felt like wet paper.

The screams erupted a minute later. Spells sizzling, smoke streaming, the clamour of bodies pushing for cover.

Everywhere, white-robed figures streamed towards the Dark Lord. Cresting like a wave to drown him.

To humiliate Tom.

Would he look around to find Harry, only to be abandoned? Abraxas and Alphard would protect him, at least.

He couldn't see Abraxas or Alphard, couldn't see any of Tom's men.

Harry straightened abruptly, lurching forward a step.

Tom was on his own.

That wasn't the plan.

This was wrong.

*Of course not, but...*

The stunner hit him straight in the back.
Bold is parseltongue, in case I haven't mentioned that before.

It took him far too long to realize Harry wasn't coming.

Stupid, really - why would he, when they were on two opposing sides of this war? When Harry had made it clear time and time again how he felt about him, how he could walk away and dismiss everything they had as if it were nothing, even when Tom never could.

But he would have come for Harry, always. He would never have let anyone else kill him or harm Harry because whether in love or violence or both (always both) he was his. Tom Riddle's, Voldemort's, his. He knew Harry viewed them as separate and in many ways they were, but not in that.

He twisted on the spot, wishing he wasn't so out of practice with his duelling. Harry was the formidable one on a battlefield nowadays, but just as Harry could still play politics Voldemort wasn't helpless.

White robes stained scarlet and crumpled like fallen pieces in a game of Wizard's chess. There were so many of them, as he spun in deadly arcs. Spells flashing, eyes burning, not about to let it end like this.

There was no sign of Black or Malfoy, no sign of anyone. He was utterly alone.

Of course, he didn't need them, he was Lord Voldemort he didn't need anyone, not even Harry Potter.

Another body crumpled. A curse sliced through his arm, tearing his skin and his expensive Acromantula silk robes.

His breath hitched.

It took a second for the sting of pain to hit. He couldn't remember the last time he bled. He felt like he stared down at the blood dripping down his skin, as pale as the white hoods, forever. It was no longer than a heartbeat before he sent another of his attacker's flying.

He never imagined dying, had no intentions to settle for anything less than immortality...but if he should die, he always imagined it would be at Harry's hand. At his side.

Not like this, in some meaningless fight where he was overwhelmed more by sheer numbers than skill.

Harry was the only person in the world who could make death something beautiful.

He cursed back harder.
The air filled with screams, sobs, bodies strewn along his carefully mowed grass - but it was their fault for daring to stand against him. To think that press interviews and a charming smile could ever make him less than the Dark Lord he was.

Rowle tugged at his arm, eyes puffy with tears, trying to get him to stop the bloodshed. To put on a better PR show perhaps, and not slaughter his enemies without hesitation or remorse. He didn't hear a single word she said, but maybe it didn't matter what she said when horror dripped off every nuance of her expression. Clearly, all she really wanted to say was 'monster'.

It all felt rather far away compared to the blood lust searing through his bones, the rage at their audacity, the boiling hate that they would even try and take his empire away from him.

That Harry didn't come.

The ground grew wet with viscera, seeping through his dragonhide shoes. The festival goers scattered, fled, cowering from him as much as the terrorists.

His heart pounded in his ears. Another fell, another curse slipped past his shields and grazed his stomach.

Each wave he drove back crashed forward again, firing from every side without Harry to watch his back. Harry had betrayed him, hadn't he?

Again. He'd left him alone, again.

_Had a sudden change of heart? As if it mattered!

The stunners hit him in the back.

Harry felt the world sway ominously, tinge black for a beat before he shook it off. Stumbled, lashed out, sending his attacker crumbling to the floor.

It took more than one stunner to bring him down after all of his training, after everything he'd endured on the battlefield. He panted for breath, chest heaving, barely waited to look at his attacker before he was sprinting to the battlefield.

"Tom!" the scream ripped out of him, beyond all control, as he watched the Dark Lord fall. Where the fuck were Abraxas and Alphard? If they weren't his friends, they should at least have watched out for their leader. It was Alphard's fucking job.

What if he stopped because Harry refused to go with him? What if he wanted Tom dead out of pure spite? His heart felt like it could jump right out of his throat like vomit.

He lurched forward down the hill, before his own attacker was on him again. He had enough time to watch Voldemort's body vanish before his own slammed into the dirt. They rolled, twisted, Harry's temper snapped. His magic howled around him.

He slammed his attacker down into the dirt, chest heaving, panting as he dug his wand warningly into their jugular neck. Then he paused.

"Alphard?"
Whatever he'd been expecting, somehow it hadn't been that. Had Voldemort ordered this? A filthy way of disposing him as the truce shattered to pieces around them? Or was Black acting on his own?

Harry dug his wand in harder, jaw clenching. "Start talking," he ordered.
No, he didn't have time for this. Tom was gone. Unless Alphard ordered that too? No, he wouldn't. More so, he bloody couldn't.

"You're not going to kill me, Harry," Alphard said. "You were never much good at that."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Death isn't the worst thing that could come to you, trust me. You have three seconds to start talking before I rip your mind open."

Sweat dripped down Alphard's face. For the first two seconds, he stared.

Harry tilted his head.

"Abraxas is planning to send a mercenary after you," Alphard muttered. "I couldn't - I-"

"So you were going to try and kidnap me if I didn't go with you willingly." Harry let go of him in disgust - he didn't have time for this! Where had they taken Tom?

Alphard's jaw clenched, and he shuddered, shakily his head mutely. "

"You were supposed to protect him," Harry spat, getting to his feet.

"Protect who?" The confusion on Alphard's face made Harry's fists clench, magic sparking with rage.

"Tom. Your Lord. Who was just fucking kidnapped while I wasted my time with you." Harry turned away, striding down the hill, thoughts racing, trying to figure this out.

The order had taken Voldemort. Why would they do that? The prophecy they believed in so desperately said Harry was the only one who could kill him, and he couldn't do that until the truce shattered. So what the hell was going on?

He apparated to their headquarters with a sinking unease.

Voldemort woke up groggy, head-throbbing, humiliated at the thought of being beaten even outnumbered.

His wand - he didn't have his wand -

The floor beneath him soaked cold through his tattered robes and the world had gone quiet. No more screams, no more blood though he could still smell the coppery stench of it.

His hands were bound - restrained with something muffling his magic -

Voldemort blinked slowly, once, twice, to clear his brain.

A woman swum into focus in front of him.

- It couldn't end like this, he itched for his wand -

"Miss Granger," he greeted, pleasantly enough.
Harry's resistance, he didn't know why it still hurt. He'd vowed, when Harry first walked away, that he'd never let anything Potter did hurt him again. Lord Voldemort was beyond such things.

She held her wand so tight that her knuckles turned white.

"Are you going to kill me?" As if she could.

"Your Horcruxes are gone," she said.

His stomach jolted, plunging to ice. How did she know? How did anyone know about them? How had this happened? Not even Harry knew, he'd known his lover would never approve. He felt utterly exposed, in a way he'd never anticipated feeling again. Stripped of his last defence.

"But no," she tilted her head forwards. "Murdering you isn't going to change anything, is it?"

He studied her closely, keeping his expression blank.

"It's not like Harry to send others to do his dirty work," he kept his voice light too. "How disappointing."

She pointed the wand in his direction, her voice firm. Cold. "I'm going to need you to overturn the legislation you've passed."

"Your leader made a truce, you can't harm me," he said. "Perhaps one of your terrorist organization can. Does Harry know that his resistance were behind the Paris Poisonings?" No, he wouldn't. Would he? Could he? Maybe he'd only taken the truce to cover for his order. Worked on corrupting his legacy from within, weakening him, making him doubt.

And he'd nearly been stupid enough to fall for it, to question.

*Change of heart?* No. Not anymore. Harry had betrayed him one time too many.

Everything in Voldemort's body turned to ice, shuttering away humanity or mercy.

"The truce will be broken soon enough," Hermione said. "I admit it took me some time to organize, but I told you to stay away from Harry. I told you not to hurt him. And I'm here for him, to offer you one last chance to do the right thing. To undo the damage you've caused without further bloodshed. You've always claimed to want to build a better world, and I know you're not stupid. Renounce blood purity and I'll make sure you and Harry leave together. No one will follow you."

Voldemort laughed, then.

It didn't last long.

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Harry burst into the room at the sound of Voldemort's - Tom's - screams.

For a second, he could only stare. At Tom writhing the floor, blood frothing from his lips and - Hermione, stood over him, no tremor in her hand as she looked down at him.

A sick, clammy sensation crept up Harry's tried to find words but felt like he'd been gutted - more now than when he'd find out Hermione had kept the time travel a secret. He hadn't thought anyone would top that. He moved forwards, throwing himself protectively in front of Voldemort in a matter of steps as she deflected his disarming spell.

"You need to leave," Voldemort managed.
Harry ignored him. "You can't do this, there's a truce,"
"Not anymore. The order have taken care of it." Hermione's eyes were wet with tears she didn't shed, and she spoke before he could. Her voice was steady. "You need to leave, you're not safe here."

Why did they keep saying that?

Harry stared at her, mind reeling. "What the fuck do you mean I'm not safe? Last I checked the order needed me a lot more than I needed them!" As if he cared about safe. He had a mercenary lurking somewhere under Abraxas's employ, or perhaps an entire hit team on Voldemort's command. Nowhere was safe they were at war. "I'll leave if I get to take him with me." He jerked his head at Tom.

"Harry-" Tom began.

"Just killing him will do nothing," Hermione said. "I don't care what they say - you get rid of one head, and another one takes over. He has structures in place - laws -"

"You tortured him." Harry didn't recognize his own voice. His anger burned white hot, and vipers reared spitting venom in his chest. His fingertips had gone numb as he pointed his wand at Hermione.

"He's turned muggles into slaves, murdered hundreds of people including our friends, ensured that muggleborns will never have equal opportunities in his reign...and you think torture's a bit much?" Hermione snapped. "Killing him isn't going to do anything. It's not going to fix anything! And neither will vanishing, not anymore."

"And you think torturing him is? That's sinking to his level."

He couldn't place the painful expression on her face, some mix of horror and pity and desperation. "Move out of my way, Harry," she said. "You don't have to have any part of that, I'd never ask that of you. But it's too late, we offered him a chance and he didn't take it. You need to get out, you don't understand-"

"I'm in charge of the resistance. And I'm ordering you to step down," Harry returned, not moving an inch.

She didn't move either. Gave no sign of lowering her wand, though nor did she curse. He supposed that was something at least.

Harry swallowed bile. "Hermione."

"We tried your method and it failed," she said, speaking fast, something odd in her tone. "He wouldn't overturn his legislation for you, would he? Not for peace, not for love, not for any goodness in the world." She took a step forward."All he understands is pain. Bloodshed. So go, leave it to me."

"Harry, untie me" Voldemort's voice cracked sharp.

"I'm not unttying you so you can kill her," Harry growled. He kept his eyes on Hermione. "Just shut up alright, I'll handle this." This wasn't supposed to happen - it was supposed to a clean fight to the death. It was supposed to easy when the decision was finally made.

"I'm not letting you leave with him," Hermione said, her voice trembling. "I can't, nothing will
change if we let him go. But you don't have to go down too."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry's eyes flashed. His stomach lurched again.

"It means you've both been treating this war more like your own personal lover's spat! As if the whole world revolves around you and now the rest of the world is catching up. If you kill him, there's still going to be dozens of laws against people like me. We need to use him to wrench the poison out by the roots first - he can give us names, unparalleled information, he can overturn his legislation-"

"He's never going to do that! Nothing you say or do is ever going to make him change his mind."

It hurt, but it was the truth. The terrible truth that he'd spent so long fighting against - that maybe one day, somehow, that Tom would have chosen him instead. Made the sacrifice for love that he always tried to demand off Harry, or that he could somehow find the right words or way to get Tom back. To vanquish Voldemort, to see him turn his back on his empire and blood purity.

But he wasn't going to turn anymore than Harry was. Death was the only way to end it.

There was a terrible pity on Hermione's face.

"That doesn't matter, they'll still try-" Voldemort started again.

"The world was never supposed to be like this!" she said. "This was not how history was supposed to go. The order doesn't just want him dead, they need to fix it before you kill him. Things have changed, we have new information." Hermione's hand began to shake, eyes wild and hair dishevelled. The bloody cut, the brand of 'mudblood seemed more vivid on her arm than ever. "Harry, please. You need to leave. Now. Just trust me."

Harry's chest ached. He took a step forward, softening, reaching for a hand. "I'll fix this, I promise. I'll undo everything he's done, we can do it together." It was his responsibility, fuck prophecy but it was. He should have stepped in the first time Tom started to change, first started acting ashamed of being halfblood. "I know his empire like the back of my hand. What do you mean new information? What's going on?"

"Torturing me does nothing. They now think I'll renounce my empire if they start torturing you."

Harry's heart stopped, stuttering a few beats. He turned to face Tom - Voldemort. Beaten, bruised and bloody, expression blank and body abruptly still. "But you wouldn't."

"Of course not," the Dark Lord said. "So go. Leave. Isn't that what you've always been good at? Why are you hesitating now?"

Harry heard footsteps beginning to thunder down the hall, the swell of voices. And yet there was something on Tom's face, something he couldn't quite place.

His breathing quickened.

Change of heart?

"What was the new information?" he didn't take his eyes off Tom.

"We don't have time for this," Voldemort said, and the blankness splintered a little. "Untie me or go, just-"
"Hermione." Harry looked over at her, could hear the stupid plead in his own voice.

She hesitated, biting her lip.

*Change of heart?*

The door burst open.
"Expelliarmus!"

Harry deflected the spell, casting in a blur. In a matter of seconds a protective shield encased them both in a shimmering light.

The only sound seemed to be the panting of Harry's breath. The pounding of his own heart in his chest.

Becoming Voldemort was always supposed to be a matter of power.

Pureblood carried power. Magic carried power. Lord Voldemort could rule worlds, be a name everyone everywhere respected and feared to speak, be the sort of wizard worthy of love and able to defend it.

Halfblood meant being torn between two worlds and belonging to none of them. It meant weak and hurt and helpless to do anything about it. Tom Riddle could barely get a meal a day, he was a common bit of gutter trash with nothing to call his own, abandoned and reviled even by his own parents.

Lord Voldemort was special.

Lord Voldemort was never supposed to be powerless.

He wasn't supposed to slump on the floor, every bit of him aching like the older boys at the orphanage had kicked his ribs in again, watching as the man he loved stood between him and a dozen strangers trying to tear the beautiful, bold new world he'd built apart.

Harry being murdered by his hand was a huge distinction from Harry being murdered because of him, even if the responsibility still came to rest at his much bloodied hands.

For a beat, nobody moved or spoke.

Harry stood battle-ready and dangerous, holding the powerful shield resolutely even as sweat dripped down the back of his shirt.

"Showing your true colours, protecting him, are you?" someone said. "Were you ever on our side, Potter?"

"Of course I was," Harry spat. "Of course I am. But since when has our side been fine with torturing people? Killing him is one thing, I'll do that. But I won't torture him."

"The truce is broken," a redhead said - he looked like a Weasley. "Kill him then." Even to Voldemort's ears it sounded like a challenge, like he didn't expect Harry to do it.

"An execution." Harry's voice stayed cold, flat.
Tom felt a flicker of fear and hated himself for it. An intimate murder, yes. A clinical execution with unworthy rebels baying for his blood? No. He had no intention of dying, but a disinterested execution as if they were only ever enemies somehow seemed worse...

"Ron, please." Hermione took a step forward, shoulders shaking. "Killing him won't solve anything."
"Neither will torturing Harry," Ron replied. "And out of the two, killing that bastard would make me feel a whole lot better." The redhead looked at him like he was the utter scum of the earth.

"He is in the room and would like to know what the hell is going on," Harry said. "We had a plan, if either of you two remember."

So Harry and his resistance had been in on it all along. He hadn't wanted to believe, he'd been such a fool…to think Harry would ever surrender to him, would ever love him unconditionally...

Clearly, what Granger told him was a lie. It had always been impossible.

"Plans change," someone said. The Malfoy-looking blond. "Lower your wand and the shield charm, Potter. We don't want to hurt you more than necessary. We don't want to hurt Granger or Weasley, don't make them die trying to protect you. Just surrender."

Tom wished he could see the look on Harry's face. For once - horrendously - all clever and eloquent words and persuasions had dried up in his mouth.

Weak weak weak.

Granger bit her lip, her hands still clutched tight around her wand. She shifted a little closer to Harry, protectively, so that was something at least. She shot him a condemning look, her accusation clear enough.

You could have saved Harry from this, if you'd only agreed to my terms before anyone else arrived.

The other order members hissed among each other like wasps, but didn't try and outright attack. Yet. Maybe they knew Harry would strike down the first person to shatter the brittle stalemate.

But they were outnumbered.

Harry was a beauty on a battlefield but even he couldn't fight everyone in the room at once, forever, and everyone in the room knew it. He suspected it was only their respect for Harry that kept them from outright attacking on sight without giving Harry the chance to sacrifice himself.

Or maybe they didn't attack because they knew even if Harry couldn't escape, he could do a lot of damage to them before they took him down. Because they knew a noble sacrifice made a much better story for the history books than betrayal.

Either way, it wouldn't last long.

Their best chance of survival was a diversion, Harry untying him…

He tugged against his restraints, but it did no good.

"Harry," he warned, a flinty edge to his voice.

"Hermione," Harry said, his voice oh so soft by comparison. "Tell me what's changed. What's the new information?"

He could imagine the look on Harry's face now; earnest, beseeching. It had persuaded Tom more than rational words could, more than once, not that he'd admit it aloud.

He wondered what Harry would look like executing him. Righteous, in his conviction to his path? Heartbroken? Unlikely. Probably righteous. Harry was always so righteous even when he was wrong.
He wondered what Harry would like on the floor, screaming, howling, twisting under the cruciatus curse.

"You're a Horcrux." Granger's words choked like she actually believed it.

Harry's gaze shot to him - not as full of surprise about his darker deeds as Voldemort had expected. How long had Harry known about Horcruxes? He'd never said anything, not even tried to lecture. Perhaps in fear of tipping him off about his execution plans.

Tom shook his head, fractionally. He'd know if he'd made Harry a horcrux - this had to be a trick of some kind, to make him turn against his own rule. An obvious ploy. A bad taste flooded his mouth when Harry still seemed doubtful. Maybe Harry thought he was lying to save himself from death, or maybe whatever small splinter of trust between them had finally shattered beyond repair.

Harry looked exhausted. Resigned. As if he were the one walking to an execution without a chance of survival. He looked like he believed that stupid lie.

"It's not true! I'd know. And even if it was...Harry just leave, now. I can cause a distraction. If you untie me, we can go together. We can talk about all of this."

Harry looked away from him. "That won't be a problem."

"You don't understand," Granger began.

"No, I understand perfectly. For him to die I have to die too. Is that why you think he will talk and renounce his claim? Because I'm his Horcrux?" Now he could hear the smile in Harry's voice. "It won't be enough."

"You're the last one," Weasley said. "The order found the others."

"Maybe that's why the resistance did so miserably. You were all distracted running about chasing shiny objects instead of fighting."

Tom's heart hammered in his head, drilling through his skull. It wasn't possible, he knew it was impossible that Harry was the last one. That he even was one. Of course, he'd considered it, when they got engaged, but he hadn't ever actually done it.

He couldn't take his eyes off Harry.

But...what if he was his last Horcrux, somehow? Granger and Weasley seemed so sure, by the determined fear on their faces. And Harry spoke Parseltongue, he called to Tom from the second they met. Maybe their souls were entwined but he'd always imagined it more sentimentally and less literally…

And if Harry was his Horcrux, his last Horcrux…Granger had said history was not supposed to turn out this way, as if she knew something different...

Harry glanced at him and baulked at the look on his face, quickly turning his head away. Now, his shoulders stiffened slightly.

"I'll take care of it," Harry said, with a sharper urgency now. "I said I would, wouldn't I? This is all unnecessary. It doesn't have to come down to this - I'll kill him, I said I would. But I'm not going to stand for torture, that's not we're about. We're better than that." He looked around at the Order members now, but they seemed unmoved.
The silence was damning. How did Harry not see that? How could he not see that peace could not be an option with these extremist rebels? They'd already attacked a peace summit! The end always justified the means, and it was only idealistic idiots too pure of heart like Harry who believed otherwise.

"Some people are less sure that you will do what," Granger replied instead, hesitantly. "They think you might be-"

"In love with him?" Harry offered. "Yeah. I've heard that. Is that why you didn't even give me a chance to finish it myself?"

"I was going to say compromised," Granger said.

Harry snorted.

"She's not going to let us go, if I don't renounce my laws," he hissed to Harry. "None of the mudbloods are. Untie me - what are you waiting for?"

Harry glanced at him, but made no move to do so. It was utterly maddening.

"They'll torture you, for no good reason, for nothing. Untie me. And we can fight on our terms, not for them. I'm not asking you to let me live or go, but we both know it doesn't end like this."

That seemed to sway Harry, at least a little, at least for a second before his expression hardened once more. "You'd slaughter everyone in this room if I untied you. I said I'm not interested in torture and bloodshed. As you said, this is between me and you."

The stalemate shattered, with fear over parseltongue and the possibility of plotting.

The first curse smashed into Harry's shield charm without warning, like a cannonball to a castle. Harry braced, his whole body jolting as he stumbled back in surprise, but the shield held strong.

"No!" Granger cried. "No - you can't hurt him -"

Too late. The room descended into chaos. Spells, dozens of spells, barraged against Harry's defensive warding, edging him back and back closer to Tom until they were both up against the wall. Hands scraped at the magic barrier, the impact reverberating all through the soft golden light.

"Stop protecting people who are going to torture you!" Voldemort hissed. Yes, he'd slaughter everyone in the room. They deserved to die for threatening Harry, for the audacity when his fiance had only ever fought for them. Sacrificed for them. He would have killed for them, died for them, wasn't that enough without forcing him to suffer on someone else's terms?

The top of the shield charm splintered under the onslaught. Just like he knew it would. Harry had protected him, they wouldn't have any mercy or sympathy - even if Harry had done it purely out of love and remnant instincts and his desire for justice. As if they cared about justice, when they could have vengeance.

Voldemort's magic strained uselessly against the charms placed on him.

Blood trickled out of Harry's nose as he bolstered his shield charm, as if he could somehow hold out forever!

The shield splintered quicker this time, under the combined force of all of the enemy's power.
Harry's knees buckled - the shield went up again. His power flared again, desperately. His head cracked against the wall.

For a beat, it felt like the whole world stopped.

The shield charm crumbled. Arms tugged at Harry, dragging him away, before Harry's power exploded once more.

"Stop - no stop!" Granger cried out, Weasley too, but they couldn't get close. The mob had rule.

Harry's magic tore the room apart, stripping the walls, stripping skin, crunching bone as he blasted their enemies around as ever Tom's own tornado trapped in human form.

Bodies dropped.

It took three resistance members to disarm Harry, and the world was left in an unnerving quiet. Harry was forced onto his knees, under the same suffocating spells that Tom was. As if magic was ever supposed to be so disgustingly restrained, when it felt like having an organ removed or a limb amputated.

Why hadn't Harry run? Why struggle with that useless Shield charm for nothing?

Their eyes met across the room.

There was still that resignation on Harry's face, despite the fierce fight he'd put up.

"Don't kill them," Harry said. "They're just doing what they think is right. This doesn't need to be a slaughter. It's going to be fine."

"Do you, Lord Voldemort, give a magically binding vow to dissolve all your legislation regarding blood purity and the first Wizarding State of Great Britain?"

A wand dug into Harry's throat.

"No."

Harry's eyes closed.

"I renounce blood purity..."

At first, when Harry heard the words, he thought they must have been imagined in some fogged up, pain-delirious part of his brain.

Then, louder. "I renounce blood purity!" Tom yelled. "Stop it! Let me get to him - he needs -"

The words swam in and out of his ears. He had no idea how long they'd been torturing him for, he'd thought Alphard and Voldemort's security team would have arrived by then. Alphard had been right behind him.

He didn't think Tom would agree to the Order's demands for anything...

The pain stopped with Voldemort's surrender. It felt impossible that the pain could ever stop, Harry's entire body buzzing as he shuddered against the floor.

Hands cradled his head, lifting him, and he was disappointed to see they were Hermione's rather than Tom's. There were tears in her eyes as she whispered to him that she was sorry, that he was alright
Tom had renounced blood purity...

The world felt fragmented, shattered, like a world viewed through bits of a stained glass window. Harry's head throbbed.

His gaze slid blearily to Tom - and if he'd still been unsure if he'd hallucinated the Dark Wizard's surrender, they vanished at the look on Voldemort's face. God, the look on his face...

The order members shouted around them.

"Lock him up for execution-"

"-No, don't let him see Potter!"

"He needs to finish confessing-"

The shouts turned to panic, turned to screams, turned to blood as Voldemort's security team finally arrived.

Hermione's frantic hands vanished, replaced by Alphard.

"Took you long enough," Harry managed.

"Salazar, what happened?" Alphard demanded.

"My lord, are you alright?" Abraxas asked Tom.

The next thing he felt was Tom's magic. Even as Voldemort, even dark beyond all possible imagining, Tom's magic felt familiar. It soaked into every atom of Harry's body and raised the hair on the back of his neck with the sheer power of him.

Bodies dropped. Crumpled. Order members fell under the Dark Lord's wrath.

Harry's vision swam.

"No!" Tom's voice cut through the chaos again. "No, Alphard, leave Harry. Don't release his magic."

He knew it was the end then, for Tom to deny magic.

The blood, not his own now, seeped beneath his cheek and soaked into his shirt. Hermione's dull blank eyes stared vacantly back at him.

"No - don't - please -" Harry began either way, because he couldn't not try. He hadn't wanted a slaughter, he'd never wanted a slaughter.

Tom paused, just for a moment, just long enough that Harry knew that he heard, long enough for their eyes to meet again.

He could almost physically see the shift from Tom, to Voldemort. He watched him grow blank and turn cold.

Voldemort killed every single resistance member in the building.

Only then, in the sickening carnage, did Voldemort come to a stop next to him. He suspended
Harry's aching and battered body in front of him with a flick of his wand.

Abraxas' eagerness to see him finally dead felt almost as visceral as the possessive coil of the Dark Lord's magic around his limbs. Harry couldn't remember if he'd ever felt it like this, unbuffered by the clash of his own power.

"You told me, once, that I'd always save you Harry," Voldemort hissed.

"I'm the one who organized your back up!" Not to mention he wouldn't even be in this situation, if it wasn't for Voldemort. "You're the one who got yourself bloody well kidnapped, you arse." Even hoarse, even with his voice cracked from screaming, he wasn't about to let Tom forget that. It was the only clear thing, when everything happened so fast and he could barely think straight.

Scarlet eyes narrowed.

Harry had never missed Tom Riddle's gorgeous dark eyes more.

They stared at each other in a stony silence.

The only sound seemed to be the panting of Voldemort's breath. The pounding of his own heart in his chest.

"Are you happy now, Harry?" Tom asked, reaching an arm out and pulling him close, taking his wounded weight. "I chose you over my world, I renounced blood purity just like you always wanted. Does it make you happy?"

"You killed them. All of them." He'd begged him not to, to show mercy. "All they wanted was their basic human rights."

"Are you happy?" Tom asked, again, oh so softly. "I chose you, love. And it feels like poison."

A/N: Well, this chapter is a mess. Not sure I got the effect I wanted.
"Are you going to execute me?" Harry asked.

They sat in Voldemort's quarters. Well, Voldemort sat, fragile and recovering, in an armchair. Harry lay on his stomach on the deep green bedspread waiting for his wounds to finish knitting together and healing.

It had been years since the last time Harry had been in Tom's bedroom, but despite the time that had passed and the Dark Lord's engagement, his wing seemed unchanged.

Tom's quarters were a surprisingly warm, cosy set of rooms, for all of their expense and elegance. It reminded Harry a lot of the Slytherin common room, with the black leather chesterfield and the four poster bed.

But everything else seemed different, broken irreparably.
Voldemort had chosen him and it felt like the sweetest poison in the world, because he knew Voldemort hated it. Hated that anyone could have that much power over him. Killed everyone in the room so no one would ever find out how much he cared.

And the truce was shattered.

"What did the mudblood mean, when she said that history was never supposed to be like this? And how long have you known about my Horcruxes?"

Harry's jaw clenched, and he considered his options. Wondered if it really mattered now, anyway. "Do you remember I asked you if you believe in alternate universes?" he asked.

Voldemort stayed silent. Harry took that as him remembering, and continued.

"Hermione…" his throat tightened choking as her vacant eyes flashed through his head. For a moment, he couldn't breathe, let alone speak. "Hermione, Ron...many of the Order members I have recently discovered, are from an alternate timeline. Were." Harry swallowed but the lump didn't leave. "I am too."

Voldemort stayed silent still, as Harry told him everything. About the prophecy, and the Boy Who Lived, and the fight at Malfoy Manor that sent them exploding back in time. About de-aging him, erasing his memories so he wasn't compromised by what he knew of the future, of how he'd once wanted to see if Tom Riddle could be saved.

Harry looked up, throat raw from talking, when Voldemort made no response even when he finished relating all that he'd learned, and how he learned it, and even what his plan had been to kill Voldemort during the final duel in the tournament.

"And either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives," Voldemort said, quietly. "I suppose it is fitting that you are the only one who can kill me. I apologize that you never felt like you could tell me this before."

Harry had never thought of it like that, but it was the last comment that Harry would never have expected to hear from the Dark Wizard. He shrugged, not knowing how to respond.

"It is irrelevant to me," he said, finally. "As you said, there is no point thinking on alternate universes. This is the universe that matters. We made our decisions, we made our graves, we can go
lay in them with everyone else. I don't care about fate either, you know I don't. And you didn't
answer my question."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't let anyone else execute you."
But that wasn't quite an answer either.

"You slaughtered them." Harry's voice cracked - he couldn't close his eyes without seeing that
confusing mess of carnage behind his eyelids, hear the screams, smell the stench of blood in his
nostrils.

"I did."

"I asked you not to, I begged you not to."

"I begged you to leave," Voldemort returned, to that, coldly.

"As if I could have ever left you there to get tortured by them any more than you could watch them
do that to me."

Harry almost wanted to laugh; winced instead as the last cut closed. He sat up properly, still not
looking over at Voldemort as he examined himself. He wasn't sure he could bear to look at
Voldemort ever again. At Tom. Funny how his mind still tried to separate them, when all he could
see now was that they would always be the same. Never one without the other.

Tom Marvolo Riddle. I am Lord Voldemort.
He still remembered when he came up with that name.

"So," Harry said. "You can't forgive the fact you sacrificed everything for me, and I can't forgive the
fact you killed them because of me. That's where we stand, right?"

"I told you the heart was a cruel thing." Tom shifted forward, grimacing with the movement. The
mattress dipped, and they sat side by side with the moonlight spilling like liquid silver through the
window.

Harry sighed softly and leaned into Tom's chest without hesitation, closing his eyes. "I honestly
thought we'd said our goodbyes already, that it was over. That we could have ended things on a
good note." Because that last night, by the lake, had been the best of nights hadn't it? A night where
Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter didn't exist, just Tom and Harry. They'd made a strange peace
then.

This wasn't peace anymore.

"You truly are my last Horcrux, aren't you." Voldemort didn't say it like a question.

Every other witness in that room was dead, but he'd heard Voldemort renounce blood purity.
Renounce his kingdom. Which meant it wasn't voided and he could still use it. As if Voldemort
would ever allow that.

"Can't let me die, can't let me live," Harry said. "Pretty much the same as we've always been, so
don't act like it makes the slightest bit of difference. You can't keep me prisoner, definitely not for
any extended period of time. I can't let you go back to treating muggleborns and muggles like second
class citizens, or worse."

If he killed Voldemort, he had to die too. Even if he didn't do it himself as one last sacrifice, Abraxas
Malfory would likely hunt him for the rest of his life.
And if Voldemort killed him, he lost his immortality. Maybe he'd find another way, with time, but Harry would never give him that time. They both knew that if it went to a fight that Harry was far more likely to win at most, or do lasting damage at least.

Harry would die. Voldemort would follow shortly from his wounds because Harry couldn't afford to let him live and continue his work.

Mutually assured destruction.

"We could leave," Tom murmured, wrapping an arm around his back.

"Live a quiet life by a lake somewhere. You would study obscure magics and invent things, and I would teach the locals and go flying." Harry smiled at the thought, but it was mirthless now. It didn't ache in a good way anymore, it just hurt.

"You would never be able to resist the urge to save the world."

"You would never be able to give up power forever and be forgotten, when you could build empires."

"We would hate the quiet life, wouldn't we?"

They glanced at each other, because it was a nice thought, a perfect fantasy. But nothing had changed and everything had changed.

Voldemort could never live with someone he'd give up everything for, he'd resent Harry the rest of his life for the sacrifice. And Harry couldn't live with all that had been done.

The kiss came hungry and desperate and fiercely possessive and he didn't know which one of them moved first - his fingers reeling Tom in close with a bruising grip, Tom's fist clutched tight in his hair in a surge of movement. It was no kiss for forever and days that didn't exist now, but a kiss for the seconds, for the stolen moments, for the years spent apart on separate sides wishing for nothing so much as to be together again.

Tom moaned quietly into his mouth, before biting down hard.

Harry shifted onto his lap, not wanting one inch of space between their bodies. Heat coiled in his belly.

Tom's hand cupped the back of his neck, nails raking into his skin as his hips ground up.

They breathed.

Someone knocked on the door.

Of course, they wouldn't simply be able to deal with matters privately and at their own pace after the hell of a day that had just happened.

Harry felt a headache throb to life.

Voldemort looked equally irritated, just for a flicker of a second, that someone dared come right to his private chambers.

"Yes?" the Dark Lord called out, rather coldly.

Abraxas opened the door seeming unbothered by the chill.

Harry barely kept his jaw clenching at the sight of the man - remembering all too well what Alphard
had said about mercenaries. Despite the worst of the wounds being taken care of, he still ached.

Malfoy's gaze slid over him briefly, before landing on Voldemort. Spots of pink appeared on his pale cheeks at their position, at the fact Harry sprawled on the Dark Lord's bed like he owned it, and Malfoy spoke tightly. "My lord, I have managed to gather up a few reporters. We have a lot of work to do after the disaster of the festival, it did rather a lot of damage to your public reputation as the rebels hoped. But it's not irreparable. There are also several reports and documents needing your attention and your signature."

In other words, duty called and time was up.

Voldemort glanced at him, rather noticeably considering his options. Or maybe it was only noticeable to Harry - funny, how the second they were shattered beyond recovery, that he could read Tom again, to understand perfectly where they stood with each other.

"You can go and take care of that if you like" Harry said with a grin, keeping his gaze on Tom. "I have some strings of my own to tie, don't I Brax?"

Voldemort's eyes narrowed.

"I wouldn't know," Malfoy said after beat. "But I assumed you had no interest in co-operating on a press conference regarding the defeat of the rebels and the resistance's surrender."

Now Harry looked at him - Abraxas' face had turned white, even as his expression remained perfectly composed.

Harry got slowly to his feet. "Actually, I love the thought of joining our esteemed lord on his press conference. Thank you so much for including me Malfoy, you've always been such a good friend."

Voldemort seized his arm, tight enough to bruise and Harry laughed.

"I'm afraid I have some matters to take care of first, Abraxas," Tom said. "I am certain you can handle affairs today, I asked not to be disturbed for a reason. You can leave now, thank you for keeping me informed."

Malfoy's fingers flexed, the tiniest tell that betrayed his desperation.

"Did you need something with me, Brax?" Harry asked in an innocent tone of voice.

Malfoy looked about to faint, but Harry didn't flinch. When Voldemort died, Abraxas Malfoy was likely next in line for the throne and if he wasn't, he after Lestrange's death, kept up this sickening system more than anyone. Wrapped it up into pretty, palatable words about magical pride and freedom of magical expression and self defence. "No," he said. "I merely wanted to ascertain for myself that you were both well on your way to recovery."

"No public execution?" Harry pressed. "The truce is broken. You can take a shot."

Malfoy didn't move. Of course he bloody didn't, the coward.

"My lord."

"I'll take care of it," Tom's voice sharpened. "Of him."

Malfoy shifted again, apparently equally aware of the odds of mutually assured destruction as they were. And, for his perfect composure slipped with those odds, as he looked at Tom. "You can't be fucking serious."
Harry blinked, not quite having expected that from Abraxas's mouth.

"There has to be another way, my lord. He's outnumbered, he has no allies left -"

Maybe Abraxas had seen this coming from the start - not like this, but in some way - maybe that was why he'd always loathed the thought of Harry returning. He knew Tom almost as well as Harry did, knew Tom could never let anyone else kill him.

A self fulfilling prophecy.

Abraxas's eyes darkened, fixing on him, and his hand reached for his wand in a blur of movement.

Harry drew faster.

Abraxas Malfoy dropped dead.

Harry grabbed Tom's hand and apparated.

The first golden rays of light washed over the edges of the lake as they stood facing each other on the bank, wands drawn and ready, with the wind rustling gently through the wildflowers. Somewhere, in the distance, the birds sang.

"I wish I could have saved you."

They started to duel.
Chapter 19

Harry gasped for air that refused to come. His ears rang and his whole body ached.

Tom didn't look to be in much better shape - he leant bent over his knees, hair damp with sweat. His fingers curled at entirely the wrong angle and one arm hung limp and useless.

A wave of nausea rolled up Harry's throat. He'd always hated seeing Tom hurt and loathed it even now.

They'd been duelling for the better part of an hour, it was ridiculous. Most duels were decided in minutes, if not seconds, not in a constant and crippling smash of spells that seemed never-ending.

"I wish I hadn't taught you half of those curses."

Harry choked on a laugh, wiping blood from his nose. "I felt the same about that nasty terror hex you sent at me."

"You always did have quite the knack for emotional spells," Tom agreed. They knew each other's styles far too well; maybe that was another reason that they'd always desperately tried to avoid each other on the battlefield. "I can do this for longer than you though, Harry. You've been tortured once today already. Yield. I'll finish it quickly."

Harry shook his head and gave a grin like tossing a gauntlet. "Oh, please. My stamina was always better than yours."

A pained laugh startled out of Tom's mouth next. Really, this whole conversation was entirely wrong for a fight to the death. They both knew what they had to do, with limping steps and screaming bones, but their were wands were hardly even pointed in that moment.

Tom straightened, one hand clutching his ribs as he swayed on his feet.

Harry swallowed.

"Maybe we're doing it wrong," Voldemort said. "For either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives. Perhaps I should try physically snapping your neck - come here."

"Don't be stupid."

"Prophecies are tricky things."

It was a reasonable comment, and Harry wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh again or sob. Because that really would make all of this so much better, wouldn't it? Not only did he have to murder the monster he loved more than anything in the world, they couldn't even have the mercy of distance.

They duelled another half hour.

The beautiful cottage had been razed to the ground, a dust and ruin shell of what could have been. The grass had been scorched beyond recognition with the wildflowers withered alongside it.

The magical exhaustion trembled through them both. There wasn't one inch of Harry that didn't feel broken and they stumbled to sit down upon a bank of ash. The smoke and the raw power in the air burned in Harry's lungs.
"This is stupid," he muttered.

They were fated to kill each other, how could it possibly be so hard?

They were fated to be equals, how could it possibly be easy?

Tom's shattered fingers ghosted over Harry's bloodied knuckles and Harry's eyes flinched shut at how the gentle the gesture was - he wasn't sure he could bear that now, at the end of it all.

"Oh, the things we do to each other," Tom said. "I always said the heart is cruel. I knew the second I laid my eyes on you that you were bad for me."

Harry twisted his hand and Tom howled in pain, his whole body sagging into Harry's side. His hand shot back to be cradled against his chest. Harry kept his gaze on the churning black waters of the lake and remembered another black lake far away and far back in time, and a gleaming ring and the gleam in Tom's eyes that had shone even brighter.

"Love isn't the problem here," he managed. "Love is the only good thing we ever had."

Tom sucked in a sharp breath, then exhaled. "It was good once, wasn't it?" He flashed a smile, and oh it made him look as if the years and the inhumanity had slipped away, that smile. It wasn't the politician's dazzling one, or the Dark Lord's crocodile smile. It was the one he'd always saved just for Harry. "The best."

It was like he wanted to torture with words because the bloody cruciatus wouldn't land - except, well, the cruciatus was the one curse in both of their not inconsiderable repertoires that they hadn't cast, knew they wouldn't be able to. Somehow that hurt more.

"Yeah," Harry's voice had gone hoarse. His eyes prickled hot at the corners. "It was good." He wished he could bring himself to give up, to yield, at least then it would be over. They had cursed so much, so fast, that even healing themselves or running wasn't an option. At this point, their grand and glorious finale was going to be blood loss and infection. And yet..."Your men are going to be searching for you frantically." He glanced over at Tom. "Why aren't you cheating?"

Harry had no choice but to have this fight to the death, but Tom. Oh, Voldemort had an entire empire, an entire army, that he could summon in a heartbeat if all he cared about was finishing this. It could be over. Harry could be executed publically as a traitor to the new world.

Instead they sat side by side bleeding in a wasteland.

"Because then you'd be gone," Tom said softly.

Harry swallowed at that, looking down at his knees. Trousers scuffed and ripped, knees bloodied and he reached out a hand despite himself, ghosting his aching fingers along Tom's knuckles in turn. "You could get rid of blood purity." He could hear the plea in his voice, even when he knew that would never happen, that they'd had all of these arguments before. "We could start over again, when history has forgotten us."

"History will never forget."

"History always forgets," Harry said.

Tom glanced over at him, shuffling closer and Harry was too tired to fight it. This was supposed to be finished by now. He curled into Tom's side, breathing harsh and rattling in his chest.
"If you'd rather see me kill you than cheat, why not just change?" Harry asked. "You're a half blood, you can't possibly believe in that rubbish."

"I have come too far to take it back now. To give it up for you or anyone else."

"Then what the hell do we have left with? You can't kill me and you can't live without me, and you won't surrender for me to kill you." Harry could win, in the end, if Tom refused to yield but with everything that had happened today there was a good chance he would pass out before then. It would go on. On and on and on and he couldn't bear to do this anymore.

"You could run," Tom murmured. "Let the world think you're dead. For what it's worth, for what we had is worth, I swear I won't chase you. I'll let you go this time."

"You think I can just run and pretend you're not doing what you're doing?"

"I am eternally hoping, much as you. You used to champion hope, Harry."

"Hope is cruel."

"I've been telling you that for years." But it wasn't his 'I told you so' voice and they sighed in unison. "Hope is cruel, love is crueller. Fight another day, Harry. Go to France."

"Hope is cruel, love is crueler. My very existence allows you to continue hurting people."

"I will...make reforms," Tom said.

Harry froze. That was the one thing he'd never expected to hear from Lord Voldemort, and he twisted to stare at the other man. "Had a change of heart?" He kept his voice light. The but from early choked him.

"Of course not," Voldemort said. "I will not demolish my system. But..." this time, he finished the sentence..."Allowances could be made. More regulations to ensure that non-pureblood citizens are not mistreated and abused by the system."

The whole system was abuse! Harry bit down on the words, the taste of his blood barely noticeable in the grand scheme of things.

Fight another day, keep fighting. He had nothing to lose. This was a bigger concession than Lord Voldemort had ever offered on his prejudices.

"And what do you want from me if you do this?"

"Stay." Tom said. "I will need a consultant on the matter." Scarlet eyes burned into him.

Harry turned his eyes to the lake, heart pounding in his chest at the sickening adrenaline and determination of the last twenty four hours crossed. He'd been so sure on his path, on his fate. He still suspected he'd have to kill Voldemort before the end, but...maybe...maybe... "I refuse to give a formal apology for the resistance."

"You remember I was in a peace treaty when your precious resistance attacked? Let there be peace, Harry. Let people heal."

Sometimes bones needed to be broken to reset to heal properly, and god the world Voldemort had built was disgustingly broken. Rotten to its core.

But close, Harry had a chance to influence. Lestrange didn't have Voldemort's sway or political
intelligence, he was nowhere near the threat, but the resistance was in pieces. Lestrange had no ties to listen to him.

It tasted like surrender and he hated it, it tasted like poison. Lestrange and Malfoy would be bitterly disappointed he was sure, but it could be an easy enough PR spin with Tom's silvertongue.

Was he actually considering this? What else did he have left?

"Sure," Harry said. "I'll even be the best man at your wedding."

Voldemort pulled him to his feet and they looked over the ruined cottage, the ravaged flowers, the blood and the bruises that they were all but made from now. Then they apparated away.

*I wish I could have saved you. I would have done anything to save you.*

But maybe saving the wizarding world was going to have to be more important.

By all rights, Lord Voldemort should have been entirely satisfied with his life.

He had everything he'd once dreamed of; he was the head of a blooming empire, the Wizarding World of Great Britain prostrating itself at his feet. He was powerful, respected, admired and feared.

The last vestiges of resistance were crushed, and Harry Potter stood somewhat reluctantly and always antagonistically at his side. It wasn't like before. It was fragile, scarred over, tentative.

He let his eyes close, taking a sip of his wine as he shifted through his reports. Harry sat stiffly on the other-side of the desk, jaw clenched hard and eyes dark as he read about things he considered monstrosities and choked them down.

Harry was still slowly evacuating muggleborns away from the country, to France. Tom made a general rule of pretending he didn't know.

It was a new beginning. A new world.

It was the night before his wedding and there was nowhere he would rather be than at the side of his worst enemy.

"I could use some air," he said. "Fancy a walk?"

Harry's gaze flicked up, head tilting to one side.

It was the night before his wedding, but there were some days and stolen hours that even history would never mark or touch. With a man who lived forever, maybe there could even be a lifetime of them.

And maybe on those days Tom Riddle had been saved after all.

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